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Nepali Girls Will Use New Law to Resist Menstrual Banishment

For seven days each month [Durga Shahi](#), 19, is banished from her home by her parents and treated like an outcast while she menstruates.



Menstrual prison: Girls in west Nepal can spend up to ten years in a chhau goth.

Durga spends the time in a small, drafty animal pen like the one shown left. She cannot consume milk products, use the family's usual cooking utensils or draw water from the village well. Bathing of any kind on days 2, 4, and 6 is also forbidden.

Durga is a victim of menstrual banishment, known as *chhaupadi*, which is practiced in the mid and far west of Nepal. Like many educated girls, she understands that she is the victim of an

irrational taboo, but feels powerless to resist. Her father works in India and has left the running of the household to his wife, who believes that the family will suffer if it does not respect *chhaupadi*. Their village, Malika, is often cut off by landslides. Change comes slowly to such communities.

Durga told her story recently to [Caroline Armstrong-Hall](#), a Peace Fellow who is working this summer at the [Centre for Agro-Ecology and Development](#), a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP) and fierce critic of *chhaupadi*.

CAED has long viewed *chhaupadi* as abusive and dangerous. Girls have been raped and died from freezing cold, asphyxiation and snake-bites in the *chhau goth* (animal pen). In areas where *chhaupadi* is practiced, women and girls can expect to spend up to ten years of their life in the *chhau goth* - a prospect that Durga dreads.



Durga, 19, faces snakes and freezing cold in the cow pen, but is reluctant to resist her mother.

Starting now advocates have a legal weapon at their disposal. Under a new law which takes effect today (August 17) anyone who forces a girl or woman into *chhaupadi* will be liable for a fine of NRs 3,000 (\$30) and/or up to 3 months in jail.

Many find it hard to imagine the police going after mothers and grandmothers. But advocates like CAED feel that the law could help change some minds, particularly if it is part of a wider strategy.



Sunita, 14, loathes the animal pen but is grateful to her mother for easing her workload during menstruation.

As Caroline's profiles show, the struggle in families is fierce and mothers are often caught in the middle between daughters and grandparents. [Sunita Dhungana](#) (left) hates the animal pen, but at least her mother tries to ease her workload and allows visits from friends while Sunita is *inchhaupadi*.

[Balika Bishwokarma](#), 17, from Gutu village, took matters into her own hands after her grandmother died and bluntly told her parents that she was rejecting *chhaupadi*.

Impressed by such examples, CAED has launched a program to train tough-minded girls like Balika to serve as "peer educators" and encourage other girls to stand up for their rights. Local schools are certainly enthusiastic. [Dorothy Khan, AP's 2016 Peace Fellow](#), raised funds

for a room at the Gutu school where menstruating girls can rest between classes instead of returning home to the cow pen.



Brave boy: Manish, 15, has helped female classmates make reusable sanitary pads and denounce *chhaupadi*.

As future heads of household, boys are also welcomed to the program. [Manish Sapkota](#), 15, is proud to help female classmates to make reusable sanitary pads in Gutu.

Social media could be another tool. Like many teens, Durga is devoted to her phone - and [during a visit to the area last year](#) AP was told that many girls pass the time in the animal pen by texting friends. CAED is exploring a way to link them up through social media.

CAED is also working with other Nepali NGOs to denounce *chhaupadi* at the United Nations. The [Forum for Women, Law and Development](#) will present a report on behalf of Nepali civil society organizations to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in October. CAED is contributing a section on *chhaupadi* and will urge the Nepali delegation to enforce the new law.

CAED is also working with other



One who said no: Hari Kala Poudel is one of the few grandmothers in Gutu Village to oppose *chhaupadi*.

The biggest question is how the new law will play out in villages. In Malika village, Durga thinks it will help that *chhaupadi* is now a crime. AP and CAED have also found that there is innate respect for law in villages, particularly among men who have served as government officials. CAED will exploit this in its information campaign.

Improbable though it may seem, the search is also on for a brave girl to test out the new law. Durga herself has no wish to take her parents to court, but were such a case to emerge CAED and its legal partners stand ready to offer legal aid.

"I already know that for me, *chhaupadi* won't end overnight," said Durga. "This change will happen gradually, as awareness grows among my people."

* Read [Caroline's blogs](#)

* View [Caroline's photos](#)

* Read our past publications on *chhaupadi*: Dorothy's [2016 blogs](#); our [2017 bulletin](#); our [2018 bulletin](#).

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