**Maastricht University**

**UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY**

# Master's thesis on shifting perceptions towards harmful menstrual practices:
*A Case Study of Chhaupadi in Nepal*



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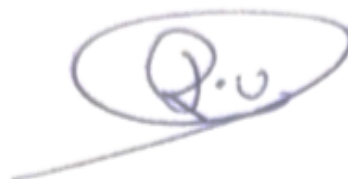| | |
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| Name: | Riesa van Doorn (i6220613) |
| Master's Programme: | M.Sc. Public Policy and Human Development |
| Cohort: | September 2019 |
| Thesis Supervisor: | Dr. Julieta Marotta |
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# Declaration of Academic Integrity

I, **Riesa Maya van Doorn**, hereby declare with relation to my master's thesis on the role of
Menstrual Education in influencing the Perceptions of Potential Opinion Leaders towards harmful menstrual practices that:

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## Abstract

In less developed countries, menstruating women face discrimination in the form of harmful practices. This study explored how menstrual education could influence perceptions of opinion leaders towards such practices through the case-study of the Chhaupadi practice in Nepal. To answer this main question, the qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews was employed. Through the collected data, this study identified who potential opinion leaders are, to what extent leaders in Chhaupadi-free villages have shifted their perceptions, and what menstrual educational approaches are currently used. Based on the findings, recommendations for policymakers and scholars were developed.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Relevance study

Do not make mayonnaise while menstruating because menstruation causes curdle, is one of the many recommendations that women in the world might hear in relation to menstruation (Carter, 2017). Due to the existence of such misconceptions, people tend to form negative perspectives on the 28-day menstrual cycle[1] of women. In less developed countries, misinformation about the hormonal cycle and the monthly menstrual bleeding itself (*period* or *menstruation*) even incites people to practice customs that harm women (Dargham, 2019). The current study aimed to explore how menstrual education could help to change these attitudes towards harmful menstrual practices of influential persons in communities. The findings of this study are translated into practical recommendations that can be implemented in perception-changing programs of the public and third sectors. Hence, this study may indirectly contribute to improving the situation of women during their menstruation and in the long term the social positions and living conditions of women.

## 1.2 Problem

Menstrual stigmas appear in a number of countries (UNFPA, 2018). For example, in Bolivia, some believe that women who bathe or touch cold water during their period will become infertile (UNICEF, 2012), and even in a developed country like Japan, some male sushi chefs believe women are not competent to prepare sushi because their menstrual cycles adversely affect their taste (Natracare, 2020). As a result, menstruation in those countries is associated with embarrassment and conversations about the topic are taboo (Bobel, 2019).

According to Dahlqvist (2015), in cases where shame surrounding menstruation is combined with poverty, there also appears to be systematic human rights violations such as their rights to equality and health. This is, for example, the case in the second-poorest country in South East Asia, Nepal (World Population Review, 2020), where women are considered to be impure or unclean during their menstruation. Consequently, they are excluded from certain daily activities such as eating meals

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[1] Counted from the first day of the menstruation up to the first day of the next menstruation (Patricio & Sergio, 2019).

with their families at the same table or sharing beds with their spouses in urban areas (Gurung, 2019). The degree of restrictions is, however, extraordinary in some rural areas in mid- and far western Nepal. There, girls and women are forced to live in small livestock sheds or mud-and-stone huts (*Chhau sheds*) outside their homes during their periods until the start of their menopause. Their access to basic necessities such as food and water is also restricted. This ancient tradition of exiling menstruating women is known as *Chhaupadi* (Robinson, 2015).

Over the years, Chhaupadi has been widely covered by international media, as it appeared to have deadly consequences (Bhattari, 2018). For instance, some females died from venomous snakebites or other animal attacks while residing in the huts (United Nations, 2011). Hence, both the public and third sector implemented interventions to discourage people from practicing or promoting Chhaupadi. For example, the third sector launched a "Chhaupadi-free campaign" (Dhungana, 2019, par. 1), in which Chhau sheds were destroyed and villages were declared to be Chhaupadi-free (Dahal et al., 2017). In the public sector, three fatalities within ten months spurred the government to enact the Nepalese Criminal Act 2074 in 2017, which entered into force in 2018. Under the Act, any person who forces a woman to follow the practice could face sanctions entailing a jail sentence of three months and/or a fine of 3,000 rupees (€ 22.12) (Jun & Jang, 2018). However, it is questionable whether these measures are effective, as the practice remains prevalent, with a growing number of fatal victims (Dahal et al., 2017; Sharma, 2019).

Communities that practice Chhaupadi believe that it is imperative to exile "impure" menstruating women to cowsheds, to prevent misfortune or punishments from their Gods (Kadariya & Aro, 2015). Hence, this study intended to explore how bridging the menstrual knowledge gap would affect these misconceptions of menstruation, and thereby, the overall perceptions of communities towards the practice.

**1.3 Structure**
This paper is divided into seven chapters. Following Chapter 1 (this introduction), Chapter 2 provides a literature review to identify relevant topic-related concepts in the academic literature. Chapter 3 presents the research questions, and thereafter, chapter 4, the methodology. Chapter 5 provides the results, and chapter 6 the

discussion. Ultimately, chapter 7 summarizes the findings and provides recommendations for policies and future studies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theory on social norms

Despite the aforementioned negative consequences of cultural customs relating to menstruation, such as Chhaupadi, people, especially in remote areas, preserve these customs and maintain positive perceptions of them. According to Frese (2015), social norms play an important role in understanding why people adhere to such practices. He defined social norms as the routinization of shared understandings that prescribe certain behaviors within a social group. Such informal behavioral rules are based on a rich network of consistent beliefs such as (potentially incorrect) ideas on health, which have a cultural basis (Bicchieri & Mercier, 2014). In this sense, cultural practices (*the behaviors*) could be understood as expressions of social norms.

Several studies have shown that social norms exert a powerful influence over one's individual behavior. In particular, they indicated that in cases where one's personal preferences, in terms of favoring or disfavoring something, conflicted with a social norm, people still behaved in accordance with this social norm. For example, a study on the experiences with Chhaupadi found that all the girls[2] would rather cease practicing the custom but still continued. They believed that disobeying this social norm, which was imposed by their family members, would lead to misfortune for their family members (Amatya et al., 2018).

There are several theories on why people act in accordance with social norms, even when this behavior is harmful to themselves or others (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018). The four compliance mechanisms of Young (2015) could be used to answer this question:

– First *Coordination* refers to coordinated actions among community members (compliance with the social norm) so that they can achieve certain goals.

– Second is *Social pressure*: community members anticipate social rewards for compliance with a social norm, or social punishment for non-compliance.

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[2] 77 girls who actually practiced Chhaupadi out of the total number of participating girls (107).

- Third, *Signaling and symbolism* reasons that people comply with a social norm because they want to signal their membership in the community to themselves or others.
- Finally, *Benchmark and reference points* refers to the phenomenon that a social norm is validated and internalized. As a consequence, group members are internally driven to comply with norms without anticipating on positive or negative consequences of non-compliance. When other community members cease to follow the social norm, these members would still adhere to it (Legros & Cislaghi, 2020).

For example, in the Chhaupadi study of adolescent girls, it could be argued that the second compliance mechanism applies. Due to the social pressure of their families and community members and possible social punishments such as emotional abuse (ActionAid, 2020), the girls complied with the social norm dictating that women are not allowed to stay in their own homes during their menstruation. Even though, they had an aversion to it.

## 2.2 Strategies to change social behavior

In various countries, the public and third sector tend to address harmful behavior with the following interventions (Lilleston et al., 2016; Bobel, 2019):
- The imposition of formal norms by the public sector
- Educational interventions by the third sector.

### 2.2.1 Formal norms interventions

As outlined in the introduction, a common strategy to tackle harmful practices is the imposition of formal norms – laws – by the public sector. However, formal norms have repeatedly been found to be less powerful than prevailing social norms (Lilleston et al., 2016). For example, the criminalization of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in African countries, which conflicted with the communities' deeply entrenched social norms, did not lead to a behavioral change (Bicchieri & Mercier, 2014). Anderson (1979) explained this phenomenon of non-compliance with laws by stating that individuals would rather be seen as a lawbreaker than bearing the stigma of being a deviant in their community. In line with this, Stuntz (2000) added that when laws are too far from norms, they will be disrespected by the public, and the

lawbreakers will not be stigmatized. This loss of stigma undermines the essence of the criminal justice system, namely its deterrent effect.

### 2.2.2 Educational interventions

While interventions that involve the enactment of laws often fail to shift perceptions of harmful practices (and thereby the harmful behavior), particularly in developing countries (Bicchierie & Mercier, 2014), educational interventions are likely to be more effective. For instance, the UN Women (2016) stressed that *education* –is the "process of receiving or giving systematic instruction" ("Education", n.d.) – contributes to the development of peaceful communities. In line with this, several studies have found that education is a powerful tool to influence behavior. Through education, one's knowledge might be increased, which could result in a change in behavior (Arlinghaus & Johnston, 2018). For example, a report reviewing studies on the correlation between education and health found that education is one of the social determinants of healthy behavior. Based on this finding, it concluded that educated individuals have better well-being and health compared to less-educated individuals (Feinstein et al., 2006).

However, it should be also noted that there is not always a causal relationship between education and behavioral change. For example, the provision of educational brochures to patients by healthcare providers, covering how their health condition could be improved, appeared to be ineffective (Arlinghaus & Johnston, 2018). Whether education is successful depends on certain factors such as the content and approach. Regarding the content, Arlinghaus & Johnston (2018) criticized the idea that providing general, scientific knowledge is sufficient to alter behavior. According to them, knowledge should be linked to one's personal relevance, by explaining why changes are needed and how one can do this.

In instances where social norms dictate behavior, scholars are in favor of educational interventions that target social norms, often implemented by the third sector. According to Cislaghi & Heise (2019), the social norms-targeting interventions should consider the participant's wider social environment, such as their social networks and

economic conditions. Although studies on the effectiveness[3] of such interventions in the context of harmful practices are sparse, one study showed a positive outcome. It showed that an educational program using the social norms approach to address the harmful FGM practice was significantly effective in Senegal (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019; Diop et al., 2004). Due to increased awareness of human rights and the consequences of FGM, there was a reduction in practicing FGM or supporting it (Diop et al., 2004).

*2.2.2.1 The importance of menstrual education*
In the context of social norms sustaining harmful behavior towards menstruating women, increasing knowledge of the menstrual cycle also seems to be relevant because these norms are based on inadequate knowledge (MacLean, 2020). This latter finding appeared in a literature review on menstrual knowledge and preparedness among girls in low middle-income countries, which found that girls often "hold misconceptions about menstruation" (Chandra-Mouli & Patel, 2017, p. 3). To illustrate this point, the authors presented a study in Nepal demonstrating that only 6% of the Nepalese girls regarded menstruation as a physiological process, whereas 82% of the girls perceived it as a curse. Common misconceptions are that menstrual bleedings are dangerous or polluted. As a result of such misconceptions, people believe that customs are a necessity to avoid infuriated Gods, and consequently misfortune (Kadariya & Aro, 2015). In other words, following menstrual restrictions is the social norm, which is based on misconceptions that *menstrual education* could correct. According to Bobel, menstrual education encompasses *body literacy*, in other words, one's capacity to understand the women's body and the knowledge that menstruation is "a naturally occurring biological process" (Bobel, 2019, p.10).

Moreover, it could be argued that menstrual education could be the social determinant of *dignified menstruation*. According to the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation (2020), this concept refers to a state where menstruating human beings[4] are free from any form of violence, discrimination and abuse.

Possible strategy
An example of a possible strategy which appeared to be effective for changing harmful social norms is the *facilitator-led* group conversation. It encourages

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[3] in terms of behavioral change.
[4] The definition is not limited to women but could also include transgenders (Paudel, 2019).

participants to critically reflect on the existing norms within their community and subsequently renegotiate these norms. Change will happen through three steps. First, the facilitator encourages the participants to change their norms, by providing, among other things, information about the harmful consequences of compliance with the norm). Second, the participants are encouraged to detach from their norm. They create a replacement positive norm and develop strategies to motivate other members of their community. Third, participants are steered to take action. They publicly commit to change their norm and motivate other members (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018). Hence, it seems that incorporating this strategy in menstrual educational programs could be useful.

This section discussed a possible element for menstrual educational programs. The next section clarifies which actors in the community should especially participate in such programs.

### 2.2.3 The importance of targeting Opinion Leaders

Prior to the implementation of an educational program which aims to change a particular social norm, it is essential to determine the program's target group. To do so, the role of community members in sustaining or abandoning the norm should be analyzed. Legros & Cislaghi (2020) identified three categories in which community members can be placed:

1. **The norm targets** are the members who act in compliance with the norm.
2. **The norm drivers** are the members who exert power of the lifecycle of norms. Within this category, three main types can be distinguished. Whereas (1) **Enforcers** encourage other members to comply with a norm and sustain it, (2) **Leaders** try to change the existing norm which mobilizes (3) **Norm followers** to change their behavior and thereby comply with the new social norm.
3. **The norm beneficiaries and victims** are neither targets nor influencers but are still affected by the norm in terms of gaining or losing from it. For example, a perpetrator of domestic abuse benefitting from the norm that neighbors should refrain from intervening in businesses of other families (Legros & Cislaghi, 2020).

The three categories, which may also overlap (Legros & Cislaghi, 2020), show that certain members – the Leaders – play a crucial role in transforming norms (Popitz, 2017). To be labelled as *leader*, a person should be "more willing to bear the costs of violating a norm" (Legros & Cislaghi, 2020, p. 75). The person is not necessarily an influential person in the community.

When individuals do have a considerable amount of power to positively influence other members, the literature refers to them as *opinion leaders* (Platteau, 2017; Legros & Cislaghi, 2020). Studies have identified the following actors as potential opinion leaders: (1) authority figures, including religious leaders (Kadariya & Aro, 2015) and (2) members who hold a special status in the community. The power of these opinion leaders is based on their rank in the community's social hierarchy, and it enables them to incite others to abandon a prevalent norm or to enforce the adoption of a new norm by facilitating its diffusion or spreading (Legros & Cislaghi, 2020).

<u>The process of influencing others</u>
Biccherie & Mercier (2014) believed that opinion leaders are even able to change the overall community's perceptions of harmful practices. Sometimes, members just take their word for it when opinion leaders, who are respected by the majority in a community, say that the social norm is ill-founded. However, often there is more needed, and opinion leaders should present convincing arguments which lead community members to realize that their beliefs are inconsistent. In other words, "inconsistencies are typically the occasion for belief change" (Biccherie & Mercier, 2014, p.44). In case one's mind notices inconsistent beliefs, then it will search for inconsistencies that can be easily rejected so that inconsistencies will be reduced. Hence, good arguments can start this process. A strong argument should start with presenting a premise, a belief that is accepted by listeners. Subsequently, it should demonstrate that this premise is incongruent with the conclusion of the argument. When a convincing argument is presented, listeners are likely to change their mind about the conclusion.[5] Accepting their initial belief while rejecting the argument's conclusion would feel too inconsistent for their minds. Furthermore, arguments can

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[5] However, it should be noted that human behavior is complex (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018) and that this is not always the case.

be explicit or implicit. Whereas explicit arguments highlight logical relationships and can, therefore, be threatening, implicit arguments do not directly make listeners face their inconsistencies. It offers listeners the possibility to realize on their own that their beliefs are in conflict with each other (Biccherie & Mercier, 2014). Another important point that Biccherie & Mercier (2014) raised is that there should be viable alternative norms, supported by opinion leaders, otherwise abandoning the prevailing norm in a community will not succeed.

