

Spring 2017

# Power to the Period: The Role of Menstruation in Nepal's Formal Workplace

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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Power to the Period: The Role of Menstruation in Nepal's  
Formal Workplace

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Industrial and Labor Relations

South Asia, Nepal, Kaski and Kathmandu Valley, Pokhara and Kathmandu  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Nepal: Development and  
Social Change, SIT Study Abroad

Spring 2017

## **Abstract**

Within the greater context of Nepal, menstruation is a topic that has long-held significance as a taboo topic due to religious and cultural connotations. However, over the past five years, there has been a push in Nepali schools to acknowledge menstruation and menstrual hygiene management as legitimate aspects of health curriculums. This is a great step forward for the country, but also begs the question of whether this educational movement is being recognized in other areas of society, such as the formal workplace. Through discussion with various individuals- from government officers to healthcare employees- this research examines attitudes towards menstruation, as well as the adequacy of facilities present in a varying range of workplaces (in terms of sanitation, hygiene, and privacy). This paper further analyzes these findings, examining the greater implications of menstruation, in the context of work, and even greater, society as a whole.

ISP Topic Words: Public Health, Industrial and Labor Relations, Gender Studies

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the SIT Staff, especially the language teachers, for all of their dedication, hard work, and gentle encouragement.

I would also like to thank my host family and fellow students for making my time in Nepal filled with laughter, friendship, and delicious food.

And finally, I would like to thank my family, for their endless love, pride, and support.

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## **Introduction**

In Nepal, as in many developing countries, menstruation remains a taboo. With the caste system at the basis for Nepal's societal structure, there remains a dominant religious context throughout the country. In Hinduism, the menstruating woman is considered to be polluted and impure (Dunnivant et al. 2012). The conservative and traditional Hindu family in Nepal disallows menstruating female family members from having physical contact with her spouse or male relatives, and prohibits entrance into the kitchen and temples (Crawford et al. 2014). This perception of menstruation in Hinduism has led to the stigmatization of a natural bodily process. This stigmatization is most common among higher caste Hindus, but due to Sanskritization, strict menstrual beliefs are also rivaled among lower caste Hindus as well (Wilson 2015).

As is often the case with stigmatized social issues, there is a failure to provide appropriate services and facilities for those most impacted by the problem. In Nepal, this is most readily seen by the absence of adequate WASH (water, sanitation, hygiene) facilities. However, due to the National Sanitation and Hygiene Master Plan of Nepal (NSHMP), schools in all seventy-five districts of Nepal are transitioning towards adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities for children of all ages, genders, and abilities. This transition reflects greatly on Nepal, but also questions whether other institutions are following suit. WASH legislation regarding school facilities and development agencies is surely present, but for remaining institutions- such as formal sector workplaces (i.e. government offices), this is seemingly not the case (Water Aid Nepal 2014).

In Nepal 90% of the working population is involved in the informal economy, yet a formal labor market is present. The formal labor market entitles

employees to ‘formal conditions’ with regular hours, taxable wages, “and paid annual leave or where the employer provides social security contributions for the worker” (International Labor Organization 2010, 25). Approximately 1.5% of Nepali women work in the formal labor market (International Labor Organization 2010).

Although this percentage (1.5%) constitutes a small population, menstruation plays a role in the lives of all women. This intersection, therefore, of menstruation as a factor in Nepal’s formal workplace, is one to consider. With women holding a minority and WASH legislation being seemingly absent, to what extent does menstruation play a role in the formal workplace? Do social taboos and inadequate facilities further the insecurity menstruating women may feel in the workplace? How are job satisfaction and workplace productivity impacted? And finally, among outside agencies, such as INGOs/NGOs, is this perceived to be a prevalent issue?

### **Literature Review**

Within the greater context of Nepal, women constitute a small percentage of the formal workplace. As of 2010, less than 1.5% of Nepali women were involved in formal sector jobs (Labour and Social Trends in Nepal, 2010, 9). This is largely due to Nepal’s labor market being historically based in the informal market, with the agriculture sector alone accounting for 74% of total employment (Labour and Social Trends in Nepal, 2010, 9). However, 1.5%, the most recent statistic regarding formally employed women, is a marginal amount, approximating around 21,000 women (~27 million people in Nepal, ~14 million female).

Although Nepal's economy is majorly informal, this is not the sole reason that women fail to enter the formal labor market. Often, Nepal societal constructs prevent women from entering formal careers without consequence. There holds a term in Nepali known as *ijjat*, which translates as "social honor" (Coyle et al. 2014). This term represents a societal construct that women continue to be held accountable for- even in urban areas of modern-day Nepal. For different Nepali families, *ijjat* can hold different meanings, but for many traditional Hindu families, *ijjat* is synonymous with household work, celibacy (until marriage), and conservative dress. For many women, entrance into the public sphere (whether that be school or the formal workplace) is permitted; however, this does not mean that it is encouraged. Women working towards a degree or working in an occupation concentrated by men are disrupting a patriarchy that has long been in place: "women's lives are among the key places where transitions from 'tradition' to 'modernity' are publicly scrutinized in domains such as consumerism, careers and labour, religion, citizenship, and sexuality" (Liechty 1996, 207). This stigma associated with entrance into a post-secondary institution or a professional workplace, therefore, discourages many women from making this leap. And even further, it breeds environments of discrimination and sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment and discrimination continue to hold prevalence in Nepal's workplaces, specifically in the garment industry, private firms, and government offices (Coyle et al. 2014). Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and discrimination are the two main factors contributing to insecurity women feel in the workplace (Coyle et al. 2014). Discrimination can be seen in many forms, but in the context of labor, it is often seen through wage disparity

and the failure to receive employment opportunities. That of a woman refused from receiving further training due to the possibility of her one day becoming a wife and/ or a mother, is an example of gender-based discrimination in the workplace.

