



Trustees Annual Report to 30 June 2024

Freedom Kit Bags (FKB) is a registered UK charity (1173656). The Freedom Kit Bag project began in late 2016 and 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 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 2024 and the next will be in April 2025.

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.

The trustees have significant experience of supporting work in Nepal gained over the past 16 years. They have a wide network of contacts engaged in health and education both in the UK and in Nepal.

We have two 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.

Three of our sewing rooms are partnerships with three local Nepali organisations who have many years experience working in social development. They run many complimentary programmes around gender equality and social inclusion. Between them they have many contacts at local government level and are strong advocates of Freedom Kit Bags in their locality. In their own areas they carry out all the tasks ascribed to our ambassadors.

The need is great

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 have 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.

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 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

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 400 village events.

Review of activities

During the financial year we made and distributed 4,118 kit bags and, including those distributed to the end of 2024, the total since we started is now 27,109. 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.



Collectively, these women will have 1,057,250 periods during the initial three years. They will bleed for around 4,757,630 days, and because of Freedom Kit Bags, they can face each of those days with dignity and comfort.

What's more, they can "afford" to change their pads almost 24,000,000 times without worry of the cost, without disposing of the used pads, and without infections and rashes.

Each change of pad costs our donors just 2.3p. Each period costs only 51p. Remarkable value, especially as this includes priceless education.

We now have sewing rooms in Chautara, Melamchi, Kathmandu, Butwal, Sanfebagar, and Nepalgunj. The last three are partnerships with local charities in Nepal, which we have developed over the past few years. We are hopeful this will lead to increasing funding from local governments - for now their support makes it easier to organise distributions and small contributions have been made for local transport.

Initially our production was mostly handled by a small family business in Kathmandu. This gave us consistency and easy modifications to the design, but we always envisaged community, not for profit, production sites giving employment to local women. We are very happy this has been achieved and now around 20 Nepali women earn some income by making kit bags or giving the education to village women and girls.

In Chautara our sewing room is based in one room in an empty house (other rooms are used to store grain and crops). The three women here started by making 50 kit bags a month. That has steadily increased and now they make 150 kit bags a month. They have taught themselves how to maintain the sewing machines. It is easy to miss the significance of the income they earn from this regular work - without it they would need to find labouring work in the fields to sustain their young families.

Our Kathmandu sewing room was born out of the Covid pandemic. Many people faced an abrupt end to their income as tourism stopped and the dire effects are still in evidence. We set up our sewing room in a family home where three women make kit bags, fitting the work around the family schedule.

In December 2023, Butwal and Sanfebagar sewing rooms joined our ambassador Nirmala to distribute 500 kit bags and other emergency supplies (separately funded) to the Jajarkot area. In November 2023 this area was affected by a large earthquake causing extensive damage and loss of homes.



Three trustees visited this area in April 2024. From Kathmandu it's a 31 hour drive to Nepalgunj, then another four hours to Jarjarkot and another two hours to where the displaced people are now living. We gave a further 200 kit bags, mostly to landless women of the lowest caste whose only source of income is to fish in the local river. A further 200 will be distributed in early 2025.

We gave 50 kit bags to each of two village medical posts in the area. This matches the number of expected births in a year. Each new mother will receive education from the midwives and a kit bag. We also gave each a large tent to serve as makeshift birthing centres - one had been given in January and we met with the mother and first born baby in that tent. A tent doesn't sound much, but it's cleaner and more comfortable than the very basic room occupied by the health post and is much valued by the midwives and new mothers.

Back in Butwal we met again with elected representatives of 10 municipalities (three more than in the previous year). This year there were more representatives from health and education offices. Many were newly elected and so we presented again the cost effectiveness of our kit bags, the importance of our education programme and the testimony of many users.

We challenged the pitiful quality of the government paid for disposable pads given to some schoolgirls. With many powerful women's voices all agreed our kit bags were far superior. But financial decisions are made elsewhere and perseverance is needed.

Progress is being made. The 10 municipalities are keen to promote our kit bags. Each municipality has nine wards and each ward has elected officials in charge of almost all

activity. Many of these wards are asking us to distribute to their villages. The ward officials make it easier for us to organise and promote events, they often make rooms available and some provide refreshments for the attendees. Currently this is a modest but valuable contribution - a first step to getting financial support.

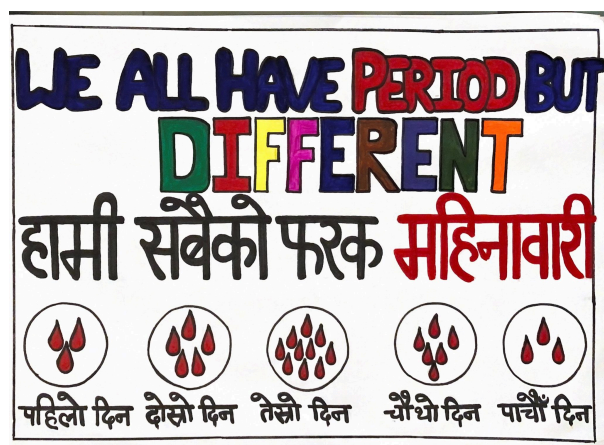
One municipality in Lumbini funded the training of 30 women by our team and provided them with sewing machines they can share. The women are from three different local women's groups and they will independently make kit bags for their villages. A similar scheme is underway in Jhapa in the far east of Nepal.

