

Freedom Kit Bags

*eco-friendly, sustainable, hygienic
sanitary wear*

Trustees Annual Report to 30 June 2023

Freedom Kit Bags (FKBs) is a registered UK charity (1173656). The Freedom Kit Bag project began in late 2016 and it was quickly obvious it had great potential so the trustees decided to manage it through a charity, established in June 2017.

The main aim of the charity is to provide eco-friendly, hygienic, reusable sanitary wear to the women and girls of Nepal, alongside health and hygiene education so the wider community, including men and boys, understand menstruation, its role in reproduction and how everyone can stay healthy.

Trustees and Structure

The current trustees, who served during the year, are:

Dr Rosa M Matheson
Dr Ian Matheson
Mr Brian Mildenhall
Mrs Anne Fisher
Mrs Hanna-Gael Darney

The governing document is a deed of trust and the charity is unincorporated. None of the trustees receive a salary or personal benefit from the charity. The trustees meet regularly and are in constant discussion to raise funds, develop and manage the programme. We talk weekly with our ambassadors in Nepal via the internet.

Three of the trustees visit Nepal each year (about 7 weeks each person) enabling us a first-hand review and management of the programme. The trustees personally pay around one half of the costs of these visits. Our last visit was in March/April 2023 and the next will be in March/April 2024.

The trustees have considered the Charity Commission's guidance on public benefit and have taken this into account when carrying out their work. Likewise, risks are identified and mitigated. One of the key risks is to ensure our funds are well spent and fully accounted for and our regular visits to Nepal and working through trusted individuals known to us for many years helps to ensure this.

We have four Nepalese ambassadors based in Nepal, essential to the programme. Their role includes – identifying community groups in need, planning distributions with local representatives, maintaining quality control, delivering education and empowerment talks, distributing kit bags, maintaining detailed accounts, raising our profile, providing information, keeping detailed records of recipients of our kit bags, and carrying out follow up interviews to gain feedback from users.

The trustees have significant experience of supporting work in Nepal gained over the past 14 years. They have a wide network of contacts engaged in health and education fields of work in the UK and in Nepal.

Understanding the need

Nepal is a very poor country. Adjusted for local prices and population, it is 17 times poorer than the UK. Over 80% of the population are mostly subsistence farmers. It's estimated that every second family has a member working abroad usually in construction, warehousing or domestic work; around 25% of the national income comes from such remittances.

Women who are now in their 30s and 40s would have left school in their early teenage years. This was driven by poverty as parents could not afford school fees; the needs of the family for children to work in the home and the fields, collecting firewood or vegetation to feed their goats; the high rate of child marriage and the prevailing view that women did not need much education. Sadly, many of these factors still exist today.

Although now illegal, child marriage is still too common. Village primary schools are basic with few resources other than some shared textbooks. At age 11 children move to secondary school, which for most means a walk of up to two hours to get to school and the same to return home.

Secondary schools are very basic by our standards. Often boys and girls share toilets of simple construction with no hooks or shelves to allow girls to change during their periods. As a result many miss school each month, fall behind in their studies and eventually drop out of education early.

The upshot is a population with scant knowledge and understanding of the facts of menstruation and how to manage monthly periods in a hygienic and healthy way. Various myths and taboos feed into this knowledge-gap. In too many communities menstruating women are "untouchables" not allowed to go to their temple, not allowed to touch food, not allowed to touch men. Some believe if they touch plants, the plant will die. Young women and girls who challenge these ideas are told by their mothers they are bringing sin and shame to the family.

And, although also illegal, Chhaupadi still exists: where young girls from the time of their first period are locked in a hut separate from the family. Every month they must endure this. Lighter forms of this practice exist, but no less harmful and discriminatory.

Consequently, women will use old clothes to make sanitary pads. Often they will be polyester lacking in absorbency so extra bulk is needed making them very uncomfortable. The women do not know to change often or about proper washing and drying – old clothes are put away damp so bacteria proliferate. Women suffer years of infection, discomfort and a lack of dignity. Problems and issues are not discussed openly, solutions easily become a low priority.

The national government gives funds to local governments to provide disposable pads to school girls. And some INGOs provide disposable pads. These programmes have real unintended consequences.

Disposable pads are very expensive in Nepal. They can cost from 12p to 25p per item depending on the difficulty of reaching the village (a significant proportion are more than two hours from a proper road). Typical nominal income is something like 25 times less than for the typical UK person. Imagine the problems we would have if one disposable pad cost from £3 to over £6.

By giving free disposable pads to school girls the government is encouraging a habit the girls cannot afford. We have heard first-hand accounts of young women wearing a disposable pad a whole day and until it is thoroughly soaked and falling apart – because they cannot afford to replace it.