Considering these matters, scholars, including Vaitla (2017) and Mackie (2015) argued that opinion leaders should be involved in social norms transforming programs. Although Platteau (2017) agreed, he argued that identifying and targeting the opinion leaders could be challenging due to complicated social networks. Notably, most studies on opinion leaders in the context of harmful practices focus on communities where FGM was prevalent. They mainly identified the migrants of these communities, who moved to countries where the practice was not common, as opinion leaders. Since they challenged FGM after their abroad experience, it could be argued that expanding their knowledge has influenced their perceptions (Platteau, 2017). This raised the question of how the perceptions of Enforcers who are unable to leave their communities could be changed so that they take the role of opinion leaders and influence the behaviors of others. As mentioned in the previous section, education is likely to be the answer because studies have found that increasing people's knowledge has a positive effect on their behavior.

However, in the context of harmful menstrual practices, current menstrual educational programs mainly target the norm targets, namely the younger girls. This approach is criticized by Bobel (2019). She stated that it is not likely that change will happen when only girls receive myth-busting information that challenges their social norms while their environment is unsupportive. Hence, she favored culturally sensitive menstrual educational interventions that not only target girls but also other actors in local communities. This study, therefore, aimed to develop recommendations for a menstrual educational program that is suitable for the opinion leaders in local communities.

## 2.3 Public and third sectors versus the private sector

The interventions mentioned above only discussed the role of the public (governmental organizations) and third sectors (non-governmental non-profit organizations) in shaping behaviors. In particular, in the context of menstruation, it would be less desirable if the private sector (companies) would take on this role. Their financial interest could produce menstrual educational programs that focus more on hygiene and the use of menstrual products instead of targeting the social norm, which is based on menstrual misconceptions, and that leads to harmful behaviors. For example, according to Dahlqvist, menstruating women are "only of interest as profit potential for companies" (Dahlqvist, 2015, p. 37). Moreover, this assumption could also be derived from the already existing criticism on the current approach of menstrual health education. For instance, Bobel (2019) criticizes that the dominant global standard focuses too much on menstrual products such as pads or cups and the biological aspects of the reproductive system. According to her, such an approach that fails to cover sociocultural aspects is deficient. Therefore, it is likely that interventions developed by the private sector would not change this focus on menstrual products.

## 2.4 Significance of the study

Since the majority of studies concerning potential opinion leaders have analyzed non-menstrual customs such as FGM, this study sheds light on menstruation-related practices. There is a growing interest globally in improving the human rights of menstruating women among other things, to foster gender equality, which is one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals[6] (Dahlqvist, 2015; Bobel, 2019). There also appears to be a scarcity of research on what effective educational strategies – in the form of improving their menstrual knowledge – are for potential opinion leaders in the communities, who have never left their community, to mobilize them to take on the role of an opinion leader. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by exploring how education could contribute to changing the perceptions of the potential opinion leaders of harmful menstrual practices, especially Chhaupadi, and thereby their behavior. This insight could be considered as a valuable contribution to the social science discipline. Additionally, the desired result of this study would be to enable the third and public sectors to influence opinion leaders by developing or

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[6] Global Goal 5 (UNDP, 2020).

modifying menstrual educational programs. Subsequently, these opinion leaders would start convincing other members to refrain from harmful practices, which might lead to changing the perceptions of other members within the community (Bicchieri & Mercier, 2014). In this way, this study aims to contribute to the safeguarding of the fundamental human rights of menstruating women.

## 3. Research Questions

To contribute to the development of menstrual educational programs, central in this study was the following research question:

*How can menstrual education of potential opinion leaders influence their perceptions towards harmful menstrual practices?*

To answer the main question, the following sub-questions were examined:

1. Who are potential opinion leaders within rural communities in shifting Chhaupadi as the social norm, and what are currently their drivers for perpetuating the practice?
2. To what extent have opinion leaders in Chhaupadi-free declared villages shifted their perceptions, and what role did menstrual education play?
3. What menstrual educational approaches that are currently used to challenge menstrual practices could be identified?

## 4. Methodology

This study used the qualitative research approach to understand the relationship between menstrual education (independent variable) and the perceptions of opinion leaders towards harmful menstrual practices (dependent variable). Since subjective understandings (unstructured data) are needed to answer this study's exploratory main research question rather than numerical data (structured data), the qualitative approach was considered to be more appropriate than the quantitative approach (Matthews & Ross, 2010). In this chapter the research design (4.1), methods (4.2), ethical considerations (4.3), and limitations (4.4) are discussed.

## 4.1 Research Design

*4.1.1* Case study
This research applied a case study, which is considered to be one of the building blocks of research designs (Bouma & Atkinson, 1995). According to Yin (2014), the exploratory case study is appropriate for answering a how research question, which is the case for the study at hand. It enabled the Researcher to develop a complete, in-depth analysis of the contemporary phenomenon of Chhaupadi in Nepal. Since this subject has not been extensively studied yet, the exploratory case study is also suitable (Yin, 2014). While gaining an in-depth understanding about a case is on the one hand an advantage, it is also a disadvantage because it reduces the external validity of findings to another population. Moreover, the selected Chhaupadi case is both an intrinsic case (due to its exploratory nature) and an instrumental case, because it exemplifies the broader phenomenon of harmful menstrual practices so that such practices could be better understood (Mills et al., 2010).

*4.1.1.1 Country selection*
Similar to other countries such as India, tied to the overall Nepali culture is silence surrounding the topic of menstruation (Sapakota et al., 2013) but the most extreme and harmful menstrual practice of Chhaupadi is only prevalent in Nepal. For this reason, this country was selected. It is also an interesting country because, while human rights are protected by laws on the one hand, this is not the case in practice. According to the Nepalese Constitution of 1990, all citizens are equal (for example, regardless of their gender or caste[7]). Also, in 2015, the Nepalese Supreme Court ruled that Chhaupadi is unlawful based on the violation of fundamental women's rights (Sen & Östlin, 2007), including the protection from discrimination and their right to health (Chagai, 2008). However, discrimination towards (menstruating) women is still prevalent in the Nepali patriarchal society, especially in the remote, rural areas of Nepal. Hence, a study on Chhaupadi providing recommendations supports the political will to eliminate discrimination and violence towards women.

*4.1.1.2 Case study's characteristics*
The characteristics of Chhaupadi made it a suitable case for this study. First, because it is, as aforementioned, a harmful practice towards menstruating women. They

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[7] based on "birth-ascribed stratification" and "hierarchical interaction" (Subedi, 2014, p.52).

suffer not only psychologically but also physically. For example, diarrhea, urinary tract infections, and dehydration are common. These problems are caused by the poor conditions of the Chhau sheds, namely the lack of electricity; toilet facilities; sanitation; door locks; mattresses; blankets; windows; and ventilation (Amatya, 2018).

Secondly, its rural character made it a suitable case study. Since the practice is only prevalent in rural communities[8], in some far- and mid-western districts[9], where there are strong social ties and expectations to act in compliance with a social norm (Jun & Jang, 2018), it was expected that potential opinion leaders could be more easily identified, which would have not been the case in urban areas where social ties are weak and how one is influenced depends on their own social network (Cornwell & Behler, 2015). To illustrate the strong ties, Kadariya & Aro (2015) found that the positive perceptions of the long-standing practice of family members and religious leaders exert a considerable amount of influence over the behavior of women and adolescent girls in Nepal. For example, they believe that disobeying the practice will not only lead to misfortune for the women themselves or their family members but also harm the whole society, as it will be shattered and cursed. Hence, the case of Chhaupadi was considered to be suitable to extend the understanding of the previously discussed social norms theory, or confirm it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), or in other words, a valuable contribution to the literature on harmful practices dictated by social norms.

Furthermore, Chhaupadi was selected because it prevails due to misperceptions regarding menstruation (Restless Development, 2015). The misperceptions can already be deduced from the meaning of the word Chhaupadi, as *Chhau* could be understood as untouchable or unclean, and *Padi* as women in the Rate dialect, which is spoken in Accham (Karki et al., 2017; Kadariya & Aro, 2015). In other words, Chhaupadi indicates that women are unclean or untouchable during their menstruation. Hence, Dahal et al. (2017) stressed that influential actors such as traditional healers in these communities should be educated on menstruation. Nevertheless, the role of education in influencing them was understudied, and

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[8] mainly among Hindus (Karki et al., 2017).
[9] e.g. Accham and Dailekh.

therefore, the question of what effective education would be, was still outstanding. Therefore, this study's selection of the case of Chhaupadi was deemed relevant.

## 4.2 Methods

*4.2.1 Sampling techniques and participants*
The main source of evidence for this case study were interviews (Smith, 2018). For the purpose of understanding the role of education in influencing perceptions of Chhaupadi, a total of thirteen experts have been interviewed. The purposeful sampling and snowball methods were used to select the participants. With the first method, participants who meet certain characteristics which are in line with this study's research objectives were selected (Emmel, 2013). The Researcher selected participants who were active in the area of addressing Chhaupadi and/or menstrual education or were knowledgeable on Chhaupadi due to their job position. Participants who solely focused on menstrual hygiene activities such as distributing pads, and not on providing education, were excluded from the sampling. Furthermore, the Researcher mainly selected participants who had a basic understanding of the English language because of a limited timeframe. Since local potential opinion leaders did not meet this criterion[10], they were excluded from the study. They were also excluded because it would have been extremely difficult to reach them from a distance. In the remote areas where they live, internet connection is limited. Searching for them via an intermediate was also not possible due to the Covid-19 lockdown in Nepal and also not feasible within the Researcher's limited timeframe. Although the Researcher had the possibility to have an interpreter present during the interviews for local experts, she preferred to minimalize the use of one because translating the majority of interviews from Nepali to English could affect the intended meaning of the interviewees. Moreover, the snowball sampling was applied. It entailed that the Researcher asked all participants whether they knew other persons who could be interviewed at the end of the interview (Johnson, 2014). This resulted in five additional interviewees.

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[10] Based on the information of local experts.

To gain a comprehensive understanding and to be able to verify different responses[11], the Researcher selected a variety of participants who can be divided into three categories: Foreign (Civil Society) actors, national Civil Society Actors (CSAs) and local CSAs. They are listed in table 1 below.

| Name/Origin | Position and relation to Chhaupadi and/or menstrual education | Interview date |
|---|---|---|
| **Foreign (CS) actors** | | |
| 1. Sophie Maliphant (British) | Initiator of the initiative *Changing the Perceptions of Menstruation in Nepal*, which provides menstrual educational workshops to schoolgirls in non-Chhaupadi communities but where other restrictions exist. She is also a graphic designer of the Dignity without Danger (DWD) research project. | 24th June, 2020 |
| 2. Sara Parker (British) | Principal of the DWD project of John Moores Liverpool University which analyzes menstrual taboos and aims to address menstrual exclusion, including Chhaupadi, since 2018 until December 2020. | 12th July, 2020 |
| 3. Tabea Seiz (German) | Development Advisor of international non-governmental organization (INGO) GIZ-Nepal. She advises the Menstrual Health and Hygiene Management Partner's Alliance (MHPA) Nepal. | 20th July, 2020 |
| 4. Ms. Clarke (British) | Master's student in South Asian Studies at SOAS University of London; lived nine months in Nepal for her thesis on formal education on menstruation. She analyzed some menstrual educational materials for children. | 21th July, 2020 |
| **National CSAs in urban areas[12]** | | |
| 5. Ram Chandra Silwal | Country Director of NGO Green Tarra Nepal, which focuses on sexual and reproductive health and menstrual hygiene and has also recently developed a program to address Chhaupadi. In the past, he also worked in Chhaupadi communities. | 25th June, 2020 |

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[11] known as triangulation, discussed in 4.4.
[12] All are located in Kathmandu, except for Ashwin (located in Pokhara).

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|---|---|---|
| 6. Ashwin Karki | Activist for dignified menstruation who has conducted several menstrual educational workshops for children in remote areas where other menstrual restrictions than Chhaupadi are prevalent. | 10th July, 2020 |
| 7. Maya Khaitu | Country Director of the NGO Days for Girls (DFG) Nepal. She worked in Chhaupadi communities. | 20th July, 2020 |
| 8. Guna Raj Shrestra | National Coordinator of MHMPA Nepal, an umbrella organization/network that connects various national and international actors (from the public, third and private sectors) to tackle menstrual discrimination. Currently, it has 80 members. He has also been to Chhaupadi communities. | 19th July, 2020 |
| 9. Elisha Shrestha | Journalist for Kathmandu post who wrote articles about Chhaupadi. | 18th July, 2020 |
| 10. Radha Paudel | Most well-known menstrual activist in Nepal with experience in Chhaupadi and non-Chhaupadi communities. Founder of the Global South Collation for Dignified Menstruation and the Radha Paudel Foundation, which provides menstrual workshops. | 31th July, 2020 |
| **Local CSAs in rural areas**[13] | | |
| 11. Pashupati Kunwar | Chairperson of NGO Sambikas Nepal. She conducted activities to address Chhaupadi and used to follow the practice herself. | 16th July, 2020 |
| 12. Bhawana Dipu Shahi | Community Health Programme Associate at the NGO possible health. She is experienced in addressing Chhaupadi and used to follow it herself. | 20th July, 2020 |
| 13. Manju Bhatta | Behavior Change Communication Officer in the Rural Village Water Resources Management Project (a collaboration between the Government of Nepal, the European Union and the Government of Finland to improve the livelihood in two rural | 25th July, 2020 |

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[13] I11 & I12 located in Accham in the far-west, I13 in Khalanga in the west.

| | provinces of Nepal, including the menstrual health management) in Chhaupadi communities. | |

*Table 1: Sample Characteristics*

*4.2.2 Data collection process*

The data was collected over a one-month period between June and July 2020. The first contacts were already established in April and May. Participants were first approached via Facebook messenger[14]. To the organizations which did not have a message-sending option on their Facebook pages, a recruitment email was sent (see Appendix A). Due to Covid-19, fieldwork and face-to-face interviews, as intended initially, were not possible. Hence, the communication mediums Surf Videobellen, Viber and Zoom were used (see section 4.3 for the ethical considerations).

Semi-structured interview questions were developed to collect data from experts. The interview guide was divided into three sections, namely (1) background questions on menstruation-related activities, (2) thoughts on Chhaupadi and (3) menstrual educational programs (see Appendix B). The purpose of a guide is to keep the interview focused on the one hand (Jamshed, 2014), while allowing for flexibility or improvisations on the other hand (Adams, 2015). For example, this flexibility proved very useful when, during the interviews, it became evident that the scope of harmful practices in Nepal goes beyond Chhaupadi. It also includes fewer extreme forms of discriminatory practices that violate women's rights. Therefore, instead of asking whether the participants could share their experience with addressing Chhaupadi, the Researcher asked them whether they could share their experience with Chhaupadi or another form of menstrual restrictions.

