On 5 April 2018, the documentary Period. End of Sentence premiered at the Cleveland International Film Festival in Cleveland, Ohio. In the documentary, Rayka Zehtabchi, the director of the film, documents the stigma surrounding menstruation[5] in India and follows a group of women in Kathikhera, a rural village in the Hapur district of India, as they manufacture and distribute sanitary pads. A group of high school students at Oakwood High School in Los Angeles, California, raised money to produce the documentary after one student was inspired by her visit to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in New York, which focused on the stigma surrounding menstruation[5] in low-income countries. Period. End of Sentence draws attention to the obstacles impeding proper menstrual health management in low-income countries by documenting the women of Kathikhera’s journey to manufacture and sell sanitary pads.

Period. End of Sentence explores menstruation hygiene management, or MMM, in Kathikhera. Menstruation is a process in which women and girls shed blood from their uterus[5] approximately once per month. In India, it is often difficult for women and girls to practice MMM, which the World Health Organization, or WHO, and United Nations Children’s Fund, or UNICEF, define as women and girls having access to an absorbent material to collect menstrual blood, private water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities to change and dispose of those materials, and water and soap to clean themselves. Those necessities are often lacking in India for menstruating women and girls, and cultural and religious beliefs that view menstruation[5] as taboo can impede necessary conversations about the need for resources from happening. In 2015, Muthusamy Sivakami and a group of researchers conducted an experiment to study the effects of menstruation[5] on girls’ education in India. The researchers found that sixty-five percent of girls reported skipping school days due to their periods. The girls in that study noted that among other reasons, they skipped school on their periods because it caused concentration problems during class, or discomfort, or fear of staining their clothes or losing their cloth pad during school.

In 2013, Helen Yenser, who was a student at Oakwood High School in Los Angeles, California, at the time, visited the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in New York City, which focused on the stigma surrounding menstruation[5] in low-income countries. The World Bank, an international finance corporation, classifies countries as high, upper-middle, lower-middle, or low-income countries based on their national income per person. The US, for example, is considered a high-income country while India is a low-income country. At the United Nations, Yenser learned that it is common for girls in low-income countries to drop out of school due to a lack of access to menstrual supplies and services, like sanitary pads and clean water, hygiene, and sanitation facilities. Yenser’s experience inspired her and eight other students, who participated in a club at their high school called Girls Learn International, to address those MHH-related challenges and provide sanitary pads for girls in India.

The Oakwood High School students collaborated with Action India, a grassroots organization[5] dedicated to empowering women in India, to reach out to the women of Kathikhera in order to establish The Pad Project. Those students at Oakwood High School raised $55,000 in order to begin The Pad Project, which installed low-cost sanitary pad machines and provided menstrual education in Kathikhera. Arunchalam Muruganantham, a businessman from India, invented that sanitary pad machine in 2006 to provide women in India with an easy, low-cost way to manufacture sanitary pads, while providing those women with jobs, too. One Oakwood High School student, Ruby Schiff, and her father, Garret Schiff, a screenwriter, asked Rayka Zehtabchi to direct a documentary about the Pad Project. Zehtabchi, a graduate of the University of Southern California[5] in Los Angeles, California, agreed to direct the documentary, and the group traveled to Kathikhera to document how the women of the village used the sanitary pad machines to make money, start conversations around menstruation[5], and provide them with affordable resources to manage menstruation[5].

Period. End of Sentence is divided into five main parts. First, the documentary highlights some of the consequences women face from living without access to sanitary pads through interviews with three women named Sneha, Rekba, and Shabana. In the third part, the documentary introduces Muruganantham’s low-cost sanitary pad machine and explains how the machine works. Then, the documentary shows how the women of Kathikhera use the machine to create a sanitary pad company called Fly and make and sell their sanitary pads throughout the village. In the last part, the documentary shows women discussing the positive impacts of working for the sanitary pad company.

The next part of the documentary showcases some of the consequences that living without access to resources necessary to MMM and living with the stigma around menstruation[5] have on women’s lives. The documentary does that through the viewpoints of three women from Kathikhera named Sneha, Rekba, and Shabana. That section of the documentary begins by showing Sneha performing her daily chores as her conversation with Kakar about issues women face due to menstruation[5] plays in the background. Sneha tells Kakar that girls in Kathikhera do not have much freedom to work or become independent from their families. Sneha states that, while girls are expected to get married, she would prefer to join the police force and not find a husband. The documentary then shows her saying that she is interested in being a police officer because she believes it is wrong for menstruating women to enter the temple because it is considered dirty, and Sneha says this is the belief that she thinks is unacceptable. Then, the documentary introduces the viewers to Rekba, who tells Kakar that menstruating women and girls struggle to find supplies that are clean and suitable for collecting menstrual blood. Rekba states that girls and women often find any clothing around the house to use during their periods, and they throw the clothing away in the middle of the night, when no one else is around, to avoid embarrassment. Then, the documentary provides a scene of a group of girls meeting together with an older woman, Shabana. Shabana instructs the group of girls that they should wash clothing used for collecting menstrual blood and it should never be dirty. Shabana mentions that, while sanitary pads would be a better alternative than clothing, they are not accessible to the women and girls of Kathikhera. Shabana tells Kakar that a lot of change needs to happen in the village so that women and girls are able to better manage their menstrual cycles.

