

Are sanitary pads a panacea for impoverished women?

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Credit: Netflix

In an era when the Indian government has prioritized women's menstrual health and movies like Netflix's "Period. End of Sentence" are garnering worldwide attention, the distribution of disposable sanitary pads to women in India's rural areas has been widely celebrated.

The question is, though, does it solve problems for these girls and

women?

Shobita Parthasarathy, professor of public policy and women's and [gender studies](#) at the University of Michigan, addresses this question in a recent research article in the journal *Social Studies of Science*.

"I immediately noticed that although these solutions are supposed to be helping [adolescent girls](#) and women, no one was asking them what they needed," she said. "You're trying to promote social equity and justice, yet the way we talk about them is as if they are ignorant and primitive. We act like we can't trust people who have limited incomes or are marginalized with identifying solutions or to know what is right for themselves."

Focusing on the case of menstrual hygiene management and disposable sanitary pads in India, Parthasarathy examines the politics of knowledge that are shaping the recent turn toward inclusive innovation in international development. She argues that the convergence of scientific and market priorities defines the choice of solutions and our understanding of global development problems.

"India is such a fascinating and unique place, especially regarding innovation. It has a long history of taking indigenous knowledge seriously and emphasizing local capacity building," Parthasarathy said. "But by saying that disposable pads will save these women, we are reinforcing the idea that innovation is primarily about market generation and commodification.

"International development institutions, governments and [social entrepreneurs](#) are increasingly enthusiastic about 'inclusive innovation,' which, to solve problems in low- and [middle-income countries](#), focuses on developing technologies for and by the poor."

Inclusive innovation differs from previous development efforts by focusing on devices instead of infrastructure. Other issues to consider with disposable sanitary pad distribution are societal, health-related and environmental. Is this solution really addressing the challenges that these girls and women face in society? Does it really value girls' and women's knowledge? Does India have the proper infrastructure to manage sanitary pad disposal?

"Claiming to be based on scientific evidence and rooted in local knowledge and expertise, they rely on market logic to achieve humanitarian ends," Parthasarathy said. "However, in the process, they reinforce narrow understandings of both inclusion and innovation in international development."

More information: Shobita Parthasarathy, How sanitary pads came to save the world: Knowing inclusive innovation through science and the marketplace, *Social Studies of Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/03063127221122457](https://doi.org/10.1177/03063127221122457)

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