



TOWARDS CHAUPADI-FREE SOCIETY

**Stories of how women and youths in Bajura and Doti Districts
in Nepal have worked to end Chaupadi**

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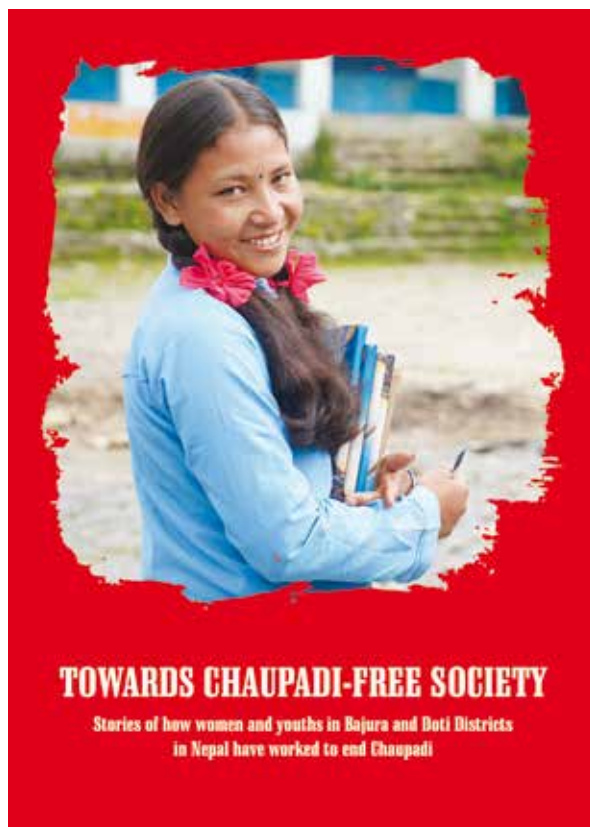
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MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Namaste and Greetings to all

In most of the remote villages of western Nepal, menstruation is still taken as one of the harmful social taboos. The ill-practice is locally known as 'Chhaupadi' and it is a tradition of considering girls/women as 'impure' during their menstruation and soon after childbirth and segregating them to stay away from home in a small unsafe hut/cow shed.

The harmful practice drives women into isolation and forces to expose in many forms of violence. Hence, they are even deprived of having nutritious food, maintain personal hygiene and live in a safe place. Incidences of rape, violence, animal attack and even death of women and girls secluded by chhaupadi are repeatedly reported. The practice also has a negative impact on their psychological health and deprives them from their rights to education, freedom, food, shelter, dignity and security.

The Government of Nepal passed a law in August 2017 and entitled Chhaupadi as a 'Crime'. The new law sentences three-month jail or Rs. 3,000 fine or both against the culprit. Nonetheless, the deep-rooted ill-practice still exists in communities and the project, 'Joint Action of Women and Youth to Break the Harmful Menstrual Taboos' was designed. It is aimed to raise awareness of local communities, mobilize adolescent girls and traditional healers to fight against the taboo, enhance livelihood alternatives of community women, and engage with local governments for collective action to break the ill practice. Advocacy on effective implementation of recently passed law and formulation of local policies for its support are the other expected objectives of the project.

This document showcases success stories achieved from the project with a glimpse of some initiatives undertaken. The project was jointly implemented by ActionAid Nepal and its local partner organizations: PeaceWin and Human Resource Centre in Bajura, and Equality Development Centre in Doti. ActionAid Denmark and Danish Television supported with their financial contribution and technical inputs.

Last but not the least, I would like to thank them all, who directly and indirectly contributed for the project's success and came up with these encouraging stories documented in this publication.

Sujeeta Mathema
Executive Director
ActionAid Nepal

PROJECT INTRODUCTION

Chhaupadi is a tradition of considering girls/women as 'impure' during their menstruation and soon after childbirth and segregating them to stay away from home in a small unsafe hut/cow shed. The tradition is practiced in the Mid and Far West Nepal. Although menstruation is a natural process, the superstitious beliefs do not acknowledge it in a positive way. It is also inbuilt in religion and customary practice of the society and compares women with purity and impurity.

Women and girls have limited or no access to hygiene and sanitation, as well as lacks education on their reproductive and menstrual health. In remote villages, they are kept separate from their houses and families during menstruation, as they are considered impure - sometimes resulting to injuries, rape, missing school, humiliation, and even death. In addition, lack of toilet facilities and water sources at home and schools can also lead girls to miss school, feel humiliated and unhygienic, and are exposed to increased risk of various forms of exploitation including sexual exploitation.

Thus, the project, 'Joint Action of Women and Youth to Break the Harmful Menstrual Taboos' was designed and implemented in two of the mostly affected districts of far-west Nepal, Bajura and Doti. PeaceWin and Human Resource Centre were our local partners in Bajura, and Equality Development Centre was in Doti. Support for financial contribution and technical inputs was provided by ActionAid Denmark and Danish Television.

