A central illustration features a white, fluffy cloud with a smiling face and closed eyes. Below the cloud is a large, stylized teardrop or rain cloud with a red outline, containing numerous red raindrops. Two white hands with red outlines are shown, one on each side, reaching towards the rain. The background is a solid light blue.

**FROM YOUR
BIG SISTERS**

**A Guide on Periods and
Everything Around It**

FROM YOUR BIG SISTERS

**A Guide on Periods and
Everything Around It**

Ricebox Studio:

Safiya Ahmed | Bristy Azmi | Maria Than | Anna Tsuda

Medical Disclaimer

Although we have done research within the health field and have cross-referenced our content with certified doctors, gynaecologists and health specialists, please do not use this book as a replacement for medical advice. It has been written to complement existing medical literature, papers, information and advice which we recommend you seek directly. This is a general book which we encourage to be used as a conversational and reflective tool for readers.

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Contributors

Everyone who submitted their period stories, Florence Low for the Gender and Menstruation chapter, Radha Paudel for the Dignified Menstruation chapter, and Manasa Gade for her overall contributions.

Preface

This project was developed as the first Fellowship of the Rights Studio, a new creative initiative by CRIN. The Fellowship seeks to support young artists to explore art for human and children's rights activism. It was piloted in 2019 with four BA Graphic Design alumni from UAL Camberwell College of Arts: Safiya Ahmed, Bristy Azmi, Maria Than, and Anna Tsuda.

Why Menstruation?

The four of us first collaborated in March of 2019 at the Tate Exchange: Beta Society, a week long event led by The Digital Maker Collective (a UAL-based group). We ran talks and workshops with CRIN, and explored ideas with the public for making society a better, fairer place. During this event, Basma Osman (from CRIN) and Safiya gave a talk on period poverty, and shared a story about a girl who died inside the Chhaupadi (menstrual hut) from smoke inhalation after lighting a fire to keep herself warm. Our heartache and outrage towards this incident lingered long after the event.

This experience left us with many questions. Why is menstrual blood seen as dirty even though none of us will be here without it? Why isn't PMS seen as serious? Why is menstrual and reproductive health not taught at some schools when it's such an important aspect of life? Why do we still hide our unopened pads and tampons? **Menstruation has to be normalised, and it should've been centuries ago!**

So when CRIN approached us for the fellowship, we decided to undertake the Red Cloud Project, a campaign project consisting of an education book on menstruation and an information-giving printing machine, in hopes to tackle period poverty and stigma.

Aim of the Book

Our aim is to increase accessibility of information, encourage conversation, and empower our readers through contents such as, but not limited to, reflective exercises, crowd-sourced stories, and religious leader and activist interviews. We see ourselves as messengers that raise awareness on the issue of period poverty and stigma.

How to Read the Book

We have divided the book into levels based on age-appropriate information and colour-coded it as shown below:

Level 1 (Age 11 and above) has a pink sticker.

Level 2 (Age 14 and above) has an orange sticker.

Level 3 (Age 17 and above) has a blue sticker.

We really hope this book will be useful and inspirational for your journey and experience with your period! We also encourage you to share your thoughts with your friends and family.

Don't hesitate to reach out to us if you want to have a chat :)

With love,

From your Big Sisters

Dear parents and guardians,

We thank you for using this book to help children learn about the intricate mysteries of menstruation. For ease of use, this book is divided and colour-coded into three levels to introduce topics at age-appropriate stages.

Level 1 (pink sticker) - Introduces the basics of menstruation and the different menstrual products available. These topics are suitable for children aged 11 and above.

Level 2 (orange sticker) - Further explores the biology of menstruation including PMDD, endometriosis, menstruation in relation to gender, and period poverty. These topics are deemed suitable for the ages of 14 and above.

Level 3 (blue sticker) - Deals with more mature content like female genital mutilation and menopause. These are topics that would be more appropriate for an audience of 17 years old and above.

All information in this book has been peer-reviewed by experts including doctors, gynaecologists, social workers, teachers, and NGOs to provide the most factual information.

Along with these informative materials, the book includes many activities to encourage reflection and proactive thinking. Although menstruation might be an uncomfortable topic for many, it is essential to talk about this topic to tackle period poverty and stigma. The book introduces various collaborative activities that you can take part with the children to start conversations about periods and share your feelings! It is important to do these activities in a space and with people your child will feel safe and comfortable.

With love,
From the authors

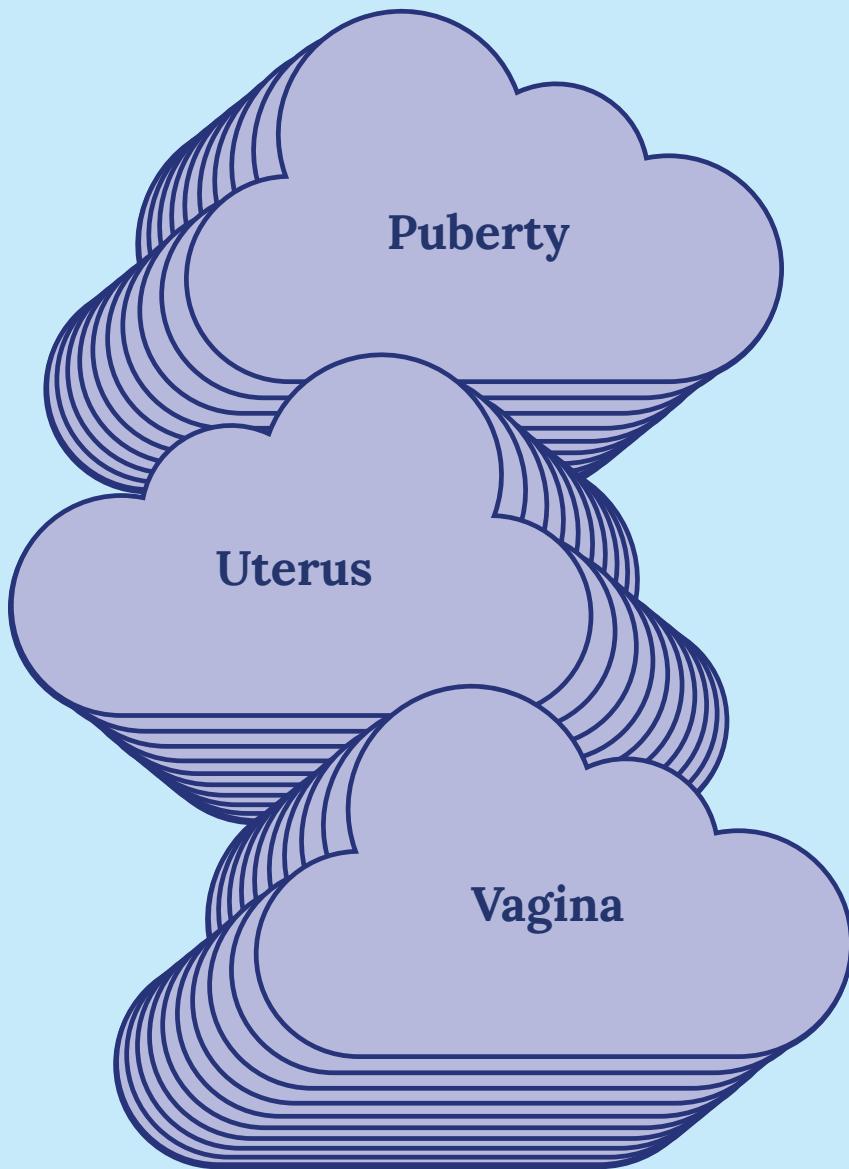
FROM YOUR BIG SISTERS

WE HAVE MADE THIS BOOK TO HELP YOU THROUGH THE INTRICATE AND WONDERFUL DETAILS OF MENSTRUATION.

WE HAVE DONE OUR RESEARCH AND CONSULTED EXPERTS. WE ALSO ASKED OUR FRIENDS AROUND THE WORLD TO SEND IN THEIR MENSTRUATION-RELATED EXPERIENCES TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND THINGS THAT WILL HAPPEN BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER PUBERTY. YOU CAN READ THEM AT THE END OF EACH CHAPTER. THIS IS FOR YOU TO KNOW THAT YOU'RE NOT ALONE IN THIS!

IT IS IMPORTANT TO BE KIND AND SUPPORTIVE TO PEOPLE AROUND US BECAUSE WE MAY ALL EXPERIENCE PROBLEMS AND INCONVENIENCES RELATED TO MENSTRUATION AT SOME POINT IN OUR LIVES. WE HOPE THAT THIS BOOK WILL HELP YOU DEVELOP A POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THIS ESSENTIAL PART OF YOUR LIFE AND BE KIND TO ALL OF YOUR FRIENDS.

Know Your Body



What Is Puberty?

Puberty is when a child's body begins to develop and change as they become an adult.

It starts with some physical changes. Girls develop breasts and start their periods. Boys develop a deeper voice and facial hair will start to appear.

The average age for girls to begin puberty is 11, while for boys the average age is 12. But it's different for everyone, so don't worry if you reach puberty before or after your friends.

It's completely normal for puberty to begin at any point from the ages of 8 to 14. The process can take up to four years, and girls usually have their first period around two years after beginning puberty. During this time, girls experience physical changes (for example growing breasts, wider hips and body hair) and emotional changes due to hormones.

Signs of puberty in girls:

Weight

Most girls gain weight (which is normal) as their body shape changes. Girls develop more body fat along their upper arms, thighs and upper back. Their hips will also grow rounder and their waist gets narrower.

Growth spurts

Girls go through a growth spurt, usually earlier than boys! After their period starts, girls annually grow 5 to 7.5 cm (2 - 3 inches) over the next year or two, before they reach their adult height.

*I REACHED PUBERTY WAY
AFTER MY FRIENDS.
I WAS A LATE BLOOMER! - B.*

*BIG SISTER TIP - THE MORE YOU
TOUCH YOUR FACE, THE MORE
PIMPLES YOU MIGHT GET! - m.*

Skin

It is quite common for girls to get acne, a skin condition that shows up as different types of spots, including whiteheads, blackheads and pus-filled spots called pustules.

Breasts

Your breasts will begin to develop. It's normal for breast buds to sometimes be very tender or for one breast to start to develop several months before the other one. They will continue to grow and become fuller.

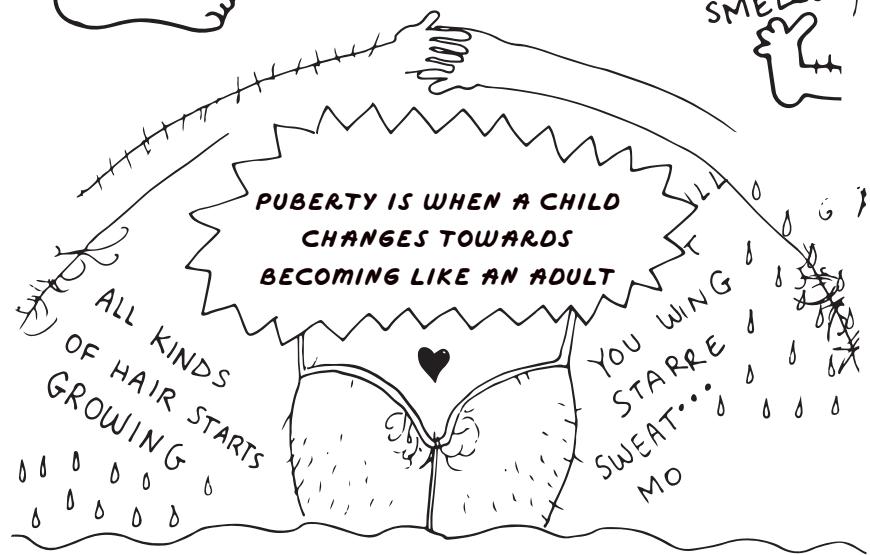
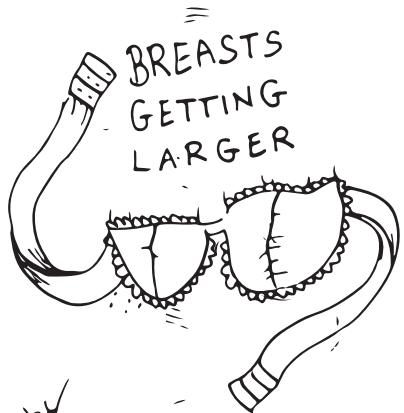
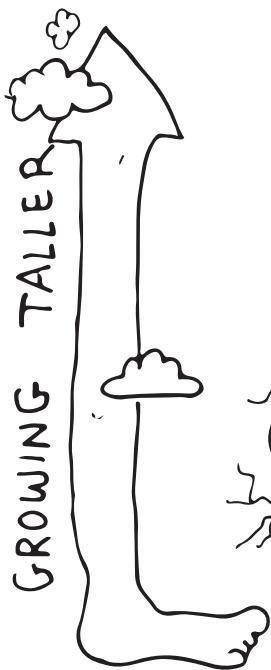
Body hair

Pubic and underarm hair begins to grow and becomes coarser and curlier. Some girls may notice more hair on their legs and arms, as well as hair in other parts of their bodies such as above their top lip. This is completely normal!

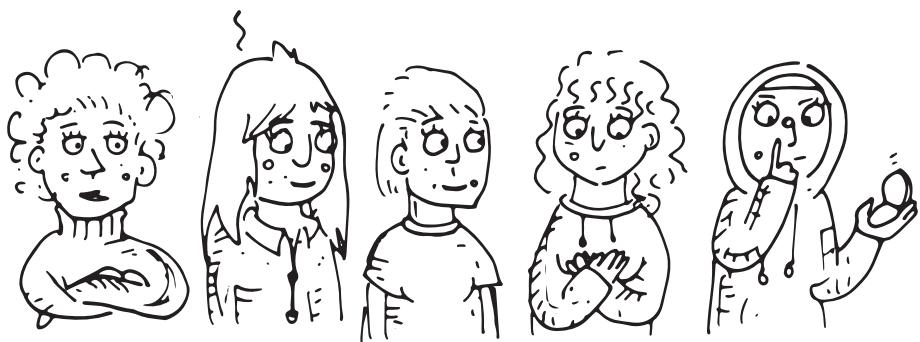
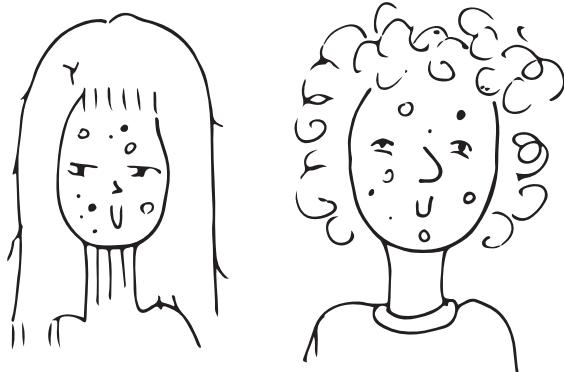
Mood changes

Puberty can be a difficult time as you're coping with changes in your body, such as getting acne or body odour. This might make you feel very self-conscious and compare yourself to others. While it can also be an exciting time when you develop new emotions and feelings, the "emotional roller-coaster" you're on can have psychological and emotional effects, such as unexplained mood swings, low self-esteem, aggression and depression.

GIRLS PUBERTY



YOU WILL START YOUR PERIOD ~~~~~



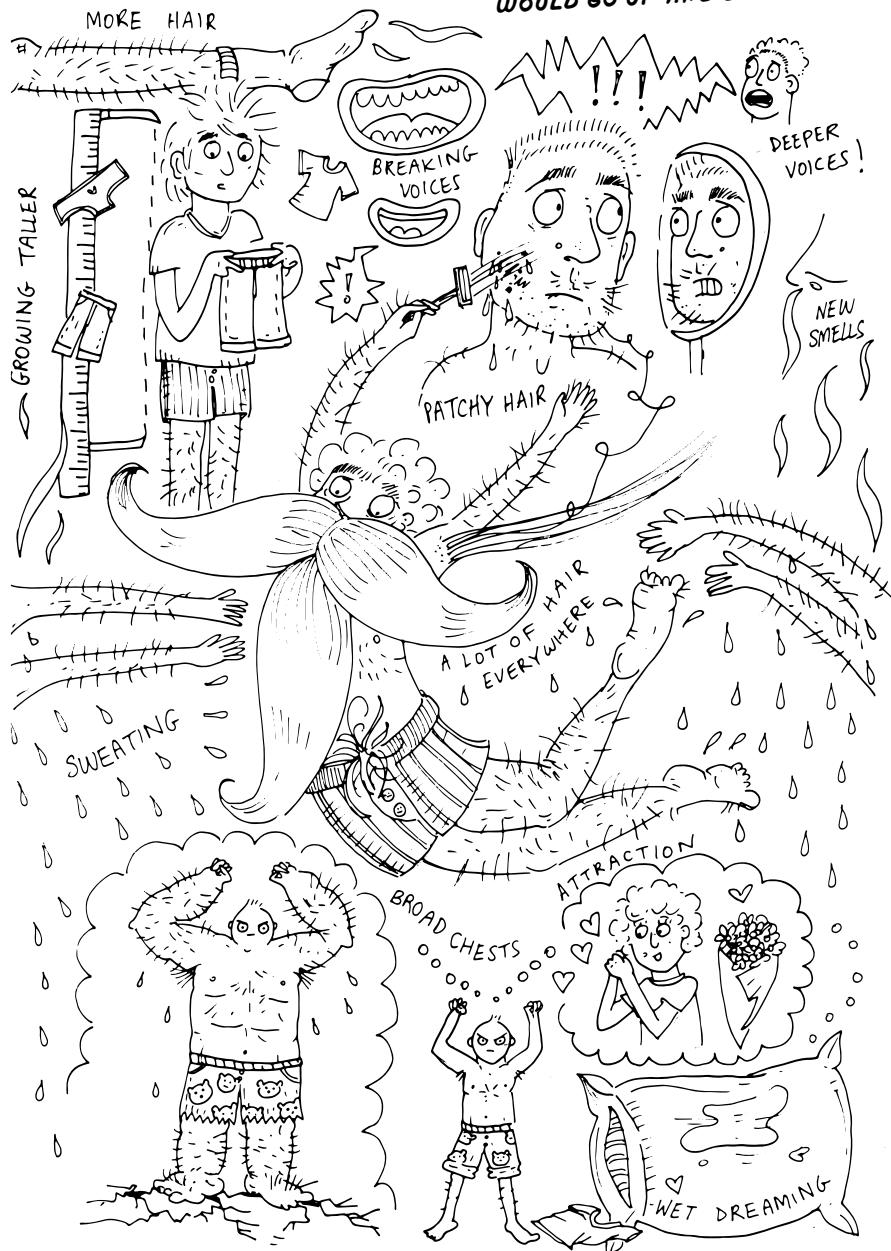
What About the Boys?

Just like girls, boys also go through the wave of puberty and hormones, and undergo a lot of changes as they grow up. Whilst girls will grow breasts, have their periods for the first time and hair will appear in different places, some changes boys will go through are:

- Your height will rapidly grow in a span of 2 to 3 years
- Your shoulders and chest will grow larger and muscles will start to develop. Your breasts can also grow bigger, however not as much as girls!
- Your voice will grow deeper. It will break at first and then it will stabilise. If you sing during the 'breaking' of your voice, you will notice it will break between high and low pitches.
- Hair will start to appear in your armpits, body, chest, arms, legs, around the genitals and in places such as your fingers, belly or even your toes! Some boys might be hairier than others, this doesn't mean anything and doesn't indicate a lesser sense of masculinity.
- Hair will also appear on your face and you will learn how to shave and trim. It might be patchy at first, and learning how to shave can be a difficult and bloody experience, but you will eventually learn how to handle a razor.
- Your genitals will grow bigger and you will start sweating more.
- You might experience some 'wet dreams' including involuntary ejaculation of semen in your sleep. This can seem embarrassing, bizarre and taboo, but remember you're not the only one who is going through this. It happens and it is normal, so just change your sheets.

Just like girls, puberty will not be the same for all boys. Everyone will have their own, yet similar experience and will grow at their own pace, so be kind and supportive to each other.

MY FRIEND HAD HIS VOICE BREAK
WHEN HE WAS IN A CHOIR. WE USED
TO LAUGH TOGETHER WHEN HE TRIED
TO SING HIGH NOTES AND HIS VOICE
WOULD GO UP AND DOWN! - A.



Puberty and self-consciousness

Both girls and boys will be going through a lot, and you may have thoughts of turmoil and become self-conscious about different things. You may feel alone, misunderstood or not listened to, and you may feel embarrassed or silly about a lot of small things.

What can I do about this?

First of all, it's normal to have some negative thoughts, but always remember that:

- Opening up, sharing and talking to your friends and the people you trust can help.
- Everyone is afraid that people remember their most embarrassing moments, but the chance is most people are too focused on themselves to remember that small embarrassing thing you've done in your life. Think about all the small embarrassing things other people have done, and you probably will not remember a lot. It is the same for everyone else.
- Puberty is a time of change for you to find ways to express yourself when you feel negative or challenged—it could be a sport such as football, running or boxing, a martial art such as karate, tai-chi or yoga, or any other activity/hobby such as knitting, drawing, art, dancing, singing or music.
- Puberty is also a time for you to discover who you are. This may cause distress and can be overwhelming as your thoughts and ideas become more complex and challenged. However this also means that your mind is becoming larger, bigger and growing everyday.

You may experiment and try things which are different, scary or exciting to test yourself. If so, be careful and be mindful and embrace this time of change to discover who you truly are.

"What is puberty and adolescence?"

Most girls and boys begin to notice changes in their bodies between the ages of 10 and 14. These physical and emotional changes are called 'puberty' or 'adolescence' and take place over a number of years. At this age, girls and boys are often called 'adolescents'.

"What happens to a girl's body when she reaches puberty?"

Puberty starts when increased amounts of hormones begin to be produced in the body. These hormones lead to changes in the body. Apart from causing physical changes, they cause emotional changes too. Puberty is the time when girls begin to produce egg cells and boys begin to produce sperm. It is the time when children develop into young women and men, and their bodies start maturing, if they so choose, that one day they can have children and start their own families.

"When does puberty begin and how long does it take?"

Changes take place in girls and boys at different times. They generally start later for boys than girls. Some people start puberty before the age of 10, sometimes as young as 8, while others start after 17. Changes may take place in a year or less for some and can take as long as six years for others.



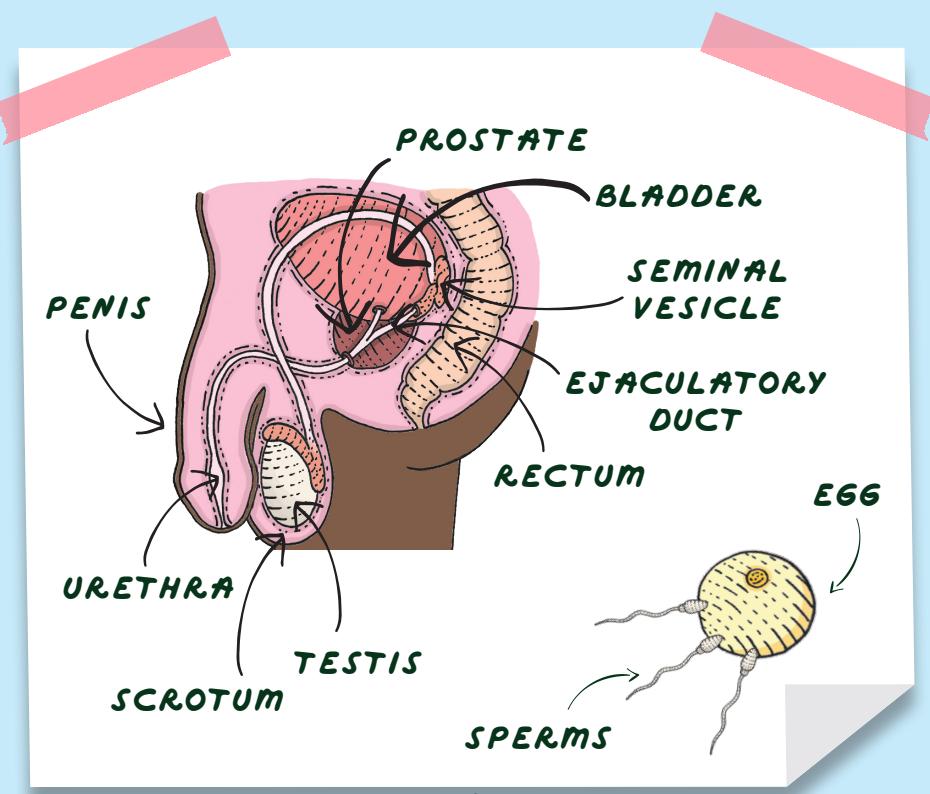
*THESE ARE SOME OF THE QUESTIONS I ASKED
MYSELF WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE. HAVING GONE
THROUGH THESE CHANGES, I CAN NOW TELL
YOU ALL ABOUT THEM. - S.*



How Are Babies Made?

The link between pregnancy and periods

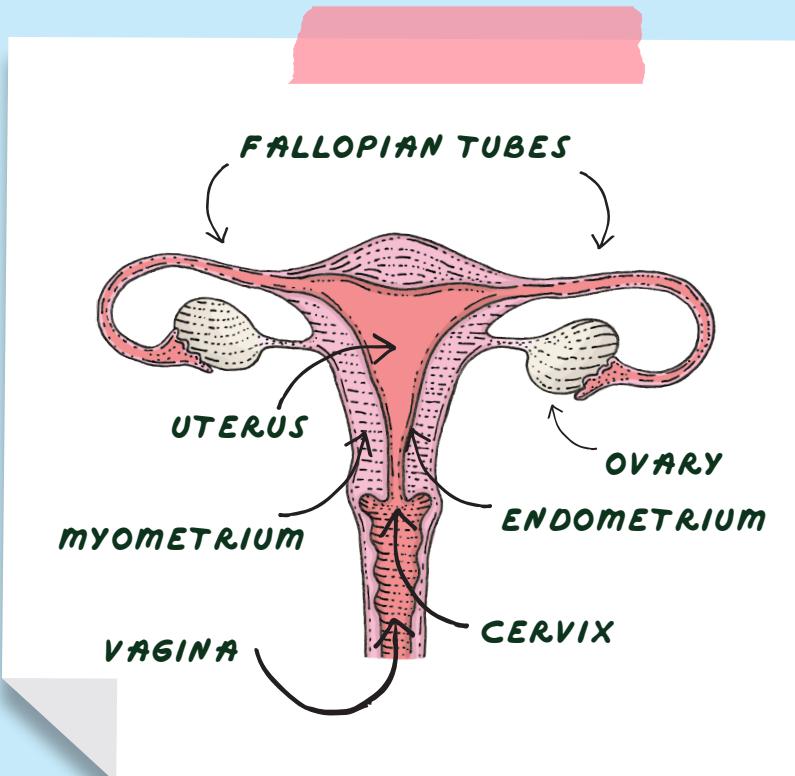
Babies are carried in women's reproductive system known as the **uterus**. In the uterus, **egg cells** are released from the ovaries during **ovulation** and in men's reproductive system, you have **sperm cells**. **Fertilisation** is when an egg cell meets a sperm cell released in her uterus by a man. The fertilised egg cell forms an **embryo** which then grows into a **baby** in the uterus after 9 months. This is known as a **pregnancy**. Every month, ovulation takes place, and if the egg cell **isn't fertilised**, your uterus sheds its lining, which leads to **menstruation**! Therefore if you are pregnant, your periods will stop until you are no longer pregnant.



What is a Uterus?

Your uterus

The uterus (or womb) is a pear-shaped organ in the pelvis that sits behind the bladder and in front of the rectum in the female reproductive system. It has multiple functions and plays a major role in fertility (the ability to have children) and pregnancy. This is where the baby grows when a woman is pregnant and where periods happen. You might wonder how a foetus can fit in there. The uterus stretches and expands like a balloon to make it possible for a baby to fit.



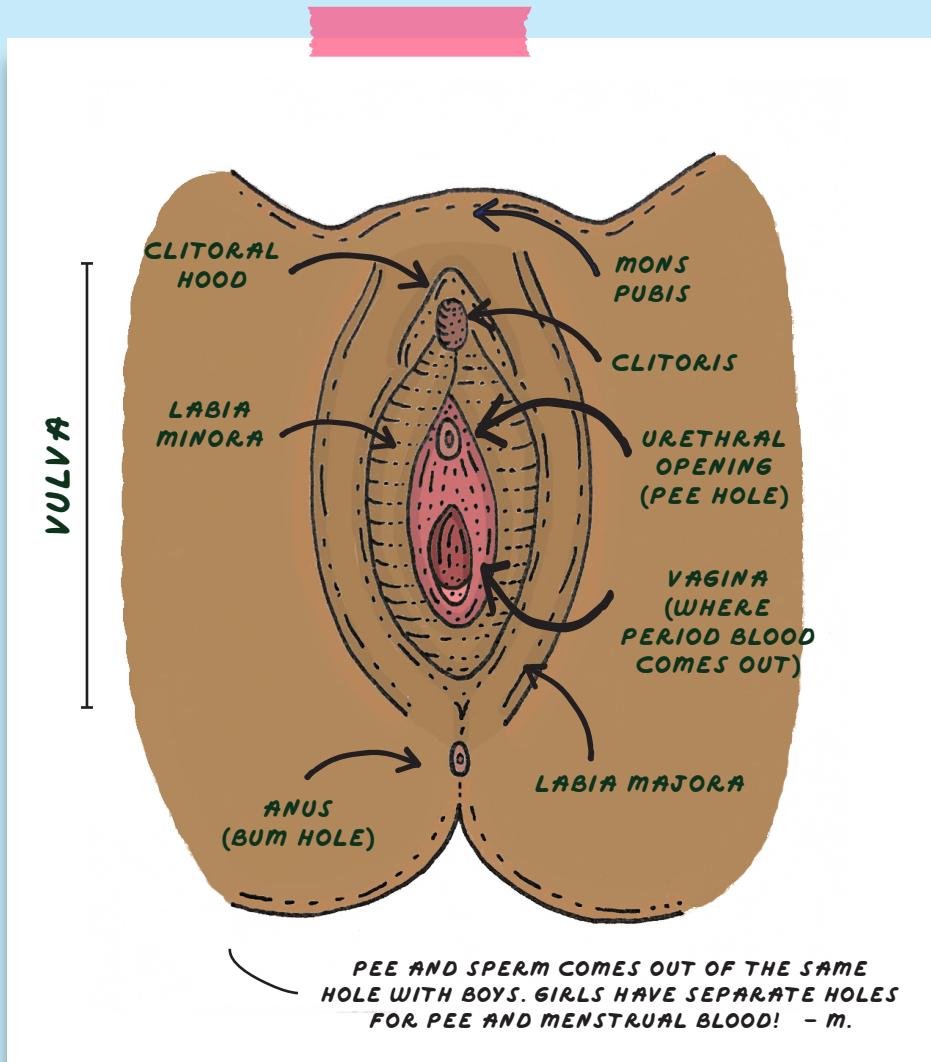
Jump to the glossary at the end of the book to read the definition for the vocabularies above.

The Anatomy of the Vagina

What is a vagina?

A lot of people, even in adulthood, are not necessarily aware of the anatomical terms of their genitals and often refer to the vulva as the vagina, so here is a breakdown of the anatomy:

Know your body



What is a vulva?

So, apart from the vagina, what else do we have down there? A lot of people, even in adulthood, are not necessarily aware of the anatomical terms of their genitals and often refer to the vulva as the vagina, so here is a breakdown of the anatomy:

Vulva: The vulva is the external part of the vagina.

Mons pubis: The tissue covering the pubic bone.

Clitoris and clitoral hood: A ball of tissue that is full of nerves, and is super sensitive.

Urethral opening: This is also known as the pee hole.

Labia majora: Large outer lips of the vulva.

Labia minora: Inner smaller lips.

Pelvic-floor muscles: The muscles under the perineum.

Perineum: The area between the back of the vagina and the anus.

Vagina: An extremely elastic muscular tube inside the vaginal opening.

REMEMBER WHEN THE HEAD TEACHER HAD TO RE-EXPLAIN TO THE ENTIRE CLASS WHAT THE VULVA WAS BECAUSE EVERYONE KEPT USING THE WRONG WORD IN THE ANATOMY EXAM? - B.



Pubic Hair

Is the hair around your vulva dirty?

Some people think that pubic hair is unhygienic or dirty. There is evidence that shaving pubic hair can make the vagina more vulnerable to irritation and infection. However, trimming the pubic hairs can also be beneficial, from both an aesthetic and hygienic perspective.

Shaving your pubic hair is a personal preference – don't let anyone else make the decision for you. It's your choice to remove or keep the hair.

Ingrown hair and how to deal with it

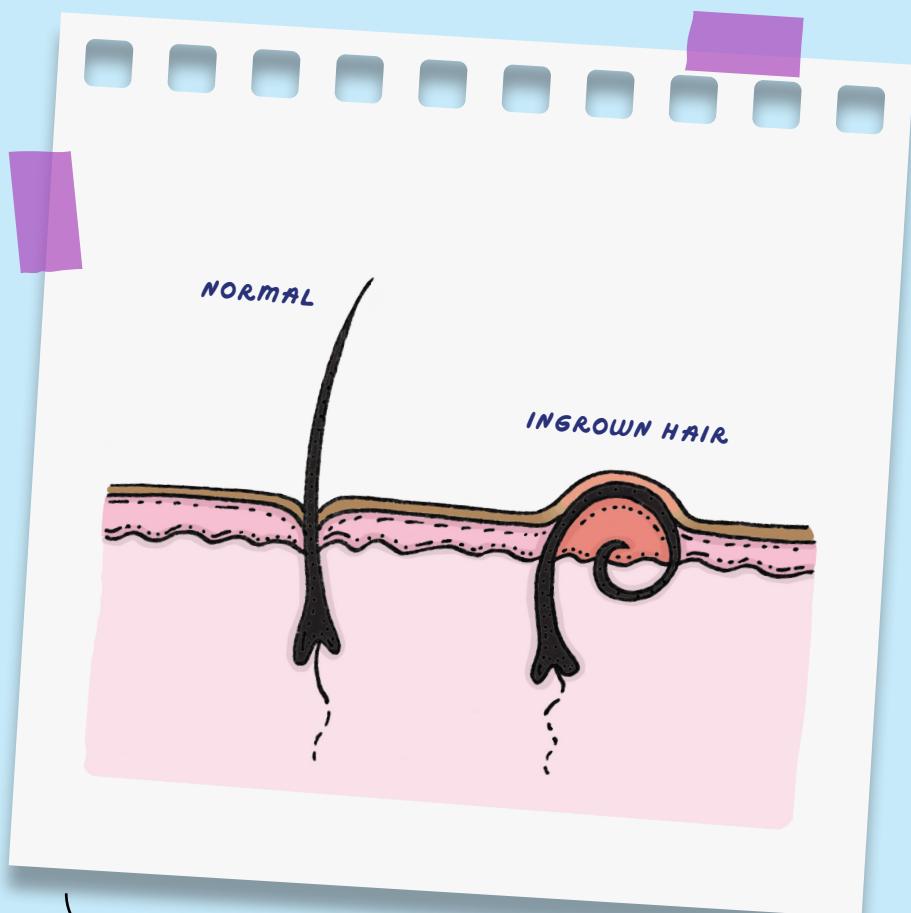
Ingrown hair happens when the hair has been removed and it grows inwards into the skin. It can cause inflammation, pain and tiny bumps in the area where the hair was removed. Ingrown hair can affect anyone.

An ingrown hair often improves without treatment, but the best way to avoid ingrown hair is to not remove hair. If that's not an option, you can try using a sharper razor, waxing or shave in the direction of hair growth, thoroughly rinse the blade and your skin and apply lotion to your skin. But these methods might not work for everyone.



This is what an ingrown hair looks like:

- Small, solid and rounded bumps
- Small, pus-filled and blister-like lesions
- Darkened skin (hyper-pigmentation)
- Pain
- Itching
- Embedded hairs



I'VE HAD THESE A FEW TIMES - SOAKING IT IN WARM WATER AND EPSOM SALT HELPS! - S.

Vaginal Discharge

What is vaginal discharge?

"I have white stuff in my underwear when I'm not on my period. What is it?"

Vaginal discharge is a normal occurrence for people who menstruate. It can start as early as a few months before your period first starts and generally starts appearing less after menopause. Vaginal discharge is the way the body expels fluid and cells.

The production of vaginal discharge can vary from person to person, and can change in consistency and appearance depending on many factors such as your menstrual cycle, hormones, and pregnancy.

What is a healthy vaginal discharge?

Your vaginal discharge should be whitish/yellowish colour. It may have a slight smell and be a little lumpy. Don't worry, that is all normal.

I FREAKED OUT THE
FIRST TIME I SAW
WHITE STUFF IN
MY UNDERWEAR!!!
I THOUGHT I WAS
GROSS, BUT THEN
MUM TOLD ME THAT
SHE HAD IT TOO.
EVERYONE HAS IT
BUT NOBODY TALKS
ABOUT IT! - B.



Changes in consistency

Ovulation

Your vaginal discharge can become thicker when your body releases an egg from your ovary.

Pregnancy

Your body may produce more vaginal discharge than usual while you are pregnant.

Menopause

During menopause, production of discharge will slow down. It can sometimes disappear because the body is no longer ovulating and estrogen levels shift. As a result, women who are in perimenopause, menopause, or postmenopause may experience vaginal dryness.

When to see a doctor?

You should contact your doctor if you notice any irregularities or changes in the consistency, colour, and smell in your vaginal discharge, and if you have other symptoms such as:

- it resembles cottage cheese in colour and consistency
- it looks foamy or frothy
- it has a strong smell of fish, yeast, or another odour
- with all of the above, your vagina is itchy, has a burning sensation or is painful

Also contact your doctor if you experience vaginal itching, swelling, burning, or pain regardless of the vaginal discharge.

Cleaning Your Vagina

Cleaning your vagina

The vagina is self-cleaning. The vaginal discharge is the natural cleaner and lubricant. All you need is water! You do not need vinegar, soap, cleansers, or deodorants of any kind. Although some people might not have any issue with cleaning their vaginas with these products, it is still not recommended.

"What's wrong with products?"

Products will harm the vaginal flora, the good bacteria in your vagina, causing odours due to increased levels of bacteria, which will grow to make up for everything washed away. Altering the bacteria levels can also lead to infections such as thrush and irritation.

"What is a healthy smell?"

A healthy vagina produces smells which are natural, but the smell is different for each individual. Track your smell to make sure everything is okay down there.

"Does exercise, sweat and food affect the smell of my vaginal discharge?"

Sweat usually affects the smell of the vaginal area, which can be confused with the smell of your discharge. Eating a lot of strong smelly foods such as garlic or onion might also affect the odour of your sweat.

"How do I maintain a healthy discharge?"

Good vaginal health is maintained by making sure you're in good general health, which includes a healthy diet and a moderate amount of exercise.

"I know I shouldn't wash my vagina, but what if I'm on my period?"

Washing more than once a day is helpful during your period. Remember to only use water. You can use soap for the mons pubis as long as it doesn't touch your vaginal lips. Keeping the area between the vagina and anus clean at least once a day is important too. Don't forget to always wear clean underwear made of breathable, natural fabric such as cotton.

"Do I need to shave my pubic hair for my vagina to be clean?"

No. Removal of pubic hair is a preference and some women prefer their pubic region with little to no hair. To mothers: if your daughter wishes to remove her pubic hair, have a conversation with her to understand her motivations.



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

The issue of “periods” was explained to me as getting a friend. My Mum spoke in riddles and there were certain times I wasn’t allowed to use her bath water. She had a bucket full of rags that she would soak, dry and then place somewhere and then they would return again another day like clockwork. When I got mine it was a 21 day experience between getting my friend back for 5 days and then seeing them again. My Mum took me to the Dr. He said I was very fertile and so as a 12-year old I was put on the pill to moderate my friend. My friend remains with me today although my friend has in these later years taken more and more blood and it has become exhausting and painful. I love my friend but one day soon I am prepared for them to be out of my life forever.

***SUBMISSION BY
LOU, 47, NEW ZEALAND***

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

MY FIRST PERIOD WITH FRIENDS

OOPS. I THINK I'VE
COME ON MY
PERIOD. DO YOU HAVE
A PAQ?



COOL THANKS. ONE SIZE
FITS ALL LOL

REALLY FITS WELL
IN MY PANTS

THAT WILL DEFO
SECURE ALL MY PERIOD!



YES SURE! HERE



LET'S GO MEET THE BOYS



OOH MY STOMACH'S HURTING.



WALK AROUND TOWN
WITH SOME FRIENDS & THEIR
FRIEND



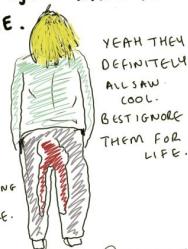
ERM CHLOE ARE YOU OK?



LEAVES WITH FRIEND
AND GETS HOME



YEAH YEAH I JUST WANT TO
GO HOME.



OMG HOW
EMBARRASSING
IT'S EVERYWHERE.

YEAH THEY
DEFINITELY
AILED COOL.
BEST IGNORE
THEM FOR
LIFE.

@HECKSAKE

SUBMISSION BY
CHLOE ROBERTS, 24, UK

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

I once passed out from the pain of my period cramps while on the toilet before taking a shower. I woke up naked on my bathroom floor with a huge lump on my forehead, my bare bottom facing the ceiling. At this point, my pride was hurting more than my uterus!

**SUBMISSION BY
ANONYMOUS**

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

We learnt a lot about the scientific side of periods but not their emotional impact or what they actually look like. I remember starting my period in year 8 after woodwork. I had a big brown stain in my knickers because the blood had got old. I genuinely thought I shat myself! Had to wait 4 hours till getting home to ask my mum what it was!

**SUBMISSION BY
SOPHIA, 23, UK**

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

My first period happened on a school trip. We were staying in a castle somewhere in Northumbria, and I woke up one day to find all my sheets completely covered in blood. I was 12 at the time, and didn't really know what was happening, but someone who I shared the dorm with very kindly explained it to me; "it's a period, love. Get ready to feel sick for the rest of the week," she said.

I remember standing up, almost military style, ready to be A Real Woman. She lent me a pad and I, still covered in blood, walked down the corridor, to the left, and to the left again, past a gaggle of boys who were having a pillow fight, then finally into a very cold bathroom where I gingerly cleaned myself up. Word very quickly spread that one of the girls was wandering about the castle caked in blood, and since we were 12 and I barely knew what was going on, the boys naturally assumed I'd murdered someone.

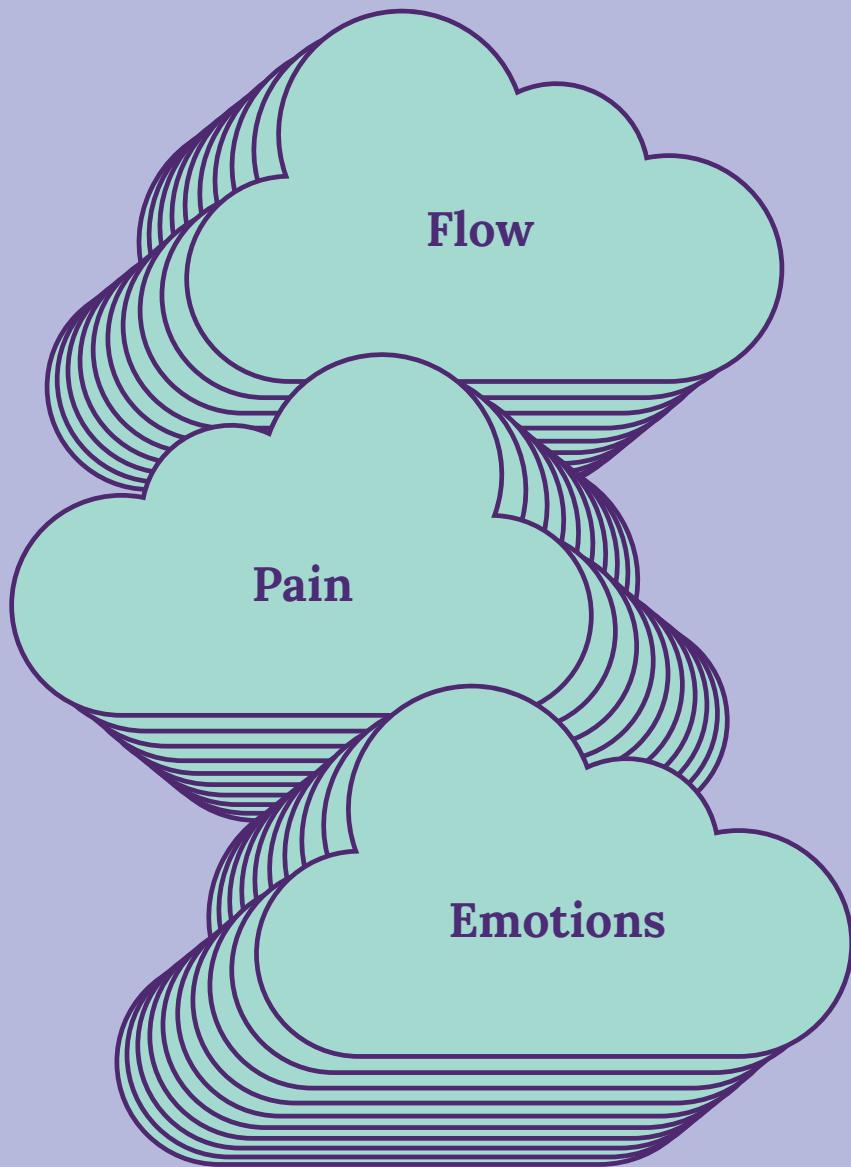
Anyway, during the rest of the week, I ended up bursting into tears because I accidentally stood on a snail, I threw up into a river, bled through a pad onto my then favourite pair of jeans, and had an argument with a girl called Chloe about Dumbledore, and whether he was actually a good person or not in which I completely over reacted (I blame the hormones).

It was an eventful week, and when I got back home, I told my parents pretty much everything and they laughed so hard they nearly crashed the car, and bought me some Ibuprofen for my next period.

