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Why menstrual stigma continues to claim lives in Nepal

By Zaheena Rasheed & Roshan Sedha

Al Jazeera (17.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2rj9k9c> - In Nepal's far western Achham, a remote arid region where farming villages dot the foothills of the Himalayas, government and aid workers have walked from door to door for nearly a decade to advocate against chauupadi, an ancient Hindu ritual where women are banished from their homes during menstruation.

Their ultimate goal is to end segregation, yet the dangers these women are exposed to have added urgency to their campaign.

In Achham alone, at least 12 women have died while following chauupadi since 2007. And just last week, the practice claimed another life.

Gauri Kumari Budha, a 22-year-old student, was found dead on January 8 after she spent the night in a chauu goth, a low, windowless mud hut where she confines herself during her period.

Officials said she died of smoke inhalation after she lit a fire to stave off the cold. Others have previously died due to snake bites and infections.

Hers is the first death reported since the Nepali parliament voted to criminalise chauupadi last year.

The new law, due to come into effect in August, sets a three-month jail term and a 3,000 rupee (\$30) fine for those who force women to follow the custom.

Birendra Budha, Gauri's husband of 18 months, said he was aware chauupadi was illegal and had advised his wife against sleeping in the chauu goth.

"I used to tell her time and again not to sleep in that hut since it was unsafe and unhygienic," he told Al Jazeera by phone. "But people here are dogmatic in their beliefs, and many women practise chauupadi even if they are told not to."

The policeman who works in the capital, Kathmandu, said he was devastated by her death.

"It was so sudden. We are all still in shock," he said.

'They will hide and do it'

Pema Lhaki, a women's health advocate, told Al Jazeera she was saddened and angered by Gauri's death.

"When the spouse of a Nepali policeman dies because of chauupadi, that gives you an indication of the kind of challenges we face in ending the practice," she said.

In 2005, the Nepali Supreme Court banned the practice. However, women still followed chauupadi, prompting the government to introduce the law criminalising it.

But campaigners like Lhaki said a lot more effort was needed to end chauupadi. Raising awareness about the science behind menstruation, as well as the buy-in of religious and political leaders, was key to that process, they said.

In the far west of Nepal, where the chauupadi tradition is prevalent, many believe that menstruating women are impure and can bring bad luck to a household. In addition to being forced from their homes, women on their periods are banned from social gatherings, denied access to some foods and can also be barred from toilets in their homes.

Describing the superstitions some Nepalis hold about menstruation, two local activists, in a recent article for the Republica website, wrote: "They believe if a menstruating woman fetches water, the well will dry up. If she touches a tree, it will never again bear fruit or will die; if she consumes milk, the cow will stop giving milk; if she reads a book, Saraswati, the goddess of education, will become angry; if she touches a man, he will be ill."

The practice is enforced by religious leaders in most villages, but women "do it themselves, too, because they believe they are protecting their families," said Lhaki, who works for the Nepal Fertility Care Centre.

"If I am told that my actions could cause harm to my daughter, husband or family, of course I will do it."

Lhaki hailed the new law as a positive step but said women and girls would continue to die or suffer from health problems associated with chauupadi as long as people linked menstruation to impurity.

Without a change in such beliefs, "the women themselves will hide and do it, and they will not report it being done either" even when the law comes into effect, argued Lhaki.

Demystifying periods

Radha Paudel, founder of the charity Action Works Nepal, said the solution was to create a national dialogue about menstrual stigma. "It's very simple. Menstruation is natural ... and we need to deliver the scientific message," she told Al Jazeera.

In Jumla district in midwestern Nepal, that change was under way, Paudel said.

A key step towards that was educating the village shamans about menstruation, she said.

Megh Nath Yogi, a 38-year-old shaman from the village of Tila-3 in Jumla, said he stopped advocating for chauupadi when he understood that "menstruation is a natural process".

"Some people were sending women to chauu goths until recently," he told Al Jazeera. "They were of the view that God would be angry if women stayed inside their homes during their periods.

"So I told them, I will take care of God but don't send women to the chhau goth."

For Paudel, the campaign does not end with the destruction of the chauu goths.

"To me, the underlying principle of chhaupadi is segregation," she said. "Menstrual restrictions are a human rights issue. It ends when gender discrimination ends."

Back in Achham, residents of Gauri's village are still in mourning.

"She was well-loved here," her husband, Budha, said.

"Chhaupadi is blind faith. My wife would not have died if she had stayed inside our home that day. People should be told that menstruation has nothing to do with religion."

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."