

Strengthening Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) Singer Alliance



1st December, 2024

Background

Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) remains a critical yet often overlooked public health issue, heavily burdened by cultural stigma, myths, and misinformation. These persistent negative attitudes not only perpetuate gender inequality but also lead to social isolation, limiting opportunities for many menstruators to thrive. Recognizing the need for innovative approaches to address these challenges, the MHH Singer Alliance was officially launched on May 29th, 2024. This initiative began with 20 members, led by Goodwill Ambassador Rekha Joshi, comprising a diverse group of singers and artists from various regions of the country. Their collective aim is to bring together a wide range of perspectives and ideas, enriching the movement with creativity and cultural relevance.

The MHH Singer Alliance is a unique and groundbreaking initiative that bridges the arts with menstrual health advocacy. Leveraging the universal language of music and art, the Alliance aims to dismantle deep-rooted taboos and drive positive societal transformation. By crafting culturally resonant messages, the group aspires to engage communities at a deeper level, sparking conversations that challenge stereotypes and inspire acceptance and change. To strengthen the Alliance and maximize its impact, workshops and meetings have been conducted, focusing on capacity building and creative collaboration. These sessions have equipped members with the knowledge and skills to advocate effectively for menstrual health and hygiene (MHH). At the same time, they have nurtured vibrant creative expressions designed to engage and resonate with diverse audiences. Complementing these efforts, a strong social media presence has amplified awareness campaigns, significantly broadening their reach and impact.

Through these combined endeavors, the MHH Singer Alliance not only shed light on menstrual health as a vital public health issue but also inspired lasting behavioral and cultural change. By leveraging the power of art, the Alliance aimed to create a more informed, accepting, and equitable society for all menstruators.

Overall Goal

To harness the power of artistic expression in raising awareness and promoting positive attitudes towards menstrual health, hygiene and minimizing gender discrimination and violence due to menstruation through a coordinated alliance of singers.

Specific Objectives

1. Build capacity of alliance members in MHH advocacy
2. Develop effective content creation strategies
3. Establish sustainable support networks
4. Create social impact through artistic interventions
5. Foster long-term behavioral change in target communities

Workshop Details

Venue: Alfa House, New Baneshwor

Date: 1st December, 2024

Time: 10:00am- 2:00pm

MHH Singer Alliance First Workshop: ‘Foundation Building and Orientation’

Theme: Understanding Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) and Establishing Baseline

First workshop objectives:

- Provide comprehensive orientation on menstrual health and hygiene.
- Identify effective methods and techniques for strategic content creation.
- Assess the current contributions and outline plans for the MHH Singer Alliance to enhance impact.
- Facilitate experience sharing and collaboration among alliance members.
- Review current social media engagement strategies to increase outreach and influence.

Outputs:

- Enhanced understanding of MHH among the singer alliance members
- Established baseline of social media presence
- Initial action plans for awareness campaigns

Session 1: Orientation on Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH)

Mr. Guna Raj Shrestha provided an insightful orientation that shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by menstruators in our society. His presentation revealed the deep-rooted social, cultural, religious, and systemic issues that continue to impact menstrual health and dignity.

Key points of the presentation:

a) Menstrual Health Challenges: A Comprehensive Analysis

The landscape of menstrual health is fraught with complex and deeply entrenched challenges that extend far beyond simple biological processes. Menstruators face a multitude of restrictions that permeate nearly every aspect of their daily lives, creating a systematic framework of

discrimination and marginalization that impacts their fundamental human rights and social participation.

b) Religious and Cultural Constraints

Religious and cultural norms impose severe restrictions on menstruators, creating an environment of exclusion and stigmatization. These constraints manifest in multiple dimensions, systematically limiting women's participation in social and spiritual life. Menstruators are routinely excluded from religious activities, including prayers, worship, rituals, and festivals. They are prohibited from entering sacred spaces like temples and are forbidden from approaching holy trees. The cultural restrictions extend beyond religious spaces, imposing mobility limitations within homes, schools, and public spaces.

The social isolation during menstruation is particularly profound. Menstruators face extensive barriers that restrict their engagement with natural elements, including a bizarre prohibition against looking at celestial bodies. These restrictions are not merely symbolic but have tangible impacts on personal freedom, dignity, and social integration.

c) Social and Personal Challenges

The challenges faced by menstruators transcend religious and cultural domains, creating a comprehensive system of social exclusion. Women are frequently barred from participating in marriages, social events, and community gatherings. Extreme restrictions include prohibitions on touching male family members, accessing water sources, and interacting with various natural elements.

