

# **"Chhue, Chhaupadi and Chueekula Pratha" – Menstrual Sheds: Examples of Discriminatory Practices against Women in the Mid- and Far-Western Regions of Nepal: Considering Women as "Impure" or "Unclean" During Menstruation and Post-Partum Periods**

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*Abstract: "Chhue, Chhaupadi and Chueekula Pratha" are discriminatory practices against women during their menstrual periods and the post-partum period in Nepal. Observational and open discussion studies were carried out in areas of the Mid- and Far-Western Regions of the country. These practices are continued through cultural norms, social taboos and superstition. During these periods, women are considered "impure" or "unclean" and are prohibited from taking part in many normal aspects of their lives. These women believe that any breach in such practice will bring bad omens upon their family, community or society. These practices are a violation of human rights and are a form of gender discrimination against women and children, in turn leading to negative effects on health, education and the country's socioeconomic development.*

**Background:** In most parts of the developed world, women assume that their menstrual periods will remain part of their private lives and will not affect their ability to work, go to school or otherwise contribute to society. This is not the case in Nepal, where women are considered "unclean" during the menstrual period and are prevented from taking part in many normal aspects of their lives. There are clear cultural reasons for these taboos and practices. When, a Hindu woman reaches maturity, she is kept in a dark room from four to sixteen days and is forbidden to see the sun. During this period of seclusion, she is often guarded by her relatives. She is not allowed to speak, or if necessary, it should be not above a whisper. It is believed that if the woman does not adhere to these practices, there could be any number of negative impacts: she could become sick or die; her bones could break; she could become infertile; others could fall ill or even die. She will become sexually dangerous and harm would come to any partners' genitals and person could not have sex and could be harmful to family members, village etc if the seclusion is broken. If these women were unable to maintain these traditions, their community would be shattered and would no longer survive.

In response to these beliefs, menstrual huts were built in the patriarchal societies. Menstrual huts are associated with ideas of pollution, misogyny, and inter-sexual tension in the literature (Janet Hoskins et al.). Known variously as "Chhue" in Dadeldhura, "Chhaupadi" in Achham and "Chueekula" in Humla districts, this is a practice wherein women must remain in a small shed, often where animals are kept in other times, during menstruation and post-partum periods. These are serious discriminatory practices, common to the Mid- and Far-Western regions, which women face in Nepal.

**Mid and Far Western Regions:** Nepal is a landlocked country, bordered by India and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China. The country's social structure is greatly diversified, be it in terms of ethnicity, language or culture. Due to the poor economic condition of the country, having a per capita GDP of less than \$200, ineffective development practices and high rates of illiteracy, taboos and superstitions continue. Nepal is commonly viewed in terms of five development regions, the mid- and far-western regions being located in the western part of Nepal. Compared to other regions, these areas are highly under serviced by development activities. People of these areas

adhere strictly to their cultures, beliefs, taboos, and superstitions. There are total of 24 districts in these regions and Dadeldhura, Accham and Humla are the districts wherein the authors observed and studied these practices.

#### **Case Studies:**

Rama Shah (name changed) from Dadeldhura shared her bitter experiences. Each month during menstruation, she has to stay in her family's cattle shed, which serves as the menstrual hut. She has asked herself why god has given this torture to women. Staying in the shed is horrible; smelling because of its function as a cattle shed. She is even obligated to take her meals in this unclean environment. During menstruation, she is considered to be "impure" or "unclean" during these periods and is regarded as an untouchable by her family members. She has had bitter experiences, rooted in these practices. She once went to clean herself and her clothes in a nearby stream, but villagers and family members accused her of making the stream impure. After several weeks, the problem was rectified, but not until she had assured her fellow villagers that she would not repeat her actions in the future. Elderly people and others in the community hesitated to use the stream water for a long period. She doesn't have hope that her situation will change after marriage, saying, "My own family doesn't consider or support us during that period, even though we are their own daughters and sisters. Why would the in-laws give us support, when the daughters-in-law are considered secondary?" She believes that this practice is a result of traditional beliefs, taboos and practices.

Mrs. Sharmila Magar (name changed) also has to stay in her family's cattle shed and menstrual hut during her monthly periods. Members of her family

and the people of the community consider the time of a woman's period as very "impure". The women have to remain secluded in a separate area and cattle sheds are used for this purpose. Because the village is stricken with poverty, the community can not construct another shelter for use as a menstrual shed. The community believes that if anything is touched by a menstruating woman, it will become impure and may cause harm to others. If they touch something accidentally, then the item should be cleaned immediately to make it reusable. If the women touch their husband or other family members, then those touched must bathe in order to cleanse themselves of impurities. During these periods, she feels as if she was an animal and, for this reason, wants to share her experience. Even during the winter season, her family's beliefs wouldn't change. She was forced to stay in the shed without a proper warming mechanism. She had to sleep on the floor with only a layer of straw and a thin blanket for a bed. Her meals were also supplied in the shed and she had to walk a long distance for cleaning early in the morning. On one occasion during the winter season, she fell sick with a high fever, later diagnosed as pneumonia. For her treatment, the family had to bear the high costs, though it was difficult for the poor family. Though the family members were aware of the reasons for her illness, they remain unwilling to change their traditions because of conservative beliefs and social pressures.

When Mrs. Sindhu Shah (name changed), a Community Mobilizer, came to understand the negative effects of "Chhaupadi Pratha", she gave up such practices and stayed in her home during menstruation. However, during this time, her goats were killed by wild animals. All of her family members believed that, because she refused to adhere to tradition, she had brought a bad omen

upon their family, angering the gods. This reinforced her belief in such practices and she felt that the "god and goddess were not happy with her". She continued the practice again, despite some reluctance. After she became a Community Mobilizer for a local NGO, working on empowering members of the community, she learned more about women's and children's issues. Now, she, along with her family members, does not believe in such practices and does not follow the tradition.

