

## **Promoting Safe and Eco-Friendly Menstrual Practices in Nepal**

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### **Background:**

*Chhaupadi*, or the practice of women living in sheds while they are menstruating, is a Nepali practice that dates back centuries. Amnesty International Nepal considers Chhaupadi to be gender-based discrimination and violence. At a minimum, it means some school-age girls regularly miss eight weeks of school per year. At its most extreme, the practice has caused the deaths of women in rural areas across Nepal. Despite being banned by the Supreme Court of Nepal in 2005, the practice persists in some regions.

The issue is rooted in greater South Asian religious and cultural beliefs that menstruating women can be “impure” and “inauspicious.” Although most prevalent in rural areas, even women in cities face isolation stemming from this ingrained tradition. From sitting at a separate table during meals to not being allowed to enter temples, women on their periods face restrictions to living their daily lives. General taboos surrounding menstruation constrain discussion on the topic and hinder women from knowledge and consideration about their reproductive health. To combat the societal pressures of being “unclean” and “impure,” women need to feel more informed and empowered to move and work while on their period.

Across most of the world, plastic sanitary napkins are often seen as the best option for women on their period; however, most are made out of approximately 90% plastic and can take 600 years to break down.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the long-term negative impacts on the environment, disposable pads can spread disease. There is contamination risk from pads containing menstrual blood when they are thrown onto roadsides or into rivers. Women who cannot afford imported plastic napkins often resort to using old rags. These women are at higher risk for developing rashes, vaginal diseases, and Toxic Shock Syndrome. To foster the general well-being of both the environment and Nepali women, there is a need for increased access to safe and eco-friendly menstrual practices.

### **Objectives and Anticipated Outcomes:**

- To start and sustain a women’s collective in either the Accham or Baitadi District, ultimately providing 5-10 local job opportunities and utilizing local resources (cotton and recycled fabrics)
- To provide affordable access to feminine hygiene products in a rural region
- To further the discussion on women’s health in Nepal by addressing a taboo subject and provide a safe space for women to ask imperative questions about their health.
- Encourage Nepali women to have the agency to make safer, informed choices about their bodies
- To promote peace by contributing to the destigmatization of periods in Nepal and empower women to be fully active members of society.

### **Summary of Project:**

To promote safe and eco-friendly menstrual practices, our group will start and sustain a women’s collective that provides affordable access to eco-friendly and reusable pads. These eco-friendly pads are the same price as a 10-pack of plastic disposable pads and can be reused for up to three years. We will work with the assistance of Ashwin Karki. Locally, he is known as the “Nepali Padman” for his dedication to normalizing menstruation. He has extensive experience in speaking to school-age girls about periods, and he sews and distributes hundreds of reusable pads every year.

To ensure sustainability for this project, we will collaborate with the Dharti Maata Sustainable Workshop, a successfully running women’s collective that produces eco-friendly reusable pads. They have offered to help us understand the process of starting and sustaining a women’s collective and will help us to develop our model for a similar collective to be established in the either the Accham or Baitadi District. This region currently lacks access to most basic health services.

Ashwin will work ahead of our arrival to select a suitable village for the eco-pad collective. We require interest from approximately 5-10 women to work in the collective. We will be in regular contact with Ashwin, who will provide us with updates throughout this process.

When we arrive in Nepal, our group will first travel to the original Dharti Maata Women’s Collective in Patlekhet, where we will observe their process of creating the eco-pads and managing a collective. Following this, we will purchase ten peddle sewing machines and have them transported to the Baitadi and Accham region. We anticipate renting

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<sup>1</sup> Peberdy et al., A Study into Public Awareness of the Environmental Impact of Menstrual Products and Product Choice: Global Sustainability Institute, November 2018.

a small office space for our collective. The project would cover the initial cost of renting this space for at least one year. The final location will be determined within the first two weeks of our arrival. At this point, we plan to begin conducting interviews for any interested local women. Following this, we will begin training our female members of the collective in eco-pad creation. We will also establish a code of conduct, as well as a system of collective leadership amongst them.

In addition to creating a sustainable producer of women's sanitary pads, our group will also be holding community and school discussion sessions. We will also be using the collective's rental space in the Accham or Baitadi to hold these discussions. In these discussions, our group will also distribute eco-friendly pads. These discussions will serve as an opportunity for women to voice their thoughts about the product or ask questions about general female hygiene. The school discussions would take place in English medium schools in the city of Pokhara. During our time in the city, we would also visit stores to gauge their interest in selling the eco-friendly pads. After establishing sales contacts, we will return to the collective to assess the production and establish a system for distribution.

### **Measuring Success:**

1. We will collect quantitative and qualitative data from the collective to measure satisfaction amongst the workers and women using the pads
2. We will collect quantitative and qualitative data from local schools to measure if our project made a significant impact on the number of school-aged girls
3. Production, distribution, and sales of collective's pads in Baitadi or Accham
4. Sales of collective's pads in Pokhara

### **Timeline:**

June 15th - June 23rd: Observe and Train at Dharthi Maata Women's Collective in Patlekhet

June 24th - July 1st: Purchase and transport sewing machines.

July 2nd - July 3rd: Visit villages in Baitadi and Accham. Meet any interested local women.

July 3rd - July 15th: Establish Women's Collective in the selected village. Begin training members of the collective, establishing a code of conduct, and selecting a leader.

July 16th - August 3rd: Hold discussions with middle and high school students in schools in Pokhara, visit stores to promote the product

August 4th - August 6th: Return to the collective to assess production

### **Sustainability:**

We anticipate that our collective will be fully self-sustainable before our departure from Nepal. The women in the collective will have the opportunity to run their own business, and gain new skills such as sewing, bookkeeping, and money management. The project will continue to be lead and maintained by the women's collective, and if needed, overseen by Ashwin. They will assist with issues such as building management and paperwork. Prashant and Ashwin will continue to serve as liaisons for the collective and promote the product beyond the village. Ashwin has offered to visit the collective at least a few times a month in the years following the project. Ashwin conducts numerous female health workshops every year and has connections with local businesses in Pokhara, so he will also continue to help distribute the pads from the collective beyond the village. This project will help to promote peace through its efforts to include women in more sectors of society such as education, the workforce and through the destigmatization of periods.

### **Qualifications:**

Prashant Bhandari is an international student from Nepal who has previously volunteered in rural Nepali communities. He is personally familiar with the practice of *Chhaupadi*, as well as the cultural and religious beliefs surrounding periods in Nepal. Sriya Chadalavada is an Economics major and Asian Studies concentrator. She regularly travels to India and has seen some of the societal restrictions placed on menstruating women in South Asia. Lelia Jo Dusthimer is an International Studies major. She is passionate about women's health issues and has previously worked on health drives in the United States. She has lived and studied in New Delhi, India and has an intermediate level of Hindi language skills.