



NEPAL: CREATING NEW TRADITIONS

Safe WASH II

Duration: 2014–2019

Challenge

Chhaupadi is an ancient system of taboos surrounding menstruating women in Nepal. In several districts in rural Nepal, tradition holds that if *chhaupadi* is not observed, crops will wither, wells will dry up, and illness will strike the family. Even though the more stringent practices of *chhaupadi* were outlawed in 2005, they persist in the far west of the country. Under these practices, women and girls must sleep in a *chhau goth* or menstrual hut during menses where they are exposed to cold in the winter and snakebites in the summer. Because they are considered unclean, they are also forbidden from using the family toilet during their period so they have to defecate in the open.

Opportunity

USAID's Safe WASH II project has a broad goal of improving sanitation and hygiene behaviors in four western districts— Kailali, Kanchanpur, Darchula, and Achham— including reducing the negative aspects of *chhaupadi*. One new approach the project is implementing is working with Nepalese religious leaders. These religious leaders searched Hindu holy texts and found nothing negative about menstruation. They did find, on the other hand, support for the protection of women, which the project plans to build

USAID's Safe WASH II activity works in Nepal to transform the meaning of menstrual taboos that prevent women and girls from using the family toilet or sleeping in the family home during their menstrual period. Photo credit: USAID/Nepal

upon as it engages with religious leaders as well as traditional healers.

The project is also working closely with traditional healers. "Traditional healers have a dual role," explains USAID Environmental Health Specialist Pragya Shrestha. "As the keepers of tradition they enforce *chhaupadi*; as healers they want to lead their communities to health." USAID works with progressive healers to encourage families to allow their menstruating girls and women to use their family latrine.

The project team anticipates that this approach will result in at least 11 village communities allowing their women and girls to use their family latrines during menstruation, and thereby removing a major reason for open defecation in those communities. There are other districts where girls and women are currently denied use of their family toilet during menstruation, and hopefully this model will be replicated in those areas as well.