**SUBMISSION BY
ANONYMOUS**



Know Your Period



Know your period

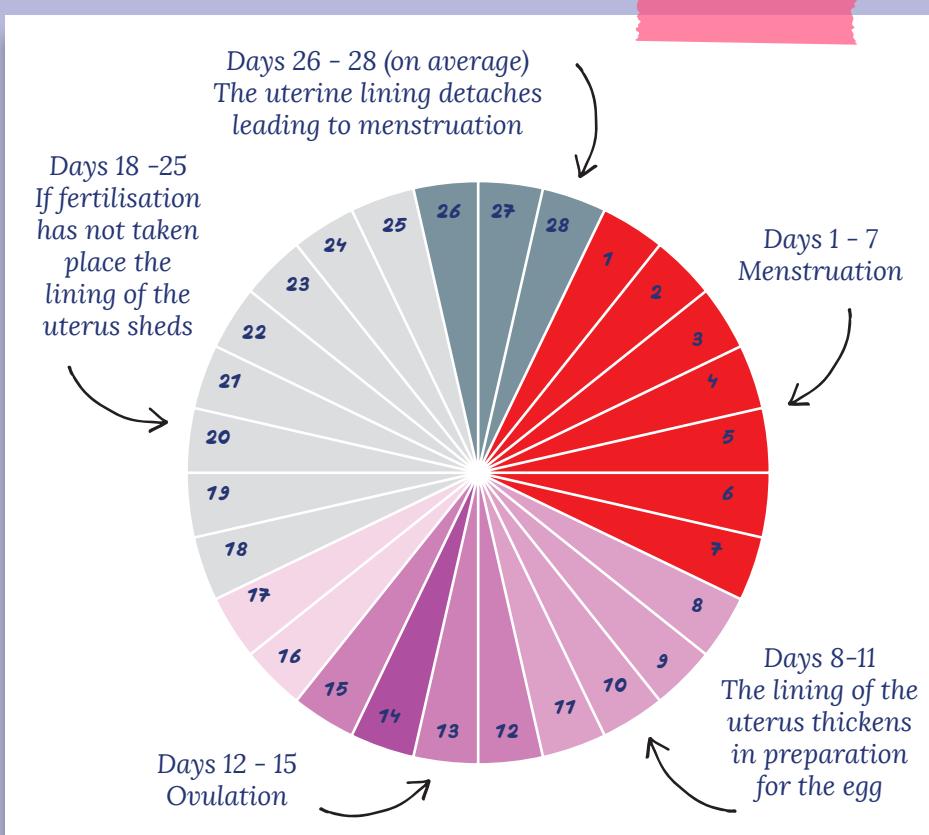
What is a Period?

What happens to the body?

Each month, one of the ovaries releases an egg - a process called ovulation. The egg moves into the uterus through the fallopian tubes, which are the 'pipes' found on both sides of the uterus and connect the ovaries to the uterus. The lining of the uterus starts to form with tissue and blood for fertilisation (pregnancy). If ovulation takes place and the egg isn't fertilised, the lining of the uterus sheds through the vagina along with blood.

This is a menstrual cycle!

Know your period

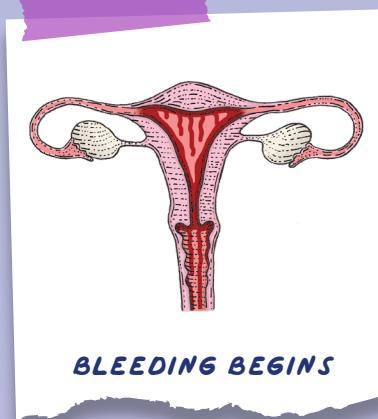


Know your period

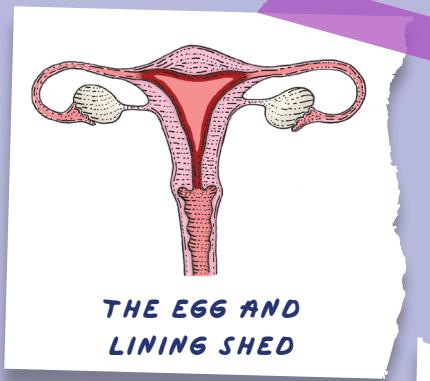
The Menstrual Cycle

Know your period

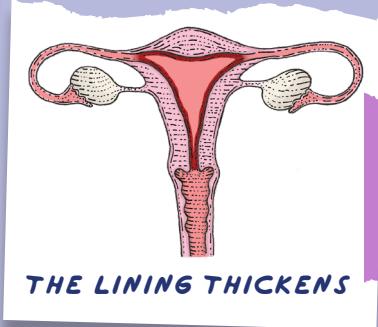
DAYS 1 - 7 OF CYCLE
MENSTRUATION



THE EGG AND
LINING SHED

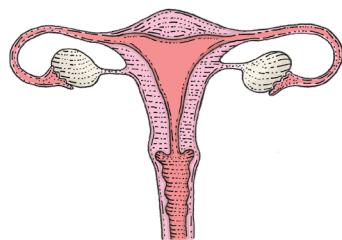


THE LINING THICKENS



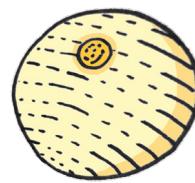
DAYS 26 - 28 OF CYCLE
THE UTERINE LINING
TEARS AND CAUSES
MENSTRUATION.

DAYS 8-11 OF CYCLE
THE LINING OF THE
UTERUS THICKENS IN
PREPARATION FOR THE
EGG.

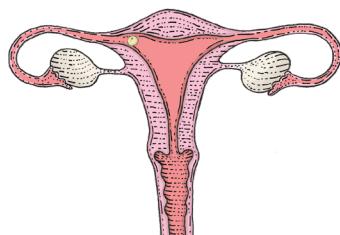


BLEEDING ENDS

DAYS 12 - 15 OF CYCLE
OVULATION



AN EGG IS RELEASED
FROM THE OVARY



AN EGG TRAVELS
THROUGH THE TUBE

DAYS 18 - 25 OF CYCLE
IF FERTILISATION
DOES NOT TAKE PLACE,
THE LINING OF THE
UTERUS SHEDS.

Period Pain

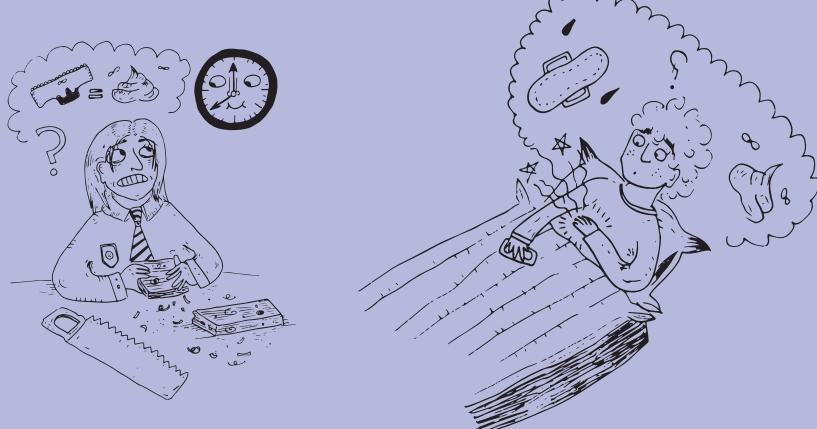
What does period pain feel like?

Many people experience slight to severe pain in different parts of their body just before or during their period, while some don't at all. Couple of years after your period first starts, you might confuse period pain with feeling ill, indigestion, or thinking that you might need to poo.

Here are some common symptoms:

- Mild to intense throbbing pain in your lower abdomen starting one to three days before your period and gets better after two to three days in to your period.
- Bloating before your period.
- Loose stools or constipation.
- Pain in your lower back, thighs, and breasts, as well as headaches.
- Emotional pain can feel stronger.

A slight pain is normal. Also if you get cramps a couple days before your period, it can even become a convenient signal to indicate the start of your period. But if it disrupts your life every month or if you suddenly start having severe pain after the age of 25, see if your doctor can help because it might be a cause of menstrual illnesses.



How to Alleviate Pain

There are different ways for a person to alleviate pain during their period; there is no fixed method or technique so you can pick whatever works for you! There are also events in your life which can make your pains worse - try to identify them in order to prevent them in the future.

Exercise

A simple walk or yoga meditation can get your mind off of the pain and enhance happiness-inducing endorphins.

Heat

Hot water bottles, teas, and anything warm are your best friends. Be careful of excess heat, don't burn yourself!

Pain killers

Pain killers like Paracetamol or Ibuprofen works best. Be careful to track how many you've taken and make sure you consult a doctor before taking medication.

Eating habits

While you may experience cravings, be mindful of overly greasy, heavy, and salty foods to help prevent nausea, bloating, and water retention.

Speak with your doctor

Your doctor or nurse can also help you soothe your pain with other methods or by prescribing other types of medication or healing.

Relieve stress

Studies have shown that stress can cause more painful periods as well as affect your next cycle.

Engage in enjoyable activities and hobbies to help you de-stress!

Sleeping patterns

As you hormone levels change, your body may have trouble controlling its internal temperature causing restless or interrupted sleep. Try going to bed earlier than usual and be as comfortable as possible.

Self-care during your period

There are many ways you can practice self-care during your period even if you're not experiencing pain. Try some of the activities below:

- take a hot bath
- make yourself a cup of tea
- do yoga or meditate
- indulge in some moderate snacking
- take a nap
- think of your period week as a holiday, be nice to yourself and take it easy!



"WHEN I WOULD GO TO INDIA, PEOPLE WOULD TELL ME 'OH, YOU'RE ON RAJA (HOLIDAY)! I WOULD BE EXEMPT FROM HAVING TO DO ANYTHING. 'JUST SIT DOWN AND PUT YOUR FEET UP' THEY'D SAY."
- AVNI CHANG (HINDU STUDIES SCHOLAR)





Question Corner



What's Your Habit?

Understanding our behaviour during periods

Next time you have your period, you can use this to determine your best and worst habits when you're in pain, craving certain types of foods, or when you feel blue!

What are your favourite things to eat during your period?

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What's your period exercise routine?

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What is stressing you out at the moment?

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When was the last time you took time alone to focus on your mind and body? Draw your favourite way to relax.



Know Your Flow

Period blood Colour



**Brown/
Dark red**

Beginning/end of period - old blood



**Red/
Bright red**

Beginning of period - fresh blood



Pink

Spotting, anaemia, vitamin deficiency or low estrogen levels



Orange

Period blood and cervical fluid or a possible infection

Seek help from the doctor if your period blood is:

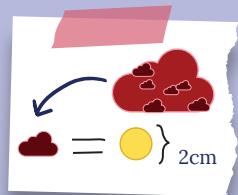


Whitish/greyish

Possible bacterial infection of the vagina
Make sure not to mistake discharge with period blood.

Know your period texture

Clots, which are small lumps of blood, are common during the first two days. Make sure it's smaller than 2cm and to always track your period!



Regularity and flow



Know your period

Tracking means control

The menstrual cycle, which is counted from the first day of one period to the first day of the next, varies from person to person. Your menstrual cycle might be regular or irregular, be light or heavy, painful or pain free, long or short, and still be considered normal. It's normal for your period to be irregular when you first start. However, it's abnormal if you are familiar with your cycle and go through months without having periods.

In order for you to understand your cycle, it is essential that you track your cycle in terms of flow, regularity, pain, emotional changes and habits! It allows you to truly connect with your menstrual experience and understand any changes in behaviour during that time. Plus, you get to know when your next period is so you can be ready for it. Jump to the next chapter to learn more about how to track your periods.

I DIDN'T TRACK MY PERIOD WHEN I WAS YOUNGER BUT NOW I'M WAY MORE AWARE OF WHY I'M TENDER OR PHYSICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY SENSITIVE AROUND MY PERIOD! - A.

How much blood can you lose?

Normally, you lose around two to three tablespoons (30-50 mL) of menstrual blood each month, but this really depends on each person. Your flow is usually heavier at the beginning of your menstruation, and it tends to lighten as the days go by.

During your menstruation, you're not just losing blood. Other fluids like mucus, can make up nearly 64% of your menstrual flow. This means that blood only makes up 36% of your flow, although it might look like you are losing a lot more blood.

So how do you calculate how much blood you lose per month?

1. Multiply the number of hygiene products you used that month during your period by 5 ml (for regular size products) or 10 ml (for extra absorbent products). **Example:**

$$12 \times 5\text{ml} = 60\text{ml}$$

PRODUCTS
PER MONTH

5 ML FOR
REGULAR SIZE
PRODUCT



2. Multiply this number by 0.36 to get the approximate amount of blood you lost that month. **Example:**

$$60\text{ml} \times 0.36 = 21.6\text{ ml}$$

BECAUSE YOU ONLY LOSE 36%
OF BLOOD IN YOUR FLOW



Heavy Periods

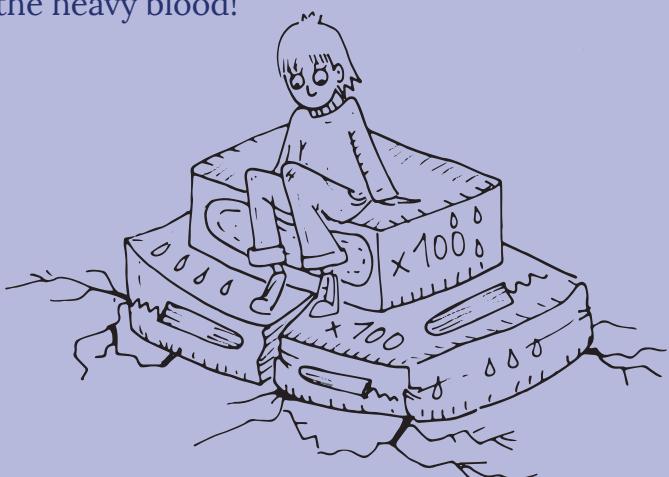
When is it too much?

Heavy periods do not necessarily mean there's anything wrong. However, if you track your flow and lose more blood than usual, it's time for a check-up. If you bleed 6-8 teaspoons on average, heavy menstrual bleeding is defined as losing 16 teaspoons or more in each period or having periods that last longer than 7 days. Sometimes it can be both.

Other indications are:

- Having to change your sanitary products every hour or two
- Passing blood clots larger than 2.5cm
- Bleeding through your clothes or bedding
- Needing to use 2 types of sanitary products together (for example, tampons and pads)

There is nothing wrong with being a heavy bleeder. However, we must remember that people who naturally have heavy periods (without underlying issues or conditions) can have flows which interrupt their daily lives and activities. If you are a heavy bleeder, we empathise with your situation! If you find your flow too problematic, talk to your local doctor to see how you can manage the heavy blood!



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

I am 54 years old. I am a carrier of hemophilia. I started the menstrual cycle at 12 years old. For me it was shame and shame. Then not a mother, not a sister, especially at school no one said anything about it. Even I had no idea why this was happening to me. There were heavy bleeding in the first 3 days. I didn't know where to hide the rags and gauze that I put (unfortunately, there were no gaskets yet). I felt guilty. I really wanted to die. I wanted to understand at that time to understand why this phenomenon occurs in the body. What happens to the body? Menstruation was accompanied by terrible pains. It is very difficult for a little girl to endure these pains.

Now I understand how girls need support from their parents and others. Girls should have remedies for bleeding and pain. The girl must be confident. Reality will overcome all the suffering during menstruation. Now I'm an adult. I have 2 granddaughters who will need support and I will support them in every possible way. I will prepare them for this event of life that can not be avoided. I will do everything possible so that they understand that it's not harmful to the body. Physiologically, this is normal. All women pass this test.

**SUBMISSION BY
GULNARA, 54, AZERBAIJAN**

Absent Periods

When is it too little?

When you first get your period, it is common that it is irregular for the first year. However, as you grow older, it should become more regular. Amenorrhea is when you don't have a period for at least 3 to 6 months. This can cause a lot of stress and anxiety and it can feel like your womanhood isn't present anymore (which is untrue of course). So why does your period disappear?

Diet

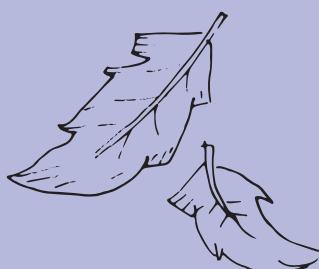
If you don't eat enough, you won't produce enough energy to sustain your body or a healthy pregnancy. Your brain will save the nutrients that would otherwise be used on ovulation, shutting down your periods.

Stress

The stress hormone cortisol influences the production of female hormones by communicating the stress to your brain, which stops ovulation until you have overcome the stress. So make sure to take some time off for yourself.

Exercising

Overexercising can affect women's periods as your body senses exertion as stress and sends information to your ovaries to stop ovulating.

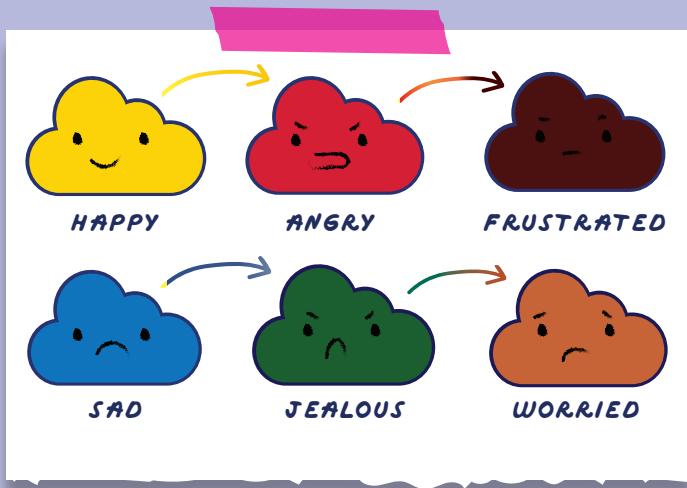


Know your period

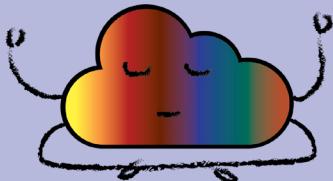
Know Your Emotions

Why do you feel this way?

During puberty and your period, you may experience mood swings. That is totally normal! Track your emotions. If you notice that it changes drastically, tracking can help you to identify, understand, and control your emotions.



If you track your period and emotions and notice these emotions significantly worsening during menstruation, you might have Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD). It's okay. Between 5-10% of people with periods are affected by this. Symptoms can resemble that of depression or bipolar disorder and are very distressing and disruptive. If you still feel low after your period or think you might have symptoms of PMDD, talk to your doctor or an adult you trust about your emotional symptoms.



What is PMS?

PMS (pre-menstrual syndrome) are the emotional and physical symptoms which happen due to hormone fluctuations before the start of your periods. Low estrogen levels decrease the release of serotonin (the happy hormone) affecting your mood levels and making you feel depressed or sad. Don't worry! The feelings won't last forever. Make sure to track your emotions to be in control of them.

THE MOST COMMON SYMPTOMS ARE



FATIGUE
MOOD SWINGS
ANXIETY
HEADACHES
TROUBLE SLEEPING
TENDER BREASTS
OILY SKIN AND HAIR
CHANGES IN APPETITE
CHANGE IN SEX DRIVE

THE SMALLEST THINGS ANNOY OR
UPSET ME DURING THIS TIME! NOW
I KNOW WHY... - A.

"I fight with my friends and family when I am on my period. What should I do?"

Identify the root of your issue to understand why you feel so negative in the first place.

Take some time to care for yourself, drink tea and other hot drinks, take baths, go for walks, eat foods that you love (and are relatively healthy), and take a breath of fresh air.

Don't isolate yourself and talk to someone you trust about what's bothering you; don't be afraid to ask for their support.

Do not repress and ignore bad thoughts or issues you have, as they may worsen during PMS and your anger could become more severe.

Grow from your mistakes. We all make mistakes, the most important part is learning from them.

Apologise to your loved ones if you have wronged them and take responsibility if you've made mistakes.





Question Corner



Understanding your emotions

Whether you have PMS or feel that your negative emotions affect you the worst during your period, it can be useful to know what things, contexts and situations affect, scare, anger, sadden or stress you out the most.

Make a list of things that help you to calm down or cheer up?

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If you are upset, how would you like your friends and family to help?

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Draw the place you feel the safest or most relaxed.

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

It's not even morning recess and my fifth grade classmate went to the bathroom and never came back. When I went to check on her she said she couldn't come out and something was wrong, that she had blood in her pants. Little did she know that she was embarking on a decades-long journey of silence and dread.

She had her period.

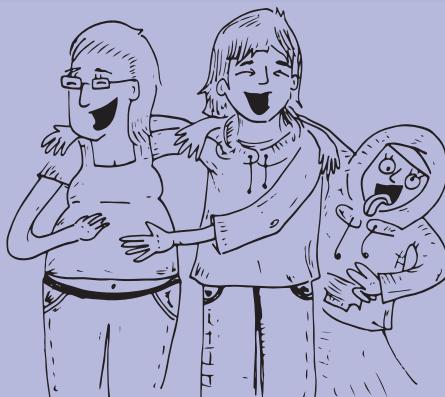
For a girl, getting a first period is odd because it's the first time blood comes out of her body without needing to go to the emergency room. Yet, in most cases, periods hurt. They cause backaches, discomfort and cramps. And with a certain amount of shame attached to it, and the dreadfulness affixed to the blood itself, it's no surprise, then, that women hide their period – including their period pain – from others.

While women use many euphemisms when talking about their periods, they also go to great lengths to conceal them. We shove pads or tampons up our sleeves on the way to the bathroom. We avoid certain clothes or tie a sweater around our waist so not to get embarrassed by a bloodstain. We stick wads of toilet paper in our underwear when we're caught without supplies. The period shame is real, and unfortunately it has gone on for

centuries. Just ask your grandmother or your mum who might not have dared to speak about their periods with anyone, probably not even with their own mothers, and much less with their partners. Periods have never been something to celebrate, at least not in my culture.

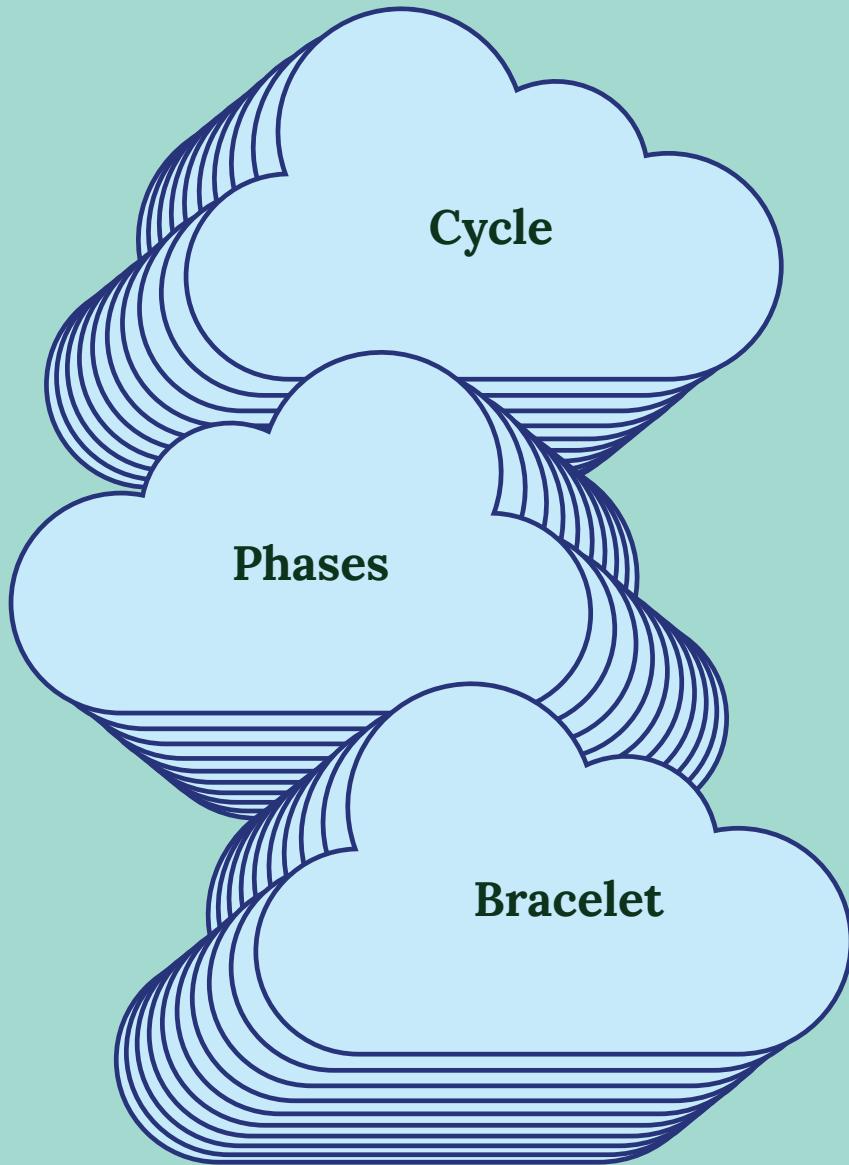
Along with period shaming comes infertility or childlessness or child-free women. We seem to live in a world that assumes parenthood to be the norm, and the best path toward a fulfilling life. For some women, holding on to hope for too long can make it harder to think about "plan B". Let's face it, you see a woman of forty, who has never had children and the reaction tends to be 'that's a shame, isn't it?' Women can carry that sense of shame and embarrassment until they reach middle aged and in many cases become invisible. The period fades and so does her womanhood. Little do people know, this can be the most celebrated time of their lives!

**SUBMISSION BY
DEBBIE GRAY, 43, CANADA**



Know your period

Period Tracking



How To Track Your Cycle

Why is tracking your period so important?

Tracking allows you to be more prepared and feel more in control. Putting all of that information together prepares you for your next cycle and connects you with your own body.

Pain

This can allow you to determine the difference between period pains and other bodily pains.

Blood flow

This allows you to know if you're losing too much blood and can determine irregularities in your flow.

Emotions

This helps you control your behaviour and mood swings which can occur or worsen during the course of your cycle.

Knowing your period will help you prepare and pack menstrual products in advance. The more you know about your own health the better.

The simplest way to track your cycle is to log when your period occurs so you can start to understand your average cycle. A 28-day cycle is a global average, but may not be your personal average. To find out what's normal for you, start keeping a record of your menstrual cycle on a calendar. Begin by tracking your start date every month for several months in a row to identify the regularity of your periods along with other factors such as:

End date

How long does your period typically last? Is it longer or shorter than usual?

Flow

Does it seem lighter or heavier than usual? How often do you need to change your sanitary protection? Have you passed any blood clots? How much blood are you losing?

Mood and behaviour

Have you experienced any changes in mood or behaviour? Are you angrier or sadder than usual? Did any major event happen during or before your period?

Pain

Describe any pain associated with your period. Does the pain feel worse than usual? Does it happen in a different area than usual?

Other changes

Keep track of your sleeping patterns. Having trouble sleeping? How's your diet? Eating more junk food than usual?

Abnormal bleeding

Are you bleeding in between periods?

You can use the calender on the next page to make notes!



Period tracking

	WEEK 1	WEEK 2	WEEK 3	WEEK 4	WEEK 5
MON					
TUE					
WED					
THURS					
FRI					
SAT					
SUN					

Period tracking

	WEEK 1	WEEK 2	WEEK 3	WEEK 4	WEEK 5
MON					
TUE					
WED					
THURS					
FRI					
SAT					
SUN					

Period Tracking Bracelet

A way to help you track your cycle

Using a menstruation bracelet is a very easy and fun way to track your period. You can follow this simple tutorial to make your very own. **Please note:** this tutorial is for a **28 day cycle** and it will help to be familiar with your own cycle so that if your cycle is different, you are able to personalise the bracelet.

What you will need



ELASTIC
WIRE
OR THREAD



4 BLACK
BEADS



9 PINK
BEADS



GLUE



5 RED
BEADS



10 WHITE
BEADS

Original guide by Feby

Instructions:

1. Start the bracelet with the red beads.
2. Then add the white beads
3. Followed with the pink beads
4. And finally, add the black beads.
5. Close the bracelet by making a knot.

Each day represents one bead. To track your period, each morning, slide the knot one bead to the right.

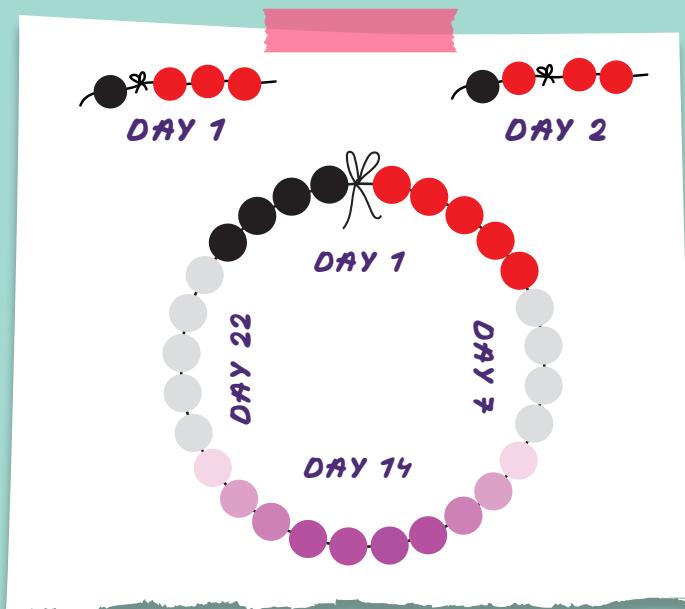
Start using the bracelet on your first bleeding day. Your cycle always starts with a red bead and ends with a black bead, flowing clockwise.

Red indicates the days of your period. The first red bead represents the first day of your period as red symbolises blood. If you bleed for 5 days, use 5 red beads.

White indicates neutral days. White beads symbolise the days between the end of your period (red) and the the first day of ovulation (pink) during your menstrual cycle.

Pink indicates ovulation. Pink beads suggest ovulation and fertility. You may notice an increase in vaginal discharge.

Black beads indicate days you may suffer from pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS). They indicate days you may exhibit PMS, such as physical and emotional symptoms. After the PMS stage, you will start the cycle all over again by getting your period.



Write a Letter to Your Older Self

A reflective exercise



With the help of this book, what are some things you wish to tell your older self when you start your puberty, periods or menopause? What do you wish to tell your older self to have a smooth transition into a new part of your life?

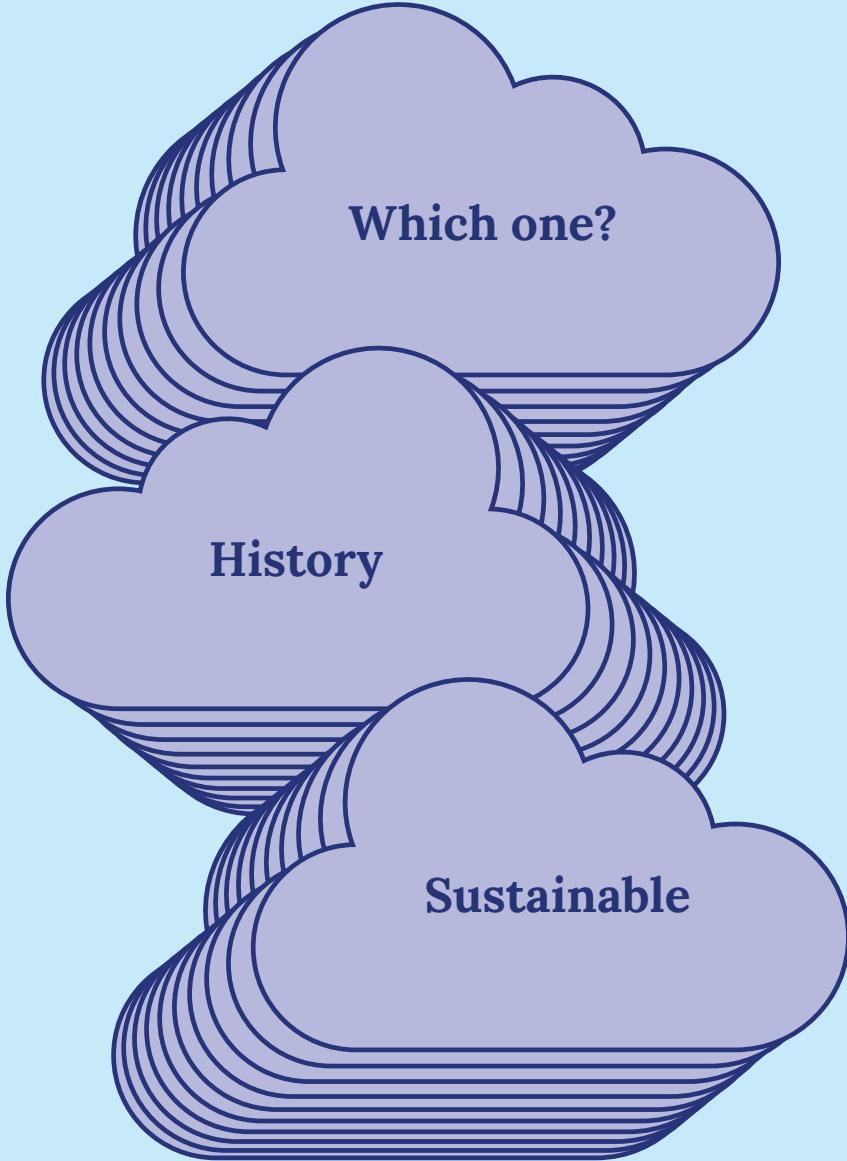
Write a letter exploring your thoughts and fears, potential exciting changes, happy memories of yourself and anticipation of starting puberty, periods or menopause.

As if talking to an older sibling or friend, what are some things you may want to remember or experience?

Dear

Period tracking

Period Products



Which one?

History

Sustainable

Period Products 101



How to be prepared for your period

It's difficult to know when you're getting your first or next period. But you can be prepared by:

1. Tracking your menstrual cycle to predict your next period.
2. Keep a pad in your bag at all times.
3. Wear dark coloured bottoms to hide accidental leaks.

Even if your period starts and you don't have access to sanitary products, don't worry at all because you can:

1. Ask a teacher or the school nurse for help.
2. Ask a friend and borrow a sanitary product.
3. Call your family members.

Hygiene during your period

Whatever sanitary product you're using during your period, make sure to:

1. Wash your hands before and after changing products.
2. Wear clean underwear and change it at least once a day.
3. Wash your genital area with plain water during showers.
4. Take a shower at least once a day.
5. Never use soap or deodorant inside your vagina.
6. Keep your crotch area dry.

The difference between period products

There are different types of products we can use when we are on our period. It is important to note that it's best to use products that you feel comfortable using. Let's take a look at some of the options and how to use them!



Disposable pads

They come in different sizes and they have adhesive backs, which you stick on to the inside of your underwear. You can wear smaller pads for light days and longer pads for heavy days and when you go to sleep. You can generally get them at local shops and it is best to get non-scented pads to avoid skin irritation. Make sure to change your pad within 8 hours for the same reason.



Tampons

They are stick-shaped cottons that sit inside your vagina with the string hanging out. They usually come in two sizes: regular for normal, and super for heavy flows. Make sure to wear the correct size, and change it within 8 hours to avoid getting TSS (read below). It might be scary at first, but it becomes convenient and comfortable after a bit of practice. Using a tampon definitely doesn't mean that you lose your virginity or that you can't pee. Most importantly, a tampon is only one of the options and only use it if you're comfortable.



What is TSS?

Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) is a rare condition caused when bacteria enters deep into your body, stops your organs from working and might lead to death. It can be caused from wearing tampons or cups for too long and wearing super absorbing tampons when not needed. If you experience nausea, diarrhoea, rashes, red eyes, dizziness, confusion, flu-like symptoms, fever, or difficult breathing, please go to the doctors. Although this sounds scary, getting TSS is rare and you won't get it if you change your tampon or cup regularly.

How do I dispose of used sanitary products?

Used disposable products should be wrapped in some form before throwing it away in the bin. Also close the lid of the bin to avoid smells spreading in the room and attracting insects that can cause diseases.

Sometimes you might not be able to find a bin nearby, but you shouldn't flush it down the toilet since it can cause clogs and flooding. You shouldn't burn them as well because it might cause dangerous smokes. Burying is also not a good option because it will stay there and is not good for the environment.

Lastly, make sure to wash your hands after disposing of any products to avoid getting diseases. This might be very difficult if you don't have access to a proper water facility, which is actually a very big problem in many countries. You can read more about the importance of water for when you're on your period in the period poverty chapter later on.

Reusable products: the most sustainable option!

Period underwear



You wear period underwear just like you wear normal underwear! Don't worry about leaking or staining since it is made out of fabric that is very good at absorbing liquid.



Reusable pads

These are similar to disposable pads, but made out of fabric and has buttons instead of an adhesive back. They are practical, sustainable, and better for the environment.

Menstrual cloths

You can make your own period cloth by cutting a clean piece of fabric you have at home. It is best to use 100% cotton since the fabric will be touching a very sensitive part of your body. Fold the fabric a couple times to build thickness to avoid any blood leaking before placing it on the crotch area of your underwear.



Menstrual cups

Similar to tampons, these are inserted inside the vagina, but the cup collects blood instead and is reusable! They are usually made out of medical-grade silicone that is safe for your body, and come in many different sizes and shapes. The cup has to be boiled in a pot for 10 to 15 minutes before wearing it on the first day and before putting it away in a clean bag on the last day. You fold it, insert and the cup will pop open inside your vagina. This might be difficult at first, but you will get used to it after a while. It depends on each person's flow, but cups can hold blood for a whole day. To empty it, you can take out the cup and pour the blood down the toilet. You can wash the cup with water or special soap and wear it again.

Go to the Let's Stand Up chapter where you can read about how activist Mashiyat Rahman used water hyacinths in Bangladesh to create sustainable pads!

How to wash and dry reusable products

Menstrual underwear, cloths, and reusable pads should be changed at least once and up to six times a day once it feels wet to the skin. Hand-wash with cold water and soap to

remove stains from the fabric. Although it might be difficult, it is extremely important to fully dry the fabric by line drying it or using a drying machine. Avoid wearing them damp since that can lead to skin irritations and infections. It would be useful to have a combination of different period products to use one whilst washing and drying another.

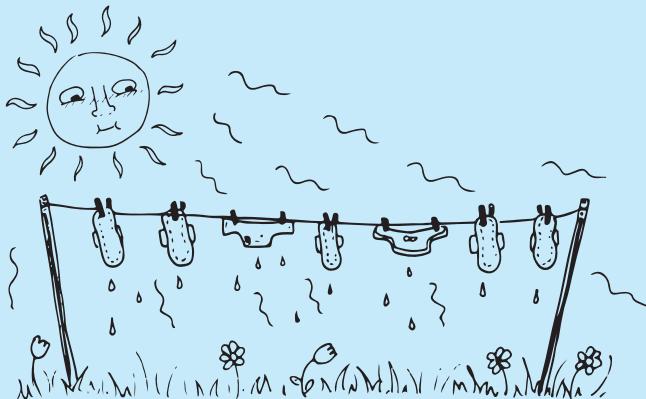
Reusable products are beneficial in many ways but can become harmful without clean water, since wearing one that's not fully cleaned can lead to health risks. You can read more about water and menstrual health management in the next chapter.

Do menstrual cloths/underwear/reusable pads smell?

Cloth pads are usually fresher than disposable ones as the fabric allows moisture to evaporate. Less moisture means there is less bacteria that creates bad smells.

Periods and disability

Managing menstruation can be challenging for some people with limited motor function. Inserting and removing a tampon or menstrual cup may not be simple, or not possible at all for some people. Period-proof underwear (like Thinx), pads, and disposable underwear are good options for people with physical disabilities, especially for people who don't feel sensation below the waist and can't detect leaks.



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

Once my girlfriend and I booked a thermal day and she had her period. Before going, we informed together about tampax, she never tried that, and I supported her with information and we watched tutorials together concerning "how to use tampax". After all, we faced "red period" together and my girlfriend for the first time used tampax and she felt comfortable, we went to the spa and we had a really nice day!

This is important because we didn't know the real usage of tampax and initially she was scared due to bad public information concerning tampax.

**SUBMISSION BY
LUCA, 28, ITALY**



Which One Should I Use?

Let's now see which products might be best for you! These are some recommendations but it's always best to try and see which one you find most comfortable to use!

Best for your first period

It is best to use a disposable or reusable pad, menstrual cloth, or period underwear at first. Once you get used to your periods, you can try using other products.



Most sustainable

All of the reusable products are sustainable options, especially the period cloth and reusable pad, because you can reuse materials you have at home.



Most night-friendly

Disposable and reusable pads are best when going to bed during your period because they both have wings that keep your pad in place. A period underwear is another great option!



Easiest to keep clean

Disposable pads and tampons are easiest to keep clean because each item is individually packed and you will use a fresh new product every single time. However, it is terrible for the environment!



Best for summer or swimming

Menstrual cups and tampons are best for when you go swimming during your period because they collect and absorb blood inside your vagina. Both products stop the blood from flowing outside your body when worn correctly, so you don't need to worry about leaking.



Easiest to use

A disposable pad is very easy to put on and remove compared to the others. Disposing of it is also easy since you can throw it away in the bin.



Best for price

Period cloth and reusable pads cost the least because you can make these out of materials you already have at home. But the menstrual cup is another option because although it is quite pricey, you can use the same one for up to 10 years.



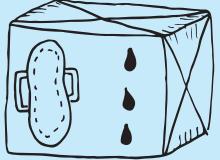
Cost of period products

Period products are essential items for a lot of people on this planet, but they're not the most affordable in many countries. This expensive price of is one of the factors of period poverty.

For example in Nepal, the price of a pack of disposable pads is about the same as the price of 1kg of rice, which can feed a whole family for a day. In Tanzania, it is about the same price as a litre of milk. In the UK, pads and tampons can cost up to £8 per month if you have a heavy flow.

In lower income countries, products are even more expensive because the price paid towards managing your period covers a bigger portion of the family's income.

Even though period products are essential, they can also be taxed, which is another cause of period poverty. But some countries including India, Canada, and Germany are making changes by removing the tax on disposable pads and tampons.



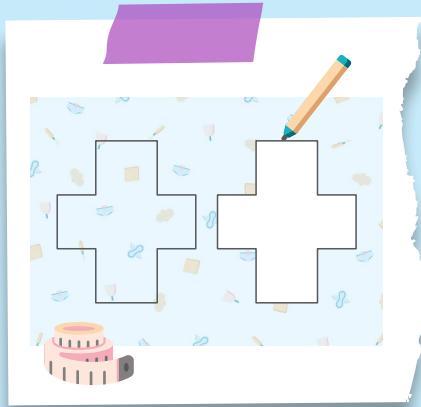
PERIOD COST - £4
ON TAMPONS, £4
ON PADS, PLUS £2
ON PANTY LINERS
= £10 X 12 MONTHS
X 40 YEARS = £4800
- B.

Real cost of periods

Having a period doesn't mean that you just need sanitary products - there are so many other products that you need to buy. If you have bad period pains you might have to buy pain killers and heat pads. You might need to get skin medication if you get painful acne caused by your period. We also can't forget that some people get sugar cravings at certain times during your menstrual cycle and might want to buy chocolates.

Make Your Own Reusable Pad

Using a reusable pad is a very environmentally friendly and economical way to manage your period. There are many different ways to make reusable pads, but this book shares a very easy example. You and your friends can follow this simple tutorial below to make your very own!

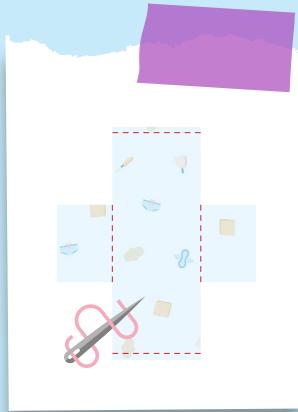
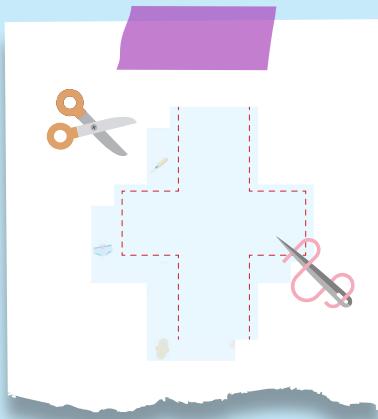


Step 1

Make a paper template using the guideline on p. 100 and use it to trace the shape onto the fabric twice. You can use any fabric you have, but it is best to use cotton, because you will be using this pad for a very sensitive part of your body.

Step 2

Cut out the two pieces of fabric and place one on top of the other, with the outsides facing each other. Stitch the two together along the red line, but leave the top and bottom open!

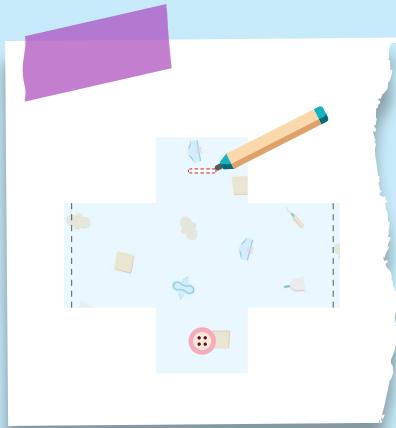


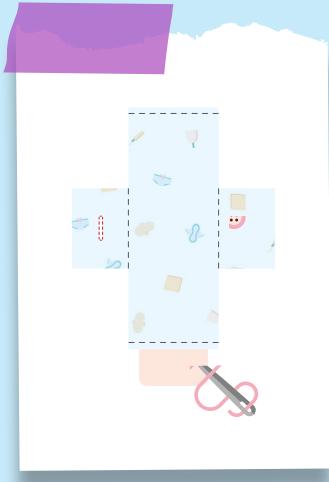
Step 3

Fold the four edges of the top and bottom and sew all edges to avoid the fabric from unraveling. You can then flip the fabric to reveal the outsides. Stitch along the base of the two wings where you're going to fold when wearing the pad.

Step 4

Stitch a button at the center of one of the wings. You can use any type of button including the normal ones and the snap buttons. Then mark with a pencil where the button hole should be on the other wing. Cut the line for the hole and stitch the edges to avoid fraying.





Step 5

Cut out two pieces of thick fabric with a width of 6cm and refer to the next page for the length. You can use any thick fabric, such as a towel. Stitch the two pieces together. Place the towel inside the reusable pad case through the top or bottom openings. If you are worried about leaking, you can stitch a layer of waterproof material such as pul fabric on top of the thick fabric.

Step 6

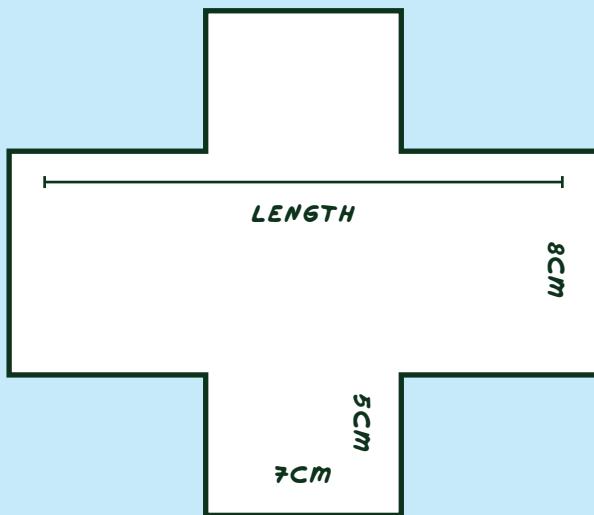
To use the reusable pad, place it inside your underwear and fold the wings outwards to button them together. When washing your reusable pad, remove the towel from the case before washing them both. Make sure to change and wash your pad at least once in 8 hours.



