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Series: Best Practices in South Asia of Engaging Men and Boys to Transform Gender Discriminatory Practices

## Engaging Men and Boys

# Against the Practice of **CHHAUPADI** in Nepal

Centre for Health and Social Justice  
&  
MenEngage Alliance South Asia

## CASE STUDY : 1

### **CHHAUPADI AND THE CONTEXT OF THE INTERVENTION**

Chhaupadi is the practice of banishing a woman from the family home for the duration of her menstruation (or during childbirth) because of a deep-seated belief that a woman is impure while she is bleeding. The woman is forced to stay in a Chhau or cow shed (hence the name chhaupadi) for the time and subsist on dry food, mainly beaten rice and salt. She is not

allowed to undertake routine activities including going to school or work, nor is she allowed to touch anyone (husband, family member or other members of the community) or anything (including trees or cows). While observed by Hindus across Nepal, chhaupadi is pervasive in Darchula, Baitadi, Dadeldhura, Kanchanpur, Bajhang, Bajura, Doti, Achham and Kailali districts of the country's Far-Western Region and Kalikot, Dailekh, Humla and Jumla districts of the

Mid-Western Region of Nepal.

Chhaupadi is inimical to the health and safety of women for the following main reasons:

- \* banned from consuming dairy products like milk, yogurt, butter and other nutritious food, a woman is denied nourishment required by the body especially during this period; and,
- \* being out in the open without much protection, the woman is exposed to natural elements and is also vulnerable to animal

attacks including snakebites, besides being vulnerable to sexual assaults too.

The practice induces the idea that menstruation, and therefore womanhood, is dirty and negative, and something to be ashamed about. The Supreme Court of Nepal banned the practice of chhaupadi in 2005 but born out of superstitions and tradition, chhaupadi continues. Moreover, there was no law to punish people even after the Supreme Court banned the practice. On August 9, 2017 Nepal's Parliament finally criminalised the practice by bringing in a new law that stipulates a three-month jail sentence or a Rs 2,000 fine, or both, for anyone forcing a woman to follow the custom. The law will come into effect in a year's time.

Action Works Nepal (AWON) sees chhaupadi as a form of discrimination and violence against women. And, in the vision of fostering gender equality within Nepal and beyond, believes that practices like chhaupadi have to be dealt with. AWON, thus, decided to work in the remote district of Jumla where the practice is

rampant. AWON also decided to engage boys and men in their fight against chhaupadi noting that tradition has provided men enormous privileges, one of them being their decision-making power at home and on behalf of the family including the girls and women, too. Where boys and men truly understand the pitfalls of superstitious beliefs and traditions like chhaupadi and their negative impacts on women, they should recognize their role in reinforcing practices discriminatory to women and must, therefore, proactively do something to stop the same.

### **AWON and Its Strategies in Engaging Men and Boys**

AWON is a Kathmandu-based non-government organization (NGO) founded in 2010 to:

- improve the livelihood of the

poor and excluded and vulnerable communities through innovative vocational opportunities and economic empowerment activities driven by communities;

- mobilize civil societies, media and other groups for and through policy advocacy, networking and media campaign;
- train professionals through different training institutes for research, human rights, natural resource management and climate change

AWON is also working on sexual and reproductive health, and chhaupadi is a main issue that it engages with. AWON has been engaging men and boys in its interventions from inception. It trains men/boys and women/girls in the community as Social



Celebrating Women's day at Jumla District





Celebrating Women's day at Jumla District

Picture Source: <http://www.actionworksnepal.com/about-us/>

Motivators. AWON is a member of the MenEngage Alliance at the national level since 2011. AWON actively engages with men and boys at the implementation level (in field areas) through fortnightly group discussions called 'Meet at AWON.' Topics discussed include gender, SRHR (Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights) and human rights. Quarterly reflections and actions (at Group Leader's level for follow-up and coaching) are also undertaken.

AWON partners with like-minded organizations operating in the same areas where it works, and with other INGO/NGOs for replication of effective strategies particularly with regard to engaging with men and boys. One of these strategies is the recognition of the “role model men” where each man submits

at least ten signatures from members of the community where he lives to attest to his conduct as “Positive Motivator” as judged from a set of criteria which includes:

- “(One who does not follow) the chhaupadi practice”
- “(One who) supports women and girls by (doing the work otherwise assigned to women and girls as per) traditional gender roles”
- “(One who) stands, speaks against any form of gender-based violence”

The assumption is that once boys and men are recognized as 'Role Models' they will have more leverage to mould other boys and men, which will be good for the community.