On average the interviews lasted one hour, and all were recorded, as all participants provided their consent to being recorded. Eleven of the thirteen interviews were conducted in English; the additional two interviews were conducted in a mix of Nepali and English. During the interviews, a translator was not present because none of the participants requested for one, despite this possibility being offered in the recruitment message. While eleven of the thirteen participants could properly express themselves in the English language, two participants understood the questions but

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[14] Because Nepali people are especially active on Facebook.

were not or only partly able to respond in English. Consequently, sometimes, the Researcher was asking the questions in Nepali. The participants expressed that they understood her Nepali. The Researcher observed that participants had an open attitude during the interviews.

Prior to the data analysis, all recordings were transcribed. Regarding the voice recordings that were partly in Nepali, the Researcher was able to translate 80% from Nepali to English, and she asked a translator to translate the additional 20%.

### 4.2.3 Reliability

Efforts were taken to safeguard the *reliability* of this research meaning, that "another researcher would expect to obtain the same findings" if the study were to be conducted under the same conditions (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 479). The interview questions were not shared with the participants prior to the interview to prevent prepared socially desirable answers, despite that three participants having asked for it. Instead, the Researcher emphasized that her study was explorative and that it aimed to understand their experiences with addressing menstrual practices such as Chhaupadi.

### 4.2.4 Data analysis

In order to identify, analyze and report patterns within the collected data, this study employed thematic analysis utilizing the software Atlast.ti. Codes were created based on repeatedly mentioned topics by the interviewees, which is known as the inductive method (including narrative), and on the literature review, known as the deductive method (including enforcer). By considering both the frequency of codes and their meaning in the context, the interview data was interpreted (Berg & Lune, 2017). The four main themes and sub-themes that emerged are displayed in the code tree below.

**Figure 1: Code tree thematic analysis**
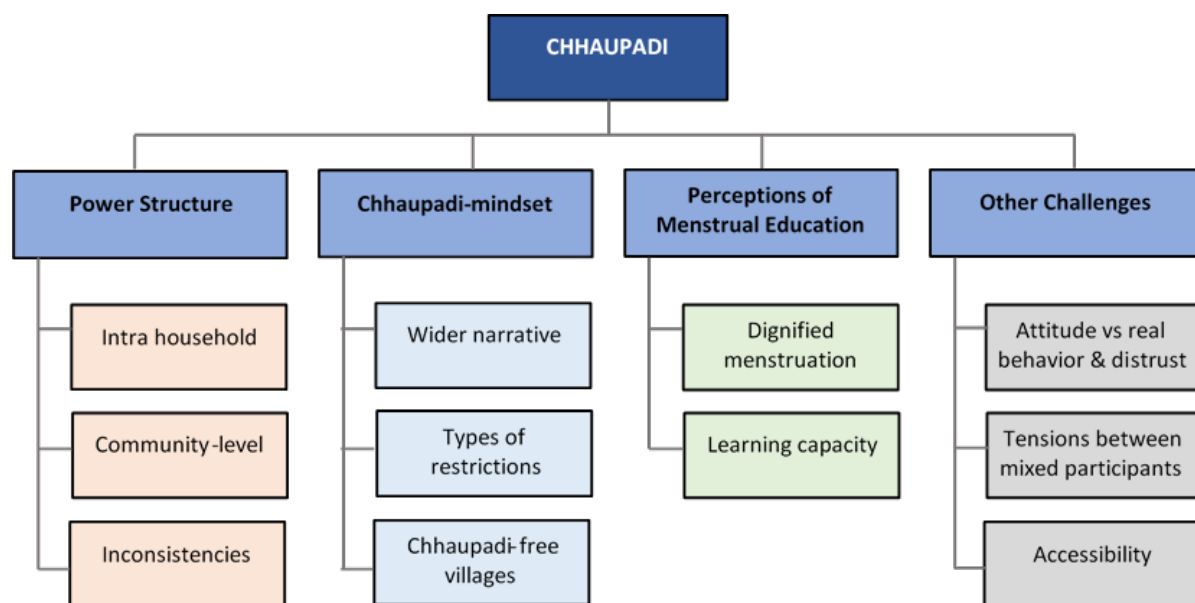


## 4.3 Ethical considerations

*4.3.1 Interview-related*
This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Ethics
Committee of Maastricht University. The Researcher carefully formulated interview
questions that aimed to gain insight into what educational elements could be used to
influence perceptions. The questions refrained from asking sensitive questions on
traumatic experiences with Chhaupadi. Although two NGO staff members wished to
share their past Chhaupadi-practicing experiences with the Researcher, they were not
emotional about the topic. Both a detailed recruitment message or email providing
clear information on this study and consent form (see Appendix C) were developed.
At the start of each interview, the Researcher repeated all the information. In this
way, efforts were taken to enable participants to make an informed decision about
participation (Matthews & Ross, 2010). After asking the interview questions, the
Researcher also asked whether the participants wanted to be addressed anonymously
or with their names in this paper. Almost all participants stated that they wanted to
be addressed by their first name and surname; only one participant expressed a
preference for only her surname. Additionally, the interview transcripts and voice
recordings were stored in a Virtual Research Environment, which is a secured
environment of the University of Maastricht. Therefore, this study is in compliance
with the General Data Protection Regulation.

*4.3.2 Communication mediums*

For the interviews, the following communication mediums were used: Surf Videobellen and Viber, which both have end-to-end encryption. Considering that the data processing posed minimal risks to the participants (BcEHI, 2013), the Researcher was also allowed to use Zoom. However, this medium was occasionally used as a last resort, when there was no alternative that the participant considered as convenient (especially, after the pilot period of Surf Videobellen was expired).

*4.3.3 Translator*

Both the consent form, translated from English into the Nepali language, and a small part of two of the thirteen voice recordings were translated by a native speaking translator. Prior to translating, the translator and the Researcher both signed a Data Confidentiality Agreement (see Appendix D).

## 4.4 Limitations

The Researcher acknowledged that the methodology used in his study has several limitations. In qualitative research, the Researcher is the primary research instrument, meaning that all outcomes are to her personal judgement and interpretation (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Therefore, the Researcher should consider her own position. In the study at hand, the Researcher has a personal connection to her topic because she is half Nepalese and a female. To reduce biased interpretations, she regularly reflected on her work by scrutinizing her decisions and ensuring that they were based on evidence (interview data and the literature) (Mortari, 2015).

A second limitation is linked to the semi-structured interview method. According to Newton (2010) interviewees may provide socially desirable answers, even though it is the opposite of what they believe. This is a threat for the internal validity. To address this, triangulation was used. It compared the responses of the interviewees with each other (aligning multiple perspectives) to verify them and strengthen the standpoint of the Researcher but also used other sources including wider literature and reports in order to enhance this study's internal validity (Salkind, 2010).

Another limitation was that Nepali interviewees could have had difficulties with expressing themselves fully in the foreign English language, which might affect the interpretation of the data. To address this, the Researcher started the interview in

Nepali (introducing herself briefly) and emphasized that interviewees could also express themselves in Nepali because her ability to understand Nepali was better than speaking it (Tsang, 1998). However, it is possible that some interviewees thought that expressing themselves in English was more appropriate. In order to reduce misinterpretations, the Researcher, therefore, occasionally asked questions ensuring she understood the statement correctly. Additionally, the triangulation technique mentioned above was used.

Due to the small sample size of only thirteen participants claiming external validity is also a limitation. This means that it is uncertain whether this study's findings would extend to a different context than the far- and mid-western regions in Nepal, where harmful menstrual practices are prevalent (Stock & Watson, 2018).

## 5. Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the expert interviews conducted. It is divided into the four emerged themes – namely, power structure (5.1), Chhaupadi-mindset (5.2), perceptions of menstrual education (5.3) and challenges (5.4) – which are further divided into subthemes.

### 5.1 Theme 1: Power Structure

This section presents the findings regarding the power structures in sustaining or abandoning Chhaupadi. First, it presents the roles of community members on an intra-household level and subsequently, on a community level. Following this, it discusses inconsistencies in the belief systems of Chhaupadi supporters.

When the Researcher asked the interviewees about whether Chhaupadi was followed due to internal pressure or external pressure there was consensus in their responses. All interviewees (I1-I13, 2020) replied that both factors played a role. With regard to external pressure, they recognized different roles of members in Chhaupadi communities on an intra-household and community level.

#### 5.1.1 Intra-household

Within the household, three types of actors who were identified were:

   I.    Grandmothers and middle-aged mothers(-in law) (elder females).

  II.    Husbands, fathers, brothers (male household members).

III.    Adolescent girls and recently married women (younger females).

I. <u>Elder females</u>

It is clear from all responses that elder females (I1-I13, 2020) are considered the most powerful actors in sustaining Chhaupadi. Interviewees explained that the Chhaupadi practice survived due to the internalization of the practice in their belief system, ignorance about their own body and menstrual cycle, and tradition.

Regarding their belief system, Ram (2020), for example, said that the majority of the females above 25-30 to 50 years old follow and enforce Chhaupadi not because of external pressure, but because of internal motivation. He also stated that the women who reached their menopause have "severe forms of belief in Chhaupadi" or in the words of Ashwin (2020) "their mindset is programmed". Sophie (2020) explained these findings by stating they believe that "something bad is going to happen" if the rules are broken.

Regarding ignorance of their own body, Sophie (2020) stated that the lack of education is the cause. According to her, due to the absence of education, their beliefs could be passed down from generation to generation without anyone questioning it. In line with this, Elisha stated that due to the older generation's ignorance concerning the scientific nature of the blood and their reproductive health, "*priests and other stereotypical persons who want to put those boundaries and suppress women have power. They have the upper hand to say okay this is impure* […]*, and that God has punished females, that's why they bleed for seven days*" (Elisha, 2020).

Regarding tradition, some interviewees stated that elder females emphasized that they also followed the practice, but in worse circumstances. For example, they had to sleep in dark caves while not knowing what was in there, or some in an open field because they were not even allowed to stay in a cowshed (Maya, 2020). This context sheds light on why they still support Chhaupadi, despite the health and safety risks. From their perspective, there have already been sufficient measures taken to improve the practicing conditions of the younger generation. For example, when Maya visited Kalikot, located in the far mid-western region, she noticed that the villagers had built the cowsheds underneath their house. Although they were smelly, dark, and still

posed health risks, Maya noticed the following: *"Even though they know it's hard, and it's so painful, they still want their granddaughters, daughters, and daughters-in-law to practice. Because they think that if they don't practice that God will punish them"*.

These findings showed that elder females strongly believe that Chhaupadi should be preserved due to the internalization of Chhaupadi in their belief system, which is a consequence of menstrual ignorance, and tradition. Moreover, grandmothers consider the current circumstances of the practice as less extreme compared to their own practicing experience.

II. <u>Male members</u>
When the Researcher asked who influence women to follow Chhaupadi – in order to understand who potential opinion leaders are in Chhaupadi communities – male members, except for religious leaders, were mentioned occasionally, only in two interviews (Sophie & Manju, 2020). In the eyes of one interviewee, male members take a neutral stance: *"they don't say don't follow this practice, but they also don't say follow this practice"* (Elisha, 2020).

Yet, interviewees underlined that male members play a role in the reason why women restrict themselves. Women, for example, believe that male members will die (Guna, 2020) or become ill if they are touched by a menstruating woman (Maya, 2020). Contrary to these beliefs, Sara noticed the following behavior: *"If you are untouchable and bring bad luck on your husband, how can a man then actually go to a menstruating woman and rape her without thinking that the Gods will be angry [...]. Why is that fear not in that man?"* (Sara, 2020).

Moreover, instead of associating male members with enforcing Chhaupadi, interviewees more often emphasized their role in shifting the practice. As Bhawana discussed: *"After my marriage, I told my husband that I didn't want to practice Chhaupadi and he supported me and said that I don't have to do it"* (Bhawana, 2020). Ashwin corroborated this by stating:

> *So, when a person like me* […] *knows about* […] *dignified menstruation, we can help sisters and mothers at our home. When our grandparents are asking our generation to follow the restrictions, we can go in the middle, and we can ask the family for the right things,* [because] *males are the head of the family and in the decision-making level of the family* (Ashwin, 2020).

However, interviewees also noted that husbands are not that influential when Chhaupadi is internalized in their wives' belief systems; not even if they have the role of a religious leader. Maya, for example, recalled that a religious leader stated that he had asked his wife to refrain from Chhaupadi, but without success. Yet, she believed that he probably would have been able to convince her if he had more menstrual knowledge, which enabled him to properly explain the nature of menstruation (Maya, 2020).

In short, it was found that males generally take a neutral stance towards the Chhaupadi practice, but that they have the potential to take the role of meditator when women are forced to practice Chhaupadi.

III. Younger females

The majority of interviewees stated that younger females are not able to express their perception of Chhaupadi. Ram (2020), as well as Ashwin (2020), stated that adolescent girls, who have access to education[15], are aware of the fact that Chhaupadi is not common in other areas and more often challenge the practice. Nevertheless, they do not dare to express their thoughts when their female family members (mothers and grandmothers) are strongly in favor of Chhaupadi. Or in the words of Ram, "*Sometimes it is like, okay I don't have a strong belief on this, but my mother is not convinced, my mother-in-law is not convinced, my grandmother is not convinced, so I do this for my grandmother or my mother*" (Ram, 2020).

Nevertheless, activities of some interviewees focused mainly on girls. One reason for that is to address the current vicious circle in which they become their mothers and

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[15] But, as highlighted in chapter 3, there is a lack of menstrual education in schools (Chandra-Mouli & Patel, 2017). This matter is further discussed under low level in subsection 4.1.2.

grandmothers (Elisha, 2020). Moreover, Sophie (2020) believed that increasing the menstrual knowledge of girls could improve their decision-making power and give them the confidence to say no to menstrual practices. In contrast to this, Elisha stated that "*even when women are educated, they have to fight with their family. Even if they say no I don't want to follow Chhaupadi, I don't want to stay in huts* […] *when something bad happens to the family, everyone will point the finger on them*" (Elisha, 2020). In accordance with this, Sophie, therefore, also stressed that when the girls' family members are unsupportive, change is unlikely (Sophie, 2020).

As a consequence of this systematic discrimination, younger females do not only have a heavy burden on their shoulders (Ms. Clarke, 2020), but they also develop a low-self-esteem, which makes them believe that they are "weak" and "incapable", and that they are supposed to comply with the discriminatory restrictions (Ashwin, 2020). This environment, which enables internalization, is already present prior to their first period, when they notice that elder females isolate themselves during their menstruation (Bhawana, 2020).

In summary, already at an early age, girls become aware of the heavy burden of responsibility that they will carry once their menstruation starts: the protection of their family against misfortune. Due to issues with access to education, these younger females, however, mainly follow Chhaupadi because they feel obliged to follow the instructions of the elders or their family-in-law, rather than because they are self-motivated.

