

# CAMILA

## GREW UP IN CHILE

*Hi, I'm Camila. I'm from Chile and I'm 34 years old. I've recently become a therapist after working as a Psychologist in schools. I also spent some periods of my life as a full-time artist. Working with watercolours has always been a big part of my life.*

I've always felt that sometimes I love to be a woman, but I also find it very challenging. Especially before and during my period, I get very emotional and have a lot of pain. But it has also been beautiful to connect more with my body and learn about the relationship between menstruation and the moon cycles. We usually think about this as something esoteric, but I think it's also natural. We're a part of this universe and everything is connected. So now I value this moment of the month much more, although I'd still say that I find the pain very challenging. Maybe it's always both for women.

I definitely remember my first period. I was super young, I think maybe I was even the first girl in class who got it. So it was very hard for me because I felt very alone in the beginning and couldn't share the same experiences as my friends. At 11 years, I really felt kicked out of childhood. I felt like I wasn't the same anymore and that somehow I was supposed to be a woman. Like I have to be more serious and not play around anymore. Nobody told me any of that, of course. But maybe that was the problem, because the topic wasn't generally talked about openly. So I just came to my own conclusions.

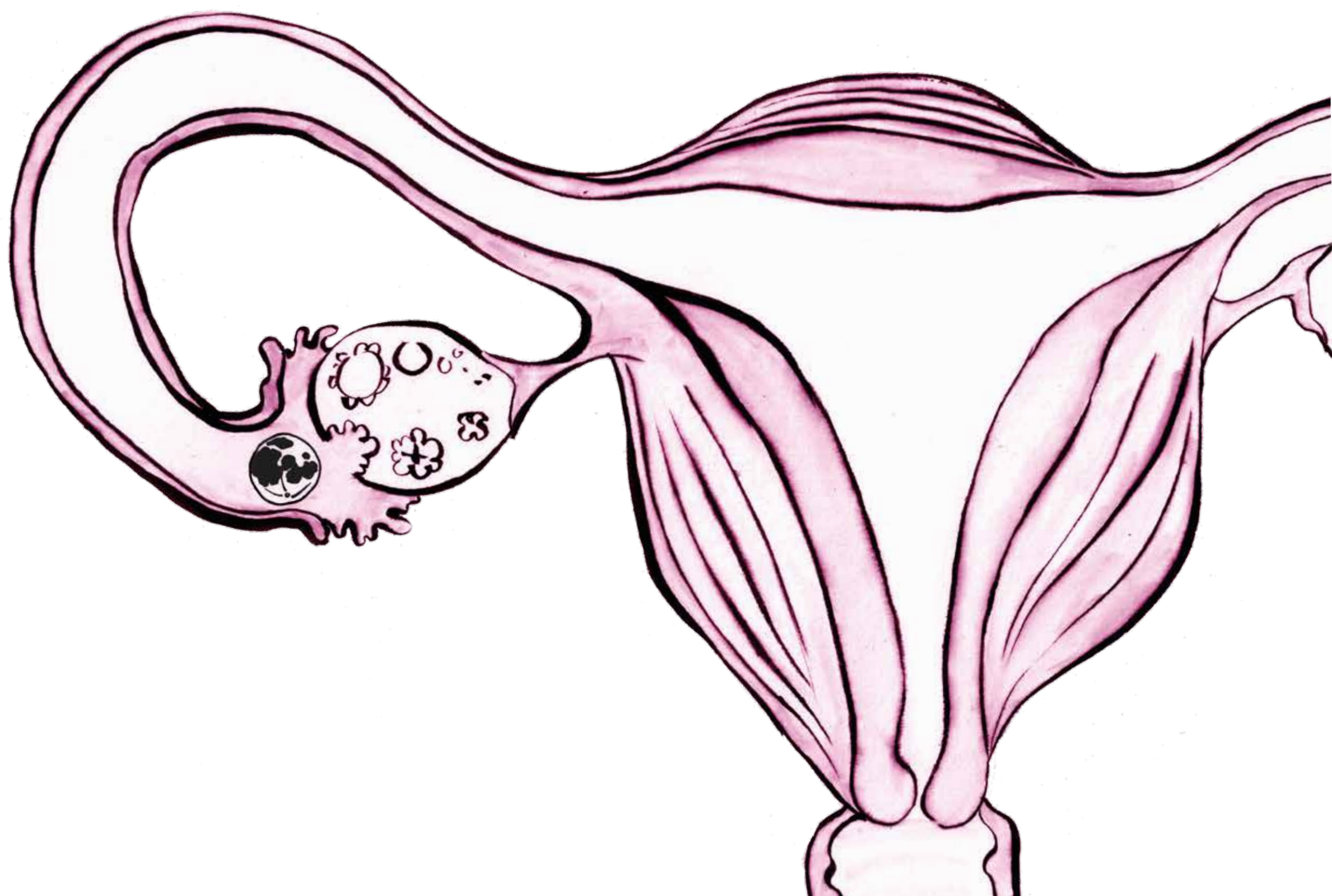
I also remember being quite ashamed at the time. I had told my mother but I didn't want anyone else, like my father or my siblings, to know. Now that I think of it, that's quite strange because my sister already had her period. But I lied to her and told her that I just didn't feel like going to the pool for some days. I'd definitely say I was quite confused and found it hard to integrate it all. Looking back, it would have been helpful to understand my menstruation as an invitation to a new experience that did not necessarily need to be the end of anything. Maybe it would have helped to know more about menstruation. The way it was, I felt stranded in an unknown land.

As a teenager, I was captivated by the topic of being a woman and what that exactly means. I created a lot of art that was showing women who didn't actually fit into society. I sometimes felt alone and like nobody understands me. I used a lot of red color in my paintings, trying

to figure out the rawness of blood. Like a reminder that it can be frightening, although it also means life. The women in my paintings had hairy legs, so they were not exactly fulfilling aesthetic expectations.

There are a lot of things that have historically been very difficult for women. But I also find that there are many demands on modern women. Some movements are strongly against using tampons or painkillers during menstruation. I think that we have to be very careful to stay respectful towards each other and how we all relate to our female bodies. Otherwise it's so easy to follow old patterns of judging each other and not allowing for personal freedom.

Learning about menstruation is such an intimate, important process. Finding your own definitions of what womanhood means. I think that's the beauty of the present moment in time, the healing of female heritage.





