

The project's goal was to start a grass-root initiative to provide educational support and generate awareness about menstrual hygiene among community members in Kalekanda, Achham - a rural village in far-western Nepal. In this region, the tradition of Chhaupadi still persists. Chhaupadi Tradition requires menstruating women to stay in small chhau hut away from the home for five or six days where no hygienic food is given, no door is kept and no bedding materials provided. This has led to many deaths of women due to snake bites, rape cases and other diseases. It is believed that menstruating women are impure and bring bad luck to the family if let in their houses. Through the project, we made a small effort to lessen the long existing taboo around menstruation and took a step to aware the women to improve the menstrual hygiene of the females in Kalekanda.

This project was solely funded by the Davis Foundation. Although we didn't have other sources of funding, we did receive a donation of books from Shiksha Nepal which helped us establish a library in the school. We also received 120 reusable sanitary pads from Days for Girls Nepal which were to be distributed to women and girls in Kalekanda.

As mentioned earlier that in Chhaupadi tradition, women who are menstruating are considered to be impure. This stems from the belief that God uses menstruation as a medium to distribute curses. It is believed that anything that comes in contact with a menstruating woman will be trailed with ill luck. If a menstruating woman touches a fruit-bearing tree, then the tree will never bear fruit; if she touches a cow, then it will never give milk; if she enters the household, then the head of the house will fall sick and it rare conditions die. These superstitions linger on to this day and fuel the tradition of chhaupadi. Achham also has a strong patriarchal society, one where sons are valued far above daughters. The norm here is that the woman is forced to have as many children until they have a son. The sons are usually sent away to the cities for quality education while the daughters stay at home and run the house and maybe occasionally get sent to a local school. This structure of society also perpetuates the deep-rooted tradition of chhaupadi. While evident change in such a society cannot be seen with a single project, our aim was to promote education, personal hygiene and sanitation along with menstrual hygiene in a way that would not try to be offensive and impose on their belief. Our goal was to give the community as much information as we could without dictating how they should change their lifestyle.

While we were getting familiar with the status quo of the village, we realized that Chhaupadi played a big part in the lives of the community members. We knew that actively speaking out against chhaupadi would only warrant an unwelcoming reaction. To prevent being the object of scorn of the village, we had to reorganize our project in a way that portrayed menstruation as natural while not criticizing the way of life of the villagers.

During Chhaupadi, women are exposed to all kinds of health hazards; increased risk of asphyxiation when they light a fire in a hut without ventilation to keep themselves warm; sexual harassment and rape; and they run the risk of being attacked by wild animals. Whenever we read the news and saw a case of chhaupadi, our hearts would sink. We decided to apply for the Davis Projects for Peace as we wanted to bring a change to this tradition through an awareness program that emphasizes education and menstrual hygiene.

Chhaupadi is most prevalent in Achham. While there are areas in Achham where NGOs and INGOs do projects on a regular basis to lessen the impact of Chhaupadi, a lot of areas are yet to receive any sort of aid. We tapped into an alumni network of Budhanilkantha school and inquired about regions we could

target. We soon came across the Kalekanda village of Achham, a location in which we could reach out to students from two different schools, as well as the members of the community. Projects relating to creating better infrastructure for schools had been done in this area but no projects relating to menstrual health and hygiene had been conducted. So, we decided to work in Kalekanda to provide more exposure to it.

For this project, we collaborated with several organizations. We partnered with Days for Girls Nepal, whose mission is to empower girls. They provided us with 120 reusable sanitary pads as well as training to talk about menstrual health and hygiene to various members of the community. Other organizations that supported us were Shiksha Nepal, who provided us with books to set up the library, and Environment and Public Health Organization (ENPHO) who provided us with brochures and posters relating to health, sanitation and hygiene.

Our project began with work more focused towards promoting education in the village. Even though the school we visited had around 400 students from classes 1 through 10, we noticed that at most 70 students attended school. Among these students, most were children from classes 1 through 4, while only a few middle schoolers and high schoolers attended. When we asked around, the reason behind this was that students usually stayed back at home to help in household chores. Students also expressed that the reason they didn't attend school regularly was because of the poor infrastructure the schools had. Girls in the village confided in us that they were hesitant to attend school during menstruation as the school didn't have proper facilities to care for their needs.

