

Sustain Her: Empowering Girls and Reducing Textile Waste Through Innovation



In an innovative collaboration, the University of Johannesburg's Fashion Department has partnered with Love Our City (LOC), a Johannesburg-based non-profit organisation, to launch the Sustain Her reusable sanitary pad project. Launched on 18 July 2023, the project continues to make an impact today. This initiative addresses two pressing issues in South Africa, period poverty and textile waste, by transforming discarded clothing into reusable sanitary pads for schoolgirls in need.

Addressing Period Poverty

Period poverty, the inability to afford menstrual products, is a significant barrier to education for many young girls in South Africa. Without access to sanitary pads, schoolgirls often miss classes during their menstrual cycles, disrupting their academic progress. The 'Sustain Her' project aims to mitigate this issue by providing reusable menstrual kits, enabling these girls to attend school with dignity and confidence.

Sustainable Solutions Through Fashion

South Africa faces another urgent crisis; the alarming rate at which clothing is discarded. The fashion industry's waste contributes to an ever-growing landfill problem. The 'Sustain Her' project takes a proactive approach by repurposing discarded textiles into reusable sanitary pads, reducing landfill waste while simultaneously addressing period poverty.

The Making of a Menstrual Kit

To ensure girls can maintain hygiene and dignity, the 'Sustain Her' menstrual kits include:

- Six reusable sanitary pads crafted from recycled clothing
- A fabric carrier bag for easy storage
- A waterproof bag for soiled pads
- Soap for hygiene maintenance
- A bucket that serves as a washing basin

While most components of the kit are made from recycled clothing, waterproof fabric and snap fasteners are purchased, along with hygiene items, through financial donations to LOC.

A Collaborative Effort

The project is a true community-driven initiative, with various stakeholders coming together:

- Community volunteers gather quarterly to cut fabric and pin pieces together.
- Third-year students from UJ's Fashion Production Diploma programme take over the weekly sewing process, gaining valuable industry skills.
- Dedicated community members meet weekly to complete final construction and pack the menstrual kits.

Since its inception on 18 July 2023, the ‘Sustain Her’ project has made remarkable progress:

- Over 1,000 reusable sanitary pads have been created.
- 120 schoolgirls in Diepsloot have already received menstrual kits.
- 225 additional kits are set to be distributed to matric students in Cosmo City.

A Vision for the Future

The long-term goal of ‘Sustain Her’ is to expand its reach, providing menstrual kits to as many girls as possible. The project serves as an inspiration for other communities to initiate similar reusable pad initiatives, further reducing textile waste and combating period poverty in South Africa.

More Than Just a Project

Beyond its immediate impact, ‘Sustain Her’ offers invaluable learning opportunities. Fashion students involved in the initiative acquire essential industry skills such as clothing production, management, and communication, making them highly sought after in the fashion industry.

N. Dlamini, a third-year Fashion Diploma student, shares:

“The advantage of this whole experience is the skill development that will help me in my fashion career. The skills I’ve learned—communication, clothing production, and management—are highly valued by recruiters in the industry.”

The project has also been deeply fulfilling for the volunteers involved. B. Naidoo, a former teacher and dedicated community member, reflects: “The ‘Sustain Her’ project was incredibly fulfilling for me because I knew that some little girls’ lives were going to be easier because of what we were doing. While sewing each of these reusable sanitary pads, I couldn’t help but think, ‘This child will never have to be absent from school again!’ That in itself was completely satisfying. May this project continue to grow and impact more lives!”

The ‘Sustain Her’ project is more than just a solution—it is a movement towards empowerment, sustainability, and a better future for young girls across South Africa. Through continued support and collaboration, the initiative aims to expand its impact and inspire more communities to take action.

Link to podcast discussion on the Sustain Her Project

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/6Z7Yah6FJWOHGu2mLbYLfg?si=HKzICSJeSxi mLcrqU8yNIQ>

