



(From far left) Sisters Joanne, Vanessa and Rebecca Paranjothy run a social enterprise that promotes the use of reusable menstrual cups, called freedom cups. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

Causes

Empowering women, period.

In fast-paced Singapore, there are those in need – and those who go out of their way to meet those needs. This is part of a series on noteworthy causes **The Straits Times** is spotlighting.

Rahimah Rashith

Across the globe, a significant proportion of women have little or no access to feminine hygiene sanitation during their periods.

For instance, in the Philippines, it is not uncommon for female sugarcane plantation workers to miss a week of work as they do not have enough sanitary napkins to tide them over, said Ms Vanessa Paranjathy, co-founder of a feminine hygiene company.

While the Philippine workers' situation may not be a problem in Singapore, Ms Paranjathy, 29, and her sisters Joanne, 26, and Rebecca, 20, have taken it upon themselves to do something about it.

Their solution is in the shape of a cup – dubbed a 'freedom cup'. Like tampons, these flexible, bell-shaped cups can be fitted under the cervix to collect menstrual blood for up to 12 hours. But unlike tampons and pads, they can be washed with soap and water to be reused.

The cups are made of medical-grade silicone and are non-toxic,

said Ms Paranjathy, who spoke on behalf of her sisters.

"It solves two big problems. One, it helps women in the First World, women like me and you to reduce our waste. And two, it helps women in the Third World who may not be able to afford sanitary products."

Each cup can last up to 15 years, the equivalent of about 5,000 disposable sanitary products, making it a more economical and eco-friendly option, she said.

In 2015, the sisters founded Freedom Cups, a social enterprise that promotes the use of these reusable menstrual cups.

Ms Paranjathy, a social sciences graduate from Singapore Management University who had previously worked in human resources, said a friend came across these menstrual cups during an internship with a non-profit organisation in Guatemala and introduced them to her.

"I'd never heard of menstrual cups before. I did a bit of research and realised that they are like reusable tampons," she said.

"They are the best things for the planet, for your wallet, for women in Third World countries."

Freedom Cups sells reusable menstrual cups to women who can afford them and distributes them around the world to those in need. It gives away one reusable menstrual cup for every cup it sells.

The cups are also ideal for women in areas with no toilets, electricity or running water as they do not need to be changed as frequently as pads or tampons, said Ms Paranjathy.

FOR WOMEN & THE ENVIRONMENT

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MS VANESSA PARANJATHY

GETTING WOMEN TO TRY IT

There is still stigma about women's bodies. Being in a conservative society, no one wants to talk about it. Women in Singapore also don't really use tampons. So they think it's a huge jump changing from pads to (freedom cups). But it's not impossible, it's very easy and they just have to take the first step.



MS PARANJATHY

To date, the sisters have distributed 3,000 cups to underprivileged women in Singapore and around the world. The cups, which cost \$35 each, are available on Freedom Cups' website.

"If there is a woman who needs a cup, it doesn't matter whether we've sold a cup or not, we will give it to her anyway," said Ms Paranjathy.

The sisters have embarked on 15 projects around the world, from Nepal to Nigeria, where they teach women about menstruation and the cups before distributing them.

They have had their share of challenges. When they were in the Philippines for their first education and distribution project in 2015, they had to trek through forests and cross rivers to get to remote villages in the mountains.

Said Ms Paranjathy: "We were in the thick of things. We were sleeping on the floor in the villages."

"For me, it's humbling – to see what these women have to go through and to share with them an option that could help in some way. It's not always easy but it's always fulfilling."

She said response to the menstrual cups "has been very good", adding that some women previously used material such as mattress stuffing or even leaves.

Last year, the sisters made it to the Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia list, which recognises 30 outstanding individuals in each field – from social entrepreneurship to sports.

They join fellow Singaporeans Val Yap, founder of PolicyPal, a mobile

app which helps users collate insurance policies, and Olympic swimming champion Joseph Schooling.

Ms Paranjathy stressed that the menstrual cups are not just for women in less developed places.

"The cup gives you full mobility over your entire period. You don't have to skip beach holidays any more, you can go diving whenever you want to," she said.

Ms Sara Swee, 29, a Singapore designer who bought the cup, believes she is saving not only the environment, but also money. She said: "Although the idea initially freaked me out, I truly believe it's a great idea. Plus, I am not so stressed about making sure I have pads or tampons with me any more."

While the project has got off to a good start, there is much more to be done, noted Ms Paranjathy. "There is still stigma about women's bodies. Being in a conservative society, no one wants to talk about it."

"Women in Singapore also don't really use tampons. So they think it's a huge jump changing from pads to this. But it's not impossible, it's very easy and they just have to take the first step."

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CAUSES: Know of a group championing a less-known cause? E-mail us at stnewsdesk@sph.com.sg