

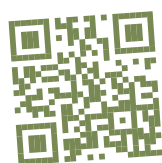
BREAKING
MENSTRUAL
STIGMA

THEATRE PROJECT CHALLENGES TABOOS

#kickThe
STIGMA



#LetsTalk
PERIOD



INSIGHTS FROM
SUCCESS STORIES IN NEPAL
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In March 2025, amidst the vibrant atmosphere of the Nepal International Theatre Festival (NITFest), a unique workshop titled **BREAKING MENSTRUAL STIGMA** unfolded at Mandala Theatre in Kathmandu. Facilitated by Theresa Hübscher, Malin Freytag and Saraswoti Chaudhary, the workshop employed Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to explore the myths, taboos, and realities of menstrual health in Nepal.



On March 24, a total of 27 women gathered on the stage of Mandala Theatre. As they came together, they began screaming and crying out in pain. Gradually, they started sharing personal stories and struggles they had faced during their menstrual cycles. Alongside their narratives, they enacted various experiences — craving food, rolling on the floor in pain, and more.

These performances were part of Breaking Menstrual Stigma, a theatrical piece developed during a three-day workshop at the recently concluded Nepal International Theatre Festival.

Facilitated by German theatre practitioners Theresa Hübscher and Malin Freytag, along with Nepali theatre practitioner Saraswoti Chaudhary, the performance was based on Theatre of the Oppressed techniques. It explored the myths, taboos, and realities of menstrual health in Nepal.

THE WORKSHOP

Rooted in Theatre of the Oppressed techniques, the first day of the workshop focused on interactive games among the participants. One of the activities involved making bracelets.

"We created the menstruation bracelet with them on the first day, which served as a nice icebreaker," says Hübscher. "Everyone was proud of the bracelet they made."

On the second day, the workshop became more intense and serious as participants practiced image theatre, depicting different emotions and pains they experienced during their periods.

"Elements like statue theatre, body mapping, and poetry were employed on the second day," says Hübscher.

On the third day, drawing from what they had learned, the participants staged a performance, choosing their roles for the act.

VOICES OF PARTICIPANTS

For the 27 participants from diverse ages and backgrounds, the workshop provided an opportunity to perform on stage, build networks, hear the experiences of people from different walks of life, and express their ideas and opinions on the subject.

According to Pooja Bista, one of the workshop participants, the experience made her realize how much she had been keeping her world confined within herself. It helped her understand the importance of expressing herself more, speaking up, and allowing her voice to take up space.

"The beauty of workshops like this is that they bring together people from diverse backgrounds — different ages, ethnicities, and geographies — offering entirely new perspectives," says Bista. "Listening to menstrual stories, especially from people I know, deepened my sense of empathy and reinforced why conversations about menstruation need to happen everywhere, from intimate circles to public platforms."

Bista, who runs Untold Period Stories, a digital movement aimed at shifting period narratives through art, education, storytelling, and advocacy, also shared her experience of performing on stage for the first time. She describes performing in front of a live audience as both thrilling and transformative.

"It made me reflect on the kind of impact I can create through forum theatre performances," says Bista. "This experience reinforced my belief that menstrual health advocacy must go beyond traditional awareness campaigns and evolve through new mediums."

INSPIRATION FROM PARTICIPANTS

Both facilitators say that conducting the workshop not only provided them with an opportunity to teach but also allowed them to get inspired and learn from the participants. They were surprised by the enthusiasm and engagement the participants showed during the workshop.

"I was very stunned by the pride and openness of the participants in sharing their creativity," says Freytag. "We had a few really talented poets who told us, 'Oh, I just wrote a poem. Can I share it with everyone?' And we were like, 'Yes, of course, we would love to hear it.'"

"And then someone else raised their hand and said, 'I am a singer, and when she reads a poem, I would like to accompany her with my singing bowl and some humming,'" she recalls.

Another thing that amazed both facilitators was the participants' ability to learn quickly. Many of those on stage — most of them being non-actors — grasped their roles and dialogues within a couple of hours and delivered the performance professionally.

"I feel like I learned a lot from the participants," says Hübscher. For Hübscher, the most inspiring moment came after the performance when some men approached her and shared how the act had completely changed their perspective on menstruation, as they had never discussed it with women before.

"They told me, 'I feel so bad. Until now, I had never asked my sisters or cousins how they feel. I will definitely change this now. I have to be a better companion and really change my behavior,'" Hübscher recalls. "And I think this is so much more than we could have wished for."

