

## When your period might just kill you : Chhaupadi



Font: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/6/nepal-makes-first-arrest-over-womans-death-in-menstrual-hut>

On January 2018, the body of Gauri Kumari Bayak<sup>1</sup> was carried up a hill to be burnt, as people mourned her untimely death. The cause? Menstruation. She'd died of smoke inhalation while trying to protect herself from the Himalayan cold in the hut she'd been forced to spend her period in, adding one more woman to

the long list of victims of Chhaupadi. Six short months later, another unfortunate soul followed in her footsteps.

Periods are, for some, a natural physiological process that happens every month, for others, an aspect that often propagates shame and

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<sup>1</sup> Gettleman, J. (2018). Where a Taboo Is Leading to the Deaths of Young Girls. *The New York Times*.

gender-based oppression<sup>2</sup>. Whilst women's rights have been reiterated by many documents since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, such as during the Beijing World Conference on Women's Rights, in many countries, period poverty still keeps many girls outside of education, or worse, leads to their premature death<sup>3</sup>. In Nepal, 72%<sup>4</sup> of girls experience shame, fear and human rights' abuses as a result of their periods. This injustice has kept a 10.4% of girls from attending school, a number considerably higher than the 7.7% of boys<sup>5</sup>. Notably in Mid-western Nepal, in districts such as Achham or Bajura, Chhaupadi, a forbidden practice linked to menstruation, is still prominent<sup>6</sup>.

Superstitions which portray women on their periods as untouchable and impure often lead to Chhaupadi, a ritual by which the woman is

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<sup>2</sup> Ranabhat, C., Kim, C.-B., Choi, E.H., Aryal, A., Park, M.B. and Doh, Y.A. (2015). Chhaupadi Culture and Reproductive Health of Women in Nepal. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health*, 27(7), p.785; Amatya, P., Ghimire, S., Callahan, K.E., Baral, B.K. and Poudel, K.C. (2018). Practice and lived experience of menstrual exiles (Chhaupadi) among adolescent girls in far-western Nepal. *PLOS ONE*, 13(12), p.e0208260.

<sup>3</sup> Singh, N., Sherpa, A.T., Pandey, S. and Pradhan, A. (2019). Menstrual Hygiene: Practice and Challenges Among Adolescent girls of a Private School of Urban Nepal. *Asian Journal of Medical Sciences*, 10(4), pp.39–43

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF (2016). Analysis of Menstrual Hygiene Practices in Nepal: The Role of WASH in Schools Programme for Girls Education 2016. [online]. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/sites/unicef.org/nepal/files/2018-07/607531012327148357-analysis-of-menstrual-hygiene-practices-in-nepal.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF (2019). Equity and inclusion; girls' education; data and evidence; system strengthening Non-formal education and the use of data and evidence to help marginalized girls learn in Nepal.

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF (2016). Analysis of Menstrual Hygiene Practices in Nepal: The Role of WASH in Schools Programme for Girls Education 2016.

secluded while she menstruates<sup>7</sup>. During Chhaupadi, women are banned from sleeping in their homes, from attending religious practices, from eating dairy products, from entering the kitchen and even from touching men, especially those who are undergoing rituals<sup>8</sup>. Menstruating women are branded as cursed, and are forced to sleep in unhygienic, narrow and dark sheds, often built with their bare hands, alienated from society until their period is over<sup>9</sup>. With no windows, and no sanitary products, clean clothes, bathroom facilities, or anything to help them weather the cold, women risk their lives on a monthly basis. Nevertheless, they cannot abstain, as unless they abide by these rules, they are believed to anger the gods, bringing misery and illness upon their families<sup>10</sup>.

Such stigmatisation doesn't only take a toll on girls' and women's mental and psychological health, who are marginalised, humiliated and abandoned by their society, but can lead to physical illness and even death. Firstly, women need to endure the inhumane conditions of poorly built, unhygienic sheds, which results in

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<sup>7</sup> (Khadka,2020,p.84; Kadariya and Aro,2015,p.54

<sup>8</sup> Amatya, P., Ghimire, S., Callahan, K.E., Baral, B.K. and Poudel, K.C. (2018). Practice and lived experience of menstrual exiles (Chhaupadi) among adolescent girls in far-western Nepal. *PLOS ONE*, 13(12), p.e0208260.

