

FIELD BULLETIN

Chaupadi In The Far-West

Background

Chaupadi is a long held and widespread practice in the Far and Mid Western Regions of Nepal among all castes and groups of Hindus. According to the practice, women are considered 'impure' during their menstruation cycle, and are subsequently separated from others in many spheres of normal, daily life.

The system is also known as '*chhue*' or '*bahirhunu*' in Dadeldhura, Baitadi and Darchula, as '*chaupadi*' in Achham, and as '*chaukulla*' or '*chaukudi*' in Bajhang district.

Discrimination Against Women During Menstruation

Women face various discriminatory practices in the context of *chaupadi*. The tradition is that women cannot enter inside houses, kitchens and temples. They also can't touch other persons, cattle, green vegetables and plants, or fruits. Similarly, women practicing *chaupadi* cannot milk buffalos or cows, and are not allowed to drink milk or eat milk products.

Generally, women stay in a separate hut or cattle shed for 5 days during menstruation. However, those experiencing menstruation for the first time should, according to practice, remain in such a shed for at least 14 days.

Access to water taps and wells is also limited. Women practicing *chaupadi* can only bathe or wash clothes in a '*chaupadi dhara*'- a separate well, stream or small rivulet near the village.

Religious and Cultural Beliefs Behind *Chaupadi*

There are strong religious and cultural beliefs linked to *chaupadi*. There is a belief that women should follow the *chaupadi* norms during the 'impure' period of menstruation. They are barred from participating in family and community level cultural and religious activities, such as *poojas* and festivals, during their menstrual cycle.



Participants of training on *Chaupadi*-WCDO
Doti

According to the Accham Women's Development Officer (WDO), more than 95% of women are practicing *chaupadi* in the district. Women and Child Development Offices in Doti and Achham are implementing an 'Awareness Programme against *Chaupadi*'. The programme is supported by Save the Children and covers 19 VDCs in Achham and 10 VDCs in Doti. In the VDCs targeted by this program, the number practicing *chaupadi* is less at 85%.¹

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 forms watch groups.²

¹ Interview with Women's Development Officer, Accham District, held on 16 February 2011.

² WCDO Achham, *Chaupadi* Programme - Annual Reports 2009 and 2010.

Furthermore, it is said that women should also observe the '*Rishi Panchami*' festival once a year, during which women fast and pray in order to purify themselves or to compensate for any inappropriate behavior during menstruation.³

Some in the Far West still believe that a God or Goddess may be angered if the practice is violated, which could result in a shorter life, the death of livestock or destruction of crops. It is believed by some that if a woman touches fruits, they will fall before they are ripe. If she fetches water, the well will dry up.

Impacts of Chaupadi on Women

Women practicing *chaupadi* face both physical and mental hardship. As mentioned, women are often relegated to '*chaupadi goth*' or cattle sheds where they stay in very basic, unhygienic and exposed conditions. According to custom, women should not be given milk or ghee while they are menstruating or

Putting Lives at Risk

- Staying in a chaupadi or cattle shed can be very risky. Many women have lost their lives while practicing the system. In December 2010, a woman in Bhairabstan-8, Achham District, died of exposure while staying in a *chaupadi* shed.⁵ Though exact statistics are not available, deaths of women are reported each year as a result of exposure, bites by poisonous snakes or scorpions or animal attacks while residing in the exposed *chaupadi* sheds.
- In January 2010, an 11 year-old girl from Achham died after a bout with diarrhea and dehydration that began while she was confined in the shed. Her family and neighbors refused to take her to hospital, believing they would become impure if they touched the menstruating girl.⁶

pregnant, but should only eat flatbread with salt.⁴ This deprives them of nutritious food during their periods. As women are not allowed in the house during menstruation, they often engage in harder, manual labor outdoors as a result, including digging, collecting firewood and grasses and farm labor. These conditions take their toll on women's health and make them more vulnerable to various health problems, including diarrhea, pneumonia and respiratory diseases.

