FROM YOUR
BIG SISTERS

A Guide on Periods and Everything Around It

Ricebox Studio | Rights Studio
FROM YOUR BIG SISTERS

A Guide on Periods and Everything Around It
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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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?
In 2019 during their talk on period poverty, Basma Osman (from CRIN) and Safiya shared a story about a girl who died inside the Chhaupadi (menstrual hut). Our heartache and outrage towards this incident lingered long after the event. When CRIN approached us for the fellowship, we decided to undertake the Red Cloud Project, consisting of a book on menstruation and a 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 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.

We really hope this book will be useful and inspirational for your journey and experience with your period! 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.

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*

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**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 Period

Flow

Pain

Emotions

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:

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!

Days 1 - 7 Menstruation

Days 8 - 11 The lining of the uterus thickens in preparation for the egg

Days 12 - 15 Ovulation

Days 18 - 25 If fertilisation has not taken place the lining of the uterus sheds

Days 26 - 28 (on average) The uterine lining detaches leading to menstruation

Pee and sperm comes out of the same hole with boys. Girls have separate holes for pee and menstrual blood! - M.
The Menstrual Cycle

Days 1 - 7 of Cycle: Menstruation

Days 8 - 11 of Cycle: The lining of the uterus thickens in preparation for the egg

Days 12 - 15 of Cycle: Ovulation

Days 16 - 25 of Cycle: If fertilisation does not take place, the lining of the uterus sheds

Days 26 - 28 of Cycle: The uterine lining tears and causes menstruation

The egg and lining shed

Bleeding begins

Bleeding ends

An egg travels through the tube

An egg is released from the ovary
Vaginal Discharge

What is the white stuff in your underwear?

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

How do you clean 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.

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.
• A simple walk or yoga meditation can get your mind off of the pain and enhance happiness-inducing endorphins.
• Pain killers like Paracetamol or Ibuprofen works best. Be careful to track how many you've taken.
• Hot water bottles, teas, and anything warm are your best friends. Be careful of excess heat, don't burn yourself!
• Avoid overly greasy, heavy, and salty foods to help prevent nausea, bloating, and water retention.
• Studies have shown that stress can cause more painful periods and can affect your next cycle. Engage in enjoyable activities and hobbies to de-stress!
• Your body has trouble controlling its internal temperature as your hormone levels change, which can result in restless or interrupted sleep, making you moody, irritable, and prone to more pain. Try going to bed earlier than usual, turn all the lights off, turn that phone off, and be as comfortable as possible.
• Your doctor or nurse can also help you soothe your pain with other methods or by prescribing other types of healing.

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 Chag (Hindu studies scholar)

Question Corner

What's Your Habit?

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 food and drinks?

What's your period exercise routine?

What is stressing you out at the moment?

When was the last time you took time alone to focus on your mind and body?
Know Your Flow

Period blood colour

- **Brown/Dark Red** – beginning/end of period – old blood
- **Pink** – spotting, anaemia, vitamin deficiency, or low estrogen levels
- **Orange** – period blood and cervical fluid or a possible infection

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

Heavy Flow

Medium Flow

Light 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 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 other underlying issues that might be 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, and changes in appetite and sex drive

"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.
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?

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

Draw the place you feel the safest or 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**
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. Knowing your period will help you prepare and pack some pads or tampons in advance, to avoid any bloody surprises. 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?
- **Pain** – Describe any pain associated with your period. Does the pain feel worse than usual? Does it happen in a different area than usual?
- **Abnormal bleeding** – Are you bleeding in between periods?
- **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?
- **Other changes** – Keep track of your sleeping patterns. Having trouble sleeping? How’s your diet? Eating more junk food than usual?
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
- 5 Red beads
- 10 White beads
- 4 Black beads
- 9 Pink beads
- Glue

**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 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.
Period Products

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!
Period products

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 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 resusable 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.

Reusuable 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 hand 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 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.

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.
What do you think about how sanitary products are priced?

What problems do you currently face during your period?

If you were to change a period product, which one would it be? How would you make it better? 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
Period Poverty

What is period poverty?

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.

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.

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.
Period Poverty Cycle

**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.

**Miss School during Their Periods**
1 in 5 American girls have missed school each month due to their period.

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

**Dropping Out of School**
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.

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.

My mom’s friend had to drop out of school when she was 15 because she was sick of leaking through her rags. – M.
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,

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
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 the majority of women, some trans men, and non-binary people go through, yet it has always been surrounded by taboos and myths that exclude them from many aspects of socio-cultural life.

Taboos about menstruation impact the emotional state, mentality, lifestyle, and physical health of everyone going through periods. The challenge of addressing socio-cultural taboos and beliefs in menstruation is further compounded by the lack of knowledge on puberty, menstruation, and reproductive health.