<sup>9</sup> Gettleman, J. (2018). Where a Taboo Is Leading to the Deaths of Young Girls. *The New York Times*.

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF (2016). Analysis of Menstrual Hygiene Practices in Nepal: The Role of WASH in Schools Programme for Girls Education 2016.; Kadariya, S. and R. Aro, A. (2015). Chhaupadi practice in Nepal – analysis of ethical aspects. *Medicolegal and Bioethics*, p.53.

diarrhea, dehydration and hypothermia<sup>11</sup>. Because of the lack of clean clothes and adequate food, malnutrition, genital infections, cervical problems, and even human papillomavirus infections are widespread among victims of Chhaupadi<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, stories of rape and animal attacks are not rare, and often buried by the families to avoid further scrutiny<sup>13</sup>. Women who have just given birth are also judged as polluted, and isolated alongside their babies for days on end<sup>14</sup>. Ms. Kunwar confessed to the NY Times<sup>15</sup> how, after she'd given birth, while in the hut, a jackal had stormed in and taken her newborn. Chhaupadi remains one of the country's main reasons for mother and infant mortality rates.

Consequences of Chhaupadi go beyond physical and mental health. The practice keeps the patriarchal society afloat, contributing to women's illiteracy rates. Estimates from different studies have shown that girls in Nepal are likely to miss up to a fifth of their school year because of their period<sup>16</sup>. Girls are often scared to sit closer to the front rows, to put their hand up, and approach teachers when they are on their

periods<sup>17</sup>. Because of the stigmatisation surrounding the 'curse', only 55% of women are aware of the accurate definition of menstruation. As for hygienic products, the vast majority use old clothes, as 61.5% still do not know the correct way of using a pad<sup>18</sup>. Schools more often than not, lack appropriate WASH facilities, and girls who leave for home to clean themselves during their periods are unlikely to return to class<sup>19</sup>.

While Nepal's Supreme Court banned Chhaupadi in 2005, and as of August 2018, people forcing women into the practice only endure a three-month prison sentence, these measures are far from enough to stop the mind-set of certain communities<sup>20</sup>. If anything, the banning of Chhaupadi often leads to even more dangerous outcomes, such as women being exiled to huts alongside livestock, or even caves<sup>21</sup>. As highlighted by many reports, women are the 'workhorses' in many Midwestern Nepalese villages. Often illiterate, worthless, and subject to

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<sup>11</sup> Amatya, P., Ghimire, S., Callahan, K.E., Baral, B.K. and Poudel, K.C. (2018). Practice and lived experience of menstrual exiles (Chhaupadi) among adolescent girls in far-western Nepal. *PLOS ONE*, 13(12), p.e0208260.

<sup>12</sup> Ranabhat, C., Kim, C.-B., Choi, E.H., Aryal, A., Park, M.B. and Doh, Y.A. (2015). Chhaupadi Culture and Reproductive Health of Women in Nepal. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health*, 27(7), pp.785–795

<sup>13</sup> Pradhan, G. (2020). Pandemic deepens period poverty. [online] *Nepali Times*.

<sup>14</sup> Gettleman, J. (2018). Where a Taboo Is Leading to the Deaths of Young Girls. *The New York Times*.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Cousins, S. (2020). Rethinking period poverty. *The Lancet*, 395(10227), pp.857–858

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<sup>17</sup> Singh, N., Sherpa, A.T., Pandey, S. and Pradhan, A. (2019). Menstrual Hygiene: Practice and Challenges Among Adolescent girls of a Private School of Urban Nepal. *Asian Journal of Medical Sciences*, 10(4), pp.39–43

<sup>18</sup> Parajuli, S.B., KC, H., Mishra, A., Bhattarai, P., Shrestha, M. and Srivastav, K. (2018). Chaupadi during menstruation still a major community health challenge: perspective from Mid-Western Nepal. *BIBECHANA*, 16, pp.228–235.

