

The *Chhaupadi* Practice in Nepal: a Difficult Time for Women and Girls  
By: Michaela Batson

Imagine being locked away and isolated during one of the most difficult times of the month for many, menstruation. This happens every month to women and girls in Nepal, particularly in rural areas, where they observe *chhaupadi*, which is a cultural practice of isolating and restricting a girl or woman during their time of menstruation. They are not allowed to consume milk products, use public water holes, or touch men, children, cattle, living plants, or fruit bearing trees. These women cannot come into the village or attend any religious practice during this time. They are kept outside of the village in a small shack or animal shed, and isolated away from their society until their menstruation is over with. Most of the time, menstruation lasts for around five to seven days, but girl's experiencing their first menstruation are kept in the shed for fourteen days.

The women and girls of Nepal have lived with this cultural practice their whole lives. They are told that when menstruating they are impure and will ruin everything that they touch. They must pause their normal lives to go live in isolation for almost a week. It is a religious belief that if the women and girls of Nepal do not follow these strict guidelines, God will send a wrath upon their homes and families. Not only are they shunned from the village to live in isolation, but the huts they must reside in are kept in terrible condition. They are very small with dirt flooring and usually only a hole for a door, which doesn't allow for proper ventilation. The huts have no plumbing and there are no latrines so women must relieve themselves outdoors.

Chhaupadi is not only meant for the difficult time of menstruation, but is also implemented when women give birth. They are sent there to deliver alone and must stay there with the baby for ten to fourteen days. The new mother is not provided with any help or resources during this time, putting their babies at high risk for disease and death. Areas that practice *chhaupadi* have very high maternal and infant mortality rates because of these conditions. The isolation of *chhaupadi* also exposes women to difficult weather conditions, making them susceptible to suffocation during the summer and hypothermia during the winter.

It is also very common for them to contract many diseases. Being kept in unhygienic conditions makes it much easier for them to get sick. Some common ones are pneumonia, chest infections, respiratory tract infections, genital infections, and extreme diarrhea. Diseases are not the only threat for these women and girls in the huts. Natural threats are a huge concern for them. The most common way for them to die is being bitten by poisonous snakes while out there. Snakes are not the only thing though, there are other wild animals and insects that could get them while out there in isolation. Records kept by police in Nepal show that over the last ten years, fourteen people have died during their *chhaupadi* practice. Of those fourteen, nine of them died from snake bites. Number of deaths continues to grow each year, in 2017 three girls lost their lives within a ten month span. Two from suffocation and one from a snake bite.

Even though *chhaupadi* creates all these health risks for these women, girls, and babies, the people of the village have still stated that under no circumstance may they reenter the village

during their time of isolation. So, they are not allowed to seek any kind of medical help if they need it.

These women and girls face psychological threats as well. Many become depressed because of isolation and how they are treated by the rest of the village during this time. Postpartum depression is an issue with the women who give birth by themselves. Exile from friends and family, the trauma of being alone while giving birth or having your first menstruation. All these things contribute to the way these girls and women feel after years of practicing this.

In 2005, chhaupadi was outlawed by the government. Then in 2017, the ritual was criminalized threatening a large fine and time in jail. Despite these legal restriction imposed by the government, the custom still continues in many rural villages in Nepal.. The best way to combat this practice is to teach villagers about the health threats that women and girls go through during this time. The NGO, Restless Development Nepal (<https://restlessdevelopment.org/nepal>), funded by the UN Trust Fund, is a group of educators who are doing just this. They go to rural towns and educate older families on why this practice should be modified. Some have listened, and allowed their women to stay in their homes separated from other family members. The older and more traditional people of Nepal will take more work to convince. This group has talked to over 20,000 females and 15,000 males across Nepal. Supporting their work can help them aid the women and girls of rural Nepal.

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