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Introduction

The environmental and health impacts of menstrual hygiene products are becoming increasingly critical, particularly in developing countries like India.

Today, approximately 121 million women in India use sanitary napkins, generating 12.3 billion napkins and 113,000 tons of waste annually. A [study by PATH](#), a global health NGO, estimated that disposable sanitary napkins contribute more to annual waste load than any other menstrual hygiene product, with 44,254 cm³ of waste per female per year. According to a 2022 report by [Toxics Link](#), these products, including tampons and sanitary napkins, contain harmful chemicals like dioxins, furans, and [volatile organic compounds \(VOCs\)](#), which can leach into soil and water, posing health risks and negatively impacting wildlife and aquatic life.

In many developing countries, sanitary napkins are primarily disposed of in landfills, despite being composed of up to 90% plastics, which increases eco-toxicity. The [scarcity and inadequacy of incinerators](#) exacerbate the problem. Additionally, menstrual hygiene management in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) is complicated by the taboo and stigma surrounding menstruation.

Globally, the use of reusable menstrual products has grown over the last decade, though disposables like tampons and pads remain more popular. In 2022, the global menstrual products market was valued at USD 26.87 billion, with reusables accounting for just USD 2.8 billion. Growing awareness of the environmental damage caused by disposable products and the benefits of reusables has spurred interest in sustainable living. Improved designs and increased availability have made reusables more accessible and appealing. However, in India, the market for reusable menstrual products has not seen comparable growth due to social stigma, lack of awareness, and period poverty. It is in this context that Eco Femme was founded to address the previously ignored issue of sanitary waste by offering a non polluting alternative.

Source : Eco Femme website | Approximate numbers captured as on July 2024



Executive Summary

“Eco Femme is a team effort and working with such people has been a thoroughly enriching and perspective-changing experience of what is possible when working for a higher vision”

- Jessamijn and Kathy



Eco Femme is publishing this Impact Report to highlight the importance of reusable and environmentally friendly menstrual pads vs commercial disposal products. In addition, the report also attempts to highlight the social and environmental impact of Eco Femme products and its various community programmes.

Social and Environmental Impact 2010 – 2024



360 K

PADS HAVE BEEN FREELY DISTRIBUTED
UNDER PAID FOR PAD



90 K

GIRLS RECEIVED PADS UNDER OUR PAD
FOR PAD PROGRAMME



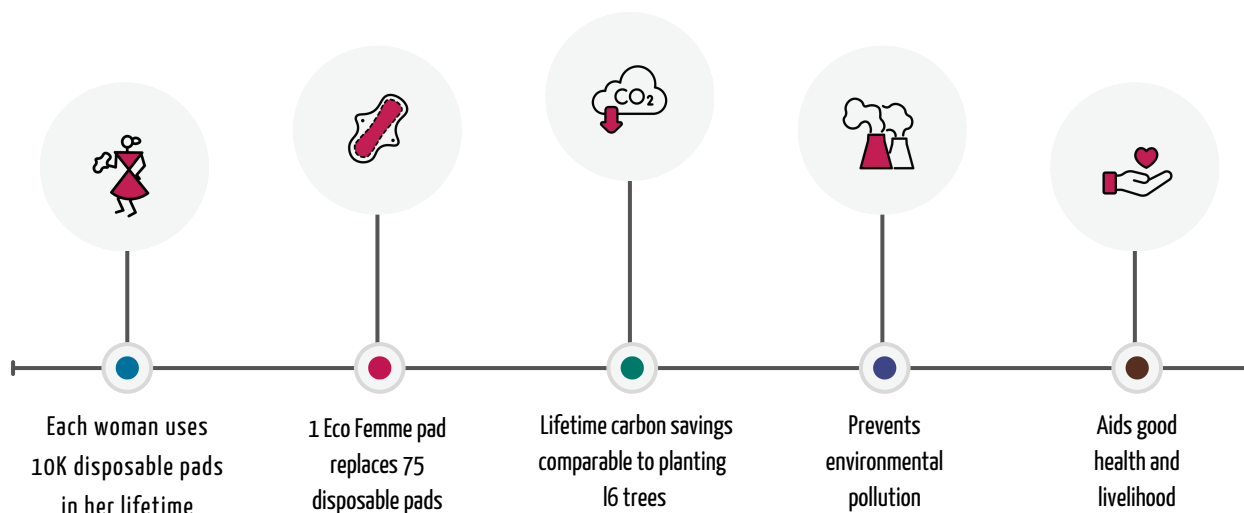
79 K

PADS DISTRIBUTED AT SUBSIDISED COST
UNDER PADS FOR SISTERS



100 Mn

DISPOSABLE SANITARY NAPKINS WERE
PREVENTED FROM ENDING UP AS WASTE



Source : [Eco Femme website](#) | Approximate numbers captured as on July 2024



Eco Femme Story

Eco Femme is a women-led social enterprise focused on revitalising menstrual practices to be healthy, affordable, dignified, and environmentally sustainable. Founded in 2010 in Auroville by Kathy Walkling and Jessamijn Miedema, the organization emerged from their shared interest in sustainable solutions and the quest for eco-friendly alternatives to disposable sanitary napkins prevalent in India.