# SUSHMA

## GREW UP IN NEPAL

**Hi, I'm Sushma. I'm 27 years old and I grew up in Nepal. I belong to a Hindu family, which means culturally there are a lot of restrictions around menstruation. But my family was a bit different...**

I started menstruating when I was almost 12 years old. I initially didn't like it and was unhappy when my belly was hurting. I also didn't like all of the cultural and religious restrictions that came with it. But when I grew older and understood my body better, I began to change my attitude. After all, my menstruation is also a sign that my body is working well and I'm healthy. So nowadays, when I'm bleeding I just see it as a time where I take good care of myself. I try to rest a lot, use a hot bag for the pain and drink lots of pineapple juice.

In Nepal, we say a girl is "kumari" before she begins to menstruate, which means she is still pure. However, life changes after that. During their first menstruation girls have to stay in a separate room for up to 15 days. They're not supposed to see any men, not even their fathers or brothers, to go to school or visit a temple. They also mustn't touch food other people will eat. From then on, there are many restrictions for the time you're menstruating. Depending on how religious your family is, you can't even enter the kitchen. In my family, my grandparents were quite strict and my mum was also rather superstitious. Just my dad isn't very religious, he can be quite unconventional.

I remember a situation when I was about 14 years old. I was sitting on the floor (as we often do in Nepal) and wanted to lean back against the bed, because I was suffering from menstrual back pain. As my grandfather was sitting on the bed, my

grandmother immediately stopped me and said I mustn't touch even the bed in my "impure" state.

As a teenager, I found it especially hard not to be able to join festivals when I had my period. In Nepal there's a festival called "Dashain". It's ten days long and at the end you receive a "Tika" (red mixture that symbolizes a blessing) on your forehead. During my first year of my menstruation we celebrated Dashain at my grandparents house. I got my period the very morning of the tenth day. Bleeding was still so new to me that I didn't have any sanitary products with me. I had to ask my mum and aunt to help me and that's how everybody knew I had my period. I wasn't allowed to partake in the Tika ritual anymore. This upset me so much that I went upstairs and cried loudly. All of my family could hear me. It just seemed so unfair to me. From one day to the next I suddenly stopped being everyone's beloved niece or granddaughter and became an untouchable outcast?

Out of everyone, it felt like my dad understood and supported me the most. The next time a festival was up while I was menstruating, he said: "Don't tell anyone and let's just go." This time we went to a relative's house to celebrate. My belly was hurting a lot and we hadn't eaten anything since the morning, so I felt quite unwell. But obviously I couldn't tell anyone what was happening. Only my dad knew about my misery. He went to the kitchen and cheekily asked how the cooking was progressing. They offered him a bowl to taste the soup and he made a face. "I can't quite figure out if there's something missing," he said. "Let me ask my daughter." Then he brought me the soup.

To this day I'm really grateful for his support and guidance. In the beginning, I

was still quite fearful when I didn't follow the rules while I was on my period. But when I had tried it out – once, twice, three times – and nothing bad ever happened, I stopped believing in all the superstition. Over time I became even more courageous and stopped hiding my menstruation to avoid the restrictions. I just started to openly do what I thought was right. I also talked with other girls about this. But I find that a lot of them worry that they'll commit a sin by breaking the rules. It makes me sad. There should be neither fear nor shame related to menstruation.

After all of my experiences, I think we should make it easier for every teenager and adult to freely share their physical experiences. We should all learn about sanitary products or family planning from an early age. When I say this I don't just mean girls, I think we should also talk more about this stuff with boys and men. In the end, we're all part of the same species. There's no reason why a man shouldn't learn about the female body and women can do the same.





GREW UP

# VASU

IN INDIA

**Hi, I'm Vasu. I'm an Indian Hindu woman in my late 20s. By profession I'm an electrical engineer. I'm currently working in Germany, where I'm also pursuing a masters degree in Munich.**

From the beginning, my relationship with menstruation has felt like a roller coaster ride. I experienced a lot of ups and downs. Up to today, there're months when menstruation feels like any other day. But at other times I feel achy and the tiniest things irritate me. What helps me most, is to just go with the flow and to listen to my body. If I feel tired, I rest. If I feel hungry, I eat whatever I'm craving. Like that I can handle my cycles with more ease.

I was 14 years old when I got my first period. It was in the afternoon after a school day. I didn't really know what to do, so I completely ignored the fact that I was bleeding. I just went to sleep. When I woke up in the evening there was blood on my bed sheets. I felt really anxious and called my mom. After talking to her I felt a lot less scared and the whole situation didn't seem like such a big deal anymore. My mum was probably more concerned than me after that. She kept checking on me and made sure I got lots of good food over the next couple of days.

In Indian society – which means in large parts of rural India as well as in many urban areas – females are considered impure and are separated during their menstruation. During their menstruation, women are prohibited from entering religious spaces, from touching or preparing food and from attending some religious family functions. However, from my experience, taboos and

