

# Uger: New beginnings in sustainable, safe, and dignified menstruation

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"Gross" might be a very normal reaction to the suggestion of a 'reusable' alternative to menstrual waste, that too in the colour white. Yet disposable sanitary pads, single-use tampons, absorbent sponges – attractive packages that help women overcome their monthly discomfort – land up month on month in landfills, adding to the environment 'gross'ness that surrounds us, never quite going away. It doesn't help that in India the very topic of menstruation is weighed down with non-scientific beliefs, silence, and discomfort.

*Uger*, a social enterprise that emerged out of NID Ahmedabad in 2011, is working in the bastis of Udaipur towards promoting better menstrual health and awareness on one hand, while creating an alternative to environmentally unsustainable synthetic pads. Smriti Kedia of Uger speaks with The Alternative on why sanitary waste is an issue that is crying for attention:

What is Uger?

'*Uger*', meaning 'new beginnings' in Mewari, the local language of South Rajasthan. Uger was launched by Lakshmi Murthy – who's pursuing a PhD in menstrual management and sustainability from IIT Bombay – in partnership with the NGO *Jatan Sansthan*, who have been working in the area of adolescent health.

Appalled at the lack of menstrual hygiene among rural adolescents and the many unsafe alternatives, from sawdust to bags of sand, that were used to manage monthly periods, Jatan Sansthan and Lakshmi Murthy launched a campaign Surakshit Mahawari Abhiyan or 'Safe Menstrual Health'. The aim of the campaign was to break the silence surrounding the topic in the community, as well as delve deeper in to the subject through studies and research.

"Uger began as Lakshmi Murthy was very concerned with poor menstrual hygiene among socio-economically backward populations," says Kedia. The initiative was started to encourage women to talk about menstruation, connect with their bodies and make healthy choices this initiative was started," says Kedia. With 6 young women from low income families, Uger also started a production unit to hand cut and stitch clean reusable cotton pads, that is now available for women across the country.

What is wrong with disposable pads?

"Disposable pads are made from wood pulp that is heavily bleached to become white. Disposable pads largely use fine plastic layers; the top and bottom covering is made of plastic. Both the bleaching agent and the plastic is not good for skin. Many of the pads also use chemicals and dioxin that have a vapourizing effect. This can lead to problems of uterus and vagina," says Kedia. Most of the raw materials (non woven polymers, polyacrylate gel, plastics) in disposable pads are not natural. These have been giving users several health problems including boils, severe itching, fungal infection and contact dermatitis. There is also a tendency to wear them much longer which is also a cause for the associated health problems.

Tampons on the other hand absorb important secretions in addition to the blood. They leave fine fibre on the walls of the uterine channels potentially leading to reproductive tract infections.

It is estimated that only in the USA, 20 billion pads get discarded every year! Reusable pads can potentially save thousands of non-biodegradable pads and tampons from going in to the landfills or discarded in garbage dumps where they are torn, tossed around by dogs, or worse still, consumed by cattle.

"A woman throws away a minimum of 120 pads a year. Uger pads come for 70 washes and could easily last for a year and more. Besides, cotton is a natural fibre and has a cooling effect on the skin. So there are no dangers of it harming the skin or causing problems like boils, itching or rashes. So switching over to cloth pads made of cotton makes sense," says Kedia.

Uger pads

Uger was launched in September 2012 and a production centre was opened in Ramnagar. The centre today is a five member team led by a designer-researcher and is supported by Jatan Sansthan. They have four online outlets selling Uger pads and also take custom client orders.

Currently Uger retails a Lite Pad, Insert Pads, and Panty Liners. The Insert Pad is a pad meant for heavy flow days and comes with insert towels. The base is a thick layer with 6-7 layers of absorbent cotton and on the top absorbent cotton towels can be inserted. Lite Pad is a single pad with inbuilt 6-7 layers of absorbent cotton. Panty liner is for every day use and has four layers of cotton inside for issues like spotting or white discharge. The top surface of all their pads is white in colour.

These pads are designed in such a way that they can be folded in to neat little packs and stored in handbags as well.

The challenges of adoption

"Convincing women from higher economic groups to think of alternative solutions and move away from the comforts of disposable pads is a challenging task," says Kedia. She adds, "When I introduce washable pads, women in cities ask me where do I hang the pads for drying? We are comfortable hanging underwear but we have not yet accepted the fact that it is okay to wash and hang our pads as well."

Also Uger pads are white at the top. "This does not go down well with women as they believe that pads should be absolutely stain free and sparkling white. So they prefer darker surfaces," she says. Why white? "Uger has always stood for white surfaces. We want women to see and monitor what is coming out of their body."

Another challenging task has been the lack of research material in this field. "If we want to conduct trials or experiments it is difficult to find volunteers for research and sustain their interest for a long time," she woes.

#### Future plans

Increasing outreach in terms of sales and acceptance of these reusable pads, involving men and creating awareness at workplaces are some of their plans. "Working women spend 8-10 hours in an office. We would like to make work-spaces more friendly to a woman's special needs, with a focus on adopting to reusable eco-friendly products, like an Uger pad," says Kedia.

"I dream of a future when women are open about their menstrual needs and feel no shame when using reusable pads." – Lakshmi Murthy, Uger

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