

Menstruation, Segregation and Religious Faith: A Case Study of Chhaupadi in Far Western Nepal

Pampha Duwadi

Rural Development Department
Padmakanya Multiple Campus, TU
duwadipampha37@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to examine the cultural, social, and religious factors that contribute to the practice of *Chhaupadi Pratha*. Menstruation is a natural biological process that occurs to a women, typically beginning at puberty and continuing until menopause. *Chhaupadi Pratha* is a harmful tradition practice in rural areas of Nepal, which mandates the exclusion of women from their homes during their menstrual periods. Rooted in religious and cultural beliefs that consider menstruating women to be impure, this tradition forces women to isolate themselves in poorly constructed shelters, often lacking basic amenities such as warmth, safety, and hygiene. The practice has been linked to numerous health risks, including physical abuse, malnutrition, and even death due to exposure to harsh weather conditions or attacks by animals. Despite being outlawed in Nepal, *Chhaupadi* persists due to entrenched societal norms, limited education, and resistance to change in rural communities. The continuation of *Chhaupadi Pratha* highlights the deeply ingrained gender inequality that persists in these regions, where women's health, rights, and dignity are disregarded in the name of tradition.

Keywords: *Chhaupadi Pratha*, menstruation, physical abuse, religious, tradition.

Introduction

This study aims to explore and identify social, religious presence of rituals work normally after 7th days of menstruation. Menstruation is a natural biological process that every woman experiences, yet it is often bounded in stigma, taboos, and discriminatory practices in various societies across the world. One of the most extreme examples of such practices can be found in the remote regions of Far Western Nepal, where a tradition known as *Chhaupadi* still persists. Menstruation, also known as a menstrual period, is a natural biological process that occurs in individuals with female reproductive systems. It involves the shedding of the uterine lining (endometrium) when a fertilized egg has not been implanted, typically occurring in a 28-day cycle. It marks the beginning of womenhood, a unique phenomenon among females which starts around females which starts around the adolescent age i.e. 11-15 years of their lives. Menstruation is a normal part of the body's cycle that gets it ready for a possible pregnancy. It usually begins during puberty and ends with menopause. Menstruation is directly linked to the practice of *Chhaupadi Pratha*, a traditional and deeply rooted cultural practice in some parts of Nepal, especially in the far western regions, where women and girls are considered "impure" or "unclean" during their menstrual periods.

It involves the forced isolation of women during their menstrual periods. According to this tradition, women are considered "impure" or "unclean" during menstruation, and as a result, they are prohibited from staying inside the family home, interacting with others, or participating in normal household activities. It is known to have initially originated centuries ago from a belief that Gods and goddess become angry if any woman stays in her home during *Chhau* time. The word *Chhaupadi* is Accham's local Rawte language word "*Chhau*" means menstrual and "*padi*" means

women. (Mazullo, 2011). It is also called 'chhue' or 'bahirhunu' in Dadeldhura, Baitadi and Darchula, 'chhaupadi' in Achham, and 'chaukulla' or 'chaukudi' in Bajhang district. It is also practiced all over the country, the only difference is the way of practice and how strict it is. 'Chhue' is considered to say and followed in each part of Nepal but its rooting was from the western Nepal. Following the ritual women are made to live in sheds/cowsheds outside their homes called *chhaupadi Goth* (Hut). A menstrual women cannot see or touch any male/senior members in the family. If anyone touches her the person should purify himself by bathing and drinking "gahut" (cow urine). The purification process begins from 4th to 8th day of "Chui". They are prohibited to take dairy products and meat. They are also restricted from going to school and perform day to day activities in the public places. This isolation is usually accompanied by restrictions on activities, such as not being allowed to cook, enter temples, or engage in communal celebrations. The women undergoing *Chhaupadi* are often sent to live in small, poorly constructed huts, far from the safety of their homes. These huts are sometimes without basic facilities, leading to dangerous situations. Moreover, the practice leads to significant psychological distress, as it reinforces the idea of impurity and inferiority during menstruation. *Chhaupadi Pratha* in Nepal causes emotional and mental harm to women and girls. They are often forced to stay alone in unsafe huts during their period, with little access to proper hygiene products, food, or warm bedding. (Karuna Trust, 2024). In Western Nepal, the *Chhaupadi* practice has been particularly prevalent in rural and remote areas, where traditional beliefs are more firmly ingrained (The Kathmandu Post, 2017). The aim of the article is to examine the cultural, social, and religious factors that contribute to the practice of *Chhaupadi Pratha* and to analyze the reasons why *Chhaupadi Pratha* is considered a superstition and harmful practice.

