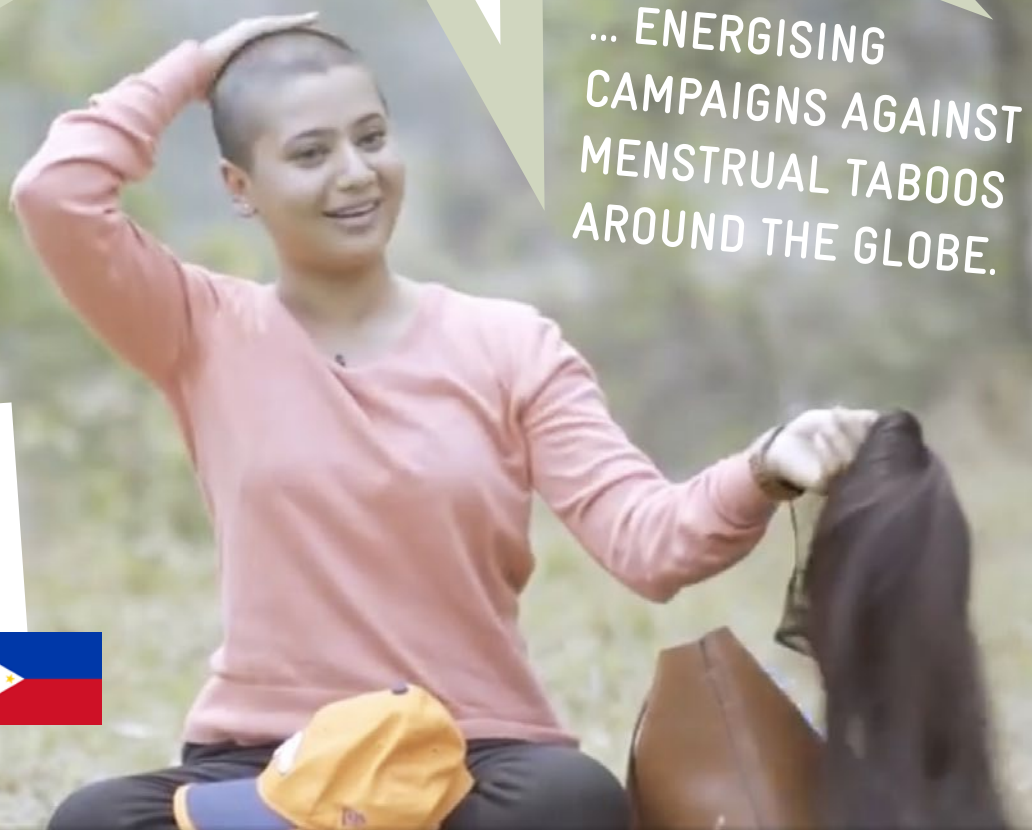


# YOUNG FEMALE INFLUENCERS

... ENERGISING  
CAMPAIGNS AGAINST  
MENSTRUAL TABOOS  
AROUND THE GLOBE.

LESSONS FROM  
SUCCESS STORIES  
IN NEPAL, ALBANIA  
AND THE PHILIPPINES



German-supported projects in Nepal, Albania and the Philippines are involving local social media influencers and celebrities to break down taboos around menstrual health and hygiene. To great effect! GIZ's short film 'Tackling Taboos' has been nominated for the WHO film festival 'Health for all'. Shortlisted out of more than 1000 entries, the film is in the final 70 – and the only one which addresses the sensitive topic of menstruation.

CLICKTIVISM IS PROVING AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR CHALLENGING HARMFUL PRACTICES AND FOR EMPOWERING YOUNG WOMEN IN NEPAL.

Keki Adhikari is a well-known Nepali actress, model, film producer and social activist. Using her powerful position as a 'local influencer' and her substantial social media following on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, Keki has led a highly successful Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) campaign drawing attention to menstrual health and hygiene and highlighting challenges and solutions for girls and women in Nepal. Now the 'Tackling Taboos' film she fronted is one of 70 shortlisted films, out of over 1,000 entries, to be nominated for WHO's 'Health for all' film festival – and the only one which tackles the sensitive issues of menstruation.

*'It was a very happy moment when we heard that our short film has been shortlisted for this prestigious WHO film award,' says Sami Pande, GIZ Technical Advisor for the Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights programme. 'We are thrilled that it will now be seen by people from all over the world.'*

### BUILDING MOMENTUM ON MENSTRUAL HEALTH ISSUES

Most women in Nepal face restrictions on participating in daily life during their period. At the most extreme end, according to some persistent ancient beliefs in some remote rural areas largely in the far west of Nepal, a menstruating girl or woman is considered to be unclean and untouchable, and must observe the tradition of Chhaupadi. She is isolated from the rest of her family and confined to a goat or cow hut during menstruation, as explained in this article. In addition, she is not allowed to touch men, to prepare food in the kitchen, to visit the temple to pray, and often not allowed to bathe using water from communal taps. Many girls – in rural and urban areas alike – miss school during menstruation as a result of a lack of menstrual products and female-friendly toilets.

