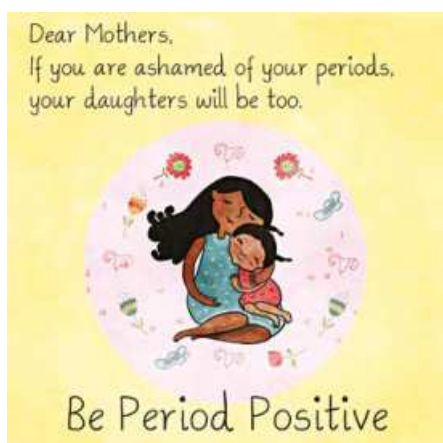
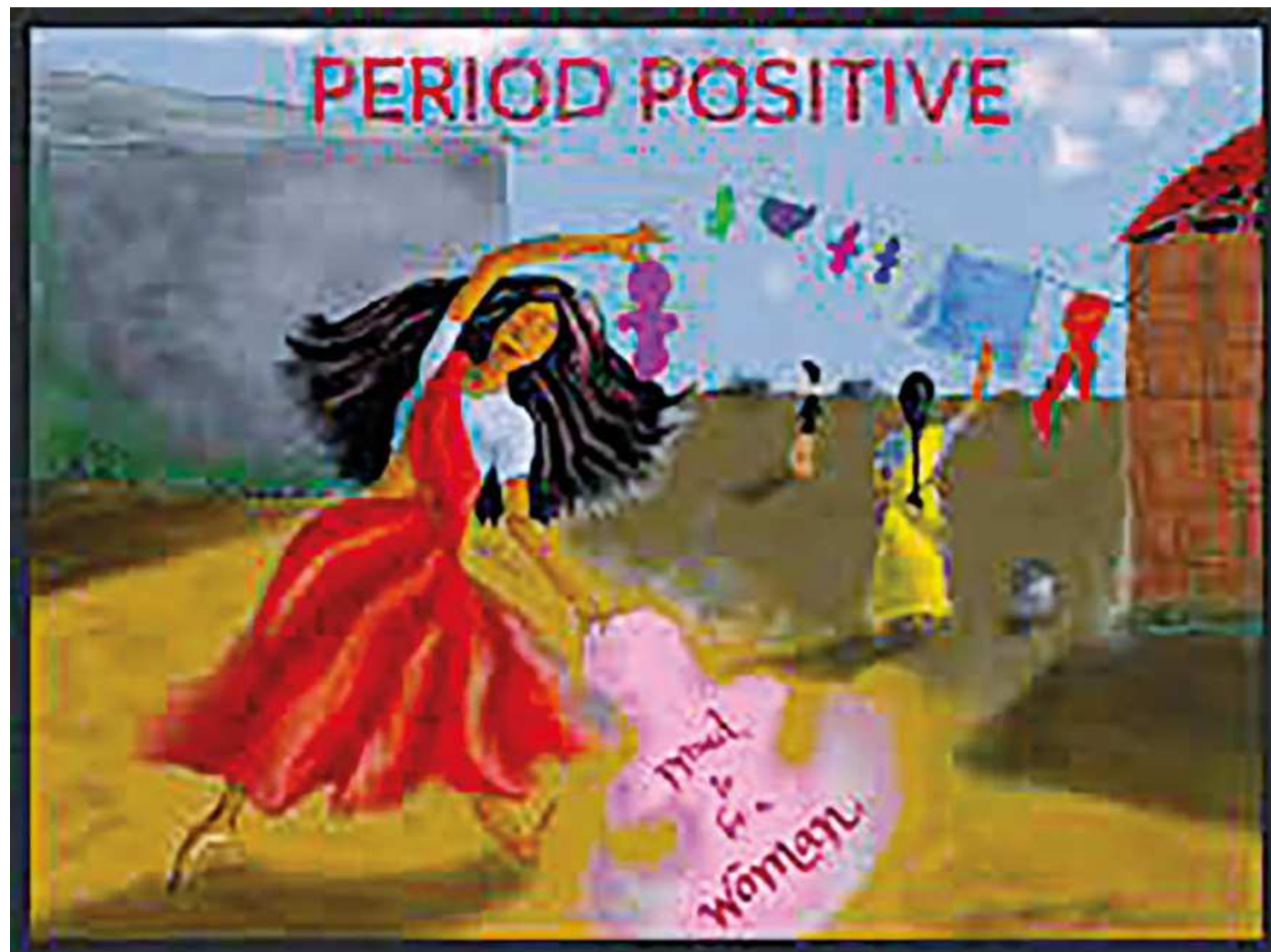


Normalising menstruation

“It’s time for action” — Sparking a bubbling revolution, the 2021 theme of Menstrual Hygiene (MH) Day is shattering taboos and reversing generations of misogyny surrounding menstruation in young girls and women all around the world. MH Day, at large, is a global observance reserved for May 28 which dedicates its efforts to dissolve period shame and destigmatize it to raise awareness of menstrual hygiene for people who menstruate.



