

Prejudice like “Chhaupadi” is Changing for the Better

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Last December, the news circulated in social media about the death of a young girl in a shed in the western district of Nepal while she was menstruating disturbed many people living in the capital city, Kathmandu. Upon investigation, the district police reported that her death was due to the suffocation from the smoke as she set fire to the twigs and dried leaves to keep herself warm from the chilly winter,.

The news about the death of young girls in the shed while menstruating or practicing Chhaupadi is common in Nepal. Often these young girls would die due to the attacks of wild animals, snakebites, diseases, rapes and sometime due to cold and pneumonia while they are living in a small makeshift hut made up of mud and stones without windows called a “shed” during menstruation. Such sheds are very narrow, dark, tight and congested, and have cold dirty floors with no locks.

Chhaupadi practice is derived from a Hindu tradition that relates to secretions associated with menstruation and childbirth. The word Chhaupadi is originated from local words “Chhau and Padi” used in Achham district in the far west. Chhau means menstruation and Padi means a woman. In this practice, women are considered impure during their periods and are therefore required to refrain from participating in normal daily activities. They are forced to isolate themselves and sleep inside a shed. Access to water taps and wells is also limited. Women practicing Chhaupadi can only bathe or wash clothes in a ‘Chhaupadidhara - a separate well, stream or small rivulet near the village. Women who violate this practice in the villages are blamed for crop failures, illnesses and sudden deaths of animals and considered bad luck.

Many experts suggest that Chhaupadi has an impact on psychosocial well-being of girls as staying apart from their families will result in low self-esteem, and having no access to proper nutritious food would also make them weak and susceptible to sickness.

Discriminatory practices against girls and women

Chhaupadi is against human rights as it is a completely discriminatory practice against women's rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims the entitlement of everyone to equal dignified life and basic human rights without any kind of discrimination based on gender, religion, creed, caste and ethnicity. Nepal is also a signatory to Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW calls upon states to work toward eliminating prejudices such as a customary practice based on the idea of inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles for women¹

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states “Everyone has a right to live standard life with adequate health care, security, food, clothing, housing and necessary social services”. Also, World Conference on Women’s Rights, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action have agreed that “Women and girls’ human rights are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedom²”. Nepal is the signatory country to these declarations and treaties. Although Chhaupadi is outlawed and

¹UN field Bulletin: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Water/ContributionsStigma/others/field_bulletin_-_issue1_april_2011_-_chaupadi_in_far-west.pdf

² United Nations [homepage on the Internet]. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Available from: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>. And Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Beijing +20: human rights of women. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Available from: <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/Beijing20Review.pdf>.

regarded as a violation of international laws and agreements, this practice is still alive in many rural areas of mid and far-western regions of Nepal.

Positive change is happening

Under an ancient Hindu ideology, menstruation is considered as unclean and impure. Such prejudices ban women from taking part in normal family activities, touching male members of the family, even trees and plants, entering temples and sacred places, during menstruation. However, things are changing and in cities, girls and modern families have started speaking against this prejudice.

Also, regarding Chhaupadi, many community-based organizations, supported by UN and other international organizations, are raising awareness among rural men and women at different levels so that this discriminatory practice will be stopped. For example, Women and Child Development Offices in Doti and Achham (western districts) are implementing an 'awareness programme against Chaupadi', which is supported by Save the Children and covers 19 villages in Achham and more than 10 villages in Doti. The key activities include awareness raising targeting adolescents, traditional healers, teachers and students at community level. The programme also advocates for women's rights, promotes infrastructure development such as girl-friendly toilets and water taps. Furthermore, there have been many advocacy campaigns by means of dramas, radio jingles, pamphlets, documentaries, etc. to stop such discriminatory practices against women. There is also a good sign from the government side as several joint programs are being implemented by allocating budgets at local levels to raise awareness towards stopping Chhaupadi.