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Nepal, Factor 16: Education

### **Nepal: Menstrual Education**

Three strong tremors were felt in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal on April 24, 2015; one day later, Nepal was hit by an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.8. The earthquake killed about 9,000 and injured another 22,000 people. By June 7th 2015, Nepal was hit with at least 304 aftershocks; almost a month after the initial quake, a 7.3 magnitude aftershock hit 47 miles away from Kathmandu, this time killing another 1,000 people. About a third of Nepal's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was lost; an estimate close to US\$10 billion. The quake brought utter devastation to the Nepalese people. Even now nearly six years later, Nepal is still struggling to rebuild homes, with hundreds of thousands of families still living in transitional shelters, built for a typical family of about 4 to 5 people. They are also struggling to grow food, obtain sufficient micronutrients (from their diet) and provide adequate menstrual hygiene materials to women and girls.

After the earthquake, one of the major problems facing farmers was their food, tools, and machines were buried under debris (FAO.org). Thus, food insecurity is heavily prevalent in Nepal. The World Food Programme (WFP) concluded that 36% of children under 5 are stunted, 27% are underweight, and about 10% are suffering from wasting caused by acute malnutrition. This is partially due to preferences shifting from healthy foods to more processed foods. Although, the main reason for malnutrition is bad sanitation and health practices as a result of the devastating tragedies of the earthquake.

As of 2020 Nepal's food consumption score is 23.2, out of the possible 112 points, meaning Nepal does not reach the World Food Programmes view of balanced diets. Micronutrient deficiency is an issue facing the Nepalese people. A typical Nepalese diet contains carbohydrates such as rice, wheat, and corn but the diet is poor in eggs, fish, meat and milk thus, poor in minerals. Most people in Nepal don't have the privilege to afford these foods for consumption rather, as a form of income. About 66% of people in Nepal are involved in farming, most farmers grow diversified crops. The major staple crops of Nepal are rice, maize, barley, wheat, millet, and buckwheat. Livestock is also one of the most important sources of income for farm households.

This micronutrient deficiency is worsened for young girls during menstruation. While menstruating it is advised to consume more iron, vitamin B, and vitamin C. Iron is one of the most important nutrients to get while menstruating as iron is part of the process to carry oxygen throughout the body. In the Nepal National Micronutrient Status Survey, conducted by UNICEF, researchers divided Nepal and randomly selected households: of which 18.7% non-pregnant women and 18.0% of girls aged 10-19 had signs of an iron deficiency problem. When someone menstruates they can lose 10-80 mL, although the average amount of blood loss is typically 35 mL. Assuming that a mL of blood contains a mg of iron that's 35 mg of iron every cycle(Mast). This information raises an alarming issue among people of the menstruating age.

Education is important to the Nepalese people yet they struggle to keep children in school past primary school. The combined average number of male and female Nepalese youth in secondary school was 42% in 2006 (CITE): of which 39% are female and 46% are male. Trends for boys and girls remaining in school continue in an upward trajectory until the age of 12; at that time, there is a significant drop in

female attendance. This is also the average age to start menstruation. This data suggests a correlation between the onset of menarche and the beginning of an educational decline. The literacy rate for girls parallels their knowledge about menstruation; it is limited at best. Even after girls get their period, almost 70% of girls still don't know why menstruation happens (Joanna).

Menstrual education is a necessary piece of education for young women. There are several cultural barriers surrounding menstruation, stigmatizing this natural occurrence. In a report focusing on the Udaypur and Sindhuli districts, researchers-gathered data from 16 different large schools including both urban and rural areas. Using 130 randomly selected girls from each district, the girls completed a questionnaire based on restrictions due to menstruation along with reasons why they were restricted. The number one restriction, 97.7% of respondents, was to visit a temple; this was due to: "divine retribution," which is the belief of punishment from a higher power and families disallowing the visit. Ninety-six point nine percent of respondents noted that they were unable to do a household puja, or blessing. Seventy four point six percent of girls said they were unable to attend a religious function. Researchers also interviewed the girls. Common themes that surfaced were: women and girls are "impure" or "polluted", they were discouraged from looking at or speaking to a male nor were they to look at the roof of their home for fear of bringing bad luck to the home. Of course, teasing between students is perhaps the largest contributor to poor menstrual education. One student in the Sindhuli district stated "Guys in our class take our bag and check it, they ask for extra pen or copy to borrow, so there is the possibility that they see it. It would be a very embarrassing situation for me so I wear a thick cloth from home". It was also mentioned that if girls were teasing other girls it was usually girls who had not started menstruating, saying "...I shouldn't touch them because they might also have their menstruation"(Morrison).