*5.1.2 Community-level*
On a community level, the following types of key actors were identified:
  I.    Religious leaders, including traditional healers and priests
 II.    Community leaders (elected officials)
III.    Female community health workers
 IV.    Younger females and teachers

I. Religious leaders

Interviewees identified the religious leaders as the most influential actors in preserving Chhaupadi. Due to their esteemed reputation, community members follow their teachings and guidance (Elisha & Tabea, 2020). For example,

> *they say, if God becomes angry, then there will be a disaster to the families, maybe their cow will die, their land will have a landslide, their family members get sick or can't grow crops. Anything by chance in this year, they will blame the ones in society that do not properly do the restrictions in Chhaupadi* (Ram, 2020).

Additionally, Guna (2020) stressed that particularly the older generation easily accepts their statements but that the younger generation is more critical.

Interviewees noted that the power of religious leaders depends on their place in the hierarchical system. Hence, religious leaders exert not only influence over community members but also over each other, or they can be influenced by religious leaders outside the community who, for example, live in the more liberal urban areas where Chhaupadi is not practiced (Ram, 2020).

It is clear from the responses that that religious leaders have a powerful position regarding sustaining Chhaupadi on a community level. They influence elder females particularly and could influence each other.

II. Elected officials

Some interviewees have emphasized that getting the support of community leaders, including local elected officials – mostly male and high caste (Tabea, 2020) – in abandoning Chhaupadi is essential. On the one hand, Ashwin mentioned that the local politicians, in rural areas, often lack knowledge about the topic of menstruation while on the other hand, Maya and Pashupati have a positive experience with interacting with them. When Pashupati (2020) was called a mentally ill person by the members of her community, after she refused to practice Chhaupadi, she collected evidence about the death cases. Subsequently, she presented it to the local politicians

who supported her. As a result, the negative attitude towards her decision of the other community members changed as well.

Considering this, this section found that local elected officials have the power to support abandoning Chhaupadi.

### III. Female community health workers

Furthermore, community health workers also occasionally appeared in the interview data. The community health workers are usually female nurses who used to practice Chhaupadi and have received informal menstrual health education by the public or third sectors (Guna, 2020). As a consequence, they themselves were able to abandon Chhaupadi (Bhawana, 2020).

### IV. Younger females

Similar to the household level, the interviewees expressed that younger females also have no influence in abandoning Chhaupadi.

### V. Teachers

Five interviewees also believed that local teachers should be able to provide menstrual health education to children. However, the current state is that teachers in rural Chhaupadi communities prefer to skip these lessons due to embarrassment (Ashwin; Ms. Clarke; Guna; Sophie and Maya, 2020). In urban areas, this did not seem to be the case. Ms. Clarke (2020), for example, mentioned that the teachers in urban areas, whom she had spoken to seemed to be willing to provide such lessons. However, the possibility exists that they provided socially desirable answers. In short, teachers and younger females are actors with low power.

### 5.1.3 Inconsistencies in the beliefs

Some interviewees noticed inconsistencies in the beliefs of Chhaupadi Enforcers. Sophie (2020), for example, wondered why on the one hand females in the form of Goddesses are worshipped in Hinduism, whilst they are treated, especially during their menstruation, unequally in society. As well, Sara (2020) wondered why not all Hindus follow the Chhaupadi practice, but only the minority who live in the mid- and far west. Ashwin (2020) also noticed an inconsistency with regard to the religious

beliefs of religious leaders. Despite that their perceptions of menstruation having a religious basis, according to Ashwin, the priests with whom he had talked, were unable to explain in which scriptures menstrual restrictions were enshrined. He also discussed this matter with religious experts, who informed him that practices such as Chhaupadi were a myth and not written anywhere.

On the contrary, Ms. Clarke, who holds a bachelor's degree in Religious Studies, stated that menstruation is referred to in one Vedic text. However, she also did not come across any person[16] who referred to the story of King Indra who slayed a Brahman, and consequently "his sin was placed in women in the form of menstrual blood" (Ms. Clarke, 2020). Yet, menstrual practices were not literally included in this text or other texts (Ashwin; Evie; Elisha, 2020). Despite this inconsistency, religious leaders still attach to the idea that Chhaupadi is written somewhere and disseminate this belief to other community members (especially, the older ones). As a possible explanation for this phenomenon, Sara (2020) mentioned that menstruating women are an easy target to blame for things religious leaders cannot explain. Hence, she emphasized that "*they need to be brought in the discourse in a positive way.*"

This section highlighted that there are inconsistencies in the beliefs of Chhaupadi supporters.

## 5.2 Theme 2: Chhaupadi mindset

This section presents three sub-themes that emerged from the interview data about the Chhaupadi mindset. First, the wider narrative, followed by types of menstrual restrictions and then Chhaupadi-free villages.

### *5.2.1 Wider narrative*

When the Researcher asked the interviewees what their experiences with addressing Chhaupadi were, their responses were not limited to Chhaupadi communities. Rather, the majority of interviewees expressed their experience with a wide variety of menstrual restrictions in other rural areas. Radha and Sara (2020) highlighted explicitly that in the context of menstruation in Nepal, the practice of Chhaupadi is

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[16] She did not interview religious leaders but schoolteachers and NGO staff.

not the major problem because only certain communities in the western parts of Nepal follow Chhaupadi. All other interviewees confirmed this implicitly by stressing that other forms of menstrual discriminatory practices, which are common countrywide, deserve more attention also. For instance, Ram (2020) stated that even though menstruating women do not have to stay in a cowshed in non-Chhaupadi communities, "*they still are kept separately, cannot touch water sources, cannot touch food or go to the temple, and even in some cases they cannot go to school.*" Ms. Clarke (2020) referred to these practices as "modern Chhaupadi", a term that was used by a menstrual activist whom she had spoken to. Ashwin (2020), who is from Pokhara, an urban area of Nepal, added that his sister was kept in a dark room for five to seven days because she was not allowed to see the sunlight when she got her first period. According to him, almost every Nepali person has a "Chhaupadi mindset"; in other words, a discriminatory mindset towards menstruating women. Although interviewees provided examples of other forms of menstrual discriminatory practices, they all considered the Chhaupadi practice to be the most severe form (I1-I13, 2020).

These findings could be summarized with one respondent's request[17]: whether I could use the wording of "menstrual restrictions" instead of Chhaupadi. According to her, "*if you use Chhaupadi, you are forgetting the additional layer of discrimination to the people who are living in West Nepal*" (Radha, 2020).

To sum up, the findings showed that the interviewees are in favor of a wider understanding of the concept of Chhaupadi. The next section sheds light on other types of menstrual restrictions.

### 5.2.2 Types of menstrual restrictions

The statements of the interviewees indicated that menstrual practices can be divided into two main categories: visible[18] and non-visible[19] practices (Sara, 2020). Whereas rapes or deaths could be the consequence of Chhaupadi (Sara & Manju, 2020), and thereby pose severe health and safety risks, food and milk restrictions might lead to reduced nutrition uptake and impose medium health risks (Ram, 2020). An example

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[17] She was the only interviewee who expressed this request to me.
[18] For outsiders.
[19] Only visible for household members.

of a restriction that poses a low risk of harm is not entering a temple, according to one interviewee. He states that *"although this can have a psychological effect, the effect is less in terms of nutrition"* (Ram, 2020). These categories and types of restrictions are included in table 2 below.

| | **Visible for outsiders** | **Less/non-visible for non-household members** |
|---|---|---|
| *High Risk of harm* | Chhaupadi huts | - |
| *Medium Risk of Harm* | - | Dark rooms; restrictions with regard to food, water sources, milk and education. |
| *Low Risk of Harm* | - | Restrictions to enter a temple or participate in religious ceremonies. |

*Table 2: Categorization of menstrual practices*

Although these other forms of menstrual restrictions are less extreme than Chhaupadi, they were also considered to be unacceptable because they violate fundamental rights of menstruating women, including gender equality (Ashwin, Manju & Radha, 2020).

### 5.2.3 Chhaupadi-free villages

According to the interviewees, the declaration of Chhaupadi-free villages was the result of the Chhaupadi-criminalizing law which mobilized NGOs, INGOs and local elected officials to destroy the huts. When the Researcher asked whether interviewees knew why some religious leaders were willing to participate in Chhaupadi-abolishing activities in the Chhaupadi-free communities, Guna (2020) believed that religious leaders were forced to comply with the Criminal Act rather than being trained or educated.

Regarding forceful measures resulting from the Chhaupadi criminalization, there appeared to be mixed views between interviewees living in rural Chhaupadi areas on the one hand, and the foreign interviewees and Nepali interviewees from urban areas on the other. The last groups took a critical stance. Tabea (2020) also noticed this inconsistency when the 80 members[20] of the Menstrual Health and Hygiene

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[20] the Nepali members are both from urban and rural areas. Moreover, the MHMPA has foreign members.

Management Partner's Alliance had to publish a common statement. To support her critique, Sara referred to a news video in which Chhau huts were destroyed in January 2020. As a response, "*the women were fighting with the police not wanting to tear down their sheds because [...] in their mind they are still fearful, people now sleeping in the jungle and caves, so there are more risks*" (Sara, 2020). Also, Guna criticized it by adding, "*attacking the community by saying that their practice is wrong and forcing them to accept this standard, is the wrong thing.*" Instead, he recommended that local governments should motivate community members through incentives such as subsidies (Guna, 2020).

However, Manju, Pasupathi and Bhawana (2020) explicitly expressed that they consider the criminalizing law as a good strategy. Table 1 above included characteristics of Pashupati and Bhawana that could explain why they are in favor of the criminalization. These females both used to practice Chhaupadi and started to question it after their secondary education. When they changed their mindset, they faced significant challenges. As stated earlier, Pashupati (2020) was verbally abused as she was called a mentally-ill person by other community members, and Bhawana (2020) tried to hide her views. To date, even though she lives with her family-in-law, she has not told her own family members that she no longer follows Chhaupadi. Hence, it is understandable that these women believe that destroying sheds are positive developments.

Unlike Bhawana (2020), who did not challenge these policy measures at all, Pashupati implicitly provided a critical note. She mentioned that some women are still not comfortable with staying at home and not following Chhauapdi, despite the fact that the law is a positive measure. Hence, "*when there is no hut, the women sleep outside*" (Pashupati, 2020). Manju also stated that on the one hand, "*women are very happy because they are allowed to stay at home,*" while on the other hand, "*they are suffering from mental torture*"; for instance, because other household members still do not allow them to sleep in their rooms, since their perception of Chhaupadi has not changed (Manju, 2020).

In relation to criticizing forceful measures, one interviewee also provided an example; Maoists forced menstruating women to refrain from the Chhaupadi practice during

the Nepalese Civil war[21] by threatening to kill them if they would disobey. But after the war, the majority of women continued the practice. They expressed to her that *"because of the Maoists my husband died, got sick, so that kind of reactions [...] because they believed that God punished them for staying at home during menstruation"* (Maya, 2020). She, therefore, believed that forceful measures are not the answer. Elisha (2020) supported this by stating *"I think that government and NGOs should not be harsh in the name of bringing change."*

To return to the "Chhaupadi free-villages" narrative, the findings showed that it is not evident that influential actors such as religious leaders voluntarily participated in Chhaupadi-abolishing activities or that such villages exist. It also showed that forceful measures fail to achieve a shift in perceptions.

### 5.3 Theme 3: Perceptions of Menstrual Education

Menstrual education was a theme that was widely covered by all thirteen participants. They all considered education as fundamental for changing the attitudes towards harmful menstrual practices. For instance, Maya stated that she herself changed her previous perception concerning that menstruation is impure and a sin of God, due to gaining knowledge on her body. From her viewpoint, *"Education is a powerful tool"* for potential opinion leaders. *"If they have strong knowledge about menstruation, I think even the traditional healers can explain about women's bodies and let their wives know what's going on* [...], *so they can explain why they have to stop"* with Chhaupadi (Maya, 2020).

While the others have the same opinion, there appeared to be mixed views on the education strategies; in particular, concerning what the focus of the educational program should be.

Moreover, Guna (2020) stated that the topic of menstruation is not only about the reproductive part, but also includes taboos, dignity, human rights, and health. Most interviewees, however, mainly focused on one area, instead of covering all areas. Yet, the majority of interviewees linked their area to dignified menstruation, or addressed

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[21] From 1996 to 2006.

this topic, but different interpretations on the definition of this concept were noted (Radha, Sara, Ashwin, Manju, Guna & Tabea, 2020).

*5.3.1 Interpretation of Dignified Menstruation:*

I. Perception 1: Being free from discrimination

Ashwin (2020) understands the concept of dignified menstruation as a state in which all forms of menstrual restrictions are absent. In order to address discrimination towards menstruating women, he tries to create a friendly environment in a playful manner, which enables the dialogue on menstruation. He targets the youth – mainly adolescent girls but also boys[22] – to inform them what their responsibilities are towards menstruating women; but also stresses that everyone should have a dialogue on menstruation. From his perspective, when the youth have menstrual knowledge, they will then transfer their knowledge to the older generation, their mothers and grandmothers. His interactive menstrual educational sessions increase the menstrual knowledge of participants on the one hand, as they become aware of the physiological aspects, and, knowledge on women's rights on the other hand. He believes that awareness of their rights could empower girls to advocate for themselves.

Sophie (2020), who mainly focuses on younger girls from 12 years old, has the same opinion. Therefore, she came up with a new idea for her recently developed project, which is intended to last around three weeks, instead of three to six hours. At the end of the menstrual educational sessions, she wants to invite the mothers of the girls, so that they can express to them "what they have learned and what they want to see changed" (Sophie, 2020).

Since Ashwin (2020) is still studying, he is not able to spend more than two days in a village; however, to improve the impact of his activities he collaborates with other NGOs. Tabea, however, is not in favor of short-lasting activities of two days, especially in remote areas where Chhaupadi communities are located. She believes that "*it's difficult to have a lasting effect if someone is coming from externally explaining something and then leaving again*". From her viewpoint, knowledge must be repeated and connected to the daily lives of community members (Tabea, 2020).

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[22] Although he stated that the maximum age of both groups are 35 years old, he mainly referred to school-aged girls and boys.

Ms. Clarke (2020) stated in this context, "these things won't change overnight".

II. Perception 2: Having physiological awareness

Ram's (2020) past menstrual educational activities mainly targeted recently married women from 18 to 35 years old in non-Chhaupadi communities[23]. Through showing pictures of the reproductive system, explaining how it works and that the menstrual cycle is a natural physiological change, he tries to make the women understand that blood is not impure. Furthermore, he encourages the women to think critically about which practices they consider as harmful, and which not, and tries to understand where their beliefs come from.

While Tabea seemed to support Ram's approach, her following comments indicate that instead of normalizing menstruation, she would be more in favor of using the power of menstruation, as she believes that menstruation:

> *is one of the most fundamental connections for women with their nature and with the world to say. And, to realize your own strength that lies within this ability [...] to give birth to other beings and not to see it as a restraint [...] can be very fundamental* (Tabea, 2020).

In line with this, Ashwin expressed that he was motivated to educate others after he had learned that "without menstruation" he "would not have been in this wonderful world" (Ashwin, 2020).

While Sophie (2020) also believed that by gaining knowledge on their menstrual cycle, women will realize that menstruation is not "disgusting" or "dirty", Radha and Sara (2020) question whether scientific knowledge is sufficient, as they have noticed that educated people also follow menstrual restrictions. During a meeting on dignified menstruation in the United Kingdom, where Nepali doctors were present, Sara (2020) heard that they explained it as follows: "*I know my biology and I can critic my own religion, but I still do not want to walk in a temple when I'm menstruating because it feels disrespectful and you can't get rid of that intrinsic feeling.*"

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[23] But he has also been to Chhaupadi communities.