As their learning journey continued and their understanding deepened, they realised that the root of the "menstrual problem" was a universal disconnect and that addressing menstruation effectively would require approaching it from a whole systems perspective. Eco Femme thus broadened its mission to drive environmental, cultural, and social transformation by combining sustainable period products with holistic menstrual education.

Eco Femme created two social impact programmes—Pad for Pad and Pads for Sisters—leveraging revenues from global commercial sales of cloth pads to finance free or discounted cloth pads for women and girls from low-income backgrounds.

Furthermore, engaging local rural women tailors as producers enabled a virtuous cycle of women supporting women through an idea Eco Femme calls Eco Sisterhood—a solidarity movement connecting women in India and around the world through the universal shared experience of menstruation.

Rooted in this ethos, Eco Femme's vibrant pad designs challenge the norm of white menstrual products, promoting self-expression and empowerment. These colorful designs avoid harmful bleaching processes, offering a dignified, beautiful, and meaningful approach to menstruation that aligns with the organization's mission of transformation and empowerment.

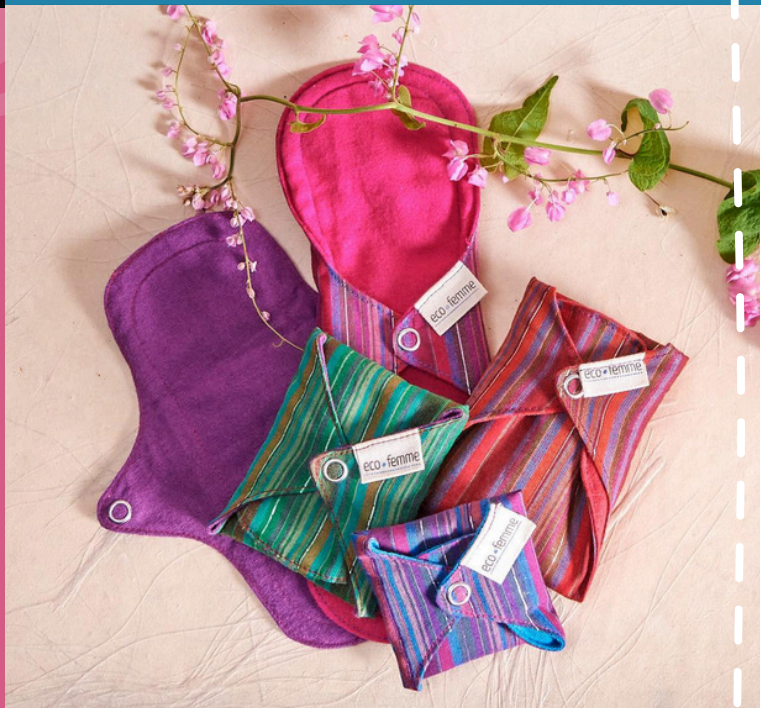


What ?

- Rising from rural India and reaching out to the world, Eco Femme has been a pioneer and leading voice for sustainable menstruation for over 14 years
- Not only have they built expertise in sustainable menstruation, specializing in manufacturing organic cloth pads and nappy products but also actively promote menstrual equity and period positivity.
- Beyond producing organic cloth pads, Eco Femme runs educational programs across India to improve menstrual awareness and health among women and girls from low-income backgrounds.

