RESPECT FOR ELDERS, REST OPPORTUNITY, OR PATTERN OF STRUCTURED INEQUALITY?: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF URBAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES WITH MENSTRUAL PRACTICES IN KATHMANDU, NEPAL

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Abstract: Women in Nepal, follow numerous menstrual practices. Past studies have focused on menstrual practices followed in rural areas, particularly emphasizing health and sanitation. Using 71 semi-structured interviews with women above the age of 18, this study provides a nuanced understanding of menstrual practices in the urban capital of Kathmandu, Nepal. I employ Gender Structure Theory to examine the relevance of menstrual practices at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels. A clear spectrum of adherence to menstrual practices emerged based on the interview responses. The identified groups are labeled "adherents" who strictly follow menstrual practices, "aspirants" who aspire to follow if someone would shoulder their domestic responsibilities, "negotiators" who engage or defy when beneficial to them, and "opponents" who openly oppose menstrual restrictions. At the individual level, respondents included in the study follow a diverse range of practices. Adherents and aspirants argue that they have internalized menstrual practices. Negotiators view menstrual practices as a respite from domestic chores, and opponents view menstrual rules as a way to dominate women. Interactional level analysis illustrates how conformity and resistance to menstrual practices allow women to do and undo gender. Adherents mostly followed menstrual practices to maintain their image as a virtuous Nepali woman, as their adherence allows them to maintain purity and show respect to elders. Negotiators and opponents consistently resist the practices, actively engaging in undoing gender. Institutional level analysis examines Nepali families to illustrate the ways transfer of menstrual customs within families enables an understanding of the structure of power and authority in Nepali society. The stringent menstrual rules followed for ancestral rituals and practices around initiated high-caste men reflect their high statuses in Nepali society. Additionally, some respondents compare menstrual customs to caste-based discrimination, showing lower statuses held by women and lower caste groups. The present study provides a detailed analysis of women's experiences with contemporary menstrual customs, highlighting the diversity of existing practices in Nepal. Women are agents who actively engage to navigate, modify, and reinterpret menstrual practices. The present study is significant in outlining how women create agreeable practices within concrete constraints, also highlighting men's role in the continuance of menstrual expectations.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Uma, a 66-year-old woman from an upper-class Brahmin family, recalls having her first period at 16. Uma, who suffered from painful periods during her adolescent years, considers menstrual practices an opportunity to rest. She proudly notes that she never broke menstrual rules, following practices for religious reasons. Shila, a 41-year-old middle-class Chhetri woman living in a nuclear family, avoids praying and entering the temple during her period. Both her natal and husband's families follow stringent practices. Shila claims that she never followed menstrual rules out of her own will; it was more of an obligation. She argues that there are no advantages to following these practices.

Thirty-year-old Manju, who belongs to a middle-class Brahmin family, recalls her first period after marriage. Manju's mother-in-law was already asleep when she had her period, and she forgot to ask her earlier about the sleeping arrangements. Manju and her husband decided to sleep together, assuming that their practice during her first period would influence the practices she would follow later in their relationship. She continues to sleep with her husband during her periods. Manju mentions that her mother worries that their sleeping arrangement may be a topic of gossip. Nonetheless, Manju

avoids entering the kitchen and touching prayer areas in her husband's home. She argues that following menstrual practices allows her to rest, but worries that her practices may be read as conservative by others.

As these narratives suggest, women in Nepal follow different menstrual practices. Families may prohibit menstruating women from entering kitchens and temples. In extreme cases, families may isolate women in a separate hut. Menstrual rules are practiced in varying ways throughout Nepal. Women from Hindu Brahmin and Chhetri families primarily follow menstrual practices. However, other castes and ethnic groups may also practice some or all of the menstrual rules. Past studies have considered women's experiences in specific parts of rural areas where menstrual practices occur in severe forms. These studies primarily focus on hygiene and reproductive health (Mahon and Fernandes 2010; Ranabhat et al. 2015).

According to the Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2014, around 11 percent of Nepali women practice severe forms of menstrual restrictions, including isolation and living in a menstrual hut or a cowshed (Central Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF 2014). The practice is widespread in the mid-western part of Nepal, where 71 percent of women live in a menstrual hut during menstruation. Women in other parts of the country, both rural and urban, follow less stringent menstrual practices. A majority of women in Nepal observe less severe practices, including not entering the kitchen, staying in a separate room, and avoiding social gatherings. In urban areas, stringent practices can be more challenging due to higher population density, modern values, and changing societal expectations. Yet, few studies have focused on changes in menstrual practices as women migrate to urban areas. A typical expectation from a menstruating woman in Kathmandu is to avoid entering the kitchen, prayer room, praying, cooking, touching male family members for four days for married and

five days for unmarried women. Menstrual practices have historically been associated with oppression and subordination where rural women are situated as victims (Amatya et al. 2018; Parajuli et al. 2019; Sapkota et al. 2013). Researchers largely overlook menstrual shame and stigma in urban areas. The few studies conducted in Nepal's urban areas fail to highlight the diversity existing in menstrual practices (Crawford, Menger and Kaufman 2014). Additionally, concerning existing literature, few studies analyze women's understandings of menstrual practices in Nepal. In the present study, I focus on understanding the relevance of traditional practices in urban areas and the ways women creatively negotiate these practices. I highlight variability in experiences and practices of menstrual rules depending on age, caste, region, and socio-economic status. I expose the fluidity and constantly changing practices according to context and convenience.

For this study, I utilize the terms 'menstrual practices' and 'menstrual customs,' rather than menstrual taboos, in order to provide participants the space to assign meaning to their menstrual experiences. I use menstrual practices to refer to actual activities performed by women during their menstruation. I use menstrual customs to indicate restrictions, expectations, aspects of control, and supernatural dynamics.

Engagement with menstrual practices is conceptualized as being on a spectrum, manifesting via four distinct groups of actors – adherents, aspirants, negotiators, and opponents. "Adherents," rigorously follow menstrual practices; "aspirants" are those women who would like to practice, if only another family member shouldered domestic responsibilities during required times; "negotiators," who engage or defy practices only when beneficial; and "opponents," who openly oppose these rules and follow them only rarely. Additionally, although women living in Nepal's capital city are held responsible for

following menstrual customs, they actively engage in multifaceted efforts to redefine and renegotiate them as an expression of personal agency within societal constraints.

I engaged in 71 qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with women living in Kathmandu between May and July 2018. Kathmandu is the most urbanized area of Nepal, where people from all over the country migrate, searching for better prospects. The capital city comprises populations from diverse social backgrounds and includes a large migrant population. I used purposive sampling, personal contacts, and social media strategies to recruit study participants. The respondents included in this study were between 19 to 68 years old. Among 71 respondents interviewed for this study, 82 percent (58) were still menstruating, and 18 percent (13) had reached menopause. Thirty-eight percent (27) of participants lived in extended families, 52 percent (37) lived in nuclear families, and 10 percent (7) lived alone or with siblings and children. Ninety-seven percent (69) of respondents followed Hinduism or a sect of Hinduism, and three percent (2) followed Christianity.

I adopt Risman's (2018a) Gender Structure Theory to examine menstrual practices at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels. Risman views gender as a social structure given its systemic nature and its embeddedness within social life. She also emphasizes material and cultural elements available to actors at each level. Material conditions consist of physical bodies and valued resources (Risman 2017; Risman 2018b). Cultural processes are ideologies that guide people's outlook (Scarborough and Risman 2017). Gender Structure Theory enables one to assess the function of gender at each level and provides an opportunity to examine an individual's agency within the structure. I address three major questions. 1.) How do women experience and navigate menstrual restrictions in

the urban area of Nepal? 2.) What actions do women engage in to conform to or resist menstrual customs? 3.) How can menstrual customs be used to reveal the structure of power and authority in Nepali society?

The individual level analysis focuses on women's experiences of menstrual practices. The interactional level analysis explores how adherence to menstrual customs allows Nepali women to maintain their image as virtuous women and also provides space to resist and challenge the image. The institutional level analysis examines Nepali families and how the transfer of menstrual customs in families reflects the structure and implications of power and authority. I highlight the dynamic nature of the material and cultural elements and how they work together to perpetuate, modify, or change the existing structure.

My study presents a nuanced understanding of contemporary menstrual practices followed by women in Kathmandu, Nepal. I address the knowledge gap created by past research that presents uniform experiences and perceptions of menstrual practices, by highlighting the existing variability within menstrual practices and how experiences and perceptions differ among women of different ages, castes, and socio-economic statuses. Past studies present women as victims of menstrual customs. Considering women as actors within the gender structure, I demonstrate women's agency as they interpret menstrual rules to consider both how culture impacts opportunity structures and a woman's agency to negotiate their experiences in Nepal's urban areas. Women constantly modify menstrual practices finding a more livable and viable alternative. Further, I debunk the myth of unchanging tradition surrounding menstruation in Nepal. My study highlights how on the one hand, menstrual rules allow family members to control women's sexuality, while on the other, bodily awareness permits women to track and modify their periods, identify pregnancies, and

choose to maintain secrecy around their cycle. Actual menstrual practices exist in the negotiation between society's rules and women's agency.

Additionally, past studies often present menstrual practices as a tradition imposed by women from one generation to the next. My research illustrates how other actors like men, religious leaders, extended family, and community also influence women's adherence to menstrual practices. Further, my study also adds class-based dynamics influencing observance of menstrual practices where women from middle-class families were more likely to follow stringent menstrual rules.

In the following chapter, I discuss existing literature on menstruation studies conducted worldwide and offer an overview of the literature on women and menstruation in Nepal. I then address Gender Structure Theory and close the literature review section with an analytical framework for the study. In Chapter III, I articulate my qualitative research design and methods, outlining both strengths and limitations. In the fourth chapter, I present an individual-level analysis elaborating how women experience and navigate menstrual restrictions in Kathmandu, Nepal. Chapter V focuses on interactional-level dynamics, assessing the way women conform to and resist menstrual practices. In Chapter VI, I focus on the Nepali family to present institutional level analyses. This chapter will examine the ways menstrual restrictions help reveal the structure of power and authority in Nepali society. Finally, in Chapter VII, I summarize key findings, highlight significant contributions, outline limitations, and suggest future research avenues.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

I begin this section with a discussion of menstruation in the literature, followed by menstrual research conducted in the global north and the global south. I then examine past studies assessing menstruation in Nepal. Finally, I outline the premise and use of Gender Structure Theory, which is the guiding framework for my research. Early studies of menstruation focus primarily on practices in the global south, with menstrual discourse beginning in the United States in the 1970s when menstrual activists questioned the safety of commercial menstrual products. Ironically, several studies conducted in rural parts of Nepal seek to examine women's access to the same menstrual products criticized by activists in the global north as harmful to health and the environment. Studies largely overlook women's understanding of menstrual practices in Nepal.

Menstruation

Menstruation, a natural biological process, is charged with social and cultural meaning. Individuals' and communities' experiences with menstruation vary depending on religious, political, demographic, and economic factors and represent society's cultural values and identities (Bobel 2010; Gottlieb 2020; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013). Menstrual taboos also reflect societal views of women (Kissling 2006; Laws 1990). Some consider menstruation a taboo (Crawford et al. 2014; Robinson 2015), while

others seek to maintain its secrecy (Bobel 2010; Kissling 2006; Laws 1990). The shame and silence surrounding menstruation is universal. Women constantly struggle to hide menstrual stains, worry about being exposed, and face embarrassment (Dahlqvist 2018).

Scholars from various disciplines, including anthropology, biology, psychology, sociology, medicine, and public health, have explored menstruation issues (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Mahon and Fernandes 2010; Martin 2001; Montgomery 1974). Anthropologists widely study menstruation and associated practices across various cultures (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) challenge the homogeneous understanding of menstrual taboos and argue that menstrual taboos are culturally variable and specific. They note that menstrual taboos are a cultural construction that must be viewed as "symbolic, arbitrary, contextualized, and potentially multivalent whose meanings emerge only within the contexts of the fields of representation in which they exist" (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:24). Additionally, before considering menstrual taboos as restrictive, it is essential to distinguish between activities that women long for from those they gladly get rid of during their menstrual practice (Martin 2001). Finally, considering menstrual taboos as a form of oppression ignores that these prohibitions may also restrict others' behaviors, not merely those of menstruating women (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988).

Menstruation in the Global North

Menstruation in the global north "is constructed as a shameful form of pollution that must be contained" (Bobel 2010:31). It is a problem to be solved within the personal and private domain, whereas public spaces like schools and workplaces overlook women's physical and social needs (Young 2005). Women's bodies are considered out of

control compared to the normative standard privilege of sameness reflected by non-menstruating male bodies (Chrisler 2008; Patterson 2014).

Secrecy and Silence

Scholars examining menstrual practices in the global north early on highlighted the culture of menstrual shame and secrecy adopted by these countries (Kissling 1996; Kissling 2006; Laws 1990; Martin 2001). Scholars claim that the public sphere does not provide legitimacy to women's bodily functions, and the significance of menstruation is limited within the private domain (Laws 1990; Martin 2001). Laws (1990) examining British men's attitudes towards menstruation focused on the prevalence of menstrual etiquette, which is the social rule surrounding menstruation where "women may not draw men's attention to menstruation in any way" (43). Menstrual etiquette includes micromanagement of behavior, where menstruating women are expected to self-discipline (Young 2005). Women who draw attention to menstruation and complain of pain and inconvenience in the public domain are stigmatized (Laws 1990).

Women learn the importance of concealing and maintaining secrecy surrounding menstruation during the process of socialization. A study conducted among girls between the ages of 12-16 in the United States finds that girls receive dual messages about menarche: on the one hand, parents encourage them to view menstruation as a normal process, while on the other hand, they must maintain secrecy and conceal (Kissling 1996). A study employing critical feminist analysis methods claims that most girls maintained a negative attitude towards periods. Parents' hesitancy to openly discuss menstruation with their daughters made menstruation challenging to talk about and experience. The culture of shame and secrecy relegates menstruation to the private

domain, and even within the private domain, women are encouraged to maintain a certain level of secrecy. The requirement of concealment creates immense anxiety as well as practical problems for women (Young 2005).

Medical Metaphors and Media Messaging

Two critical dimensions promoting negative perceptions of menstruation are medical metaphors and messages received in media (Kissling 2006; Martin 2001; Young 2005). Women's bodies and their cyclical changes, including menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation, illustrate " a potentially dangerous volatility that marks the female body as out of control" (Shildrick and Price 1999:3). Out of control female bodies, in contrast to contained male bodies, attract more attention and regulation (Shildrick and Price 1999). The medical metaphor and the media messaging highlight regulation imposed on women's out of control bodies.

The medical lexicon pathologizes menstruation and views it as a problem to be solved. Martin (2001) argues that the medical metaphor considers the body as a machine and reproduction as a form of production. This framework views menstruation and menopause as failed productions (Young 2005). The medical metaphor results in negative perceptions regarding women's bodily functions.

Viewing menstruation as a problem provides an opportunity for the consumer market to provide solutions (Kissling 2006). Kissling (2006) adopted a critical feminist perspective based on Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism to assess the representation of menstruation in the U.S. mass media and consumer culture. Based on earlier assertions made by Beauvoir, Kissling (2006) argues that "menstruation does not make women impure or dirty; they menstruate because they are dirty and impure" (10).

Practices of consumer industries and the idea of feminine protection imply "menstruation is something that women (or their clothing) must be saved from" (Kissling 2006:5). In purchasing and using these products, the consumer industry compels women "to buy into the idea of the menstruating woman as one of tainted femininity" (Kissling 2006:124).

Consumer industry and media present menstruation as a threat posed to femininity, and women must conceal their menstruation to maintain the public projection of femininity. Menstrual products provide women freedom of movement and reduce discomfort. However, the consumer industry reduces women to mere consumers, highlighting the need to conceal menstrual blood, stay fresh, and smell nice (Dahlqvist 2018). These messages continue to view menstruation as a dirty and shameful event (Quint 2019).

Recent literature shows how premenstrual syndrome perceptions also reflect the notion of women being out of control (Gottlieb 2020; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013; King 2020). Popular culture presents premenstrual and menstruating women as violent and irrational, explaining the importance of concealment (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013). The reduction of premenstrual syndrome, which includes numerous symptoms, to mood-based symptoms helps to reinforce the claims of women being out of control where they fail to manage their anger and annoyance (Gottlieb 2020; King 2020). Gottlieb (2020) argues that controlling the undisciplined behavior of modern menstruating women has become a new version of ancient taboos. Concealment of menstruation provides a false sense of control to women over their out of control bodies (Wood 2020).

Menstrual Inequalities and Activism

Recent studies have also explored menstrual inequalities in the United States and the United Kingdom (Gruer et al. 2021; Vora 2020; Weiss-Wolf 2017). Finding solutions to menstrual inequalities is more challenging because the problem itself is invisible and overlooked as a "female matter" (Weiss-Wolf 2017:65). Weiss-Wolf (2017) argues that although women in America may not be banished during their menstruation, the poorest and most vulnerable lack access to adequate menstrual hygiene. She considers menstruation as an American problem worthy of consideration. A study conducted among women experiencing homelessness in New York City reflects the situation (Gruer et al. 2021). Women faced issues in gaining access to menstrual products through service providers due to the rationing system, the need to disclose menstrual status to gatekeepers, and the lack of preferred and quality menstrual products (Gruer et al. 2021). Vora (2020) also found similar results among homeless women in the UK, where they lack access to menstrual products, undermining their ability to fulfill cultural scripts that promote secrecy and concealment.

Nonetheless, the cultures of shame and silence adopted around menstruation are constantly being challenged and resisted by menstrual activists (Bobel 2010; Quint 2019). Menstrual activism began in the United States in the 1970s when feminists questioned menstrual products' safety (Bobel 2006; 2010). Menstrual activists are concerned with commercial products' health and environmental impacts and confront and resist menstrual medicalization (Patterson 2014). Activists point out that women may spend thousands of dollars in their lifetimes to support an industry potentially hazardous to themselves and the surrounding environment. Menstrual activists claim that commercial

menstrual products are “designed to obscure the reality of menstruation” (Bobel 2006:334) and oppose “the menstrual mandate of shame secrecy, and silence” (Bobel 2018:5).

The global north adopts a culture of shame, secrecy, and silence around menstruation. It is viewed as a private matter to be solely addressed within the domestic domain. The medical metaphor that pathologizes and considers menstruating bodies abnormal and out of control supports these cultural ideologies. Consumer industries further reinforce the culture of silence, highlighting the need to conceal and give women a false sense of freedom from their out of control bodies. The secrecy adopted surrounding menstrual issues makes it harder to recognize and mitigate challenges. Nonetheless, menstrual activists confront this culture of silence by bringing menstruation to the forefront in their research, art, and activism.

Menstruation in the Global South

Unlike the global north, where recent studies address menstrual inequalities (Gruer et al. 2021; Vora 2020; Weiss-Wolf 2017), studies conducted in the global south extensively examine women’s access to menstrual products (Afiaz and Biswas 2021; Alexander et al. 2018; Chebii 2018; Garg, Goyal and Gupta 2012; Ssewanyana and Bitanihirwe 2019). Studies explore the challenges women face in low and middle-income countries due to their limited access to commercial menstrual products.

Menstrual Hygiene

Scholars examining menstrual hygiene focus on adolescent girls and their access to commercially available menstrual products as they attend schools (Alexander et al. 2018; Chebii 2018; Garg et al. 2012; Kirk and Sommer 2006). In addition to menstrual

products, studies also highlight the importance of clean toilets with locks and a regular water supply. Such facilities allow girls to change menstrual products comfortably and manage their periods with dignity. Programs working to implement access to sanitary conditions and resources are broadly known as Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM).

Past research focusing on menstrual hygiene presents a product-centered solution to menstruation, ignoring its social and cultural significance. Considering menstruation solely from a medical lens as a problem to be remedied using mainstream hygiene products presents those lacking these products as deficient (Lahiri-Dutt 2015). Emphasis on mainstream products also ignores any traditional or alternative means of managing menstruation that might be effective (Lahiri-Dutt 2015). Bobel (2018) argues that the product-centered approach to menstruation promotes a culture of concealment, which she refers to as the menstrual mandate, which expects "that menstruation should be silent and invisible" (9).

Viewing menstruation as a problem to be fixed using menstrual products socializes women to "discipline their bodies and manage menstruation according to certain norms" (Arora 2017:529). Arora (2017) claims that although sanitary pads are considered a symbol of modernity, they also reinforce the traditional view of menstruation as dirty and impure, further stigmatizing menstrual blood by emphasizing the need to conceal bloodstains. Her findings mirror assertions made by scholars studying menstruation in the global north (Dahlqvist 2018; Kissling 2006). Unlike in the global north, few studies conducted in the global south examine the environmental impacts of menstrual products and the need to promote locally produced sustainable menstrual resources (Kaur, Kaur and Kaur 2018; Ssewanyana and Bitanihirwe 2019).

Past literature shows the importance of menstrual hygiene and sanitation in low and middle-income countries. The emphasis on concealment in the product-centered approach creates a good period, invisible and managed using the mainstream product. It also overlooks the cultural and social factors surrounding menstruation which also influences how women manage their periods.

Menstrual Taboos

Studies conducted in the global south also explore various forms of menstrual taboos (Das 2008; Das 2014; Hoskins 2002; Pedersen 2002). These studies deal with the oppressive nature of menstrual taboos and grapple with the complexities and dynamics of these practices. Scholars studying menstrual taboos emphasize the need to recognize the ambivalent nature of these taboos where they could have negative, positive, and neutral connotations (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Gottlieb 2020; Patterson 2014; Stewart and Strathern 2002). Among the Vaishnava Baul community in Bengal, India, menstrual flow is considered potent. Community members ingest first menstrual blood and conceal rags used to manage menstrual flow, illustrating the ways the community views menstruation polluting (Hanssen 2002).

Similarly, Pedersen (2002) demonstrates the complexity of menstrual taboos in Bali, where women are considered vulnerable and powerful during menstruation. Women are treated like raja or ‘king’ while menstruating as families exempt women from domestic responsibilities. Also, pollution is associated with menstruation as women are restricted from participating in various rituals. Hartman and Marmon (2004) also present similar perceptions of menstrual separation among Orthodox Jewish women. Some

women view menstrual rituals as oppressive and burdensome, while others consider menstrual separation as power over their sexuality.

Researchers assessing menstrual taboos examine how they restrict women and note women's agency to maneuver these taboos (Das 2008; Das 2014; Hoskins 2002; Pedersen 2002). Hoskins (2002), comparing two eastern Indonesian societies: Huaulu and Kodi, shows how societies view menstruation differently. The absence of menstrual restrictions does not necessarily translate to women's higher status. Huaulu have stringent menstruation practices where women live in a communal menstrual hut and are not allowed to cook or carry heavy loads of water and firewood. On the contrary, women in the Kodi community maintain the secrecy of their menstrual cycle. Community members observe a deep fear of the consequences of menstrual contamination and suspect that women bleeding in secrecy were scheming to undermine authority, using spells, medicine, and poisons (Hoskins 2002). Based on the discovered differences, Hoskins (2002) concludes that the lack of menstrual taboos does not necessarily correlate with women's high status in society.

Scholars also emphasize women's agency to negotiate menstrual taboos. Women in Pedersen's (2002) study adopted various strategies to manipulate taboos while still respecting them: consuming different kinds of food to influence the timing of their periods; using birth-control pills to postpone their periods; flexibility in interpreting the duration of impure time between three to five days; and maintaining secrecy and going to ceremonies and temples when bleeding.

Similarly, Das (2008), examining menstrual practices in Assam, India, states that menstruation is considered a polluting agent, containing dirt and germs, and associated

with impurity in Hinduism. She claims that the role of purity and pollution not just divides people into different castes and classes but also results in gender divisions. Menstruating women in Assam are considered impure and restricted to their rooms during their period. Das (2008) argues that menstrual taboos that deem women dirty and polluted further push them to inferior positions. However, Das (2008) also claims that adherence to menstrual taboos also provides women an opportunity to rest. Hanssen's (2002) and Das's (2008) assertions underscore the diversity of practices in India, highlighting menstrual taboos' ambiguous nature.

Women follow various forms of menstrual taboos, and also society's understandings of these taboos vary (Hoskins 2002; Kothari 2010). Some of the common menstrual taboos followed across communities include avoiding entering the kitchen, cooking, and maintaining distance. The experiences of menstrual taboos also differ within a society where high caste women are more likely to follow extensive practices (Pedersen 2002). Additionally, Das's (2008) study with Assamese women claims that older women experienced severe restrictions in their youth. Menstrual taboos also widely vary within a woman's lifetime. Das (2008) argues that women follow rigorous menstrual practices before marriage yet receive some relaxation in menstrual rules after marriage due to various reasons, including childbirth and nuclear family structure.

Similarly, taboos can be flexible depending on the availability of helping hands, convenience, and other pressing issues (Das 2008; 2014). Menstrual taboos can work to women's advantage by relieving them from domestic work and providing an opportunity to rest (Das 2008; Pedersen 2002). Following menstrual taboos also enables women to keep elders and patriarchs happy (Das 2008). In other instances, women may observe

menstrual restrictions to show their deference to a particular lifestyle without associating religious significance (Hartman and Marmon 2004). The continuation of menstrual taboos is possible as long women maintain some agency and families continue to socialize young women into these practices (Das 2008; Pedersen 2002).

Studies conducted in the global north examine the culture of shame, secrecy, and silence adopted in these countries. Scholars also assess the role played by media and medical discourse to promote a culture of concealment. Menstrual activism is also increasing in the global north, emphasizing the urgency to overcome the culture of concealment. The importance of commercial menstrual products and sanitation among adolescents within the school setting has been the main focus of studies conducted in the global south. These studies are crucial in influencing access to menstrual products but overlook how social and cultural factors also affect women's approaches to menstruation. A few scholars have also examined menstrual taboos, recognizing their restrictive nature and women's agency to maneuver menstrual practices. Nonetheless, Lahiri-Dutt (2015) argues that more studies are needed to address contemporary attitudes towards menstruation in the global south. My research addresses this gap by presenting women's experiences of menstrual practices in Nepal.