**The Change Process**

AWON conducted a research at

the beginning of its intervention to understand the magnitude of issues in the area and inform its course of action. The research validated the deeply entrenched cultural and social biases against women, traditional practices like chhaupadi and child marriage, gender stereotypes in terms of sexual division of labour and decision-making, lack of women's agency, lack of information on health, persistent gender-based discrimination at home and in the community etc.

While promoting women's leadership and decision-making at home and in the community, AWON also facilitated men engaging in domestic work such as cleaning the house, cooking, taking care of children etc. This allowed women time to attend the group discussions in the community.

Boys and men were part of advocacy groups interfacing with local leaders and government functionaries. As 'Role Models' they could reach out more credibly to other boys and men, discussing gender issues and the need to stop chhaupadi. Discussions on SRHR also resulted in more community members visiting local health

centers and increased traffic for hotline counselling in the community especially with adolescents.

## The Gains

The initiatives by AWON to actively involve men are pushing them to bring a change in patriarchal thoughts and beliefs. This has made them aware of the importance of gender equality within their family and community, a major achievement of AWON.

The male support groups in the area are increasingly becoming effective. They have expressed a better learning about women's rights, gender-based violence and problems women face in the community; they say they have also gained a better understanding of themselves, confidence in their relations and improved self-esteem. Women in their community and family are also becoming more empowered as they get the opportunity to be more involved inside and outside their homes.

Four villages in Jumla have been declared cowshed free or chhaupadi free by the community, to date. Twenty men have been recognized as 'Role

Models' by their community.

Four men have been recognized as 'Role Models' at the national level.

Founder and President of AWON, Radha Paudel says, "The remote village of Dhimkot in Kudari VDC of Jumla is declared chhaupadi-free by the community. AWON worked relentlessly with Kalika Miteri Women's Groups (community groups) over two years to eliminate cultural taboos from the village. Significant support was received from Miteri Male Support Groups in the campaign. Now, this village of 41 households is working on various activities to make it a model village in the district."

There have been many individual stories of change in Kudari:

**Bhim Bahadur Shahi** from Kudari-4, Jumla, is a member of a male support group. He has overcome traditional beliefs on menstruation and gone against societal practice by bringing his wife back from the cow shed into their house, even into the kitchen, during her menstruation. Now, she does not have to spend nights in the dark and scary cow shed during her periods. He says,



His wife Tara says,



As Bhim Bhadur began interacting regularly on gender issues through the male support group, he came to believe there should be no division of work between men and women and he does not think that there is any work which is not important. "Both men and women should have equal responsibility to do

tasks and each of their work should be accepted with dignity," he says, adding, "I gradually came to the realisation that chhaupadi is a form of violence against women."

**Pratap Shahi says, "We should respect the rights of women and ensure that they live with freedom and dignity."** He was the first man in his village to raise voice against the chhaupadi practice, and he was the first one to bring his wife into the house from the cow shed. He helps his wife with chores in the house and in the farm. He encourages her to attend women's group meetings and trainings for empowerment.

His participation in women's groups helped him earn respect. The groups invite him to attend their meetings as an adviser. They have given him the title of a 'model man' in the village.

**Janak Bahadur Shahi** exemplifies the saying that "change starts with one self."

People say that men should not do household work, that it is solely the women's job. But, Janak has been able to change this concept through his own example and has become a role

model for other men in his community. He lives with his family in Kudari VDC of Jumla. He is a farmer with three school going children, and is a member of a male support group. His wife Rita Shahi enjoys working together with him in the field, and they prefer to work

Janak often motivates other women in the community too to be independent and to express their thoughts. Despite the dominating nature of most men in the community, he says, "I am determined to help women to fight for their rights and



**Group discussion at Rachuli, Kalikot**

together on household chores, too. Rita Shahi says: "He helps me in my work at home. He cooks, washes dishes, sweeps and does other indoor work. He has made my life easier and has encouraged me to attend meetings and do other work outside the home."

freedom." Rita Shahi says, "My husband asks for my views in his work, too. He respects my decision on economic transactions. This has made me confident and has helped me improve my self-esteem. AWON deserves a salute for its work in promoting gender equality and



justice.”

## The Challenges and Lessons Learnt

Getting boys and men to be involved on an issue such as menstruation and the long-held tradition of chhaupadi was not easy – not for the men and boys, not for the organization, not for the funders and other stakeholders of AWON.

Awareness raising on the issue and facilitating an understanding on one's role in perpetuating a practice that was discriminatory to women were critical steps for any engagement by boys and men.

There was resistance to new concepts – to the concept of engaging men and boys, to the concept of fighting chhaupadi. AWON was also faced with challenges of the 'status quo,' for example male leaders overtly exercising their male power in the name of “engagement of men.” Having to work together with women was not easy among male stakeholders and sometimes among male team members. Transcending the stereotypes – and men going



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### Sharing household chores at Jumla

beyond their 'comfort zones' – takes understanding of oneself in relation to people around and courage to embrace change.