In recent years momentum has been growing to address issues of menstrual health and hygiene management (MHM) and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), with various development partners working with the Government of Nepal on school-based programmes, as well as local production and distribution of sanitary pads. In December 2018 the first 'MenstruAction' summit took place with over 500 participants, from government, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, development partners, media, social entrepreneurs and representatives from the private sector, coming together to push forward the MHM agenda. Today, Nepal's MHM Partner's Alliance coordinates the menstrual health and hygiene agenda, enabling members to share experiences and information.

### TRUSTED LOCAL INFLUENCERS CAN HELP TO BRING ABOUT BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Much of this work came to a sudden stop when COVID hit and lockdown led to school closures. In order to try to keep the momentum going, GIZ's Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights programme decided to expand its existing social media campaign to try to reach as many people as possible virtually. And to do this effectively, they decided to work with a local celebrity 'influencer'.

Working with stars as influencers for human rights campaigns is obviously not a new idea: Angelina Jolie for example served as a Special Envoy for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Richard Gere advocates for the rights of the Tibetan people. However, working with local influencers is a relatively novel concept in Nepal. 'The purposes and benefits of local versus international influencers are different,' says Tabea Seiz, GIZ Development Advisor to the MHM Partners' Alliance Secretariat. 'International influencers are useful for raising awareness globally and for fundraising, but if you want to bring about behaviour change, it's more effective to have a respected local influencer whom people know and trust.'

### DISCOVERING KEKI ADHIKARI

The project team approached Keki Adhikari, a well-known and respected Nepali actress with a large social media following of round 1.3 million followers (from a population of around 30 million) in both urban and rural settings. Keki has appeared in numerous music videos, television shows, commercials, print ads and more than a dozen of Nepali movies, including 'Love Sasha' and 'Ghampani'. She also has an MBA degree in human resources management from KFA Business School in Kathmandu, and also has a BA in Information Management.

'I was really delighted and surprised when GIZ asked me to be involved in this project,' says Keki Adhikari. 'I wanted to give something back to my community and this was a good learning experience. I met lots of girls and learned about their reality. It is painful to hear that many girls and women are still facing these physical and psychological taboos and challenges.'

### FINDING THE RIGHT INFLUENCER IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Initially, all contact with Keki Adhikari had to be virtual due to COVID restrictions, but then as these relaxed, the team were able to meet and travel with her to rural areas for three weeks, to shoot the 'Tackling Taboos' film and short social media clips, including one on how to make pads and the need for proper toilet facilities for girls.

Finding the right person to become a respected goodwill ambassador or influencer is crucial to a campaign's success, says Tabea Seiz: 'It is important to give them freedom to use their voice and trust them.' The shoot was largely unscripted, giving Keki the freedom to interview girls about their own experiences. It produced so much footage, they decided to do a second film.

'We are very proud of Keki' says Sami Pande. 'She made the girls she talked to comfortable by sitting on the ground with them and really gained their confidence on things that are often very hard to talk about.'

### RESPECTING CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES

Although there is a growing awareness about these issues amongst younger people, older generations – especially in rural areas – can be more resistant and convincing them is more challenging. Given these deep-rooted cultural sensitivities and taboos about menstruation, any campaigning needs to be carefully calibrated to make sure it is not seen as imposed from outside, but as something that has evolved in Nepal itself. Without this local 'ownership' it is difficult to sustain such campaigns according to Development Advisor Tabea Seiz.

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## #Nepals Menstrual Movement

महिनावरी सम्बन्धि नेपालको अभियान  
SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN NEPAL 2021/2022

- 50 000 REACTIONS
- 3 000 COMMENTS & SHARES
- 1 MILLION VIEWS

**KEKI ADHIKARI**  
ACTRESS, PRODUCER, GOODWILL AMBASSADOR, INFLUENCER WITH 1.5 MILLION FOLLOWERS

## #Let'sTalk PERIOD

SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN ALBANIA 2022/2023

- 30 000 REACTIONS
- 900 COMMENTS & DMs
- 1.5 MILLION VIEWS

**FATMA HAXHIALIU**  
JOURNALIST, TV-HOST, GOODWILL AMBASSADOR, INFLUENCER WITH 0.3 MILLION FOLLOWERS [POPULATION ALBANIA: 2.8 MIO]

## UPCOMING SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN PHILIPPINES 2022/2023

disposable pad

**PIA WURTZBACH**  
MODEL, ACTRESS, MISS UNIVERSE 2015 GOODWILL AMBASSADOR, INFLUENCER WITH 13.5 MILLION FOLLOWERS

'If you push it too much, there might be a backlash,' says Jan Schlenk, GIZ's WASH Policy Advisor. 'We need to work with local people and influencers but not overdo it because it could backfire.'

