“CHHAUPADI”: Banishment Culture in Rural Nepal with Serious Health Consequences

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ABSTRACT
“CHHAUPADI” is a sociocultural tradition practiced by people living in the rural part of western Nepal of where women and girls are prohibited from practicing normal family activities and forced to live in a cattle shed/makeshift hut during the entire period of menstrual bleeding with the pretext of menstruating women and girls considered impure in Hindu religion. Multiple deaths have been reported in recent times as result of Chhaupadi with the vast majority of cases going unreported. The culture of secrecy among people practicing with fear of social isolation and humiliation has caused many deaths go unreported. This system is justified by people practicing it by relating it to the superstition of impurity and fear of bad omen. The health risks are immense but lives lost as a result of such ignorance makes it worse. Grave reproductive and mental health consequences are obvious. Weak policy, ineffective laws, weak socio-economic status, lack of education in the affected area and minimal intervention by the government bodies have led to continual deaths and health problems pertaining to Chhaupadi.

Keywords: Chhaupadi, Menstruation, Health Consequences, Nepal

1. INTRODUCTION
Chhaupadi is a tradition practiced by people living in rural western Nepal of Hindu religion. With a strong belief of women being impure during the menstrual bleed, every woman and girl under reproductive age group are required to live in isolation away from family in isolated mud houses or cattle sheds under very poor conditions until their menstruation is over before returning to daily activities with the cycle being followed every month. The unmarried females are required to stay in the shed for a whole week every month whereas for married women the time duration varies from 3-4 days. This practice starts from adolescent menarche and ends with menopause in the life of every woman living in the area. In addition to that women with recent childbirth also are required to follow this practice living in abandonment with their newborn as they bleed. The hut where women and girls sleep and stay is mostly mud hut which is completely separate from the housing and in some cases hundreds of yard away. The condition of such sheds is horrific with very cramped spaces, no proper ventilation, no proper facilities thereby subjecting women to a very cold temperature of harsh winters with inadequate clothing for warmth and increased risk of various infectious diseases. The women and girls in addition to being isolated in sheds during the period of the menstrual cycle are also barred from touching books, going to school, have a bath or touch members of the family until the period of bleeding.
is over. The girls and women are not given adequate bedding while living in a shed with the belief that everything bleeding women touches become impure. Increase incidence of death among such women by carbon monoxide poisoning is on the rise as harsh winters make it absolutely necessary for these people to light a fire in such a cramped space to keep warm in the absence of adequate bedding. The death of a young girl following snake bite while in chhaupadi was also reported recently indicating wide risk factors risking the lives of women and girls. Nutritious food is also barred such as milk, milk products, and meat, for people fear giving such food to bleeding women will cause the food scarcity as punishment by God. So women survive on basic staple food items.

2. HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF THE PRACTICE

The condition of shed, inadequate ventilation, the unavailability of proper sanitation, inadequate nutrition, isolation with increased risk of sexual violence, attack by wild animals in cases where sheds are near or into the jungles with intention of keeping much distance between home and the shed as well as deaths due to snake bite, inadequate medical attention of mother and child when necessary and the social stigma attached to the process are various factors that directly and indirectly result in grave consequences of reproductive and mental health problems in women and girls. There are risks of various infectious diseases pertaining to unhygienic surroundings, gynecological infections due to poor sanitary habits, risks of infertility, in addition to the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning, of sexual assault and harm from animals. Reproductive health, as well as general and mental health problems, are relatable health issues in concern to Chhaupadi. Though reproductive and general health is something visible and can grant easy attention, the mental trauma in young girls of being subjected to the idea of being impure by the whole society at a very young age and being forced to live in isolation away from family with additional fear of sexual assault or harm is equally alarming. Similarly, the practice of isolating mothers immediately following child birth which in itself is a traumatic experience and the neglect of care, inadequate nutritious diet with breast feeding newborn can impact the health of mother and child in various ways possible. Deaths have been reported in recent days due to suffocation, sepsis and infectious disease and with continual practice of such traditions, more deaths seem to be inevitable in future until major changes are brought upon.

3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT

As the practice requires giving up normal activities with going to school and touching books considered impure, there is a high risk of this playing negatively in socioeconomic status of family, society, and country as a whole. There is a high chance of this having adverse effect on education and overall confidence of girl child. This has been seen impacting the already low level of females going to school as covering up the lost days and staying up to date with male counterparts may be a challenge which many find easier to give up on, with the process repeating every single month in a girl’s life. This will remain as a hindrance in progress being made throughout the country to create equality among men and women in various fronts.

4. CONCLUSION

The Government of Nepal has already declared the practice illegal in 2005. But the progress till date to let go of this system has been very slow. The government officials have focused their means and attention to create awareness about the harmful impacts of the process and encouraging people to give up on it themselves. But the deeply rooted practice ongoing for centuries based on the ideology of sin and fear is not easy to be abolished any time soon with the hope of people themselves abolishing it. Implementing lawful course of punishing people involved in such form of social violence is must to bring the urgency of letting go of Chhaupadi practice in people of rural Nepal. This practice is plainly a form of sociocultural violence on women in rural Nepal within the platform of religious beliefs. Though the process of bringing change is hard and lengthy one, a continual effort is a must as the lives being lost are too expensive to be given up on. Additional efforts on teaching safe sanitation practices to women and girls, including the subject in school courses to bring about changes in perspective of young girls and boys from an early age and conducting community-based programs to bring about awareness and change in practice can also have an impact in the long run. In today’s world where health has become more of a right than a plain necessity, Chhaupadi is a deeply rooted tradition with increased risks to health and life of women in rural Nepal.

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