

My imbrued frock disclosed to my displeasure- my entrance into puberty. Two days prior to my twelfth birthday, it ensued- the 'biological inevitable.' The flowing down of thick red fluid did not place me into perplexity, but it made the next seven days highly uncomfortable. I was determined to conceal the shame it bore, hence to the best of my abilities I tried to bury the occasion from my mother. Inevitably, I failed! Despite my best attempt to conceal, the soiled bed-sheet, the imbrued frock provided testimonies. The betrayal aggrieved me!

Conventional social practice dictates that the monthly cycle be treated with utmost confidentiality, since it is perceived that the 'discharge' makes a woman

writes, "menstruating woman spoils harvests, devastates gardens, kills seeds, makes fruit fall, kills bees; if she touches the wine, it turns to vinegar; milk sours...." Such views predominated in the West until the early twentieth century, and

today menstrual hygiene products are considered a privilege even though Article 25 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights considers it as a basic human right. Despite Bangladesh's progress in

percent of the students wash it properly with soap, and dry it under the sun. The report also highlights that 40 per cent of the female students in Bangladesh skip schools during menstruation as a result of poor toilet infrastructure. During the monthly cycles even the female teachers are forced to take leave due to inadequate toilet facilities.

Gender equity is one of the priority areas of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Nonetheless, progress in this aspect would be unachievable without access to better menstrual hygiene, since improper access to 'adequate facilities' restrict women's mobility during menstruation. Reusable sanitary napkins or menstrual cups need to be provided for free to the

THE PLIGHT OF MENSTRUATING WOMEN

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PHOTO: ANANYA RUBAYAT



impure and an object of ridicule. I observed the prevailing practice until I read Gloria Steinem's "If men could menstruate." It made me question the wisdom of veiling the monthly cycles into a non-existent entity. Gloria writes, 'magically, if men began menstruating...menstruation would become an enviable, boast-worthy, masculine event: Men would brag about how long and how much.... Boys would mark the onset of menses [with parties].. Sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free...[Menstruation would serve as the] proof that only men can serve in the Army, ("you have to give blood to take blood"), ... or rabbis ("without the monthly loss of impurities, women remain unclean").'

Justifications reversed! Menstruation is nicknamed 'the curse,' considered as a shame that limits women's abilities. Universal degradation of women continues due to the functionality that prepares the womb for the continued existence of the human species. In his book Natural History, Pliny the Elder

are rampant in some parts of the world even today. In India menstruating women are prevented from cooking, as it is believed that it poisons the food and in Japan due to the monthly cycle women are prevented from becoming sushi chefs.

Predominant among the Hindu communities in western Nepal and in certain parts of India is the practice of keeping menstrual women/girls in seclusion in small 'menstrual sheds.' The sheds lack access to basic amenities forcing women and girls on their cycles to reside in unhygienic conditions making the genitalia vulnerable to infections. Residing in these menstrual sheds, women are exposed to life threatening dangers-rape, wild animals, and snake bites. In the rural areas of Kenya, many women use twigs, leaves, chicken feathers, which make the monthly cycle a difficult time for girls to attend schools. Expressing her menstrual plight, a Kenyan girl in the short documentary film Period of Shame said, "To avoid soiling the bed, I collect soil, pour it on the floor and sit on it naked overnight..." In many parts of the world

women empowerment, much needs to be done in the area of menstrual hygiene. Menstruation in the local Bengali language is termed *sharir kharap* that translates as 'sickness.' The usage of the term *sharir kharap* stigmatises menstruation, providing justification for the shunning of public discussions on periods. In our local vocabulary the words *mashik*, period, menses have evolved into dirty words, stigmatising women's sexual and reproductive health.

Few months ago, *The Daily Star*, published an incident of a grade nine female school student who died after fainting in the classroom. During autopsy, two baby snakes were found in her uterus. She used a damp old cloth as her menstrual rag, which caused the unfortunate incident. Menstrual cloth that does not get washed with soap and gets dried in the open air becomes a breeding ground for bacteria. According to "Bangladesh National Hygiene Baseline Survey 2014," 86 per cent of adolescent students use old cloth during menstruation, among which only 12

HEALTH

SKETCH: YARIZ SIDDIQUI

BEGUM SUFIA KAMAL

20 June 1911 – 20 November 1999

An acclaimed Bangladeshi poet, Begum Sufia Kamal played an important role in the Bengali nationalist movement of the 1950s and 60s. Kamal is also hailed as an exemplary poet, a committed activist and feminist who worked all her life for women's emancipation.

“ We must bring respect and dignity to our country and to our people, and reach the fruits of independence to the masses. We must all work together to build our country. We should not allow ourselves to be misled by a vested group, in the name of religion, and let people exploit our religious sentiments for narrow political ends. Our younger generation must be taught the values of our Liberation War and the ideals for which millions gave up their lives.

Absence of leadership is the uppermost thought in my mind. But I am hopeful that out of this present crisis there will emerge a patriotic, visionary and courageous leadership. We will, once again, hold up our head in pride and dignity of an independent nation.

Another thing that worries me is the lack of respect for women these days. Earlier when men and women used to work side by side, there used to be tremendous mutual respect. Now it is all gone. It is the age of competition and I can understand that men may resent women intruding into their world. So let there be competition, but why should it come with lack of respect?

Today nobody is exploiting us – not Russians, Japanese, Indians or Pakistanis. Today we Bengalis are fighting against one another and destroying ourselves. It is we who are killing, injuring, abusing and insulting one another. We have become our worst enemies.”

The quotes are taken from an interview by *The Daily Star's* Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam and published on January 1, 1996 on *The Daily Star*.

A KIND INITIATIVE

The weather in Dhaka city has never been very pleasant as far as I can remember. At the onslaught of global climate change the summers are getting warmer every year. This year the heat is more than overwhelming. I usually take a stroll around my neighborhood in Dhanmondi during the afternoon. One day after walking for a few kilometers, dehydration was setting in. While walking along road no. 2, I saw this barrel of water outside a house. It was drinkable water; even a mug was strapped along with it. It was surely an act of kindness. In this city, while we grow more self-centered with more technology in our comfort zone, someone thought about the people who were simply passing by. It was a notable initiative indeed. As Dhaka dwellers, we rarely pay attention to other people or empathise with them. This makes things harder for all of us, eventually. We should be more kind and thoughtful to each other. Because being kind to others is being kind to yourself.

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PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

LOOKING FOR THE SPIRIT

The other day, I was in one of the supershops in Gulshan, buying necessities for home – shampoos, soaps, deodorants etc. The place was swarming with people of all ages and sizes – toppling over one another buying fruits, oats and other iftar items. I almost kicked myself for not picking another time during the day to do my shopping. Ramadan seems to have made everyone crazy, always in a rush and worst of all, all the time angry. Growing up in the Middle East, we were taught that Ramadan was a month to ponder upon all our actions, to see the good in people and ignore the bad, to learn to forgive and encourage the good within us to be stronger. Of course, we did enjoy the new clothes, the food and interaction amongst family and friends – but what I see today is scary, not reassuring.

I hope one day the real spirit of Ramadan will be restored, as soon as we realise the actual meaning of course.
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