

Nominee: *Sophia Klumpp Grinvalds*
Company Name: *AFRIPads Uganda Limited*
Plot 28 Ntinda View Crescent, Naguru
Industry: *Manufacturing /Health*
Years in Business: *7 years*

Introduction

My name is Sophia Klumpp Grinvalds, co-founder and Managing Director AFRIPads Uganda. AFRIPads specializes in the local manufacture and global supply of cost effective, reusable sanitary pads. The AFRIPads design includes “all in one” pads that button securely into a pair of underwear. After use, the pad folds conveniently for easy storage before washing. AFRIPads are ultra-absorbent, natural and unscented. AFRIPads sells its products under two separate brands – **AFRIPads** and **So Sure** – for its wholesale and retail markets, respectively.

AFRIPads started in 2010 as a seed idea – a tiny pilot project based on the hope that a product innovation like reusable pads could help empower women and girls to experience their monthly period with comfort and dignity, instead of a discomfort they had to endure or a monthly obstacle to overcome. We had no start-up capital, no background in business, product design, or manufacturing, and very few connections or mentors in Uganda to help guide me to bring this idea to fruition. But what we had was conviction – the conviction that something as simple and normal as menstruation shouldn’t be holding women and girls back or preventing them from reaching their potential, or at minimum, experiencing their period with dignity.

What would you describe as your biggest achievement?

In March 2015 AFRIPads celebrated a major milestone of having reached 500,000 girls and women with our AFRIPads Menstrual Kits. Less than 12 months later, we are just shy of reaching 1 million girls and women with AFRIPads as a result of our continued exponential growth. This represents 1 million girls and women whose challenges of managing their monthly periods were eased through access to our reusable menstrual kit.

This is my greatest achievement. I arrived in Uganda years ago, completely unaware of the challenges that menstruation presents for hundreds of thousands of women and girls. When I realized this and saw the gap in the feminine hygiene market, I took the leap to try to create a solution. Against the odds, 7 years later I have been able to help nearly 1 million women and girls with our AFRIPads Menstrual Kit, empowering them to feel comfortable, productive and dignified during that time of the month. Period!

How is your product/service unique from others in the same industry?

AFRIPads Ltd pioneered the reusable sanitary pad industry in East Africa, and possibly even across broader Africa. AFRIPads is the only company in East Africa that exclusively

manufactures reusable sanitary pads, and does so at a commercial scale and quality. Prior to AFRIpads entering the market in Uganda the only mainstream sanitary products available to women and girls were disposable sanitary pads, and to a much lesser extent tampons.

Our product is not your typical FMCG. It is unique because it addresses the demand for a durable solution for managing menstruation that not only saves Ugandan women and girls money due to its reusable design, but also reduces their environmental footprint by reducing the monthly waste that would otherwise be created by using disposable sanitary pads.

What would you say are the major challenges experienced by your business and how have you managed to overcome them?

Facing and overcoming the stigma and taboo that surround menstruation has been one of our greatest challenges when it came to getting the business off the ground and later, growing our sales. Since reusable sanitary pads previously did not exist on the mainstream Ugandan market, and because menstruation is still considered a 'taboo' subject in many parts of the country, it can be difficult to speak to communities openly about such a stigmatized subject, and about our product in relation to that.

To achieve this we forged strategic partnerships with NGOs, civil society organizations, and the Government of Uganda. AFRIpads has had a 4-year partnership with PLAN Uganda in Tororo, Lira, and Kamuli, whereby PLAN helps us educate large numbers of women and girls about proper menstrual hygiene management and the importance to use a hygienic product like AFRIpads Menstrual Kits. AFRIpads is also one of the founding members and leaders for the National Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) Steering Committee that meets monthly at the Ministry of Education. With this steering committee, we played an active role in organizing the first 'Menstrual Hygiene Awareness Day' celebrated internationally on May 28th. Finally – AFRIpads worked together with the Ministry of Education to develop an MHM reader, which detailed many aspects of menstrual hygiene including physical aspects, proper hygiene and effective ways of managing menstruation, which was distributed in various languages to thousands of schoolgirls in Uganda. It is through these strategic partnerships and community outreach that we have strived to break the taboos and make menstruation an everyday topic that all Ugandans can talk about openly.

Where do you see your business in the next 3-5 years?

