

Meet The Washing Machine Project, who want to be “the Dyson of the humanitarian world.”

Nav Sawhney and his team hope the manual washing machine will allow women to spend more time educating themselves, working or spending time with loved ones.

A London-based social enterprise that has created a manual washing machine to be used in refugee camps and low-income areas is hoping to solve the problem of unpaid, unproductive and often painful labour that falls mostly on women.

The Washing Machine Project was founded in 2018 by engineer Nav Sawhney, who was inspired to create a washing machine designed specifically for developing countries, conflict zones, and refugee camps after spending a sabbatical year in south India.

The machine – named the Divya 1.5 after his then-neighbour who spent several hours every day handwashing clothes – was created to reduce the amount of time people like Divya spend on household labour, allowing them to instead spend time working, educating themselves or being with loved ones.

“The burden of unpaid labour is disproportionately placed on women, and it’s unfair,” said Nav. “From a very kind of tangible point of view, such labour takes up five to eight hours a week. Think what else you could do with that time?”

“The back pain, joint pain and skin irritation is also very painful for them, and it’s demoralising getting on the floor for many hours a day,” he added.

The Divya is powered using a manual crank handle and uses around 30 litres of water – compared to the 60 litres used in hand-washing clothes and 100 litres used by electric washing machines – meaning both water and the time spent collecting it are conserved. Cleans take only 15-30 minutes to complete, meaning the Divya saves up to 75% of time spent washing clothes by hand.

Plus, the machine is made predominantly from off-the-shelf components that can easily be replaced or fixed in poor communities.

“We’re not just making a product and just selling it,” said Nav. “We could create the best washing machine that cleans clothes most efficiently. But if it’s not designed for the people that need to use it then there’s no point. We are passionate about creating impact and to create impact that the beneficiary has to be at the heart of everything we do.”

Nav has just returned from Lebanon, where he spent time discovering how effective the machine is for families in need.

“I was speaking to a lady who said, ‘the winter is coming, and I’m so glad I have this machine because my hands get so cold in the winter washing these clothes,’” he said.

“People take pride in clean clothes”

Nav previously worked at Dyson before he met Divya. “I realised that every good bit of engineering that I was doing was making a vacuum cleaner for a rich person. Divya completely transformed my life and made me see the world in a different lens,” he said.

The engineer, who was recently nominated for Entrepreneur of the Year by Business West at the 2021 British Chambers of Commerce Awards, said his aim was to “design, manufacture and distribute washing machines to the millions of Divyas across the world.”

Since 2018, Nav and his team – now 25 volunteers spanning five countries – have travelled to 12 different countries and interviewed over 2000 families on their washing habits alongside agencies like Oxfam and Care International, who help to buy and distribute machines.

The social enterprise has also recently partnered with a London-based provider of product and service solutions for designers, Electrocomponents, to distribute another 7500 machines across ten countries in the next three years.

“We’re in this scaleup mode now, where we’ve done the research and now the overall goal is to keep continuing to innovate. We want to be the Dyson of the humanitarian world, and we are already looking at off the grid refrigeration, lighting and air conditioning,” said Nav. “We’ll have a complete product portfolio specifically for Divya and her friends.”

For now, their focus will remain on delivering machines as widely as possible to ease the burden and pain of unpaid work needed to get clothes clean.

“People take a lot of pride in clean clothes,” said Nav. “What we’re doing is really just giving people back the dignity of clean clothes and doing it in a dignified way.”

Nav Sawhney is the founder of *The Washing Machine Project*.

Article by ABBY WALLACE