Following were expected outcomes of the project:

1. Girls and young women are aware, united and act collaboratively to break the social taboos.
2. Increased economic income of local women and their daughters through small scale enterprise business.
3. Government institutions at local and provincial level taking actions against Chhaupadi as per the government policy.



Financial independence gives Happiness and Security

Hira Devi Bogati, 35 from Shikhar Municipality, Ward No. 2- Mudegau, Doti is a single mother of three little daughters. She is the eldest daughter-in-law of the family. Her brothers-in-law go to India for employment. Thus, she bears the responsibility of taking care of her large family and her daughters. "I lost my husband a few years back in a tragic incident. I am the sole bread winner of my family. The male members in the family are working in India and only visit home occasionally. I am the one who carries out all household chores and takes care of the family," she says.

Like other women in the district, I too faced hardship during my menstruation. I used to hide in the jungle during my period. I was not permitted to come near my house since they considered it to be a sin to see any male members of the family during the period. I was not even allowed to have normal food. I was given flatbread with salt without any dairy product. I was physically and emotionally strained.

One day, my parents married me off to a family. I thought maybe after my marriage I would not be discriminated and ill-treated. Unfortunately, this did not happen. I was



forcefully kept in a cowshed with my newborn baby during my post-pregnancy. We were not rich and couldn't afford many of the healthy foods but not being allowed to have what we already had at home was heartbreaking.

Equality Development Centre (EDC) helped change the prevailing mindset on Chhaupadhi. They organized group discussions, training, and interactive sessions with people from different age-groups. Local women, REFLECT circle members, and local government representatives also participated in these programs.

Before attending these programs, I thought it was only me who was suffering. But I came to know there were many women with the same plight. I realized it was high time to act against this inhumane tradition. I had been dreaming of a life without Chhaupadi for a long time. I finally saw a glimpse of hope to make it real.

We started having regular interaction and discussions regarding the eradication of Chhaupadi from our village. I started it from my house. My mother and father-in-law were first apprehensive towards it. That is understandable to me as following the rules related to Chhaupadi is just not our tradition but our way of living. But I did not give up. They slowly started listening to me. They gradually started to change their mindset. I could have never done it alone. Fortunately, my husband supported me in this. He too believed Chhaupadi was an evil traditional of our society. My late husband's support made it a lot easier, and I am always grateful to him.

We started visiting other villages as well to sensitize people about the harm Chhaupadi caused to women and girls. We, along with REFLECT circle group, young girls' group, and local representatives started organizing campaigns against it. We faced some obstacles initially especially from elderly ladies as they didn't want to listen to anything else against the tradition.

They strongly wanted it to be continued at any cost. However, we didn't lose our hope and patience. After a lot of struggles, convincing, and counseling, they started listening to us.

After getting involved in program EDC, we came to know that they are not only working for the eradication of Chhaupadi but also for the upliftment of local women and their daughters through small-scale enterprise. I also requested for support as I was in need of such support.

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The organizations provided me opportunity to participate in scented sticks making, seasonal vegetable farming, and cattle farming trainings, which gradually helped me become economically and socially independent. They further provided me NRs. 25,000 for starting a shop. I was earning well. Unfortunately, the shop was swept away by flood last year.

However, I did not give up after that. I tried to put to use what I had learnt in the training. I started kitchen garden and a poultry farm. I have been earning well from the poultry farm. My in-laws and sister-in-law help run the garden and farm.

I am planning to expand my kitchen garden with more seasonal vegetables and requesting AAN and EDC to support me with a tunnel for it. I want to start commercial farming in the future.

EDC support helped better my life and life of my daughters. I am able to feed and educate them with the earning I make. I am really grateful!



From a Housewife to a Leader

Q uinquagenarian Bishna Nepali from Shikhar Municipality, Ward No. 2-Mudegau in Doti district is actively participates in group discussions and training with youth campaigners, joining her hands to eradicate 'Chhaupadi' in her village. At the time when her contemporaries are busy taking care of their grandchildren, she prefers joining hands with young campaigners in the mission. Chhaupadi, the practice of segregating girls and women and keeping them a hut or shed away from home when they are on their periods and after childbirth, is common in many districts of the far- and mid-west of part of Nepal.

"I don't remember much about my marriage. At 10 years of age I was too young for it. At that time my mensuration had not started. I started menstruating at the age of 13. I remember how my in-laws made me hide in the jungle for the first 11 days. At that time, I was given the leftover Chapatti with salt to eat," recalled Bishna with teary eyes.

"Imagine, a 13-year teenage girl living in a dark cave with no decent clothes in her body and without any sense of security. Yes, that was me. I have suffered all those and

I can tell you this is a horrible experience for any girl. I am sure I would have treated the upcoming generation in the same way, if I was not being sensitized and aware by Equality Development Centre (EDC)."

In 2018, EDC held trainings about Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and menstruation hygiene in Bishna's village. "We did not know Chhaupadi had such a negative impact on our health. We faced problems during and after menstruation days, but we never thought it was one of the reasons for our poor health."