In response to the scientific criticism, Ram's Green Tara organization is also developing a program[24], especially for Chhaupadi communities, which will use another approach. In particular, it will target religious leaders. In order to shift their perceptions, he intends to organize exposure visits[25] to Kathmandu. The idea is that religious leaders can expand their knowledge through exposure to another part of Nepal, an urban area where Chhaupadi is not prevalent. On the one hand, other religious leaders with a higher rank in the hierarchical structure could inform them that Chhau sheds do not exist in Kathmandu, and on the other hand, Ram himself aims to convince the leaders by encouraging them to reflect on the practice with questions like, "Chhaupadi is not a problem in Kathmandu but why in your village?" (Ram, 2020).

Moreover, Ram would not explicitly express that the visit aims to address Chhaupadi, but rather would motivate them to participate by saying, *"Let's see what other people do with Chhaupadi in Kathmandu. We can meet some families […] and we can have the opportunity to see traditional healers in Kathmandu and interact with them."* Mentioning that they will have the opportunity to visit temples will also likely motivate them.

### III. Perception 3: Being healthy and safe

From Manju's (2020) understanding, dignified menstruation includes safety, sanitation, and nutrition. Hence, the activities she is involved with raise awareness of menstrual hygiene and safety in Chhaupadi communities. Included in the menstrual hygiene sessions for women and girls are workshops on how to make reusable sanitary pads and information on the nature of menstruation[26], as well as consequences of unhygienic behavior such as unitary tract infections. The safety sessions also provide information on risks associated with harmful menstrual practices to women, girls and traditional healers. In order to discourage participants from following Chhaupadi, the mortality risks (due to snakebites) are highlighted by sharing stories of girls who died in the cowsheds. The idea is that by spreading fear for the consequences of the practice people are more likely to refrain from it.

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[24] Due to Covid-19, its implementation is postponed.
[25] Manju and Guna also believed that exposure to other communities could have a positive impact.
[26] Maya (2020) also uses this approach.

Bhawana (2020), who has similar characteristics as Manju, as they are both from the western region of Nepal and live there, is in favor of the same strategy. She also explains the risks of Chhaupadi and the biological aspects of menstruation and provides information about sanitary pads. Several other interviewees mentioned as well that community members, both the younger and elder ones (also the ones who reached their menopause), are interested in menstrual products (Maya, 2020), especially when they are free (Sophie, 2020).

Moreover, Manju emphasized the positive outcomes of her approach. When she first approached the community members, she noticed a resistant attitude. In her words, "*they were not ready to listen to an unmarried lady's voice*"; but currently she noticed that the women are more receptive in talking about menstrual hygiene (Manju, 2020).

IV. <u>Perception 4: All-inclusive</u>

Radha (2020) strongly disapproved of the understanding discussed above, including the distribution of pads. Although she recognized the importance of hygiene, she believed that it does not guarantee dignified menstruation[27]. She[28] defined this concept in the same way as Ashwin did; namely, as a state free from menstruation-related discrimination and violence. Moreover, Radha thought that NGOs chose for this narrative because it is "easier to distribute pads" than to talk about dignity, since some menstrual advocates themselves follow some sort of restriction (Radha, 2020). However, it should be noted that she was the only interviewee who had raised this latter point.

Instead of one focus area, her menstrual program covers all topics that are affected by menstrual discrimination – namely health; water and sanitation; gender; human rights and empowerment – for one week. It also includes the engagement of different types of stakeholders, including elder women, youth, religious leaders and government representatives. Her strategy is as follows: Radha first tries to understand the participants' perspectives on menstruation and their practices and

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[27] It should also be noted that she explicitly mentioned that dignified menstruation should not only the basis of education but also be incorporated in health, peace, empowerment programs (Radha, 2020).
[28] This definition is also recognized by the thirteen (mainly international) partners of the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation of which she is the founder.

how they are shaped over the years. Subsequently, she reconstructs their beliefs and behavior to mobilize them to spread their knowledge to other members in order to achieve dignity during menstruation. After her departure, she returns every three months to the village to encourage participants to continue their menstrual advocacy and to monitor their progress.

Considering the previously mentioned comment of Tabea, it is, on the one hand, questionable whether such results could be achieved in only one week. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that Radha has a good reputation among both national and international menstrual activists. The Researcher noticed this because six interviewees[29] referred to her.

IV. Perception 5: Being respected
Whereas the other interviewees aimed to address menstrual restrictions in order to achieve dignified menstruation, Sara (2020) believed that dignified menstruation means that "*you have to respect that some people may not want to challenge their religion, cultural traditions, and taboos because that might actually give them dignity*".

The findings show that the concept of dignified menstruation, which is the foundation of current menstrual educational programs, could be interpreted in a broad sense. It not only encompasses scientific knowledge on the nature of menstruation, but also knowledge on topics such as hygiene or human rights that are intertwined with the situation of menstruating women in Nepal. Additionally, it could also include knowledge on how other high-ranked Nepali citizens, such as religious leaders, deal with menstruation. The next section explores what the learning capacity is of the key stakeholders in Chhaupadi communities.

*5.3.2 Learning Capacity*

The older generation of female household members
Although all interviewees recognized the need for menstrual education to all, some interviewees – in particular the younger ones – also highlighted that imparting

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[29] Guna, Sara, Ashwin, Ram, Elisha and Sophie.

knowledge to the older generation of female Enforcers could be a complex task (Ashwin, Elisha & Bhawana, 2020). As education was not accessible to them, there is a high illiteracy rate among them. Ram (2020) estimates that less than 10% of elder women over 60 years can read simple Nepali words or sentences. Additionally, they have a low capacity to understand and process knowledge (Bhawana, 2020). They highly value the society's dominant norm and their mindset is already shaped by it (Ashwin, 2020). When the Researcher noticed that Guna first mainly referred to younger persons, she asked him what his view was on the older generation, and whether they can change their mindset. In response to this, he recognized that it would be more difficult but, subsequently, he stated "*We cannot rule out and say that the older generation cannot change their mindset. I'm also 50plus, every day through education I change my mind. […] If I can change, if I'm adaptive through education, then it is also possible for other old people*" (Guna, 2020). Moreover, he emphasized the need for a different type of program for the religious supporters. For instance, local religious leaders could play a role in their education process. Ms. Clarke (2020) suggested that pictures and working in small groups could enhance their learning process, which was based on the responses of her study's participants who enjoyed seeing educational posters.

Religious leaders

In contrast to the elder females, religious leaders are literate. Since they have studied complex Hindu scriptures, they likely have a moderate to high capacity to process and understand knowledge. However, they might resist processing or rejecting knowledge that conflicts with their religion. As mentioned earlier, despite the fact that the leaders with whom Ashwin had spoken to could not name a specific scripture in which menstrual restrictions are enshrined, they still adhered to the idea that these were written somewhere. Elisha and Guna (2020) mentioned that scientific evidence could influence their perceptions. In Guna's words, "*They had less the chance to read the latest research. So, when we have an informal talk, we should convince them with scientific research.*"

The younger generation

The younger generation of females and males have a high literacy rate; according to Ram's (2020) estimation, 80 to 90% had a high capacity to process and understand

new information. Additionally, interviewees stressed that they are also more receptive to it. In particular, the interviewees who more often referred to girls than to other actors in the context of menstrual education (Sophie, Ashwin & Maya, 2020). It should be noted that the main target group of their activities were girls. Nevertheless, all interviewees (explicitly) stated that "education at all levels" (Tabea, 2020), or for all community members is needed.

The findings in this section show to what extent the older generation, religious leaders and younger generation are able to process and understand knowledge.

## 5.4 Theme 4: Other challenges

When the Researcher asked the interviewees whether they had experienced obstacles with conducting their activities, they seemed to be more reluctant than when the Researcher asked them to describe their activities. In the latter case, they answered extensively. It could be argued that they wanted to make a good impression in order to promote their organization. However, the Researcher was able to identify some other challenges.

### 5.4.1 Attitude versus real behavior, and distrust

Several interviewees noticed that women have the tendency to be dishonest about Chhaupadi or they explicitly state that they do not follow the practice, while failing to mention that they do, in fact, have a separate home within their homes (Maya, Manju, Ashwin & Radha, 2020). In order to understand the community's real behavior and respond to that, six interviewees suggested that fieldworkers should stay with the community members to "build a relationship" (Maya, 2020) and earn their trust (Manju, Radha, Sara, Ram & Elisha, 2020). It should be noted, however, that the villages, as they are located in remote mountains are difficult to access (Tabea & Ms. Clarke, 2020).

Regarding trust, some interviewees also expressed that distrust towards outsiders – people who do not belong to the community – is a common phenomenon (Manju, Maya, Radha, Sara, Ram & Elisha, 2020). Consequently, two interviewees were received with resistance and anger (Manju & Radha, 2020). Regarding this, the Researcher also noticed that the Nepali interviewees themselves expressed feeling more comfortable talking to her because she has a Nepali appearance. One

interviewee of the rural area also explicitly stated that she expected a "white person" when she heard the Researcher's country of origin (Manju, 2020).

In line with this, Maya, Radha & Guna (2020) also mentioned the importance of locals who impart information. As Guna stated:

> *If some outsider says like this is taboo this is bullshit, nothing happens. [...] So, sometimes I give an example of an egg with a chicken inside [...], the normal process is that the chicken should break the cell of the egg from inside to come out. The mother cannot break it from outside to reduce the hedging time. So, from the community itself, this belief should break, I would say that it's like a hedging time"* (Guna, 2020).

Another pitfall that requires attention is that participants can make the impression that they will use their knowledge to alter their own behavior and influence the attitudes and behaviors of others at the end of educational sessions, when they are not actually willing to bear the possible consequences. Radha (2020) experienced this, in particular, with female participants who seemed to be vocal during the sessions but still felt powerless to raise their voice regarding Chhaupadi against their family members upon their return home.

### 5.4.2 Tensions between mixed participants

Although some interviewees explicitly (Ms. Clarke, 2020) or implicitly (Elisha, Sophie & Ashwin, 2020) suggested intergenerational sessions in which knowledge could be transferred from the younger to older generation (while they do not have experience with such activities yet)[30], it is relevant to mention that Manju (2020) did not have good experiences with this method. When she organized an intergenerational, mixed-gender session, the hierarchical social structure was strongly present. For example, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, who both have a different perception on Chhaupadi, were not willing to listen to each other's viewpoints. Additionally, traditional healers tried to discourage women from raising their voices. In response to that, she tried to create a safe space in which she stressed that everyone has the right to express his or herself; although, currently, the activities are separately (Manju, 2020).

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[30] Except for Ashwin, who tries to transfer his knowledge to his mother and grandmother.

In short, this section identified several challenges that could affect the outcome of menstrual educational programs in Chhaupadi communities.

## 6. Discussion

The primary purpose of this research was to explore how education could influence the perceptions of potential opinion leaders around harmful menstrual practices. Scholars recognized the importance of menstrual education (e.g. Bobel, 2019), and earlier studies indicate that educating opinion leaders, in particular, could play a crucial role in changing behaviors of other community members (Platteau, 2017). Still, research mainly focused on non-menstrual harmful practices. In instances of menstrual practices, the aforementioned findings support the theory that menstrual education is able to influence the perceptions of potential opinion leaders. This chapter explains the meaning of the major presented results in the light of existing literature.

**Theme 1: Power structure**

In accordance with the theory of Legros & Cislaghi (2020), the data revealed that members in Chhaupadi communities fulfil different roles. Although the interviewees did not use the same terms as the theory, the Researcher noticed that members in Chhaupadi communities could be divided as follows:

I.    **The norm drivers, consisting of:**

–   The *Enforcers* are religious leaders and elder females (grandmothers and middle-aged mothers, including in-laws) who encourage other members to comply with Chhaupadi.

–   The *Leaders* are liberal religious leaders, elected officials and female community health workers (FCHW) who try to change the norm of Chhaupadi.

–   The *Norm Followers* are male members (husbands, fathers and brothers) and teachers, who neither enforce nor try to change the norm.

II.   **The Norm targets, entailing:**

- younger females (adolescent girls and recently married women) who comply with the norm.

The results did not include any type of actor who falls under the category "the norm beneficiaries or victims", as this refers to actors who are neither targets nor enforcers but still benefit or lose from the norm.

However, this categorization is not sufficient to answer the question of who potential opinion leaders are, which was one of this study's sub-research questions. An actor who is labelled as norm driver (Leader) is not automatically an opinion leader. As discussed, according to Platteau (2017), an opinion leader is someone with a considerable amount of power who induces others to abandon an existing norm or adopt a new norm. While the literature emphasized that identifying opinion leaders could be a complex task, it did not provide concrete guidelines on how this task could be achieved. Considering that one's position in the community's social hierarchy is determinant for being regarded as opinion leader, the Researcher considered it as essential to categorize the results concerning the actors based on their power level.

Accordingly, the results are categorized based on the actors' power level: high, above average, average, and low; and the two dimensions of power structures: the intra-household level and community level. In this way, the Researcher contributed to the existing literature.

- **Intra-household**

| Power-level | High | Above average | Low |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Actor** | – Elder females | – Male members | – Younger females |
| **Current role** | – Sustaining Chhaupadi | – Neutral stance <br> – Main decisionmakers in general <br> – Potential to mediate between Enforcers and Norm targets <br> – Less power when Chhaupadi is internalized | – Challenge Chhaupadi but still follow it <br> – Low decision-making power |

| Drivers/Causes | – Internalization in their belief system, due to menstrual ignorance, tradition and fear for Gods | – Unclear to what extent they share the fears for Gods<br>– Might want to sustain a tradition. | – External pressure (which might develop into intrinsic motivation based on fear) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |

*Table 3: Power levels[31]*

One finding in this table deserves more clarification; namely that younger females have the least power in Chhauapdi communities. This finding does not only support the study of Kadariya & Aro (2015) which showed that the behavior of women is, in general, influenced by other family members, as discussed in chapter 2, but could also be considered as a representation of the current Nepali patriarchal society. Especially in rural areas[32] in Nepal, where 80% of the population lives (Trading Economies, 2020), women have traditional roles. Women are discouraged from making their own decisions, and girls are raised to respect the wishes of the elders, namely mothers, grandmothers, or their fathers. After marriage, they are expected to do household chores and act in compliance with the wishes of their mothers-in-law (Dev et al., 2010; Shrestha, 2008). Against this background, it is not surprising that younger females in Chhaupadi communities are also identified as the actors with the least power. Nevertheless, the results showed that it is also important for them to be educated, because education[33] could alleviate the burden of responsibilities they carry during their menstruation and obstruct the internalization process of Chhaupadi in their belief systems.

- **Community level**

| Power-level | High | Above average | Average | Low |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Actor** | – Religious leaders | – Elected officials | – FCHW | – Teachers |

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[31] Average is not included in the table because no actors with average power were identified.
[32] Not only Chhaupadi-communities.
[33] It should be noted that adolescent girls are often the main target of both the public sector (in the form of formal education) and third sector (in the form of informal education such as menstrual workshops).

