

Time will Tell: Exploring Impacts of a Collaborative Filmmaking Menstruation Research Study on Adolescent Participants One Year Later

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Background

Menstrual health, stigma, and taboos in Nepal

Menstrual restrictions in Nepal are widespread. Such restrictions range from not being allowed to enter the kitchen, to avoiding touching certain food products and plants. Many women are restricted from looking at male members of the family or physically restricted in where they can sit or sleep during their menstrual period. In fact, nearly 91 per cent of women in Nepal have reported practising one or more menstrual restrictions during their period, such as avoiding worship spaces, water taps, keeping distance from others, or sleeping in separate spaces during menstruation (Baumann *et al.*, 2019a; Karki *et al.*, 2017; Parker *et al.*, 2024). The most visible and severe menstrual restriction is called *chhaupadi*, sometimes referred to as menstrual seclusion or menstrual exile, in which women and girls are isolated to small menstruation sheds (called *chhau goth*) or animal huts during their menstrual cycles (Joshi, 2015; Kadariya & Aro, 2015; Ranabhat *et al.*, 2015; Gautam, 2017; Amatya *et al.*, 2018; Baumann *et al.*, 2021, Parker *et al.*, 2024). The practice receives much media attention (Das, 2014; *Guardian*, 2016; Jolly & Venema, 2017; Gettleman, 2018) and it is often the most extreme and sensationalised stories associated with the practice that are featured in the news; however, recent research continues to demonstrate that the tradition of *chhaupadi* is widely varied and complex, taking on different forms and flexibility depending on a variety of intersecting factors such as religious beliefs, caste/ ethnicity, and geographical location (Subedi & Parker, 2021). It is important to note here that there is no such thing as a typical Nepali woman (Tamang, 2009), nor a typical menstrual practice. There are over 125 caste/ ethnic groups in Nepal and menstrual traditions and experiences depend on a variety of factors such as caste/ ethnicity, wealth, geographical location, religious beliefs, and family and social structures (Karki *et al.*, 2017).

While the dominant narrative focuses on women being ‘banished’ or ‘exiled’ to the *chhau goth* (menstrual shed), there is also a need to recognise the role of women’s agency in this traditional practice, albeit within the social constraints of the communities in which they reside. Menstrual exile is often self-imposed by women themselves due to the strongly held internalised beliefs that if these traditions are broken harm will fall to family members, especially male members (Baumann *et al.*, 2021; Subedi & Parker, 2021). There have been anecdotal stories shared of women sleeping in the *chhau goth* despite the protest of their husbands to sleep inside the house.

Furthermore, in some communities exclusion is imposed on women after giving birth due to the women being viewed as untouchable (Amatya *et al.*, 2018). Also notable, menstrual restrictions are not limited to remote regions of Nepal but are also practiced in the capital, Kathmand (Karki *et al.*, 2017). Older generations, male and female, as well as local religious leaders reinforce these belief systems despite several awareness campaigns by menstrual activists, many of whom are part of the Menstrual Health and Hygiene Partnership Alliance Nepal (MHMPA).

The impact of *chhaupadi* and menstrual restrictions are multifaceted and impact not only the physical health of women and girls but also have psychological effects due to the feeling of shame associated with a natural process. The conceptualisation of menstruating women as being impure when in fact menstruation is an often routine biological process is at the root of the stigmas and taboos that surround menstruation (Bennett, 2002; Paudel, 2020).

In this chapter, we reflect on the longer- term impacts of a Collaborative Filmmaking study, in which we engaged with a community in far- west Nepal to share their own experiences, reflections, traditions, and stories around menstruation. We will first outline the value of visual methods and the process of Collaborative Filmmaking before discussing the impact of using the method in Nepal to study menstrual traditions. Through a partnership between researchers at the University of Pittsburgh and the British Academy funded Dignity Without Danger research project, we had the opportunity to gain further insight into impacts of the Collaborative Filmmaking process on the lives of participants one year after the study.

Why use visual research methods and what do they offer?

