Convenience at what cost?
Traditionally, women all over the world have used cloth to handle their monthly menstrual flow. These days, however, disposable menstrual products have become commonplace throughout the developed world and are now gaining popularity in the developing world as well.

Promoted for their convenience, these products are seen as a step towards women’s liberation, yet the imagery in the ads that market them, and even the products names themselves, perpetuate cultural attitudes that view menstruation as something dirty and shameful that needs to be kept secret.

What is not revealed is the real secret behind disposable menstrual products: the immense environmental, health and human costs involved.

The costs to women’s bodies
What the ads won’t tell you is that disposable menstrual products present a number of health issues for the women who use them. Most major brands of tampons and pads...
contain cotton grown using agrochemicals and therefore carry a high level of residual pesticides. In addition, the chlorine bleaching process that is used to whiten the products produces dioxin, which has been linked to various forms of cancer as well as immune system suppression, endometriosis and pelvic inflammatory disease. (1)

The costs to nature

Something else you won’t learn from the ads is the fact that most disposable menstrual products are made almost entirely of non-biodegradable plastic. The bleaches, adhesives and fragrances used in manufacturing the products also release pollutants into the environment.

Along with the problem of non-biodegradable plastic accumulating in landfills, disposable menstrual products create havoc when flushed down the toilet. Finding their way into seas and rivers, they cause severe problems for marine life. Disposable pads and plastic tampon applicators frequently wash up on beaches throughout the world.

According to a recent UK study, disposable menstrual products create over 200,000 tonnes of waste per year. An average woman will throw away 125-150kg of menstrual products in her lifetime. Considering the fact that a disposable pad takes up to 800 years to decompose, this is an alarming prospect (2).

What does this mean for India?

Until recently, women in India handled their menstruation by using scrap cloth from old saris or towels, which were folded or held in place by underwear or a string 'belt'. Over the last 15 years, however, as multinational corporations have made their way into the
Indian market, disposable pads like 'Whisper' and 'Stayfree' have become the product of choice for those who can afford them.

Although the traditional use of cloth is an inexpensive and eco-friendly option, it can present a health risk if the cloth is not properly looked after. This is a concern in India, where cultural taboos often prevent women from drying the cloth properly.

Perceiving the widespread use of disposable menstrual products to be the solution to these project alone challenges, various Indian government agencies and nonprofit organisations are encouraging women to make the switch.

In June 2011, the Indian government passed a Free Day Pads scheme, which subsidises disposable pads to make them more available to rural adolescent girls. The first phase of this project aims to provide subsidised pads to 25% of adolescent girls in 152 districts across 20 states. This amounts to a total of 15 million (1.5 crore) girls and 90 million (9 crore) disposable pads, in just the first phase of the project alone!

India is poised to become the largest market for menstrual pads in the world. There are 300 million women of menstruating age in India. If all these women used disposable menstrual pads, they would generate 58,500 million pads of waste every year!

While menstrual waste presents problems in all parts of the world, India's dense population and lack of organised waste disposal systems lead to particular challenges. Most disposable menstrual pads in India end up littering village roadsides or getting burned in huge trash heaps. This releases toxic dioxins into the atmosphere and also pollutes the soil and groundwater. In more developed areas of the country, disposable pads are often flushed down toilets, leading to sewer blockages which can be challenging and costly to repair.

The cost to human lives

Unlike those countries that have more effective waste disposal systems in place, the Indian system requires sanitation workers to regularly descend into manholes to remove sewer blockages, or pick up used menstrual products from public toilets or even by the roadside. A recent survey conducted by PMC and non-profit Bharatiya...

Shree Shikshan Jagran (BSSJ) found as many as a quarter of a million used sanitary napkins are discarded in Pune every day. They either choke drainage pipelines or litter footpaths. This is true for any city in India. (5)

In contravention to existing laws, these workers, who are all members of lower (‘untouchable’) castes, are given no protection for doing this work. All tasks are done without protective clothing, gloves or masks. This puts the workers at the risk of contracting infections or even deadly viruses or diseases. (6)

This leads to a question that is never addressed in the ads that celebrate the ‘liberating’ effects of disposable menstrual products. Whose liberation are we talking about?

What can I do?

Fortunately there are alternatives. Eco-friendly and ethical menstrual products are now available that are hygienic, cost-effective & attractive to wear as well as causing minimal damage to the environment. Cloth menstrual pads are a common alternative which can be worn in the same manner as a disposable pad, and there is also the menstrual cup (see left), an alternative to tampons.

Menstrual cups are becoming more popular worldwide, with many different brands on the market, and there are different sizes and shapes available too. The same applies to cloth pads, there are a number of different brands and designs on the market as well as tutorials on how to stitch them yourself.

Eco Femme is a social enterprise based in Auroville, Tamil Nadu, India with a global mission and reach, working in the the area of menstrual hygiene management. In addition to promoting eco-positive menstrual practices, our project supports education for girls and livelihood for women, with a focus on rural India. Eco Femme has designed a premium range of cloth washable pads that are available within India and internationally. Profits from sales help sustain our educational outreach work and enable us to provide cloth pads at cost price to economically disadvantaged women and girls.

To find out more visit: [http://www.ecofemme.org/](http://www.ecofemme.org/) and you can also watch our new video made by Auroville Video Productions in partnership with [earth&us](http://earthandus.org) entitled 'Masika' which details the current situation in India and the possible solutions: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xr2xXs7VmA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xr2xXs7VmA)

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(2) [http://www.down2earthmaterials.ie/decompose/](http://www.down2earthmaterials.ie/decompose/)
(4) [http://www.indiantextilejournal.com/articles#details.asp?id=1567](http://www.indiantextilejournal.com/articles#details.asp?id=1567)
(5) [http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/kicking-stink](http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/kicking-stink)