In Butwal we have given sewing lessons to 300 teenage girls. They are taught to hand sew the pads and pad holders. These are all "dirt-poor" girls. The trustees attended one of the sessions - it was held in a cattle shed. Tarpaulin was laid down for a clean surface while two buffalo were secured in the corner.

The aim is to expand the use of reusable pads beyond what our normal programme can do. The girls were given the normal FKB education. As expected we learned from this first exercise and this will be reflected in the next round of training. For example, the girls were asked to bring clean cloths to use. What they brought was closer to what we would call dirty rags. A simple difference of understanding and experience. In future we will provide the material so girls can see the difference. It will cost more, but the understanding it creates is immeasurable.

Nepalgunj is our newest sewing room. We have known the people here for some years and worked with them on several distributions. We have committed to funding 50 kit bags a month. Our hope is that through their local contacts they will be able to fund additional kit bags.

Sanfebagar sewing room has also met with two municipalities in their district. Both have agreed to support FKB and promote our work. They have both pledged to find other ways to develop a partnership.



Our educational flash cards are now available digitally along with a Nepalese transcript of the educational content. We make these available to schools and midwives to help ensure the correct messages are given and the education is consistent.

We have continued our distributions out of Charikot hospital. We have given them a further 110 kit bags for the medical team to give to women as part of their community work encouraging pregnant women to attend antenatal checks.

Similarly we have given 50 kit bags to the medical post in the village of Chyamtang close to Tibet. Our long standing friendship with this village ensures the kit bags arrive safely to this remote area.



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 harmful practices. It is common to hear that girls are sent away to a relative, or locked in a room, during their periods. Women are barred from family events, weddings and funerals, if it is known they are having a period. Menstruating women are not allowed in their temple.

Yet in all these places we are warmly welcomed and everyone is keen for our education. Change is happening, albeit slowly.

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.

Feedback from the women is important to help ensure our work remains meaningful. Below are some extracts from our field reports (names have been changed).

"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."

Adolescent Girl (Gargare, Rupandehi): *"I found today's program very impactful. Despite being a science student, I couldn't openly discuss menstruation before. Now, I feel confident to speak up and share this knowledge in my school, emphasizing that menstruation is neither shameful nor something to hide. You must visit my school as well." She shared a tragic incident where her close friend, after being mocked by boys*

for dropping a disposable pad, could not bear the humiliation and committed suicide. This event deeply affected her and inspired her desire to work on this issue.

Rekha: *"When I had my first period, I was very young, and it happened on the day of my uncle's wedding. When I saw the blood, I cried because I didn't know what it was. I told my mother, and she explained that it was a normal thing that all girls go through. My mother was understanding and did not believe in the old customs, but my father was very traditional and separated me from everyone, telling me I couldn't go near anyone, not even in the kitchen, the temple, or participate in the wedding. There were many guests, and everyone was enjoying the wedding, but I was isolated. No one gave me food for two days; I only drank water. I felt like I had committed a sin for having my period, and I still haven't been able to forget how terrible I felt."*

Kalpana, Deputy Mayor: *"We didn't have these kinds of pads before, nor did we have good cloth. I had to walk two hours to get to school, and because we didn't have proper cloth, my dress would get wet before I reached school, and the boys would tease me. I felt ashamed, and that's why I used to miss school during my period."*

Saru: *"When I had my first period, I was kept separate for 7 days. I wasn't allowed to see my father or brothers, I couldn't go out in the sun, I couldn't go to school, and I felt very ashamed. I thought menstruation was a sin, and I regretted being a girl. But now participating in this program, helped me not to regret any more for being a girl."*

We 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. We have partnerships in place that can sustain our work over the coming years and increasingly draw on local resources.

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

Digitally signed on behalf of the trustees:

BRIAN MILDENHALL

Mr Brian Mildenhall
13 February 2025

Freedom Kit Bags

*eco-friendly, sustainable, hygienic
sanitary wear*

Financial Accounts to 30 June 2024

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The aim of the charity is to provide eco-friendly, hygienic, reusable sanitary wear to women and girls in 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. The Trustees Annual Report is available separately.

Funds

The charity's reserves at 30 June 2024 increased to £87,522. The trustees intend to hold a reserve to enable production and distribution to continue for around nine months. This increase is largely due to a number of donations towards the end of the financial year and has since reduced to around £75,000 by the end of 2024.

Our income for the year increased significantly to £118,981 due to a couple of significant one-off donations. Our charitable expenditure at £74,525 was similar to last year. Currently we are benefitting from a strong exchange rate of around £1=175npr; 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.

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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Signed on behalf of the trustees:

Mr Brian Mildenhall

B. Mildenhall 13/2/25

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

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Email: freedomkitbags@hotmail.com
www.freedomkitbags.org

Accounts

For the period 1 July 2023 – 30 June 2024

	2023/24 £	2022/23 £
Receipts		
Grants and donations	118,981	75,260
Payments		
Charitable activities	74,525	79,715
Cost of Fundraising	16,793	9,423
Other expenses	959	686
Total cost	92,276	89,823
Surplus/(Deficit)	26,705	(14,563)
Cash and bank at 1 July 2023	60,816	
Total reserves	87,522	
Represented by		
Cash and bank at 30 June 2024	87,521	

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 2024Charity 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 30/06/2024.

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:

6/2/25

Name:

Terry John Williams

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

Retired accountant

Address:

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

Freedom Kit Bags

*eco-friendly, sustainable, hygienic
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Date:

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Name:

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Relevant professional
qualification(s) or body
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Retired accountant

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