<sup>19</sup> Singh, N., Sherpa, A.T., Pandey, S. and Pradhan, A. (2019). Menstrual Hygiene: Practice and Challenges Among Adolescent girls of a Private School of Urban Nepal. *Asian Journal of Medical Sciences*, 10(4), pp.39–43

<sup>20</sup> Amatya, P., Ghimire, S., Callahan, K.E., Baral, B.K. and Poudel, K.C. (2018). Practice and lived experience of menstrual exiles (Chhaupadi) among adolescent girls in far-western Nepal. *PLOS ONE*, 13(12), p.e0208260.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*; Standing, K. and Parker, S. (2019). Nepal's menstrual huts: what can be done about this practice of confining women to cow sheds? [online] *The Conversation*; Pradhan, G. (2020). Pandemic deepens period poverty. [online] *Nepali Times*.

domestic violence and child marriage, they have no say in the eradication of Chhaupadi.<sup>22</sup>

There is a long way to go to ensure safe periods in Nepal. The special emphasis Hinduism places on purity makes the beliefs associated with menstruation difficult to uproot<sup>23</sup>. In a study by Cousins, one of his participants explains how 'sanitary pads cannot guarantee dignity during menstruation'<sup>24</sup>, there needs to be a change in societal behaviours. Many teachers and mothers have voiced their opinions against the foul tradition, expressing how they do not want their children to go through the trauma they suffered, yet their insignificant position as women gives no power to their pleading voices<sup>25</sup>. Once more, 2019 turned the world's eyes towards Nepal, when a woman died of suffocation in a Chhaupadi hut on the fourth day of her period<sup>26</sup>. On the day, Dambara woke up to find that her sister Rojita had not joined their daily trip to the jungle to look for firewood. Later, she was found dead. A study by the University of Bath<sup>27</sup> and the CREHPA, following the shocking news, found that, only two years ago, in Midwestern Nepal, 60% of girls were

actually aware that Chhaupadi is illegal, yet that didn't prevent 77% of them from still being forced into its practice.

The start of 2020 brought even more challenges for women in Nepal. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the access to period products all the more difficult for Nepalese women, with many projects to provide them in the area coming to a halt. The London-based organisation Voluntary Service Overseas, that implemented a mentorship programme for women in Nepal at the beginning of the pandemic, asserted the worsening of the dangerous tradition<sup>28</sup>. With schools closed, the access to period products has diminished, as have the safe spaces for women to seek help if they find themselves trapped in Chhaupadi. Period poverty is an issue that goes beyond the provision of free products or advice. The shame associated with it often goes hand-in-hand with women's oppression and lack of access to education, and so efforts must be multiplied to change the mind-sets of the communities that keep threatening their women's lives.

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<sup>22</sup> Gettleman, J. (2018). Where a Taboo Is Leading to the Deaths of Young Girls. *The New York Times*.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Cousins, S. (2020). Rethinking period poverty. *The Lancet*, 395(10227), pp.857–858.

<sup>25</sup> Singh, N., Sherpa, A.T., Pandey, S. and Pradhan, A. (2019). Menstrual Hygiene: Practice and Challenges Among Adolescent girls of a Private School of Urban Nepal. *Asian Journal of Medical Sciences*, 10(4), pp.39–43.

<sup>26</sup> Adhikari, R. (2020). Bringing an end to deadly "menstrual huts" is proving difficult in Nepal. *BMJ*.

<sup>27</sup> University of Bath (2019). *Women in Nepal still forced to sleep outside in "menstruation huts" despite practice being banned*. [online] [www.bath.ac.uk](https://www.bath.ac.uk). Available at: <https://www.bath.ac.uk/announcements/women-in-nepal-still-forced-to-sleep-outside-in-menstruation-huts-despite-practice-being-banned>.

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<sup>28</sup> Menstrual health and mentoring in Nepal lockdown. (2020). *BBC News*. [online] 11 Aug. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/in-pictures-53685825> [Accessed 16 Feb. 2021].

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