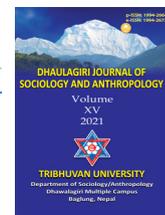


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Menstrual Exclusions in Nepal: Some Evidence of Transition

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Abstract

There is a long history of menstrual restrictions, stigmas and taboos across nearly all religions, regions and cultures. The origins of myths and misconceptions have often been linked to various religious texts and women were prohibited from participating in normal life while menstruating. Culturally, in many parts of the world, menstruation is still considered 'dirty' and 'impure', although this is not true. Menstruation is often associated with feelings of shame, horror, danger, disgust, and sin. There have been initiatives to change the perception that menstruating women are not polluted, thus bringing an end to traditional customs such as not being allowed to sleep in their own home or touch male relatives to more extreme forms of isolation such as being confined to the 'cow shed'. This paper draws on research conducted between 2019 and 2021 under a British Academy-funded Global Challenge Research Fund project entitled 'Dignity Without Danger'. The study employed qualitative methods, covering 160 qualitative interviews and 16 focus group discussions among different caste and ethnic groups in three different ecological areas (mountain, hill, and tarai) in seven provinces in Nepal. Today, menstruating women have relatively more freedom to discuss this topic due to increased awareness that menstruation is a natural process. However, our study shows there are still differences between cultures, religions, castes and ethnic groups, and regions, and a single narrative does not represent the issues related to menstrual exclusion in Nepal. The study shows that many menstruating girls and women are still restricted in a number of diverse ways, from not offering prayers, entering or worshiping in temples, touching holy books, and participating in religious rituals. In some areas, more extreme practices persist which discriminate against women when menstruating. Our research highlights that education and an interdisciplinary, multisector approach are required if menstrual discrimination is to be addressed. Finally, this paper emphasizes the necessity for providing correct knowledge about menstruation to the entire community including elders, males and religious leaders as well as adolescents and young girls. Such knowledge will help them practice safe and hygienic menstrual practices, challenge and reduce their traditional beliefs, misconceptions and restrictions regarding menstruation that are essential to achieving menstrual dignity.

Keywords: dignified menstrual, menstrual practices, new knowledge, traditional beliefs, Nepal

Introduction

Menstruation is a natural physiological phenomenon experienced by women monthly after attaining puberty and continues until menopause. Bio-medically, menstruation results from ovulation when the egg is not fertilized, leading to bleeding from the endometrial vessels

in preparation for the next cycle. Menstruating girls and women in many parts of the world who experience forced or self-imposed isolation, are prevented from participating in daily household activities such as cooking and are increasingly subject to stigma and shame (Bobel et al., 2020). The question of menstrual exclusion and the associated socio-cultural practices has emerged as



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a prominent issue in recent human rights discourse and within the feminist movement. Unquestionably, various practices during menstruation are linked with historical, socio-cultural, and interrelated power dimensions.

This paper aims to explore the changes in menstrual exclusion practices in Nepal. This requires a comparative historical perspective on the social structure in society. The social world we live in, social institutions, and social relationships are changing as the economic, political, ideological and cultural context keep changing. Traditional roles ascribed to children, youths and elderly, men and women, are undergoing transformation. The nature of marriage and family, parent-child relationships, and friendships are changing (Mishra, 2007). People's perceptions and practices related to menstrual exclusion are also changing.

In some places and times, the speed of social change is rapid, whereas the pace of change is slow at other times and places. Comparative methods engage a prominent place in the social sciences because of the value of the description, explanations and interpretations of the reality that can be made from them. In addition, they have been recognized as valuable in the last decades, for being constructed as an input for the identification of the social problems and for the design of public policies and, at the same time, as a reference parameter and a source of legitimation (Piovani & Krawczyk, 2017).

Research on menstruation in Nepal has focused on either menstrual hygiene and management issues or the nature of taboos and exclusions practiced in various cultural contexts (Robinson, 2015; Crawford et al, 2014; Wateraid, 2015). Researchers have not given adequate attention to the transformation of menstrual practices as a product of social formation and negotiation in their daily life.