We established a library with the intention of enhancing the learning environment for the students. We provided the library with a wide variety of books, from general knowledge, tips on various types of farming, short stories, novels and course books. After setting up the library, we conducted brief workshops with the students in which we discussed various ways to maintain books and wrote down the rules of the library. After the workshop, we gave the students an overview of the library. We also conducted a workshop with the teachers on how to properly utilize the library and how to encourage students to read more.

Our next objective was to educate the students on health and hygiene. In the village, sanitation and hygiene isn't given as much importance. We touched on some essential topics such as daily hygiene, proper food, fecal and plastic waste disposal. We also showed them ways to purify water and proper cooking habits. In addition to this, we demonstrated proper handwashing and toothbrushing techniques. Our final school centered activity was with Early Childhood Development (ECD). Here, we provided the school various ECD material such as toys, puzzles, and educational charts.

As for our community based program, the topics we covered in the workshop were puberty, male and female reproductive organs, menstruation and conception. These workshops were designed for both males and females. The male workshops were more general than the female workshops, but we were able to give as much information as possible. The female workshops were more detailed and had more topics such as the menstrual calendar, self-defense and human trafficking as well as training on how to use the reusable sanitary pads, which were distributed at the end of the programs.

One of our main concerns during the course of the project was talking about menstruation. We didn't know how the members of the community would react. We also had to be careful with our words as we didn't want to upset the villagers by going against their beliefs. As we had expected, the male members of the

society didn't have much to say for the programs we had organized. Even though menstruation is a difficult topic to talk about for the men in the village, they did stay for the entire time of the program, listening to all we had to say. However, we didn't get much feedback from them as we had expected earlier.

Whereas, women and girls were ecstatic that we had conducted the workshops. After the program was completed, the participants approached us and told us that they had learned a lot about menstruation and how to maintain good menstrual hygiene. The workshops conducted for women was very successful as it acted as a platform where they could open up without any judgement.

As a part of our project, we conducted a pre and post survey. These surveys assessed the knowledge of the participants about their understanding of menstruation. The pre-survey analysis suggested that most females weren't knowledgeable about menstruation. The post-survey analysis indicated that the females learned about proper practice to maintain good menstrual hygiene. We were also successful in getting exposure to the Kalekanda village. One of the organizations we partnered with, Days for Girls Nepal, reached out to us and told us that they would try to do projects that promote menstrual health in Kalekanda. We have come to know that Chhaupadi is still prevalent in excess, but we hope that through awareness, this deep-rooted tradition will soon be abolished.

The short-term goal of the project was to foster an environment that promoted education for school children. While we did construct the infrastructure that does this, we've left it in the hands of the teachers and the students to utilize it to the fullest. The other short-term goal was to improve the menstrual habits of women and girls in the village. We were able to meet this goal by educating the people about menstrual health and distribution of reusable sanitary pads. The long-term goal of our project was to promote peace through promoting education and healthy habits. We also aimed to cultivate peace by trying to remove the barriers of Chhaupadi. Our project has managed to reach out to various female members of society and educate them on proper menstrual hygiene and health.

The project has definitely changed the way we think about the world. It has given us a platform to venture and learn about the different cultures and backgrounds people come from. The impact that we made on a local level made us realize that any sort of effort, big or small, is required to bring a change. This project has also shown us the impact education can make in a community. So, we plan to use our education to create a positive influence on society. We would like to thank the Davis foundation for giving us this amazing opportunity.

"Through the project, I realized that education is one of the fundamental tools for uplifting peace and that any amount of effort, if backed up by hard work and dedication, can bring change, even if it's by a small amount." - Digesh Chitrakar

Awareness: A step towards abolishing Chhaupadi; Nepal
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The female participants of our workshop on menstrual health and hygiene



One of the chhaupadis, where women are pressured to stay in during their menstrual cycle



Students writing down what they had learned during the library workshop