If coming across the word “menstruation” above has made you recoil with shock and disgust, the modern world stirring with change is not for you. This is the era of social movements like #happytobleed, a 2015 Facebook protest of women unapologetically standing up to claims that women would only be allowed to enter a shrine in India after a machine detected if they were pure (not menstruating). Welcome to the world where such sexist comments are crushed; where people are passed the mic to share their real-life stories about menstruation on platforms like Instagram via hashtags like #TheWholeBodyTruth.

Get used to a society that sees stains to be sacred and is ready to work on reforms to sensitize itself to the stigma, myths and concerns of menstruation. This is the time when groundbreaking adverts like Always’ 2014 #LikeAGirl campaign glorifies, rather than belittles, being a girl. Make yourself comfortable to a place that doesn’t accept

watery blue, Windex-like liquid on TV ads to show absorption of period blood anymore; we’re okay with it being red on TV channels and social media.

Scratch that last one; apparently, we’re not quite there yet.

Just last year, Facebook banned a realistic ad by Modibodi, an Australian brand marketing period-proof underwear for depicting period blood as red. The ad, reportedly, violated the platform’s guidelines. This tells you that much work is still needed to change the way we see menstruation and a woman who menstruates.

What plagues humankind is a disease that is rooted in ancient perception and sexism: women who bleed are seen as impure and dirty. If you are on your period, you are expected to evade every religious practice, sit out an event, skip school, stay confined to your homes and just hide the fact that you are, in fact, on your period. You are made to feel as if getting your period is an unforgivable crime and the dark cloud of shame continues to loom over you for 5-7 days.

Usaila Alam, an extraordinary woman, a proud mother of two daughters and a teacher, remarks on the irony of such taboos, “Yes, some practices are excused during menstruation but reciting religious scripture is perfectly fine; after all, your mouth is clean. Touching the Qur’an is alright, your hands can’t be impure.”

“Menstruation is the shedding of the uterine wall. Your uterus is your womb; it’s the place where a child is borne and nurtured for 9 months. This is the place where the soul of your child is sent; another human being is born out of your womb. How much more

wonderful can this phenomenon be? If the womb is such a sacred place, how can the blood shed from that organ be impure in any which way? It can’t,” Alam emotionalizes.

Conversations like these need to make it to the fore. 2021 is no place for illogical taboos and laughing at someone experiencing their periods. Rather, let’s normalize it.

A girl’s confidence takes a big hit during puberty. The fear, anxiety and surprise associated with the first period can well be avoided if parents simply sit their daughter down and tell her what to expect. Be gentle and respectful, positive and enthusiastic. Take a cue from Alam who teared up when her daughter entered womanhood.

If you’re a father, 32-year-old Faisal Bin Ashraf working as a high school Physics instructor may know what to do, “If I’m married, I’d look forward to the day of having that conversation with my daughter. I’d prefer both my partner and I to talk to her about menstruation and boys as a team to make sure she feels safe to come to either one of us when in need.”

For talking points, proper menstrual hygiene must be the focus. The idea is to empower women to manage menstruation with safety and dignity. Choices amongst sanitary napkins, tampons and menstrual cups need to be laid out, outlining pros, cons, absorption, comfort, application/insertion and, finally, disposal and cleanliness are all things we need to know about. Informed decisions to best suit personal needs can only be made after that.

Not just parents, schools can also make an impact. Teachers need to learn how to empathize with students experiencing

cramps or discomfort during class and excuse them amid lectures, no questions asked. Here, Ashraf’s approach is simple. Alongside a marker and class materials, you’ll find a pack of sanitary napkins in his classroom ready to be offered to anyone who may need it. He believes in establishing an open communication channel with his students about menstruation, dating and other issues, trying his best to normalize them to an impressionable crowd.

Alam, however, believes in a more holistic effort, calling upon schools and the government to take action. “Schools with progressive values should also take menstrual hygiene seriously and educate both adolescent girls and boys the same way. Nation-wide drives should be initiated to eradicate period poverty. Messages preaching the importance of menstrual hygiene should be taken to rural areas where it’s needed the most,” she opines.

Other action plans that deserve attention are menstrual leave policies and sanitary napkin/tampon dispensers being made available in restrooms of schools, restaurants, malls and other public places. The pink tax levied on female goods, including menstrual hygiene products making them more expensive, should be abolished. The government should make sanitary napkins dirt-cheap and easily accessible to all so no one has to resort to using old rags, cut-up cotton, tissues or papers as bad alternatives.

Eat, sleep and repeat: the red spot on a white skirt is not obscene. Break the taboo and talk about a period. If not now, then when?

By Ramisa Haque