

MY PERIODS AND ME

A collection of unique and quirky stories of adolescent girls' experiences with Menstruation



PREFACE

Back in 2016, while on a project to gamify Periods in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, a youth worker shared about an incident in her community. That young girl had her periods delayed. Expecting to be comforted by the mother, she confided in her and was shocked out of her wits when her mother led the family brigade that assassinated her character. Ashamed and embarrassed about ruining the family's reputation by getting pregnant before marriage, this young girl committed suicide. The interesting fact here is that she was not sexually active and there was no way that she could be pregnant!

Unfortunately, popular media generally portrays skipped or delayed periods as a confirmation of pregnancy. With a lack of effective conversations around it, Periods are normally spoken about in a negative light, made worse by regressive practices and beliefs that have already been distorted from their logic over the generations.

However, much affected by this story, we started sharing about this young girl in our workshops. This led to more and more girls, either publicly in the group or in private, come up to us to share how they have had similar pregnancy scares regarding their delayed periods. It was then that we thought how valuable it would be to have young girls share their own stories, their weirdest assumptions, and lived experiences that a whole lot of other girls could relate to! Thus, this collection was born.

We facilitated multiple story circles with girls and boys from and around Lucknow, each of them from underprivileged backgrounds, some who came from families and others who grew up in shelter homes. Every story circle started with an awkward silence because opening one's mouth meant to be vulnerable to the world's judgments, but once the stories started, the sessions became never-ending. There is a story of a girl who befriended her toilet pot during her periods, one who thought her face gets yellow patches during her periods and another who thought her boyfriend had the power to prolong her periods, so avoids getting intimate with him at all cost.

Each of the sixteen stories is written from real-life experiences. Certain stories feature complementing experiences shared by different girls to make a piece more wholesome. We have taken care to not name any of our characters, to maintain the trust we have built with our participants while also influencing the relatability of each story beyond social identities. The intention is to let more of these 'weird' stories out into the world, so that a greater number of young girls who read this, know that they are not alone.

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A SYMBOLIC PUNCH

I am sixteen years old and among the first generation of girls in my family who is studying in high school. It is an exciting journey for me and a difficult journey for my parents who want to encourage me to get more exposure but are also scared of me getting over-exposure that distances me from my roots and makes me look like a 'bad girl'. On most days I understand my family's concern. I understand what belonging to our society means to them and their fears for me in this big bad world.

In an effort to show respect for the support that my parents give me, I try my best to be as responsible as I can. I am also extremely aware and conscious of what I do and how I present myself. While I don't want to let my parents down, I also don't like being on the wrong side of an issue or a situation. I often feel like I am a bundle of paradoxes. I am meek and dainty but also fierce and fearless. I bow down to certain gender roles that exist in our society and I fight furiously to break some other gender norms that exist. This can often make me a difficult person to understand, not just for others but also for myself. Anyway, as I make my journey to grow as a person, I feel the weight of constantly balancing out how I look to my family and myself. As I grow older, I feel extremely image-conscious. It bothers me if someone laughs at me and my early experiences with periods had started out with just that.

"I DECIDED TO LET ANY GIRL WITH PERIOD STAINS KNOW ABOUT IT CLEARLY AND ALSO VOWED TO ALWAYS CARRY A COUPLE OF EXTRA NAPKINS IN MY BAG TO GIVE TO WHOEVER ELSE MIGHT NEED IT. I LOVED THIS IDEA, IT FELT LIKE A SYMBOLIC PUNCH TO THE FACES OF THE GIRLS WHO THOUGHT PERIODS WERE SHAMEFUL."



Once when I got my periods, I was in school. I was not wearing a sanitary napkin and had stained my skirt. I noticed that girls in my class were pointing and laughing at me. I asked around but no one shared what had happened and only responded with giggles and I had started to get irritated.

I tried to look around and figured that my sky blue coloured skirt was stained. I had had my periods once before, so I knew what it was. I went to my teacher to ask for a sanitary napkin, which I wore before cleaning my skirt in school, working hard on holding my anger back for all this time.



As I had said, I don't like being laughed at, but also don't like being on the wrong side of things. In a fit of rage, I did have the urge to punch some of my friends, but I knew that wouldn't be the right thing to do. I thought hard on how I could get to the better end of the situation and at that very moment, decided to let any girl with period stains know about it clearly and also vowed to always

carry a couple of extra napkins in my bag to give to whoever else might need it. I loved this idea, it felt like a symbolic punch to the faces of the girls who thought periods were shameful. In school, I am now known as that girl who always has a napkin in her bag, so, the girls who are embarrassed to ask their teachers, come to me for one when they get their periods unexpectedly.

BAG FULL OF NAPKINS

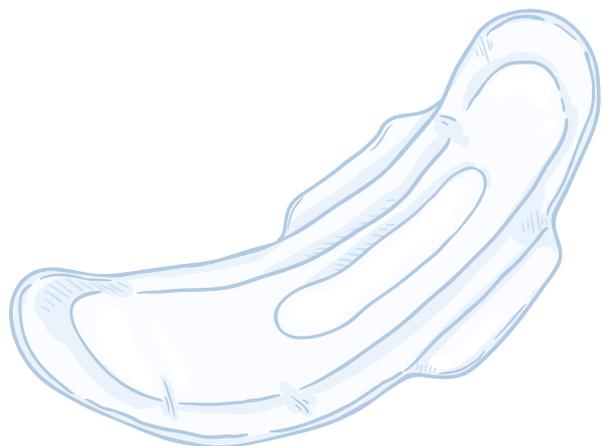
I was very young when both my parents were murdered right in front of my eyes by a man I had known. The police had brought me to the government shelter home that I am currently in. One of my most difficult struggles while growing up was this intense guilt I felt at not being able to save my parents or do anything to help them.

I started living in the shelter home feeling a sense of disconnect with everyone around me. I lived in a happy family with good fortune. Suddenly finding myself sleeping in a dormitory and using a shared bathroom, cooking food for a minimum of 50 individuals in a common kitchen, all seemed a little overwhelming. I would mostly keep to myself, morose, lost in the world of my past that still lived in my head. I distinctly remember how there were some girls who tried to steal the toiletries allotted to me and sometimes also steal my share of food, but I was mostly touched by the kindness some others showed to me. As I started opening up to some of my peers, I realized how we were all so different in who we were and what our stories are, but still somehow connected through the sorrows we had to endure in such a short time in our lives. While I was still struggling to get used to how that space looked, smelt, and felt like, I found among the staff some of the most encouraging people I have known. I was to inherit my parent's fortune once I was

18 years of age, so, my way out of this shelter home system had already been carved. The staff, completely aware of this, would always encourage me to study with my highest sincerity so that I can make something out of my life, supported by the money my parents had saved for me. I found it strange how they thought I was lucky, but I probably understand it now.

While I was still struggling to get used to my new life, another change got added to the list – I got my periods. I shared this with a friend of mine and she asked me to not tell anyone about it because at the shelter home, the staff considered premenarche girls as 'small girls' and the ones who got their periods as 'big girls'.