Menstruation in Nepal

Menstrual taboos in Nepal are among the most studied issues faced by Nepali women. Women in various parts of the country follow menstrual restrictions to a certain extent. The studies conducted in Nepal focus primarily on rural areas examining hygiene and sanitation (Amatya et al. 2018; Kadariya and Aro 2015; Rothchild and Piya 2020).

Chhaupadi: Menstrual Taboos Followed in Nepal's Mid and Far Western Regions

National and international media coverage focuses on stringent menstrual taboos called *Chhaupadi* followed in Nepal's mid and far western regions. The word *chhaupadi* comes from the western region's local *raute* dialect, where *chhau* means menstruation and *padi* means woman (Kadariya and Aro 2015). Women are exiled to the *chhau* shed for at least 14 days during their menarche, their first menstruation, and four to five days each month after that (Amatya et al. 2018). Women are also forced to these sheds for 10-14 days after childbirth. *Chhaupadi* sheds are small huts without doors and proper ventilation, located 20 to 25 meters away from the main household (Upadhyay 2018). The sheds lack adequate sanitation, and women are vulnerable to extreme weather conditions, suffocation, rape, assault, attack of wild animals, and wildfire (Upadhyay 2018).

Women may not enter houses, kitchens, and temples while menstruating (United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator's Office 2011). Women cannot touch plants, male family members, other males, water taps, religious objects, or cattle (Upadhyay 2018). Women cannot consume milk and milk products (United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator's Office 2011). A few studies claim that women cannot eat meat and fresh vegetables (Kadariya and Aro 2015). They experience insecurity, guilt, and humiliation while practicing *chhaupadi* and fear harm if they accidentally touch something (Kadariya and Aro 2015; United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator's Office 2011). Since women may not enter the kitchen, they spend more time engaging in arduous tasks outside the household like digging, carrying heavy loads, and collecting firewood and fodder (Kadariya and Aro 2015; United Nations

Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator's Office 2011). The Supreme Court of Nepal banned *Chhaupadi* in 2005 and criminalized it in 2017.

Researchers examine the prevalence of *Chhaupadi.* Amatya et al. (2018), in a study among adolescent girls living in Nepal's far-western region, found that 2.8 percent of women lived in traditional *chhau* sheds, 58.88 percent lived in animal sheds, 10.2 percent stayed in courtyards outside their home, and 28.04 percent stayed inside their houses. Some of the factors motivating women to follow menstrual restrictions are family traditions, religious beliefs, fear of negative consequences, and social pressure (Baumann et al. 2020). Women are vulnerable to blame for any misfortunes that befall their families, relatives, and communities if they defy these practices (Wong 2018). However, women's ability to modify their rules increases as they become primary decision-makers within their households (Wong 2018).

Baumann et al. (2020) emphasize the need to recognize various restrictions rather than solely focusing on menstrual sheds. Using collaborative filmmaking, Baumann et al. (2020) adopt a more holistic approach to assess how menstrual practices differ in various ethnic and religious groups. Participants in the study followed menstrual rules related to cleansing, cooking, sleeping, touching, and worshipping.

Few studies examine women's experiences and their agency to maneuver traditional practices (Baumann et al. 2020). A midterm review of the *chhaupadi* Elimination Project in the far-western region of Nepal mentioned how women avoided *chhaupadi* practices without insulting their elders (Uprety and Bhandari 2010). Women state that they did not inform their in-laws about their menstrual statuses and told their

family members that they were using contraceptives that interrupted their monthly bleeding.

Media in the global north have also covered *Chhaupadi* practices in recent years. Bobel (2018) argues that media reporting dramatically presents the tradition, primarily covering women's tragedies during the practice. Media representation helps to generate funds but also widens the gap between a "sophisticated" global north and a "backward" global south (Bobel 2018). According to the Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (2014), around 11 percent of Nepali women practice severe forms of menstrual taboos. Approximately 2.9 percent stayed in *chhaupadi* huts, 2.7 percent lived in animal sheds, 2.8 percent ate different food, and 2.3 percent missed school and work during their periods (Central Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF 2014). Others practice moderate forms of menstrual practices. The study notes that 25 percent stayed in different rooms, 8.8 percent bathed in separate places, and 57.6 percent avoided social gatherings (Central Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF 2014). Few studies focus on less severe menstrual practices or changes in rules that impact Nepali women's daily lives.

Menstrual Hygiene in Nepal

Past studies on *Chhaupadi* and also other forms of menstrual taboos have primarily focused on sanitation, health impacts, and violation of human rights (Amatya et al. 2018; Hamal and K.C. 2014; Mahon and Fernandes 2010; Parajuli et al. 2019; Ranabhat et al. 2015; Rothchild and Piya 2020; Sapkota et al. 2013; Upadhyay 2018). These studies are similar to research conducted in other parts of the global south focusing on Menstrual Hygiene Management. Researchers examine various menstrual products

used by adolescent girls to manage their periods (Hamal and K.C. 2014; Parajuli et al. 2019).

Scholars have conducted studies in the country's rural areas that follow menstrual practices to various extents (Adhikari et al. 2007; Rothchild and Piya 2020; Sapkota et al. 2013). These studies consider health and sanitation practices. Researchers assess various absorbents used by women and particularly adolescent girls, to manage their periods (Adhikari et al. 2007; Pandey 2014; Sapkota et al. 2013). Studies examine menstrual hygiene within schools, finding that educational institutions lacked clean toilets and arrangements for disposing of used products and cloths (Pandey 2014). A majority of extant studies seek to examine access to commercial menstrual products among adolescents, assuming that access to proper menstrual products decreases the number of girls who miss school during their periods.

Oster and Thornton's (2011) study, conducted among adolescents in Nepal's central region, showed girls who had access to sanitary products were just as likely to miss school as those without access. Oster and Thornton's conclusions indicate the role of other factors influencing girls' school attendance during menstruation, including physical discomfort and stigma associated with menstruation. Some of the common health problems menstruating girls face are menstrual cramps, backaches, and excessive blood loss (Sapkota et al. 2013). The study implies the need to consider menstrual taboos followed within the household and how they may impact school attendance.

Parajuli et al. (2019), examining the knowledge and practice of menstrual hygiene among 109 women living in the mid-western region of Nepal, found that 40.4 percent of women used sanitary pads to manage their menstrual flow. The majority of

women used reusable cloths to manage their periods (Hamal and K.C. 2014; Parajuli et al. 2019). Women experienced diarrhea, dehydration, hypothermia, and reproductive and urinary tract infections while practicing *Chhaupadi* (Amatya et al. 2018). Some of the remedial measures adopted by women during their periods included taking adequate rest, drinking plenty of water, and seeking medical advice if needed (Parajuli et al. 2019).

Menstrual Taboos in Other Parts of the Country

Bennett (1983), in her ethnography of high caste women in Nepal, observed the existence of menstrual taboos, though not necessarily seclusion, among rural Brahmin and Chhetris. Some of the common restrictions followed are not entering the kitchen, holy places, and avoiding touching male family members (Baumann, Lhaki and Burke 2019; Sapkota et al. 2013). Menstruation is considered a strong source of pollution, and "high caste initiated males are singled out as the group specifically endangered by menstruation" (Bennett 1983:215).

Bennett (1983) argues that menstrual segregation is a way of controlling female sexuality. Affinal women are usually held responsible for the breakdown of family relationships, whereby women's negative image is intensified during such occasions. Affinal women are considered dangerous intruders who pose potential threats to patrilineal groups' unity (Bennett 1983). Hence high caste Nepali women engage in various practices such as "honoring of household gods, the maintenance of strict ritual purity in the kitchen, and the observance of frequent fasts and religious vows" to maintain their image as virtuous women (Bennett 1983:313). "Being respectful of one's elders and submitting to their control" is one of the essential parts of being a good woman or man in Nepal (Bennett 1983:313).

High caste Brahmin and Chhetris primarily follow menstrual taboos. The upper castes' inclination to enforce traditional practices allows them to maintain their claims of superiority. However, the widespread migration of Brahmins has influenced lower-caste and non-Hindu groups into Brahmanic ritualism (Bista 1972). Srinivas (1956), studying Indian society, introduced the term sanskritization to indicate how low caste groups adopt Brahmin ways of life. By adopting rituals of the upper caste, sanskritization allows a caste to maintain a higher position in society.

In terms of class, the middle class is more likely to implement traditional practices and is more likely to adhere to traditional values. Following predominant norms help the middle class distinguish their group from the vulgarity of those below them and the morally bankrupt lifestyle of those above (Liechty 1996). Liechty's (1996) assertions indicate that the prevalence of menstrual taboos may be higher among the middle class.

Several studies have also analyzed how women view their adherence to menstrual restrictions and how they navigate these taboos (Crawford et al. 2014; Pandey 2014; Rothchild and Piya 2020; Sharma 2014). Women experience confusion, anxiety, and inconvenience during their menarche due to a lack of adequate information (Crawford et al. 2014; Rothchild and Piya 2020). Crawford, Menger, and Kaufman (2014), in a qualitative study examining women's perceptions of menstrual stigma in the Kathmandu Valley, found that all study respondents observed menstrual restrictions and considered them uncomfortable, inconvenient, and bothersome. Crawford et al. (2014) argue that their study participants experienced more menstrual stigma from other women rather than male family members.

Mothers are mainly responsible for disseminating information to their daughters about menstruation rituals (Pandey 2014). Nonetheless, girls and women in Nepal are also engaged in negotiating menstrual taboos. Pandey (2014) notes that girls practiced menstrual taboos and challenged these restrictions through defiance and reflection. Participants in the study mentioned touching water, trees, and entering kitchens. Pandey (2014) states that girls reflect on their nonconformity, realizing that nothing terrible happened to their families or objects they touched. Hence, girls said they learned that defiance of menstrual practices might not have actual consequences.

Additionally, Sharma (2014), investigating menstrual rituals among Hindu women of Nepali origin, found that women in Nepal were more likely to follow various menstruation restrictions and define these days as a period of rest. Women practiced menstrual taboos out of respect to elders and devotion to god. Crawford et al. (2014) find similar results where participants followed menstrual taboos out of respect to their elders and tradition. Women of Nepali origin in other countries mostly avoided attending religious functions due to adherence to menstrual taboos (Sharma 2014). The Nepali diaspora modified their practice of menstrual taboos according to convenience in the new economic setting. Likewise, respondents in Crawford et al.'s (2014) study engage in the selective observation of restrictions, whereby the primary reason to follow menstrual taboos is social acceptance.

Similarly, Rothchild and Piya (2020) argue that the emphasis placed on menstrual rules and seclusion in Nepali society exceeds the importance of menstrual hygiene and health. They contend that most women self-regulate, internalizing menstrual taboos. The researchers conclude that menstrual taboos control women and make them solely

responsible for managing menstruation without providing adequate means to manage it in a healthy manner (Rothchild and Piya 2020).

The majority of studies conducted in Nepal focus on health and sanitation concerns associated with *Chhaupadi.* These studies focus on menstruation management using commercially available products. Only a few studies seek to understand women's experiences with menstrual practices - both *chhaupadi* and less severe forms such as avoiding religious gatherings or cooking. Few studies focusing on women's experiences with menstrual taboos consider the consistency of these practices among diverse women (Crawford et al. 2014). Variability of menstrual taboos across age groups, marital statuses, and socio-economic backgrounds, and women's agency to maneuver are understudied.

Additionally, few studies (Pandey 2014; Sharma 2014) address how women may resist and redefine the practices. My research employing qualitative interviews with 71 women living in Kathmandu, Nepal, addresses this gap by providing a nuanced understanding of menstruation and how practices change over time. My study highlights women's agency to resist and redefine menstrual taboos and examines traditional practices' relevance in a comparatively modern setting.

Gender Structure Theory

Gender Structure Theory (GST) is the guiding framework for this study. GST emphasizes the relevance of gender at the individual, the interactional, and the macro levels (Risman 2004; Risman and Davis 2013; Risman 2018a). Risman (2004; 2017) argues that considering gender as a social structure highlights its importance to social organization. Scarborough and Risman (2017) claim that viewing gender as a social

structure enables us to recognize how gender shapes practices and how these very practices contribute to sustain, challenge, and reproduce the gender structure. Considering gender as a structure helps highlight its dynamic nature where actors not only reproduce but are capable of transforming the structure itself.

Risman (2004; 2018a) argues that gender is not limited to the individual level. Instead, it is deeply embedded in society as normative expectations at the interactional level and within institutions and organizations at a macro level. Risman's (2018a) GST is based on Anthony Giddens's Structuration Theory that emphasizes recursive relationships between social structure and individuals. Giddens (1984) cautions on equating structures with constraints as they are both constraining and enabling. Risman (2004; 2017) argues that social structure shapes individuals and social interactions. However, individuals also hold the agency to create, sustain, and modify current social structures. Connell (1987) argues that social structure emerges from practices, and neither is conceivable without the other.

Sewell (2005) claims that structures are "constituted by mutually sustaining cultural schemas and sets of resources that empower and constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that action" (151). Like, Sewell (2005), Risman (2017; 2018a; 2018b), in her updated version of GST, incorporates consideration of cultural processes and material conditions. Material conditions include physical bodies, how bodies are segregated into social networks, distribution of valued resources, and restrictions in a historical moment (Risman 2017; Risman 2018a; Scarborough and Risman 2017). Cultural processes are socially constructed ideologies that guide people's perspectives and worldviews (Scarborough and Risman 2017). Recursive relationships exist between

"cultural and material processes at each level and across levels of the gender structure" (Risman 2018a:34-35).

Individual level analysis focuses on creating and internalizing gender identities (Risman and Davis 2013; Scarborough and Risman 2017; Scarborough, Risman and Meola 2017). The material processes at the individual level include biological forces that "play a small, but, significant, part in the formation of gendered personalities and self" (Scarborough and Risman 2017:3). Cultural processes impart norms about gender, and once individuals internalize these norms, they contribute to the creation of gendered selves (Risman 2017).

Focusing on agency is crucial at the individual level of analysis. Sewell (2005) defines agency as the capability of "exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree" (143). Individual agency largely varies and depends on cultural and material resources available to the actor. Additionally, cultural and historical contexts determine an individual's agency (Sewell 2005). The agency held by an individual is not uniform and is determined by the social position occupied by an individual. Hence, structure empowers agents differently, and "agency is implied by the existence of structure" (Sewell 2005:144). Individuals are born into the gender structure, but they hold power to reinforce, react, and change the very structure (Risman 2018a).

At the interactional level, interpersonal social relations and expectations reinforce the existing gender order (Scarborough et al. 2017). Material processes at the interactional level include numerical representation, same-sex networks, access to valued resources, and other material conditions contributing to gendered behavior patterns

(Risman 2017; Scarborough et al. 2017). Cultural processes shape what individuals expect from each other and themselves (Risman and Davis 2013). The concept of "doing gender" enables us to understand the functioning of gender at the interactional level (Risman 2018a).

West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that doing gender is more than a gender display and includes routine production of gender in everyday interactions. Individuals hold each other accountable to behave in ways consistent with an existing gender order and stereotypes in daily social interactions. Individuals who fail to meet these expectations are judged harshly and face strong norms to conform and "do gender" (Risman 2017). Butler (1990) also presents a similar conceptualization where gender is regarded as a continuous performance solidified through constant repetition. Butler (1990) argues that intelligible gender is "those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (23). She considers gender a survival strategy as it humanizes individuals, and those who do not intelligibly express their gender are regarded as less human. Nonetheless, Butler (1990) states that it is possible to disrupt gender by creating gender trouble. Failure to repeat and/or a parodic repetition of gender can highlight performative dimensions of gender, demonstrate foundational illusions of gender identities, and create gender trouble (Butler 1990).

Although the "doing gender" model includes both conformity and resistance, it has been widely used to study persistence of gender norms and expectations (Deutsch 2007). My intention in using GST is to analyze both conformity to and resistance of menstrual practices. Hence, I also use the concept of "undoing gender," which was first

introduced by Butler (2004). Butler (2004) highlights what it means to undo restrictive normative conceptions of gendered and sexual life. Additionally, she argues that "normative restriction of gender can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life" (1). Butler's (2004) idea of undoing gender means demonstrating the instability of cultural constructs associated with gender binaries and creating a newer version with greater livability. Although Butler (2004) introduced the term "undoing gender," I adopt Deutsch's (2007) conceptualization. Deutsch (2007) proposes the use of "undoing gender" to refer to resistance.

Gender structure also operates at the macro level and shapes organizations, institutions, and cultural logics (Risman 2017). The macro level's material conditions include organizations and institutions like the existing legal system that constrains an individual's actions (Risman 2017, Scarborough and Risman 2017, and Scarborough, Risman, and Meola 2017). At the macro level, cultural processes focus on "dominant ideologies about what it means to be a woman or a man" (Scarborough and Risman 2017). The dominant gender ideologies present at the macro-level influence and constrain an individual's behaviors. Risman (2018a) argues that the ideologies prevalent at the macro level are not fixed but significantly influence social change possibilities.

A few studies have adopted GST to examine gender patterns and processes (Risman 2018a; Scarborough and Risman 2017; Scarborough et al. 2017). Scholars have adopted the theory to investigate gender inequalities in various cultural contexts. Davis (2015) uses GST to understand how intersex is defined, experienced, and contested in the United States. She argues that it is essential to recognize the constraints posed by gender at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels as it enables individuals to

overcome some of the restraints it has over our lives (Davis 2015). Similarly, Scarborough and Risman (2017) apply GST to illustrate how gender is contested and reproduced in three significant social life areas in the United States: family, work, and gender identity. Risman (2018a) also employs GST to examine millennials' experiences with the current gender structure. Using the life stories of 116 millennials, Risman (2018a) outlines the existing gender structure for young people in the United States. Based on how millennials maneuver within the gender structure, Risman (2018a) categorizes them as believers, straddlers, innovators, or rebels.

Scarborough et al. (2017) implement GST to examine the effectiveness of a fish polyculture program to address the gender asset gap among households in Bangladesh. Researchers find that preexisting gender dynamics shape the effect of fish polyculture, a macro-level input, influencing patterns of asset ownership. Although targeted towards women, the program led to an increase in the gender asset gap. Higher levels of women's education help to curb growth in the asset gap. The study shows how factors operating at the individual, interactional, and macro levels constantly interact to shape one's experience within the gender structure. The study is essential in demonstrating how GST enables researchers to consider multiple factors impacting the gender asset gap.

The use of GST enables these studies to identify multiple processes contributing to form and maintain a gender structure within society. Although GST provides a robust tool to analyze prevalent gender inequalities, few studies adopting this strategy have been conducted both in developed and developing countries. My study employs GST as a framework to illustrates how various processes operating at the individual, interactional,

and macro levels influence the ways women experience and navigate their menstrual practices.

Analytical Framework

Menstrual customs are prevalent in various forms in Nepal. In an urban area like Kathmandu, families forbid menstruating women from entering kitchens, temples and attending religious gatherings for three to five days each month. Menstrual customs may be more stringent or lenient depending on expectations across different households, with practices largely prevalent among high caste Hindu. However, other caste and ethnic groups may also follow menstrual customs to various extents. For this study, I use the term menstrual practices to indicate actual activities performed by Nepali women during their periods. Further, I use menstrual customs to indicate restrictions, expectations, aspects of control, and supernatural dynamics.

Laws (1990) made a similar choice in her study where she used the term menstrual etiquette rather than taboos. She argued that menstrual etiquette was more suitable for British culture as practices were not based on supernatural beliefs. Laws (1990) defines taboos as a supernatural belief system. Although Nepal has religious texts supporting menstrual practices, women may or may not be familiar with these texts.

Further, the term taboo is derived from the Polynesian word *tabu.* As cited by Buckley and Gottlieb (1988), Steiner defines *tabu* as 'marked thoroughly,' and the etymology of the word lacks positive or negative dimensions. Nonetheless, the use of the expression menstrual taboo has been associated with oppression (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). The Nepali language lacks a literal translation of the word taboo. Further, the most severe form of menstrual practice in Nepal is called *Chhaupadi pratha,* where *Chhaupadi*

is the name of the tradition and *pratha* means custom. Hence, I use the terms menstrual practices and menstrual customs rather than taboos and allow participants to determine whether their menstrual practices are taboos. For this study, I adopt the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2006) definition of taboo as "a prohibition against touching, saying, or doing something for fear of immediate harm from a supernatural force."

The current study will employ GST to examine the prevalence of menstrual practices in Kathmandu. I will assess how women internalize and how they define these practices at the individual level, considering women's agency to reinforce, reinterpret, modify, and resist. I acknowledge the limitations of agency as individuals operate within particular historical and cultural contexts. Further, other individuals sharing the same historical and cultural contexts seek conformity and limit agency. At the interactional level, I assess how women engage in conforming or resisting these practices. Hindu ideologies shape the dominant gender image prevalent in Nepal, which views men as breadwinners and women as domestic caretakers. A Nepali woman's dominant image is compliant, chaste, religiously devoted, and shows respect for and compliance with elders (Bennett 1983; Grossman-Thompson 2017). Another essential dimension of being a good woman is prioritizing others' needs and comfort before one's own (Chrisler 2008; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013). Women from various ethnic communities may follow flexible gender roles (Tamang 2002).

Menstrual practices are a way of becoming a virtuous Nepali woman, but at the same time, women constantly engage in changing, resisting, and undoing these practices. High caste women generally follow them. The dominant way of high caste women is widely prevalent, and women from other groups may also conform to maintain their

claims of purity. I also use the concept of "undoing gender" to view the prevalence of menstrual practices at the interactional level. I examine Nepali families at the institutional level and the role menstrual customs play in perpetuating or shifting power and authority relations. The dynamics operating at various levels constantly intersect and overlap. Nonetheless, analyzing the prevalence of menstrual customs at various levels allows us to highlight its dynamic nature as well as the agency held by women to transform these customs.

Sewell (2005) states that structure does not operate in isolation, rather intersecting and overlapping. Menstrual practices in Nepal operate within a gender structure. Further, the gender structure interacts with other structures like capitalism, mass media, and education. Hence, I demonstrate how women transform and reproduce menstrual practices in Nepal with increasing access to education and employment opportunities. Further, I show how women act to conform to and resist menstrual practices, constantly transforming Nepal's gender structure.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN

Oklahoma State University's Institutional Review Board approved the study under protocol AS-18-22. I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews in Kathmandu, the capital city and an urban center of Nepal. Qualitative interviewing is a data-gathering process that generates deep responses through fairly specific research questions (Dixon, Singleton and Straits 2015; Miller and Crabtree 2004). Qualitative interviews "use open, direct, verbal questions that elicit stories and case-oriented narratives" (Miller and Crabtree 2004:189). Using semi-structured interviews enabled me to maintain consistency in the content covered in each interview (Corbin and Strauss 2015).

The interview schedule included a semi-structured set of questions to direct the conversation. The schedule was flexible and provided respondents with an opportunity to guide the interview in the direction they thought most important. The interview outline included questions on women's experiences and rules followed during menarche, monthly menstruation restrictions, interactions in settings other than women's homes, experiences with childbirth, changes in practices over the lifetime, and women's perceptions of menstrual practices.

A pre-test interview session was conducted to assess the flow of the interview schedule. Dr. Tamara Mix acted as an interviewer and interviewed me. The interview was significant for two primary reasons. First, it helped to identify areas of the interview schedule in need of clarification. Second, it also helped me to reflect on my perspectives about menstrual practices. Being aware of my standpoint was crucial to recognize influence on the research (Denzin 1997; Watt 2007). In addition, my position as a middle-class Chhetri woman who grew up following menstrual restrictions and pursuing a higher degree in a US-based university shaped the interview process and data analysis.

I had my first period at the age of thirteen, and I spent the next seven days locked in an empty room. Since then, I follow numerous restrictions each time I bleed. I am not allowed to enter kitchens, enter temples, or touch male family members of my family. I spend four days a month in my room, away from the rest of the family members. However, I can go to school and work outside. As a teenager, I detested the practice. But gradually, with age and an increase in domestic responsibilities, I realized that I could use this practice for my benefit. I could avoid going to some religious functions, get some relief from household activities, and choose not to share information about my periods. My family still follows the practices, and I followed the menstrual restrictions for two months during my data collection for this study. I used the time away from domestic responsibilities to catch up on my research. For the first month, I decided not to share information about my menstrual cycle as my younger sister got married, and I did not want to be left out of the wedding activities.

For the most part, my position as a woman who also followed menstrual restrictions allowed me to facilitate the interview process. Nonetheless, my privileged

status as a student studying at a US-based university also created fear among some respondents that I might judge them for their adherence. I decided to use purposive sampling as it enabled me to use knowledge of the population and menstrual practices to recruit participants. Purposive sampling is a form of nonprobability sampling whereby researchers select participants based on particular characteristics related to the purpose of a study (Babbie 2013).

I also paid particular attention to ensure respondents' diversity by outlining various demographic characteristics that may influence women's menstrual practices. The sample included women of different ages, caste, education, region, marital status, socio-economic status, and employment. The sample consisted of women who were within their reproductive age and also those who had reached menopause. The decision to include menopausal women was influenced by the fact that women are primarily responsible for transferring and holding upcoming generations accountable to traditional practices.

Kathmandu City was a purposeful selection as it is one of the country's urban centers with a huge migrant population. The population for this study comprises all women living in Kathmandu who practice some form of menstrual restriction. Respondents include women above the age of 18 living in Kathmandu, Nepal. Participation in the study was voluntary. I began with key personal contacts, which gave me an entry point and access to women from similar socio-economic backgrounds. I also posted to the social media site Facebook regarding my project to spread information to a broader audience. The Facebook post helped me to diversify participants.

I engaged in several place-based approaches to participant recruitment. I spent a significant amount of time involved in volunteer work and observation at a non-traditional women's school, which, with institutional permission, led to respondent access. For approximately ten days, I helped the school administration prepare an annual report for submission to Nepal's Government. During my initial time there, I conducted one or two interviews and spent the remainder of my energies working on the report and observing school activities, where all the students and most staff are women.