Reusable Pad Template

Guideline

It's very convenient to use different sized pads depending on the amount of your flow. Follow the guideline below to make a couple of paper templates with different pad lengths. Apart from the case and towel length, all other measurements shown below in the diagram can stay the same.



For day time

Case length = 23cm
Towel length = 21cm

For night time

Case length = 29cm
Towel length = 27cm



Question Corner



What do you think about how sanitary products are priced?

-
-
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Period products

Which products have you used and which ones would you like to try using?

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-
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-

What problems do you currently face during your period?

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If you were to change a period product, which one would it be and how would you make it better?

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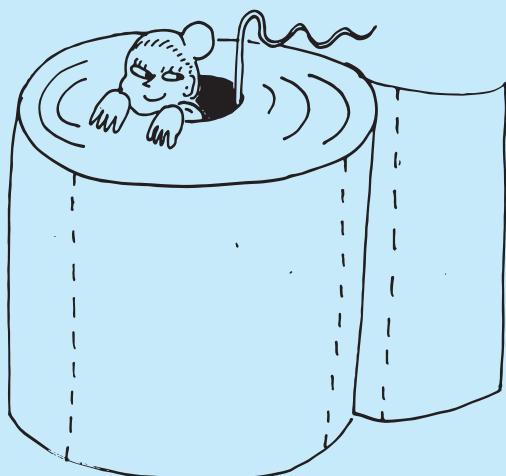
Draw a sketch of your new product(s) here and give it a name. Use your imagination to revolutionise menstrual care!



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

As a teenager I was a competitive gymnast training up to 16 hours a week. My (period) flow was heavy and I often needed to change my tampon in the middle of practice. I hid tampon packets in the stacks of toilet paper in the gym bathrooms because I didn't want to be seen taking a tampon out of my gym bag and carrying it to the bathroom. But sometimes I hid so many that I forgot they were there. I laugh now thinking about my coaches (the team owners) finding all these little tampons amongst the toilet paper rolls like some strange Easter eggs.

***SUBMISSION BY
ANONYMOUS***



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

Whenever my period would come knocking, I'd always get very anxious. I would think others would be able to smell it so I'd go through a lot of deodorant, and I was always worried about leaking as I have a heavy flow since I was younger. I didn't like to sit down anywhere and I wouldn't leave the house without a hoodie tied around my waist, even in the winter. However, since being told about moon cups (menstrual cup brand) by a friend, I feel more comfortable and relaxed when my periods come. The cramps still kill but, in my mind, I'm more at ease. Since I started using it a few months ago, I've had no leaks and no problems with it. Also, it feels good that I'm producing less waste with single use items such as tampons.

**SUBMISSION BY
LUCY, 22, UK**



History of Products

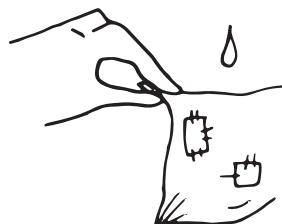
Have you ever wondered who invented these products?

Menstrual pads

Menstrual pads have been around for a very long time. Someone wrote about them in the Suda, an ancient encyclopaedia written in the 10th century. It says in the book that Hypatia, who lived in the 4th century AD, threw her used menstrual rag at her admirer to discourage him.



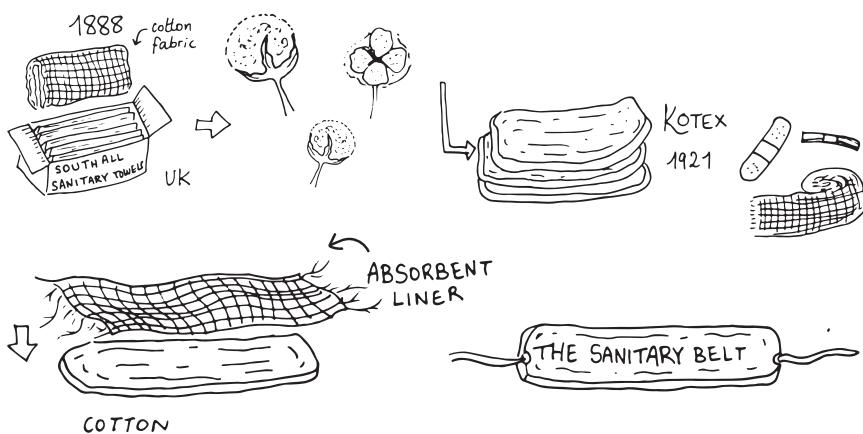
Before pads were around, most women used pieces of cloth to absorb their menstrual blood. 'On the rag' is a phrase that originally referred to women on their periods.



In the 1880s, Benjamin Franklin created disposable bandages for bleeding soldiers, which led to the idea of using disposable menstrual pads. Nurses used these wood pulp bandages to absorb their menstrual blood. They discovered a cheap, environmentally friendly product to use during their periods.



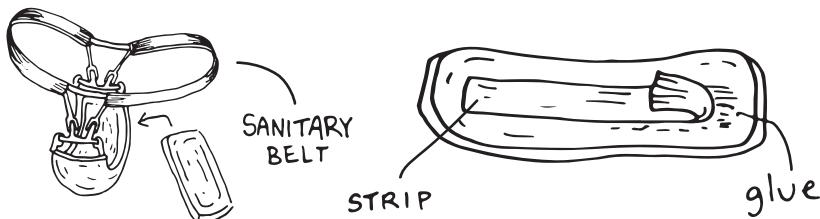
The first commercially available disposable pad was sold by Southall from around 1888. Some of the other manufacturers that started selling pads as well were originally making bandages. Also, the first advertisement for pads using wood pulp (cellucotton) was released by Kotex in January 1921.



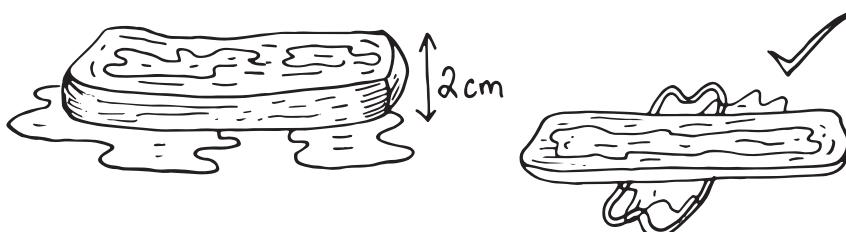
When disposable pads were commercially available, they were too expensive for women to buy. When people wanted to buy pads from the shop, they would place money inside a box and take a pack of pads from the counter themselves, so that they didn't have to speak to the clerk. As you can see here, it took several years for people to get used to disposable pads. Feel familiar?



Before the mid-20th century, women had to find ways to keep their menstrual pads in position, whether they were wearing disposable or reusable pads. Wearing a menstrual belt was a common option for about half a century, but they were known for slipping back and forth. This problem was solved when disposable pads with adhesive strips that stick to the panties became popular in the 1980s, which led to sanitary belts quickly disappearing from the market.



We still use adhesive disposable pads today, just like in the 80s, but the material used to make pads has changed since then. Pads before were up to two centimetres thick, were not good at absorbing, and often caused leaks. Now our pads are a lot thinner and better at absorbing blood due to adding plastic to them. However the plastic disposal has become an environmental issue.



Tampons

The earliest historical evidence of tampon use can be found in Ancient Egyptian medical records that described tampons made from the papyrus plant.

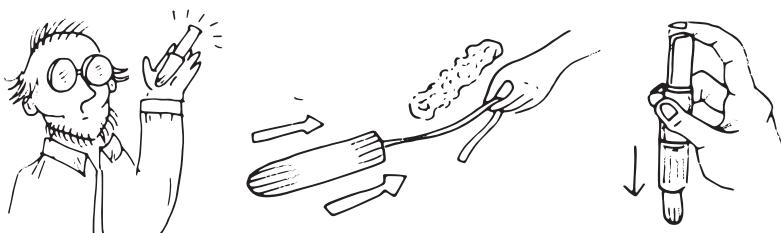
According to the writings of Hippocrates, Greek women wrapped lint around a small piece of wood and inserted it into their vagina to stop blood from flowing out in the 5th century B.C.



Meanwhile, Roman women used wool, Indonesian women used vegetable fibres, and some African women used rolls of grass to stop their menstrual flow. Ancient Japanese women made tampons from paper, secured them with bandages, and changed these dressings between 10 and 12 times every day. Women were very creative in making their own version of modern-day tampons, and some other examples include using materials such as sponges and cottons.



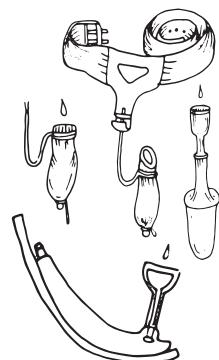
In 1929, Earle Haas, a physician invented today's tampon with an applicator. A friend told him about improvising a comfortable and effective alternative to the bulky pads, by inserting a piece of sponge inside the vagina rather than absorbing the blood outside of your body. Since doctors were using plugs of cotton to stop secretions at that time, he thought a compressed form of cotton would absorb blood just as well.



Dr Earle Haas' design is a tightly bound strip of absorbent cotton attached to a string for easy removal. To keep the tampon clean and to push the cotton into place without women having to touch it, they came with an applicator tube that extended out.

Menstrual cups

The first prototype of a menstrual cup designed in the USA was called catamenial sack. It was inserted into the vagina and was attached to a belt. Other similar devices were invented at the turn of the century. Some of them were put in the vagina, but they were able to empty the blood without taking the device out, because they had different valves.



The first modern menstrual cup was invented in 1937 by American actress Leona Chalmers. It was made with latex rubber, and her design was known for not causing discomfort or making the wearer conscious of its presence. It also allowed women to wear "thin, light, close fitting clothing" without belts, pins or buckles that might show.

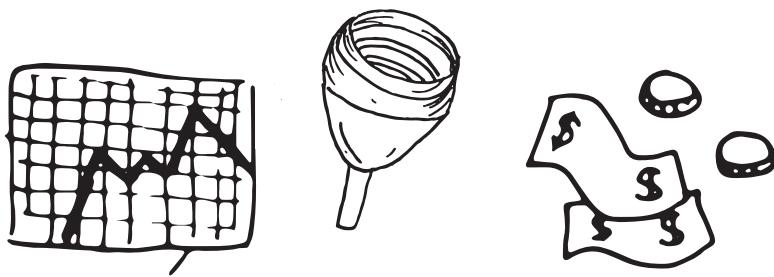


During World War II, a shortage of latex rubber occurred and the cup companies were forced to stop production. After the war in the early 1950s, Mrs. Chalmers made some improvements and patented the new design.



Even though society's view on menstruation had progressed since the 30s, women still weren't open to the idea of using a menstrual cup. The idea of a reusable product that had to be inserted into the vagina by the wearer was scandalous to many for socio-religious reasons.

The Tassette company spent a fortune to market the cup, but only made a small amount of sale. Many women didn't feel comfortable with the idea of emptying or cleaning the cup, and women who were happy with the product didn't buy it again as it was reusable. So the cup disappeared from the market in 1963.



Menstrual cups were reintroduced in the late 1980s with the creation of The Keeper. This cup is made from latex rubber and is still sold today.

At the beginning of the 21st century, many brands started using medical grade silicone as the material for their menstrual cups. This was a great success and now, women with latex allergies can safely use menstrual cups.





Question Corner



What Can You Invent?

Exploring your potential for creation

Through the ages, period products were invented to respond to the biological needs of women. However, the stigma and the environmental impact of plastic in products remains a barrier in the potential of truly revolutionising menstrual care. Use your imagination to think of ways to revolutionise feminine care!

What are the problems you currently face during your menstrual cycle?

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If you were to change a period product, which one would it be and what would you do?

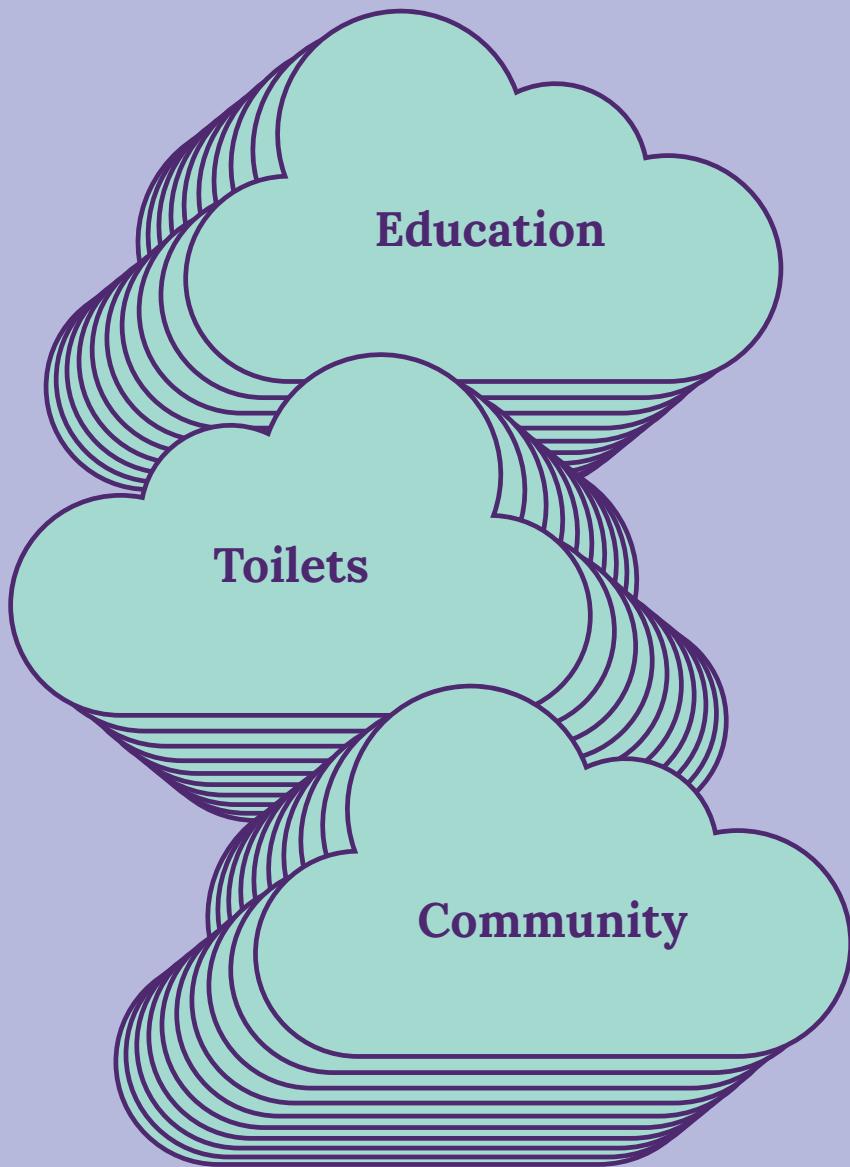
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Draw a sketch of your new period product(s) here:

What would you name your invention(s)?

Do you have ideas for creating a product in a new context?
For example, period products to use in outer space?

Period Poverty



Period Poverty

What is period poverty?

I REMEMBER FRIENDS
HAVING TO SKIP
SCHOOL BECAUSE
THERE WEREN'T
ENOUGH TOILETS! - S.

Period poverty is the lack of access to menstrual products, menstrual hygiene education, toilets, hand washing facilities, and waste management. It is a global sanitation issue affecting people around the world. Menstrual products are essential, but unlike toilet paper and sometimes condoms, they are not free in public areas, leaving many to go without pads or tampons, or to use toilet paper, rags, socks, or nothing at all. Not having access to a safe and hygienic way to deal with menstruation can have profound consequences, particularly on education, mental health, and dignity!

Another problem intertwined with period poverty is the taboo surrounding menstruation - this can be particularly harmful in terms of mental health, and directly affects a child's potential to succeed. Studies conclude that the knowledge of effective treatments for period pain is low, people with period pain experience reduced classroom performance, and a lower level of class attendance.

Period poverty also denies children some of their rights, for example their right to education (article 28 in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child-CRC) as some children are forced to skip school due to lack of access to menstrual hygiene. Find the UN CRC website online to view all 41 articles and think about how period poverty can affect your rights.

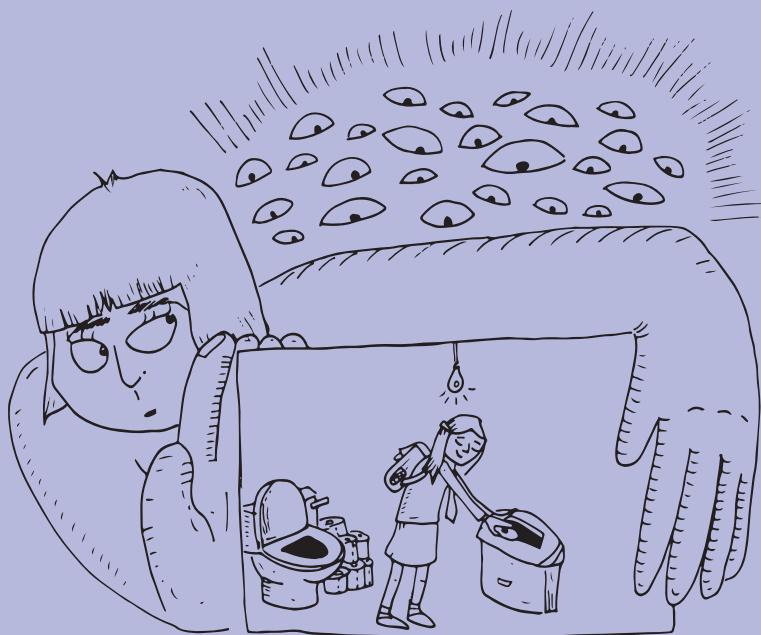
If a pupil misses school every time they have their period, they are set 145 days behind their fellow students.

IF YOU KNOW ANYONE MISSING SCHOOL, IT WOULD BE NICE TO SHARE YOUR NOTEBOOK AND HELP THEM CATCH-UP. IT'S NOT THEIR FAULT. - A.

Building Safe, Separate Toilets at School

Without a safe, private toilet at school, people can't feel secure and comfortable going to the toilet. This is a problem throughout people's school lives, but it is especially problematic when they are on their period.

Due to the lack of sanitary facilities at school, some people flush their used pads and menstrual cloths down the toilets or leave the soiled pads in the toilet corners. This causes many problems including blocked sewage and dirty toilets. Some schools provide incinerators or "feminine hygiene bins" for disposing menstrual waste materials, but many people refrain from using them due to shyness or fear of being seen by others. Also many are reported absent from school due to the lack of a proper disposal system, water tap and supply, bucket, and lockable doors.



Period Poverty Cycle

Period poverty



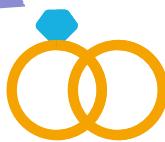
LACK OF REPRODUCTIVE EDUCATION

In the UK, 1 in 7 girls didn't know what was happening when they got their first period.



PREGNANT AT YOUNGER AGE

In Bangladesh, 33% of girls aged 15-19 years are pregnant with their first child.

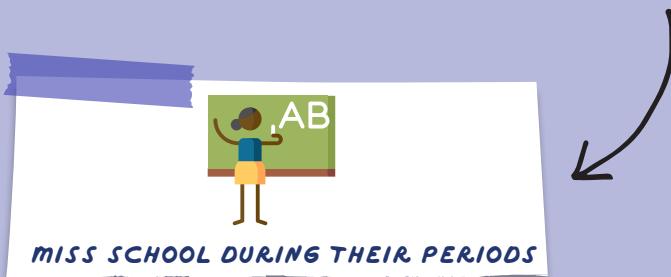


GREATER RISK OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Niger has the highest overall rate of child marriage in the world, with 77% of girls married before their 15th birthday.



79% of girls and women in Pakistan do not use menstrual products to manage their menstruation.



1 in 5 American girls have missed school each month due to their period.



In India, 23 million girls are forced to drop out of schools every year, once they begin menstruating.

Tackling Period Poverty

How can we help fight this issue?



An average person is affected by menstruation for 3,000 days in their lifetime. That works out to more than eight years! The basics that can make a period bearable is having a private place to manage it, knowing there are people to talk to who understand what you are going through, and having clean materials to use. Sadly, this is not a reality for many people living with period poverty.

Despite an emerging body of evidence and an increased commitment to gender equality, the global response has been slow. One reason is this issue falls through the cracks between programmes such as health, education, gender, water, sanitation, and hygiene. Across the world, it is men who are in most positions of power and policy making, and they do not deem menstruation an important enough aspect of life to give it the attention it needs.

Poor menstrual hygiene can cause physical health risks and has been linked to reproductive and urinary tract infections. It also stops people from reaching their full potential when they miss out on opportunities crucial to their growth. The impact of people missing out on secondary education is huge. The loss of education can mean they are more likely to be forced into child marriage, experience an early pregnancy, pregnancy complications, social separation and neglect, and domestic violence. If everyone had a secondary education, child deaths would be cut in half, saving three million lives.

my mom's friend had to drop out of school when she was 15 because she was sick of leaking through her rags. - m.

How to Help

As individuals:

- Hygienically manage your own menstruation to maintain your health and that of others - including washing, drying and safely disposing sanitary materials.
- Support and educate each other, especially young teenagers, about menstrual hygiene practices.
- Address barriers to water and sanitation for the hygienic management of menstruation.
- Challenge negative attitudes and ideas.

As a community:

- Break the silence, confront dangerous myths/taboos/practices, and challenge negative perceptions.
- Ensure access to water and sanitation facilities.
- Involve women and girls in policy and decision-making.
- Encourage all households and schools to have private and secure toilets and facilities for the safe disposal of sanitary products.
- Ensure everyone in vulnerable situations can manage menstruation hygienically with privacy and dignity.
- Encourage local businesses that make sanitary products, or ensure shop keepers sell affordable and accessible alternatives.
- Encourage and promote the use of reusable period products to reduce the health and environmental impact of disposable products.

Men, Boys, and Menstrual Hygiene

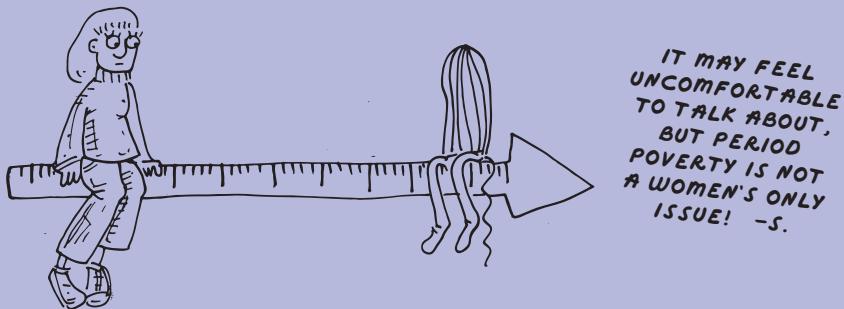
Reasons to get men and boys involved in menstrual hygiene.

Men and boys typically know even less about menstruation, but it is important for them to understand menstrual hygiene so they can support their wives, daughters, mothers, students, employees, and friends.

- To provide support at home or school when a person faces their first period and has an embarrassing or difficult experience.
- Challenge taboos/social norms/stigma and influence the attitudes of others (both male and female).
- Ensure that the school or work environment makes it easy for everyone to manage menstruation with dignity.
- Support programmes for improving the menstrual hygiene context for everyone.

It is important for boys and men to respect the experience of menstruation. Educating boys (from adolescence) on the challenges people with periods face could help reduce teasing and help them become more understanding and supportive.

To find out more about different activists around the world, go to the Let's Stand Up chapter



Helping Someone Who Needs It

An empathy building exercise



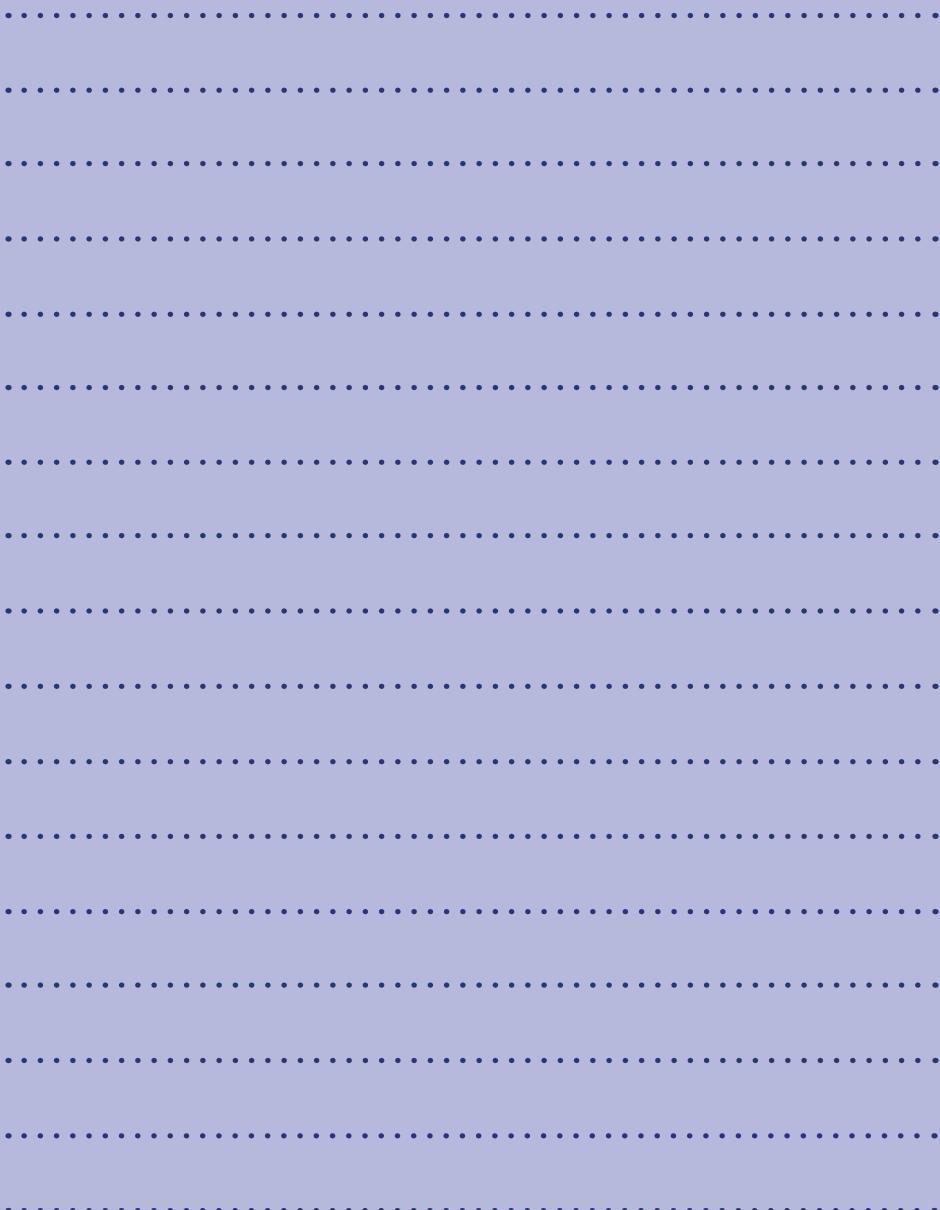
A friend has recently been missing a lot of school. At first they tell you it's nothing but one day you notice that they started their period during school. Then they packed up their things ready to leave and goes home.

They explain to you that their unable to manage their period while at school and the only option is to stay at home during this time.

Write to your friend. What would you say to comfort them? How would you find ways of helping them?

Dear friend,

Period poverty



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

I had my first period when I was in high school. I already knew what I was gonna face because all my female cousins already had their first period. The only thing they never spoke about were the signs, pains, cravings and mood swings. Clearly we were not all informed about that. I had and still have the worst flow. All the time I have bad heavy flow and I have to double up my pads, meaning I'll have to wear a pad and a tampon at the same time.

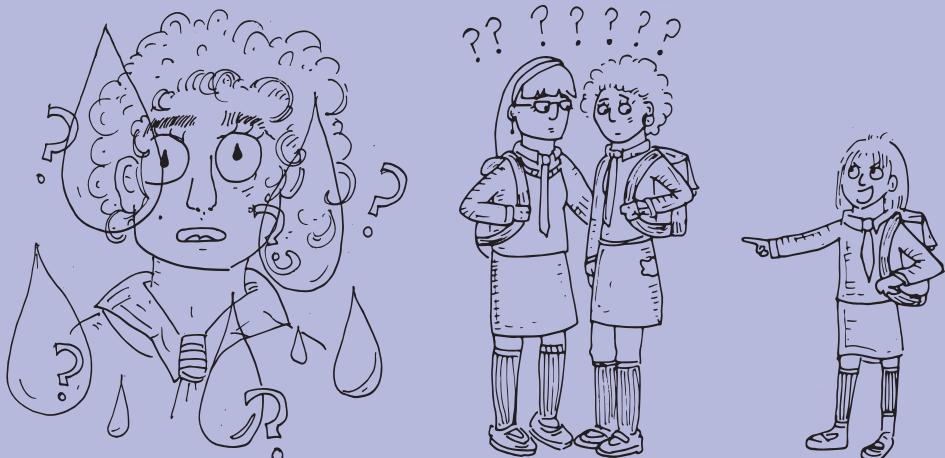
I stopped wearing a tampon because I was advised that my period pains were caused by clogs and that is why I am always worst when I am wearing one. After my mother passed away, I had to ask for pads at school and that meant I could only have proper sanitary towels when the schools are opened. During the school holidays I had to improvise. That put down my self esteem because after my high-school, I had to find ways to be able to buy pads. And I was so ashamed to ask someone because they didn't know that they have to buy double of everything. It took me a year to find a job and actually get myself some sanitary towels.

**SUBMISSION BY
ANONYMOUS, SOUTH AFRICA**

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

I got my first periods at the age of 14 years. I had heard about menstruation from my big sister who talked to me about periods, but I did not take it seriously since I could not understand anything. I was lucky that I was at home when I got my first periods. When my mother saw me, she called and explained to me in detail what was happening to me, and she gave me a pad. I was not green about a pad because our senior woman at school had never talked about pads and demonstrated how to use them. I was very lucky that I never got to be laughed at like some girls. This was also because my friends had gotten periods before me and were also handy to offer me extra advice.

***SUBMISSION BY
NANCY KAYEN, UGANDA
HAD TO LEAVE SCHOOL***



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

The first time I had my period I was 13 and I didn't know anything about it. I felt ashamed thinking I would go to my school the day after and I finally found the information I was looking for on the internet or by myself, growing. The taboo is still there even with science teachers. We should open the mind and the dialogue.

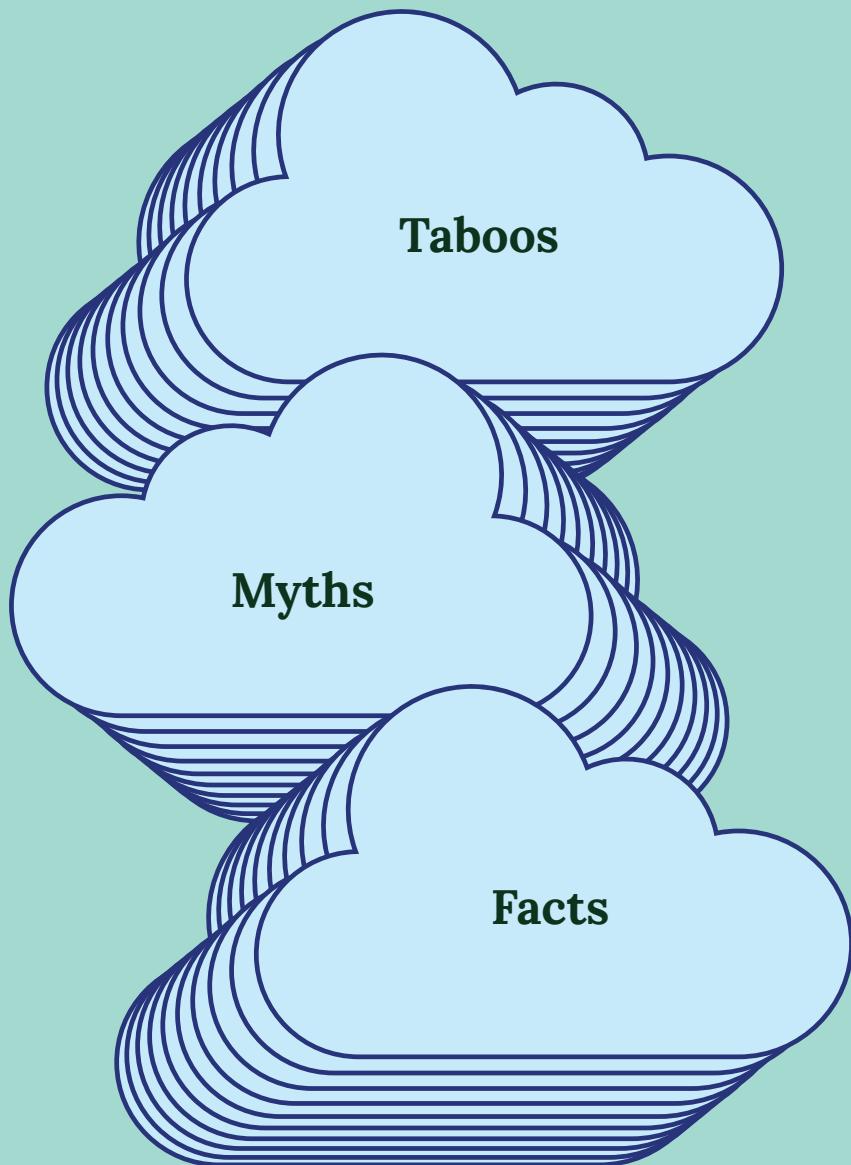
**SUBMISSION BY
ELSA, 22, FRANCE**

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

I got stomach ache and later saw blood but I did not know where the blood was coming from. Since I was at school students came around me looking and laughing at me so I ran home and told mom who told me that all women go through what I was going through and she told me how to take care of myself. Mom had no money to buy pads but they were also scarce at that time so I started using clothes and whenever periods came I had to miss school because of heavy flow and pains and I was scared of being laughed at. This also happened to my friends at school and some dropped out of school.

**SUBMISSION BY
JULIA, 20, UGANDA - HAD TO LEAVE SCHOOL**

Breaking Myths



Taboos and Myths

What are taboos and myths?

Taboo

Labelled by society as improper or unacceptable.

Myth

A widely held but false belief or idea.

Menstruation is something that all female bodies go through, yet it has always been surrounded by taboos and myths that exclude women from many aspects of socio-cultural life.

Taboos about menstruation present in many societies impact on girls' and women's emotional state, mentality, lifestyle, and physical health. The challenge of addressing the socio-cultural taboos and beliefs in menstruation is further compounded by the lack of knowledge and understanding of puberty, menstruation, and reproductive health.

Myths are not all ill-intentioned and were sometimes a form of control that is meant to protect women. For example, historically when there were no period products available and wild animals roaming free, it was likely they would attack if they could smell blood. Therefore, it was for the good of the women to not go outside during their period. Similarly, going into the kitchen or preparing food with no period products could be unhygienic and increase the chance of blood getting into the food. Therefore they may have been told to stay away from the kitchen when menstruating.

The important thing to note is context – many myths arose in a time when there were no period products or ways to manage their period which likely led to myths such as women should not go out during their period or enter the kitchen. For a lot of people now, it is much easier to access products, and therefore, these myths do not apply to current ways of living.

Myths are often prescriptive measures coming from good intentions, however, because they don't have scientific or factual foundations to stand on, they could have negative implications. **The most important thing is to ask yourself if the myth is meant to protect the person menstruating or protect society from you** (e.g. you are impure, therefore you must be separated from others) the latter being an oppressive issue which should be fought against and eradicated.

Myths based on superstition are not only incorrect, but can also perpetuate gender-based discrimination and behavioural restrictions on people who menstruate. Believing these myths make it more difficult for people to talk about their periods, and to know whether or not their menstrual cycle is normal and healthy. Superstitions and myths lead to shame, silence, and even poor reproductive health outcomes.



Common Misconceptions

Don't believe everything you hear



Myth

You should sleep separately from others during your period.

Sanitary products should be kept private and covered in paper when purchasing.

PMS and PMDD is all in your head.

Leaking shows that you can't take care of yourself.



Fact

Menstruation is not contagious and causes no harm to anyone else around you.

Buying sanitary products is like buying soap or toilet paper. They are all hygiene products.

PMS and PMDD are medically proven and happen due to hormonal fluctuations.

Some sanitary pads can have poor designs which can shift improperly, leading to blood stains.

Not everyone knows when their next period starts, so they sometimes have leaks before they can get a pad.



Myth

Any form of physical activity can disturb the menstrual flow.

Showering or bathing during your period will cause infertility.

You should not touch or go near plants during your period, since they will immediately die.

Enter a kitchen or cook during your period, as it will contaminate the food.

You can hold in your period like pee.

Period blood is blue.



Fact

Exercise and sports can actually help relieve pain.

Showering or bathing doesn't cause infertility. Hot water can actually help relieve cramps and ease muscular tension.

Your period will not harm any plants.

There is no harm in entering the kitchen, eating and drinking, or cooking while menstruating.

You can't hold in your period because the muscle in the urethra used to hold in your pee is non-existent in the vagina.

Contrary to what you see in TV adverts, period blood is red like all other blood.



Myth

An irregular cycle is a sign of infertility.

If you don't start your period before the age of 14, there's something wrong.

You can't get pregnant if you have sex while on your period.

Having menstrual sex is unhealthy for the woman and can kill the man.



Fact

Irregular cycles can be a sign of infertility.

But many factors may cause irregularities, such as change in weight, stress and birth control.

The first period usually occurs between the ages of 10 and 14. However, it can occur earlier or later in some cases.

Although unlikely, it's still possible to get pregnant.

Having sex during your period is not at all unhealthy and won't kill anybody.

Two Truths and a Lie

Debunk the myths about periods!

How to play (2 players or more)

To play, one by one, each person says three statements on the topic of menstruation. Two of these statements must be facts, or "truths," and one must be a lie. The other players then try to guess which statement is the lie. Here is an example:



Truth: Exercise and sports can help relieve period pain.



Lie: Bathing during your period will cause infertility.



Truth: A period will not harm any plants.



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

Our primary school has a class that explained to all the girls in our class about period and explained to us it's a part of being a female. We also had a sanitary pad sample each to explore how it captures water. That were the things I can remember. At home, my mom has started to let me know information about period during primary school time earlier than I had period education class at school. My mum would tell me it's normal for girls to have period and don't freak out. Also she told me not to eat icy stuff when having the period because the coldness might clog the blood. And it's a common saying in Chinese medicine, and a lot of girls I know heard the same things from their mothers.

**SUBMISSION BY
ANONYMOUS, 30, CHINA**

Menstrual Blood

Is menstrual blood dirty?

"YOU CAN'T HAVE A BABY WITHOUT SOMEONE HAVING A PERIOD... TO SAY IT IS UNCLEAN OR UNNATURAL MEANS THE WHOLE OF CIVILISATION IS UNCLEAN AND UNNATURAL."
- NATASHA CHAWLA (HINDU SCHOLAR)

It's certainly not "dirty"! Menstrual blood is different from the blood that flows in our veins due to its composition and physical properties. A period is a mixture of blood, uterine tissue, mucus lining, and healthy bacteria that shed when an ovulated egg doesn't get fertilised. This means that it has to be clean enough to be able to **nurture a baby**. A lot of the menstrual stigma and shame stems from the taboo around menstrual blood and the myth that you can hold in your period like pee. The simple sight of blood stains on clothes in public settings have led to people of all genders being humiliated, shamed, and mocked by their peers which can be traumatising and reinforce period myths. It is time to put a stop this nonsense and humiliation!

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

I was 13 when I had my first period. And I think I have the best family. Although I wasn't permitted to go to kitchen and temples, my grandmother used to make me understand why is it so. Not only for culture believe but because our body needs rest through this period. This was my period positive story.

SUBMISSION BY
SWORNIMA, 16, NEPAL



Question Corner



What do these myths mean to you?

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What are some of the myths you were told? Did these myths affect your actions and beliefs in any way?

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Why do you think these myths exist?

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DEAR BIG SISTERS,



SUBMISSION BY
SIAN LEWIS, UK



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

Every month I hold my own personal event; I menstruate. I tell no one except in emergencies; whispered in hush hurried tones. 'Do you have a tampon I can have?' In private I dash off to curb the flow, mustn't make a mess, no blood must show. Neat, clean woman. All stains must be meticulously washed out; removed with a cocktail of chemicals.

"Can you smell my blood?" Oh the shame!

As a girl I was told that menstruation was a painful curse that affected all womankind and something to be endured. I was horrified by this description and promised myself that this blood was not an affliction but just a bodily function. However, it was harder to get a distance from this cultural appropriation as I learned about not only the pain, but the sudden unpredictable onset and the bloody mess it caused. I learned about the colours of menstrual blood, clotting and flooding.

Women experience menstruation in many different ways, some celebrate a time of slowing down and tuning into the rhythms of their body, others take to their bed with cramps and floods. For many women it is expected to be business as usual as the blood is mopped up by 'new super liquid holding gel' that promises to keep you fresh. Do we have time to allow

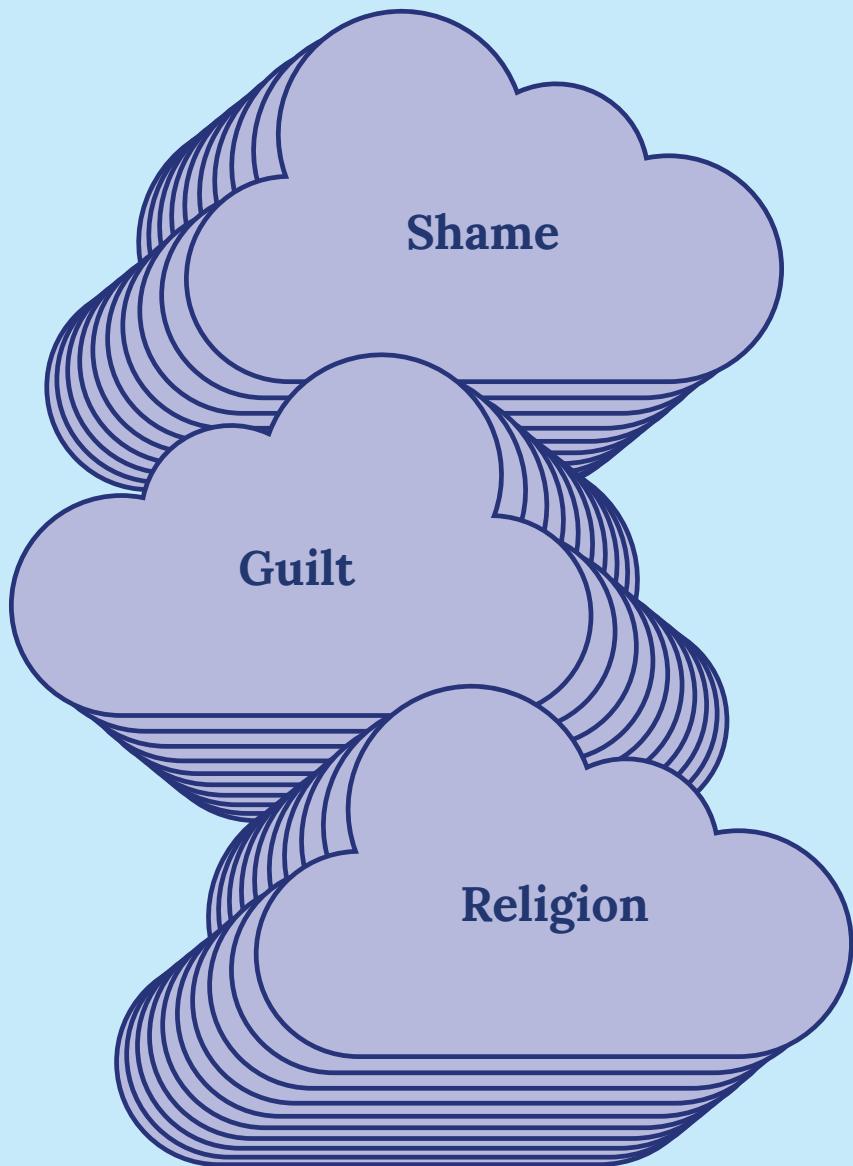
menstruation to be the 'wise wound'? Does our predominately patriarchal culture support women in slowing down to take stock of this monthly cycle and shedding of the lining of the uterus? Do you have time in your work place to take a slow day? I certainly have not experienced that outside creating nurturing space for myself.

Emancipation comes with the menopause. With the release of the last egg, women are relieved of their biology and social expectations to reproduce. Cessation of the menses cycle is a type of liberation. Liberated from the constraints of procreation, liberated from mess, liberated from the smell. And in this society that shames women's blood, liberated from having to pretend that nothing is happening to your body. Within our culture the menstrual cycle is glossed over. It is fundamental to the perpetuation of the species yet the current marketing campaign for sanitary products are focussing on the fact that we females can just mop the blood up with their product and act like nothing is happening. I do not believe that emancipation lies in pretending that nothing is happening. At what point will we culturally acknowledge that a women's monthly cycle is the sacred bringer of life?

Women are sacred bringers of life.

SUBMISSION BY
JENNIFER WESTON, 55, UK

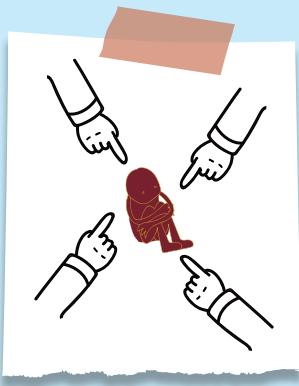
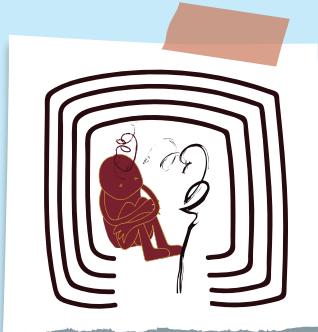
Period and Culture



Let's Talk About Shame

What is shame?

Shame is a powerful emotion which comes from a fear of exposure and our flaws being seen, causing people to feel that your whole self is wrong, defective, unacceptable, or damaged.



Why do we feel shameful?

When those around us have attitudes of devaluation or contempt towards us, when they treat us in a blaming fashion, and when we internalise the image and voice of a shaming person or parent, we become subject to a shame-based identity.