AFRIpads is a rapidly growing company that has many possible opportunities in the future. As local demand for our product continues to grow, AFRIpads will expand its sales and distribution model into neighboring Kenya (where we already have an exploratory office in place) and to establish a wider East African presence. These products will continue to be manufactured at our factory in Masaka, and resultantly these regional sales in East Africa will contribute to Uganda's growing export economy. As demand for our products start to grow outside East

Africa, our business model and production method being both scalable and replicable will enable us to consider additional manufacturing sites in Western or Southern Africa in the future.

We also believe there is a strong demand for other cost-effective, washable products on the Ugandan market to meet the needs of value-conscious consumers. Accordingly, this year we have commenced research and development on washable diapers and we intend to launch this product on the Ugandan market in 2017. Not only will this product continue to save our Ugandans money, but it will also help Uganda maintain its eco-friendly footprint by consuming less wasteful, disposable products.

With the expansion of both our product line and our geographical territory, AFRIPads hopes to create at least another 100+ more jobs in Ugandan in the coming 3-5 years, which we will continue to give priority to rural women.

Apart from providing the product/service offered by your business, how has your business contributed to your community?

AFRIPads is a "social impact" driven company. Creating positive impact on the lives and livelihoods of our employees, the customers we serve with our products, and their communities at large is at the very core of AFRIPads' mission statement: *to empower women and girls through business, innovation and opportunity.*

At the heart of our community involvement initiative is our commitment to hiring locally from the rural villages surround our manufacturing operations and primarily hiring marginalized young women in order to help them achieve financial independence through gainful employment in the formal economy.

Additionally, we work together with the AFRIPads Foundation to help support thousands of girls who are disproportionately disadvantaged by providing them with free AFRIPads Menstrual Kits and menstrual hygiene education. Annually, AFRIPads and our Foundation are able to support between 6,000-7,000 Ugandan schoolgirls with our menstrual kits.

What have you done to develop/empower other women?

AFRIPads is a female-centric company - almost 90% of AFRIPads' 150-person team is female. We manufacture a product for women, primarily by women, and creating social impact is at the core of what we do.

The women we employ come from the villages surrounding Masaka and the majority of them joined AFRIPads with minimal education. They are young women, mostly under the age of 30, but nearly all have 1-2 small children at home who they care for. Prior to joining AFRIPads most of them were either subsistence farmers or only had informal, irregular earning opportunities. Since joining AFRIPads, these women have been given considerable vocational training in tailoring and related skills, as well as additional trainings on topics like financial literacy, health and safety, and computer literacy.

Advice to women

My advice to women is if you have an idea, pursue that idea and do not fear to fail. Your idea will materialize one day.

How has MTN Uganda contributed to your achievement?

The main production of AFRIPads Menstrual Kits still to this day takes place in a rural village outside of Masaka, with over 130 factory workers employed producing a large volume of pads on a daily basis. But, AFRIPads head office moved to Kampala some years back with only 20 staff members where all of the directors, sales, administration, logistics and communications staff work. To make sure the business is running smoothly, communication is key. We are currently on CUG for our staff members and using MTN internet at our offices to run our highly important company server, where all managers update their files and documents which can be instantly shared amongst the rest of the team members. For these purposes MTN has been critical in allowing us to run a highly effective business with administration and product being 120 kilometers away from one another.

More Information

I am honored to be nominated for this award and to be part of the growing movement of women in business! It is an exciting time to be an entrepreneur in Uganda. I truly believe that the time has come to knock down the remaining barriers that hold women and girls back and keep them from being fully engaged and formal contributors to Uganda's growth and development. If I have been convinced of anything in the 8-years I have lived in Uganda it is that women are a lynchpin for development and social change. And until gender-specific taboos and stigmas like those surrounding menstruation are deconstructed, women and girls will continue to face barriers on their road from school to careers and beyond. I am also convinced of the importance of growing Uganda's manufacturing sector and I believe there is enormous opportunity to achieve this in up-country areas to create rural job opportunities, particularly for women. Social businesses like AFRIPads have the power to transform lives and be catalysts of development, and I feel proud to live in Uganda as CEO of AFRIPads and to be help pioneer this new way of doing business, and doing good.

Please also find an article attached about AFRIPads that was featured in *The Irish Times* on January 18, 2016 called, "*Menstrual pads help Ugandan women journey out of stigma*".