

17-year-old Ziyaan has developed a menstrual bandage that lasts for three years

500 million women and girls worldwide have no access to hygienic menstrual products. Ziyaan from Tanzania came up with an idea

with an idea.



Laura Dahmer



The bandage is biodegradable and costs between five and eight dollars. Photo: Ziyaan Virji

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In the 9th grade Ziyaan from Tanzania was to implement a personal project in class. What it is about, he was free. A difficult task for the 15-year-old - until he casually scrolled through his Facebook feed and found the approximately five-minute **documentary *India's Menstruation Man*** by *Al Jazeera* . Ziyaan clicked on the video. What he saw moved him permanently.

The documentary tells the story of Arunachalam Muruganantham, who one day notes that his wife must use unsanitary products for her period. She is not alone: According to the documentary, 300 million Indian women can not afford hygienic menstrual products, **worldwide there are 500 million** . One in five girls leave school in India as soon as they get their period.

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Ziyaan turned to his mother. Has she experienced such problems as well? She affirmed and Ziyaan began to investigate. "I've read of women who use old clothes, leaves, sand or handkerchiefs during their period," he says. The 17-year-old decided: That will be the topic of his school project.

Ziyaan not only wanted to produce cheap menstrual products, but also sustainable ones. He entered the keyword "reusable pads" at Google. From what he found, he developed a prototype for a bandage that can be used for up to six months. Ziyaan picked a tailor and let him teach him how to sew. Using flannel and cotton, he sewed 22 pads and distributed them to schoolgirls in his hometown Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. That was two years ago.

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Today, Ziyaan leads the *Affordable and Accessible Sanitation for Women* (AASW) initiative *and runs* school workshops with 17 teams in Kenya, Tanzania, India, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan and Nigeria. They have networked via the Internet. "After the school project was over, I thought: I've helped 22 out of 500 million women. That's nothing. I really wanted to make a difference and needed help with that," says Ziyaan. So he brought a couple of school friends on board, at the beginning they were just ten people. They joined with a *group of Tunaweza women with disabilities* in Kenya, who already worked on sustainable bindings. Together, they developed a bandage that lasts up to three years, is 100 percent biodegradable and costs between five and eight dollars.



A bandage that lasts up to three years. Photo: Ziyaan Virji

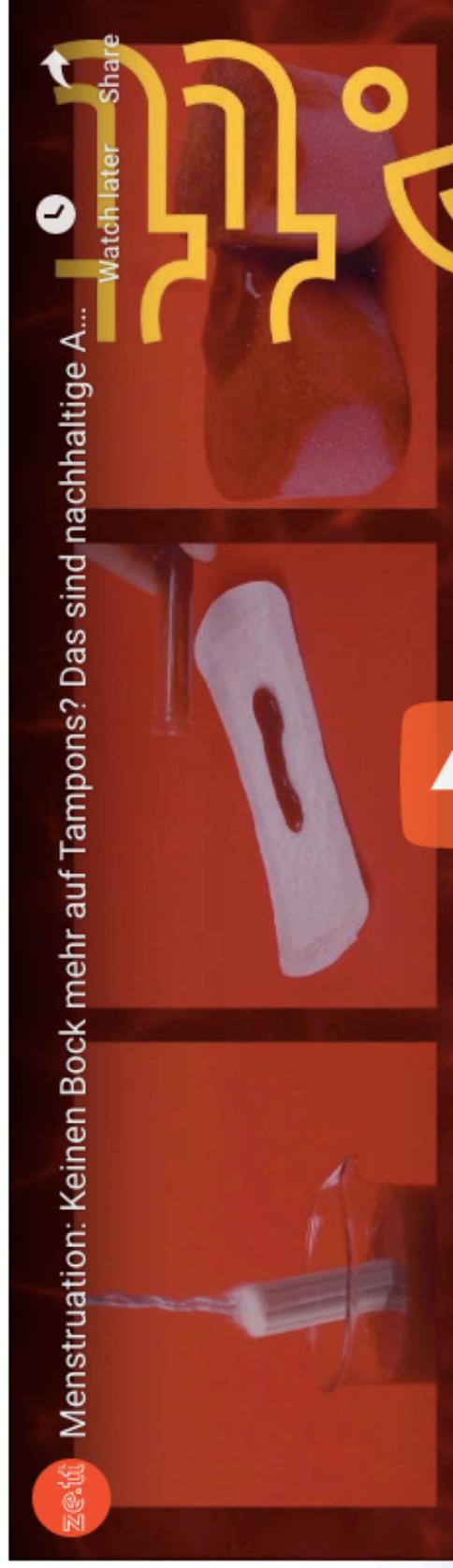
How does this work? Ziyaan shows underpants whose fabric is reminiscent of bathing suits. The pattern is fashionable. The underpants are made of the same nylon-like material that makes umbrellas. It has two drawers in which a red cloth is inserted.

Ziyaan takes it out and unfolds it. "This is our cotton bandage and Kitege, a material from Kenya," he explains. It can be washed and cleaned with soap and then reused. She looks like a towel. "We deliberately

did that in case the women and girls are out and about to wash their bandages. For many it would be too uncomfortable to wash something that looks like menstrual products. *

Bandage and underpants are part of a set that Ziyaan and his people distribute free to schoolgirls. It includes eight cloth bandages, two underpants, antiseptic soap, a waterproof bag to stash the used bandages on the way and a bag for the entire set. *We always work with materials that are regionally available to girls and women. Depending on the country, that's the other thing, *says Ziyaan.

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"Some people have declared me crazy and laughed at me"

Meanwhile, Ziyaan and his team in Kenya, where the 17-year-old goes to school, have expanded their commitment: In workshops they want to enlighten boys and girls between 9 and 16 years. On the one hand, it is about breaking the taboo on female menstruation. On the other hand, Ziyaan wants to show the girls how to make reusable pads themselves. "Many nonprofit organizations just buy a bunch of bandages and spend them at the schools. That helps the girls for two, maybe three months. And after that? "Asks Ziyaan. His idea is: "We enlighten ten girls, who in turn enlighten ten friends and turn ten."



Ziyaan and fellow campaigners of the "Affordable and Accessible Sanitation for Women" initiative.

Photo: Ziyaan Virji

At the beginning of his project, Ziyaan got a lot of headwinds: "Some people thought I was crazy and laughed at me." Meanwhile, many come to him to help. The 17 teams with youth in Kenya, Tanzania, India, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan and Nigeria organize themselves via Skype Conferences.

Facebook and WhatsApp groups. The money for the projects they receive through donations. Personally met Ziyaan has hardly any of the now over 100 volunteers. "That's the power of social media and us young people. We have to use the Internet for us!" Says the 17-year-old. Ziyaan does not see that he is a boy as a disadvantage - on the contrary. He could inspire other young men and give the debate a new perspective. "I do not know what the period feels like, I do not know as it is, therefore not able to go to school. But I can see how big the impact is."

A terrible event that happened recently gave Ziyaan another boost. "A young girl in Kenya got her days in class, the teacher saw the blood on her pants, called her dirty and disgusting and threw her out of class," says Ziyaan. Because she was so ashamed, **the girl took her life**.

Ziyaan and his fellow campaigners are committed to ensuring that no girl has to suffer from the stigma attached to menstruation worldwide.

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