This paper highlights the evidences of transitions of menstrual practices in Nepal. These changes do not happen in a vacuum, but are situated the changing economic, social and political context of society.

Methods and Materials

This paper is one of the outputs of the research project, 'Dignity Without Danger: Collaboratively analyzing stigma and taboos to develop innovative strategies to address menstrual exclusion in Nepal'. The research was funded by the British Academy through the Global Challenge Research Fund (GCRF) Sustainable Development project. One of the objectives of the research was to study the social formation, transformation and to identify general patterns. The aim was, among others, to study social processes over time, highlighting contexts and contingencies that influence specific changes while looking for general patterns and evidence of complexity.

This study applies a historical-comparative perspective that menstrual exclusions are not 'natural' and 'divine'

categories but historically and socially constructed (Kiser & Hechter, 1991). This method allows social scientists to analyze at the middle and macro level, and offer important insight into perplexing and pertinent social issues (Mahoney, 2004; Lange, 2012). This perspective has certain characteristics. It is contextual. In situating menstruation practices in the socio-political and historical context, we may understand the social relations and cultural practices. It is comparative. Historical research can compare the practices and reveal the changes in various practices that allow us to discern sources of differences and to trace changes as it evolves over time (Mishra, 2007). History can also reveal development over time. Stigma and taboos on menstruation are not uniform, fixed and unchanging. The direction and rate of change are historically shaped and potentially discontinuous. This approach reminds us that cultural practices are not static but vary across time and location.

This qualitative study included 160 interviews and 16 focus group discussions among different castes and ethnic groups (Brahmin, Chhetri, Dalits, Newar, Magars, Gurungs, Sherpa, Rai, Limbu, Tharu and Muslim minority). The research was conducted in 14 districts (Ilam, Solukhumbu, Dhanusa, Mahottari, Makawanpur, Lalitpur, Baglung, Kaski, Kapilvastu, Rolpa, Dailekh, Jumla, Kanchanpur and Achham) in 2019 and 2021, covering mountain, hill and tarai areas in all seven provinces in Nepal. Menstrual taboos, practices, and exclusion were explored among menstruating girls and women, political leaders, mother groups, and traditional healers, to compare their manifestations in different socio-cultural settings (institutions, customs, traditions, value system). It was a rapid multi-sited ethnography to explore the cultural formation produced in several locales (Marcus, 1995). Six field researchers were given a week-long training about the issue of menstruation, ethnographic fieldwork methods, ethnic and culturally sensitive issues. Data collection tools were pre-tested and refined. The field researchers were divided into two groups to cover the 'West' and 'East of Nepal. All three members in each group were females, with two being senior and four junior researchers. The field team stayed in the study villages for at least one week and collected data using interview and focus group discussion guides. They also kept field diaries for observations and captured key moments on cameras (Punch, 2012). In each study districts, the field researchers were assisted by the local non-governmental organization (NGO) partners. The collaboration with the NGO partners helped to negotiate access to a number of the study sites and observe the life and living of people. By using multi-sited rapid ethnography, the research team was able to understand how various factors have contributed to forming and decreasing stigma and discrimination during menstruation. Workshops were also held mid field data collection and also after data collection on data analysis and using creative methods and diaries. Although there were some challenges, not least the

challenges presented by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the multi-sited rapid ethnography was the most appropriate way to explore the issue and central to the research. Ethical approval was taken from Nepal Health Research Council and Liverpool John Moores University, United Kingdom.