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Current role** | – Enforcing Chhaupadi, especially influencing elder females<br><br>– Could be influenced by external liberal religious leaders to reject Chhaupadi | – Neutral stance<br>– Some supported female menstrual activists in rejecting the practice | – Used to follow Chhaupadi, currently fighting it | – Reluctant to teach menstrual education due to embarrassment |
| **Drivers/Causes** | – Religion, based on the idea that blood is impure and that restrictions are enshrined in scriptures | – Unclear to what extent they share the fears for Gods | – Increased awareness on their body/menstrual cycle. | – Possibly ignorance on the menstrual cycle. |

*Table 4: Power levels*

With regard to the *enshrined in scriptures* driver, included in the table above, it is worth reiterating that the results indicated that this belief is inconsistent, as several religious leaders were not able to name these scriptures. As the literature stated that inconsistencies are a window of opportunity for change, this insight could be considered to be valuable for future menstrual educational programs aiming to involve these powerful actors in a positive way (Biccherie & Mercier, 2014). The data is, however, not able to provide a detailed overview of inconsistencies. Besides the aforementioned inconsistency, only one other was detected, namely that Hinduism worships females in the forms of Goddesses, on the one hand, while the religion is also used to discriminate them, on the other hand.

Based on these findings, two models are created. First, a model that illustrates the current power dynamics in sustaining Chhaupadi between key actors, displayed in figure 2. It should be noted that this model only displayed the external pressure in sustaining Chhaupadi, and that intrinsic motivations are excluded. In general, the results indicated that elder females take the word of religious leaders and that they impose the norm on the younger females. Although most of them are also intrinsically motivated, it is likely that they will be influenced by religious leaders in cases where they hesitate to enforce Chhaupadi.

**Figure 2: Power dynamics sustaining Chhaupadi**
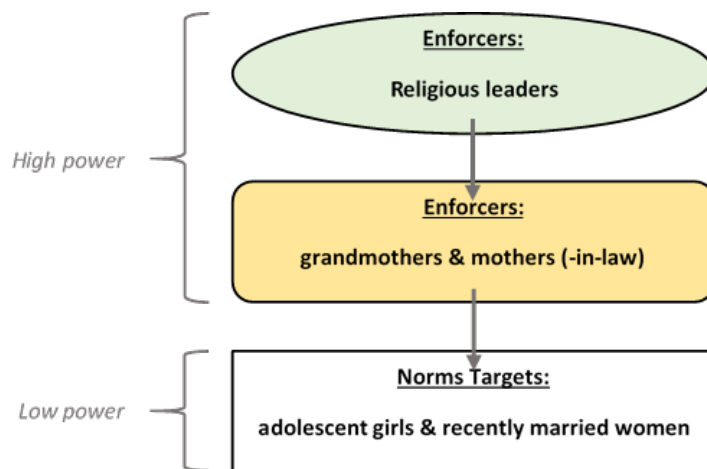


The second model illustrates what the desirable power dynamic's would be to shift perceptions of Chhaupadi (see figure 3).

**Figure 3: Potential power dynamics to shift perceptions of Chhaupadi**
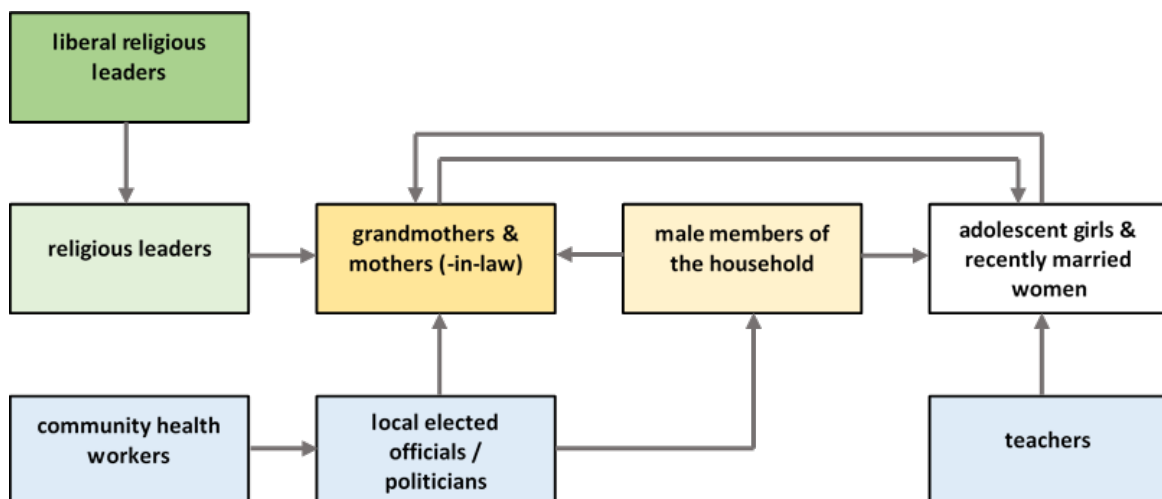


It should be stressed that the second model is a proposal of the Researcher to show how knowledge on menstruation could be strategically transferred. The data indicated that:

- Religious leaders have the ability to influence each other and Enforcers on a household level.

- FCHW have the potential to influence local elected officials who could reach household members due to their position in the community.[34]

- When male members are educated, they can take the role of an intermediator between the Enforcers and Norm Targets.

- Teachers have the ability to inform younger girls, who could try to refuse Chhauapdi, if the elder females are supportive.

In short, all types of community members have the potential to become *leaders* in the definition of Legros & Cislaghi (2020). However, not all actors have the potential to become *opinion leaders*, only the ones who have a considerable amount of power to influence other actors; namely the elder females; religious leaders; local elected officials; and male members.

> **Theme 2: Chhaupadi-mindset**

A somewhat surprisingly finding was the criticism of the respondents about how the concept of Chhaupadi is currently understood, as this theme did not appear in the literature. They highlighted that the Chhaupadi-focused narrative places too much emphasis on the huts, and not on other forms of discrimination which are both caused by the Chhaupadi-mindset. In other words, the findings indicated that the term Chhaupadi consists of two layers: the Chhaupadi practice, which lies on the surface and is visible, and the Chhaupadi-mindset, which is deeply rooted in one's belief system, more hidden and less visible.

Nevertheless, the narrow cowsheds-focused interpretation of this concept was dominant in the international and national media articles and literature on Chhaupadi. Amatya et al. (2018), who explored the perceptions of Chhaupadi, explained that locals perceive the banishment of girls and women into sheds as a tradition, and highlighted the risks. These scholars, like several others (e.g. Jun &

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[34] This was indicated by the participants. It is unclear to what extent they have the power to influence other members.

Jang, 2018) did not regarded the Chhaupadi-mindset and Chhaupadi-practice as separate elements that one should be aware of. A good example of the importance of making a distinction between the mindset and practice is the finding that current Chhaupadi-free villages are a deception. In these villages where huts were destroyed, there appeared to be a lack of menstrual education. This result could also be found in a menstrual health report, which revealed that only 24% of women had heard about menstruation before their menarche in Chhaupadi-free villages. Notably, the rate was even higher in Chhaupadi-practicing villages, at 38% (Karki et al., 2017).

Moreover, as the data showed that powerful actors refrain from taking action to encourage menstruating women to stay at home, or to not practice other forms of discrimination, it is not evident that they have taken the role of opinion leaders. Also, it is questionable whether the ones who engaged in the hut-destroying activities of the public and third sectors, did this voluntarily. Nevertheless, the local elected officials would likely suppose that they have taken sufficient measures to protect the women's rights because of the credits they get for eliminating Chhaupadi, from the media (e.g. Singh, 2019) and the government. However, this appeared not to be the case, because the perceptions of Chhaupadi have not shifted.

Another observation was that forceful measures could even have the opposite effect. Since they only suppress the practice but raise feelings of fears about infuriating Gods, they could also have the undesirable effect of reinforcing the Chhaupadi-mindset. For example, should something unfortunate in the Chhaupadi-free communities happen, menstruating women would likely be blamed. Consequently, stronger negative attitudes towards menstruation develop.

The results indicate that the Researcher should consider the difference between the Chhaupadi-mindset and Chhaupadi practice in order to contribute to designing programs that achieve the desirable, long-term perceptional change.

Although the interview data did not address the literal meaning of the word Chhaupadi, it is worth mentioning that the meaning of Chhaupadi not only refers to the exile to menstrual huts, but also encompasses several less or non-visible forms of

discrimination. As discussed in chapter 3, Chhaupadi could be translated literally as: women are untouchable or unclean (Kadariyo & Aro, 2015).

However, it should be noted that these findings are based on the collected interview data. The possible opinion leaders in such villages were, as discussed in chapter 3, not approached. The Researcher, therefore, acknowledges the possibility that the conclusion might have differed, had they been interviewed.

> **Theme 3: Perceptions of Menstrual Education**

One key observation associated with the third theme is, that dignified menstruation could be considered as an umbrella term, which allows multiple interpretations. This is based on the phenomenon that the majority of interviewees referred to it but in the context of different menstruation frames. These differences could be explained in the light of the differences in the interviewees' characteristics. By analyzing the collected data[35], the Researcher identified the five following frames:

1. **The women's empowerment frame** aims to increase knowledge about the nature of menstruation and about human rights of mostly adolescent females so that they can advocate for themselves.

**Comment:**
However, it is worth mentioning that the two interviewees, who favored this frame, have never been to traditional Chhaupadi communities. Their activities focused only on remote areas, where other forms of discriminatory restrictions exist. Given the findings on the power structure, – for example, that only women who are supported by their families or husbands could change their situation – it is questionable whether education for the younger generation is sufficient to change the current situation of girls and women in Chhaupadi communities. A recent report of International Alert indicates that the answer would be negative, as it stressed that even locally elected Nepali women representatives depend on their husband's approval to take such a role and speak up (Khanal, 2019).

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[35] For example, the codes.

The interviewees' characteristics, in particular their origin, could clarify why they use the Empowerment frame. In the urban area and western country where they come from, women are more allowed to raise their voice (Acharya, 2010). Therefore, these interviewees mainly focused on younger girls. However, it is important to be aware of the fact that this is not the case in traditional Chhaupadi communities, especially if the perceptions in their social environment remain unaffected.

2. **The normalizing menstruation frame** aims to make women aware of the fact that blood is a natural phenomenon and not impure.

It partly overlaps with the women's empowerment frame. On the one hand, both frames aim to increase knowledge about the true nature of menstruation. On the other hand, there is a distinction between the two frames. Whereas the women's empowerment frame focuses especially on providing menstrual knowledge (related to women's rights) to make adolescent girls vocal, the normalize menstruation frame focuses particularly on shifting the perception of women of a wider range of ages on menstruation.

**Comment:**
In line with Arlinghaus & Johnson's (2018) and Bobel's (2019) points of criticism, the interview data is also subject to a critical note, in terms of whether scientific knowledge is sufficient to change perceptions. Elder females have Chhaupadi internalized in their belief system and since they have a low learning capacity it is especially uncertain whether scientific knowledge could affect their Chhaupadi-mindset.

3. **The health, hygiene and safety frame** aims to improve the health, safety and hygiene of menstruating women.

**Comment**
In particular, the risk-focusing approach, which provides information on the consequences of Chhaupadi, also appeared in the literature review. For example, the study on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) showed that emphasizing on risks could have a positive outcome (Diop et al., 2004). Whereas FGM practitioners would be

more willing to cease if other community members would cease, because the practice is, among other things, based on the belief that uncircumcised girls are unable to find husbands, this does not apply for Chhaupadi Enforcers. Their practice is linked to a great fear of misfortune, which does not easily disappear when their surroundings cease. Therefore, although the risk-approach was effective in FGM cases, this does not guarantee effectiveness in the Chhaupadi cases (Biccherie & Mercier, 2014).

In particular, the effectiveness is questioned because the main focus of this strategy is not tackling the Chhaupadi-mindset but promoting health, hygiene and safety. As a result, the Chhaupadi practice might be abolished – but not necessarily, as community members could also just take extra measures to improve their women's safety because their mindset is unaffected. Consequently, the practice could shift from menstrual exile in Chhau sheds to exile within the homes.

Despite this, this strategy was preferred among certain interviewees and actors in other countries such as Uganda or India (Bobel, 2019). The results could explain their preference. First, it could be argued that this framework is regarded as essential because it safeguards the personal autonomy of community members to decide whether they want to eliminate all forms of menstrual discrimination or not. Second, because menstrual product-focused sessions could incentivize women to participate in activities and become familiar with talking about menstruation. Third, because it is safer to practice a menstrual restriction within the home than staying in huts.

4. **The holistic frame** merges all the previous mentioned frames in order to shift the overall community's perception towards all forms of menstrual discrimination.

**Observation**

Although the term facilator-led group conversation was not mentioned in the interviewee data, the Researcher observed that this strategy was incorporated in the menstrual educational program on this frame. Therefore, this frame supports the claim of Cislaghi & Heise (2018) that the facilitator-led group conversation is considered to be a useful strategy.

**Comment**

In order to validate the interview data concerning the holistic frame, the Researcher assessed a report of the Radha Paudel Foundation of a menstrual educational program in Chhauppadi villages, located in the Dailekh district, in 2017 (Paudel, 2017). Whilst this foundation is one of only a handful of the Nepali menstruation-focused NGOs that has published reports on its website, it should be noted that the activities were presented in a positive light, which is a common phenomenon among NGOs (Burger & Owens, 2010). The brief report did not include any reflections or major obstacles and only briefly mentioned in the background section that several stakeholders had a high level of resistance regarding dignified menstruation. It also highlighted six key results, such as an "enhanced knowledge on menstruation among all stakeholders", including the "deconstruction of myths" and the "realization of rights of women and dignified menstruation" (Paudel, 2017, p. 7). Since the foundations' activities lasted only one week in each village, it is questionable whether these outcomes were actually achieved.

5.   **The urban influencing frame,** aims to encourage religious leaders to shift their perceptions of Chhaupadi by expanding their horizons.

Although the interview data did not explicitly refer to a certain technique, it could be argued that the idea of this frame is in line with Biccherie & Mercier's (2014) theory on arguments. According to them, this technique of first presenting a premise[36] and then demonstrating that it is incongruent with the conclusion of an argument, is an effective convincing strategy. In the Chhaupadi case, the premise seems to be that Gods should be respected in order to prevent misfortune – and therefore, Chhaupadi is necessary. The conclusion of the argument seems to be that other Hindus who do not follow Chhaupadi do not suffer any negative consequences; thus, are still able to respect the Gods. Hence, the aim would be to convince the religious leaders to accept this conclusion, to make them realize that Chhaupadi is not necessary.

**Comment**

Similar to the health, hygiene and safety framework, menstrual programs based

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[36] a belief that the leaders accept.

on this frame should not focus only on addressing the Chhaupadi practice. Another point that requires attention, which emerged from the findings, is that one should be aware of the fact that new knowledge could fade away when it is not structurally repeated.

**Similarities**

Another observation was that all frames used the implicit argumentation strategy, which was recommended by Biccherie & Mercier (2014). Taking into account the prevailing distrust towards outsiders, threatening community members with explicit arguments is not desirable.