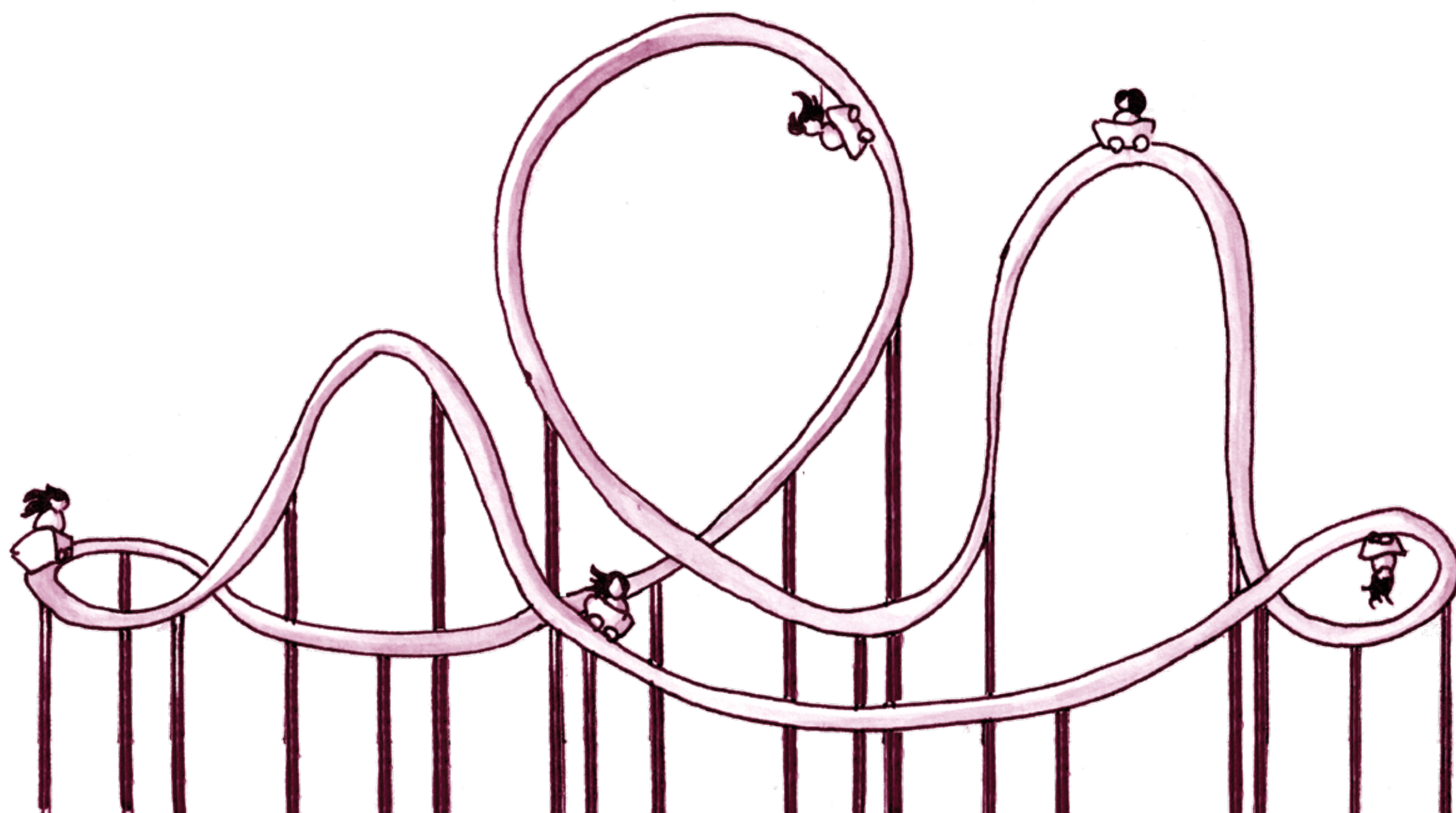
social restrictions around female periods are quite common and can be found all over the world. They aren't specific to just one region or religious practice. The problem with taboos usually is that there's also a lack of information. For example, when people don't talk about menstruation this often leads to poor menstrual hygiene. Especially for teenage girls, all of this can create problems. When they start bleeding they often experience a lack of acceptance in society and sometimes even in their own homes. Many start seeing their period as a negative thing and feel anxiety and embarrassment. They want to keep it a secret but that also means that they don't know how to use hygiene products and they miss school on their period days.

When I was a teenager I had many questions about menstruation. There was so much that I hadn't been aware of before starting my cycle. What are periods and why do we have them? What if a girl starts bleeding in public? Will she find appropriate hygiene products? I also didn't know that menstruation can be quite different on different days. I would've loved some more education before hitting puberty. I also think that it would really help to inform boys about menstruation, so that we all feel less embarrassment and shame.

I still remember a situation during my teenage years. I was on a small trip with my

dad and we had just stopped our car to get some food. I was wearing a light-coloured dress that day. When I got out of the car I suddenly saw a red stain on my dress. I quickly covered it with my hoodie and rushed to the bathroom, where I started to just soak the area with water. I thought I had managed the situation, but when I came back to the car, there was a large dark crimson area on the seat where I had been sitting. I freaked out. I felt so embarrassed. When my dad realised what was going on, he assured me that everything was okay. He really made me feel comfortable. He called my mom and explained the situation to her and then we headed back home. I remember this moment so well, because my dad's reassurance helped me to accept me and my body more and I began to see my cycle as a natural process. In my family, we didn't follow traditions or rituals during the menstruation time. The only thing my mom asked of me was to skip religious routine, as I wasn't allowed to enter the temple during my period.

If I recall correctly, I was initially quite happy about not having to do religious stuff. It was after some time that I started questioning the reason for my exclusion. I asked my mom and grandmother about it, but their explanations didn't convince me. That's why I eventually refused to follow the tradition. Once again, my parents supported me in my decision.





GREW UP IN RUSSIA

# ANASTASIA

*Hi, my name is Anastasia. I'm 29 years old and I grew up in the city of St. Petersburg, Russia. Nine years ago, I fell in love with a German man and got married. Today, I live in Munich with two lovely daughters.*

I was born in 1992, shortly after the collapse of the USSR. The 90s were a quite difficult time with poverty and political uncertainty throughout Russia. My mum was 41 years old at the time and raised me according to her "Soviet" worldview. That also meant there were many things we didn't talk about at home, such as menstruation, sexuality, contraception and feelings about all of these things. But the silence wasn't limited to my family. Generally, there wasn't much information available in our society. I remember feeling quite confused while trying to put bits and pieces together to get a better understanding of what it might mean to become a woman.

I finally learned about menstruation when I was ten years old. I had seen a red stain on my aunt's pants and said to her: "I think you were sitting on a tomato." In truth, it seemed quite unlikely to me that she had really been sitting on a tomato. I simply had no explanation or idea where that red stain might have come from. That day she explained to me that she had her period and that I would also have it one day. I felt quite uncomfortable with the idea of bleeding every month and wondered what it would feel like. And why my aunt was whispering? It seemed like nobody was supposed to talk about it, so I didn't dare to ask any more questions.

A few years later, my time had come. I had already heard stories about other girls having their first menstruation and expected an exceptional event. In the end it turned out to be quite an ordinary day. I had been working in the garden all day long, when I discovered that I was bleeding. Nobody seemed very interested in my experience or asked me how I felt. I remember being quite disappointed.

It wasn't until much later, when I finally had a proper conversation about menstruation with my mum. She told me about her first period. Apparently she had no idea what was happening to her at the time and had felt so ashamed that she buried her blood-stained underwear in the woods. Nobody had ever told her about menstruation. This is more than half a century ago, so I'd definitely say we made some progress since then. Relationships between mothers and daughters seem more open and girls also have the possibility to learn about menstruation outside their families.

We had some books and occasionally there were people at our school who would advertise sanitary products. Their visits were exciting because we all felt like they were talking about "forbidden" things. I think at the time I would never have asked another girl for a pad and the mere thought of a boy knowing about my period seemed unbearable. I couldn't even speak to my best friend about it. I

remember that one day, we planned to hang out together after school when I saw that she was bleeding through her pants. Today, I'd say this is quite a classic situation that every woman will have experienced. Back then I just didn't know what to say to her. Luckily, she discovered the issue herself. She wrapped her jacket around her hips and told me that she had forgotten something at home, so she'd see me later. I completely understood what was happening, but instead of offering help I just nodded and let her go. I still don't know why talking to my best friend felt so impossible at the time.