In the context of this research, failing to provide adequate facilities for female employees is yet another form of workplace gender discrimination. Adequate toilet/latrine facilities can be defined as those in which provide soap, running water, a dustbin (or something similar), and lock from the inside. Failure to provide such facilities can only further any insecurity women may feel in the workplace. Further, under Chapter 5 (Health and Safety) of the Nepal Labour Act, 2048 (1992) it is noted: “To make provisions for separate modern type toilets for male and female workers or employees at convenient place (Nepal Labour Act, 1992, 16). Thus, gender-segregated toilets are required under the Labour Act, yet many women do not recognize this. Toilet insecurity denies women the right to manage menstruation in a timely and private manner.

Menstrual hygiene management goes hand-in-hand with facility adequacy. Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) can be defined as “women and adolescent girls using a clean menstrual management material to absorb or collect menstrual blood, that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of a menstrual period, using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having access to safe and convenient facilities to dispose of menstrual management materials” (Sommer et al. 2014, 2). Without access to adequate facilities (with water, soap, a dustbin, and a door that locks) menstrual hygiene management standards cannot be met. This term has gained significant ground over the past five years, resulting in countless interventions by the

international development community into school health curriculums across South and Southeast Asia. However, in comparison to schools, MHM in the workplace is a topic that has received little to no attention in low and middle-income countries (Sommer et al. 2016). “For MHM in the school environment, the Ministry of Education is a clear lead institution. In contrast, the range and types of “workplaces” in LMIC (low and middle-income countries) are numerous, with businesses being diverse in size, location and scope, and many girls and women working in both the informal and formal sectors” (Sommer et al. 2016, 3). Ultimately, businesses and government institutions have to take responsibility for the adequacy of their facilities and the menstrual attitudes present, but who is going to enforce and/or encourage these standards?

### **Methodology**

I began my research in Pokhara, Nepal. I chose Pokhara because it is the second largest city in Nepal and offers a significant formal labor market. Further, the high WASH ranking of Kaski’s schools (#14 out of 75 districts) inspired curiosity about the status of WASH facilities in the workplace, and more generally, workplace attitudes towards menstruation (Water Aid Nepal 2014). While in Pokhara, I was able to interview four women in various professions.

However, after about a week and a half into my research, I realized that it would be beneficial to speak with a few NGOs that were located back in Kathmandu. Kathmandu is the capital of Nepal, as well as the most populated urban area in the country. I would not describe my time in Pokhara as a ‘setback,’ as it offered a manageable environment where I felt comfortable beginning my research. Kathmandu can be an overwhelming city, and although in retrospect I

believe the entirety of my research could have been conducted in this city, I am thankful that I was able to speak with individuals in two different urban settings of Nepal.

While in Kathmandu, I spoke with two NGO's, employees from an online distributing company (the first company in Nepal to give off menstrual leave), and also employees from two different government offices. I would not have contacted MITRA Samaj (a local NGO) had it not been for the individual I interviewed at WaterAid Nepal, who encouraged that I speak to someone from this organization. I came across the online distributing company and the women's development organization while researching online. The healthcare facilities I chose, CIWEC Pokhara and a local government hospital, were quite random, but also intentional in the way that they offered two hospital settings that differed in regards to patient populations, patient treatment, size, location, and ownership (private vs. government-run).

My interviews were all semi-structured. This structure allowed for me to enter interviews with the confidence of having grounded questions, while also maintaining a sense of freedom in conversation. I had planned to enter interviews with the informed consent forms, but after my first interview, I preferred to explain confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity verbally. I therefore received informed consent verbally from all participants. For further purposes of confidentiality and anonymity in writing, I decided to provide several participants with pseudonyms. In the case of MITRA Samaj, I received consent from the employee I spoke with to identify the name of this organization, as well as their leading initiative (Mitini).

Every individual I interviewed spoke at least intermediate English (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012). However, I preferred to receive informed consent verbally as it seemed to be less intimidating. Many of my questions concerned the adequacy of facilities present and the social environment at work, which are topics that require for interviewees to speak honestly and openly. Entering with a form, and presenting this to individuals for signing (within the first five to ten minutes) felt intrusive. In interviews with individuals outside of the NGO sector, I reiterated my role as a student first and foremost. I did not want to be perceived as someone trying to promote change in workplaces or organizations. Simply put, this perception would have been counteractive to my role as a researcher.

Another difficulty I often faced while researching was communicating my study over the phone. While scheduling interviews, my spiel certainly changed from person to person, but I often tended to oversimplify my project. I felt that by doing so, I was not overwhelming a potential interviewee, and further, I was getting my message across directly and efficiently. Often times it was also hard to hear on the phone, and so I preferred quick phone conversations rather than longer ones. I waited until meeting in person to explain my project in greater depth.

When meeting with participants, I often began with questions concerning the individual's professional history; asking about education, entrance into the field, etc. If the participant worked for, or was a member of an NGO, I would ask the individual to describe the purpose and activities of the organization.

However, although I continue to believe that background information is important, while in interviews, it could also distract from the focus of my

research. After a week or so in the field, and with the help of an American professor who specializes in this area (public health, menstrual hygiene management) I was able to revise my questions so that the transition from ‘career history’ to ‘menstruation’ was smoother and not so abrupt. I began asking about an ‘average day’ in the workplace, which allowed me to begin a conversation regarding breaks (specifically toilet use) which often led to a discussion regarding menstruation. However, menstruation can be an uncomfortable topic, and with non-NGO employees, interviews often included many giggles and/or some uncomfortable body language. The American contact I had been in contact with urged me to ask participants about ‘women in general’ rather than asking the individual about their personal experiences with MHM in the workplace (American Professor 2017).