The pride the participants felt after the performance brought joy to both facilitators.

"They were so proud, and they truly felt like stars," says Freytag.

APPROACH FOR THE FUTURE

Even today, menstruation remains a major taboo across Nepal. Women are restricted from many daily activities during their periods. The conservative practice of chhaupadi still persists in the country, endangering women's lives.

The taboo and misbelief on menstruation is so huge that many females internalise that due to the menstruation something is wrong with them and their body.

Due to this discriminatory practice, the taboos and misconceptions surrounding menstruation are so deeply ingrained that many women internalize the belief that something is wrong with them and their bodies when they menstruate. To overcome this issue, both facilitators and participants believe that such workshops should be conducted frequently across different parts of the country.

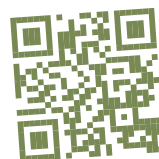
"These workshops shouldn't just be occasional; they need to happen regularly at both organizational and grassroots levels to create a lasting impact," says Bista.

Echoing Bista, Freytag emphasizes that school curricula should require students to engage with the topic of menstruation. Alongside an intellectual approach, artistic expression should also play a crucial role in changing perceptions.

"It doesn't have to be limited to theatre; it can include drawing, singing, and other forms of art," says Freytag. "The message should reach people on an emotional level, where language is no longer a barrier."

Article by Prasun Sangroula – published on 2nd April 2025

@ Onlinekhabar English | Nepali portal for latest Nepal



Read more about the workshop
on blog.susana.org:
> <https://bit.ly/4erXe1n>



RIGHT: Nepalese superstar and NITFest director Dayahang Rai – in his role as #LetsTalkPERIOD Goodwill Ambassador – is showing his support to this important issue in wearing the menstruation bracelet – together with his colleague Keki Adhikari – and hands over certificate to workshop participant.

BOTTOM LEFT & RIGHT: Theater workshop
"Breaking Menstrual Stigma" at NITFest Kathmandu



HOW TO BREAK MENSTRUAL STIGMA THROUGH THEATRE?

Over the last decades there has been a growing tendency to include theatre approaches in peacebuilding, especially when working with youth. Social workers, teachers, psychosocial counsellors, and human rights activists can also use theatre to reflect on and actively shape the future they are trying to build.

Forum Theatre is an interactive theatrical approach with deep historical and philosophical roots that connect to peacebuilding in a special way by creating knowledge and developing skills, and also through building the networks which are necessary for positive social change.

THE #LetsTalkPERIOD APPROACH



What started as a social media campaign in Nepal evolved to a gender-transformative #LetsTalkPERIOD approach implemented in Nepal, Albania, the Philippines, Zambia and South Africa – having reached now more than 10 million people since 2021.

Male role models – like Goodwill Ambassador Dayahang Rai (Nepalese superstar and NITFest director) – are an important next step: As role models for boys and men, the idea is that they make it easier to talk openly and tackle prejudices.

Read more on <https://akzente.giz.de>:

Menstruation: let's talk!

> <https://akzente.giz.de/en/menstruation-lets-talk>

FORUM THEATRE is one of the theatrical techniques developed by Brazilian Theatre activist Augusto Boal under the umbrella term "Theatre of the Oppressed" in the 1960s during the time of the Brazilian dictatorship. Since then, the methodology has developed further and spread to more than 90 countries around the world.

The intention of THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED is to challenge power relationships in society. In every society there are situations where people feel powerless. There are certain dimensions of identities which imply different degrees of social power, such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, tribal affiliation, rural/urban backgrounds, religion, age, sexual orientation, certain abilities and disabilities, nationality, etc. Obviously, these dimensions also intersect and interlink with one another.

AT THE NITFest 2025: By embodying their stories on stage, the young women in Kathmandu challenged societal norms and inspired others to question and change their perceptions of menstruation.

The success of "Breaking Menstrual Stigma" underscores the importance of creative approaches in addressing deeply rooted societal issues. By providing platforms for expression and dialogue, we can continue to challenge taboos and promote a more inclusive and understanding society.



To learn more, see Manual – Forum Theatre in Peacebuilding (ZfD 2024):
> www.ziviler-friedensdienst.org/de/publikation/manual-forum-theatre-peacebuilding



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www.giz.de

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For more Information please contact:
menstruation@giz.de

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