Why does it happen and how does it differ from guilt?

Period shaming happens when an individual is shamed as a consequence of their periods, for example if someone has a blood leak which results in a visible blood stain on clothing. You may have been shamed for leaking or for talking about periods in the past, and it is important to understand where it comes from.

Shame versus guilt

You may sometimes confuse shame with guilt because these two emotions have similarities, but they are different.

Shame

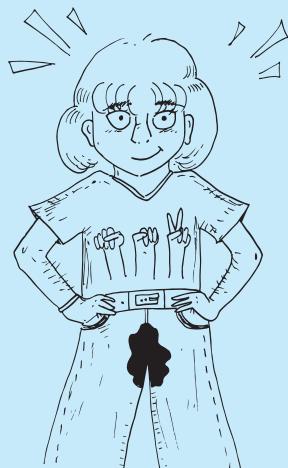
When you're feeling that your whole self is wrong.

Guilt

When you're making a judgment that something you've done is wrong.

How does shame start?

Your self-esteem is shaped by your daily experiences of being praised or criticised, lovingly disciplined or punished, and taken care of or neglected. You may become super sensitive to what feels like criticism (even if it isn't) and feel rejected by others. You might feel painful, self-contemptuous, and worthless. Intense feelings of shame can take hold of your self-image and create low self-esteem. Evidence is increasing that serious problems can occur, such as impacting your mental health, when the sense of shame gets deeply woven into a person's self-image and sense of self-worth.



Break the cycle of shame

Learn to separate and evaluate whether you are ashamed or if someone else is shaming you. The experience of shame is directly about the self, which is the focus of the problem. In guilt, you are not the focus of the problem, but rather the thing done is the focus.

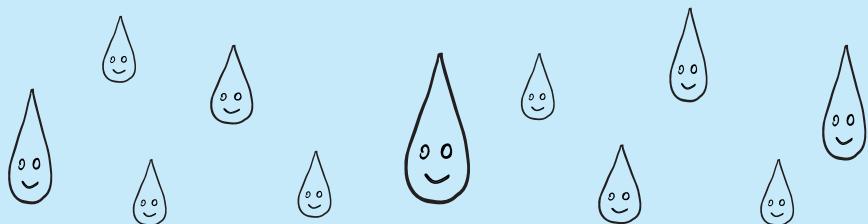
When you feel guilty about something wrong that you did, you can take steps to make up for it and put it behind. But when you feel ashamed, you feel convinced that you are the thing that is wrong, making it difficult to 'come back' to feeling more positive about yourself. Therefore, you must break the cycle of shame by not allowing period-shaming to define who you are and viewing your period and period stain as completely normal, which doesn't deserve any shame.



"THERE'S AN INTERESTING STORY WHERE THERE WAS ONCE A YOUNG GIRL WHO WAS TRAVELING WITH THE PROPHET MOHAMMED (PBUH) AND HIS FAMILY. SHE SAT ON A CAMEL AND HAD HER FIRST PERIOD AND STAINED THE SADDLE. SHE WAS QUITE ASHAMED BY THAT. BUT WHEN THE PROPHET HEARD ABOUT IT, HE SAID 'THERE'S NOTHING TO BE ASHAMED OF!' AND HE INSTRUCTED TO WASH AWAY THE STAINS AND JUST REUSE THE SAME SADDLE."

- IMAM AARIJ ANWER (MUSLIM SCHOLAR)

A period stain is not shameful. You are not impure. You are not dirty.





Question Corner



A confidence building exercise

Let's say you're going to school and you're wearing your uniform. You don't know what a period is or you are still very new to having a period. Suddenly, a boy in your class asks you what that stain is on your trousers. A girl in your class gasps and tells everyone that you're bleeding. The toilet is too far away for you to quickly run to and people are starting to stare and whisper. You have period blood on your uniform, everyone is looking at you, and some of them start calling you "dirty". You feel ashamed and embarrassed.

How would you react if this happened to you?

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How would you react if this happened to someone else? For example your friend or classmate.

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Why do you think some people would use the word "dirty" to describe period blood?

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DEAR BIG SISTERS,

One time in middle school I wore white jeans (I know, yikes) and my period was early. In class I didn't know what had happened in those moments, but when I stood up from my chair to go answer a question on the chalkboard, it bled through the white pants and everyone was laughing. Now that I look back on this memory I was disappointed not only in the boys, but all the girls in my class who shamed another girl. Especially the female teacher who treated me like I had the plague. Like all those girls didn't go through the same every month.

SUBMISSION BY

GIANNA ROSE, 20, UNITED STATES

Write a Letter to Your Younger Self

A reflective exercise



With the help of this book and everything your body has taught you through puberty and menstruation, what are the things you wish you learnt sooner? How would you explain menstruation to your younger self?

Write a letter exploring your thoughts and fears, pleasant surprises, and the anticipation of starting menstruation.

As if you're talking to a younger sibling or friend, what are the things they might experience? What is some the information that might be useful to know beforehand?

Dear

Periods and Religion

Menstruation is not a punishment from God!

Here are a few examples of how menstruation is viewed within some religions. Whatever your belief or religion says about periods, always remember that it is a normal, natural, and biological process that half the world's population will experience at some point in their life.

Islam: The Quran says, "Her praying while pure is worship (ibada) and her refraining from prayer while menstruating is worship. All of it is worship".



Buddhism: "Menstruation is viewed as a natural physical excretion that women have to go through on a monthly basis, nothing more or less".



Taoism: Menstruation is referred to as a "Red Dragon".



Sikhism: The menstruation cycle is a God-given process. A woman's blood is necessary for human life and is therefore sacred, rather than impure.



Christianity: Sister Philotte Mukashema said, "For me, you cannot save the soul without saving the body."



Judaism: The Torah talks about menstruation in a very neutral way - neither positive nor negative. It is a unique spiritual time.



Hinduism: As a Hindu tradition, when a girl starts her period she's adorned and gifted. The idea is that the goddess is now coming into her form.





Question Corner

How are periods represented in your country, culture, and/or religion?

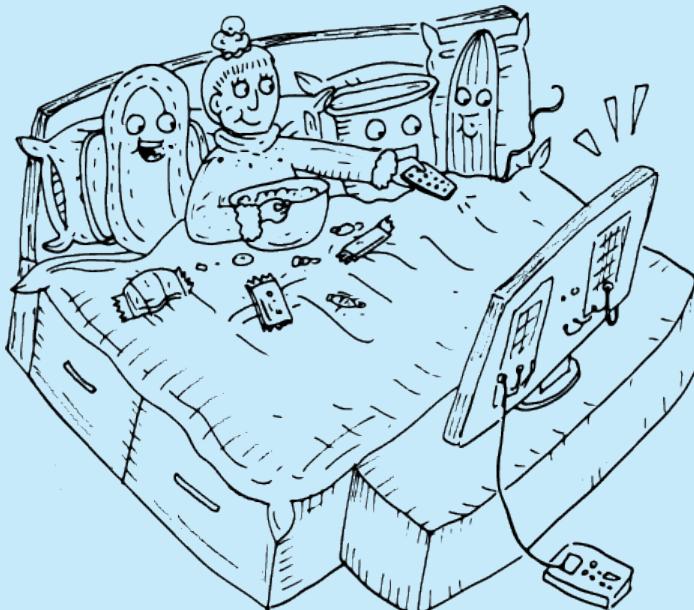
Was there a time you felt religion or culture positivity impacted your experience of menstruation?

In some cultures, families and communities come together to celebrate a girl starting her period. Draw a scene at your ideal period celebration party!

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

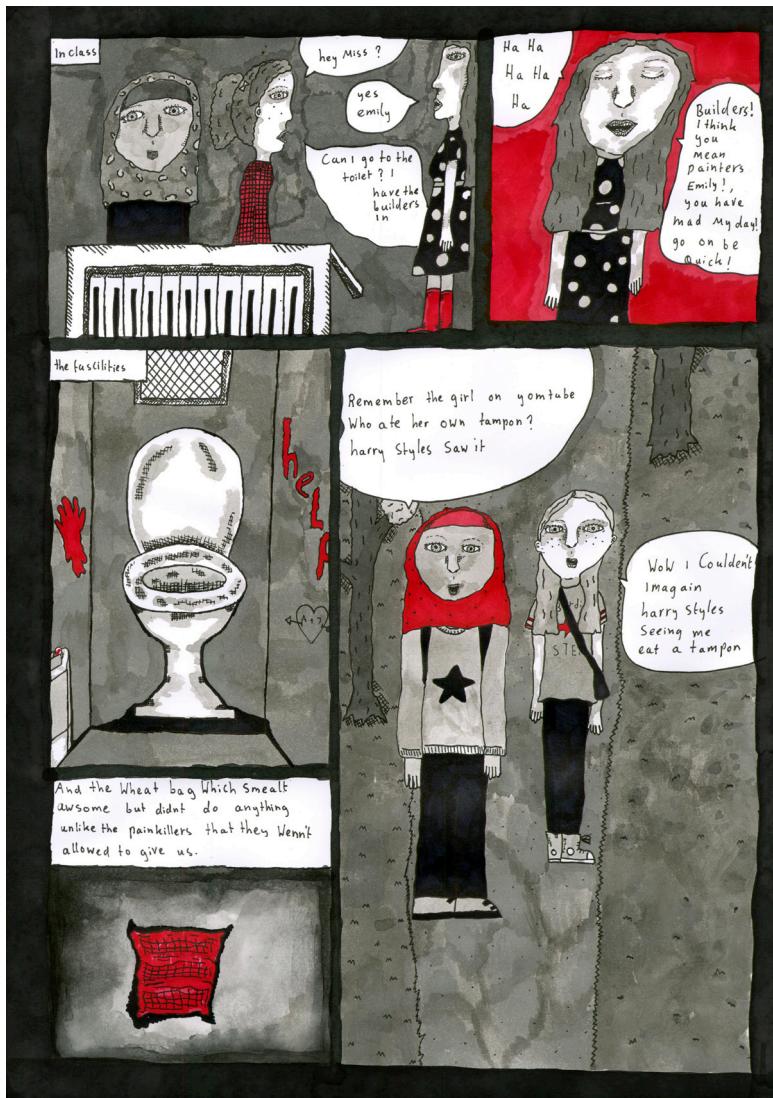
I was 11 years old in Beirut when I got my period. Luckily my mom and girlfriends had prepared me and I felt absolutely beautiful and grown up. I was a little worried about how to keep my pads hidden from my brothers and dad but I don't think I wasted too much time on that. I feel lucky that I was never shamed and my period made me feel empowered. Later on in life it became my favorite time of the month when I needed to use it as an excuse not to be intimate with my husband. I was unfortunately not very comfortable sexually and it certainly served me well to take breaks. I made my periods longer than they should have been.

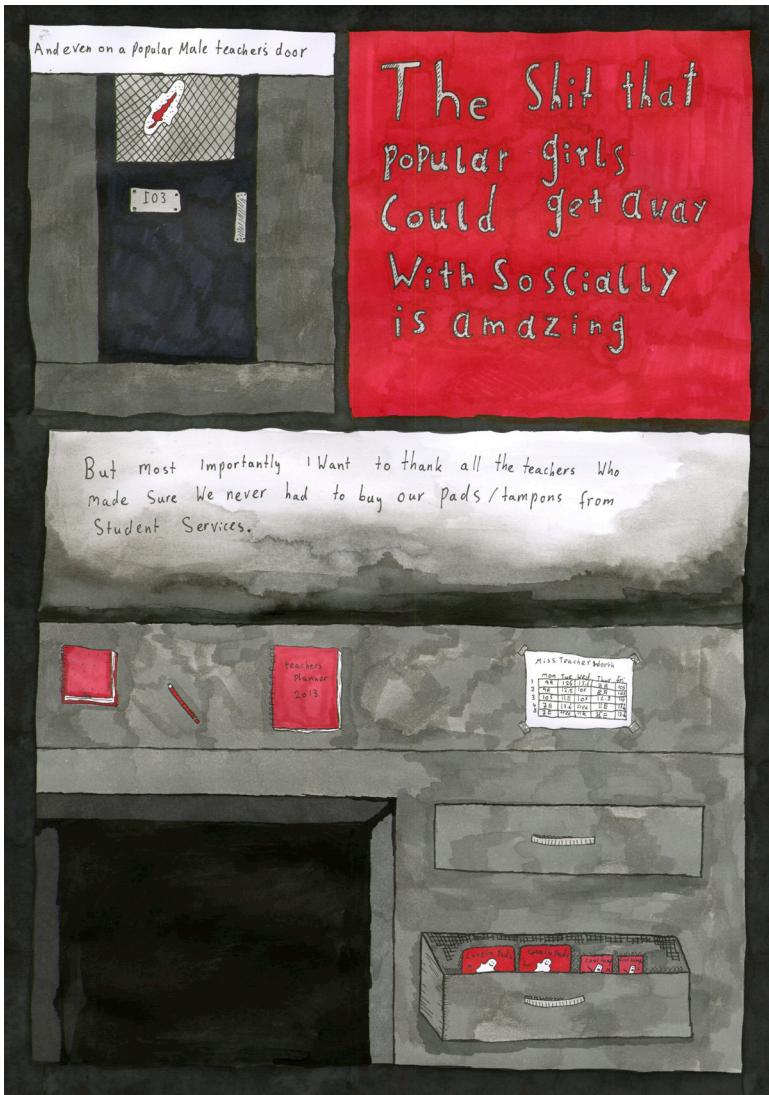
**SUBMISSION BY
HOURY, 58, LEBANON**



DEAR BIG SISTERS,







SUBMISSION BY
EMILY BOWER, UK

Your Period is Your Power

Periods are often associated with negative images in many religions and cultures. But let's look at some examples of myths and actual stories around the world and throughout history, in which periods are represented as something positive and powerful!



Ancient Sumer

Ninhursag, the goddess of fertility in ancient Sumerian mythology, taught women to make clay dolls painted in period blood.

These dolls were then used for magic spells to help women to become pregnant.

Hawaii

In ancient Hawaiian communities, having your period was seen as the most sacred time for women. They were also believed to have very strong spiritual powers that could even suck out the mana (or soul) of men.



Borneo



Women from the Rungus tribe in Borneo have a neutral opinion about periods. They often see period blood, not as being clean or dirty, but simply as a fluid that must come out of your body on a monthly basis.

Celtic Britain

According to the Celtic Britains, if you were stained red (which might be referring to period blood), it means you were chosen by the god. Also, the word for red in Celtic, ruadh, means royal.



Ghana

Different countries and families have different ways to celebrate when a girl gets her first period. In some parts of Ghana, young girls are treated like queens and sit under a beautiful parasol decorated with flowers, while receiving gifts from family members.



Native American

In Native American tradition, it is said that a woman has a powerful impact on Earth when she bleeds. The renewal of all your senses allows you to see the world with new eyes. This moment of epiphany, breadth and vision is completely yours.



Ancient Rome

The Ancient Romans were told that women, while they are on their period are so powerful and magical that they can guard off natural disasters like hailstorms and lightnings. They were also believed to save crops in the field from beetles, worms, and caterpillars.



Amazon

In the Tikuna tribe, some girls choose to be isolated for one year after their first period. During this year, they learn their own tribe's music, dances, history, and beliefs from female tribe members. They are welcomed back into the community with a 3 day Pelazón ceremony.

Ancient Hopi

Hopi, a Native American tribe, believed that men would come back safely from war and the Earth would be peaceful if women on their period gave their blood to the soil of the earth.



Ivory Coast

A religious leader of the Beng tribe in the Ivory Coast beautifully described period as the “flower of a tree”, because the tree (or girls) can’t nurture fruits (or babies) without the flower (or periods).



Food for Thought

Many stories introduced in this section describe menstruation or menstrual blood as something sacred, powerful, and invincible. Some stories even mention that periods can be destructive, which might be the reason behind misconceptions like “women on their period must spend time in the menstrual hut”, “women can’t enter the kitchen when they are on their period because the blood can spoil the food”, or even “period blood is dirty and dangerous”. It is very important for us to understand the difference between myths and facts!



"THERE ARE QUITE A FEW STORIES WHERE AISHA AND THE PROPHET WOULD OFTEN EAT FROM THE SAME PLATE AND DRINK FROM THE SAME CUP...SO THE TWO WOULD DO ALL THAT TOGETHER, IRRESPECTIVE OF WHETHER SHE WAS ON HER PERIOD. THERE WOULD BE WOMEN WHO WOULD COME AND ASK HER QUESTIONS ON HOW THEY SHOULD INTERACT WITH THEIR HUSBANDS [WHILE ON THEIR PERIOD]. AISHA IS THE ONE WHO'S LIBERATING THEIR MINDS BY SAYING, "NO. THIS IS HOW ME AND THE PROPHET WERE." EVERYTHING ELSE WE DID LIKE WE WOULD DO IN OTHER TIMES EXCEPT ACTUAL INTERCOURSE."

- IMAM AARIJ, READ MORE ON PG 209



Question Corner

How are periods represented in your culture and/or religion?

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Was there a time you felt religion or culture positively impacted your experience of menstruation?

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In some cultures, families and communities come together to celebrate a girl starting her period. Draw a scene at your ideal period celebration party!



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

When I was 13, I remember taking part in a Maths competition. The whole year was involved and it took place in the sports hall. I'd just finished doing some sort of sport so was still in my P.E. kit.

Our classes weren't very well integrated at my school, especially mine. I was in the top class, which they decided to push forward a year, and I barely knew anyone in my actual year group. This meant I was already freaked out when I found out this competition was mixed with the whole year, and I ended up being the only person from my class in my group. I remember everyone was relying on me to answer and the pressure was mounting. I then had that gut wrenching feeling that my period had started. Normally I wore thick tights at school and could trust that it wouldn't bleed through my clothes immediately, but my P.E. kit was a different story.

I spent the whole excruciating hour freaking out internally about my period. I couldn't leave to go to the toilet, I'd be letting down my teammates, so I just sat there for an hour, trying to concentrate enough to do a good job. When it was over, all I felt was fear. Everyone is going to see, everyone is going to know. When I eventually plucked up the courage to stand up, the smallest blood stain was on my shorts.

I still shuffled out panicking about what people would think, but in reality, no one noticed, and no one would have cared. Even writing this now I can feel the embarrassment and the redness in my face caused by something that should be totally normal.

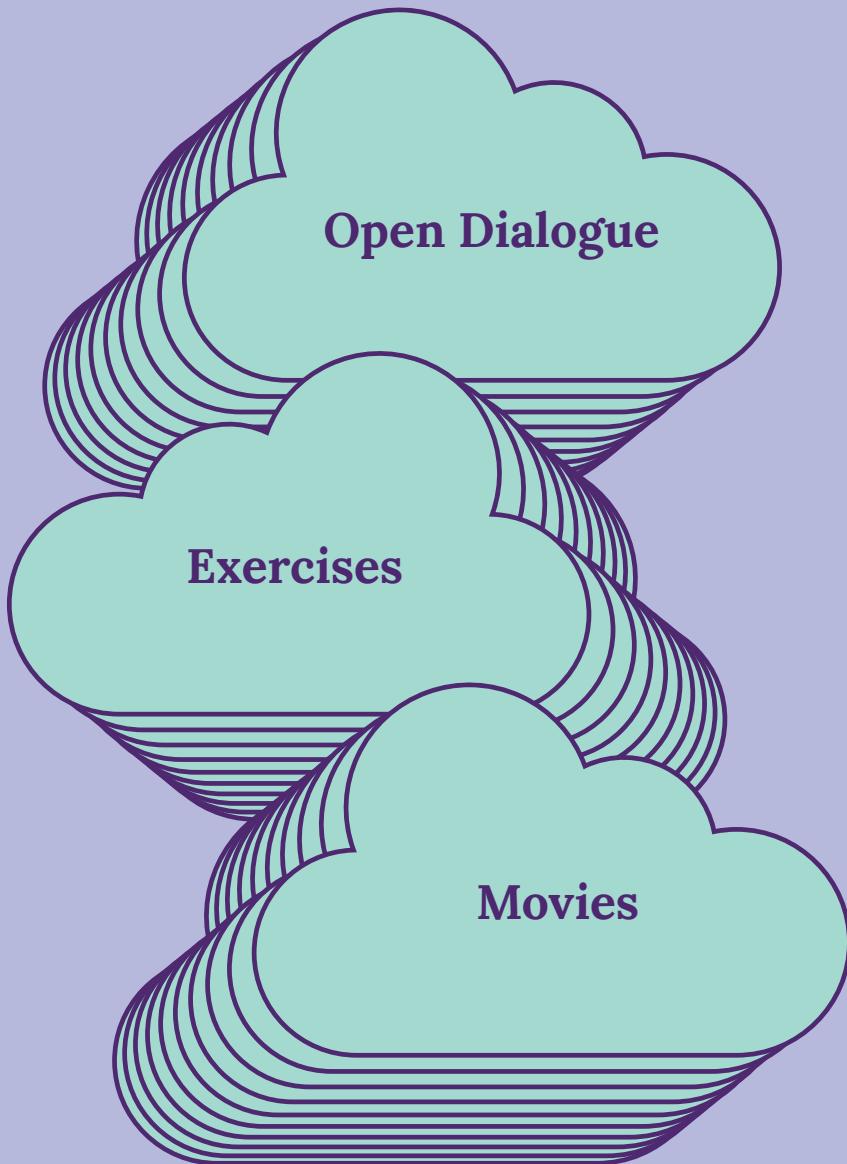
**SUBMISSION BY
ABBIE, 23, UK.**

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

Menstruate definitely the curse
Every month nothing worse
Nothing can be done
Surely not for fun
Twelve times a year
Red is bound to appear
Undergarments stained
Absolutely drained
Thousands of woman bear the pain
Evolution has to go on
It's the only gain.

**SUBMISSION BY
HEATHER HILL, 51, DURHAM**

Who Knows Best?



Play It Safe

General guide for all activities



Menstruation might be an uncomfortable topic for many people, but it is very important to talk about it to tackle the issue of period poverty and stigma. This chapter introduces collaborative activities which you can use to open up conversations, share your feelings, and learn about periods! Read the general guide below before you start the activities.

Who Should I Do The Activities With?

You can do the activities with anyone you trust and feel comfortable around. If you feel comfortable, you can also talk to people outside of your close circle.

Where Should I Do The Activities?

It's best to do the activities in a safe and comfortable space. This might be your living room, bedroom, classroom, friend's house, aunty's house, or even a cafe. It can be anywhere, but the key is to be in a comfortable location.

What should I do?

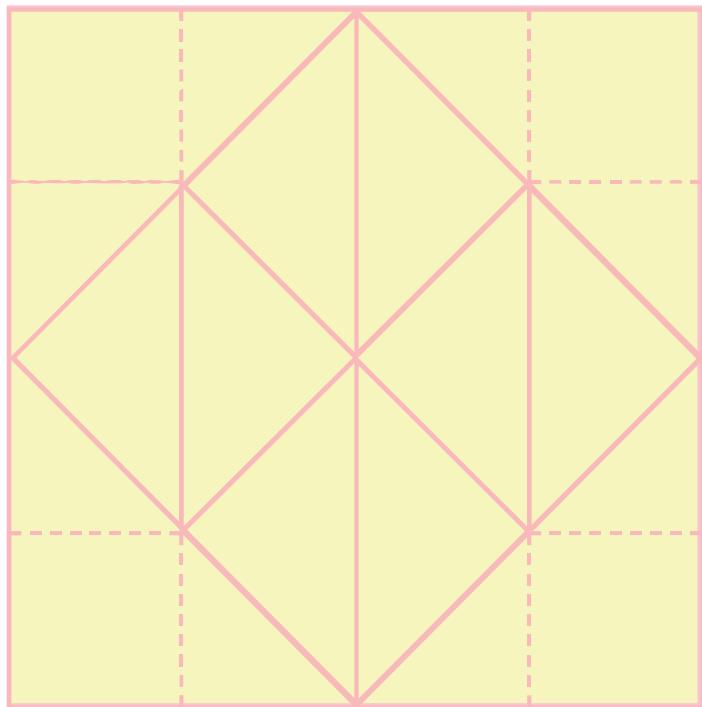
Remember to take time to listen to each other, ask for their time politely, and let the conversation grow as natural as possible.

What shouldn't I do?

Remember to not interrupt each other while talking, judge each other and be afraid to refer to info in this book.

Chatterbox: Period Edition

Who knows best?



Use the template above to make the chatterbox.

What you will need



PAPER



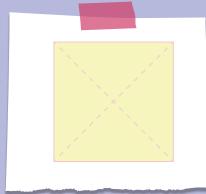
PEN OR PENCIL



SCISSORS (ASK AN
ADULT FOR HELP)

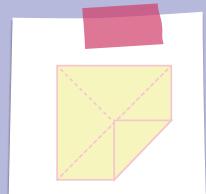
Step 1

Use or cut a square piece of paper.



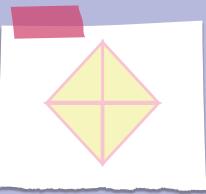
Step 2

Fold the four corners of the square into the centre, forming a cushion.



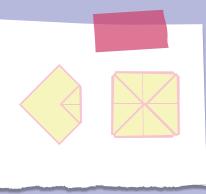
Step 3

Flip the square over to the opposite side.



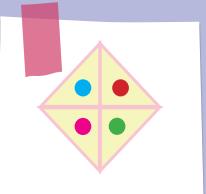
Step 4

Fold each of the corners into the centre to create another smaller square.



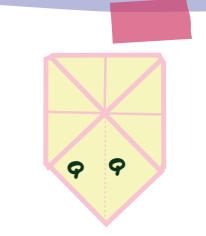
Step 5

Flip the square over and write the names of 4 different colours on each of the 4 quarters.



Step 6

Flip the square over again and write a question related to **periods** underneath each flap. An example would be, "Have you ever spent an entire day with only toilet paper instead of pads?"

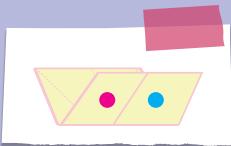
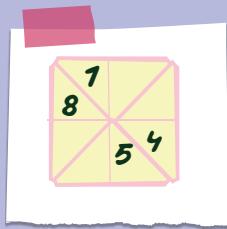


Step 7

Close the flaps and write in the numbers 1 to 8 making sure there is one number on each half of the flap.

Step 8

With the numbers facing up, fold the square in half to make a rectangle. Then unfold, spin the square 90 degrees, and then fold in half again to create a rectangle.



Step 9

Now put your fingers into the pockets of paper in each of the four corners.

How to play

- Pick a colour/fold based on the number of letters in the colour.
- Pick a number and fold based on the number chosen.
- Pick a final number, open the fold and read out the question.

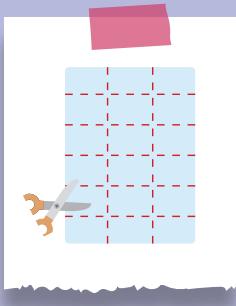
Sharing is Caring

Paper Chit (2 players or more)

Follow the simple visual instructions below to learn how to make paper chits for this exercise!

Step 1

Take a piece of paper and cut it into smaller rectangles.



Step 2

Choose prompts from below and write different ones on each paper chit.



Step 3

Fold each rectangle with the writing inside and put them into a bowl or container.



Who knows best?



Step 4

Take turns picking a chit from the bowl and discuss the question.

Possible question ideas

Share your own personal story around menstruation using one or several of these questions:

1. When did you have your first period?
2. Do you think menstruation is a women only problem?
3. Why do we get periods?
4. What is discharge?
5. Why do people bleed through their trousers?
6. Is period blood dirty?
7. Have you ever stained your bed sheets?
8. How do you clean stained clothing?
9. How do you wash blood from your clothes?
10. Have you ever leaked blood in public?
11. Why do my boobs hurt?
12. What's your favourite product?
13. Why do I have spots? What is acne?
14. Can you swim on your period?
15. Can I stop my period?
16. What can I do about my painful stomach?
17. Do men have periods?
18. Do animals have periods?
19. How much do menstrual products cost in your country?
20. How many menstrual products can you name?

Story Time

Watch a movie or read a book with someone

Get your blankets and snacks - these are some highly recommend movies, books, and comics for you to watch or read.

Period. End of Sentence.

- Rayka Zehtabchi -

2018, India



A film in which Indian women fight the stigma surrounding menstruation and begin manufacturing sanitary pads.

Revenge of the Red Club

- Kim Harrington -

2019, USA



A positive and empowering novel about the importance of standing up for what you believe in.



Are You There God?

It's Me Margaret.

- Judy Blume -

1970, USA



A novel about a sixth grade girl who grew up without religious affiliation, due to her parents' interfaith marriage.

Growing Up: It's a

Girl Thing

- Mavis Jukes -

1998, USA



A series of books about growing up and menstruation.

Padman
- R. Balki -



2018, India

A film inspired by the life of period poverty activist Arunachalam Muruganantham

It's Only Blood: Shattering the Taboo of Menstruation
- Anna Dahlqvist -



2018, Sweden

A book about how menstruation is seen around the world.

My Time
- Giulia Gandini -



2018, UK

A short film about a school girl leaking during her period.

Little Miss P
- Ken Koyama -



2017, Japan

A comic series about menstruation

WOMENstruate
- Lauren Anders Brown -

2019, UK



A documentary following seven women in Africa as they discuss menstruation and menopause.

Menstrupedia Comic
- Aditi Gupta -



2012, India

A comic book about menstruation

LET'S DO A MOVIE NIGHT!! - A.

Phullu
- Abhishek Saxena -

2017, India



A film about an errand boy who makes low-cost menstruation pads.

The Story of Menstruation
- Walt Disney Productions -

1946, USA



An animated film about the menstrual cycle.

Revenge of the Red Club
- Kim Harrington -

2019, USA



A positive and empowering novel about the importance of standing up for what you believe in.

Hot Flash Havoc
- Marc Bennett -

2012, USA



A feature-length documentary film focused on the female medical condition menopause.

Flash Count Diary: Menopause and the Vindication of Natural Life
- Darcey Steinke -

2019, USA

A book recounting Darcey Steinke's experience with menopause.



Our Menstruation
- Cynthia M. Zelman -

2018, USA



A an academic paper about menstruation.

5 Whys

This is an exercise designed to help you break down and understand the root of a situation. It's best done in pairs.

- a. **Define a problem** (i.e. not being able to use tampons).
- b. **Ask 'why' to the previous response** and repeat this five times (i.e. Why can you not use tampons?).
- c. **Read the answers back** to them and come up with a solution.

The first person asks “Why?” and writes down the answers the second person gives. You can use the template on the next page to take notes. Make sure you don't interrupt or disturb the person thinking or answering!

Here is an example of the exercise:

1. **Why are you not able to use tampons?**

Because my mum is scared it will mean I'm no longer a virgin.

2. **Why is your mum scared it will mean you're no longer a virgin?**

Because she believes tampons can break your hymen.

3. **Why does she think it would break your hymen?**

Because no one told her it's a myth.

4. **Why did no one tell her it's a myth?**

Because she didn't have menstrual education at school.

5. **Why didn't she have menstrual education at school?**

They didn't think it was important or were too shy to talk about it in public.

Once all **5 Whys** have been asked, read the answers back to the person and come up with a possible solution to the problem.

Possible solution to the problem:

Try talking more about menstruation. Every time you mention periods, it becomes less of a taboo. Teach your mum about menstrual education to help overcome misconceptions and misinformation.

Who knows best?

Problem

Why



Why



Why



Why



Why



Solution



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

When I was around 10 years old, I noticed that my classmates, friends and cousins had already gotten their periods. I used to feel different and I thought that getting your periods was something fun. One day, I decided that I also wanted to be a part of the "menstruating family" so I smeared red paint on my baby pink pants and waited for someone to notice it, and BINGO! My grandmother saw my "blood" smeared pants and then the whole fiasco started. I was treated like royalty, I got to miss school, everyone was nice to me and the most important thing was that, I could "flaunt" my periods in school. I had put up with the act for 1 year and finally on one bright day, I got my period, and that's when I realized that it wasn't FUN!

**SUBMISSION BY
ZAINA, 15, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES**



Learn The Lingo

Learn the right menstruation words (1 player)

Match the right word to its meaning

Who knows best?

a. The fluids and cells expelling from a woman's body



1. Discharge

b. Organ in the pelvis playing a major role in fertility and pregnancy



2. Amenorrhea

c. Heavy periods



3. Fertility

d. A female reproductive organ in which egg cells are produced



4. Uterus

e. The absence of period for more than 6 months



5. Ovary

f. The ability to make babies



6. Menorrhagia

g. The lining of the uterus which sheds during your period



h. The extremely elastic muscular tube inside the vaginal opening



i. Small, pea-shaped and creates hormones. It's at the base of your brain



j. A widely held but false belief or idea



k. The symptoms that occur when your hormones fluctuate before your cycle



l. A ball of tissue in the vulva area that is full of nerves and super sensitive



7. Pituatary Gland



8. Vagina



9. PMS



10. Clitoris



11. Myth



12. Endometrium

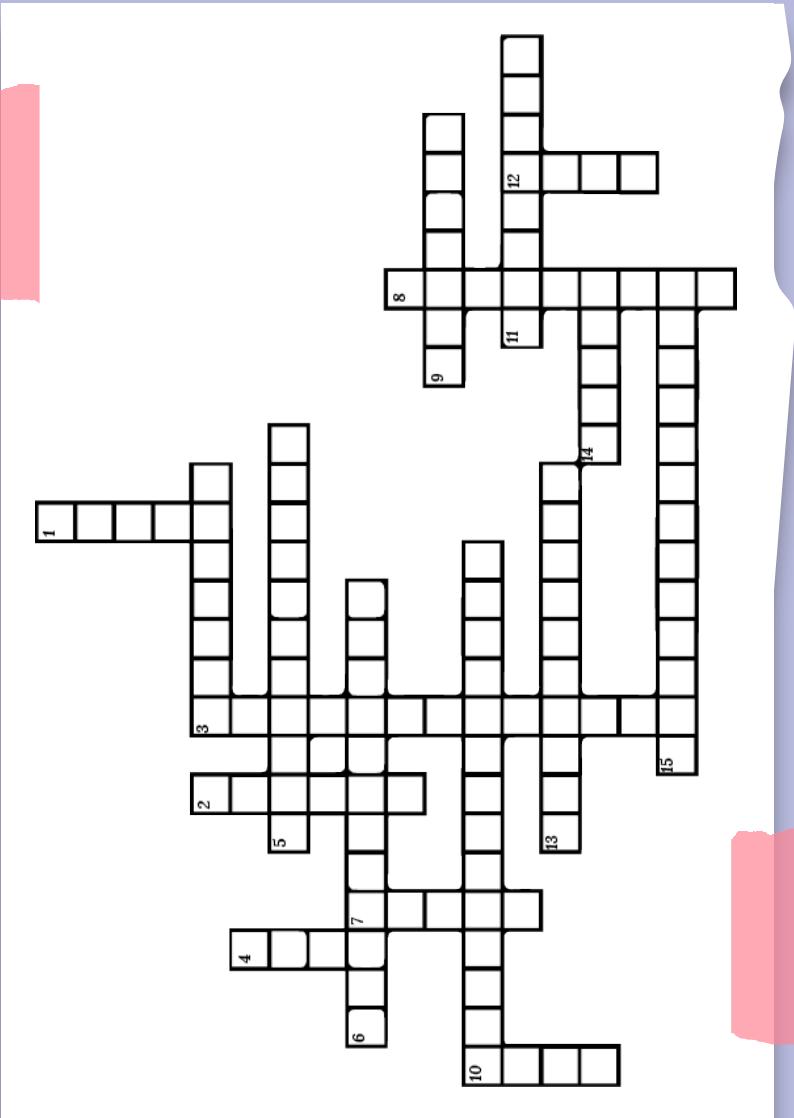


Crossword

(1 player)

The game's goal is to fill the white squares with letters, forming words, by solving clues, which lead to the answers.

Who knows best?



Down

1. A negative emotion coming from an action
2. An organ playing a major role in fertility and pregnancy
3. A chemical responsible for period pain
4. Where the term menstruation comes from
7. A negative sense of embarrassment affecting the whole self
8. The beginning for new changes and end of your periods
10. A clump of blood
12. Serious symptoms causing irritability, depression, or anxiety before your period starts

Across

3. Changes occurring in a child when becoming an adult
5. Heavy periods
6. Another word for periods
9. The opening for urination
11. Synonym for cellucotton, the original material for sanitary pads
13. Lack of periods
14. Often confused with the vagina
15. When the uterine tissue grows outside the uterus
10. First menstrual cup prototype



Who Knows Best Exercise Answers

Learn the Lingo

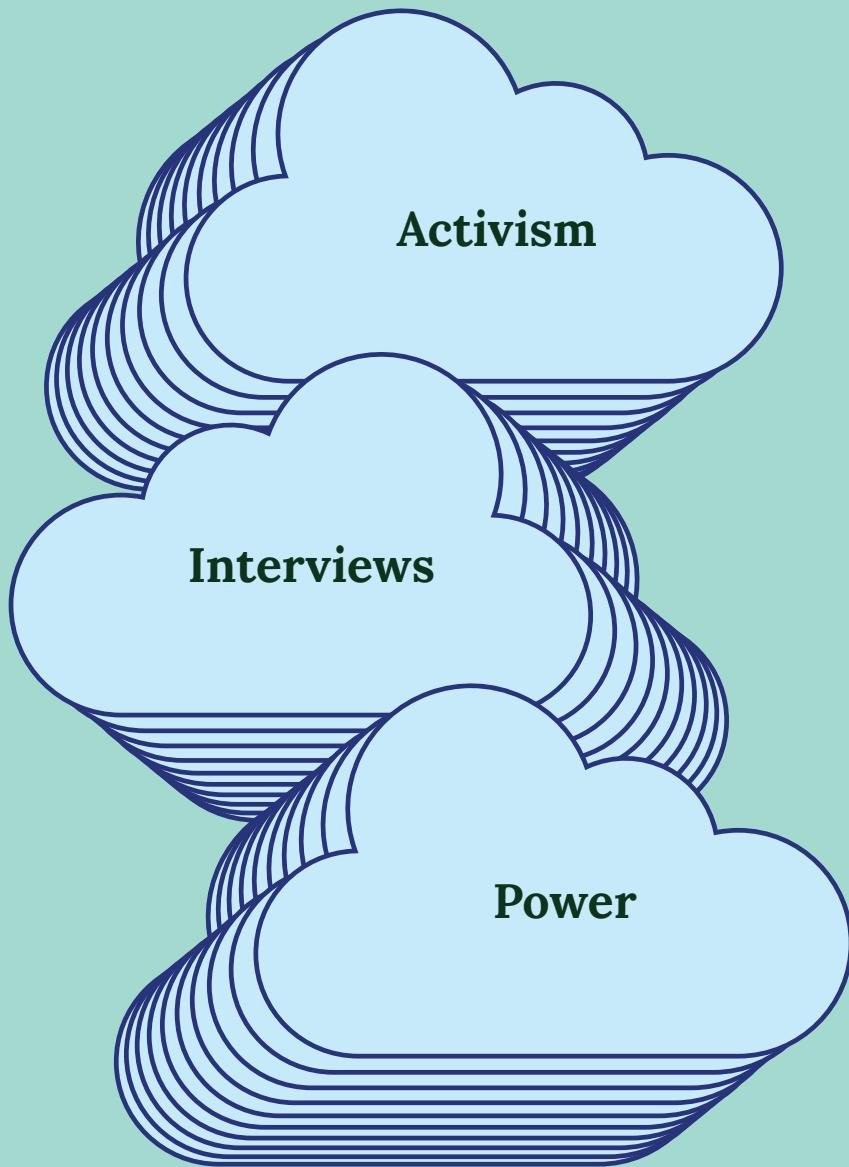
Page 215 - Answers: 1a, 2e, 3c., 4b, 5d, 6f, 7l, 8h, 9k, 10g, 11j, 12i

Crossword

Page 218 - Answers: 1: Guilt, 2: Uterus, 3 Down: Prostaglandin, 3 Across: Puberty, 4: Moon, 5: Menorrhagia, 6: Menstruation, 7: Shame, 8: Menopause, 9: Urethra, 10 Down: Clot, 10 Across: Catamenialsack, 11: Woodpulp, 13: Amenorrhea, 14: Vulva, 15: Endometriosis

Who knows best?

Let's Stand Up



Let's stand up

Period Activists From Around the World!

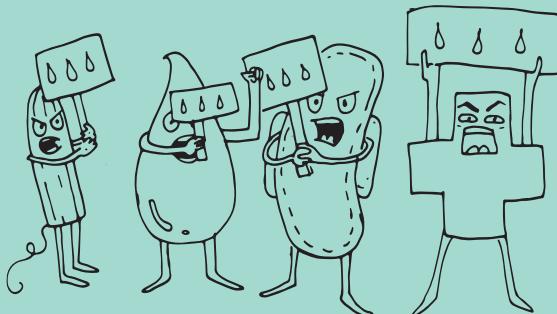
We got the opportunity to interview activists from different countries to hear about their journeys and projects around fighting period poverty and stigma.

We decided to interview period activists since we wanted to learn more about the ways in which period poverty and stigma can be tackled in many different ways and across different sectors. We also wanted to share with you all the inspiring people and stories behind these projects.

We reached out to **Mashiyat Rahman**, the founder of Resurgence, an NGO in Bangladesh focussing on creating sustainable pads out of water hyacinths, and **Theresa Nyava**, the founder of Sanitary Aid Zimbabwe.

We also got in touch with **Amika George**, the founder of Free Period, a campaign which successfully pushed the government to provide free sanitary products in schools in the UK, and **Radha Paudel**, the founder of Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation in Nepal.

From the film industry, we spoke to **Lauren Anders Brown**, the director behind 'WOMENstruate', a documentary following the menstrual experience of 7 women across Africa, and **Sophie Ascheim**, the co-executive producer of 'PERIOD. End of Sentence.' and co-founder of Pad Project in the US.



Interview with Amika George



AMIKA GEORGE

We sat down with Amika George, founder of Free Periods which campaigns to end period poverty in the UK

Photo credit: Mollie Rose

How did you become an activist?

I became an activist quite by accident. I don't think I actually understood what the word meant when I first started Free Periods at the age of 17, but I did know what I wanted to achieve and why it was so important. I read an article about girls missing school because they were too poor to afford pads and tampons and the government didn't seem to want to help them. I felt really angry that this whole cross section of girls were being ignored as if they didn't matter and something kick started in me - I just felt that I had to do something.

I started a petition as the backbone to my campaign, asking for free pads and tampons to be made available in all schools, and started raising as much awareness around period poverty as I possibly could, talking to magazines and newspapers giving interviews about why we needed government intervention. When the government still didn't respond, we

organised a protest to make as much noise as possible. Our first success was in securing some money from the Tampon Tax fund to be given to charities tackling period poverty but our real success came in 2019 when the Chancellor pledged to end period poverty in schools and colleges by giving funding to all schools to offer pads and tampons to all students who need them. Now every primary and secondary school and college can access the products they need and no child needs to miss school because they are too poor to manage their period.

Who are the most vulnerable when it comes to period poverty?

Everyone who's affected by period poverty is vulnerable, and period poverty touches people of all ages. We see period poverty affect women in prisons, the homeless and swathes of refugees. They are all being ignored by the government and continue to suffer in silence.

What are the biggest challenges with ending period poverty in both the UK and internationally?

The taboo surrounding periods is a huge challenge, because we have been conditioned into feeling ashamed and embarrassed about issues that affect our bodies for generations. As soon as the subject of menstruation is mentioned, people close up, and that includes women. I think things are changing now but it's going to take time for us to change perceptions and attitudes. The conversations around periods and our bodies need to be turned on its head and only when women start to feel less ashamed will men feel they can join in the conversation.

We would like to thank Amika George for her time and sharing with us her activist journey of tackling period poverty in schools in UK and beyond.



Interview with Sophie Ascheim



SOPHIE ASCHEIM

We sat down with Sophie Ascheim, the co-executive producer of Oscar-winning film "Period. End of Sentence."

How did The Pad Project come to be?

I sort of stumbled into it through different personal inspirations. Perhaps most importantly, as I was growing up, my mom, a cardiologist, [working with] refugees seeking political asylum, looking for signs of torture... inspired me well before I understood the definition of inspiration.

I also attended an all-girls school in New York City that had no patience for misogyny, where the idea that girls should be seen and not heard was a myth we checked at the door. I learned to speak up and to trust my voice, well before I learned that there were those who would expect me to keep quiet.

I eventually moved to Los Angeles and started at a super liberal school. My passion for learning quickly turned into outrage at inequality and societal scars. My English teacher saw this while teaching us Ibsen's A Doll's House and pulled me aside to ask me to read up on period poverty. She then asked me if I wanted to get involved with a project she was slowly starting, and from there we built The Pad Project.

How did *Period. End of Sentence.* come to be?

Period. End of Sentence. came about because we knew that isolated projects would not change the deep-rooted stigma surrounding menstruation that reached every corner of the globe. We didn't think that anything we did would reach all of those corners, but we thought that it was important to try and educate our own community, while working with the community in Kathikhera. We realised that though we were very privileged in many aspects of our lives, we were also some of the more "woke" kids in our school, and if we had never even heard of period poverty, it was doubtful anyone else had either. But we wanted to help start the conversation. We created a Kickstarter campaign and raised over \$45,000 which was enough to fund our first machine, a year of supplies to produce pads, as well as [a] documentary.

Why did you choose filmmaking as your medium to actively challenge period poverty?

Though none of us were filmmakers ourselves, many of our parents worked in the film industry and had taught us the power of visual media. Realizing that we could be the ones to create impactful storytelling was super empowering. At the end of the day, our goal was to amplify the voices of the women in Kathikhera, and a documentary was the perfect opportunity to do so. Especially considering that much of the stigma surrounding menstruation keeps menstruators from seeing their experience and the experience of others, what better way to shock the system than to show periods on film?

The group that will most often be ignored when tackling period poverty are trans men, or non-binary individuals with uteruses. We have associated periods and menstruation with womanhood, which can be super alienating to the trans community.

What barriers or struggles did you encounter when challenging and documenting period poverty?

The biggest struggle is getting people to listen in the first place. It's hard to ask people to ignore everything society conditioned them to believe about periods, while simultaneously explaining that there is a whole other form of inequality in our society. Period poverty is inherently related to issues of class, race, and gender-identity, so if your audience is not willing to buy into those, it's hard to engage them on period poverty.

Another barrier we faced was that of acknowledging privilege head on. It's hard to deny that The Pad Project was founded by a bunch of white girls who were walking into a world they had had no previous exposure to. We felt super strongly that what we were doing didn't fit the trope of "white saviorism" but just because we felt that way didn't mean everyone else would. To combat this, we have had to continuously check our privilege and focus on partnering with organisations and communities, as opposed to speaking over them.

