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# RE-DEFINING MENSTRAUTION

Visions For The Future of Feminism

by Noa Bartfeld

**DATE**

January - May 2017

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**LOCATION**

New York City

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**SPECIAL THANKS**

John Bruce

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## INTRODUCTION

This project started with my curiosity of the many taboos surrounding women's health and menstruation in particular. While searching for the meaning of the word taboo, I learned that the name comes from the Polynesian word 'tapua', meaning both 'sacred' and 'menstruation', which pinpoints to the deeply rooted link of the female body and the negative stigma menstruation has in society. Stigmas around menstruation can be seen as part of a larger component of stereotypes of the female identity (such as irrationality, hysteria and unpredictable), and because of that women are considered as inferior to men in many parts of society, such as in the workfield and economics. Why does society treat periods as a disease instead of a biological and a natural process, and how does it contribute to the gaps between genders? Can women own their periods as a positive thing, and how can that look or influence gender equality? In a world where women and men need to struggle for equality between genders, the behavior around periods has to change. 'Re-defining menstruation' is an exploration of alternative futures of the system surrounding menstruation stigma. By designing new experiences of fictional scenarios presented in a series of audio artifacts. Applying the speculative design approach, allows me to raise questions that break stigmatized and delicate areas of menstruation, without giving any particular answers. Through a newly designed experience that encourages self-reflection and visualize and make tangible the complex system of the menstruation taboo.

Women's rights over their bodies have been part of the political dialogue within the U.S. and across the world, a dialogue that is exploited and used as a political tool, which reinforces sexist ideologies and gaps between genders. The last political season in the U.S, has been particularly patriarchal and chauvinist, - when speculation about whether a female candidate was or wasn't on her period in the GOP debate<sup>1</sup>, or a discussion about Hillary Clinton's age and her stage in her cycle of life<sup>2</sup>, have become a public discussion over the Internet. Now more than ever, with the fourth wave feminism and the uprising of the menstrual

movement within the US, there is an opportunity to evolve the conversation around menstruation. The social, cultural, personal, political values and experiences surrounding women's health, to use design to create a new conversation, establish new mindsets and perceptions around women's bodies, to give form to the issues of the period stigma, stereotypes and women's rights- an issue that deserves a debate and public transformation. We need to open up the dialogue surrounding women's rights and equality between genders, and break down the 'circle of shame' of menstruation with both males and females.

Although periods have existed since the beginning of womankind, there have been few design innovations in the 20th century. "Why should women feel it necessary to hide their menstruation in the first place, what is so shocking, gross or shameful about something that happens to half of the world's adult population every month?"<sup>3</sup> What if we could reposition the cultural values that come out of the menstruation stigmas, to help women experience it as an empowering element of their identity. How might we design an experience that reengineers the menstruation experience and shows how it could be different? There are many harmful elements to menstruation stigma and stereotypes that affect women all over the world. My aim is to make people flesh out and more deeply understand the negative barriers that prevent acceptance of realistic views on menstruation by fictional design scenarios.

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## SOCIAL CONTEXT

According to a research published in The Atlantic magazine in 2015 by Ashley Fetters, “The average American woman is estimated to use more than 16,000 tampons in her lifetime.”<sup>4</sup> A fact that does not prevent women from all over the world to hide the point that they are using period props, simply by hiding it in various creative ways on their way to the restroom. In one Tampax commercial from the 80’s promoting a compact tampon, the product is described as: “Tampax Kompakt has a smooth plastic applicator that is half the length of a usual Tampax ... making it twice as discreet to carry.”<sup>5</sup>

The keyword in that ad is “discreet. Taboo from its definition, is something forbidden for a discussion in certain societies or religions, however change is happening in the menstruation taboo. In this section I will address several examples that hints to a paradigm shift in the conversation that is happening about the menstruation taboo in the United State. Today in the US, different nonprofit and for-profit companies are promoting menstrual change and are a part of what is considered to be “the menstrual equity movement.”<sup>6</sup> Champions of Care for example is a nonprofit organization founded by Nadya Okamoto, during her studies at Harvard University, and promotes menstrual equality. “The organization is a group of young activists across the United States, united by the belief that menstrual care is a fundamental right.”<sup>7</sup> With the support of partners, sponsors and individuals, their mission is to celebrate periods and to provide products to those in need and fight for systemic policies around menstruation taxes and regulation. “We created a comprehensive policy toolkit that has everything from communication materials, talking points to the actual action steps to connect youth activists to legislators, to push policies that make menstrual hygiene more accessible and more available, whether that be around the tampon tax or with government assistance programs. We are still figuring out the details, but we are trying to enter the realm of policy change and engage the youth voice in making long-term difference,” (Okamoto), Nov 2016.<sup>8</sup>

Another example is the “Period positive movement,” who, unlike the menstruation movement who celebrate periods, this initiative is developed to neutralize the mainly negative public discussion around menstruation, and tries to “unpack how big an influence the media plays in these attitudes.”<sup>9</sup> Based on the period positive website, their aim is for ‘period neutral’ by using a positive approach. They invite anyone who works around “ethos” of menstruation to use their hashtag #periodpositive, and logo to serve as a benchmark for an open and informed menstruation reproductive health. Chella Quint, the founder of the ‘campaign and research infoshop’ recently published an article in The Guardian (UK) newspaper, where she talks about the need to improve menstruation education in the school system and encourage legislation on brand-free menstruation education that includes reusables products and eliminate the period taboo perpetually.<sup>10</sup>

# How #periodpositive are you?

How much do you know about menstruation?

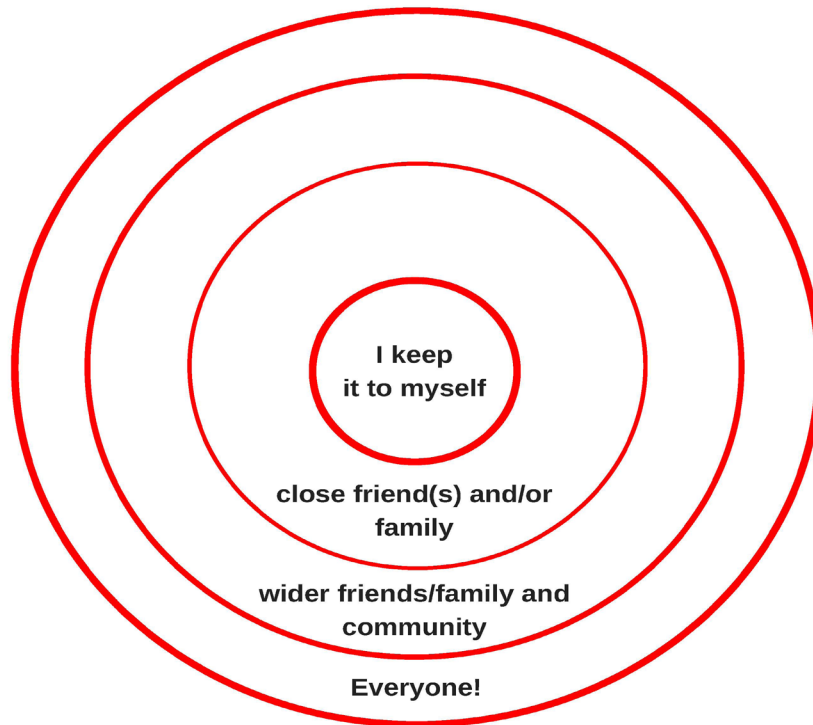
Quite a lot.

