

Have you ever thought about what tampons and disposable pads are made of? Like most people, Indian ecologist Shradha Shreejaya believed for a long time that they were simply made of cotton. It was only when she was 24 years old and involved in environmental protection campaigns that she realized how much plastic and toxic ingredients conventional tampons and pads contain. Suddenly she understood why she kept getting these red skin rashes. She had always thought it was because of her skin type, or maybe she wasn't clean enough. She switched to a menstrual cup, which revolutionized her life. Not only was she suddenly rid of her rash, but for the first time the cup allowed her to touch herself in her most intimate places, giving her a more natural relationship with the areas of her body sexualized by society. Her perception changed and she asked herself: Why are girls and women ashamed of a completely natural, biological process that has its origin in something as essential as human reproduction? In India, monthly bleeding is such a taboo that many girls and women do not even talk about it among themselves.

Spurred by her own experience, the environmental scientist became interested in the impact menstrual products have not only on the environment but also on the health and wellbeing of girls and women. She understood that changes in this field are only possible if the taboos are broken. To solve problems, you have to be able to

address them. But this is a big challenge in her home country, because in many parts of India, girls and women are considered unclean during their menstruation and are not allowed to enter a temple or the kitchen. Often they also stay away from school during this time, either because they are afraid that stains will show on their clothes or because there is no way to change and dispose of sanitary pads in many schools. Often girls even drop out of school because of this.

At home, too, especially in rural areas and slums, women face the problem of not knowing where to dispose of used menstrual products. They are not allowed to put them in the household rubbish. They get soaked up in the toilet and clog up the sewage system. In rural areas, women often walk long distances to bury them in the ground outside the villages. Or they wedge them between their thighs when they bathe in the lake or river to get rid of them there. But regardless of whether they are in the water or in the ground, because of their high plastic content, each individual pad exists for another hundreds of years. When women burn them, toxic gases are released.

Disposable products are, of course, very practical for most girls and women, and most consider them a great advance over the scraps of cloth women have traditionally used for this purpose. The Indian government wants to help more women use disposable pads, so it distributes them at a reduced price to girls aged

between 10 and 19 in rural areas. It has also abolished the tax on sanitary pads and tampons, because the purchase is a financial problem for many. The state loses sight of the waste problem in the process.

Another important point is not addressed either, and this is not only a problem in India, but worldwide: How can it be, Shrada wonders, that we pay attention to healthy nutrition and low-pollutant cosmetics, but hardly anyone questions what chemicals are contained in menstrual products? There is no obligation to declare the ingredients, yet every woman should have the right to know which toxins and plastics regularly come into contact with her mucous membranes for about 40 years.

Shrada began researching what initiatives already existed to spread sustainable menstrual products. Fortunately for her, her home state of Kerala in southern India has a very progressive and environmentally conscious government and participates in the international Zero Waste Cities program. This means that there was already a dense network of NGOs working on waste issues. But Shrada found hardly any that dealt with the issue of menstruation. She used social media to connect with activists in this field and came across initiatives like »The Red Cycle« or »EcoFemme,« a cooperative that produces washable sanitary napkins from organic cotton, providing jobs for socially disadvantaged women.

At the same time, the women use the surplus from the sale of the cloth sanitary napkins to finance educational campaigns in schools. In order to network the existing projects, Shrada co-founded the »Sustainable Menstruation Kerala Collective« – an informal group of committed individuals, initiatives, and producers who have the same concern: to provide girls and women with access to healthy, affordable, and environmentally-friendly menstrual products. To this end, they exchange ideas with each other or organize festivals and campaigns. They educate and present environmentally-friendly and harmless alternatives at public events and in schools, such as washable cloth pads and menstrual cups made of medical silicone, which do not harm the environment or the body and are cheaper in the long run, despite the higher one-time purchase costs. They earn a lot of thanks for finally addressing a topic that is tainted with so much shame. Shrada is aware that not every woman has the opportunity to choose freely. Often it fails because of such basic things as clean toilets, which is why they also involve politicians in their work. Education, social situation, environment, and health – everything is connected. Shrada's efforts have been instrumental in making Kerala a good example for the whole of India.