Many disciplines including sociology (Cary, 1982), education (Mitchell, 2008), anthropology (Pink, 2007), and psychology (Nassauer & Legewie, 2018) have incorporated visual methods into the research process. However, the use of film and visual methods in public health is relatively limited (Baumann *et al.*, 2019b). Reflecting upon the rich visual methods literature from various disciplines, we theorised that a participatory, creative, and visual research approach would support new questioning of menstrual experiences in Nepal. Before developing and testing this approach, we investigated the ways in which visual research methods, in particular film, have been used in health- related research to date. We identified 15 different types of film methods published in peer-reviewed journals that have been used in various forms to study health topics. These methods were applied to study topics ranging from adolescent health to mental health, asthma, environment and neighbourhood effects on health, and more (Baumann *et al.*, 2019b). The authors of these studies discussed the power of visual methods to study abstract concepts and contexts (Murray & Nash, 2016), highlight subtleties in agency and practices, capture emotions (MacDougall, 1998; Suhr & Willerslev, 2012), engage hard- to-reach populations (Milne *et al.*, 2012; Pain, 2012), raise awareness, and advocate for social change (Catalani *et al.*, 2012; Gubrium *et al.*, 2014).

Since filmmaking is a naturally collaborative art form, we were surprised to find only three studies in our search results that engaged participants throughout the entire research process. Based on the findings of the aforementioned review, we concluded that future studies and approaches are needed to explore missed opportunities, such as engaging participants throughout the entire research process. Equipped with this information, and a strong foundation of examples and approaches to

build upon from the literature, our team utilised these findings to develop a new research method that embraces collaboration with participants throughout the entire research process, called Collaborative Filmmaking (Baumann *et al.*, 2020).

Collaborative Filmmaking as a research method

Collaborative Filmmaking is an embodied visual and participatory research method in which participants are trained to create, analyse, and screen films to answer a research question (Baumann *et al.*, 2020). The method was developed by a team of researchers at the University of Pittsburgh and the Nepal Fertility Care Center (NFCC) and first used to explore menstrual experiences in Nepal. Since then, Collaborative Filmmaking projects have been implemented in various settings around the world, including Nepal, Madagascar, the United States, and the Republic of Georgia. Researchers and practitioners have used Collaborative Filmmaking to study a range of health topics, including maternal and reproductive health issues, substance use, mental health, end-of-life care and bereavement, and more (to see films from other projects visit www.collaborativefilmmaking.com).

There are six steps involved in applying the method, and participants are engaged in each step (Figure 14.1):

- **Step 1: Training.** Participants are trained in basic filmmaking techniques in an interactive workshop-style training, which includes brainstorming sessions, camera practice, film screenings, storyboarding exercises, film critiques, and more (Baumann & Burke, 2019). During the training, participants are familiarised with the research question and spend time interacting with fellow participants to develop their film projects.
- **Step 2: Filmmaking.** Participants are provided equipment to go off into their communities to create their own film projects. Aligned with the nature of filmmaking as a collaborative art form, participants are encouraged to work together, and can turn to their families and friends for support. This approach also allows the research team to address scepticism in the community by opening the project up to others who wish to be involved or watch the filmmaking process. It also encourages open dialogue between community members and participants when it comes to the research topic. Participants are invited to explore any film medium they choose to best support their storytelling – from dramas, to video diaries, to day-in-the-life documentaries, to animations, to music videos – participants are invited to use their own creative styles and voices to share their stories.
- **Step 3: Preparation for Co-analysis.** The films are compiled and edited in preparation for co-analysis. Depending on the interest and comfort of participants and equipment available, the research team can support the participants in editing their films or the participants are welcome to edit the films themselves. In previous Collaborative Filmmaking projects, the editing step has taken on various approaches depending on the context and project; in some cases, the editing support was provided by the research team, in other projects an external freelance film editor was employed, and in some projects, participants preferred to edit the films themselves. At this stage in the research process, the

research team watches the participant films and develops a list of discussion questions to explore in the co- analysis session.

- Step 4: Co- analysis. Participants partner with the research team to conduct a co-analysis session and discuss the film they created in depth. This one- hour session is guided by a member of the research team, in which they and the participant watch the film, and discuss the various segments of the film using the SHOWED method (e.g., What do you see here? What is really happening here? How does this relate to our lives? Why does this condition exist? What can we do about it?) and address other clarifying questions from the research team or that the participant wishes to discuss. This session is critical for adding contextual details for understanding the film, and for understanding decision- making by the participants in their storytelling processes. Co- analysis is then conducted in a group setting, in which all the participant films are screened, and the fellow participants get to watch and discuss the films made by their fellow participants around the research topic.
- Step 5: Community Screening. The participants are invited to screen their films in the community if they wish. The research team collaborates with the participants to decide where and when the event should be held, who should be invited, and what the event should include. In this project, the film screening was held at a local shop in the village, and family members and local leaders were invited to attend. Central to the screening is ensuring that the participants are comfortable sharing their films publicly and centring the event decisions around the expertise of participants.
- Step 6: Data Synthesis. The research team qualitatively synthesises the films, co-analysis transcripts and field notes, in which they seek out patterns and summarise key themes from the films and discussions in narrative form to read alongside the films for further dissemination.