A little bit.

Nothing at all.



Now choose a pen in the colour below your answer.  
Place a cross on the chart to show your comfort zone  
when talking about menstruation.



## ABOVE

Survey offering a reflection on your attitude  
towards periods.

Source <http://www.periodpositive.com/>

## PRECEDENT ANALYSIS

### Guys Experience Periods For The First Time

Guys try period is an experiment done by BuzzFeed media (BF), where three men workers from BF's offices volunteered to act as a live varies. For three days those transient people walked around with an object designed to simulate period, funneled through a car siphon pump in their pants all day. According to BZ, the idea behind this experiment was to see how man will react to having a period for the first time in their life. They made it possible for people who would otherwise never understand what it's like to have to deal with the anxiety of experiencing period accidents or the distractions it might bring.

The experience for the participants is as it would have been expected, they were stressed and unprepared, and by the end of those three days they could open up to the understanding of a women period experience, and maybe break up a bit the fear of having a conversation about menstruation. This project is a small example of an investigation into genders and identity with an emphasis on female menstruation, which enabled an open dialogue surrounding the perception of both women's and men's about period 'accidents.' It seems like this experiment affected all the members of the office, including women and men that did not actively participate in it.

In this intervention, the experiment enabled a change in the mindset of the guys involved in the test and the male workers in the office. According to BZ employees, it created a sense of community between them and sparked a conversation about the experience of having a period and the approach men have for it. Although some may say BF used the menstruation topic to optimize visits, I found this example interesting due the humoristic approach of this experiment, addressing periods in a lighter way which enable a direct dialect with the topic, and the mirroring experience of menstruation men were able to sense.<sup>11</sup>



#### LEFT

The volunteers in the BZ experient, 2016.  
Source: [https://www.buzzfeed.com/aurijackson/guys-try-periods?utm\\_term=.yvv911mpz#.yx0lxxb3D](https://www.buzzfeed.com/aurijackson/guys-try-periods?utm_term=.yvv911mpz#.yx0lxxb3D)

**“The designer embeds herself in the fictional world of the project and uses the presumed language of the main character, the builder of the DIY device. The prop’s ‘voice’ is often overlooked but offers interesting possibilities for playing with viewers’ expectations to create deeper engagement.”<sup>15</sup>**

– Dunne & Raby

#### **BOTTOM**

Sputniko’s Menstruation Machine. Photograph by Rai Royal.  
Source: <http://www.di10.rca.ac.uk/hiromiozaki/>



#### **Sputniko’s Menstruation Machine (Hiromi Ozaki, 2010)**

The menstruation machine is a fictional design project by the designer Hiromi Ozaki, a Japanese/British artist based in Boston and Tokyo, and aims to understand the experience of the period. Hiromi is “known for her film, and multi-media installation works inspired by how technology changes society and people’s values – in particular focusing on gender issues.”<sup>12</sup>

This work was done during her MA studies at the Royal College of Art, Design Interactions. She was motivated by the question why humans were still menstruating in 2010. According to Hirno, the contraceptive pill was intentionally designed to provide with a one free week period of menstruation because doctors felt human would find not having periods altogether as troubling and insufferable. She is arguing that with today’s advanced technology, it is possible for women not to bleed at all. In this aspect, it is interesting to think about concepts such as motherhood and the expectations society has of women in a childbearing age to ‘fulfill her role as a woman to produce life, or how the pill has become the woman’s responsibility even if the concept of a contraceptive pills for men has been an ongoing interest and a research topic. .

When thinking critically about menstruation, those are concepts which are certainly interconnected and this project neglect to talk about. Hiromi’s work is inspired by questions such as: “So what does Menstruation mean, biologically, culturally and historically, to humans? Who might choose to have it, and how might they have it?”<sup>13</sup> Her project includes a ‘Menstruation Machine’ that simulates the period bleeding and pains of a five-day cycle, based on her experience. She presents the machine in a short music video clip, showing her fictional character of a Japanese boy named Takashi, who invented the machine and walks around Tokyo wearing it “in an attempt to biologically dress up as a female, being unsatisfied by just aesthetically appearing female.<sup>14</sup> The video was published in social media and became viral. By utilizing social media Hiromi’s intention was to spread her work to audiences outside of the gallery and it certainly paid her off.

Her speculative menstruation design project has gained her a broad recognition in the art and design fields, and today she is the director of the Media Lab’s Design Fiction group, MIT.





BETTER  
↓  
**UNDERWEAR**

**FOR** OR ANY  
MENSTRUATING  
HUMAN  
↓  
**WOMEN**

SHEDDING  
OF  
THE UTERINE  
LINING  
↓  
**WITH**  
**PERIODS**

—

hellothinx.com

**ABOVE**

Thinx ad campaign

Source: <http://www.wdish.com/health/thinx-period-new-york-subway-ads-sexualyv911mpz#.yx0lxxb3D>

### Thinx – Period Underwear

Thinx is a NYC based company founded at 2011 by Miki Agrawal. They sell period-proof underwear and aim to eliminate shame surrounding periods. On June 2016 my older sister visited me in New York. While walking down the Union Square subway station, she noticed a series of ads in what seemed to be a typical campaign for women's underwear.

She was not the first female to start a conversation about those ads with me. She said that from first impressions it seemed like those were regular ads presenting a woman in her underwear, selling women underwear but there was something different about them. At a closer look, you could see that the woman was not Photoshopped and her sexuality was not the center of the ads. Those ads that we saw together were the first part of an ongoing campaign, which turned out to be selling period-proof underwear, by Thinx. The second part of the campaign was published a few weeks later. Thinx ads were minimalistic, using bold colour blocks, showing a woman in an empty room on a piece of furniture on one side, and a grapefruit or an egg on the other, used for imagery to the female genitalia and reproduction system. The text was: "Underwear for women with periods." By using compelling visuals and a distinguish choice of contrasting colours, they created a strong composition between the text, the images and their models and represent the female reproductive organs in a more graphic and direct way, which in my opinion is why their ads manage to create a beautiful and meaningful campaign.

Usually companies and designers of female hygiene products such as Tampax are mindful of the need women have to be discreet about their

periods and will consider this element in their design. According to Julie Beck, from The Atlantic magazine, "advertising companies will avoid any reference to the physicality of the objects,"<sup>16</sup> and Thinx breaks that pattern. According to an article posted on The Huffington Post, the company faced some issues with getting approved for placement on the New York City subway, by Outfront Media, "a company responsible for reviewing some of the advertising for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA)."<sup>17</sup> According to the article, a few of the issues Outfront Media had with the ads for approval were: children seeing the ad, the amount of skin visible in the ads and the imagery that seemed inappropriate.

