



## Ishu Shiva Managing director, Sanitree

by Amy Houghton

As a young girl living in Goa, India, Ishu Shiva had always been surrounded by open discussions of periods. It was only when her family moved back to their roots in Rajasthan, when Shiva was 16, that she realised these attitudes were far from universal. “One after the other, I realised there are so many myths and stigmas around [menstruation],” she recalls. “It was getting on my nerves, because it was affecting not only me indirectly, but a lot of girls. It’s like a curse for them.”

Living in a more conservative community pushed Shiva to found a period education programme in partnership with the Jeevanarth Foundation, an NGO committed to development in rural India, in 2017. She hoped to help eradicate the immense stigma that shames young girls into missing out on vital education, and to encourage more open conversation at home by making parents and grandparents aware of the potentially fatal risks of poor menstrual management.

The Jeevanarth Foundation became the first NGO in the country to educate both boys and girls on menstruation. The programme delivered disposable pads to those unable to afford them and reached an estimated 18,000 children living in disadvantaged communities.

A year later, while seeking more sustainable means of distributing sanitary products, Shiva came across the work of the Edinburgh-based social enterprise Sanitree, which focuses on tackling period poverty. She immediately spotted an opportunity for collaboration and invited the student-led team to Jaipur.

Together they developed a high-quality, fully biodegradable fabric sanitary pad to be sold in both India and the UK. Made from industry

offcuts, the pad can be used and reused over two years – “like a dignity kit”, Shiva explains. She was subsequently appointed Sanitree’s managing director and co-founder.

One of the biggest accomplishments for Sanitree’s international team was the substantial role it played in Scotland becoming the first country to offer free period products to all. Shiva admits that India has a long way to go, as the vast majority of menstruating people still use makeshift, unhygienic alternatives. Yet she is optimistic that it can follow Scotland’s example.

“When we started, only 23 per cent [of the menstruating population] were using menstrual products. Now it’s gone up to 36 per cent. I’m really happy that a lot of people like us are working on the ground to spread awareness and come out with good products to reach different communities.”

Over 8,000 women in India now use Sanitree’s products, and the organisation not only promotes better menstrual health but also guides women towards financial independence.

The products are made at the Her Shakti Centre in Jaipur by local women, many of whom are widows or single mothers and their household’s sole breadwinners. Sanitree employs its workers for three hours a day so that they can dedicate time to their families while earning enough to live comfortably.

“They are working well and earning well,” Shiva says. “Somebody’s got their first scooter in their life, somebody’s got their own phone for the first time in their life. For us, it’s a normal thing, but for them it’s a huge thing. These women feel pride in the work that they do, and it drives me to keep going and do more and more for them.”