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Sustainable menstruation in India: where are we headed?

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Vikas Bagaria, Founder, Pee Safe talks about sustainable menstruation in India



Your periods are on and each of the approximately five days, you wrap that sanitary pad in another piece of plastic or paper and throw it into the bin. How many times do you wonder about the life cycle of the disposed pad after it moves out of your house? Just to give you a fair idea, there are over 336 million menstruating girls and women in India, which totals to approximately 121 million used disposable sanitary pads. This number is a huge concern given the fact that it takes at least 500 to 800 years for a single sanitary pad to decompose. The pads are made of non-biodegradable plastic – which can be detrimental to the health of the women and girls using them as well as the environment. In a country where safe menstruation continues to be a concern, can sustainable menstruation become a reality?

India has for long been known for its sustainable and resourceful practices, and menstruation is not alien to this phenomenon. The practice of using cloth pads goes back in time and while these are not practical anymore, we must find safer, more natural means of disposal. Eco-friendly materials such as cotton are also biodegradable, return to nature and break down into smaller blocks which can be reused. Cut to as recently as 30 years, and use and throw has become a norm in almost all aspects of our lives – sanitary pads are sadly no exception to this.

There is always reluctance among people when it comes to change or adapting to something away from status quo. However, given the figures above and concerns around environment protection, the need of the hour is to opt for alternatives to traditional sanitary pads for sustainable menstruation to become the norm. Efforts are already in place towards this as startups like us have understood the drawbacks of synthetic sanitary pad usage. We have aligned our solutions to bring more sustainable menstrual hygiene products for both the urban and rural women – supplemented by efforts to raise awareness. Other than offering biodegradable cotton-based pads, which are safer, we have also come up with alternatives such as tampons and menstrual cups. Although tampons are still disposable, menstrual cups can last for a good 5 to 6 years. They are reusable which means they contribute to lesser waste and make for a better financial choice for women in areas where sanitary pads may not be as affordable. Menstrual cups collect blood like a container and are washable. They do not absorb anything and therefore do not pose a threat to women's health as well.

While it will take a while before menstrual cups are adopted by rural women, there is already a change happening on the urban front. In India in the urban setting, we have noticed a considerable shift in the usage of biodegradable options in the age group of 25 - 35. To further boost this adoption rate, innovators like Pee Safe are targeting the millennials through interesting social media campaigns. This is because the millennial population is more aware of their immediate environment and the need to switch to better alternatives for a safer future. This group also has the highest scope of adoption and therefore, it makes absolute sense to promote sustainable feminine hygiene products, linking environmental awareness with intimate and personal hygiene. This kind of an approach is also the need of the hour in schools and colleges.

Even as we work towards helping Indian women switch to these products, there is a need for other stakeholders including the government to collaborate for conducting awareness programmes in the rural areas. Many startups are already distributing menstrual cups and biodegradable options for free to those from economically weaker sections. It is only through these awareness generation initiatives across all socio-economic sectors that the vision of a 'pad-free' India can be achieved sooner than imagined.

While these are efforts at the larger level, somewhere, sustainable menstruation practices also boil down to individual choices in the end. Girls and women must understand how disposable pads can affect vaginal health and alter our immediate environment – an impact that can last beyond our lifetime. Who is responsible then? We all are and where there is responsibility, there is no room for illusion of free will. We are what we use and being sustainable is a baton that we must carry forward.