Findings and Discussion

Cultural Understanding of Menstruation

Menstruation is the beginning of womanhood, a unique phenomenon among women that starts around the adolescent age of 11-15 years, a key sign of reproductive health and a way of preparing for pregnancy. However, there are several taboos in many parts of the world concerning menstruation and it is often associated with discourses surrounding purity and danger (Douglas 1966). Nepal is a multiethnic, multilingual, multi-religious and multicultural country. More than 125 caste and ethnic groups live, 123 languages are spoken and ten religious practice their norms and values (Central Bureau of Statistics[CBS], 2014). There is a great variation in the menstrual practices within and between the groups.

Cultural norms and religious taboos concerning menstruation are often associated with evil spirits, shame, and embarrassment regarding sexual reproduction. Many of those taboos are based on religious beliefs, while others have roots in culture and tradition, and they are manifested in the form of various practices (Kadaria & Aro, 2015). Women are often considered 'impure' or 'dangerous' during menstruation and are therefore required to refrain from participating in normal daily activities (Douglas, 1966; Bennet, 1976). In some places, they are forced to isolate themselves for the duration of their period. Depending on the religion, ethnicity, caste, and geography; menstruating women and girls are variously prohibited from cooking, eating with family, looking in mirrors, visiting temples, going to school or work, farming activity and physical contact with men (Mahon & Fernandes, 2010; Baumann et al; 2021, PSI, 2017). The menstruation discourse in Nepal has mainly focused on the extreme form of *chhaupadi* where women and girls are confined in unhealthy and dangerous spaces, often a cowshed, which despite being criminalized, is still practiced in some regions of Nepal (Parker & Standing, 2019, Baumann et al, 2021). It is important to note that there is no single narrative of menstruation in Nepal and the diversity and intersecting factors need to be considered. The social construction of beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes about menstruation varies in various times, places, and among different people and communities and largely depends on the area's socio-economic and cultural history. There are levels of severity of menstrual restriction that depend on several intersecting factors such as the education levels of males and females in the household, location, religious background and caste/ethnic background. The following sections explore the key

variables for the change of menstrual exclusion in Nepal.

Gravity of the Problem

Menstruation is a biological process. However, the stigma and discrimination during menstruation are historically shaped and socially constructed, and a human rights concern is relevant to all genders. However, many societies take menstruations as a 'women's issue', or 'private issue'. Compared to other issues like social inequality, ethnic identity, democracy and social movements, social exclusion and inclusion, menstruation is often seen with much silence globally. With the rise of feminist movements, 'period poverty' and media attention on this issue, there is an emerging discourse on menstruation. People are concerned about the issue and hardly have access to reliable information. Much of what they know about menstrual concerns come from religious beliefs, practices, and stereotypes. In many cultures, discussions on menstruation, menopause and sexual and reproductive health-related issues are stigmatized (Chrisler, 2013). The findings of this research from different cultural groups and places also clearly showed that, in the past, menstruation was considered dirty and polluted. People did not want to talk about it. Such views contributed to restrictions on women and girls from cultural and social spaces. Such practices reinforced the idea that women and girls have fewer claims to public spaces and participate in public life. These ideas created gender inequality and obstacles to opportunities.

Until recently, human rights activists, development workers, and academia did not take menstruation seriously. Violence, stigma, discrimination, abuse associated with menstruation were not taken care of in Nepal. Only after 1990, with the successful democratic movement, information was gathered and disseminated through publications, and conferences and events started looking at menstruation exclusion. The recommendations decision-makers can address are being shared to review the evidence and identify solutions for dignified menstruation.

Nepal has made tremendous efforts to address menstrual taboos and discrimination in academic, civil society organizations, and state policy. In the academic field, different forms of knowledge are shared at the regional, national and transnational levels, and voices are shared and raised for dignified menstruation. Exploring existing taboos, humiliation, and discrimination faced by women in Nepal during menstruation and building a novel framework of thinking and engaging against such practices are helping to reorder social relations and empower women for dignified menstruation. Various civil society organizations are working against gender-based violence and women's sexual and reproductive health rights. Civil society organizations and state policies have emphasized 'right to health', 'right to education', 'right to work' and 'right to water and sanitation' for women and girls during

menstruation. There is now a wide agreement that women must have access to clean material to absorb or collect menstrual blood; have a place to dispose of used materials supplies or to wash reusable supplies; have basic education about the menstrual cycle, and to manage menstruation without discomfort or fear. We can see some changes on these issues, but many girls are still facing isolation and discrimination during menstruation, having difficulties managing menstruation, especially in school and public places (Budhathoki et al., 2018). They do not have access to clean pads to manage their menstruation.