Myths are not all ill-intentioned and were sometimes a form of control that was meant to protect certain groups of "vulnerable" people, such as women. For example, historically when there were no period products available and wild animals roamed free, it was likely that some animals would attack if they smelled 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 or proper hygiene could 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 for
women to manage their period and the societal perception of certain groups were misinformed. 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myth</th>
<th>Fact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You should sleep separately from others during your period.</td>
<td>Menstruation is not contagious and causes no harm to anyone else around you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanitary products should be kept private and covered in paper when purchasing.</td>
<td>Buying sanitary products is like buying soap or toilet paper. They are all hygiene products.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMS and PMDD is all in your head.</td>
<td>PMS and PMDD are medically proven and happen due to hormonal fluctuations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaking shows that you can't take care of yourself.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Breaking myths

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.

Two Truths and a Lie - Debunk Myths

Each player 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 members 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?

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!

“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)

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 it is 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?

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

Why do you think these myths exist?
Dear Big Sisters,

Submission by
Sian Lewis, UK

Period and Culture

Shame
Guilt
Religion

Breaking myths

LEVEL 1
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. Guilt is 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.

A period stain is not shameful. You are not impure. You are not dirty. - M.
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?

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

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

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

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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.

How are periods represented in your culture or religion?

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

In some cultures, communities celebrate the start of a person's 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
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author/Series</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Period. End of Sentence.</td>
<td>Rayka Zehtabchi</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A film in which Indian women fight the stigma surrounding menstruation and begin manufacturing sanitary pads.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are You There God? It's Me Margaret.</td>
<td>Judy Blume</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A novel about a sixth grade girl who grew up without religious affiliation, due to her parents' interfaith marriage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revenge of the Red Club</td>
<td>Kim Harrington</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A positive and empowering novel about the importance of standing up for what you believe in.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing Up: It's a Girl Thing</td>
<td>Mavis Jukes</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A series of books about growing up and menstruation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Padman</td>
<td>R. Balki</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A film inspired by the life of period poverty activist Arunachalam Muruganantham</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>My Time</td>
<td>Giulia Gandini</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A short film about a school girl leaking during her period.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Little Miss P</td>
<td>Ken Koyama</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A comic series about menstruation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOMENstruate</td>
<td>Lauren Anders Brown</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A documentary following seven women in Africa as they discuss menstruation and menopause.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menstrupedia Comic</td>
<td>Aditi Gupta</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A comic book about menstruation</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Let's do a movie night!! - A.
5 Whys

An exercise designed to help you break down and understand the root of a situation. (2 players)

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.

This simple exercise works best in pairs. The first person asks “Why?” and writes down the answers the second person gives. 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:
Every time you mention periods, it becomes less of a taboo. Tell your mum about menstrual education to overcome misconceptions.

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
How did you become an activist? Who inspired you? How did you create your enterprise?

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?**

Who are the people who are often ignored in the issue?

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.

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**Interview with 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?

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

How did you become an activist?
I was born into a peasant family of five girls from the rural areas of Zvimbaba 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.

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.
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

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
Let's stand up
Let's stand up
Let's stand up
Let's stand up

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.

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Interview With Mashiyat Rahman

We sat down with Mashiyat Rahman a Bengali activist and founded 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? Who inspired you? How did you create Resurgence? (Funding/how did it happen?)
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? What was your process?
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?
Who are the people who are often ignored in the issue?
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 international!)
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.

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**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.**

Please visit our website to read about more inspiring period activists, period-positive movements, and organisations around the world!
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
CATHARINE BANDA, 14, MALAWI
Know Your Period

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

Know Your Period

Uterus

Periods

PMDD

What can you do to break the stigma around menstruation?

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

Write down your ideas for activism here.
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.
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!

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

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 the pituitary gland?

The pituitary gland is a small, roundish, and pea-shaped gland located at the base of your brain. It is responsible for a lot of
things including creating ‘hormones’ such as the LH hormone, hence its nickname of the ‘master gland’. It is safe to say that without this gland, this book wouldn't even exist!

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<th>DEAR BIG SISTERS,</th>
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<td>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.</td>
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**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.
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

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
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.
Menstrual Value Chain

**Access to Products**
- Appropriateness, choice of menstrual hygiene products
- Safety in production, distribution and sale, access

**Awareness and Education**
- Menstrual awareness and educations equal for both genders

**Menstrual Use and Waste Management**
- Water for personal use
- Safe, accessible, private sanitation e.g. toilets
- 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.

