



it for themselves

BO-BUSTING CHARITY THAT IS HELPING OTHER WOMEN

weight rapidly and then struggling to lose it had a devastating impact on Heera as it would any woman, especially in the age of social media. She pointed out that it can be difficult for women with endocrine disorders to really feel like a woman, especially when they display features that are socially seen as manly. This subsequently led to self-harming and mental trauma.

Then at 24 while studying for her masters in law, Heera collapsed in agony and was told she had a burst ovarian cyst.

"I had chocolate cysts on my ovaries and that was indicative of endometriosis. It was the first time I'd ever heard of endometriosis. So, I'm a 24-year-old at university and thought I was quite well educated about my body because of the PCOS diagnosis, but clearly, I wasn't.

"I later learned I also have premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), which affects one in 20 women. It can make you very suicidal and usually occurs around a week or two before ovulation."

During that time, Heera revealed she had become really sensitive to light and sound. She struggled to be around large groups of people and it was almost like she had a split personality because she was fine one minute and raging the next. She had eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy as well as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) to help control her reaction to chronic pain and traumatic events, which helped Heera manage her own mental health.



"Sometimes a flare-up can cause me to remain in bed for weeks. This can drive you mad, make you physically ill and exhausted. You are constantly bleeding and feeling as though your uterus is being ripped apart. The longest I've had this was six weeks off work.

"This obviously has an impact on your career. I really do believe my illness has held me back from progressing in my legal career."

The pain Heera was feeling led her towards setting up Cysters. "I wanted to support other women in a similar situation without them feeling they were on this journey on their own. In truth, I was so frustrated with the lack of support. So Cysters was initially born out of anger and resentment that I was going through a chronic illness and couldn't change this."

While trying to set up Cysters, Heera soon realised that talking about PCOS and endometriosis along with its impact on relationships, fertility, friendship and sex was still seen a huge taboo for Asian females.

She soon became a target for online trolling and abuse, which continues till this day.

"I pushed the ideology behind Cysters into a separate entity, so the trolling wouldn't be as directed at me. It didn't quite work because I ended up being the face of Cysters. But it gave women an opportunity to come to me privately about the problems they were having both medically and socially.

"Saying words like sex and vagina out loud are still very taboo, so I try to play it down by arguing that you won't die if you say the words."

Cysters has grown rapidly since its inception and is today a registered charity that helps women from diverse backgrounds who no longer feel they are alone. This includes working with faith and community organisations to help those who struggle to overcome cultural and religious barriers.

"One campaign we are working on revolves around women going for smear tests and actually understanding why they need it because this is something that a lot of women still don't understand.

"I was recently approached by a Somali woman who felt the smear test was inappropriate for an unmar-



ried woman due to the act of penetration. So it's about understanding it and dispelling the myths around smear tests and supporting women who have any fears."

The organisation dedicated to helping and educating women with reproductive health issues is culturally sensitive, all-inclusive and completely volunteer-led.

Heera explained: "We aim to educate the public about reproductive health. We challenge the societal, cultural and misogyny behind women's reproductive health.

"I feel that women don't take ownership of their health due to centuries of misogyny and patriarchy, making pain associated with these conditions normalised. Pain is so subjective and should not be

brushed off due to your gender. It should still be given the appropriate medical attention and investigations.

"I want to change perceptions of women's health, making

it ok to put yourself first and dispel myths around gynaecological health. I want to bring out in the open the mental health associated with these conditions and social isolation that some women may feel."

The determined 29-year-old has been doing exactly that and became a champion for women. Her successes have included giving talks at conferences including in Dubai, organising successful workshops and setting up a private Facebook group for women.

"I come from a liberal family. My mother used to be a sex education teacher before moving on to working in mental health, but others are not



so fortunate and keep everything bottled in, which subsequently leads to feelings of solitude.

"Cysters really took off when women started coming forward to ask me questions. This subsequently enabled me to create a platform where women could support other women. Over time we have become 'sisters for Cysters' and the door is open for all."

Research by Cysters has also noted that the number of women with chronic illness like endometriosis often struggle to hold down a nine-to-five job and points out that this condition alone costs the UK economy £8.2 billion per year in lost productivity and absentees.

Heera has also set up peer support groups and wants Cysters to be the leading voice in reproductive and sexual health, particularly within the ethnic community.

"I really want to tackle some of the misogyny and unconscious biases within the healthcare system," she said.

"I feel that there is an internal prejudice when it comes to how women are treated in the healthcare system and the only way to change that is to start educating healthcare professionals in cultural and religious awareness and how these have an impact on women coming forward openly about their sexual and reproductive health.

"I think it is important we start having these frank conversations in order to get better care for women."



Follow Priya Mulji on www.twitter.com/priyamulji or log onto www.priyamulji.com



Dating the New York way

ONCE upon a time I met a guy on a train and even went on a date with him. He was one of those guys who went on dates with anyone and everyone. When I questioned him about it, he said, 'let's multi-date, the New York way.' My response was an emphatic no.

Those who regularly read my column will know that recently my friend Urvashi and I were invited to attend the wedding of Ashley and Natasha in New York. With just 120 guests, it was an honour to be part of this elegant affair at the stunning Brooklyn Botanic Gardens.

Once the wedding shenanigans were over, I had some free time so took the opportunity to channel my inner Asian Carrie Bradshaw in the city where you can have a date every day and sometimes even two in one night.

While in New York, I got on dating apps and within a couple of hours of talking to a few guys, I had got a couple of dates lined up.

This is very much unlike in the UK where you can talk to a guy for weeks and still never meet. That was my main dating observation in New York. Men and women have a lot more confidence in asking you out for drinks or dinner, literally after exchanging a few messages.

When I put this observation out on social media I was surprised to learn this wasn't limited to me being in the city for a few days - one American guy said that this was a very American thing to do. A girl also said that while living in NYC for six months she had been asked out at the bank and while out shopping. In the UK, this would never happen and a guy would just wait to come across you on social media.

So a date happened and it was really lovely (such a shame he lived in New York City, but you never know what will happen in the future, right?) We had drinks in a New York bar where the guy paid and shared dating experiences with me. The most popular app at the moment is Bumble, so if you're hoping to go on a date while visiting the city, that's the one to use. My date told me about the women he dates, which nicely leads me onto the differences between women in the UK and the US.

The guy told me that American women are very forward and aggressive, but in my eyes it's not bad for a woman to tell a man that she wants a man to text her. In fact, our hairdresser for the wedding told us she tells men that she wants to be texted. In the UK, women fear rejection even when telling a guy how she feels.

Also from speaking to women and men in the US, a woman is equally as likely to ask a guy out, so why are UK women just as reserved in making the first move? My biggest lessons from the dating I experienced in New York City is to have confidence, ask that person out because what's the worst that can happen?

PHOTOGRAPHER: Neelam Sandhu; and (above right) Heera speaking at a conference