

SARAH BALDWIN: From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is *Trending Globally*. I'm Sarah Baldwin. In high school, Charlotte Silverman worked with Action India, a women's rights organization based in Delhi. One of its fundraising campaigns helped women in a small village in India obtain a machine that makes affordable menstrual pads.

Inspired by this campaign, Charlotte and some classmates decided to spearhead production of a documentary about it. The film would show how that machine empowered the women and girls of the village. Charlotte hoped it would be shown in classrooms and health centers. It was. It also won an Oscar. The film's called *Period. End of Sentence*, and it's available on Netflix.

Charlotte's now a rising sophomore at Brown. On this episode, I spoke with her and with Sarah Tucker and Carly Paul, two development studies concentrators who are doing fascinating work on gender and development. We talked about the power and success of Charlotte's film, and about how to better frame issues of gender equality and public health around the world. We started by talking about the surprising origins of Charlotte's film.

CHARLOTTE SILVERMAN:

So I was already involved before this project with a partnership with Action India. And Action India is a local women's rights organization based in Delhi that works with a lot of villages outside of Delhi. And so we had had this kind of ongoing relationship through an organization called Girls Learn International. So we were partnered basically with our girls' rights and women's rights group at my high school, and then with one of their girls' groups there. So we had been doing kind of Skype calls, and we would read books together.

And soon after I started in that club, a couple of girls in my group went to the United Nations, to the Commission on the Status of Women. And that's where we first heard about the machine, about the pad machine. So that's where a lot of people-- I mean, there are people from all over the world that come to that conference and basically talk about what's affecting their communities. And access to menstrual products was a big one that year. That was something that we hadn't really heard about. And from our own research, it was shocking to all of us.

So we started doing local pad drives and tampon drives for women's shelters and youth shelters and things like that. But we also started talking to Action India about how this could be

a bigger project, and how menstrual health affected their own communities in the villages that they worked with and the women that they worked with.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, I'm going to guess that in LA, when you were doing pad drives, it was a question of affordability or access. It wasn't so much a taboo, I hope. But in India, it was really a question of both, right? Access and taboo.

CHARLOTTE SILVERMAN: Yeah. So I think in LA, there are definitely communities where it was taboo, and where-- I mean, we definitely noticed it's still not something that anybody would feel comfortable talking about. This project has definitely changed that at my high school. But in general, that's something that we wanted to break down everywhere. But definitely, it was more extreme with the group that we were working with.

And so we decided that we wanted to go through with a project that would install one of these pad machines, that would kind of work to break down these taboos. But again, one of-- so Action India had contact with-- the first unit is placed in [INAUDIBLE], which is three hours outside of Delhi. And they had sort of identified about nine women that were really dedicated to this idea, that wanted to work on the machine, that wanted to do door-to-door business sales and really get something running.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, let's just break that down for one second. So Mr. Muruganatham, how did he end up making this machine? Why did he care about this, when menstruation is such a taboo in India? Here's this guy-- tell the story about the machine and how it's like a whole micro economy that gets born.

CHARLOTTE SILVERMAN: So he basically started this machine because he noticed his wife was kind of hiding her-- like once a month hiding this whatever it was that was happening to her, that she had no idea what was happening to her, that she was using really unsanitary products. And he wanted to combat that in some way. He's known in India as the pad man. He has like a Bollywood film after him. Yeah.

I would say though that one thing we've tried to get across in a lot of ways is that really the micro economy is not really a part of his mission. That's entirely Action India and the women that decided themselves they wanted to have this be like a fully women-run system. We're actually not using his machine going forward. We're using a semi-automatic one, and hoping to having more women employed as business strategists and working on that end, rather than the actual manual labor.

SARAH BALDWIN: So it's more about women as business people than it is about women as labor, in a way. Is that-- that's intentional?

CHARLOTTE Yeah.

SILVERMAN:

SARAH BALDWIN: Oh, that's interesting.

CHARLOTTE And all of these steps and moving away from that machine and who's working on the machine,
SILVERMAN: where they buy it, all of that is decided by the women that are employed back in India, and that are on the ground doing the work. So we obviously are here as supporters in whatever way we can be, but it's not our project or decision to install something or change something that nobody else wants changed.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, how did the idea to make a film about this come about?