"AS I REALIZED HOW TALKING RESPONSIBLY AND POSITIVELY ABOUT PERIODS HELPED ME STAND OUT FROM MY CLASS, I SUDDENLY SEEMED TO HAVE FOUND A WAY OUT OF MY CHILDHOOD FRUSTRATION OF NOT BEING ABLE TO HELP MY PARENTS."





This distinction was extremely important because based on this, all the tasks at the shelter home were allotted among us. A 'big girl', even though they might be the same age as a 'small girl', gets the responsibility to help with cooking in the kitchen, washing the big utensils, and assisting girls with mental disabilities. I understood that and hid my period update from the staff for a couple of months.

This conversation actually helped me understand a few other phenomena too. The naughtiest girl in my shelter always seemed to have a low period for a couple of days in a month. While generally she would dance around and create a nuisance for the others, at least once a month she would be at her calmest, claiming a bad headache. After I started mine, I figured that headache actually meant periods. I often wondered why someone as confident and outspoken

like her would use headache as the code word for periods, but now I was big enough to be let in on the secret – the staff at the shelter home did not consider a normal amount of period cramps as bad enough to back out of daily chores, they would say that as girls we will be menstruating for at least for the next 30 years of our lives, so, it is better that we get over this and do the job at hand. However, for headaches, they had different standards. They would allow girls with headaches to take rest. So, the 'headache' was not born out of the shame she felt about being on her periods, but as a way to get out of tasks, she did not want to do.

One other fascinating thing I figured was how girls in shelter homes felt about their schoolmates who came from homes. On most days we felt bad about not having our own families, but when it came to periods, we were way superior in knowledge! This was the one time we felt really lucky to not have mothers and grandmothers in our lives to inject shame and ban us from talking about periods. Instead, our staff would invite organizations to talk to them about Periods and more. One day, the quietest girl in my class, who also stayed in the same shelter home as



me had all the answers in a biology lesson focused on Menstruation. Every girl in class, including the teacher, was dumbstruck with this confidence and the knowledge of periods itself. Both of us felt very cool showing off how much we had already known about periods, thanks to the didis who taught us about it. As I realized how talking responsibly and positively about periods helped me stand out from my class, I suddenly seemed to have found a way out of my childhood frustration of not being able to help my parents. Most girls in my class don't understand cycle tracking, also, their mothers provide them with napkins after they start their periods, so,

stained

skirts became a common sight in school for me. I started carrying sanitary napkins in my bag and every time I gave one to a girl, I made sure to also explain what periods are and why we get them. It started out with me helping my classmates and eventually, both my juniors and my seniors started recognizing me as the girl who always carries a sanitary napkin. I loved being able to help each of them every single time and started carrying multiple napkins in my bag instead of one and sometimes I consider replacing all my books and stationery in my bag with only sanitary napkins so I am able to help every girl not carrying one to school that day!

EASY TO ASSUME

One day, a friend of mine started her periods while at school. That was also the one day that I was not carrying an extra napkin in my bag. The good thing is that I knew that the other girls from my shelter home carried an extra napkin too. I was able to meet only four of them over lunchtime and realized that none of them were carrying their extra one today. A friend who overheard my conversation suggested I meet our principal with my friend and get her a napkin. Our principal kindly gave me a sanitary napkin which I gave to my friend.

In all this rush, the one thing that skipped my mind is the fact that it was her first period. She had a rough idea about periods and knew about sanitary napkins from tv, but no one tells you on tv how often you need to change them. The next day in school, I was sitting next to my friend when I realized that she was giving out a strong odour. I asked if she had had a shower, she confirmed. Then I learned that she hadn't changed her napkin since yesterday because she did not know that she had to. Thankfully, I was carrying my extra one that day and offered her my napkin to change into.

"ONE WOULD WONDER THAT IF THERE WAS SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED TO EVERY GIRL IN THE WORLD, INFORMATION ON THE SAME WOULD ALSO BE AVAILABLE TO EVERY GIRL TOO."



I felt really bad about this incident because just a few days back I was getting judgmental about a staff member from my shelter who simply handed out a sanitary napkin to another girl without explaining anything about it. This girl had just come in from a village and was on her period. She was handed a napkin, which she did not know how to use, so just kept it on her underwear like she would have kept a piece of cloth and walked out of the toilet. After a while, her clothes were stained again and the staff scolded her for being careless.

On seeing her scared and confused about this, I went up to speak with her only to realize that she had never seen a disposable napkin before. She did not know that the sticker needed to be peeled for the napkin to stick to her underwear and for the surface to absorb the blood.

Back then, I was really irritated with that lady for not telling a young girl how to use a disposable napkin and here I was, just a few days later doing something similar with a friend who just had her first period. Makes me think how easy it becomes to miss out on sharing these small and such trivial-sounding pieces of information, assuming that 'obviously she would know about it'.

Turns out that this is not just in our shelter home, even my friends from school who come from regular homes are never explained the same. We watch blue liquid on sanitary napkins on tv, get scared when we actually have red liquid coming out of our bodies, and then are given a napkin that we don't know how to use, are not told about infections, are unaware of the medicines that we can take and how to deal with period cramps.

There absolutely is no information about something that we are told again and again that 'happens to every girl'. One would wonder that if there was something that happened to every girl in the world, information on the same would also be available to every girl too.



HOW I GOT MY PERIODS

No one can tell how I reached the shelter home; they just know that I was here from the very beginning. Everything I have and everything I know is because of my experiences and opportunities that I got from the home, even my name was given by the staff who picked me on her lap first. I grew up having a lot of fun. Since I had known no other life, I have lived my best life here at the shelter and the friends that I made here are like my sisters.

A few years back, I was having a tough time at the home. We were a group of four best friends and three of them had already started their periods. I hated that I was the only odd one out and was almost desperate to start my periods and be exactly like them again! There was a point when I actively prayed to god for my periods. One day I overheard a



group of girls creating stories about a piece of cloth in the dustbin that was stained with blood. They were talking about how a ghost must have sucked some girl's blood at night and wiped its face with that cloth, therefore leaving it stained. I shut them up for being silly and shared how that was a cloth used by someone to manage their periods. I laughed at how silly these girls were, only to be picked on by another senior girl who scolded me for talking about periods, and after that asked if I had stepped over the cloth too. I was taken aback and shared how I had not personally seen the cloth but was only clarifying to the other girls, she replied with "Thank god you did not step over it! Otherwise, it is believed that if a young girl steps over the period blood of another girl, then the first one starts her periods!" While all the other girls got scared with this, I had a bulb switch on in my head!

I was the naughtiest of my lot, and I got hold of the only other friend in my group who was close to being as naughty as me. I made an evil plan with her to trouble the staff by relieving ourselves on the cemented floor in the washing area and stink up the place. She immediately agreed. As soon as we both finished peeing, I immediately jumped up and stepped over her pee.