Apart from discussing topics such as the workplace environment and personal beliefs and home life, many of my questions concerned the adequacy of facilities present in the workplace. I asked non-NGO employees about the toilets in their workplace; how many, if they were gender-segregated, if they were inside or outside, if there was running water, soap, and locks on the inside of the toilet/latrine doors. These questions were usually answered with simple responses. However, to observe for myself, I always asked to use the toilet afterwards. This allowed for me to view the facilities privately, and in a non-intrusive way.

## **Research Findings**

*Women’s Development Organization*

I decided to begin my interviews with individuals from a local women's organization. I had researched this group beforehand and understood this organization to be philanthropy-based, with the goal to empower women through education and vocational training. This organization also works to conduct conversations and programs regarding such topics as equal wages for equal work, sanitation, and the significance of education. I contacted a member of this organization and planned to meet the next morning.

We met at the City Hall, and from there, walked to her house. Upon arrival, we sat down, and she served me tea. As I started to explain my project, she excused herself for a moment and soon returned with her husband. This was a bit odd for me, and is certainly something that I would define as a bit of a roadblock. Her husband sat with us throughout the entire conversation, not saying a word, but listening intensely. When I asked her about the organization, she was more than happy to talk about the philanthropy of this group. We talked for at least 10-15 minutes about the various projects the organization has completed. She told me about the daycare center and microloan center the group established, and the skills training they provide for underprivileged and unemployed women. After our conversation about philanthropy came to a close, I asked her to speak about her professional life. Apart from being a member of the organization, this woman is also an upper level administrator in a nearby secondary school. Within the school, there are several teachers, but only two of them are female. Other female staff members are present, but concentrated in kitchen and administrative work. I asked her to explain what the school environment is like, with an emphasis on male/female relations and menstrual hygiene management. She said that male and female staff get along very well; that sometimes teachers have to

stop young male students from making fun of female students; and that the school provides emergency sanitary napkins for young girls. Staff members have two breaks per day (one 30 minutes, the other 45); and that there is a separate toilet for teachers, but only one, and therefore not gender-segregated. I asked whether menstruation is talked about between female coworkers, and further, whether female staff members ever express any issues regarding managing menstruation in the workplace. “During the first period, a young girl is found disturbed,” she answered, “but after this menstruation is not talked about...” (Women’s Organization Member 1 2017). I will never forget this statement, because it was said so casually, yet saturated with sentiments of the Nepal menstrual taboo. This woman, an administrator of a secondary school, spends her days with young teenage students, many of whom experience their first period in the very building that she administers. She is sensitive, therefore, to the struggle that young girls endure when encountering menstruation for the first time. However, as her husband sat next to her, she explained to me that for matured women, menstruation no longer causes difficulties. I later asked if these issues were ever discussed at the organizational meetings, as she had previously mentioned that the group meets two or three times every month. She responded quickly, with a confident ‘no.’ At meetings, there is a lot of discussion regarding the balance between professional and private lives, but never about menstruation (Women’s Organization Member 1 2017).

She served me a delicious meal of Nepali *Khir* and potatoes, and then gave me the contact information for another member of the organization. Soon thereafter, I left, with mixed feelings and a mobile number in hand.

I called the number and after a few tries, was successful. The woman on the phone was more than happy to meet, that day, at 4PM. She told me that she would be at “Open Hut,” and gave me vague directions, noting that her location was nearby a popular coffee spot. The name, however, caused me significant confusion. Was “Open Hut” a landmark? A restaurant? Or was she simply in place that could be described as an ‘open hut?’ I passed the coffee spot she had noted and walked for five-ten more minutes, but did not see any establishment named “Open Hut,” and unfortunately also realized that most institutions in the area resembled an ‘open hut.’ After about five more minutes, I decided to call her, and tried to explain my location, but she insisted that I hand the phone over to a nearby Nepali shopkeeper. This was quite helpful, as this individual pointed me in the right direction. Soon thereafter, I came across “Open Hut,” - which turns out, is a restaurant.

This woman, Laksha<sup>1</sup>, was all-alone in the restaurant, and led me upstairs to sit at a table with a nice view of the water. As I did with all participants, I explained my research to her, followed by an explanation of informed consent, emphasizing that I would not be using her real name in the research report, unless she preferred that I did so. She preferred that I did not, and we launched into a discussion about her professional life. Laksha is a university professor teaching in the English department. She noted that within the department, the majority of the staff is male, but there are three female professors, including herself. Despite this inequality in numbers, she felt that there was gender-equality between males and females within the department, in regard to decision-making and career

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<sup>1</sup> Name change

advancement. When I asked the Professor about menstruation in the workplace, she noted that this is not something to be talked about- maybe with close family and friends, but certainly not at work. There are separate toilets for the staff and students, but until recently, these were not gender-segregated. After a group of students met with individuals from the Kaski District Area Office, the municipality passed a proposal requiring gender-segregated toilets at the university level (Women's Organization Member 2 2017).

Towards the end of the meeting, she emphasized that as a professor, her schedule allows for many hours of unstructured time. Because of this, menstruation never really caused difficulties of her in her work life. However, she encouraged me to speak with women in a field where hours are long, hard, and allow for few breaks.

### *Healthcare Facilities*

I called CIWEC and set up an appointment to speak with a nurse at 9AM the next morning. I arrived, and although I was disrupting her workday, she was incredibly kind and welcoming towards me. Before working at CIWEC, this nurse worked at government-run hospital located away from Lakeside. She talked in depth about the many differences between working at CIWEC and the government hospital, from working hours to patient treatment. I soon began with questions regarding menstruation in the workplace. At this point, it was early into the ISP process and therefore my questions were still quite blunt. "Does menstruation ever interfere with your work life?" I asked. She responded quickly: "Yes menstruation does interfere with my work life..." (CIWEC Nurse 2017).