After completing the report, I spent another 20 days collecting data in the school, where I waited for students' leisure time. Sometimes, I also covered classes if teachers were unavailable. My constant presence in the school helped me build rapport with both teachers and students. In addition, the non-traditional school enabled me to access women from different castes, ages, regions, and socio-economic backgrounds. I also spent a week with a women's group who, at the time, was organizing a shoe-making training for women. The women's group also owned a grocery store, and I engaged with women there as well, talking to several women stationed at the grocery store or those coming to purchase groceries and had some time to spare.

Similarly, I also spent two days at a college that offered graduate and undergraduate degrees. I gave a talk to undergraduate students about career prospects in the social sciences and briefly talked about my research. Several students agreed to participate in the study, and I interviewed them in a room provided by the college immediately after the talk. Interviews were conducted in school, college, coffee shops, restaurants, and women's homes on a few occasions. Given the study's nature, most of the women preferred to be interviewed outside of the household.

Before the interviews, I informed the respondent about the study and clarified my intention to learn about their household's menstrual practices. I also took participants' consent to record the interviews. A few respondents were anxious to participate in the study for two primary reasons. First, participants were concerned about confidentiality and worried about being featured in the media. Second, respondents were concerned that admitting to following menstrual practices may present them and their families as regressive. To address respondents' concerns, I mentioned the study's objectives and the measures taken to maintain their confidentiality. I also clarified that I had no connection with the media, which helped women feel comfortable sharing their stories. In a few instances, I also mentioned my own experience with menarche and monthly menstrual customs. While talking about my own experience, I focused on rules rather than my perspectives. Sharing my personal menstruation experiences provided women with assurance and helped them to relate with me better.

In most cases, initially hesitant women agreed to participate in the study when I addressed some of their concerns. All the interviews were audio-recorded. In numerous instances, women shared more personal stories about menstruation and family dynamics after turning off the recorder. I asked the participants if I could use these narratives in my study. Most times, respondents were willing, and I recorded these conversations in my field notes. Several women mentioned that the interview was therapeutic as they could share their stories with a confidential listener. A few respondents used the conversation after the main interview to share personal stories and vent their frustration towards their families and in-laws. I assumed the role of a listener at that point without taking any field notes.

Initially, I planned two different waves of interviews. The summer of 2018 was planned for preliminary data collection. Once I started data collection, I received immense support and interest. Women were actively willing to participate in sharing their stories and giving me their precious time. The decision to include a more robust sample in the first wave was influenced mainly by women's interest in participating. During my visit to an undergraduate college, I met several male and female students who invited me to visit their households and communities to collect more data. At that point, I had already conducted 65 interviews and was unable to accept their invitations. I had to respectfully turn down a few other interview opportunities at the end of my stay in Kathmandu, as it was getting physically and emotionally exhausting.

As a woman who followed the menstrual custom and understood the social context, my position encouraged respondents to share their menstrual practices and other painful experiences like challenges they faced during their childhood, after a parent's death, as a new bride, or during childbirth. These narratives are crucial, but listening to them is also emotionally taxing. Similarly, traveling in Kathmandu during the monsoon using public transportation is physically exhausting. Public vehicles are often overcrowded and may take more than ten minutes to travel a mile. On sunny days, the high level of air pollution required constant use of a mask. Monsoon rain and muddy roads added another challenge traveling around the city. I conducted 71 interviews with women living in Kathmandu, Nepal and the length of interviews ranges between 20 minutes to almost two hours. Due to the robust response during the first wave, I did not conduct a second wave of interviews as planned.

A spectrum emerged based on interview responses, consisting of four groups reflecting women's experiences with menstrual restrictions in Nepal's urban areas. Women's beliefs in menstrual customs and their actual practices during their menstrual cycle contributed to creating the spectrum. Categories are constantly overlapping in terms of women's opinions on menstrual customs or their everyday practices, but respondents belonging to each group have a unique combination of beliefs and practices. The spectrum is valuable to illustrate a nuanced understanding of menstrual customs.

I refer to the first group as "adherents," women who strictly follow menstrual practices. Out of 71 respondents, 44 percent (31) rigorously followed menstruation restrictions. The majority of adherents were women above the age of 36 who belonged to middle-class families. I call the second group "aspirants;" they would like to follow menstrual practices if someone else from the family shouldered the responsibilities during their periods. Eleven percent (8) of respondents included in the study aspire to follow menstrual rules. All aspirants were married and came from lower and lower-middle-class families. Aspirants were between 26 and 43 years old. The third group, whom I refer to as "negotiators," either engage in or defy rules only when beneficial. Thirty-five percent (25) of respondents interviewed for the study continuously negotiated, following when beneficial. Unlike adherents, most negotiators were below the age of 36. They belonged to middle and upper-class families. The final group, "opponents," openly oppose menstrual practices and follow them rarely out of compulsion. Opponents were from various age groups. Ten percent (7) of respondents included in the study oppose menstrual practices. I use the spectrum as an orienting framework to guide the analysis.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Demographic Characteristics	Adherents	Aspirants	Negotiators	Opponents	Total
Total	31	8	25	7	71
Age Range					
19-28	6	2	9	1	18
29-38	6	4	11	2	23
39-48	7	2	3	2	14
49-58	7		2	2	11
59-68	5				5
Menstrual Status					
Menopause	13				13
Menstruating	18	8	25	7	58
Marital Status					
Single	5		11	2	18
Married	23	8	14	5	50
Separated	2				2
Widowed	1				1
Caste					
Brahmin	15	1	15	3	34
Chhettri	10	4	7	3	24
Vaishya	3	1		1	5
Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups	1	2	1		4
Indigenous groups	2		1		3
Untouchables			1		1
Religion					
Hinduism or its sect	31	8	24	6	69
Christianity			1	1	2
Class					
Lower	4	2	3		9
Lower-middle	8	5	2	2	17
Middle	16	1	11	4	32
Upper	3		9	1	13
Family Type					
Nuclear Family	17	7	9	4	37
Extended Family	13	1	12	1	27

Living alone or with siblings or young children	1		4	2	7
Education					
Illiterate	3	1	1		5
Primary education	15	4	3	2	24
Secondary education	10	3	6	2	21
Undergraduate degree	3		6		9
Graduate degree			9	3	12
Employment Status					
Employed-Formal	7	3	16	2	28
Employed-Informal	3	3	4	1	11
Never worked for money	17	1	3	3	24
Worked for money in the past	4	1	2	1	8

Table one presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents across the spectrum. The majority of the respondents interviewed for this study followed Hinduism or a sect of Hinduism, including offshoots such as *Manav Dharma*, *Aatmagyan Satsangs,* and *Vajrayani. Manav Dharma* and *Aatmagyan Satsangs* are sects originating from mainstream Hinduisms. *Vajrayani* is a Buddhist tradition and in Nepal *Newar,* who belong to the Vaishya caste group, practice it along with Hinduism's traditions. Most of the respondents had a primary level of education. The primary level includes grades one through eight, and the secondary level includes grades nine through twelve. Employment status is divided into four groups. The first group is employed in a formal sector like teachers, doctors, bankers, working in a factory, or non-governmental organizations. Employed in an informal sector includes working as live-in maids, live-out maids, and self-employed like running shops, an eatery, online business, or beauty parlor. Never worked for money includes respondents who have never held a paying job. This category

also includes students who may be employed in the future. However, women in this category did highlight their experiences taking care of children or working on a farm. Worked in the past for money includes respondents employed in formal and informal sectors but have retired or taken a break due to various reasons.

Interviews were conducted in Nepali and were transcribed into English. I used NVivo 12 to code the data, adopting an interpretive approach to data analysis. The interpretive approach allows for an understanding of lived experiences from the perspective of those involved (Denzin 2004; Schwandt 1998). I assessed how respondents associated meanings to their menstrual practices and how they continuously redefine, negotiate, modify these meanings within their social and cultural contexts.

I began line-by-line coding and coded three interviews from respondents with diverse backgrounds to identify common thematic codes across the interviews. Coding is the process of relating the data with broader concepts (Schreier 2012). Line-by-line coding is a coding strategy where the researcher examines each line of data, enabling them to critically and analytically look at the data. I decided to use line-by-line coding as it allows me to see the "familiar, routine, and mundane" in a new light (Charmaz 2004). Given my familiarity with the menstrual customs in Nepal, the use of line-by-line coding helped me maintain a reasonable distance from any taken for granted assumptions and perceptions of menstrual customs (Charmaz 2004). Initially, I began with line-by-line coding and identified some frequent themes. The themes were categorized, and codes were used to focus code the rest of the interviews. Focused coding adopts codes that continually appear in line-by-line coding and makes the coding process more manageable

(Charmaz 2004). I remained open to additional codes that emerged after I started to focus code the interviews.

Codes were broadly divided into four major sections: experiences, enforcement, interactions, and demographic categories. The experience category included respondents' experiences with menstrual restrictions during their lifetime, including practices for their first period, monthly cycle, monthly cycle followed in natal home, monthly cycle after marriage, rules followed upon childbirth, transfer in natal family, transfer after marriage, and terms used to refer to menstruation. The enforcement category included codes of various family members and others who enforced these practices, such as female family members, male family members, extended family, friends, community, and shaman/religious doctors.

The interaction category included experiences of women's interaction with others during their menstrual cycle. It consisted of codes like visiting someone else's home, educational institutions, workplace, and visiting temples or attending religious functions. The demographic category included demographic characteristics like age, religion, caste, income, class hierarchy as per respondents, marital status, education, age at marriage, age at first period, number of children, place of origin, number of years lived in Kathmandu, family members sharing the same kitchen, and work status. Several codes did not fit into these categories, and these codes were separately listed. Separately listed codes include self-perception after the first period, relationship with family after menstruation, relationship with friends, women's religious and other understanding on why menstrual restrictions are followed, conformity, defiance, benefits, limitations, negotiation,

consequences, impact, changes, transfer to next-generation, contradictory narratives, and miscellaneous.

Given the wide range of data gathered during the data collection process, selective codes were utilized for this study to make it more manageable. The codes used to present individual-level analysis consist of experiences with the monthly cycle, benefits, limitations, and impacts of monthly practices. Conformity, defiance, and negotiations were the codes used to present interactional-level analysis. The codes used to present institutional level analysis include monthly practices, monthly practices natal family, monthly practices after marriage, transfer natal family, transfer after marriage, the role of male family members, shaman, and religious doctors. Pseudonyms are used to maintain respondent confidentiality.

The research design's strength is that it is one of the most extensive studies conducted among Nepal's urban women regarding their perceptions of menstrual practices. Further, semi-structured interviews provided an adequate opportunity for respondents to guide the interview in directions they considered most important. Kathmandu city consists of a significant migrant population which offers a chance to explore diversity in menstrual practices. The study's major weakness is a focus solely on urban women or women who could migrate to urban areas. Hence, I am not able to include the experiences of women living in rural areas. Additionally, all the respondents included in this study are cisgender women. Thus, the study is unable to address the menstrual experiences of gender-nonconforming individuals.

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES WITH MENSTRUAL PRACTICES: INDIVIDUAL LEVEL ANALYSIS

During the interviews, the terminologies used by respondents to refer to menstruation were *nachune, chui bhako, para sarne, pancheko, chhau, nahune, bhageko, means,* and *mahinawari*. Both *nachune* and *chui bhako* loosely translates to English as being in an untouchable state. The terminologies *para sarne* and *pancheko* imply the act of moving away. *Chhau* is the term used by people from the mid and far western regions of Nepal to refer to menstruation. The respondent who used the term to refer to her period mentions that the term's meaning is similar to the term *para sarne*. Finally, the term *bhageko* means running away. These terms might have come from the traditional practice of living in a cowshed or menstrual hut located away from the household during one's period.

The younger generation uses the term *means* adopted from the English word menses. The term least used by respondents was *mahinawari,* which translates as monthly. Government agencies and health professionals widely use the word *mahinawari* to talk about menstruation in Nepal. Apart from *mahinawari* and *means,* Nepali terminologies for menstruation consider women impure or untouchable during their periods. Untouchables hold the lowest caste ranking and are considered impure within

the Nepali caste system. Hence, these terminologies signify the lower status of women within Nepali society.

Traditionally, women were married before menarche. Menarche threatens a girl's purity, and parents expect to earn religious merits by marrying their daughters while virgins. Seven respondents included in this study were married before their menarche. All the respondents who were married before menarche were at least 41 years or older. These patterns indicate the increasing age at marriage and the gradual decline of marrying daughters before menarche. The average age at marriage for respondents was approximately 18 years. Now, families focus on maintaining unmarried daughters' ritual purity, and the strict imposition of menstrual customs allows families to do so.

Women have diverse experiences surrounding menstrual practices, employing numerous strategies to navigate and adjust them according to their current circumstances. In this section, I ask, "How do women experience and navigate menstrual restrictions in the urban areas of Nepal?" The individual level analysis within the GST allows for an assessment of women's experiences with menstrual customs. The material processes at the individual level include the menstruating bodies of women. Women owning these bodies hold some agency to determine when to share the information with their families. Cultural processes convey norms about gender. Nepali society's expectations for women to follow menstrual restrictions dictate how women define and negotiate existing menstrual practices. The interaction between material and cultural processes at the individual level illustrates that the way women associate meanings to their menstruating bodies largely depends on cultural context.

The menstrual expectation for women living in Kathmandu is to avoid entering the kitchen, prayer room, praying, cooking, and touching male family members for at least four days for married and five days for unmarried women. However, significant variation exists in the number of days restrictions are practiced, ranging between three to eight days. A majority of respondents state that they follow some menstrual rules, primarily avoiding praying and going to temples. Sixty percent (43) of women in the study avoid entering the kitchen, prayer room, going to temples, and cooking during their periods. However, even women who cook and enter the kitchen during their periods avoid praying and entering temples. Two respondents did not follow any menstrual restrictions.

Respondents across the spectrum claim that they follow menstrual customs to show respect to elders. Adherents and aspirants in their narratives highlight the internalization of menstrual restrictions. Adherents, aspirants, and negotiators, to a certain extent, argue that menstrual practices provide respite from domestic chores. Although aspirants' views surrounding menstrual practices were similar to adherents, they did not have resources like helping hands, physical space, and financial resources to maintain strict adherence to menstrual restrictions. Unlike adherents and aspirants who believe that there are no disadvantages of following menstrual restrictions, negotiators and opponents note that menstrual restrictions are mechanisms to dominate women. In the following section, I use some women as representative exemplars, offering details and nuance to illustrate how women experience and navigate menstrual practices at the individual level. I divide the chapter into four different sections: adherents, aspirants, negotiators, and opponents, to illustrate varied experiences of menstrual restrictions.

Adherents

Out of 31 adherents who rigorously follow restrictions, 74 percent (23) are married, six percent (2) are separated, 16 percent (5) are single, and one is widowed. Adherents are mostly from high-caste Brahmin and Chhetri families. The majority of respondents included in the study and those who primarily follow menstrual customs in Nepal belong to these caste groups. The finding is consistent with Pedersen's (2002) results, where high caste women in Bali were more likely to follow stringent practices. Adherents are equally divided among all age groups. My finding challenges the general notion that older women are more likely to follow menstrual rules strictly. Ten percent (3) of adherents are illiterate, 48 percent (15) have primary education, another 32 percent (10) have secondary education, and 10 percent (3) have undergraduate degrees. Adherents have a lower level of education compared to women in other groups. Fifty-five percent (17) of adherents live in a nuclear family, 42 percent (13) live in an extended family, and one adherent lives alone. Adherence is more prevalent among the middle class. Findings support earlier assertions that the middle class lays claim to traditional values to distinguish themselves from the crudeness of the lower class and morally devoid lifestyles of the upper class (Liechty 1996).

Rima, a 38-year-old Chhetri woman, is an adherent. She had her first period at the age of 14. She is originally from another district in Bagmati Province, moved to Kathmandu 22 years ago, and is currently living in a nuclear family. Recalling her first period, Rima mentions, "I stayed with my married sister for eleven days. I didn't need to hide. We don't have that *challan*. I could accompany my sister to get fodder or go to the jungle with her. As I was staying with my sister, we would laugh a lot and have fun."

Unlike women from other parts of the country, Rima did not hide or live in a menstrual hut during her first period. Rima has fond memories of her first period, where she spent time with her married sister. The word *challan* translates as a trend in English, but several respondents use the term to denote current practices in their community.

Rima stayed with her sister for eleven days. Upon returning, she wore a new set of clothes. The host applied tika (a mixture of vermillion powder and rice grains placed on someone's head as a blessing), indicating her purified status and entrance into adulthood. Many other respondents mention following a similar kind of practice where their families performed rituals signifying their adult statuses like giving a new pair of *gunyo* and *cholo,* a traditional attire worn mainly by adult women. This tradition of marking women's entrance into adulthood contributes to creating gender identities at the individual level (Risman and Davis 2013; Scarborough and Risman 2017).

After return to her home, Rima's father and brother, who had already had their *bratabandha* did not consume food touched by her for an additional eleven days. *Bratabandha* is an initiation ceremony for Hindu men marking their entrance into adulthood. The extended restrictions not to touch male members of the family supports Bennett's (1983) assertions that high caste men who already had their *bratabandha* are considered most at risk from menstrual pollution. Adherents were more likely to avoid touching male family members compared to other groups.

Rima, a mother of two children, now purifies herself and enters the kitchen on the fourth day after migrating to Kathmandu. She proudly claims, "even in Kathmandu, I don't neglect these practices. I think it is because we follow this religion. Our mother and father trained us into this *sanskar,* and now we are habituated to menstrual practices.

These days' people say that it is nothing. They say it is our flowering process and don't follow these practices. I don't touch my husband or anyone who already had their *bratabandha*." Rima takes pride in her ability to still adhere to menstrual practices even after migrating to Kathmandu. Her statements indicate an understanding of the biological processes. Rima still chooses to follow these practices as per *sanskar*, which loosely translates as cultural socialization, received in her natal family. Rima adds, "It's not like I don't touch while people are watching and touch when no one is around. I have properly followed these practices." Rima demonstrates deep internalization of menstrual restrictions where she follows menstrual practices even when she is away from others. Her husband's willingness to take on domestic responsibility during her periods also allows Rima to adhere.

Like Rima, most respondents whose practices can be categorized as adherent emphasize how they have internalized these practices. Several respondents claim that their families' socialized them into these practices since early childhood and highlight how hard it is to give up their internalized rules. Adherents' emphasis on internalization also resonates with Rothchild and Piya's (2020) assertions that women internalize menstrual practices and self-regulate their behaviors. Twenty-two percent (7) of adherents who strictly follow these practices state that they follow these practices for religious reasons and worry it might be sinful if they do not. The respondents who follow menstrual rules for religious reasons emphasize the need to maintain ritual purity. Past studies examining *Chhaupadi* found similar results where women were fearful of accidentally touching something (Kadariya and Aro 2015; United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator's Office 2011).

Adherents also follow these practices to show respect to their elders and give continuity to traditional practices. Rekha is a 19-year-old adherent who was born and raised in Kathmandu. She belongs to a Tamang (an ethnic group) family. Rekha avoids going to the temple and entering the prayer room during her periods. She argues, "it is an old cultural practice that we have been following and our ideas developed around those cultures, so I am worried that something bad might happen." Rekha, who belongs to a liberal Tamang family, shows that women learn the stigma surrounding menstruation from their immediate family and the larger community. Rekha has internalized these practices, and she self regulates her behavior as she worries that something terrible might happen if she defies menstrual practices. Although Rekha belongs to a Tamang family, her family follows menstrual customs to a certain extent. Brahmins' widespread migration in Nepal has influenced various ethnic groups, with groups adopting Brahmin rituals and traditions (Bista 1972).

Twenty-six percent (8) of adherents associate menstruation with dirt and argue that following menstrual practices allow them to maintain hygiene. A few respondents use terms like germ and bacteria to emphasize a need to maintain sanitary conditions. Usha, a 58-year-old, Brahmin adherent from an upper-class family, argues,

> We started following these practices for religious reasons, but now they follow because period has germs. But we followed for a religious reason because we were worried that it might be sinful. We were worried that we need to pay for the sin committed in this life in our next lives. We might be born as a dog. If we touch male members, our husband will be reborn as an ox in the next life. Women are reborn as a bitch.

Usha justifies her practice using both orthodox beliefs, where menstrual defilement is sinful, and media messaging. Widespread media messages where the consumer industry frames menstruation as a hygiene crisis to be managed using commercially available menstrual products might influence adherents' associations of menstruation with dirt, germs, and bacteria (Kissling 2006), thus media messages reinforce traditional beliefs (Arora 2017). These messages emphasize the need to keep clean and maintain hygiene during menstruation.

The majority of adherents did not identify any disadvantages to following menstrual practices. Thirty-two (10) percent of adherents appreciate that following menstrual practices provide them some respite from domestic chores. Thirty-eight-year-old Sabita, who belongs to a lower-middle-class Brahmin family, outlines the benefits of following menstrual practices. She claims, "We get some rest, and our body gets an opportunity to rest. I don't think there are any limitations. For me, it's all benefits. You get to rest, talk to people, watch television and play with your mobile phone. No one scolds you for doing that or asks you to come here for a moment." Sabita's statement indicates that women have limited leisure time during ordinary days, and other family members may constantly require their attention.

Like Sabita, Radha, a 60-year-old Chhetri woman, also appreciates respite provided by menstrual practices but for a different reason. "One of the benefits is chores get a little easier. Most of the women in Nepal must do domestic chores day in and day out. At least men cook for the family during those four days. Even male family members get to know what women's work is," claims Radha. Although Radha considers cooking women's work, she welcomes the break menstrual practices could provide from domestic

chores' consistent demands. Radha appreciates that menstrual practices force men to perform household chores, mainly to cook for the family during those four days.

Saili, a 49-year-old, who reached menopause several years ago, views menstrual practices as a disciplinary mechanism and argues, "I think if there are no disciplinary mechanisms and if there is freedom for everything, it is harder for survival. I believe it is beneficial to discipline society. There is no guarantee that giving up all practices is for betterment." Saili's statements might indicate compliance to normative femininity and staying within its boundaries. Following menstrual practices, Saili can self-discipline and maintain the image of a virtuous woman. Saili's narratives on menstrual restrictions show how internalizing these practices at the individual level helps create gendered selves (Risman and Davis 2013; Scarborough and Risman 2017). Twenty-two percent (7) of adherents claim that a significant challenge posed by menstrual practices is the inability to fulfill their gender roles, particularly cooking and taking care of younger children. Only one adherent views menstrual practices as a way to dominate women.

Like Saili, who views menstrual practices as essential to stay within feminine boundaries, 62-year-old Yamuna, who belongs to a middle-class Chhetri family, considers menstrual restrictions necessary for fulfilling women's duties as mothers. She argues, "Fruit comes only after flower. You won't have a child if you don't menstruate. So we need to follow all these rules during menstruation. If you deceit and take medicine, you might give birth to children with a congenital disorder. So if you sin, it is going to impact your offspring." Yamuna claims that following menstrual restrictions is essential to maintain children's well-being. She also claims that following menstrual rules provides bodily awareness, "If you don't follow menstrual practices, you won't be able to track

your pregnancy. If you don't follow these practices, you won't keep track of your next period or why you haven't had your period so far. If you have regular periods, following menstrual practices will make you aware of the missed period." Yamuna's narrative shows how menstrual restrictions may provide women more information about their bodily functions and offer agency over their bodies.

Several adherents differentiate their menstrual practices from the practices followed in the western part of the country. Saili outlines the distinction between good and bad practices. She argues,

> During the old times, where you worked a lot outside without access to enough food, the practice was terrible. But I don't think it is awful when women are asked not to enter the prayer room and kitchen. I don't think women must have access to those areas during their periods. People practice these rituals in the western region where women are tortured with the painful practice; I don't think that is *dharma* (religious merits); I believe that is *aaparadh* (crime).

Saili distinguishes *paap* and *dharma.* The word *paap* translates as sin in English, and the word *dharma* translates as a virtue but is used in Nepali to refer to religious merits. Saili does not think that stringent practices followed in the western part of the country earn any *dharma.* Instead, she views it as *aaparadh* or a crime committed against women. The broader conversation where the government of Nepal and national and international media have framed forceful abandonment to the menstrual hut as a crime may have influenced Saili's narrative. She also considered practices where women are forced to

work in the agricultural field but don't have access to the kitchen as bad. By referring to various practices, Saili absolves her adherence to menstrual practices.

Like Saili, 66-year-old Uma, in differentiating her practices from strict practices followed in the western region, claims, "Our practices are not as strict as the western region. I don't think our practices are doing *dur-bewahar* to women." Uma does not think her practices are mistreating (*dur-bewahar*) women. A certain level of menstrual stigma is prevalent across many societies. A reference to the most stringent rules enables individuals to focus away from their practices while scrutinizing others' practices. Uma recalls suffering from painful menstruation before she reached menopause and views menstrual restrictions as an opportunity to rest and maintain sanitary conditions.

Aspirants

Out of eight aspirants, seven live in a nuclear family, and only one lives in an extended family. All aspirants are married and are between 26 and 43 years old. Six aspirants are employed outside of the household and are from the lower class. Only one aspirant belongs to a Brahmin family, three are from Indigenous caste groups, and four are from Chhetri families. Aspirants in their prime age are mothers with young children who have more domestic responsibilities, and their class statuses also demand their engagement in the labor market. In general, aspirants believe that it is beneficial to follow these practices. Five aspirants view menstrual practices as essential to provide rest; one thought it was necessary to give rest and maintain ritual purity; two aspirants consider menstrual practices crucial to maintaining ritual purity. Like adherents, aspirants argue that there are no disadvantages to following menstrual restrictions.

Anu, a 30-year-old, is an aspirant. Anu belongs to a lower-middle-class Chhetri family and has been living in Kathmandu for the last 16 years. She had her first period at the age of 14 and stayed with her married sister for 11 days. Anu followed menstrual practices six days before marriage, where she slept on the house's porch and avoided touching anyone. She mentions, "today is the sixth day of my period, and I have not lit incense in my beauty parlor. Although I don't pray, I have to cook. As soon as my husband returns home, I stop cooking during my period. My husband thinks that it is important to follow menstrual practices during periods." Anu's husband, currently employed in a foreign country, considers menstrual customs essential to follow. She now cooks for herself and her young son, even during her periods. She also presents a comprehensive understanding of the reasons that encourage her to continue following menstrual customs. She states,

> Scientifically, people say that we should not follow menstrual customs. I think that is also true. But we have this *samajik chap*. I believe that is the reason why we are following it. I think this concept of following the practice and not touching anything is wrong. But we came out of the same *samajik samrachana* and followed menstrual practices even when we know it is wrong. *Hamro maan le nai mandaina*.