"WE WERE A GROUP OF FOUR BEST FRIENDS AND THREE OF THEM HAD ALREADY STARTED THEIR PERIODS. I HATED THAT I WAS THE ONLY ODD ONE OUT AND WAS ALMOST DESPERATE TO START MY PERIODS AND BE EXACTLY LIKE THEM AGAIN!"

That night, I felt a lot of pain in my abdomen. I knew that this was a different kind of pain and immediately told my friends that I will be on periods. They asked me how and I said that my body is telling me. They had a good laugh at me and went off to sleep.

The next day when I actually got my periods, I was the happiest. In the changing area, I saw that someone had kept a nicely folded piece of cloth, which looked like was meant to be used for periods. I picked it up without asking and took it in my underwear. I went back to let my friends know how I was one among them again as now even I had started my periods. They were happy for me when I started to show off how I made



my periods happen by stepping over my friend's pee and then topping it by stealing her period cloth too! All three of them burst out laughing again and I wondered what had happened!

Turns out that my friend whom I had tricked into peeing in the open was actually not on her periods and therefore the cloth I used was also not hers! So, it seems like I got my periods because my body had decided to start my periods and some poor girl must be fuming at seeing her carefully folded period cloth gone!

I AM A HARMLESS YOUNG GIRL

I am generally known as a sweet little girl in my circles. The way I dress or talk or make my hair, adds to that notion about me. I don't look threatening at all. My parents are migrants from Assam, we stay in a small slum inhabited by ragpickers. My parents leave early in the morning to collect trash from the houses in nearby colonies and sweep the roads. We are poor and both my parents have to work extra hard to make ends meet, but they have raised me like a princess. They say that I am already working as a student, so while they hold their job to keep the city clean, I should earnestly do my job of studying. They hope that one day I will be educated enough to break the cycle of poverty and do better for myself. On my part, I reciprocate with absolute sincerity in my school work and have always been among the highest score getters in class in my ten years of schooling.

While my parents are exceptional in how they treat me and support me in everything I do, the rest of my family is much more regressive. According to them, I should already have been married! My parents understand me very well and also their own families. They know that we both belong to two different worlds, and every time we

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take a trip to our hometown in Assam, my parents request me to stay patient with my family, because they do not know any better. I understand where my parents are coming from and comply. I know that this will be just for that one month that I am there, but once when I am back in Lucknow, I am my own person. While I think that I have been successful in dodging all pressures put forward by my family in Assam, my friends, teammates and my coach points out how after every trip back from home, my body language is completely different. They say that I slouch, I hold back in my pace while running, my arms, instead of being free and aiding me in my run, is closer to my chest and I appear more hesitant in how I use my body to play frisbee. Initially, I would think that they are all teasing me, but after a couple of similar trips and reflecting on myself, I realized that this was actually happening.

In 2019, I went back to Assam, more determined than before, to not get influenced and instead influence some of my cousins to be more open and comfortable in occupying their space.

This trip was not for a regular summer vacation, but for my cousin's nikah. While my parents put no restrictions on me during my periods, in my hometown, we were specially instructed by an elderly relative to not actively participate in any wedding festivities, if we were on our periods. I paid full attention to what was being said, the do's, the don'ts, and the exact tasks that we were to help out with. I volunteered to grind the fresh turmeric for the bride. I was an athlete and although I am petite, my aunt trusted me with the responsibility to grind the entire bulk of turmeric needed. We all had a great time in the nikah, the food was good, we danced a lot, my

cousin was happy and her in-laws seemed to be nice people too. When I returned to Lucknow, my mother was all praise for me for being a good girl and helping out so actively at all the functions and was also happy at how smoothly everything went. I asked her why girls on their periods were asked not to participate directly at the nikah, my mother mumbled that it is a common belief that menstruating women are impure, so their participation in a wedding might ruin the festivities and turn the happy event into something sad.

I gave out a burst of evil laughter right then and shared, "you know, amma, I got done with my periods two days after the nikah!". My mother was taken aback for a moment, but understood what I did here and just shared her usual supportive smile.



I AM A SCHOOL GOING ILLITERATE FOOL

Growing up I was an obedient and giggly little girl. No matter what I said, it was easier for people to hear my giggles in a sentence than the words I had used. However, as I grew up, I met a wonderful group of young

teachers who would visit our shelter home twice a week to facilitate play-based sessions. They taught me the value of presenting myself as I am. They encouraged me to be myself, ask questions about things that I don't understand, to understand and act according to my context but also to stand up for and do what I deemed was right. Because of them, I started



"I REJECT THE IDEA OF A GOOD GIRL BEING ONE WHO IS EMBARRASSED ABOUT HERSELF AND HER BODY AND HIDES HER NAPKINS BECAUSE THAT REFLECTS ON HER DIGNITY."

seeing a newer side of my personality which sometimes came across as rebellious and other times as incorrigible to the staff in my shelter home.

One day, there was some construction work going on on the roof of the dispensary and the masons were all men. As I walked in to take a sanitary napkin out, the staff in the room asked me to hide it in my kurta and walk out carefully, because there were men outside who would see it. I gave her a disgusted look and walked out waving my napkin for the whole world to see, especially the uncles who were working. Aunty was furious. I realized that the men hadn't noticed, so I walked back into the dispensary and banged the door hard while walking out again with my napkin at display, trying to get at least one of their attention. By then, aunty had lost her cool and yelled at me, I shouted back saying, "what is there to hide in this? If you are on your periods like me, then you can

take one napkin too!" Aunty retorted, "You are a school-going illiterate fool!"

I personally didn't like that I had to be disrespectful and I also don't believe that one needs to announce to the world about our periods, but this is our space! We are all women here and these men, barely a handful, have entered our space and if we still need to be ashamed about our natural bodily functions, how will we ever get to feel confident as and when we walk out of this home as adults? Also, I reject the idea of a good girl being one who is embarrassed about herself and her body and hides her napkins because that reflects on her dignity.



KISS OF (NO) LOVE

If you look at me, you will never know where I come from. You will not know that my parents are illiterate, that my father sells vegetables and my mother is a cook and that I stay in a makeshift house in an empty plot owned by a rich family, who employ us as domestic help, without any pay, as a return for this favour. My mother is the most inspiring person in my life. She has big dreams for my sister and me, even bigger than the ones we have for ourselves. She wants us to be everything that she could not be and encourages us to dress up for where we see ourselves and not where we belong to. My mother is my hero and, as a child, I couldn't wait to grow up to become a woman like her.

While that was a childhood fascination that I had, my first experience of becoming a grown-up happened when I got my first period. Although I was still the same little girl that I was the day before, I was suddenly getting treated like a big girl! I got my periods and my mother gave me a piece of cloth till she bought me a pack of expensive sanitary napkins. This attention was exciting but also made me feel awkward. Soon I found myself become a conversation topic among my female relatives who were happy that I could bear a child and then had a big list of dos and don'ts for me. The list of don'ts was a longer one! I should not:

"I WAS HATING ON MY BOYFRIEND AND VOWED TO NEVER, EVER, EVER LET HIM HOLD MY HAND AND TO DEFINITELY NEVER KISS HIM ON MY LAST DAY OF MY PERIODS. HIS LOVE HAD THE POWER TO EXTEND MY MENSTRUATING DAYS!"