Another issue worth mentioning is the state of the schools bathrooms and toilets. Of all schools interviewed, only one had a trash can in the restroom and it was not emptied regularly. The toilets were dirty and rank, and most girls chose not to do their period business in the restrooms. It is also worth noting that the only toilets with consistent water supply were the teachers toilets while the girls toilets were filled with leaves, sticks and other unflushable materials. A few schools required the girls to clean the bathrooms as they had irregular cleaning staff and were unwilling to do so themselves (Morrison). The unwillingness to clean up the bathroom is counter to those educators who teach girls that personal hygiene during menstruation is important to maintain. For example, many participants discussed the fear of bacteria in the blood and many were scared to touch anything for fear that the bacteria would spread.

To help absolve these sanitation related dilemmas, WASH, Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene, is a programme developed by UNICEF that aims to resolve the issue of sanitation and hygiene in public schools. They aim to improve and provide sanitation and sustainable drinking water to everyone(Water).The portion of WASH focused on schools is called WinS and was implemented into Nepalese schools in 2016. In an analysis of menstrual hygiene practices and the role of WinS, it was discovered that schools engaged in the program had students who felt comfortable asking their teachers for hygiene products. While in non-WinS schools, students would usually have to buy and bring their own. It is also shown that girls in WinS schools are more likely to speak up about their period, rather than be afraid or ashamed of it(Joanna). Teachers found it to be important to teach girls about menstruation before they experienced their period for the first time. This included menstrual education at a younger age: this included body image, body awareness and understanding what their bodies go through. Teachers are already observing slow improvements within the communities (Joanna).

Another report on schools with and without WASH noted that: girls were more likely to change at school, improvements within toilet facilities, and a greater appreciation for and increased likelihood of using the restroom. They also stated "Girls said that the main factor that would make a difference to

the state of the toilets was a regular water supply to keep them clean and usable". With this they suggested that the most important thing is to end poor menstrual hygiene and to keep facilities clean and private, through education of good menstrual hygiene.

WASH's finance report of 2021/22 showed where WASH was making strides in portions of their efforts. In one instance, more women and girls, aged 15-49, were using reusable materials rather than single use products. Additionally, there was an increase in the amount of girls able to find a private place to change and wash. Sadly it also demonstrated that 0% of women and girls participated in activities while menstruating. Along with these statistics the finance report also gave estimates for the 2021/22 year. They estimated that the annual budget for WASH was to be 1.2% of Nepal's GDP, roughly 44.2 billion nepalese rupees. Within this budget, 40% of it is directed towards Kathmandu Valley. WASH is also the one of the highest budgets received among 22 ministries in Nepal.

While the massive 7.8 earthquake of 2015 that hit Nepal's capital, left its mark on the country, Nepal is striving for improvements in a variety of areas. Among the many poor outcomes of the earthquake, one of the most threatening was micronutrient deficiency and a decline in the literacy rates of young women. These issues were more pronounced in women and girls of the menstruating age. By including menstrual education, the Nepalese women and girls can have the knowledge and tools to improve their diets and begin to break cultural taboos around menstruation. Programs such as WASH will help Nepal improve facilities, provide access to hygienic products thereby, keeping young women in schools longer. This decreases pressure among girls and provides greater opportunity for them to succeed well beyond secondary school. Like the nesting dolls of the Netherlands, when a woman feels empowered she can have the confidence in her education and expand that confidence throughout her family, village, district, country, and world.

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