

# A Qualitative Analysis of Sustainable Menstrual Products

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to raise awareness about a more sustainable eco-friendly, money-saving, and hygienic way for women to manage menstruation by using sustainable menstrual products. The commercialization of disposable plastic menstrual products as a stress-free period by the corporate giants made women use sanitary pads which offer menstrual hygiene. Though it is hygiene which means managing menstruation under all conditions, it is not safe for both the environment and for women. Sanitary Napkins cause serious health issues for women. In the article titled 'Wrapped in Secrecy: Toxic Chemicals in Menstrual Products', the report presents a detailed investigation that the researchers did to find out the presence of two specific chemicals which are phthalates and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in sanitary pads sold in India which would cause health concerns like endocrine disruption, impacts the reproductive systems, diabetes, some cancers, and birth defects. Disposable menstrual products are often made with plastic and other non-biodegradable materials that can take hundreds of years to decompose, harming the environment, and contributing to junk waste piled up in water bodies and landfills. So, it's time to encourage sustainable menstrual alternatives that can promote better menstrual health and reduce waste.

**Keyword:** Menstruation Products, Sustainable, Women college, Environmental impact

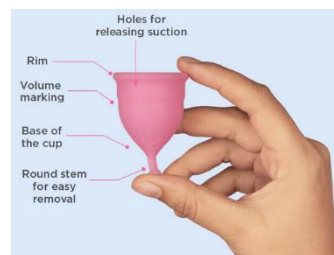
## INTRODUCTION

Disposal of sanitary napkins which are non-biodegradable plastic is not eco-friendly at all. More than 1.6 billion pads were piled up each day, creating a huge garbage dump. Furthermore, it creates serious health concerns for women. Today waste management is a serious issue in India. So, it's time to promote sustainable menstrual hygiene. Sustainable menstrual products such as menstrual cups, cloth pads, and period panties are eco-friendly alternatives that can reduce this environmental impact. Recently a variety of new-age start-ups in India have launched sustainable menstrual products. These products are free of both chemicals and plastic and are much more comfortable and hygienic than plastic-based sanitary pads. College students are one of the largest target audiences for menstrual product companies. Understanding their preferences and needs can help companies create more effective and appealing sustainable menstrual products that can address the concerns and issues that matter to them. So this study will help to understand and analyse the perception and attitude of women towards sustainable menstruation products.

## SUSTAINABLE MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS



### *1. Washable Cloth Pads*



### *2. Reusable Menstrual Cups*



### *3. Biodegradable Sanitary Pads*

#### **1. Washable Cloth Pads**

Cloth pads are making a comeback from the past when women used to handle menstruation with the used clothes, except these are sanitary cloth pads made safe and hygienic with technological enhancements that come in a variety of sizes and shapes according to menstrual flow. These are sustainable, eco-friendly sanitary pads but they need to be hygienically washed and dried in the sunlight as the sun's heat naturally sterilizes them. They need to be stored in clean and dry places to avoid contamination. They are reusable and do not create disposable waste after each use. Lakshmi Murthy who works with Vikalp Design (NGO) conducted workshops in the rural areas of Rajasthan to explain the usage and procedure of washable cloth pads to women in the area which became **successful (Lakshmi Murthy 2015)**.

#### **2. Reusable Menstrual Cups**

The menstrual cup is a small, flexible funnel-shaped cup made of rubber or silicone that is inserted into the vagina to catch and collect period blood. According to **Jennifer Rainey (2023)** cups can hold more blood than other options on the market and depending on the flow, can be worn for up to 12 hours. They are durable and reusable for up to 6 months to 10 years without any health hazards depending on the product and aftercare the user provides. Aftercare involves washing with water and wiping it clean. One may even sterilize them after use to be on the safe side. According to **Akshara Maurya (2020)**, finding the right menstrual cup and the fit is a trial-and-error process and requires some gynaecological assistance or can

be learnt through internet tutorials but one has to be careful in their choice of product as the wrong size can lead to leaks or spillage. It is important to consider the fate of menstrual cups once abandoned as finding the right menstrual cup is a trial-and-error process and sharing or lending menstrual cups is not advised by any means.

### 3. Biodegradable Sanitary Pads

These are pads that claim to be biodegradable, eco-friendly and compostable. There are a few companies in India that manufacture these using water hyacinth, bamboo fibre, banana fibre, and organic cotton. It is undeniable that they can be a gateway to reducing plastic waste and learning more about the various menstrual product alternatives available. Ultimately, any disposable menstrual product that is used only for 3 to 6 hours will negatively impact the environment due to waste generation and treatment. Although, since it decomposes in 3 to 6 months, it has an exponentially smaller carbon footprint than non-biodegradable disposable sanitary napkins (Akshara Maurya 2020). Testing conducted by volunteers at Green the Red of these pads from three popular companies that are Heyday, Saathi, and Carmesi gave them inconclusive results about their claims of being compostable since none of these pads were 100% compostable under the three months. With Carmesi pads, there seemed to be a layer of bio-plastic or plastic which would not shred ("Biodegradable Sanitary Pads - Testing the tall claims", 2019).

## QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF SUSTAINABLE MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS

Qualitative data was collected from 10 college women students who were pursuing their graduation at Ethiraj College, Chennai by self-constructed in-depth interview schedules. When discussing the suggestions for the promotion of sustainable menstrual products the respondents mentioned various ideas.

1. Respondent A said, "Suggestions to promote this cloth pad by sharing positive experiences like the rash-free eco-friendly product and genuinely positive reviews can be shared to promote it."
2. Respondent B said, "By sharing the positive experience of using cloth pads with others."
3. Respondent C said, "My family and friends also supported and encouraged me to use these products, they feel like health is more important so when you use these products you will feel better and healthier also I would recommend people to use these products and after start using these products I feel like this lot of inbuilt changes that happen to me during the menstruation so with the cramps that I have I do not have other problems like irritability or itching which is an add-on to my dysmenorrhea so I think these products are very good to use. so, people don't have much awareness about these products in most areas due to a lot of misconceptions about using these products lot of people are afraid of using these sustainable products, so when we reach out to those people and educate them about these products there are a lot of chances that people will start using sustainable menstrual products and we will get to have a better environment."
4. Respondent D said "Positive things about sustainable menstruation are environment friendly and if people started to talk about the topic, periods taboos can be removed. In marketing, sustainable menstrual products must be advertised widely, it is women-friendly and eco-friendly, and holistically I feel it's good. I feel the barrier to using sustainable products is women are generally used to disposable sanitary products from childhood and their mindset doesn't allow them to switch suddenly. To promote sustainable products, they must be at an affordable price to buy and must be accessible in nearby shops. Even if it can be used for 5 years it's like a one-time investment people must be ready to spend money so awareness about sustainable menstrual products to be spread and mass production of sustainable

- menstrual products must be done to make them easily accessible to all women.”
5. Respondent E said, “To promote sustainable menstrual products, awareness must be given in schools and colleges and also awareness programs must be conducted in villages so that we can avoid pollution and disease caused because of disposable pads.”
  6. Respondent F said, “I would suggest that with the help of Instagram influencers sharing product reviews of the cloth pad, the reach would be more, and sharing positive reviews of cloth pad in the story and creating videos related to sustainable menstruation would help to promote the sustainable menstrual products.”
  7. Respondent G said “Create awareness among women about its impact on body and environment, getting the government or famous personality to promote such campaigns, make documentary regarding it. Sooner the better.”
  8. Respondent H said “I have heard a Misconception about cotton cloth pads that it shouldn’t be used we must use only sanitary pads so that misconception must be cleared. Benefits of the cloth pad like comfort, non-infection, rash free, positive awareness about cloth pad must be shared among women.”
  9. Respondent I said “Lack of availability accessibility and affordability Is the challenge in sustainable menstrual products. It’s not available for everyone. For women to switch to sustainable products the government must take the initiative They should provide sustainable menstrual products for free of cost to everyone available and accessible I think that is the only solution if they want to save the environment, I think they have to make it available and also, I think the awareness is very important. Even for Menstrual cups, most people don’t know how to use them so awareness about sustainable products must be given to every woman.”
  10. Respondent J said that “to promote cloth pad, positive reviews about the cloth pad must be shared like cloth pad is reusable, cost-effective and sustainable. If a Cloth pad provides more stiffness, it would be better to use.”

### **Theme 1- Need for awareness and education**

Sharing genuine reviews and positive experiences such as cost-effectiveness, comfort, and rash-free of using cloth pads to promote sustainable products, can influence others to consider making the switch. Participants mentioned that the lack of awareness and misconceptions surrounding these products led to hesitancy and fear of usage. Participants suggested that educating people about the benefits of sustainable menstrual products, addressing misconceptions, and removing period taboos could encourage more women to adopt these eco-friendly alternatives. Additionally, the promotion of sustainable products through awareness programs in schools, colleges, and villages was a crucial step in spreading knowledge and changing mindsets.

### **Theme 2 - Accessibility and Affordability**

Participants suggested mass production to increase availability and affordability by creating easy access to these sustainable menstrual products. One participant stated, "Making it affordable and accessible to all women, mass production must be done to make it available and affordable to all". They mentioned the importance of making sustainable products affordable, making them accessible in local shops, and available for mass production to ensure access for all women. Furthermore, the suggestion for government initiatives to provide sustainable menstrual products free of cost.

**Theme 3- The role of influencers and government initiatives**

Participants recommended social media influencers, such as Instagram influencers, to share product reviews and create awareness about sustainable menstruation. Additionally, participants stated the need for government support, including the involvement of famous personalities in promoting campaigns, making documentaries, and providing free sustainable products to make widespread adoption. This indicated the importance of influential persons and governmental interventions in influencing public perceptions and behaviors toward sustainable menstrual products.

**CONCLUSION**

Thus the research study tells about the perception of sustainable menstrual products among women college students in Chennai. This provides an overview of the significance of menstruation in a woman's life and the health and environmental impact of disposable sanitary products emphasizing the need for a shift towards eco-friendly menstrual products. The research aims to find women's perceptions of sustainable menstrual products that can guide them towards building a more sustainable and healthier future for women and the environment.