

An interview with
Zareen Roohi Ahmed
Founder & CEO of Gift Wellness Ltd

by Sandra J Millbank, November 2015



If you're the kind of woman that's always looking for healthy alternatives, then you'll have spotted the stylish packs of GIFT sanitary pads while browsing the shelves of independent health and pharmacy stores around the country. You may even have benefitted from the amazing benefits of the herbal mineral layer in the pads and their luxurious comfort that makes you feel positively pampered when you need it most... at your time of the month!

Earlier this month Zareen Roohi Ahmed, the founder and CEO of Gift Wellness Ltd, gave us a behind-the-scenes look at the award-winning, fastest growing natural sanitary range in Europe. She told us why she took on the Sanpro market, what her real passions were and what she had planned for the future of Gift Wellness.

Can you tell us how it all started and how you came to develop the GIFT product range?

I was in Pakistan, inaugurating the school for orphan and needy girls that we built in memory of my daughter. It's called The Halimah School of Excellence and the four hundred plus students absolutely love it there. Many of the girls were victims of the earthquake in Kashmir a few years back. The school was the first major project of our charity, The Halimah Trust, which was set up after my daughter was abducted and murdered in November 2007 by a mental health patient. She'd just started university in Nottingham to study International Relations and Third World Development. So after it happened, we set up the Trust to do the work that she aimed to do.

So, we'd just opened the new school. My mother was with me when we visited a Chinese herbalist near Islamabad who gave my mum a kind of belt to wear, which contained a material made from a mineral stone called Tourmaline. Apparently it was going to help her blood circulation, balance her hormones and help her to sleep better.

At that time, I was actively in search of a product that I could bring to market. Something that would generate a passive income for the charity and allow me earn a living and fundraise at the same time. I guess because I had been with the girls in the school and their needs were in the forefront of my mind at that time, the product that I was on the lookout for would be something that would benefit girls like them and women in general.

This mineral material and its uses fascinated me, so on my return to England I began to research in to it. One piece of research led to another. It was like doors opening and I just knew that they would lead me to my product. A year and a half later, the GIFT range was born.

In a nutshell, what's special about the tourmaline layer in your pads?

I found in my research that the scientific use of Tourmaline, which is a semi-precious jewel was discovered by NASA. So it was literally rocket science! They used a material made from tourmaline in astronauts' space suits to help regulate their body temperatures, blood circulation and hormones. Plus the naturally antibacterial effects of the mineral killed odours and infections. After that it was applied to many products, air filtration units in aeroplanes and office blocks, so that a virus would be killed before it could go round through the air conditioning system. You may have seen the negative ion sports bands for people with joint problems or the mattresses for people with bad circulation.

As I looked into these applications, I really felt there was something there. So when I found that some top scientists were actually starting to use the mineral in toiletries, cosmetics and sanitary products, the penny dropped and the Gift range started to evolve.

The technology within the products was all science theory a couple of years ago, but as more and more women have used the products, the evidence of the benefits has astonished us. Every day, we're receiving testimonials from women with endometriosis, migraine and fertility issues that are feeling the benefits of Gift pads. I was invited to speak at the Endometriosis Association of Ireland's annual conference recently, where our products were officially endorsed by the organisation's chair.

So why did you call it GIFT?

Because it's a gift for women who have menstrual problems and are sick of the usual brands that only make them feel worse... And it's a gift for women who benefit from the charity side of the business. The homeless women, refugee women and women who pick up our products in food-banks that we supply.

What did your husband think of your business idea?

Believe it or not, my husband Ash has become a bit of an expert on Gift pads and will quite casually talk about the problems caused by ordinary pads and why Gift pads are better. Not bad for an Asian man eh?! Women love it when he tells them how the products work and he tells all the guys how the products will help them too. After all, if their wives or girlfriends are happy then they'll be happy... Don't you love it when men champion women's causes?

The current product range is in around 1000 stores in the UK including Holland & Barrett; and is now being distributed across a number of European countries. Two and a half years on, what's next for the range?

At the moment we're in the process of developing the product range to include a wider selection of sanitary wear, such as maxi, incontinence, maternity pads and tampons. We're also testing an organic intimate wash which will hopefully launch in 2016. Then we'll be going into nappies and wipes. I'm always on the look-out for new opportunities for the range.

Most businesses get established and then think about a charity contribution or a CSR strategy, but you seem to have started with the aims of the charity in mind. As the business grows, is the charity work still as important?

The charity work is not just important - for me, it is a primary objective and is evolving with the business, if not ahead of the business. We're becoming more and more aware of women's human rights abuses that are linked directly to women's reproductive systems. There are too many incidences where, what makes us women is used against us like a weapon.

In some countries, when a girl comes of age and starts her periods, she is prevented from going to school and is often married off as a child. Refugee camps of war torn countries such as Syria are full of innocent women and girls, who bear the brunt of the crisis. The abuse of women and girls in these places is well documented, but very little action is taken to address it. One of the issues they face is the negligence of their feminine hygiene needs. I read that women were resorting to tearing strips off their clothes to fold up and use as sanitary pads, which is why we decided to start donating pads to women in refugee camps. We're also donating to other disaster zones such as Nepal, homeless women and foodbanks in Britain. Basically, wherever women are in crisis and without access to sanitary pads. We have donated over 90,000 pads so far. It sounds like a lot, but barely scratches the surface, plus it is obviously an ongoing need.

We have run a couple of promotions now called BUY 1 GIFT 1, during which, for every pack we sell, we donate a pack to women in crisis. What I really want is for this to become a permanent feature of our sales strategy. I believe that women of today expect more for their money. They want to know that what they're using is good for them and that the company behind the brand actually cares about more than just making money.

What are most excited about?

I'm excited by the amazing people I'm meeting through this work. I love the face to face contact with customers at trade shows like the Allergy & Free From show – real women who tell me how our products are helping them. That's really rewarding. As for my distributors and trade partners, they're all such great people. I think you attract like-minded, passionate people that are ready to do whatever it takes to make it work.

At a personal level, I'm excited about recently becoming a grandmother. It's given me a whole new lease of life and made me feel 20 years younger!