According to Mang Shui, the head strategist at Thinx, whom I met during my research, the company first targeted young liberal women, and their strategy is to be honest and direct about menstruation. She told me that, they do not only advertise the product, but they also talk about menstruation in a bold way. When I asked her how does she think a shift in the stigma paradigm should be approached she answered, by showing the positive side of menstruation, educate people and empower women. She feels like with their ads and attitude, they can help people feel comfortable with the issue, and humans who menstruate can see that they are not by themselves. Their aim is to talk about it and make it beautiful at the same time, and make women feel better and free of menstruation stigmas. Going back to the trigger those ads had in sparking a conversation in everyday life between my sister and I, or in the media, e.g, in covering that Union Square campaign, demonstrates the ability of design as a medium to raise awareness and communicate this issue.

## CONCLUSION

While searching for projects about the menstruations social stigma, I actually learned that there aren't many projects. In those three projects I find the element of humor and playfulness as a key factor in the success design can play in addressing the taboo, and that it can do so in a direct and bold way (even if by "simply" proposing - let's talk about it).



**ABOVE**

A part of Thinx ad campaign.

Source: [http://nymag.com/](http://nymag.com/the-cut/2016/01/thinx-miki-agrawal-c-v-r.html)

[the-cut/2016/01/thinx-miki-agrawal-c-v-r.html](http://nymag.com/the-cut/2016/01/thinx-miki-agrawal-c-v-r.html)

**THINX**

*“If the shoe was on the other foot, men would deem the experience worthy of pride. ‘Menstruation is a biological process, but its meaning is gendered. And because it’s largely a woman’s experience, it’s devalued.’ ”<sup>18</sup>*

*— Martin Julia*

## SUPPORTING RESEARCH

### Wheel of Reasoning

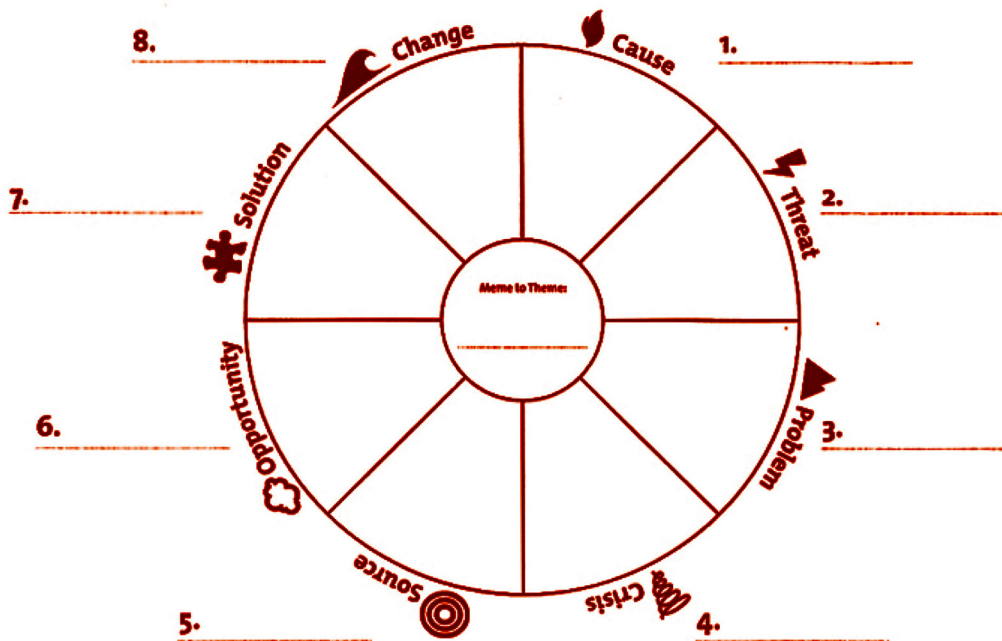
The wheel of reasoning is a design strategy tool, credited to Freedom Lab, Future Studies and was extracted from the Learn Do Share deck.<sup>19</sup> Its goal is to offer users an opportunity to analyze the experience of their research space in a systematic way through eight categories, and offer a visual representation, 'of the full cycle', "from cause of the primary problem to the resulting change from the solution."<sup>20</sup>

These eight categories offer:

- A deeper understanding of the whole experiences that indicate unmet needs within the system, by mapping out the system.
- Identify the who, what, why and how to intervene with the system.
- To illustrate where misalignment exists within the system and to identify my main goal and focus - rather than fixing the whole system and to get a better understanding of what it is I am trying to stop, start or continue.

The way to work through those eight lenses is to start from the crisis (# 4), which is the current state of the problem in your wheel, and from there you move backward to the problem (# 3), the threat (#2), and cause (#1). After you have the first half of the circle, you then move to the change (#8), the solution (#7), opportunity (#6) and source of the primary problem (#5).

In each step I leaned on insights from the many conversation I had around this topic, e.g with Mang Shui, from Thinx, from secondary research in the literature, or by personal experience. I used this as a research tool to make sense of the insights I gathered to that point and ask questions such as what is the source of the taboo, and what is the threat. The eight categories can be revisited during your process.





# HERE IS MY 'CIRCLE OF SHAME'

## 1. Cause

Throughout the year's menstruation blood was/is considered as unclean and not hygiene. E.g., since the beginning of the feminine hygiene products advertisement periods has been framed as a health problem. Another example can be drawn from language, e.g., the "sanitary napkin" can be associated with how the blood should be kept clean and "the dirtiness of blood."<sup>21</sup>

## 2. Threats

- The stigmas around menstruation are seen as a confirmation for more pervasive stereotypes about women, (such as irrationality, hysteria or unpredictable) in society and the work field and because of that women are considered as inferior to men, which might pinpoint to the reason why menstruation is gendered. This ties into a larger structural perception of women in society, and particularly in the work world, e.g., women's salaries and executive positions. Because of this deep rooted stigma menses is seen as a disease to be 'solved' and 'cleaned up' and 'abnormal' when in reality, it's a monthly cycle for women bodies and a natural process, e.g., some women told me they refer to their periods as sickness, "I am sick" when in need to explain their cramps in a workplace for example, this relates again to the tendency women has to hide their periods.
- In India, women during their period are considered as impure and are not allowed to participate in everyday activities and in some areas young girls will drop out of school when reaching their puberty. In Africa, one out of ten girls will miss a week of school when they have their period.<sup>22</sup> There is a huge risk that the education of these girls may be permanently damaged. The resulting threat from that is the influence those dropping rates has on the economics state of the family in those developed countries.
- Menstruation is hidden and kept secret when in public. Conversations about periods are still most likely to start in a small voice when in public and most men would prefer to walk away from the situation.



### TOP

"Kotex ad in Hygieia Magazine, September 1924."

Source: <https://nyamcenterforhistory.org/tag/advertisements/>

### LEFT

The wheel of reasoning model from Freedom Lab, Future Studies.

Source: Learn Do Share.

### 3. Problems

- The social stigma around menstruation is deeply embedded in the patriarchal structure of genders, and one might connect those behaviors as a justification for the gaps between genders.
- Most teenage boys consider menstruation as a sexual thing, e.g., the expression boys use to describe period; “when the red river’s up”, boys cannot cross the river”. “Take the dirt road”, is the alternative path of anal intercourse, which boys might take instead of vaginal intercourse when their female partner is menstruating.”<sup>23</sup> Another explanation to why menstruation might be correlated with sex could be because of the larger role menstruation has in reproduction, yet another reason for menstruation to be kept in secret.
- Women are re-embracing/ not challenging male assumptions about menstruation stigma.
- Parts of the vital element of menstruation are invisible (such as the hormonal basis for changes in mood) but are still considered as a personality thing (women are sensitive, but it’s because of hormones, not their character. Therefore it’s seen as a ‘choice’ to be sensitive). Furthermore, values like sensitivity has a negative perception in aggressive workplace cultures and are considered as weaker as opposed to logic/ reasoning - qualities associated with men.