The women of her village had been victim of uterus cancer, reproductive tract infections (RTI), and diseases in the sexual organs. Some of them even lost their lives due to this reason.

EDC also conducted training on making sanitary pads in the village. It trained a group of 30-45 women. "We were already familiar with stitching and sewing. We learned it in no time. Soon enough, we started making our own pad and using it, says Bishna."

The sanitary pad helped the woman and girls get rid of infections caused due to the use of dirty pieces of cloths during their menstruation. This was a huge relief to them as they could now work more efficiently and confidently.

In collaboration with EDC, the women then started a campaign against the Chhaupadi tradition. Bishna went to different villages and joined the community-level discussion on the negative impact of the Chhaupadi on women's health in presence of local-level representatives.

"At first villagers, especially elderly women, were hesitant even to talk about the Chhaupadi. But with our constant efforts and counseling, we were able to change their views on it. We have been getting support from the Kishori Samuha (Teenager girls' group) and REFLECT circle members as well. Also, the male participation in the campaigns is overwhelming."

As a result the practice of Chaupadi has been reduced significantly in Bishna's village.

Bishna was elected as a member of the Ward committee of Ward number 9. Recently she has also been elected as a member of the Judicial Committee. "This has been possible due to my involvement with EDC. All credit goes to the organization. I could have never done this without their support and encouragement," Bishna says.

"I urge every woman, especially Dalit women, to step out of their houses and learn new things. We can be as important as any other person in this country."





The Fight for Women's Rights Continues

Jana Devi Paddhaya, 39, is a free spirited and fearless woman. She never liked following traditions blindly. This put her in conflict with her mother-in-law who wanted her to follow her suit. Jana Devi hated the Chaupadi malpractice but had to follow them as it was a long-practiced tradition.

One day, Paddhaya was invited to a community interaction on Chaupadi by Human Resource Centre (HRC) Bajura. In the interaction, she heard about many painful stories of suffering caused to many women in her village due to this malpractice. However, what took her by surprise was to know that Chaupadi was a crime that was punishable by law. "I was stunned to know about the different provisions of punishment regarding Chhaupadi," says Jana Devi. This gave courage to her. She decided to commit herself to the work of eradicating Chaupadi from her locality.

Jana Devi also got the opportunity to get involved in the REFLECT circle run by HRC. The circle was mainly responsible for organizing several awareness



campaigns against Chhaupadi. She got more courage and confidence after joining the REFLECT circle.

Jan Devi decided to destroy the cowshed of her family. "My mother-in-law shouted and yelled at me (for destroying the cowshed) where I was made to sleep during my menstruation days. She was so loud that neighbors came to see what had happened. They watched my mother-in-law berate me but I didn't care. The step I was taking was not against my family but against wrong tradition that made women suffer", she says.

After destroying her family's cowshed, she along with other women from the village, destroyed other cowsheds in her village as well as in neighboring villages. The villagers shouted at them and threatened them. But the women did not deter. "I wasn't going to stop nor was any one of us from our group. What we were doing were not only for us but also for our future generation", she recalls.

After organizing several awareness campaigns and discussions in the community, people slowly began

to understand. People started changing the way they thought about Chaupadi. This resulted in change in the behavior as well. Families started to give nutritious food to the women and girls when they were in their periods. "At present, every family in our village gives ghee, milk, and curd to girls and women during their period," she says.

The people in her village gradually began to appreciate the courageous work Jana Devi had done, and recognize her contributions. Subsequently, she was elected as the treasurer for the 'Women's Rights Forum'. The

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"I heard her saying my daughter-in-law is the most talented and clever woman in this village. This is my biggest achievement," Jana Devi says with a smile.

forum advocates for the right of the women and girls. Jana Devi has been able to further hone her leadership skills after joining the forum.

"I am now advocating for women's rights, against Chhaupadi and other social evils that are prevalent in the society. I have been delivering speeches to a large group of people. This has not only changed my life but even my family", she says.

Her mother-in-law who berated her in front of villagers has had a change in her heart. She is now proud of Jana Devi and what she did for eradicating Chaupadi from the village. She appreciates her daughter-in-law in front of the same neighbors and villagers. "I heard her saying my daughter-in-law is the most talented and clever woman in this village. This is my biggest achievement," Jana Devi says with a smile.

Jan Devi gives credit to HRC, and the REFLECT circle. "They have given us a new life", she says. "I will not be deterred by any challenge but continue my fight for the rights of the women and against evil traditions", says determined Jana Devi.



God Man Changes his Heart

Dal Bahadur Dhama, 72, is a respected Shaman of Ghatalo Devata (God) in Budhinanda Municipality Ward No. 9 Guyali in Bajura district. He has been a Shaman all his life.

"I am a god's man. I do what god tells us to do", claims Dal Bahadur Dhama.