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 hygiene 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. I nearly lost this leg because of injecting and I nearly lost the other leg because of injecting. 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**

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**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... 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.
Period poverty

- 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.
Dignified Menstruation Chart

Beyond the infrastructure of hygiene

Dignified 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.

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The Urgency of Dignity in Menstruation

**Menstrual blood considered as dirty, impure or contaminated**

- Restriction on food
- Restriction on mobility
- Restriction on touch

**Chronic malnutrition/ Other illness**

- Humiliation/ no participation
- Low self esteem
- Separated during period

**Reproductive/ urinary tract issues**

- Psychological trauma/ illness
- Drop out from school

**Financial burden**

- Depression, suicide
- Child/ forced marriage

**Increased risk/ exclusion**

- Abuse/ rape/ murder/ death
- Increased poverty

**Conflict**

- Disempowerment
- Low Sustainable Development Goals

**Violation of Human Rights**

**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

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**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
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.

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

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

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— it’s 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.”

And in Ethiopian 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.
Interview with Imam Aarij

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

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

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 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?
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.

Why do you think it is taboo to speak about menstruation?
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.

But there are sensitivities that people have developed over time culturally. 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, 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.

What would you say to those who shame 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...” 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."

What would you say to women who experience menstrual leakage 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.

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. Topics like ritual acts of worship, marriage, and intimacy between couples, this has to be a component of it because it affects half the population.

To read the full interview, please visit www.redcloudproject.com
Interview with Father Jonathan

We sat down with Rev. d. Jonathan MacNeaney of St Mary Abbots Church to speak about how menstruation is written about within Christianity.

We would like to thank Father Jonathan for speaking with us and providing the Christian perspective within this important discussion.

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 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. 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?
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 think menstruation is seen as a taboo topic?
It doesn’t carry taboo within Christianity, but it probably does within the cultures where 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 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. I suppose it’s probably a correlation and incorrect assumption that because sometimes touching blood leads to bad consequences, always touching blood is going to lead to that consequence.

What would you say to those who shame women about periods?
“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.
What do you think there isn’t much writing about menstruation 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.

There’s a significant amount of sensitivity that we have 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”. Menstruation 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.

To read the full interview, please visit www.redcloudproject.com

Interview with 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.

We would like to thank Natasha Chawla for speaking with us and providing the Hindu perspective within this important discussion.

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.

To say that menstruation is impure implies that the baby she delivers is also impure. Such statements, born of ignorance and not stated in Hindu scriptures, were often accepted by illiterates and promoted superstitions or traditions that carried on 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. 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?**

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 smrti-shāstra (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 would you say to those who shame menstruating women?**

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?**

I read in a book on śāktas, 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. 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 women who feel spiritually impure 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.

To read the full interview, please visit [www.redcloudproject.com](http://www.redcloudproject.com)
More Interviews

If you enjoyed the previous interviews, visit our website for the whole transcript plus more interviews with religious scholars and leaders such as:

Interview with Dr Lidia
A senior lecturer 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" to speak about how menstruation is written within Hinduism.

Interview with Dr Haifaa
An OBGYN and religious scholar, to speak about how menstruation is written within Islam.

Interview with Avni Chag
A Hindu studies scholar, to speak about how menstruation is written within Hinduism.

Question Corner

Write down the 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 and approach the topic of menstruation?
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 UPLOAD 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.

Amenorrhea - When you don’t have a period for at least 3 to 6 months.

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.

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.

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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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 Cycle** – The process of ovulation and menstruation.

**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.

**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.

**Menstrual Cup** – A feminine hygiene device that is inserted into the vagina during menstruation. Its purpose is to collect menstrual fluid.

**PCOS** – Polycystic ovarian syndrome is a common hormonal disorder.

**Period Poverty** – This refers to having a lack of access to sanitary products due to financial constraints.

**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.

**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.

**Periods** – The release of blood from the uterus during menstruation.

**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.
**Refugee** - Refugees are people fleeing armed conflicts or persecution.

**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.

**Shame** - When you feel that your whole self is wrong.

**Spotting/Intermenstrual Bleeding** - Blood loss (even slight) between periods.

**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.

**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.

**Vaginitis** - This is when the vagina is inflammed.

**Vulva** - The external part of the vagina.

**WASH** - Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene.

**Waste Management** - This includes the collection, transport, treatment, and disposal of waste.

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From puberty to menopause, period poverty, debunking period myths and interviews with period activists - This book is about EVERY THING period-related and for everyone! Flip through the pages to not only learn about periods, but also to make your own period bracelet, read period stories from around the globe and write letters to other menstruators!

Let's start talking more about periods because none of us will be here without it!

To access the online version, visit www.crin.org or follow us on Instagram @crin_stagram!