There is no easy way to dispose of a disposable pad in Nepal. In small towns rubbish is collected and then dumped by the sides of rivers. In a village there is no rubbish collection so pads are thrown in the bushes, sometimes buried in shallow pits, sometimes incinerated. Animals have died from eating discarded used pads.

The national government's initiative results in erratic provision, some schools are excluded from the programme, and mostly poor quality pads are provided – girls have told us they do not like to use them. Apart from this there is ample evidence to show disposable pads are environmentally more damaging than alternatives.

Freedom Kit Bags – education and a solution leading to empowerment

We explain the facts about menstruation and its role in reproduction. We discuss common issues like discomfort, aches and pains, and what constitutes 'normal' for each person. We talk about healthy diets and the benefits of less sugar, spice and home-made alcohol.

We teach the need to wash hands and how to use pads correctly. We discuss the need to change often, to wash themselves with clean water rather than strong soaps.

Education is a vital first step, but alone is not enough. We need the women to experience a better way so they are motivated to maintain good practice and teach others. Every woman or girl who attends the education (and sometimes grandfathers, husbands and sons) is given a Freedom Kit Bag containing everything she needs to manage her periods for three years. Finally, we show how they can hand sew replacement pads when needed, using our pads as the template.

Our 'kit bags' are made in Nepal in one of our six sewing rooms giving some income to the women who make them. There are 12 cotton-rich reusable pads plus six thinner liners so women can add more absorbency when needed. We give three panties and three padholders to keep the pad in place with a waterproof lining to prevent leakage.

We include a small dry bag for used pads when changing away from home. There is soap to remind women to wash their hands plus a line and pegs to remind them to dry thoroughly in the sun. There is an attractive carry-purse so women and girls can take spare clean pads with them. Everything is contained in a larger bag made from recycled saris. Everything is colourful and celebratory.

All feedback is overwhelmingly positive. Women, girls, fathers, medics, social workers, local officials, police, teachers all praise our work and have welcomed us to over 300 village events.

Review of activities

During the financial year we made and distributed 5,080 kit bags and, including those distributed to January 2024, the total since we started is now 21,576. It's remarkable and uplifting to think that so many women and girls (and some men and boys) will have a proper understanding of menstruation and the means to stay healthy because of this programme.

We often convert this to a 'days of dignity' figure using averages from some UK research (average period of 4.5 days). Our kit bags are lasting at least three years - at least 39 periods. That's over 3,786,000 days of comfort, confidence and dignity directly attributable to our Freedom Kit Bags.

Every place we visit we see the need for education, greater understanding and inexpensive, environmentally friendly products for women and girls to manage their periods. There are still far too many taboos and practices that are harmful. It is common to hear that girls are sent away to a relative, or locked in a room, during their first periods. Women are barred from family events, such as weddings and funerals, if it is known they are having a period. Menstruating women are not allowed in their temple.

In all these places we are warmly welcomed and everyone is keen for the education. Change is happening. Local government and health officials are receptive but reticent to take the next step - purchasing Freedom Kit Bags for school girls and promoting them to women.

Freedom Kit Bags, registered charity 1173656
28, The Willows, Highworth, Wiltshire, SN6 7PG

Follow us on Facebook – search Freedom Kit Bags
Email: freedomkitbags@hotmail.com
www.freedomkitbags.org

When we were in Nepal in April and, with our Sewing Room partners in Butwal, we arranged a conference of local politicians, officials, health and social workers. Around 30 people. We presented our programme, compared the cost to a lifetime of disposable pads, considered the environmental impact of disposables, and discussed the health issues arising from current practices. We invited half a dozen women who have been using our kit bags to give their testimony and they spoke powerfully in our favour.

All the officials were impressed. However, there were some unspoken barriers to switching away from disposables to our kit bags for their schoolgirl programme. The finance minister spoke of needing higher approval and national guidelines. But these are early days, progress has been made and we will follow up with more discussion and persuasion when we visit in 2024.

Our Butwal Sewing Room have recently trained 20 older school girls (17/18 year-olds) to be advocates for healthy menstruation. This is a new, small initiative to promote healthy attitudes, proper understanding and to develop links so girls have someone to talk to should they have concerns or worries.

Support from many organisations has helped to make this happen. The trustees wish to acknowledge this tremendous support and say "Thank you" to all who have given.

This support has also helped our Chautara Sewing Room. This is on a smaller scale than Butwal. Sarita, Radhika and Gita between them now make up to 75 kit bags a month, working part time. They have now become very proficient and if funds allowed could easily double their production.

Elsewhere some notable distributions include to Charikot hospital where new mothers are given a kit bag after childbirth. In Melamchi we gave over 100 kit bags in a small settlement several hundred metres above the river floor, a difficult place to reach. In Rasuwa we distributed 400 kit bags in several villages and schools - they had been asking for more than two years for us to come.