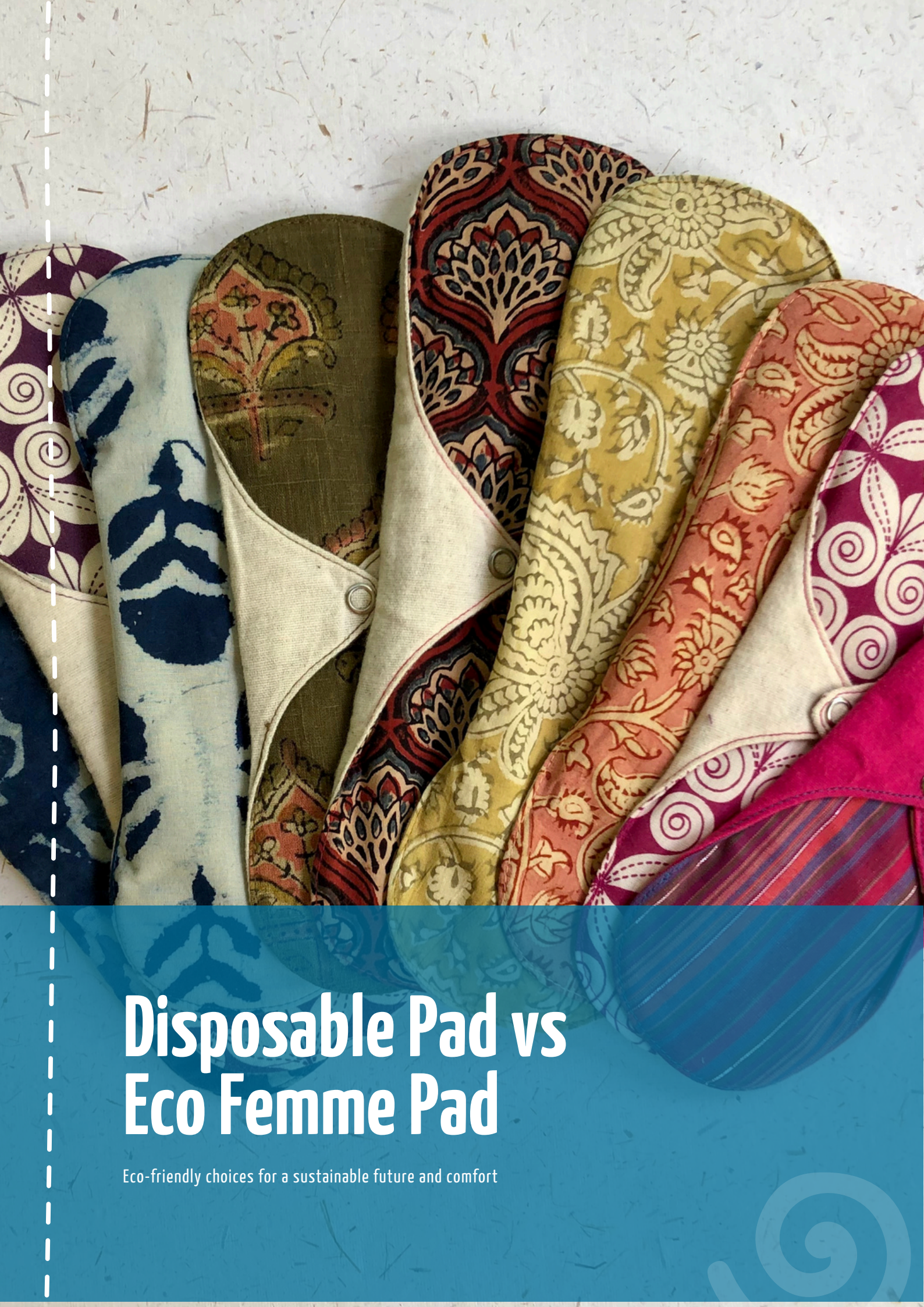
Why ?

- Disposable menstrual products, made predominantly of plastic and when improperly disposed, pose significant environmental and health risks.
- They take 500 to 800 years to decompose, releasing microplastics and toxic chemicals.
- Harmful ingredients can disrupt hormones, cause reproductive health issues, and affect children's development, underscoring the need for sustainable menstruation practices.



How ?

- Eco Femme supports sustainability and empowerment through eco-friendly products, education, and community partnerships.
- They use a hybrid economic model, reinvesting profits into non-profit programs and partner with local women tailoring units to create local livelihood.
- Their educational approach integrates peer engagement, social-emotional learning, and topics like female anatomy, body positivity, and period tracking.

The image shows a variety of reusable pads with different patterns and colors, including purple, blue, green, red, yellow, and orange. They are arranged in a fan-like shape. A single disposable pad is visible on the right side. The background is a light, textured surface.

Disposable Pad vs Eco Femme Pad

Eco-friendly choices for a sustainable future and comfort



De-constructing a disposable pad

Sanitary products like tampons and pads often contain harmful chemicals, including dioxins, furans, and Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs). The bleaching process used to prepare cotton for fluffed cellulose pulp can produce dioxins, which may leach into soil and water, posing risks to both human health and the environment.

Composition of plastic content

Most of the commercially available sanitary pads have plastic as the main constituent; at almost 90%. which sometimes take more than 500 years to decompose.

Plastic Type	Use in a Disposable Pad	Time Taken to Decompose
Polypropylene (PP)	Top and back layers	20-30 years
Polyethylene (PE)	Outer layer	20-30 years
Polyester (PET)	Cover of the core of the pad	100-1000 years
Polyurethane (PU)	Backing for the adhesive layer of disposable pad	Thousands of years
Ethylene Vinyl Acetate (EVA)	Breathable backing	20-50 years
Super Absorbent Polymer (SAP)	An inner component that is used for absorption	Depends on brand