"We used to believe evil spirits possess girls/women's bodies during the menstruation. That's why we kept them away from the house, farms, and cattle. They were not given healthy diet during this time since we believed doing so would strengthen evil inside them. They were allowed to eat the leftover for keeping the evil spirit away.

Deep down I knew this was wrong. But this had been our tradition for so long. I could not just go against it. I was worried if something went wrong if I didn't follow the tradition. I felt that since I was god's man, I should follow the tradition."

One day a tragic incident occurred in the nearby village. A young mother with her two little boys were found dead due to suffocation in a cowshed where she was sleeping as she was in her period. The cowshed was far from the house, and it was a chilly night. Nobody found out until late morning. "When we came to know, it was already too late," he says.

"This incident hit me and many others hard. Those little kids and their mother didn't deserve such a painful death. Chaupaddi killed them, and somewhere I felt, I'm to be blamed as well for it" he confesses.

There was huge media coverage of this story. People from the capital city and higher officials came for inspection. "Everyone felt bad about it. It was not the first tragic incident in our village, but it definitely was an eye-opener," he says.

One day, Dal Bahadur was invited into community-level interaction and discussion against Chhaupadi with all his family members. During the interaction, they heard and felt the pain of our women. "I felt like a culprit for the second time. I was hurting my loved ones for the sake of tradition. I decided to change for good. My wives, daughters, and daughter-in-law are far more important than this custom".

Since then, Dal Bahadur was constantly invited to other events organized to create awareness against Chaupadi. He was also mobilized as a facilitator by PeaceWin. As a facilitator, he visited other villages for the campaign. They destroyed many cowsheds (home for girls during menstruation time).

"You see, I am a God's man, so my words matter to the villagers. They follow me and my action. Now I take extra care of my daughters and daughters-in-law during menstruation. I have requested my wife to give them milk, ghee, and butter during the time. I also make sure they don't overwork during those days. My daughters and daughters-in-law now sleep inside the house and are allowed to go to all rooms except the worship room. If I

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had acted against the Chaupadi soon enough, fewer girls would have to endure so much pain during menstruation.

I will be involved in any campaign against Chaupadi and will always work in favor of women rights," Dhama concludes.





Working together for the Change

Janak Bahadur Rawat, 22, from Jagganath Municipality Ward Number 9, Guyali in Bajura district, grew up seeing his mother and aunt sleep in a cowshed whenever they were in their period. The shed was cold, dirty, and far from the house. There was fear of wild animals and insects too.

His mother and aunt, like many other women in the village, were not allowed to eat ghee and milk during their menstruation. He felt very bad about this. Janak thinks that her mother's health was affected because of the suffering and lack of nutritious food during her period.

When Janak was in Kathmandu for his studies, his father died. He then came back to his village. The death of his mother, who was not in sound health, followed soon.

When he was in his village, a field staff of PeaceWin Bajura came to him with the idea of mobilizing young campaigners for the eradication of Chhaupadi. As he hated Chhaupadi, he agreed to it instantly.

In collaboration with the chairperson, members, women representatives from the 'Women's Rights Forum', 'Kishori clubs', and young male activists, they visited different villages and organized discussions about the adverse effect of Chhaupadi. "Challenging Chaupadi was a tough task since it is a deep-rooted tradition in our society. We had to work very hard and work continuously for it", he remembers.

As they were carrying on their campaign against Chaupadi, they got a heart-breaking news. His cousin had died in a cowshed along with her two little sons. She was on her period. Everyone got shocked.

"I felt anger and helplessness at the same time. We were losing so much because of the prevalent evil deep-rooted custom", he says.

The story was highlighted by the media, which attracted the attention of the local as well as central government and the local people.

After this incident, he then along with the local representatives, started destroying the cowsheds in the village. After destroying the sheds, they put the focus on sanitation and diet for menstruating women. They made people understand why women need sanitation and nutritious food when they are in their periods. People slowly began to understand. "Now the

girls in our villages are allowed to eat milk, ghee, and curd during their menstruation."

"Our society is changing and so is the mindset of our people. However, we need more changes. Gender inequality and discrimination still prevail in the society. But I am really happy to say things are moving in the right direction," says Janak.

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"Our society is changing and so is the mindset of our people. However, we need more changes. Gender inequality and discrimination still prevail in the society. But I am really happy to say things are moving in the right direction," says Janak.

He thinks that men need to work together with the women to bring social and economic changes. Such changes, according to him are beneficial to both women and men of the society. On his part, he is ready to work with women of his village.





From Odd Jobs in India to Profitable Vegetable Farming

Mangal Bohara, 45, a resident of Budhinanda Municipality Ward no. 9, Guyali in Bajura district went to India and worked there for two years. He did odds jobs there. He used to miss his family a lot. It was his compulsion to leave his family to make a living. He was also beaten and robbed many times in India. But he could not afford to return as he had no source of income back home.

When he had returned home in 2015, he found out that a REFLECT circle was working in the village. He was also invited to one of the meetings.

