



India's "Pad Man:" Making Menstrual Hygiene Affordable for Women

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Abstract

"Breaking the Taboo," one of PBS News Hour's Under-Told Stories, shows how entrepreneurial innovation can address social and economic challenges that contribute to gender inequity. The story not only tells an incredible tale of product development and testing. It also shows how social responsibility can be integrated into the purpose, practices, and products of business.

Arunachalam Muruganantham is a "born tinkerer" who is perplexed by a "taboo" topic in his society: the high economic cost of menstrual hygiene and its accompanying social costs. Although few discuss it openly, during their periods, many girls miss school, and women are vulnerable to infection because they cannot pay for expensive sanitary pads. Muruganantham experiments with methods and materials for producing a low-cost, locally-made, effective pad, resulting not only in a more affordable product but also employment opportunities for local women.

This learning module can stimulate discussion about the potential for business to make the world better by answering social problems. This story shows that socially responsible business can consist not only of what business makes (in this case, an effective product) but also how it manufactures (providing employment for those who need it) and sells (at an affordable price) and why (for the purpose of alleviating unfairness in society). The learning module also promotes critical examination of potential risks and downsides of Muruganantham's methods and plans.

Story Link

<https://www.undertoldstories.org/2017/04/18/breaking-the-taboo-how-one-man-is-trying-to-make-sanitary-pads-affordable-for-women-in-india/>

Learning themes/topics for consideration

- Ethics, economics, and the purpose of business
- Corporate social responsibility
- Gender, society, and economics
- Business at the base of the pyramid
- Breaking norms using entrepreneurial innovation

Preparation

This story is accessible for undergraduate and graduate students and can be used with little or no preparation to initiate conversation on the potential for business to address social problems through innovation and experimentation. It is certainly possible to use this story for more in-depth inquiry into social and economic conditions in India circa 2017. While the specific setting and circumstances of the story should be acknowledged and appreciated, the story teaches timeless lessons across cultures about creative problem-solving for the common good.

Background

- Key contextual information (contained within the story):
 - Discussing feminine hygiene is a social taboo in some cultures
 - “Millions of girls across the developing world miss school during their periods” due to lack of sanitary pads
 - Girls who do not use sanitary pads “remain susceptible to infection throughout adulthood”
 - Only 1 in 10 women use commercially available sanitary pads, in significant part due to their high cost

Discussion Questions

About the purpose of business:

1. Why is menstruation in particular and feminine hygiene in general a “taboo” topic in some cultures?
2. In what ways have women have experienced unfairness (social, economic, etc.) associated with this “taboo”?
3. What are the various options (products, lifestyle, etc.) discussed in the story that available to women who have their period?

4. How is Muruganantham's solution better for his target consumers? Are there ways in which Muruganantham's solution may be detrimental for his target consumers or pose risks to them?
5. Muruganantham showed that the economics of making menstrual pads were sufficient to support a business. Why hadn't other businesses entered this market earlier?

About innovation:

6. Social entrepreneurs must be deeply immersed in a problem to address it, though having the "fresh eyes" of an outsider may help them identify new solutions. Was Muruganantham benefited or hindered by how little he knew about menstruation at the beginning? How did he overcome his limitations?
7. Identify as many examples as you can of norm-breaking methods – innovative approaches to product development, testing, manufacturing, selling, etc. – used by Muruganantham to develop, test, manufacture, and bring his product to market.
8. Muruganantham hoped to scale his business by creating an open-source platform that would support women and workers. Were there other avenues of expansion he might have pursued consistent with social goals he hoped to achieve? Is open source the best option?

About ethics

9. Do Muruganantham's innovation or business methods raise any ethical concerns?

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