Anu illustrates menstruation's scientific knowledge and agrees that following these practices is wrong. Additionally, she demonstrates an understanding of structural factors when she argues that being part of a social structure or *samajik samrachana* encourages her to follow these practices even though she recognizes that menstrual

practices are unfair. The phrase *samajik chap* refers to the social influences and hints towards the process of socialization.

Like Anu, several respondents also used the phrase *hamro maan le nai mandaina*, which translates as "our hearts do not permit us," when asked why they adhere. Any other reasons do not guide aspirants' adherence to these practices than by their hearts. This quote highlights how respondents internalize menstrual customs and attempt to self-regulate their behavior. Although Anu aspires to continue following menstrual rules, her current living arrangement with her son restricts her from doing so. Her situation indicates that even when women may have internalized menstrual practices, adherence is also influenced by other factors rather than solely on women's self-regulation. Family arrangement and class status are two important factors influencing women's adherence.

Diwa, a 28-year-old Newar (Vaishya) respondent living in a nuclear family, is an aspirant. Diwa outlines why it is impossible to follow extensive rules while residing in a rented room in Kathmandu, "you have to sleep, cook, and pray in the same room. The situation may be different for those who own a house." She adds that you can ask neighbors in the villages to cook for you if there are no other women in the household. In these statements, she underlines two additional resources: the availability of physical space and human resources, to make adherence to menstrual restrictions possible.

Aarti, a 35-year-old who runs an eatery, followed menstrual practices for seven days when she lived with her husband's extended family. She mentions, "If there are others around or your children are grown up and can cook for themselves or if your husband is kind enough to cook food for the family and also gives you food, it may be beneficial to follow menstrual practices. But I don't follow these practices because I run

an eatery." This quote shows Aarti's willingness to follow menstrual practices. It highlights the household division of labor in a Nepali family where women are solely responsible for domestic chores, and men are considered kind if they perform them. Aarti is comfortable cooking for her customers, husband, and son.

Like Anu, other aspirants also emphasize how they have internalized menstrual practices and worry that their inability to follow menstrual customs may have consequences. For example, Geeta, a 42-year-old Brahmin respondent, grew up in a traditional family where her mother demanded strict adherence to menstrual customs for four days each month. Geeta belongs to a middle-class family and stopped following menstrual rules after marriage. Nonetheless, Geeta struggles to give up the practices she learned in her natal home. She follows to a certain extent as she grew up respecting traditional practices. Geeta asserts, "Even if I fail an exam, I wonder, is it because I touched something. If some work does not go right, I feel scared and ask, is it because I touched something?" Although Geeta cannot follow menstrual practices, she is worried that her defiance may have negative consequences. She seems to have internalized the norms that her mother taught her during the early years of her life. Five aspirants mention that they follow menstrual practices to a certain extent as it is a traditional practice.

Geeta, a mother of two sons, thinks following menstrual practices is vital to providing rest to women during their periods. Geeta, who also works as a teacher, mentions, "the first day of the period, I don't have an appetite, and I feel weak." For Geeta, menstrual practices may provide some respite from her second shift on the days when she feels physically frail. One of the significant reasons why Geeta cannot follow is that she is the mother of two sons. The typical Nepali family rarely asks sons to

contribute to domestic chores. Additionally, mothers are also responsible for socializing their daughters, which might increase adherence rates among mothers who have daughters in their families.

Negotiators

Like aspirants, negotiators also are forced to do domestic chores during their periods. Twenty-five respondents are classified as negotiators. Negotiators follow menstrual practices when beneficial and do not hesitate to push current practice boundaries when needed. Participants included in this group are younger, 80 percent (20) are under the age of 36, and the negotiator's age range is between 19 and 52. Most single (11) respondents are negotiators. Negotiators also have a higher education level than other groups, where 60 percent (15) of respondents included have undergraduate and graduate degrees. Negotiators reside in both nuclear and extended families. Eighty percent (20) of negotiators belong to middle and upper-class families. As a group, negotiators are younger, have high education levels, and come from comparatively well-off families. They have access to more information, skills, and resources to efficiently maneuver menstrual restrictions prevalent in their households. The majority of negotiators (21) are employed.

Negotiators also view menstrual restrictions as a part of the tradition focusing on socialization. Kabita, a 52-year-old, who belongs to a middle-class Brahmin family, argues,

> I focus on our traditional practices and what our elders taught us. Decisions are ours. Like I cook, which means everything is impure. But we have been told that you shouldn't touch god. We go to funeral

> ceremonies where they recite *Garuda Purana* (religious text). They say if you touch during your third day, you will become a bitch. If you touch during your fourth day, you become an ox. So you start doubting your actions. We all are social beings, we attend programs that happen in our society, and when such things come up in *Purana*, you feel the need to practice menstruation customs to a certain extent. That is the reason I avoid religious chores, but other than that, I do all domestic activities.

Kabita, in her narrative, highlights how she has learned traditional practices during her early socialization. She is hesitant to touch religious objects as she is continuously being socialized into these practices via various religious texts and functions. Kabita has internalized these practices to a certain extent, yet she also highlights her agency to choose the types of menstrual restrictions she follows. Kabita, who lives in a nuclear family and holds a graduate degree, has the necessary cultural and material resources to modify her practices. Her position as a college-educated middle-class Brahmin woman allows her to reinterpret menstrual customs irrespective of the pressure she experiences when listening to religious texts and attending ceremonies. Nonetheless, not all respondents have a similar kind of agency over their practices. Her case reinforces earlier assertions that the structure empowers individuals differently (Sewell 2005).

Thirty-six percent (9) of negotiators considered menstruation a biological process of getting rid of bodily impurities. “It is a natural process of getting rid of dirt. But here it has become like a rule where you need to follow these practices,” argues 35-year-old Indira, who belongs to a middle-class Brahmin family. Negotiators acknowledge the

biological process and demonstrate an understanding that these restrictions may be socially constructed. Nonetheless, negotiators also associate menstruation with impurity.

Negotiators also question the validity of menstrual restrictions by highlighting how it is socially constructed. Sangita, a 27-year-old Brahmin respondent who views menstruation as a natural process, argues, "One should not mix a natural process with religion and tradition which is completely manmade. All these beliefs and customs are completely manmade. Even if you want to follow it, it should be a choice, not a compulsion." For Sangita, the decision to follow these practices should be a woman's choice. Sangita also recalls how her perceptions surrounding menstrual restrictions have changed with time. She recounts,

> Initially, I felt like it was my responsibility and duty to follow menstrual practices. You submit as a child. But after six months or a year, I don't exactly remember, I started getting rebellious. Initially, I was scared to touch around. But once you learn that it does not matter, you begin to unlearn all these practices. Initially, you are just angry, and you question why you aren't letting me in. But later, you don't feel like arguing anymore. You feel like it's their home, and it's their rules. Like now, I am least bothered.

Sangita now chooses to follow menstrual practices around her mother to avoid confrontation and respect her mother's beliefs.

Fifty-six percent (14) of negotiators view menstrual practices as a way to provide respite from domestic chores. Durga, a 20-year-old, single Chhetri respondent, is originally from western Nepal and has been living alone in Kathmandu for the past year.

She recalls, “when I was in tenth and eleventh grade while menstruating, I stayed in my room for seven days and didn’t need to work in the kitchen. I felt so much relief. If I think about work that I need to do after returning from school, I felt that I was more comfortable in the room.” Young girls in various parts of the country are responsible for domestic chores after returning home from school. Menstrual practices often provide them time away from their responsibilities.

Similarly, Rashmi, a 30-year-old married respondent who works in a non-governmental organization, mentions, “In a way, I feel some relief during these four days. Sometimes I need to cook early in the morning. The time I get during periods is like ‘me time.’” She believes that menstrual restrictions are designed to provide rest to women. She argues, “You are not feeling well, you are having cramps, you feel tired, and I feel maybe these days are given to us to relax.” Rashmi, who lives in an extended family, has a full-time job and a toddler, appreciates the time away from domestic chores. Her adherence allows her to keep her in-laws happy as she enjoys her ‘me time.’ Previous studies conducted in India and Bali found similar results where women viewed menstrual practices as an opportunity to rest (Das 2008; Pedersen 2002).

Nonetheless, negotiators also are more likely to acknowledge the discriminatory and restrictive nature of menstrual practices. Several negotiators evaluate the argument that considered menstrual practices as a respite from domestic chores. They admit that families in rural areas might ask women to perform heavier duties outside the household to counter the rest narrative. Additionally, negotiators are also critical that women would not need to seek respite during those four days if both men and women contributed equally to domestic chores. 30-year-old Manju laments,

> If a couple shares domestic chores day to day, resting for four days is not essential. But that does not happen. Even in my context, my father did not perform any domestic chores, my brother did not perform any household chores, and it is awkward to ask my husband to do so. If I ask my husband to cook, he cooks. But he is not like a woman who thinks that it is her job to prepare food for the family. I think it is different when you cook because you want to. I also used to enjoy cooking when I cooked occasionally.

Manju, who grew up in a household where her father and brother rarely performed domestic chores, hesitates to seek her husband's support. Manju might also be worried about how her mother-in-law would perceive her if she asks for help. In her statement, Manju distinguishes helping versus responsibility where women are responsible for cooking and other domestic chores and men are just helping out. Her narrative is also crucial to highlight the difference between cooking a special dish and cooking every day. Negotiators who are married and expected to perform domestic chores particularly appreciate the respite from these chores. Nonetheless, the majority (11) of married negotiators argue that they feel restricted and are unable to fulfill their childcare duties. Sixteen percent (4) of negotiators claim that menstrual restrictions are a mechanism to dominate women.

Twenty percent (5) of negotiators recall their stay in a foreign country and how they did not follow any practices during that time. Another 16 percent (4) of negotiators, currently living alone or living with their siblings in Kathmandu for work or to pursue higher education, mention similar flexibility to shape their practices during their time

away. However, all the negotiators who spent time away from their family mention that they follow more stringent rules when traveling to their parents' home.

Rama, a 33-year-old Brahmin respondent, lived in the United States with her husband for almost a year. She recalls not following any practices and sharing the same bed with her husband during her stay. Rama's experiences are similar to Sharma's (2014) study where individuals identifying as part of the Nepali diaspora followed more flexible menstrual practices modifying them according to their convenience. Rama grew up in an upper-class family in Kathmandu and had her first period at 13. She experienced mixed emotions during that time. Rama was sad that she had to hide for six days and was not allowed to look at her brother. She also remembers that other female family members visited her bearing gifts. Her cousin spent time with her. When Rama insisted on watching television, her mother sent her brother to Rama's relative's place and allowed her to watch television. Practice in Rama's natal family became more lenient with time. Like Rama, negotiators start bargaining about their menstruation from an early age to make the experience more manageable for them to follow later.

Compared to her natal family, Rama's in-laws follow strict practices. After their return from abroad, Rama's husband started to advocate following menstrual customs strictly. Her husband asked her to sleep on a floor bedding. As Rama felt uncomfortable sleeping on the floor bedding, she started going to her natal home during her period. Rama asked her husband to sleep together. Worried that his mother will know about it, Rama's husband sleeps on the floor bedding during her periods. Rama holds limited agency to determine her practices. She is living in an extended family in a house owned and headed by her father-in-law. Rama's husband is attempting to address her concerns

and show respect to his parent's beliefs. Her case also supports earlier assertions that menstrual customs may also force others in the household to change and restrict their behaviors where her brother and her husband have had to modify their actions during her cycle (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). A few other respondents also state that their husbands moved to another room during their periods.

Rama also appreciates that menstruation forced her husband to take on domestic responsibilities. "I also think that following these practices may have a positive impact in a society where men don't contribute to domestic chores at all and consider it as solely women's duty. Like my husband, he is active when I am menstruating, or else on other days, he has this mentality where he expects me to give him even a glass of water." Rama values the ways menstrual practices challenge traditional gender roles for a couple of days. She and several other respondents appreciate that menstrual restrictions force men to engage in domestic chores and that menstrual practices provide her some respite from household duties.

The experiences of respondents who moved to Kathmandu with their younger siblings are, to a certain extent, like respondents who travel abroad. Respondents who live alone or with younger siblings enjoy more flexibility to shape their practices than those who live with extended family members and relatives. For example, Alina, a 23-year-old respondent studying in Kathmandu for the past six years, outlines changes in her menstrual practices over the years. She elaborates, "In Kathmandu, I don't cook and touch water for three days. Previously I had to follow these rules for five days and needed to ask even for water. Now only my younger brothers live with me, so I reduced these rules myself to three days. If my younger brother is not around and it is just my sister and

me, we don't follow menstrual rules. That too if my family came to know about it, they would be really upset." Alina, who has been consistently pushing the boundaries of menstrual practices, still strictly follows menstrual customs when visiting her family. Unlike Rama, who did not observe any rules when living abroad, Alina follows menstrual practices to a certain extent during her stay in Kathmandu. However, she is actively engaged in determining the number of days she follows menstrual practices and has been able to modify the rules to make them more agreeable to her.

Twenty-two-year-old, Dipa, who belongs to a Chhetri family, claims that she does not mind following menstrual practices because, "If we had to work around the household and in the kitchen, maybe I would have questioned why is this happening to me? But as I don't have to do any work in the kitchen, so I think it's no harm to follow menstrual practices and preserve these beliefs." As young negotiators do not regularly perform domestic chores, they are not bothered by menstrual restrictions prohibiting them from entering the kitchen.

However, not all respondents appreciate that they are not able to follow menstrual customs when living alone. Alka, a 31-year-old, Brahmin respondent suffers from painful menstrual cramps. She lived alone for several years while she was working in rural districts. She mentions, "it is easier to live with your family during the period. When you are at home, you have your bed, your toilet, someone is serving you food, and you don't have to work. It is so much easier." Alka, who has a painful period, feels relief that she did not need to cook when living with her family during menstruation. Both Rama's and Alka's statements indicate that young women are more comfortable when they don't experience restrictions within their private space, in these cases, their bedrooms. Alka

explicitly states that she might feel uncomfortable if her family asked her to sleep on the floor bedding. Most negotiators do not mind their limited access to the kitchen as long as their family does not restrict them in their personal space.

Opponents

Like negotiators, many opponents (5) also belong to upper-middle and middle-class families. Practices of seven respondents can be classified as opponents where they vehemently contest prescribed menstrual restrictions, following only rarely. Five opponents are married. Opponents all had educational experience, ranging from primary to graduate degree. Like adherents, opponents are also from all age and caste groups, where three are Brahmin, three are Chhetris, and one opponent is from a Newar (Vaishya) caste group. The majority of opponents (4) live in a nuclear family, and two live alone.

Shakti is the only opponent residing in an extended family. Fifty-one-year-old Shakti belongs to a Newar family and got married before menarche. She recalls that her natal family strictly followed menstrual customs. However, Shakti's in-laws only follow a few restrictions, including avoiding entering storage areas, prayer rooms, and touching during festivals. She lives in an extended family with her mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Shakti holds the majority of the household's power as her husband is the head of the family. She has the agency to determine practices that she and her daughter-in-law will follow in the home. Women's living arrangements and position within the household are crucial to holding strong opposition against menstrual customs. The result is consistent with Wong's (2018) study examining women following *Chhaupadi,* where women's

ability to modify their rules increased as they become primary decision-makers within their household.

Bina, a 19-year-old, Chhetri respondent follows Christianity and is one of two single opponents. She is also one of the two respondents who currently does not observe any menstrual practices. Bina had her first menstruation at the age of 15, and her family sent her to live in her school's hostel for a month. Although Bina's mother did not follow menstrual practices, her mother decided to send her to the school's hostel as she was worried not doing so would anger Bina's grandfather. Her experience resonates with Christian respondents' experiences from Baumann et al.'s (2020) study, where they experienced social pressure to follow menstrual practices.

Additionally, Bina's mother instructed her not to meet her brother at school. She could not enter the school's kitchen and remembers how her brother used to come to visit her at the school. Her restriction from entering the school's kitchen shows the possibility that even institutions like schools may impose menstrual restrictions on women to a certain extent. Currently, Bina has been living in a hostel for the past year. Distance from her extended family gives Bina more agency to shape her menstrual practices.

Like Bina, 50-year-old Seema also does not follow any practices. Seema, belonging to a Brahmin family, followed stringent rules in her natal home. She was able to hide her first period from her family for the first two years and was worried that she would not be able to go back to school due to having her period. Her family came to know about her period when she stained her clothes while at school. Seema's mother sent her into hiding for thirteen days as per the family's custom. Seema remembers going on a hunger strike for the first few days, "I was worried that my family wouldn't send me back

to school, get me married, and stop my education. Whenever my mother, sisters, cousins, or sister-in-law came to visit me, I would start crying and did not eat anything." Seema's mother, seeing her condition, convinced her dad to allow her to pursue education. Seema became the first in the family to attend school even after the start of her menstruation. Seema's case illustrates how women hold a certain level of agency to determine their menstrual experiences.

Yet, not all women can skillfully navigate menstrual customs. Seema, who had her first period at the age of 15, was old enough to gather necessary resources and hide her period from her family for the first two years. Seventeen-year-old Seema also took extreme measures to persuade her family to allow her to remain in school. Similar strategies may not help other respondents who had their periods earlier or are unwilling to adopt a similarly radical approach.

Seema strictly followed menstrual practices when she lived with her natal family, who required menstruating women to go into hiding for three days each month. Upon completion of an intermediate degree, Seema started teaching at two local schools. After following menstrual practices for the first two months, she requested that her parents not make her hide during her period because "I (Seema) was missing classes three days in a month. I was teaching in two places, and if I missed so many classes, I was not going to get good evaluations." After convincing her parents, Seema became the first woman in her family to appear in public during her periods. In this case, Seema made an additional bargain related to her increase in education level and a promise to bring home income. Additionally, she did not have to take extreme measures like going on a hunger strike to convince her parents.

Working as a women's health activist, Seema elected not to follow any menstrual customs after migrating to Kathmandu. She argues, "once I started living in Kathmandu, where I was independently living, cooking, was able to make my own decisions, was earning money, had my room, then I stopped following these practices." Her statement illustrates that resources like income and residence are required for women to resist menstrual expectations. Power over living situations seems to be crucial. After marriage, Seema told her husband that she does not follow any menstrual practices, and he was okay with it. Seema currently has all the necessary resources living in a nuclear family, including her husband's permissive attitude to challenge the practice openly. Her access to resources gives her more agency to determine her adherence to menstrual practices.

Six opponents argue that following menstrual customs have no benefits. Only one opponent claimed that it could provide women some rest. Like negotiators, opponents consistently highlight the contradiction with the rest narrative where families don't allow menstruating women inside the kitchen but may ask them to perform heavier chores outside. Opponents are also more vocal about their opposition to these restrictions. Four opponents consider it a mechanism to maintain women's subordinate status within Nepali society. For example, 44-year-old Sita considers menstruation as a religious mechanism to control women. She argues,

> I think menstrual practices are one of the ways to control daughters. Because I think menstruation is one of the crucial events that signify a daughter's maturity. However, controlling daughters starts at their birth. We pierce their ears, which is painful, bind them there, pierce their nose and bind them, make them wear *kalli* (traditional anklets), bind them, and

> make them wear *chura* (bangles) bind them. We have always been controlling our daughters, and even later on, menstrual practices are also controlling them.

Sita, drawing an analogy with various traditional practices of adorning young daughters, argues how these practices, and menstrual practices cumulatively, restrict women within normative femininity. These practices are socializing women to the current gender order and limiting their possibilities.

Similarly, Seema views menstruation as a mechanism to control unmarried daughters' sexuality. She elaborates, "Elders are worried that their daughters might have a love marriage and if they are sexually active, they might get pregnant before marriage which is disrespectful. And this might also bring dishonor to the family. One is related to the family's honor and reputation. Another is related to purity." Seema's narrative indicates an attempt to control the sexuality of unmarried daughters whose illegitimate sexual involvement might taint families' reputation and their future marriage prospects. Bennett (1983) found similar results where menarche before marriage threatened the girl's purity and the natal family's reputation. Menstrual practices also provide information to families that their daughters are not engaging in any illegitimate affairs. Each period is a testimony of the absence of an unwanted pregnancy that may tarnish families' honor.

Table 2: Summary of the Individual Level Analysis

Material conditions: Menstruating bodies, income, education, age, and ownership of physical space			
Cultural Processes: Society's expectations for women to follow menstrual customs			
Adherents	**Aspirants**	**Negotiators**	**Opponents**
Take pride in their adherence	Fear that their inability to rigorously follow menstrual customs may have negative consequences	Part of traditions learned during socialization	Vehemently contest prescribed menstrual restrictions
Deep internalization of menstrual customs contributing to create gendered selves	Deep internalization of menstrual customs	Way to provide respite from domestic chores and challenge gender division of labor	No benefits of following menstrual customs
Menstrual customs providing bodily awareness	Essential to provide rest	Did not mind limited access to the kitchen if not restricted in their private space	Mechanism to maintain women's subordinate status
No disadvantages of following menstrual customs	No disadvantages of following menstrual customs	Mechanism to dominate women	Mechanism to control unmarried daughters' sexuality

Table two presents a summary of key ideas included in the individual level analysis. At the individual level, apart from physical bodies, income, education, age, and ownership of physical space are some of the additional material conditions impacting women's adherence to menstrual practices. The influence of cultural processes that expect women to follow menstrual restrictions largely depends on women's access to these resources. All respondents demonstrate their agency to reinforce, reinterpret, modify, and resist menstrual practices.

Adherents are from all age groups, with most of them from middle-class families.

Adherents have someone else in the family and physical space available to maintain distance from their family. They are also more likely to intensely focus on the process of socialization and how they have internalized these practices. Adherents take pride in their ability to continue following menstrual practices. They attempt to redefine their rules by differentiating them from the country's western region's customs. Adherents employ both religious and media messaging that considered menstruation as a dirty event to justify their practices.

Aspirants also focus on internalization. Unlike adherents, aspirants are from lower and lower-middle-class families and are in their prime reproductive age. Most aspirants who are also employed cannot follow these practices as they don't have someone else to take responsibility. Negotiators are younger and more educated. They belong to upper and middle-class families and have more skills and resources to maneuver their periods. Negotiators living alone or with their siblings mention having more agency to shape their practices. They are more comfortable if families do not restrict them within their personal space. Compared to other groups, negotiators highlight menstruation as a respite from domestic chores. Young negotiators, whose families do not ask them to work in the kitchen, do not mind being restricted during their periods. Negotiators redefine their adherence to menstrual practices as an opportunity to rest and a way to show respect to their elders.

Like negotiators, the majority of opponents are also from upper-middle and middle-class families. A majority of opponents live in a nuclear family where they have more control over their physical space. Opponents are continually resisting menstrual practices. At the individual level, it is hard to argue whether respondents are endorsing or

opposing gender norms solely based on their observance or defiance of menstrual restrictions. Some respondents are pushing the boundaries of menstrual practices to absolve men from domestic chores. In contrast, others continue to follow as they appreciate how menstrual practices, for a certain time, challenge existing gender norms and provide women an opportunity to rest. Respondents' adherence to menstrual restrictions and how they might reproduce or subvert current gender norms largely depends on why women adhere or resist menstrual practices and the meaning they associate with their actions.

CHAPTER V

CONFORMITY AND RESISTANCE: INTERACTIONAL LEVEL ANALYSIS

In this section, I ask, "What actions do women engage in to conform to or resist menstrual customs?" Interactional level analysis within GST allows for the opportunity to outline the ways women engage in conformity and resistance to menstrual practices. Adhering to menstrual rules enables women to do gender and maintain an image of a virtuous woman. However, women also regularly engage in modifying, resisting, and undoing menstrual practices. The material processes at the interactional level include valued resources like menstrual products to manage periods and access to human and financial resources, allowing observence of menstrual practices. The cultural processes are what people expect from each other and themselves. In this chapter, I examine what others expect from women regarding adherence to menstrual practices and what women expect from themselves.

Adherents follow menstrual restrictions as it allows them to "do gender" and they are willing to strategically modify their practice when menstrual rules limit their ability to perform gender roles and define them as circumstantial demands. Aspirants engage in selective observance of menstrual practices, with their gender identity dependent on fulfilling domestic responsibilities and bringing home additional income. Negotiators

employ strategic resistance to tactically modify menstrual rules as needed while limiting disagreement with others. Opponents shift between openly resisting and engaging in strategic resistance. It is challenging for opponents to avoid menstrual restrictions as they are held accountable by their families and the larger society. In the following sections, using representative examples, I outline how adherents, aspirants, negotiators, and opponents conform and resist menstrual restrictions at the interactional level.

Adherents

The majority (29) of adherents avoid cooking food during their period, with only six percent (2) of adherents mentioning that they cook during their periods. One adherent belongs to a Tamang family (ethnic group) where menstruating women are allowed to cook. Another respondent lives with her young child, and is obliged to cook. In general, adherents avoid entering the kitchen, cooking, entering the prayer room, or engaging in religious activities during their periods.

Parbati, a 56-year-old, is an adherent. She belongs to a Brahmin family and reached menopause several years ago. She outlines her practices, “We avoid cooking food, praying, touching religious objects and utensils, and touching male family members.” Parbati managed to follow strict rules until the end of her cycle. She outlines the virtues of a woman, “Early in the morning I wake up, sweep and mop the entire house. And then we pray to god. Keeping things clean and praying are some of the virtues of a woman.” She argues that following menstrual restrictions allows her to maintain cleanliness and purity around the household. All respondents who had reached menopause before participation in the study claimed that they strictly adhered to

menstrual customs. The group uses their adherence as a way of doing gender and maintaining their image of virtuous women.

Sapana, a 33-year-old Brahmin respondent, is an adherent. She outlines her current practices,

> Still, in Kathmandu, I don't cook rice for three days, and on the fourth day, I take a shower, wash clothes, and then I cook. I don't even sleep with my daughter. If my daughter sees something, she might ask questions. That is the reason I ask her to sleep separately. My daughter sleeps on the bed, and I sleep separately on the floor.