CHARLOTTE So that was definitely a long conversation at the beginning, before we started our Kickstarter
SILVERMAN: campaign. We were deciding between-- we could purchase three machines or something for villages nearby, or we can make this film. And we thought that-- I'm sure this is also a product of being in Los Angeles, but we thought film was a really powerful way to reach a mass audience, and to educate people about this issue that was affecting this really specific community, and also something that was affecting people around the world.

So we thought by making a film, we would one, spread awareness, and also hopefully inspire people to get involved with this work and breaking down taboos, and also kind of working with on the ground activists and projecting those stories that are not really told in our general film world, I would say.

SARAH BALDWIN: But you went from having this idea to actually making a 26-minute documentary. How did you assemble the team, and did you all go?

CHARLOTTE Yeah, it was a long process.

SILVERMAN:

SARAH BALDWIN: Did you ever dream that it would win an Academy Award?

CHARLOTTE No. When we made the film, or when we were talking about making a film, we thought it would
SILVERMAN: be an educational tool, and we would try and get high schools and colleges to maybe screen

it. And that was kind of our goal. We've gotten there, which is great. But yeah, I think we-- I guess, how did we start it? We reached out to every single person that could help us in some way, with like directing or editing or festivals and how to go about entering festivals. Because we were pretty clueless, as high schoolers.

But the team has gone-- I mean, there are the founders of the organization, and there is like an extended group of like 100 people that have done different parts of the project. And it wouldn't have worked without all of that.

SARAH BALDWIN: And as executive producer, what was your role?

CHARLOTTE SILVERMAN: So basically, the six of us that co-founded the organization ended up being executive producers, which basically just means we were overlooking the whole process. So I didn't have any cinematic control or anything like that. But I was basically-- we were the ones that were talking about what the film should look like, who it's going to portray, if it should be about this partnership, if it should be about the greater issue, or if it should be something really specific. I think we all ended up thinking it was much-- it didn't seem right to have us in it, one. That it should be more in the control of Action India and the people that were being portrayed what the message is. So kind of making sure that the message is constantly evolving based on the community, and not our own views and thoughts about it.

And then during production, I guess was also just maintaining that contact with Action India. So our director was doing all the cinematic choices, and gathering the footage. And then we were kind of overlooking those more behind the scenes--

SARAH BALDWIN: Keeping the project moving.

CHARLOTTE SILVERMAN: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and then I guess afterwards, it was the editing process, doing a similar thing. And then entering film festivals, doing panels and interviews and all that.

SARAH BALDWIN: You entered a lot. How many film festivals did you enter?

CHARLOTTE SILVERMAN: I could not even tell you.

SILVERMAN:

SARAH BALDWIN: Like a couple dozen?

CHARLOTTE SILVERMAN: More, yeah. Entered-- I think we showed at probably 12 or something.

SILVERMAN:

SARAH BALDWIN: That's amazing.

CHARLOTTE Yeah. It was a fun year.

SILVERMAN:

SARAH BALDWIN: Well Charlotte, you're a gender and sexuality studies concentrator here at Brown. And Sarah Campbell and Carly, you are development studies, both of you. How do you overlap?

CARLY PAUL: I think that Sarah Campbell and I were kind of invited into this conversation because development studies, while a small concentration, is a really, really broad concentration. And people have a lot of very different interests and the ability to really bend their concentration towards those interests. And so she and I are both writing our capstone projects on-- well, with a kind of a gender lens and a gender focus. And so I think that that was what brought us into this conversation.

SARAH BALDWIN: And what are your respective thesis topics?

SARAH TUCKER: So my capstone is on the ways in which women in government don't necessarily translate to experienced gender equality in countries. So I compared two countries that had really high numbers of women in government, that was well above the global average, but then tried to look at what the private sphere experience of gender equality meant. And so for that, it was like the way women experienced violence in households or between one-on-one relationships with people.

So a lot of my distinction, I think how it relates to the idea of menstrual taboo and just trying to talk about menstruation more, is this distinction between public and private sphere experiences for women. So in a public way, countries can have gender quota laws, and they can purport to include women in economics and all these decision making things. But behind closed doors, it's a different conversation. And a lot of what I found is that the private sphere is where violence against women plays out in the places where sort of more entrenched patriarchal norms play out.

And I think you could place talking about menstruation in the private sphere as something that doesn't get discussed. And what you're doing, trying to make it visible, really opens a lot of doors for a greater discussion about what gender equality actually means for people to experience on a day-to-day basis, rather than just the sort of visible idea of who is in power as

being representative of what people actually experience.

