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The Journey from Cloth to 'MY Pad'..

Not Just a Piece of Cloth-Part II



We know that cloth is a basic need of a woman as is her self-respect and dignity. The symbiotic relationship between these two defines Goonj's *'Not Just a Piece of Cloth' (NJPC)* initiative. We started with the simple idea of making cotton cloth available to women. We can do this given our pan India network and processes around clothes collection. Our insight into the connection between cloth and menstruation started in 2005, when Goonj first worked on more than 100 truckloads of tsunami disaster wastage in *Chennai, Tamil Nadu*.

The 40 women from nearby slums, working on sorting the mammoth cloth piles were instrumental in the first insight on what kind of cloth should be used for making cloth pads. These women used various samples on themselves first. From this small practical lab evolved the length, width and thickness of the first cloth pad *'EASY'* (now

called *'MY Pad'*). Many of us may have different ideas about the design of a sanitary pad but for the women who can't even afford enough cloth, a basic pad they are familiar with, was ready. In the entire *Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)* discourse, the



common premise is that women in urban India are much better off than their village counterparts. We find this to be only partially true. There is still a big population of urban women-domestic workers, cleaners, hawkers, homeless women, migrant construction workers, etc. who struggle with the same access, awareness and affordability challenge as their village counterparts. While many young girls in cities may be aware of disposable pads, thanks to the advertising bombardment, they can neither access nor afford these pads. *MY Pads* may be called basic but that's precisely what they are meant to be. Over the years some experiments like putting loops etc. have been tried but in a vast country like India with varied practices and socio-economic factors, this simple aspect also gets us varied responses. In the process, we also found out another connected yet

The ten step process of making MY Pads:

1. Select the cotton and semi-cotton cloth and take out the buttons, chains, elastic or any hard material.
2. Soak the cloth overnight in detergent, water and wash it (washing machine/hand wash) on the next day morning.
3. Dry it in open sunlight if the weather is pleasant or we can use the cloth dryer for the same
4. Top layer and bottom layer- Length 9.5", Width 4.5" and absorbent core- Length 9.5", Width 4.5" (can use fillers also)
5. First place the bottom layer, then fill 4 or 5 layers of cotton/semi-cotton cloth as a fillers/absorbent core (as per the thickness of cloth), then place the top layer.
6. Stitch *MY Pad* in cross shape (x) from middle. Length 9" and Width 4"
7. Interlock the *MY Pad* from 4 corners.
8. Remove the additional thread from stitched *MY Pad*.
9. Each pad is to be checked with a magnet so that no iron things are left behind.
10. Pack 8 pieces of *MY Pad* + 1 Packing Cover + 1 Pouch + 1 Undergarment + 1 Leaflet.



Sorting



Washing



Drying-



Cutting



Placing & Filling



Stitching



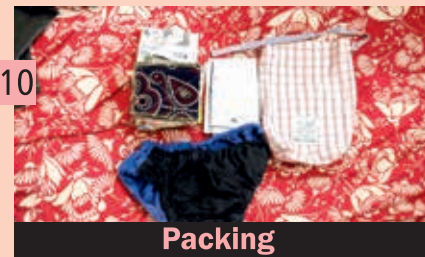
Interlock



Finishing



Final checking with magnet



Packing

ignored need for undergarments. That's how we started making undergarments out of non-wearable yet recyclable T-shirts and other hosiery material.

Most rural women find *MY Pad* simple and familiar because it is like the cloth pad they make at home. It is reusable, easily disposable and affordable for women at the lowest economic strata of society. Instead of trying to introduce a new product or design, these pads are improvisation and mass-scale replication of the existing usage patterns or practices. Goonj has simply removed the risk elements of the existing practice and done a lot of value addition in terms of cleanliness and awareness.

Today, our menstruation-related work is reaching women in the most far-flung villages across India while millions of *MY Pads* are used as an alternative, to change menstrual practices and to open up the shame and silence on this issue.



The Challenges

The most challenging part is to change the mind sets and taboos and build awareness about the health and hygiene aspects of menstruation. Like our larger work around ignored basic needs, the challenge with menstruation is the all-pervasive culture of shame and silence that shrouds it, marred by many taboos and demeaning practices.

