

NEPAL

In Nepal, Women on Their Periods are Banished From Their Homes



by Amber Roberts
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Women's rights activist Radha Paudel is working with documentary filmmaker Elena Dirstaru to lift the lid on an centuries-old rural tradition that hurts Nepalese women.

After a decade-long civil war, life for many women in Nepal is brutal and exhausting. They have restricted access to property, work 18 to 20 hours a day and face the constant threat of sexual assault. Oh, and they have to live in cowsheds during their periods.

British filmmaker Elena Dirstaru highlights their struggle in *But They Can't Break Stones*, premiering at the [London Feminist Film Festival](#) this weekend. The documentary follows women's rights activist and former

nurse Radha Paudel in her unrelenting efforts to stop the practice of *chhaupadi*. The tradition, upheld in many of Nepalese rural communities, banishes menstruating women out of their homes for the duration of their period.

They are forbidden from coming into the house or any public space and they are not allowed most foods like meat, dairy, vegetables and fruit. Instead, they live in sheds and are only permitted to eat homemade bread or wheat.

"They're not even allowed to wear certain kinds of clothes, or other people wouldn't be allowed to wear them again," Dirstaru told me. It is believed that even the touch of a menstruating woman causes fruit trees to sicken and wells to dry up. "It's simply a matter of superstition. They think bad things would happen if the women were allowed to be near anyone else on their periods."

What about tampons? "No one uses a tampon, even in [capital city] Kathmandu," Paudel laughed. "In the villages these women share one cloth between the mother and daughters and wash it in the river. They simply do not have the funds to purchase sanitary towels."

The cowshed tradition has an all-consuming impact on the lives of Nepali women, especially when you consider that a woman is on her period for around a quarter of her life. Aside from being an obvious breach of human rights, menstruating girls cannot attend school, so they miss vital proportions of their education. [Unicef statistics](#) reveal that in the whole of Nepal, secondary school participation or net enrolment is 74 percent in men and only 66 percent in women. This disparity is a direct result of *chhaupadi*.

Being confined to the sheds also leaves women even more susceptible to rape or harassment, which is all too common in the country. More than half of women in Nepal are affected by domestic violence. According to the Informational Sector Service Centre, there were [910 incidents of violence](#) against women and 464 incidents against girls recorded in 2012 alone.

"Rape is more common in the rural areas of Nepal," Dirstaru said. "Most rapes are not being reported, but that's unfortunately the case everywhere, isn't it? The victims are rural women, people who don't actually own anything or have any rights. There's a lot of marital rape too unfortunately--a lot of women are being raped by their husbands."

When a person kills another person he is put behind bars, so when a woman is on her period, we put her in the cowshed. It's the same thing.

While confined in the sheds, many women who have recently given birth also die from conditions like a ruptured uterus and an infection relating to a retained placenta. In the documentary, Paudel finds a new mother outside a cowshed who has been bleeding for more than 12 days.

She explains to the woman's family that this is not still her period but an infection, and that she could die if she is not taken to hospital within 24 hours. Unicef reports that 280 women died in Nepal at some point during or after their pregnancy between 2008 and 2012. These statistics are most likely just the tip of the iceberg, due to the remote nature of the villages these women live in.

"These deaths are very very common," Paudel said. "I think around 200 every month--and even worse, these deaths are very easily preventable. It only takes from about 30 seconds to three minutes to administer a treatment that saves lives."

People don't often visit hospitals because they're expensive and difficult to get to. That means that only 36 percent of Nepali women have a

"The villages Radha works in are very isolated," Dirstaru explained. "One village, Jumla, is only accessible by flights, which are expensive. The other two Radha visits are Dilichaur and Patراسي, which are even more isolated and are only accessible on foot, about 6 hours away from Jumla."



Female villagers gather for a political meeting in the film. Photo courtesy of Elena Dirstaru

If someone falls ill, it's a long way to be carried to a hospital that they're unable to pay for anyway. Instead, villagers go to a faith healer who is paid with basic exchanges of food or belongings.

