
Bloody Periods! Visualising Menstruation to Challenge Taboos and Social Norms insights from Nepal

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Abstract

This paper will explore the use of visual imagery in menstrual activism in Nepal and seeks to address the way that visual methods have been used to empower women to represent their own lives and challenges stigmas and exclusionary cultural practices in Nepal.

In Nepal, unhygienic menstrual hygiene practices have been linked to negative outcomes for women and girls in relation to reproductive health and social factors such as school attendance (Hennegan and Montgomery, 2016; Standing et al 2006). Taboos around menstruation are widespread (Standing et al, 2016), while basic understanding of menstrual hygiene is limited, especially in rural areas (Sapkota, 2013). The Chhaupadi system whereby menstruating women are banished from the household, although illegal since 2005, is still practiced in Far Eastern Nepal. It has received a lot of media attention in recent years.

To address these problems, NGOs use Menstrual Health Management Programmes to provide education on menstruation and reproductive health and to deliver reusable sanitary pads. Some NGOs, notably WaterAid ran a participatory visual project in collaboration with Nepal Water for Health in 2016 which highlighted the taboos women faced. This project has received media attention and has served to raise awareness and start a debate about the social practices and their impact on the lives of girls and women (Bakshi 2016, Narany, 2016). Following on from this, Actionaid have used participatory photography as a means of engaging young women and girls to share their experience in an attempt to raise awareness of the stigmas and challenges they face and how they play out in everyday life.

There has also been a notable increase in the use of visual images in social media to draw attention to the issues surrounding Chhaupadi in Nepal. In addition to this locally generated material is being developed such as cartoons and story books to help situate knowledge in local contexts. Bobel (2010) argues these are forms of menstrual activism which challenge taboos and improve women and girls' education, and which promotes social and reproductive health outcomes.

Often material is generated by NGOs using the resulting work for their advocacy work but more recently material is being generated by the general public for sharing on social media often with the aim to raise awareness. This paper shares visual material that is being used to raise awareness of the stigma and social exclusion that is experienced in Nepal. By analysing the online availability of, and reaction to this material insights can be gained into

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how NGOs and activists can use visual media to promote engagement and social change.
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