

# PROUD

## *Sustainable Cloth Pads*

### BACKGROUND

Menstruation is something that half of the world's population has to deal with<sup>1</sup>. Despite advancements in human rights and women's rights and issues, menstruation continues to be a taboo topic in many societies and those menstruating face discrimination, harassment and violence. Women and girls are a vulnerable population in virtually every community today, which is not helped further by the continuous stigma concerning menstruation.

The public sphere is designed to fit the needs of the small group of people in power, which in most societies is embodied in the straight, able-bodied, upper-class, middle-aged, (light-skinned) male. This excludes the majority of the population in any given country and leaves everyone not belonging to the small group in power struggling to survive in a society which often fails to accommodate their needs.

This is manifested, for example, in the lack of accessible and affordable menstrual protection. Sanitary pads, tampons, birth control (such as hormone pills and spirals for controlled menstruation and reduced blood flow) and painkillers are expensive and far from available for everyone affected by menstruation. There is still no progressive research done on how the menstrual cycle affects the body and mind, and those suffering from extreme menstrual cramps and heavy blood flow are often ignored or not taken seriously by health care.

**PROUD** started as a way to contribute to raising awareness about menstruation and the troubles facing those menstruating, by offering knowledge on how to manufacture sanitary products. The project wants to spread knowledge on how to produce cloth pads, so that everyone has the possibility to create what they need themselves, thus making sanitary products accessible for everyone.

The first project took place in the village Bishozi in South-Western Uganda. It is not uncommon that girls on the countryside in Uganda stay home from school during their menstruation, due to lack of affordable menstrual protection and social stigmatisation. As they get older, the girls miss more and more of their education, causing them to fall behind, which often results in girls dropping out of school altogether. During our visit to Uganda in February 2018, we discussed these issues together with representatives from the Bishozi Women's Association. We showed them our ideas on how to produce easy and affordable menstrual protection in the form of cloth pads and together, we sewed approximately 100 cloth pads. When we left the village, we donated enough material for the production of 100 cloth pads

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<sup>1</sup> Women and girls are not the only people menstruating – anyone with a uterus, regardless of gender, faces the same issues and marginalisation. For the sake of easier reading of this text, women and girls will be used to describe the menstruating population, although this of course also includes anyone else who has a uterus and menstruates.

more, along with a functioning sewing machine and instructions for how to make the cloth pads. We were hoping that they would continue on their own to manufacture cloth pads and teach more women and girls how to make them. In this way, menstrual protection could become accessible for everyone, even on the countryside of Uganda, and it could even possibly turn into an opportunity for women to start their own business and gain income.



*Sewing cloth pads in Bishozi, Uganda*

In May 2018, we conducted a workshop in association with the organisation MENSEN in Gothenburg, Sweden. MENSEN organised an event with workshops, lectures, seminars and panel discussions on the subject of menstruation. We presented our cloth pads and invited all participants to sew their own pads, providing them with material and instructions.



*Sewing workshop in Gothenburg, Sweden*

## **VISION / GOAL**

It is the goal of **PROUD** to provide everyone with the knowledge on how to produce menstrual protection in an easy and affordable way. In extension, **PROUD** wants to enable those menstruating to manufacture the products they need by themselves, thus making them independent from companies trying to sell their products and minimising the costs for menstruation. In this way, we want to help people regain the control over their lives and eliminate menstruation as a cause for exclusion, limited movement or participation in society. **PROUD** wants to create equal opportunities for everyone, by providing the tools necessary for people to overcome some of the obstacles preventing them from participating in the public sphere. **PROUD** wants to facilitate communication and help create a forum where menstruation and everybody's right to participate in society can be discussed.

## METHOD

### Workshops and seminars

**PROUD** uses seminars and workshops, often conjoined, to spread awareness on menstruation and gender issues. In the workshops, participants are taught how to sew cloth pads and in the seminars, menstruation and other gender issues are discussed. In this way, theoretical and practical knowledge is combined. The material used for sewing the cloth pads is either donated or sold for a symbolic sum. **PROUD** encourages the participants to pass on the knowledge and experiences from the workshops and seminars to other people and communities. For example, some participants might create a sewing club where they manufacture cloth pads for themselves and their communities, for selling (thus acquiring a source of income), and where they can meet and discuss different issues.

### Material

Our cloth pads are designed to be made with material that is affordable and easy to find, regardless of where you are, and they can be sewn by hand or machine. Three types of cloth are used: cotton, fleece and towels. The only other necessary materials are scissors, needle, thread and a pair of snap buttons. The material we use and provide for our workshops comes from second hand stores in Sweden. This means that the cloth already has been washed and is free from chemicals and other poisons found in brand new cloth. Rather than purchasing newly produced cloth, using recycled material is more eco-friendly. Reducing the material costs makes the cloth pads even more affordable to make.



### Why cloth pads?

*Affordable* Cloth pads are much cheaper than disposable sanitary products, given the low cost for production and the fact that they are reusable. A small number of cloth pads will be sufficient and last for a year or more. If one manufactures the pads oneself, the cost for material is very low, and sewing a cloth pad does not take a long time.

*Eco-friendly* Shifting from disposable sanitary products to cloth pads is eco-friendly since the cloth pads are reusable and do not contribute to the large amounts of waste. Cleaning the pads after use is easy; all that is needed is water (even cold water will do) and soap. In this way,

making and using cloth pads does not require chemicals, which are used in large amounts when manufacturing and discarding disposable sanitary products.

*Skin-friendly* There is a huge industry for sanitary products and women and girls are continuously encouraged to use all kinds of products to ensure that their intimate hygiene corresponds to the beauty norms for women, i.e. cleanshaven, odourless and as sterile as possible. Consequently, many products marketed for women's intimate hygiene, including menstrual protection, are full of fragrances and chemicals, which may cause allergic reactions or damage the sensitive skin and tissue in and around the vagina, in turn provoking infections and diseases.

*Accessible* The cloth pads are cheap and easy to make. Since the number of pads needed for a year of menstruation is very low, the costs for material is also low. The low price for buying ready-made cloth pads (given the small amount needed) and the low cost of purchasing the necessary material to manufacture cloth pads oneself, makes menstruation protection accessible to a larger population. The fact that it is possible to make the cloth pads yourself, instead of continuously buying disposable pads or tampons further adds to the accessibility of menstruation protection.

### **POSSIBLE OUTCOMES**

**PROUD** wants to spread knowledge on gender issues, in particular highlighting menstruation and the way women and girls are still marginalised and discriminated against. It wants to encourage people to engage in discussion and communication, and in this way reduce the stigma facing the menstruating population. **PROUD** wants to challenge norms, break taboos and fight marginalisation. People should not be held back by their menstruation – the lack of sanitary products should not limit their lives.

First and foremost, **PROUD** wants to work as a facilitator or initiator, encouraging and inspiring people to create organisations, associations and cooperations by themselves. It is not the aim of **PROUD** to turn the production of cloth pads into a profitable business; rather, we want to share the knowledge and insights we have acquired through meeting and engaging in discussions with people all over the world. **PROUD** wants to present its participants with tools to engage with societal issues and to combat existing inequalities. If it is possible to turn the production of cloth pads into a small business, **PROUD** merely wants to provide the necessary tools and initial material and knowledge needed. We believe in self-help and that empowerment cannot be given to someone. We all learn from engaging with each other, and **PROUD** could be a forum where initial contact between people is formed. Menstruation should not be a source of shame, stigmatisation or marginalisation. It should be a source of pride and strength!

Nema Vinkeloe Uuskyla & Biggi Vinkeloe, founders and initiators of PROUD.