Methods and Materials

This descriptive study included 25 people who migrated from the far Western to Kathmandu. The respondents of this study were girls and women between the ages of 11-45 years. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling and the method of data collection was questionnaire survey. To explore how far western women adapt traditional *Chhaupadi* practices and migrated people followed traditional *Chhaupadi* even after migration. We examined that even though people migrated from one place to another but also their perception about *Chhaupadi* has not changed yet. The implied method required for collecting data analysis is qualitative method. During this step objectives are defined and the contents, narrative analysis are selected. In addition Data were taken from different books, journals, articles, newspapers, reports, internet sites, webpages were also currently mentioned. The primary data were collected from structural questionnaire, survey and case study with the local migrated people. The information clearly indicate that *Chhaupadi Pratha* is superstition because its challenges, how people perceive and due to different information's analysis, it is superstition.

Result and Discussion

Challenges of Chhaupadi Pratha

Chhaupadi Pratha is a traditional practice that forces women in certain rural regions of Nepal to live in isolation during menstruation or after childbirth, often in makeshift huts or animal sheds. The practice is rooted in religious and cultural beliefs that view menstruation and childbirth as impure and dangerous for others. According to these customs, women are considered unclean during these periods, and are excluded from family and community activities. This practice has been a significant part of rural Nepali life for centuries, despite its clear violation of women's rights (Sharma & Chhetri, 2020).

One of the major challenges of *Chhaupadi Pratha* is the violation of women's basic human rights. Women who are subjected to this practice face physical risks, including exposure to harsh weather conditions, lack of proper nutrition, and vulnerability to attacks by animals. Tragically, some women have died due to these dangers. According to a report by the Human Rights Watch (2011), these women are also denied access to healthcare and other resources, which can exacerbate existing health problems. In addition to the physical risks, there is also a significant emotional toll, as women experience social ostracism, shame, and stigma for their supposed impurity during menstruation, which often leads to psychological distress and a loss of self-esteem (Hughes, 2020).

The mental and emotional impact of *Chhaupadi Pratha* is another significant concern. Women subjected to this practice often face feelings of isolation and guilt, as they are taught to view themselves as dirty or impure. This belief system perpetuates gender inequality by reinforcing the notion that women are inherently inferior or unclean. Social stigma, compounded by the practice itself, further isolates women, making it difficult for them to access support networks. The mental health consequences are severe, and women who are isolated during menstruation are often left with limited avenues for emotional expression or relief (Bhusal & Shrestha, 2017).

Although Nepal's government outlawed *Chhaupadi Pratha* in 2005, the practice continues in many rural communities, particularly due to deep-rooted cultural and religious traditions. The persistence of this practice is tied to a lack of education, limited awareness of women's rights, and insufficient enforcement of the law in remote areas. Even when legal protections are in place, social norms often trump them, as rural communities resist change. As a result, addressing *Chhaupadi Pratha* requires not only legal reforms but also education and awareness programs aimed at challenging these cultural beliefs and empowering women to fight for their rights (Sharma & Chhetri, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2011).

Health and Hygiene

Menstrual health and hygiene are essential aspects of a person's overall well-being, particularly for individuals who menstruate. It involves not only maintaining physical cleanliness during menstruation but also addressing the emotional, social, and psychological factors associated with menstruation. The Joint Monitoring Program (JMP) of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) highlight the importance of managing menstruation hygienically and with dignity. In order to accomplish this, women and girls must have access to clean menstrual management materials, that can be changed as frequently as necessary, privacy, access to water and soap for washing, and access to appropriate disposal facilities. In addition, women and girls' require information on menstrual health and hygiene. For women and girls to live a healthy, productive and dignified life, effective menstrual health and hygiene is essential. The practice of *chhaupadi* enforces social isolation, which can have severe mental health consequences. Women may experience depression, anxiety, and shame due to the stigma attached to their menstruation or post-childbirth status (Sharma et al., 2018). This isolation can have long-term effects on emotional well-being and self-worth.