Furthermore, it should be noted that these terms are not formally recognized terms that appear in the literature. Except for the holistic frame, which one interviewee referred to as the "holistic approach" (Radha, 2020), The Researcher herself created the other terms, based on her codes and certain words that were used by the interviewees. Categorizing the frames enables one to compare the strengths and weaknesses of the menstrual educational frames. Therefore, she considers this categorization as an added value to the existing literature.

The last key finding was that there are different levels of learning capacity; namely, high (for the younger generation), low (for elder females), and moderate to high (for religious leaders, as they are able to read complex scriptures on the one hand, but could be resistant to process information which conflicts with their beliefs on the other).

**Theme 4: Other challenges**

The results indicated that menstrual educational programs in Chhaupadi communities should consider three challenges, namely:

1. That community members could withhold relevant information because of their distrust towards outsiders.

2. That locals, especially the ones who have a low rank in the social hierarchy, bear more costs when they engage in educational Chhaupadi-addressing activities than outsiders; for example, threats to be ostracized from the community.

3. That a mixed group of participants could have a negative impact on the participation of persons who have a lower power level (mainly women). This point could be understood in the wider context of the position of women in the Nepali society, which is addressed under the discussion of theme 1.

4. That prior to the program's implementation, the fact that Chhaupadi villages are difficult to reach and transport could be more expensive should also be taken into consideration. Despite the fact that this finding is only based on one interviewee, sources show that it is still reasonable to believe that the distance and accessibility of Chhaupadi villages could be seen as an obstacle. Basu (2017), an Indian photographer, stated that it could take approximately two to three days (which could include a six- to eight-hour walk in the mountains), and according to Parker (2017), transport could be expensive. Hence, accessibility issues could be an explanation for the fact that the majority of interviewees of urban areas are not working continuously in those regions and that interviewees, who especially conduct short-lasting activities, have never been to the remote Chhaupadi villages.

In short, the findings of this study build on existing evidence of this study's literature review. It also filled the existing gap in the literature by suggesting how education could influence the perceptions of opinion leaders towards harmful menstrual practices. Hence, this study aimed to contribute to improving the position of menstruating women in Nepal, so that they will not be exposed to harm because of their period. In short, the importance of this study could be summarized with the words of Ms. Frost, the Chief Executive of WaterAid: "*[...] Being able to deal with periods in a [...] dignified way is crucial to women's wellbeing. It helps women feel that they are able to play a full role in society, no matter what time of the month*" (Castile, 2016, para. 5).

# 7. Conclusion

## 7.1 Main Findings

The central question addressed in this study was how menstrual education could influence the perceptions of potential opinion leaders towards harmful menstrual practices. Through the selected case study – namely, Chhaupadi communities where menstruating women are exiled to Chhau sheds in mid- and far-western Nepal – an in-depth analysis of those communities was gained. To answer the sub-questions, and thereby, the main research question, primary data in the form of expert interviews was analyzed. The analysis identified and focused on the following four themes: power structure, Chhaupadi-mindset, perceptions of menstrual education and challenges. The main findings are discussed in the next sub-sections. First, the research questions are answered. Subsequently, recommendations for the public sector, third sector, and scholars are provided.

### 7.1.1   Sub-question I

*Who are potential opinion leaders within rural communities in shifting Chhaupadi as the social norm and what are currently their drivers for perpetuating the practice?*

This research showed that not all community members have the same role in terms of sustaining or abandoning a social norm. While the literature provided a basic model to understand the roles that members can take, this research analyzed the stakeholders more extensively. It mapped them based on the following power levels: high, above-average, average and low. Another added value to the literature is that this study made a distinction between the influential members on a community level and an intra-household level and their power dynamics.

**Religious leaders** are the first group that are classified as potential opinion leaders. The findings indicated that they are regarded as the most powerful members in the Chhaupadi-abandoning process. However, the current state is that they are Enforcers, as they encourage other members to comply with the Chhaupadi norm, based on religious justifications. Nevertheless, the interviewees believed that menstrual education could have a positive effect on their perceptions of the practice.

When religious leaders take the role of opinion leader, then they are, especially, able to influence the most powerful Enforcers of Chhaupadi on a household-level: the **elder females**. They perpetuate the practice due to ignorance on the menstrual cycle, tradition, and fear of infuriating the Gods. Since they internalized Chhaupadi and have a low learning capacity, it is questionable whether education could change their mindset. However, given their high-power level to influence the younger females in their household, they are still regarded as potential opinion leaders.

The third and fourth categories of potential opinion leaders are **male household members** and **elected officials**, respectively. They have an above-average power to influence others (elder females), but currently, they are norm followers. As they are not active in enforcing Chhaupadi, but rather take a passive role, educating them will likely have a positive outcome on their perceptions. It should be noted that the question of what their current drivers for passively sustaining Chhaupadi are is still unanswered.

In contrast to the definition of opinion leaders, which is limited only to individuals with significant power to influence others, it should be noted that the definition of *leaders* is wider. Basically, every community member has the potential to become a leader. Hence, the following identified actors, who have a low or moderate level of power, can be considered as leaders when they violate the norm of Chhaupadi and try to mobilize others: **younger females**, **FCHW**, and **teachers**. Although these females are less powerful at present, it is also crucial for them to be educated, and encouraged to educate each other. This could prevent them from becoming their mothers and grandmothers. In other words, menstrual education could break the vicious circle of sustaining Chhaupadi.

In summary, actors who have the potential to become opinion leaders through menstrual education are: (1) religious leaders, (2) elder females, (3) male household members and (4) elected officials.

### 7.1.2   Sub-question II

> *To what extent have opinion leaders in Chhaupadi-free declared villages shifted their perceptions and what role did menstrual education play?*

When the Researcher started the journey of this study, the exile to Chhau sheds appeared to be the major menstruation-related issue in Nepal, in part, because of the numerous media articles about this matter. The findings, however, indicate that not the practice but the Chhaupadi-mindset is the main issue. This mindset, consisting of the belief that menstruating women are impure, and therefore, should be restricted, is the root problem that causes both the Chhaupadi practice and other forms of menstrual restrictions. Hence, the majority of interviewees stressed the need for a wider understanding of Chhaupadi.

However, the current term of Chhaupadi-free villages seems to focus only on destroying the Chhau sheds (thus, the practice). Due to the legislation community members changed their huts-related behavior but their perceptions remained unaffected, as menstrual education was absent. Additionally, it is expected that the behavioral change has a temporary character. Although the practice is suppressed at present, the huts will likely be rebuilt when (non-)governmental actors leave the villages. Therefore, it could be argued that there is no causal relationship between Chhaupadi-free declared villages and the shift of perceptions of harmful practices in a broader sense.

Given this, it could be argued that the slogan of Chhaupadi-free villages can be misleading. It could give the impression that interventions in those villages are not needed, when perceptions of Chhaupadi are not genuinely shifted. Due to the remaining root cause, other less visible forms of restrictions with regard to food, water sources, milk and education remain or will be adopted.

Based on the collected data, this study found that Chhaupadi-free villages do not exist yet. As well, influential community members have not changed their perception and become opinion leaders. In order to achieve a sustainable improvement, the underlying negative attitudes of opinion leaders towards menstruation should shifted: from considering menstruation as impure to considering it as a natural phenomenon.

*7.1.3    Sub-question III*

*What menstrual educational approaches that are currently used to challenge menstrual practices could be identified?*

This study identified five menstrual educational approaches: the (1) Women's Empowerment, (2) Normalizing Menstruation, (3) Health, Hygiene and Safety, (4) Holistic and (5) Urban Influencing frames. They have similarities but also differences. One similarity is that they all use the implicit argumentation strategy, which entails that participants being indirectly encouraged to think about their own practices. Another similarly is that almost all approaches provide scientific information about the nature of menstruation; however, there appeared to be a sharp distinction between the purposes of providing basic menstrual information. As a result, not all frameworks will have the same effect on the perceptions. In other words, a framework determines how one's perception will be influenced. All are listed in table 3.

| Frames/Codes | Focus | Current target group |
|---|---|---|
| **Women's Empowerment (F1)** | Increasing scientific and human rights knowledge to make the participants vocal. | Adolescent girls and boys. |
| **Normalizing Menstruation (F2)** | Increasing scientific knowledge to make participants realize that blood is a natural phenomenon and not impure. | Recently married women (18 to 35 years old). |
| **Health, Hygiene & Safety (F3)** | Increasing knowledge on how to manage menstruation with menstrual products, combined with scientific knowledge. | Girls, women and traditional healers. |
| **Holistic (F4)** | Increasing knowledge on risks of Chhaupadi. | Elder women, youth, religious leaders, government representatives. |
| **Urban Influencing (F5)** | Expanding one's horizon to shift perceptions of Chhauapdi. | Religious leaders. |

*Table 5: Menstrual educational frames*

In summary, this study showed that menstrual education could serve various purposes, as shown in the table above. It also demonstrates that not all frames are currently suitable for Chhaupadi communities – for example; F1, which only targets the norm targets, and therefore, sustainable perceptional change of powerful actors is

unlikely; and F3, which mainly focuses on the cowsheds. Additionally, most of the other frameworks target mainly (the younger) females, rather than males or another group of the identified opinion leaders. However, with small adjustments, all frames could be suitable for potential opinion leaders and address their Chhaupadi mindset. These recommendations are provided in the next section.

### 7.1.4 Main research question
*(answer in the form of general policy recommendations)*

To conclude, menstrual educational programs could influence the perceptions of opinion leaders towards harmful menstrual practices in two ways. On the one hand, they could cause negative perceptions towards the Chhaupadi-practice itself, for example, by stressing the risks of the practice. While such educational programs could have the immediate visible effect of opinion leaders encouraging menstruating women to stay in their homes, they fail to address the Chhaupadi-mindset. Consequently, the opinion leaders tend to adopt an alternative form of discrimination. For example, they might promote others to build cowsheds underneath their houses or lock women up in dark rooms because their beliefs that menstruating women are impure, and thereby, cause infuriate Gods, remained unaffected. Therefore, there is a need for educational programs that change the perceptions of Chhaupadi in the wider sense in order to achieve a sustainable perceptional change. This section and the next section present recommendations for achieving this objective. First, this section provides suggestions about how the aforementioned existing frames could be improved for the four identified possible types of opinion leader; namely, (1) religious leaders, (2) elder females, (3) male members, (4) elected officials:

| Frames | Adjustment Suggestions | Possible Target group |
|---|---|---|
| **F1** | – Increase awareness on the importance of menstruation and how males could safeguard the rights of menstruating women.<br><br>– Incorporate simulation exercises so that the opinion leaders could practice defending the rights of their female family members. | – Religious leaders;<br>– Male members;<br>– Elected officials.<br><br>– Considering their low learning capacity, it is unlikely that elder females will understand the concept of human |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | rights. Therefore, they are excluded. |
| **F2** | – Select suitable educational materials for illiterate persons such as videos and pictures.<br><br>– Link to religion in a positive way (e.g. stress that menstruation is not a sin but a gift to indicate that females are fertile).<br><br>– Emphasize that practices are not included in religious scriptures. | – Elder females;<br>– Religious leaders;<br>– Male members;<br>– Elected officials (All). |
| **F3** | – *Separate this framework into two components:*<br><br><table><tr><td>F3a. Health & hygiene</td><td>F3b. Safety</td></tr><tr><td>– Start with health and hygiene to encourage participants to talk about menstruation.<br><br>– Emphasize that it is their responsibility to safeguard the health & hygiene of the younger generation.<br><br>– Normalize menstruation.</td><td>– Add risks of other menstrual practices; for example, less nutrition due to food restrictions.<br><br>– Incorporate knowledge about human rights.<br><br>– Normalize menstruation.</td></tr></table> | – F3a: Only elder females.<br>– F3b: All. |
| **F4** | – Provide information step by step. Start with the basic knowledge.<br><br>– Select key topics to avoid an overload of unnecessary information.<br><br>– Extend the current duration of one week. | – All. |
| **F5** | – Encourage participants to maintain the established relationships via Facebook for the literate ones, and Viber for the illiterate ones (so that their knowledge and experience will not fade away after a while.<br><br>– Prevent focusing only on the practice but rather focus on addressing their Chhaupadi-mindset.<br><br>– Avoid visiting religious leaders or families who | – All. |

| | support any form of a menstrual discriminatory practice.<br><br>– Provide scientific knowledge before and during their trip to normalize menstruation and link it to religion in a positive way. | |
|---|---|---|

*Table 6: Recommended adjustments*

## 7.2 Further Policy Recommendations

*7.2.1* Public Sector

Other conditions for effective menstrual educational programs are:

1. Use an **implicit argumentation strategy** (which could be incorporated in facilitator-led group conversations).

2. On the one hand, organize **separate activities** for the four different types of opinion leaders.

3. On the other, make use of **strategic local knowledge transfers** between opinion leaders. For example:
   - The religious leaders could transfer their gained menstrual knowledge to elder females.
   - Community leaders could transfer their knowledge to male members.
   - Male members could transfer their knowledge to elder females.

4. Take into consideration the **different learning capacity levels**:
   - Plain language for the elder females use visual materials (posters, pictures, videos) instead of text;
   - Besides visual materials, textbooks with scientific information are also possible for religious leaders, community leaders and males.

5. Design a **longer program with an adaptive character** than the current programs. For example, start with a program that lasts at least three months. Regularly reflect on the program to detect obstacles and to appropriately respond

to them. For example, if participants have difficulties with understanding a particular topic, then this topic could be explained in another way.

6. For NGOs that cannot afford to have longer programs, it is recommended to **focus on one or two menstrual-related topics** instead of discussing various elements, as an overload of information could be difficult to follow, especially for persons with a low learning capacity. Moreover, structurally repeating an overload of information is also more challenging than catchy and concise menstrual information. Considering that Chhaupadi is based on the idea that menstruating women are impure, it is suggested to especially use the normalizing menstruation framework in cases of limited time.

7. At the end of the program, when perceptions towards Chhaupadi of potential opinion leaders are positively influenced, they should be incited to change the perceptions of other members. Trainings in which they learn how they could effectively transfer their menstrual knowledge are, therefore, required. Regarding this, it is also essential to stress that this task could have negative consequences, such as aggressive responses or threats to be ostracized from the community. Discussions about how to deal with such obstacles or simulation exercises could be useful.

*7.2.2 The Public Sector*
Based on the findings, the public sector could:

**1. Replace forceful measures with incentivizing menstrual education:**
Since forceful measures appeared to be ineffective, this study recommends the public sector to create a learning-enabling environment instead of a climate of fear. The public sector could allocate a budget to the elected officials to provide remuneration to local schoolteachers for providing menstrual educational workshops for opinion leaders. To be able to perform this task, schoolteachers should be trained beforehand (by governmental organizations or NGOs).

The budget could also be used to incentivize opinion leaders to engage in educational activities; for example, that their children or grandchildren receive

educational vouchers to alleviate their financial burden (Weidrich, 2007). On the one hand, this could incentivize all types of opinion leaders while, on the other hand, this could also break the vicious circle that the youth become Chhaupadi Enforcers.