In the third part of the documentary, the viewers learn how the introduction of a low-cost sanitary pad machine in Kathikhera begins to change aspects of the women’s lives there. That portion of the documentary begins with an interview with Arunchalam Muruganantham, the inventor of the sanitary pad machine. Muruganantham articulates that people in India never discuss menstruation[5], not even mothers and daughters, and that he believes menstruation[5] is one of the biggest taboos in India. Muruganantham explains that at the time of the interview, less than ten percent of menstruating women and girls had access to sanitary pads. He states that his goal is to use the sanitary pad machine he invented to raise that rate so one hundred percent of the women and girls in India use sanitary pads. Then, the documentary shows more interviews with young girls, and Kakar asks them about sanitary pads. Some girls say that they have never heard of sanitary pads, and other girls say that they have only seen sanitary pads in the media. When Kakar shows a sanitary pad to the girls, they look excited.

Next, the documentary shows a man installing a sanitary pad machine inside of a home where a group of women eagerly await. A woman named Suman takes notes as the man teaches them how to use the machine. First, the man shows them the women the raw materials for sanitary pads. Then, the man fills a container with the raw material and snips the lid of the container shut. He turns the machine on to process the raw material in the container, and the machine whirs. Then, he opens the container to reveal the processed raw material, which resembles cotton. Next, the man transfers the material into a tray and uses another part of the machine to press the material into rectangular molds three times. He wraps the pressed material around a board to create a thick pad made out of layers of the pressed material as he instructs the women to wrap the material approximately ten to twenty times. The man then uses another part of the machine to cut the end of the pad, and then the sanitary pad is finished. After watching the entire process, the women begin making sanitary pads using the machine by themselves.

The next part of the documentary shows the beginning of the women of Kathikhera’s journey to start a business to manufacture and distribute sanitary pads. Suman explains that one of the biggest obstacles for the sanitary pad production process is electricity. The electricity comes and goes randomly, sometimes even being gone for two days at a time, so the women of the village end up working at night to adapt. Despite that obstacle, the documentary demonstrates that the women have fun working together as it shows them laughing while working. Next, Suman reveals a storage space filled with sanitary pads that the women had manufactured. She indicates that the women have about 18,000 pads in that building. Lastly, the documentary shows the women packing the pads into boxes decorated with the logo Fly. The women explain that they have decided to name their company Fly because they want women to rise and soar above the stigma surrounding menstruation[5].

After the women package the sanitary pads, the documentary shows that the women are eager to sell their product throughout the village. They travel to different stores in Kathikhera, but the men who work in the stores are unsure of their product. Suman states that women and girls may find it difficult to buy sanitary pads from men, so she offers that it may be easier for the women to directly sell their products to other women. The documentary shows the working women traveling door-to-door to try and sell the pads and hosting demonstrations and workshops. One scene shows the working women demonstrating the absorbency of their sanitary pads to a group of women, explaining that Fly’s sanitary pads are less expensive, better quality, and more environmentally friendly than the pads sold in stores. At the end of the demonstration, some women in the crowd shyly purchase sanitary pads. The working women excitedly count their
money and announce that they have earned a total of 180 rupees, which is the official Indian currency. That amount equates to approximately two US dollars.

The last part of the documentary discusses how women in Kathikhera felt empowered by working to produce sanitary pads and why the women of the community believe it is so important to feel empowered. One woman states that she has gained respect from her husband since she has started working, and another girl talks about how she bought her mother a suit with the money she earned from working. A principal of a school in Kathikhera smilingly proclaims that women are the basis of society, but they do not always realize how much power they hold. The documentary ends with an interview with Sneha, one of the women from the beginning of the film. Sneha confidently asserts that the world is moving forward because of women, and that the world could not go on without them. Sneha explains that her experience manufacturing sanitary pads empowered her to pursue a career with the police force and fulfill her dreams. The ending credits state that Sneha had used the money that she made working for Fly to fund her training with the Delhi police.

Period. End of Sentence. is a short documentary that lasts twenty-five minutes. The documentary premiered at the Cleveland International Film Festival on 5 April 2018. Originally, Zehtabchi and the production team released the documentary in Hindi. In February 2019, the documentary became available on the streaming service Netflix in English, Spanish, French, and German. Later that month, on February 24, 2019, Period. End of Sentence. won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short, which allowed the film to become more widely recognized.

Following its win at the 2019 Academy Awards, Period. End of Sentence. was met with praise and critique from public health researchers. In particular, Marni Sommer, a public health researcher at Columbia University[17] in New York City stated that while she was glad that the film helped to open a discussion regarding MHM in low-income countries, the documentary only focuses on access to pads, and does not address other important aspects of MHM whatsoever. For example, the documentary does not address the lack of clean water, hygiene, and sanitation facilities, which impede a woman or girl’s ability to adequately manage her menstrual cycle in private. Sommer explains that researchers, activists, and policymakers concerned with menstruation[18] ought to address these other obstacles in the future to help eradicate stigma surrounding menstruation[19] and better MHM in low-income countries.

Period. End of Sentence. addresses stigma surrounding menstruation[20] in India and draws attention to the obstacles impeding proper menstrual health management in low-income contexts.

Sources


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Subject

Topic
Publications[33]

Publisher
Arizona State University, School of Life Sciences. Center for Biology and Society. Embryo Project Encyclopedia.

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Format
Articles[34]

Last Modified
Sunday, June 20, 2021 - 07:57

DC Date Accessed
Wednesday, May 19, 2021 - 20:10

DC Date Available
Wednesday, May 19, 2021 - 20:10

DC Date Created
2021-05-19

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