- Wear sleeveless clothes
- Wear shorts
- Sit or stand with my legs apart
- Can't cook
- Can't visit a temple or pray to god when on my periods, and such...

It won't be wrong to say that I started out by disliking periods for killing my happiness.

My mother had raised me to be independent and a free thinker. I did not get into much trouble with my family members too, they would just let me be, but now because of periods, I had a whole list of things that I couldn't and shouldn't do.



As I grew older, I was part of multiple conversations around periods in my school and an organization that coached me in Ultimate Frisbee. I realized that for the lack of better knowledge, my extended family shared things that were pretty much baseless. I did come to terms with accepting periods as a natural, normal thing that women experience. This never meant that I celebrated my periods or my womanhood or my possibility of motherhood, just that I acknowledged that this was normal and natural and will happen once a month. It was more on the lines of 'I don't hate periods, but it also doesn't mean that we are best friends. This went on for a while till one day I was with my boyfriend, holding hands in a park. It was the last day of my period and I was in a happy place. While in the park, seeing no one around, we moved ahead to kiss each other and it was a beautiful experience. The sun was setting, the sky looked beautiful, the park was lush green, and my boyfriend

and me alone on the bench without a world's care, madly in love with each other. As we got up from the bench to leave for home, I just felt like something squirted out of my body 'phhchht...', just like it feels sometimes when I suddenly sneeze during my periods and a gush of fluids pushes out of my privates and into my napkin. I initially thought nothing of it, I just wanted to be in the moment.

When I went back home, I was happy, I ran to the makeshift bathroom of ours to take my napkin out and throw it away till I meet it again the next month and to my dismay, my periods were far from over... My periods happened in full flow for another three days and no, this time I wasn't hating my periods, I was hating on my boyfriend and vowed to never, ever, ever let him hold my hand and to definitely never kiss him on the last day of my periods. His love had the power to extend my menstruating days!

LEADING THE CHANGE

I stay in a hut made of bricks and bamboo, with a thatched roof covered by a thick layer of plastic to protect us from the rainy days. We are five sisters and a brother, two older than me and two younger ones. The older ones are married and stay far away from us. We don't meet too often. My brother too lives separately from us and we do not talk much. My younger sisters are the two apples of my eyes. My father was a mason and died while at work one day, without a warning for us to be prepared for it and my mother works with a self-help group.

I love my family a lot but from a young age have felt a sense of disgust and irritation at my two older sisters for just not knowing anything and neither making enough efforts to know them. They are both illiterate, but so are my parents and I am able to forgive them for that, it wasn't their fault. However, often as a child I felt that my sisters could have known better and done better if only they had just a little intent to seek and accept opportunities.

"I THOUGHT THAT BECOMING THE CHANGE IN MY FAMILY, MY SOCIETY, WILL BE A LOT EASIER. I LEARN NOW HOW THE STRUGGLE FOR EVERYTHING THAT I WANT TO CHANGE IS GOING TO BE UNIQUE."

Watching them feel underconfident on most days, lacking dreams and ambitions, and especially how they restricted themselves during their periods from doing anything that they enjoyed incited a sense of anger that made me not want to be like them.

As migrants from Chhattisgarh, one of the first things we did when we reached Lucknow was to find a place for us to live, then my parents got a job and after just a little familiarization of the area, we started looking for a school for me and my two younger sisters. While in school, I was always on the lookout for opportunities for exposure and participated in any and every extra-curricular that my school offered. I have represented my school and my house in both inter and intra-school competitions at sporting events, dancing events, acting events, and also debating and singing events. I now introduce myself as a multi-talented girl. I am good at a lot of different things and can be better at many more that I try.

In my efforts to be different from my elder sisters and inspire my younger ones to be more aspirational, I do consider



myself fairly successful, but even a multi-talented girl like me has a secret. Normally, I walk like I own the world. I don't care that I live in a small hut in a big plot of land, in a colony of families that own big cars while I ride my faded pink cycle that I share with my sisters. On most days, I dance to my own tune, playing out scenes in my head while walking back home from wherever I had gone. Sometimes people complain that I ignore them on the road, but the truth is, I am playing the queen of this world in my head and I walk as if I have no care. But now back to my secret – am I super-confident? Yes, of course, I am! But when I am on my periods, I wish, I only wish that I walk



like an invisible person. I just feel weighed down by the shame and guilt that so often I have seen my elders pass down to their daughters. I walk sheepishly to the store to buy myself a pack of sanitary napkins. On other days I advocate for shame and stigma to be removed from periods and encourage everyone to carry their sanitary napkins with pride, without the black polythene bag hiding the newspaper-wrapped napkins. But when on my periods, I feel this struggle to choose between being the educated person in my family who knows that periods are a normal biological phenomenon, so carries herself confidently and being exactly like my elder sisters who never questioned the norms and believed they are unworthy of holding their space... I have been conflicted with this choice for a couple of years now, but I also see some progress in how I ask for the specific napkin that I want to buy and how I am a little less fidgety while walking on the road.

I thought that becoming the change in my family, and eventually my society will be a lot easier. I understand now how the struggle for everything that I want to change is going to be unique. It has been so easy for me to seek and grab opportunities for growth and so much more difficult to be the confident girl who accepts her periods with pride. Anyway, for the sake of my sisters, and others girls whom I might or might not know, I will continue to lead the change...

MAGIC CUP

In families like ours growing up is not a family affair. We are born, our parents work multiple jobs, we sometimes accompany them, and at other times the oldest sister, even if a five-year-old herself, becomes the guardian. After we turn about ten years or so, we begin accompanying our mothers as help and then slowly graduate into becoming full-time help in that house, while our mothers try to find another job or two to bring in more money. Time flies. It looks like we are born one day and by the next day we begin working at someone else's house and by the next we are old enough, running around for the same kind of life that our parents lived before this. The cycle continues.

In my family, women aren't thought of much. Men are the head of families and the sole decision-makers, irrespective of how useless they are. My mother works in multiple houses to earn a living. My father had died in 2019. He was a drunkard, would often fight with and sometimes beat up my mother and take away her hard-earned money to spend on alcohol. No one would come to help my mother and often my siblings and I did not know what to do. When he died, we of course

felt miserable to lose someone we loved, but on a certain level, we also did not technically lose much. I don't like talking about this.

She is the only one who gets me sometimes. I am the only educated person in my family and I am only in class 6. My younger sister gave up studies to start earning from a young age and my family supported this. I have big dreams for myself and I hope to make something better out of my life. My mother did not always understand me or my aspirations. When I started playing Ultimate frisbee and began traveling with my team for tournaments, she couldn't comprehend the idea of it all. She never called me when I was traveling

"SPENT THE FIRST COUPLE OF MONTHS HIDING IT IN MY STACK OF CLOTHES AT HOME, HOLDING IT IN MY HAND SOMETIMES, FEELING IT AND IMAGINING WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE INSIDE MY BODY."





for tournaments. I would watch other girls speak with their mothers asking about their travel, their matches, and feel bad about it. One day, she called one of my teammates from her neighbors' phone and that still is among the happiest moments of my life. I felt acknowledged in some way. As days went by, my mother started showing more confidence in me. I would go out to get groceries, help out with bank work and I also was the only one at home who could read and write and use a smartphone.