89% of women in Nepal deliver their children at home.⁷ While the proportion of these women that in fact deliver in *chaupadi goth* is not known, it is thought to be high in the Far West. Furthermore, nearly 60% of women give birth with only family members or no one in attendance. These conditions are thought to contribute to higher maternal and child mortality rates.⁸

Feelings of insecurity, guilt and humiliation, as well as sadness and depression, are also experienced by women practicing *chaupadi*.⁹

An NGO worker interviewed in Dadeldhura reported that drunkards sometimes go to *chaupadi* sheds and sexually abuse the women staying in them. Such incidents are rarely reported due to stigma.¹⁰

In some areas, it is believed that '*Sarswati*,' the Goddess of Education, will become angry if a girl or woman reads, writes or touches books during her menstrual cycle. This results in girls' attendance at school being

³ Interview with NGO staff member working on gender, Doti, 17 March 2011

⁴ www.myrepublica.com/portal/index.php/thweek/http/slc/index.php?action=news_details&news_id=20263

⁵ www.ekantipur.com/np/news/news-detail.php?news_id=304668

⁶ Anju Gautam Yogi, "Menstruation Forces Rural Nepali Women into Isolation," 16 September 2010

⁷ Government of Nepal, Demographic and Health Survey, 2006

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Dadeldhura DDC, *Study Report on Chaupadi in Dadeldhura*, December 2010.

¹⁰ Interview with female staff of NGO working on gender issues, 17 March 2011

interrupted, and has the potential to increase the gap between girls and boys in education and increase discrimination over the long term.

Current Trends of Chaupadi Practice

Despite the efforts of Government and various organizations, most women in the Far West are still

following the *chaupadi* practice. There are still *chaupadi* sheds in Achham, Bajhang, Bajura and the *Tarai* areas of Dadeldhura. Most women in rural areas of the Far West hill and mountain districts stay in such sheds. In Doti, Baitadi and Darchula, most women stay in cattle sheds, while only a few women stay in a separate room within the house called a '*baitkak*'.¹²

Most women follow all the norms of the system. However, some women residing near the district headquarters have started to drink milk and eat milk products. The number of girls attending school during menstruation has significantly increased recently. At the same time, even educated women still hesitate to visit temples or prepare food in case they may anger the Gods or Goddesses and bring misfortune.¹³

A female NGO worker in Dadeldhura reported that it's very difficult to convince the older generation to abandon *Chaupadi*. Neighbors are said to put pressure on the woman or her family when they do not follow the system.¹⁴

Some Initiatives by The Government of Nepal (GoN)

- In May 2005, the Supreme Court of Nepal outlawed the chaupadi system and issued a directive to the GoN to formulate laws eliminating the practice. However, it's still practiced throughout the Far Western Region.
- In 2008, the Ministry of Women, Child and Social Welfare promulgated guidelines to eradicate chaupadi nationally ("Chhaupdi Pratha Unmulan Nirdesika" of 2064). Adherence to these guidelines remains incomplete. For example, the guidelines call for committees to be established at district level to address chaupadi, many of which have not been formed.
- The Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007 seeks to bring an end to discrimination, including based on gender, and ensures rights to equality and social justice, and protection against caste discrimination.¹¹ This provides further legal backing to efforts to end the practice of chaupadi.