Religious Ideologies and Norms

In the Hindu faith, women are prohibited from participating in social and religious activities while menstruating. She must be purified before she is allowed to return to her family and to the day-to-day chores of her life. It includes washing clothes, bathing, and drinking or sprinkling cow urine. For Hindus, menstruation is connected with taboo. Purification rituals vary from place to place and range from bathing and washing clothes to drinking or sprinkling cow urine to signify the end of the menstruation period. The number of days that people are considered to be 'impure' ranged from four to over eight days. In the past, the more commonly used Nepali words of menstruation were *para sarne*, *bahira sarne*, *nachhune hune*. It was considered a state of ritual impurity (Bennett, 1976; Bennett, 1983). Individual households and communities were rigid in following these rules, and women and girls had to follow them carefully. The Brahmin and Chhetri respondents of hill origin stated that, in the past, menstruating women and girls were not allowed to go to the kitchen, religious places, and water sources. They were not allowed to touch any plants, fruits and vegetables. They were not allowed to look in a mirror and touch cows, male members, traditional healers and priests. It was believed that girls and women would be cursed if they would not practice the same way. People believed that plants would die if touched by someone during their period. These beliefs were deeply embedded in everyday life of the people. Although exclusion and social stigma related to menstruation still exist, the degree of rigidity has gone down. Collecting fodder and firewood, working in the agricultural field, and washing dishes were the major activities of the menstruating girls and women. These beliefs and practices, however are not confined to the Hindu religion.

Often, respondents from the Buddhist community would inform us that they practice menstrual restrictions, not due to their religion but their culture. Muslim girls and women were following restrictions during menstruation, such as not being allowed to touch the Quran, praying, fasting during Ramadan, not allowed to eat any kinds of citrus fruits and food, not allowed to join any cultural activities, not allowed to go Madarasa, due to consideration of

menstrual blood as impure or dirty. Within Buddhism, although religious leaders informed us that menstruation is not considered impure, there was still hesitancy to enter Buddhist religious sites when menstruating. This highlights how intersectional and complex menstrual practices are in Nepal.

The respondents also mentioned that they have more flexibility on menstrual restriction compared to the past. Many respondents reported that their daughters and younger generation now go to school when they are menstruating and often do not sleep in a separate building (though many had a separate space to sleep) and that in some cases, the number of days was reduced. Some respondents informed us that they did not believe that menstruation was impure and felt that they could challenge the traditions they did not like. However, few people felt they could not challenge the deeply embedded religious beliefs. Many religious people suggest that menstruating women should not touch religious artifacts, attend religious sites, or participate in religious ceremonies. People who broke these traditions did not inform their families for fear of upsetting them, especially their elders. Some respondents felt it would be for them and the next generation to change these practices as the older generations were socialized in their ways. Most of the girls and women mentioned that they do not worship and visit religious places, and do not touch traditional healers and priests during menstruation. Many women mentioned that they do not cook and serve food for four days. Many women still believe that if they do not follow these practices, their family will blame them for all harm that may befall them, their family and livestock.

The Role of the Male

The voice of males has been neglected and marginalized within the discourse on dignified menstruation. In particular, there is little written about how men's ways of knowing contribute to the development of knowledge base on cultural teaching in menstrual practices. Men's roles as father, husband, religious leader and decision-maker play a key part in reinforcing beliefs and practices. The findings of this study revealed that, in the past, men did not discuss menstrual issues with their wives, sisters or daughters. Men in the household were generally unaware of menstruation's biological aspects and had little knowledge about how best periods can be managed. There was little awareness about menstrual pads and the need for menstrual hygiene, for example, to enable women to have dignified menstruation. This lack of knowledge helped maintain the misconception that menstrual blood is impure and reinforced the beliefs that lead to menstrual discrimination.

