

# Making life better for menstruating girls and women in Nepal – month after month

## Background

Menstruation is a natural process that signals a girl’s entry into womanhood. While it affects around 50% of the global population, discriminatory practices and policies prevail around the world. In Nepal, 8.8 million girls and women face a complex set of challenges relating to menstruation, these challenges are often influenced by deeply entrenched cultural and religious beliefs.

Some of the practical concerns relating to periods are due to lack of access to sanitary pads and poor hygiene in many public schools and communities and the traditional practice of *Chhaupadi* persists, where girls are separated from the rest of their family and confined to a cow shed during menstruation. (Ojha, 2016). Despite its official ban in 2005, and later criminalisation 2017, *Chhaupadi* is still practiced in some of the Mid- and Far-Western Regions. The practice confines adolescent girls to a ‘menstrual hut’, exposing them to both dangerous and isolating conditions, where they are at risk of ill-health and in some cases, death (KC, 2016).

Such challenges and beliefs do not only have fatal consequences for girls and women, but can also exclude them from actively participating in their community, education and work. The German Development Cooperation (GIZ) projects have found that these practices can have a negative impact on school attendance, performance and can lead to high drop-out rates of girls from school (S2HSP, 2016).

In Nepal, attitudes regarding menstruation occur in tandem with other forms of gendered discrimination. A survey in 2014 found that there were high rates of early marriage in Nepal with 25% of adolescent girls (ages 15-19) either married or in a marital union (CBS, 2015). This coincides with a high fertility rate among

adolescent girls, with 71 per 1,000 having a life birth between the ages of 15-19 (CBS, 2015). There is also a high prevalence of Gender Based Violence, a recent study found that twenty six per cent of married women aged 15-49 had experienced either physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (MoH, New Era and ICF, 2012). Such practices in Nepal may lead to diminished educational and lifetime opportunities for girls and women thus perpetuating gender inequity.

In 2016, a sectional comparative study commissioned by GIZ’s Support to the Health Sector Programme (S2HSP) on 528 girls from 8 districts and the findings were as follows:

## Menstruation Product Access and Usage

- 90% of women and girls in hard-to-reach rural places in Far Western Nepal use unhygienic cloth pads for menstrual management (S2HSP, 2016)
- Only 4.94% of women and girls in the Far- Western Region and 7.5% in the Mid-Western Region use commercial sanitary pads (S2HSP, 2016)
- Only 40% of girls who had experienced menstruation reported using disposable sanitary pads (S2HSP, 2016)
- 13.5% of girls who have experienced menstruation reported using strips of old cloth and other unhygienic methods. (S2HSP, 2016)
- According to the Nepal Adolescent and Youth Survey 2011, one key problem with menstrual hygiene management in remote areas of Nepal is the lack of access to affordable sanitation products including sanitary pads (MoHP, 2011)



Data from other reports conducted in Nepal by different organisations have found:

### Restrictions

- A study among 204 adolescent girls showed that 89% of them experienced some form of restriction or exclusion during menstruation (WaterAid, 2009)
- 57.6% of 15-29 year old women avoid social gatherings (CBS, 2015)
- 25% of 15-29 year old women stay in different room of the house (CBS, 2015)
- 8.8% of 15-29 year old women bathe in a separate place (CBS, 2015)

### Prevalence of *Chhaupadi*

- 71.2% girls and women stay in *Chhaupadi* during menstruation in the Mid-Western Mountains of Nepal (CBS, 2015)
- 15.5% in Far-Western Hills (CBS, 2015)

### Sanitation:

- In 2011, 38% of households did not have a toilet (CBS, 2011). In 2015, only 46% of the population in Nepal had access to improved sanitation facilities (WHO and UNICEF, 2017).

After the 2015 earthquake, the lack of health care services and functional water and sanitation systems exacerbated the issues of menstrual hygiene management, as girls and women were forced into temporary shelters, often together with men, making them more vulnerable to reproductive and sexual health issues.

### Women's fight against 'Period Poverty'

The Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) assigned the Recovery Programme of Nepal (RPN) to support the reconstruction of damaged health facilities and school buildings in Nuwakot, Rasuwa and Dhading districts, after the 2015 earthquake. Alongside the reconstruction, the RPN has established to close collaboration with the communities to support their economic

development and promoting vocational training, especially capacitating women of the community.

To encourage recovery post- earthquake, Semjong VDC in Dhading district and Sikre VDC in Nuwakot district were chosen as areas to implement small start-ups initiatives such as the production of Low-Cost Sanitary Pad (LCSP). The LCSP start-ups followed the innovative design of Mr. Muruganatham Arunachalam from Coimbatore, India, who marketed a simple and easy to operate manufactory system. His model included 4 machines that could be operated by women and produce low-cost sanitary pads for rural women in India and in other part of the world.