Sapana manages to follow menstrual practices even while living in a rented room in Kathmandu. She later states that she will teach her daughter about menstrual practices. However, Sapana decides to sleep separately to avoid questions her daughter may have about the biological process. Mothers are more likely to provide information surrounding menstrual customs while avoiding discussion of biological process, consistent with Rothchild and Piya's (2020) findings.

Sapana claims that following these practices allows her to fulfill her roles as a daughter-in-law. She mentions, "*Deu, pitra, issta, mitra sabai mannu parcha hamile.* Suppose we touch wherever we like during our periods. What is the use of respecting them?" Sapana argues that she needs to show respect to god, ancestors, relatives, and friends. She views touching everywhere during periods as disrespectful. Maintaining purity around the household permits women to show respect to traditional ways. Sapana's adherence to menstrual practices is one way she is "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987). Adherents emphasize that

honoring gods and ancestors and maintaining ritual purity in the kitchen allows them to preserve their image as virtuous women (Bennett 1983).

Sapana highlights how engaging in menstrual practices allows her to maintain purity around the household and respect elders. Similarly, 46-year-old Laxmi, who belongs to a Brahmin family, stresses why it is essential to show respect. She argues, "I think women must follow these rules and show our respect to god. We need to show respect to people who deserve respect. If you keep following these rules, it will benefit us. If you maintain a good relationship with your friends and relatives, they will support you. Even if you don't know how to talk properly, but if your friend does, that might also benefit you." For Laxmi, adherence to menstrual practices permits her to maintain support from friends and relatives. She highlights more concrete benefits that women may derive if they can maintain a robust social network. Laxmi's husband left her eleven years ago. Maintaining healthy relationships with friends and relatives is essential to gain valuable resources like a voice to put forward Laxmi's concerns and access her husband's ancestral property to support her children. Laxmi stopped menstruating after she had to remove her uterus after the birth of her second child. However, she makes her daughter strictly follow these practices. Although Laxmi does not need to follow menstrual restrictions anymore, her claims to ritual purity are strongly related to her ability to make her daughter follow menstrual practices. Claims to purity depend on individual adherence and the ability to make other female family members of the household adhere.

Similarly, adherents also highlighted their compliant nature by using the observance of menstrual practices. Gyanu, a 67-year-old, who belongs to a Chettri family and reached menopause several years ago, argues, "Once people say not to touch it's

enough, why should you touch? If someone asks me not to touch or not to eat something, I strictly follow. But if someone offers some food that is harmful and suggests it's okay to consume it. I will eat it." Gyanu uses her practices to underline her compliant nature, where she is willing to follow even though the act may harm her. Compliance is one of the valued attributes of a virtuous Nepali woman (Bennett 1983; Grossman-Thompson 2017). Women use strict adherence to menstrual practices to "do gender" and maintain their claims to the dominant image. The recurring nature of monthly restrictions illustrates how menstrual rules enable routine production of gender in daily interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Women's adherence to menstrual practices might garner support from relatives, but women also face criticism if they fail to follow menstrual rules as expected. Sapana, introduced earlier, argues, "People will say that she performs lots of religious activities, but she performs them even when she has her menstruation." Her statements show that women cannot maintain their claims to purity when they engage in religious activities during their periods. On the contrary, women are more vulnerable to gossip when they defy menstrual practices or engage in religious activities during menstruation. Ganga, a 46-year-old who belongs to Newar (Vaishya) family, highlights the importance of maintaining distance from others. She argues, "If we intentionally touch someone, they might say - so and so touched me even during their period. But if we maintain our distance, there won't be such issues." Ganga also follows menstrual practices to avoid gossip. Adherents' recognition of possible sanctions supports Risman's (2017) assertions that individuals who fail to meet normative expectations are judged harshly and pressured to conform and do gender.

Likewise, adherence to menstrual practices lets women distinguish themselves from others who do not follow. Maiya, a 56-year-old, belongs to a Newar (Vaishya) family and rigorously follows menstrual practices. She avoids entering the kitchen and prayer room. In her narrative, Maiya highlights how rules were changing in her household. She recalls how previously her family avoided looking at menstruating women before traveling to a foreign country. In the past, Maiya also avoided touching male family members. However, she argues, "in Kathmandu, you need to change according to time." She takes pride in her adherence and uses it to differentiate herself from others who do not follow such practices. She claims, "These days, in Chettri and Brahmin communities, they behave as if menstrual practices are over once you take a shower. Our practices are stringent." She adds, "If we leave our practices, we will become *chhada* like foreigners." Maiya maintains her claims to purity by following the practice and distinguishing her rigorous practices from others who do not follow. The word *chhada* translates as shameless; Maiya differentiates herself from shameless foreigners and upper-caste women who have forgone their practices. Commonly, Newar follow less stringent rules. Maiya's claims also show how diversity in practices exists even within a caste group.

Eighty-seven percent (27) of adherents state that they have never intentionally defied any menstrual rules. Thirteen percent (4) of adherents mention that they resist menstrual rules. Ten percent of adherents (3) recalled breaking menstrual rules during their adolescent years, highlighting how age impacted their decisions. Respondents used their defiance to reflect on the ways resisting menstrual practices may not have any consequences. 36-year-old Binda is the only respondent who recalled an instance of

defiance during her adult years. She recounts, “Once during my daughter’s birthday, I had my period, at the most crucial time, when we were about to cut the cake. All our guests, including my natal family, were already there. And I had to get things from different rooms. It was hard for me to mention my period, so I did not mention it.” Binda emphasizes how her situation forced her to defy the practice and states that she still worries that she might have sinned on that day.

Additionally, all adherents mention their periods while visiting someone else’s home. Rima, a 38-year-old Chhetri respondent, introduced earlier, argues, “If you maintain purity in your household, you should not be careless while visiting someone else’s home. Your heart won’t allow you to do that. Women lie about it as they think they are clean and wearing nice clothes, and no one would know even if they entered inside. *Aatma le dekhira huncha*.” The last sentence translates as - the soul is watching. Rima claims that even though some women choose not to share information about their period, their souls know that they are wrong. She highlights how adherents expect themselves and others to follow these practices. The expectation is placed on women to follow these practices within the household and respect practices while visiting others. Rima adds, “Even when people invite me for a cup of tea, I tell them that I will go drink in my own house as I am menstruating. My mother-in-law will be angry at me if I eat here, and I will also waste food at my home. I also tell them my family might get angry at me for touching other’s home during periods.” Rima highlights how other family members, particularly her mother-in-law, expect a woman to follow menstrual practices even while visiting someone else’s home.

Although adherents claim that they follow stringent practices, they also made some strategic choices to make the rules more manageable. Adherents rarely define their current choices as resistance or an attempt to defy tradition. Like Binda, other adherents view their actions as attending to demands related to circumstances. Parbati, introduced earlier, recalls how she maneuvered around menstrual practices due to lack of alternatives, "After having kids, sometimes I would prepare some roti and boil potatoes after taking a shower." Here Parbati is attempting to maintain her claims to purity as she makes a tactical decision to cook certain kinds of food that she considers not easily defiled. A few adherents listed the types of food acceptable for a menstruating woman to cook if no one else is around to assume the responsibility.

Parbati also recounts owning a cow, which she milked even during her periods. Cow milk is considered holy among Hindus, and the milk is used on various religious occasions. She narrates, "Our cow used to give seven liters of milk, and there was no one else to milk it. I used to milk the cow, and then I took milk to the market without adding any water. One of the customers got mad at me when I sold milk during periods. But what can I do? There was no one else." Parbati justifies her adjustment to practices as the requirement of her situation where her children were still in school. Her statements highlight how she had no other options. She never explains why her husband did not take on the responsibility.

Additionally, Parbati makes an interesting choice of not adding water to the milk and argues, "some people say that if you do not add any water to the milk, a touch of menstruating women cannot defile it." These maneuverings of what is considered pure vary, as one of Parbati's customers was unhappy about it. Women may decide to make

changes in their practice based on their situation. Das (2008) found similar results in Assam, India, where women modified their menstrual practices according to convenience. Later, Parbati mentions that she was scared that she sold milk during her period and states that she prayed to god to forgive her.

Adherents also acknowledge that it is impossible to strictly follow these practices when women live alone or with young children. Radha, a 60-year-old Chhetri respondent, argues, "There is a difference in how you follow the menstrual practices when you are living alone versus when you are living with your family because everyone helps and it is easier. You might be in a situation where you might be obligated to do certain chores." Radha's statements highlight how women living alone or in nuclear families might be obligated to perform certain chores when there is no one around. Several adherents recall asking their young children to get supplies from the kitchen to cook for them without defiling the entire kitchen.

Adherents are more likely to modify practices when they challenged their abilities to fulfill their gender roles. Suntali, a 56-year-old Brahmin adherent, strictly followed menstrual customs until she reached menopause a few years ago. However, she recognizes how it might be impossible for women in Kathmandu to follow menstrual practices strictly. She states,

> When you have lots of household members and lots of agricultural work outside, the practice was feasible. But now my daughters and daughter-in-law live in Kathmandu. It might be because of a busy schedule; it is not feasible for people to follow menstrual practices. In our home, anyhow, we manage to follow these practices for four days. For some, only

> husband and wife live together. Husbands may leave early in the morning for the office, and they might have young children. It would help if you cooked for the children; you cannot keep them hungry. You cannot keep your husband hungry, and the husband might not have time to cook for himself.

Suntali highlights how women's household roles supersede the need to follow these practices. Like Parbati, Suntali does not consider that even men could contribute to domestic responsibilities during women's periods. Scholars have argued that normative femininity expects that women are available for men and children at all times and should avoid anything that might cause discomfort to them (Chrisler 2008; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013). Adherents' willingness to modify menstrual practices when they obstruct their ability to fulfill their gender roles resonates with these sentiments.

Likewise, Rima, who takes pride in her practices, also highlights situations when following these restrictions is not possible. She argues,

> If I am alone with my husband and my children are in a foreign land; then, I cannot let my husband go hungry when I have periods. I might say I am having periods and hold on to the orthodox practices. I might be satisfied, but my husband's soul is going to cry. Lots of men are not eager to enter the kitchen. I feel that we should not follow these rules making the souls of our children and husband cry. We should not follow these practices to avoid working.

Rima holds a complicated and conflicting perspective towards menstrual practices. On the one hand, she takes pride in her ability to follow these practices.

On the other, she believes that women should not follow these practices to get rest. Her statements surrounding rest also contradict other adherents who acknowledged that menstrual practices might provide women that opportunity. Respondents belonging to all spectrums of adherence may decide not to follow menstrual customs to absolve men from household responsibilities.

Several respondents state that they choose to complete their work before checking their menstrual statuses when they realize they might have started bleeding. Maiya, introduced earlier, mentions, “Like during prayers, if I notice that I am menstruating but don’t get the opportunity to get up and check, then it is okay. But once I check that I am on period, I need to sit separately.” For Maiya, practices are applicable only after she confirms her status. Women consider that menstrual practices are strictly enforceable only when women checked and verified their periods. Women’s strategic decisions buy them time to complete their chores before they start following menstrual practices. Even adherents who focus on following menstrual restrictions as much as possible recognize practical problems it might create. Respondents are willing to make minor changes to their practices to accommodate their current situation. Adherents’ practices highlight the dynamic nature of menstrual rules, modified even by those who claim strict adherence.

Aspirants

Aspirants’ adherence is mainly limited to avoiding going to the temple or attending prayers. All aspirants mention that they prepare food during their periods. They are obliged to perform domestic chores as there is no one to take on their household responsibilities. Aspirants primarily engage in selective observance. Twenty-six-year-old Devi, who belongs to a Chhetri family and has two daughters, outlines her practices, “I

follow the rules for five days now. Early morning, I wake up and take a shower and cook for my children. Who is going to cook for them if I don't cook? In the village, families still don't allow you to enter the kitchen or touch the stove. But I have a sister who can cook for my husband during those times." Like a few adherents, aspirants' gender roles overtake their need to follow menstrual customs. Aspirants, who have limited access to resources, derive their gender identity by fulfilling domestic responsibilities within the household and bringing home additional income. They make some strategic choices to retain their claims to purity. Like in Devi's case, she avoids cooking for her husband even though she cooks for her children. Initiated men are considered more vulnerable to menstrual defilement.

Like Devi, other aspirants also mention some of the innovative adjustments they make to maintain purity around the household. Geeta makes minor adjustments to ensure ritual purity, like "I have a smaller jar of spices and condiments that I use while cooking during my periods. I sleep separately." Geeta is making sure that she does not defile the entire stock of spices and condiments in her kitchen as she might have to use that for prayers and prepare food offered to her ancestors. She also sleeps separately to avoid defiling her husband.

Like Devi and Geeta, 43-year-old, Ramita, who belongs to a Tibeto-Burman family, also makes strategic choices on practices that she can follow. Ramita argues that following extensive rules are challenging when living in a rented room. However, she manages to perform menstrual practices to a certain extent - she avoids touching the water, oil, or religious materials used for prayers. Ramita also avoided cooking before the birth of her child. She recalls,

> My husband used to cook for the family during those times. He leaves home early at 6 am and returns only at 9 or 10 pm. So I started cooking after we had children. When I have periods, I ask to put all necessary stuff aside, and then I cook separately. What other options do I have? Previously, I used to stay hungry till late at night until my husband returned home. Sometimes he returned home only at midnight.

Ramita places more emphasis on fulfilling her role as a mother than continuing menstrual practices. Her current circumstances do not allow her to follow stringent rules. She also attempts to maintain her claims to ritual purity by highlighting her past rigorous practices where she stayed hungry until midnight waiting for her husband. Ramita also engages in selective adherence, like not touching water or oil or avoiding sleeping with her husband during her periods. Unlike adherents, aspirants may touch male family members, but like adherents, they avoid sharing the same bed or having sex during menstruation.

Diwa echoes Ramita, arguing that it is not possible to follow extensive rules in a rented room. Diwa, a firm believer of menstrual defilement, states, “here in Kathmandu; I don’t pray or go to temple until my seventh day. I cook for the family as no one is around, and I need to feed my children. So, how can I follow?” Diwa cannot extensively follow these practices because there is no one else to shoulder the responsibility.

Diwa also presents a complicated position of adherence to menstrual practices. She argues,

> I think it is essential to follow these practices. If there is someone to take on the work. But if the children are small, I don’t believe it is necessary. In

> many Brahmin's homes, I have seen where a daughter-in-law has periods, and mother-in-law or sister-in-law are not around to prepare food for the child. For children, we are not supposed to give them cold food. We need to prepare warm food and heat the food before giving it to them. There is no point in following these rules making our children cry.

Although Diwa thinks it is essential to follow menstrual practices, she emphasizes fulfilling her maternal roles before adhering to these practices. She also differentiates her practices from those of Brahmin households where women may compromise childcare during their periods. For Diwa, being a good mother is an essential part of her gender identity.

Diwa's current circumstances force her to cook during her period, but she also makes some tactical choices to maintain her claims to purity and avoid menstrual defilement. She recalls avoiding going to someone else's home during menstruation. Diwa argues, "Once someone says I am not supposed to do it, I don't do it." Diwa highlights her compliant nature in the above statement, which is considered a Nepali woman's virtue.

Diwa also mentions taking medication to postpone her menstruation in situations that demand ritual purity. She recollects, "If it is mandatory for me to work during that time, I take medicine to postpone my period. I take medicine so that I can complete my work before having a period." Several respondents mention taking medication to postpone their periods. Medicine to delay menstruation is easily accessible and can be bought without prescription in Nepal. Respondents use these drugs to modify the timing of their period. However, Diwa

and other respondents acknowledge the side effects of using these medications, including a heavier period following medication use. In one case, a respondent experienced early menopause following use of the drug. Accessibility of drugs regulating menstruation gives women agency to influence their cycle and the ability to adhere to menstrual practices. This finding is consistent with Pedersen's (2002) study in Bali, where women used birth control pills to influence the timing of their periods.

Like adherents, six aspirants state that they never intentionally defy any menstrual practices. Only two aspirants said they have disregarded menstrual rules at some point. Thirty-year-old Anu, introduced earlier, recalls resisting during her adolescent years. She states, "I was a little rebellious. If no one were around, I would enter the room and get things that I wanted. If I realized that someone else was coming, I would run outside. I would go inside looking for food and come out once I find it. Even if I cannot find it, I always checked for food." Anu's experiences illustrate how enactment of these practices is more relevant at the interactional level as women are held accountable by other family members. Young Anu was more willing to disregard these practices when she was away from other family members' watchful eyes. Anu claims that she never intentionally defied any menstrual practices and associates her disregard to these rules as teenage rebellion.

Only one aspirant recalls breaking menstrual rules during her adult years and was fearful about the incident for a long time. Thirty-year-old Binita, who belongs to a Chhetri family notes,

> Once, I attended a close friend's wedding during my period. My friend's family believed that menstruating women should not participate. Deep inside, I was fearful that something terrible might happen to my friend. I started to question - what if attending this wedding was a mistake? What if something terrible happens to my friend? Are they going to get separated?

Binita demonstrates internalization of these practices where she experiences guilt for attending her friend's wedding. She left during the wedding as she started getting more anxious. She adds, "Everyone was there like my friend's mother, and if they knew about my periods, they would not let me stay even for a bit." Binita was also fearful of others like her friend's mother, who strictly followed menstrual practices and would be offended by her attendance. She worries about not meeting expectations others have for her and the possibility of being held accountable for her actions. Binita's experience demonstrates how social relations and expectations reinforce the existing gender order at the interactional level, in her case, an expectation to follow menstrual practices (Scarborough et al. 2017). Apart from this particular incident, Binita always shares information about her periods when visiting someone else's home.

All aspirants agree that they mostly avoid going to someone else's house while they are menstruating. Even if aspirants visit, they share information about their periods with the host family. Cultural processes influence aspirants' motivation to follow these practices. Aspirants are conscious of other expectations from them. Although aspirants' material conditions do not allow them to follow

these practices regularly, they engage in selective adherence to meet others' expectations.

Negotiators

Sixty percent (15) of negotiators do not cook food, and 40 percent (10) cook during their periods. Negotiators who cook during menstruation are either single, living alone, or married and living in a nuclear family. Seventy-three percent (11) of negotiators who avoid cooking live in extended families. Negotiators follow menstrual practices to a certain extent to avoid conflict and confrontation, but they also continuously push the boundaries of their practices.

Kanchi, a 49-year-old negotiator belonging to an extended Brahmin family, outlines her current practices, "I don't follow anything, I don't cook for three days, and I start cooking on the fourth day." Originally from a district in the far-western province, she recalls practicing *Chhaupadi*, the custom of secluding women in menstrual huts during their periods. She followed menstrual practices for seven days, where she stayed in a menstrual hut and remembered crying a lot during her first period. After marriage, she continued to live in the menstrual hut during her periods for seven days. A few years after marriage, she moved to an urban area near her hometown and followed menstrual practices for five days. In Kathmandu, she starts cooking on her fourth day, and even her in-laws consume food prepared by her. Unlike adherents, who take pride in following similar practices as they migrate to the urban areas, negotiators emphasize how they negotiate their adherence throughout their lifetime.

Changes in menstrual practices that Kanchi experienced during her life influence her response that she does not currently follow any practices. Several respondents also

use the phrase “I don’t follow anything” while beginning to highlight their current practices. Kanchi’s experiences illustrate the way women’s agency to determine their practices increases as they move to an urban area and when their husbands establish an independent household. Although Kanchi lives in an extended family, her power to determine her practices might have increased because her husband, rather than her father-in-law, heads the family. Past studies consistently find that women’s ability to modify their menstrual practices increases when they become primary decision-makers within the family (Wong 2018).

Kanchi is making strategic choices where she gradually modifies her menstrual rules, but, at the same time, she is careful not to make sudden and drastic changes that might upset her in-laws. Kanchi engages in both doing and undoing simultaneously. The gradual change in practice highlights her selective resistance (Deutsch 2007). Still, at the same time, she attempts to make changes more acceptable to her in-laws. Kanchi engages in doing gender by retaining an image of a respectful daughter-in-law (West and Zimmerman 1987). She assumes that maybe she won’t follow these practices anymore if she travels to a foreign country.

Like Kanchi, 36-year-old Karuna, born to a Tibeto-Burman ethnic family and married to a Brahmin man, also highlights the changes in menstrual practices she experienced during her lifetime. She currently lives in a nuclear family. Karuna’s natal family, belonging to an ethnic group, follow minimal menstrual restrictions, primarily avoiding entering the kitchen and prayer room. However, after getting married, she was not allowed inside the household until the fifth day of her period. Karuna, who still follows these practices when traveling to her natal and husband’s families, outlines her

current practices. She notes, “It is not feasible for us to follow all these rules here. Apart from me, all are male family members, and none of them know how to cook. Although I touch my husband, we sleep separately.” Karuna avoids praying for seven days. She focuses on fulfilling her gender roles within the household and mention this as one reason for not following menstrual practices. Like adherents and aspirants, negotiators also prioritize fulfilling their gender roles.

Nonetheless, Karuna feared that others might judge her lack of adherence. She elaborates on an incident when her mother-in-law and brother-in-law were visiting,

> I lied to them that I follow menstrual practices. Later, when my husband came from work, he told them that we do not follow any rules. At that moment, I felt uncomfortable. I was menstruating, and they were visiting Kathmandu for the first time. They did not know how to use a gas stove. They cooked using firewood. And then we could not touch my brother-in-law during periods. I was worried that something terrible might happen to them if I cooked for them. As I was scared, I told them that I don’t cook food for three days. Also, I was worried that they might judge us for not following these rules.

Karuna ended up cooking for the family, and her mother-in-law and brother-in-law cooked for themselves. Karuna’s fear for defiling also comes from the fact that her brother-in-law is a *dhami*, a religious healer, who avoids touching menstruating women. Thirty-six percent (9) of negotiators mention that they avoid touching temples and sacred objects as they are worried about negative consequences. Baumann et al. (2020) note similar results in a study conducted among women in a far-western region in Nepal.

Religious beliefs and fear of negative consequences were two primary motivations for adherence to menstrual customs. Like Kanchi and Karuna, negotiators are mindful of others' expectations to adhere to menstrual customs. They tactically modify their rules as needed while also making an effort to limit disagreements with others.

Indira, 35-years-old, married, and belonging to a Brahmin family, shares a story of strategic resistance. Indira grew up in a family where her grandparents demanded strict adherence to menstrual practices. However, she recalls engaging in strategic resistance during her adolescent years, "In our home, we were not allowed to sit on a motorbike with a male relative. So even to show our elders we did not ride a motorbike at home. We rode on a bike with our brother a little farther from home. My brothers were liberal and did not care about menstrual practices." Indira and her brothers tactically decide not to ride together on a motorbike from home to avoid offending their elders, particularly their grandparents. However, Indira does not mind modifying these practices when away from the family's watchful gaze.

Indira faced similar challenges after marriage. She married into a household where her in-laws follow stringent menstrual practices. She recalls,

> Initially, I was not allowed to sit on a bike with my husband during my period. I was shocked because I did not follow these practices in my natal home if my parents were not around. So, while going to the office, I just walk to the office during my period. And I told my husband that it is too much. My husband also could not do anything about it because that was the rule followed in the household, and it was awkward for him to immediately change it just because I told him to do so. And my in-laws

may think that their son used to follow these rules but changed because of me.

Here, Indira faces a complicated situation where on the one hand, menstrual practices followed in her husband's home are not agreeable to her. She mentions being late for work as she has to walk to her office during her periods. On the other hand, she does not expect her husband to make drastic changes in the practices where family members may consider her responsible for the changes. The daughter-in-law is often blamed for manipulating the son and jeopardizing the household's solidarity (Bennett 1983). Indira makes a strategic choice to maintain her image as a dutiful daughter-in-law as she negotiates changes with her husband. Her husband eventually agreed to ride together during her period, but they still follow stringent practices as soon as they enter the household.

Not all negotiators follow lenient practices after migrating to Kathmandu. Twenty-two-year-old Dipa, who moved in with her relatives in Kathmandu, currently follows more stringent rules than her parents' home. Dipa, who had her first period when she was 10, had more flexibility in her parents' house. She mentions that her mother made arbitrary decisions to determine areas accessible to a menstruating woman, "My mother does not allow us to touch the stove while she is cooking, but we can touch everything else. Our prayer and storage areas are in the same room. So, if I have to get something from the storage, I am allowed to go in but asked not to touch the prayer section of the room." These interesting choices made by Dipa's mother might have been to make these restrictions more bearable to her young daughter. Dipa's relatives in Kathmandu follow more stringent practices. "After coming to Kathmandu, I think the

practices have become stricter for me. I am allowed inside the kitchen door, but I cannot sit at the dining table. I am not allowed to go near the water filter or fridge or inside any other room." Living with her elder relatives, Dipa does not have similar power as Kanchi and Karuna to determine her practices.

Nonetheless, Dipa recollects, "It was my cousin's wedding last month. I got my period, but I did not tell anyone about it except for my cousin. I did not feel guilty about it because I know nothing is going to happen." Dipa adds, "we have the power to decide whether or not to hide." Dipa's experience with menstrual practices shows how negotiators follow menstrual rules to appease elders in the household while acknowledging women's agency to determine whether or not to share the information surrounding periods with their family. Like respondents in Pandey's (2014) study, Dipa engages in defiance and reflection, realizing that there are no actual consequences for defiance.

Negotiators regularly engage in pushing the boundaries of current practices. Twenty-two-year-old Gouri, belonging to an upper-middle-class Chhetri family and a native of Kathmandu, recalls her mother sleeping in the attic during her period. However, Gouri's mother allowed her to sleep in her room as she was scared to sleep alone. Her mother also stopped sleeping in the attic after Gouri started her periods yet instructed her not to enter the kitchen for five days. However, Gouri claims, "I was a little confused about the practice and started following it only for four days. Now we follow menstrual practices for four days." She is now allowed inside in the kitchen on the fourth day instead of the fifth.

