

## Let's embrace our periods by Zazie Piva

As I dig deeper into the Nepali menstrual culture for my thesis in anthropology, I am forced to come to terms with the fact that there are a lot more similarities with the situation in my own country, Italy, than I had previously imagined. The purpose of this essay is to share my menstrual experience and relate my perception of menstrual talk in Italy. These reflections are drawn from what happens to my body, in my family and friend circle, therefore my intention is far from wanting to provide an exhaustive account of the national situation.

When I replay the arrival of my menarche in my mind, I describe it as normal and uneventful. One day in late spring, right around my twelfth birthday, I discovered a red stain in my underpants. I called my mum into the bathroom to show her. I don't remember her congratulating me or making a big deal out of it, like you see in Hollywood movies, but she simply pulled out a pad and brought me a clean pair of underwear. I don't recall telling my dad as I probably assumed my mother would. Looking back, was I withholding this information because I was ashamed I had become a *signorina* ('little lady'), or was it because there was nothing to tell? A couple of my friends had already gotten their period in elementary school and lots of my peers were going through it at the same time as me, so I felt in the know about what to do. Plus, since my first period had arrived at the end of the school year, I had all summer to practice putting on pads and preventing spotting to show up on my pants. While some of the girls in my class would use their period as an excuse to get out of P. E., I have never let it get in the way of horse-back riding, jogging or swimming. I owe this to my mother, who has always encouraged me to do sports while menstruating, explaining to me that for her working out eased the pain as if she could sweat it out. Although I believe some women take advantage of that time of the month to avoid situations that make them uncomfortable, others go through unimaginable nausea, high fever or excruciating pain that requires complete bed rest. A friend of mine recently told me about what she experiences during menstruation. In high school she would make a huge effort to go to class but would eventually end up spending the morning puking in the girls' bathroom and have to call someone to pick her up. With attendance not being compulsory for most of her university lectures, she was afforded more flexibility and chose to stay at home when she felt at her worst. One day she was feeling especially moody and lashed out at her boyfriend; she later apologized for not acting like herself, explaining she didn't know what had gotten into her. He very wisely reassured her that there was nothing wrong with her with these words "You can't distinguish between the person you are when you are not on your period and the side of you that comes out when you are menstruating. It's always the same you." But this is rare behavior my friends, usually men aren't so understanding and just bulldoze ahead with a "You're such a lunatic", "Uh-oh, she's PMSing", or the more hurtful "Let's talk about it when your period is over", or "I can't stand you when you're on your period".

The pain has always been moderate – at least this is what I figure since I will never know what others are experiencing – and limited to my lower back and abdomen. However, for a year or so I have been getting terrible headaches the day before the bleeding starts and I've had to learn how to cope with them, listen to my body and take it easy. When the destabilizing headache wears off and the blood begins to flow, I am at peace with my body, I'm grateful to my organism for giving me a sign that I am a healthy young woman. The cramps last for a couple of days, my insides twisting and turning to allow the blood discharge, and at that time I wonder if they can vaguely compare with what I'll experience at labor.

My period comes every 31 to 34 days, this is the way it has always been and my gynecologist confirmed that this frequency is okay for me despite other women are more in synch with the lunar phases. *Ciclo* (literally 'cycle') is in fact one of the most common ways of referring to one's period in Italy. Then there are the basic *mestruazioni* or just *mestruo*, *le mie cose* ('my things'), and more elaborate periphrasis like *profondo rosso* ('deep red') from the thriller movie directed by Dario

Argento, *semaforo rosso* ('red light') or *patata al sugo* ('potato in sauce') used by men who are disgusted by having sex when their partner is on her period, *il tempo della cioccolata* ('the time of chocolate') which refers to the common craving for sweets, or *essere indisposta* ('to be indisposed') which is said to cover it up under a veil of vagueness and ambiguity.

I usually wear big white bleached single-use pads, not having made the more environmentally friendly transition to the menstrual cup yet, and only switch to tampons when I'm at the beach or go to the pool. To this day I still find the latter to be extremely uncomfortable and don't entirely trust their absorbent action. Female sanitary products' cost has been soaring over the last years, as they are taxed at 22% just like electronic devices and alcoholic drinks. This is why the current discourse on menstruation has taken a political turn, as earlier this year the majority in our government voted against the reduction, from 22% to 10%, of the so called "tampon tax" which basically recognizes female sanitary products as luxury goods. This translates to the undermining and denial of the importance of the natural bleeding process of women, which should not only be held in the same regard as daily bread (essential food item on Italian dining tables), but encouraged to be embraced wholeheartedly by all women AND men. The average price for a box of 20 pads is €4, which means companies are making a very lucrative business out of periods and the state is getting its unfair share exploiting an essential necessity in every woman's life.

As for restrictions, I have never experienced any limitations with regards to contact, food or mobility, though, especially in the past some behaviors were frowned upon and judgement was passed around concerning women's "purity". It was believed bread wouldn't rise properly and mayonnaise would go crazy if prepared by menstruating women; flowers would wither, hair would fall out if washed and sexual intercourse was greatly discouraged owing to infertility claims. Most of these practices are now deemed redundant, albeit some popular myths still need to be debunked, such as the predominantly male misconception that a tampon might deflower a virgin girl, whilst some women still hesitate to say the word 'menstruation', it comes out as a mumble or is pronounced by lowering their voice. Although we have condom vending machines on the streets, pads and tampons are not so ostentatiously sold and cannot be found in public toilets either. And when going to the bathroom, you are likely to see a woman shoving the sanitary product of her choice in her pocket and then disposing of the used one secretly. Are we really still weary of pulling out a pad in public? Is revealing you're on your period an admission of guilt? And when will men realize that menstrual blood is the same color of their own blood if ads keep showing blue and violet drops?

There is no quick solution, but as my new friend Radha Paudel explained to me, it is a question of dignity, which is "the essence of human beings". Framing the issue of menstrual restrictions and more in general of women discrimination, from the perspective of dignity helps us to understand how many more strides must be taken, but also allows us all – women and men – to participate in the conversation and take affirmative action.

The ball is rolling, the seed of change is sprouting and the voices are getting louder. Let's all meet at the International Conference on Dignified Menstruation in Kathmandu on May 26-28, organized by the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation #MenstrualTalkDignityFirst.