Field researchers asked several male respondents some pertinent questions around menstruation and discussed their opinions relating to girls and women sleeping in a shed during menstruation. How does a shed ensure the rights of the girls and women during menstruation? Can

she live with her family members? Can she go to school as usual? Can she touch the male and senior members of the family and neighbors? Can she move freely? Can she take part in the social and cultural activity of her family and community? Can she touch fruits and vegetables? Can she eat meat and milk products during menstruation? Close attention was paid to the ways in which males understand menstrual issues.

Most males viewed menstruation and its related practices as a natural phenomenon and had not considered the negative impacts that such beliefs and traditions had on females when they menstruated. Many of the respondents felt this was an issue they had not taken seriously. Some males were concerned about the extreme forms of menstrual exclusion and disagreed with the societal view on menstrual exclusion. Younger men often disagreed with their parent's views. Several male activists were interviewed who act as agents of change by speaking out about menstrual exclusion, some who were involved in producing reusable menstrual pads and others as advocates for change. These interviews will be shared in 2022 along with interviews with a diverse range of activists working to address menstrual stigma. Some religious leaders also informed us that menstrual blood is pure and people needed to stop practices that caused harm to women. These males were, partly, the agents of change. Exploring the role of men as change agents is an area for further study.

Intergenerational Gap

Knowledge and perceptions are dynamic. Interviews with NGO workers, political leaders, and female community health workers revealed that both males and females of the older generation still resist changing menstrual practices, which leads to exclusion and discrimination. The positive aspect is that the younger generations are becoming increasingly compassionate and have been supportive of change (Mishra, 2014). In Rolpa, for example, the mother-in-law instructed her daughter-in-law to follow exclusionary menstrual practices saying, "do not go to the kitchen, worshiping room and do not touch the religious books". On the other hand, the daughter-in-law argued that was not true and told her mother-in-law that menstruation is like flowering. All these ideas she had gained from education.

Similarly, an elderly woman in Kanchanpur mentioned that the new generations do not want to follow the menstrual exclusion and do not enforce her daughters and daughter-in-law. She recalls the hard time she had during her menstruation. She has observed so many changes within her life and feels happy. She further mentioned that new generations are educated and have better ideas about what to do. However, she also stated that while she wants discriminatory practices to end for the younger generation, she will not change her practices to honor the *devis* (goddesses) and *deutas* (gods). We also found that in

some places in the west local communities have negotiated a reduction in the number of days that restrictions were enforced by, but this was done by consulting with the local priests and healers. Participants shared that the priests and local healers did not want to change their traditional practices. The younger generations of almost all caste and ethnic groups were more liberal and critical to the exclusionary practices during menstruation.

An elderly Muslim religious scholar in Dailekh mentioned that menstruating women are considered impure but younger Muslim women can stay at home, enter the kitchen, cook food and perform routine tasks except for Namaj, touching the holy book of Kuran or prepare food that goes for offering to Mosque. In Kapilvastu, the older Muslim women mostly followed the menstrual restriction and practices. However, many daughter-in-laws and daughters were less rigid to following such restrictions. It clearly shows that there has been a drastic intergenerational change in the menstrual practices in all study areas. In all study sites, it was found that the perceptions of boys and men towards menstruation had changed compared to their senior generations. The younger generations are more familiar with the subject compared to the older generation. Such positive attitudes have helped reduce humiliation and discomfitures and restore women and girls' dignity and self-respect.