Gouri is also constantly negotiating with her family surrounding menstrual restrictions. She recalls,

> We are not allowed to eat food until we take a shower on the fourth and fifth days. It is freezing during the winter season, and I do not feel like taking a shower early in the morning. Sometimes I also had coaching classes early in the morning, and I used to go without taking a shower. They did not allow me to eat before leaving for class. I ate after I returned. Sometimes, I would get angry and go to school without eating, and then my parents would bring my lunch to school.

Gouri is hesitant to shower early in the morning during the winter, and she frequently bargains with her parents surrounding this issue. She also makes some strategic choices to avoid further confrontation with her family, “My family gets angry if I bring a menstruating friend home. It is inconvenient because menstruating women cannot touch around. My grandmother yells at me if she came to know about me bringing home a menstruating friend. I invite my friend but ask them not to disclose their menstrual status to my family.” Gouri's tactical decision allows her to invite her friends to her house and avoid overt confrontation with her grandparents.

Several young negotiators followed menstrual restrictions to a certain extent to show respect to older women in the household and also to prevent conflict. Kalpana, a 29-year-old woman married and belonging to a Brahmin family, argues, “once you become a daughter-in-law of a family, you need to follow all the rules and instructions of your mother-in-law.” Kalpana, who lives in an extended family, argues that she does not

think it is necessary to follow menstrual restrictions, but being a daughter-in-law necessitates following menstrual practices. Similarly, for Kalpana, following these practices is not her choice. Instead, it is a requirement to avoid disagreements with her mother-in-law. Kalpana recalls one such incident,

> I followed the practice for almost three or four months after marriage. My husband would sleep on the bed, and I would sleep on a couch. And then my mother-in-law traveled abroad. And I thought that as no one is watching, I started to sleep together with my husband. When my mother-in-law came back, we got used to sleeping together, and my mother-in-law got angry. Whenever anyone visited our home, she told them that we sleep together during my period and do not follow menstrual practices. My mother-in-law also told everyone that I don't obey no matter how many times she asked me.

Kalpana, tired of her mother-in-law's constant criticisms, started to sleep alone during her periods. Negotiators like Kalpana do not view menstrual practices as a way of doing gender. However, families held them accountable if they fail to adhere to menstrual practices and experience pressure to conform (Risman 2017). Therefore, negotiators are willing to modify or absolve themselves from menstrual restrictions when others are not observing their actions.

Fifty-six percent (14) of negotiators state that they have defied menstrual customs. 29 year-old, Riya who belongs to a middle-class Brahmin family, argues, "If you don't tell anyone about your period, it becomes easier to lie. But if you share the information with your parents and do something that you are not allowed to do, defying menstrual

practices becomes harder." Riya's statement highlights that defying menstrual restrictions is simple, especially when negotiators are not held accountable for their actions.

However, negotiators struggle when judged harshly for failing to engage with menstrual requirements. Alina, introduced earlier, recalls not being allowed to read books during her first period. She was worried about upcoming district-level exams and had hidden her notebook with class notes. She secretly studied and looked at her father and brother in violation of menstrual customs. Alina recalls an episode during her first period where she was held accountable for her actions. She recollects, "While I was studying, a brother from the house where I stayed saw me and said, 'Oh my god, she is studying,' which means '*yesko purai bidhyanasta huncha.*'" The brother told Alina that she sinned and will never retain whatever she studied. Alina recalls being highly distressed by this event, and the incident clarified others' expectations of Alina early on.

Unlike Alina, 35-year-old Sonia, who belongs to a Chhetri family, did not experience any remorse for her defiance. She recounts, "Before I had this childish behavior where I thought I need to mention my period and follow the practices. The day my elder father passed away, I had my period. I was confident to go to his funeral to say goodbye for the last time because if I did not go during that moment, I would never see him again." Menstruating women are usually not allowed to attend funerals. Sonia's ability to participate in the funeral depended on her confidence and hiding the information surrounding her periods from other household members. Sonia, challenging current menstrual practices, is engaged in undoing gender (Deutsch 2007).

Negotiators' awareness that others seek their accountability forces them to hide their defiance from others. For example, 27-year-old Rumi, who belongs to an upper-

class Brahmin family, had her first period at 14. Rumi, who was traveling with her family, decided not to inform her parents about it. She started following the practices from her second period to satisfy her mother's demands. Rumi mentions that "My mother tells us not to touch the fridge as it contains water, and once a menstruating woman touches it, you need to clean the entire fridge. Sometimes, at night when I am hungry or thirsty, I get food and water." Rumi takes the liberty to enter the kitchen when she is away from her mother's watchful eyes. Like Rumi, Sangita states that she enters the kitchen when her mother is not home. Negotiators engage in selective adherence, particularly to meet the expectations others have from them and avoid confrontation.

Many negotiators state that sharing information about their periods while visiting someone else's home depends on the circumstances. Forty-four percent (11) of negotiators mention that they mostly avoid visiting someone else's home during their periods. Only eight percent (2) of negotiators state that they choose not to share information regarding their periods while visiting others. Sonia is one of the negotiators who claims that it is unnecessary to share information surrounding periods while visiting someone else's home. She argues, "I try not to mention my period as much as possible because there is no point mentioning, creating an issue, and humiliating myself. It is humiliating because my elder mother constantly asks me not to touch this or touch that and lets everyone know about my period." Here, Sonia highlights her experience while visiting one of her relative's homes. She finds it humiliating when she is instructed not to touch.

Nonetheless, Sonia claims that she shares information about her periods when she feels lazy while visiting her relatives. Families may expect female relatives to help in the

kitchen during their visits. Sharing information surrounding periods may absolve women from responsibilities to help the host family during a visit.

Sometimes, negotiators bargain their adherence when visiting others. Twenty-nine-year-old Sami, belonging to a Brahmin family, recalls facing problems while visiting her grandmother during menstruation. She recounts, “Initially, my grandmother would insist that menstruating women should use separate bathrooms, sit separately, sleep in a separate bed, should not enter the room or step on the carpet, and should have different utensils to eat.” Sami describes that her grandmother asked her elder sisters to follow stringent rules. However, these rules were not agreeable to Sami, and she recalls arguing with her grandmother. She tells her grandmother, “either I am not going to visit her during my periods. But if she wants me to come, I won’t be able to stay in that environment.” Eventually, Sami’s grandmother became more lenient and did not ask her to follow stringent practices.

Opponents

Six opponents mention that they enter the kitchen regularly during their periods. One opponent states that she enters the kitchen in her apartment but avoids entering while staying at her in-laws’ home. Five opponents note that they avoid praying or touching religious objects during their periods. Only two opponents state that they enter the temple or engage in religious functions during their periods.

Samata, a 37-year-old Chhetri opponent, outlines her current practices, “I don’t follow any practices. I don’t touch god.” But, she avoids entering the kitchen while visiting her in-laws during the weekend. Samata’s natal family followed lenient practices, where she avoided cooking food and touching the prayer area. However, Samata’s

mother notes that she might face challenges after marriage as some households follow stringent menstrual practices. Samata resisted menstrual practices at her husband's home from the very beginning. She remembers,

> According to our traditional practice, husband and wife don't sleep together during menstruation. That is the reason why the bride's parents give extra bedding during the marriage. My mother intentionally gave me only one bed during the wedding. My parents were discussing whether to provide extra bedding. I told them not to because I cannot sleep on the mattress on the floor. My mother-in-law brought a floor-bedding for me when I had my period for the first time after marriage. I did not sleep on the bedding. It was my decision, and anyways no one comes to check whether or not you are sleeping on the bedding. So, if the rules are extreme, I don't follow them, and even my in-laws did not care that I was not following these practices.

Samata engaged in strategic resistance from the very beginning of her marriage. Her decision not to sleep on her in-laws' extra bedding demonstrates how the need to comply with menstrual practices is higher when women are being observed. Behind the closed bedroom door, Samata chooses not to sleep on the floor-bedding. Samata, resisting menstrual restrictions, engages in undoing gender by sharing a bed with her husband even when normative guidelines prescribe otherwise (Deutsch 2007). Opponents view menstrual practices as unnecessary, but they are forced to follow to keep their family and community happy. Shila, a 41-year-old belonging to a middle-class Chhetri family, argues, "From the very beginning, I did not want to follow these rules, but I still followed

because everyone in our community and my in-laws followed these practices." Shila follows these practices to fulfill the expectations of her family and other community members.

Additionally, opponents sometimes follow menstrual practices to avoid chores or events. Bina, who identifies as Christian, is one opponent who enters a temple during her period. Bina usually does not observe any practices, but sometimes she tells her grandfather about her periods to avoid chores, "And, then my grandfather would yell at me like you get your period only when you have some work to be done." Bina strategically uses menstrual restrictions to get away from chores. Like Bina, Seema also mentions sometimes using menstruation to her benefit, "Like if there are some programs and I am invited. But I don't want to attend or if I am busy and also have my period. I think in those instances, it is easier to use my period as an excuse." Seema, who usually does not follow any menstrual practices, tactically uses her menstruation as an excuse to avoid some functions. Seema claims using menstruation for their benefit is possible only when "women are capable of making their own decisions."

All opponents state that they defy menstrual rules. Opponents also attempt to hide their defiance from others as they know others expect them to follow. Seema, who was able to conceal her menstrual status from her family for the first two years, recalls her defiance, "While I was following these practices, I never defied in a way that would be visible to my parents. If no one were looking, I would touch something or get some food to eat. If I defied any practices in front of them, they might throw the food or anything I touched away, scold me, or beat me." Even when Seema followed menstrual restrictions

in her natal home, she engaged in strategic resistance where she concealed her defiance to avoid any repercussions.

Similarly, Samata shares information surrounding her periods depending on convenience. She mentions sharing the information only after feeding her children as she is not allowed to sit at the dining table during her periods. Samata does not find it agreeable to sit on the floor to feed her children. Still, after finishing her work, she mentions her menstruation to her in-laws because she worries that they might find the used sanitary pads. She recalls, "Some days ago, I bought food for everyone from a restaurant, I forgot about my period. I cannot throw it away just because I touched it. First, I let everyone finish their food, and only then did I inform my family about my period." Samata's strategic decisions to defy certain practices buys her time to complete her work conveniently, and hiding her defiance from others helps avoid confrontations.

Three opponents claim that they did not mention their periods even while visiting others, another three state that it was contingent upon the situation. Only one opponent views that it is essential to share the information if the hosts adhere to menstrual practices. Bina, who follows Christianity, states that she shares information about her menstruation when visiting her friend's house. She does not adhere to restrictions, but she puts forth an effort to show respect towards her host's practices. Her case indicates that although women may choose not to adhere to restrictions, they might be compelled to follow menstrual rules to a certain extent when visiting someone else's home to respect their practices. Also, women from different castes and religions may be required to follow menstrual practices in a Hindu majority community irrespective of their

adherence. Bina's experience is similar to those found in Baumann et al.'s (2020) study, in which Christian respondents experienced pressure to conform to menstrual practices.

Women's decisions to hide information about their periods come with their own set of challenges when visiting for an overnight stay. Seema recalls a situation during an over-night visit,

> I was expecting my monthly cycle to begin soon and had periods that night. Then I woke up and turned on the light and was looking for sanitary pads. The person sharing a room with me asked why I was awake. I told the person it was my fifth day, and I started bleeding again due to a day-long bus drive. It was the first day of my period, but I told that person that it was fifth.

Seema lied about her period because she knew that the host would expect her to follow menstrual restrictions. Like others, opponents are also held accountable for their actions, but they are more willing than other groups to engage in strategic resistance.

However, Seema argues that it is challenging not to follow any menstrual practices. She recalls,

> The disadvantage of not following these practices in a society that insists on following them is facing and tolerating people's allegations. How to respond to those allegations? People ask about your period and don't think well when you say you don't follow menstrual practices. In those situations, I worry that people might have viewed me differently. Even being an activist, I worry about it. There is also a certain stigma associated with not following menstrual practices. Like my landlord strictly follows

these practices. They observe me to determine whether I follow these practices. Even the landlord can give you a certain amount of torture regarding those issues. I don't think they must ask. But they ask, don't you ever have a period? Don't you follow the practices? Don't you do this or do that? My landlord constantly reminds me not to keep stuff here or touch there during my periods. I think even that constant reminder is torturous.

Seema is held accountable by her landlord. Although Seema does not follow any menstrual practices at home and openly resists, she is held responsible for her practices by external forces unrelated to her. Seema's experience supports Risman's (2017) claim that individuals who fail to meet gender expectations are judged harshly and pressured to conform and do gender.

Table 3: Summary of the Interactional Level Analysis

Material conditions: Valued resources like menstrual products to manage their periods and access to human and financial resources			
Cultural Processes: What others expect from women regarding adherence to menstrual practices and what women expect from themselves			
Adherents	**Aspirants**	**Negotiators**	**Opponents**
Menstrual restrictions allow adherents to "do gender" by maintaining purity around the household and highlighting their compliant nature	Selective observance of menstrual practices, focus on fulfilling domestic responsibilities, and bringing home additional income	Employ strategic resistance to tactically modify menstrual rules as needed, limiting disagreement with others	Shift between openly resisting and engaging in strategic resistance
Willing to modify menstrual customs when it challenges their ability to fulfill gender roles	Make strategic choices to maintain their claims of purity	Willing to modify or absolve themselves from menstrual restrictions when	Forced to comply with menstrual customs when being watched by others

		others are not observing them	
Never intentionally defied menstrual customs	The majority never intentionally defied menstrual customs	More than half have defied menstrual customs	Have defied menstrual customs
Mentioned their periods while visiting others	Avoid visiting others during their periods	Sharing information while visiting others depends on the circumstances	Half of the opponents viewed that sharing information while visiting others depend on circumstances, and the other half did not mention their periods

The ways women decide to conform and resist menstrual practices reflect interactional level dynamics within the GST. Table three outlines important ideas included in the interactional level analysis. The interaction between material conditions and cultural processes determines women's conformity and resistance to menstrual customs at the interactional level. For example, although the cultural processes may expect women to follow menstrual customs, the lack of human resources to shoulder domestic duties may force women to modify their practices. Additionally, society's expectation for women to follow menstrual customs makes adherence to menstrual practices more critical at the interactional level as women are held accountable for their deviance. Similarly, easy access to menstrual products allows women to defy menstrual customs. Nonetheless, the material reality of a used menstrual product might force women to share information with their families at a certain point.

Adherents follow the most extensive menstrual practices and view their practices as a way of doing gender and maintaining an image of a virtuous woman. A virtuous Nepali woman is pious, compliant, respects tradition and elders, and fulfills her gender

roles. Following menstrual practices allows adherents to maintain their claims of purity and show their respect to elders, ancestors, and traditions. Further, following menstrual restrictions also help adherents highlight their compliant nature, avoid gossip, and maintain social support. One adherent uses her compliance to distinguish herself from others who have forgone the practices. Most adherents do not defy any menstrual rules, and all of them mention their periods while visiting others. Adherents also make strategic choices to modify their practices and view their actions as circumstantial demands. They are more willing to alter their practices when it hinders their ability to fulfill their gender roles as mothers or wives.

Aspirants' observance of menstrual restrictions is limited chiefly to avoiding entering temples or attending prayers. They perform domestic chores as there is no one to take on their household duties. Aspirants engage in selective adherence, like not cooking for their husbands or keeping a different set of spices and condiments. Aspirants also highlight their roles as mothers to justify their current practices. Many aspirants state that they never intentionally defy menstrual rules and share their statuses while visiting others.

Negotiators follow various kinds of menstrual restrictions, where some avoid entering the kitchen while others avoid engaging in religious activities or entering temples. Negotiators simultaneously engage in doing and undoing gender as they navigate these practices. They are aware that others expect them to follow menstrual rules. Negotiators make strategic decisions following specific menstrual restrictions that allow them to do gender and avoid conflict and confrontation. But at the same time, they continuously challenge the boundaries of current practices according to their needs and

convenience. Many negotiators recall defying menstrual rules, and the majority communicate their menstrual statuses while visiting others.

A majority of opponents enter the kitchen and cook food during their period. However, they avoid going to temples or engaging in religious activities. Like negotiators, opponents also engage in doing and undoing gender. Unlike negotiators, opponents continuously resist the practices, following only rarely. It is not possible for opponents to completely overlook the rules as they are held accountable by others. However, opponents may also choose to follow menstrual practices intermittently to avoid chores, events, or upkeep their valuable social networks. All opponents defy menstrual practices at various times. Like others, opponents also covertly defy menstrual practices.

CHAPTER VI

POWER AND AUTHORITY: INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL ANALYSIS

In this section, I ask, "How can menstrual customs be used to reveal the structure of power and authority in Nepali society?" GST's institutional level analysis examining Nepali families allows for an investigation of the ways menstrual practices reflect the structure of power and authority. I argue that the way menstrual practices are transferred and enforced in the household demonstrates the structure of power and authority within the Nepali family. The institutional level's material conditions are patriarchal family structure, and the cultural conditions are the dominant image of a Nepali woman.

Respondents across the continuum mention that menstrual customs are more stringent for rituals associated with ancestors, which signifies the higher status and power held by ancestors, traditions, and elders within a Nepali household. Adherents and aspirants stress the importance of maintaining ritual purity around ancestral rituals and compared women's menstrual rules to caste-based discrimination, equating menstruating women's lower status with the lower caste. Similarly, aspirants and negotiators recall situations when menstrual defilement is associated with illness and misfortune. The majority of diseases caused by menstrual defilement are among men. Men are more vulnerable to menstrual defilement and in need of maintaining a higher level of

ritual purity. The requirement to maintain higher ritual purity around men shows their higher status within the Nepali family structure.

The transfer of menstrual practices also elucidates the patriarchal structure existing in Nepali families. Respondents across the continuum mention that mothers, mothers-in-law, and other female family members instructed them about menstrual rules. Male family members also play a vital role in determining the extent of menstrual practices a family follows. Most adherents who follow stringent practices state that their male family members also ask them to follow these practices. Similarly, at least half of those classified as aspirants and negotiators also mention that at least one male family member asks them to follow menstrual customs. Only opponents state that male family members do not care about their menstrual practices.

Whether and how menstrual restrictions are obeyed also indicates the existing hierarchies among women living in a household, where older women hold higher status, followed by daughters and daughters-in-law. Several respondents make a distinction between the practices followed by married and unmarried women. Families expect unmarried girls to ascribe to stringent rules, followed by married women. Married women with children have the most flexibility. Respondents draw distinctions between *Kokh Futeko* and *Kokh Nafuteko* or *Karma Chaleko* and *Nachaleko,* which means one who already has a child versus those who don't have one yet. Adherents following the most stringent restrictions are also more likely to note the difference in menstrual customs between daughters and daughters-in-law. In the following section, I offer representative examples to demonstrate how menstrual customs reveal the power and authority structure in Nepali society via women's experiences in their families.

Adherents

More than half (16) of adherents state that they follow stricter customs for ancestral rituals. Extensive menstrual customs surrounding ancestral rituals and an emphasis on maintaining family tradition reflect the powerful positions of ancestors and elders in a Nepali family. Maya, a 25-year-old, Chettri adherent argues, "People say that we should not touch ancestral shrines. They say that ancestors are greater than god." The Hindu families in Nepal usually have a household shrine devoted to ancestors.

Similarly, Gyanu, a 67-year-old, who belongs to a Chhetri family, outlines some of the negative consequences that families might incur if they disrespect their ancestors. She claims, "Gods, religious places, and the ancestor they don't appreciate us touching. If ancestors get angry, they give us *dukha* (troubles), *pir* (sorrow), and people get sick. Ancestors tell us you did terrible things, and they beat us up. *Hamro ta ghumai ghumai kutcha kul le.* This year we need to worship our ancestors. Do you want to come? You will see what ancestors can do." Gyanu presents a graphical statement, *Hamro ta ghumai ghumai kutcha kul le,* which loosely translates as - ancestors continuously twisting and turning as they beat them for the wrongdoings. Here Gyanu may be referring to the sufferings when she states that ancestors beat them for their misdeeds. Gyanu strongly believes in the power ancestors have to determine the troubles and the suffering women and their households may face.

Families taking extra precautions to maintain ritual purity during *Shradha* also illustrates the higher status held by ancestors. *Shradha,* a ritual honoring dead ancestors, is performed on deceased parents' and grandparents' death anniversaries. The son conducts the ceremony, and maintaining the household's ritual purity is prioritized during

that time. Thirty-three-year-old Sapana, hailing from a Brahmin family, adds that a husband cannot perform *Shradha* when the wife is on her period. Adherents' statements indicate the reverence given to ancestors in a Nepali family, with cultural processes determining the dominant image of a Nepali woman reinforcing these sentiments. Honoring household gods, including ancestors, and maintaining ritual purity around the household are essential traits of a good Nepali woman (Bennett 1983). Sapana's role as a daughter-in-law demands the maintenance of household purity and ancestral rituals.

Several adherents state that they follow menstrual practices as a part of tradition and as a way to show respect to their ancestors. Saili, a 49-year-old Brahmin adherent, argues,

> That is the practice among we the Brahmin caste group. *Matwali* (caste group in which drinking liquor is socially acceptable) caste and other groups don't follow these practices even in Nepal. Nothing has happened to them, or nothing might happen to them. It is a practice that our ancestors left behind, and our mothers followed it, we followed it, and now our children are following it. And now, it is hard for my heart not to adhere. Nothing happens if we choose not to follow, but why shouldn't we follow the traditional practice that our ancestors followed?

Adherents also follow the practices to continue family traditions. Several past studies have also found similar results where women follow menstrual restrictions to show respect to elders and family traditions (Baumann et al. 2020; Crawford et al. 2014; Sharma 2014).

Ten percent (3) of adherents, including Saili, mention caste-based stratification while discussing their menstrual customs. Saili uses the practices to distinguish her family from other caste groups. Parbati, a 56-year-old Brahmin adherent, claims she follows menstrual customs for religious reasons, drawing an analogy between menstrual restrictions and caste-based discrimination. She implies both are necessary to maintain ritual purity, stating,

> I never visited the temple during my periods. Suppose I do anything wrong, like if I touch something or allow someone else's to enter my prayer room. I dream of god, where he advises me not to allow outside persons into the room. Like, previously, we rented our house to a *Sarki* (lower caste). I dreamt of god where he told me what kind of person are you renting your home to? Are you going to touch him while fetching water for performing prayers? Like we use the same bucket to get water from the underground well. I know we are not supposed to behave like that in today's era.

Parbati understands that discrimination based on caste is unacceptable in the present context. However, she also demonstrates deep internalization of both menstrual customs and caste-based discrimination. Both lower-caste individuals and menstruating women threaten ritual purity. The comparison between these two groups illustrates the subordinate position held by women within the family. Adherents' narratives reinforce Das's (2008) argument that the concept of purity and pollution determines both caste and gender distinctions.

Women responsible for maintaining ritual purity around the household are also expected to transfer menstrual practices to future generations. The majority of adherents state that it was their mothers who gave them specific instructions about menstrual rules. Past studies note similar results where mothers and other female family members are responsible for disseminating information about menstruation and menstrual customs to daughters (Pandey 2014; Rothchild and Piya 2020). Similarly, mothers-in-law instruct new daughters-in-law about menstrual customs after marriage. Most adherents agree that they need minimum instructions after marriage about menstrual customs as socialization into these practices begins early during childhood.

The reasons mothers decide to teach their young daughters about these practices are reflected by adherents who argue that it is essential to transfer menstrual practices to younger generations. Only one adherent claims that it is unnecessary to teach these practices. “Daughters, they should learn. These days daughters and daughters-in-law are reluctant to follow, but I teach them anyways. Sons don’t need to learn anything, but daughters need to learn everything. Sons don’t need to do anything. Women need to do everything,” claims Parbati. Her statements might be referring to the gender division of labor existing within a Nepali household where women are solely accountable for domestic responsibilities, including showing respect to ancestors and following other rituals. Families expect daughters to respect these practices, at least when they are home. Mothers teaching their daughters about menstrual practices are socializing them for their adult roles as daughters-in-law and wives. Continuing family traditions and respecting elders are crucial traits of an ideal Nepali woman (Bennett 1983).

Although mothers and other female members are at the forefront of transferring menstrual practices to upcoming generations, it is crucial to consider other factors influencing women's adherence, including the views of male family members. Seventy-one (22) percent of adherents mention that at least one male family member, including one's father, father-in-law, husband, and son-in-law, asked them to practice menstrual restrictions. "We have this rule of following these practices for four days. My husbands also come from the same *sanskar.* So, he also follows these rules," claims Mala, a 38-year-old who belongs to a Chhetri family. Mala argues that her husband, who also received similar cultural socialization, expects adherence to menstrual practices.

Tara, a 68-year-old adherent, furthers the argument, "Even for the male family members, they have taken to heart our traditional beliefs, they insist on following these practices. No matter whatever we do outside the household, the practice needs to be observed inside the home." Tara's statement might be indicating a change in women's roles outside the household and the need to maintain traditional gender patterns within the home. Unlike Mala's statement that focuses on men's role in the passive continuation of practices, Tara highlights their active role in implementing menstrual restrictions where they specifically ask women to follow them.

Sapana, a 34-year-old, was the only adherent who mentions that her grandfather instructed her about menstrual practices. She recalls, "My paternal grandfather told us about menstrual practices. He told us that you are not supposed to enter the kitchen or go near the stove during your periods. He said that he doesn't eat food prepared by unmarried women for five days during their periods. My grandfather and grandmother told us that. Once they told us about menstrual practices, it was enough." Sapana's

statement illustrates the vital role her grandfather played in teaching her menstrual practices, and she highlights the need to follow menstrual rules once instructed by elders of the household. Adherents' comments highlight the role that men of the family play in sustaining current menstrual customs. Like practices regarding ancestors, stringent menstrual restrictions are followed around high-caste-initiated men as they are considered more vulnerable to menstrual defilement (Bennett 1983). Rigorous practices implemented for ancestors and high-caste-initiated men signify their higher statuses within a Nepali family.