**7.3 Directions for Future Research**

Regardless of whether a study's findings seem promising, a Researcher must always question her own study. The major limitation of this study is that the potential opinion leaders in Chhaupadi communities themselves were not interviewed. Therefore, further research is required to gain a deeper understanding of their current perceptions, drivers for enforcing or accepting Chhaupadi, and what their preferences are for educational materials. Moreover, this study's underlying assumption, which is based on the literature, is that influencing their perceptions would mobilize them to convince others to not practice Chhaupadi. However, further research is required to explore whether this is valid.

Although the data indicated that Chhaupadi-free villages do not exist, it is also questionable whether this finding is reliable, as the sample size was small, and no inhabitants of such communities were interviewed. However, in case the perceptions of some opinion leaders were shifted through education, then it is valuable to know what elements were successful. Hence, this could be further explored in a future study.

Finally, impact evaluation studies of the current menstrual frameworks are also necessary, as the NGOs have not done this, or have mainly published reports that lack objectivity.

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# Appendix A: Recruitment email /Facebook message

## Recruitment email for Nepali experts:

**Subject: Request with regard to study on the Chhaupadi practice**

Namaste Ms./Mr. _

**Information about me and my thesis**
My name is Riesa van Doorn, I am half Nepalese (as my mother is from Nepal) but I was born and raised in the Netherlands. Currently, I'm writing my thesis about the role of menstrual education in changing the perceptions of influential actors in Chhaupadi-practicing communities. This thesis is for my master's in Public Policy and Human Development at Maastricht University/The United Nations University in the Netherlands. The findings of this study will be translated into practical recommendations that can be implemented in perception-changing programs of policy actors such as the governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Hence, this study may indirectly contribute to improving the situation of women during their menstruation and in the long term the social positions and living conditions of women.

**Further information about the interview**
I believe that your position at _ and expertise in addressing Chhaupadi would provide valuable insights for my study. Therefore, I would appreciate having the opportunity to interview you on a voluntary basis (please note that remuneration would not be offered). The interview will be conducted over Surf Videobellen or Viber (whichever is convenient for you) at a for you convenient date and time. My university strongly is in favor of using these platforms for privacy reasons. Although Zoom does not have end-to-end encryption, this medium is also possible, if this is more convenient for you.

The interview will follow a semi-structured guide and approximately takes 45 minutes. All information you provide will be considered to be confidential and you will also have the possible to participate anonymous. In that case, you will not be identified by name in my thesis or in any report or publication resulting from this study. In addition, you are free to decline answering questions you do not wish to answer and end the participation at any time.

**Translator:**
Despite that I am able to speak and understand basic Nepali, I am not fully confident to conduct the interviews in Nepali. If you prefer to express yourself in Nepali rather than English, then a translator will be present who will also safeguard your personal data but all the data you share will belong to me and not to the translator.

**Data protection:**
Furthermore, efforts will be taken to ensure that this study is in compliance with both the Dutch Code of Ethics for Social Science and the European General Data Protection Regulation. Therefore, the interview could not start without a consent form that is signed by you. Moreover, this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a Research Ethics Committee of Maastricht University.

I hope that I have sufficiently informed you. Please let me know if you would be interested in participating in my research, and the language of your preference. Subsequently, I will send a follow-up email to you with the consent form.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my request. Please do not hesitate to contact me to ask additional questions.

Kind regards,

Riesa

## Recruitment email for foreign experts:

**Subject:** Request with regard to study on the Chhaupadi practice

Dear Ms./Mr. __

**Information about me and my thesis**
My name is Riesa van Doorn, I am half Nepalese (as my mother is from Nepal) but I was born and raised in the Netherlands. Currently, I'm writing my thesis about the role of menstrual education in changing the perceptions of influential actors in Chhaupadi-practicing communities. This thesis is for my master's in Public Policy and Human Development at Maastricht University/The United Nations University in the Netherlands. The findings of this study will be translated into practical recommendations that can be implemented in perception-changing programs of policy actors such as the governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Hence, this study may indirectly contribute to improving the situation of women during their menstruation and in the long term the social positions and living conditions of women.

**Further information about the interview**
I believe that your position at __ and expertise in addressing Chhaupadi would provide valuable insights for my study. Therefore, I would appreciate having the opportunity to interview you on a voluntary basis (please note that remuneration would not be offered). The interview will be conducted over Surf Videobellen or Viber (whichever is convenient for you) at a for you convenient date and time. My university strongly is in favor of using these platforms for privacy reasons. Although Zoom does not have end-to-end encryption, this medium is also possible, if this is more convenient for you.

The interview will follow a semi-structured guide and approximately takes 45 minutes. All information you provide will be considered to be confidential and you will also have the possible to participate anonymous. In that case, you will not be identified by name in my thesis or in any report or publication resulting from this study. In addition, you are free to decline answering questions you do not wish to answer and end the participation at any time.

**Data protection:**
Furthermore, please note that efforts will be taken to ensure that this study is in compliance with both the Dutch Code of Ethics for Social Science and the European General Data Protection Regulation. Therefore, the interview could not start without a consent form that is signed by you. Moreover, this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a Research Ethics Committee of Maastricht University.

I hope that I have sufficiently informed you. Please let me know if you would be interested in participating in my research, and the language of your preference. Subsequently, I will send a follow-up email to you with the consent form.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my request. Please do not hesitate to contact me to ask additional questions.

Kind regards,

Riesa

# Appendix B: Interview Guide

## Interview protocol for Expert interviews

### Introduction
Namaste/Hello, it's nice to meet you. Do you hear me well? Thank you again for your time and signing the consent form. Due to your expertise in the menstrual health area, I selected you and I'm very happy to hear your experience and understand your views today.

My name is Riesa, I'm 25 years old and currently doing a master's in Public Policy and Human Development in the Netherlands. (My mother is from Kavre, Nepal and the last time I visited the country was 2.5 years ago.)

### Short recap essential information
Today's interview will last around 45 minutes. I want to remind you that this is an explorative study that aims to explore how education could influence the perceptions of opinion leaders towards Chhaupadi. Our conversation is being recorded and you are free to withdraw participation at any time. Besides, please keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers.

- Do you consent to being recorded?
  *starts recording after this question*
- Do you have any questions before I start with the first question?

### Section 1 Background questions on menstruation-related activities

1. I would like to start this conversation by learning more about your position at and your experience with addressing menstrual discrimination such as Chhaupadi.

**Further questions if not mentioned by the participant:**

1.1.1  What was the age range of your target group? / Did you notice that younger persons respond differently than the older ones?

1.1.2  What were the outcomes of your activities? And what factors appeared to be successful and Unsuccessful in addressing Chhaupadi or other forms of discrimination?

### Section 2 Thoughts on Chhaupadi

Now I would like to ask questions that are related to understanding the Chhaupadi practice.

2. 1  From your experience in this job, why do you think that people practice Chhaupadi? Do you believe its intrinsic motivation (women want to do it because it satisfies them) or external pressure?

2.1. 1  Who would you identify as the main persons that influence women to practice Chhaupadi?

2. 2  What is the current knowledge level about menstruation of these influential person
*If low: Do you think that their low level is a problem?*

2. 3      What would be needed to change the perceptions of these influential persons? / Is education sufficient or do you think that there is more needed to change perceptions?

2.3. 1    What do you consider as obstacles with the menstrual knowledge transmission?

## Section 3 Menstrual Educational Programs

I am also wondering if you have knowledge on menstrual educational programs of other organizations. Could you tell me more about it?

3. 1 What are the most common strategies?

3. 2 What are in your opinion (other) effective menstrual education strategies?

## Section 4. Final questions

I also have some final questions.

4. 1 First, I am wondering how you would like to be described in my research? Would you like to have your name and position included in my thesis linked to ? Or should I address you anonymously?

4. 2 Do you have recommendations other experts (or influential actors) that I can interview?

4. 3 Do you have data such as program reports or interviews with the participants that you can share with me?

4. 4 Would your organization be interested to receive my thesis with policy recommendations?

## Thank you very much for your participation in this study.

## Appendix C: Consent Forms



# INFORMED CONSENT

I,_____, agree to be interviewed by Ms. Riesa Maya van Doorn, student of the master's Public Policy and Human Development of Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, Maastricht University & UNU-MERIT.

### I. Purpose of the research:

The research of Ms. van Doorn aims to explore how menstrual education could help to change perceptions towards Chhaupadi in communities because Chhaupadi is a harmful practice that violates women's rights. The findings of this study will be translated into practical recommendations that can be implemented in perception-changing programs of policy actors such as the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

- **Do you confirm that you understand the purpose of the research and how your information will be used?**

### II. Safeguarding confidentiality:

I understand that all information collected during the study period will be kept strictly confidential and no reference to my identity is made in the study.

- **Do you still have concerns about confidentiality or related matters?**

### II. Recording

**Relevant information:**
During the online interview meeting, a communication medium such as Surf Videobellen or Viber or Zoom will be used. Please note that Zoom does not have end-to-end encryption.

The tapes, transcripts and notes from the interview will become the property of the research project and will be kept anonymous in a secured environment, without any reference to my identity.

- **Do you consent to be recorded?**

### III. Participation

**Relevant information:**

I understand that I am allowed to decide not to answer any question. Besides, I can withdraw participation at any time.

- **Is everything clear? Do you have additional questions?**

- **Do you agree to participate?**

I **agree/don't agree** to participate in one or more electronically recorded interviews for this project and confirm that I have been informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of this project and any questions I have regarding this have been addressed.

_____ Date _____

Signature of Interviewee

*If you cannot obtain satisfactory answers to your questions, or have comments or complaints about your treatment in this study, please contact:*

Dr. Julieta Marotta – Supervisor
julieta.marotta@maastrichtuniversity.nl
Riesa van Doorn – Master student
riesamaya@gmail.com | 0031-628818051

# सूचित समूह

म ........................., Ms. Riesa Maya van Doorn, student of master's Public Policy and Human Development of Maastricht Graduate School द्वारा अन्तर्वार्ता गर्न तयार छु ।

## क. अनुसन्धानको उद्देश्यः

Ms. Van Doorn को अनुसन्धानले शैक्षिक तत्वलाई समुदायमा छाउपदी प्रथा प्रति धारणा परिवर्तन गर्न मद्दत पुऱ्याउन सक्ने अन्वेषण गर्ने उद्देश्य राख्दछ किनभने छाउपदी प्रथा एक कुरीति हो जसले महिला अधिकार उल्लंघन गर्दछ । यस अध्ययनका खोजहरुलाई व्यावहारिक सिफारिशमा अनुवाद गरिनेछ जुन नीति अभिनेताहरु जस्तै सरकारी र गैर सरकारी संस्थाहरुको कार्यक्रम परिवर्तन गर्ने धारणामा लागु गर्न सकिन्छ ।

- के तपाईं पुष्टि गर्नुहुन्छ कि तपाईं अनुसन्धानको उद्देश्य बुझ्नुहुन्छ र तपाईं जानकारी कसरी प्रयोग हुन्छ ?

## ख. गोपनियता सुरक्षा :

म बुझ्दछु कि अध्ययन अवधिमा संकलन गरिएका सबै जानकारीहरु कडाईका साथ गोप्य राखिन्छन् र अध्ययनमा मेरो पहिचानको कुनै सन्दर्भ गरिएको छैन ।

- के तपाईलाई अझै पनि गोपनीयता वा सम्बन्धित मामिलाहरु बारे चिन्ता छ?

## ग. रेकर्डिङ :

### सान्दर्भिक जानकारी ;

अनलाइन अन्तर्वार्ता बैठकको दौरान, end-to-end encryption को साथ एक संचार माध्यम प्रयोग गरिनेछ । उदाहरणको लागि, LifeSize वा SURF Videoobellen किनभने मास्ट्रिच युनिवर्सिटी कडाईका साथ यी प्लेटफर्महरु को उपयोगको सल्लाह दिन्छ ।
अन्तर्वार्ताको टेपहरु, ट्रान्सक्रिप्ट र नोछहरु अनुसन्धान परियोजनाको सम्पत्ति हुनेछन् र मेरो पहिचानको कुनै सन्दर्भ विना नै सुरक्षित वातावरणमा बेनामी राखिनेछ ।

- के तपाई रेकर्ड गर्न सहमत गर्नुहुन्छ?

## घ. सहभागिता

सान्दर्भिक जानकारीः

मैले बुभ्रे कि मलाई कुनै प्रश्नको उत्तर नदिने निर्णय गर्ने अनुमति छ । यसका साथै म कुनै पनि समयमा सहभागिता फिर्ता लिन सक्छु ।

- के सबै स्पष्ट छ? तपाई थप  प्रश्नहरु छन्?
- के तपाई भाग लिन सहमत हुनुहुन्छ?

म यस परियोजनाको लागि एक वा बढी इलेक्ट्रोनिक रुपमा रेकर्ड गरिएको अन्तर्वाताहरुमा भाग लिन सहमत छु/छैन र यस परियोजनाको गोपनीयता र अज्ञातताको बारेमा मलाई सूचित गरिएको छ । यसका बारेमा मैले गरेको कुनै पनि प्रश्नहरुलाई सम्बोधन गरेको छु भनेर पुष्टि गर्दछु ।


_____मिति _____

       हस्ताक्षर


_यदि तपाई आफ्नो प्रश्नहरुको चित्तबुभ्र्दो प्राप्त गर्न सक्नुभएन् वा यस अध्ययनमा तपाईको व्यवहारको बारेमा टिप्पणी वा गुनासोहरु छन् भने कृपया सम्पर्क गर्नुहोस् :_


Dr. Julieta Marotta – Supervisor

julieta.marotta@maastrichtuniversity.nl

Riesa van Doorn – Master student

riesamaya@gmail.com | 0031-628818051

# Appendix D: Data Confidentiality Agreement

## Data confidentiality Agreement between researcher and translator

This agreement sets out the confidentiality conditions between Ms. Riesa Maya van Doorn (Researcher), student of the master's Public Policy and Human Development of Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, Maastricht University & UNU-MERIT, and Ms. Bulu Tamang (Translator).

Parties hereby declare that Translator has the following responsibilities:
1. Translator shall be attending all the interview meetings with the participants.
2. Translator shall be available for translating all data the interviewees have shared after the interview meetings.
3. Translator shall be aware of the fact that it processes personal data, as defined in the European General Data Protection Regulation. In particular, receiving information that is shared by participants qualifies as a processing activities.
4. Translator shall strictly safeguard the confidentiality of participants at all times. Translator is not allowed to share any information it translates with any other person.
5. Translator shall not have access to raw data.
6. Translator understands the purpose of the research. Researcher's study aims to explore how education could help to change perceptions towards Chhaupadi in communities.
(7. Translator shall receive an appropriate remuneration for his/her time and compensation for his/her travel costs.)

Parties hereby declare that the researcher has the following responsibilities:
1. Researcher shall answer all questions of the Translator.
2. All the data that is collected will belong to the Researcher and not to the Translator.
3. Researcher shall be ultimately responsible for the actions of the Translator and carrying out the data anonymity procedures and securing data storage.

### *Dispute resolution*
* In case of a dispute between the Translator and researcher, either party may request mediation by Maastricht University. Please refer to the Grievance and Mediation Process for the Master Thesis.
* If mediation is unsuccessful, this agreement may be terminated.

We hereby acknowledge and agree to these conditions:


20-07-2020, Signature Researcher          21-07-2020, Signature
                                                  Translator