

Final Project Report  
Promoting Safe and Eco-Friendly Menstrual Practices in Nepal  
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To promote safe and eco-friendly menstrual practices, our group worked to start and sustain several women's collectives. We were inspired by our interest in women's health and what we had learned about the practice of Chhaupadi in Nepal. We had several initial goals for the project. Due to the high cost of imported sanitary products, many young girls in Nepal stay at home during their menstrual cycle. By distributing pads in rural villages, we anticipated that our project would improve female students' access to education. We also expected that the collective would provide local job opportunities and promote social entrepreneurship among rural women. The collectives also used local materials in their manufacturing (such as cotton and recycled fabrics). The sanitary products created by the collective are reusable (for up to three years), affordable (cost the same prices as a 10-pack of plastic disposable pads), and eco-friendly.

Our initial vision for the project was to create one women's collective in the Western region of Accham or Baitadi. However, due to weather concerns and the project's overlap with monsoon season, we reconsidered the general location and structure of the project. In light of the unexpected heavy demand for our project—five communities wanted our group to visit—we began to brainstorm how to expand the project's scope and outreach. After reexamining the budget, we found that our initial estimates for some expenses were too high—such as food and rental space. In fact, after reworking expenditures, our group was able to rent four rooms/buildings for collectives and purchase 2 or more sewing machines for each location. Our model for the collective had half the women tracing and cutting while the other half sewed, so each member of the collective did not need their own personal sewing machine.

Initially we had also planned to travel to Dharti Mata, an existing women's collective, to observe that collective's structure and pad making process. However, after talking with Ashwin, and going over the model and plans he had developed, we realized this was unnecessary and our time would be better spent on location. Ashwin, known as the "Nepali Padman," has worked to fight against menstrual taboos across Nepal. Over the past few years, he has spoken with hundreds of women and school children about menstrual health. Around three years ago, Ashwin, with the help of his mother, created his own design for a reusable and eco-friendly pad—he was only fifteen. This project helped Ashwin expand his activist efforts to teach women in rural areas how to make and sell cloth pads. We are extremely grateful for Ashwin's efforts and assistance throughout this project. It would not have been possible without him!

Ultimately, the choice to relocate our project and expand its focus was a positive one. Our group visited five communities throughout central and eastern Nepal: Chepang, Binayi Triveni, Bardibas, Lamjung, and Parbat. In each community our group faced different challenges, as well as vastly varying attitudes surrounding menstruation and female health. In some villages, women face very little restrictions around their periods and speak more openly of them. In others, women and girls are hesitant to speak of them and it takes a lot of work to get them to open up on the subject. Ashwin, a local menstrual health activist and our partner for the project, was instrumental in encouraging both school children and women to normalize periods. The male principals, local male activists, and even sons listened along as Ashwin gave talks.

The format of our project was similar across communities. Ashwin and Prashant led the information sessions and classes for village women. These sessions covered topics from basic hygiene to pervasive taboos surrounding menstruation and femininity that these women faced on a day to day basis. We also showed women the pad model and explained how they could informally create it from old clothes if they didn't want to purchase one. After these sessions, interested women would apply to be a part of the collective. Our group would spend two to three days holding workshops to teach women to make the reusable and eco-friendly pads. The goal of the first and second training workshop was to teach the women, and with our instruction, they produced several sample pads. On the final day of the workshop, however, Ashwin and our group simply observed. The women often only needed minimal feedback to correct their work. Through our observations, we would get an idea of which woman would operate as the leader or head of the cooperative.

In addition to creating these collectives, our group also held several health classes at local schools. In some regions, we held multiple talks by age if there were too many girls to fit in one classroom. Ashwin also spoke to the school's administration and suggested improvements that would improve general menstrual education and health. In one school, he requested that a trash bin be placed in the girl's restroom for the convenience of those menstruating. In another, he helped make and hang up posters of the female reproductive system. Our group discussed hygiene and menstrual taboos but tried to make the content more relatable for each age group. Often, we asked each school pupil to say out loud "I menstruate" as well as to discuss their personal stories surrounding periods. This helped to lighten the atmosphere and deconstruct harmful taboos that periods are an unnatural or shameful thing. In another instance, we had girls write anything that they wanted to about periods. We collected and redistributed their papers, and each girl gave voice to the feelings of an anonymous peer as she read out the words she was handed.

A few unexpected issues made it impossible to form a collective in Binayi Triveni. As with the rest of Nepal, it was farming season, and few women could leave the fields. Due to miscommunication with the local chairman (similar to a mayor), he ultimately said that he could only ask for a few women from different areas to come together for our programming. We believed this to be unproductive to forming a cohesive collective. Instead, our group only held a one-day information session for women. Ashwin has been invited to return to Binayi Triveni after harvest season concludes, and he will continue the Peace Pad Project's goal of creating a collective there.

We also encountered seasonal issues in Bardibas when a local bridge collapsed due to heavy monsoon season flooding and our group had to evacuate a day before our project was complete. Considering the weather, part-way through the project, we decided to offer women refreshments and snacks when they came to our talks so there was a small incentive. We were also suggested by locals to offer monetary compensation but decided against it. We believe these drinks and snacks improved attendance; to the extent where, in one location, even older women that were past menopause attended! We did, however, offer small stipends to the women working in the collectives. They varied by the standard wages in the villages we visited. We wanted to compensate them for their time in the months before the profits from the pads could be collected.

While some collectives began production full-time, others decided to wait until September when monsoon season concludes. One of our conditions was that at least half of the pads we financed would be distributed throughout the village for free. The rest are to be sold in businesses throughout Nepal with 100% of the proceeds going back to the collective. With just Ashwin's contacts, our group has already received orders for the purchase of more pads than we have to sell (nearly 3,000). Purchasers include a handicrafts store, local activists, and even a local council that wanted to distribute them for free. We believe the project to be successful in that it is self-sustainable for the foreseeable future and it encourages the aims we initially proposed.

This project helped 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. Lelia Jo Dusthimer said, "For me, personally, participating in this project has revolutionized my understanding of female empowerment and the various social barriers which inhibit equity among human beings. I also learned so much about the importance of grassroots organizations in developing nations and am incredibly grateful for the UWC Davis Projects for Peace for providing our group the opportunity to learn from and interact with rural Nepalese communities."