Rural and Urban

The study focused on the people who were mainly engaged in agriculture versus those in other pursuits and the presence or absence of certain social facilities and services like schools, health posts, market centers, and the like. In the urban areas, we looked at individualization, market economy and globalization, the rise of democracy and freedom, and the idea of the practice of citizenship.

There was also often a relationship between urbanization and a better standard of living, such as higher life expectancy and a higher level of literacy, better provision of water and sanitation and basic services. Urbanization is also often associated with gender-related transformation such as women's greater engagement in paid employment and public life, linked with a wider range of opportunities than in rural areas. However, urbanization does not necessarily result in a more equitable distribution of the wealth it generates. Most of the urban populations were relatively liberal and supportive of dignified menstruation.

In rural areas in Nepal, contacts with outsiders are still limited. The grounds for interfering in village affairs are considered potentially troublesome and even dangerous. Local norms and values determine the day-to-day social practice. Rituals and beliefs are strongly linked with local deities. People believe that any change to the traditional beliefs and practices may cause disease or accident in the families, death of the animals and failure of crops. It is not only because of religious beliefs but also the value

of women is rarely acknowledged. Although changing gradually, such practices have facilitated the traditional harmful practices during menstruation. Many people still think that women are ritually, spiritually, and morally inferior during menstruation. Menstruation-related violence is underreported, and many people object to the researchers' curiosity and discourage their presence in the village.

Caste and Ethnicity

Menstrual restrictions varied across caste and ethnicity. Menstrual exclusion among the Magars in Rolpa, Tharus in Kanchanpur, Rai and Limbus in Ilam and Madheshi Brahmins in Dhanusha, were loosely followed. They observed restrictions during their clan deity worship only and at other times, few families observed some restrictions related to kitchen work. In the case of Brahmin and Chhetri families in Jumla, Achham, Dailekh and Baglung districts, the exclusion and isolation practices were relatively strict. However, the women and girls also mentioned that strictness has been lesser than in the past in all caste and ethnic groups and places. Younger generations break the silence and share their experience about periods in schools and communities. Such practice has challenged the traditional discourse of menstrual practices.

Nature and Structure of the Family

Family is a source of nurture and emotional support. Sometimes it can also be a source of inequality, control and oppression. At the family or household level, varieties of restrictions are following. Women who are living in joint or extended families face more pressure to follow the traditional practices during menstruation. However, such practice is not uniform. Women in west Nepal face more discrimination compared to east. In some districts of west Nepal, women still have to sleep either in a separate house or shed called *chhaupadi*. *Chhaupadi* is a traditional practice that can have long-lasting harmful effects on women and girls, specifically impacting their psychological, social and mental well-being and reproductive health. In the past, during menstruation, the girls and women were not allowed to touch males and cows; to stay in the house, to visit religious places, or take a bath were forbidden. They were not allowed to go to school or the marketplace. They were prohibited from staying and sleeping in their usual room, secluded to a different place to stay during menstruation. They were not allowed to eat any milk and milk products, meat and meat products, oily and fried foods, vegetables, fruits, or pickles during menstruation. Although many practices are continuing, the nature of rigidity has changed. The joint families with the older generation are more rigid than nuclear families. Many families allow them to enter and sleep at the specific house, allow eating any milk and milk products, meat and meat products, oily and fried

foods, vegetables and fruits.

Many elderly women still do not enter the worshiping room in the house. They do not participate in any religious and social activities at home. They do not chant the holy epics/books. Religious amulets or any kind of religious offerings must be taken off during the period of menstruation.

Nature of Community

The nature of community varies across time and place. At the community level, researchers observed that girls and women are not allowed to eat rice in the study areas of Jumla, Dailekh and Achham districts. They are to eat *roti* (homemade bread from wheat flour). They are discouraged from performing or attending social activities, being secluded to a different place for around 7-11 days during first menstruation, then for 3-5 days monthly (*Chhaupadi*). During these days, they are not allowed to fetch water, cross the river, not to touch animals or fodder. Religious activities are not performed during five days of menstruation, like marriage, death ceremony, etc.