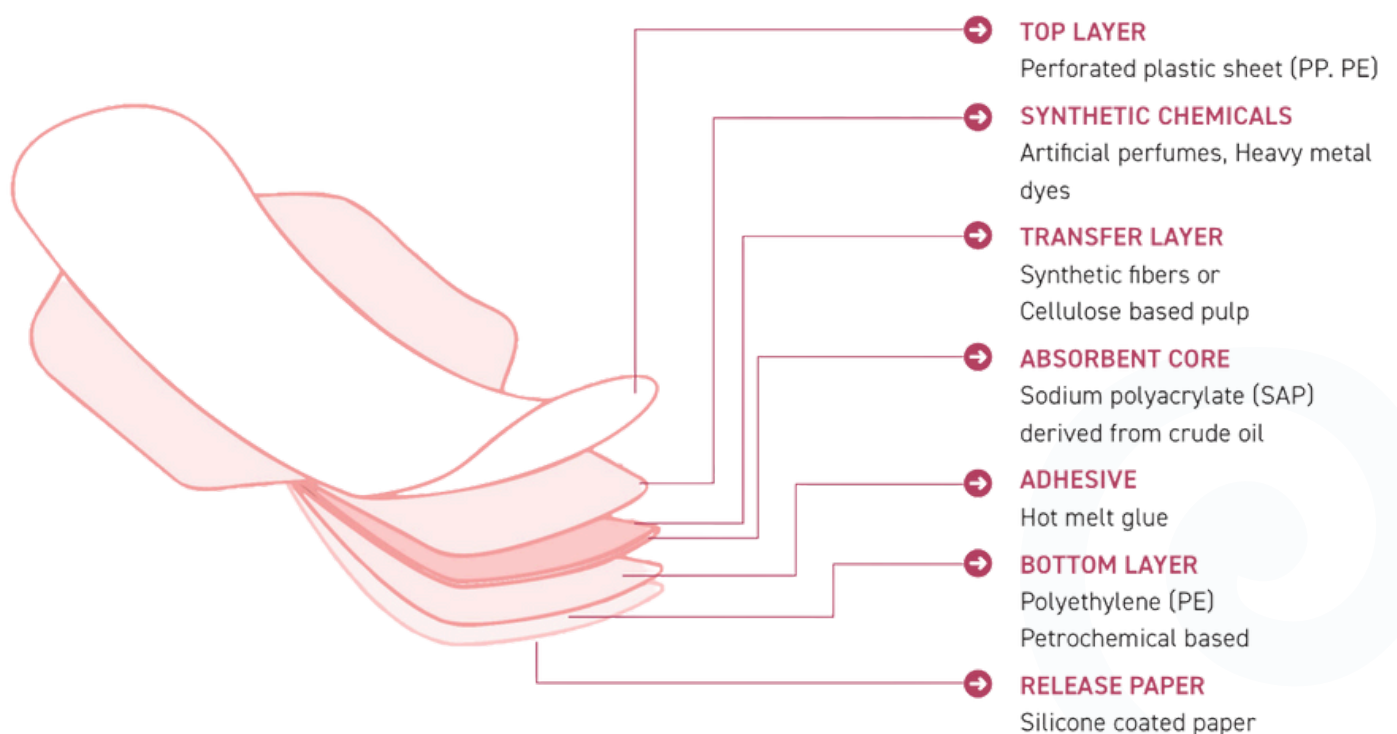


The hidden harm of chemicals

Beyond the environmental impact of plastic waste, the chemicals used in sanitary pads are a significant concern. These substances are intentionally added or introduced during manufacturing to enhance the product's functionality, appearance, or consumer appeal.

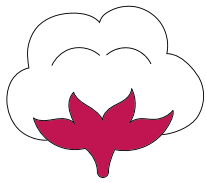
The skin's direct contact with disposable sanitary pads can significantly increase exposure to harmful chemicals. The top sheet, in constant contact with the skin, allows these substances to be absorbed, while the transfer and super-absorbent layers, though not directly in contact, can still facilitate chemical transfer. According to a study by [Toxics Link](#), exposure to Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) that are added as fragrances, adhesives, and moisture barriers in disposable sanitary pads have been linked to negative health effects such as endocrine disruption, infertility, birth defects, cancer and other serious health conditions.

Structure of a disposable pad

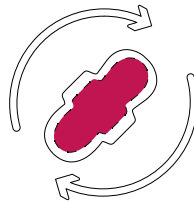


Source : Wrapped in Secrecy - Toxic chemicals in menstrual products : A report by Toxics Link

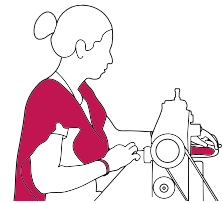
Know Your Eco Femme Pad



Organic Material



Reusable



Locally Made

Eco-friendly

- Made with 100% Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS)-certified cotton and dyeing
- No pesticides, chemical fertilizers, or child labor involved.
- All cotton layers in Eco Femme's products are fully compostable, breaking down naturally at the end of their lifecycle without causing any harm to the environment.
- No use of plastic in packaging material and fabric scraps are upcycled into handmade paper and accessories.



Reusable and Comfortable

- Eco Femme reusable cloth pads are crafted from 100% organic, soft brushed cotton flannel for maximum comfort and absorbency to prevent rashes or irritations. The back layer is also made of pure cotton with a lamination of polyurethane (PUL) to make the pad leakproof.
- The nickel-free press buttons and wings ensure the pads stay securely in place enhancing ease of use and confidence.

Supports Girls

- Through the Pad for Pad initiative, Eco Femme provides one pad and menstrual health education to girls from low-income backgrounds in India for each pad purchased internationally.
- This initiative supports both global customers and local communities, promoting menstrual health and access to essential products.





Supports Women

- Through the Pads for Sisters initiative, Eco Femme provides reusable cloth pads at affordable, subsidised rates to women from low-income backgrounds in India.
- The initiative also includes menstrual health education to support and empower these women. This impact is possible through extensive partnerships with grassroots organizations across India, ensuring outreach and sustainable change at the community level.

Supports Dignified Livelihoods Locally

- All Eco Femme production takes place within a 10km radius of its headquarters in Auroville, Tamil Nadu.
- Pads are stitched in four small-scale women's tailoring units, where 90% of the women employed come from low-income neighboring villages.
- This work provides a living wage and allows them flexibility and self-determination in managing their work and workplace conditions within their own community.