His wife was a member of the REFLECT circle and she was involved in the campaign against the Chhaupadi through the circle. "I have been into many places and I know how superstitious our community regarding this. Chhaupadi is wrong", Mangal says.

However, and PeaceWin Bajura were not just working for the eradication of Chhaupadi but also for the economic upliftment of poor and marginalized communities in the district.

As Mangal came from a poor family, he was invited to a training on seasonal farming organized by the organizations. "In the training, I learned about the importance of modern farming. I also learnt about the methods and techniques to be used for it", he says.

Mangal decided to start tomato farming after he attended the training using a polytunnel. "It was a challenge for me, but I was getting constant support from the PeaceWin Bajura", he says. The farmers like him meet 2-3 months where they discuss ways to

address they face in farming, and also ways to better their farm. The meeting also helped him a lot.

He started making profit from the second lot. "I earned 500-1000 Rupees per day by selling tomatoes," he says. He is now cultivating cucumber, chilly, cauliflower, radish, and spinach on his farm. "I don't use pesticides. I use cow dung and other natural manures", he says.

He says that the earning that is he making now is more than what he used to earn in India. "I am now with my family and am also earning more. My life is secured, and I can take care of my wife and two sons. I have been taking care of the household expenses and educating my sons from the earned money", he says with a smile.

He gives credit to PeaceWin Bajura for this. "I and my family will always be thankful to PeaceWin Bajura for the support. Had it not been their support, I would still be working in India with no life security and low paid wage--and away from home and family."

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His wife was a member of the REFLECT circle and she was involved in the campaign against the Chhaupadi though the circle. "I have been into many places and I know how superstitious our community regarding this. Chhaupadi is wrong", Mangal says.





Chaupadi Free Village--at last

Kali B.K. from Swamikartik Rural Municipality, Ward No.1 in Bajura district was 13 years old when she had her first menstruation. 'I was sent to stay in the forest all by myself without decent cloths on my body. I was bitten by spider. I shivered and remained awake in fear of animals and men', she recalls.

She was told that during the period some kind of evil spirit possessed girls' body, and hence they should remain far from the worship room and the kitchen.

Kali's family married her off at the age of 15. Her suffering continued after she went to her husband's family.

"I gave birth to my first baby in a cow shed. I and my new born baby remained in the cowshed for first 13 days. I was not given cloth to wrap my new born baby. I was not also given nutritious food. It was really very painful," she recalls with tears in her eyes.

One day, Human Resource Center (HRC) organized training on good governance in her village. Kali was invited to attend the training. During the training, there was a brief discussion on Chaupadi. After some time, there was a longer interaction on

the topic. It was then that Kali came to know that what had been told to her about Chaupadi was superstition, and not the truth. They were shown several video clips of women doing amazing things around the world. "In one of the videos, I saw 4-5 women worshipping in a temple in Haridwar in India. I was awestricken by it. I realized how ignorant I had been all my life."

Even though she had already suffered, she thought that younger girls like her should not suffer like her. Together with HRC team members, they started organizing meetings, interaction programs and discussion about Chaupadi regularly in their village. Kali was blamed for putting evil things in the mind of simple women and ruining the families. She was even portrayed as the evil woman of the village.

"A man threatened me for walking freely during my period. He threatened to take revenge if anything happened to his cattle as I had passed by them," she recalls. Superstition has it that if menstruating women touch animals, they could fall ill or even die.

Kali did not give up despite all these challenges. It almost took 4-5 years to change the mindset of the villagers. Change was not easy but not impossible.

In 2015, her village was announced as "Chaupadi-free". During all these difficult times her husband stood by her. "It was really a challenging time for me but I enjoy every bit of it," she says.

These days pregnant women are staying inside the house with their newborn babies in her village. Young girls are making and using sanitary pads during menstruation after being trained by the organizations. They are allowed to stay inside the house during the period.

Moreover, the patients of uterus cancer are decreasing. This is because women are now taking adequate rest and consuming nutritious food during menstruation. Even the child mortality rate is dropping. Importantly, the financial status of the poor and marginalized families are improving, thanks to the support from the project for financial empowerment.





From a Housewife to Vice Chairperson of Municipality

After being elected as a Vice-Chairperson at KI Singh Rural Municipality in Doti district, Mina Bista, 45, has become a well-known figure in the Municipality. In the past, her identity was limited to that of a housewife and mother.

Though Mina felt that she was not much discriminated in her family in comparison to her brothers, she later realized that she was sent to school only at the age of 12. Also, she could attend school only for four years. Her brothers went to school at early age and continued their education for a longer period of time.

After Mina got married, she expressed her desire to continue her studies. However, her in-laws said they could not afford to send her to school as her husband was also going to school. "I spent my time taking care of my in-laws and raising my kids", she says.

Her life took a new turn when she met her aunt (her father's sister). She encouraged her to continue her studies and not be confined to the house. Subsequently, she resumed her studies and she completed 10th grade.