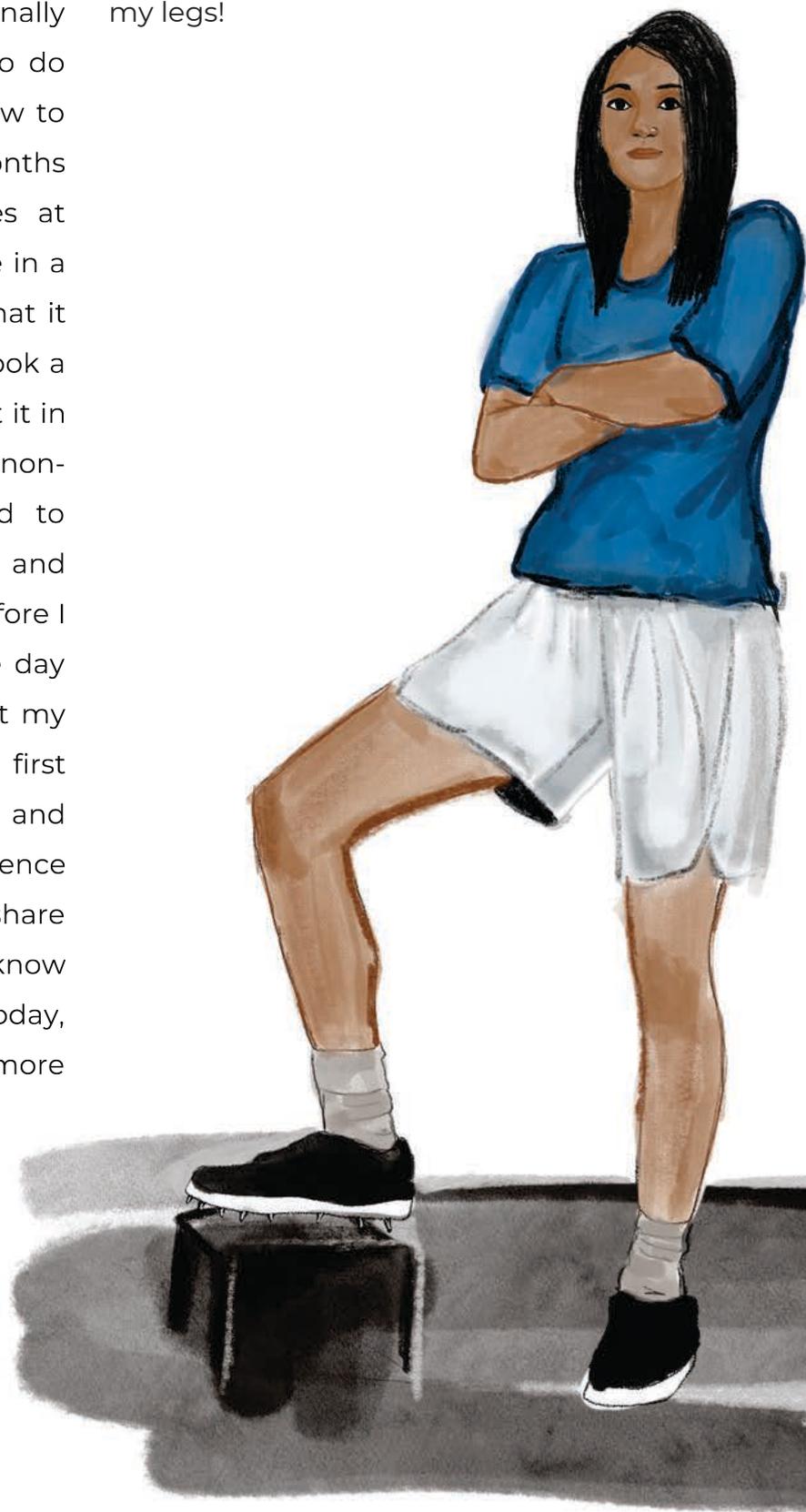
While participating in a workshop on periods I was listening to how girls shared that their mothers just gave them a napkin and asked them to not tell anyone about it, as they got their first periods. My mother, who knew very little about why periods happened, was the first one to normalize periods for me. She said it

was natural and normal and I should never feel ashamed of it. At this point in the discussion, I felt a lot of gratitude for her. In other period-related conversations, I learned about the different products available in the market apart from sanitary napkins. Did you know there is a pad made out of cloth? It looks so beautiful that even if I were to use it, wash it and dry it out in the open, no one could guess in their wildest dreams that they are reusable sanitary napkins!

I used to find it difficult to participate fully in my sports training sessions while wearing a normal disposable napkin. In fact, I often felt that if I wore loose clothes then my napkin would fall off, but wearing tight clothes during periods did not help me feel better either. Also, I loved wearing white, but couldn't wear whites during my periods. While I was still trying to live with my periods and my issues with clothes, I remembered the menstrual cup that was mentioned in our workshop. I was fascinated by it! That cup would just stick inside my body and I would not have to bother about my clothes at all. Of course, I was skeptical at first. In our ultimate team, we were asked if anyone was interested in trying out a menstrual cup, and I was really hoping that

some other girl raises her hand, and when they did, I raised my hand too. The lockdown happened right after and we could not get our cups until after a few months. When we finally did, I did not really know what to do with it, although we were told how to use it. I spent the first couple of months hiding it in my stack of clothes at home, holding it in my hand once in a while, feeling it and imagining what it would be like inside my body. It took a few months for me to finally insert it in myself, which I did, but on a non-menstruating day. I just wanted to make sure that I could wear it and wanted to know how it felt like before I actually got my periods. That one day went well and the next time I got my periods, I wore my cup for the first time, after months of staring at it and holding it in my hands! That experience was wonderful! I really wanted to share this with my mother, letting her know of that one new thing that I tried today, that helped me become a little more independent.

I finally shared with her a few days back and she thought I was joking, because why exactly will a young girl like me put random things between my legs!



MY BEST FRIEND MY BATHROOM

I was about four years old when I got separated from my father on a crowded train.

My mother had died just a week before that day. My father had wanted to restart our lives in a different city, so we left our house, my father, me, and my two younger sisters. That day did mark the starting of a new life for all of us, but contrary to the original plan, we were not starting it together. As I got separated from my father, my younger sisters strayed away from me in the crowded train and I could never trace them back.

I grew up in the government shelter home set up of our country. While I do have fond memories of friendships and love from my days in the shelter, one part I wish I could have changed is how we grew up. There were a lot of good intentions mixed with apathy too among the staff there. We were also too many girls in one small space, so I understand how it might have been difficult to provide emotional support to each of us. Anyway, one real relationship I built during my puberty days was with my bathroom!