Leakproof layer with PUL (Polyurethane Laminate)

Nickel free push buttons

Lasts 75 washes (~4 years)

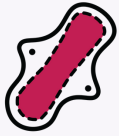
Unbleached organic cotton inner absorbent layers

Wings keep the pad in place

Organic cotton top layer

GOTS certified fabric dyes

Mapping the Theory of Change



Inputs

Produce and sell reusable cloth pads as a sustainable menstrual product combined with menstrual health education for under privileged beneficiaries



Outputs

Increase in uptake of sustainable menstrual products



Outcomes

Avoided impacts of disposable menstrual products.
Reduce period poverty through enabling affordable access to products + menstrual education



Impact

Reduction in CO2 emissions and eco impact due to disposable pads



Impact

Reduction in human and environmental toxicity



Impact

Improved menstrual health practices for all

Life Cycle Analysis(LCA)

- **What It Is:** LCA measures the environmental impact of Eco Femme products from production and use to disposal.
- **What It Covers:** It examines the carbon emissions of Eco Femme products from the start (raw materials) until they leave their facilities. In addition to raw materials, it takes into consideration the energy use, and the environmental costs throughout the product's life cycle.
- **How It Works:** The analysis uses data from Eco Femme and its suppliers to understand the full environmental impact, from production to disposal. The assessment also includes some information on the impact of using and disposing of the product, particularly related to water.

Raw Materials

- Cotton (Organic)
– Production
- Transport

Production/ Processing

- Printing/Dyeing
- Stitching
- Transport

Packaging and Logistics

- Packaging (Materials)
- Transport/ Shipping



Understanding LCA Results

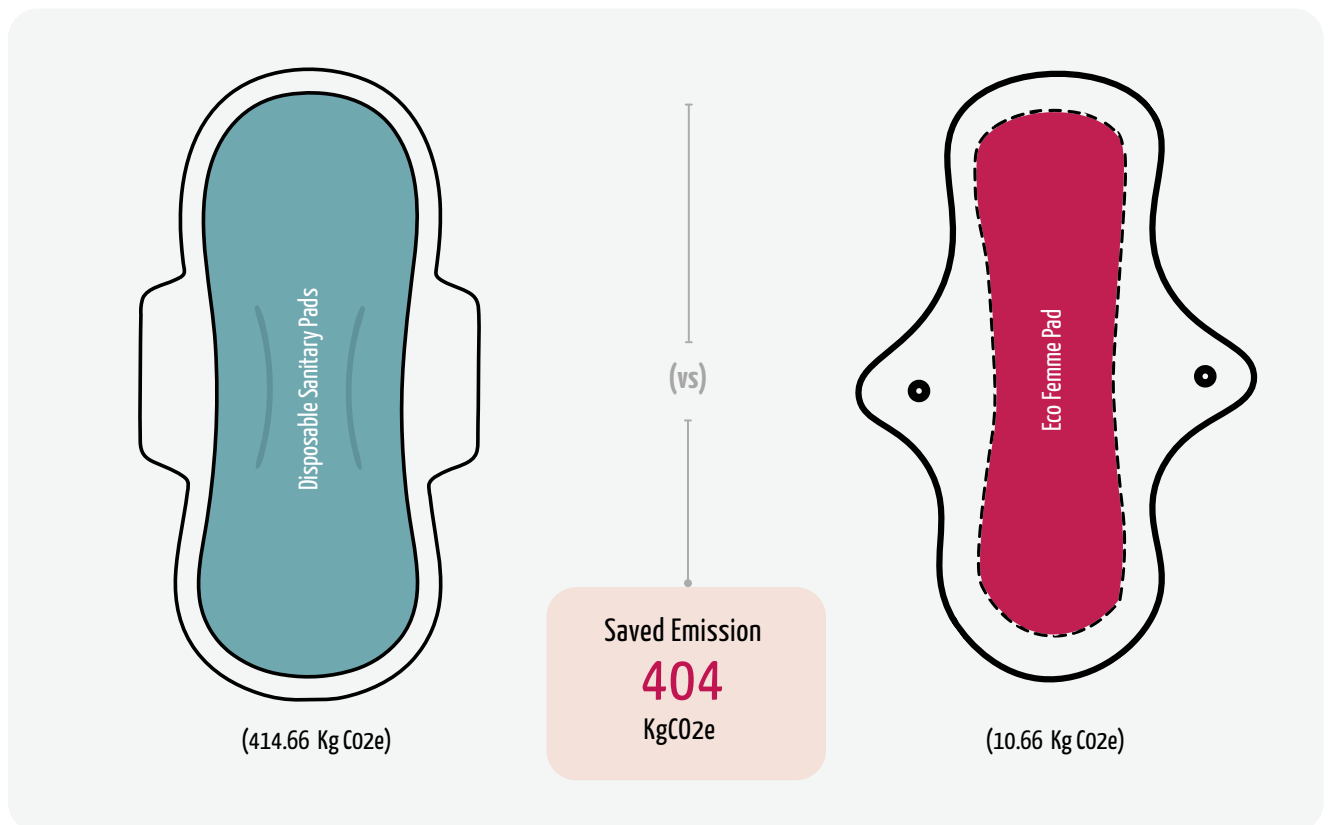
Due to their ability of being reused, Eco Femme pads are more environmentally friendly as compared to single use alternatives.