Figure 14.1 The Six Steps of the Collaborative Filmmaking Process (Baumann & Burke, 2020). Published with permission from the University of Pittsburgh School of Public Health under the Creative Commons License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Collaborative Filmmaking study in Nepal

This chapter reflects upon a Collaborative Filmmaking study conducted in Nepal to explore complexities of menstrual traditions across caste/ ethnic groups among a group of adolescent girls. The study was conducted in Kanchanpur district, in far- west Nepal, situated in the lowland Tarai region on the border with India. This region was selected due to the diversity of people living there from different caste/ ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as different historical patterns of migration. Conducting the study in this location allowed the research team to explore a range of

experiences and histories when it comes to menstrual traditions and practices, including but not limited to *chhaupadi*.

We worked closely with a diverse group of seven girls aged 16– 18 over a 21- day data collection period in June– July 2017. The girls were instructed to create films about the menstrual practices in their families, using any film technique of their choice to tell their stories. We recruited participants who practice *chhaupadi*, but also those who follow a range of other practices outside of *chhaupadi*, or those highlighted in the dominant media narrative. The girls came from three different caste/ ethnic backgrounds (i.e., Brahmin, Janajati, and Dalit) and followed Hindu or Christian belief systems. The full results describing their menstrual practices and motivations are published elsewhere (Baumann *et al.*, 2021).

Notably, using Collaborative Filmmaking to study menstrual complexities in far- west Nepal with adolescents offered several unique strengths. The embodied methodology supported participants to avoid relying on memory alone, and centred the body in storytelling and knowledge generation. The participants physically moved between public and private spaces and used their bodies to explain and reflect upon their experiences of menstruation, offering unique insights and deeper understanding, and encouraged self- reflection in real time (i.e., participants created their films while menstruating and practising their traditions). As a participatory research method, the approach also shifted the voice from researcher to participant, in which participants were fully in control of the way their experiences and stories were told and shared, emphasising authentic experiences, and recognising participants as experts in telling their own life experiences – which may or may not align with those being told in the media, by organisations, or by researchers. When it comes to dissemination, creating films as part of the data collection process allowed the data to continuously be reinterpreted by a variety of audiences and was a powerful and authentic awareness- raising tool (Baumann *et al.*, 2019b).

As with all methodologies and approaches, there are challenges to consider when using creative and participatory research methodologies. First, there are ethical challenges associated with collecting identifiable data, such as images, identities, and voices captured on film, and these must be carefully considered and planned for. For example, we treated consent as an ongoing discussion in which participants could remove or reshoot footage at any time. Second, using cameras can be a potential hindrance to participation. While we found that the use of film was an engaging way to include participants in the research process, we also acknowledge that the use of cameras could also be considered a hindrance to participation in other contexts, and thus the data collection tool selected to highlight community stories needs to be chosen with purpose and the cultural context in mind. Third, while the method is time- intensive, this limitation should be weighed with the many strengths it provides, such as the incredibly rich and nuanced data about menstrual experiences; the time investment is similar to other qualitative research methodologies.

Assessing the impact of Collaborative Filmmaking one year later

Following the completion of the Collaborative Filmmaking project in far- west Nepal, our team began to reflect on the potential longer- term impacts of such a research approach on participants and communities. While the primary objective of the Collaborative Filmmaking study was

research – to explore complex cultural traditions associated with menstruation – it also became evident that Collaborative Filmmaking may have impacts beyond the immediate scope of the research study, and thus should be further explored. Furthermore, given the ethical considerations, as well as the visual nature and public facing components of the project, our team wanted to follow up with participants after the study had ended to develop a deeper understanding of the meaning of participation, and how it impacted, for better or for worse, their lives and their community.

Methodology

The original Collaborative Filmmaking research study was held in the summer of 2017. In December 2018, we brought four of the filmmakers to the capital, Kathmandu, to present their films at the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (KIMFF) with support from the Dignity Without Danger (DWD) Research Project, funded by the British Academy. The participants were selected at the local level based on interest, availability, and available funding, and were accompanied by one of the participants' older sister. This was the first time that any of the girls left their home city.

KIMFF is one of the largest film festivals in Nepal and the panel organised by DWD brought together several experts who watched the collaborative films and featured the work of Poulomi Basu to an audience of over 200. After the screening, a panel discussion was hosted by a representative from the Feminist Project, including the authors, Poulomi Basu, and Uma Bista, a Nepali photographer, and one of the filmmakers also gave a short speech about her experience on behalf of the collaborative filmmakers. Given that this event was held in the capital, and the girls had the opportunity to see their films in a movie hall for the first time, it was powerful in validating the contributions that the participants had made in telling their stories via film. Photographs of the event can be found on the flickr site that highlights the event (Parker, 2018).