So how does Keki herself view these boundaries? 'We were very careful about respecting religious, social and psychological boundaries,' she says. 'We don't want to offend older generations and religious leaders, but the girls could relate to me because they have seen me on the TV and in films. My voice has to be out there, on social media or whatever other means I can get the message across on these sensitive issues. People listen to me because I am well known and have credibility.'

## WHAT HAS BEEN THE RESPONSE?

The films and wider social media campaign have been received very positively, with the film getting over 500,000 views (over 200,000 on Facebook), and 30,000 reactions or 'likes'. 'People take me seriously and there has been a very good reaction to the campaign,' says Keki. 'It is really changing how people view menstrual issues.'

### HERE ARE A FEW OF THE REACTIONS TO THE FILM, BOTH FROM NEPAL AND BEYOND:

'Yes, we respect actresses like you when you talk on the issues of public interest'. DAMBER KHAREL

'This is amazing! Talking about periods is getting easier these days among young people too. Thanks to these advocacies! Great work!!!'. AKRITI SHRESTHA

'I remember my teenage years in my rural village in Kipsaina, Kenya. God, forbid you have period over-flow... you would be the laughing stock of the entire school. I remember when I first had my period and realised that the sanitary towels were too expensive, the only option left were rags from old clothes... Nepal may be thousands of miles away from my village in Kenya, but the experiences of many girls regarding menstruation are not. There is nothing impure or unclean about menstruation. On the contrary, it is the most God-given gift!'. BRENDA MBAJA

'Thank you for the film about this sensitive topic. It should reach every girl (and also boy!!!) in Nepal and India – even every girl and boy in the world where they still think that menstruation is taboo. Please teach the world that it a natural thing which happens in every female body.' LHAK TSAM

'[The campaign] has opened up the social discourse about these issues on social media and increased public discussion about things that were previously taboo,' says Tabea Seiz, adding that it takes time and a step-by-step approach to build momentum on such sensitive topics.

## CAMPAINING AGAINST MENSTRUAL TABOOS WITH INFLUENCERS IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Realising how powerful celebrity campaigners can be, Jan Schlenk, GIZ's WASH Policy Advisor, in close collaboration with the health programme in Nepal, are now encouraging other countries to adopt this approach – most recently in Albania where the #LetsTalkPeriod campaign, supported by GIZ, is working with Fatma Haxhialiu, a local influencer with 240,000 followers on Instagram (a substantial following in a country with only 2.9 million people). A short video clip posted on her Instagram went viral on the first day of shooting, with nearly 4,000 'likes' and she has received many messages from women and girls sharing their – mostly negative – menstrual experiences.

Meanwhile in the Philippines, former Miss Universe Pia Wurtzbach, who has 13.5 million followers on Instagram alone, produced an educational MHM video last year with support from GIZ's Fit for School Programme for the Department of Education. Pia Wurtzbach is very committed to serving as a Goodwill Ambassador as well and will start a 12 month social media campaign to be launched on this year's Menstrual Hygiene Day.

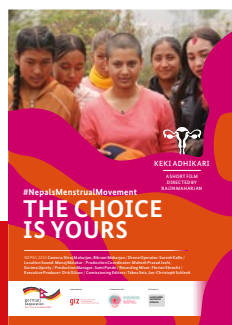
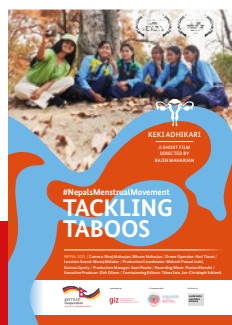
The success of Nepal's campaign, and its possible adoption elsewhere, says Jan Schlenk, is very much in line with the new German coalition government's ambitious goals for gender equality and strengthening the rights, resources and representation of women and girls worldwide through its new emphasis on a 'feminist' foreign and development policy.

## 'CHANGE WILL NOT HAPPEN OVERNIGHT'

Whether they win or not in May at the WHO's 'Health for all' film festival, Keki Adhikari and the GIZ team, as well as the Nepali production team are excited that 'Tackling Taboos' has been shortlisted for a prize. They are confident that, along with the wider social media campaign, it will help to highlight deeply entrenched issues of menstrual health and hygiene still faced by so many women around the world.

'Change will not happen overnight,' says Keki Adhikari. 'But if our film helps in some small way to move people beyond outdated mind-sets, it was worth it.'

READ THE ARTICLE ONLINE:  
<http://bit.ly/3yA2JYL>



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