

Breaking the stigma around menstruation and sanitary napkins

In 2018, one day after my morning classes, I realised that my time of the month had arrived. Unfortunately, I was unprepared and the only option was to go to the pharmacy right next to the university. I hurriedly walked in and asked for a packet of sanitary napkins and thus, began a long process of wrapping.

Not only was the man across the counter using a brown paper bag to conceal what was inside, but he went the extra mile to wrap it with two sheets of newspaper and to tape it up for me. There I was standing for almost 15 minutes and hoping that I would not stain my clothes, while the man made it more and more difficult for me to cater to my menstruation, a natural, biological process for the female body.

Be it because of my impatience or my gut instinct, I tore the newspaper off in front of the man and took out the packet of sanitary napkins from the paper bag. The man looked at me displeased and I said to him, "This was unnecessary." However, I did walk out of the pharmacy with the packet inside my backpack, again concealed.



Menstruation has long been a stigmatised topic in our society. Addressing this stigma, Freedom's #UnwrapYourFreedom campaign demonstrates the reality that women face in purchasing sanitary napkins. Rather than being treated as a basic necessity and like any other commodity, it is concealed from public view. We, as young girls, are taught

to never speak of it in front of other people, especially men. We are taught to never express the discomfort and difficulty that comes with menstruation. We are taught that concealment and menstruation go hand in hand.

The logic behind this concealment is that sanitary napkins are a symbol of shame and menstruation is something

extremely personal and demands to be hidden. The campaign video shows the viewpoints of multiple women, the majority of who are either hesitant to talk about it or blatantly refuse to talk about this natural process openly. This stigmatisation and taboo surrounding menstruating and by extension, sanitary napkins is a social rejection of womanhood.

As a society, it is important to break past this illusion of shame associated with menstruation and bring this topic to light. The campaign advocates for the normalisation of women's bodies and the experiences which are unique to women. It illustrates that menstruation is as natural as breathing and the commodities, which are essential during this time need to be easily accessible without any fear of social ridicule.

As women strive for their rightful place in society alongside men, it is high time that we start disagreeing with the concealment of sanitary napkins and treat it like any other daily essential.

By Puja Sarkar
Photo: Star Multimedia

#HISTORY & HERITAGE

Fabled 'Dhakai Muslin' revived

Nearly two centuries ago, Dhaka's Muslin was the finest fabric on the planet. Then colonization happened, and it just disappeared. For over 200 years, Muslin was only a memory, until recently, when due to the keen interest of Bangladesh government and the craftsmanship of our local artisans, it was revived and the fabled cloth is now once again a reality.

There are 18 different types of Muslin. The speciality of Muslin is in its yarn count. The higher the yarn count, the finer the fabric. Back in our glory days, when Mughal emperors donned Muslin with pride, the thread count went as far as 1200 but attempts to recreate Muslin had been futile for the last 200 years because no one could reach a yarn count that high. The closest thing to Muslin we had was the Jamdani which barely tops the 100 count. Until recently when a young woman from Cumilla, Chandina made the dream a reality by spinning 500 metric count yarn. She is the first Bangladeshi artisan in more than 200 years to spin 500 metric count Muslin yarn.

"When I first started, the count was barely 10-15. Now I can reach a count of 550," said Mohsena Begum, with spectacular humility as if she does not realise that she has brought a myth back to life. "We have to do this on hand spinning wheel, manually. You can't do this on a machine, it's too delicate and the thread will snap if you get distracted even for a moment. It takes 3 to 4 days to spin 1 gram of thread," she added pointing

out what a herculean task it is and once again reminding us why Muslin is so special. "There are a lot of things you need to maintain if you are going to work on Muslin. For one thing, a sharp eyesight is very crucial. As is the light. We need to work for long hours sitting at the same spot. If the light is not exactly right, there will be headaches. If you are distracted by any other thought, your progress is impeded. You cannot work under a fan because of the nature of the work. We need to care for our hands and keep them soft through a number of rituals and caring procedures. It's quite a challenge, to be frank," Mohsena Begum explained.

As a trainer under Bangladesh Handloom Board, she is teaching a new generation of artisans, her students have surpassed her yarn count and recently reached 731 metric counts, which is the highest so far. "We want to expand this craft through more training, obviously. Commercialising the Muslin is also in the plans and we hope that maybe in the next three years or so, we can make that happen," said Mohd Rezaul Karim, Chairman of Bangladesh Handloom Board, observing that there is a huge potential in the craft.

'Dhakai Muslin' is a GI product of Bangladesh, and it's not difficult to understand why. From Jane Austen to Joséphine Bonaparte, many other historic figures were very fond of Muslin. Its resurrection is nothing short of historic.

By Ashif Ahmed Rudro








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