In Kathmandu Valley, Kapan is well known for its monasteries. It is also becoming known as a place for internal refugees. We did a distribution in Payuitar, Kapan and our Ambassador Sumi wrote:

'Here people have come from their own different villages hoping for a better life and better times for their children's future. They have made tin-shack-houses out of metal roofing, where we see no proper facilities of toilet or water supply. They work mostly in low-skilled, hard labour work like in house building, carrying things in baskets on their backs.

All the people were so happy and delighted to come and sit and get education and FKBs. They thanked us for coming to their place, I too am delighted to know that with our Freedom Kit Bags, we have made their lives so much better... more comfortable, more healthy, and more dignified.'

28 May 2023 was Menstrual Health and Hygiene Day. Working with three other like-minded organisations we went to Shree Krishna Ratna Ganga Higher Secondary School to educate, discuss, share and celebrate with boy and girl students. Led by Nirmala (our Ambassador) they talked about - your body and how it changes; of menstrual health and hygiene and its importance to reproductive health; about molestation, bad touch, abuse, harassment, and negative remarks linked to menstruation. The day was greatly enjoyed by all.

Our largest distribution took place in the summer. In Gorkha district we distributed 1,000 kit bags in two villages - Gumba and Larpak. This involved a 10 hour drive to Machhakolha followed by an 8 hours walk to Gumba and a further 4 hours walk to Larpak. All in very steep, tricky terrain. It needed 13 porters to carry the kit bags, mostly women keen to earn some money.

In Gumba the distributions started at 6am because of the women's fieldwork, even so some of the women were too busy planting potatoes to attend. Our team went to the fields to do a presentation during a break from the women's work. They were thrilled.

Feedback from the women receiving our education and kit bags is important to help ensure our work is appreciated and meaningful. Below are some extracts from our field reports.

Maya Devi Magar (name changed) says:

"After the earthquake devastated our homes and dreams, life has been a challenging journey for me. I am Maya Devi Magar, living in Ward No. 14 of Aathbiskot Municipality in West Rukum. At 26, I got married at the age of 15, I am a mother of three girls, who used to attend school until the earthquake disrupted everything. Surviving here is tough, especially since my source of income, goat husbandry, was wiped out in the earthquake. I used to sell goats during Dashain to make a living and worked on others' fields since we don't have our own. My husband, working in India, sends money occasionally. Amidst these struggles, a ray of hope comes through relief teams. Your organisation is the fourth to visit, and surprisingly, no one had provided me with a menstrual bag before. It's strange how menstrual products are often overlooked as essential supplies. This thoughtful gesture is overwhelming; it ensures I can manage my menstruation for the next three years, providing a sense of relief in these challenging times."

One of our Ambassadors writes:

"In our conversations with the locals, it became evident that discussing menstruation was a taboo, met with embarrassment and shame, especially among men. The community members revealed that nobody in the village had initiated discussions or organised programmes addressing menstrual health. For them, menstruation was considered solely a woman's concern, limited to discussions about menstrual cramps and rarely extending beyond that."

However, as we delved into broader conversations about sexual health, women gradually opened up about the previously unshared challenges they were facing. Issues such as vaginal infections, unbearable lower abdominal pain, and uterine prolapse (one woman described a overhang from her vagina but not been seeking medical help due to lack of money and hesitation) were disclosed. This condition, uterus prolapse, added a significant layer of physical discomfort and highlighted the lack of access to healthcare resources. Within the group, seven women were identified to be experiencing some form of prolapse, and regrettably, they are unaware of their condition, enduring considerable pain in their daily lives."

Another Ambassador writes:

"During our visit, in a discussion session, we invited women to privately share their concerns. Astonishingly, 19 women and girls raised their hands, indicating a pressing need for a safe space to discuss their problems. Among them was a 27-year-old woman married at the tender age of 13 and already a mother of three by the age of 20, shared a harrowing account of her deteriorating health. With teary eyes, she bravely shared her ordeal, detailing the pain experienced during intercourse and the added suffering of a prolapse. She described how it felt pushed inside, leaving her numb with pain each time. Heartbreakingly, when she communicated her discomfort to her husband and sought support, she was met with a threat of a second marriage. Her sobs echoed the profound challenges faced by these women, stirring deep emotions in all of us present."

Shanta Nepali (name changed) says:

"I'm Shanta Nepali, a 38-year-old working woman. I encountered issues with disposal pads as they caused irritation and itching. When I switched to homemade pads, they tended to slip, leading to embarrassing situations where others noticed. This shame kept me from going to work for several days, causing stress and a loss of dignity. The absence of suitable pads also resulted in anxiety during menstruation. Fortunately, I now use Freedom Kit Bags, ensuring the safety of my reproductive and mental health, as well as preserving my dignity. This invaluable gift has brought me peace, and I will always cherish it."

