



**NEWS BULLETIN 303  
WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 1, 2017**

### **Generations Clash Over Menstrual Banishment in Nepal**



**Karisma and her mother are sent to the cow shed (background) during menstruation**

Gutu village, Surkhet District, Nepal: As a modern young woman, Karisma, 16, seems to love her Facebook profile (150 friends) and phone with equal fervor. She is popular at school and has a winning smile.

Except, that is, during menstruation.

As soon as Karisma's period begins, she will head to an open cow shed behind the family house (photo) where she will spend the next five days living above animals. She will be barred from entering her home, using the same utensils as her parents, touching male

relatives, or eating dairy products. Menstruation, she will be told, is impure and evil.

Karisma has submitted to this severe regime since she began menstruating three years ago, and she shudders at the very thought. "I hate it!" she says. "I'm afraid of snakes and drunken men." She has protested to her parents, who sympathize but ask her to respect the family custom. At least Karisma has her phone. It helps her to pass the time as she chats with friends from the cow shed.



**This painting at Gutu school shows an enlightened father rescuing his wife from a cow hut**

Known as *chhaupadi*, the practice of menstrual banishment offers a jarring contrast between old and new Nepal. *Chhaupadi* is common in western Nepal, where it is thought to be divinely ordained, and has been brought to some central districts by migrating families.

But advocates for women's rights have long denounced the practice. They were outraged when two girls died earlier this year during banishment - one from a snakebite and the other from smoke inhalation.

"*Chhaupadi* cannot be justified," said Samita Pradhan, director of the Centre for Agro-Ecology and Development (CAED), a partner organization of The Advocacy Project (AP) that works to end *chhaupadi* here in Gutu. "It deprives women and girls of proper nutrition and exposes them to risk when they most need rest and nourishment." Women have also been raped in the sheds, she adds.

While numbers are hard to come by, Ms Pradhan estimates that *chhaupadi* is practiced in 21 of Nepal's 77 districts. Simple math suggests that a woman can spend almost 8 years of her life between the ages of 11 and 45 cooped up in cow sheds and huts as small as fifty square feet. Adolescent girls can miss over 60 days of school a year.



**Friendly persuasion: Dila Kandel, right, helps 80 child activists in Gutu make the case against *chhaupadi* for the CAED campaign**

Emboldened by the growing political representation and influence of women in Nepal, advocates have pushed through a new law that will make *chhaupadi* illegal in 2018. The maximum sentence will be three months in jail and a fine of 3,000 rupees (\$30).

CAED's approach seeks to empower adolescent girls rather than pressure their parents. It was [well described in blogs](#) by Dorothy Khan, an AP Peace Fellow who worked with CAED in 2016 and raised \$1,000 for a girls' toilet at the Gutu school.

"We tell girls that menstruation is healthy and natural, not impure and sinful," said Dipika Shrestha from CAED. The campaign works closely with the Gutu school, which offers classes on hygiene and nutrition and provides sanitary pads for students during their periods.

Dhurba Raj Upadhyar, the school's deputy principal, feels the campaign is changing attitudes. The number of families who keep girls home during their periods has fallen sharply and several families have reduced the period of banishment to as little as three days.



**Jalesha, left, in front of the hut where she and her daughter live during menstruation. A defender of *chhaupadi*, she asked that we not use real names.**

CAED is also active in the women's network in Kathmandu, and organized a recent conference on *chhaupadi* to mark the International Day of The Girl Child. Karisma was invited - the first time she had visited the capital - and even appeared on television. But she came back down to earth on her return to Gutu when her grandmother told her to continue using the cow shed.

In this family at least, the grandmother calls the shots. Karisma's mother Kamala also stays in the shed, even though she too detests the practice. Kamala is an educated woman who runs the family business and teaches. Still, she said, the family home is owned by her in-laws - and the power of the family is strong in Nepali

society.

Several interviews by AP in Gutu suggested that older women may be the fiercest supporters of *chhaupadi*. Dura Chalise submitted to the cow shed at the insistence of her mother-in-law but pulled the structure down as soon as the old lady died. Her daughter Champa, 14, got the message. "I would never enter the cow shed," she said. "Menstruation is completely natural."



**Champa, 14, is one of 15 adolescent girls helping the CAED campaign in Gutu. Her mother Dura pulled the cow shed down when her mother-in-law died.**

"It does seem that those who live with their in-laws are more likely to use the cow shed" said Ms Shrestha from CAED. But all agree that it is hard to change the minds of the old.

The question is whether the new law will help when it takes effect next year. At first sight, the idea of arresting grandmothers seems implausible. The proposed fine (\$30) would also hit hard in villages like Gutu where a farming family can earn as little as \$200 a year.

But Karisma's mother was excited to hear about the new law, which might just be the argument she needs to

convince her husband and in-laws. "Once the law comes we will move from the shed to a room in the house," she said with conviction. At this news, Karisma's grin reappeared.

***Drafted by Iain Guest [iain@advocacy.net](mailto:iain@advocacy.net)***

***Thanks to Humanity United for supporting our 2017 program and to the Peace and Collaborative Development Network for re-posting our bulletins***



HUMANITY  
UNITED