Thankfully, at one point puberty and all of its difficulties were over. I learned to talk about not feeling well on my period and I'd even ask strangers for sanitary products. When I started to try for a child I even began to see my cycle as a miracle. I'd say that being pregnant even reminded me a little of puberty in that I went through a lot of unfamiliar physical changes. Not having my menstruation for a while was interesting, too. When I started menstruating again after about 15 months, it felt a little bit like greeting an old friend.

I think what I learned through my experiences is that challenges and changes usually feel less difficult when we're not afraid to prioritise ourselves over social taboos. No girl should feel like they have to hide a part of themselves to look more acceptable in public.





# NEHAMA

GREW UP IN ISRAEL

***Hello, my name is Nehama. I grew up in Jerusalem in Israel, but I also studied Fine Arts in Italy for 3.5 years. A few years ago, I moved to Germany with my husband and son. I work as an art therapist and a researcher. I also design Jewish wedding certificates ("Ketubot"), which is a specific Jewish tradition.***

My relationship to menstruation has always been a complicated one. I was the last in my class to get my period. I was about 15 years old. All my friends already had it and I started to think something is wrong with me. So, when I finally got it, I felt a mixture relief and dread. I was just glad to finally be "normal" – but I was also in so much pain that it was scary.

The pain I experienced would actually color my whole relationship with menstruation in the future. I grew up with strong bonds to a group of girlfriends. I was proud to have my period as a symbol for being a woman and for being part of my group. But I was always in a lot of pain during my menstruation and that was really hard to deal with. Sometimes I even fainted because the cramps became so bad. Initially, I wasn't sure if the pain I was experiencing was normal. It wasn't until much later, that I learned I had something called "Endometriosis".

Looking back, I can see how important it is to listen to your body and to trust your instincts. Nobody should feel too ashamed to ask questions and or to seek support. As I got older, I was better able to deal with my condition. For example, as a teenager I often forgot to eat breakfast, which made it more likely for me to faint. Today, I pay more attention to my nutrition during my

period. Resting a lot and using a hot water bottle also helps me.

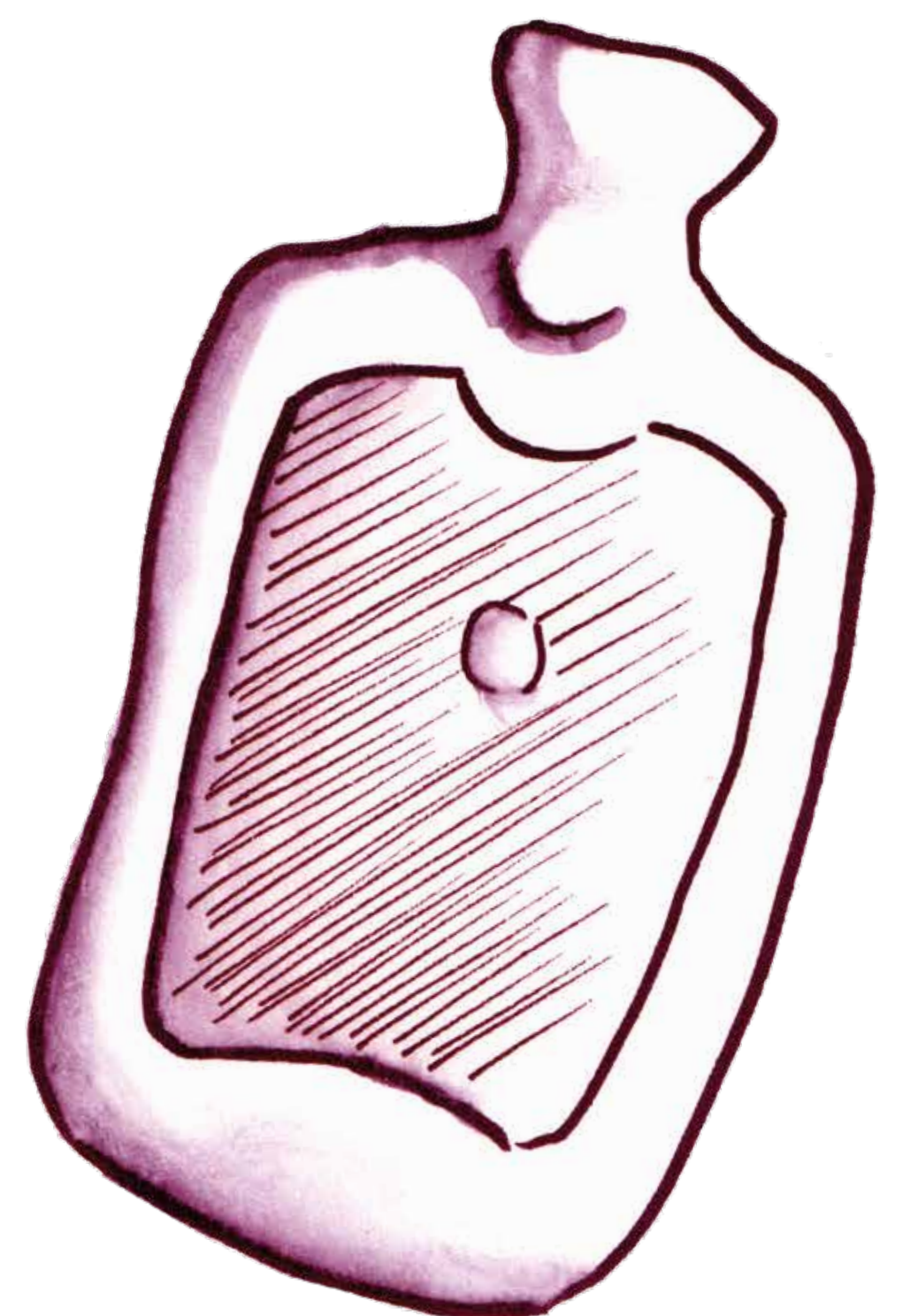
On a cultural level, I'd describe my upbringing as multi-layered, especially with regards to menstruation. I grew up in a city that was simultaneously modern, multicultural and in parts ultra-religious, and remember tampon ads on TV, magazines and music festivals. My parents had lived in the US and in Australia during the 1970s. Fighting for women's rights was important for them. One could say they both brought something like a free-spirited "hippie vibe" into the family. There wasn't anything that was taboo to talk about in my family. We were discussing menstruation very openly. However, we were also a religious household and there are a lot of rules regarding menstruation in Judaism. In that regard, one could say I was brought up in the midst of quite different influences. But for me, they actually mixed together well. Of course, that might not be the same for every Jewish person.