Freedom Kit Bags – the cost

The cost of one Freedom Kit Bag is just £25.

This covers all the costs of:

- Buying all materials in Nepal
- Making the kit bags in one of our sewing rooms and paying the ladies who make them
- Arranging village events where education and distribution take place
- The cost of transporting the kit bags, often to hard-to-reach places
- Keeping records, including local financial records (overseen and checked by the volunteer UK trustees)

A Freedom Kit Bag will last a woman three years.

During this time:

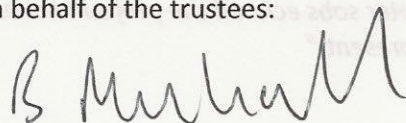
- She will have 39 periods; the education and kit bag will cost just 64p a period
- She should change her pad 22 times each period; the education and kit bag will cost 3p per use
- And during this time she will have 176 days of comfort and dignity
- Which is why our work to date provides 3,786,000 days of comfort and dignity

We now have a proven track record of delivering a quality sustainable solution, remarkable value for money, education and community understanding, and above all – we are changing lives, improving equality and health for thousands.

All our funds are from donations achieved through the efforts of the un-paid trustees and volunteers. A further two individuals are paid to identify and help contact grant giving foundations and trusts across the UK. Our accounts are set out in a separate document.

Our work continues. We are making real progress

Signed on behalf of the trustees:



Mr Brian Mildenhall

28 January 2024

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Financial Accounts to 30 June 2023

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Funds

The charity's reserves at 30 June 2023 reduced again to £60,816. The trustees intend to hold a reserve to enable production and distribution to continue for around nine months.

Our income for the year was similar to last year at £75,259. Our expenditure at £89,823 was also similar to last year and reflects our planned reduction in reserves built up during the pandemic years. Currently we are benefitting from a strong exchange rate of around £1=165npr; in 2019 it was closer to £1=145npr.

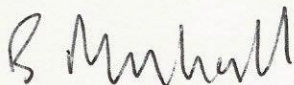
The Other Expenses shown in the accounts include bank charges transferring funds to Nepal and print costs for our annual newsletter.

Our need for financial support is greater than ever. We are immensely grateful for the fantastic support we have received from many different organisations and individuals. On behalf of the thousands who have benefitted, we say "dhanyabad".

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Mr Brian Mildenhall

19/09/23

Accounts

For the period 1 July 2022 – 30 June 2023

	2022/23	£	2021/22	£
Receipts				
Grants and donations		75,260		76,322
Payments				
Charitable activities		79,715		80,123
Cost of Fundraising		9,423		9,345
Other expenses		686		860
Total cost		89,823		90,327
Surplus/(Deficit)		(14,563)		(14,005)
Cash and bank at 1 July 2022		75,379		
Total reserves		60,816		
Represented by				
Cash and bank at 30 June 2023		60,816		

Notes to the Accounts:

None of the trustees received a remuneration or personal benefit from the charity

The charity has no UK employees

Section A

Independent Examiner's Report

Report to the trustees/
members of

Freedom Kit Bags

On accounts for the year
ended30th June 2023Charity no
(if any)

1173656

Set out on pages

Financial statement attached

Responsibilities and
basis of report

I report to the trustees on my examination of the accounts of the above charity ("the Trust") for the year ended 30/06/2023.

As the charity's trustees, you are responsible for the preparation of the accounts in accordance with the requirements of the Charities Act 2011 ("the Act").

I report in respect of my examination of the Trust's accounts carried out under section 145 of the 2011 Act and in carrying out my examination, I have followed all the applicable Directions given by the Charity Commission under section 145(5)(b) of the Act.

Independent
examiner's statement

I have completed my examination. I confirm that no material matters have come to my attention in connection with the examination which gives me cause to believe that in, any material respect:

- the accounting records were not kept in accordance with section 130 of the Charities Act; or
- the accounts did not accord with the accounting records; or
- the accounts did not comply with the applicable requirements concerning the form and content of accounts set out in the Charities (Accounts and Reports) Regulations 2008 other than any requirement that the accounts give a 'true and fair' view which is not a matter considered as part of an independent examination.

I have no concerns and have come across no other matters in connection with the examination to which attention should be drawn in this report in order to enable a proper understanding of the accounts to be reached.

Signed:



Date:

24/8/23

Name:

Terry John Williams

Relevant professional
qualification(s) or body
(if any):

Retired accountant

Address:

36 Bydemill Gardens, Highworth, Swindon, SN6 7BS.

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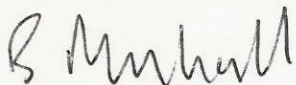
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