From this point forward, we talked about various reasons as to why this was the

case, talking about experiences at both CIWEC and the government hospital. At the government hospital, she said, the facilities were inadequate. They were not clean, often without soap, and not gender-segregated. Further, there were simply not enough toilets for the number of employees present. She noted that this could have differed from department to department; however, she was speaking solely about the department she worked in. For this nurse, the situation at CIWEC is a bit different, where toilets are clean, and there are enough for staff members. They are not gender-segregated, but she did not feel that this was a problem, as she described the staff at CIWEC to be very “cooperative.” At the government hospital, if she needed to use the toilet, or take a break, she would have to ask a colleague to watch over her patients, which could often be difficult. Even though there are 600 employees, she still described the staff as “limited,” and therefore it was often hard to find this time to eat or use the restroom. She found this to be extremely problematic, especially while menstruating. At CIWEC, the hours are long, but she finds it easier to manage time, as there are fewer patients, and communication is better across staff members (CIWEC Nurse 2017).

After meeting with the nurse at CIWEC, I decided to call this government hospital to schedule an interview. I spoke with a receptionist over the phone, and was given the mobile number of another individual. I called this number, and spoke with a man who arranged for me to come in and meet with a nurse.

When I arrived, I met with the man I had spoken with over the phone. I had suspected that he would lead me to any nurse who might be available, and he did- but the circumstances were a bit different. We entered into a large office, where a woman was sitting alone at a desk. The man left, and the woman gestured for me to have a seat. After I gave my introduction, the woman

described herself as a nurse, who had recently been promoted- just twenty days prior. After almost two decades of being a staff nurse, she was now in a role of leadership- with much of her day focused on administrative and overseeing tasks. I could tell that she was busy, and so I jumped into my main questions a bit quicker than usual. The woman, Sharada<sup>2</sup>, like the nurse at CIWEC, told me that menstruation does interfere with her work life because hours are long and she often experiences a fair amount of menstrual pain. However, she also admitted that in the position of an overseeing nurse, she has more personal time than she did as a staff-nurse, even having her own office within the administrative building of the hospital. Sharada never discusses menstruation with coworkers, but does understand if fellow nurses have to rest or take time off if they are having severe menstrual-related symptoms. Interestingly, however, I received different information from the CIWEC nurse and Sharada regarding the facilities present at the government hospital. Sharada told me a quite different story, where the toilets were clean, there was always soap, a disposal area, and plenty of toilets for all employees. Further, the nurse at CIWEC mentioned that while working at the government hospital there were sanitary napkins available for female staff if need-be. However, when I asked Sharada about this, she said that the hospital has never provided sanitary napkins for employees (Sharada 2017).

#### *Kathmandu-based NGO's*

I arrived back in Kathmandu, and soon thereafter, I met with a woman from WaterAid Nepal. I chose to speak with WaterAid Nepal because their

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<sup>2</sup> Name change

research is cited in many of the works I have read- specifically pertaining to WASH facilities in schools across Nepal. Their office is located in a hidden area of Patan, away from the busy streets and the tourist appeal of Patan Durbar Square. I had called, that day, and was told to come at 2PM. I arrived and received a visitor pass, allowing me to enter into the beautiful house-turned-office-space. A younger woman approached me and explained to me that she was a Project Coordinator at WaterAid Nepal and would be speaking to me about my research. We went outside and sat at a lone table in the middle of the garden. She began speaking in depth about the importance of WASH in schools. The standard in place, one toilet per fifty pupils, is not met in many schools across the seventy-five districts of Nepal. She further explained that WaterAid works to change this, while also using education as tool to change the way younger students think about menstruation and MHM.

After narrowing in on the workplace, the Project Coordinator expressed her belief that that in most private offices, buildings, and hospitals, the facilities are adequate and that generally, attitudes towards menstruation are a bit more progressive, as employees often hold higher degrees. In government buildings, however, this is often not the case. She further emphasized that the older generation is very set in its ways, which is why the focus is on the younger generation to work against the menstrual taboo still present in Nepal. However, she also noted that in her opinion, taboos are far more present in the household, than anywhere else. The workplace, for example, is often comprised of people of various ages, genders, castes, religions, and even educational degrees. Because of this, opinions regarding menstruation can vary significantly, working against the strength of a menstrual taboo. She encouraged that I speak with the Kathmandu-

based NGO MITRA Samaj, one of WaterAid Nepal's partners in the fight against menstrual stigma (Project Coordinator 2017).

I found the organization online and immediately called the phone number listed. The receptionist answered, and gave me the mobile number of an individual working at MITRA Samaj. After getting in contact with this man, Vishva<sup>3</sup>, we set up a time to meet at the organization's Kathmandu office. He welcomed me in, and told me the story of the organization's establishment. In 2006, WaterAid Nepal published data regarding school absenteeism, noting that 48% of Nepali girls missed school 4-6 days every month due to menstruation. After seeing this alarming information, the executive director established the local NGO now known as MITRA Samaj. Their most prevalent initiative, the Mitini bins, work to counteract this statistic. The bins are placed in establishments in Kathmandu, primarily in NGO offices and fancier restaurants/bars. Using the funds generated by the bins (2000 rupees/ bin/ month), MITRA Samaj provides schools with sanitary pads, and MHM education. There are currently 250 bins 'out on the market,' in establishments across Kathmandu. However, when I asked if any Mitini bins were placed in government institutions- schools, offices, hospitals, Vishva responded that due to bureaucratic reasons, government institutions had not been approached (Vishva 2017).