One day, the people from her Municipality office came to her and offered her to work as a volunteer. Working as a volunteer she contributed in controlling gambling, forming mother's groups, spreading awareness against Chaupadi and sensitizing people on the importance of using contraceptive pills in her village. She, however, could not continue with this work due to her family responsibilities.

Her husband was involved in political party. She used to get invited to meetings of the party because of him. She subsequently joined the party.

She actively participated in the people's movement

in 2006. Her party appreciated her work. Her party members encouraged her to contest local election in 2017, which she won. She was elected as the vice-chairperson of the Municipality. These days she is getting full support of her family.

"We have been working very closely with Equality Development Centre (EDC) for the last few years. They are doing very noble work for our society," she says.

She and the Municipality office supported the organization in its campaigns against the Chhaupadi and also in other social activities. "They have become successful in bringing about many changes to our society. The literacy rate and women's participation in development work are also growing. People have adopted new modern techniques in farming, and they are also looking forward to learning new skills. Undoubtedly, EDC has been a boon to our Municipality, and I hope they will continue to work in the future," she says.





Girls can now attend School during Menstruation

19 years old Suntali Parki from Silgadi Municipality, Ward No. 4 Pipalabot Dipayal in Doti district knew about Chaupadi when she was quite young. She knew women had to sleep in cowshed wearing dirty clothes alone without having anyone to talk to. She had seen her sisters do the same. Sunita was worried that she would have to do the same and bear the same suffering when she started menstruating.

When she was studying in grade 8, people from an organization name Equality Development Centre (EDC) came to her village. They told them about the importance of maintaining proper sanitation during mensuration and also about sanitary pads. "It was quite fascinating to learn how well this piece of cloth could save us from so much embarrassment and diseases," Sunita says.

"We never thought personal hygiene could be so important during the mensuration. Girls often complained about rashes and itching. I now knew that this was due to use of dirty clothes". The women of her village went to visit the doctor during their mensuration due to ill health. "We didn't know that the lack of proper diet caused this", she says.

After knowing these things, Sunita and other girls of her village started a Kishori Samuha (young girls' group) in their school with the support of EDC. In Kishori Samuha, girls were trained on making sanitary pads. The girls also demanded a rest room in their school. With the support of EDC, they now we have a rest room where the girls can take rest when they are unwell or in pain. They also have sanitizer, sanitary pads, and underwears in the restroom.

The school also provided them with a gender focal person. The girls can reach out to her when they are in health problem or pain.

In the past, if a girl student menstruated, she had to run away to home or hide in a jungle till school was over. But now this has become a thing of a past. "We can simply let our teacher know that we need to go to the rest room. We can take rest for some time if we have back pain or lower body pain," Suntali says. "Our male teachers are also very supportive in this matter. We don't hesitate to ask them questions about mensuration during the class and they answer us."

The girls also stage street drama in their effort to make people aware of how harmful and wrong Chaupadi is. Their teachers and EDC help them develop the drama. "I have acted in several street dramas. It's fun as well as an engaging way to make people aware of the harm Chhaupadi does to women and girls. Sometimes our schoolteachers also take part in it."

Sometimes, the girls also collaborate with the REFLECT circle in their village. The circle organizes campaign against Chhaupadi. "We are invited to an interaction program or awareness campaign. We voice our opinion in the presence of people of different ages from all walks of life and also local representatives. We tell them how important it is to eradicate Chhaupadi from our society," Suntali says.

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"We need to create a society that is free of any kind of discrimination, one where there is no Chhaupadi, child marriage and dowry system." Suntali says she is ready to contribute for it from her side.





Discrimination Free at last

S Sarita Gurung's family in Budhinanda Municipality Ward No. 9, Guyali in Bajura district did not practice Chaupadi before they migrated to the far western region of the country.

"We belong to an ethnic group. In our culture, we are not discriminated during menstruation as much as it is done in so-called upper caste families," she says.

However, after the family migrated to the far western region where Chaupadi was prevalent, they had no choice but to practice it. "My sister and sister-in-law used to sleep in a small cowshed (when they were in their periods). They were not allowed to enter the house for five days," she recalls. Her mother also did not like Chaupadi but the family had to follow in the fear of being ostracized. Thus, for her family, Chhaupadi was more of an obligation rather than a tradition.

Sarita, 16, was very worried about her turn. The thought of staying in a cold lonely and insecure shed far away from home used to give her a start. Also, she didn't want to miss out on her school. She loved going to school and being with her friends.

The girls in her school remained absent during their mensuration as there was no proper toilet and clean water in the school. They were afraid of the embarrassment

that would case them if somebody saw bloodstain on their skirts. Besides that, they were also not able to share about the problems they faced during menstruation to their teachers.

When people from PeaceWin Bajura came to her school for an interaction program on Chaupadi, she felt as if her prayers had been answered. The girls also came to know about sanitary pads and how to use them. They were also provided training on make sanitary pads. A lady teacher was assigned as focal teacher. The girls could reach out to her for help if and when they needed it.