SARAH BALDWIN: And what two countries did you compare?

SARAH TUCKER: I compared Ethiopia and Argentina.

SARAH BALDWIN: Oh. Why?

SARAH TUCKER: Great question. So I was looking-- to be perfectly honest, I was looking at this ranking of women in government. Because that's sort of the go-to conversation, I think now, of how many women are in an exposition of power. And both of them are at 38%, and the global average is around 26%. And so they're notably above the global average, but they're not outliers. So there are some countries that are at 50% for various reasons. Like Rwanda, for example, is at 50%, but that's partially because a lot of men died during the genocide. So they're sort of comfortably high, but not outliers.

And then I really liked the fact that they were very different countries. I thought they-- it was good to have a comparison of two geographically and economically different places, to illustrate the fact that the private sphere idea is not an anomaly, but more of a trend across countries.

SARAH BALDWIN: And what made you interested in that topic in the first place, or when did you notice that there was this discrepancy between representation and what was happening to women in their private lives?

SARAH TUCKER: I'm not sure. I think that perhaps similar to Carly, my theme for DS came a little later in my process. So I've always been interested in ideas of equality and feminism, but I think like many people, politics has played a large role, I think, in my college life, because of just the time that we're in college. And that sort of forced me to start thinking about the way women in politics are treated. And that's always been sort of important point for me to think about.

But then I wanted to think, once women are in power, what does that mean for change? Because I always talk about, I think it's important to have representation. But if it doesn't actually do anything, what is the barrier to that? And why is it not doing something? Because I don't think it's a bad thing. But there's got to be some outcome there for it to be meaningful.

SARAH BALDWIN: That's a great point. And Carly, what is your topic?

CARLY PAUL: Yeah. So mine also kind of aligns with this idea of stigma and who is represented and who is heard. And I'm writing about PTSD and thinking about how the category of PTSD and its origins are very related to American military figures pretty much. And the goal of my capstone is to kind of break down the way in which the PTSD diagnosis was created and think about its political and social and international connotations and the way in which it is supposed to be this kind of diagnosis that can provide restorative justice to people. But it doesn't actually expand its justice creation to the people that we impart trauma on around the world.

And so I'm looking specifically at women, civilian women in Afghanistan, and how the way that we understand and diagnose PTSD, if it is useful or has restorative potential for these women, and thinking about the ways in which they're actively excluded from that category and that diagnosis.

SARAH BALDWIN: Oh, I had not thought of that. But PTSD--

SARAH TUCKER: I hadn't before she talked about it either.

SARAH BALDWIN: Like wow, that's a big gap in our brains that we hadn't thought of. That it's for everyone.

CARLY PAUL: And it's really, really interesting because I've thought a lot about the way in which diagnosis is really interesting and really important in a lot of ways, but also leads to this sort of medicalization of everything. And I think especially in an era of Me Too and seeing that being so present on our campus and in our lives, and watching Dr. Ford go and give this testimony, and so much of it being rooted around these provable statements or things like that, I think that might have been part of the reason that I started thinking about this so much.

And the way in which I think in DS and in more of an anthropological and social based concentration, we're kind of taught to take people's experiences as fact, and understand those things as important and real and valuable. And especially from the feminist sort of classes that I've taken too, that is totally a pillar of feminism. And I think that that for me was a really, really hard conflict with the way that public health work occurs.

And that that is so much rooted in what are these measures we can create and prove and kind of determine. And I find myself reading those papers and being like, but they said that it was painful and terrible and obvious. Like obviously it is. And so I think it's really interesting to think about these categories that we have, and how useful they are at the end of the day, or who they're useful for, and who they include.

SARAH TUCKER: So I'm curious about how you talk about PTSD relates to what you were saying about the anecdote of the man who created the machine. You were saying his wife was sort of in this state of distress. Do you think there's trauma associated with not knowing about periods, and then experiencing one not having an outlet to discuss with other people? I feel like there's an overlap between the way you talk about PTSD and then maybe how a lack of conversation about periods can create trauma for people as well.

