

## NAPKIN RING: WHY INNOVATION IN MENSTRUAL PADS IS MORE THAN JUST FLUFF

Donating menstrual pads to developing countries has become a new go-to for Western “humanitarian” aid. In many developing countries, young women struggle with unreliable toilets, imperfect period pads, and the economic pressures that come with sexual maturation. Under the guise of keeping girls in school (since some rural, underprivileged students drop out when Aunt Flo arrives if they can’t afford the right rags), everyone from Procter & Gamble to small-town churches have started sending napkins abroad (“Blood Pressure,” no. 39). Unfortunately, Western donors often support the wrong type of pad: disposable, petroleum-based napkins.

These pads clog landfills, family compounds, and water channels in countries whose waste removal systems cannot process them. Countries like Mozambique and Bangladesh struggle with rubbish pickup. Uganda has only a handful of landfills for its 33.4 million residents. In such places, residents burn their garbage, or wait until a rainstorm washes it downstream.

Sanitary pads can also stress underdeveloped waste systems. They don’t burn well in open fires and create a hazard when left out for the next rain. Animals feed on them. They overflow pit latrines. And when bathrooms lack trash cans, women riding the crimson tide must get creative with their used pads.

Lastly, pad “philanthropy” creates demand for the latest, greatest commercial menstrual



*Pad “philanthropy” creates demand for the latest, greatest commercial menstrual products, turning environmentally unsound napkins into a luxury good.*

products, turning environmentally unsound napkins into a luxury good.

Fortunately, alternatives exist. Small-scale producers

offer a variety of local, environmentally friendly alternatives. In Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, India, and Malaysia, organizations make pads from papyrus,

banana fiber, water hyacinth, cloth, and wood cellulose.

Dr. Moses Musaaazi, a professor at Makerere University in Uganda, invented MakaPads (t4tafrica.co) in 2003 after the Rockefeller Foundation first approached him to develop a sanitary pad incinerator. The foundation then funded the development of the napkins, made from locally sourced papyrus and recycled paper. The company employs more than 240 Ugandans, many of them socioeconomically disadvantaged workers including refugees, women, and people living with HIV/AIDS. Most of the production process requires little electricity, so factories can operate in the middle of refugee camps, where jobs and power are scarce. Since the Ugandan Bureau of Standards has formally approved MakaPads, consumers can find them in select shops for about \$.56 - \$.68. In July, Musaaazi plans to paint an auto rickshaw with the MakaPads logo and sell his product around the city, like an ice cream truck for sanitary pads.

In Kisumu, Kenya, an NGO called K-MET (kmet.co.ke) started making reusable cloth napkins in 2009. A group of eight young mothers assembles the product on simple sewing machines, then travels throughout the country to train other women how to do the same—more than 85 women have been trained so far. Executive Director Monica Oguttu explains how K-MET teaches women

about more than pads: "We use sanitary towels as an entry... into reproductive health issues. [The girls] can openly discuss menstruation, and we use that to enter into discussions like negotiating the use of condoms and family planning."

India's Arunachalam Muruganatham invented a small-motor, stainless-steel pad-making machine. Not only is his award-winning invention a much-needed alternative to industry-monopolizing giants like Johnson & Johnson and the aforementioned Proctor & Gamble, he also sells it directly to women's collectives and NGOs to keep costs low and business local (newinventions.in). Currently, 600 of his appliances produce pine-cellulose napkins throughout India.

And in Malaysia, a team of female students was a finalist in a 2010 national design competition for their biodegradable prototype, Bombastic Pads. The clever students concocted their pads from banana fiber, tapioca, and vinegar, and oven-dried them in the kitchen of their hostel.

With all of the environment- and labor-friendly pads that small-scale entrepreneurs are dreaming up abroad, there's no need to donate corporate rags. When girls start seeing red, it's time to think green.

—Liz Granger

## BREAKING: UNMARRIED WOMEN VANISH FROM FRANCE!

The French are doing away with the term "mademoiselle." *Quelle belle idée!* In the close and inevitable future, a young or unmarried French woman will not be referred to with the diminutive "mademoiselle." (Traditionally, even small boys are addressed from the start with the term "monsieur," which judges neither age nor marital status.) Now, according to a memo issued this past February by the office of French Prime Minister François Fillon, all official terms used to identify a woman in relation to the men in her life are to be stricken from administrative use.

The announcement stated that "mademoiselle" (miss), "nom de jeune fille" (maiden name, or literally, "name of young girl"), "nom patronymique" (father's name), and "nom d'épouse/nom d'époux" (spouse's name) will be progressively removed from all government and civic forms and administrative communications, with already-printed material to be used until supplies are exhausted. "Mademoiselle" will be replaced with "madame" as the equivalent of "monsieur," with the memo formally recognizing that the latter two terms do not prejudice individuals on the basis of marital status. Acknowledging, as well, that men may wish to take a woman's name in

marriage, "nom de jeune fille" will be avoided. "Nom patronymique" will be replaced with "nom de famille" (family name) and "nom d'épouse/époux" with "nom d'usage" (which, in English, means simply, "The name one is using").

Two French feminist organizations have been pushing since last September for a linguistic departure from these vestiges of patriarchal hegemony: Osez le féminisme, or "Dare to be feminist," and Les Chiennes de Garde, which some like to translate as "Watchdogs." But since *les chiennes* are dogs of the female sort, I prefer to use the more civil term "Guard Bitches." Either way, this counts as a *victoire*. —Roz Foster



ILLUSTRATIONS BY KRISTEN ROGERS BROWN