



Press Release

India: Menstrual waste creating plastic mounts!

New Delhi, June 3, 2021: 12.3 billion or 113,000 tonnes of used sanitary pads are dumped in landfills in India every year, adding to the already existing plastic pollution in the country, shares a new study titled '**Menstrual Products and their Disposal**' released by the environmental group Toxics Link in New Delhi today. The study has also raised serious concerns on improper disposal methods and non-segregation of menstrual waste from household waste, which leads to unhygienic working conditions for waste workers, and posing the risk of infectious diseases among them.

The survey, done during the study, clearly shows that disposable sanitary napkins are the most popular choice among women, who are using commercially available products in India, and hence results in huge amounts of waste. The study further reveals that most women are unaware that commonly available disposable sanitary napkins constitute 90% plastic and they are adding to the plastic crisis. The study found that currently there is no proper management or recycling of this non-biodegradable waste, and hence it ends up in landfills, where it stays for centuries and over the years will add to the microplastic pollution.

The study has also raised strong concerns over the use of small-scale incinerators, which have emerged as a favoured-disposal technology and are being installed in various establishments like rural schools, colleges, hostels etc., as there are no minimum standards set for these. "Improper burning of used pads in these low cost, low-temperature incinerators can result in the emission of dioxins and furans, causing more harm to the environment and our health. There are no tests or monitoring done which is a serious gap," states Priti Banthia Mahesh, Chief Program Coordinator at Toxics Link.

Another major concern raised in the report is over the presence of several harmful chemicals in the products, which may create health risks. "Most of the inorganic sanitary pads contain SAP, VOCs, phthalates etc., which can cause adverse health impacts including cancer. But shockingly, most females are unaware about it", shares Dr. Aakanksha Mehrotra, one of the researchers.

Menstrual waste is covered under Solid waste Rules but the Toxics Link report found that there are no systems on the ground to manage it. "As per the rules and the manual on MSW, sanitary waste needs to be wrapped securely in the pouches provided by the manufacturer or brand owners and handed over separately to the waste collector to avoid manual handling of such waste. But clearly, there is no implementation of EPR and there is a lack of any initiative from companies to address the issue of menstrual waste", shared the study team at Toxics Link. The waste workers who were interviewed during the survey in Delhi disclosed that sanitary waste is 100% non-segregated at the municipal level and almost all of it reaches the landfills. Also, most of the waste handlers are forced to work in unhygienic conditions, handling sanitary waste without adequate PPE.

There are alternatives available in the market, like organic pads, menstrual cups etc., and the study reveals that the majority (88% of the respondents) are willing to switch to environment-friendly alternatives, though many shared that environment-friendly products aren't easily available. "Scientific research should be encouraged for the most suitable techniques of disposal of sanitary pads or other menstrual products. Also, tax rebates, subsidies must be issued if a tested organic product releases in the market in order to obtain a significant customer shift," said Satish Sinha, Associate Director, Toxics Link.

Key Findings

- A single commercially available non-organic sanitary pad (e.g., Whisper, Stayfree) takes up to 250-800 years to decompose or may even never decompose at all
- 12.3 billion sanitary pads are disposed of every year in India alone which is equivalent to 113,000 tonnes of waste
- Each pad contains plastic which is equivalent to around 4 plastic bags
- Tampons and organic pads may also contain plastic, but it is very low compared to inorganic sanitary pads
- Menstrual cups contain no plastic (made up of medical-grade Silicon), if used and sterilized properly can last up to 10 years
- Most of the inorganic sanitary pads contain SAP, VOCs, phthalates, and other harmful compounds which can cause conditions ranging from nausea and fatigue to cancer
- Most sanitary waste Incinerators installed in schools, public toilets are operating without any guidelines, burning sanitary pads at the wrong temperature, causing emissions of harmful carcinogenic gases
- 80% of the females in urban India use inorganic disposable sanitary pads
- The first choice for an alternative to normal sanitary pads by most women is organic disposable sanitary pads followed by menstrual cups. Many females do not have any knowledge about other products like period pants, tampons etc.
- The biggest barriers in shifting to eco-friendly sanitary products are ease of availability followed by high pricing for these products.
- 39% of women throw their sanitary napkins in common household bins after wrapping them
- 57.5% of women have no idea about the menstrual waste stream or the after-effects
- 89% of females believe menstrual waste to be a concerning topic, though most of them do not have complete knowledge about the subject
- 84% of waste workers find sanitary waste in regular household waste, out of which 70% waste workers always find menstrual waste mixed with household waste
- In Delhi, sanitary waste is 100% non-segregated at the municipal or landfill level, i.e. nobody separates or picks up menstrual waste from household waste - almost all of it reaches the landfill
- Only 11% waste workers wear proper PPE before handling menstrual waste, the majority of women waste workers are devoid of any PPE

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