We had a set of common bathrooms for all of us at the home, however, during my periods, I chose one stall that in my

"MY BATHROOM FELT LIKE THAT FRIEND WHO IS SILENTLY THERE FOR YOU IN YOUR TOUGH TIMES, NO QUESTIONS ASKED, NO SUGGESTIONS GIVEN, JUST A SILENT FRIEND THAT ALLOWS YOU TO BE..."



make-believe world only belonged to me. I used to keep it clean myself and also keep an eye out for the girls using it, ensuring they left the floor and the pot clean too. One of my strongest memory from my shelter home days was sitting on the floor of my stall, wishing, hoping, and praying that all the periods cooped up in my body for the next 4 days may all come out in one go. It never happened that way, but I also never stopped hoping! My bathroom felt like that friend who is silently there for you in your tough times, no questions asked, no suggestions given, just a silent friend that allows you to be...

In my hours in the bathroom stall, I would spend a lot of time talking to my pot, drawing out imaginary situations, dreaming what my future would look like. I would ask the pots and the taps what they felt like being stuck to a single place. I would sometimes turn on the tap and ask the water how it felt like to flow so freely. The one thing in the bathroom that I never spoke to though, was my mirror! I hated my mirror during my periods. I actually didn't like who looked back at me from there... During my periods, I don't like what I look like. It feels like the glow has left my face, I imagine yellow patches on my skin and deep dark circles

around my eyes. Although none of this was true, this is an image I had imagined for myself because of everything that I heard my elders say about periods. We weren't even allowed to pray to the gods we believed in and I thought that maybe it was because periods made us bad people with a bad face. God wouldn't want to be friends with bad people!

When my periods would get over, I would love my bathroom unconditionally, including the mirror in it, because now I could go back to doing pooja, which meant god would want to be my friend too, which meant that I was a good person again and that implied that I looked good too.



MY GOD AND ME

We are three sisters and used to live in a village not very far away from Lucknow. We were still in school when our father passed away. While living in extreme poverty and with no one else to support us, my mother was forced to send the three of us to a government shelter home for girls. Having lost a parent for life and separated from the other one, only to be sent into a new world within a boundary wall, was one of the most difficult times of my life. We were surrounded by young girls our age, each with a life completely different from ours. I used to feel sorry for myself, but on knowing the other girls, I realized how much more hardships some of them have had to face and yet they start the day with a smile. Unlike others, I at least had both my sisters there with me and that was all the support I needed to accept this new place as home.

I started my new life at the shelter strictly living by my mother's last instruction to us – "listen to the elders around you to avoid getting into trouble." I have been the most obedient girl in my school as well as my shelter home, which brings me a

lot of responsibilities, along with appreciation.

In the shelter, a group of young women had started coming to play new games with us that also taught us important life lessons. Although they were our teachers too, they did not like being called ma'am, they liked it better if we called them Didi. I learned how to be considerate, that two people with different viewpoints didn't need to have one as wrong, the need for self-love and such. I loved engaging with them and being a fun-loving person myself, I am sure that these Didis enjoy my company too!

One day, they facilitated a session on Menstrual Hygiene Management in my shelter home. Being a curious person,



"STARTED BY APPLYING A SMALL TIKA FROM THE PRAYING AREA ON MY HEAD DURING MY PERIODS AND WAITED THE ENTIRE DAY FOR SOMETHING TO GO WRONG AND THEN THE ENTIRE WEEK NOTHING BAD HAPPENED! NO GOD WAS UPSET WITH ME!"

person, I soaked in all the information that I could. I realized that everything that the Didis had shared was quite different from what I had heard all my life. From every conversation that I remember with the women in my life, menstruation was always something that happened to all the girls in the world and along with it was a list of don'ts that we needed to strictly follow. One on this list was about girls not entering a temple or even participating in any kind of prayers while on their periods! This was starkly opposite to what the Didis had shared! They said that our relationship with our God is personal and if we felt like visiting a temple then we could, and if we did not want to, then that was OK too. Didi had said that it is our choice but my elders said that we absolutely shouldn't! To make matters worse, most of the senior girls as well as the staff at the shelter shared things that matched all my aunts' thoughts.

I struggled with choosing the side I wanted to be on. This time it was not an easy choice between the word of an elder against a peer, but where different adults had different perspectives to share. One perspective sent me away from my god for a few days every month and the other gave me the right to choose my relationship with my god. I liked the latter, yet, for two years I struggled between my need for being obedient and choosing what information I wanted to believe in.

This went on till one day I joined a conversation between two senior girls in my shelter home. They belonged to two different religions. While one said that her holy books do not allow to even take the name of their god while being on periods, the other said that she has been praying



whenever she wanted to, irrespective of periods. The second girl was an amazing dancer, was great at studies, and also among the more dependable girls in the shelter. I had not known for anything bad to happen to her, despite her audacity to offer prayers during her periods. Encouraged by what she shared, I started by applying a small tika from

the praying area on my head during my periods and waited the entire day for something to go wrong and then the entire week. Nothing bad happened! No god was upset with me!

Now, I offer prayers whenever I want to, because my relationship with my God is personal.



SAME SHAME EVERYWHERE

I studied in a second shift school, which basically means that the campus and resources of a mainstream school are used to educate children from less fortunate backgrounds. I used to be a house captain in school and quite honestly, I took up that responsibility to feel a little more powerful and also to be able to bunk classes in the pretense of encouraging my housemates as they practiced for inter-house events and other unimportant meetings.

One day, our teacher asked all the badge holders to do a sudden checking of everyone's bag to see if anyone was carrying a cellphone. I got really excited about it because I would be checking others' bags and no one would be checking mine because I am a house captain! These little moments were my cheap thrills back in my school days.

Anyway, as I began thoroughly checking one bag after the other, the last bag that I spent time on that day has left a deep impact on me. That particular girl looked awkward as I went ahead and opened her bag. Her bag had a horrible stench and I was wondering why, till I opened the zip in the back pocket and it seemed like an ugly odor punched my face.

I spread the section out, only to notice a few used sanitary napkins stuffed inside it. I think I saw insects or worms wriggling out of it, probably they were maggots or maybe they were flying snakes! I shrieked with disgust and announced immediately to the class how disgusting this girl had been for filling her school bag up with used sanitary napkins and even scolded her for not maintaining basic hygiene. The entire class laughed at her and the teacher added on with her scolding. Within the next few days this incident was discussed by all teachers and girls in the senior school. She was ridiculed and her sanity questioned. I really did

"HEARING EACH OF THEIR STORIES MADE ME FEEL HEAVY IN MY HEART AND A LOT MORE GUILT ON HOW MY MINDLESS REACTION MIGHT HAVE SCARRED ANOTHER GIRL FOR LIFE."



not see anything wrong in it till one day a dear friend of mine shared how this girl used to be the best debater in her house and it was strange to see how someone so articulate, smart and confident could do such a thing. I never really paused to understand why this happened. That girl had started missing school more regularly after that and even on the days she came, I couldn't really muster up courage to apologize to her and the most I could do was that every time someone brought up this incident to laugh at her, I would distract them into another topic.