"After we started making and using sanitary pads, we felt secure. Our school now has a dustbin for disposing it. So, it is quite easy for us to change it during our class hours," she says. Girls no longer remained absent during their menstruation.

The girls also formed a group named Kishori Samuha. The group organized roadshows, debate, and speech contests in the school about Chaupadi. All these activities were organized to make the students aware of the negative impact of Chaupadi.

"Our schoolteachers also supported us in our campaign against Chaupadi. They convinced our guardians to let us organize street drama and door-to-door awareness campaigns."

Slowly but steadily, the mindset of the people of Sarita's village started to change. This led to change in their

behavior and action. "We are now not forced to sleep in a cowshed or hide in a jungle during our periods. We are also allowed to eat whatever we like," Sarita says.

"I can walk freely during my periods. Hence, I feel more confident now. I have developed a positive attitude towards everything now. I think I can tackle any problem with ease with this newfound confidence in me."

Sarita wants to become a forest ranger in the future. "By being a forest ranger, I will be able to save nature, wild plants and animals. Furthermore, I want to prove to my society that girls are capable of anything if only they are given the right education, better chance, and discrimination-free society.

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Capable to fight against Discrimination and Social Evils

Like all girls in the district, Thumara Joshi, 17, who hails from Swamikarthik Rural Municipality Ward Number 4 in Bajura district did not like Chaupadi. She felt that sleeping in a cowshed, remaining out of school during menstruation, and not being able to talk or face one's father and brothers just because a girl is menstruating was plainly unfair.

Thumara is a confident and bright girl. She secures first position in her class. She thus knew that she could be successful in life and achieve what she wants. However, she was afraid Chaupadi and the suffering caused by would deter her from being successful in life. She had seen many girls and young women being taken to hospitals in nearby city and district headquarters because of bad health during their periods. She also knew many girls from her village who had dropped out of school because they could not face the embarrassment caused during menstruation. How much she wished people did not practice Chaupadi?

However, the people in her village, like in all villages in far western region of Nepal, were very strict when it came to culture. "You could not challenge them," she remembers.



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"I want to study well and contribute to my society in a positive way in the future. I will also use my leadership skills to fight social evils and discrimination prevalent in my society," she says.

When Thumara was studying in class 8, a field staff of Human Resource Center (HRC), Bajura came to her school. After doing necessary coordination with the school administration, she gathered the girl students studying in grades 8, 9, and 10. Some of them had already started menstruating. Others could start in the near future. The field staff told the girls why Chaupadi was a superstition and why it had to be eradicated. She also told that they could work together to fight against it.

"This was the new beginning for us. We then formed a Kishori Samuha to work more effectively on fighting this superstition", Thumara says. There are 35 members in the group, including boys. "Our main motive was

to make people aware of the negative impacts of Chaupadi. We tried to convince them that god did not want to see women in pain, and being women and girl's impure was all an illusion and superstition."

The REFLECT circle, a group of shamans, and other young activists supported them. They also received support from the local government. "It took time, but slowly the villagers started becoming aware and sensitized. Our street dramas, door-to-door awareness campaigns and public speech were finally showing some results," Thumara says.

These days, families in her village take extra care of women and girls when they are menstruating. They are allowed to talk and mix with male members of the family. Girls attend school during menstruation. "All these changes would not have been possible if HRC Bajura had not come to our school," Thumara reasons.

The experience of fighting for a cause, organizing and participating in activities and events, and meeting and interacting with people has bolstered Thumara's confidence and developed her leadership skills. "I want to study well and contribute to my society in a positive way in the future. I will also use my leadership skills to fight social evils and discrimination prevalent in my society," she says.



From Invisible to Respectable

Radhika Nath, a resident of Jagannath Rural Municipality Ward No. 2 Baskena in Bajura district always had a hard life. She could not go to school and had to marry young. Her husband's family was also poor. Her husband used to go to India for work. However, he did not earn much. "His earning was so little that it was not sufficient to provide for the family," she remembers.

In 2019, Radhika got the opportunity to participate in the Sundarsil Janmukhi Kendra, a REFLECT circle, organized in her Municipality by PeaceWin Bajura. The organization was implementing a project aimed at making women aware of their rights over their body and importance of reproductive health, building their capacity to fight against Chaupadi as well as uplifting their livelihood through skill development training.

Sundarsil Janmukhi Kendra initiated a campaign with the aim of eradicating Chaupadi from their Municipality. Radhika also participated in this campaign.

Radhika was also selected for the livelihood support by the project. She was provided training and then NRs. 20,000 to start poultry business. Her happiness knew no bound when she was selected for the support.



She started the farm with 30 chicks. At first, she encountered some loss due to the unfavorable weather. However, from the second lot it got better. Her husband who had just returned from India due to the COVID-19 pandemic joined her. It was like a blessing for her. "He supported me in my business as well as in the household chores," she says.

