

growing with the

Periods are being rebranded as sustainable, economical, and empowering agents of change.

WORDS BY FARAH KHALFE

As a millennial in my late twenties, I remember growing up with the topic of menstruation considered taboo – it was so discreet, almost otherworldly, that my peers and I felt ashamed of ours. So, we'd stash tampons and sanitary pads – which at the time were limited and costly – away at the very back of our bathroom cabinets. But more recently, there's been a cultural shift towards women empowerment and environmental conservation, which has spawned the notion of a 'sustainable period', which mainly consists of reusable sanitary products.

The sustainable period is down to two things: period pollution and period poverty. According to Sherie de Wet, CEO and Founder of Palesa Pads, period poverty refers to a situation in which women and girls can't access menstrual hygiene products regularly. As a result, they have to resort to unhygienic

alternatives such as newspapers, old socks, cloths and rags. "These alternatives don't provide them with adequate protection against leakage, so they tend to stay away from school or work whilst on their period to avoid embarrassment," she says.

That, in turn, has a knock-on effect on societal advancement, as they miss vital opportunities for education and work. Then there's period pollution, which refers to the millions of single-use plastic, disposable sanitary products that harm the environment. These products take between 500 and 800 years to break down, during which time they impact oceans, landfills, and even pit toilets in rural areas, causing blockages.

"In communities where people dump pads in an open area, the blood is likely to attract rats and other insects and can cause diseases," says Sherie. "For example, a woman or girl on her period uses around four pads per day for five

"Often, reusable sanitary products offer more protection and are more personalised to your needs than disposable ones"



Flow

periods have risen to the fore of public consciousness, whilst women have become more vocal about the effects of the time of the month on their bodies, society and the environment. The stigma around menstruation is lessening, resulting in a range of eco-friendly, innovative, reusable and cheaper alternatives taking the world by storm. Women are buying into the idea of menstrual cups, reusable pads, period pants and reusable tampon applicators.

The benefits of these products are many: "Once a person has a small supply of reusable pads (or other menstrual products), they can easily wash and reuse the pads as and when needed, eliminating the need to purchase them monthly," says Sherie. "They can spend the money they save on other essentials for their family, which is a huge financial relief, especially for families with more than one female in the house."

Numerous community outreach programmes and initiatives have championed the movement for sustainable periods, of which Palesa Pads is one such organisation. The women-led social enterprise manufactures and distributes high-quality, reusable cloth pads to women and girls across the country. They have upskilled and created jobs for over 30 women and, so far, manufactured over 400 000 pads.

Often, reusable sanitary products offer more protection and are more personalised to your needs than disposable ones. They usually consist of an absorbent core concealed by a stay-dry fabric that's easy to use and hygienic. Palesa Pads come in five different sizes and are colour-coded according to absorbencies, allowing users to choose the best product for their flow. "The top layer of each pad consists of a sports fabric that draws moisture away from your body resulting

days, meaning they throw away 20 per month. This equates to 240 per year. On average, a person menstruates for approximately 40 years during their lifetime, so they pollute the environment with around 9 600 pieces of single-use plastic," she adds.

It's for these reasons sustainable

IF YOU'RE CONTEMPLATING STARTING YOUR SUSTAINABLE PERIOD JOURNEY, HERE ARE A FEW THINGS TO NOTE:

- ▶ Reusable pads are easy to clean and quick-drying. Pop them in the washing machine with your normal cycle after hand-rinsing and placing them in the wet bag that comes with most brands. You might want to skip the fabric conditioner, as it can affect absorbency over time. Hang to air-dry and use as many times as you like.
- ▶ As with single-use pads, cloth ones are assembled with multiple odour-eliminating layers, meaning they won't emit an unpleasant smell when you're wearing them or whilst they're in your bag.
- ▶ They also come in a range of sizes: with or without wings, extra-long, extra-thick, and in a range of prints and colours.

in a stay-dry feeling all day. They have multiple layers of absorbent fabric, meaning you can wear the pad for up to 12 hours and include a fully waterproof layer to prevent leakage."

Many people may advocate using reusable sanitary products, but there's still significant apprehension about its practice, stemming mainly from a lack of information and hygiene concerns. Whilst reusable menstrual products have tangible environmental and societal benefits, to me, their proliferation into the mainstream represents years of suppressed female presence finally finding its voice. We're no longer hiding our natural bodily functions but instead using them as a tool to make the world a better place, one period at a time. **G**