



Nepal, 9 March 2019

## **GHRD Report on *International Women's Day***

### **Report – International Women's Day 9<sup>th</sup> March 2019**

Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD) has successfully conducted a health camp in Sankhu on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2019. Although Nepali law criminalizes the practice of Chhaupadi, the custom prevails in certain regions, especially the Western provinces of the country. This undermines women's rights, equality and empowerment.

Chhaupadi, an ancestral tradition and Hindu practice in Nepal, has considerable consequences for women. Every month, menstruating women are banished from their homes to live in a separate hut, usually located in the family's property. Women who have recently given birth are also expected to remain outside of the family house. For five days, menstruating women and girls follow a strict diet composed of rice, salt and cereals. Such extreme practices isolate women family life and daily activities. The rationale behind the religious-cultural practices is the fact that Hindu families consider menstruation 'impure'. As a result, women cannot have physical contact with any of the members of the family nor touch cattle or plants, in fear of angering the gods. Thus, menstruation is surrounded by shame, taboo and secrecy.

With this in mind, GHRD organized a health camp where doctors and medical students informed the local communities about menstruation, and the science behind it. The difficulty lies in educating the local groups about hygiene and care during menstruation whilst respecting the importance of religious practices and beliefs in Nepal. Nevertheless, it is important to raise awareness about menstruation and Chhaupadi in order to create an environment for change.

At 10 am, 60 people in Sankhu participated in the event. Some tea was shared and the program started with a speech by Dr. Lata Bajracharya, former member of the board of directors of The Thapathali Maternity Hospital (the first maternity hospital of Nepal). She discussed menstruation taboos and general health issues. Dr. Lata Bajracharya also encouraged women to go to the doctors when they are ill and explained the danger of going to Dhama Jhakris (quacks).

Sukomal Bhattarai, a doctor and organizer of the event, continued the program with the importance for all young girls and women to attend and participate in community-based programs. To put into practice what was said before, Mrs. Bhattarai demonstrated the proper method of using a pad, reusable cloth pads, methods of sterilization and disposal. The third speaker, Muna Joshi, a medical student, talked about the danger of the Chhaupadi practice.

Because of Chhaupadi, women suffer serious physical and mental harms from their isolation and discriminatory treatment. On the one hand, the harsh weather conditions cause pneumonia and other severe health risks for women. Additionally, women and girls' mental health is jeopardised from being ostracized from their families and community. Moreover, these huts make women targets for possible sexual abuse or rape, or even attacks from animals. Rakshya, the fourth speaker, discussed various important topics such as family planning, nutritious food, vaccines and prevention of diseases.

During the event, other medical students, Supriya, Shilpy and Sunikshya, measured the blood pressure and weight of the participants to create a database for future investigations and analysis. At the same time, Abisha, Anjali, Rabina and Sadikshya collected data of the women present at the meeting. This information is relevant to better understanding menstruation taboos and extreme practices in Nepal.

To conclude, the event was a great success and a great experience for all the medical staff present, namely Dr. Rajiv Yadav, Sukomal Bhattarai, Rakshya, Sunikshya, Supriya, Muna, Rabina, Abisha, Anjali, Ashmita, Shilpy, Sadikshya. GHRD will continue to work on this issue in order to protect women and religious minorities' rights in the future.