*“If a man lies with a woman so that there is a seminal emission, they shall both bathe in water and be unclean until evening. When a woman has a discharge, if her discharge in her body is blood, she shall continue in her menstrual impurity for seven days; and whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening. Everything also on which she lies during her menstrual impurity shall be unclean, and everything on which she sits shall be unclean...”<sup>23</sup>*

–*Leviticus 15*

### 4. Crisis (Current State)

- The experience of menstruation is devalued and the stigmas and stereotypes around menstruation are reinforcing the gaps between genders (as stated above).
- Most men don’t know much about it, e.g., in one video from Thinx, asking men (on Union Square NYC, 2016), to describe how menstruation works: some of the answers show just how little did they know “Menstruation works in mysterious ways”, “It’s the shedding of the walls of something” and “Maybe her period brought on by stress”.<sup>24</sup>
- Females are thought to be embarrassed by it through encounter with outdated attitudes, and feel shame surrounding menstruation.

### 5. Source

- Holly text presents periods as an impure and as a negative thing that needs to be hidden. The Bible for example strictly prohibits men to touch a woman during that time, and the Koran defines it as harmful.
- There is a lack of education on the process of menstruation cycle.

## 6. Opportunity

There is an opportunity now for design to enable change but only if we are bold and provocative if we really want to challenge the social stigma about menstruation - including positioning and treating it as a female problem and extending the boundaries between genders, to a new perception treating menstruation as natural and healthy thing, to policy design to facilitate conversation by design.

## 7. Solution(s)

Exploration of possible solutions to this systemic and deep rooted primary problem of the social stigma on periods, “something that is ingrained in cultures around the world and as old as biblical text will not feel an impact unless chipped away at many levels. There is not one solution but many.”<sup>26</sup>

- Period props will be free and available at workplaces and at schools and in all-gender bathrooms.
- Women will carry period’s props at public spaces and won’t quiet down when talking about periods in public areas or mixed gendered groups of people.
- Menstruation education at school should be held in mixed group.
- Both men and women will understand the different stages of menstrual cycles and accompanying physical and mental changes.

## Change

Menstruation won’t be a matter of shame for women and girls, but instead a source of pride and therefore won’t be a “hush hush” thing for a public discussion for all genders. Men will know how periods work and will consider it a natural thing, not a disease, and women will be appreciated by both man and woman for having periods and would see the menstruation effect as a source of power, hence a shift in power dynamics between the genders.

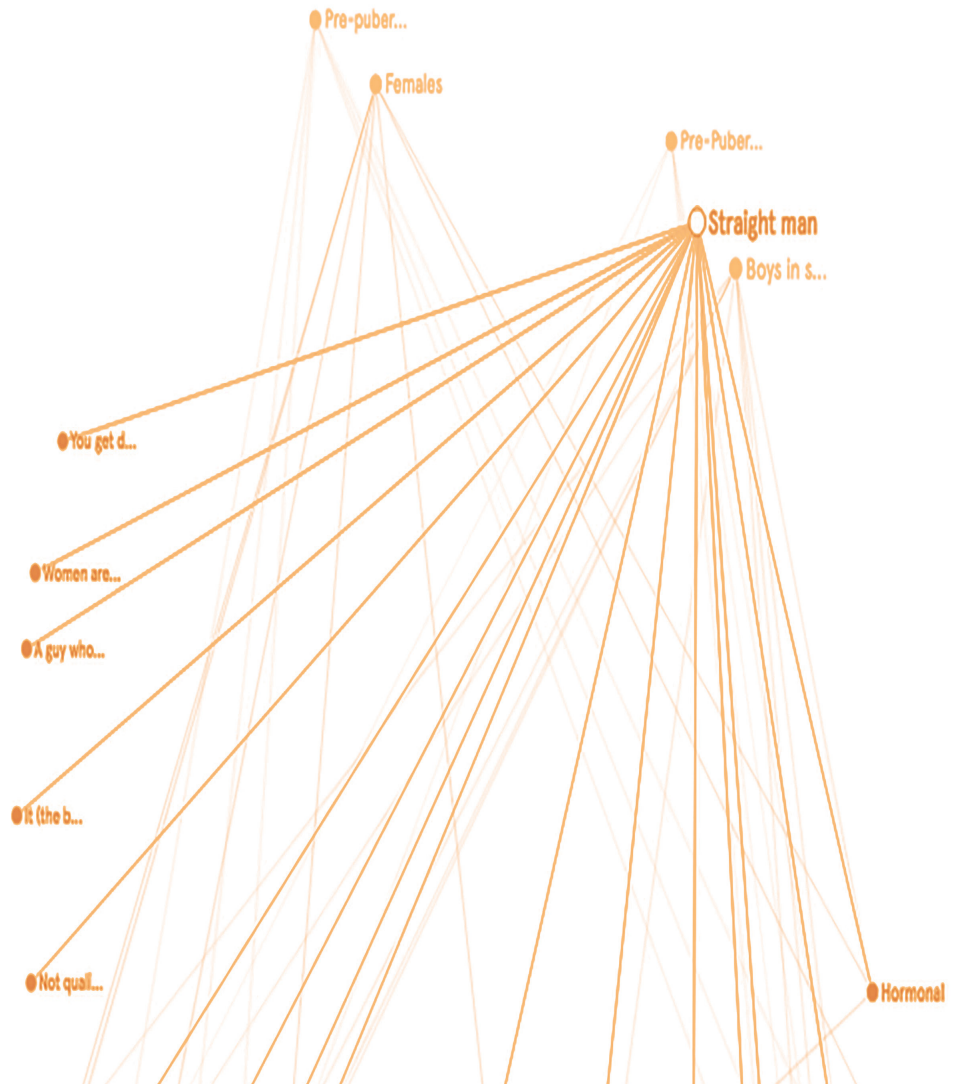
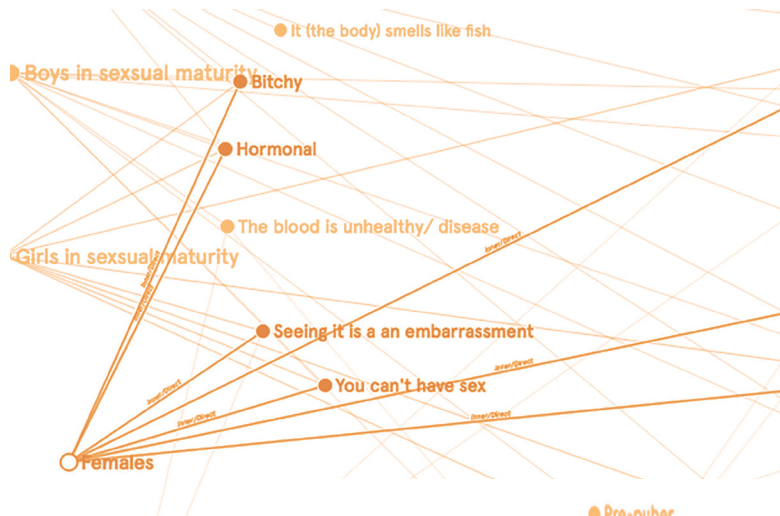