In Dhanusa, Mahotari, Makwanpur, Rolpa, Solukhumbu and Rupandehi districts, girls and women are allowed to eat rice and vegetables during menstruation. Community in east Nepal was less rigid towards menstruating girls and women compared to west Nepal. The urban community was found to be relatively compassionate and liberal during menstruation.

Almost all participants in this study believed that the community, due to social taboos and superstition, was following the restrictions regarding food, touch and religious activities. The participants further stated that there had been a transformation and the exclusionary practices during menstruation are decreasing slowly.

Front and Back Stages

While conducting fieldwork, a gap between 'saying' and 'doing' was found. Saying and performing on the 'front stage' and 'back stage' (Goffman, 1959) were influenced by the time and place of social interaction. The study participants maintained proper 'front' before the researchers and other audiences. The political leaders and social workers, during the interaction, tried to manage a positive impression on the issue. What they had shared in public and did in family life was explored. They thought that people had not observed their family practices. Many of them attempted to convey an expected impression of themselves and interpret the expected behaviors and attitudes accurately. We were quite certain that they were aware that the researchers were asking pertinent questions related to menstrual exclusion and structural violence.

The 'back stage' menstrual practices in the houses of the political leaders and social workers were not very different; the local values, norms, beliefs, and common

cultural practices in the village were followed. So, in 'back stage' they were concentrated within the household and community. 'Back stage' was significantly different from an individual's front stage behavior. Such a difference between the 'front stage' and 'back stage' has played an important role in the continuity of the menstrual exclusion. With the increase in media attention on the issues surrounding menstruation in Nepal this topic is one that is being brought to the 'front stage'.

Political Conflict

One issue discussed during our research was the impact of the conflict and political factors. During the Maoist movement, many *Chhaupadi* huts were destroyed and women were forced to stay in the house during menstruation. The custom of women living in a shed when they had their period was comparatively low. The respondents were afraid of the Maoists and the gods and goddesses. If they followed the traditional rules and stayed in a cowshed, the Maoists would punish. On the other hand, if they followed the Maoists' rule, they would be punished by supernatural forces. Immediately after the comprehensive peace agreement between the government of Nepal and the Maoists, the women reverted to building and using the huts again. It was a forced change but could not be sustained. The women commented that they felt unsafe from the gods and goddesses staying in the house for religious reasons. However, most of the respondents in Karnali, Sudur Pachim and Lumbini Provinces acknowledged that the Maoist Movement had encouraged women to discuss the problem of disrespect and abuse during menstruation.

State Policy and Role of Supporting Organizations

The Government of Nepal has made substantive efforts to curb *chhaupadi* practice since 2005 through legal and policy interventions. In the recent past, the government of Nepal took strong action to destroy menstrual sheds in some districts of Karnali and Sudur Paschim Provinces. However, the use of police force to destroy *chhaugoth* does not guarantee that women and girls will be allowed to stay inside their homes. A right-based understanding of menstruation is needed to move forward to tackle this issue.

The Menstrual Health and Hygiene Management Partners' Alliance (MHMPA) Nepal, established in 2017, is working in dignified menstruation. One of the objectives of the MHMPA is to support the government of Nepal in menstrual-related policies, plans, programs and initiatives. It also focuses on intersectoral policy advocacy in communities, schools and workplaces to establish dignified menstruation. Both the authors of this article have participated in various programs organized by the MHMPA. The alliance regularly organizes programs

to highlight the issue, such as current textbooks used in school curricula are limited to the biological dimension of menstruation, advocates for a friendly infrastructure in schools and public organizations, and mainstreaming of dignified menstruation in schools and public total sanitation master plan.