The Dangers of Chhaupadi Goth

The study shows that forced isolation during menstruation in unhygienic conditions can lead to urinary tract infections (UTIs), reproductive tract infections (RTIs), and other hygiene-related diseases (Shrestha et al., 2011). Additionally, inadequate menstrual hygiene can result in complications such as pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), which can affect fertility. Women isolated in *chhaupadi* huts are more vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment. Due to their isolated location and the cultural practice that marginalizes them, women are at risk of being

attacked by men or other members of the community. Several reports from Nepal highlight cases where women have been assaulted while living in these huts. The lack of protection and the stigma associated with menstruation or childbirth can increase the likelihood of sexual assault and harassment. The practice has resulted in severe consequences for women, including mental and physical health problems, with cases of deaths due to cold, snake bites, animal attacks, or other health hazards from being confined to poorly constructed sheds. High chances of rape might also increase in this case (Ghimire & Sam, 2019).

Many *chhaupadi* huts are built with highly flammable materials, and women sometimes light fires inside the huts for warmth. This creates a significant **risk of fire accidents** and **smoke inhalation**. For instance, in 2018, a young woman died from smoke inhalation after lighting a fire in a *chhaupadi* hut in Nepal (The Guardian, 2019). In recent years, two girls are known to have died as a result of the practice. One was a 19-year-old girl who died from snakebite while sleeping alone in a shed. Another was a 15-year-old who suffocated to death after lighting a fire to stay warm in her poorly ventilated hut (Poulomi, 2024).

Social norms and values

Chhaupadi is a practice linked to Hindu beliefs, where menstruation is seen as a "curse" and women who are menstruating are considered "impure." Because of this, women on their period are not allowed to participate in regular religious activities, enter their homes, prayer rooms, or temples. Many girls and women follow this tradition because they believe it is their religious duty. They think that if they break the rules of *Chhaupadi*, they will destroy their Dharma (duty). Violating Dharma is seen as a sinful act (*Paap Lagchha*). It is also considered a sin (*Paap*) if menstruating girls or women are given dairy products like milk, curd, or ghee when they come near religious places or fruit-bearing trees.

The *Chhaupadi* system is linked to the *Dhami-Jhakri* system. *Dhamis* and *Jhakris* are local religious leaders who represent the gods. Because of their influence, people followed the *Chhaupadi* rules. They played a major role in spreading myths and superstitions. According to one local *Dhami*, if a woman doesn't follow the *Chhaupadi* rules, the god (*Deota*) will get angry (*Risauchha*). The *Dhami* might become sick, or their neck might bend backward. Sometimes, they might even faint. This belief strengthens the idea that menstruating women should avoid contact with sacred things during this process (Khadka, 2020).

Case I

Sanumaya Shah (name change) an 18-year-old girl from Pancheshwor Rural Municipality, Ward No.2 Kulaun in Baitadi District. Sanumaya first menstruated at the age of 12, she was instructed to sleep in a small, unhygienic cowshed for 7 days away from the warmth and safety of the home. During her periods, she was not allowed to go to school, see any male members from the family, and prohibited to consume dairy products. According to Sanumaya's parents if menstruated girls consume any dairy products then cow won't provide milk and they are also banned to eat fruits. Sanumaya was isolated from her family and friends, facing physical discomfort and emotional distress. The shed lacked proper sanitation, exposing her to the risk of infections, while the psychological toll of isolation made her feel lonely and fearful.

Despite the law banning *Chhaupadi* in Nepal since 2005, the practice persists in remote areas like Pancheshwor due to deeply ingrained cultural beliefs. Sanumaya's family, though initially resistant to change, began to reconsider the practice after awareness programs facilitated by a local NGO. With the support of her teacher and community advocates, Sanumaya was eventually allowed to stay inside the house during her menstrual cycle. Her case underscores the importance of education and

legal enforcement in dismantling harmful cultural practices and protecting the rights of young girls like Sanumaya, who are forced to endure discrimination and poor health due to outdated customs.