What is the best way to talk about menstruation within the community, especially with children (both boys and girls)?

The easiest way to tackle taboos is to be open to questions. Make sure to support them when and if they decide they want to talk about their own period. Allow their cramps to come up at the dinner table and push back if their dad seems uncomfortable with the conversation. If your child is in pain, or just uncomfortable, they should feel comfortable telling you! Also, include boys in the conversation. Let them giggle a bit, but also emphasize that periods aren't embarrassing, but perhaps annoying. Answer their questions!

What would you say to other people who want to help eradicate or challenge period poverty?

Talk about your period! Your words have power, and talking is the fastest way to break down barriers. Be unapologetic when others are uncomfortable with menstruation. And please work in your own communities! Contact local shelters and women's organisations, make sure they have menstrual products stocked! Work with your local school system to make sure that menstrual products are stocked in bathrooms, not just in the nurse's office. And be sure to work with communities rather than speaking over them, or assuming their needs.

What's next in your work?

The Pad Project has some really amazing partnerships we are getting ready to announce. We are expanding into new regions and getting to work with amazing activists all over the world. The scope of our work has been a dream of mine since we ever started planning all those years ago, but never in a million years did I think we'd get here so soon and be nowhere close to stopping.

It's a really amazing feeling, and I couldn't be prouder of our ever-growing team. For me personally, I'm planning on finishing my time at Yale and soaking up as many experiences as I can. Not quite sure where I'll be after college, but I do know that The Pad Project will continue to be a part of my life, no matter what.

We would like to thank Sophie Ascheim, for her time and sharing with us her activist journey of tackling period poverty in schools in UK and beyond.

Interview with Theresa Nyava



TERESA NYAVA

We sat down with Theresa Nyava, the founder of NGO Sanitary Aid Zimbabwe (SAZT) to speak about her activism in tackling period poverty in Zimbabwe.

How did you become an activist?

I was born into a peasant family of five girls from the rural areas of Zvimba in Zimbabwe. We lived with other female cousins from the extended family. I experienced period poverty from the very first day I started menstruating, as my family was already struggling with school fees, food and other basic household necessities. I know what it feels like to walk a long distance to school while wearing pieces of cloth or mattress stuffing to try and manage the flow of blood, and coming back with bruises; and how it feels like to spend the whole day at school worrying about whether I have leaked and spoiled my uniform or the school chair. Many girls also missed school during their periods, during my adolescent days, with some being mocked when they start their periods unexpectedly at school. This lived experience, coupled with how incidences of period poverty remain prevalent in my country, albeit not being given attention, inspired me to start an initiative where we put a spotlight on these issues.

Who are the most vulnerable when it comes to period poverty?

The most vulnerable are found in several traffic lanes of life. We have homeless girls and women who survive on begging and scavenging from the bins to find food. To them, period necessities like underwear, soap, sanitary wear and water are luxuries, and they struggle each month, and are forced to resort to newspapers, dirty rags, socks and free bleeding to manage their periods. Access to toilets is also a challenge as public toilets are locked at 6pm and only open in the morning. This means they have nowhere to go and have to take matters into their own hands. Further, we also have female prisoners who have to resort to tearing pieces of blankets to manage the flow of blood when they are on their periods, with some also lacking underwear and soap. Then we also have female refugees who live in overcrowded refugee camps, girls in children's homes, as well as rural school girls.

What are the biggest challenges with fighting period poverty (both in Zimbabwe and internationally)?

The biggest challenge arises from failure by people to recognize period poverty as a humanity problem. But period poverty is still not even recognised as a problem, to begin with. Yet, this is actually a silent pandemic that is killing millions of dreams and destroying lives in the world. Some people think that we are whining when we are highlighting the challenges that people who menstruate face. They regard it as a light issue.

Then we have taboos hiding in the deep pockets of culture. In some rural communities, the custodians of tradition think that gathering people together to openly talk about periods is a breach of their culture, and they say this may result in rains not falling on their land or crops failing. Some religions also do not want their female congregants to be taught about menstruation or to receive period products.

How do you try and demystify menstruation when stigma and shame is culturally ingrained within a community?

The best way to discuss menstruation with communities is avoiding using a one-size-fits-all approach, but instead first take time to understand the cultural and religious dynamics of the specific community. You then have to ensure that you always begin with introductions and icebreakers that are appropriate. It is also vital to begin from neutral ground, like discussing what the menstrual cycle is. Then I have always found sharing personal experiences very effective. So for me and my volunteers, we always start by sharing about our first periods, our embarrassing period stories, as we teach them correct information about periods, so that they realize that whatever they might be ashamed to talk about is normal. Singing always helps; we sing a lot wherever we go. By doing this, you will realize that you can then engage with your audience better from a position of trust.

What advice do you have for people who haven't got adequate access to water?

Never compromise when it comes to washing hands before and after changing sanitary wear or toilet use as well as before eating. Also, always ensure that you foster preservation in all activities that involve use of water.

Tell us about any positive encounters through your activist work?

Some of the major outcomes of our activism include: the removal of customs duty and value added tax on imported sanitary wear as well as raw materials used to manufacture sanitary wear; lobbying for the Education Amendment Act to include a clause providing for free allocation of menstrual products to all school girls; and increasing awareness about period poverty as well as widening knowledge about menstrual health.

We would like to thank Theresa Nyava, for her time and sharing with us her activist journey of tackling period poverty in Zimbabwe.



Interview with Lauren Anders Brown



LAUREN BROWN

We sat down with Lauren, a filmmaker who directed 'WOMENstruate', a documentary which follows seven women from across Africa and their experiences with menstruation.

How did you create WOMENstruate?

WOMENstruate began after a lunch in South Sudan along the Nile river sharing a cup of coffee with Dr. Julitta Onabanjo- who had written an article on menstruation that resonated deeply with me. It made me question my own understanding of my menstruation, and if this was how silenced I felt about my menstruation at 33 years old what were other women and girls going through? Dr. Julitta is the Director of the Regional UNFPA office of East and Southern Africa, the hub of the menstrual health coalition. The team working with her, Puleng and Maja saw and understood my vision for WOMENstruate and were essential in gaining access and logistics to make most of the filming possible.

Why did you choose filmmaking as your medium to actively challenge period poverty?

I've always been a filmmaker, and have spent more than half my life around cameras so it was a natural format for me. I wanted my audience to really know and understand where these women came from, the barriers they faced, the way they lived, and when no one else was in the room and it was just them and the camera what they felt about menstruation and what they wanted others to feel. Filmmaking has a way of making all this possible in an hour.

Who are the most vulnerable when it comes to period poverty?

Women who have other human rights denied due to menstruation I feel are most vulnerable, and I think of Sunday the 17-year-old from South Sudan in a Protection of Civilians camp, which is a camp for displaced persons due to the conflict in South Sudan. When she menstruates, its not just about shame or hygiene but her right to attend school and be safe from early marriage. Her story I think really highlights some of the people who are often ignored in the issue- the men. The shame and social norms that are associated with menstruation are perpetuated more often by men than women. Sunday knew her father plays an important role in her life, and so when a man wanted to marry her when her menstruation began at 16 she made a case to her father that she should finish her education first, be able to support herself and her parents, and then she could marry. Sunday's insight into understanding how important it was to approach her father and discuss these issues allowed her to continue her education. Men are important in changing this narrative.

What barriers or struggles did you encounter when challenging and documenting period poverty?

The biggest struggle was that I chose to make a film on an issue all women could relate to and men should be aware of, but one specifically focused on African women. As in a lot of

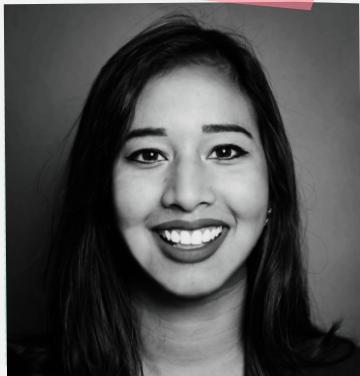
my work I am an outsider coming in, asking for someone to share something I even found hard to discuss. I always give my contributors the freedom to walk away and one nearly did, because she felt I could not understand her or her situation. I was upset, not for the project but for this misunderstanding and how it had upset her and was ready to leave when she asked if she could call her uncle and ask his advice (again- see men ARE important in this issue). After the conversation she changed her mind and wanted to share her story, and the film is all the better from it.

What's next in your work?

WOMENstruate was the first documentary I've ever done where it was focused primarily on the dialogue and my cinematic shots took a backseat. I'm so grateful to have had the opportunity to know I could create a documentary so far outside my comfort zone and have it resonate with others, its given me the confidence to remotely direct a documentary on essential workers in my home city of New York. It's called 'When The Shifts Change' and focusing on having essential workers record themselves just before or just after their shift changes during COVID-19. It will cover issues of healthcare access, isolation, racism, and belief systems. It feels strange to be away from the frontlines when that's where I usually am, but I always focus on the safety of contributors and this time its also the safety of the general public so having my contributors self-record their shift changes brings another interesting dynamic to what this film will become. I'm also doing a lot of virtual public speaking and hosting screenings. If you'd like to host a screening of WOMENstruate, please don't hesitate to reach out!

We would like to thank Lauren Anders Brown a, for her time and sharing with us her activist journey.

Interview With Mashiyat Rahman



MASHIYAT RAHMAN

We sat down with Mashiyat Rahman a Bengali activist and founder of social enterprise Resurgence, tackling the lack of affordable sanitary products by producing sustainable pads using the overgrowth of water hyacinth in Bangladesh.

How did you become an activist?

In terms of menstrual health, I found inspiration within my own life. When I had my first period at the age of 11, I thought I had contracted some kind of deadly disease! It was years later when I finally understood more about menstruation and the male/female reproductive systems. Consequently, when my sister (who is 7 years younger than me) was growing up, I made sure I did everything I could to make her more aware of socially stigmatised topics. The process got me more involved in the wider scale issues attached to menstruation and female health in low-income neighbourhoods, and encouraged me to conduct further research about the subject.

How did you create Resurgence?

Resurgence was created when some of my friends and I teamed up to compete in our university's chapter of Hult Prize in 2016. The competition's prompt was to come up with a marketable and innovative product that would generate

employment for refugees, and as the team leader, I wanted to look more into menstrual health (as refugees have little to no access to menstrual health and hygiene products). After field trips to local refugee settlements, we found that most of them do not even have proper toilets. Sanitary napkins are expensive, so women mostly use cloth, leaves, or even ash while menstruating - and do not have access to proper washing facilities. This pushed us to look into cheap, accessible, and biodegradable menstrual sanitation options, and led us to experiment with a number of plant-based solutions. We eventually succeeded with water hyacinth (as the cotton-like pulp of water hyacinth plants allowed us to make absorbent layers), and received funding from BRAC University and social entrepreneurship accelerators to continue on with our innovation. We also hired workers from the refugee camps in Dhaka (also known as Bihar camp) for water hyacinth extraction, purification, drying, sanitary napkin production and sterilisation, and distribution processes. We began to train local community leaders on menstruation and reproductive health in order to make the knowledge more relatable. This helped us address three problems at once: the inaccessibility of sanitary napkins and reproductive health awareness, lack of employment opportunities for refugees, and the environmental nuisance caused by water hyacinth infestation in lakes.

Who are the most vulnerable when it comes to period poverty?

In a country like Bangladesh, period poverty often transcends the boundaries of social class. The stigma is so apparent that most schools, regardless of their funding status, are unwilling to approach the topic of menstruation and reproductive health. However, the most vulnerable, in my opinion, would be those who are unable to financially afford sanitary care in the form of sanitary napkins or safe water. This is even more extreme in the case of women who are homeless, physically or mentally challenged, or have refugee status, as most people tend to forget that they menstruate too.

What are the biggest challenges with ending period poverty (both in Bangladesh and globally)?

The biggest challenge is definitely social stigma, shame, and sanction. Many governments all over the world still tax menstrual hygiene products as 'luxury' goods, or refuse to take initiative in subsidizing basic menstrual hygiene goods. As a result, people fail to perceive menstruation as an essential part of being human.

Additionally, many religious and community leaders press certain taboos upon their society, and these continue to worsen overtime. Superstitions are difficult to overcome in communities that do not have access to education. There is also a huge lack of platforms where women and men can discuss and learn about periods and reproductive health, allowing stigmas to continue.

What struggles have you faced whilst being an activist within period poverty?

A huge struggle that we faced collectively while conducting our awareness campaigns was repeatedly being branded as pro-Western radicals. Many of the communities that we have worked with have dealt with generations of period shame and superstitions, and this makes them less receptive to new knowledge. However, by training local community leaders over an elongated period of time and demonstrating real life case studies with the help of local gynaecologists, we have learnt how to overcome this challenge in most cases.

What is the best way to talk about menstruation within the community, especially with children (both boys and girls)?

All schools must have a mandatory reproductive health curriculum and there should be public platforms or even entertainment-style shows that openly discuss periods.

Usually, people are most perceptive and responsive to new information at a young age, and children and teenagers like to educate themselves through relatable content. As such, learning through school, social media and TV will help them broaden their minds. At Resurgence, we have developed period and reproductive health-related games and competitions in order to encourage discussion and enthusiasm about reproductive health education through positive reinforcement.

What positive encounter did you have through your activism work?

The most positive encounter I have had was when a group of teenage girls we worked with successfully managed to address being bullied in school due to their periods. Not only that, they also managed to conduct independent research projects on their own and destigmatise periods for young girls in their neighbouring communities!

What's next in your work?

We are currently trying to construct a text-bot that can help women access menstrual and reproductive health advice directly from their phones, by connecting them with gynaecologists free of charge.

Is the low-cost biodegradable method pads replicable by using other products? Is it accessible for other people to try it out? In case our readers wish to replicate this in their own countries!

Yes! Many activists are already experimenting with the use of other plant-based biodegradable alternatives, such as banana leaves and bamboo. Personally, however, we found water hyacinth the most feasible due to the highly absorbent and cotton-like consistency of its pulp.

We would like to thank Mashiyat Rahman, for her time and sharing with us her activist journey.

Interview with Radha Paudel



We sat down with Radha Paudel, author, Nepalese activist and founder of the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation.

Trigger warning: This interview mentions suicide.

How did you become an activist?

I was deeply traumatised [as a child] when I saw the discrimination against my three sisters and mother because they were menstruating. I did not see any value for girls. I attempted suicide at the age of 9, somehow I survived. But I was living with the feeling of inferiority, dehumanisation, and profoundly thinking on ways of dying. At the age of 14, I had my first [period] and I ran away from home for five days in order to avoid all restrictions, which my three sisters, mother, and many more in my community experienced. But I became enlightened at nursing college where I saw menstruation with pride and power. Then, I started to speak up publicly about menstruation to seek dignity during menstruation.

But the journey was not easy due to deep silence, ignorance about menstruation, and the taboo around menstruation. I experienced all forms of challenges from accusations to death threats. No one liked to talk about it until 2017 here in Nepal. I started to speak aboard since 2008, I spoke in

more than dozens of countries, forums, and universities. I created the space for a conversation about menstruation globally by linking health, education, peace, empowerment, and the Sustainable Development Goals. I quit my job in 2009 and have since been working voluntarily to amplifying the conversation around dignified menstruation.

What part does dignity play within the conversation of menstruation?

My position is always **dignity**. I strongly believed that in menstrual talk, dignity comes first because menstruation is very complex and multifaceted. No matter what project you are doing, for instance, if you are working on promoting use of the menstrual cup or school programme or constructing toilets or tax or anything related to menstruation, the conversation must start from dignity. Dignity during menstruation or dignified menstruation is very holistic approach to address all forms of abuses, discrimination, violations associated with menstruation. Each menstruator deserves dignity during menstruation.

How do you try to demystify menstruation when stigma and shame is culturally ingrained within a community?

There are many ways and methodologies which vary from place to place but the commonalities among them are the Three Es: education, empowerment, and emancipation. I have worked with religious people, uneducated people, parliamentarians, academics, NGO workers, colleges, and so on, and I was amazed by their transformation. First, they worked at an individual level; they liberate themselves at first. Then, they work in a group and eventually transform the society.

How would you talk to a community about menstruation?

It is very easy to discuss menstruation with boys and girls in and out of school. It depends on the context, though usually

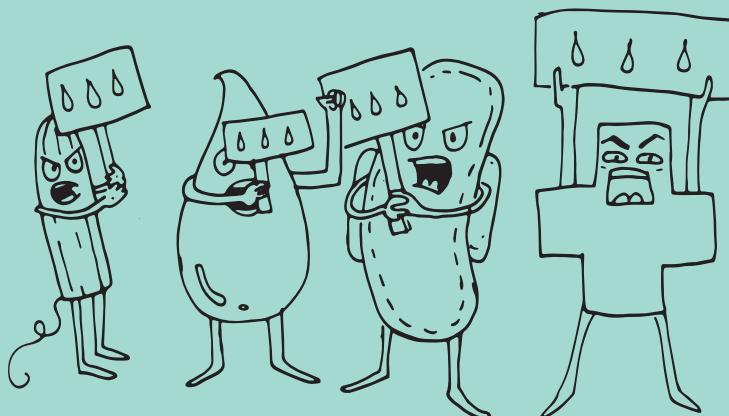
I use references of flowers in the garden or the biological development and difference between the mother and father. I use drama, story, songs or pictures to warm up and contextualise menstruation.

What is the end goal to your activism?

Activism for dignified menstruation is just beginning.

I strongly believe that menstrual activism remains incomplete without dignified menstruation. The global human right and development discourse remained biased and did not prioritise the issue globally until 2014. Even after 2014 to date, the majority of activism has focused on hygiene or pads or tax. If this world is really seeking sustained peace, human rights, and empowerment, then dignified menstruation is pre-condition. The global community must redefine these elements and menstrual activism at large. The global community still does not know about the gravity and complexity of menstruation so it will take the next decade to secure dignity during menstruation.

We would like to thank Radha Paudel for her time and speaking to us about her important work as a menstrual activist.



Activists Fighting Period Poverty and Stigma in Africa

Let's stand up





Sister Philotte Mukashema

Teaches youth in Burundi about sexual and reproductive health and how to make sanitary pads. This is because religious leaders are considered immoral for discussing this taboo topic.



Period Pride Campaign

They want to remedy the negative social impact from period poverty among financially disadvantaged communities. The campaign aims to provide knowledge, education and raise awareness.

info@periodpridecampaign.org



Robert Mukondiwa

A Zimbabwean journalist doing work on Menstrual health. As a television personality, he held a six episodes discussing Menstrual Health Management. He campaigns to end period poverty and for the government to provide sanitary pads to urban and rural school girls.

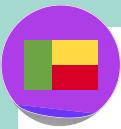
Twitter - @zimrobbie



Theresa Nyava

She founded Sanitary Aid Zimbabwe Trust to try and fight period poverty in Zimbabwe and to educate girls and women about menstrual hygiene and health.

admin@sanitaryaid.co.zw



Mino Period

A woman-owned menstrual health management social enterprise. They provide cost-effective sustainable solutions to period poverty in different parts of the world through the **Mino Menstrual Management Kits**.

ubuntu@minoperiod.com



Project Soar Morocco

They work towards empowering teenage girls with weekly workshops on various topics including managing menstruation effectively and valuing health and wellness. They have also given out 850+ BeGirl menstruation kits.

giveback@projectsoar.org



Ecolibre

A washable sanitary pad brand in Makther, a rural region of Siliana, which is managed by three seamstresses. Ecolibre represents a ray of hope for girls in need who can't afford to buy disposable pads in rural Tunisia. For every two pads that are sold, one pad is given to a girl in need.

office@TheCupEffect.org



Amos Eli Katsekpor

Amos believes men can play an important part in ending the taboo around menstruation. He is developing initiatives for menstrual hygiene in Ghana and expanding the conversation beyond young girls and women to include boys and men.

Twitter - @amblac

Activist Fighting Period Poverty and Stigma in Asia



Let's stand up



Zuraidah Daut

She created **Projek Oh Bulan!**, a movement to fight taboos and put girls back in schools. She placed boxes in grocery stores, salons and fitness studios, calling on people to donate a packet of sanitary pads to those in need.



Resurgence

A social enterprise by university students revolutionising menstrual hygiene in low-income communities through low-cost, biodegradable sanitary napkins and sexual and reproductive health education in Bangladesh.

members@resurgence.org



Aditi Gupta

Co-creator of Menstrupedia, a friendly guide to periods which helps girls and women stay healthy and active during their periods. Menstrupedia aims to shatter the myths and misunderstandings surrounding menstruation.

contact@menstrupedia.com



Free Periods HK

Free Periods HK in Hong Kong providing support to low-income women through the supply of free sustainable menstrual products. It is run by Happeriod, MenstruAction and M Cup M Stuff, 3 groups that highlight the issue of menstrual stigma in Hong Kong since 2014.

hello@freeperiods.hk



Freedom Cups

Based in Singapore, Paranjothy and her sisters sell menstrual cups and use the 'buy one, give one' scheme to donate to women in need. They are now trying to reach Rohingya refugee women and also run workshops with them.

Instagram - @
freedomcups



Happperiod

Founded by Zoe in 2014, she dedicates her hard work to empower women and mentruators, and provide them the tools including alternative menstrual supplies and knowledge to develop their confidence and body awareness.

Instagram - @happperiod



Manjit K. Gill

She is the founder of Binti. They provide menstrual dignity to all girls, around the world. This means facilitating access to pads to ensure menstrual hygiene, educating girls about what menstruation is and what they can expect from it, and dispelling stigma, taboos, myths and negative perceptions around menstruation.

enquiry@binti.co.uk

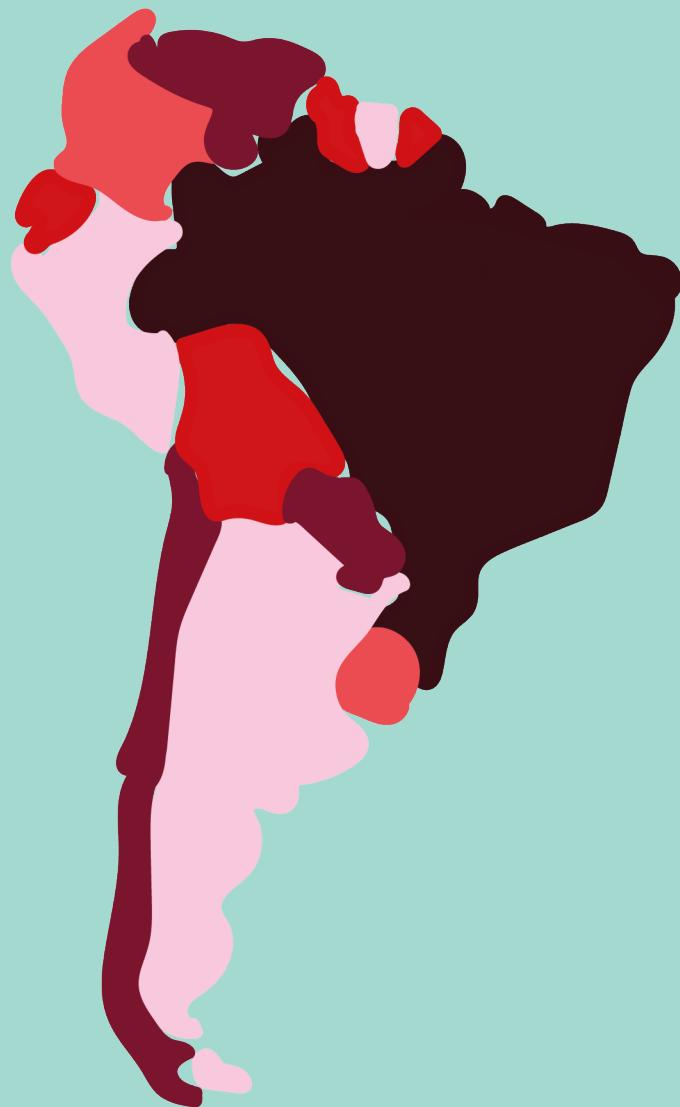


Gyan Maharjan

Known as the "Nepali Padman", Gyan has been producing indigenous sanitary pads using cotton or flannel since the 2015 Nepal earthquake. The vibrant coloured pads are intended to break the taboo surrounding menstruation and celebrate womanhood.

Twitter - @
MaharjanGyan

Activists Fighting Period Poverty and Stigma in South America



Let's stand up



Proyecto Mujeres

A foundation that works for the empowerment of girls and young women by providing menstrual cups and reusable towels. They also host workshops and talks on gender, menstruation and sexual health for alumni, so that they can make safe and informed choices.

[proyectomdemujer
@gmail.com](mailto:proyectomdemujer@gmail.com)



Carina Úbeda

In “Cloths,” exhibition, the artist put 90 used sanitary rags on display, each embroidered with words like “destroyed” and “production.” Each embroidered rag is placed in an embroidery hoop and hung up, surrounded by dangling rotten apples symbolising ovulation. The artist stated, “Male blood is celebrated for being brave while ours is a shame”.



Carpa Roja Colombia

Red Tents are changing the lives of women around the world. These wonderful sacred spaces rescue the feminine ancestral traditions in which the wisdom of the Woman was passed from generation to generation and shared in brotherhood.

www.carparojacolombia.com



#quericomemenstruo

An art project and movement that seeks to eradicate the stigma surrounding menstruation by encouraging people to use red mediums like ink, fabric or beads and sequins on clothes to illustrate period stains.

[www.facebook.com/
quericomemenstruo](http://www.facebook.com/quericomemenstruo)



Pro Mujer

An initiative focused on de-stigmatising menstruation by providing menstrual hygiene education and access to free sanitary products. They also offer access to finance, health and educational services in Argentina, Bolivia, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua and Peru.

[communications@
promujer.org](mailto:communications@promujer.org)



Lahaie Luna Lezama NGO

They strongly believe that women deserve to menstruate with dignity, and menstrual hygiene is not a luxury but a fundamental human right. They help women get access to environmentally, economically sustainable and reusable feminine hygiene products.

[lahaielunalezama
foundation@gmail.com](mailto:lahaielunalezamafoundation@gmail.com)



Princesas Menstruantes

A pioneer in menstrual education in Latin America, proposes from emancipatory practices and pedagogies, academic and investigative spaces to politicise menstruation as a strategy of resistance of the bodies of women and girls.

[www.princesas
menstruantes.com](http://www.princesasmenstruantes.com)

Activists Fighting Period Poverty and Stigma in Australia and Oceania



Let's stand up



Mana Care Products

They aim to help give access to proper products to manage their periods by teaching refugees and remote communities how to hand sew and make reusable pads using readily available materials.

[www.facebook.com/
manacareproducts](https://www.facebook.com/manacareproducts)



Dignity NZ

They support a buy one, give one model to provide sanitary items to girls in secondary school currently going without menstrual products. Their mission is to ensure women around New Zealand have access to free sanitary items.

www.dignitynz.com



Mammas Laef

Run by Jack and Mary Kalsrap, Mammas Laef empower women in Vanuatu by providing sustainable menstrual products, creating social enterprise and breaking menstruation taboos.

hello@lavkokonas.com



The Period Place

They aim to challenge conversations and education around periods for individuals and communities as well as changing how menstruators access period products in New Zealand.

www.theperiodplace.co.nz



Taboo

An Australian based company passionate about universal access to sanitary products, and empowering women and girls around the world with the knowledge and resources to safely manage their periods.

[communications@
promujer.org](mailto:communications@promujer.org)



Kaleko Steifree

A locally made, quality and affordable menstrual hygiene product for women and girls. It provides a combination of products and services to address key challenges that women and girls experience in managing their menstruation in the Solomon Islands.

kalekosteifree@gmail.com



Zillah Douglas

Zillah volunteers with young girls and women in remote communities in Fiji and the Solomons. She distributes re-usable sanitary pads to girls and women and provide basic medical care and education on women's health related issues, including menstruation and reproductive health.

[www.facebook.com/
LolomaFoundation](http://www.facebook.com/LolomaFoundation)



Queenpads

They aim to produce and reach as many unemployed women with alternative reusable menstrual products. They also conduct awareness on Menstrual Heath and MHM practices in schools, villages and workplaces.

info@queenpads.net

Activists Fighting Period Poverty and Stigma in Europe

Let's stand up





Lauren Anders Brown

Filmmaker and director of *Womenstrate*, a documentary about 7 women in Africa and their experiences with periods and menopause. When Brown set out to film it, she planned to do it in 4-7 days, the average length of a woman's period, as an ode to what a woman can achieve with the right resources and support.

[twitter.com/
WomenstruateD](https://twitter.com/WomenstruateD)



Red Box Project

The Red Box Project is a community-based, not-for-profit initiative, which aims to support young people throughout their periods by providing red boxes filled with free period products to local schools.

redboxproject.org



Gabby Edlin

CEO and Founder of Bloody Good Period, Gabby wanted to create a sustainable flow of menstrual products for those who can't afford to buy them. They are now partnered with 40 asylum seeker drop-in centres, helping more people to have 'bloody good periods'.

www.bloodygoodperiod.com



#nemluxustaska

A Hungarian social media campaign #non-luxury bag was launched by Szandra Cserta and Agi Huszka to encourage people to donate a bag of menstrual products and lingerie. With the help of the Hungarian Maltese Charity Service, they were donated to women in need.

<http://nemluxustaska.hu/>



Kiran Gandhi

She had trained for a year for her first marathon but realised she was going to be on her period on the day of the 26.2-mile run in London. She almost backed out of the marathon, but then decided to run free-bleeding (using no tampons) the whole way through. Gandhi wrote about her experience on her personal site:

madamegandhi.blog



Lola Hernández

Founded La Caravana Roja which runs projects, workshops and psychotherapeutic support. The Red Caravan is a menstrual culture movement to promote women's health from a cyclical, feminist and intercultural perspective.

lacaravanaroja.com



The Female Company

They sell tampons hidden in a book to avoid the unfair taxation of tampons as "luxury items". They also run a pad for girls scheme where women in India are supplied with washable cloth pads per pack sold.

www.thefemalecompany.com



Mary Consolata Namagambe

An Afro-Danish law student, human rights activist and CEO of She for She - an NGO with the aim to equip and empower women in to produce and sell affordable and reusable pads to keep girls in school and offer affordable menstrual products.

www.sheforshepads.com

Activists Fighting Period Poverty and Stigma in North America



Let's stand up



PERIOD

Founded by two 16-year-old high school students with the intention of distributing menstrual products to homeless people in Portland. Since then, the organization has addressed over 700,000 periods through product distribution.

www.period.org



The Period Purse

A non-profit, volunteer-run organization that provides hundreds of women living in Toronto shelters with menstrual products and wellness items.

www.theperiodpurse.com



I Support The Girls

Dana Marlowe, founder of I Support the Girls, collects and distributes essential items, including bras, underwear, and menstrual hygiene products, allowing women experiencing homelessness, impoverishment, or distress to stand tall with dignity.

isupportthegirls.org



Barbados Association of Endometriosis and PCOS

A non-profit organization in Barbados, which seeks to educate citizens and advocate for those who have Endometriosis and Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome.

endoandpcosbb.com



Be Girl

Be Girl is a mission-driven design company that creates innovative, beautiful, and affordable products for womankind. Be Girl works for a world where menstruation is considered beautiful and being a girl does not stand in the way of opportunities, health, and success.

www.begirl.org



Jen Lewis

Beauty in Blood is a photographic project devoted to subverting the stigma and shame that surrounds menstrual blood. Using the blood collected in a menstrual cup, she captures its movements on a camera. She experiments with different camera lens and lighting to find new dynamic textures, shapes, and color gradients.

www.beautyinblood.com



Rupi Kaur

Rupi Kaur is an Indian-born Canadian poet, illustrator, and author. 'period.' is a photo series developed by Rupi for a visual rhetoric course in her final year at university. The goal was to challenge a taboo, tell a story without the use of words.

rupikaur.com/period

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

At the age of ten I really wanted to start menstruating because I was hearing it from my friends who had started already. In their sound, menstruation seemed like a very good thing and nobody talked bad about it. I felt left out in the circle of these friends who were menstruating when they talked about it because I had not started. My heart shed tears.

This prolonged and I had to endure the talking until I started menstruating at the age of 13. But I was frustrated on the onset to see blood shedding off from my genitalia. I quickly blamed my friends for giving me false impression towards menstruation. And I blamed myself as well for admiring a bad experience. Then I started isolating myself and spent most of the time in bed sobbing. But my mum came and comforted me. She told me her experiences and encouraged me to realise that I am a female person and my gender will not change anymore. Mum encouraged me that when I reach a certain age, menstruation will completely stop and this gave me some little hope.

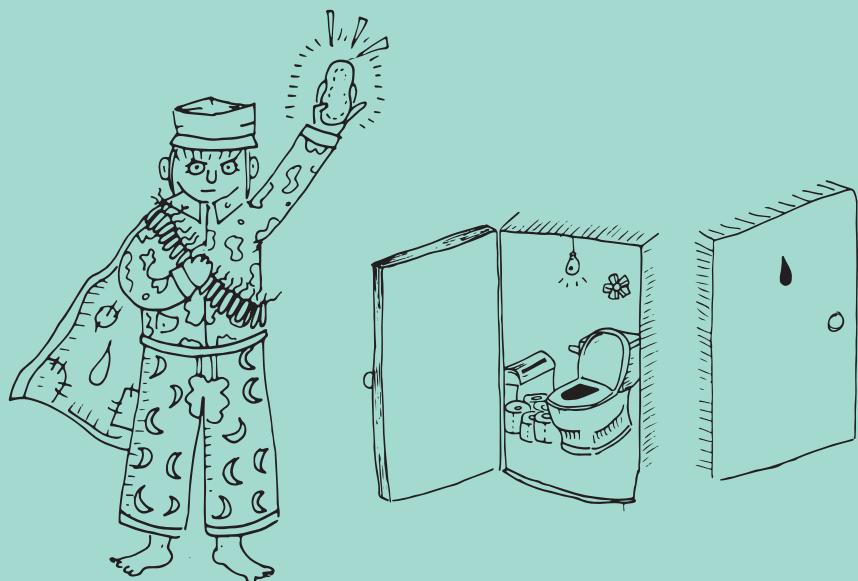
I was a happy person when the menses were over during that particular period and could work hard in school. However when my calendar was at it again I wished to not be seen at school because I felt like everyone knew I was in menses. This affected my studies. However,

I am learning to get used to it and shut ears from hearing discouraging insults from people, especially boys. I know their voices have nothing to do with my menstrual life because they too have sisters who are also menstruating, so we are equally the same.

Today I am used to my situation and feel empowered that I am indeed a female person. My menses make me stronger and drive me to stand against insults and I fight for menstrual rights through advocacy for sanitary pads provision and construction of changing rooms.

I hope I am making the difference.

**SUBMISSION BY
CATHERINE BANDA, 14, MALAWI**





Question Corner



What can you do to break the stigma around menstruation?

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Let's stand up

Think of family or friends who can help you change the world!

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Write down your ideas for activism here.

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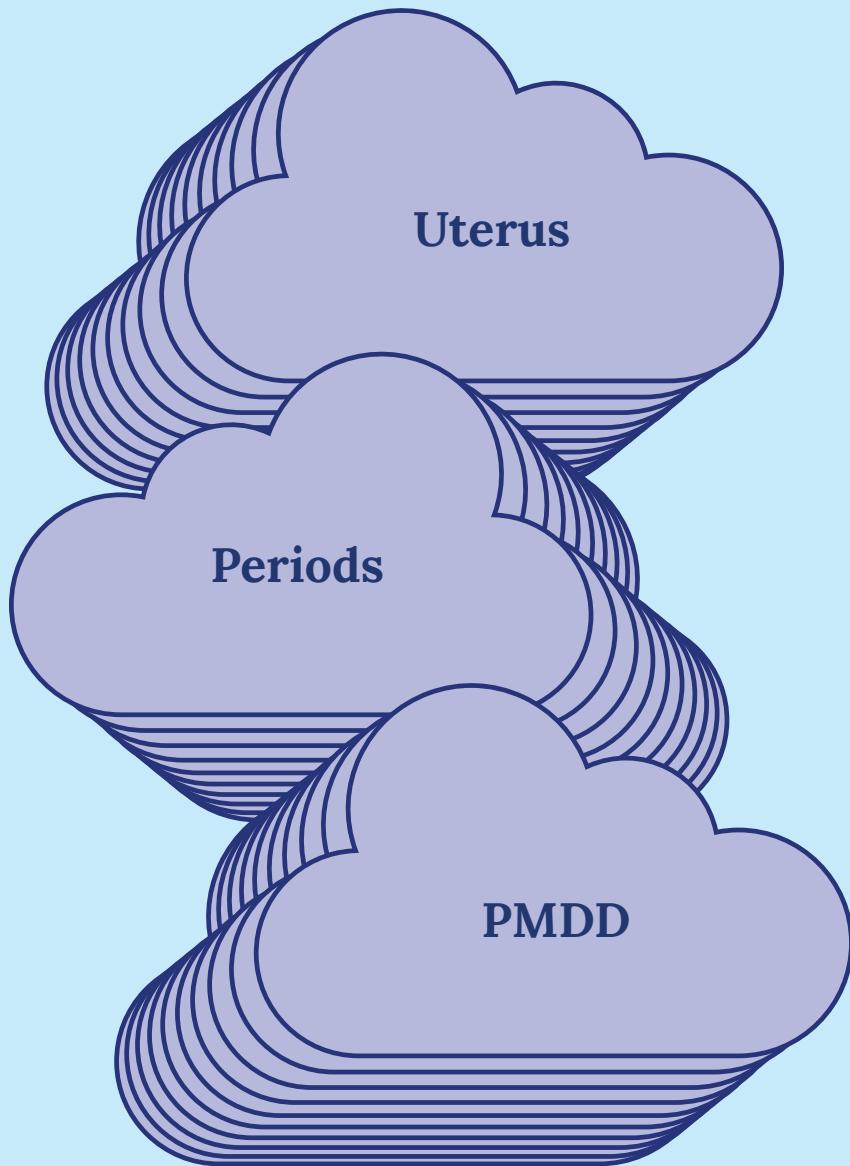
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Let's stand up

Know Your Period

This topic is a continuation from Level 1 - Know your Period

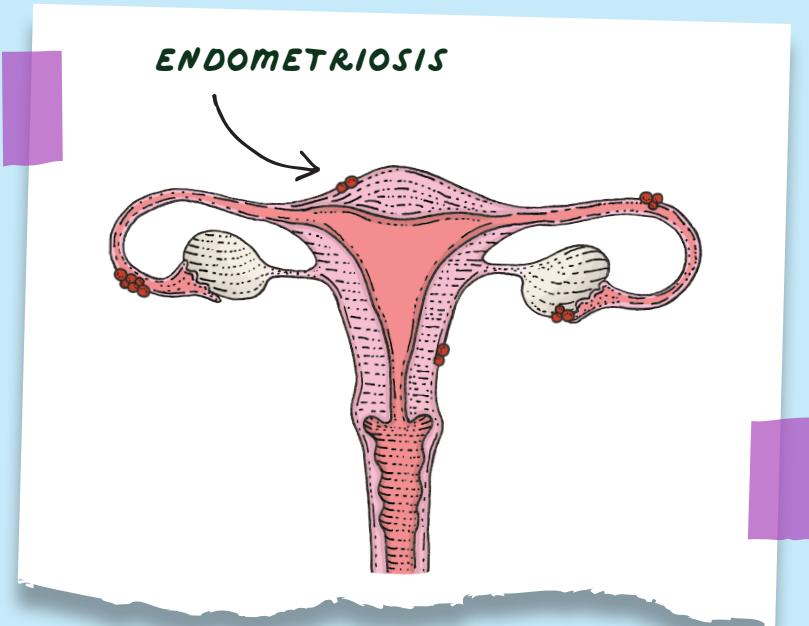


Know your period

Endometriosis and PCOS

What is endometriosis?

You might have heard of a well known illness known as endometriosis, which is an example of uterus-related illness! This is when the uterine tissue grows outside the uterus. Although there are theories, nobody knows exactly why this happens. It scars tissues and can cause excruciating pain when menstruating or going to the bathroom because of many different reasons. Endometriosis can happen at any age and can affect your everyday life and your activities. You can have mild to severe back pains and it may affect your fertility as well.



What is polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS)?

PCOS is a common hormonal disorder; one in five women are affected by it. The main symptoms are irregular or absent periods, increase in male hormones (which can be detected in a blood test) that lead to excess body hair or acne, and polycystic ovaries. PCOS can differ from person to person; however, environmental and genetic factors can affect and effect people's lives if they wish to conceive. Although PCOS has no cure, there are ways to alleviate some of the symptoms. If someone wishes to become pregnant, a change of lifestyle is best through the following:

Relaxation

Stress can exacerbate PCOS symptoms. Find ways of managing stress.

Sleep

Lack of sleep can increase your stress levels and give you cravings.

Improving diet and exercising

It is one of the most effective ways to help alleviate PCOS symptoms by increasing chances for a healthy pregnancy, improving acne, and reducing risk of diabetes and heart disease. This can also be good for a healthy mind. Find an exercise you can stick to but don't over push yourself.

MY MOM'S FRIEND HAS PCOS! SHE SAID THAT HER PERIOD DIDN'T COME FOR A YEAR WHEN SHE WAS 20! SO SHE WENT TO THE DOCTOR WHO DIAGNOSED HER. - B.



Reproductive Tract Infections

Types of reproductive tract infections:

Urinary Tract Infections

(UTIs) are often caused by *E. coli* bacteria, which usually enter the urethra from the rectum.

Symptoms include burning sensation or pain when urinating, blood mixed in urine, no vaginal discharge and not being able to urinate despite the urge.

Thrush

A common fungal infection that occurs when there is an overgrowth of the fungus (or yeast) called *Candida*, causing the change in the vaginal pH or hormone levels. Symptoms can include genital itching and/or burning, with watery, white and lumpy vaginal discharge.

Bacterial Vaginosis

The inflammation of the vagina and infection of the vulva which can affect people of all age, resulting from urinary tract infection (UTI), irritations, and allergic reactions to the chemical residues on sanitary products. Symptoms include unusual vaginal discharge, itching and burning pain.

Vaginitis

The inflammation of the vagina and infection of the vulva resulting from a urinary tract infection (UTI), irritations, and allergic reactions to the chemical residues on sanitary products. Symptoms include unusual vaginal discharge, itching and burning pain.

*I'VE HAD THIS ONCE - MAKE
SURE TO GO TO THE DOCTOR!*

- A.

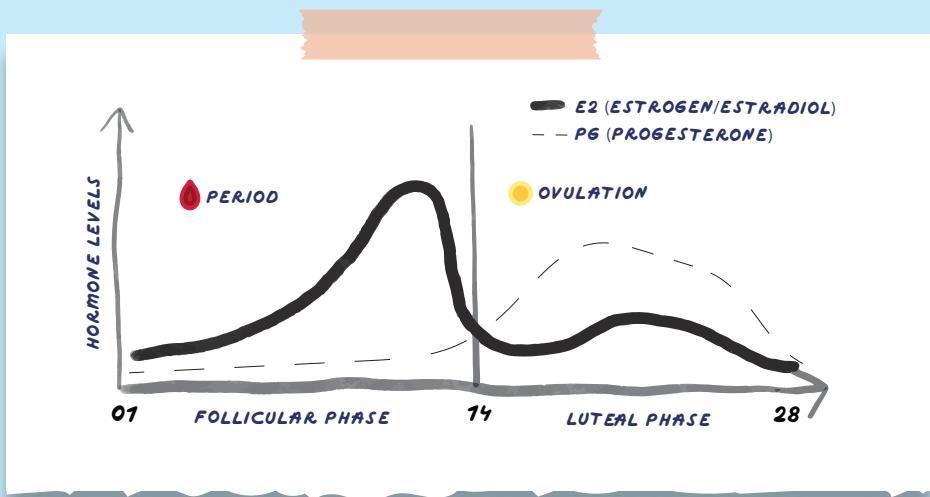
Know your period

The Menstrual Phases

Follicular, ovulation, and luteal phases

The menstrual cycle is the direct communication between your brain and your body, which happens through hormones influencing your brain. Hormones are what cause us to grow, go through puberty, and have periods!

Know your period



How long is it?

The menstrual cycle is different from your actual period. The length of the menstrual cycle is the number of days counted from the first day of your period (when you are bleeding) up to and including the day before the start of your next period.

Day 1 is the first day of your menstrual cycle and **day 28 (up to 35)** is the last day of your cycle.

For example, if your period starts on the **6th of March** and your next period starts on the **3rd of April**, then your menstrual cycle is about **28 days long**. If you have a short

cycle length, you might get your period twice in a month. For the first few years after menstruation begins, having a long cycle is common. However, menstrual cycles tend to shorten and become more regular as you age.

Follicular phase

This starts on the first day of your period. During this time, Follicle-Stimulating Hormone (FSH) is secreted, stimulating follicle production in the ovaries which contain eggs. But **what is a follicle?** It's a cell which generates hormones. Basically ovaries contain lots of cells, and one cell gets chosen randomly to mature during each cycle. It can then potentially become fertilised (which would make you pregnant). During this time, the FSH gradually increases the production of estrogen in order to make both your vaginal discharge and the lining of your uterus thin so that sperm can swim through the uterus.

Ovulatory phase

YOU HAVE PROBABLY HEARD PEOPLE SAYING THEY'RE 'OVULATING' - M.

LH (Luteinizing Hormone) increases during this phase and releases an egg from the ovaries into the fallopian tubes for fertilisation and pregnancy. This is the 'hot' time of the month when you are extra fertile and your body temperature is higher.

Luteal phase

The luteal phase is the second half of the cycle. If you don't get pregnant after ovulation, the empty follicle releases hormones (estrogen and progesterone) to thicken the lining of the uterus to prepare for a possible future pregnancy! After this, the cycle starts again where the uterus lining is shed and you start bleeding!

What is defined as an "irregular" cycle?

An irregular cycle is when you detect a significant change to your usual period cycle. You might feel anxious when you experience a lack of period, but this in no way defines your femininity or womanhood.

Irregularities can be caused by different reasons such as extreme weight-loss or excessive exercising, PCOS or other uterine conditions, and some types of medication. Thyroid problems can also mess with your hormone production and make your periods very light, heavy, or irregular. An irregular cycle every now and then is quite common and can be harmless, but make sure to track your period to check if the irregularities continue. Consult your doctor and health care provider if you are worried about your cycle.

Amenorrhea in high level athletes

The lack or interruption of periods within high level athletes is a common phenomenon due to a pause in the secretion of hormones due to an important amount of stress in the body and/or a lack of calorie intake (especially a decrease of body fat). If you are an athlete undergoing this issue, reducing the amount of sport activity or increasing your calorie intake, specifically consuming enough healthy fats can help. You can also substitute a day in a week of intense sport activity with a milder activity such as yoga.