## ZOOMING IN: MAPPING OUT THE ECOSYSTEM

In this part of my research, I mapped out a higher level of this ‘cycle of shame’. I wanted to gain a better understanding of the moments of the stigma in our society in everyday life. What are those stigmas, and what are the different notions and dialect of stigmatizing relationships from different perspectives, (e.g., men will have a different relationship to menstruation and shame about periods), and to understand society’s norms. To generate initial insights I decided to utilize the availability of the international nature of our cohort, and the diversity of genders and sexual orientations. First, I wanted to gather different stigmas I asked from 15 students (from Chile, Lebanon, Iran, Canada, Germany, India, South Korea, Costa Rica and the US), all Millennials age to contribute their stigmas or stereotypes of menstruation. I started by writing down on a mutual wall in our studio the headline Notions of period stigma, and contributed two stigmas; repulsive and hypersensitive. Later I asked the students to write down on the wall what comes to their mind when they think of periods related stigma. By about three hours, ‘the wall of shame’ was filled with various stigmas. I synthesized all the stigmas and and the spontaneous conversation I had with the participants while they contributed their examples of stigma and personal experience and gather all the stigmas together and mapped them out in a way that will help me identify a pattern between the different stigmas gathered from the students, in an attempt to narrow down my project’s target audience or intervention space, and to understand what are the moments these stigmas may appear in the everyday lives in today’s society. I divided them into four different dialects of relationships; an outer/inner connection, and direct/indirect. In this model men were the ‘outer’ and women are the inner, (man do not have an inner circle to menstruation versus women). Or women who are not in a childbearing age (in-direct relationship to menstruation) vs women of reproductive age (direct relationship). Based on the different stigmas from my list, possible relationship to menstruation might be: women to their body, women to other women bodies, men to women body, pre-puberty girls to women body, pre-puberty boys to girls/women body. Based on the different stigmas from my list, possible relationship to menstruation might be: women to their body, women to other women bodies, men to women body, pre-puberty girls to women body, pre-puberty boys to girls/women body. Based on this mapping, straight adult men would be most likely to have a more stereotypical views and holds the most stereotypes, while women hold the least.

*“Systems diagramming: Disentangling the complexity that ensnares us in so many aspects of everyday life requires that we piece together the bigger picture, understand the broader context, and visualize the flows and disruptions of resources between stakeholders. Systems thinking provides a rigorous method through which one can begin to manage complexity, or at least start to get a sense of it. By diagramming relationships, flows, and connections one can make manifest the intricacies of a problem to all its stakeholders, while also revealing opportunities for optimizing patterns within complex contexts that might otherwise seem ungovernable.”<sup>27</sup>*

– Jamer Hunt



Based on this exercise, it was clear to me that menstruation has a negative perception for both women and men. I began to think of ways to investigating how people can understand female menstruation as an exploration of empowerment. I first wanted to understand what will be possible scenarios in the current state. Through this exercise, I was then able to ground those stigmas into a particular moment in time in our society, and to gain a deeper understanding of those notions of stigmas, relationships and symbols. I paired stigmas based on their stakeholders and created different scenarios of a moment in time they might happen. I created these scenario based on the experiences of myself and colleagues who participated in my 'Wall of shame' exercise.

STIGMAS	STAKEHOLDERS AND RELATIONSHIPS
Mood Swings	Men to women body/ an outer interaction
Bitchy	“
Hypersensitive	“
Can't function well at work	“

**Scenario 1: This experience takes place in a creative office. Pete and Peggy (25-30 years old) are participant in this situation. They are both working on a big presentation for a client due the next day. Peggy is Pete's supervisor but they work together as a team. Peggy got her period the night before the deadline while sitting with Pete, working on the final touch ups ;all the details have been discussed already, and now it is time to put everything together for the presentation. He sees her taking a pill and asks her what happened and she answers that she got her period.**

**PETE: Is it that time of the month already? I can't believe this happened today of all days- I was counting on you to close the loops tomorrow.**

**PEGGY: Get mad that he assumes she won't function well even though she knows it won't get in her way). She tells him he can relax and she is about to leave the room and says; First finish all your assignments.**

**PETE; OK OK no need for you to get all hormonal on me now!  
Peggy leaves the room.**

In this moment, the man assumed the fact his work partner got her period means she will not be able to handle her work duties which ties into the stereotype of period seen as a disease. When she is confronted with his opinion, her reaction to his behavior also ties to her period and not to his behavior / assumption, another example to the negative reaction some people will have with periods.

In order to analyze this scenario, I used my Thesis class time to generate a 40 minute creative session with my Thesis cluster team. My main goal of this exercise was to narrow down my intervention space. After presenting them with the scenario to identify leverage points in this specific moment, we started to write questions together on a wall:

- in what ways might we **create period ethics in a working environment?**
- It what ways might we **create regulation to prevent period harassment?**
- It what ways might we **prevent harassing behavior with the help of non-verbal signs or objects?**
- It what ways might we **address the tension between dependability and period?**
- It what ways might we **educate men about period?**
- It what ways might we **prevent the secrecy that makes people hide their props?**

Together we then choose two of the questions to explore and started to brainstorming about them.

#### In what ways might we educate men about period?

##### **Answers:**

- Lunch and learn.
- Online course.
- Teach at sex education in pre-schools.
- Porn.
- Empathy tool (e.g., baby dolls to take care of).
- Poster with information on periods at public restrooms.

#### In what ways can we create a space for understanding and sensitivity?

##### **Answers:**

- Mirroring the female experience, (if they can see it / feel it).
- Educate women to react to men lack of knowing, e.g., what if Pegie, would just tell him he is wrong and explain to him how things actually work. Women owning this as something natural and not embarrassing.

## **CONCLUSION**

Starting this investigation into the topic of menstruation stigma, I wanted to understand and define these deep negative notions and assumptions society holds about periods. Through this research phase, I began to understand the menstruation 'cycle of shame' as a wicked problem- a problem that has existed for far too long for both girls and boys. I discovered that this taboo has multiple factors and together they create and maintain a whole system of shame. From my research I chose to focus on these insights to direct my design proposal;

- The stigmas around menstruation are seen as a larger female identity stereotypes, in society and work place and because of this women are considered as inferior to men, this ties into a larger systemic perception of women. Because of this deep rooted stigma menses is seen as disease and not a natural process.
- Women are embarrassed by and feel shame about menstruation.
- Women are re-embracing/ not challenging male assumptions around menstruation.

## PROJECT

### SCOPE

In my early research stages, I had different questions in mind. Should menstruation be normalized or celebrated? Who is the primary target audience for this desirable change? Should it be the man (who require knowledge of how does the menstruation biologically works), or should the objectives of this kind of project need to empower women?

