

Low-Cost and Accessible Female Hygiene Products

HIGHLIGHTS

- Production and distribution of high-quality sanitary products at affordable prices.
- Maximizing reach through production in and distribution to rural and remote areas.
- Combination of filling a need (sanitary pads) with income generation for poor women.
- Using locally available raw materials, including agri-business waste and addressing environmental concerns through compostable pads.
- Working with schools to create synergies in menstrual hygiene management education and sale of products.



Development Challenge

Women and girls who use unhygienic alternatives for sanitary pads or tampons (such as newspapers, leaves, pieces of cloth, cow dung, and other materials) not only face health issues, but also tend to miss work or school more frequently. Indeed, most women in developing countries, particularly in Asia-Pacific and Sub-Saharan Africa, do not use adequate female hygiene products. This lack of use negatively affects their participation in education and employment and ultimately, in society.

Social enterprises have responded by developing low-cost methods of sanitary pad production coupled with innovative models for distribution and marketing. Women at the Base of the Pyramid (BoP) are included at all stages of the value chain—as entrepreneurs or employees in production, distributors, health educators, and consumers.

Business Model

A number of social enterprises and other non-state actors provide affordable female hygiene products, mostly sanitary pads, which are produced locally and distributed to rural and remote areas. Through the marketing of their product, they also improve menstrual hygiene management. By offering these hygienic sanitary solutions to girls, they facilitate school attendance. They also provide income generation opportunities for women and girls by engaging them as producers or distributors of the hygiene products.

A number of different business models are used by enterprises offering female hygiene products. Some models focus on the sale of pads, others on machines to produce them. For example, Jayashree Industries, Aakar Innovation, and Saathi Healthcare, all based in India, employ the latter model. Distributing a sanitary pad machine allows for decentralized production and distribution by women’s groups, thus enabling the creation of micro-enterprises. While upfront investment is required, a constant revenue stream is created for rural women.

Stages of Feminine Hygiene Products Business Model



FEMININE HYGIENE MODEL

- Target low-income females
- Build capacity of women along the supply chain
- Conduct community awareness
- Manage sales and installations



SANITARY PRODUCTS

- Offer cheaper alternative to existing brands and substitutes
- Customize products by size and packaging
- Sell disposable versus reusable



AWARENESS AND DEMAND

- Offer informal or formal education, such as workshops, female sales agents, teachers, village meetings, toll-free hotline
- Synergize with schools



FEMALE CUSTOMERS

- Sell in bulk, such as to hospitals, or sell to individual customers
- Give easy access to products
- Help reduce missed days of schooling and employment



COMMUNITY DISTRIBUTION

- Use trusted network of door-to-door sales agents and in-school distributors to remove taboos
- Generate income for female sales agents and entrepreneurs



DECENTRALIZED

- Focus on local production operated by women
- Involve schoolgirls sometimes with in-school production
- Minimize supply chain

Implementation: Delivering Value to the Poor

Awareness

Awareness is closely related to menstrual hygiene management education. Such education is a key part of most models, whether through informal knowledge sharing through sales agents or in formal workshops, through schools, or at village meetings.

Acceptance

Acceptance is key when it comes to female hygiene products since this is an area particularly sensitive to cultural taboos. To enhance acceptance, enterprises adapt products and packaging to customers' needs and wants, sell them in a kit, distribute them through locally trusted partners, and create local brands.

Accessibility

Accessibility or availability is ensured through local production (which minimizes transport requirements), door-to-door sales (e.g., JI, SHE), and distribution through schools (e.g., One Girl, Afri-Can, SHE, Impact Africa) as well as other partners (e.g., UNHCR in the case of T4T). Distribution models frequently aim to circumnavigate outlets dominated by men, since women are more comfortable buying sanitary products from other women

Affordability

Affordability is ensured through a low-cost approach that builds on several elements, including a short supply chain and eliminating middlemen, local production, use of local inputs, and avoidance of marketing costs.

Most business models integrate women at all levels of the value chain. For example, where production is centralized, the enterprise typically owns the factory and employs women. Where production is decentralized, in other words, where the enterprise facilitates local production through sale of a production machine to women in rural areas, local women become entrepreneurs. Awareness raising and demand creation is commonly done through female sales agents employed by the social enterprise or through external stakeholders, such as or Community Health Workers (CHWs).

Results and Effectiveness

Depending on its maturity, female hygiene business models range in scale from 1,200 to about seven million customers. JI is the most mature model, with replication in 17 countries through export of machines and dissemination of information regarding its business model, and the highest reach due to its decentralized production and the snowball effect of increased growth as established producer groups become satellites for others. AFRIPads is the second most mature model with a reach of 500,000 women based on centralized production and a reusable product. Almost half of the social enterprises are already in an expansion phase (JI, Ruby Cup, T4T, Impact Africa) through developing the base of micro-entrepreneurs (JI) or targeting more customers. Afri-Can Trust has educated about 30,000 girls in menstrual hygiene management through 290 schools.

Girls and women with access to safe female hygiene products face lower health risks, such as reduced reproductive tract infections. School attendance rises: Afri-

Can Trust reported a 40 percent increase in school attendance, and the provision of sanitary pads and menstrual hygiene management education decreased absenteeism of schoolgirls in Ghana from 21 to 9 percent. Impact Africa has trained 125,000 girls in four countries on menstrual hygiene management. A number of other stakeholders, such as teachers and villagers, also benefit from training. Afri-Can and SHE have trained 135 and 50 teachers respectively while AFRIPads has provided training to 53 villages in Uganda.

These innovative business models also break down cultural taboos, particularly where they involve men. They improve men's awareness, knowledge and engagement on female health issues, which in some societies is key to ensure their support. Women's productivity at home and at work is also enhanced through access to sanitary pads. For example, women with access to such products are less likely to miss work during menstruation, thus contributing several days per month to additional work and household income.

All female hygiene business models generate employment, mostly for females. For example, in addition to JI's 70 employees (male and female), 21,000 female micro-entrepreneurs produce and sell sanitary pads using its machines. Of T4T's 250 employees, the most come from vulnerable groups, such as BoP women, people with HIV, and refugees. Sanitary pad production also improves income generation for local farmers who see increased demand for papyrus, banana trunk fibre, bamboo, and water-hyacinth pulp, some of which would have been previously considered agri-waste.