The LCSP initiative was implemented in Nepal since January 2017, as an adaptation of Mr. Arunachalam (Pad Man's) social entrepreneurial business model. (Yunus, 2007). Both GIZ programmes, S2HSP and RPN have facilitated the procurement of the machines and respective technical training for production and supply of the raw materials. The first manufacturing unit for LCSP was set up in Semjong VDC of Dhading district, by the local cooperative 'Sana Kishan Women's Cooperative'. A second unit was set up in Sikre VDC, Nuwakot district by the cooperative 'Namaste Agriculture Women Cooperative'.

The first task that the women were confronted with was to build their own manufacturing unit, the RPN provided masonry training for the women which was utilized in the construction process when they needed to build the two rooms that were necessary for production.

The two cooperatives are led entirely by women from the community. Sana Kisan Women's Cooperative of Semjong now has 600 members and Namaste Agriculture Women's Cooperative of Sikre has 100 members.

Both the units have started production with a "trial and error" method overcoming a range of challenges such as access to electricity for the plant, limited human resource capacity, etc. The workshops have provided employment to 4-8 women and are in the process of being extended.

The pads are being sold in the communities, particularly to cooperative members and their families. Similarly, cooperative members who have been selling their products in the market have been approached by other enterprising women who buy and then market their LCSPs in other districts of the country



as well (Kalpavriksha Greater Goods). To date, there have been MoUs signed between the cooperatives and two other female entrepreneurs. This initiative has become a unique way to generate income for local remote communities and raising awareness and sensitization of menstrual health management. Not only has it heralded women-led production of LCSP, but it is also a sustainable one: these cooperatives produced Nepal's first 100% compostable sanitary pads. By engaging women in the manufacturing and selling of sanitary pads, the project also helps to address the culture of restrictions and silence around menstruation, which is a veiled public health concern that puts females' physical, sexual and mental health at risk.

### The pads are being produced by the abovementioned cooperatives have resulted in:

- On average, 20–40 packets of pads are produced each day, by four full-time staff.
- By the end of 2017, the Semjong cooperatives had produced and distributed around 6,000 packets of sanitary pads at NPR 60 per pack (each pack containing 8 pads).

### Key features of low cost sanitary pads

- The napkins are rectangular in form, covered with a soft cottony layer.
- There are two types of napkins: monthly menstrual pad and post-delivery pads for new mothers.
- The napkins are sterilised using ultraviolet light.
- The napkins are biodegradable and contain no harmful chemicals.
- They have good absorptive capacity (14 times that of other napkins) and comply with standards in terms of acidity/alkalinity criteria, fluorescence, and colouring matter.
- They are affordable and easily accessible to girls and women.

Once production was underway, the pads were supplied to the local market and to the district headquarters. There was an independent study conducted by Zest Laboratories, Kathmandu, Nepal assessed the quality of the sanitary pads; the lab concluded that the quality of sanitary pads were equivalent to the local commercial pads. The LCSP has 14 times more absorptive capacity

than commercial pads in Nepal. The LCSP are being received well by the communities.

As we can see through the success of the LCSP project, Support to the Health Sector Programme (S2HSP), alongside other projects it supports through the MoHP and DoE, has been one of the major pioneering organisations in pushing forward the Menstrual Health Management and sustainability agenda in Nepal. Through the leverage presented by this LCSP project, S2HSP used the platform to promote positive action in regards to MHM in these communities and the wider country.

### Future Prospects and Challenges: Partnership with the Private Sector

One year on from the initiation of the LCSP, a strategic partnership has been established between the cooperatives, GIZ and Chaudhary Foundation, a key private Nepali company. The objective of this partnership is to improve and promote a social inclusive business model for the LCSP cooperatives. Chaudhary Foundation team provides a six month package to support the cooperatives to set up their social business on the Low Cost Sanitary Pads. This includes among other topics: awarenessraising to clarify the features of social business development, organizational structure, financial/accounting trainings, mentoring and coaching on business plan development, investment readiness, innovation and marketing. However, one challenge is that the access to these courses is complicated by the remote locations of the cooperatives.

### Replication by other Nepal female Initiatives: women for women

This initiative has inspired other organisations to replicate the model and search for sustainable alternatives to menstrual health management. Not only does it provide low-cost products for girls and women in Nepal, where access to menstrual products is limited, but also entrepreneurial opportunities.

For instance Radha Paudel Foundation:

(<http://www.radhapaudelfoundation.org>) Radha Paudel is a female social entrepreneur in Nepal who has been inspired to establish a similar project on Low Cost Sanitary Pads.



Kalpavriksha Greater Goods (<http://www.empowergeneration.org/kalpavriksha-greater-goods>) is also another organization that promotes clean energy female-led startups. It has provided support 'Sana Kishan Women's Cooperative' to market the Low Cost Sanitary Pads in other districts.

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