With the encouragement of Vishva, I decided to approach an establishment where Mitini bins are present, to talk with a female employee about the bins, and the impact they have had on her work life. After a failed first attempt (the female employee did not understand what I was talking about and I

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<sup>3</sup> Name change

did not have a picture on hand), I tried another place- this time, a restaurant in Thamel. I walked in with a photo of a Mitini bin, and asked the woman working at the check-out desk if she recognized the object in the photo. She excitedly told me that she did, and that the Mitini bins were great because they discouraged employees and customers alike from flushing their used sanitary napkins down the toilet. Further, they kept toilets clean, and individuals, including herself, seemed comfortable using them (Restaurant Employee 2017).

### *Online Distributing Company*

The Mitini initiative, however, offers just one example of this uprising movement against menstrual stigma in Nepal. Just over a year ago, an online distributing company in Nepal added ‘menstrual leave’ to their employee leave policy. I met with two employees at the company’s headquarters to hear more about the beginning of this bold addition. I had called beforehand, but the woman on the phone misunderstood my request as an issue with one of their products, so I decided to just show up and explain my research in person. Upon arrival, a male employee, Prajesh<sup>4</sup>, listened intently and told me to wait for just a moment. I sat down on the couch in the lobby and watched through the wide window as he made his way around the open office space, from one female employee to another, seemingly having a series of brief conversations. 5-10 minutes later, Prajesh returned, unaccompanied, saying that he would be happy to speak with me. He told me that the CEO’s wife had actually suggested the idea of a menstrual leave policy, after terrible menstrual pain began disrupting her work

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<sup>4</sup> Name change

life. This company became the first in Nepal to institute a policy like this, leading to acknowledgment and support from the media and fellow companies. Prajesh, however, emphasized that this was simply an option for female staff, and not something that had to be utilized. When I asked if he had talked to his female colleagues about their opinions regarding menstrual leave, he looked down and laughed. “Yeah, I wanted one of the women in the office to talk to you- but they are all too shy!” he said, referring to the situation earlier (Prajesh 2017).

However, as he finished saying this, a female colleague walked by, and Prajesh, noticing, began calling her name. After a few minutes, she made her way over, and hesitantly joined in on our conversation. Prajesh reiterated the question that I had asked earlier, asking this woman, Saatvika<sup>5</sup>, how female employees, including herself, felt about the menstrual leave policy. She spoke highly of the leave policy, saying that women in the office do utilize it. Menstrual leave is paid, and therefore women taking menstrual leave are encouraged to work from home, but by no means have to. This is quite possible for a company like this, as the majority of their work is based online. Further, both Prajesh and Saatvika felt that the menstrual leave policy had positively impacted job productivity and satisfaction. Prajesh later remarked that even though the men in the office will never fully understand menstruation, this leave policy has pushed them to greater acknowledge it (Prajesh and Saatvika 2017).

### *Government Offices*

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<sup>5</sup> Name change

For the last segment of my research, I decided to speak with employees at two different government offices. I called various offices, introducing myself as a research student, asking to meet with a female employee to speak about the government workplace. However, after calling various government offices- from the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives to the Ministry of General Administration- I had still not received a single interview. Most of the office lines- some I called multiple times- were busy. Others did not understand and hung up. One person gave me a contact number, which I called, resulting in a man telling me that he did not speak with students. After this discouraging series of attempts, I decided to make my way over to the Ministry of Health. To my surprise, I was able to walk right in. I went up to the inquiry desk and began giving my spiel, but the woman soon interrupted me, saying that she did not speak English. So I tried again, this time in Nepali. This attempt was far more successful, and she pointed to an office just down the hall. I made my way, and introduced myself to the man sitting in the office. After a strange interaction and a 5-10 minute wait, he called over the woman who had earlier served him tea. She led me to the Ministry's library, where, behind several bookshelves, an older woman sat reading a newspaper. This woman introduced herself as a government officer and we began talking, in a mix of English and Nepali. She informed me that within the Ministry of Health, there are approximately 145 employees, with less than 25 being female. She felt that this inequality in numbers often led to discrimination in the workplace. When I asked her to explain further, she described this discrimination as a "discrimination of opportunity," whereby men tended to receive more opportunities than women. Although she felt strongly about this, she emphasized that this did not mean women failed to receive *all*

opportunities. She started listing off government leadership positions that women held, and then paused. She stood up, and told me that we were going to go meet a higher-up female employee within the ministry (Government Officer 1 2017).

I followed her down the long hallway and up a flight of stairs, and soon entered into the office of a younger, female officer. The older officer explained my presence in Nepali to the younger officer, and we soon continued the conversation. I opened my field notebook to my page of questions, and began to read one of the questions aloud. After a bit of scattered conversation and a few blank looks from the female officers, the younger woman gently turned my notebook for her to see. “Can I read these on my own?” she asked, referring to my questions. “I have trouble understanding your accent” (Government Officer 2 2017). I happily granted her request and was slowly amazed as the conversation transformed. The younger woman began reading my questions aloud- in a quiet, muffled voice, and then would turn to her colleague to discuss. This occurred question after question, resulting in the women responding together, united with their answers.

We continued the conversation from earlier, finishing this discussion of discrimination. The younger officer agreed that this “discrimination of opportunity” is present, but that sexual harassment is not. Soon thereafter we talked about the workday- where lunch is from 1-2 and toilet usage can be whenever they find necessary. The women mostly felt that the toilets were adequate, as they said the toilets were mostly clean, always had soap, a dustbin, and privacy. However, the younger officer later added that some of the locks on the doors did not work but this was fine because on most floors, toilets were

gender-segregated. Further, because there are so few women working in the ministry, they felt that there were more than enough toilets.

They did not feel that the menstruation really interfered with work life, and were not familiar with anyone taking medicine or time off due to menstrual pain. However, the younger officer, through giggles, noted that government employees receive many holidays per year in addition to personal/sick leave, emphasizing that time off is not an issue. When we reached the questions about supervisors, and transporting sanitary napkins, they answered briefly- they both seemed to get along well with their supervisors (both male), but would never speak to them about menstrual pain. Sanitary napkin transportation usually occurred through the use of a bag.