Based on my research I came to the conclusion that the primary audience I want to address in this part of the project should aim to voice women for empowerment. When design helps empower women, it helps not only to free them from the 'cycle of shame', but can bring women one step closer to eliminate the stigmas they may have about their own bodies or the bodies of women in general and to provide collective experiences that can build new positive stories. I believe that when women starts to challenge their and their surrounding behaviors that are allowing the stereotypes and stigmas to passe along for new generations, over so many decades they will not only be empowered but they can also pass those 'new' behaviors along to young boys and girls, as well as to men in their environments.

### HYPOTHESIS

Menstruation has a negative stigma; because of the social norms and hierarchies of gender which contribute to it. This negative stigma impacts how women experience their periods and prevent them from challenging it; the menstruation experience is gendered and has a negative effect on the perception of women in society.

Women will gain personal and collective empowerment by challenging mindsets and behaviors that encourage stigma and shame surrounding menstruation, which can scale up to create change in the behaviors of both genders.

Design can empower women by providing an alternative experience in which the menstruation is not considered shameful. By providing a fictional object (in this case the audio artifacts), the listener can imagine themselves in that environment and can think of their version of that alternative. In this aspect, success looks like a personal engagement with the 'object,' and by understanding the individual's own actions and behaviors, that encourage stigmas around menstruation, and owning that experience to encourage a different behavior.

## METHODS & PROTOTYPES:

### VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF

#### FEMINISM

##### Backcasting

Based on the insights from my wheel of reasoning research, I created a vision of the change I wanted to see (number eight on the wheel of reasoning). With this desirable future in hand- where people consider menstruation as a source of power- I began to ask what will the experience of getting your period for the first time would be like in this type of environment. Backcasting was a useful strategy tool suggested to me. Backcasting (outlined by John. B Robinson from the University of Waterloo in 1990),<sup>28</sup> is usually used in sustainable design, and it's purpose, is to imagine the necessary steps to reach a preferable future and connect the future into the present. Unlike forecasting strategy which analyzes current trends to forecast the future, backcasting is used to predict starting from a backwards point in time to work from a preferable future into the present

'Menstruation won't be a matter of shame for women and girls, but instead a source of pride and therefore won't be a "hush hush" thing for a public discussion for all genders. Men will know how periods work and will consider it a natural thing, not a disease, and women will be appreciated by both man and woman for having periods and would see the menstruation effect as a source of power, hence a shift in power dynamics between the genders.'

I invited three friends to participate in my backcasting session- name: Valentina Branada, country: Chile, age 29. Name: Christopher Robin, country US, age: 30. Name- Johanna Tysk, country: Sweden, age: 33. I created a script to immerse my participants in my desired future to tell the whole narrative of the desirable change. To build my script, I began to imagine the future of menstruation in that world and looked for signals of trends already happening

in the world these days around menstruation. Inspired by the "Futures wheel"<sup>29</sup> method, from the Extrapolation Factory Operator's Manual by Elliott P. Montgomery and Chris Woebken, I divided my future into six lenses: gender, health, workplaces, relationships, technology, and politics to imagine the consequences of this change in society. Which I transformed into the script. Once the audience was immersed in the story, they were asked to write up their continuation to it. This allows them to consider their cultural values and bring in their ideas. After sharing their stories the final part of the exercise, was a group discussion. Prompted by the question 'what needs to happen for us to get to this desired world?', the participants talked about gender and boundaries, the expectation from women to overcome their natural state of the menstruation part of their cycle, the possibilities this new world presented to them could open up for women in society, and more. At this point of the process, I used the method as a brainstorming research tool. I wanted to learn from my participant how they imagined the implications of my future on menstruation stigma, and to start imagining together what would needs to change in today's society to get there.

##### Fictional Scenarios

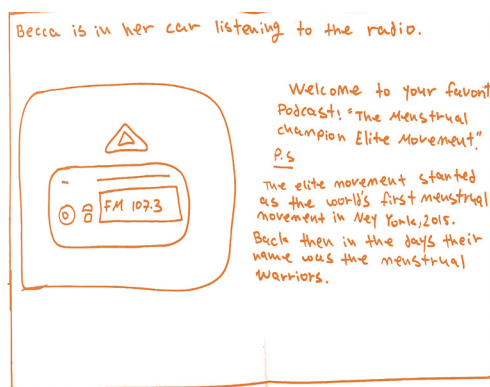
As I was trying to understand the values of the 'cycle of shame' around menstruation, who benefits from it, how and why it happens one thing was clear: women are embarrassed to talk about it in public, and especially in front of men. Going back to Martin Julia, statement "If the shoe was on the other foot, men would deem the experience worthy of pride,"<sup>30</sup> the understanding that periods can be something to be proud of, was suddenly a possibility. When I imagined men experiencing period in pride, I began to think of ways to investigate how people can understand the female menstruation as an exploration of empowerment and connect the pride value with menstruation.

My guiding question then became, how might we design an experience that reengineers the system and shows how it could be different.

From the beginning of my process, I wanted to use fictional scenarios to show an alternative to the negative stream of the shame surrounding periods and to reveal the complexities of a whole system of identifications inscribed (internally and externally) into each person. I can present an alternative perspective that breaks the ice for delicate conversations by using these scenarios, between the imaginative to the fictional, and open up the dialogue for- alternative futures.

## THE FLOW, A PODCAST FOR CIRCLES AND CYCLES EVERYWHERE.

I pulled out scenes showcasing ideas I wanted to explore from the script and conversations with the backcasting participants. I was mindful to pick out moments I was able to visualize and imagine as a narrative of the preferable future, to transform them into a storyboard. My next challenge was to set the medium I wish to showcase the scenarios. Inspired by Orson Welles, "War Of The World's" podcast (1983, Radio Broadcast)<sup>31</sup>, I decided to narrate my story as a podcast. I used one of my scenarios (The Menstrual Champion Elite Movement), as the motive in the narrative. The outcome is an enactment of those scenarios pulled from the backcasting experiment, in a six minutes fictional podcast named The Flow. The playfulness of the Welles' podcast appeal to me as critical speculative storytelling which successfully positioned himself out of the gallery.





# WELCOME TO THE FLOW, A PODCAST FOR CIRCLES AND CYCLES EVERYWHERE. THIS IS YOUR HOST MARILYN.

Our main story today is a celebration of International Women's Day. We'll be profiling three initiatives focused on empowering the monthly triumph of menstruation.

We'll also cover the 20th anniversary to the woman march benefit .

We'll then review the new musical: "The flooding of my soul", that tells the story of a collective of women and how every woman's experience and value of embodied knowledge is different and, well... how a woman cannot be defined by her menstruation chart and cycle.

We'll talk to Morgan Parker about her new book "There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé". We'll talk about the latest trend- men, who also started keeping track of their cycle.

This podcast is sponsored by the 'The Menstrual Champion Elite Movement' which has been a leader in the past 10 years of embracing and promoting the 'menstrual equality movement'. The 'elite movement' started as the world's first menstrual movement in New York 2018. Back then in the days their name was the 'menstrual warriors'. Today the the 'menstruation equality' movement is and has been a crucial part of the past 10 years.

## Musical transition

Our first story today profiles a day in the life of Becca's. Becca is a the CEO at Delek Energy group for the past 3 years. We'll be sharing with you, snippets from her day, from her commute to work, to when she goes to her child's performance at

school. You'll gain insight into her experience with the new cycle calendar app and how it affects her life. For the full transcript, check out our blog F to the 4. Which as our loyal followers know stand for: 'the Freaking' Feminist Fiction Future'.