I had never spoken about this incident with anyone till we had our



story circle for the creation of this series. The question that I was not able to ask that girl, I asked the others in the room as to why this would have happened and one after the other girls started sharing the immense amount of shame that they experience while going to buy a sanitary napkin and even worse when they go to dispose of one after use. Someone shared how she waited in the toilet for about fifteen minutes, for her uncle, who was sitting right outside, to move away so she can walk out with the napkin wrapped in newspaper and how she ultimately had to hide it in her clothes to bring it out and then go back to take another shower. There were girls who had kept disposable napkins wrapped in newspapers hidden inside their bag because a brother, even though a younger one, or an uncle or just about any other male family member happened to stand a little distance away from the bin.

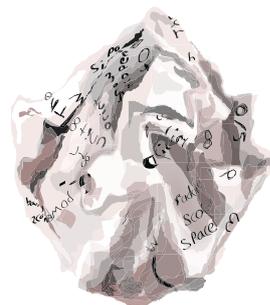
Hearing each of their stories made me feel heavy in my heart and a lot more guilt on how my mindless reaction might have scarred another girl for life. We obviously never kept in touch, but if you happen to be reading this, I want you to know that I am deeply sorry.

SIGNIFICANTLY TRIVIAL

There are two types of girls who live in our shelter home, one, who have been dropped off or brought to the shelter home while they were little girls, and the other, minor girls who are temporarily being brought to the home for a variety of reasons like eloping with a partner but neither the partner nor the family wanting them back, both parents are dead and no family to look after them, girls who have complained to the police about feeling unsafe in their homes but with nowhere to go and such. While the first lot of girls have a strong sense of community and bonding with each other, we are also very well synced with how the organization functions. The girls who come in temporarily are the ones who have a stronger struggle to adjust to a changed, more authoritative environment, change in eating time and food quality, stricter discipline in daily routines, and such. However, the strongest daily struggles that most of us have are with the toilet habits of young girls who are brought to our shelter from a completely rural environment.

A number of girls who come from rural backgrounds in our shelter are used to open defecation, therefore

"I HAD ALWAYS HAD IT IN MIND TO LET NEW GIRLS KNOW THAT THEY SHOULD DISPOSE THEIR USED NAPKINS IN THE DUSTBIN BUT IT NEVER OCCURRED TO ME TO EVER ASK THEM IF THEY KNEW WHAT A NAPKIN WAS OR EVEN A DUSTBIN."



flushing after relieving their selves is not what comes to them naturally.

On our part, flushing is such a normal activity that we never even think of orienting any new girl to do it. This leads to smelly and soiled toilets, leading to fights over who did it and who will clean it.

One of the stranger things I saw recently in my bathroom was that the cemented ventilator seemed to be lined with what looked like folded sanitary napkins. Out of curiosity, I checked one closely and realized it was a used one stuck to the holes in the ventilator. Disgusted, I ran out screaming. I took a couple of minutes before calming down and thought to myself. This was a brand-new phenomenon.



Even if someone was pranking, they wouldn't go to the extent of piling up used napkins to trouble others. So, I personally went to each and every new admission to our home and asked if they were on their periods. One of them confirmed and then I asked her about the napkins in the bathroom. What she shared after that confused my feelings about this entire episode. She shared that back at home, women use pieces of cloth to manage their flow and after each use, they stack it up in crevices of their wall or thatched roofs and then wash it after five days. She was just doing what she always did, but this time with a disposable napkin, that she did know was different.

It was then that it hit me, how while living in the city, we are so used to

certain ways of doing things that it doesn't strike us how another person might actually be clueless about the same. I had always had it in mind to let new girls know that they should dispose of their used napkins in the dustbin but it never occurred to me to ever ask them if they knew what a napkin or even a dustbin was.

I spent the next couple of hours in the room with the new girls, discussing our periods-related experiences and stories around practices, the funny logic that women around us shared about certain practices, and more. That evening was wonderful and honestly speaking, that exact second that I ran out disgusted over a stack of used napkins, I never thought I will be bonding with the same girls over it!

SOLO PREGNANCY SCARE

I am sixteen years old and am known as the female Salman Khan in my circles because of how I walk. Like Salman, I walk with a bloated chest, laughing and talking and teasing everyone that I am remotely friends with. I think my sense of confidence has a lot to do with how I carry myself. I am very comfortable in my skin and in who I am.

I am one of six siblings, two of whom are brothers and it won't be wrong to say that I am more outgoing than them and demand equal treatment in everything offered to us siblings. This becomes a point of contention at home. I often feel that my family loves me, but doesn't like me much for being so outspoken. I get into a lot of trouble with my father specifically and as much as sometimes I hate my life, I also know that I am not wrong in demanding a better life for myself as a girl and also working for it. It upsets me how all chores are divided in my house based on gender – my sisters are in charge of doing all the domestic chores like cooking, cleaning, mopping and my brothers are in charge of all the work happening outside our home, like buying groceries, paying for bills, etc. I am a female athlete, I play ultimate frisbee, I have travelled much more than anyone in my family owing to the various tournaments my team

participates in. I also work as a youth coach for the organization that coaches me in my sport, so I contribute to my family's income too. I have a cycle and through my friends, I have learned to ride a scooter as well as a bike. I am currently the most educated person in my family although I am studying in the tenth grade. I enjoy and am also good at helping out with chores outside the house but just because I am a girl, I am expected to wash dishes and cook for my family and that upsets me. I am often tagged as the wayward, uncultured, and shameless girl in my family, who is bound to bring disgrace to our family's reputation. These fights often affect my eating habits. On most days I am too upset to eat and sometimes even imagine what life will be like if I ran away from home.



"I NEVER AGAIN ASKED FOR MY PERIODS TO NOT COME AND STILL HAVE A GOOD LAUGH AT HOW CONVINCED I WAS BACK THEN THAT I WAS PREGNANT."

Anyway, coming back to my period story, I would often think of periods as unnecessary trouble that I was cursed with. Apart from the period's related pain, I particularly dislike wearing napkins. They make me feel uncomfortable and affect my intentions to run during my sports coaching sessions. I wished there were months when I did not get my periods. This was much before I learned to be careful of what I wished for...

A couple of years back, there came a time when I missed my cycle twice in a row and I was scared. I was scared that I was pregnant and didn't know how to share this with my mother. As it is they had expected the worst



out of me, but having their unmarried teenage daughter pregnant was the last thing they would have imagined...

I felt very lonely back then and longed to be able to speak to someone about this but couldn't think of a single friend who would listen without being judgmental. I hadn't had anyone talk to me about periods, so I did not know why we get it. I just knew that it happens every month, that it was uncomfortable, there is a list of things that we are not supposed to do during our periods, and that missing period means a sign of pregnancy. I did not have a boyfriend and neither was I sexually active, it puzzled me how I could get pregnant by myself, but I was convinced that I was because that is what I heard. I lost a lot of weight within the next few weeks. I was looking for answers and hoping to escape a beating that was awaiting me.