Case II

Asha Bhatta (name change) a 20-year-old girl from Mallekh Rural Municipality, Ward No. 1, Accham district, has been living under the constant fear imposed by the *Chhaupadi Pratha*. Every month, as soon as Asha begins her menstrual cycle, she is sent to an old, cold hut outside her home, away from her family and the safety of her community. The secluded shed, built from mud and straw, lacks proper ventilation, and its conditions worsen during the cold winter months. Asha's experiences are shared by many other girls and women in her village, where this tradition continues despite being officially banned by the government years ago.

For Asha, this practice isn't just physically harmful; it takes a heavy toll on her mental health. During her periods, she feels ashamed, isolated, and fearful, especially when her peers continue their normal lives, while she is forced to stay in the hut, vulnerable to harsh weather and the risk of animal attacks. The community around her, including her own family, supports this tradition, citing religious and cultural reasons for keeping her away from others. Despite being aware of the negative consequences, Asha's family has remained bound by the deep-rooted customs, believing that the practice is necessary for her purity and the protection of the household. When families like Asha's migrate from rural areas like Accham to urban centers like Kathmandu, they often bring with them certain traditional practices, including *chhaupadi*, especially if they are deeply rooted in their community's customs and beliefs. From cowsheds to isolated rooms where menstruated women cannot touch or see anyone but even after migration this tradition is still in practice.

However, Asha is not entirely without support. In recent months, a few local organizations and activists in Accham District have been working to challenge the perpetuation of *Chhaupadi*, and they have begun reaching out to young women like Asha. With the help of these organizations, Asha has started to understand her rights and the harm caused by *Chhaupadi*. Though her journey is fraught with cultural resistance, Asha has begun speaking out against the practice, hoping that her voice will inspire others to break free from this oppressive tradition. Her case highlights the struggle for women's rights in rural Nepal, where the battle for equality and safety often begins with young girls like Asha daring to challenge long-standing customs.

Chhau Goth is still in practice

Case III



Sources: The Annapurna Express, 2023, October 17

Some young girls from Hattikot in Mellekh Rural Municipality-8 of Achham lodged a complaint at the ward office last month (September, 2023), alleging that they were coerced into staying in menstruation sheds', and were denied access to restrooms.

Despite having the highest rates of deaths related to *Chhaupadi*, not a single police complaint has been filed in Achham and Dailekh districts. *Chhaupadi*, the practice of banishing menstruating women and girls from their homes to huts and cowsheds, was criminalized in 2017, but the number of women who've lost their lives in Nepal's mid-western hills continues to rise.

Case IV

Chhaupadi is not only limited to the time of menstruation, it is also observed during childbirth. This practice is deeply associated with Hindu belief which regards secretions during menstruation and childbirth to be religiously impure. Thus, *Chhaupadi* is also forced on women in their postnatal state whereby delivery must take place in the shed. Women and their newborns are bound to stay in exile for 10-14 days delivering the child.



Source: The Kathmandu Post, 2024

Married women and young girls are banished to outdoor sheds like this one during their menstruation.

Efforts made to stop *Chhaupadi Pratha*

Recognizing the harm caused by *Chhaupadi*, the Nepalese government took legal action to end the practice. Although the Supreme Court of Nepal banned *chhaupadi* in 2005 and in 2010 the National Plan of Action against Gender-Based Violence in Nepal recognized it as a harmful practice and a form of violence against women, the practice continues, fueled by myths. The court ordered that the government take measures to prevent the practice and provide education to people about the dangers and discriminatory nature of the practice. In 2018, the Nepalese government took a more proactive step by criminalizing *Chhaupadi*, imposing fines and imprisonment for those who force women into isolation. However, even with the legal framework in place, the practice remains a significant issue. Local leaders, families, and even women themselves often resist abandoning the tradition, believing that it is necessary for social and spiritual reasons.

According to World Health Organization (WHO), 2016, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), women's rights groups, and activists have been working to eliminate *Chhaupadi* by raising awareness about the harmful consequences of the practice. These groups focus on educating communities, improving menstrual hygiene management, and offering support to women who face

pressure to follow the tradition. There has been significant progress in some regions, with younger generations beginning to question and resist the practice.