## CALENDAR EXPERIENCE

Becca's receives a notification and says, read messages, first message saying: Good morning Becca, today you are willing to take more risks according to your cycle, so get out there girl and do your thing!

BECCA: it's not a coincidence we are meeting today yea, I am so glad my assistance is also connected to this app and my cycle, he managed to schedule the most important negotiation meeting with the new investors for today, on my growing phase. Are you connected to this app?

Second phone notification: The Marbella has scheduled a meeting for April 4 th, on this date you are entering the bleeding phase of your cycle, we predict your energy will be at low, you might want to reschedule.

BECCA: see this is where it gets tricky, I told my assistance to never share my cycle with the Marbella's offices, sometime it's just too much, you know? One of my friends is working there and she keeps on inviting me to the 'risky time' fitness group, were all women on their growing phase have a salsa dance class together, now I would really prefer to spend my time elsewhere, you know?

## Musical transition



HOST: Hello and thank you for coming back to us, we are now with Becca at the Delek group offices.

BECCA: I really love the idea behind this new calendar system, you know that my mother is telling that in her days it wasn't expected to report your cycle? For me, most of the time having my cycle aligned with the office calendar makes things much easier. For instance- when I am in my menstruation phase my assistance and the board of directors group know that if I leave the office earlier it's because my body is shedding and nothing else.

### PARTNER EXPERIENCE

HOST: Second in our series about menstrual innovations since the 'Menstrual Movement' of 2018 is about intimate partner relationships. Namely, we're focusing on 'Cycle Method' - the highly politicized method to building transparency and trust around menstrual cycles in intimate relationships. The 'Cycle Method' is part of our mainstream culture like never before. If somehow you haven't caught wind of this process, here's how it works: couples with at least one woman, go through a series of led tutorials and meditations on how the female body changes throughout a month. Rather than leaning on embarrassment and hiding, couples are able to not only talk about the female body, but celebrate it. In one user study by the American Health Association, couples have reported to having a more dynamic, open communication and empathetic relationships with one another. Partners are increasingly aware of the woman's cycle, moods and desires. Men have gained their own version of this bond, as brothers, fathers, sons and friends. The calendar gives them a sense of perspective and awareness. Here's what one heterosexual male said about his partner:

MALE PARTNER: We sync our calendars not just on our work schedules, but also on Olivia's cycle. It's strangely cool to feel connected to her body in that way. Sometimes i feel like i am some kind of an astrologer predicting her moods.

HOST: The program started as a free app and is now being sponsored by major national brands. They recently launched a partnership with Target that uses beacons to remind customers of their female partner's needs. Apparently Cycle Method has received thousands of emails thanking them for giving their partner that little push to arrive at their door with chocolate in hand. This program isn't all rosy though. The Federal Communications Commission, has opened up an investigation on breachings of privacy. In particular, sponsors were sending free gifts to client's homes based on their phase of the circle. But it was backfiring because it was exposing their participation in the program to household members that they didn't want to know. It does beg the question of how an app that is aimed to improve romantic relationships might actually be using information against their customer base.

### YOUTH EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

Stay tuned after the commercial break to hear more about the 'menstrual movement' in the school system. For the first time, the new curriculum of Transformation Class is being taught to both boys and girls, together, in the same room. They learn not only about the different stages of menstruation, but also about the consequences of them to the woman body and her feelings. After the break, we'll chat with the youth psychologist that will speak about the potential of this transformation classes on girls body image, and the first experience of getting her period in that kind of an environment.

Stay with us later as well! As we hear more about the book review of Morgan Parker! It's gonna be a good one!

Using audio as a medium allows me to strip away the baggage of the context and let the audience focus on listening to stories rather than being bogged down by visual detail. Reflecting back at my precedent analysis, to the Thinx campaign which used bold and humoristic approach by positioning provocative imagery of the reproductive system, or BuzzFeed experiment used the visceral appearance of a period as a leading actor quite visible in their project. While effective in engaging an audience and creating “buzz,” it is at the same time- what makes this subject matter untouchable, and therefore creates a barrier. By using audio as a tool, I can rationalize the case and reach a larger audience, to offer people a different perspective.

During my mid-term presentation, I received reinforcement of my choice of audio as a medium, and the use of speculative design as a starting point to the facilitated conversation I was trying to establish, which bolstered me to continue with this direction. The conversation that the podcast manifested was deep and brought up a lot of interesting questions about the meaning of period as a source of power, social conditioning, patriarchy and so on. The main insights from this audio prototype and method used:

- The scenario should include a thorough consideration of economics in my desirable future.
- When talking about menstruation as gendered, it is impossible to ignore certain kinds of social conditioning. It is important to push past several norms and address different types of experiences such as- transgenders who identify as women but do not menstruate, and vice versa. By addressing this topic, there is an opportunity to create a representation to a non patriarchal moment.
- The podcast and the subject matter opens up an opportunity to address other cycles women go through in life, such as women in menopause and their relationship to their period, and to discuss ageism that women experience and how the society is treating them. By not addressing this issue, the project is missing an opportunity to normalize being a

women in our society.

- The storytelling aspect of the backcasting strategy allows people to bring their cultural values into the conversation and the imaginative future scenarios is the strongest element of my proposal that I want to elaborate and make in the future of the project.
- Using the podcast format, might not be reachable or suitable vehicle to a wider demographic audience in creating change. My project might benefit from considering ways to extend outreach. This raises the question whether I want to create something wholly new or rather I should think about ways to weave in my design intervention.
- By addressing teenage boys through an imaginative and engaging medium such as the podcast (and bring sexuality into this), and educate them on this matter there is a possibility to create a change in the attitude in the psychological, physical, mental and emotional space.



I became interested in the idea of manifesting the backcasting strategy while creating the podcast. Changing the tool into a generative instrument for the use of non-designers, individuals and groups like educators, parents and different types of communities. Adjusting the narrative to a particular target group, will require research of cultural values, backgrounds, age and needs of the audiences and modify various types of audio artifacts. Through these enacted scenarios, I want to offer people an opportunity to reflect or evolve their attitude to the menstruation 'cycle of shame,' which eventually might link back to affecting the system at multiple scales. While simply by listening to it, the individual listener could have a value in a reflection of different experience and empowerment, I believe there is a larger opportunity. Design allows me to utilize the backcasting strategy imaginative strength and communicates it to the user in a way that will help them not only reflect upon this new possibility of treating menstruation as not shameful but also to encourage the user to bring in their imagination in offering their continuation of the narrative. The enacted audio media narrative, are a new form of provocative storytelling, positioning the audiences in this new alternative, in a concrete situation, place and time.