Several adherents recognize the change in menstrual practices after marriage. Distinct practices followed by married and unmarried women signify their statuses within households. The majority of adherents state that they follow more stringent menstrual restrictions in their natal home. Parbati outlines the difference in rules between married and unmarried women. She argues,

> Practices are similar even in my husband's family. However, in my husband's family, we followed these rules for three days, and we could do everything from the fourth day. Unmarried and virgin women were called *kokh nafutya* (not birth a child), and they followed these rules for four days. But after marriage, your mother-in-law is looking forward to you getting back to work. So, you follow these rules for three days and get back to work on the fourth day. We are allowed to cook. The only thing you cannot do on your fourth day is praying or entering the prayer room. You can start praying after you take a purifying bath on the fifth day. We asked our priest whether we can pray on the fifth day, and he said it's okay

> to pray on the fifth day, but you can pray to your ancestors only on the seventh day.

Daughters-in-law usually shoulder a majority of domestic responsibility, and as Parbati states, mothers-in-law look forward to them returning to work as soon as possible. Parbati's comment also highlights the influence religious leaders hold within the household, where families regularly consult them to ensure ritual purity. Her remarks also reinforce the need to maintain purity for ancestral rituals. Saili, a 49-year-old from a Brahmin family, shares a similar experience, claiming,

> My *Maiti* (natal home) was stricter than my *Ghar* (husband's house). My parents said it was difficult for us to work during periods and did not ask us to work much. We just did whatever we can and whatever we like. But in *Ghar,* once the daughter-in-law has her period, they give her more work outside as she cannot enter the kitchen. You do not enter the kitchen, but the workload is heavier. It was like people need to assign women more work during their periods. They thought that when daughter-in-law is around mother-in-law or any family's daughters should not do the dishes. They behaved as if it is a sin or disrespectful for them to do those chores.

Both Parbati and Saili's narratives recognize the burden of domestic responsibilities placed on daughters-in-law. However, Saili is more critical about the unequal burden placed on daughters-in-law. Several married adherents attest to these narratives. Sarita, a 33-year-old from a Chhetri family, mentions how her natal family does not expect her to carry wood or organic fertilizers. Families require daughters-in-law to complete these chores. Practices show how families

assign more domestic duties to daughters-in-law, signifying their lower statuses within the household. Both carrying wood and organic fertilizers are arduous chores that require getting dirty.

Laxmi, a 46-year-old Brahmin adherent, further clarifies the position held by daughters and daughters-in-law. She argues, “My daughter is already married. Even in her husband’s household, they don’t ask her to do domestic work; they treat her like a daughter, not like a daughter-in-law. They treat her well.” Laxmi equates being treated well to being treated as a daughter. Laxmi’s narrative supports arguments made by other adherents that families expect daughters-in-law to perform more domestic chores. The domestic expectations associated with daughters-in-law can be one of the potential reasons why they follow less stringent menstrual restrictions. Daughters-in-law following less severe menstrual practices does not necessarily mean a higher status within the household. Instead, it may indicate the in-law’s hesitancy to absolve daughters-in-law from domestic responsibilities during their periods.

Aspirants

Like adherents, three aspirants mention following more stringent menstrual customs for ancestral rituals. Bijaya, a 31-year-old who belongs to a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group, mentions, “When you make offerings to your *kul* and *pitra* (ancestors). During that time, you make fresh and pure alcohol, and menstruating women are not allowed to touch it.” Although practice in Bijaya’s house is far more lenient than other high-caste Hindu households, rules are similar in paying particular attention to ritual purity for ancestral rituals. Also, the use of alcohol is unacceptable in high-caste Hindu

rituals. Forty-two-year-old Geeta, hailing from a Brahmin family, states that menstrual women are allowed to engage in ancestral rituals only after the seventh day.

Aarti, a 44-year-old from a Chhetri family, adds, “Our ancestors taught us about it, and that is how we have understood. They said that it is essential to follow these practices or else you have to face several consequences, including impacting future reincarnations.” Several respondents believed that defiling menstrual practices may have negative consequences, and one of them is that women might experience suffering in another life or be born as an animal.

One aspirant mentions caste while justifying her current menstrual practices. Ramita, a 43-year-old belonging to a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group, states, “I have friends who say that menstruation is a bodily process and unnecessary to follow these practices. But it is hard not to follow these practices. People say you shouldn’t discriminate based on caste and be willing to receive food from *Janajati* (Indigenous groups) and people from the lower caste. But you will feel uncomfortable not following those rules as we have been doing that for ages.” Ramita views both caste and menstrual practices as traditions that people have internalized and find difficult not to follow. Comparing two forms of restrictions indicates lower statuses held by women in a Nepali household. Menstrual women are equated to caste groups who have the most subordinate position in Nepali society.

Six aspirants state that their mother helped them understand menstrual practices before marriage. After marriage, half of the aspirants note that their mothers-in-law instructed them about the menstrual rules followed in their husband’s home. Another half of the aspirants express that they did not receive any instructions because they did not

spend much time with their in-laws or their mothers-in-law did not follow menstrual practices.

Aspirants' decisions to transfer practices to the younger generation also reflect the patriarchal structure that guides Nepali families. The decision to teach was driven by the need to share aspirants' husbands' families' norms and practices. Five aspirants state that they will teach their daughters about menstrual customs. Diwa, who did not follow menstrual restrictions in her natal home, argues, "My husband's family follows these practices. I have to teach my daughter. *Pache dukha napaos bhanera ne sikaunu parcha*." Diwa plans to introduce her daughter to menstrual customs to protect her from future troubles. Although Diwa did not follow menstrual customs growing up, her statement reflects how her role as a daughter-in-law necessitates transferring menstrual practices to her daughter. One of the essential aspects of Nepali womanhood is respecting traditional rules (Bennett 1983). Sharing the practices across generations is one of the ways women show respect.

Similarly, two aspirants declare that they will not teach menstrual rules to their daughters. Thirty-year-old, Binita, belonging to a Chhetri family, argues, "I will not teach my daughter about these practices as my husband's family does not follow menstrual customs. Then why should I teach that to my daughter?" Both Binita and Diwa's statements illustrate how aspirants' decision to teach their offspring about menstrual customs largely depends on the patriarchal structure guiding the Nepali family. Families expect married women to follow consistent norms and practices in their husbands' homes.

Although aspirants mention that mothers and mothers-in-law primarily instruct them to follow menstrual restrictions, half of the aspirants said their husbands or other male family members also ask them to follow these practices. Diwa, a 28-year-old aspirant belonging to a Newar (Vaishya) family, recounts, "We are not supposed to touch my father-in-law during periods. If a menstruating woman accidentally touches him, he starts to shiver and gets crazy." Diwa claims that her father-in-law feels ill for days if he comes in contact with a menstruating woman. The incident encourages Diwa, who did not follow such rules in her natal family, to follow menstrual practices around her father-in-law.

Diwa's experience shows that even men from other caste groups may be vulnerable to menstrual defilement. Past studies argue that high-caste Hindu men are particularly in danger of menstrual defilement (Bennett 1983). Diwa's father-in-law's experience shows that men from all caste groups, holding higher statuses than women, may be vulnerable to menstrual defilement. Nonetheless, Diwa's husband views these practices as unnecessary when they are away from home.

Further, Diwa also avoids touching her son before taking a shower during her period and instructs others not to do so because she is worried that her son might get sick. Her observation of her father-in-law might have triggered Diwa's concern for her son. Diwa's practice of not touching her young son shows how men's vulnerability to menstrual defilement is transferred to the next generation.

Likewise, 26-year-old Devi also mentions that she felt unwell when touched by another menstruating woman. Devi believes that menstrual defilement may bring bad luck or cause sickness; thus, she avoids touching others during her periods. Devi was

among a handful of respondents who reported feeling unease when defiled by menstruating women. Similarly, 35-year-old Aarti, who belongs to a Chhetri family and runs an eatery, states that her husband does not think it's necessary to follow menstrual practices. Nonetheless, she mentions that she avoids giving food during her periods to her father and father-in-law. Aarti's approach demonstrates existing hierarchies in Nepali families where menstruating women avoid defiling patriarchs.

The majority of aspirants follow more stringent practices in their natal homes. Aspirants mainly live in a nuclear family and recall spending little time with their husband's family. Aspirants follow limited menstrual restrictions as there is no one else to fulfill domestic responsibilities. Geeta recalls,

> My mother emphasized keeping the tradition alive. So, it was more stringent during that time. But after marriage, I cook food and do everything. I never really stayed with my mother-in-law. But even when I am with her, I don't share information about my periods. Even now, when my mother-in-law visits my place, I cook for her. But if I have to enter the prayer room, then only I mention my periods.

Geeta adds that practices are more lenient in her natal home with her sister-in-law. She mentions that her sister-in-law is allowed inside her parent's room to clean it. Families seem more willing to let go of practices, especially for daughters-in-law, if they hinder their ability to perform domestic chores. Fulfilling gender roles seem to supersede the need to follow menstrual restrictions. Geeta adds, "My mother-in-law did not force me to follow any rules, but she asks me to follow the practice if there is someone who can help with the domestic work." Geeta's

mother-in-law refers to another female family member when she says someone else can help with the domestic responsibilities. Thus, married aspirants' domestic duties supersede the need to follow menstrual restrictions.

Negotiators

Several negotiators (20 percent (5)) mention that they follow more stringent menstrual practices for ancestral rituals. Alka, a 31-year-old, Brahmin negotiator outlines practices in her natal home, "We follow these rules for four days, and from the fourth day, we can enter the kitchen and cook. We start praying on the fifth day, and we give our ancestors offerings only on the seventh day." Alka's family pays particular attention to maintain ritual purity while giving ancestors offerings. Similarly, 30-year-old Rashmi's conversation with her mother further demonstrates the importance of maintaining ritual purity while honoring dead ancestors. Rashmi recounts,

> My mother doesn't allow us to enter the kitchen during periods. I had asked her why? What would happen if we entered the kitchen? She told me that more than anything else, we need to perform *Shradha*, and during *Shradha*, we use food and spices, which are already in the kitchen. So, she said that it is better if we do not touch those things. She used to say that she wouldn't feel anything if a household that doesn't have to perform *Shradha* doesn't follow these practices.

Rashmi's mother's statements illustrate that the primary reason for following menstrual practices is to show respect to the ancestors.

Negotiators' adherence is more inclined towards appeasing living relatives and extended families rather than respecting ancestors. Like adherents and aspirants,

negotiators also mention that they receive instructions about menstrual practices from their mothers, mothers-in-law, or other female family members. Nonetheless, negotiators are also more likely to recognize how grandparents and extended relatives influence their menstrual practices. Manju notes that her mother gave her instruction about menstrual practices. She recalls negotiating with her, "Even with my mother, when she was imposing some rules on me if I said no, she would make the practice a little flexible." Manju claims that the problem started when visitors observed her mother's flexible rules. She remembers, "For a certain time, my mother used to wash my clothes even during my period. Clothes that I used to wear for school. My mother would wash it and then take a shower. And my relatives gossiped that my mother did my laundry during periods." Manju's mother experienced social sanctions from outside the household when making menstrual restrictions flexible for her daughters. As Manju mentions, outsiders are also interested in whether or not the family follows the practices. Although mothers are the enforcers of menstrual rules, they do not decide to impose these restrictions independently. External factors influence mothers' decisions, ready to enact sanctions in case of deviance.

The majority of negotiators (52 percent (13)) were instructed by their mothers, fathers, and grandparents. Indira, a 35-year-old negotiator, hailing from a Brahmin family recalls,

> It was mostly my mother. My grandfather taught my mother about these practices, and my mother would instruct us about them. I had also observed my elders receiving these instructions. My family would ask us not to touch, but sometimes I would forget and touched it. My mother

> would then tell me not to do that. My mother was more worried that my grandfather would get angry and yell at us. She would say if your grandfather sees it, he will yell, so move from here. She was scared of my grandfather.

Indira's mother seems to be more worried about offending her father-in-law. Indira's mother instructing her daughters about these practices teaches her daughters the importance of maintaining ritual purity and respecting the elders. These values are essential to maintain the image of a good Nepali woman (Bennett 1983; Grossman-Thompson 2017).

Some negotiators say that they learned these practices by observing others in the household. Alka, a 31-year-old, Brahmin negotiator claims that learning menstrual rules is not like training. She adds, "There was already a system in place in the house. My mother followed these practices, and then my sister had her period, and she started following these practices. So, no one had to train me. We learned these practices from childhood." Alka refers to the system that transfers menstrual restrictions across generations and shows how these restrictions exist within a family like a recurring structure. Families socialize negotiators to fit into these structures since early childhood. Alka outlines her experience learning these practices,

> When we were young and my mother had a period, they would say my mother has a stomachache and shouldn't touch around. And we had to help during that time, and we also learned about these practices during those interactions. That was even before we had periods, like at the age of

> six or seven. As my mother could not touch around, we were asked to cook tea and bring her stuff. And even when we handed her stuff, she would place her hands far down, and we would give it to her without actually touching her. So, when I had my periods, I knew how to hold my hands when I asked for something.

Alka's narrative highlights the process of socialization and how negotiators are prepared to follow these practices when they start menstruating.

Negotiators, who followed flexible menstrual practices, had mixed responses about transferring menstrual practices to the next generation. Sixteen percent (4) of negotiators argue that they attempt to teach their daughters about menstrual practices but face resistance from their daughters. Twenty percent (5) of negotiators mention that they engage in transferring certain aspects of menstrual restrictions, particularly avoiding entering the temple and prayer room to the future generation. Thirty-six percent (9) of negotiators claim that it is not essential to teach the younger generation about menstrual practices. Instead, several negotiators emphasize teaching about menstruation, focusing on positive aspects of menstruation rather than the rules.

At least 28 percent (7) of negotiators highlight the complexity involved in deciding to teach younger generations about menstrual practices. Manju, a 30-year-old, Chhetri negotiator stresses the dynamics of transferring menstrual customs to the future generation. She argues,

> We should teach them to pay attention to hygiene and eat nutritious food. But I think we shouldn't teach our daughters how to follow these practices. If I stay in a nuclear family, I am not going to teach them these

> practices. But there are also lots of things that we have to do out of compulsion. I cannot break and change all the rules. If I have complete control, then I can decide. But if I follow these practices during menstruation, my daughter will continue the tradition, and if I am not following the rules, why would she follow them? So, I should change the practice.

Manju's statements indicate that she might make her own decisions about menstrual restrictions if she lives in a nuclear family. Further, her narrative clarifies how future generations learn these practices by explicit instruction and observing their mothers and other household women. Negotiators also argue that women might face difficulties after marriage if they are not taught about menstrual practices in their natal home.

Negotiators also highlight how male family members ask them to follow menstrual restrictions to maintain ritual purity and respect elders. Sixty percent (15) of negotiators have at least one male family member who requests they follow menstrual rules. "My husband cooks by himself during my period. Everyone in this family is very religious. My husband, mother-in-law, and father-in-law all do the prayers and chanting. My husband wears *Janai* (holy thread worn by initiated men). Whenever we go outside, and we are riding a bike, we go together. But as soon as we enter the household, he says he will cook and asks me not to enter the kitchen," states 35-year-old Indira. Indira's husband, who shows some flexibility around menstrual customs outside the household, follows these practices strictly in his parents' presence.

Similarly, 20 (5) percent of negotiators express that their husbands do not care about the rules, but they expect women to follow menstrual restrictions in front of their

extended family. Kanchi, a 49-year-old negotiator who belongs to a Chhetri family, states, “My mother-in-law and father-in-law live with us. My husband says it’s okay to touch him, but his parents are strict and ask me to follow these practices.” Kanchi’s husband asks her to follow menstrual restrictions to show respect to his parents. Being respectful towards elders is an essential element of being a good man or woman in Nepal (Bennett 1983). Kanchi’s husband is attempting to maintain a good son’s image by respecting his parent’s beliefs.

Also, 30-year-old Manju argues that other family members are observing the couple’s adherence to menstrual restrictions. She claims,

> But even in a nuclear family, some couples follow these practices. Like my sister-in-law, they follow these practices. Her husband cooks and cleans. Thinking about it as giving rest to women, then it is good. Education does not matter; even doctors follow these practices. But it also depends on how much parents are interested in whether or not the couple follows these practices. Parents visit in between, and they see that their son and daughter-in-law are not following these practices; they turn into criminals. It is also hard not to follow these practices at other times and pretend when parents are around. There are lots of things to consider in Nepal.

Manju, in her narratives, highlights factors beyond the individual family unit that are shaping menstrual practices. Family as an institution in Nepal is embedded within a larger social structure that comprises external family, other family units,

religion, and shamans, to name a few. All of these factors influence the family's adherence to menstrual practices.

Negotiators recall more incidences of external pressure that they and their families experience due to their flexible practices. One of the sanctions negotiators face is an association of menstrual defilement with illness and misfortune. At least, 32 percent (8) of negotiators note that menstrual defilement is considered a cause of disease, particularly epilepsy and other seizures and misfortunes. All but one story about the disease is among male family members. One negotiator did not disclose the gender of the individual while sharing a story of menstrual defilement causing disease. Gouri, a 22-year-old, Brahmin negotiator, recalls how her family blamed her for her brother's epileptic attack. She recounts,

> My brother was having his *bratabandha,* and I touched him. My brother had an epileptic attack a day after his *bratabandha*. My grandfather, other elders, and religious doctors blamed me for the attack. My family has stopped blaming me after realizing that my brother was suffering from a disease that was not caused by menstrual defilement. My parents took my brother to the hospital, and the medical professionals could not find anything. My brother had his second attack after a year. And when my parents took him to the hospital after the second attack, my brother was diagnosed with epilepsy.

Gouri, who touched her brother during the initiation ceremony, is blamed by her grandfather for causing her brother's seizures. The finding is consistent with Wong's (2018) results among women practicing *Chhaupadi* who are vulnerable to

blame for any misfortunes that befall their families, relatives, and communities if they defy menstrual customs. Gouri's experience also resonates with earlier arguments that initiated men are considered vulnerable to menstrual defilements (Bennett 1983). The increased necessity to maintain ritual purity around initiated men also shows their higher status within the household. Other than around initiated male family members, families uphold a high level of ritual purity for ancestors and gods who hold higher positions in a Nepali family. Gouri also recalls paying attention to avoid touching religious objects after the incident. Her experience demonstrates how numerous factors shape women's experiences with menstrual customs rather than being solely imposed by one woman onto another.

Kalpana, a 29-year-old, Brahmin negotiator recalls a similar episode in her natal home. Her natal family stopped following menstrual restrictions for some years. However, during an ancestral ritual, a shaman told her family that menstrual defilement was causing problems in her family. Kalpana recalls, "When we were praying our *Kul Devata* (ancestral god), a lot of shamans told us that *timi haru ko kul devata bigrecha, timi haru nachune bardainau*." The shaman told her family that not following menstrual restrictions had angered their ancestral god. Kalpana's natal family started following menstrual practices again after the incident. She recounts her father's reaction, "After my father realized that defiling these practices brought chaos to the family, my father asked us to follow these practices. If we mistakenly came near the kitchen during our periods, my dad would ask why we were near the kitchen and instruct us to sit in another room." Kalpana and Gouri's experiences illustrate how menstrual restrictions within the family

are influenced by factors operating beyond the household, like the ideologies and practices of religious healers.

A few married negotiators discuss the difference in menstrual practices after marriage. Kabita, a 52-year-old, who comes from a Brahmin family, states, “My husband insisted on following these rules, and he cooked for the family during my periods. Practices got flexible after the birth of children. Because after having children, you need to feed them even though there may be no one in the house. You cannot keep them hungry. So, the birth of my children made these rules more flexible. Before childbirth, we followed these rules.” Kabita’s experiences are similar to other respondents. Negotiators, who are younger than other groups, include fewer narratives of change in practices after marriage.

Opponents

Three opponents state that they attempt to maintain ritual purity for prayers and ancestral rituals. Shakti, a 51-year-old opponent from a Vaishya family who otherwise does not follow any menstrual restrictions, argues, “I don’t enter the prayer room, where we store food and spices required to conduct prayer and *Shradha.* So, I start praying on the fifth day. I only perform rituals related to our ancestors on the seventh day.” Shakti’s practices indicate higher importance given to ancestors and associated rituals.

Two opponents mention that they touch ancestral shrines. Indu, a 32-year-old, Brahmin respondent recalls, “At home, we had a room where we placed our ancestral shrine and was asked not to touch it. But I used to go there and touch it. I wanted to see what would happen if I touch it.” Indu was told that something terrible might happen to

the family or someone from the family might get sick if she defied the practices. Indu resists the rules and also reflects on her resistance to justify her opposition. Indu's engagement in defiance and reflection is similar to adolescent girls from the Kathmandu valley in Pandey's (2014) study. Opponents like Indu are undoing menstrual practices by challenging the requirement to adhere to menstrual rules. Via their challenges, opponents are also undoing gender, which requires them to respect ancestors and elders (Deutsch 2007). The remaining opponents did not mention ancestral rituals while talking about their menstrual practices.

Three opponents state that mothers gave them instruction for menstrual practices. Two opponents learn these practices by observing their mothers and other women in their households. Among married opponents, one notes that her husband's family does not follow menstrual restrictions, and another told her husband that she is not going to follow any menstrual rules. The remaining three married opponents mention that their mothers-in-law instructed them about menstrual practices after marriage.

Samata, a 37-year-old Chhetri opponent, shares, "My mother-in-law told me about the rules. You need to follow when instructed by your mother-in-law. Firstly, everyone is worried that their mother-in-law may get mad at them. And now, I follow because my mother-in-law takes care of my children, and I am afraid that she might get angry, and I follow even when it is not agreeable to me." Samata makes a strategic decision to follow menstrual restrictions in exchange for childcare from her mother-in-law. Samata's adherence to menstrual rules absolves her from childcare responsibilities allowing her to practice medicine. Samata's adherence is undoing current gender

practices and redefining why someone may choose to follow these practices in specific ways (Deutsch 2007).

Opponents who do not follow many menstrual restrictions do not consider that it was essential to teach the younger generation about these practices and claim that the younger generation is reluctant to comply. Forty-one-year-old Shila, who belongs to a Chhetri family, recalls how her daughters hid their first period from her. She recounts, "My youngest daughter, she had her first period during the festival Dashain. She asked me for a pad one day and said that it was her third day. I asked don't you need to tell me? I told her that you are not supposed to touch god even though you don't follow anything else. And you are eating your food sitting next to your small brother and father. I asked her to sit separately, at least for the first time. So, after that, she stayed separately for the next four days. My daughter argued that it not necessary to follow these rules. She said that you are not aware, but it is unnecessary to follow these rules."

Shila's experiences with her daughter highlight young girls' agency to determine when and how to share information regarding their periods. Although mothers may teach their daughters about menstrual customs, the younger generation constantly negotiates acceptable behavior. Traditionally, families' sent girls starting their first period into hiding for anywhere between five to twenty-one days away from all festivities. Shila's daughter, confronting the current practices, was asked to stay aside for only four days. After several unsuccessful attempts to teach her daughter, Shila now believes that "I don't think it is necessary to teach upcoming generations about these practices. You should teach some of our other traditions like respecting elders." Although Shila plans not to impose menstrual restrictions on her daughters anymore, she thinks it's essential to

teach them to be respectful to elders, which is a crucial trait of Nepali women and men (Bennett 1983; Grossman-Thompson 2017)

One opponent struggles to determine whether she is willing to teach menstrual customs to her young daughter. Samata contemplates, “If I decide not to teach any rules to my daughter, I am worried that when she gets married, she might face problems. In a way, I don’t want to teach any of these practices to my daughter as these practices make no sense. And why should I teach it to her?” Although Samata finds menstrual practices nonsensical, she struggles to determine whether she should be willing to transfer them to her daughter. Samata claims that her daughter may face problems after marriage if she fails to learn her husband’s home culture, highlighting how learning menstrual restrictions prepare young girls to do gender as adults (West and Zimmerman 1987).

The majority of opponents mention that their husbands or other male family members do not care about these practices. Seema, a 53-year-old, belongs to a Brahmin family and followed stringent rules in her natal home. She does not follow any menstrual restrictions now, and her husband supports her decisions. Seema recounts, “My father still thinks we need to follow these practices strictly. He is happy when we follow menstrual rules. If he hears that his daughters follow menstrual practices, shower every day, and change their clothes before cooking. My father has a different smile listening to these stories. He says that we should regularly follow these practices and teach our children about them.” Seema’s father expects his daughters to maintain an image of an ideal Nepali woman who maintains ritual purity around her household (Bennett 1983). Her experience shows how the pressure to comply with these practices does not necessarily come only from female family members.

Like Seema, 19-year-old Bina, who follows Christianity, recalls how her grandfather, who follows Hinduism, expects Bina and her mother to follow menstrual restrictions. Similarly, Samata's husband, who does not care about the practices, asks her to follow these restrictions when visiting his parent's home. She argues,

> In our home, I touch everything, and my husband does not care about it. But while staying at his parents' house, my husband expects me to follow their practices. My husband expects me to show respect towards his mother's rules. I follow these practices for my husband's peace of mind and my mother-in-law because I stay in her home. Not following these practices becomes a big issue in Nepali culture. Everyone looks at you as a useless person.

Samata's statements illustrate how women are judged for not following these practices. Similarly, Samata and her husband are obligated to follow menstrual rules at his parent's home as a sign of respect for his mother.

Opponents also highlight the difference in menstrual restrictions between their natal and husbands' homes. Among married opponents, one had her first period after marriage. Four opponents followed more stringent practices before marriage. Some married opponents mention that they had strict grandparents, particularly grandfathers who insisted on following menstrual restrictions.

Shakti, a 51-year-old Vaishya opponent, states that her husband's family follows flexible menstrual practices. Their practices are limited to maintaining distance during prayers and ancestral rituals. Shakti claims that menstrual practices become more lenient for mothers. Some opponents say that their

husbands' families ask them to follow menstrual restrictions after marriage, but they resisted. These opponents are currently living in a nuclear family. Shila, a 41-year-old Chhetri opponent, claims that she follows stringent practices while living with her in-laws for seven years. She recalls, "I stayed with my in-laws for seven years, and I stayed outside all seven days during my periods when I was living with them. Even when my children were young, I slept outside along with my children." Shila, now living in a nuclear family, avoids entering the prayer room and temple. Opponents living in a nuclear family can decide to stop following or follow flexible menstrual restrictions.