Avoid Carbon Emissions with Eco Femme pads

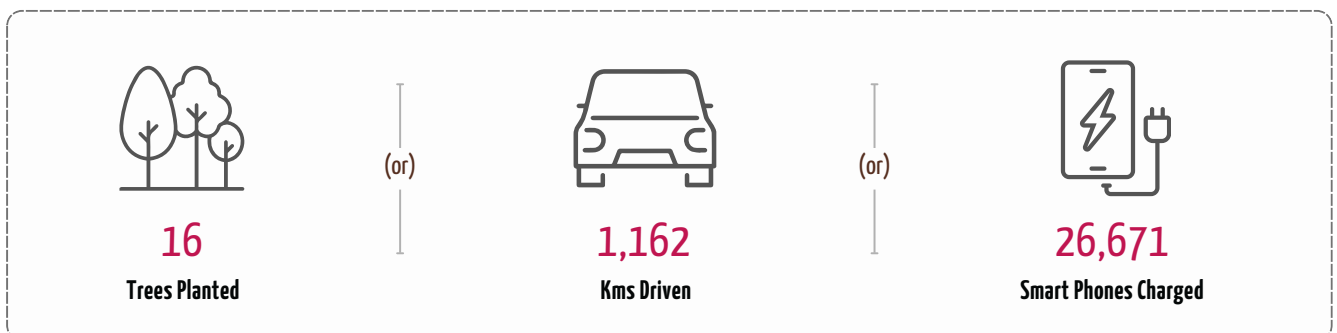
A woman uses around 10,000 disposable pads in her lifetime.

1 Eco Femme pad can be reused approximately 75 times, saving 3.03 kgCO₂e when compared to 75 disposable /single use pads.

Instead of 10,000 disposable sanitary pads, a woman can use 133 Eco Femme pads in her lifetime.



This saving is equivalent to:



ipcc





The Eco-Sisterhood

Empowering global communities, fostering sisterhood and breaking taboos

By Women, For Women

Eco Femme nurtures a global community of volunteers, interns, and ambassadors dedicated to sustainable menstrual practices. With 80 NGO partners in India and over 250 ambassadors worldwide, collaboration and empowerment is at the heart of everything they do - it is an idea they call "Eco Sisterhood". In Eco Femme's worldview, menstruation is celebrated, not stigmatised and caring for our personal body does not come at the expense of caring for our planetary body.

Eco Femme fosters a unique workplace culture. As an almost entirely women led and run organisation, the culture is distinguished by openness, flexibility and love.

Eco Femme promotes a social, circular economy through reusable menstrual products and partners with grassroots organisations in India to spread menstrual health awareness among women and girls from low-income backgrounds. Their educational programs rooted in group inquiry, challenge women to think critically and dismantle negative beliefs that undermine healthy menstrual practices and attitudes.

In India:

- 52% of adolescent girls are unaware of menstruation before menarche
- 45% of girls do not consider menstruation normal
- 77% of girls are restricted from visiting places of worship
- 24% of girls sit separately from family members during menstruation

Adapted from: Van Eijk et al (2016). Menstrual hygiene management among adolescent girls in India: a systematic review and meta-analysis.

The Pad for Pad program provides menstrual health education and free cloth pads to adolescent girls (10-19 years) from low-income backgrounds. Funded by donors and international purchases, every international customer becomes a donor, embodying the Eco-Sisterhood concept. This programme exemplifies the power of women supporting women for a sustainable and inclusive future.

Yearly Progress 2023/2024



Source : [Eco Femme website](#) | Approximate numbers captured as on July 2024

Why switch to Eco Femme pads?



GOOD FOR OUR EARTH

Over our lifetime, we will each dispose of about 150kg of toxic sanitary waste – cloth pads are a way out of this mess



GOOD FOR OUR BODY

Cloth washable pads are a safe alternative to chemically laden disposable products ensuring rash-free, healthy periods!



SAVES MONEY

A one-time purchase of cloth pads prevents costly expenditure of single-use and throw products saving you A LOT of money!



CREATES SISTERHOOD

Your purchase helps sponsor cloth pads for other women and girls providing them with long term access to healthy menstrual products.



Testimonials

Firsthand stories from the Eco Femme community



"The cloth pads offered by Eco Femme are very useful. Every month, I used to financially struggle to buy disposable pads, but now I don't worry about that anymore. The cloth pads also have better absorption compared to disposables. I also used to feel ashamed of myself whenever I was on my period and after receiving the awareness session I feel proud of my body and positive about the period.."

-- Vadheeswari, 9th Grade student



"I used to suffer from itching problems during my period. After switching to Eco Femme cloth pads, that issue is no longer a problem. I am very happy about the change I've made, and my mother is also pleased. Thank you for educating us about periods in detail."