One significant religious celebration in Judaism is called "Bar/ Bat Mitzvah". At the age of 13, boys celebrate transitioning into their next life stage, while girls celebrate this at age 12 (*Bat Mitzva*). It is a form of initiation, after which they're embraced as adult members of the community. Menstruation is not necessarily mentioned by name, but the connection is naturally implied, as getting your period is an important part of growing up and usually appears around this age.

Another very important tradition is called "Mikveh" and has to do with spiritual purification. A *Mikveh* is composed of non-flowing water that is at least partly derived from a pure natural water source. Men and women (separately) dip their whole body into the *Mikveh* and say a prayer

as part of various life cycle and holiday purification rituals. As a woman, you go to the *Mikveh* on the night before you get married. According to Jewish religious law ("Halacha") you'll then go again, every month, 7 ("clean") days after the end of your period. Before purifying in that way, you're not supposed to touch to your husband.

I have a complex relationship with this tradition because of its manifold meanings. On the one hand, I can understand that some people say the implication of having to purify after menstruating could be perceived as degrading to women. On the other hand, I've learned about these old customs from amazing, wise women and I see a lot of beauty in these rituals and in maintaining ancient traditions. If you take some time to talk about them in more depth, many positives become apparent. I especially like the support and sharing of physical, relational and religious knowledge between women.





# ANGELA

GREW UP IN ITALY



***My name is Angela, I'm 82 years old and I'm Italian. In the past I was Catholic, but I wouldn't describe myself like that anymore. I used to be a teacher and a school director, but now I'm retired.***

I was very young when I got my first period. I was just 10 years old and nobody had ever spoken to me about menstruation before. So when it happened one night I was absolutely terrified. For many days I didn't know what was happening to me, I actually thought I was ill. When I finally told my mother about the blood in my underwear, she didn't properly explain what menstruation was. She just told me that every woman had it and I wasn't supposed to speak to other people about it. I remember that made me feel like menstruation was something bad, almost like a sin.

Unfortunately, my mother also didn't explain to me that my period would come back every month. So I was utterly shocked when I was bleeding once again a month later. When she told me it would be like that every month for my whole life, I began to cry desperately. For me this was a horrible problem. It wasn't so much the physical aspect of it, but the idea of having to deal with this "dirty secret" every month while feeling an enormous amount of shame, was just unbearable to me. At the time, we also didn't have

suitable underwear or sanitary products, like you would find in the supermarkets today. I only had towels that I had to wash thoroughly with Candice soap in order to get them clean again. It was a lot of work to scrub my blood off the towels every month. Looking back, I think having to wash my towels probably enhanced my feelings of being gross and dirty during that time.

At school there was nobody I could speak to about my experiences, as I had started my menstruation so young that none of the other girls knew what I was talking about. I think that they weren't given any information either, so all of us were more or less clueless. Being the rebel character that I am, I decided this situation was unacceptable. I simply didn't want to experience all the shame and difficult feelings anymore. As I couldn't find someone who would talk to me, I began looking for books with more information. It wasn't easy, as those kinds of books weren't really on display on public bookshelves and I didn't want to go around and ask for them openly. But I finally found what I was looking for. The books taught me what happens in the female body during menstruation and what it actually is that makes us bleed. Even back then, I experienced education as very powerful. Knowing what was going on helped me to accept my body more.

What didn't go away for a long time was the feeling of shame and embarrassment. For many years to come, I found it

humiliating that my society considered me as dirty when I menstruated. As there was no way around this, I simply had to find my own way through my experiences. In a way, menstruation made me a tougher person.

My period would stay with me for a very long time. Again, I was older than many of my peers in menopause. I was 60 years old, when I had my period for the very last time. I think this was because I gave birth to my son when I was 45 years old. I could imagine that my hormones delayed my menopause after that. So altogether, I menstruated for 50 years. I can't even believe it, when I say it. Half a decade of menstruating. I have to admit that when it finally stopped, I felt a sense of freedom.

Because of what I had to go through, I later found it very important to better support young people when I became a teacher. Teenagers need some help to prepare psychologically for life changes, such as menstruation. So I'm quite happy that nowadays there are things like social media where teenagers can easily learn about menstruation. They don't have to sneak around bookstores and libraries in order to get some information about their own bodies. They have so many opportunities. There's so much education on sexuality and I see young people talk more openly about all of these things. Still, to me life also seems much more complex than it was in the past, so maybe teenagers need even more support.



GREW UP IN SOUTH KOREA

# YOUNG

**Hey, I'm Young. I'm 43 years old. I'm from South Korea, but I currently live in London, where I work as a sales manager.**

Menstruation is a quite important topic for me at the moment, because I'm actually approaching the end of mine. Recently, I noticed that my cycle is getting shorter and I'm not bleeding as much anymore. It's like my menstruation is starting to fade away. It almost feels like my companion through womanhood is leaving me. Now, I'm looking back at my experiences and I'm wondering if I took it for granted to have my period every month. Did I not appreciate it enough? I think I'll miss it when it's gone.

But let me go back to the very beginning: I started my period when I was just 10 years old. I already knew what menstruation was at the time, but I think I had expected something quite different. What I saw in my panties didn't look like blood at all. It looked like chocolate. Obviously, I knew that's not what it could be. It also didn't seem to be "poo". It might sound funny, but initially it just didn't come to my mind that it could be my period. The brown stuff was there for about three days. I felt really unsure about it until actual blood came on the fourth day. Then I finally went to my mum and told her what was happening. To be honest, I can't even fully recall what she said. I just remember that from the moment I told her, everything began to feel more normal. I was okay.

One thing I didn't like from the start were the sanitary pads. At the time they were quite thick and it was just so uncomfortable to wear them. I was still at an age when I constantly ran around or

wrestled with other kids. I remember I used to wish that I didn't have to bleed.

In high school menstruating became much easier. I had started using tampons and I usually didn't have any pain. I felt really lucky in comparison to many of my girlfriends. Bleeding really didn't bother me much at all anymore. Actually, the only time it became slightly annoying again was when I started having sex. My menstruation would get in the way for a few days every month and I felt really impatient with it.

Growing up in South Korea, I initially learned that menstruation is something super private that shouldn't be seen by men. For example, you always get your sanitary products in a black bag when you buy them. All the secrecy seemed quite stupid to me. I remember a time when I was sharing a flat with my brother. One day, our mum visited us and saw that I stored my sanitary products in the bathroom cupboard. "You should not let your brother see those," she said. It didn't make sense to me, especially since my brother himself didn't mind at all. I just responded: "So what? I eat, I poop and I have my period every month. He already knows all of that."