Personal hardships are equally severe. Many women are forced to sleep on floors or outside their home spaces, with the Chhaupadi practice being a stark example of such dehumanizing treatment. Household activities become restricted, with menstruators prohibited from cooking and facing dietary limitations that prevent them from consuming fruits, milk, and dairy products. These restrictions directly impact education and work participation, creating cycles of marginalization and economic disadvantage.

d) Evidence and Systemic Impact

The UNICEF/CBS MICS 2019 report provides stark evidence of the systemic challenges in menstrual health management. The report highlights significant gaps, including limited access to water and hygiene facilities, insufficient menstrual materials and education, and inadequate awareness program quality.

The comprehensive impact of these challenges spans multiple domains. Health consequences include elevated infection risks, reproductive health challenges, and significant psychological stress from persistent stigmatization. The broader societal implications are equally alarming, encompassing educational disruption, economic challenges, environmental concerns, and increased gender-based vulnerabilities.

Of particular concern are the human rights violations inherent in these practices. Menstruators experience infringements on fundamental rights, including dignity, freedom, equality, health, education, and housing. These violations directly contradict principles of human rights and social justice.

e) Sustainable Development and Strategic Challenges

The menstrual health challenges directly impede progress across multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including poverty reduction, health and well-being, education, gender equality, and economic growth. Persistent challenges include deep-rooted taboos, policy limitations, harmful traditional practices, and infrastructural deficiencies.

f) Forward-Looking Recommendations

Addressing these complex challenges requires a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach. Recommended strategic actions include:

- Developing comprehensive menstrual health policies
- Strengthening local government initiatives
- Scaling up awareness and training programs
- Promoting affordable and eco-friendly menstrual products
- Enhancing monitoring mechanisms
- Improving inter-ministerial coordination
- Integrating Menstrual Health Management into workplace policies

Conclusion

Ultimately, addressing menstrual health challenges demands a holistic approach that challenges existing social norms, strengthens policy frameworks, and fundamentally promotes dignity and inclusivity. It requires sustained effort across social, cultural, economic, and policy domains to dismantle the systemic barriers that perpetuate discrimination and marginalization.

The path forward lies in recognizing menstruation not as a source of shame or limitation, but as a natural biological process deserving of respect, understanding, and full social support.

Session 2: Sharing Experiences, Current Contributions, and Future Action Plans

a) The Landscape of Menstrual Stigma and Transformation

Menstruation, a universal and natural biological process, remains heavily stigmatized in many societies, including Nepal. Despite growing global conversations about menstrual health, menstruation is still widely viewed through a lens of shame, impurity, and exclusion. This session explored the complex realities faced by women and girls, highlighting the persistent

taboos and emerging transformative efforts. MHH Singer Alliance members shared how menstruation continues to be treated as a "curse" rather than a natural phenomenon, influencing every aspect of a woman's life — from health to education, and social participation. As one of the member put it:

"Menstruation should be about care, not shame. But for many of us, it's still about hiding and suffering."

b) Understanding Existing Stigmas and Cultural Barriers

Cultural stigmas surrounding menstruation are deeply woven into the social fabric. Members discussed how menstruating women are banned from kitchens, religious activities, and even sleeping in their own homes.

Common restrictions during festivals such as Dashain and Tihar were discussed, where women are often prohibited from participating in rituals and gatherings if menstruating. These social sanctions strip women of dignity and perpetuate feelings of inferiority.

One member noted:

"Even today, in some families, girls are told not to touch the water sources or enter kitchens during their period. They are made to feel unclean."

This segment highlighted how menstrual taboos go beyond superstition and directly obstruct women's rights to equality, education, and public life.

c) The Brutal Reality of Chhaupadi Practices

Among the most extreme forms of menstrual stigma is Chhaupadi, a practice that forces women to isolate themselves during menstruation, often in dangerous, unsanitary huts. Members shared harrowing accounts of women and girls enduring freezing nights, attacks from wild animals, and even sexual violence (rape) while confined in Chhaupadi huts.

"I still remember a story of a young girl from Achham who died from a snakebite while she was isolated in a Chhaupadi hut. Such practices continue to steal lives and dignity," shared one member.

