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Menstruation. A simple word describing a natural biological process, weighed down by centuries of stigma, has been transformed into something most of us can only speak about in whispers. But why? As I speak to you right now, more than 800 million women around the world are having a period. None of us would exist without it, and yet it remains an "embarrassing" subject to broach. From my experience and that of the women around me, I can tell you that it's exhausting.

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It's exhausting to carefully take out a brown paper bag hiding a pad, stuffing it into your pocket in the middle of a class and rushing to the washroom as discreetly as possible. It's exhausting to sit through lessons and meetings pretending to be absolutely normal, while internally crying out from intense period cramps. It's exhausting to be dismissively told that you're PMSing or suffering from "that time of the month," and it's exhausting to continuously fight back against age-old traditions that ask you not to pray, visit temples, cook, touch pickle and the list goes on and on, while you're just trying to bleed and be left in peace.

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(Laughter)

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But you know what the worst part is? The worst part is that the things that seem tiring to us are merely the tip of the iceberg, because we in this room are privileged enough to be able to afford sanitary napkins every month, to be able to visit a gynecologist in case of any problem, to be able to tell what's normal and abnormal with our monthly cycle. We have access to water, sanitation and toilets that help us maintain our privacy and hygiene.

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But what about those who don't? What about 335 million girls around the world who go to school without even having access to water and soap to wash their hands? What about 15-year-old schoolgirls in Kenya who have to sell their bodies to be able to buy sanitary napkins? What about two-thirds of rural high school girls in India who don't even understand what their bodies are going through at menarche? And right now, we are all gathered here in the USA. So what about 64 percent of women in St. Louis, Missouri, who weren't able to afford menstrual hygiene supplies in the previous year? What about the struggles of homeless, transgender, intersex and displaced people who menstruate? What about them?

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The scale of the problem, stemming in part from the deep-rooted stigma attached to menstruation, is unimaginable. And the desire to voice this frustration led me, along with three other teammates, to initiate a campaign that calls for change, questions the taboos surrounding menstruation and spreads period positivity. The name of our campaign, "Pravahkriti," was born from the message that we want to convey to the world. "Pravah" means "flow," and "kriti" means "a beautiful creation." Because how could the monthly cycle that ultimately gives rise to all creation be anything less than beautiful?

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Now, as a social issue, menstruation has several facets to it that overlap, reinforce and worsen the situation. So we based our campaign on four fundamental pillars: health, hygiene, awareness and spreading positivity. But how did we actually implement this? Well, we started within the walls of our school classroom. Instead of simply explaining menstruation to children from a textbook or biological standpoint, we adopted an innovative approach. We conducted an activity where students strung together a bracelet consisting of 28 beads signifying the length of the menstrual cycle, out of which four to seven beads were of a different color, demonstrating the days a woman bleeds. And in this way, we not only explained what periods are in a manner that was educational but also approachable and engaging. To offer another example, we explored various ways of alleviating cramps, including preparing some natural remedies in school itself.

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And we didn't just stop at involving girls in our campaign. In fact, boys were equally involved, and one of our co-team members, as you saw, is also a boy. Through internal conversations where girls could freely share their personal experiences and boys could just ask questions, no matter how "dumb" they might seem, our male volunteers quickly got over their awkwardness, not just supporting but also leading educational sessions. Clearly, starting an inclusive conversation, including members of all genders and listening to and supporting each other, can go a long way.

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Now, to make our campaign successful, we conducted extensive research, interviewed gynecologists, surveyed people to gauge public opinion on periods and conducted a panel discussion with professionals working in this field. And then we undertook the journey to create change. We organized a stall at Shilpotsav, a local fair, where we distributed sanitary napkin-shaped envelopes and bookmarks containing period-positive messages. We donated hundreds of pads that we had collected through a pad donation drive at school. Interacting with young girls in government and charitable schools, we explained periods to them through a game of hopscotch

and distributed period kits that we had made ourselves that consisted of a pad and other items like a paper soap and sanitizer for maintaining hygiene, a piece of dark chocolate just to lift their mood, a sachet of ginger tea and so on. In whatever we did, we strived to think beyond the norm and break barriers, be it by creating a physical period tracker to help girls without access to the internet to record their monthly cycle, or sensitizing the masses by performing street plays, or even developing a video game called "Crimson Crusade" --

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(Laughter)

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that introduces both boys and girls to problems faced by menstruating women globally and players progress in the game by defeating menstrual monsters.

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(Laughter)

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To sustain this effort, we've installed 10 sanitary napkin dispensers in several schools. Gradually, people's mindsets are changing.

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But does change come so easily? At a school for the underprivileged, we encountered a girl who had just got her first period but wasn't wearing anything to absorb the flow. Imagine being her, sitting in class feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable, looking down and seeing red, asking your parents for help, asking what was going on with you and being dismissed. Imagine the shame, fear and embarrassment for being "caught" doing something wrong that forces you into living in ignorance and silence at the cost of your health and dignity.

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While we do our part, our endeavors will only be successful if each one of you internalizes and spreads onward the idea that menstruation is completely normal, if each one of you conveys this message to every person you know. When we can discuss digestion, blood circulation and

respiration -- all natural, biological processes -- why should menstruation be off-limits? And you, too, can help make it less taboo, simply by being more open with male friends and family members, supporting local and international organizations working to improve menstrual hygiene management, making menstrual bracelets with middle school kids in your area or even by playing Crimson Crusade with your friends. Every small steps counts, because brushing this topic under the carpet perpetuates lack of access to sanitary absorbents, ignorance of menstrual health issues, school absenteeism, infection and so much more.

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I'd like to end with a few lines a volunteer wrote for us: "Let the crimson tide turn. Let there be waves of positivity, thundering applause, villages full of women who bleed with pride. Let there be a scent of education drifting through the oxygen inhaled by men, women and children. Let all know the marvels of menstruation and celebrate Pravahkriti."

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Thank you.

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(Applause)