However, one of the most interesting parts of this interview occurred when we reached final questions about personal lives. The younger officer, who is Newar, while sitting next to her elder colleague, who is Brahmin, spoke about the lack of restrictions present her household- in regards to menstruation. “Even when I am menstruating,” she said, “I still enter the kitchen to eat and cook, because I cannot afford not to. If I am not cooking, who will?” I nodded and turned to the older officer, “And in your household?” I asked. She turned to the younger one, and they laughed. “Only after 3 days,” she responded (Government Officers 1 and 2 2017).

A few days later I made my way to another government office. This time, it was a city office nearby my Kathmandu guesthouse, with a sign barely visible for passerbys to see. I walked inside and was met by a group of Nepali men and an overwhelming urine scent. I was never able to make my way to the toilet, but I did get to peek in- it was dirty, with no dustbin in a sight, and undoubtedly the

source of the strong smell. I found a woman, Supriya<sup>6</sup> amidst the group of men, and asked if I could speak with her for just a short time- explaining that I was a student learning about female employees in the workplace. The men were confused, and she looked hesitant, but finally agreed, and led me to a quiet space outside of the chaos. I explained myself again, this time explaining my project in a bit more depth- with mention of facilities, menstruation, and equality in the workplace. Supriya's English, however, was not great, and so the conversation was slow, in mixed Nepali and English words. She had worked in this office for almost a year in a temporary position, as she was part of a four-year development project. Supriya is one of four females in the office; however, out of these four, two work in the kitchen. The ten other individuals in the office are all men. This woman, dressed in a beautiful red top and a bright pink scarf, said that there was a *general* feeling of gender equality in the office, but also described scenarios where she felt discriminated because she was a woman. She then pointed upstairs and told me about her office, where she did not have a desk for months. As I understood, she was doing much of her written work on the floor. She had told her male boss about this, but he did not do anything about it: "He just did not care," she said (Supriya 2017). It was unclear whether she had yet to receive a desk.

The toilets are another issue. There are two for the ~14 staff members within the office, but they are not gender-segregated. She noted that the toilets are dirty, smell like cigarette smoke (even though smoking is technically illegal in office spaces), and often men discard of their chewed paan in the toilet and sink.

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<sup>6</sup> Name change

When I asked her if there was an area to place used sanitary napkins, she laughed and said no. She then proceeded to roll up a *pretend* used sanitary napkin, placing it in her backpack. This demonstration allowed me to understand a common strategy practiced among Nepali women, one that the employee from MITRA Samaj had also mentioned. If a woman needs to change her sanitary napkin, she will often place her used one in her backpack, or purse, and later dispose of it elsewhere. In Supriya's case, she disposes of these sanitary napkins at home, or in a trash collection area nearby work. Regardless, she does not believe menstruation to be a taboo in Nepal, as she speaks openly about it with close female friends (Supriya 2017).

### **Discussion/Analysis**

#### *Older vs. Younger: Menstrual Taboo*

I left the first interview feeling discouraged. The woman I talked with did not see the value in discussing menstruation- maybe in regards to young girls receiving their period for the first time, but not for women who have experienced this for years. She answered my questions briefly and spoke little of this topic, noting at one point that to her knowledge, menstruation was not discussed in the workplace.

What could I gain from so little information? However, while rewriting my notes later that night, I realized that I could take quite a lot from the interview. Her reluctance towards discussing this topic was subtle yet strong, and conveyed a conservative attitude towards menstruation, one common among individuals of the older generation. By not saying much, she was actually saying a lot; For her, menstruation simply did not play a role in the workplace.

With the exception of the two participants from the Kathmandu-based NGOs, all individuals I spoke with were hesitant about speaking with me regarding menstruation. However, I found that younger women were more willing to talk about this topic, specifically through speaking from personal experiences and going into greater depth with answers. Older women, such as the two members of the women development organization, and the overseeing nurse (Sharada) at the government hospital answered my questions, but in brief form. Younger women; such as the nurse at CIWEC, the government officers, and the employee at the online distributing company, although still *extremely* hesitant from the outset, would speak far more honestly, and openly about menstruation. This discussion was not always related to work life: sometimes, it was connected to the household, or relationships with friends, and husbands, as these were the people consistently mentioned who played the role of confidant in all menstrual-related issues. Often, there would also be talk of the older generation and how among their parents, their grandparents, the menstrual taboo was still very much alive. This difference can even be seen with the Professor (Laksha) and the discussion regarding gender-segregated toilets. For her, the lack of gender-segregated toilets among staff facilities was a non-issue. But for the students at the university, the absence of gender-segregated toilets among their own facilities resulted in a student-led complaint to the DAO.

But this is not to say that among these individuals, of the younger generation, that menstrual taboo is absent. Through stories of hiding sanitary napkins in bags, and almost refusing to speak about menstrual leave, it is evident that taboo still lies within this group of younger participants.

### *Triangulating Data*

Over the course of ISP, there were a few instances where information received should have been triangulated, and it was not. For example, when I heard of the university constructing gender-segregated toilets after a group of students went to the District Area Office, I found this interesting, and should have visited the office to better understand the proposal. However, I did not, deciding to call instead. I called several times and failed to get through. I researched this proposal on the internet using keywords such as District Area Office Kaski, proposal, students, toilets, gender-segregated, but yet again, was unsuccessful.

One way I worked to triangulate data was through observation. By asking to use the toilet after many of my interviews, I was able observe the sanitation (soap, water, dustbin) and privacy of facilities for myself. In my conversation with the overseeing nurse (Sharada), she noted that the toilet facility was adequate, including a dustbin being a present. However, when I used her toilet later that day, I could not find a dustbin anywhere, which induced a curiosity about where she disposes of sanitary napkins.