Despite laws criminalizing Chhaupadi, enforcement remains weak, and many communities still uphold these harmful traditions, fueled by deep-rooted beliefs and fear of divine retribution.

d) Personal Journeys of Transformation

i) Singer's Contribution to Social Change

Artists and singers have emerged as powerful voices in challenging menstrual stigma. One renowned singer shared her journey of breaking silence around menstruation through music and public platforms:

"When I first sang about menstruation in 2011, people were shocked. But music reaches where words can't. That's how we begin to shift minds."

Collaborations with INGOs, and advocacy groups have enabled these artists to amplify their messages to fight against menstrual stigma and taboos. They aim to create more songs, reels, and short videos that can reach millions, with a special focus on rural communities where menstrual stigma remains deeply entrenched.

ii) Challenges in Awareness and Education

Alliance members highlighted the lack of menstrual health education in schools and communities of Karnali and Sudurpashchim provinces. Many girls first experience menstruation without understanding what is happening to their bodies, leading to fear, shame, and health issues.

One member observed:

"Girls still miss school during their periods because they lack pads, and worse, they lack knowledge. Awareness must start early and reach everyone."

e) Strategic Approach to Social Change

i) Leveraging Influence and Media

Singers with significant social media influence, have recognized their role as change makers. They actively use platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube to share stories, educational content, and powerful calls to action. As one singer mentioned:

"Our voices are louder online. When I post a song about menstruation, thousands listen, share, and talk. This is how we chip away at the stigma."

ii) Innovative Awareness Strategies

Alliance members discussed multi-dimensional strategies to fight menstrual stigma:

- Partnering with local and religious leaders to promote acceptance.

- Creative campaigns combining music, drama, and art to start conversations in conservative communities.
- Educational content tailored for different age groups.
- Focusing on high-need regions like Achham, Surkhet, and Bajura, where practices like Chhaupadi are still prevalent.
- Producing songs and videos that debunk myths and share real stories.

One member summarized:

"To reach hearts and minds, we need to be creative. A song, a play, a story — these connect more than lectures ever can."

f) Future Action Plans and Vision

The collective vision of the members aligns with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and looks toward 2030 as a benchmark for progress. Key future goals include:

- Normalizing open conversations about menstruation in every household.
- Eliminating Chhaupadi and other harmful practices permanently.
- Ensuring comprehensive menstrual health education in all schools and communities.
- Upholding women's dignity and rights as central to development.

"Menstrual dignity is not just a women's issue — it's a human rights issue, and by 2030, we must ensure no one is left behind," emphasized by one member.

g) Observations and Progress: A Case Story

While there is momentum for change, members acknowledged the challenges that persist. Cultural beliefs and restrictions still dominate in many areas, but personal and collective efforts are breaking barriers. One poignant story came from a singer who shared her dual experiences of menstruation in Kathmandu and her hometown in Sudurpaschim:

Living in Kathmandu, she faces no restrictions during her menstrual cycle and is free to follow her daily routine without any interruptions. However, this freedom fades when she returns to her hometown, where traditional norms still hold strong. "In my family, the restrictions are still in place, and I have to follow them when I am home," she shared. Despite these challenges, she has been actively working to persuade her family to reconsider these practices. "The strictness has eased a bit over the years because of my efforts, but change takes time—it's a slow process," she added. Her work with organizations like SUSWA and the Menstrual Health and Hygiene Partners Alliance (MHMPA) and her involvement in the MHM Singer Alliance have further deepened her commitment to breaking menstrual taboos. "Being part of this movement, I feel a

sense of responsibility to initiate change,” she said. Her involvement has given her the platform and courage to challenge outdated norms, not only in her family but also within the broader community through music/reels and videos.

Her story is a testament to the power of individual effort combined with collective action to dismantle deeply rooted practices. It highlights how one person’s voice, amplified by engagement with advocacy organizations, can contribute to societal transformation.

Closing Quote from Rekha Joshi, Goodwill Ambassador

"An artistic approach is the fastest way to change someone's mind. When we speak, many people listen, and collaboration with like-minded organizations amplifies our impact to reduce menstrual stigma and prejudice."

Conclusion

The journey towards menstrual health awareness is a complex, multilayered process requiring sustained, creative, and compassionate interventions. By combining personal narratives, artistic expression, community engagement, and strategic advocacy, meaningful change becomes possible. The path forward demands collective effort, empathy, and an unwavering commitment to challenging deeply entrenched social norms that compromise women's dignity and well-being.



Some Glimpses of the Event