This event also provided the research team an opportunity to formally gain further feedback in person from the filmmakers over a year after the original Collaborative Filmmaking study was completed, to understand the impact of the study on their lives in the longer term (*Nepali Times*, 2018). During the visit, the research team conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) in Nepali with four participants from the original study to gather their insights on their experience and the impact of participation. The FGD was conducted by the lead author and a trained translator from NFCC. The discussion was audio recorded, transcribed, and translated from Nepali to English by a trained member of our research team, and analysed using inductive thematic coding in NVivo. Participants were asked a range of open-ended questions about their experience in the project, such as “How did the Collaborative Filmmaking project impact your life?”, and “What impact did the project have on your community?”, and “What challenges did you face?”.

Results

While the participants shared that at the start of the Collaborative Filmmaking study, they all initially felt afraid, or even confused about how to use the cameras to create a film, they quickly explained how after the project ended there were numerous unintended positive impacts. As a

result of participating in the Collaborative Filmmaking study, participant menstrual knowledge and practices and critical reflections about their own menstrual practices developed. Additionally, the project had wider impacts on soft skills that the participants carry through to other aspects of their lives, such as improved communication skills, open-mindedness, self-confidence, and changes in ways of thinking about taboo issues. In the following section we discuss the unintended benefits that arose for participants of the Collaborative Filmmaking study based on the discussion with participants more than one year after the study finished.

Impacts: menstruation related

The study topic centred on menstrual practices, so it was not entirely surprising that because of engaging and reflecting on the topic by creating short films, the participants expressed that they increased their awareness about menstruation and gained a deeper understanding of the various cultural practices around menstruation that exist in their village. For some participants, this new awareness led to behaviour change (Figure 14.2). For others it resulted in increased knowledge, as one participant expressed, ‘This film taught me menstruation is a natural process.’

Collaborative Filmmaking also encouraged the participants to reflect critically upon the practices embraced in their village. One said, ‘[In the films] we showed our culture, but [in doing so] somehow felt our culture is bad too. [I think we] have to change our culture slowly’. While the primary aim of using Collaborative Filmmaking as a research method was to gather nuanced, visual data to understand menstrual experiences, for the participants, the method did so much more than this. It also led to critical reflection as they contemplated the narratives that they wanted to share.

Some participants talked about how their menstrual practices changed after participating in the Collaborative Filmmaking study. For example, instead of sleeping in an area far away from their house, the girls said they began sleeping closer to home after the study. For instance, one said, ‘the changes between this year and of the time after filmmaking is that people used to have the *chhau goth* (menstruation hut) far away from their home, but nowadays people destroyed the old ones and built new ones near their homes’. This is an interesting finding, considering the primary purpose of the Collaborative Filmmaking study was exploration and discovery and not influencing behaviour change. Yet, these reflections from the participants over one year later suggest that engaging with creative tools (i.e., filmmaking), providing a space for communities to reflect upon their own traditions, and offering opportunities for those with different practices and backgrounds to engage in dialogue in safe spaces can, ultimately, lead to changes in related behaviours and practices.

One participant’s quote highlights the impact of their participation in the Collaborative Filmmaking study and the connection between increased awareness, critical reflection, and changing practices (Figure 14.2):

Besides making film, we got the chance to change our community. We even see changes within these two years. Change can be also like this; you cannot change the thoughts of elder people of your home but can bring changes within your friends. So, I believe this

change should be started from adolescent girls. We can change our thoughts by giving awareness to adolescent girls by telling them that menstruation is this, we have to do this while we are menstruating. Even if we must stay in the *goth* (shed), we should stay near our home. I believe that upcoming years will bring more changes in our community. I really want to thank you guys because of you guys we learned this entire thing and brought changes in our community.

