A study of the disposal of menstrual products

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What do the women at the bottom of the new menstruation revolution think?

What drives their choices of products and the ways they dispose of them?

What are the implications of these behaviours for the environment?
How do women in India dispose of menstrual products and what are the environmental implications of these behaviours?

Menstrual taboos affect the ways women access and use menstrual products,¹ and the ways they dispose of them. Existing disposal practices are causing significant environmental effects, which threaten to increase as consumption of these products grows, particularly in developing countries. This research addresses the lack of understanding of the factors that shape disposal practices of menstrual products in different contexts, in order to help inform policies and push for more innovative solutions that meet the needs and preferences of women and girls.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM A RESEARCH PROJECT ON GENDER AND ENVIRONMENTAL RELATIONS IN GLOBAL PRODUCTION NETWORKS

Intensive product marketing, international aid, NGO encouragement, and progressive popular media have contributed to pads and tampons beginning to unseat traditional menstruation management methods. With an expanding population and women’s growing disposable income, hyper-growth is a possibility, if not already a reality. The problem is how to dispose of all this new waste? Non-biodegradable products are ending up in water supplies, inadequately burned or left to be picked up by waste pickers who are then exposed to diseases.

¹ In this report, the term ‘menstrual products’ is used to refer to digital and applicator tampons, and synthetic pads, that are disposable or single-use. This study recognizes that not all individuals who menstruate identify as women. However, for the purpose of this brief all menstruators are referred to as women and girls. It must be noted that only female consumers were considered in this sample.

AS OF 2018
26% OF THE GLOBAL POPULATION or 2 BN PEOPLE ARE OF MENSTRUATING AGE (UNICEF, 2018)

On average
1 PERSON USES
250-300 lb OF MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS IN A LIFETIME! (Borowski, 2011)

At present, most efforts around Menstrual Hygiene Management have focused on “hardware” (products and/or facilities). However, prevailing social norms and the lack of adequate waste management systems are compounding the effects of these products on the environment and on the lives of individuals working as waste pickers.

To navigate this reality an important piece of information is missing: what factors shape women’s disposal of menstrual products?
India is an emerging market with the largest potential for sales in sanitary protection (Euromonitor, 2018). It is also a country where menstruation remains a strong taboo and where environmental pressures are observed and have the potential to scale.

The objective of this study is to investigate how the ways menstrual products are disposed of impinges upon the environment. These findings are drawn from qualitative research conducted in urban and peri-urban areas in two cities in India. Several research methods were employed, including focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with consumers and waste pickers, as well as interviews with key stakeholders from government, the industry and civil society.

Case study: India

Women go to great lengths to dispose of menstrual products because menstrual blood is believed to cause harm to those who come in contact with it, including animals. Women think the source of pollution for the environment is the blood not the products.

Waste pickers do not have access to menstrual products but have to manually handle this type of waste to maintain their livelihoods. Menstruation taboos also add stigma to this waste and distress to waste picking work.

Key Findings

1. To hide traces of menstrual blood from pads before disposal, women wrap them in newspaper and/or in plastic bags. In some cases after washing the blood off them. This means that, on average, one plastic bag is used to dispose of each product, which increases the impact these products already have on the environment.

2. Women go to great lengths to dispose of menstrual products because menstrual blood is believed to cause harm to those who come in contact with it, including animals. Women think the source of pollution for the environment is the blood not the products.

3. Waste pickers do not have access to menstrual products but have to manually handle this type of waste to maintain their livelihoods. Menstruation taboos also add stigma to this waste and distress to waste picking work.

78% OF WOMEN IN URBAN AREAS IN INDIA & 48% IN RURAL AREAS USE MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS (NFHS, 2015)

12.3 billion pads are discarded annually in INDIA (Muralidharan, 2017)

If all women in India used menstrual products
THIS WOULD GENERATE 580,000 tons OF WASTE EVERY YEAR (Dsara, 2014)
If the future [of the economy] is female, what does this mean for the environment?

The culture of silence and shame around menstruation, which is especially prevalent in developing countries, results in disposal habits that have significant consequences for the environment and for individuals working in waste management.

The projected increase in the use of menstrual products threatens to exacerbate this environmental impact.

To provide solutions that minimize adverse impacts on women and girls, sanitation workers, and the environment, the disposal of menstrual products needs to be addressed. This can’t be done in isolation, it requires consideration of local socio-cultural norms about menstruation, product availability, purchase and usage behaviours, and existing sanitation and waste management systems.

Recommendations

- **Conduct more research** to gain a better understanding of disposal behaviours, waste management systems, and health risks for waste pickers, and to **generate more evidence** that informs policies, mobilizes relevant stakeholders, and supports business solutions.

- **Invest in developing, testing and scaling innovative and sustainable solutions** that consider the product life cycle, and the ways products are used and disposed in different contexts.

- **Disposing of menstrual blood can have different social, cultural and religious connotations and the breadth of these needs to be fully understood before designing solutions. All users deserve choices in line with their physical needs, and their cultural and socio-economic circumstances. Overcoming unsustainability and gender inequality requires challenging existing social norms and global power structures that simultaneously contribute to environmental destruction and systematic discrimination based on gender.**

- **Strengthen and harmonize approaches to Menstrual Hygiene Management through holistic policies and gender-informed interventions** that prioritize the disposability as much as the accessibility of products, and that consider the effectiveness of sanitation facilities and waste management systems.
Final reflection

Addressing the disposal of menstrual products needs to be done alongside considerations of health, education, sanitation and waste management to ensure all women and girls can manage their menstruation with dignity and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

References


Dasra. 2014. Improving Menstrual Health and Hygiene. Available at: https://www.dasra.org/resource/improving-menstrual-health-and-hygiene


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