IRREGULAR PERIODS CAN
BE STRESSFUL. VISIT
THE DOCTOR IF YOU ARE
WORRIED! - A.

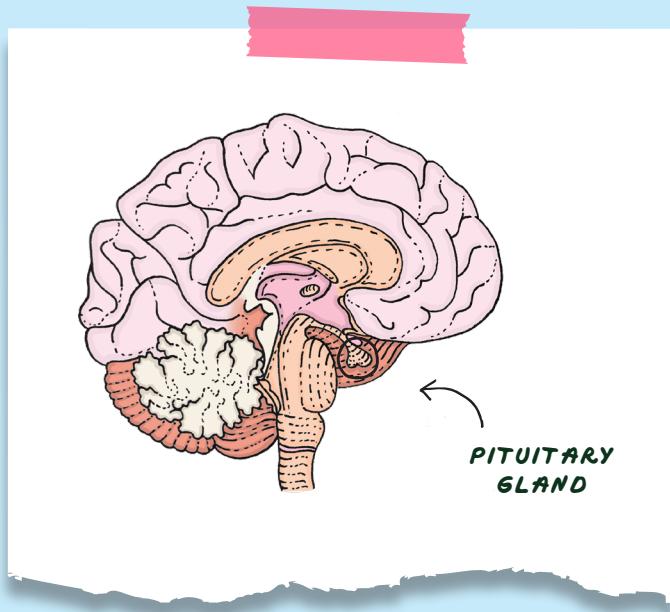


What is the pituitary gland?

The pituitary gland is a very important gland which is located at the base of your brain. It is small, roundish and pea-shaped. It is responsible for a lot of things as it creates the chemicals which we call 'hormones', hence its nickname of the 'master gland'. These chemicals are what cause us to grow, go through puberty, have periods! It is safe to say that without this gland, this book wouldn't even exist!

How does the pituitary gland affect my periods?

Once you have reached a certain age, the pituitary gland will start secreting the LH hormone every month. This hormone causes ovulation, which is when your ovaries release an egg cell which finds its way into the uterus through the fallopian tube.



Emotions During Periods



What is PMDD?

PMDD (premenstrual dysphoric disorder) manifests as severe premenstrual symptoms which affect your everyday life and interfere with your activities. You can feel depressed, anxious, angry, tired, extremely irritable, and suicidal. You might also have very low self-esteem and intense conflicts with your loved ones. PMDD happens because you are more sensitive to the hormonal fluctuations. PMDD is more common in people with mental illnesses. If you have PMDD, make sure to track your emotions and behaviour during your menstrual cycle. Understanding your emotions and habits during the darkest moments of your PMDD can help you control your behaviour during the next cycle. If you feel overwhelmed, please consult your doctor or therapist.

Although PMDD and PMS affect your hormones and mood, it is important for you to take responsibility of your actions by finding ways to alleviate the stress without hurting your loved ones. PMS related stress adds a layer of negativity if you're already anxious. Tracking your mood can help recognise these signs. Remember that your stress is always genuine. "It's just your PMS talking" dismisses your emotions. Although hormonal imbalance during PMDD or PMS worsens your negative emotions, they still come from somewhere.



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

Growing up with PCOS and being prescribed hormone pills that have such adverse effects on the body- pretty distributing growing up.

I've always been into sports and doing stuff outside, with PCOS I used to get down 3-5 times a year but I used to bleed continuously for 28-30 days. It used to be heavy and as a result very restricting because my games/ activities used to take a hold because of my cramps.

Cramps are horrid- there's diarrhoea, intense cramps that make you faint. I remember I had a tournament and I'd gone to play and on my way back in an auto I fainted because I was in immense amounts of pain. This continues till date. It's so constraining - I've to take a half day from work just to deal with cramps. I've to take care, exercise and eat stuff keeping in mind that certain things will trigger PCOS while some will help it. It's been a completed life style change too. Growing up with this was great in a way that people around me, my brothers, dad, friends, etc have grown to be so much more understanding now that they've seen me like this. There's been no disgust or judgements or awkwardness with them and how they treat other people menstruating around them. And this is a big thing.

**SUBMISSION BY
DEEPITA, 24, INDIA**

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

My name is Nandar aka Nandu Gyawali. I grew up in a small village in Northern Shan State, Myanmar. I was raised in intercultural communities but my family was very strict about Nepali cultural practices and made me follow each and every one of them from fasting for religious reasons to banning me from home during the period. Initially, I did follow all the rules given to me during menstruation from not touching anything in the household to not going to temples. I think I did it out of fear, fear of not belonging to my family or ethnic group. Gradually, after receiving quality education out of the country, I realized menstruation is not disgusting or shameful as I was told. In fact, it is the most healthy and pure thing that happened to your body every month. That's when I give up the art of trying to belong to a culture where women's bodies are attached with shame and where women are made to feel something is wrong with their bodies because they bleed. Now, I do not follow any of the rules regarding menstruation practices in my family and they are more accepted towards my choice since I made it very clear about why I don't respect that. Imagine a world without the period, none of us would exist. We exist because of the uterus, that's the whole point.

***SUBMISSION BY
NANDAR, 25, MYANMAR***

Know your period

Gender and Menstruation



Menstruation is a biological function and should not be used as an indication of gender, femininity, or womanhood.

While the language used in this book is quite gendered, it is done so to make our book more accessible to people who are not familiar with the evolving language surrounding gender.

Sex and gender

While the terms are used interchangeably, sex and gender are two different things:

Sex is biological and is assigned when a child is born. So your sex is either male, female, or intersex (neither male or female). These are determined by physical attributes like hormones, chromosomes, or anatomy (penis or vulva).

Gender is the performance of roles, behaviours, activities, attributes, and opportunities associated with a sex - male, female, or intersex.

Gender identity is what we as a person identify as: male, female, non-binary. This is not assigned at birth but relies more on how we feel in our head and heart, what we feel comfortable with, and our behaviour.

Non-binary is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity is not defined in terms of traditional binary opposition like male and female.

Some people's gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth (cisgender), and some other people's gender identity is different from their sex.

Transgender is a person whose sense of personal identity and gender is different from the sex assigned at birth. E.g. a trans woman is someone who was assigned as male at birth but identifies as a woman or has transitioned into a female.

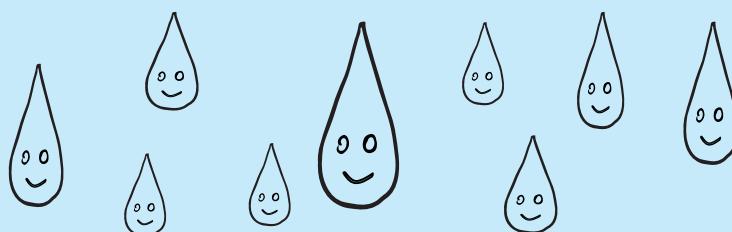
Trans women **do not menstruate** as they do not have a uterus. Also some women who have a uterus, also don't menstruate due to factors like menopause, stress, hysterectomy, or underlying medical conditions. But this does not define them as 'lesser' women. Some women and trans women have to fight to justify themselves as female to others due to not menstruating. **Menstruation doesn't define the essence of a woman.**



A trans man is a man who was assigned female at birth. Since trans men are born with a uterus, many will experience menstruation during their lifetime. This can be distressing due to dysphoria and lack of sanitary bins in men's bathrooms, which makes it hard to dispose of sanitary products. Trans men will usually see their periods stop after a few months on hormone therapy, though this can vary and they can come back if the testosterone dosage is changed.

Menstruation can be a tricky subject to navigate as a trans or non-binary person or someone struggling with gender dysphoria. Menstruation is not a 'woman's thing' - it is a biological function and should not be used as an indication of gender, femininity, or womanhood.

*YOU SHOULD TREAT EVERYONE WITH RESPECT
AND KINDNESS - WE ARE ALL JUST HUMAN. - S.*



DEAR BIG SISTERS.

I'm lucky that compared to other people I don't seem to struggle with the same level of debilitating dysphoria. I experience a fair amount of distress and stress around my chest but having a vagina doesn't bother me as much. I remember as a teen feeling a huge amount of anger and horror at having a period, it made me feel so disgusted at myself and desperately wish I was a guy, but I don't know if this had anything to do with my internal sense of gender, it might have been just the fact of periods and the unfairness of it and general societal shame.

I remember vividly what lengths we would go to in the girls' bathroom to hide the fact that we were on our period (especially the sounds of sanitary products). It was such a shock when a close friend would mention being on her period, I would feel horrified. Just further proof of the primacy of men in our society, that periods are automatically shameful and seen as 'gross'.

Since my teens however I've been more at peace with them, which is helped by the fact that my pain is mild and I use a mooncup, which helps me to forget I even have a period, not to mention the fact that it saves me from monthly purchases of menstrual products with feminine packaging and the dysphoria that publicly buying these products would bring.

Menstrual cups seem to generally have much more gender neutral packaging. I hate talking about periods still, because now it feels to me like it is a “woman’s” subject of conversation, though recently it has felt more and more neutral to me; I am grateful to online activists who do work around de-gendering products.

**SUBMISSION BY
FLORENCE LOW, NON-BINARY
TRANSMASCULINE PERSON**



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

Menstruation quickly became a topic which I try to talk about as little as possible with the exception of my very close friends.

With my mother, when we come to talk about this topic, I almost automatically shut down. It is something which I dread, I sometimes have nightmares about it even when I am not on my period.

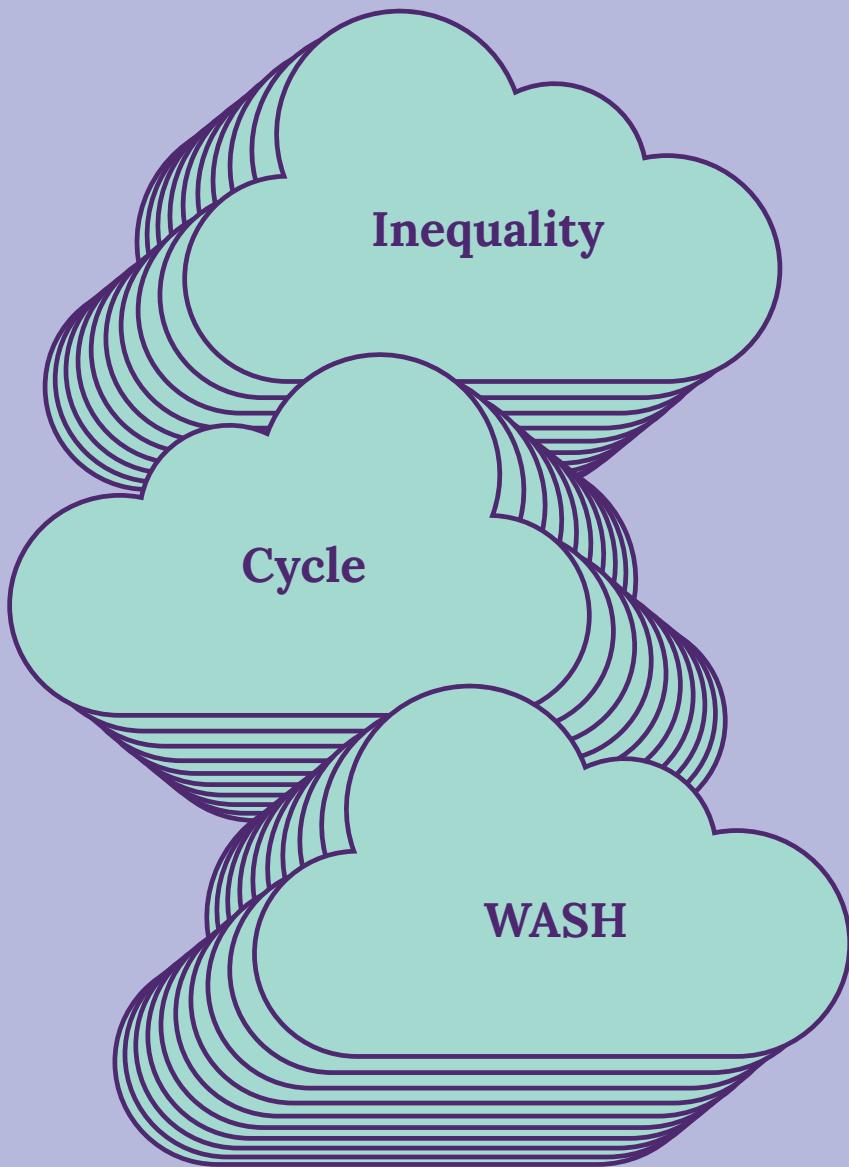
Even if the pains are really strong and I don't have access to medication, I still keep it to myself, either out of pride or to show that I can overcome this alone.

In terms of activities, I try my best to not avoid them even when it is not necessarily an easy thing to do, sometimes I push myself too far and end up with accidents, I had really embarrassing moments in times where I didn't have the possibility to hide my periods. In the end trans or not, menstruation doesn't seem too different to me.

***SUBMISSION BY
ANONYMOUS, FEMALE TO MALE
TRANSGENDER, 22, FRANCE***

Know your period

Period Poverty



Menstrual Value Chain

Period poverty

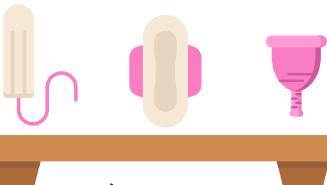


Awareness and Education

Menstrual awareness and educations equal for both genders

Access to Products

Appropriateness, choice of menstrual hygiene products



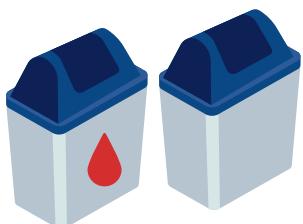
Safety in production, distribution and sale, access



Menstrual Use and Waste Management

Water for personal use

Safe, accessible, private sanitation e.g. toilets



Disposal of products



Disposal of products

Waste treatment

Source: Period Talk: What Do We Need To Consider During COVID-19. Organised by Columbia University and Dr Marni Sommer.

WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene)

When it comes to period poverty, millions of people continue to be denied their rights to WASH, health, education, dignity, and gender equity.

Menstrual hygiene requires access to:

- Water for washing hands, body, reusable menstrual cloths.
- Private and hygienic sanitation facilities for changing and disposing sanitary protection materials and for bathing.
- Hygiene information.
- Waste management for disposing cloths and pads.



Incorporate menstrual hygiene:

- At different levels, including service delivery, capacity development, and policy.
- Within approaches to WASH - e.g community led total sanitation, social marketing, WASH in schools, participatory hygiene, and sanitation transformation.

Challenges for cross-sector collaboration

The ministries and departments responsible for water, sanitation, and hygiene are often separate, and can vary by context. Different departments are responsible for construction and maintenance.

Features of menstrual-hygiene friendly water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities in the household:

- There is somewhere secure and private for waste disposal, changing sanitary products, and bathing.
- Facilities (e.g. toilet facility, water supply, and bathing units) are near to the house and accessible for all members of the household, including those with mobility limitations.
- Toilet facility and bathing units have covered walls and a door with an internal lock.

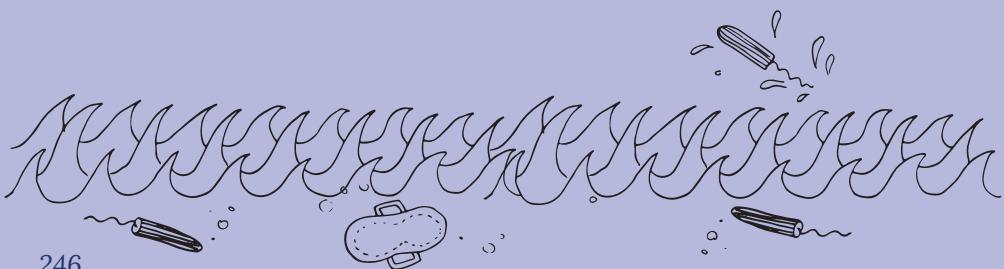
- Water is available inside the toilets (from a tap or container).
- The toilets and bathing units are cleanable.
- A washable container with lid for collecting sanitary materials is located inside the toilets and/or bathing units.
- There is somewhere private for washing sanitary cloths and drying them in the sunlight, using a charcoal, or other iron.
- There is a mechanism for final disposal of sanitary materials, such as a pit or incinerator.



Benefits of good menstrual hygiene in school:

The benefits of good menstrual hygiene in school (available sanitary protection materials, clean and safe toilets, bathing or changing facilities with locks on the inside of doors, discrete disposal facilities, understanding and supportive staff, and information on menstrual hygiene) are considered to help students in ways such as:

- More time spent in school (for those who menstruate).
- Increased concentration.
- Higher self-confidence.
- Increased comfort, good hygiene, less irritation from sanitary materials, and less risk of related infections.
- Greater participation.
- More confidence to stand up to answer questions and ask to leave the classroom to use the toilet.
- No exclusion from sports due to discomfort, concern over leakage, or because of cultural restrictions.



Homelessness

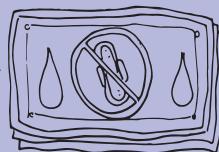
How does homelessness impact periods?

Anyone can experience homelessness. There are many reasons why people lose their homes: family break-up, unemployment, domestic violence, mental illness, poor physical health, substance abuse, and physical/sexual/emotional abuse - to name just a few.

For people without housing or with limited income, managing their periods is complicated and often expensive, but unavoidable. For many people living on the streets, getting their period is more than just a hassle - it's a matter of comfort, cleanliness, and dignity. Spending money on menstrual supplies means not taking public transit or going without food. They might use any menstrual product that they can afford or are given longer than they should.

For example, there are 50,000 women living on the streets of America with limited access to pads and tampons and no steady, comfortable place to shower. They are forced to get creative with ways to keep clean when they have their periods. Some are forced to steal products. Others wait for homeless outreach crews to come by with pads. Some use socks, paper towels, plastic bags, toilet paper, towels, cotton balls, or clothing in place of menstrual products.

When you experience homelessness, getting your period can lead to stress, embarrassment, missing meals, and missing opportunities. So please donate period products to people going through homelessness as often as you can.



DEAR BIG SISTERS.

I left Chile in 1987, I went back in 1988 and since 1989, I haven't seen my family. My period finished when I was 36 because when I was 28 years old, I had a daughter - she's 27 today, she was born 6th of December 1993. Immigration could not find my status to remain. Because I got involved in drugs, they took my daughter away and put her for adoption with a family in Spain and I didn't even know the type of family they were... A woman is under pressure since she has her first child. And somehow I can never forgive the people that took my child away and that was 27 years ago.

In Chile when you start your period it's like a celebration, you are no longer a child anymore. You are a woman. In my time my mother and father never talked to me about this - my parents died when I was 11. They don't teach about it enough in schools as well - I don't know today but when I went to school, no they did not teach you anything about it.

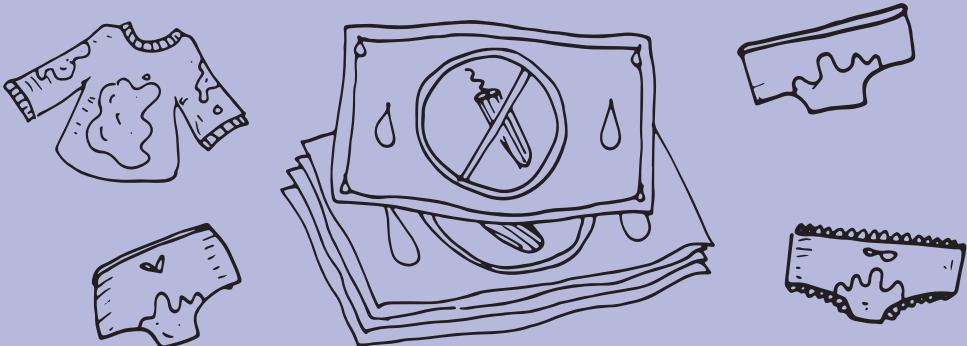
**SUBMISSION BY
ANONYMOUS, UK**

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

My periods have become really irregular since I have become homeless. When I bleed, I bleed really heavy - it's a bit awkward. I manage it with difficulty - lots of tissue! I would feel pissed off or embarrassed if I leaked onto my clothes. I don't have a home, so I can't wash them. So I have to walk around, being messy, with my jumper tied around my waist, it's just awkward. I really try not to leak.

And I get a lot of pain which I try to manage with pain killers. I'm quite old, almost 50 now. I think I'm starting to go through 'the changes' and starting to get hot flashes now. I've not got a doctor so everything is all up in the air at the moment. But it will settle down, I'm sure. I've got housing support that I am meeting tomorrow so that is a start.

**SUBMISSION BY
SOPHIE, 47, UK**



Refugees, Migrants, and Asylum-Seekers*

Because they were forced to leave their country

Refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers are a “forgotten community” when it comes to period poverty. People all over the world make one of the most difficult decisions of their lives: to abandon their homes in search of safety or for a better life in another country. Millions are forced to leave everything behind. Refugees flee from armed conflicts, oppressive governments, or human rights violations.

Migrants leave to reunite with their family, due to the lack of educational and employment opportunities, or even natural disasters in their home countries.

For example in the UK, asylum-seekers receive just £37.75 a week and are not allowed to work before they can be registered as a refugee and obtain legal employment status. Therefore, they must rely entirely on the state for support. It is estimated that a heavy period could cost upwards of £10 a week. This being more than a quarter of the allowance, asylum-seekers are sometimes forced to go without food and other basic needs in order to purchase period products. Some folks resort to using tissue, strips of clothing, and/or bath towels in place of appropriate period products. This has a negative impact on a person's physical and mental health, which can cause further damage and stress. Being able to hygienically and safely deal with your periods shouldn't be a luxury. Period poverty is preventing asylum-seekers from rebuilding their lives with dignity, and is part of the hostile environmental policy against people seeking safety.

*To know the difference between refugees, migrants, and asylum-seekers, visit the glossary at the end of the book.





Living With Challenges

Challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities:

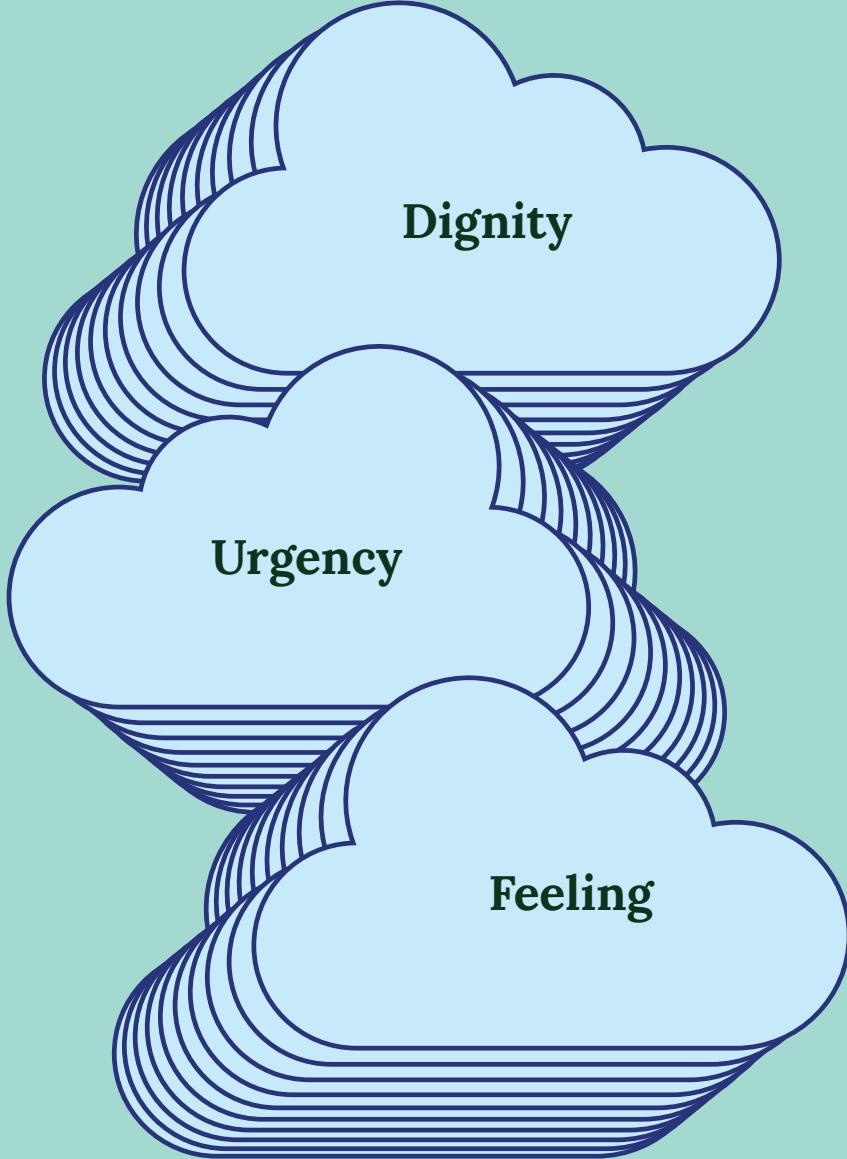
- **Lack in menstrual hygiene** since people in rural areas face more challenges maintaining adequate hygiene because clean water supply is often a long way from home.
- **Additional support and carers** are often needed for those with disabilities to help them deal with menstruation and to learn social norms.
- **Difficulties with travelling** since there are risks such as the menstrual cloth moving when rushing to get on the bus, causing leaks.
- **Greater risk of infection** because people with physical disabilities or are visually impaired often have to crawl or sit on dirty toilet seats to change their pads or cloths.

Challenges faced by school girls and female teachers:

- **Lack of sanitary products** can cause stress due to leakage, smell, and teasing.
- **Lack of clean water supply** and private facilities for washing and drying soiled clothing, cloths, or hands.
- **Fear of using toilets** caused by the worry of others seeing menstrual blood.
- **Exclusion from sports** due to discomfort, worrying about leaking, or because of cultural restrictions.
- **Lack in concentration/participation**, such as not standing up to answer questions due to worrying about leaking.
- **Absence** due to the lack of facilities and services at school to manage menstruation.

Dignified Menstruation

With voluntary contributions from Radha Paudel



Dignity

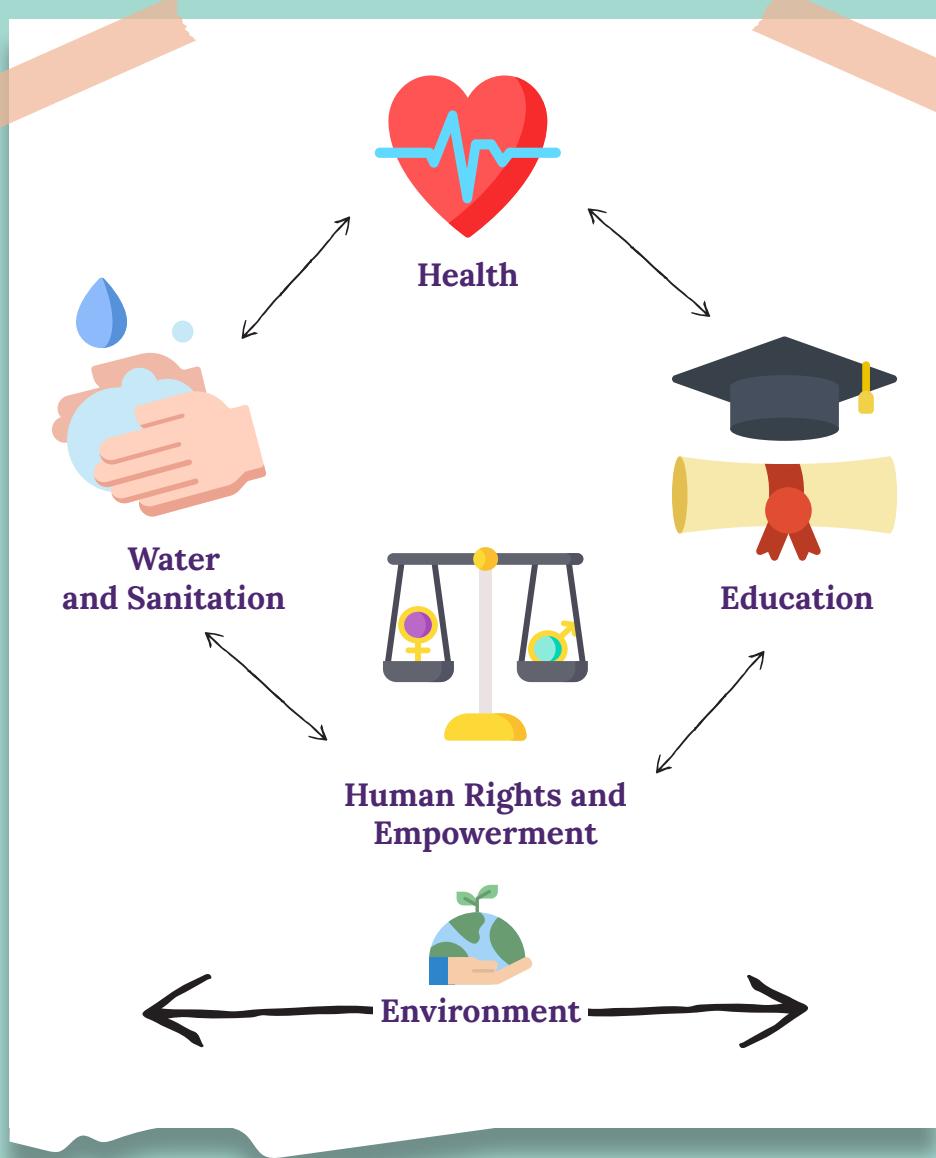
Urgency

Feeling

Dignified Menstruation Chart

Beyond the infrastructure and hygiene

Dignified menstruation



Framework developed by activist Radha Paudel

Dignity During Menstruation

What is dignified menstruation?

Dignity is the right of a person to be valued and respected for their own sake, and to be treated ethically whether or not they are menstruating. Being shamed into thinking that you are less valued and respected because of a natural process like menstruation is a direct cause of undignified menstruation. Regardless of aspects like class, religion, and race, menstrual stigma and restrictions are practised to varying degrees globally. A key role in breaking this is understanding that menstrual blood is not impure and that menstruation is a biological milestone for women.

Misunderstanding periods and the fear of menstrual blood leads to restriction on things like mobility, food, and activities. This can lead to long term negative consequences in people's lives as they are menstruating. This can lead to both physical and psychological suffering manifested at various levels such as feeling disgusted, shocked, surprised, low, absent in school/work, etc. People should be able to have periods without it disrupting their daily lives every month.

Within the topic of period poverty and menstrual exclusion, a lot of the focus is placed on menstrual hygiene, period products, and the tax placed on menstrual products. While these are important elements to tackle, they do not guarantee dignified menstruation. More effort needs to be placed in acknowledging and educating society to view menstruation through a lens that does not involve any stigma, taboo, or discrimination.

For example, in order to improve access to education, the Kenyan Government has been distributing menstrual products to all school girls since 2017. While in theory,

this should have made great leaps in dissolving menstrual exclusion, shame, and stigma, there is more to be done. In September 2019, a 14-year-old schoolgirl who had her first period during school lesson was reportedly branded 'dirty' and expelled from the classroom. Due to being ridiculed by both her teacher and the boys in her class, the girl's mother said her daughter took her own life after she returned home because of the menstrual stigma and shame after she stained her clothes.

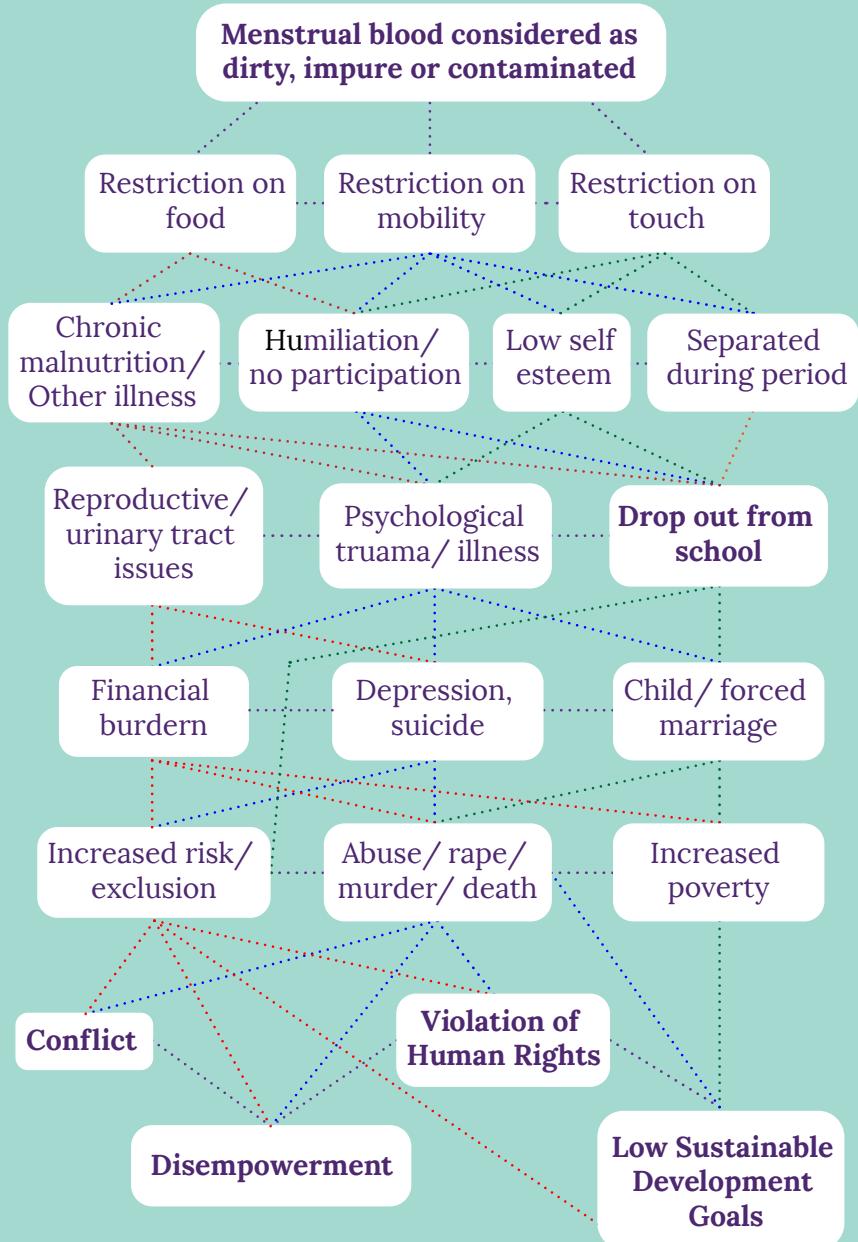
Even with the access to menstrual products, there is still shame and stigma attached to the act of menstruation. This is why any menstrual education must tackle the issue of menstrual blood through the lens of dignity.

Activist Radha Paudel explains that: *"As the virtue of a human being, each girl, woman, and menstruator deserves dignity during menstruation. It is a state free from any forms of abuse, discrimination, violence associated with menstruation."*

In other words, there should not be a difference between the five days in a month when they are menstruating to the rest of the month. Here is how Radha Paudel explains the ways to achieve dignified menstruation through the three 'P's:

- **Principally**, menstruation should be viewed as a *human rights concern*.
- **Practically**, by considering the complexity and multifaceted nature of menstruation, intervention should address both immediate and long term issues - water, sanitation, education, human rights, and empowerment should go simultaneously under the overarching goal to achieving dignified menstruation.
- **Psychologically**, in order to cultivate the culture of gender equality and justice, the dialogue on dignified menstruation should start for girls and boys from a young age.

The Urgency of Dignity in Menstruation



Framework developed by activist Radha Paudel

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

Women in Nepal practice menstruation separation norms where for at least the first 3-5 days of them bleeding they are made to "live separately". Women would be restricted from entering the kitchen, sleeping on their beds and basically restricted from accessing many areas inside the house. Even the colloquial word for it is "Bahira niskeko" meaning "out of the house". The term explains itself explains it very well.

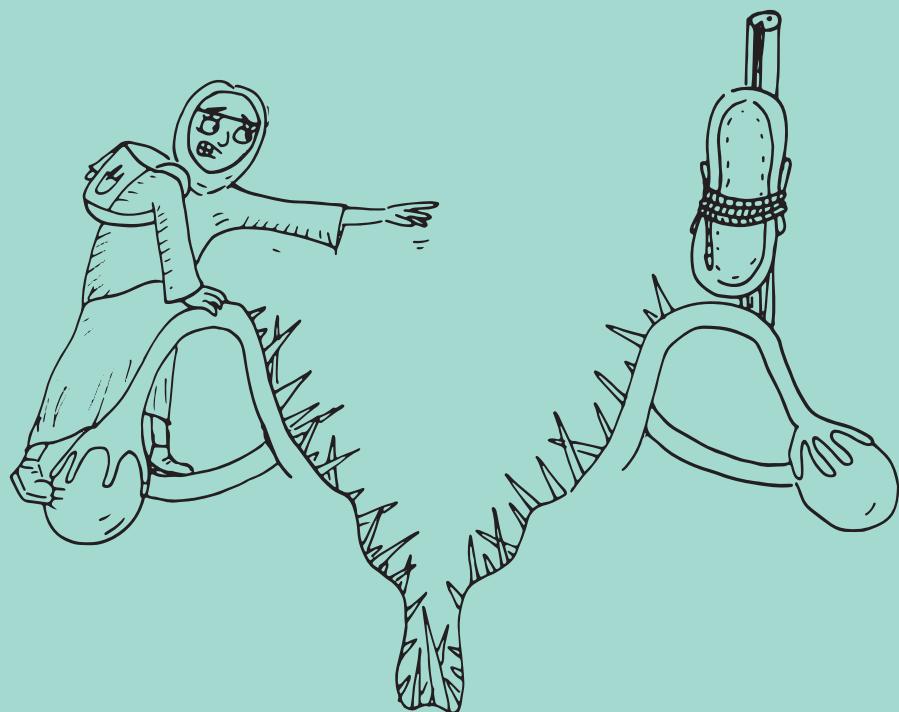
In my house, we are all women of menstruating age. There can be times when all of us have this cycle intersecting. In such a scenario, how can we run the household activities, starting with cooking food for ourselves, if we were restricted from entering the kitchen. If we choose to follow the traditional practice of remaining away from the kitchen, we would starve for days. This is not what we can afford. After analysing these practicalities of life, my family started to break the norm and enters the kitchen during the menstrual cycle. We are free to move around the house, cook, sleep on our own beds, wear any clothes we like or eat in any plates we choose. Can you imagine us being tagged as rebels for taking this step? This is how bad it used to be and it still is the case in many parts of Nepal today including the most advanced city Kathmandu.

**SUBMISSION BY
ANUJA, 29, NEPAL**

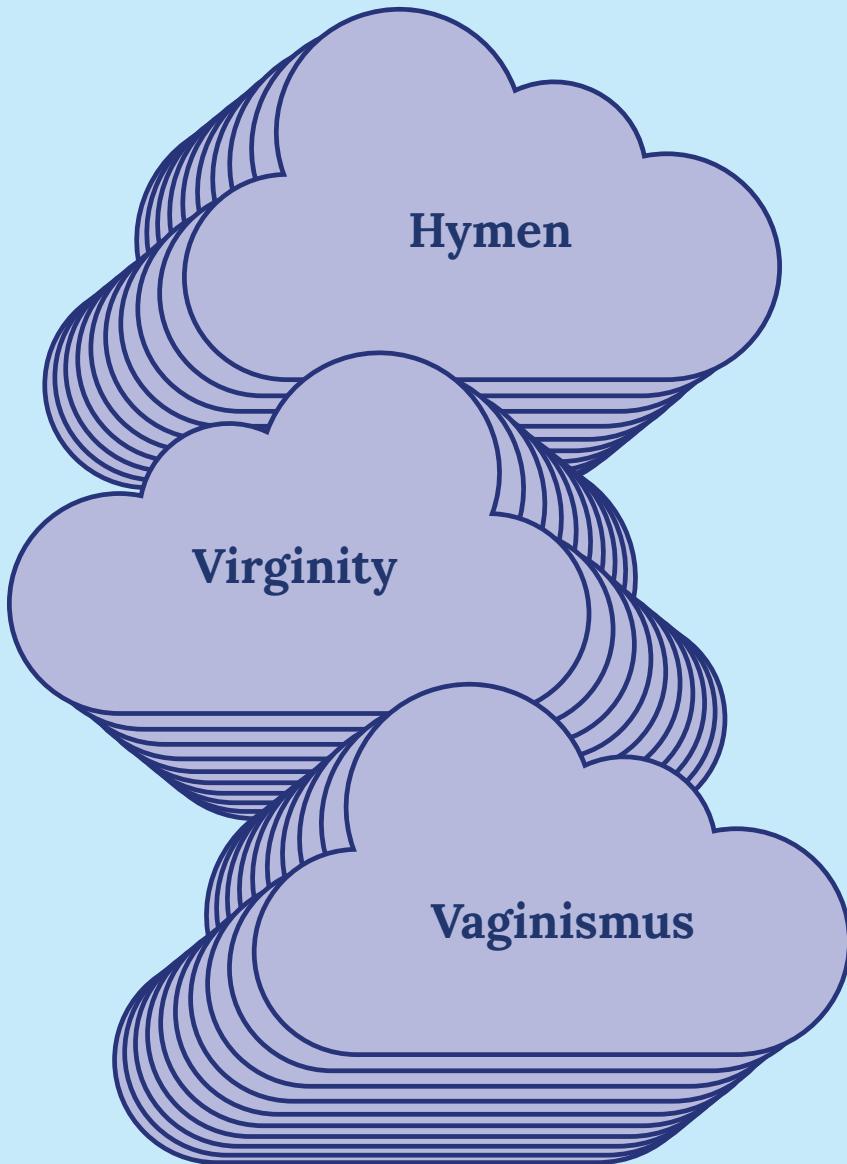
DEAR BIG SISTERS,

I knew the word and practices around menstruation when I was seven years old. I was so terrified from the hardships, restrictions during menstruation observed on my three sisters and mother. My mother shared me that I would have menstruation, as a curse from the god. I deeply traumatize and do not like to live as girl due to internalization of status of powerless, dehumanization than boys. Thus, I ran away from the home for attempting suicide.

**SUBMISSION BY
RADHA PAUDEL, NEPAL**

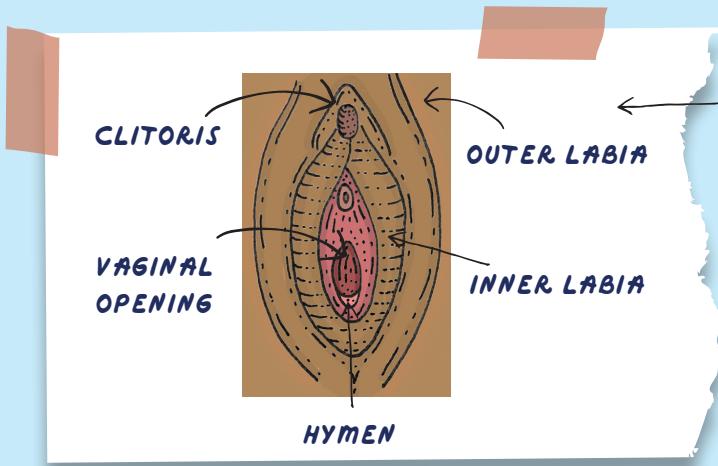


Breaking Myths



What is a Hymen?

The hymen is a thin membrane that surrounds the opening of the vagina. Not all hymens look the same—some people are born with extra hymen tissue and some are born without one. The most common hymen is shaped like a half moon. This shape allows menstrual blood to flow out of the vagina. Tampons can be inserted through the opening of the hymen without changing the shape of hymen.



Does having a hymen mean you're a virgin?

Sexual intercourse may stretch the hymen to make a larger opening or may cause a tiny tear or change in the shape of the hymen—sometimes this is called **breaking** the hymen, but it doesn't really break, it just stretches.

Some people believe that you're not a virgin if your hymen is stretched open. But having a hymen and being a virgin are not the same thing. Some people are born with hymens that are naturally open. And many other activities besides sex can stretch your hymen, such as horse-riding. So you can't tell if someone has had sex by the way their hymen looks or feels.

It's true that the hymen can tear during intercourse, physical activity, or when a tampon is inserted. But the hymen does not "break," and **virginity is an emotional and a socio-cultural concept**, not just the disruption of a piece of tissue that a woman may or may not have been born with.

Why is the hymen so culturally important?

The hymen is the name of legend and lore in many cultures, the treasured prize a woman gives her husband on their wedding night. There have been cases in different cultures where people have forced women to undergo pseudo-scientific 'virginity tests' which have no factual basis and stems from a will for others to control women's sexuality

The concept of female "virginity" has a complicated history, and has often been incorrectly linked to breaking the hymen. Bleeding after intercourse was thought to be proof of an unbroken hymen, which was considered as a proof that a woman had not had sex before. The reality, however, is that the state of your hymen has nothing to do with sexual activity. As for how to know if your hymen is broken, it's near impossible to see it by yourself.

"THE HYMEN IS NOT IN THE SCRIPTURES, NOT IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH... AGAIN, I'M SURE THEY'D BE PART OF THE CULTURES AND THE FOLK RELIGION IN NATIONS WHERE CHRISTIANITY EXISTS. BUT NEVER AT THE BEHEST OF THE CHURCH."

- FATHER JONATHAN, READ MORE ON PG 203

Myth



Using tampons and menstrual cups as a virgin will break the hymen and take a woman's virginity.

Fact



An intact hymen does not indicate if you're a virgin or not. Virginity has to do with sexual activity, not the presence of a hymen.

Breaking your hymen

"Will it hurt when my hymen breaks?"

Not necessarily. Breaking your hymen during intercourse can hurt but not all women feel pain, and some don't feel anything at all. However, painful intercourse is a reality for many women, and there are a handful of health conditions that can contribute to it, such as vaginismus.

What is vaginismus?

Vaginismus is a condition involving a muscle spasm in the pelvic floor muscles. Vaginismus can make it painful/difficult or impossible to have sexual intercourse, to undergo a gynaecological exam, and to insert a tampon. Vaginismus is a physical condition, but it's a psychological condition as well. The main cause is psychological fear.

The reasons might be:

- bad first sexual experience
- trauma of rape
- sexual abuse
- lack of sexual knowledge
- religious beliefs and teachings

Food For Thought



Incorrect beliefs about sex, taboos and fear around insertion can have mental and physical effects on your body! You should know it's okay to feel nervous about inserting something but doing so will Not make you "impure".

"Will my hymen change shape?

When you go through puberty and start menstruating, the estrogen that is made by your ovaries may change the appearance of your hymen and also cause it to become very elastic and because of this, your hymen will become more susceptible to stretching.

