



The evidence in case we need some.. on cloth and menstruation..



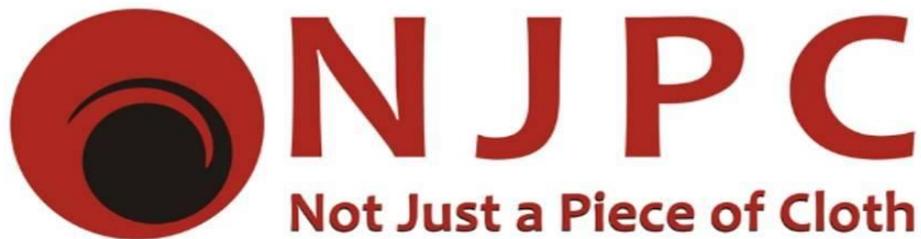
If you have read the first two in this 3 part story series you would know how menstruation is a monthly disaster for women who don't even have enough to cover their bodies. We have earlier talked about the deep culture of shame and silence around menstruation that permeates our lives irrespective of whether we live in city or a village.

Various agencies in India and internationally are working on the issue of menstrual hygiene now but will it make you and me think differently about menses? This last story in the series sheds light on the disaster around menstruation right in our midst with hard facts about why cloth is a viable solution that is meanwhile solving a lot of other issues.

But first why is this about you and me? There is no official data on menstrual waste in India, but on average, *a woman is said to have 3,500 days (between the ages of 12 and 45) of menstruation. *According to Down To Earth magazine there are about 300 million menstruating women in India, and only 12 percent of them i.e. 36 million Indian women have access to and can afford sanitary napkins. Allotting 12 napkins to a woman per month, it found

that this added up to 432 million soiled pads, weighing a staggering 9,000 tonnes a month – enough to cover a landfill spread over 24 hectares.

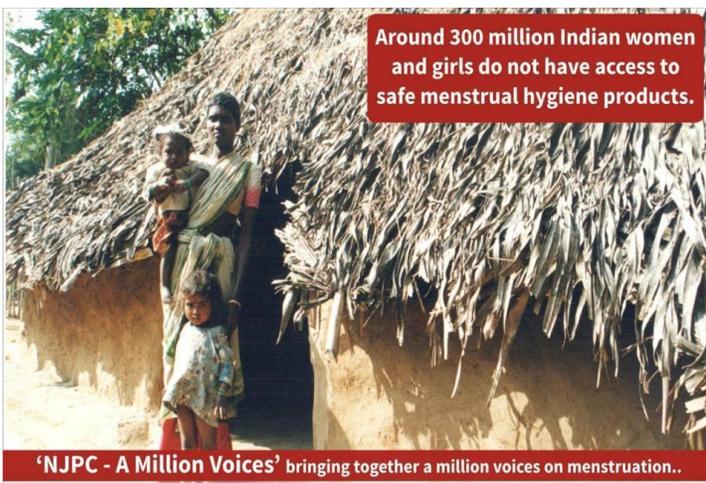
You could take these numbers as a big reality check, if you needed one.. The low use of disposable sanitary napkins in India will also change soon. *According to a 2013 paper on sanitary napkin brands, 'A growth rate of over 18 percent to 20 percent is expected in India for the sanitary napkins market, which holds a huge potential and excellent profit margin for the manufacturers.'(Quoting from a Yahoo News article, link enclosed)



A Million Voices

Till there is a mass market biodegradable napkin available, the present non biodegradable one with a plastic sheet in the pad and the plastic wrapping reaching the villages would essentially mean another environmental mess. Here's why? Typically a village has around 400 houses with approx 1000 women using sanitary pads. Every woman needs at least 7-8 pads every month, means 7000 to 8000 pads @ month or about 70-80,000 pads per annum. A non-biodegradable product in a village which has no proper sanitation/disposal facilities commonly means disposal near a water body. The plastic would end up going into the soil already worsened due to fertilizers and pesticides (Mind you it takes about 500 years for a plastic in a pad to degrade). In a city slum you'd be walking on sanitary pads as most toilets would be choked without a separate channel to dispose.





The verdict is still out on solutions like incinerators as some reports from the ground highlight their dangerous side effects. * “Incinerating menstrual waste is a dangerous practice as it is linked to toxic emissions. Pune Municipal Corporation has set up four mini-incinerators, where the cost of incinerating one sanitary napkin comes to Rs 2 [including waste collection, electricity charge, etc]. This is both ecologically and financially unsustainable,” says Lakshmi Narayan, general secretary of Solid Waste Collection and Handling (SwaCH), a Pune-based organisation of over 2,000 waste pickers.

The women outside the access or affordability map of disposable market pads are the one's Goonj is trying to reach, using clean cotton cloth as a tool. Till date we have distributed more than 30 lakh (3 million) MY Pads across India (more than 2 meter of shredded cloth is used to make a pack of 5 My Pads) that means more than 6 lakh sq. meter discarded cloth put to use. This is the cotton cloth we get from the cities; bed sheets, salwar-kamizes, cotton t-shirts etc. that the cities out-grow. Tons of cloth flows from all over India to make this model efficient and sustainable. If this entire cloth was bought from the market at present rate (approx 50/metre) it would cost Rs 3 crore (30 million), just for the raw material. That would escalate the cost of the napkins 10 fold while our efforts of reaching the most far flung areas and keeping them affordable for the most impoverished would also be strained. Apart from the monetary value MY Pads also save huge volume of cloth from landfills. Our NJPC (Not Just a piece of cloth) is a simple but successful model only because the cloth you give makes it sustainable. What makes it powerful is when Goonj uses these MY Pads as a tool for spreading awareness about the related health and hygiene issues.



So what do all these dizzying numbers mean? Probably that we need to look; not only at the products we use and promote, the infrastructure we have and want to build but most importantly on what we want to do with the strong culture of shame, silence and ignorance so that we allow a woman to be a human being, equal in all ways...

*Source; a Yahoo News article dated 9 Jan, 2015. Please find the article here <http://goo.gl/zpQW0n>