It was during this time that we started having deeper conversations on Periods at our frisbee center. We had a workshop, to begin with, followed by more conversations with our coach and also among us girls.

I did not have it in me to discuss my predicament with anyone at the moment. I just tried to follow everything that was shared. It occurred to me that YouTube has a lot of informative videos too, so I typed out my problem there and found a video that shared how stress and poor eating habits could also impact our menstrual cycle. I immediately began to work on myself. I started eating more regularly, especially the dal and leafy vegetables that my mother made, and worked harder on avoiding fights at home and at keeping happy. I got my periods after two months and my happiness knew no bounds! I never again asked for my periods to not come and still have a good laugh at how convinced I was back then that I was pregnant.



WE ARE FAMILY

Growing up in a shelter home, I have seen a lot of different types of girls come and go. It is strange how all the girls in the shelter home felt disconnected from others in the world but seem to have connected with each other through our sorrows. I was very young when I got lost in a crowd. I do not remember that day too clearly, in fact, I don't even remember my parents' face as clearly either. It feels like I was there with them for a minute and then I was brought to a house with lots of girls like me. Like many other girls who come to our home, I started out with a sense of disinterest and disconnect with everyone around me, but soon realized that we are the closest thing to what a family would be like. This helped me look out for other girls in my shelter.

"THIS IS ONE OF THE FUNNIEST AND ALSO THE BEST MEMORIES I HAVE FROM MY DAYS IN THE SHELTER HOME, FOR TWO REASONS – ONE, THAT I KNEW I WAS NOT GOING TO DIE AND SECOND, THAT IT WAS RECONFIRMED IN MY HEAD THAT WE ARE INDEED A FAMILY, WHERE WE ALL LOOK OUT FOR EACH OTHER."

Among all the girls I remember meeting from when I was a child, there was one who had tuberculosis. She was a nice and kind person, but every time she coughed, she would vomit blood. Back then no one had really explained to me what exactly had happened to her, I was only told that she will probably not live as long. My young mind remembered this experience as people who bleed without a cut, die. As days went by, this girl became increasingly sick and was eventually taken for medical care. I did not meet her again.

A few years after that, a sudden feeling of wetness in my underwear got me running to the bathroom. I was really embarrassed with the idea of having wet my pants while taking my afternoon nap. However, in the bathroom, I realized that it was not pee. I washed up and quietly came back to the room. At tea time, I offered my tea to a friend of mine who loved tea way more than I did.





I refused to join the other girls at game time and then at dinner I gave my food to someone else who wanted to have a second helping. A dear friend of mine was observing all this and found it completely outside my personality to not play or even drink my evening tea. She checked with me if I was doing fine. I hugged her immediately and let her know that I loved her a lot. She pushed away from me and shouted what was wrong. I just let her know that she was one of my best friends in the shelter. She ran out of the room and told the staff about my 'strange' behaviour who called me to her asking what might have happened. I let her know that I have tuberculosis

and that I would die. She was scared out of her wits and asked how I knew this. I let aunty know about the bloodstains in my clothes and how I remember this old girl who would cough blood and had less time to live. Aunty laughed it off and gave me a sanitary napkin to wear for the night.

Having no clue what a sanitary napkin was meant to do, I tried to hold the napkin between my inner thighs, inside my panty. It was difficult, but I was happy that at least I am not going to die. That night and the next day I walked in a strange manner, pressing the napkin between my legs and hoping it wouldn't fall off. Some of the senior girls saw me walk like that and asked what was wrong. I shared about the new napkin I was gripping between my legs and after having a good laugh, they taught me how to stick a sanitary napkin in my underwear so I wouldn't be scared of it falling off.

This is one of the funniest and also the best memories I have from my days in the shelter home, for two reasons – one, that I knew I was not going to die, and second, that it was reconfirmed in my head that we are indeed a family, where we all look out for each other.

WHERE TO CHANGE?

I stay in a little shack built in a plot in a big colony. There are two other families who stay in their own huts in the same plot. We don't have a man in our family, it is just my mother and my sisters, the other two families have a few male members, but they are mostly out looking for odd jobs to make some money. The women in our plot work as house helps, so are mostly away in the early mornings and then the early evenings, and for the rest of the day, you will find us doing our chores at home.

Since all three families are living in makeshift houses, we obviously do not have toilets in our plot and the colony itself is a posh one, therefore there hasn't been a need for a community toilet so there was none. As much as I dislike this habit in general, in India, men have it easy when they need to relieve themselves. I have seen the richest of men and the poorest ones too simply unzip their pants at any random corner or street and take a leak, but we women do not have that liberty. All of us have to walk a long way to the railway tracks to defecate. Also, since we live in one-room huts, we struggle to even change our clothes at home if anyone else happens to be home at that point.

As a solution, all of us girls in the plot have managed to put together a small structure and cover it on all four sides with old clothes to make a changing area for ourselves. While we were initially excited about the idea, it was only when we first used it that we realized that we have high buildings on all three sides of our hut! Every time we sit to urinate or go to change our sanitary napkins during our periods, it seems to be a fight between what we need to do against the fear and shame associated with someone seeing us do the same. What if someone takes a picture or records a video someday? We know how young girls get blackmailed.



"EVERY TIME WE SIT TO URINATE OR GO TO CHANGE OUR SANITARY NAPKINS DURING OUR PERIODS, IT SEEMS TO BE A FIGHT BETWEEN WHAT WE NEED TO DO AGAINST THE FEAR AND SHAME ASSOCIATED WITH SOMEONE SEEING US DO THE SAME."

Once, we did try to cover the top part of the structure too, but with no proper drainage system, the stench was too difficult to bear. The girls and women in my plot have trained our bodies to defecate only in the early mornings or the late evenings, when it is dark, to avoid anyone from seeing us at the railway track, but we need to change our napkins at least four times in a day, how can we do that in daylight?

However, disposing of the napkin becomes slightly easy. Since we do not live in a proper house, we do not have the municipality ragpickers come to our direction, so, we use a sack as a bin, where all three houses collect their garbage for the day and we go and empty it on the railway track nearby. I have grown up seeing the railway tracks normally used as a dumping ground, so we feel no fear while emptying our trash there.





Project KHEL harnesses the power of play to create a positive impact in the lives of adolescents especially in the spaces of Gender, Pluralism, and Sense of Self.

Our work on Menstrual Attitude Management utilizes storytelling, games, art, and humour to reach out to thousands of girls and young women to help them re-evaluate their periods, positively impacting their self-esteem and self-worth, which further encourages them to make informed decisions for themselves.

You can read more about our work at www.projectkhel.org.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All Participants of our story circles

Concept, Stories, Editing, and Curation: Angana Prasad

Review: Akshai Abraham, Riniki Sanyal

Illustrations: Steffi Xavier

Hindi Translations: Adarshika Pandey, Pooja Kashyap

With support from the New Zealand High Commission