

Culture Clash: Menstruation taboos and ODF in Nepal

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Project background

The Rural Village Water Resources Management Project, a bilateral project funded by Finland and Nepal, operates in 10 districts of far and mid west Nepal (<http://www.rvwrmp.org.np/>). The project is fully embedded in district structures and supports small-scale rural water supply, sanitation, microhydro, livelihoods and home gardens, as well as capacity building. It has a strong focus on gender and social inclusion, as well as a human rights approach.

Menstruation practices in far west Nepal

Many Nepalese women face a discriminatory practice during their menstruation, popularly known as Chhaupadi practice. In the Far-West, adolescent girls and women are confined in a small hut ('chhau hut') or livestock quarters, as they are considered impure. The chhaupadi practice is a social tradition that prevents women from participating in normal family or communal activities during their menstruation. A similar practice is prevalent during childbirth and for the following 11 days or so (with obvious health risks). Many women believe that if they don't follow these practices, their families will blame them for all harm that may befall them or their livestock.

The duration and harshness of the chhaupadi varies geographically (but is more pronounced in the Far West Nepal districts), and is often coupled with other traditional practices (related to diet during periods and pregnancy, such as avoiding milk products) which have an adverse impact on the health and nutritional status of reproductive aged women and girls. One of the main concerns for any WASH-related project is that menstruating women are not allowed to use the same water resources and sanitation facilities as other family or community members, which can result in poor and unsafe personal hygiene.

The conditions of the chhaupadi huts are very basic in most cases (see photos below). Rather than being an opportunity to rest and have quality time with other women, they can even be dangerous. We have witnessed cases of disabled women dying alone in the huts (eg. one last year who suffered an epileptic fit and kicked the fire, leading to serious burns and death). Some women have also been raped while isolated.



That's not to say that all women object to using them. During the Maoist insurgency, many chhaupadi huts were destroyed under duress. However, in some areas women have reverted to build and use the huts again. Some women have commented that they feel uncomfortable staying with the house for religious reasons.

RVWRMP, as part of pre-and post-Open Defecation Free (ODF) sanitation and hygiene promotion activities, has been actively campaigning against harmful aspects of chhaupadi practices. Increasing the capacity of the community-level health workers, V-WASH-CCs as well as D-WASH-CCs and district-level partners is one of the main approaches of the awareness creation. In addition, the project has supported the production of two chhaupadi-related documentaries. The issue is commonly raised in discussions with community members. RVWRMP is also collaborating with the district level Women and Children Office, to change community attitudes and behaviours. In response to the Chaupadi system in far western region, the Government of Nepal has formulated "Chaupadi Directives 2064 B.S. (2007)" as per the verdict of Supreme Court.

Chhaupadi and ODF

Within the sanitation activities promoted by the project, there has been a strong focus on construction of toilets. This was originally using an education and subsidy approach, but in recent years it has moved to the Community-Led Total Sanitation approach. This has proved very successful. The project is now fully aligned with the Nepal Sanitation and Hygiene Master Plan.

Many of the areas where the project functions have never had toilets earlier. We now have many VDCs (the smallest administrative area) declared ODF. However, after this achievement a new issue has arisen. Queries by visiting technical staff have revealed that in some VDCs, menstruating women are not allowed to use toilets as they may “make the toilets impure”. In other words, cultural behaviours towards menstruating women are causing exclusion from toilets and therefore open defecation. It is making a mockery of ODF declarations, as in practice it means that at any time 1/4 of all women who are cycling are defecating outside. This is happening both in the hill districts and in the Terai, where some groups have brought their traditions with them when migrating. Given that the toilets are a new thing in the villages, there is no tradition of exclusion – it has been an extrapolation from exclusion from other household sites. During discussion, the main problem identified is touching the same water container (used for washing and flushing) as other household members – in this case community came up with an option of using a different utensil for toilet use during menstruation. However, others argue that the whole toilet will be contaminated by the menstruating woman.

There have also in the past sometimes been problems due to menstruating women and dalits not being able to wash in communal taps and therefore having to find other more risky sources - in rivers, or in some cases disgruntled women have washed in the intake – which is a true hygiene problem for everyone. However, with community discussions and good awareness raising, attitudes in most districts towards tap access are gradually changing.

The use of household toilets is more problematic in some of the districts however. The project is working with district authorities, Village WASH Coordinating Committees, and community and religious leaders, to think up new approaches. One example is given below.

Kotatulsipur VDC Kailali, Nepal

Kota Tulsipur VDC has been declared as first ODF VDC Kailali district. Although a terai region, (where Chhau practice is less prevalent) people migrating from Acham district in the hills have also brought this practice in the VDC. Thus, there are still some Chhau huts in some clusters of the VDC, and women are forbidden to use toilet during their periods. RVWRMP organized a meeting in January 2013 with a religious leader (or dharni) for sanitation triggering, concentrating on women’s right to use toilet during menstruation as a Pre-ODF Campaign. 200 women and school girls attended.

Pictures of chhau huts in Kota Tulsipur taken during VDC monitoring in June 2012 were printed and shown to the participants. Other triggering materials were picture cards (cat, dog and human methods of defecation and faeces route to food, etc.). Pictures of goddesses who never stayed in chhau hut and pictures of ShivaParvati who never separated even during her periods, were also used. Some female project staff talked of their own experiences.

The dharni advised the participants to use a separate water pot for menstruating women in the toilet and just to clean the toilet properly after every user. He assured the participants that God would not get angry with menstruating women using the toilet. With all these awareness campaigns, the VDC has been declared ODF and women are using toilets during menstruation.



Dhakari VDC, Achham

Achham district has been the district with the most deep rooted tradition of Chhau practice. Ms. Laxmi Buda, 16 years of age, from Dhakari VDC (one of our working areas) died in a Chhau hut in December 2010 due to the cold. Dharma Buda, mother of Sunita, who was following the tradition of Chhau, was disheartened with this accident. She burnt her Chhau hut right there. Since then, she has been actively participating in the anti-Chhau Campaign and creating awareness among community members.