The first time you have vaginal sex, your hymen may not even be there for a variety of reasons, like physical exercise, tampons, or menstrual cups. If it's still there, however, it can cause temporary bleeding or discomfort. Once your hymen has been stretched out, it won't grow back, but that's OK!

"If my hymen is stretched out, does that mean I'm not a virgin?"

Nope! As previously stated, your hymen can be ruptured without knowing from numerous activities that don't involve sex at all. So, your hymen has nothing to do with virginity.

"How does menstrual blood pass through the hymen?"

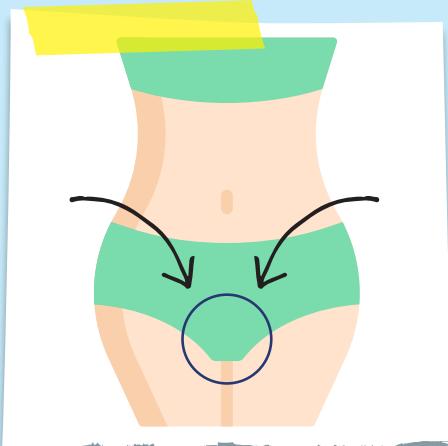
The hymen has one or more holes to let blood through naturally. In most girls, the hymen looks like a doughnut and has one large hole that can let one or two fingers in. Much less common are hymens with two holes, like nostrils. Some even have several small holes!

Get to Know Your Body Better

Pelvic floor exercises

Pelvic floor exercise have been known to help relax muscles around your pelvis.

I'VE BEEN DOING THESE EXERCISES AND I HAVE FELT THE DIFFERENCE! - A.



Kegel Exercise

To work your pelvic floor muscles, sit comfortably and clench the muscles for 10-15 seconds. It should feel like you are holding in your pee. Don't hold your breath or tighten your stomach, buttocks or thigh muscles.



Try some of these yoga poses while you do the kegel exercise!

Cycle Of Vaginismus



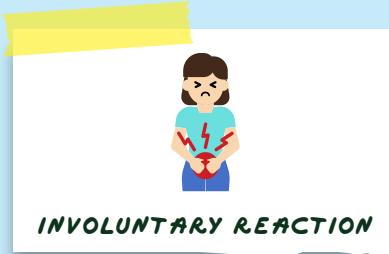
The body anticipates pain and might experience fear and anxiety



Avoidance of intimacy and lack of desire may develop



Body remembers experience and braces for pain on an ongoing basis



The body automatically tightens vaginal muscles

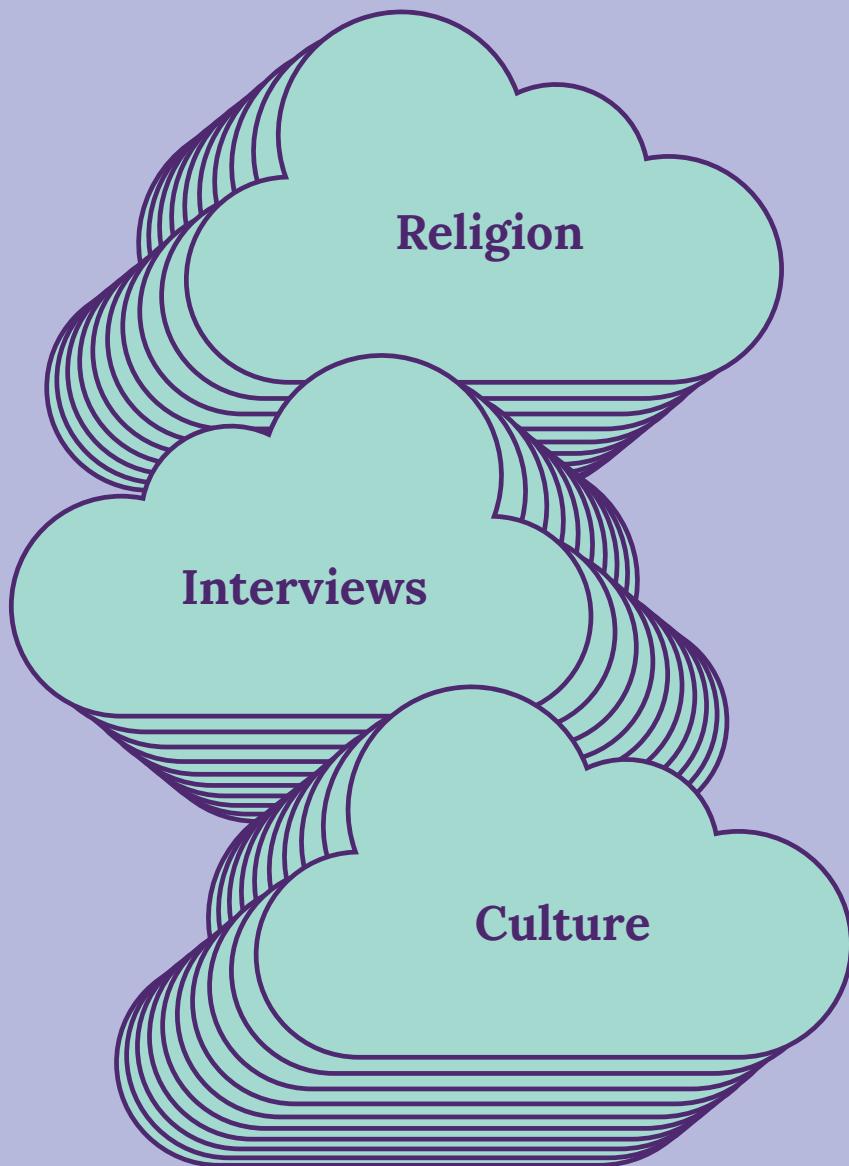


Tightness makes sex painful and penetration may be impossible



Pain reinforces and intensifies

Period and Culture



Religious Leaders and Scholars.

We got the opportunity to interview leaders and scholars from different religions to hear about their views and perspectives around menstruation within specific religions.

We decided to interview religious leaders and scholars as we found that culture and religion are impactful in shaping the way we view things. Our intent was two-fold: to explore how different religions spoke about menstruation and to try and break the shame and stigma through a theological lens.

We reached out to **Rabbi Sybil Sheridan** of West London Synagogue to explain how menstruation is viewed within Judaism. For the Christian perspective, we spoke to **Father Jonathan MacNeaney** from St Mary Abbots Parish Church.

We also got the chance to speak to **Imam Aarij Anwer** of Khalid Bin Al-Walid Mosque in Toronto and **Dr. Haifaa Younis**, an OBGYN and religious scholar, to speak about menstruation within Islam.

For the Hindu perspective, we spoke with **Avni Chang**, a Hindu studies scholar, **Natasha Chawla**, a practitioner and scholar studying yoga, Vedanta and Hinduism, and **Dr Lidia Wojtczak**, a senior lector in Sanskrit and the co-investigator on the BA Sustainable Grant: "Dignity without danger: collaboratively analysing stigma and taboos to develop innovative strategies to address menstrual exclusion in Nepal".

We would like to thank all of the religious leaders and scholars for taking their time to speak with us in an effort to fight the shame and stigma surrounding menstruation.

Disclaimer: all views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in the following interviews belong solely to the interviewee and not necessarily reflective of 'From Your Big Sisters'.

Interview with Rabbi Sybil



RABBI SYBIL

We sat down with Rabbi Sybil of West London Synagogue to know how menstruation is written within Judaism.

Key terms: Niddah

A family purity law governing the separation of husband and wife during a woman's menstruation. Physical contact between spouses is avoided and they sleep in separate beds while a woman is in Niddah. Some orthodox couples also avoid passing objects directly to each other, seeing each other undress, or engaging in flirtatious conversation.

Are there any interpretations of menstruation within the Torah and how is it represented?

It's just very matter of fact. The Torah doesn't seem positive or negative. It's just neutral.

Are there any religious activities that menstruating women are forbidden from doing?

All religious activities remain the same. You pray as normal. Your relationship with God does not change. It is beyond what is happening physically.

 **GOOD POINT! - B.**

Most people think that when a woman is menstruating, she cannot touch the Torah scroll, the holiest object. Absolute rubbish! The Torah is not defiled by a woman's touch. In fact, the same word used for a woman who is menstruating, is used to define holy objects. The word is **tamei**. Ritual objects are not unclean - they are special, separate, different from ordinary objects. So is a woman during her period.

Regarding words like “separation”, “purification” and “unclean”, why do you think these words are used to describe menstruation?

These are all descriptions that were made by men, so I think it's got their values imposed on it. There's a lot of different things that go into it - its very hard to know exactly, but I'm going to throw out a few random ideas.

I think the idea of keeping separate [during your period] plus seven days means that, on an average menstrual cycle, you come back to your husband at the height of your fertility. So maybe the system was designed to ensure that women have as many children, as easily as possible. Another one: when you are menstruating and you feel lousy, sometimes you just want to be on your own and not be hugged or cuddled. It doesn't go for everyone, but many have a feeling of "just let me be."

In Ethopian Jewish communities, they had a separate house in the village for the women to live in during their period. They cooked and chatted together and didn't have to do any work for the family, because there were other people taking care of things.

All these rituals and rules about going to the Mikvah and bathing were not just for women. These rules were for men too. If there was any semen produced, they would also have to separate and go to the Mikvah before they could be with their wives. If you touched the corpse of something, you would

have to ritually immerse. But because for women it occurred so frequently and regularly the rituals surrounding separation and bathing have been understood or interpreted to be mainly for them.

My feeling is that the men probably said “We don't need to” and the women said “But we want to”, because what it does is give them control over their own sexuality. They're the ones who decide when they sleep with husbands. It's not the husbands who decide when they sleep with their wives. So it gave women control, which they didn't have in many other ways of their life because of the way society developed. The women carried on, separated from the husband for the five plus seven days and going to the Mikvah.

What would you say to women who feel impure physically or spiritually during this period?

I would say that this is a very spiritual time actually and a very special time in that this is something unique to women. It is the gift of life and in a sense it's death, because it's evidence of a non-birth, but it confirms the power that you can give life.

We would like to thank Rabbi Sybil for taking the time to speak with us and providing the Jewish perspective within this important discussion.

Interview with Imam Aarij



IMAM AARIJ

We sat down with Imam Aarij Anwer of Khalid Bin Al-Walid Mosque, Toronto, to discuss how menstruation is written within Islam.

How is menstruation viewed within Islam?

Menstruation falls under ritual purification which is a big part of Islamic studies. It's discussed strictly in the context of what a person in a situation should or shouldn't do.

What activities are women exempt from during menstruation?

The Prophet, peace be upon him, says menstruation is something God has created for the daughters of Adam. It is part of being a female, not something that should be shamed. It is mentioned in the Quran as *adha*, which means a painful thing. So the acknowledgement is there from both the Quran and from the Prophet that this is a natural process and simply how things are for all women.

Certain responsibilities are removed from a woman; she is not to pray when menstruating. This does not refer to a prayer for help or a prayer to God which is always permissible. Prayer here means ritual prayer that starts at a certain time, ends at a certain time, has specific movements, you face the direction of

What activities are women exempt from during menstruation?

The Prophet, peace be upon him, says menstruation is something God has created for the daughters of Adam. God has made a male gender and female gender. This (menstruation) is part of being a female, not something that should be shamed.

It is also mentioned in the Quran as adha, which means a painful thing. For the large majority of women, it would be something that is difficult and painful, either physically or emotionally. So the acknowledgement is there from both the Quran and from the Prophet that this is a natural process and simply how things are for all women.

Certain responsibilities are removed from a woman; she is not to pray when menstruating. This does not refer to a prayer for help or a prayer to God which is always permissible. Prayer here means ritual prayer that starts at a certain time, ends at a certain time, has specific movements, you face the direction of Mecca. That ritual prayer, a women is exempt from. During her period, she is exempt from fasting in the month of Ramadan and is exempt from pilgrimage. These are the three main acts of worship in Islam.

Why do you think women are exempt from these activities apart?

The idea is that it's not a stigma for a woman to be in that situation. It is simply a natural but painful process. It's called the acts of worship. If a man or a woman are not in a state of ritual purity, they are not allowed to pray until they attain ritual purity. If I have used the restroom, I have lost my state of ritual purity. To regain ritual purity, I have to make Wudu (ablution). You wash your face, you wash your hands, up to your arms, etc.

Now, what does ritual purity mean? I keep adding the qualifier ritual because it doesn't imply that a person is impure if they're not in that state. It's just a description of having to be in that

state to pray. It's a strictly religious requirement. The Prophet has said that people of faith are always pure, irrespective of what situation they find themselves to be in. This is strictly a matter of "are you able to perform an act of worship or not?" The same applies to men. You're not allowed to do certain acts of worship until you meet the prerequisites. A woman being on her period puts her in a situation where she's not in ritual purity until she finishes her period. And that's not an indictment of who she is. That's not an indictment of the gender, because this is a natural thing that God has written for the daughters of Adam. Like the Prophet said, it's part of all women and neither is it a slight that this is somehow lesser in any way. If you're not able to fulfill the prerequisite, you don't perform that action.

You keep referring to the daughters of Adam. Do stories refer to Eve as well?

Of course, Eve was considered to be the mother of all the kids of Adam. This is just an expression in Arabic. Like your surname comes from your father. So it's as if the Prophet is referring to all of humanity as one large family and their last name is Adam.

Why do you think it is taboo to speak about menstruation when it is a very natural thing and almost half the world's population experiences it at some point in their life?

I teach at a school and I noticed that when I tell them we'll be studying about menstruation, there's a lot of resistance from the girls saying "No, we don't want to talk about this in front of the boys." I counter that with: you have fathers, brothers, male cousins, so you should know what happens to boys. Likewise, do the boys have mothers, sisters, cousins? Yes, so they should know what is happening to you. This is just how things are.

 *THAT'S A GOOD WAY OF THINKING ABOUT IT... - S*

But there are sensitivities that people have developed over time culturally, that's probably why it's a taboo. Not because the

scripture or the Prophet or the early codifiers of Islamic law made it a taboo. In fact, they spoke about it very openly, very respectfully, and in a very unambiguous way. It became a taboo when perhaps people didn't feel that they had the expertise to speak about it or chose not to speak about it. That's my assumption.

So what would you say to those who shame their daughters or women about their periods in the name of culture or religion?

That's an unacceptable practice. If a culture is shaming women for something that the Prophet has said is a natural thing, something that the Quran says is a natural thing and it's a painful process - meaning that empathy is required here, not shaming - that is unacceptable. A woman on her period is no less or no more than someone who is not on her period. The only difference is there are certain things ritually that she's not doing whereas other things she would do. But as a human being, a person is exactly the same. Their value and their excellence is irrelevant with regards to their natural cycle of menstruation.

Are there any positive interpretations or representations of menstruation within the Quran?

There is an example of the wife of the Prophet, Aisha, who is titled "the mother of believers". There are very beautiful descriptions of how the Prophet is lying on her lap while she's on her period and the Prophet is reciting the Quran. She explained to her students that "the Prophet and I would be very close and loving in our relationship, but the only thing that would not be allowed is the act of intimacy itself". The Prophet would be just as loving and romantic with her, when she is on her period because a woman is menstruating, doesn't mean that she is any lesser.

Her example is the best example because she is married to the Prophet. She experiences these things on a monthly basis,

and she's the one who explained to us how he acted when she was on her period. That tells you that that's the de facto understanding of Islam. If someone brings an interpretation that contradicts that, we say, "Well, that's your opinion. It actually contradicts the way the Prophet acted with his wife." You can find interpretations of menstruation in the Jewish tradition and in the Muslim tradition that would blame the women or somehow degrade the women. Those interpretations that are negative are largely biased and largely people's own opinions. Whereas if you look at scripture and its understanding from the Prophet, it's very clear that this is a natural process.

Are there any other positive stories within Islam about menstruation?

There are quite a few stories where Aisha and the Prophet would often eat from the same plate and drink from the same cup. Maybe today we might find that to be a little gross, but back in the day, that was how you would express your feelings for the other person. So the two would do all that together, irrespective of whether she was on her period.

There would be women who would come and ask her questions on how they should interact with their husbands. Aisha is the one who's liberating their minds by saying, "No, this is how me and the Prophet were." Everything else we did like we would do in other times except actual intercourse. She would share her personal life with the women around her to explain to them this is what Islam is teaching. So I think that's a really empowering narrative that Aisha is the one who pushes the envelope in medieval Arabia about what menstruating women can and can't do.

What would you say to women who feel impure spiritually during their period?

In Islam, if somebody does something mandated by God, then

that person is rewarded for that. If they refrain from something prohibited by God, then they're rewarded for that. The fact that you're stopping your ritual acts of worship, in accordance with the commands of God and his Prophet. That is a spiritually uplifting thing you should expect to be rewarded for.

What would you say to women who experience menstrual leakage in a religious setting and feel ashamed about it?

There's an interesting story where there was once a young girl who was traveling with the Prophet and his family. She sat on a camel and had her first period and stained the saddle. She was quite ashamed by that. But when the Prophet heard about it, he said: "There's nothing to be ashamed of" and he instructed to wash away the stains and just reuse the same saddle. Don't try to replace it.

If something happens like that, the task is really clear. You just clean it the way any other impurity would be cleaned. It's not that that thing becomes permanently damaged in any way.

Within Islam is there any insertion or hymen taboo before marriage or if the woman is a virgin?

There's no virginity test to verify a person's chastity. That construct isn't found in the texts of Islam. The idea of using a tampon, as long as it doesn't cause her to have medical problems afterwards, it's something that is permissible irrespective of whether the person is married or not.

There was a woman who came to the Prophet and asked "I have a strong and prolonged flow of blood, what should I do?" And that's her period.

He instructed her to use cotton to block the bleeding - this is analogous to a tampon, even though the cotton isn't fully inserted into the hymen. But if women did that back in the day to prevent their blood from gushing, that's an acceptable thing for them to do. It's not a problem as long as it doesn't cause any harm medically to the woman.

Does the hymen itself hold any significance within Islam? And if so, why?

It's a body part, like any body part. In Islam, if a person is unfaithful, man or woman, they're equally sinful. It's not like a woman is more sinful if she is unfaithful to her husband and a man is not. The idea of promiscuity is equally disliked for both genders. So from that perspective, the hymen is irrelevant.

Physically a woman's hymen might be broken in many ways - injury, accident or sports. That doesn't affect them as a person. Likewise, a tampon doesn't make them sinful. It's not like a girl has lost her virginity because they're inserting something there. Islamically there's no precedence to prove someone's virginity.

Do you think Islamically there's a responsibility to teach children about menstruation?

Oh, yes, absolutely it is a responsibility to do so. For example, if you have a book that has 20 chapters of Islamic sciences, this would be chapter number three or four. If you're going to teach an Islamic programme at a school and you have a curriculum, this has to be a component of it. If there's a course being taught about ritual acts of worship, this has to be a component of it because it affects the ritual acts of worship for half the population. There's a course taught on marriage and intimacy between couples. There's a lot of advice and anecdotes and whatnot, but then this is a component in that as well because it affects intimacy of couples, and so on and so forth.

We would like to thank Imam Aarij for taking the time to speak with us and providing the Islamic perspective within this important discussion.

Interview with Dr Haifaa



DR HAIFAA YOUNIS

We sat down with Dr. Haifaa Younis, an OBGYN and religious scholar, to speak about how menstruation is written within Islam.

Is there anything that your Islamic study has helped you understand better about being an OBGYN and gynecology?
Everything. You start practicing differently, start looking at your patients differently, how you treat diseases and your expectation from treatment - The more you study Islam the more compassionate you are.

How is menstruation written about within Islam?

Amazingly, it's in the religious book and is mentioned in the second chapter, Surah Bukrah, in the Quran. The Prophet's (pbuh) companions ask him, 'what is this menstruation?' The word menstruation in Arabic is "adha" which is pain, discomfort, it's something they don't like. So absolutely, it is mentioned in the Quran and in the Sunnah [the way or the path of the Prophet (pbuh)] too.

What activities are women exempt or forbidden from during their period?

So the first thing is, they should not pray or fast during their period. If they are menstruating during the time of Hajj (pilgrimage) they can do everything except 'tawaf', which is when you circumambulate the Kaaba. She is not allowed to touch the Quran, unless she wears a glove, or (there is) a barrier. To read the Quran, there are some exceptions like if she's memorising the Quran and is worried she might forget. Or if she is a teacher and she has to teach. And then in private life, intimate relations with the husband is absolutely not allowed.

How does menstruation come into play with being a religious scholar? How do you overcome these restrictions and in these moments of abstaining from being religious?

The beauty of Islam is, the act of worship in Islam is not linear and if I cannot do this in a certain way, that means I'm less, or I am disconnected. No, the acts of worship of Islam are external and internal (in the heart). There is a long list of things I can say, read or do and I'm still connected [to Allah]. It's just that the action [praying], I am not allowed to do. So the connection with Allah, it doesn't stop during the menstruation. The way we connect changes.

What would you say to women who feel impure physically and spiritually during their period?

I don't use the word impure because there's a hadith (story) of the Prophet where he says "The believer is never impure". So I always use the term 'in a state of menstruation'. You need to change the mindset that 'I am impure, that I am different, No, I am not.'

In arabic, the word used is 'Tahāra'. I don't think there's a better way to translate it other than 'impure'. But the implications of 'impure' in English are very different than the

word in Arabic. That's where the confusion comes in. You are always pure. You are Islamically in a state of impurity because you cannot pray and you can not fast. That's it. But you are pure.

What would you say to women who feel ashamed of menstrual leakage in religious settings (holidays, when praying, in a mosque...)?

I would say to them "Allah decrees and whatever Allah decrees will happen". Secondly, it is the same as if someone leaked urine - they have a full bladder, there isn't a bathroom close by. What do you say? Okay! It's not a big thing. But it is uncomfortable because you feel something coming out. So I would say, don't look down on yourself, you've taken precautions but these things happen. I would go and change, take it easy, and in the future, take more precautions - that's it.

Do you think Islamically there's a responsibility to teach children about menstruation?

Something I would say to all my beautiful Muslim sisters is that this [menstrual education] is something that they have to learn and they [children] need to learn. Every Muslim woman and girl, mother and daughter needs to learn this subject because it is related to your relationship as a believer with your creator. Some scholars will teach you this is a compulsory knowledge of every woman. Even after menopause, a woman needs to know because if she's 57 or 58 and she sees blood, what is this blood? Is this menstruation or not? Can she pray or fast during Ramadan? Can she and her husband have intercourse? So this is a subject that every Muslim woman needs to learn because it's involved in every step of her life and her relationship with her creator.

Would you say the interpretations of menstruation within the Quran are positive or neutral?

I'm speaking as a physician now – when a woman comes to me and says "I have severe pain in my period, I can't go to work. I feel nauseous. I am emotional. To me, anything makes me cry. Anything makes me tense."

My answer is "That's how it is. That's what Allah said it's like in the Quran!" The way I look at it, anything written in the Quran, is something I need to learn about - you shouldn't hide it.

Secondly, Allah has written it in its exact way – menstruation is something that can bring discomfort and pain. It is very sympathetic to the woman. Allah is saying give her space - this can be the time of the month where she is not her normal self. So it looks at it very positively, Alhumdullilah (Praise be to God).

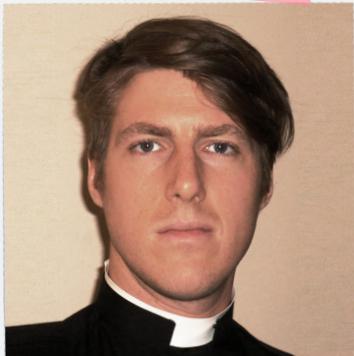
From a gynecologist's point of view, is menstruation clean?

From a gynecologist's point of view, what is menstruation? It is the lining of the uterus. Its blood and tissues. And then when the hormones change in the body and no pregnancy happens, the hormone decreases and lining of the uterus starts shedding. How can it be impure? It is just the lining of the uterus.

We would like to thank Dr Haifaa Younis for taking the time to speak with us and providing the Islamic perspective within this important discussion.



Interview with Father Jonathan



FATHER JONATHAN

We sat down with Rev.d. Jonathan MacNeaney of St Mary Abbots Church to speak about how menstruation is written within Christianity.

Within Christianity, how is menstruation written about?

There's very little in the New Testament texts, but it's been a non-issue in the Christian Church throughout history. There's some debate in the early Church Fathers (ancient religious Christian theologians), because there's lots in the Old Testament about menstruation, but Christians don't tend to abide by most of the purity laws, so there's some debate in the early Church in the first 500 years about whether we should continue with the purity laws that are about menstruation. And the answer is no.

But it is retained in Orthodox Christianity - Greek, Russian, and Coptic Orthodox Christians, don't allow women to receive communion when they're menstruating. So through their tradition, it's been kept alive. But for the churches of the West, it's just a non-issue. That's the official church line. Although in many places it's kept alive through folk religion and through the received culture. These deeply ingrained patterns of cultural living often live alongside Christian faith.

They often hold stigma and taboo around menstruation in a way that the official teaching of the Church doesn't.

Is menstrual blood viewed as unclean within Christianity?

In the Hebrew Scriptures blood is seen as the real unclean thing - but it is blood from anywhere and everywhere. So the worst kind of food law you can break is the drinking of animal blood, as it's seen as being sacred, divine and where the life force of things comes from. It is both the most pure and holy thing because it's what gives birth to life, but it's also the most impure thing to spill, to be covered with or to ingest. Menstrual blood is not seen as different from any other blood. And nor are there any rules about cleaning yourself of it or washing or regaining holiness.

Why do you feel that menstrual blood is seen differently within the Old Testament?

It's to do with its life giving properties. The understanding of reproduction in the first century are quite an agrarian one. Women were seen as fertile fields in which little humans were sown. That's why there are all these rules about masturbation. There's a character called Onan, an Old English word for "masturbating" (hence the sin of Onan), and he spills his 'seed' upon the ground. This is seen as a bad thing to do because rather than making use of it for its proper purpose of creating humans, he has wasted this gift. I guess that's the reason menstrual blood is seen as being sacred because it is a place for the birth of new life. As it's sacred in that way, it also falls on the other side of being particularly polluting when it's not being fertilised.

Why do you think that menstruation is seen as a taboo topic to speak about when almost half the population will experience it at some point in their life?

It doesn't carry taboo within Christianity, but it probably does within the cultures in which Christianity exists. My

perspective is that the holiness code is an attempt to live in healthy ways. People may have recognised that those who spend a lot of time touching blood, tending to the wounded or people with leprosy, got leprosy themselves. So if you wanted to protect your community from disease, one way of doing that was to keep all of the diseased people away from you. So I suppose it's probably a correlation and incorrect assumption that because sometimes touching blood leads to bad consequences, then always touching blood is going to lead to that consequence.

What would you say to those who shame their daughters and women about their periods and the name of culture and religion?

"Stop it!" It would be hurtful, to me as a Christian, for other people to be justifying that kind of shaming in the name of Christ. Shame is believing that there's something wrong with you. Guilt is believing that you've done something wrong. In that, shame is a much more insidious issue than guilt, because guilt you can be forgiven for.

It says that you, who are God's beloved creatures, have not only done something wrong but that you are something wrong, and that's not right.

Those who do shame others probably don't know the significance of the damage they are doing in terms of hours of lost schooling and education, lost earnings, etc. due to menstruation. I suppose that upon learning that, they might feel quite ashamed about what they've been doing. So I guess I'm calling them to repentance, to seek forgiveness for this thing (shaming) that they've been doing wrong and to amend their lives.

Are there any interpretations of menstruation within the Bible that are represented in a positive way?

No, but I would suspect that in folk religion and the times that Christ lived in, rejoiced and held ritual acts of transition from personhood surrounding menstruation. But it doesn't appear as narratives in the scriptures themselves. Given that there was so much positivity about pregnancy and the bringing forth of children, and given that menstruation is required to recognise the “way of women”, then presumably there was also joy around menstruation because it is indicative of the fact that this person could have children.

What do you think about the fact that half the population experience menstruation, that on average it lasts about eight years of a woman's life, and yet there isn't much writing about it within the Bible?

I don't find it massively surprising because all of these are scriptures were written by men who have kept themselves away from women. So Paul is writing most of the New Testament letters – he's single and doesn't have a wife. Throughout Christian history, the people who are literate are often monks and holy men and often on their own, so it's not surprising that they're not writing about women and particularly about things that women were keeping or forced to keep hidden from them.

What would you say to women who feel impure spiritually during their period?

For Christians, I would say that there is no reason for them to think that they are physically or spiritually impure within the Christian tradition. This is a part of who they are, created lovingly as a creature of God. They are welcome to take full part in acts of Christian worship and in communal life.

When I'm in church preaching to people in their eighties and nineties, I think of the person who was preaching to them when they were children telling them "Do not allow women to speak in church, menstruation is impure, etc., which is the exact opposite of what I'm saying to them now, and I realised that it's unreasonable for me to think that they are suddenly going to change. They're in that difficult position of hearing both of those contradictory voices and trying to decide whom to follow. If they decide 'I'll do what Jonathan says', then a part of them is feeling like they're betraying what they were told as a child. They're trying to be faithful to what was passed on to them and the swing side of that is the cost that it continues to have. We have to find a path between those two things.

There's a significant amount of sensitivity that we have to around telling people what they ought to think about menstruation, just like other issues, even when it feels so clear-cut to us, especially as a white Western man, I suppose.

What would you say to women who feel ashamed of menstrual leakage in religious settings?

Being embarrassed about something like that is fine, just in the same way that if any other bodily function that I normally keep private, but not secret, was suddenly made public. If I let out a massive fart as I was in front of the altar, I might feel embarrassed, but I wouldn't feel ashamed as if "gosh, there's something wrong with me". [M]enstruation is part of what bodies do. So I would hope that they wouldn't feel ashamed that there was something wrong with them, but hope that they could laugh off the potential embarrassment of it.

Does the hymen hold any significance within Christianity and if so, why?

Nope, not in the scriptures, not in the history of the Church. So what holds significance is virginity. The rules of the church are still that "sexual relationships are exclusively for marriage",

but very few people in this nation are still practising that. Again, I'm sure they'd be part of the cultures and the folk religion in nations where Christianity exists, but never at the behest of the Church.

Within Christianity, is there any insertion or hymen taboo before marriage or if the woman is a virgin?

No, but I can completely imagine that there are Christians and even Christian leaders who would say that within cultures and contexts. The responsibility there, in the Church, [is] to do some work of demythologisation, which it hasn't done. Either way, I would imagine that it is to do with men wanting control over women's bodies.

Do you feel it's your role to educate others when it comes to subjects such as menstruation?

So yes, the Church does a lot of educating of children by way of its schools, about sex education, but it's just such a non-issue for most of the people in my churches. It's not something I've preached about, I've talked about other related issues like female genital mutilation in public service. So I haven't spoken about it explicitly, but there would be no reason not to.

Do you think there is a responsibility to teach children about menstruation within Christianity?

There's not a scriptural warrant to do it but obviously we want our children to be well adjusted, happy, healthy adults, and want them to know about issues of justice. There is responsibility to talk about any issues of justice and to teach our kids about it.

We would like to thank Father Jonathan for speaking with us and providing the Christian perspective within this important discussion.

Interview with Natasha Chawla



NATASHA CHAWLA

We sat down with Natasha Chawla, a practitioner and scholar studying yoga, Vedanta and Hinduism, to speak about how menstruation is written within Hinduism.

What does Hinduism say about menstruation?

Hinduism has two categories of scriptures. Shruti is the eternal and unchanging knowledge revealed to great seers in their meditation since the inception of Time. Smrti is man's societal customs and traditions of any given time.

In parts of rural India, it is a celebration when a girl first gets her period, as it is considered her passage into womanhood. Fertility is considered as a blessing, a chance to help bring life on earth.

Throughout India's many regions, there were/are varying restrictions followed for girls/ladies during their menstruation period, but the premise is the same: It is a time of detoxification, when the body is ridding itself of toxins. Th[e] restrictions [vary] from not entering the kitchen, to not visiting a temple, to not serving guests. For the sake of "maintaining purity," some customs are observed above reason and science simply because they are traditions of yore.

To say that menstruation is impure implies that the baby she delivers is also impure. Such statements are born of ignorance and not stated in Hindu scriptures, but nevertheless were often accepted by illiterates who succumbed to and promoted superstitions or traditions that carried on over time as a result of power plays for control.

In Hindu scriptures, the restrictions given seem to coincide more with logical reasoning, such as the need to stay indoors, revive energy, and maintain hygiene in a time when sanitary products had not been developed. For example, wild animals could attack at the smell of blood, so it was safer for women to remain indoors.

What activities are women exempt or forbidden from doing during menstruation?

In Hinduism it is suggested to abstain from sex when menstruating due to hygienic reasons. It is also suggested not to cook for others because your vibrations go into your food. It is well known that while cooking, it is important for a homemaker to have positive thoughts because thoughts, too, have energy, and energy affects everything. During menstruation, hormones are at play and can lead to wandering thoughts, or emotional swings, or a restless mind. These don't spell balance, and such energy transfers into the food you cook for others.

It was said in much earlier days not to sleep in the same room or the same bed during menstruation, but this was also said because of hygienic reasons, and in a time when sanitary products had not yet been developed.

In Hinduism, how is menstruation viewed?

Menstruation is viewed as natural and part of the female cycle, not as clean or dirty. There is a concept of impurity in rituals

because the body is unhygienic and the mind is susceptible. But whether menstruating or not, hormones at play can lead to a mind becoming agitated or imbalanced. To do any worship ritual properly, the mind should be calm, balanced, and focused. The word shucha in Sanskrit means clean. It does not always imply purity. It is not that menstruating women are bad or impure. It is a matter of practicality and hygiene. Back in the day, to go to a place of worship, whether temple or mosque, without sanitary napkins was partly because it was unhygienic. To maintain the sanctity and purity of a holy place of pilgrimage, such as a temple, any negative vibrations of anyone, due to menstruation or not, should be checked at the door.

Hinduism, which reveres all natural forces and worships nature as the expression of Divine Mother of the cosmos, does not aim to suppress women. Over time, a lack of right thinking and understanding of Hindu scriptures have created countless taboos and stigmas. These have brought their own dangers, including society deeming natural phenomena like menstruation as dirty or impure.

Why do you think menstruation is seen as a taboo topic when almost half the population will experience it at some point in their life?

While most written Hindu scriptures and commentaries have been written by men, it is not that women are told not to discuss such matters or that their experiences are taboo and not for social discussion. Different cultures of countries, even in regions within countries, determine their own levels of conservatism, extreme or liberal, scientific or spiritual or superstitious, per their norms, customs, and traditions. In Hinduism, this is why smṛti-śāstra (scriptures that adapt with the changing times per the values and needs of society) is important.

The driving force behind Hinduism is always dharma: for

humanity to adopt right thinking and action that results in the highest welfare of all. For this, discussions will be needed at the right time, but if this does not happen, the respective affected sect of society will force it to happen because of its need. Matters stigmatised or labelled as taboo based on age-old traditions cannot, and should not, be buried or ignored for the sake of convenience. In Hinduism, dharma is key and awareness or alertness is its thought-provoking instigator.

What practices regarding menstruation do you feel are not prescribed by religion, but come from cultural pressures?

I don't think Hinduism prescribes impractical rules and regulations for women. I think cultural pressures do have strong influences on the masses and on people who choose to remain unaware or overly conservative for the sake of blind tradition. One cultural stigma about menstruation that continues is the insistence for women not to leave the house when menstruating, or not to enter the kitchen. Times have changed and women are part of the work-force to support their families.

Hinduism's scriptures focus on dharma, or righteousness, in societal living, to think and do what is dharmic, which necessarily means what is the best way to proceed to benefit all.

I think many cultural stigmas have been stamped as the insistences of religion when they are not so. And I think awareness and knowledge are key in helping create a more harmonious and dharmic society.

What would you say to those who shame their daughters or women about their periods in the name of culture or religion?

I think men wrongly shame women as a result of their own agitations, negativities, and weaknesses. It is a cultural defect born of ignorance, and ignorance can only be removed by knowledge. After all, how can a woman be blamed or eschewed because of a natural occurrence in her body?

If you haven't experienced something, it's easy to shame it. It is more heart-breaking to hear of women shaming other women—they should know better.

Are there any interpretations of menstruation within religious scriptures that are represented in a positive or natural way? Are there any positive stories?

I read in a book on shāktas, or worshippers of Divine Mother, and practitioners of tantra yoga that they consider menstruation as something very sacred.

The Devipuram Temple in Andhra Pradesh is dedicated to Devi worship and the temple's presiding deity is Goddess Lalita. In the temple, every woman is looked upon as the living Goddess. It is believed there that a woman's entry into the temple results in the transmission of energy from the temple deity to her, even more so during a woman's period. Far from considering it impure, menstruation is considered just the opposite—sacred.

In Hinduism, all forms of Devi (Goddess Parvati, Durga, Kali, Chandi, etc.) are, in various ways, related to fertility and/or blood. There are many temples like this that follow the cycle of the Goddess. Respecting a woman's cycle, the temple is closed for three days a month for the living Goddess deity in the temple to rest. When the temple reopens, there is a celebration and devotees flock there.

What would you say to a woman who feels impure, physically or spiritually, during her period?

I would say, 'Educate yourself and study the scriptures you follow, because naturally occurring hormonal changes are not an indication of impurity.' If girls are taught properly on the who-what-why-when etc. of menstruation, I do not think they would feel this way. The taboo and secrecy around this natural phenomenon needs to be properly explained.

What would you say to women who feel ashamed of menstrual leakage in a religious setting?

Clearly, it is nothing to be ashamed about. It may be embarrassing, but it is not an offence against God or humanity. It happens.

Is the topic of menstruation spoken about on a public level within Hinduism?

Culturally, it is discussed and explained in private not public, woman to girl, not man to girl. In [the] modern day, educated Hindus do not hesitate to mention such topics in public. There are NGOs and social service programmes that serve India's villages and rural areas, and help create awareness among village women about menstruation, sanitary napkins, hygiene, disposal, fertility, contraception, and similar topics.

Do you think there is a responsibility to teach children about menstruation within Hinduism?

More than searching for statements in Hindu scriptures, children learn science first. Menstruation is a regular, natural, scientific occurrence. It has to be introduced and taught at home or in school. This is the 21st century and I think there is a greater relevance and prevalence of these conversations today.

We would like to thank Natasha Chawla for speaking with us and providing the Hindu perspective within this important discussion.

Interview with Avni Chang



AVNI CHANG

We sat down with Avni Chang, a Hindu studies scholar, to speak about how menstruation is written within Hinduism.

How is menstruation written about within Hinduism?

When it comes to Hinduism, there's so much diversity so I cannot speak for every single tradition and belief. There is no blanket 'Hindu' view, teaching or tradition. Many Hindus believe one of two things: that a menstruating woman is either so pure that she takes on the form of a living goddess during her time of the month and can redirect the energy of an idol in a temple, or that the menstruating woman is impure and her body is undergoing a period of drastic change and detoxification. Attitudes surrounding menstruation in general have less to do with a single, time-honoured religious principle and more to do with a kind of 'handed-down' tradition that their families or close circles are keepers of. In this view and in practice taboo ideas around menstruation are more cultural than they are religious. This is why you will find rules or prescriptions in dharma texts – texts that lay out rules and duties that tend to paint more of a picture of the time in which they were written – a time that had different technologies of self-sanitation, health, etc. Today, things are different.

If girls choose to follow traditions from their mothers or grandmothers it's a matter of personal choice.

What activities are women exempt or forbidden from during menstruation?

The way that menstruation is talked about is so diverse. One idea around it is self-purification (tapas) for the woman – something that only a woman has the privilege of experiencing and therefore she doesn't need to partake in devotional rites. A lot of that is based on the different states and energies of the mind. When she's experiencing this kind of self-purification, she is kind of resetting her physical and mental wellbeing. The Manu Smrti, one of the oldest well-known texts on dharma, specifically states that the woman whose thoughts have become impure would be purified by menstruation (5.108). In order for the woman to undergo self-purification she is 'restricted' or does not need to do certain day-to-day activities. This might be typically viewed as segregation. However, the Hindu texts say something else – the idea of menstruation is an act of tapas, which when performed by anyone (male or female), is performed in solitude.

Perhaps this is why when I would go to India, people would tell me 'Oh, you're on raja (holiday).' I would be exempt from having to do anything.

What are some examples of restrictions within the Hindu texts?

Depending on what view we consider – whether menstruation is a period of impurity due to a rise in a certain mental energy, or whether menstruation is a period of austerity, or self-purification – the restrictions and prescriptions (some more positive than 'oppressive') are different. For example, certain dharma texts ask the menstruating woman not to perform any sacred (religious) activities like morning rituals, large scale rituals, visiting temples, etc. Others ask women not to cook food as her mental energies will be transferred into the food.

Others even go to specifically restrict women from touching certain metals due to how her energies may react when coming into contact with these metals. On the other side of the coin, certain dharma texts also ask the menstruating woman to rest and not physically exert themselves. When we read such texts we may see the prescriptions given to women as 'oppressive', but these are no different to the prescriptions given to people who have just experienced a death in the family or given birth, etc. The idea is that you shouldn't be involved in religious rituals as they expect you to be calm and collected when you perform them.

Can women pray the same way during their period?

A hundred years ago, the narrative would be different, but now if you go to certain temples, there are sanitary bins and tampon [vending] machines which makes it quite obvious that everyone's welcome.

How is menstruation viewed? And how is menstrual blood viewed specifically?

I would say it's seen as natural in some cases it is considered pure and sacred, and even plays an important role in Tantric rites and rituals.

What would you say to women who feel ashamed of menstrual leakage in religious settings or when praying in a temple?

I think we would all be embarrassed if something like that happened to us. I don't think the embarrassment would have anything to do with religious thinking or settings specifically.

Why do you think menstruation is seen as a taboo topic to speak about when almost half the population will experience it at some point in their life?

I think it's based on tradition. We're being brought up in a household in which these things have been practised for so long and you will ask questions as to why, and won't get

answers until you start exploring for yourself. It's the way it's always been, isn't it? I don't think it's a specific religious or cultural issue. I think it's a worldwide issue.

Can you speak more about the traditions in Hindu culture when a girl does start her period.

Like in many other religions/faiths, it is a matter of personal choice. The guidance is for them to rest for the first three days of the menstruation to allow that much needed rest from their physical chores and it was also hoped that at this delicate time the menstruating girl would get the co-operation of her family.

Speaking specifically, in certain parts of India, young girls who have just started menstruating are dressed up, adorned, gifted and fed and the idea is that the goddess is now coming into her form. The celebration is also tied to self-purification - only the woman is able to go through this monthly detoxification because she's more eternally pure. What men may have to put special effort into comes as part of a natural process to women.

In other parts of India certain cultures hold mass festivals and celebrations. Other ideas revolve round 'loss of life'. When someone dies the family goes through a period of grievance. It is a period in which they find a way to cope with their loss. If menstruation is viewed in this same light the unfertilised egg may be equated to the prevented birth of a soul. The woman's body naturally takes time to grieve this loss.

These are only some beliefs and associated views. There is not one specific blanket Hindu worldview.

Given that menstruation is such a big part of a girl's and woman's life, are there any interpretations of menstruation within Hindu scriptures?

Not that I know of. But we are translating Sanskrit into English, so you have terms like 'coming of age' or 'she's now a woman' that might get lost in translation.

Do you think cultural views about menstruation are changing in different countries?

I think it is in places that have access to information and knowledge.

Do you think it's problematic that blood, hymen, menstruation and sex are not addressed?

It really depends on where the responsibility lies. As a parent, I think that the times and thinking are changing, that people are talking more. I would hope that when my daughter grows up, she's going to come to me to talk about things that I wouldn't necessarily have felt comfortable talking about openly when I was growing up. I think it's a responsibility of individuals to feel comfortable to receive that information and we'll be able to talk about it more.

Can it be problematic? Yes. If people aren't informed, but everyone has their own opinion, it's like vaccinations.

Having the internet to use isn't always the best thing, but I guess calculated decisions and good informed choices are important.

I can see that there are consequences of not addressing it, but again, that depends on the parent - a lot of the stigma depends on what the parent chooses to teach or inform the child.

We would like to thank Avni Chag for her time and providing the Hindu perspective within this important discussion.

Interview with Dr Lidia



DR LIDIA WOJTCZAK

We sat down with Dr Lidia Wojtczak, a senior lecturer in Sanskrit and co-investigator on the BA Sustainable Grant: "Dignity Without Danger" to speak about how menstruation is written within Hinduism.

In your opinion, do you think that menstrual exclusion is mostly rooted in culture and religion?

Hinduism can be seen as both a religion and a way of life and many of the 'religious' rules actually come from books of law - Dharmaśāstras. I'm using the term "Sanskrit Text" as shorthand for texts written in Sanskrit which belong to the normative or orthodox traditions. If we read these texts from the point of view of exclusion, we can see that there are at least three main ways in which women are "put in their place."

The first factor is the impurity of a menstruating woman. Through her impurity, she is able to put all the man's and the village's hard work at risk and completely ruin that whole situation for everyone. She is seen as impure and she knows she's impure. That's very important. She knows it's her responsibility to not pollute. That's her duty as an impure menstruating woman.

In the case of menstrual exclusion in Nepal, impurity is what takes the forefront. In some extreme cases, women can be excluded to these so-called cow sheds and this can lead to very tragic circumstances where women might get very ill or sometimes even die from things like snakebites or smoke or the cold or all these things

You've done research on menstrual exclusion in Nepal in particular - do you know, or have you observed any positive cultural experiences of menstruation in Nepal?

Menstrual exclusion is a very complicated social phenomenon so there are bound to be different perspectives on it. It can be seen as something positive by the women experiencing it. Because of the restrictions they are under, perhaps they don't have to cook for two days, or do any of the cleaning or touching anything at home. This may be the attitude if they have a safer space to be isolated in, safer than a shed in the forest, like a special apartment in their house. Periods are often referred to as 'a woman's holiday' in some places in India. So, while the foundations of the practice are inherently oppressive, women experience it in different ways and, for the most part, they'll try to make the best of it when they can. Another important note is that not all women are forced or choose to isolate when menstruating. Many modern South Asian women are going about their daily lives normally when they menstruate.

What do you feel are the most effective ways to break the shame and stigma of menstruation?

The thing is that they are in a specific context and it's impossible and immoral to take that away from them. Very often you'll see that the girls themselves enforce all of these practices of exclusion and that's because they feel responsible in so many different ways for so many things. It's quite hard to try to force a change from the outside without that context in mind.

I would say education is perhaps the best way to approach the problem of the shame and stigma surrounding menstruation in many places in the world. I do think that many girls don't know what menstruation is.

Menstrual exclusion takes place for a whole range of complicated religious or cultural or historical or social reasons - actually because of a mixture of them all. So a good idea is to make sure girls are receiving the correct information about what is happening with their bodies so that they can choose to make their own decisions insofar as they are able.

