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Shunned during her period, Nepali woman dies of snakebite

The Straits Times (10.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2tFtJ5Y> - Every month when her period came, Ms Tulasi Shahi was sent to stay in her uncle's hut, the one where he keeps his cows tied up, in a village in the Dailekh district in western Nepal.

This month was no different. She slept there on wooden boards laid on the ground, in keeping with a tradition known as chhaupadi that sequesters menstruating women from their families.

But while she was in the hut on Thursday night, the 18-year-old was bitten by a poisonous snake. Her mother took her to a shaman, but he could not cure her. Then she was taken to a health clinic, but workers did not have the anti-venom medicine she needed, her family said.

She died early on Friday (July 7) morning.

"If she was given proper treatment, she would have survived," said Ms Kamala Shahi, a cousin of Ms Shahi who works at a government health post. "She died because of superstition." The Supreme Court of Nepal ordered an end to chhaupadi, which is linked to Hinduism, in 2005. But it is still practised in many of Nepal's isolated villages, particularly in the west.

A Bill is pending in Parliament to formally criminalise the practice. Many people in rural villages believe that menstruating women are impure and can bring bad luck on a household. Under the chhaupadi tradition, the women are kept from taking part in normal family activities and social gatherings or from entering houses, kitchens and temples.

A Nepali government survey in 2010, cited in a State Department human rights report, found that 19 per cent of women in the country aged 15 to 49 practised chhaupadi, and the proportion rose to 50 per cent in the mid-western and far western regions.

The practice has its dangers: Women must often brave winter cold or summer heat in rude huts, where they are vulnerable to human and animal intruders.

Ms Anita Gyawali, an official responsible for women's issues in Dailekh, said that another teenage girl died in the district about six weeks ago, also from a snakebite, while staying in a menstrual hut. And a 15-year-old girl in another part of the country died in a menstrual shed in December; local news reports said she was killed by smoke inhalation after lighting a fire in the hut to keep warm.

"Young girls feel guilty," Ms Gyawali said. "They are forced to follow this tradition by their parents and religion."

Ms Shahi's family said she did not object to the practice. "I think my sister accepted it and followed it because it has been continuing since ages," said her brother Prem Shahi,

24. "I think she accepted it because my grandmother followed it and my mother followed it."

Others pointed to lack of education as a factor.

"I heard about the incident of Tulasi Shahi," said Ms Rukmini Acharya, 17, who lives in the area and said she had observed a less extreme version of the practice. "I am very sad about it. Girls who stay in a hut face a lot of difficulties. It's all because the parents are illiterate."

Ms Radha Paudel, a Kathmandu-based women's rights activist who focuses on menstrual health, said Nepal needed to enact legislation specifically outlawing the practice, and to do a better job of spreading awareness of its dangers.

"There are so many organisations working on this issue," she said. "Our president is a woman, the speaker is a woman and our chief justice was a woman. But girls are dying in the shed and they have to live like animals. It's shameful."