Table 4: Summary of the Institutional Level Analysis

Material conditions: Patriarchal family structure			
Cultural Processes: Dominant image of a Nepali woman (compliant, chaste, religiously devoted, and shows respect for and compliance with elders)			
Adherents	**Aspirants**	**Negotiators**	**Opponents**
Follow stringent menstrual customs for ancestral rituals signifying their higher status	Around half of aspirants follow stringent menstrual customs for ancestral rituals signifying their higher status	Some negotiators follow stringent menstrual customs for ancestral rituals signifying their higher status	Less than half of the opponents state that they attempt to maintain ritual purity for ancestral rituals
Essential to transfer menstrual customs to younger generations to prepare them for adult roles	Transfer of menstrual practices depends on whether women in their husband's home follow menstrual customs	Highlight the complexity involved in deciding to teach younger generations about menstrual customs	Claim that younger generations are reluctant to comply with menstrual customs
The majority of adherents have at least one male family member who asked them to observe menstrual customs	Half of the aspirants said that their male family members ask them to follow menstrual restrictions	More than half of negotiators have at least one male family member who requests they follow menstrual rules	The majority of opponents claim that their husbands or other male family members do not care about menstrual customs

Daughters-in-law follow flexible menstrual customs signifying the pressure of domestic responsibilities placed on them	Families more willing to let go of menstrual rules, especially for daughters-in-law, if they hinder their ability to perform domestic chores	Share stories of external pressure by associating menstrual defilement with disease and misfortune	Opponents resist the imposition of stringent menstrual customs

Table four presents vital concepts included in the institutional level analysis. The material condition that is patriarchal family structure influences the cultural processes that construct an ideal image of Nepali women. Respondents across the continuum highlight the need to follow extensive menstrual customs for ancestral rituals signifying higher status held by ancestors and elders. The demand of following stringent menstrual rules for ancestral rituals and considering ancestors superior to god provides a glimpse of the patriarchal family structure. Like, ancestors, men's vulnerability to menstrual defilement indicates their higher status. Similarly, Nepali women's dominant image also requires respecting ancestors and elders and maintaining ritual purity around the household which encourages compliance with menstrual restrictions to maintain the image. Although several women live in nuclear families, the dominant image of women illustrates the influence of a patriarchal family structure.

Unmarried daughters follow the most stringent practices that do not necessarily indicate their lower status in their natal homes. Families are more likely to spare their daughters from domestic chores for an extended period, allowing the implementation of stringent practices. In contrast, families expect daughters-in-law, who shoulder most domestic responsibilities, to return to work

as soon as possible. Additionally, rules become more lenient with childbirth and a further increase in household responsibilities.

Adherents who follow the most rigorous practices emphasize maintaining ritual purity for ancestral rituals. Compared to other groups, adherents mention that their male family members either support or request that they follow menstrual restrictions. Adherents as a group more eloquently highlight the distinction between daughters and daughters-in-law. They argue that families expect daughters-in-law to get back to work as soon as possible. Adherents assert that it is essential to teach the younger generation about menstrual restrictions to prepare them for adult roles.

Aspirants also state that menstrual practices are followed to show respect to ancestors. They receive a mixed response from male family members where some ask them to follow while others do not care about the practices. Like adherents, aspirants also highlight the need to teach younger generations about these practices, and a few aspirants associate menstrual defilement with illness.

Unlike adherents and aspirants, some negotiators state that they follow stringent practices for ancestral rituals. A majority of negotiators receive instructions from their mothers about menstrual rituals. A few negotiators who learned by observing their mothers indicate a system existing within the Nepali household that socializes negotiators into these practices from a young age. Like aspirants, negotiators also receive mixed responses from male family members and share stories of illnesses associated with menstrual defilement. Both aspirants and negotiators who follow more lenient practices experience social sanctions by

others inside and outside the household. These experiences signify how shamans and other religious leaders influence their decision to follow menstrual rules. Individuals impacted by menstrual defilement were male family members.

Several opponents note following more severe menstrual practices for ancestral rituals. Opponents' male family members have more liberal views than other groups, and opponents state that younger generations are hesitant to follow menstrual restrictions. Still, they also recognize the challenges daughters may face in their husbands' homes if they fail to learn about menstrual expectations.

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Using data drawn from 71 qualitative semi-structured interviews, I present the variation in menstrual restrictions followed by women living in Kathmandu, Nepal. A spectrum emerged from the data illustrating women's diverse experiences with menstrual customs. For analysis purposes, I divided respondents into four groups: adherents who strictly follow menstrual restrictions, aspirants who hope to follow menstrual rules, negotiators who follow when beneficial, and opponents who openly oppose menstrual practices, following rarely. This section provides an overview of significant findings from my study, connecting them with past literature. I then discuss the primary contributions of my research and propose future research directions.

Gender Structure Theory (GST) provides a theoretical foundation for this research to examine menstrual practices at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels. GST also allows researchers to assess material conditions and cultural processes at each level. Material conditions at the individual level include physical bodies, income, education, age, and physical space availability. Cultural processes expect women to follow menstrual restrictions. Respondents across the spectrum had different access to material resources determining their agency to maneuver menstrual practices. Individual level analysis illustrates how women's agency to navigate menstrual restrictions varies by

available resources (Sewell 2005), with significant disparity existing in how respondents experienced and viewed their menstrual practices.

At the interactional level, I offer analysis to examine how women conform and resist menstrual restrictions. Adhering to menstrual rules allows women to do gender and maintain their image as virtuous women. Nonetheless, women also engage in modifying, opposing, and at times undoing these practices. The material conditions at the interactional level are the availability of products to manage menstruation and human and financial resources available to women. The cultural processes determine what people expect from others and themselves. The interaction between material conditions and cultural processes determines women's adherence to menstrual practices. Like Pedersen's (2002) study in Bali, women in Kathmandu also adopt numerous strategies to modify the rules, including using medication to postpone periods, flexibility in interpreting the notion of purity, maintaining secrecy, attending functions during periods, or using their periods to avoid social obligations.

Institutional level analysis illustrates the structure of power and authority in a Nepali family. The ways menstrual practices are transferred and enforced in the household reflect the existing power and authority structure. The material condition operating at the institutional level is the patriarchal family structure, and the cultural processes enforce the dominant image of a Nepali woman. A typical expectation from menstruating women who observe menstrual customs in Kathmandu is to avoid entering the kitchen, prayer room, praying, cooking, and touching male family members. The majority of respondents at least avoid entering prayer rooms, temples, praying, or

engaging in religious activities during their periods. All women who reached menopause before the study strictly follow these practices.

Adherence to menstrual practices allows women to do gender and maintain a virtuous woman's image by maintaining purity around the household, respecting traditions followed by elders, and demonstrating their compliant nature. Moreover, adhering to the dominant image allows women to gain support from elders and extended family, maintain peace in the family, and ensure childcare support. Nevertheless, in urban areas of Nepal, in a new economic setting, women also derived their gender identity by fulfilling their domestic responsibilities and bringing home additional income.

The recurring nature of monthly restrictions facilitates a routine production of gender in daily interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987). Additionally, menstrual customs exist within a family like a recurring structure where socialization of a young girl begins long before menarche. Thus, women learn about menstrual customs through childhood socialization and socialization they continue to receive as adults. Finally, constant socialization facilitates the internalization of menstrual practices where women self-regulate their behavior. Like Rothchild and Piya's (2020) study, at least half of the respondents included in this study indicate that they have internalized menstrual customs.

Mothers are primarily responsible for transferring menstrual practices and view this education as socializing young girls to adult roles. However, not all mothers were equally enthusiastic about transferring the menstrual customs and highlighted how their agency largely depend on the living arrangement. Several mothers also recognize the complexity of deciding whether or not to teach their young daughters about these practices. On the one hand, young women may face challenges in their marital homes if

they are unaware of menstrual customs, and, on the other, at times, mothers themselves found these practices nonsensical. Also, younger generations are reluctant to follow traditional customs.

Unmarried women follow the most stringent rules, and restrictions become more flexible after marriage. Das (2008) found similar results in India, where menstrual practices become more relaxed after childbirth and due to the nuclear family structure. This result also shows different societal statuses held by married and unmarried women. The family is more likely to absolve their daughters from domestic chores, allowing them to follow stringent practices. My findings also support Hoskins's (2002) assertions that lack of menstrual practices does not necessarily translate to a higher status. Married women following flexible menstrual customs do not necessarily indicate their higher status; instead, it illustrates the pressing demands of domestic responsibilities.

All respondents consistently condemn the practice of banishing women to menstrual huts. Respondents who followed stringent menstrual customs also distinguish their practices from the most severe forms of menstrual regulation. Women following rigid menstrual customs did not necessarily consider these practices oppressive. Instead, they view menstrual restrictions as a disciplinary mechanism enabling them to remain within normative boundaries of femininity.

Respondents across the continuum view menstrual customs as a disciplinary mechanism, where some find that this mechanism enables them to maintain an ideal image. In addition, a few respondents claim that menstrual practices offer them bodily awareness to control their reproductive functions, where women actively track their periods to detect pregnancies. In contrast, others view it as restrictions imposed on

women and their sexuality. Menstrual customs allow families to control adolescent daughters' sexuality. The monthly cycle assures parents that their unmarried daughters are not engaging in illegitimate relationships.

Respondents across the spectrum consider menstruation as dirty and employed media messaging to highlight the need to maintain menstrual hygiene. Respondents who strictly follow menstrual customs utilize traditional beliefs and media messaging to justify their adherence to menstrual customs. Further, respondents who follow flexible menstrual customs or reject them altogether highlighted their ability to maintain a high level of cleanliness during menstruation to rationalize their practice. The media messaging reinforces the traditional view of menstruation as dirty and creates a notion of a good period – one that is concealed and invisible (Arora 2017; Kissling 2006; Lahiri-Dutt 2015). Although mainstream products allow women to manage their periods, they also strengthen the stigma surrounding menstruation.

Some of the significant reasons women in Nepal follow menstrual customs are respecting elders, ancestors, and traditions, avoiding conflict within the household, gaining respite from domestic chores, and worrying about negative consequences. Additionally, women also follow stringent menstrual customs during ancestral rituals, which signifies higher status held by ancestors within Nepali households. Past studies conducted in the western part of the country found similar results where respondents follow menstrual restrictions as a part of the tradition and fear negative consequences (Baumann et al. 2020; Kadariya and Aro 2015). Similarly, several respondents following flexible menstrual practices share instances where menstrual defilement is associated with diseases.

These results are noteworthy as they provide empirical evidence to women's claim that defying menstrual customs may have negative consequences. Additionally, these results illustrate how respondents who adopt flexible menstrual practices are more likely to be sanctioned by extended family and shamans via the association of menstrual defilement with illness and misfortune. Also, these findings indicate how a family's adherence to practices is influenced by other families and religious institutions operating within the same cultural and historical context. Beliefs of defilement make women vulnerable to blame for various challenges faced by the family.

Wong (2018) found similar results where women are blamed for misfortunes when they defy menstrual practices. High caste men are particularly vulnerable to menstrual defilement, consistent with Bennett's (1983) assertions. My study extends extant results to illustrate how men belonging to other caste groups may also report illness associated with menstrual defilement. These findings indicate cultural imperatives to maintain ritual purity around men who, like ancestors, hold a higher status in Nepali families.

The association of menstrual restrictions with diseases and misfortune and women's fear of sinning during menstruation shows that the taboo nature of menstrual customs still exists in Nepali society. Moreover, the taboo nature of menstruation is also enforced at the institutional level by religious leaders like *shamans* and patriarchs of families worried about menstrual defilement. Nonetheless, not all women view menstruation as taboo. Rather many women may be following menstrual rules to appease their elders and gain respite from domestic chores.

Unlike Crawford et al. (2014), not all respondents in my study view menstrual practices as inconvenient and bothersome. Instead, the majority of respondents view menstrual restrictions as a respite from domestic chores. They appreciate that menstrual practices challenge the gendered division of labor for a few days. This finding resonates with Sharma's (2014) study, which found that women in Nepal are more likely to define their menstrual practices as rest. Das (2014) found similar results in Assam India, where menstrual practices exempt women from manual work and provide an opportunity for respite. Currently, women are solely responsible for domestic chores, and the shift in the gender division of labor within the household in Nepal is happening at a sluggish pace. Adherence to menstrual practices provides respite from domestic chores until there is a change in the gender division of labor.

Nonetheless, respondents also acknowledge that families of women in rural areas might give women more arduous tasks. Women's ability to define menstruation as a respite shows how the experience of menstrual customs depends on social and cultural contexts. Women in rural areas who are equally involved in agriculture may not be able to enjoy similar benefits. Young respondents living in urban areas who do not regularly work in the kitchen do not mind limited kitchen access during menstruation. Women are comfortable following menstrual restrictions as long as they are not controlled in their personal spaces.

Respondents in this study present a malleable notion of purity with room to change when needed. Even respondents who claim strict adherence modify their rules and define their modifications as circumstantial demand. They are more likely to alter their practices when they challenge their ability to perform gender roles. Modification of

menstrual practices allows women to meet cultural expectations that require them to be available for men and children at all times (Chrisler 2008; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013). This finding is consistent with Das's (2008) results among women in Assam, India, where menstrual restrictions are flexible depending on the availability of helping hands and other pressing issues. The malleable notion of purity highlights the dynamic nature of menstrual customs and how it is transforming in urban areas. However, women's living arrangements and position within the household are crucial in determining their ability to modify their practices (Wong 2018).

Several respondents also recall defying menstrual customs. However, women are more likely to absolve themselves from menstrual rules when they are not observed by others and are less likely to be held accountable. This particular finding highlights how society's expectation for women to follow menstrual customs makes adherence crucial at the interactional level when they are most likely to be held responsible by others. In addition, menstrual customs are more critical at the interactional level as women may experience external pressure in the form of gossip and other sanctions when they overlook these customs.

My study highlights the variation in menstrual practices followed by women in urban Nepal, extending previous research by illustrating the complexities in perceptions and experiences among women who identify with and engage in a diverse range of menstrual practices. The study also emphasizes how adherence to menstrual practices serves two contradictory purposes; the information surrounding menstruation allows families to control women's sexuality. Also, bodily awareness provides women with agency over their reproductive functions and the ability to modify and resist menstrual

practices. I highlight the ambiguous nature of menstrual practices where some view menstrual practices as a way to do gender and maintain an image of a virtuous woman. Others view menstrual taboos as an opportunity to challenge the gender-based division of labor and gain respite from domestic chores. Rest was particularly appreciated by negotiators who were also more likely to be engaged in the workforce. Menstrual restrictions provide them a much-needed break from their second shift obligations.

My findings demonstrate the flexibility of menstrual practices, which women constantly modify to find a more livable and viable alternative. Women as knowledgeable actors maneuver menstrual customs, finding opportunities for rest and respite. Women modify menstrual practices according to circumstantial demand. Findings of flexibility and resistance contradict the general notion that countries like Nepal are engulfed in the rigid culture of the past. I highlight women's agency to interpret their practices. Women are constantly engaged in reinterpretation, modification, and resistance. Both negotiators and opponents are willing to defy the rules when not observed and are less likely to be held accountable for their actions. I also illustrate how cultural and social contexts determine women's agency and the limitations of agency held by some women, like opponents who had necessary resources to openly oppose menstrual practices but are still held accountable by extended families and society.

A notable finding of this study is men's role in the continuation of menstrual practices. Respondents who follow the most stringent rules note that male family members support and demand adherence to menstrual practices. Even though this project does not include an extended conversation with men, my findings highlight the potential role of men in encouraging or discouraging menstrual customs. This finding is

noteworthy as previous studies have presented menstrual customs as a practice that women from one generation impose on the next. Although women are at the forefront of transferring menstrual practices, other factors like men and religious leaders perpetuate the practices as well.

This work offers an opportunity to consider urban women's perceptions of and experiences with menstrual practices. The current study adds to the existing literature on class and caste-based dynamics in adherence to menstrual practices. Past studies have examined caste, and the present study adds class analysis of women following menstrual restrictions. Middle-class women were more likely to follow stringent menstrual practices. My work also highlights the usefulness of gender structure theory to present a holistic perspective regarding a pertinent and contemporary social issue.

While this study provides insight into the menstrual experiences of urban women in Nepal, future studies can focus on perceptions and assessments of rural women to better understand the diversity of menstrual practices in which women engage. The present study shows how adherence to menstrual practices allows some women to maintain the dominant image of a Nepali woman. Future studies can extensively examine how women do gender in a particular cultural context. Studies can also explore the Nepali diaspora and their experiences with menstrual practices. Young girls' narratives during their menarche, when they follow the most stringent rules, may also offer helpful insight into changing menstrual practices and reduce challenges with recall in older populations. Future studies can explore practices and perceptions of women during childbirth. The current research shows that some women in Nepal follow menstrual restrictions to gain respite from domestic chores. Future studies can explore the

relationship between gender division of labor and women's adherence to menstrual practices. Additionally, another potential avenue of future research is examining the menstrual experiences of gender-nonconforming individuals.

Nonetheless, the present study is essential in providing a nuanced understanding of contemporary menstrual customs followed by women in an urban area of Nepal, highlighting diversity in experience and perceptions. Furthermore, the current study is significant in presenting women in Nepal as active agents following, negotiating, modifying, and reinterpreting menstrual practices within the existing gender structure while attempting to find agreeable menstrual practices and opportunities within these concrete constraints.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

List of Terminologies

Bhageko:	a word used to refer to menstruation and translates as running away
Bratabandha	initiation ceremony for Hindu men
Chhaupadi:	a menstrual practice followed in Nepal's mid and far western region
Chhau:	menstruation
Chui bhako:	a word used to refer to menstruation and translates as being in an untouchable state
Challan:	translates as a trend and use to refer to current practices
Dharma:	religious merit
Ghar:	home/ also used to refer to husband's home
Gunyo and cholo:	a traditional attire worn mainly by adult women
GST:	Gender Structure Theory
Janai:	holy thread worn by initiated man
Karma Chaleko:	a woman who has given birth to a child
Karma Nacheko:	a woman who has not given birth to a child/ unmarried
Khokh futeko:	a woman who has given birth to a child
Khokh nafuteko:	a woman who has not given birth to a child/ unmarried
Kul:	ancestral shrine placed within each household
Mahinawari:	a word used to refer to menstruation and translates as monthly

Maiti:	natal home
Means:	derived from English word menses and used by the younger generation to refer to menstruation
Nachune:	a word used to refer to menstruation and translates as being in an untouchable state
Nahune:	a word used to refer to menstruation and translates as not available
Padi:	woman
Pancheko:	a word used to refer to menstruation and translates as moving away
Para sarne:	a word used to refer to menstruation and translates as moving away
Pratha:	custom
Paap:	sin
Sanskar:	cultural socialization
Shradha:	a ritual honoring dead ancestors performed on deceased parents' and grandparents' death anniversaries

APPENDIX B

SCRIPT TO OBTAIN VERBAL CONSENT
(To be given prior to start of the one on one interview)

Thank you for speaking with me. This is a research project conducted by Srijana Karki from the Department of Sociology at Oklahoma State University, USA. I am interested in learning about your experiences with menstruation.

Your participation with this research involves a one on one interview that will last between 45 minutes to one hour. I will ask you to answer questions about your experiences with menstruation, including your personal experiences and history, and the rules you are required to follow.

This interview will be completely confidential. Your participation is voluntary, you are free to withdraw your participation at any time, and you are free to not answer any single question or series of questions if you choose.

The interview will be audio recorded and I will take written notes on your responses. I will keep recordings and written notes in my possession in a locked file cabinet in a secure location. Only the research team will have access to the audio recordings and written notes. Your name will not be connected to any of the information you provide during the interview. Audio recordings will be coded with a number and identifying information will be removed immediately after the interview is over to better protect your confidentiality. After data collection is complete, all audio recordings will be destroyed.

Do you have any questions for me about the research project? Do you consent to participate in this research project?

IRB Initial approval: 04/11/2018
Continuation Approval: 03/22/2019
Protocol #: AS-18-22

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT SCRIPT

Project Title: Women's Experiences with Menstrual Customs in Kathmandu, Nepal

Investigators: Srijana Karki, Department of Sociology Oklahoma State University

Purpose: The purpose of the research is to better understand women's experiences with menstruation in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. The study will ask women to talk about their experiences over time and discuss the rules they are required to follow.

Procedures: Your participation involves a semi-structured audio-recorded interview expected to last between 45 minutes to one hour. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to answer any single question or set of questions at any time.

Participation Risks: There are no known risks associated with this project greater than those in daily life.

Benefits: This research will provide several benefits. First, it will give you a chance to discuss your experiences with menstruation. The study is also essential to understand how menstrual rules occur in the urban areas and women's agency in their experiences.

Confidentiality: Records of this study will be confidential. Any written results will discuss group findings and will not include identifying information. We will keep digital audio files and written notes securely stored on password protected computers and in a locked file cabinet located in our offices. The research team will be the only people with access to the audio files and written notes. Audio files will be transcribed once each interview is finished and will be kept in a locked file cabinet. After data collection is done and the transcripts have been checked for errors, the recordings will be digitally erased.

Research records will be stored securely and only researchers and people responsible for research oversight will have access to the records. It is possible that the consent process and data collection will be observed by

research oversight staff responsible for safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of people who participate in research.

Participant Rights: Your participation is voluntary, you are free to end your participation at any time and you are free not to answer any single question or set of questions if you choose. There is no risk or penalty for ending your participation in this study.

Contacts: If you have any questions about the research, you may contact Srijana Karki Department of Sociology, 450 Murray Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 628-701-7598 or srijana.karki@okstate.edu.
Dr. Tamara Mix, Department of Sociology, 470 Murray Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-6125 or tamara.mix@okstate.edu.

I will provide you with my contact information if you have any questions for me about this study, or anything we discussed. The card I am giving you also has the contact information for the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have any questions about your rights as a participant. Locally, you can also contact me, Srijana Karki at 977-9841696236 and I can contact the OSU IRB on your behalf to answer any questions you may have regarding this study.

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research study, its procedures, risks and benefits, you may contact, Srijana Karki at 977-9841696236 (Nepal) or 628-701-7598, srijana.karki@okstate.edu. She can answer any questions you may have regarding this study and assist you in contacting the OSU IRB.

Independent Contact: If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about research or your rights as a participant, please contact the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to speak to someone independent of the research team at (405)-744-3377 or send an email to irb@okstate.edu.

IRB Initial approval: 04/11/2018
Continuation Approval: 03/22/2019
Protocol #: AS-18-22

APPENDIX D

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Discussion of informed consent narrative and documents

Let's first start talking about the menstrual practices prevalent in your household

General Experiences

1. What was your first experience of menstruation like?
    - Can you elaborate on the practices that you followed during your first period?
    - Do you think you were adequately prepared for the experience?
2. How did feel about menstrual practices at that time?
3. How did you come to know about these practices?
4. Did the start of menarche impact your relationship with your family? What about school and friends? Can you elaborate what were some of those changes?
5. Did menarche and menstruation practices had/have any impact on the ways that you view yourself and your body?

Rules

6. Do you follow any rules or regulations when menstruating?
7. Are rules and practices followed in your first period similar to practices you follow on the monthly basis? Discuss how similar or different.
8. Can you elaborate some of the rules that you follow on the monthly basis? (Dietary restriction, restriction to enter kitchen and other spaces, rules related to religious activities, touching male members of the family).
9. How did you come to know about these practices?
10. How are these practices transferred from one generation to the next?
11. Are you married?
12. Are menstrual practices followed in the household where you were born similar or different to the household where you got married? Please elaborate similarities and differences.
13. Who helped to understand the menstrual practices in the household where you got married?
14. Have you given birth to a child?
15. Did you follow any maternal rules or practices? Can you recall some of the rules and regulations you followed after you gave birth? (any dietary or mobility restrictions)

Interactions

16. How does your experiences with menstruation differ while being at home versus visiting someone else's place?
    - school or any educational institution?

- offices or workplace?
- temples or any religious functions?

17. How do male members of the household respond to these practices?
18. What part do male household members play? (imposing these practices, asking you to stop following, totally ignorant?) Please elaborate.

Feelings about the practice

19. Why are these practices followed?
    - Aware of religious or other logics behind these practices? Please elaborate.
20. What do you think these practices are doing?
21. What do they mean to you?
22. Why is it important or not so important to follow these rules?
23. Do you think these practices are helping you in any way? Limiting you? Just a part of your life?
    - Please elaborate on why you think menstrual practices are helping/limiting/just part of life.

Change

24. Have you experienced any changes in the way you view menstrual practices during your lifetime?
25. If you or your family migrated from rural areas, how have practices changed as you migrated to the capital city?
26. How important are these rules to upcoming generations?
27. Why is it important or not so important for future generation to know about these practices?
28. Are you participating in the transfer of these practices?
    - Why/why not?
    - If yes, in what ways?

Outcomes

29. How do you follow menstrual practices?
    - Are there any strategies you use or any reasoning you give to yourself?
    - Do you follow all of it?
    - If no, now do you decide which rule to follow and which to let go?
30. Have you ever defied any menstrual practices?
    - Please elaborate on why you decided not to follow those practices at that particular times?
    - How did you feel when you defied those practices?
31. Are there any situations in which you are more likely to defy compared to others?

Demographic Variables: I would like to ask some questions about you

32. Age
33. Religion
34. Caste
35. Monthly or Annual Family Income (whether or not you hold any property in the Kathmandu Valley, what kind of assets does your family hold, husband's profession, number of earning members in the family).
36. Educational status
37. Marital Status

38. Age at Marriage
39. Number of children
40. When are you originally from
41. How long have you been living in Kathmandu
42. Family Size

Is there anything you would like to add about your experiences with menstrual practices that I did not ask about?

Are there others you think might be willing to speak with me about menstrual practices?

VITA

Srijana Karki

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: RESPECT FOR ELDERS, REST OPPORTUNITY, OR PATTERN OF STRUCTURED INEQUALITY?: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF URBAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES WITH MENSTRUAL PRACTICES IN KATHMANDU, NEPAL

Major Field: Sociology

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Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2021.

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Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in Development Studies at Annamalai University, Annamalainagar, India in 2013.

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Project Officer, READ Nepal, 2011
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