Paudel tells me that faith healers receive around 20 visitors a day. But these faith healers lack the medical knowledge that she possesses as a trained nurse, and are often entirely unhelpful to their patients. In the film, she urges one of the faith healers to give his visitors proper medical information, exclaiming, "Your lies can kill people!" The life expectancy in Kathmandu is about 81 years old--in the rural western regions like Jumla, that drops to 36 years.

According to Dirstaru, a lack of education lies at the root of many villagers' superstitions. "I don't think that the connection is really made between fertility and the period. Chhaupadi is practiced mainly in western Nepal, which is very much rural, it doesn't happen so much in the rest of Nepal because it is a lot more accessible and people have more access to education and the outside world."

Men are considered gods: Superior and powerful.

Paudel has made it her mission to try to educate the villagers on the fact that periods are not 'shameful' or 'dirty', and that conversing with those on their period will not bring harm. In the film, she even tells people, "I am on my period now and here talking to you; what is going wrong?"

In certain areas of Nepal, that's a radical thing to own up to. When I asked her about it, she laughed naughtily and admitted that she lies about it a lot of the time--she wants to shock people into seeing the truth.

Nepal's civil war ended nine years ago, with over 16,000 killed and 70,000 displaced from their homes. Before the conflict, women's rights in the country were improving and the cowshed tradition was a rarer occurrence.

"During the war, that fell through and after the war a lot of people started to practice the cowshed tradition again," Paudel said, suggesting that villagers may have reverted back to chhaupadi as a way to deal with postwar shock through old and familiar customs.



Nepalese girls attend a female trekking guide programme, where women are trained to be tour guides. Photo courtesy of Elena Dirstaru

Chhaupadi still goes on in rural communities, despite the fact that it was made illegal in Nepal in 2005. "There are some laws in Nepal that do protect women," Dirstaru said, "but these aren't enforced in any way. Many of the villagers are not even aware that the cowshed tradition is illegal."

Nepali culture is a perfect example of how constitutional change is not enough to make people to change their prejudices or their practices. Legislation is just the starting point; it is activists like Radha who ensure that these changes come in force.

The country has had an interim constitution since 2007, with a new constitution set to be adopted in August 2015, but this text has been [heavily criticised](#) by women like Paudel for curtailing their right to citizenship and property. Though women make up 33 percent of the Nepalese parliament, their opinions are often disregarded.

"The current constitution doesn't say that citizenship can be passed through mothers, so if you only have a Nepali mother and not father, you wouldn't be a Nepali citizen," Dirstaru explained, "which makes it really difficult for a lot of people."

Women are also not allowed to have property in their names, which was a big problem when Paudel was in Jumla: When their husbands leave then or die, they are left with nothing--no homes, no possessions and no independence.

In some of these villages, Paudel said that Nepali women are made to work 18 to 20-hour days. Most of this is housework, leaving the women economically dependent on their husbands. This is compared to the five or six hours a day that a man works. The men in *They Can't Break Stones* come off especially badly. "When a person kills another person he is put behind bars," declares one, "so when a woman is on her period, we put her in the cowshed. It's the same thing, really."

"Men are considered gods," Paudel said, "superior and powerful."

Dirstaru said that their inherent sexism was really clear, "even by their body language and just ignoring women--sometimes refusing to talk to them."

"What was really telling was that scene in the film," she added. "After seeing that woman in the cowshed, Radha kept talking to the mother and explained to her why she had to go to the hospital, and as soon as the man spoke, he reiterated what Radha said and then she was like, 'Ah, okay,' and listened to the man but not Radha. Even women don't want to listen to other women."

Paudel is one of the few activists doing all they can to eradicate the ingrained sexism in Nepalese society, but this is not without danger. Two women's rights activists have been killed and others face daily harassment; Paudel herself has received a number of death threats. But there is positive change on the horizon. "Radha has been visiting the villages for about five years," Dirstaru said. "They've really changed quite a lot, they were a lot more welcoming to outsiders and the cowshed tradition is not as widespread in that area as it was."

The title of *But They Can't Break Stones* is lifted from something one man says in the film to justify women's position in Nepalese society.

"But *they* can't break stones as well as us, can they?" he argues. But as

Dirstaru points out, "Obviously men can't really break stones either. It's just the most ridiculous thing to say."

But They Can't Break Stones premieres at the London Feminist Film Festival on Sunday 23 August. More information [here](#).