-- Dhanaja, 8th Grade student



"Eco Femme has been doing unparalleled work towards Menstrual Health and Hygiene among adolescent girls and supported us immensely to reach out to girls in the rural pockets of Purulia District of West Bengal by not only spreading awareness but also creating a sustainable and eco friendly way of dealing with menstruation by providing reusable cotton cloth pads for girls. We wish to continue our journey towards a more eco friendly and hygienic menstrual experience for women and wish them good luck in their endeavor."

-- Shainy Ghosh (Pad for Pad partner)



"We have had a very satisfying and enlightening relationship with Eco Femme since 2015. Yardi CSR has bought 12,000 pads and distributed them to 3,000 women and girls in Pune. Over 90% of users reported positive experiences regarding comfort, ease of use, and improved cleanliness. We are committed to continuing our partnership due to the high and consistent quality of Eco Femme's products."

-- Bharati Kotwal, Yardi CSR



"We at Pinkishe Foundation are incredibly grateful for the support provided by Eco Femme through their Pad for Pad programs. The quality of their reusable cloth pads is exceptional, and their educational resources have empowered hundreds of volunteer menstrual educators and thousands of girls in rural India. Eco Femme's leadership in menstrual hygiene has inspired many organizations and made a significant impact on the communities we serve."

-- Pinkishe Foundation





Annexure

Additional data and insights



SDG Mapping of Eco Femme

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

Eco Femme promotes good health through different initiatives related to menstrual health in India, including providing free and subsidized access to reusable cloth pads, conducting educational sessions in various settings, and using storytelling to engage and empower women and girls.

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



SDG 8: Decent Work & Economic Growth

Eco Femme supports Indian women in creating organic cloth pad units, collaborating with local stitching units, retailers, and self-help groups across Tamil Nadu . They employ 40+ women, ensure fair conditions, and contribute to Auroville's volunteer programs.

12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION



SDG 12: Responsible Consumption & Production

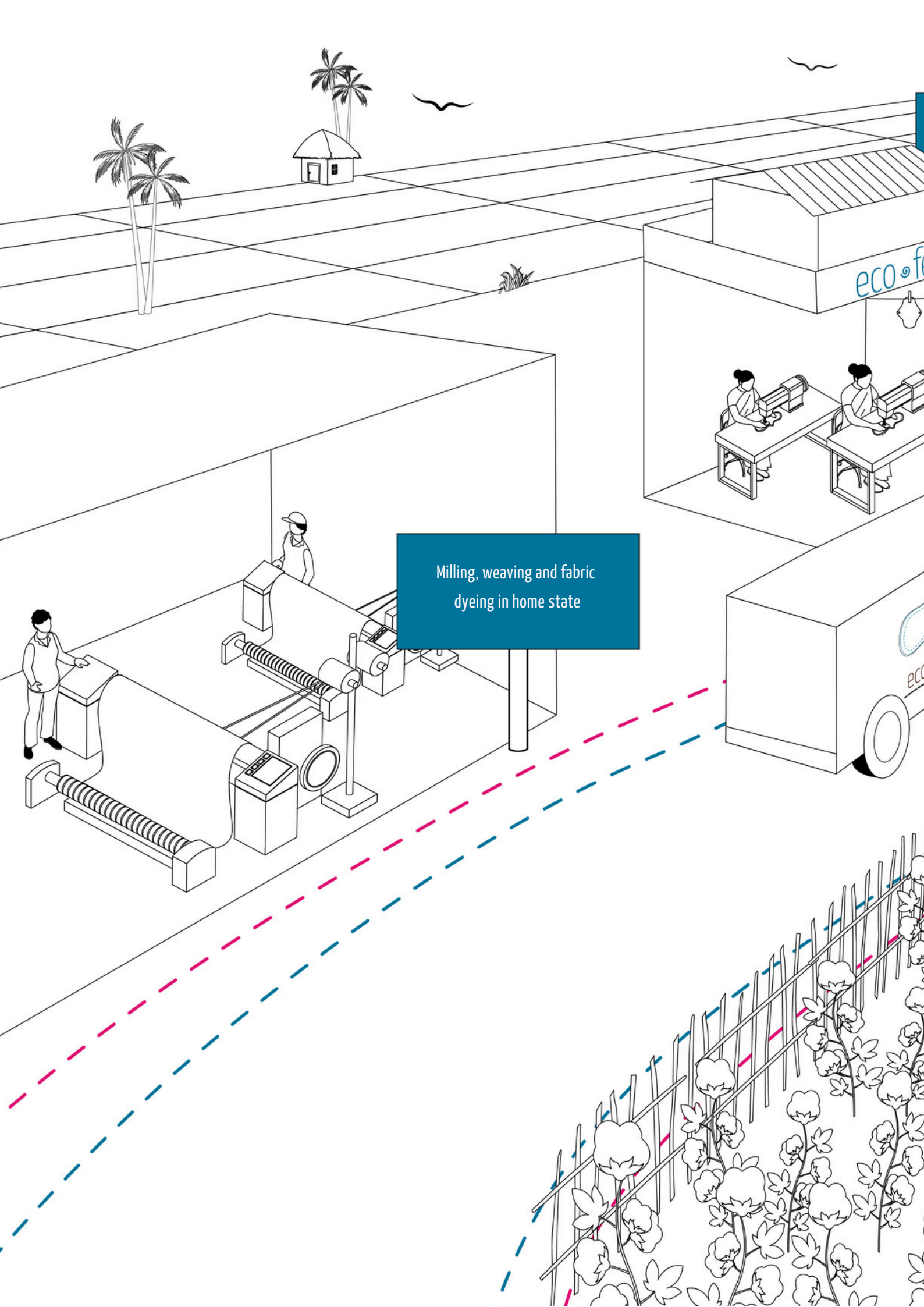
By adopting organic cotton, non-toxic dyeing, and hyper-local supply chains, Eco Femme combats disposability culture, advocates for waste reduction, raises awareness about disposable product impacts, and promotes a circular economy through reusable product innovation.

