

This New Innovation Lab Supports Women Entrepreneurs Who Solve Sanitation Challenges

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A college student visits a public toilet built by WaterAid, with support from Kimberly-Clark, at a bus stop in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Under normal circumstances, many people around the world face discrimination around menstruation as well as difficulty obtaining hygiene supplies, either due to unaffordability, lack of access or inadequate information.

The coronavirus pandemic has made matters even more challenging, as clinics serving women were forced to alter their services and some regions saw **hoarding of menstrual products** like pads and tampons, similar to the notorious stockpiling of other staples like toilet paper and disinfectants. Add that to the fact that women represent an **outsized proportion of frontline workers**, and it's clear the pandemic has made an already difficult situation for some even harder.

Why period equity matters

Around the world, 129 million school-aged girls do not attend classes. While those numbers cannot be directly linked to periods, in part due to the difficulty in recording absenteeism, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that girls **miss four days every four weeks**. This is a problem in richer and poorer countries alike: In a 2019 survey, **84 percent** of menstruating teenagers in the U.S. said they have missed class during their periods or know someone who has.

There are several reasons girls may miss school during their periods, including lack of access to hygiene products or inadequate access to toilets, hand-washing facilities and hygienic waste management, as well as insufficient information and social stigma.

All of this adds up to missed opportunities for women and girls around the world. Further, **recent studies** have shown a link between period poverty — one term describing the reality of not being able to afford sanitary products — and poor mental health among college-aged women in the U.S. In developing countries, where girls may miss 10 to 20 percent of each school year, possibly leading them to drop out altogether, the gender disparity for economic opportunity widens even further.

Scaling up women-led startups focused on solving sanitation issues

To help address some of the world's biggest sanitation issues, Kimberly-Clark, its foundation and the company's Kotex brand partnered with the Toilet Board Coalition to create the Women in the Sanitation Economy Innovation Lab — which aims to **cultivate and catalyze** women-led, early-stage businesses within the sanitation economy. The Innovation Lab recently completed its first pilot including five startup businesses from Kenya, the U.S. and the U.K., along with 11 Kimberly-Clark employees who acted as mentors to the group.

"We see there's a gap in the business ecosystem around women's menstrual health and personal care products," said Alex Knezovich, director of operations at the Toilet Board Coalition (TBC), which was established in 2015 to drive private-sector engagement and contributions to **Sustainable Development Goal 6** (clean water and sanitation).

"At TBC, we have a 30,000-foot view of the sector. We get to hear a range of voices and see a lot innovation," Knezovich told 3p. "There are businesses out there for women's health, but they're not growing at the pace of other sanitation businesses. They need additional guidance and customized support to further their innovation and ultimately empower more women and girls."

The Toilet Board focuses on scaling sustainable solutions within the sanitation space, centered on SDG 6.2 which calls for sustainable water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)

access to women and girls in vulnerable situations. Here, the partnership with Kimberly-Clark made sense for both organizations.

“We’ve always had mentorship at Kimberly-Clark,” Alessandra Castro, the company’s director of global brand purpose and social impact for its adult and feminine care brands, told TriplePundit. “But we never really leveraged why we were doing it, how or for what purpose. The Innovation Lab aligned perfectly with our Kotex brand, which exists to ensure that a period never gets in the way of a woman’s progress. Our partnership with the Toilet Board enabled us to work together and help these women-owned businesses develop and provide opportunities for others.”

Representation matters

In the end, what drives all of the women involved with the Innovation Lab — from the Toilet Board, Kimberly-Clark and participating businesses — is the power to make a difference for those who are held back by not being able to afford products like pads and tampons, and those whose progress is crippled by period stigma.

For Castro, seeing the struggle women experience due to the lack of access to hygiene supplies shifted her perspective. “I knew women didn’t have access, but when you get in there and see the gaps, it’s painful,” she told us. In the Toilet Board’s annual Accelerator program, the predecessor to the more specialized Innovation Lab, Castro mentored a team of entrepreneurs that **transformed decommissioned buses** in India into toilets for women. It’s a good idea in theory, but in the end, women did not use the buses because of the stigma associated with going to the bathroom. Working with the team in India, Castro and her team realized they had to take a step back.

“There was a huge gap between the team’s analysis of the issue and what was really holding back consumers,” she said. They ultimately opted to convert the buses into health centers where women could gain access to education and feminine hygiene products, as well as use the toilet. “Working with the team to positively impact so many women was a life-changing experience,” she added. “Kotex is more than a global brand. The product is only part of what the brand stands for, which is bringing a clear purpose for feminine care to eliminate stigma, educate and open doors for women and girls.”

With a background in women-focused media production and engaging more young women in the production process, Knezovich understands the power of representation. “You can’t be what you don’t see,” she told TriplePundit. “It’s amazing to see what happens when we connect the entrepreneurs with mentors at a leading multinational corporation who believe in them and their businesses. That’s the through line for me: getting the stories and relationships there for women to comprehend their potential.”

Jasmine Burton, former Innovation Lab manager at the Toilet Board, further noted that Kimberly-Clark mentors helped provide support for the Lab's "female entrepreneurs as they aim to tackle some of their unique business challenges and positively contribute to some of the world's most pressing sanitation issues." And for her personally, as she left the project to start an MBA program, she added, "It is my personal mission to help support, amplify and lift other women in the Sanitation Economy as I climb."

More still to come

With the success of the pilot program, Kimberly-Clark and the Toilet Board plan on expanding the Innovation Lab to include more entrepreneurs and make more partnership opportunities available. As the project moves into its next stage, Castro emphasized the importance of the work ahead. "Women are addressing some of the biggest challenges facing our society," she told us. "A period should never get in the way of her progress."

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