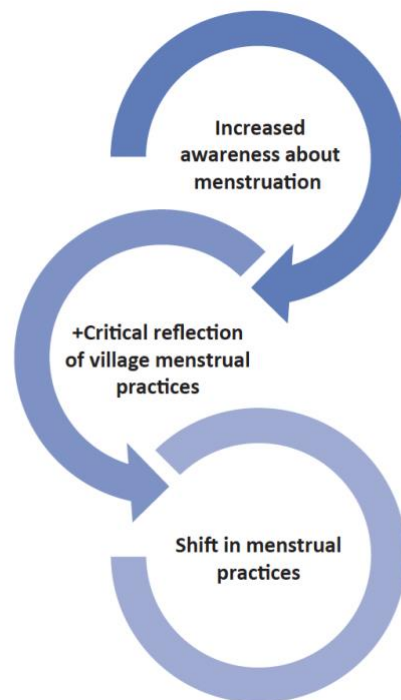


Figure 14.2 Menstrual-related impacts from Collaborative Filmmaking (Baumann *et al.*, 2022)

Impacts: beyond menstruation

Participants shared that the project had broad impacts beyond menstruation, particularly on soft skills that the participants can carry through to other aspects of their lives. Participants expressed that they gained tangible skills, like learning to conduct interviews, improved communication skills, and learned how to effectively talk with others. One expressed, 'The good point after filmmaking [was it] helped us to be self- confident and our talking habits have developed. Nowadays, we don't even feel nervous to talk with anyone.' One prime example of communications skills in practice was of this same participant speaking on behalf of the filmmakers at KIMFF, putting into practice some of these communication skills that she honed through the project (see images 32, 33, and 34, in Parker, 2018).

The participants also shared that they gained confidence through the project, which has implications for making change in other aspects of their lives, including but not limited to shifting menstrual practices. Specifically, they expressed that it was powerful to see how far they have come; at the beginning of the project, they had never held a camera before and were scared to even hold it. By the end of the project 21 days later, they had each created their own films and shared them in the community with great interest and recognition by several leaders in the village. One participant said: ‘We got self- confidence to move forward and change the menstruation practices and bring changes in our community.’ This demonstrates that quick gains over a short period of time when it comes to building new skills can bolster confidence in adolescents, and give them the self- assurance to try new things, take on new hobbies, and voice their beliefs. The new skills and reflective processes bolstered through Collaborative Filmmaking unexpectedly led to community changes, albeit incremental.

Key takeaways

The results highlighted in this chapter from following up with Collaborative Filmmaking participants one year later illustrate the unintended benefits that can arise for participants when they engage in research that embraces creative and participatory tools. The Collaborative Filmmaking research method trains participants to create their own films and works with those participants to better understand the content and to share the products with relevant stakeholders. The method was designed to provide a vehicle for participants to share their experiences so that researchers and relevant stakeholders can learn more about the focal topic, but we were also pleased to learn that, in addition, participants increased their own understanding of the topic. Participation also nurtured critical reflection and indirectly cultivated related behaviour change and increased confidence. As such, Collaborative Filmmaking may serve as an awareness raising and reflective tool, in addition to being a visual research method.

Our results lay the foundation for future quantitative and qualitative research investigating the short and long- term impacts of Collaborative Filmmaking on participants. For example, a pre–posttest design could be used to assess changes in knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs as well as the experiences of confidence, and self- efficacy. In addition, in- depth interviews with Collaborative Filmmaking participants could explore the mechanisms and reasons why participation leads to observed changes. As researchers and practitioners around the globe use this creative method it will be important to learn more about the impacts over time in various contexts.

These findings highlight a pronounced opportunity for understanding and addressing harmful menstrual practices using creative, visual, and participatory methods – both in Nepal and around the globe – while supporting the development of participants. While this method has numerous strengths, including the visual films and nuanced data, it is time- and resource- intensive and requires that those leading the efforts address the associated ethical challenges and are comfortable conducting community engaged work. It is also important to consider funding implications for the dissemination components of Collaborative Filmmaking projects. While community- level screenings are a key part of the research process, providing opportunities for the filmmakers to travel to large, culturally appropriate venues like KIMFF to share their films has significant time, cost, and planning implications. Hosting panels where filmmakers can be present to answer

questions is powerful but presents obvious funding challenges which need to be embedded into research proposals.

Conclusion

Collaborative Filmmaking is an engaging and empowering arts- based research method that can be harnessed by researchers and practitioners around the globe to study complexities around menstrual traditions and more, as well as bring about additional community- level benefits. The method not only benefits the research team in uncovering a nuanced understanding of the research topic, but this chapter also highlights the added benefits that are gained by the participants themselves through the Collaborative Filmmaking process. The participants gain insight and knowledge on the research topic, opportunities for reflection, and build soft skills in communication and confidence. Overall, Collaborative Filmmaking offers a genuine means to engage with, listen to, and share voices from the grassroots level in the case of the Global South, which is urgently needed in health and development scholarship. For more information about Collaborative Filmmaking visit www.collaborativefilmmaking.com.

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