CHARLOTTE SILVERMAN: Yeah. I mean, I wish I had a way to fully understand that. Because honestly, I don't. And I think that was the biggest shock for me, is imagining being a girl that was my age experiencing a period for the first time, thinking the absolute worst because she had absolutely no education as to--

SARAH BALDWIN: Can I just say some of the most heartbreaking quotes from the film, when girls were asked in this village what was happening to them? One elder woman said, it's something only God knows why. Another girl said it's an illness. Another said it's a girl's problem. And when they went to the temple, when they were menstruating, their prayers were believed not to be heard. It's amazing, the power of taboo to keep people in a sort of ignorance that is harmful. That's a great question about trauma and ignorance, I guess. Ignorance being the not knowing, literal not knowing, not a judgment.

Yeah. So I was a part of GlobeMed at Brown for a long time. And GlobeMed is like a national organization that pairs college campuses with grassroots nonprofits around the world. And Brown has been paired with a group in Nairobi, Kenya called [? U-Tena ?] for about probably nine years now. They're basically an arts organization that wanted to bring more arts and awareness through arts to their community, which is a slum in Nairobi. And we helped them start a women's mentorship program that is focused on reproductive health and financial literacy.

But definitely the part that was more developed is the sort of mentorship on reproductive health. And this kind of relates to your question. And I had the chance to go to Kenya. People go to Kenya every summer to work with our partner organization and do kind of monitoring and evaluation of how the program is running. And we attended some of the sessions where the girls are learning about different reproductive health issues and diseases and safety, and how to-- yeah, all of those things. And it really was a shock to me.

And we also got to tour the clinic that is alongside this community center where these trainings

occur. And we went through and helped them edit their manual that they teach from. And it just makes you think about how terrible health class is in elementary school or junior high, but also the fact that it's this amazing blessing that we have. And I know that my sex education was fairly liberal, and that doesn't even exist in some areas of the United States. So yeah, it was definitely shocking to me to be speaking to these girls who are facing this same sort of inability to get an education because of what's going on with them. Where they have really, really high pregnancy rates and all kinds of overlapping problems.

And another one that was really huge for me was seeing the fact that they talk about birth control, but there are so limited options of what types of birth control that they have access to. And so it's kind of like, here you can get this really invasive feeling kind of bar put into your body, when you don't really even have a basic understanding of your own reproductive organs. And that seems so simple, but in reality is absolutely not. And it seems so simple to say, here's this pad. It will fix everything. But at the same time, if you don't have that foundational understanding, those things are completely foreign.

SARAH BALDWIN: Does the Pad Project come with sex ed, for lack of a better word?

CHARLOTTE SILVERMAN: So basically the way that Action India does all the work currently is they have youth programs where they'll go and do sex education, menstrual health education. And basically they individualize it based on what the community is asking for and what people are needing.

Yeah, so their work is kind of specifically with groups. So it's with girls that attend their groups. We're hoping that with the spread of the Pad Project and the awareness that the film has brought in a lot of areas that they work with, that more schools will adopt the-- well, one, that more schools will actually purchase fly pads and use them and provide them for free or really low cost within the schools.

SARAH BALDWIN: Fly is the brand.

CHARLOTTE SILVERMAN: Yeah, Fly is the brand they started. And also that they'll then give more of an education about what pads are. That's also something that-- just to make this connection-- actually the mayor of Providence implemented, is in the process of implementing, free pads in schools in Providence. And a lot of the research they did actually showed that girls here also will leave school a lot of the time if they have their period.

There's a lot of cultural taboo in areas around Providence. And where people don't know

what's happening to them, and then don't have access to them. And that the sex education here is not actually as progressive as we would think it is. So there's a lot of work to be done locally too. And I think that's one thing that we're working on in the Pad Project, is making these global networks of activists, and not seeing it as us and them, but really connecting the whole problem.

SARAH BALDWIN: That's great. I wonder also if it has benefited men and boys as well, if they are breathing easier as well, or if it's given them more of a sense of solidarity or connection or something to these girls, now that they can name what's happening and see that it's just perfectly natural.

CHARLOTTE SILVERMAN: I mean, I think there's still a ton of work to be done, so it's hard to speak to the lifting of the taboo entirely. But I only really know what from my co-worker [INAUDIBLE], who I talk to most of the time. But she's sort of expressed the changes within the communities they work with specifically. So I guess that's all I can really speak to.

But I think when I was there, the film hadn't been released yet. And I'd known all of the hardships that they had faced before anything had been done, when they were implementing the machine. You see that a lot of the men in the village didn't know what it was. They had just tried to keep them in the dark about it.

SARAH BALDWIN: They thought it was to make diapers.

