

# Farah Ahamed

## DIGNIFYING THE MENSTRUATION EXPERIENCE

BY MILLY MAINA

**H**uman Rights lawyer Farah Ahamed was born in Nairobi and studied at Loreto Convent Msongari and Hillcrest International. She has worked in period poverty in Kenya for many years. Farah is the Editor of "Period Matters: Menstruation in South Asia", an anthology of poetry, essays, fiction, interviews, art and a dance on how menstruation is experienced in South Asia. Its cover features a radical painting by Lyla FreeChild, using her menstrual blood. We indulge her on her menstrual activism.

### What is your earliest experience of menstruation?

My earliest memory relating to periods goes back to when I was eight years old. After "Little House on The Prairie" one Sunday evening came an advert for pads. It began with a blonde girl in white jeans riding a bicycle, talking about the pads being 'soft and fluffy', and promising girls could be 'free' to do anything they wanted. It showed blue ink from a dropper filling a sanitary pad and ended with the image of two blonde girls on horses galloping into the sunset. I was scared of horses, I didn't have a bike, I wasn't blonde and I had no idea what the blue ink blotting the pad was about. I thought it was some kind of magic potion which girls in other countries took to help them with their sporting activities. Later, I saw one of my older cousins with the same packet of pads. I imagined her having a secret life, riding horses and doing all kinds of exciting things which no one in the family knew about.

This anthology has similar stories of how girls – and boys – learn about menstruation from their mothers, sisters and friends, and how some men only find out about it after marriage.

### What gave you a voice in this taboo topic?

When I was working for the Aga Khan Foundation in Uganda in 2000, I was shocked

to learn about how underprivileged girls were missing five days of school every month because of their period. I realised that while I had the luxury of a choice of menstrual products and carried on with life as normal during my period, poor girls were using leaves, feathers, and dirty rags and hiding at home.

### Tell us about "Panties with Purpose."

"Panties with Purpose" was started with my two sisters in 2011, with the aim of raising awareness and helping school girls with menstrual products. Back then, the phrase 'period poverty' hadn't been coined and no one was talking about periods.

We decided to ask donors to give us new cotton underpants because we thought if they did this, instead of giving a monetary donation, they would be more likely to talk about it. Also, as we were not a registered charity, this approach made it easier for us to manage our operations.

Today, thanks to well-wishers, "Panties with Purpose" has distributed over 55,000 pairs of underpants to more than 17,000 girls. We have sponsored 150 health-education workshops across Kenya, including in prisons, orphanages and schools.

### What strides has the campaign made?

We've seen a gradual but perceptible difference in attitude. For instance, The Ramgarhia Youth Sikh Association in Kenya, after an initial ambivalence, now includes menstrual products as part of the care packages they donate to the poor.

Girls and boys, like my young nieces and their friends, speak about periods more freely and fundraise to help poorer schools with period products and underpants. These are big steps forward.

### What inspired "Period Matters: Menstruation in South Asia?"

The idea came to me that the diversity of the experience of menstruation could best be reflected in a book which included every genre. I decided the anthology would move away from the conventional to a deeper and more honest cultivation of stories about menstruation.

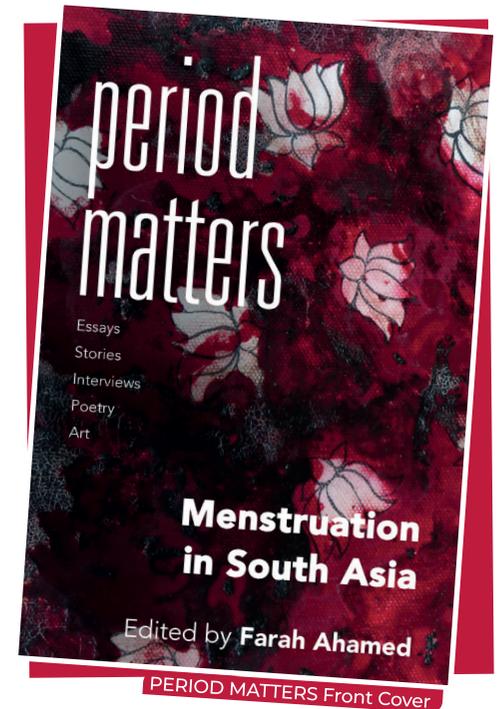
### What is the book about?

It highlights thirty-five different perspectives which open the conversation around menstruation to make it more inclusive and provides a glimpse into the way menstruation is viewed by people from different genders, backgrounds, religions, cultures and classes.

The book carries the stories of factory workers in Bangladesh, Buddhist nuns in Bhutan, and an activist in Nepal. It highlights the entrepreneurial efforts around creating bio degradable pads, and policy initiatives like the Menstrual Rights Bill and period leave debate in India. It illustrates how menstruation in Pakistan is experienced by the trans gender community. It explores cultural rites in Afghanistan and the menstruation challenges of refugees in Sri Lanka. It discusses period tracking apps and what 'dignified menstruation' really means. It shows that for some, menstruation is a time of creativity and rejuvenation.

### Why South Asia?

My decision was motivated by two events. The first is



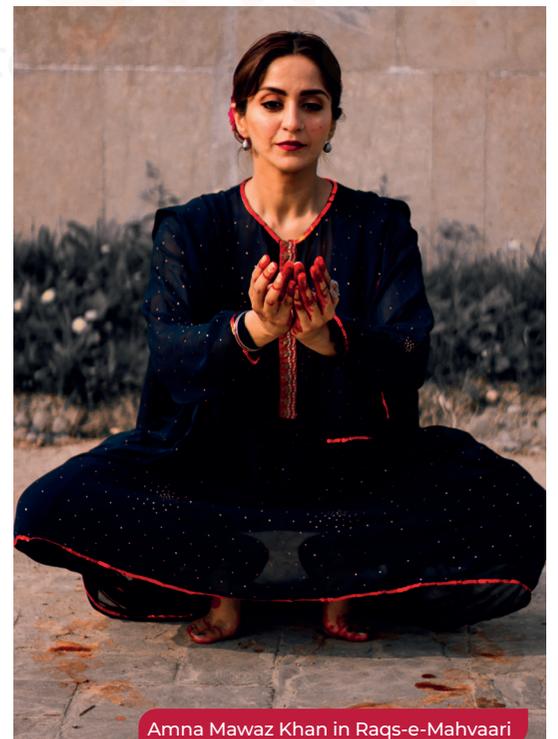
when I was stopped and asked if I was menstruating as I was about to enter a Jain temple in India. The second is when I picked up a packet of sanitary pads while shopping at a supermarket in Pakistan, and a male shop attendant told me to hide it in a brown bag to avoid being humiliated at the checkout counter. I found both incidents disturbing – being questioned about intimate details of my body by a stranger and having my behaviour in a public space controlled because menstruation was associated with shame. I realised once again how much I had taken for granted.

### How did you compile the book?

For three years, I gathered together as many diverse voices as possible. From well-known artists and writers such as Shashi Tharoor, Rupi Kaur, Lisa Ray, Tishani Doshi and Anish Kapoor to the so called 'invisible,' and living at the margins. For instance, the book carries the stories of female sweepers in Lahore and homeless women in Multan. It also has a QR code for a dance which interprets menstruation through classical music and movement.

### How are menstruation experiences similar or different in Kenya and South Asia?

I was struck how in some places there are restrictions around menstruation, and in others, it is seen as a time of healing. It depends on the religious, socio-political and cultural context. Each person's experience is unique.



Amna Mawaz Khan in Raqs-e-Mahvaari