Table 1:

Distribution of respondents by Religion

Nepal is a religiously secular country. There are Hindu, Buddhist and Christian. In the study area mainly Hindu and Buddhist religious people are found. There is no interference between religious groups.

S. No.	Category	Number	Percentage
1	Religious	21	84
2	Hindu	3	12
3	Buddhist	1	4
4	Christian	0	0
Total		25	100

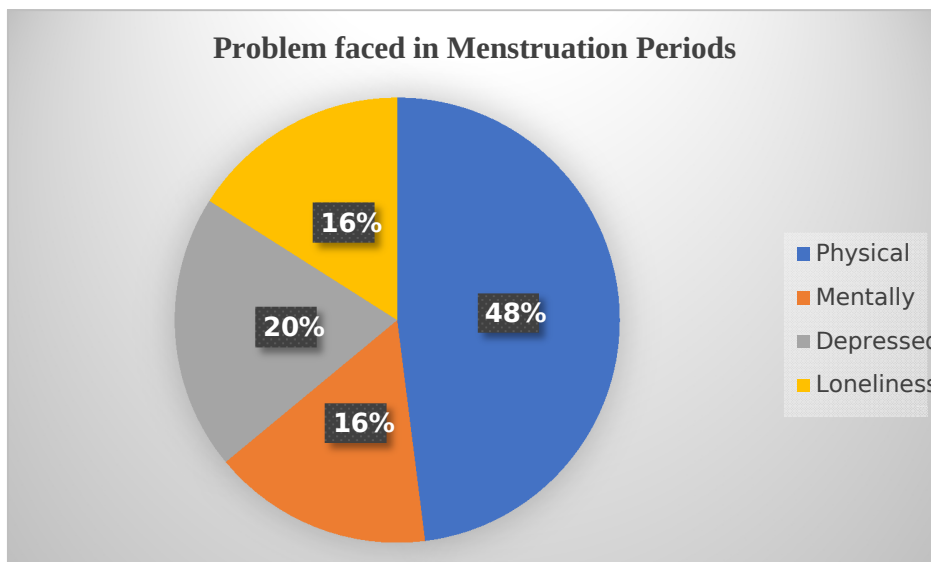
Source: Field Survey, 2024

In this survey Hinduism is practiced in majority in the study area which is 84 percent. And recently moved few Buddhist and Christian with 12 and 4 percent.

Figure 1:

Problem faced in Menstruation Periods

As mentioned above there are many problem that have to face by women and girls, they need to stay out of home far family so they are victim of so many kind of problem like Physically, Mentally, Depressed, Respondents were asked about their problem.



Source: Field Survey, 2024

When enquired about any problem faced in their periods, nearly half said yes, it was physical problem, 16 per cent mentally, 20 per cent feeling of depression and rest 16 per cent loneliness, whenever they got menstruation, they need to stay in a separate isolated room without in a contact

with any male members of the family, so all the women and girls at that time feel discriminated and feel very low, so on they faced physical, mentally, depressed and feel loneliness.

Table 2:

Change this Superstition Chhaupadi Pratha

In rural area all woman are discriminated by their own family and mostly by society and their superstitious mind. They are forced by family society to perform *Chhau* system.

S.No.	Category	Number	Percentage
1	Probe Religious	3	12
2	Social Significance	22	88
Total		25	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Among 100 percent of the respondent 12 percent had not performs *Chhau*. The remaining 88 percent had to perform well therefore there is social significance.

Change in trend but not in perception

Despite the several legal, policy and programmatic efforts, the changes have not come. Women still continue to fear God. Even though the house far away from the house has been demolished, one room next to the house is still the house of the *Chhau*. They still have the illusion that they will not stop when something bad happens.

Conclusion

Chhaupadi Pratha is a harmful tradition that continues in some rural areas due to cultural, social, and religious beliefs. Culturally, it has been passed down through generations as a practice that women should be isolated during their menstruation, seen as "impure." Socially, women are pressured to follow this tradition because of patriarchal attitudes, where their roles are limited and their rights are ignored. Religious beliefs also play a part, with some people thinking that menstruation makes women unclean and that they need to be separated for purity.