This is the story of a mother from Achham who had been practicing "Chhaupadi" since her first menstruation, even continuing the practice during the post-partum period, following the birth of her child. She had many difficult experiences since she began the practice, but also she agrees with the traditional cultures and practices. She believes that if she doesn't follow them, her family will blame her for all harm that may come to the family. Because of this practice, she had lost her baby. To her surprise, however, no one in her family developed a negative attitude towards such practices and so they continue the tradition. Immediately after delivering her first baby, she was taken to the cattle shed with her baby. Due to the cold and unhygienic environment, both of them were struck by illnesses. The mother had a puerperal sepsis (Post partum Infection) and the baby girl came down with pneumonia. The mother's bleeding and infections never stopped and baby's respiration and fever worsened with the passing of every day. By the time the family had them taken to the hospital, it was too late to save the baby. The pain of losing her daughter could be observed in her watering eyes.

**Observation of the shed:** The sheds the serve as menstrual huts are used primarily as a shelter for

cattle. Frequently, the sheds have two stories, where the upper floor is about three feet high, though some are single storied. The ground floor is used for the cattle. When it has been built, the upper floor of is used as the menstrual shed, whereas in a single storied hut, a side room or even the main area is used. In front of the shed, dung and other wastes are collected. Typically, the shed is located at a distance from the home. These sheds are typically roofed with grass, although occasionally are made of stone. The sheds are very unhygienic, unventilated and poorly built. During their seclusion, women have to remain within the shed, often without sufficient clothes or blankets. In some places, there are small sheds built specially for the purpose of seclusion. These tend to be very small and unventilated. Women and girls are barely able to stand up inside them. In Achham district, they are called Chhaupadi. "Chhau" means menstruation and "Padi" means women.

**Discussion:** These practices are driven by culture, its taboos and superstitions, in particular. A Hindu girl or women are secluded, believing that it will not bring any harm to community and the family. If the custom is breached by any means then it will create problem both on women and other member of the community like becoming sick, infertile and even the death. During this period they defer from the sex believing that the period is dangerous and may harm the genitals of the partner and making him sterile or impotent. It is believes that if women don't maintain this tradition, the community would no longer be able to survive. Partly as a result of these beliefs, menstrual huts were built in the patriarchal societies.

Tribal men of the west are frightened of menstrual blood and believe that a single drop could kill them. Even the gaze of a menstruating woman could

mean death. If touched by her hands, they could come to great harm in the hunt. Menstrual seclusion rites, as recorded over the last few centuries, typically include the following practices. Menstruating women must not see light. She must touch neither water nor earth. When a girl gets her period for the first time, she is separated from her community and is not allowed to see light. At the end of her bleeding, she reemerges and is taken around and shown the earth, water, flowers and friends as if seeing them for the first time. Girls are secluded in a darkened section of the house and forbidden to look upon men and allowed to go outdoors only on a dark night. At the end of the cloistering, the family and villagers celebrate with a feast.

The sheds are very dirty and unhygienic, having cattle excreta on the floor. They are also very cold during the winter. The women sleep on the floor, with only straw and a thin blanket for bedding. They have to take a bath every day for seven days, but they are not allowed to clean themselves at the common tap. They have to go to a separate tap built for Chhaupadi or to a nearby river for bathing and the washing of clothes. Frequently, "Chhaupadi" are not allowed to enter the household compound and are not allowed to touch other people. There are also strong traditional beliefs that their family would become sick and bad things would happen in the house if the "Chhaupadi" stayed at home. The women are unable to touch fruit trees, fetch water, water plants or milk the cattle. It is believed that if they touch the fruit trees, the fruits will fall before they are ripe or the fruits will be dry; if they fetch water, the well will dry up; if the cattle are fed or milked by Chhaupadi, blood will come out of their teats instead of milk.

In certain villages of the hill districts in the Mid- and Far-Western regions of Nepal, there is also the

practice of keeping pregnant women in a small shed, known as a "goth" for the delivery of their babies. After delivery, they have to stay in the shed for 11 days because they are "impure". Both infant and women are forced to stay in a shed that has cattle excreta on the floor. Their family members do not touch the woman or child. Alone and tired, the women have to do all the caring practices for themselves. Generally, 11 days after the birth, after rituals of purification are performed, the women receive new clothes and they are allowed to return home to stay with the other family members.

In the shed, these women and infants are exposed to various infections and long-term ailments. There have been many cases of deaths and serious illnesses due to these practices. They are regularly suffering from infections like pneumonia, puerperal sepsis (Post partum infection), diarrhea and other chronic diseases, including mental disorders. This practice contributes significantly to the low birth weight of children, high infant morbidity and mortality, and to high maternal mortality, resulting in a lower life expectancy for women. This has contributed to the poor socio-economic development of the society and the country.

It is a culturally driven gender discrimination against women. These beliefs and taboos continue to be practiced in this country, in even in the Twenty-first Century. Women are considered "impure" or "unclean" and are prevented from taking part in many normal aspects of their lives during these periods. They believe that any breach in such practices will bring bad omens to their family, community and society.

**Conclusion:** "Chhaupadi" in Achham, "Chueekula" in Humla and "Chhue" in Dadeldhura are practices in which women are kept in a small shed during menstruation and after the delivery of their

children. The low birth weight of children, high infant morbidity and mortality, and to high maternal mortality, resulting in a lower life expectancy for women are the products of such practices. So these practices contribute significantly on the health status of the people of the region and poor socio-economic development of the society and the country. These culturally driven gender discrimination has made people to believe that any breach on practices will bring harm to their family, community and society even in the twenty first century.

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