But there are also customs in South Korea that I really appreciate. The best one is that every month you can take a day off during your period. It's called "Women's Welfare Day". In contrast to all the secrecy, women's wellbeing is officially acknowledged. I think that's great! There're also some traditional remedies for menstruation pain that work quite well. It's generally believed that the organs in the lower body (including your vagina) should always stay warm. I remember

that my mum had something like a swimming candle that she put in the toilet together with some herbs and sat on it for a while. I have to admit that I never tried it myself because I'm afraid that my vagina might get burned.

When I later moved to the UK, I expected there to be much more open communication around menstruation. I was surprised when my British friends acted just as secretive around it as my Korean friends. It's not until more recent times, that people have started to speak about their periods more openly. I just want us to go to shops and say we need tampons. Or that we can share openly when we're menstruating and feeling unwell. It should be seen as a natural process. And as I said in the beginning, it will come to an end. Maybe it's about appreciating it while we have it.





# SAREH

## GREW UP IN IRAN

***My name is Sareh and I am 44 years old. I'm Iranian and I've lived in Italy for the past 17 years of my life. I have a degree in business management from Iran, but in Italy I graduated in painting. Today, I'm the mum of a 2-year-old boy. Since my son was born, I enjoy being a full-time mother.***

Looking back, I think my period was mostly something that bothered me when I was young. I was quite a lively child who loved playing games with other children and running around with boys. When I started to menstruate I felt that it took away my freedom to move as I wanted. I always had to be careful that there wasn't any blood on my dresses.

I remember exactly what happened when I had my first period. I was 13 years old and stayed at my grandmother's house with my older sister and my cousin that day. We were playing and I was climbing like a monkey on a railing, when my cousin suddenly shouted: "Sareh, look, you have dirty pants!" I didn't believe her

at first, but when I checked I saw a big red stain of blood on the back of my white pants. I got really scared and started crying. I already knew what menstruation was, but I hadn't really expected to get it so suddenly. I had no sanitary pads or anything to stuff down my pants. None of us had a clue what to do, so eventually we went to my aunt and asked for help. She gave me some pads.

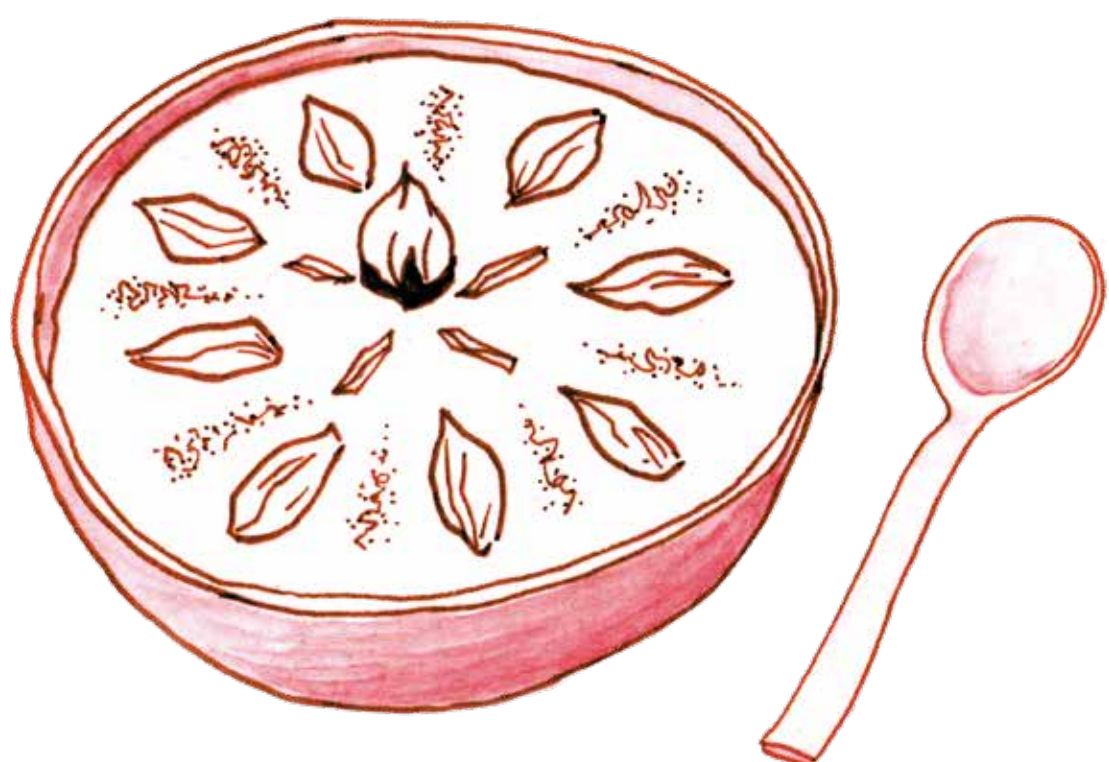
Menstruation often means a big physical and mental change for a teenager. Everyone's experience is different, so it might take some time to figure out what serves us best during this time of the month. For me, it wasn't until much later in life that I realized: having my period didn't actually prevent me from doing any of the things I liked. By that time I had also learned to better understand my own body and its needs. Today, I think my menstruating means that I'm healthy because my organs function the way they should. I also see how fortunate I was to have a mum who was a fairly open-minded woman and talking about menstruation has never been a taboo in my family. She had prepared me and my sister with lots of information, so we entered puberty with an idea about what our period might be like. My mum always gave us the opportunity to choose what we wanted to do – even if it was out of the ordinary or contradicted traditional customs. She just made sure we weren't putting ourselves in danger.

So thanks to my mum, my childhood experience was quite different from many of my peers. In Iran, women generally aren't supposed to enter the mosque, pray or be in any sacred environment when they're on their period. If the woman is a

practicing Muslim she washes her body in order to purify it after menstruating. This gesture is called "Ghosl". After performing the ritual, she resumes her daily habits as usual. But there are also other cultural traditions, for example the preparation of a dessert called "Kachi". It's said that it will provide strength, help menstruating girls (or women in labour) to strengthen their body and lower potential pain.

What I don't like about Iranian society is that I find there to be a lot of male chauvinism. Women are often seen as sentimental and sensitive, especially during their period. As a young woman, I often felt inferior because of that. I actually think that's why most women prefer to hide their cycle and menstruation becomes a big taboo. When you go to a supermarket in order to buy sanitary pads, you get them in black sachets so that nobody can see what you're buying. Men are generally not supposed to know about menstruation, not even fathers or brothers know about the cycles of their daughters and sisters. I know plenty of families where information isn't passed down at all and the girls are really unprepared for their first period. Many of them don't even know what's happening to their own bodies when they start bleeding. Naturally they get scared and feel stupid and embarrassed.