13 CLIMATE ACTION



SDG 13: Climate Action

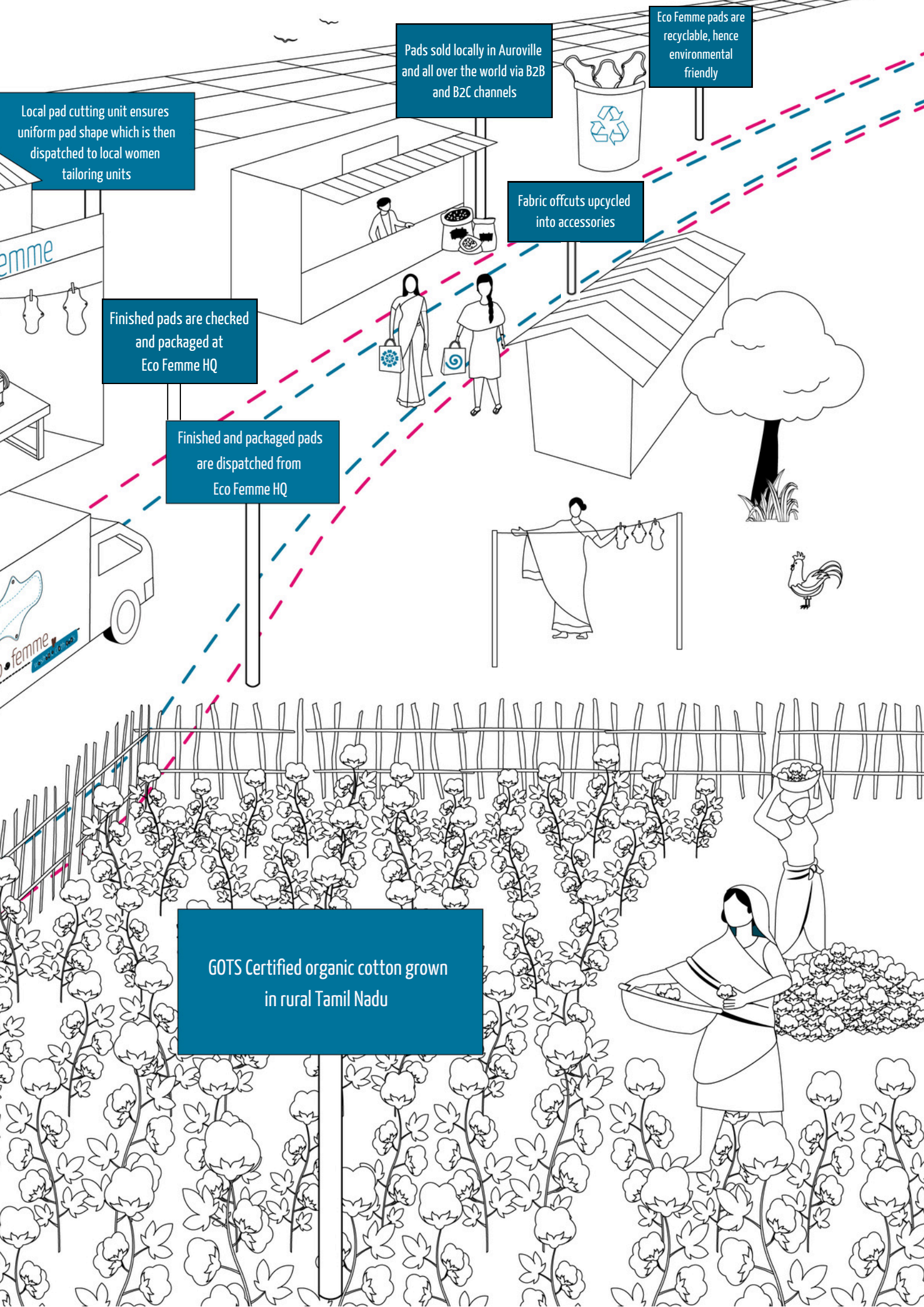
Eco Femme reduces CO2 emissions by offering pads with a low average of 0.07 KgCO2e, replacing disposable pads. They raise awareness about waste issues, enhance menstrual education for low-income women, and build environmental capacity through partnerships.



Milling, weaving and fabric
dyeing in home state

eco-f

eco-f





Acknowledgement

This report is the result of the invaluable support from Kathy Walkling provided to the Bevolve team

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📷 [ecofemme](https://www.instagram.com/ecofemme)

📺 [ecofemmeindia](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqWz8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8)

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