A Belgian woman with 20 per cent lung capacity starts a home-based mask sewing army

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What started as a one-person operation about a week ago has mushroomed into a small army of home sewing Belgian mask makers.

Magda Leonard, sews a face mask, meant to help protect from the spread of COVID-19, at her home in Edegem, Belgium. (Gerd Moyson via AP)

Antwerp: With only 20% of normal lung capacity, Sien Lagae was extremely wary of viruses before anyone in Belgium heard of the coronavirus â€" and has long relied on caregivers to help her get dressed, clean her house and provide home health care services.

Then one of her caregivers mentioned she had just paid 10 euros ($10.67) for a mask to protect herself and others from the virus. Lagaeâ€™s hobbies happen to include sewing â€" and inspiration struck.

â€œI suddenly had the idea to make some face masks for my physiotherapist so that she could protect herself and her patients better,â€• Lagae said.

What started as a one-person operation about a week ago has mushroomed into a small army of home sewing Belgian mask makers. Membership in Lagaeâ€™s Facebook page â€" â€œMondmaskers Naaienâ€• (Sewing Mouth Masks) â€" jumped to 3,000 two days after she started it and hit 5,300 on Friday.

In another boost to Belgiumâ€™s mask making production, the countryâ€™s Van De Velde lingerie company is now producing masks for hospitals. The hospitals provide the material to the company and Van De Velde provides the labor for free.

Lagae, 31, from Torhout in western Belgium, created her first design from scratch. Belgian medical authorities then gave her an approved design and advised her on materials to use.

She makes her masks using two layers of cotton fabric so they can be washed at 90 C (194 F) and reused, taking care to ensure the masks fit well around the nose and chin.

Each member can produce about 20 masks per day, and it isnâ€™t only women sewing.

â€œWe have plenty of men,â€• she said.

There is no suggested quota for members, with Lagae stressing that â€œevery mask does count.â€•

â€œSo everyone who wants to help is welcome, even if you only make one a day,â€• Lagae said.

Sien Lagae, shows her creation of a mouth mask, meant to help protect from the spread of COVID-19, that she produced on her sewing machine at home in Torhout, Belgium. (Sien Lagae via AP)

Itâ€™s unclear how the protection provided by home-sewn, reusable masks compare to mass produced masks, but masks are in very short supply with the World Health Organization asking manufacturers to boost production by 40%. Scientists think the coronavirus is mostly spread by respiratory droplets when people cough or sneeze, so masks provide a physical barrier to protect wearers.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever or coughing. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. About 93,800 people have recovered, mostly in China.

Among Belgiumâ€™s new mask makers is Anais Moyson, who is staying at home with her 3-year-old child because of Belgiumâ€™s virus lockdown, which asks people to stay home and limit contact to immediate family members. Moyson saw home mask making as a way she could contribute to the effort to keep the virus at bay.

â€œI had a lot of extra fabric at home, and also my sister-in-law works in a hospital as a midwife and they are affected by the shortage of masks,â€• she said. â€œI will also bring some to my doctors in the neighborhood and to the nursing homes.â€•

Mask making volunteer Lies Astro is sewing them for her relatives and friends.

â€œThe government first told us weeks ago they werenâ€™t needed, then all of the sudden they say itâ€™s better to wear them,â€• she said. â€œSince I couldnâ€™t find them anywhere I made (one) myself. Everyone was laughing at me, and now all my friends want one.â€•

- AP