Initially, many of our grassroots partner organisations also expressed resistance and hesitation in working on this issue. The ray of hope came from the women themselves. In the village meetings by our teams after initial hesitation, women spoke vociferously about their menstrual challenges. One thing was clear; no one had ever spoken to them about this monthly 'disaster'. They were desperate to share their confusion and mind-boggling questions. We soon realised that Goonj's NJPC initiative could act as a trigger to get women to speak up about this under wraps issue.

The change was apparent... *"I was selling the packed Goonj MY Pad packs, at an exhibition. A man came over and said he liked the 'pillows' on sale. Instead of correcting him, I told him to buy a couple of them, rest his head on them and then pass them on to his mother/sister/wife at home,"* shared Sheela ji, one of Goonj's oldest processing team members. When she finally explained the real use of the 'pillows', the man was first embarrassed and then impressed. He said, *"It's the first time I have talked about this 'taboo' topic with a woman."* Sheela ji narrated with a chuckle.

It is not common for women like Sheela ji, who migrate to cities like Delhi from conservative village backgrounds, to speak so candidly about menses or sanitary pads to a stranger, that too, to a man. She is part of Goonj's strong team of empowered and aware women who not only make MY Pad but also engage actively with the masses in breaking the taboo of shame and silence revolving around this issue.

But you can buy a market sanitary napkin and may never use a Goonj MY Pad, so why are we sharing this story with you? It is why we all still get sanitary pads wrapped in a black plastic bag from the shop? Why are women in educated households still forbidden from doing many things during 'that time of the month'? Can you honestly tell your male colleague, friend or brother about your menstrual cramps? This story isn't just about a product, about women or villages...it is about changing the larger culture and ecosystem.

In April 2014, Goonj launched '**NJPC- A Million Voices**' campaign (www.goonj.org) asking people in the cities and villages across the world to share their thoughts, opinions and challenges. More than 10,000 people from all over the country have shared their voices with us about what they feel, face and believe about menstruation.

What we heard is disturbing as well as hopeful at the same time. On the one hand, the young voices sound concerned about the shame and embarrassment they go through in schools and on the other hand, the housewives share the isolation and restrictions that they



face in their own homes. A working woman shared, *"I have seen my aunt being prevented from seeing the corpse of her mother for the final time before the cremation, just because she was having her periods. It seemed very odd and awkward to me."*

Another woman said, *"After my child's birth, I wasn't prepared for the restart of my periods and it happened unexpectedly while I was in the office. My dress and chair got soiled. It was hugely embarrassing, especially because the colleagues around me got uncomfortable. In spite of being an educated, professional woman- modern in my thoughts, I felt as if I had committed a crime. I was shaken up for the next few days and felt as if only my story was being talked about in every corner of the office."*

The men had a different story to share: One male said, *"Being a married man, one thing I learnt today - to respect women even more. Knowing about this particular topic has increased my respect towards them."* A student from a Delhi college wrote, *"I want to be my sister's brother, mother's son, a daughter's father to tell her about menstruation and make her understand that it is a*



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UPDATE FOOTNOTE

natural process rather than anybody else telling her the same!"

The campaign aims for a million people to talk about this issue. We hope that in turn, it will multiply into a culture of normalcy around menses. That will really be the first step towards accurately understanding the various aspects of this subject.

A humble piece of cloth is thus highlighting what we all need to know: This is a Human Issue, not a Women's Issue !!

The production of *MY Pads* by Goonj has been hugely significant in addressing the ignored basic need of menstrual hygiene for menstruators across rural India. Some key data highlights this impact - from **FY 2014 -2023**, Goonj has channelized over **8.3 million MY Pads** and over **704,000** undergarments to women lacking access to proper menstrual hygiene products. Furthermore, Goonj has converted over **320 tonnes** of old recycled cloth into *MY Pads* in this period of nine years. By providing a basic, reusable and easily disposable menstrual product, the *MY Pad* initiative has enabled millions of rural and urban women from economically disadvantaged families, comfort, dignity and awareness around menstruation. The widespread reach and adoption of this simple piece of cloth is helping slowly change attitudes and break taboos around this stigmatised issue. By highlighting the sheer scale of Goonj's efforts, these data points showcase how a basic solution centred around community participation can have an outsized impact on meeting a crucial but often ignored need for women.