[? CHARLOTTE SILVERMAN:] Yeah, exactly. So people have definitely gained a sense of pride from the machine, have been like this is our one claim to fame. But also, this is something that so many people in our community are working on and are a part of, that it's something that they're proud of. And I think that's one of the biggest changes, is it's not just accepting something, but it's actually feeling a sense of pride in it. And that's a huge change.

And I don't think-- I don't know how everybody feels about it, or how it's changed other communities. I do know that since we've released the film and people have seen it, we get Facebook messages on our organization every day that say this is my exact story. I'm so glad it's out there. I'm so glad people know about this problem. And to hear that, I guess always reminds me that there are so many people that this relates to, and that hopefully this brings them also some sort of inspiration or hope that things are changing.

[? CARLY PAUL:] I really love the whole thing across the board. And I think that the testimony from all the different people, you got to see the different perspectives. But I loved one of the moments

where no one was speaking actually, when the two women are kind of bundling either hay or something. And they-- yeah, you liked it too.

And they have their heads together. And they have their heads pressing against one another, and they're leaning down, and they're tightening this bundle. And I just thought, it was this really, really beautiful image and metaphor for women putting their heads together and accomplishing something really impressive. And I think that image encompasses so much of what I think is important and amazing about women's work and women's issues. And I thought that was gorgeous.

SARAH BALDWIN: That was a beautiful scene. That was like if you had to sort of illustrate collaboration and working together, that was it.

CHARLOTTE Yeah, and strength too.

SILVERMAN:

SARAH BALDWIN: And strength. Oh my god, the things that they put on that girl's head. And she walks away. It was amazing.

[? SARAH TUCKER: ?] What I think is really impressive, Charlotte, about the way that you talk about the organization, is this incredible awareness of not wanting to be an imposition other places. Like having talked to you about this multiple times, you always reference the importance of having a connection with someone before you actually try to talk about the Pad Project with them, and making sure that it's not just a bunch of people from the US coming in with this idea of [INAUDIBLE] it's actually socially salient there, and from the ground up. And I just think that's really important to highlight, because it's a model that's been successful, one, and two is respectful.

Because I think a lot of times, we try to impose these ideas of what empowerment means on other communities. And that's not the way to go about it, and that's very presumptuous. But I feel like the whole premise of the way that y'all have gone about it has been always centering the people who are affected and making that decision maker. So I just think that's really cool to highlight as well.

SARAH BALDWIN: Here, here.

[? CARLY PAUL: ?] Was the movie shown in India as well?

CHARLOTTE Yeah. So Netflix, the idea was to get a platform that was accessible to the most people. It's not
SILVERMAN: as big there as it is here, which is-- it is what it is. But also one of our big goals, again, is to make it an educational tool. So we try and-- any school that reaches out, we try and make it as accessible as possible, or send them a DVD or something.

But yeah, we first showed it at the UN last year, at the Commission on the Status of Women. And then from there, I went to India to show it to the people who are in it, and then to Action India, and to a couple of their youth groups. So those are the only places that I was there for the showing. But yeah, now it's kind of in a process of-- a couple of the representatives at Action India brought it to legislators, and are kind of showing it in a [INAUDIBLE].

SARAH BALDWIN: That's awesome. So it's sort of creeping toward policy in a way.

[? **CHARLOTTE** ?] Yeah, that's the goal. Yeah. Because we really were trying to get the free pads in schools
SILVERMAN: again there. So yeah, that's one big--

SARAH BALDWIN: That would be a victory. That's amazing.

[? **CHARLOTTE** ?] I mean, we need it here too.

SILVERMAN:

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, it sounds like that's also starting.

[? **CHARLOTTE** ?] Yeah. I mean, there are so many ends of it. The tampon tax, there's like-- yeah, plenty of
SILVERMAN: work to do.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, this has been so much fun and so interesting. And I feel so lucky to have met all of you.
Thank you for talking to *Trending Globally*.

[? **CHARLOTTE** ?] Thank you so much.

SILVERMAN:

[? **CARLY PAUL:** ?] Thanks for having us.

SARAH BALDWIN: Keep up the good work.

This episode of *Trending Globally* was produced by Dan Richards. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin. You can subscribe to us on iTunes, Stitcher, or your favorite podcast app. If you like what you hear, leave us a rating and review on iTunes. It really

helps others find the show. For more information about this and other shows, go to watson.brown.edu. Thanks for listening, and tune in in two weeks for another episode of *Trending Globally*.

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