

AFRIPads

In 2010, Sophia and Paul Grinvalds founded the organization AFRIPads in Kampala, Uganda, to provide reusable cloth pads to menstruating women and girls throughout the country. At that time, the Grinvalds wanted to help implement better menstrual health and hygiene in Uganda to encourage women and girls to engage in work and school. While living in Kampala, in 2010, they employed Ugandan women to sew cloth pads daily and sell to others living in the local village. In 2018, the United Nations Human Rights Council, or UNHRC, conducted a study in Uganda to test the efficiency of AFRIPads and found that a majority of women and girls studied favored reusable cloth pads. Since then, as of 2021, AFRIPads has expanded to collaborate with other organizations to distribute their reusable cloth pads to women and girls living in African countries. By doing so, AFRIPads has helped introduce a sustainable method for managing menstrual hygiene and teaching menstrual education in low-income countries.

The Grinvalds introduced AFRIPads to provide a way for women to manage their menstrual cycles in accessible, hygienic, and discrete ways. During a menstrual cycle, also called a period, blood and endometrial tissue that lines the inside of the uterus sheds from the uterus through the vagina. Menstruation occurs approximately once every twenty-one to forty days and typically lasts three to five days. Public health researchers have determined that proper menstrual hygiene management, or MHM, requires women to have reliable access to water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities, materials like sanitary pads and tampons, and knowledge of why and how menstruation occurs. Access to those necessities can become a challenge for women and girls living in low-income countries due to poor infrastructure and the stigmatization of menstruation. For instance, if girls leak menstrual blood onto their clothing or lack private bathrooms to change their sanitary pads, they may be shamed and embarrassed by their peers. Inadequate MHM may push girls to drop out of school if they are unable to manage their periods at school, thereby widening the gender gap in education and increasing early child marriage and teen pregnancy rates.

In 2008, AFRIPads founders, Sophia and Paul Grinvald learned that menstruating girls in Uganda did not have access to the sanitary supplies necessary for managing their periods, which caused those girls drop out of school. Instead, girls and women utilized materials like newspapers and leaves to absorb menstrual blood. Those are inefficient at absorbing menstrual blood and increase women's risk of contracting certain illnesses like urinary tract infections. The Grinvalds contacted LunaPads, an organization based in Vancouver, Canada, that manufactured sustainable and reusable sanitary pads to inquire about developing a new product. The Grinvalds utilized the LunaPads design in order to inspire their reusable sanitary pad for women and girls in Uganda, and in 2009, they distributed their first supply of AFRIPads.

In 2009, The Grinvalds launched a pilot version of AFRIPads and employed five women living in Uganda who each were able to sew three cloth pads per day. According to Griffin, the Grinvalds received funding to establish AFRIPads in 2009 from philanthropist Bert Bolkenstein. Also, the Grinvalds began a formal affiliation with LunaPads, which donated a portion of its proceeds from LunaPads sales in Vancouver, to fund the Grinvalds' distribution of AFRIPads in Uganda. At that time, the organization was based in a village in Uganda called Kitengeesa, which is located near the border of Tanzania. According to Sophia, the pilot version of AFRIPads quickly resulted in an increasing demand for cloth pads among girls and women in Kitengeesa. After they considered the pilot version to be a success, they formally founded AFRIPads in 2010.

By 2013, AFRIPads had expanded to serve women living outside of Kitengeesa. For example, Mali Nyeta, an organization that works to improve education in Mali, helped to distribute 300 cloth

AFRIPads to women living throughout rural villages in Djangoula, Mali, and Kodofra, Mali, in addition to two schools in the capital city of Bamako, Mali. According to Mali Nyeta's US project director Jinny St. Goar, the distribution of AFRIPads in Mali helped prevent girls from dropping out of school by introducing an affordable and sustainable method to manage their periods. Also, according to St. Goar, AFRIPads encouraged girls to openly talk about menstruation, which is often a stigmatized topic. The expansion of AFRIPads, through Mali Nyeta, provided more women and girls with reliable access to reusable sanitary pads, which increased the need for more employees and products as a result.

By 2015, the organization had employed 135 Ugandan women who helped the company to manufacture as many as 30,000 cloth pads per month. Because Kitengeesa did not have electricity at the time, the women manufactured the cloth pads using sewing machines that users operate with a foot pedal. As AFRIPads continued to expand, it also employed more women. Sophia stated that one of the new goals of AFRIPads had been providing means of a reliable income for their women employees living in Uganda.

From July to November 2018, the United Nations Human Rights Council, or UNHRC, collaborated with AFRIPads to test the impacts and efficacy of the organization in Uganda. They collected data among schoolgirls living in three different refugee communities. Refugee communities were an area of interest because according to the UNHRC, menstrual health researchers often overlook emergency settings, and women living in such communities tend to face additional challenges associated with achieving proper menstrual hygiene management due to their displaced locations.

Together, the UNHRC and AFRIPads distributed menstrual hygiene management kits that included four AFRIPads cloth pads, underwear, soap, and a bucket, alongside menstrual hygiene management training and education. The education involved a three-hour session during which AFRIPads team members taught girls in the refugee communities about the menstrual cycle, the reproductive system, and menstrual hygiene. Following that intervention, the UNHRC reported that eighty-four percent of the girls studied preferred using the reusable AFRIPads cloth pad rather than a disposable sanitary pad, and nearly all of the girls retained the information taught during the teaching sessions. The UNHRC found those conclusions to be important for improving menstrual hygiene management in refugee communities.

In September 2019, following the conclusion of their study, the UNHRC announced that they planned to team up with AFRIPads again to distribute 150,000 menstrual hygiene kits and education to women and girls throughout different refugee communities in Uganda. According to the UNHRC, they refocused the educational component to dispel the stigmas and taboos surrounding menstruation in order to empower women and girls to manage their menstrual hygiene without feelings of fear or embarrassment. Alongside the implementation of menstrual education, the distribution of menstrual hygiene kits increased access to the products necessary for girls to manage their menstrual cycles. Also, access to those resources helped reduce the need for girls to use dirty cloths, leaves, or other unsafe objects to absorb menstrual blood, helping to reduce the risk of infectious disease.

Some institutions found that AFRIPads' distribution of reusable sanitary pads had resoundingly positive impacts on menstrual hygiene in low-income countries, while others noted that the organization does not address critical barriers to menstrual hygiene management such as a lack of access to clean water, hygiene, and sanitation. A research team from the University of Oxford in Oxford, England, conducted a study of the acceptability of cloth pads among women in Uganda and found that the AFRIPads cloth pad was generally more acceptable than other sustainable options, like menstrual cups, because cultural beliefs within the Ugandan community found it unacceptable for menstrual hygiene products to be inserted into the vagina. On the other hand, AFRIPads has received criticism from others, because the organization does not address that many women and girls in low-income communities do not have access to clean water, sanitation, and private bathrooms to have the necessary privacy or resources to change their cloth pads. Marni Sommer, public health researcher at Columbia University in New York City, New York, stated that clean, private bathrooms are essential for maintaining menstrual hygiene and keeping girls in schools during their periods, most critically because they help to reduce shame and embarrassment surrounding menstruation. Sommer notes that researchers need to conduct more work on a larger scale to improve the hygiene

infrastructure in low-income countries.

As of 2021, AFRIPads continues to distribute their reusable cloth pads to women and girls living in countries in Africa. AFRIPads has helped introduce a sustainable method for managing menstrual hygiene and teach menstrual education in low-resource areas. Since its foundation in 2010, AFRIPads has provided women and girls in low-income countries with 3.5 million kits.

Sources

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