The toilet Sharada uses; Dustbin absent.

### *Government offices*

I took a lot from my visit to the two government offices. I had heard from two individual NGO workers, and read in literature, that the facilities within Nepali government offices were infamously known for being inadequate. When I visited the Ministry of Health, however, I was pleasantly surprised. The toilet facilities were not shiny and beautiful, but they were generally gender-segregated (on most floors), there was soap/ water, and in at least one of the toilets I viewed, there was a dustbin.

However, at the city office, the situation was quite different, where the toilets were not gender-segregated, carried a scent of urine and cigarettes, and did not have a dustbin in sight. Further, I gained these understandings through both conversation and observation, and therefore did not rely solely on the words of an employee. This difference between the facilities within the ministry and the city office could be due to a variety of factors; from funding to the role of these offices within society. To elaborate, the Ministry of Health is a well-known office within Kathmandu, and more generally, in Nepal. This government entity holds significance in society, playing a “leading role in improving the health of the people including mental, physical and social well being, for overall national development with the increased participation of the private sector and non-government institutions in the implementation of programmes...”

([www.mohep.gov.np](http://www.mohep.gov.np), 2014). The building itself can attest to this, with multiple floors, an inquiry station, and waiting areas. This Ministry, therefore, seems designed in a way that caters towards outside clientele; citizens approaching with

complaints, those in the medical field arriving for meetings, etc. Therefore, it seemingly makes sense that facilities would appear adequate. The Kathmandu City Office (ward #), on the other hand, is a building blended into the city, with a washed out sign, barely visible for the eye to see. With only ~14 employees, this office is not a destination for dozens of individuals everyday, but rather an administrative building designed to tackle local affairs. Therefore, the significance and size of the government office, as well as the population of people who approach it, can really impact the adequacy of facilities present within a workplace. This then leads to a follow-up question: For office spaces where employees are the main population utilizing facilities, what is the incentive in maintaining their adequacy? In other words, in workplaces where outsiders do not frequent facilities, and employees do not vocalize any related issues, how can companies and (local, regional) governments be incentivized to maintain and/or establish adequate facilities?

I did come across two consistencies while speaking with female employees at the two government offices. All three women either mentioned gender discrimination in conversation, or (in the case of the city office employee) described a scenario of discrimination. This was not exactly surprising, as it is certainly noted in literature as a commonality in workplaces where there are drastic differences in numbers (male and female). In the Ministry of Health, there are ~145 employees, with less than 25 being female. In the City Office (ward #), there are ~14 employees, with 4 being female. And note, these numbers include kitchen and cleaning staff members. In spaces like these, where male employees account for 2-5x the number of female employees, it can only be inferred that ideals of gender equality: “equal chances or opportunities for groups of women

and men to access and control social, economic and political resources”, are not met (World Health Organization 2017).

The other consistency was the English language-ability I noticed among government employees. There was certainly a difference in English language ability between government staff (at the city office, Ministry of Health, and government hospital) and participants outside of this sector (at CIWEC, in NGOs, women development organization). This could be due to various reasons, with the most outright one being the different populations that these employees interact with. For high government officials involved with foreign affairs, superior English skills are necessary. This is seemingly the case with employees of well-established NGOs and INGOs as well, where high-level English is critical, often due to western influence and intervention. However for mid- and low-level officers who focus on regional and local affairs, high-level English speaking ability would not seem necessary. However, to qualify for a permanent civil service job, individuals have to pass the competitive Public Commissions Entrance Exam. With the exception of foreign affairs (English required), whether this exam is conducted in Nepali or English is unclear (Aryal 2014). Further research would have to be necessary

One of the most significant statements made by a research participant regarded the bureaucracy of the government offices. In my interview with the NGO employee, he noted that government entities had not been approached for Mitini bin installation due to bureaucratic reasons. In conversation, we did not dwell on this remark, but it certainly holds significance in regard to this research. Government offices are bureaucratic institutions, where processes are slow. Mitini bin installation in government offices would be no exception; as higher-

ups would have to grant approval, funds would have to be allocated to provide for the 2000 rupee/bin/month fee, and it would have to be decided whether this should be an initiative granted in all government offices, or only specific ones. The purpose of this NGO, however, lies in government observation of MHM education. By failing to approach government entities for Mitini Bin installation, this organization is failing to provide a hygienic disposal alternative for a significant sector of the formal workplace, while also missing an opportunity for government officials to recognize the magnitude of this issue.

*Communicating my role as a student, and not a development worker*

Finally, I found that communicating my role as a student, with the primary goal to learn and observe, was increasingly difficult. I believe the idea of Big 'D' Development relates directly to this barrier. Although I reiterated again and again that I was student, and showed my SIT syllabus every time, there was always a lingering feeling that I was not 100% understood. Many of my questions included words such as 'adequacy,' 'discrimination,' 'equality,' and 'taboo;' words that, more often than not, are used in relation to a social issue that needs to be addressed. Despite this, however, I was not planning on changing or "Developing" anything- I did not plan to intervene, and I most certainly did not plan to transfer any Western opinions- regarding menstruation, facilities, or gender relations through the wording of questions. Ensuring this in interviews with a range of participants seemed nearly impossible.

*Idea for further exploration*

One area that I did not explore, but later realized would have allowed for a greater overall perspective on this topic, is travel to and from work. Because my focus is based in cities, and transportation systems present in Pokhara and Kathmandu are often in the form of overcrowded minibuses, it would have been interesting to inquire about menstruation-associated barriers women face while traveling to and from work.