How would you say menstruation is written about within Sanskrit or within Hinduism?

It's a big topic. Very generally, you could say it has its foundations in the Vedic texts and these are around 4,000 years old. There's one specific story where one of the greatest Gods, Indra, kills a brahmin, a rival sacrificer, and becomes impure. Therefore he can't do any sacrifices himself and decides to get rid of his impurity by dividing it into thirds. He gives a third to some trees, a third to the earth and he leaves a third to the women. The women say 'sure, we will take on this one-third of your impurity and in return, we want to be able to have children'. And he said, 'fine you'll take the sin and be able to have children whenever you want but the burden you will have from now on is that you will menstruate every month'. Every time this myth gets retold in the texts over the centuries a little bit more is added.

Menstruation gets written about a lot within Hinduism medical literature for the purpose of just describing what it is, 'Why does it happen? Where does it come from?' It's very clear these medical texts, written by men, didn't know exactly how a woman's body works.

Tantric texts are texts which were written to be subversive

and as a sort of a counterculture. Another thing that tantric practitioners may appreciate is menstruation as a sign of the 'shakti' or the power of a female goddess. But it's not necessarily true for every branch.

There is a temple called Kamakhya in Assam, where it's thought that that is where the goddess' vulva resides, and so that's where she menstruates. Practitioners might go and worship the menstruation of the goddess, but then at home, they may still practice menstrual exclusion for social reasons because the women of the family may still be seen as impure when they menstruate. However, if you are interested in finding textual references to more positive outlooks on menstruation, I would say the Tantric texts are where you might find them.

Within Hinduism, are there any activities that women are exempt or forbidden from during menstruation?

Within the texts and the prescriptions of broadly understood Hinduism, the most important thing is that a woman just cannot be around a man. She cannot look at him. She cannot be looked at by him. She cannot touch anything that is generally used in the house. She cannot cook. But there are all sorts of ancient prohibitions, which don't make much sense anymore, but which people may still follow. In Nepal, a woman may decide that she can't touch a jar of pickles when she's menstruating, because they will go off rather than pickle. The normative Sanskrit texts tell women they can't cut their nails or hairs. They shouldn't be doing their makeup. They shouldn't be making ropes, for some reason. That's a very ancient prohibition that must have originally had some relevance. You can't specifically use eyeliner, can't use body creams, etc. Personal hygiene is just generally not seen as something that should be happening.

Do you find it interesting that menstruation is considered impure but then women are forbidden from personal hygiene?

The point is that this is a very different type of impurity. Beside the basic, physical impurity, there exists a social and ritual impurity and the things you endanger with this second type of impurity are much more consequential. For instance, the chances of someone else reaching liberation or the ritual failing. It's not impurity in the sense of physical impurity, but just being a danger to society.

Within a Sanskrit text, apart from how menstruation is viewed, how is menstrual blood specifically represented?

Within Orthodox Hinduism, I would say that menstrual blood is the symbol of this impurity - it's taboo, impure, bad. In general, all bodily fluids are seen as impure. If you think about tantric texts, menstrual blood is one of the respected bodily fluids, because it is something that the goddess also has since she menstruates.

From what I've seen, I'm pretty certain that menstrual blood itself isn't that talked about in Orthodox Hindu settings. It's talked about a lot in medical texts because of this idea that it's a female fluid that is the counterpart of semen. There is a lot of discussion on how the female 'semen' works and on its relation to menstrual blood. Is it the menstrual blood which is the semen itself? Is there a secret feminine semen just hidden inside the menstrual blood? Or even is it something separate to menstrual blood, which is a female semen. There's no taboo there because it's just the medical text.

Why do you think menstruation is a taboo topic when almost half the population experience it at some point in their life?

I'll speak only again to Hindu normative texts. It's very clear from a Hindu perspective that the texts were masculine, male-oriented, very patriarchal. If you think about the caste system (there are four castes in the system) that's always

related to men. Women are very often classed together with the lowest of castes. Of course we can't actually verify how all of these prescriptions and prohibitions affected women throughout history, but as far as we can tell from the texts that were being produced, this was a male-centred culture that was writing male-centred texts and creating male-centred prescriptions and propositions.

What would you say to those that shame their daughters or women, about periods in the name of religion? Or are there any religious texts that speak against it?

For the most part, menstrual shaming and menstrual exclusion happens for more complicated reasons than we can understand looking from the outside. While I'm very compassionate and very empathetic towards anyone who's going through something like menstrual shaming, I wouldn't want to create even more difficult situations for women, for instance, by turning them against their families. That just seems to be counterproductive. I think that every case will need to be treated separately and with a very deep knowledge of the cultural, religious, and social context that's taking place and which is leading to this exclusion and shaming.

To answer the second part, no. I have yet to come across a text which would speak against menstrual exclusion (period shaming does not seem to be a concern, perhaps because men do not have much of a role to play in it?). I would imagine that in those texts which venerate menstruation, we'll find an ultra transgressive, ultra-feminine female power goddess narrative. I doubt they would have anything to say about the real-life experiences of women who go through menstrual exclusion or shaming.

Does the hymen hold any significance within Hinduism?

I don't know. Good question. The hymen more in the sense of virginity, for instance? I don't think it's written about at all as a piece of female anatomy, like 'the hymen exists'. I don't even think I've seen that come up.

Do you know why it isn't mentioned? Maybe they didn't know about it.

Exactly. That's the thing, to know what a hymen is, you'd have to observe the female body with pretty strong interest. At least Indian texts that I've read, it's not that they are not mentioned because they are too taboo to mention, it's just that they weren't of any interest to the people writing the texts. It feels like two sides of the same coin - since the authors don't seem to know much about menstruation, they've not studied it themselves - as something 'unknown' and 'mysterious', it's easy to be afraid of. That's the sort of feeling you get in these Sanskrit normative texts - menstruation is such a mysterious thing, it's completely unknown and unstudied and dangerous and, importantly, men don't have it. There is a feeling even in the oldest myth about the god Indra, that there must be something inherently wrong with women or something magical or weird.

You can also sometimes get the impression when reading these normative Sanskrit texts that women menstruating [are] very powerful. They are a danger and should be locked away because they have this destructive power.

It must be a huge power because sometimes there seems to be this undercurrent that all of these mechanisms - women's natural 'wicked nature', women's dharma and the impurity of menstruation are all tools in a complicated system of controlling this power.

Do you think there is a responsibility to teach children about menstruation within Hinduism or Sanskrit?

I think there is a responsibility to teach children everywhere, about menstruation. In an ideal world, boys and girls are taught about menstruation. I think that one of the biggest things that's still missing from the discussion in the West, for instance, is the fact that despite a more advanced sexual education in schools, boys still don't always realise how menstruation and the menstrual cycle work. It would be brilliant if that could change everywhere, within whatever context.

We would like to thank Dr Lidia Wojczak for her time and providing the Hindu perspective within this important discussion.



Question Corner

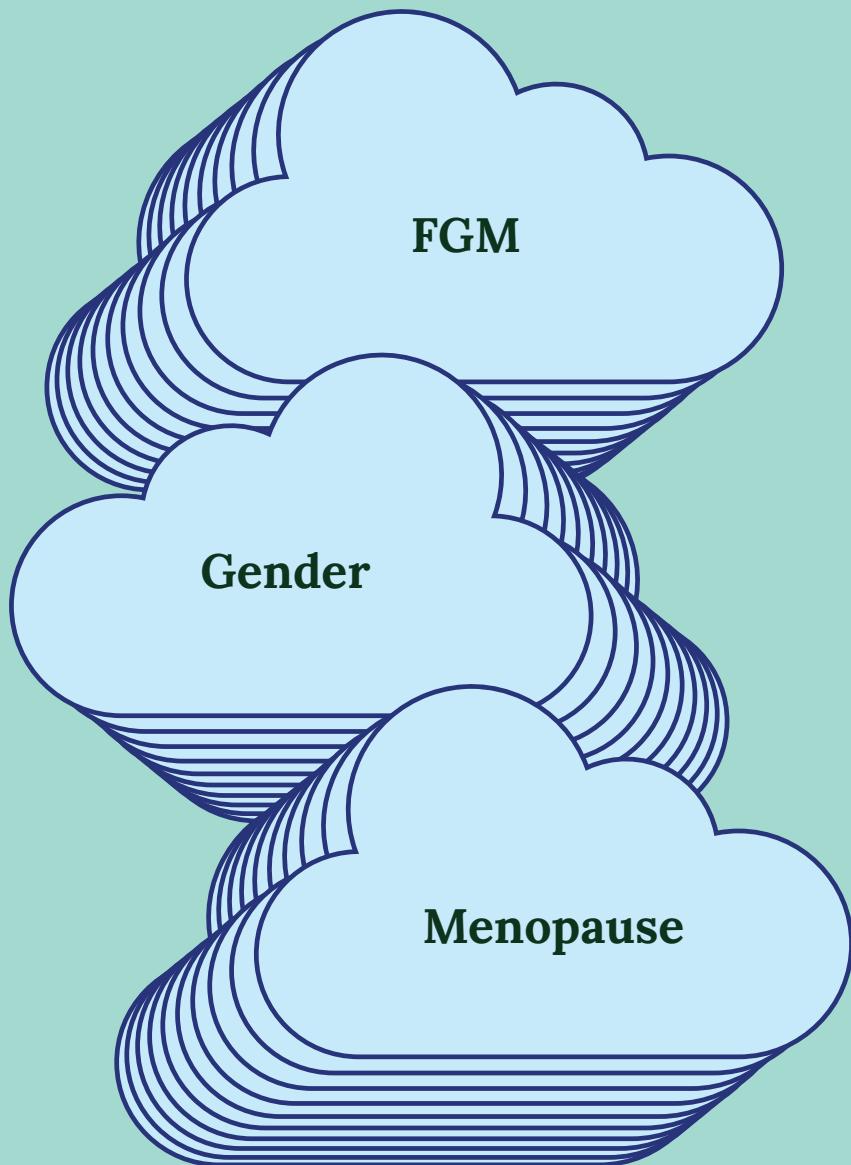
Write down quotes that any of the religious leader or scholars said that you found meaningful:

What religious stories do you know that positively or neutrally explores the topic of menstruation?

Have you ever been religiously or culturally shamed for having a period?

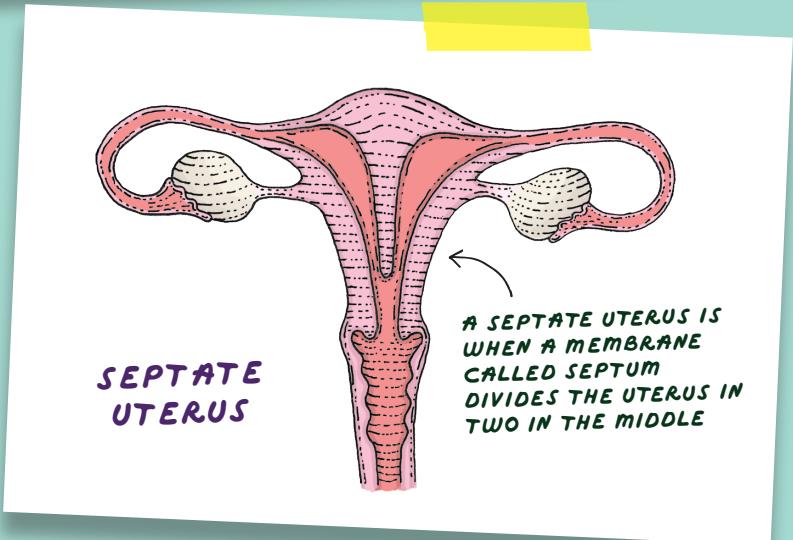
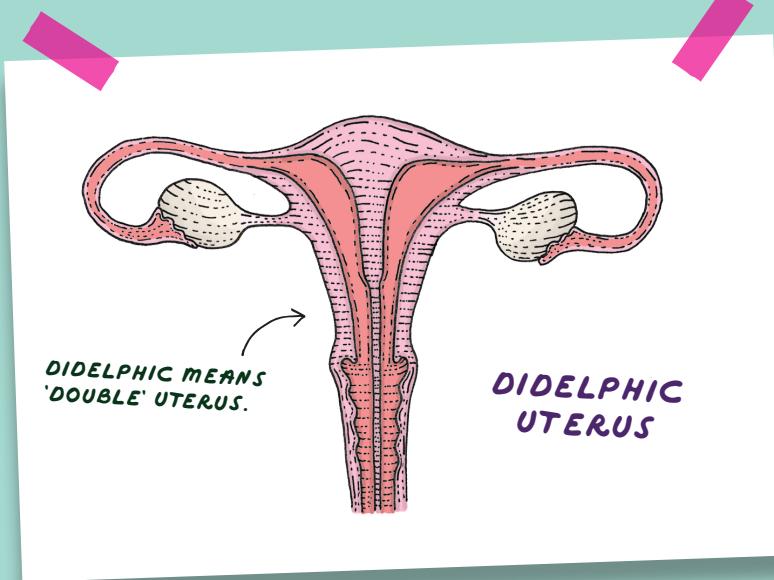
How would you like for people within your culture and/ or religion to view/approach the topic of menstruation?

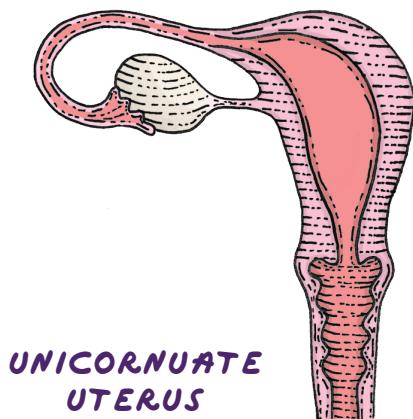
Know Your Body



Congenital Uterine Malformation

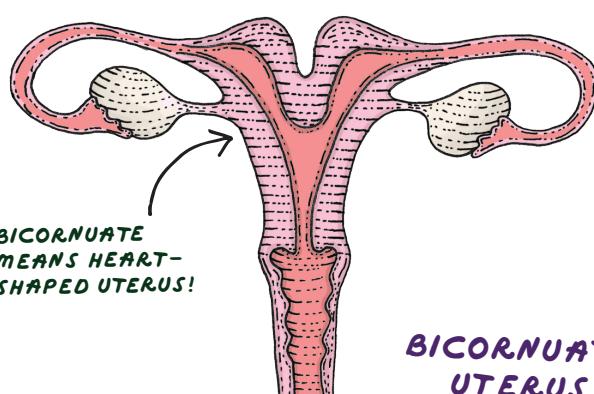
The uterus itself may also be abnormally shaped, which can sometimes interfere with pregnancy. Alternatively, you can also have a differently shaped uterus and be perfectly healthy as well! Here are some examples of what these uteruses can look like.





UNICORNuate
MEANS THAT
YOU ONLY HAVE
HALF A UTERUS

UNICORNuate
UTERUS



BICORNuate
MEANS HEART-
SHAPED UTERUS!

BICORNuate
UTERUS

Infertility

What is infertility?

Infertility is the inability to conceive children and affects up to 15% of reproductive-aged couples worldwide. It affects both men and women. A third of issues with infertility come from men, and another third are from women. The final third is a combination of other factors, or unknown causes. It is important to note that infertility is never a sign of weakness or a lack of femininity.

What are the causes or signs of infertility in men?

Sperm and semen: The most common cause is poor-quality semen (the fluid containing sperm that's ejaculated during sex). Things like a very low sperm count, no sperm at all or sperm that aren't moving properly make it harder for sperm to swim to the egg.

Abnormal sperm: Sperm can be an abnormal shape, making it harder for them to move and fertilise an egg.

Testicles: They produce and store semen; however an infection, testicular cancer, testicular surgery, congenital defect or injury can affect the quality of sperm.

Ejaculation disorders: This means it can be difficult for some men to release semen during sex or when they ejaculate.

Sterilisation: Some men choose to have a vasectomy, which involves cutting or blocking two tubes, called the vas deferens, so that sperm can no longer get into the semen.

Medicines and drugs: Certain types of medicines can also cause infertility problems.

What are the causes or signs of infertility in women?

Scarring: Cervical surgeries can scar or damage the fallopian tubes, obstructing the egg passing through.

Cervical mucus problems: Thick mucus can make it harder for sperm to swim during conception.

Fibroids: Non-cancerous growths around the womb could block a fallopian tube or prevent a fertilised egg from attaching to the womb.

Endometriosis: A condition where tissue usually found in the womb is present elsewhere in the body and can damage the ovaries or fallopian tubes. It can also cause very heavy, painful periods.

Dark or pale menstrual blood: Passing very dark, old blood, or light, pale blood at the beginning of a period can also be a sign of endometriosis.

Irregular cycle: Usually a sign of irregular ovulation which can be caused by PCOS, obesity, being underweight, thyroid issues, etc.

Pelvic Inflammatory Disease: An infection of the upper female genital tract, which includes the womb, fallopian tubes and ovaries—often sexually transmitted. It can damage and scar the tubes making it difficult for an egg to be released.

An estimated 34 million women, mostly from developing countries, are infertile as a result of maternal sepsis, lack of dignified and hygienic menstruation, and unsafe abortions.

TRIGGER WARNING

Female Genital Mutilation



Women and girls who have undergone infibulation

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), also known as female circumcision, is a practice where the female genitals are deliberately cut, injured or changed for non-medical reasons. Terms to refer to FGM in other languages are 'sunna', 'gudniin', 'halalays', 'tahur', 'megrez' and 'khitan'. It is a highly dangerous procedure which is banned in multiple countries due to its long term problems such as emotional and physical trauma, infection, infertility, and even death.

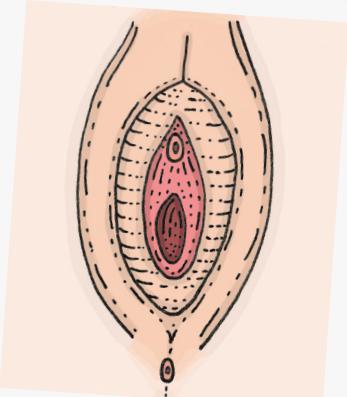
FGM is usually carried out on girls younger than 15 years old, but sometimes also on newborn babies and married women. It is often performed to control female sexual desires and to preserve her virginity until marriage. Those who don't undergo the procedure may be thought of as promiscuous. The belief that FGM equates to purity, cleanliness and 'good morals' is a reason why the practice continues.

Regardless of the reason, FGM enforces gender inequality and is a ***direct violation of a person's fundamental human rights***.

The most extreme form of FGM is known as infibulation and results in the removal of the clitoris and labia minora, and stitching together the labia majora. A small opening is left in the vagina for the passage of menstrual blood and urine, which can cause significant health problems.

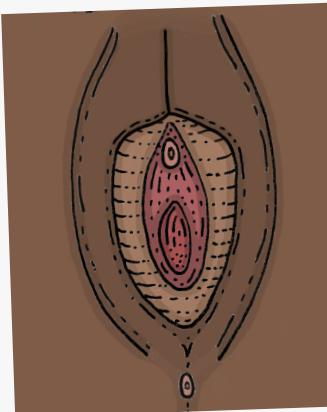
FGM can cause constant pain, cysts, and greater risks of infection, as well as difficulties with peeing, holding pee in and pregnancy. Menstruation is often accompanied by severe pain after infibulation, since blood is unable to flow freely and clots are more likely to form.

Types of female genital mutilation:



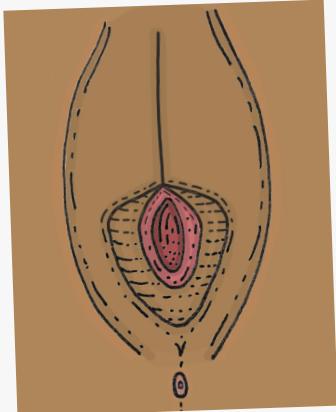
Type 1

Partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce (the fold of skin surrounding the clitoris).



Type 2

Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora.



Type 3

Sealing and narrowing the vaginal orifice by cutting and positioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora closer, with or without excision of the clitoris (infibulation).

Gender Inequality

There has been lots of debate on the inequality arising from condoms being distributed for free in many countries at health clinics, university campuses and more, whereas period products have a price tag (and are often taxed). This current situation is undeniably unfair, considering that period products are a necessity, much like condoms that help prevent sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. Additionally, there are only a selected handful of countries that don't place tax on period products. But this is slowly changing. Governments in countries including Scotland and Botswana are now funding public education institutions to distribute period products for free.

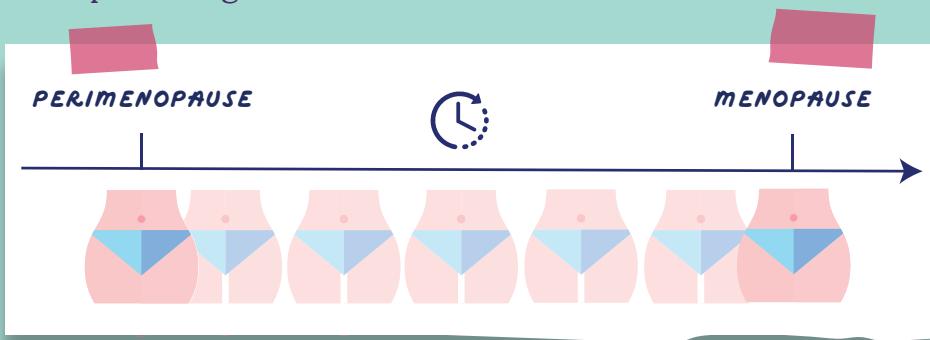
Another example of gender inequality in the context of menstruation is some UK hospitals providing razors and shaving foams to patients but not offering sanitary products. However, as a result of medics voicing their concerns, patients can now access sanitary products free of charge from this summer.



Know Your Menopause

Why does it happen and what is it?

Although you might be too young to be going through menopause, this is a phenomenon which happens to all women eventually. There are people in your life who will have gone or are going through this experience at the moment. Menopause is the time that marks the end of your menstrual cycles. It's diagnosed after you've gone 12 months without a menstrual period. Menopause can happen in your 40s or 50s and is a natural biological process. It can also happen due to other factors, such as chemotherapy or a hysterectomy (surgical removal of the womb). First off, let's discuss the difference between perimenopause and menopause. Perimenopause refers to the period of time right before menopause begins.



During perimenopause, your body is beginning the transition into menopause. That means that hormone production from your ovaries is beginning to decline.

Symptoms associated with menopause will start. Your menstrual cycle may become irregular and will stop after the perimenopause stage.

Once your menstrual cycle stops for 12 consecutive months, you've entered menopause.

Symptoms and What to Do

What will you go through?

Emotional and physical symptoms, such as hot flashes, may disrupt your sleep, lower your energy or affect emotional health. There are many effective treatments available, from lifestyle adjustments to hormone therapy.

**SYMPOTMS VARY FROM
WOMEN TO WOMEN.**

**IRREGULAR PERIODS
VAGINAL DRYNESS
HOT FLASHES
CHILLS
NIGHT SWEATS
SLEEP PROBLEMS
MOOD CHANGES
WEIGHT GAIN
SLOWED METABOLISM
THINNING HAIR AND DRY SKIN**

Know your body

Be careful of your bones

During menopause, your estrogen production will decline and affect the calcium levels in your bones, decreasing bone density and leading to osteoporosis, making you susceptible to bone fractures. Take care of them.

*JUST LIKE AUNTIE WHEN SHE BROKE HER HIP AFTER
SHE TRIPPED ON THAT STEP! CAREFUL! - S.*

How do you keep your bones healthy?

TO KEEP YOUR BONES HEALTHY

EAT FOODS WITH LOTS OF CALCIUM, SUCH AS DAIRY PRODUCTS OR DARK LEAFY GREENS.

TAKE VITAMIN D SUPPLEMENTS.

EXERCISE REGULARLY AND INCLUDE WEIGHT TRAINING IN YOUR EXERCISE ROUTINE.

REDUCE ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION.
AVOID SMOKING.



What is a Hot Flash?

During a hot flash, you'll feel the top half of your body temperature rise and your skin might become red or blotchy. This rush of heat could lead to sweating, heart palpitations, and dizziness. After the hot flash, you may feel cold. Hot flashes can happen daily or multiple times a day. It can last for a year or even several years. Multiple things can trigger or worsen your hot flashes, such as alcohol or caffeine, spicy food, feeling stressed, being somewhere hot, being overweight, and smoking.

How to manage hot flashes

A few techniques may help reduce your hot flashes and their symptoms:

- Dress in layers
- Use a fan in your home or office space
- Do breathing exercises when you experience a hot flash

Menopause and depression

You may feel depressed or experience negativity during or after menopause. Changes in your behaviour, habits and environment can help you overturn these feelings.

Menopause is a time of change, and you can turn it into a positive experience. Try to focus on the present and try not to look back in anger, forget about your past regrets and don't worry about the future. It might also help to talk to other women, socialise, find new activities and opportunities, since menopause indicates new beginnings.

"Does menopause mean that I'm no longer a woman?"

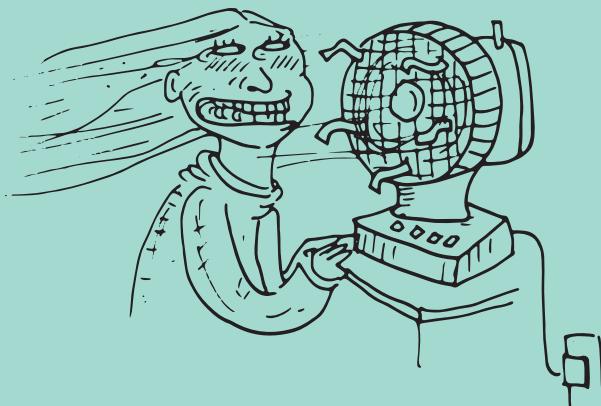
Women have been reduced to their biological functions for centuries. Periods allow you to have children and to be fertile. However fertility does not equate femininity. You are a woman and feminine regardless of your age or your ability to bear children. Menopause is just a change in a woman's life and will never define you.

"Will menopause make me gain weight?"

Changes in your hormone levels and aging may cause you to gain weight. Focus on maintaining a balanced diet, exercising regularly, and practicing other healthy habits to help control your weight.

"Will I experience the same symptoms as my mother, sister, or friends?"

Not necessarily. Menopause can differ slightly depending on the person. The symptoms can vary from one woman to another, even in the same family. However, you're all in this together and should support each other.



"Can I still be pregnant or have periods?"

Not during menopause. However, during perimenopause, your periods may skip a month or several, then return. They are often on shorter cycles and are closer together. Despite irregular periods, pregnancy is possible. If you've skipped a period but aren't sure you've started the menopausal transition, consider a pregnancy test. However, if you are bleeding from the vagina after menopause seek medical advice.

"When should I see a doctor?"

You should have regular visits with your doctor to prevent health issues and if you have any concerns. Continue getting these appointments during and after menopause. As you age, the doctor can recommended health screening tests such as colonoscopy, mammography and triglyceride screening, thyroid testing if suggested by your history, and breast and pelvic exams.





Question Corner



Menopause Reflections

Menopause is my power

Going through menopause and being post-menopause can be a massive change in someone's life.

What are your thoughts about current or future menopause?

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Know your body

Always appreciate the good stuff. What are your top 5 best memories in your life so far?

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List 5 things you want to change in your life.

.....

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Now draw one of those memories.



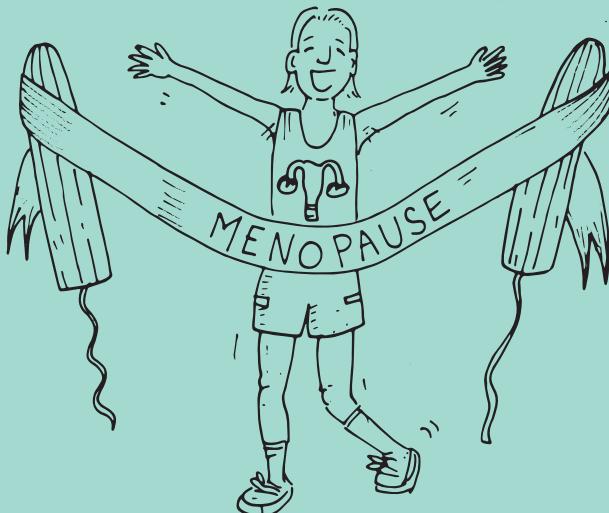
DEAR BIG SISTERS,

I had menstruations for the first time when I was 10 years old and the event has left me with shame within my family.

Nobody explained to me this phenomenon and its implications on my future. The years following I suffered each month with dysmenorrhea and it was one of the most painful physical suffering in my life.

I spent almost all my life in hospital during my periods and I was disadvantaged in all my activities. Today I am in my fifties and menopause has been the only solution for my suffering.

***SUBMISSION BY
ANONYMOUS***

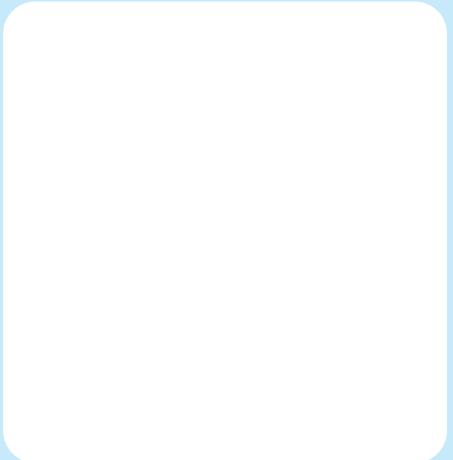
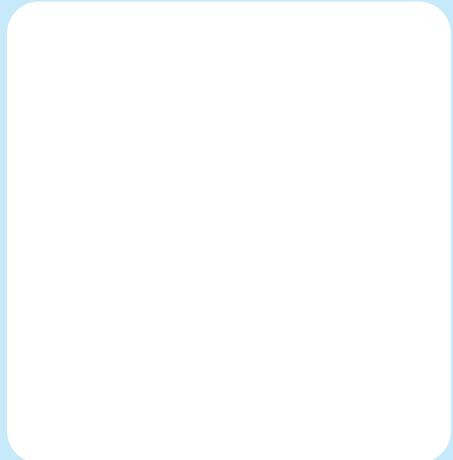
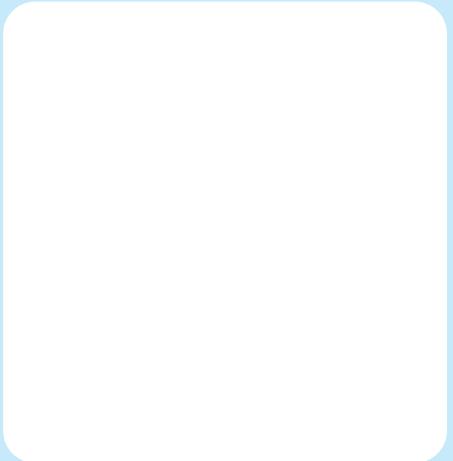
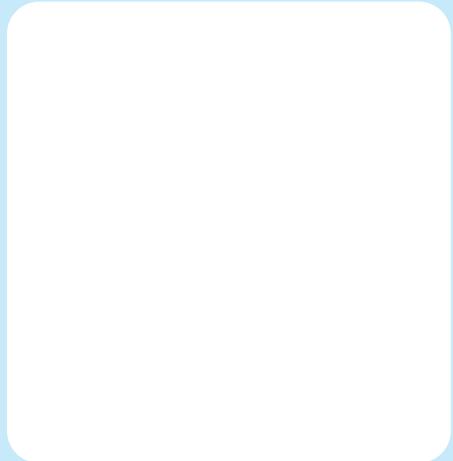


More Activities

Make your own comic

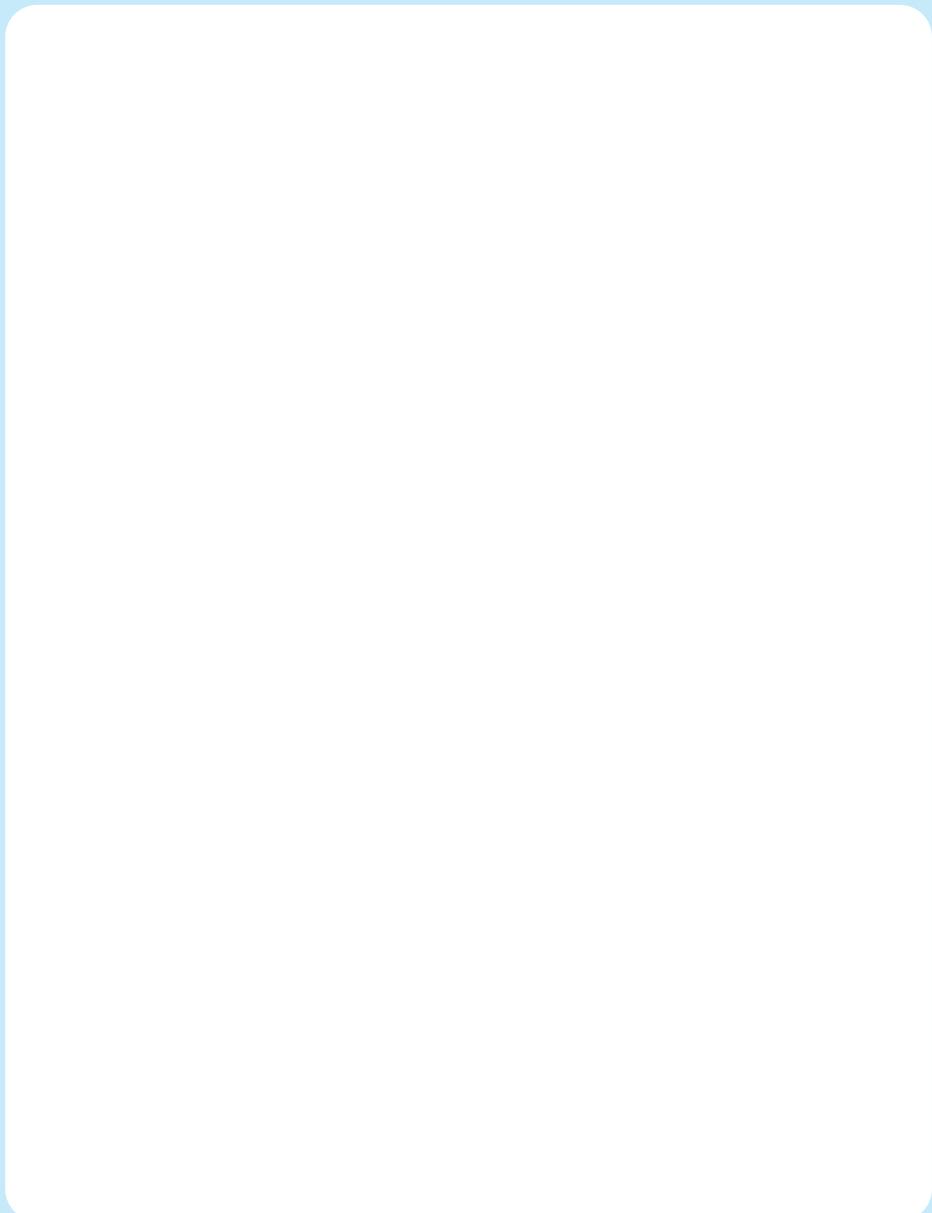
Come up with a period-related story and draw some illustrations to go with it in the boxes. The story can be from your personal experience or be completely made up!





Free drawing space

You can use the box below to draw anything you want to!



Design your own stickers

You can use the sticker paper on this page to design your period-themed original stickers. When you're done, you can cut the paper off this book and cut around each sticker.

FROM YOUR BIG SISTERS

THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING...

WE HAVE SPOKEN WITH MANY POWERFUL PERIOD ACTIVISTS AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND WE RECEIVED PERIOD RELATED STORIES CROWD-SOURCED FROM GENEROUS PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD. IT HAS BEEN A STRUGGLE TO KEEP THIS BOOK SHORT... IN SOME WAYS, WE SEE THIS NOT AS A FINISHED PRODUCT, BUT AS THE BEGINNING OF A COLLECTIVE EDUCATIONAL PROJECT FOR MENSTRUATORS AND NON-MENSTRUATORS AROUND THE WORLD TO COMBAT SHAME, STIGMA, AND PERIOD POVERTY.

AS A RESULT, WE HAVE BUILT A WEBSITE WHERE YOU CAN FIND ALL THE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION WHICH DIDN'T MAKE THE CUT - FROM PUBERTY AND HYMEN, TO MORE RELIGIOUS INTERVIEWS AND EXERCISES TO HELP START CONVERSATIONS AROUND MENSTRUATION. WE ALSO UPLOADED ALL THE CROWD-SOURCED STORIES WE RECEIVED. TO FURTHER CHAMPION MENSTRUAL ACTIVISM, WE ALSO COLLECTED GLOBAL RESOURCES OF ORGANISATION AND ACTIVISTS DOING VITAL WORK AROUND THE WORLD.

IF YOU READ THROUGH THE BOOK OR EVEN CERTAIN CHAPTERS, WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR YOUR THOUGHTS OR IF THE BOOK IMPACTED YOU IN ANY WAY! VISIT WWW.CRIN.ORG TO FIND THE ONLINE VERSION OF DEAR BIG SISTER!

CHANGE LINK

Glossary

Activism - Someone who tries to create social or political change.

Adolescence - The period of time between being a child and an adult.

Adulthood - The part of your life when you are an adult.

Amenorrhea - When you don't have a period for at least 3 to 6 months.

Antiandrogens - Also known as testosterone blockers. It is a class of drug that prevent androgens like testosterone from mediating their biological effects in the body.

Anxiety - The feeling of being very worried.

Asylum-seekers - Someone who claims to be a refugee but the claim hasn't been evaluated.

Cervix - The narrow entrance to a woman's womb.

Christianity - A religion based on belief in God, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and the Bible.

Clitoris - A super sensitive ball of tissue that is full of nerves. It is a sexual organ above the vagina that can give a woman sexual pleasure when it is touched.

Clots - A lump that forms when a liquid, especially blood, becomes almost solid (i.e. blood clot).

Congenital - Congenital diseases or problems are ones that people have from when they are born.

Contraception - Methods that can prevent women from becoming pregnant.

Cortisol - A hormone (a chemical made in the body) that is used in medicine to treat parts of the body that are swollen and painful.

Dignity Kits - They contain items like sanitary pads, soap, underwears, comb, flashlight, toothbrush, toothpaste and other items that cater to the

specific needs of people who menstruate, all housed inside a backpack or easy-to-carry bucket.

Dysmenorrhea - Pain during or just before a period.

Egg Cell - A cell inside a female person or animal that can develop into a baby.

Ejaculation - The act of (a man or male animal) producing a sudden flow of semen from the penis.

Embryo - A human or an animal that is starting to develop in its mother's uterus.

Endometriosis - A condition where tissues usually found in the womb form elsewhere in the body and can damage the ovaries or fallopian tubes. It can also cause very heavy and painful periods.

Endometrium - The inside lining of the uterus which sheds during your period.

Estrogen - A chemical substance in a woman's body that prepares her eggs for

fertilisation (= joining with the male sperm to make a baby).

Fallopian Tubes - The two tubes in a woman's body for eggs to travel from the ovaries to the womb.

Fertility - If people or animals are fertile, they are able to have babies.

FGM/ FGC - Female genital mutilation or female genital cutting is the practice of cutting away parts of female sex organs for traditional or religious reasons. It is a fundamental abuse of human rights.

Fibroids - Non-cancerous growths around the womb could block a fallopian tube or prevent a fertilised egg attaching to the womb.

Flow - If something such as a liquid flows, it moves somewhere in a smooth, continuous way.

Foetus - A young human or animal that is still developing inside its mother.

Follicles - Ovarian follicles are small sacks filled with fluid that are found inside the ovaries. They secrete hormones which influence stages of the menstrual cycle.

Follicular Phase - This phase starts on the first day of your period. The 'Follicle-Stimulating Hormone' (FSH) is secreted during this time, stimulating follicle production in the ovaries.

Gender - The state of being male or female.

Genitals - The sexual organs.

Guilt - The strong feeling of shame that you experience when you feel like you have done something wrong.

Hormones - One of several chemicals produced in your body that influence your growth and development.

Hot Flash - A sudden hot, uncomfortable feeling experienced by some women during menopause.

Hygiene Facility - Clean and safe spaces for changing, washing, and drying.

Hymen - A thin piece of skin that partly covers the opening to a vagina.

Infibulation - The practice of excising the clitoris and labia of a girl or woman and stitching together the edges of the vulva to prevent sexual intercourse. It is traditional in some north-eastern African cultures but is highly controversial.

Ingrown Hair - Ingrown hair happens when hair removal such as shaved or tweezed hair grows back into the skin.

Irregular Cycles - Unpredictable long and short cycles with varying degrees of blood loss.

Islam - The religion based on belief in Allah, the Quran, and the teachings of Mohammed.

Judaism - The religion of the Jewish people, based on belief in one God, and the laws contained in the Torah.

Labia Majora - The large outer lips of the vulva.

Labia Minora - The inner smaller lips of the vulva.

LH - Also known as Luteinizing hormone. LH plays a role in puberty, menstruation, and fertility.

Luteal Phase - This phase is the second half of your menstrual cycle. It starts after ovulation and ends when your next period starts.

Menopause - The time, usually between the ages of 45 and 55, when a person gradually stops having periods.

Menstrual - This is relating to menstruation/periods.

Menstrual Cup - A feminine hygiene device that is inserted into the vagina during menstruation. Its purpose is to collect menstrual fluid.

Menstrual Cycle - The process of ovulation and menstruation.

Menstruation/Period - The shedding of the uterine lining occurring on a regular basis in reproductive-aged females in monthly menstrual cycles.

MHM - Menstrual hygiene management.

Migrants - People who choose to move not because of a direct threat or persecution, but mainly to improve their lives, such as to find better work, seek better education, and reunite with family.

Mons Pubis - The tissue covering the pubic bone.

Myometrium - The muscular wall of the uterus behind the endometrium.

Myths - Ancient stories about Gods, Goddesses, and brave people, often explaining events in history or the natural world.

Ovary - Organ of a female that produces eggs, or the part of a plant that produces seeds.

Ovulation - The time when a woman produces an egg.

Ovulatory Phase - LH (Luteinizing Hormone) increases during this stage, which releases an egg from the ovary into the fallopian tube for fertilisation and pregnancy.

(Sanitary) Pads or Napkin - A piece of soft material worn to absorb blood during your period. There are single-use disposable pads, as well as reusable pads.

Painkillers - A drug that is used to reduce or remove physical pain.

PCOS - Polycystic ovarian syndrome is a common hormonal disorder.

Pelvic Floor Muscles - The muscles under the perineum.

Pelvis - The group of bones that forms the area below your waist and above your legs, which your leg bones are joined.

Perimenopause - The time in a woman's life when changes start happening in her body that will result in menopause.

Perineum - The area between the back of the vagina and the anus.

Period Poverty - This refers to having a lack of access to sanitary products due to financial constraints.

Pituitary Gland - A pea-sized body attached to the base of the brain that is important in controlling growth, development, and the functioning of the other endocrine glands.

Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) - A more extreme version of PMS which can affect your everyday life and activities. You can feel depressed, anxious, excessive anger, fatigue, overwhelmed, suicidal, and have conflicts with your loved ones.

Polyps - A small mass of cells that grows in the body, and is usually not harmful.

Power - Control or influence over people and events.

Pregnant - A pregnant woman has a baby developing inside her uterus.

Premature Menopause - This is when ovaries stop making hormones and periods stop at a younger age than usual.

Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) - Consistent and severe pattern of negative physical and emotional symptoms, such as pain, bloating, and mood changes that occur in the latter stage of the menstrual cycle.

Progesterone - A female hormone that causes the womb to prepare for pregnancy.

Prostaglandins - The chemical responsible for period pain.

Prostate - An organ near the penis in male mammals that produces a liquid that mixes with and carries sperm.

Puberty - The time when children's bodies change and become adult bodies.

Pubic Hair - The hair that grows around the sexual organs.

Rectum - The last part of a tube in the body that solid waste travels through before coming out of the anus.

Refugee - Refugees are people fleeing armed conflicts or persecution.

Reproduction/Intercourse/Fertilisation - The process of producing babies through the joining of male and female sexual cells.

Reusable Pads - A piece of soft material worn to absorb blood during your period. It is made of fabric and can be washed and reused.

Sanitary Bins - A type of bin, usually in toilet cubicles, that allow the easy and hygienic disposal of sanitary products.

Semen - The liquid containing sperms that is produced by the male sex organs.

Shame - When you feel that your whole self is wrong.

Sperm/Sperm Cells - A small cell produced by a male animal that joins an egg from a female animal to create a baby.

Spotting/Intermenstrual Bleeding - Blood loss (even slight) between periods.

Stretch Marks - Thin lines or marks left on someone's skin after they have grown bigger quickly, for example on the skin of a woman who has been pregnant.

Taboo - Something that you should not say or do because people generally think it is morally wrong, unpleasant, or embarrassing.

Tampons - A small roll of cotton that people insert in the vagina to absorb menstrual blood.

Testicle - Either of the two round male sex organs that produce sperm and are contained in the scrotum.

Testosterone - A male hormone that causes a stage of growth in older boys and development of their sexual organs.

Thrush - A common vaginal yeast infection. Symptoms can include vaginal itching or burning, white discharge, and stinging or burning while urinating.

Thyroid - An organ in the neck that produces a substance that helps your body to grow and develop.

Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) - A sudden, potentially fatal condition caused by the release of toxins from an overgrowth of bacteria found in many women's bodies.

Urethral Opening - This is also known as the pee hole.

Urinary Tract Infections - (UTIs) are caused by E. coli infections often introduced into the urethra from the rectum. Symptoms include burning sensation or pain when passing urine, blood in urine, and an inability to urinate despite the urge.

Uterus/Womb - The organ inside a woman's body where a baby grows.

Vagina - An extremely elastic muscular tube inside the vaginal opening.

Vaginal Discharge - Is the way a woman's body expels fluid and cells.

Vaginal Flora - This refers to the bacteria that lives inside the vagina that helps keep the vagina healthy and inhibit the growth of yeast and other unwanted organisms.

Vaginismus - A painful spasmodic contraction of the vagina in response to physical contact or pressure, especially during sexual intercourse.

Vaginitis - This is when the vagina is inflamed.

Virginity - The state of never having had sexual intercourse.

Vulva - The external part of the vagina.

WASH - Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene.

Waste Management - This includes the collection, transport, treatment, and disposal of waste.

Wet Dream - This is when a sexually exciting dream in a man causes an ejaculation.

Womanhood - The state of being a woman or the period of time when someone is a woman.

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WHY DO
PERIOD
SHAMING
AND MYTHS
EXIST?

WHAT IS
PERIOD
POVERTY?

WHAT IS
PMS?

WHAT DOES
RELIGION
SAY ABOUT
PERIODS?

HOW DO YOU
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