Chaupadi in the Context of International Rights and Norms

The practice of chaupadi challenges fundamental human rights in that it promotes discrimination and increases vulnerability. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) proclaims the entitlement of everyone to enjoy equal dignity, rights and fundamental freedoms without distinction of any kind, including sex, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, birth or other status.¹⁵

Nepal is also a state party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Its preamble states that discrimination against women is an obstacle to the equal participation of women in political, social, economic and cultural life. CEDAW also calls upon states to work toward eliminating prejudices and customary practices based on the idea of inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles for women.¹⁶

¹¹ Interim Constitution of Nepal, Part 3, Articles 13, 14 and 21

¹² Interview with NGO staff working on gender issues in Doti, 17-3-11, and in Dadeldhura, 29 March 2011

¹³ Interview with WDO and women attending chaupadi training, Doti, 17 March 2011

¹⁴ Interview with NGO staff member working on gender, Doti, 17 March 2011

¹⁵ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1 and 2

¹⁶ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Article 5a

Further Interventions Needed to End Chaupadi

There are many international and national organizations working to end *chaupadi*. Similarly, Women’s Development Offices and women’s groups in all the Far Western districts are also working on the issue.

Because of the efforts of these organizations, things are improving. However, further efforts are needed to end this long-held tradition. Millennium Development Goal (MDG) Goal -3 aims to promote gender equality and empower women. Similarly, MDG Goal-5 aims to improve maternal health and reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three-quarters between 1990 and 2015. The *chaupadi* system may be one of the barriers to achieving these goals, or to ensuring that progress, such as the recent advancements achieved by Nepal under MDG 5, are shared equally across the country. Thus, further interventions are required to end the practice.



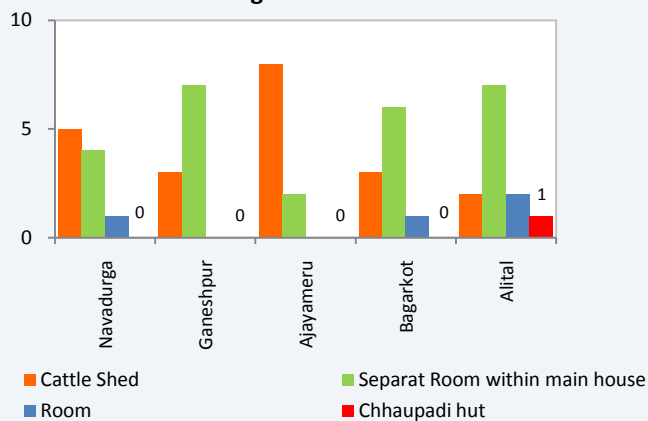
Chaupadi shed (Photo-WCDO Achham)

Shelter During Menstruation Period

During the menstrual and post-partum periods, women stay in a small shed called a ‘chaupadi goth’ - a separate, dedicated shed constructed near the house. These huts are made of stone and mud and some have grass roofs. They have no proper doors and generally don’t have windows. These sheds are often unhygienic, and women sleep on the floor with straw and only a thin blanket for bedding.

The Women Development Officer (WDO) and women participating in a chaupadi workshop in Doti reported the number of dedicated ‘chaupadi goth’ was decreasing, and that most women now stay in cattle sheds during menstruation.¹⁷ A study carried out by the District Development Office in 5 VDCs in Dadeldhura corroborated this, and revealed that women are also using a ‘baithak’ -a separate room within the main house.¹⁸

Shelter During Menstruation Period



¹⁷ Interview with WDO and women attending chaupadi workshop, Doti, 17 March 2011

¹⁸ Dadeldhura DDC, *Study Report on Chaupadi in Dadeldhura*, December 2010

Some of the activities highlighted by persons working against *Chaupadi* include:

- Raising awareness among men and women at community level, and targeting traditional healers, mothers-in-law, priests, adolescents and vulnerable groups in particular;
- Advocacy campaigns against *chaupadi*, including posters, booklets, and radio campaigns in local languages;
- Increased joint programming on *chaupadi* through, for example, forming district level committees as per the MWCSW guidelines and developing coordination mechanisms among agencies working on *chaupadi*;
- Allocating funds at VDC level fund to enhance awareness on *chaupadi* and encourage VDCs to declare *chaupadi* free areas.¹⁹

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¹⁹ Interviews held on 17 March 2011 with WDO and participants attending chaupadi training in Doti; Dadeldhura DDC, *Study Report on Chaupadi in Dadeldhura*, December 2010