The experience from the poultry farm gave Radhika confidence. The profit from the farm provided her money to invest in a canteen, which she wanted to start. She started one. Her family now has a poultry farm, a canteen and some cattle. Her earning has increased significantly.

"My life was confined inside the four walls of my house. Thanks to the PeaceWin Bajura and REFLECT Circle, I could come out of it and start an enterprise.

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"His earning was so little that it was not sufficient to provide for the family," she remembers.

In the past, I was like an invisible person. No one cared to ask me anything or gave a thought to what I felt about things. Now it's different. People come to ask me and take my advice. PeaceWin Bajura and REFLECT Circle not only helped me improve my financial but social status as well. For an illiterate person like me, this is beyond what I would dream", concludes Radhika.



Fighting for Discrimination Free Society

Since his childhood, Nanda Lal Sarki, 42, of Budinanda Municipality of Anga Pani Ward No. 9 Guyali in Bajura district, has had to face caste-based discrimination many times and during many occasions. He comes from a Dalit group, the so-called untouchable. "It is very painful when somebody treats you differently just because you belong to a different caste," he says. Thus, one day, he decided not to discriminate and segregate women in the family when they were having their periods. In other words, he decided not to follow Chaupadi.

However, when he shared this idea to his family members, his parents, and especially his mother, disagreed vehemently. They were ready to leave the house if he went ahead with the idea. "My parents started packing their bags and got ready to leave the house," he recalls. He had to bow down and beg them not to do so.

One day, an incident happened in place called Pandusin in the same district. A woman had died in a shed along with her two little sons. She was in her period and had been

sent to segregate herself in the shed away from home. This became a big news everywhere. This also made my parents realize that Chaupadi was a wrong tradition.

It was after this incident Nanda Lal started campaigning against Chaupadi more actively and vigorously. He contributed from his side to organize interaction sessions where they made people aware about the harm Chaupadi caused to women and girls. They also educated them on how it was an ill tradition that had to be eradicated. After doing this, they destroyed all the cowsheds in village and made sleeping arrangements for girls and women when they had their periods. They also built public toilets.

In coordination with REFLECT circle, local elected representatives, the police, and other stakeholders,

they started to monitor to see if any family in the village was practicing Chaupadi. They monitor every month even now.

"I am happy with the change in peoples' perception. It's really good that they have listened to people younger than them such as me. It is understandable that giving up such a deep-rooted and long-practiced traditional is not easy. But then what is wrong is wrong and change must come", he says.

"I wish the campaign against gender discrimination could be as effective as one against Chaupadi in our community," he says. "Our upcoming generation deserves to be born and grow up in a discrimination free society. For this we need to transform our society," he says.

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No More Segregation during Menstruation

Kalawati B.K., 18, Silgadi Municipality Ward no. 4 of Pipalabot, Dipyal in Doti district grew up witnessing the malpractice of Chhupadi. She had seen her mother, grandmother, sister, and sister-in-law suffered due to this malpractice.

"When I was small, I saw them sleeping in the cowshed during menstruation. They suffered a lot," she recalls. The women were not allowed to enter the house or given nutritious food. But they had to work outside home. "My mother used say her back and abdomen pained when she had her period," she says. Kalawati used to fear if she would have to bear the same suffering after she started menstruating. She hated Chaupadi.

Kalawati was studying in class 9 and had not started menstruating when Equality Development Center (EDC) organized a program in her school to discuss Chaupadi. In the program, she learnt that it was an evil tradition and could be done away with. "I used to think Chaupadi as an obligation for every girl. But I learnt it wasn't. It could be done away with," she recalls.

The students discussed more about this matter with EDC. Subsequently, under the facilitation of the organization, they formed a group named 'Kishori Samuha'. The Kishori Samuha had 35 members, including boys.

Soon, the group started conducting awareness campaigns against Chaupadi in the village. The EDC provided them the materials needed for the campaign. "It was difficult at first, especially as people did not listen to us. But gradually they started listening to us. They started to discuss about Chaupadi". Things were starting to change.

When Kalawati first experienced her menstruation she slept inside her room in her house. No one in the family opposed it. In fact, her mother gave her extra milk and ghee. Her happiness knew no bounds.

EDC also helped them build a toilet in our school. The organization also provided training on making sanitary pads. "Thanks to EDC, we have the facility of a clean toilet and sanitary pads in our school's restroom," she says. Nowadays, no girl misses school during her

menstruation because she has access to sanitary pads and a clean toilet facility.

The group also conducted several extra-curricular activities such as speech and debate competition

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Nowadays, no girl misses school during her menstruation because she has access to sanitary pads and a clean toilet facility.

against Chhaupadi. "This kind of competition not only helps us to get information about the malpractice but also increases our confidence", she says.

In the future, Kalwati wants to continue towards fighting other evil customs prevalent in the society such as gender discrimination and dowry system.