Fortunately, the internet allowed many girls to have access to more information and learn about bodies. Through social media we can even see how other women deal with menstruation and what they experience in their cultures. I feel this opens up a lot more freedom to become open-minded and empowered.





# MELINDA

GREW UP IN AUSTRALIA

***My name is Melinda. I'm 32 years old and am working as a nurse in Australia. I also spent some time in Europe when I was younger, but I lived in Melbourne for most of my life. Today I'm the mother of a baby son.***

I have a quite indifferent relationship with my menstrual cycle. My periods have never been too painful and I find that having them for 5-6 days is more of an annoyance. I mostly look forward to when it's over.

I had my first period when I was 12 years old, while traveling with my parents around the United Kingdom. I remember being excited at first, as my mother had been preparing me that it might happen soon and a couple of my friends at school had gotten their period already. When I first got it I wasn't totally sure what it actually was. I had to ask my mother for her opinion and she confirmed that it was menstruating. We had to go to the supermarket to get some pads. My father came with us, which I found rather embarrassing. I thought that menstruation should only concern women and I didn't want my dad to know I had it. Back in the hotel, my mother showed me how to use pads and tampons. I couldn't wait to get back to school and tell my girl friends that I had got my period. Somehow it made me think I was no longer a little girl and this made me more important and special.

Although my mother gave me guidance and comfort regarding my period at the start, we never really talked about it afterwards. She also never discussed her own period with me. It wasn't until last year that I found out that my mother had a "Mirena" (hormonal intrauterine spiral for

contraception) before she went through menopause. We also never discussed what it has been like for her going through menopause. Somehow menstruation always seemed like a taboo subject. I would sometimes talk to the other girls at school, but we never really went into much detail. We also had some sex and menstruation education at high school. I remember that the boys were teasing us about it. When I was at school I would have lots of anxiety around leakage through my clothing. I would always be checking and asking my friend if I had anything showing when I would get up off a seat. I was even worried about going swimming, as the idea of leakage was just too gross and embarrassing. Generally it felt like it was left to me to work through all of these experiences, it was just something everyone of us was going through in silence.

When I was 16 I began taking the Pill (for birth-control) in order to regulate my periods better. A couple of years later I also started dating my boyfriend, so contraception and control over my period became more important to me. Some years later, I decided to try out an Implanon (contraceptive implant). I had this inserted as I was going to live over in London and I thought it would be easier than having to remember to take the Pill every day. However, I found that it made me feel quite moody and grumpy. My menstruation also became irregular. I

would have my period for a week and then two weeks later it would come back again for a week. After three months I had the Implanon removed and returned to the Pill.

A couple of years ago my husband (who I had been married to for a year) and I began to think about starting a family. As I had been on the Pill for 12 years and I had regularly skipped my period during this time, I was a bit worried that it would take a while for my cycle to become regular again. But after a few months, everything seemed fine and I actually found without the Pill, my mood became more stable and my periods weren't painful or too heavy. I got pregnant in February 2021 with my son Ledger. The first sign that made me think I was pregnant was my period. I seemed much lighter than usual and only lasted 2 days. Later I understood that it was not menstruation, but the implantation bleeding of the fertilized egg. Apart from being really happy, I have to admit that it was also nice to know that I wouldn't have a period again for quite a few months.

My son is currently 8 ½ months old and I started to have my period again. Nowadays I use a menstrual cup in order to reduce waste in the environment. I also find that I have almost no leakage and this is a real comfort. I really enjoy being a mum and we are planning on more children in the future.





# MOHAMED

## GREW UP IN ENGLAND

***Hi, my name is Mo. I'm from an African Indian family, but I was born in London 43 years ago. I've worked in organisations and schools for children with special needs for almost 20 years.***

To be honest, I think I never fully understood menstruation until my mid 20ies. It wasn't a secret in my family, but nobody ever spoke to me in depth about it when I was younger. My parents were born in Zanzibar and sought refuge in England during the Civil War. I think it was quite important to them that we blend into the British mainstream despite our Moslem background. I remember that we celebrated both Christian and Moslem holidays when I was a child. But I wouldn't describe myself as very religious anyways.