However, *Chhaupadi* is based on superstition, as menstruation is a natural process, not something that makes women impure. The practice harms women physically, mentally, and emotionally. It can lead to poor health, exposure to danger, and feelings of shame and isolation. It also violates women's rights by denying them dignity and respect.

Chhaupadi is a superstition practice. It is based on false beliefs and does more harm than good. Education, awareness, and challenging these superstitions are necessary to stop *Chhaupadi* and protect the well-being and rights of women.

Reference

- Bhusal, R., & Shrestha, M. (2017). Impact of Chaupadi Pratha on women's health and mental well-being. *Kathmandu University Journal of Social Science*, 8(1), 12-18.
- Human Rights Watch. (2011). Nepal: Ban on Chaupadi Pratha must be enforced. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org>
- Hughes, S. (2020). Gender and social stigma in rural Nepal: The case of Chaupadi Pratha. *Gender Studies Journal*, 5(2), 45-59.

- Kandel, N., Bhandari, A. R., & Lamichhne, J. (n.d.). "Chhue, Chaupadi and Chueekula Pratha" – Menstrual sheds: Examples of discriminatory practices against women in the mid- and far-western regions of Nepal: Considering women as "impure" or "unclean" during menstruation and post-partum periods. *Nepal*. Retrieved from <http://nirmalkandel.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Journal1.pdf>
- Khadka, N. (2020). Chaupadi Pratha: Women's experiences and perceptions about social suffering. *ResearchGate*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348197741_Chhaupadi_Pratha_Women's_Experiences_and_Perceptions_about_Social_Suffering
- Karuna Trust. (2024). Menstrual exile: The dangers of Chhaupadi in Nepal and what it means for women and girls. Retrieved from <https://karuna.org/menstrual-exile-the-dangers-of-chhaupadi-in-nepal-and-what-it-means-for-women-and-girls/>
- Karuna Trust. (2024). End menstrual exile period. Retrieved from <https://karuna.org/campaigns/end-menstrual-exile-ad2/>
- Mazullo, Y. P. (2011). Chaupadi Pratha: The taboo of menstruation. *Eaniner*. Retrieved from <https://www.eaniner.com>
- Mott, M. L., & Eisenberg, M. L. (2014). Menstruation and reproductive health. *The Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 123(4), 662-669.
- Poulomi, B. (2017). Chaupadi and menstrual taboos. *ActionAid UK*. Retrieved from <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/our-work/period-poverty/chhaupadi-and-menstruation-taboos>
- Sharma, A., McCall-Hosenfeld, J. S., & Cuffee, Y. (2022). Systematic review of menstrual health and hygiene in Nepal employing a social ecological model. *Reproductive Health*, 19, 154. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-022-01456-0>
- Sharma, M., Chhetri, S., & Rai, B. (2018). The health risks and psychological impact of Chaupadi practice in Nepalese women. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 59(4), 512-526.
- Shrestha, P., et al. (2011). Chaupadi Pratha and its effects on health in rural Nepal. *The Lancet*, 378(9795), 1819.
- The Annapurna Express. (2023, October 17). Chaupadi still persists in remote Achham. Retrieved from <https://theannapurnaexpress.com/story/46251/>
- The Guardian. (2019, January 10). Mother and two boys suffocate in Nepal: Latest period hut tragedy. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jan/10/mother-and-two-boys-suffocate-in-nepal-latest-period-hut-tragedy>
- The Kathmandu Post. (2017, October 4). Chaupadi practice still prevails in remote parts of Nepal. Retrieved from <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2017/10/04/chaupadi-practice-still-prevails-in-remote-parts-of-nepal>
- The Kathmandu Post. (2024, January 7). Women are still dying after being sent to menstruation huts, but no one is filing complaints. Retrieved from <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/03/22/women-are-still-dying-after-being-sent-to-menstruation-huts-but-no-one-is-filing-complaints>
- UN Nepal. (2017). Case study: Stopping Chaupadi: A harmful traditional practice in Nepal. Retrieved from <https://unf.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2017/04/stopping-chaupadi-a-harmful-traditional-practice-in-nepal>
- World Health Organization (WHO) Nepal. (2016). Menstrual health management in Nepal. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/nepal>