

Profile: Jayaashree Industries

Female microentrepreneurs produce and sell pads, bringing sanitary hygiene to women and girls in villages



Challenge

Of the 355 million women of reproductive age in India in 2011, 88 percent (312 million) did not use sanitary pads, resorting instead to unhygienic alternatives, such as ashes, newspaper, sand, husks, and dried leaves to manage blood flow during menstruation (Khan and Gokhale 2013). Such alternatives increase the risk of reproductive tract infections by 70 percent (Sinha 2011). Poor menstrual hygiene is also associated with cervical cancer, the second most common cancer among Indian women (Institut Català d'Oncologia 2014).



These microentrepreneurs—pictured here with company founder Arunachalam Muruganatham—produce and sell sanitary pads in their villages.

Lack of sanitary pads has also been linked to poor school attendance and drop-out. According to a 2011 study by AC Nielsen, 23 percent of girls in India drop out of school after they start menstruating (30 percent in Northern India) (Sinha 2011). Girls who remain in school miss about five days a month, equivalent to 20 percent of the school year. Women miss work for the same reason. The benefits of providing women and girls with sanitary pads are thus enormous.

Innovation

Jayaashree Industries (JI, newinventions.in) developed the world's first local sanitary pad production machine. The business is based on a women-to-women model. Groups of 4–10 women acquire a machine, which they use to produce pads they sell to other women. Home sale enables women's groups to create awareness and allows for an intimate information exchange on menstrual hygiene in an environment that facilitates privacy.

JI has set up 2,300 manual or semi-automated machines in India. Each machine can produce 1,000–3,000 pads a day, using locally available pine wood fiber or other absorbent materials, such as bamboo fiber. Purchase of a machine—including installation and training—costs USD 2,300–3,800. The women finance their purchases through self-help group loans, loans from NGOs, banks, investment organizations, and government social schemes.

JI empowers women and gives them a sense of ownership by having them choose their own brand names. Since the sanitary pads are marketed only locally, through word of mouth, the benefits of creating a local product outweigh the creating a national brand.

The Earn While You Learn project installed 126 machines in schools. Schoolgirls who purchase the required raw material produce the pads for their own use and sell their surplus production in nearby villages. Corporate social responsibility programs or wealthy donors paid for the machines.

Impact

India has about 2,300 machines, each supplying about 3,000 customers. Thus, the program provides 6.9 million girls and women with access to sanitary pads.

It also has significant economic and social impact. Its 21,000 rural microentrepreneurs earn USD 46–99 a month—two to three times what the average farm worker earns and two to four times the poverty line of USD 15 a month (Singh 2014).

Jl reinvests all profits from the sale of machines in the business. It increased its production capacity 50-fold in the 11 years since its founding.

Scaling Up

Jl benefits from the dynamism of its founder, Arunachalam Muruganantham, one of *Time Magazine's* 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2014. His mission is to create one million employment opportunities and convert India to a country with 100 percent sanitary pad use.

The company's decentralized model facilitates horizontal expansion and deep penetration into rural areas. Local production also has the advantage of cutting transportation and storage costs (processed material requires 10 times more storage space than unprocessed material). Uptake of the product has been reinforced by setting up machines in schools—not least because young girls are more receptive than older women to using sanitary pads and often convince others to do so as well.

Cultural taboos associated with menstruation make it challenging to reach women in rural areas. Considerable time is required to receive community permission to talk to women and dissipate their doubts about the product. Installing the machines and training people to operate the time takes time. Market development is slow, and producer groups often face limited economic viability.

Jl has received requests from several other countries, including Botswana and Côte d'Ivoire, for assistance in replicating the model. Although the company holds a patent on the machine, it provides open access to the model, facilitating replication. To date, more than 250 machines have been sent to 17 countries, improving the lives of an estimated 750,000 people.

References

- Khan, Natasha, and Ketaki Gokhale. 2013. "No Menstrual Hygiene for Indian Women Holds Economy Back." *Bloomberg*, July 24. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-07-24/no-menstrual-hygiene-for-indian-women-holds-economy-back>.
- Sinha, Kounteya. 2011. "70 percent Can't Afford Sanitary Napkins, Reveals Study." *Times of India*, January 23. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/70-cant-afford-sanitary-napkins-reveals-study/articleshow/7344998.cms>.
- Institut Català d'Oncologia. 2014. *India Human Papillomavirus and Related Cancers, Fact Sheet 2014*. Information Centre on HPV and Cancer. http://www.hpvcentre.net/statistics/reports/IND_FS.pdf
- Singh, Mahendra Kumar. 2014. "New Poverty Line: Rs 32 in Villages, Rs 47 in Cities." *Times of India*, July 7. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/New-poverty-line-Rs-32-in-villages-Rs-47-in-cities/articleshow/37920441.cms>.