Similarly, the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation (GSCDM) is working at the national and local levels to empower girls and women to protect their menstrual health from overcoming the stigma, restriction and exclusion related to menstruation (Paudel, 2020). The GSCDM has created global solidarity against menstrual taboo. Radha Paudel Foundation, established in 2016, focuses its activities on eradicating misconceptions of people regarding menstruation taboos. The foundation advocates that menstruation is not a private issue; it is everyone's issue.

Our study findings showed that the role of state and various supporting organizations, including UN agencies, have been important to empower girls and women to overcome stigma and discrimination during menstruation. The study also found that the radical move of destroying *chhaugoth* without adequate planning and preparation has been counterproductive. The demolition of *chhaugoth* could further marginalize them. They may either have to stay in the open space without shelter or construct substandard *chhaugoth* once the police force disappeared from the village. Context-specific planning and implementation are needed that should be compatible at the local level, especially with women and girls.

Conclusion

Menstruation is regarded as a sign of good reproductive health in girls and women. Yet, it remains a taboo subject in many communities in Nepal. It is strongly marked by cultural beliefs, taboos, and religious prohibitions. Many people still think menstrual blood is an 'impure, dirty and malevolent substance' and menstruating girls and women are impure and polluted. The pattern of forced change is not the primary focus of this article. Coerced change is sustained by power and/or the resources but is inherently unstable when power and resources cannot be sustained.

In the past, farmers were the largest single group in the country. There were few 'knowledge workers'. Knowledge workers gain access to jobs and social status through formal positions. Education became the crucial means for obtaining knowledge and schools turned into a key institution. Education has played an important role in questioning the traditional harmful practices and traditions. After 1950, the economic conditions among Nepali people have improved very fast. Also, the position of women has changed (Shakya, 2014; Subedi 2016).

There is no doubt that stigma attached to menstruation and discrimination of menstruating women has differed greatly between past and present. This difference is

caused by globalization, urbanization, and legal and policy intervention in many aspects. There has also been an increase in activism and media coverage in Nepal, including introducing new laws to help address the extremely harmful practices during menstruation. This difference has made the world a small village where everyone is influenced by the belief and ideas of other easier than before. In the past, societies could close and retain their social and cultural heritage. Contemporary life is different. Television channels, mass media, and educational institutions have entered many homes, bringing knowledge of other societies and cultures.

In this context, profound changes have occurred in menstrual practices that have both shaped and reflected how menstrual practices are woven into social and individual consciousness. Many menstruating girls and women in Nepal continue to face challenges in managing their menstruation safely and with dignity. More attention is needed to the meaning of dignity and how this interplay with wanting to respect local customs and traditions while reducing harm. It is something for further research to be done at the local level and with agents trying to promote change and dignified menstruation.

It is also important to look closely at men's practice, especially males who express the commitment to dignified menstruation. What knowledge must everybody have? What is "quality" in learning and teaching? These will, of necessity, become central concerns in the society, and central political issues. Breaking period taboos and changing society's perception of dignified menstruation remains a significant challenge in Nepal, but it is changing in a positive way.

To change people's mindsets and break taboos in society, we must ensure that everyone gets the right information. Both men and women benefit when women receive cultural respect. While powerful motivations for change in menstrual practices could come through legal means, the change should be motivated by a human desire to care for each other. It requires access to accurate and programmatic information, a high level of awareness of the issue, and the confidence of women and girls to manage menstruation safely and with privacy and dignity. Continuous interaction is needed with the concerned researchers, activists, local women groups, and an alliance of committed organizations to improve menstrual health and human rights and help formulate effective and acceptable strategies and programs to address menstrual exclusion practices in Nepal. There is a need for intervention that proactively educates, empowers, and supports families to practice dignified behavior during menstruation. It is also important that these issues be discussed more openly at the local level as breaking the silence surrounding menstruation and discussing issues at the local level is essential. It is also important that activists who want to help address harmful practices work with local religious and community leaders and people who menstruate. The policies developed at the

National level can be implemented at the local level with local stakeholders being respected.

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We declare that this research has been conducted ethically.

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