

Remote town becomes first in Nepal to end practice of isolating women during periods

The Telegraph (24.07.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2LFLzkW> – A remote district in the west of Nepal has become the first in the country to eradicate the illegal practice of banishing women and girls to secluded huts when they have their periods.

Despite an official ban on the centuries-old Hindu superstition, known as chhaupadi, it is still common for women and girls in rural areas to be sent to the isolated huts.

In February a 17-year-old girl suffocated after lighting a fire to keep warm in the windowless hut, just weeks after a mother and her two young sons died in similar circumstances.

These deaths prompted a huge outcry and a parliamentary investigation.

Dhan Bahadur Bista, mayor of Bungel, the district which has now got rid of the huts, told the Telegraph a decade-long programme of initiatives, including education programmes and the establishment of an organisation to advocate for young girls, was behind the success.

The organisation, Kishori Sanjhal, put on regular street plays and educated residents about menstruation and the dangers of banishing women and girls to the isolated and often freezing huts.

Mr Bista comes from a region where women are not forced to leave their homes during their periods.

“It was simply to give a message that this old tradition should be let go,” he said. “I am sure our people not practising the tradition will have a greater impact on women.”

The practice of banishing women stems from an ancient Hindu superstition that periods are a curse. When a girl has her first period she is sent to a run-down shed – typically used to keep cows or other livestock in – for 14 days.

During this time she is forbidden from leaving the hut and must refrain from touching family members. After this she is banished for the duration of her period.

Girls are also banned from going to school or to the temple every month. Meat and dairy products are also withheld.

“Chhaupadi is an extreme form of period shaming,” said Sunita Tiwari from charity ActionAid in Nepal.

“Chhaupadi has seriously held women and girls in Nepal back. It’s propped up unacceptable social norms which dictate that women and girls’ bodies are the property of men – something to be abused and controlled,” she said.

Countless women have died in the freezing huts over the years – suffocation is common as women light fires in a desperate bid to keep warm. Other women and girls have died from snake bites.

Safety is also a major concern and women have reported being raped while isolated.

“Our aim was simple – to tell our girls and everyone that they had the freedom to either go to the hut or not to. I think we won,” Mr Bista said.