### **Conclusion**

There were many moments throughout the course of ISP that I thought to myself: “Is this even an issue?” Dustbins may have not been present in several of the facilities, and there was talk (mainly among healthcare employees) of menstruation interfering with work life, but really, how prevalent of a topic is this? *Does* menstruation play a role in the workplace? My final answer is yes. Most of the literature published concerning menstruation in Nepal is about MHM education in schools, or extreme menstrual practices (*Chhaupadi*) in far-Western Nepal. In published works though, the formal workplace seemed almost to be a nonexistent environment for menstruation to be an issue- And there are reasons for this. As the NGO employee at WaterAid said, the formal workplace “brings together people of varying educational backgrounds, age castes, even religions;” And this wide range of people counteracts the strength of a menstrual taboo that is so present elsewhere, such as the traditional conservative Hindu household. However, this does not mean that this taboo does not still linger in offices across Pokhara and Kathmandu.

Over the course of the ISP period, the majority of the participants I interviewed were younger, between ages 20-40. This population seems to hold

significance in the formal labor market as the older generation transitions into retirement, or the like. This population, from 20-40 years, is in an interesting place. As schoolchildren, they were not the beneficiaries of overwhelming INGO/NGO intervention into secondary health education, but generally, they have moved away from conservative practices of parents and grandparents. However, the fact that members of this generation still place rolled up sanitary napkins in their purses, or shy away from a conversation about menstrual leave, indicates to me that menstruation does play a role in the formal workplace- regardless of how small this role may be.

Not a single woman I interviewed said that she would go to a supervisor if menstrual-related symptoms were to worsen. This is not terribly problematic, as long as support systems are in place- friends, coworkers, or family members- of which many participants described in conversation. However, in government offices, where gender inequality is more likely to be present (greater numbers in men, ‘discrimination of opportunity’), and toilets are not guaranteed to be gender-segregated, support systems would seem even more crucial. Noted, I spoke with a small, *small* population of female government employees, but I did not gain the sense that menstruation was really talked about among women working in this environment. With outside friends and family, yes, but not necessarily within the office space.

In different workplaces, though, menstruation played varying roles. In the government hospital for example, it was the effect of long working hours and few toilet breaks; In the city office, it was the inadequacy of facilities and the absence of a female support system; and finally, in the NGOs it was a strong focus on changing the mindset of today’s youngest students, but little acknowledgement of

this working, generation Y population. My findings did not necessarily follow a pattern, and certainly presented inconsistencies. However, for human dignity's sake, women should be entitled to, at the very least, the privacy to manage menstruation in a humane (clean, sanitary, honorable) way, and the ability to discuss any issues with those around them. For the majority of the participants I spoke with, I found that this was the case. However, it was when this was not true that I was reminded of why this research is significant.

Menstruation may not play a large role in Nepal's modern-day formal workplace, but it is far from irrelevant. Women experience menstruation in various environments, and the workplace is no exception. Whether workplaces (businesses, institutions) decide to acknowledge this is their choice. These workplaces- hospitals, government offices, even NGOs, however, offer a micro-perspective of the dynamics present within Nepal as a whole. While providing female staff with private and clean toilet facilities equipped with water, soap, and a dustbin may not seem like much, it acknowledges these women as valued members of the workplace environment.

Further, the fact that all women, regardless of age, were hesitant to speak about this topic is especially interesting in regards to the workplace. This hesitancy speaks much to attitudes towards menstruation in Nepal as a whole. As previously mentioned, younger women were more willing to open up than older women about this topic, but hesitancy still lingered. Granted, I am a female, American student who bombarded various offices, hospitals, and restaurants to speak with women I previously did not know about a seemingly strange topic. However, away from household taboos and conservative parents, and surrounded by people of varying backgrounds, the workplace would seem as though it should

be one of the safest places to discuss a topic such as menstruation; however, this was a sense that I rarely gathered.

But why is this? Based on my experience and what I gathered, I truly believe that in terms of counteracting menstrual stigma, the workplace is the perfect place to start. Even further, in workplace environments where gender discrimination is high, or open communication is lacking, the topic of menstruation is a perfect gateway for discussion regarding these pressing issues. In other words, the role of menstruation in the workplace may be small- but it is far from irrelevant.

## **Glossary of Terms**

NGO: Non-governmental Organization

INGO: International Non-governmental Organization

MHM: Menstrual Hygiene Management

Mitini: An initiative by MITRA Samaj

*Ijja*: Social honor

*Khira*: Nepali rice pudding

## Appendix

### *Appendix A: Photos*



The Mitini initiative. These bins can be found in INGO/NGO offices and other establishments throughout Kathmandu.



Toilet at online distributing company; dustbin absent, but menstrual leave policy present!



Two toilets from the Ministry of Health; one with dustbin, one without.

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**List of Interviewees:**

Women's Organization Member 1, Member's house, April 10, 2017, Pokhara, Kaski, Nepal.

Women's Organization Member 2 (Laksha), Open Hut Restaurant, April 10, 2017, Pokhara, Kaski, Nepal.

CIWEC Nurse, CIWEC, April 12, 2017, Pokhara, Kaski, Nepal.

Government-Hospital Nurse (Sharada), April 13, 2017, Pokhara, Kaski, Nepal.  
American Professor, April 14, 2017, Email.

Project Coordinator, April 17, 2017, WaterAid Nepal Office, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Mitra Samaj Employee (Vishva), April 18, 2017, Mitra Samaj Office, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Online Distributing Company Employees (Prajesh and Saatvika), April 20, 2017, Company Headquarters, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Restaurant Employee, April 21, 2017, Restaurant, Kathmandu, Nepal.  
Government Officers 1 and 2, April 23, 2017, Ministry of Health, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Government Officer 3 (Supriya), April 27, 2017, Kathmandu Metropolitan City Office (Ward 3), Kathmandu, Nepal.

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