## **PART 1- BUILDING THE SCENARIOS**

I partnered with the 'New Women Space' (NWS), located in Brooklyn, for a facilitated workshop by me. The goal of this workshop was to create a base for my next scenarios and audio narrative media and to share my prototype with a larger extended audience. The NWS is a "mixed used space," dedicated to "women and femmes of all experiences."<sup>32</sup> In a two hours session, I met with five women in the age range of 25- 40 years old, from different backgrounds and ethnicity. Our first activity included a 'traditional' backcasting experience. Through a script, describing a day in a life of a woman named Becca, I positioned them in a moment when menstruation is no longer a matter of shame, and it is a subject people feel very comfortable to talk about both in an intimate situation as well as in public heterogenic groups. When calendars are in sync with the women phase of the menstruation cycle, considering their mental and physical stages and conditions. In that vision, there has been a shift in the power dynamics between the genders and menstruation became a public part of our everyday lives. Women are being appreciated by men and females for having their menstruation to the point that getting your period for the first time is a celebration itself. They then had twenty minutes to write their sequence to the story. This session ended with the participants sharing their stories, followed by a discussion on the meaning of all this, considering what could be the negative elements of this reality along with the positive things this change might bring.

## **PART 2- PROTOTYPING**

In the second part of this workshop, I played my six minutes podcast and later gave them each three postcards, each with a different prompt;

1. The podcast made me ask. 2. What would need to be different to get there? 3. Which other podcasts would I want to hear?

With this three prompts followed by a thirty minutes discussion, we ended the workshop. The participants shared their personal background and interest on this topic. We talked about female health and how little do women know what is happening to their body through the monthly cycle, the complexity of the taboo revolving menstruation and the implications it has on women and girls in different cultures and the evolutions of the taboo throughout decades. We also talked about what needs to change for women to feel comfortable talking about their periods and whether it can or can't be a source of power for females. We ended the discussion on a positive note, pointing to the changes that are already happening in the technology and policies realm. And most of all, on how important it is to have a space where women can simply talk about it.

My final step in this part of the project was to transform all the participant's stories into scenarios so I can then enact them into my audio narrative media. I gathered eight stories from the workshop and divided them into three groups: Group #1- scenarios that had a positive reaction to the vision. Group #2- scenarios with a more of a negative nature, and group #3 - scenarios that did not fit into either one of the categories. I narrated the new podcast as a battle between group number one and group number two, including one commercial and one announcement from the FDA- inviting people to replace the period props into the menstrual cup, from group number three. Regardless to the narrative, the overall tone of the podcasts positions menstruation as a public and open matter in the American culture.

*“Is it only powerful if you have power over it.”*

–Venessa Sivery

#### BOTTOM & RIGHT

workshop participants scenarios.

**Vanessa Siverly** - The rhythm method? Yea...the rhythm method! I heard you the first time...but i don't understand. It's ok. Do you fully understand your body now? No I don't. Would you like to? Yea...one day...maybe??? I mean what's there to understand. I bleed, I cramp, I gain weight. I feel very better once I pop my pills. I've got 2 weeks of freedom. Is that what you call freedom? Yea! Okay. well what if you still bleed, no cramps, no weight gain, NO PILLS... you have more clarity, you are more aware of not just yourself but other around you, you sleep better and you are more relatable? Would you like that? Uh..hell yea! But that is not real. It Can be. Okay show me how. Well for me to do that I have to take you back to day 1. Day 1? Yea day 1. Day 1 of what? Day 1 of your cycle. You mean the first time i got my period. No.. i mean the very first day after your period. If you could put a color to it. What would it be? It will be green. I think. Ok lets just stick with green for now. Now if you could put a smell to that day what would it be? I don't know...i guess it will be clean linen smell. Ok good. Now we are getting somewhere. If you could put a song to that day what would it be? At last by Etta James. Awesome! So let's recap, your day one is green, it smells of clean linen + the smooth sounds of Etta James singing At Last guiding your movement. Ok what does all of this mean. It means you've got rhythm !! What?! You've got rhythm. Do me a favor and close your eyes. Picture the trees swaying back and forth in an open meadow. You are in a white hammock that has been freshly washed and sun dried and you just happen to be listening to At Last. You picked that song for a reason. You picked it because of appreciation. Your appreciation that you have about your body completing a cycle that only you can complete and no one else. I like how that sounds! But wait... that's not all, now give every day of the week a color, smell and sounds/songs leading up to your last day of your period. I don't know. You do know. You just did it . You mean 28 days! Yes, a visual, sensory, album of your body for 28 days. How awesome would that be. It would change, wait not change but uncover a whole dynamic about you that you didn't know existed. All from your cycle of life!! Wow, now that you say it that way... I guess I can, but what about the pain?? I need my pills. Listen if you can re-imagine your day without pain... you can do the same with it. Just replace it with a song, or a color or a smell that represents true freedom. I'll think about it. Ok and while you're on it... think about 8 billion other women composing their visual, sensory albums all at the same time. Now that sounds like music to my ears. Mine too. The rhythm method, the rhythm method. Yea the rhythm method!

*“Isn’t there in any way a mens cycle? That’s why I think the women cycle movement, let’s call it, can leads for a better understanding to men cycle and there will be an effect in the emotional Vs rational conversations; just shifts and changes, because they have it too, we are hormonal people and spices, so I think it will be good.”*

**–Ortal Saadon**

*“when the shades finally does get broken, a lot of other stuff are going to be broken too, the moment and energy behind all that is going to be crazy”*


**–Venessa Siveriy**

**Robin DeLuca**- Maybe girls should move beyond being introduced by their first name after they have their first period, only to miss “Robing” to indicate their transition and to empower and respect their period .

**Danielle, N Muller** - Becca’s mostly pleased with the impact of her cycle tracking app in the workplace. Her assistant had canceled and rescheduled meetings while considering Becca’s cycle to suit it. Massive business opportunities were missed/ compromised because of the re- scheduling. When Becca learned of this, she was pissed, she was fully capable of handling the majority of the compromised opportunities.

**Briana Segarra**- The menstrual cup is now the only menstrual product. The free tampons and pads have heightened to cost of these products at grocery stores and they now no longer exist because no one was buying them. We have now learned how to use menstrual cup and the environment thanks us for it.

**Briana Segarra**- Women have now become the superior race in the business world. Because their menstruation cycle have been linked to negotiation and important meetings, they have been performing better than men. Men now feel women have an upper hand and are fighting to do away with menstruation calendars in the workplace. Because men do not have periods they feel less than and inadequate. Men start fighting for male rights.



**“Critical reframing: Examining a situation, analyzing it, and ‘framing’ it in new ways can reveal new opportunities or possibilities. This requires analytical acuity, research and understanding...”<sup>33</sup> “The nature of a problem shifts as the scales shift; so it is critical that designers recognize what resources and partners are involved at each level so as to best identify the optimal avenue for intervention.”<sup>34</sup>**

**– Jamer Hunt**

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**NEWS STORY # 1 - Our first interviewer for today is Becca. Once an avid supporter of the menstruation schedule assist, becca is now the leader of the anti - cycle method. She now makes claim that this transparency in the workplace is, actually, very limiting and in fact anti - feminist.**

**NEWS STORY #2A- Our second story of the day sheds a more positive light on the Anti- Method Cycle. We talk to two different women about how transparency and alignment with one's menstrual cycle brings empowerment. Here's Anna to tell her side of the story.**

**NEWS STORY # 2B- Now we'll hear from Claudia, about her personal experiences with the Rhythm Methos and some plans she has for the future.**

**SONGS:**

**JIM OROURKE- "WOMEN OF THE WORLD."**

**JIM OROURKE- " SOMETHING BIG"**

**NEWSLETTER**

**BLOG**