

A study of
**the disposal
of menstrual
products**



BY MARIANA LOPEZ

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



*What are
the implications
of these behaviours
for the environment?*



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



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

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM NEW RESEARCH ON GENDER NORMS AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS IN GLOBAL PRODUCTION NETWORKS.

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 impacts, 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.

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.

Do gains in gender equality come at the expense of environmental sustainability?

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.

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 negative 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: **how do women dispose of menstrual products?**

Case study: India



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 menstrual products

are disposed of and the impacts of these practices on 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.

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**. These practices increase the use of resources needed for disposal. By 2030, if all discarded products are washed and wrapped, this would result in an **extra 1,800 million tons of plastic and water**.
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 often attribute environmental impacts to menstrual blood rather than to products**.
3. Waste pickers often **handle discarded products manually** and without protection. Taboos can also make waste pickers **reluctant to engage with menstrual waste** and to support waste management efforts.



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)

By **2030**
discarded pads
COULD AMOUNT TO
800,000 tons
OF WASTE EVERY YEAR
(author, 2020)

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 practices 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 these impacts.

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 requires consideration of local socio-cultural norms about menstruation, product availability, usage practices, and existing sanitation and waste management systems.

Recommendations



Conduct **more research** to gain a better understanding of disposal and waste management practices and to **generate more evidence** that informs policies, mobilizes relevant stakeholders, and supports business solutions.

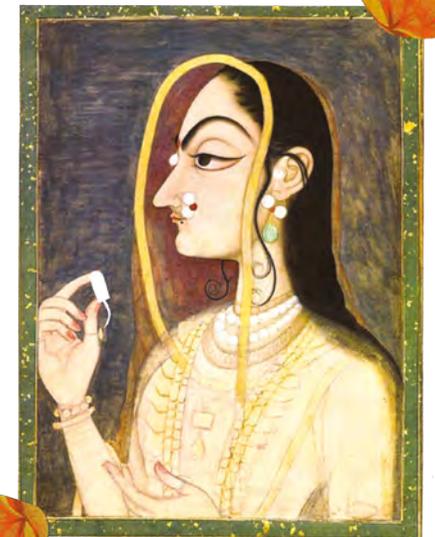


Strengthen and harmonize approaches to Menstrual Hygiene Management through **holistic policies** and **gender sensitive interventions** that prioritize the disposability as much as the accessibility of products, and that consider the effectiveness of sanitation facilities and waste management systems.



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



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).



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To find out more please contact

Mariana Lopez

mariana.lopezrodriguez@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

[@lopezmarianar](https://www.instagram.com/lopezmarianar)

[linkedin.com/in/marianalopezrod/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/marianalopezrod/)