

Sustainable Cycles pedals awareness about menstrual cups

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Over a lifetime, the average woman spends about \$2,000 on single-use pads and tampons, creating an enormous truckload of trash. There are more affordable and sustainable options that very few people seem to know about. To raise awareness, we decided to take this cycle to the road – literally.

We left Seattle on bikes Aug. 18, and plan to be in LA by the end of October. Along the way we are meeting women, community organizers, health professional, business owners, and people of all stripes, and having conversations about the benefits of reusable menstrual products.

Toni Craige and Sarah Konner are bicycling down the West Coast, living on \$4 a day, and talking to people about sustainable menstrual products.

On this trip, we are focusing on menstrual cups – made of latex or silicon. They catch, rather than absorb menstrual flow. One cup costs \$35 and can last up to 10 years – quite a deal. There are three companies that sell menstrual

cups in the U.S. Each company has donated cups – totaling 200 – for us to give as gifts along the way. We also have a small number of reusable pads to give away. Thirty-five dollars is a big chunk of change for many people to spend on a product they have never tried, even as pads and tampons stress their budgets. As we have met people throughout our trip, we are realizing more and more what an economic burden pads and tampons are to low income women. Menstrual products are not covered by food stamps. Women rely on social service agencies, or often improvised devices like rags and socks. Women we have met have been pressed to bum tampons on the street or even shoplift them.

The trouble with disposables

Pads and tampons contain harmful chemicals (bleach and dioxins). Tampons, especially the extra-absorbent kinds, are a perfect breeding ground for the deadly bacteria, toxic shock syndrome (TSS).



Most pads and tampons are made of chlorine-bleached wood pulp, with some cotton, rayon, plastic, and glue mixed in. Imagine the amount of trash that is created in a lifetime of using pads and tampons. That's a lot of trees and oil to be using once and throwing away. It's also a big added burden in our landfills and sewer systems.

The most immediate concern for many women is the cost of single-use products, every month, until menopause. Instead, buy a menstrual cup for \$35, once every 5-10 years. Incredibly convenient. No more trash, no more health risks.

The scoop on reusables

Before the mass production of cloth pads in the 1800s, your period didn't cost you anything. Women used wool, moss, softened papyrus, sea sponges – basically, whatever was around. These days, the most popular reusable products are menstrual cups, reusable cloth pads, and sea sponges.

Menstrual cups are a liberating innovation that took off in the 1980s. Like tampons, they give women freedom of

movement and help them live their lives uninterrupted. Cloth pads are reuseable and can also last many years. To clean, simply soak them in cold water, then put them in with your laundry. You can make your own, or buy them from any of several companies. Sea sponges are worn internally, and function like a tampon. You can wash them and reuse for several months.

Reusables are sold in some health food stores, and are easy to order online.

Learning from the people we meet

Traveling by bicycle you meet a wide cross-section of humanity. Part of the reason we are doing this campaign via bicycle, is to open ourselves to meeting all sorts of people, that we might not know to look for otherwise. In Tacoma, Wash., at the beginning of our trip, we had an amazing experience at the Irma Gary house, a home for recently incarcerated women. All of the women were out at work, but we had the opportunity to talk with the "house-mom," Patty Imani, about the cups and this

demographic of women. In prison, women are not allowed to have any of their own belongings, including underwear and bras, and women are only allowed to use pads – no tampons. Patty also told us that buying, bumming, or finding pads and tampons at distribution centers is a struggle for women experiencing poverty. Because Patty lives with the women for several months as they transition into independent housing, we hope she can be an ally to help them make this empowering lifestyle change. Patty now has five cups to give to the women who will use them.

We believe that person-to-person relationships are the way that people make this lifestyle change. We are on the move and we don't have time to make relationships with everyone. Since meeting Patty, we are realizing the value of connecting with case workers and community leaders who can carry our message to people we do not come in contact with. If we wisely plant seeds with a few allies, the impact can go far!

Making the switch

Changing to reusables may seem like a challenging adjustment: there is an initial price barrier, and reusables put us in slightly more intimate contact with our bodies. The economic, environmental, health and convenience of these products far outweigh the challenge. Likely, someone you know already uses sustainable menstrual products– ask them about it. If not, use us as a resource. Call us, email us, look at our blog, www.sustainablecycles.org.

We invite you to participate in the continuing brainstorming as this project grows. Do you have any ideas for getting the word out and increasing accessibility for low-income women? Do you know of a person or organization we should get in contact with? We are looking for caseworkers, community organizations, or anyone who has ongoing relationships with communities who could benefit from access to these products.

Follow Sarah's and Toni's journey at www.sustainablecycles.org

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