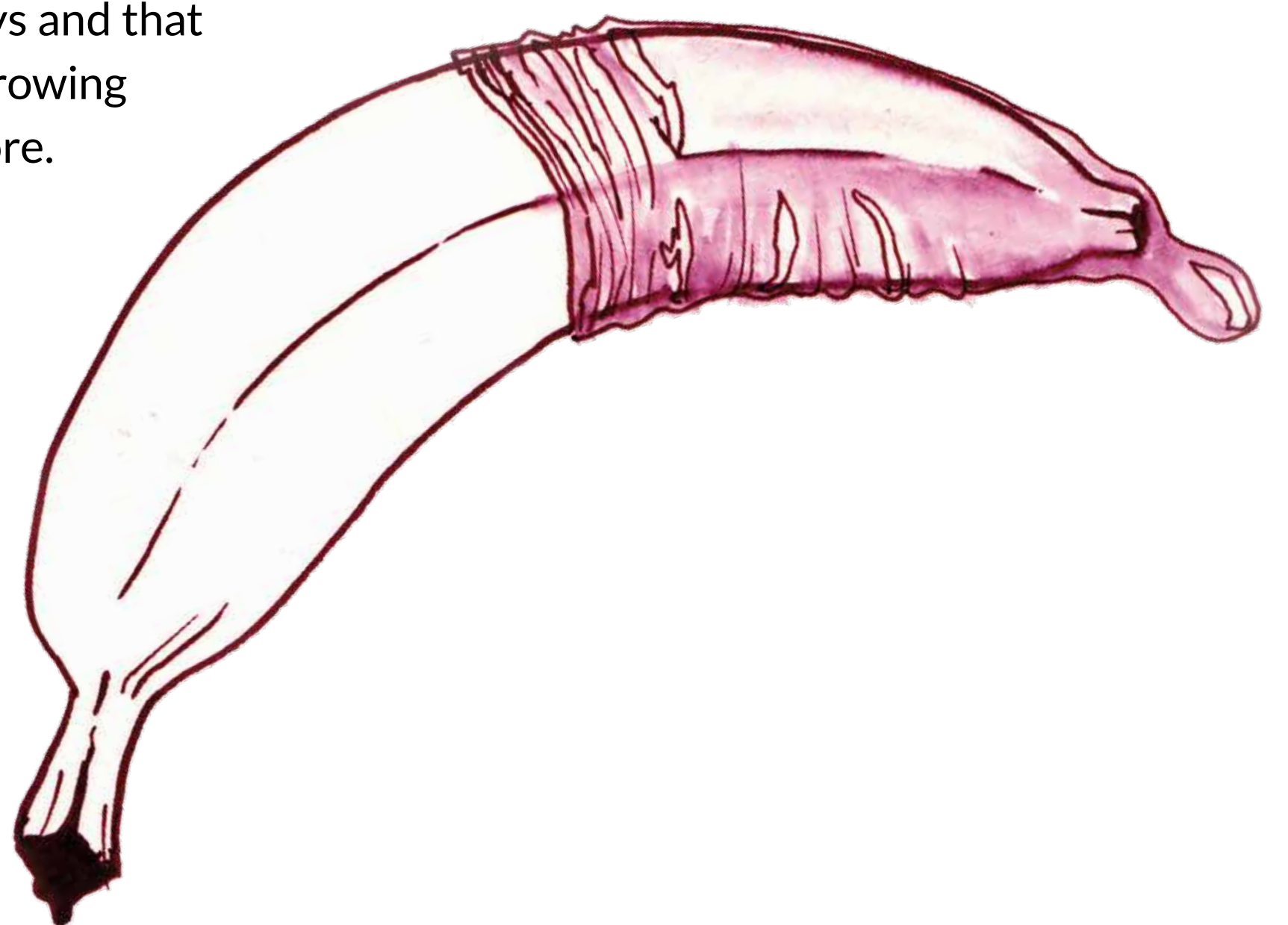
I don't remember the exact situation when I learned that menstruation exists. I know that my mum and my older sister kept their sanitary pads in the bathroom and I asked them what they were for. They did explain to me that they were bleeding every month – something about their interior walls bleeding if there wasn't a fertilised egg. They said they'd feel more comfortable with pads during that time. I think I didn't ask much more after that and it just wasn't a topic anymore. At school we had separate sex education, so I wouldn't be able to tell what the girls might have learned about menstruation. I know that as boys we were mainly taught about the importance of using condoms and we practiced rolling them over bananas. It was really basic and not very useful in my experience.

When I got older, I dated a girl for about 3 years, but I honestly don't think we ever talked about her menstruation. As a guy I always had the feeling I should just stay away from that topic as much as possible. There was also talk about hormones and mood swings that were better avoided. Soon after this first relationship, I realised that I actually liked boys and stopped being intimate with women. Female topics obviously became even less present in my life. I would say that men generally don't talk much about sex or physical experiences outside their relationships (whether they're homosexual or heterosexual doesn't matter). At least in the society I grew up in that's how it seems to be handled most of the time.

It wasn't until much later, when I was sharing a flat with a female couple, that I had proper conversations about the female cycle and menstruation. The couple was trying to have a child and shared their worries and experiences quite openly with me. I still remember this very distinctly, as I feel I really benefited from their openness. It makes sense to me that we understand each other's bodies. I do really hope that schools are more aware of this nowadays and that young people aren't growing up with taboos anymore.

Our special needs school works somewhat different from the mainstream. Again, as a man I'm not able to tell what the female staff and teenage girls experience. We often need to support our students physically with changing clothes or using the toilette, so we have strict gender divisions for these tasks. However, I do know that many of our female students are on a contraceptive pill that would prevent them from having their periods. Especially when toilet training is already an issue, the worry is that menstruation might be too upsetting and difficult for them to deal with on a monthly basis.

Sex education also works differently in that regard, as our main goal is to help the children understand what actions are appropriate when they reach puberty. For example, we discuss when it's okay to touch one's private parts and also what's not considered safe with regards to possible exploitation. I'm sure that we also still have much to learn when it comes to helping teens with special needs deal with physical and social processes.









# MELVILLE

GREW UP IN

## TRINIDAD AND NORTH AMERICA

*Hi, my name is Melville. I was born in a little fishing village in Trinidad about 62 years ago. Since then, I've lived in the USA and Germany where I've worked in the military, as a soccer player, education administrator and psychologist. Today, I mainly reside in Spain.*

I would say my first encounter with menstruation was somewhat unsettling. In the 60s, most women in rural Trinidad had children incredibly early, which meant that my mother was only 15 years old when she had me, my grandmother being only 31 years old at the time. Maybe it was because I experienced her as more mature, but I was particularly attached to my grandmother as a boy. So it was her menstruation (not my mother's) that I stumbled upon first.

Like most families in my village, we lived under quite poor conditions. Today, I understand that my grandmother didn't have any sanitary products for her period. She simply used old clothes turned into rags that she had to wash by hand every month. I know that she left them to dry in a hidden part of the yard and stored them under her bed. The first time I discovered the blood-stained rags, I thought someone was gravely injured. I remember asking my grandmother what had happened, but she shushed me and left me without any explanation. I'm assuming my discovery was quite embarrassing for her, but as a result of this situation I also grew up with a feeling of shame and fear

around menstruation. I thought it must be something very bad, if there was blood and secrecy involved. It didn't help that the men around me seemed to regard such female matters with an air of scorn. There was just nobody I could really talk to about it.

When I was 13 years old, my family emigrated to the USA and everything changed from there. Women and girls seemed to deal with their periods much more openly. In the end, it was my 14-year-old girlfriend who finally educated me on what was happening to her every month. At last, my grandmother's rags made sense to me and I experienced it as quite liberating that we could talk about the blood as something normal. I learned about available sanitary products and found that American society was generally a lot more accepting.

Much later, when I became the father of two girls, I gained yet another perspective on menstruation – beyond my rather passive experiences as a grandson and partner. Sadly, I couldn't engage with my older daughter as much as I'd have liked as she grew up separately from me in

her mother's household. I think for this reason it was even more important to me, that I was later able to have proper conversations about her cycle with my younger daughter. It was very important to me that she could experience her menstruation free of any shame or embarrassment as a teenager. Looking back at my own upbringing, I think the chance to positively engage with my daughter's menstrual cycle was restoring an important connection for me.

Even from a male position, I suffered from the shame that the women my family seemed to experience. I definitely know that social shame and scorn separated me from my grandmother when I grew up and that this shouldn't be the case between parental figures and the children who learn from them.

Therefore, I believe it's very important to begin early positive conversations with children about menstruation. Instilling positive activities or rituals around "rights of passage" and educating communities who continue to hold negative bias towards menstruation would help to strengthen both girls and boys – as well as their relationship to each other.

