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*The Story of Cloth and
the Impact on the Environment..*

Not Just a Piece of Cloth-Part IV

Today, the debate is raging about the veracity and effects of various sanitary pads available in the market. This story sheds light on the environmental disaster around menstruation right in our midst, in the cities. Allowing this same scenario to repeat itself in the villages, will be something all of us working on this issue, will have to be accountable for in times to come.

There is no official data on menstrual waste in India but on an

average, a woman is said to have over 3,000 days of menstruation.⁷ Even if we take 10 to 12 pads as a woman's monthly usage, it is millions of kilograms of waste that is being generated despite the fact that very few women have access to sanitary pads. We all know this is mostly non-biodegradable waste. No one is taking responsibility for the disposal of this waste.





In the Indian feminine hygiene market, the sanitary napkin segment is one of the highest revenue-generating products.⁸ This will obviously grow with time, indicating the huge potential and excellent profit margin for the manufacturers of plastic-based sanitary napkins. Now that menstrual hygiene and management is becoming a mainstream issue, the overarching well-intentioned hope is that more women and girls will have access to sanitary products. When we generate a million kilograms of non-biodegradable waste just with a very small percentage of the female population utilising sanitary pads, imagine what will happen when the demand and consumption go up by just a few percentage points,

if there are no biodegradable alternatives present!

Until there is a mass-market, biodegradable sanitary napkin available, the present non-biodegradable one with a plastic sheet in the pad and the plastic wrapping, essentially means another environmental mess in the villages. Why? Let's do a rough 'back of an envelope' calculation. Let us assume that a village has around 100 to 200 houses with approximately 400 women and girls using sanitary pads. Each woman needs at least 10-12 pads every month, which means approximately 5000 pads every month or over 50,000 per annum. This is just one village. Even if we marginally change the

assumptions, the results are staggering for the entire country. A non-biodegradable product in a village-like in cities, which has no proper sanitation and disposal facilities, means disposal either by burning or by discarding near a water body or in a field. Burning would pollute the environment and the discarded plastic will end up going into the soil or water, which is already worsened due to other factors. A single-use disposable pad is estimated to take between 500–800 years to decompose.⁹

The widespread usage of disposable sanitary pads would mean the overloaded waste disposal infrastructure in cities will further deteriorate. We would be walking on sanitary pads as most toilets would be choked without a separate channel to dispose of. The waste-pickers are already getting the worst of it with millions of pads a month to be handled, turning it into a huge environmental and health hazard. The jury is still out on solutions such as incinerators because some reports highlight their dangerous environmental and health impacts. The growing urbanisation, a middle class with better income levels, raising awareness of and exposure to media, growing number of working women and the increasing availability of sanitary napkins is only going to add to the scale of this challenge.

There are two things that can stop this scary scenario from becoming a reality. Firstly, when all stakeholders; manufacturers, organisations and the government look at the solutions only from the point of view of the realities and needs of the women they are trying to serve. Secondly, maybe a bigger aspect is that every solution must go through the acid test of ensuring that it does not create bigger problems or add to the existing problems. In both aspects, the bigger onus is on MHM organisations and the government since the manufacturers are led largely by their profit margins.

Goonj is trying to reach the women who are still outside the access or affordability map of disposable pads, using clean cotton cloth as a tool. To date, we have reached more than 4 million *MY Pads* across India. More than 4 metres of shredded cloth is used to make a pack of





This story runs parallel to the sanitation story in this country as the ecosystem of one affects the realities of the other. All of us working in the MHM space need to look carefully; not only at the products we promote but also at the infrastructure and regulations we have and want to build as a conducive ecosystem. The sobering reality at the back of all this discussion is that for many women, the urgency is right now, this month and she can't even speak about it.

*Can we please let a woman be a human being, equal in all ways?
After all this isn't really a women's issue.. it is a human issue..*

UPDATE FOOTNOTE

In disaster-prone areas, the challenges faced by women and other menstruators are further aggravated by the additional burden of natural disasters like floods or cyclones as they compound the challenges of access, awareness, and affordability surrounding menstruation. Already present gender inequalities further contribute to the vulnerability of women affected by such disasters.

To address this, Goonj introduced the **MY Pad ATM** initiative, especially in flood-prone regions of certain states. These manually operated boxes are strategically placed within village communities, offering cloth pads at a reasonable price. Unlike mainstream market mechanisms, local volunteers from the community manage these boxes. Half of the funds generated from the sale of **MY Pads** are directed towards village development programs, such as school repairs, painting, and acquiring communal toilet facilities. The remaining portion serves as a modest honorarium for the volunteers forming the management committee. In **FY 2022-2023**, more than **35** such **MY Pad ATMs** were established in rural areas across India.

8 **MY Pads**; that means that approx. 1.6 million metres of discarded cloth has been put to the best use possible. This is the cotton cloth - bed sheets, *salwar-kameez* (traditional north Indian dress of women), cotton t-shirts, etc. that the cities out-grow, discard and give away. Tons of cloth flow in from all over India to make this model efficient and sustainable. If this entire cloth was purchased from the market at the minimal rate (approx. ₹50 per metre) it would cost over ₹80 million just for the raw material!

That would increase the cost of these **MY Pads** ten-fold, making them un-affordable for women in the most far-flung villages of India.

So, what do all these dizzying numbers mean? Simply, that for millions of women **cloth is still a viable option**. Meanwhile, the need is to nurture many more affordable and environment-friendly options. Goonj's '**Not Just a Piece of Cloth**' initiative is successful because of the cloth given by the masses. It becomes more powerful when we use the **MY Pad** as a tool to open up discussions on the issue, breaking the culture of shame and silence around it.

CALL TO ACTION

ON MENSTRUAL CHALLENGES FACED BY MILLIONS ..



Highlighting voices & challenges of unheard women

Migrant labourers, differently abled, tribals in disasters, bringing these and other forgotten voices into the MHM discourse. Understanding and valuing them..addressing their challenges.

Highlight the connect between, a woman's body and her dignity

From adolescence till menopause to be told every month that you are dirty and impure, how does a woman's confidence take a beating? This must change.

Cloth a viable solution

Used by millions of women. Familiar, bio-degradable, cheaper, reusable, easily accessible to millions of women. A humble piece of cloth, a viable option for women.

The BIG gaps in Research on product usage, knowledge, aptitude and practices etc.

Point to the urgent need of a robust multi faceted research For a country as big and varied as India, a reliable primary research is urgently needed.

Make menstrual health an important part of women's health mapping

Deaths, infections, illness, cervical cancer. Why isn't women's menstrual status and practices connected with their general health? This must change.

Make it Normal for a Woman. Menstruation is a human issue not a women's issue..

The first step is to let women speak up.. to understand and address this basic for every woman..

For more information write to us at : njpc@goonj.org