

PROJECT KANNAMMA PROVIDES SANITARY NAPKINS TO GOVERNMENT SCHOOL STUDENTS IN CHENNAI

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Women - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

One step ahead (Far left) Workers from Irula Tribal Women's Welfare Society manufacturing the Aavaram pads (left)

"I couldn't sleep at night, knowing a teenager lost a possible scholarship, because of her period," says IT professional Sugirda Nishanth. Member of Uthandi Residents Association, the 35-year-old Sugirda recalls how a star carrom player at the Government school they had adopted, missed travelling for her 2018 State championship because she was menstruating, and did not have access to any sanitary napkins. "Something so basic changed the course of her future. It broke my heart," says Sugirda, her initial visceral reaction still palpable in her eyes.

Soon after this episode, in the August of 2018, she would start Project Kannamma, providing free, biodegradable sanitary napkins to 82 students at the Government High School in Uthandi.

Last year, a talk by motivational speaker Jayanthasri Balakrishnan, at the Rotary Club of Madras North, sparked a mini revolution in Uthandi. 'Chinna Chinna Aasai' brought neighbourhood kids together to provide a fun outing to the less fortunate, but Balakrishnan stressed that needs, more than desires, have to be addressed: she was talking about menstrual hygiene in districts around Chennai.

"I didn't realise young girls were wrapping hay, ash or leaves in coarse cloth as a substitute for a pad. Some skip school altogether. I had to do something about it," explains Sugirda, on how Project Kannamma was born, under the umbrella of Rotary Club of Madras North. Today, under Project Kannamma, Rotary North supports 300 girls across seven Government and Government-aided schools in the city.

The sanitary napkins are provided by the Irula Tribal Women's Welfare Society (ITWWS) (The Irula tribes are classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups.) "Women from the community make 1000 pads per day, using Arunachalam Muruganatham, aka, Padman's machines. If the group sells 15,000 pads per month, it can sustain the families of 12 tribal women," explains Jacob Premkumar, who works with ITWWS. The sanitary napkin, under the brand Aavaram, is prepared with natural raw materials such as cotton and wood pulp, and a pack of six costs just 22.

"A pack of pads is a luxury for some families. Now we get natural ones at school, and we are happy that a doctor speaks to us about our hygiene," says KS*, the head girl at the school.

Dr Maragathamani G, a gynaecologist affiliated with Project Kannamma, adds, "Many of the girls had misconceptions about their periods; they had no idea about the timing of their cycle. I am glad they are all so open-minded, asking questions and then informing their families as well."

PS*, another student at the school, chimes in, "Earlier, we would use one pad the whole day, just to save money, and if our uniforms got stained, we had to go home to change, and we would miss our classes. Now, we are happy," she says, with a smile.

"For 360, a single student receives pads for the year, and sessions with a gynaecologist. We are

trying to shift the burden from the staff, who often use their own resources to buy sanitary napkins for the students,” adds Sugirda. She recounts what Ashok Kumar, Principal at the Panchayat Union Middle School, Mootaikaran Chavadi, said of the impact of Project Kannamma in his school. “He said that his students benefited greatly from it. The teachers are given the requisite number of packs per month and everything runs like clockwork.”

It is a labour of love, says Sugirda, who has a boy and a girl of her own. “I see how girls have to work twice as hard to get anywhere they want. Something as normal as their period should not keep them away from class or competitions. I want to take this programme to rural areas, around Chennai. Right now, our Rotary Club is sponsoring the programme, but we are looking for like-minded groups to pay it forward,” she says.

For further details or donations, contact Rotary Club Members Venkatesh (9840346608), Anand (9094796766), or Sugirda N (9962555878).

**Names hidden to protect the identity.*

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Making a life away from home (#adulting), my college friends and I often find ourselves sharing tips on what helps us stay healthy. Pinged one, on our

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