Staff members were also threatened by some groups and individuals in the course of work so it was important that AWON forged strategic partnership with other like-minded groups working in the same areas and on the same issues.

The practice of chhaupadi is slowly changing. With access to information and better connectivity (by road and television), many organizations running anti-chhaupadi

campaigns have come up in various districts, using a variety of tools. Some are working to raise awareness through media, some are working with communities in the field and others are working for change at the policy level. The government too is concerned and is working to eliminate the practice.

The existing Civil Code which will make chhaupadi punishable by law has just been revised in August 2017 after a long wait by activists. This is in keeping with the Supreme Court's decision on the issue in 2005, the Ministry of Women, Child and Social Welfare's guidelines to eradicate



Chhaupadi being practiced

chhaupadi nationally (“Chhaupdi Pratha Unmulan Nirdesika” of 2064) in 2008 and the Constitution of Nepal's provision on gender equality.

Slowly, with time, patience and resources, transformation is being facilitated. But, much remains to be done. Myths remain about chhaupadi which pose huge hurdles in eliminating the practice. It will take massive efforts and a long time to get communities to fully overcome superstitious beliefs relating to chhaupadi and to many other issues but small beginnings have been made.

The box below shows some persistent myths and misconceptions:

- **Cows/buffaloes will get sick if their milk and milk products are consumed by women having periods**
- **Pickles will get spoiled if menstruating girls/women touch the pot of pickle**
- **Menstruating girls/women should not touch their fathers, brothers, grandparents and any male members because they will fall sick and their life span shortened**
- **Menstruating girls/women should not touch priests/faith healers as they would start shaking because the gods who are residing in their bodies will get upset**
- **Menstruating girls/women should not look at the sun because the sun is considered to be God**

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# ABOUT THE CASE STUDIES

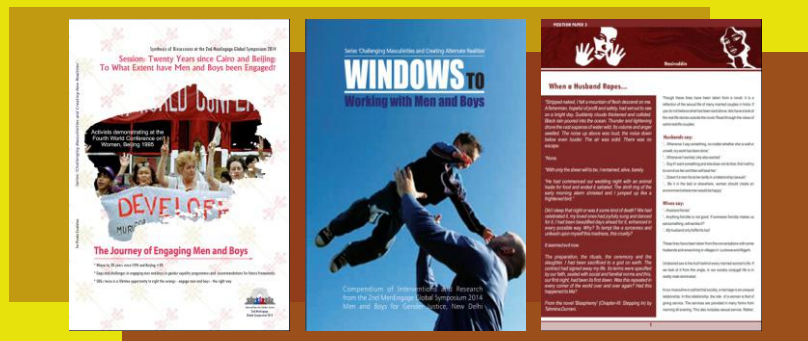
Five case studies have been put together by the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) in *the series Best Practices in South Asia of Engaging Men and Boys To Transform Gender Discriminatory Practices.*

These are practices developed by MenEngage South Asia network's member organisations in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and India. The purpose of developing these case studies is to provide increased visibility to organisations and issues related to work with men on masculinity, gender based violence, sexual and reproductive health rights and gender equality. The five case studies are:

- 1 Engaging Men and Boys Against the Practice of Chhaupadi in Nepal
- 2 'Awaaz Do' (Speak Up)- Engaging Youth to Address Violence Against Women in Odisha, India
- 3 Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality in Sri Lanka - Resisting 'Karumaya' (The Fate Of Women)
- 4 Using Communications For Exploring Masculinities - Work With Young Men In Urban India
- 5 Engaging Boys And Men To Stop Acid Violence In Bangladesh

## About CHSJ

CHSJ (chsj.org) is an Indian civil society resource organisation working on issues of masculinities and gender justice. It focuses on networking, capacity building, research and implementing strategies it has developed on working with men and boys for gender justice through field based interventions. Its work is grounded in 10 states. Some of the material brought out by its Resource Centre on gender and masculinities can be seen here:



- <http://www.menengagedilli2014.net/knowledge-products-link-page.html>
- <http://www.chsj.org/positions-papers.html>
- <http://www.chsj.org/resource-centre-on-masculinity.html>
- <http://www.femindia.net/>

## About MenEngage South Asia

The global MenEngage Alliance (menengage.org) has a strong presence in South Asia since 2007, where it is known as MenEngage South Asia (MESA). Through country-level and regional alliances, MESA seeks to provide a collective voice on the need to engage men and boys in gender equality and addressing masculinities, to build and improve the field of practice around engaging men and boys in gender justice, and advocating before policymakers at the local, national and regional levels.