

## Safe Sanitary Napkins for Everyone

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Last year was a very important year for Korea in terms of both women's health movement and environmental health movement. For the first time in more than 50 years since the production of disposable sanitary napkins began in Korea, safety issues have been publicized, and the side effects and suffering caused by using napkins have been voiced by 3,009 people. These health hazards experienced by the women during their menstrual periods have questioned the universality of mainstream napkins and strongly urged the integration of the women's experiences into scientific knowledge.

As a result, we made a survey on all 666 kinds of sanitary napkins produced and distributed domestically. We are also in the process of introducing the labeling of all components of sanitary napkins at the end of October this year. Health effects of disposable sanitary napkins are also being investigated by relevant authorities centering on the Ministry of Environment. Although not enough, this is an unprecedented institutional achievement in the world. First of all, I would like to celebrate with all of the women who supported the efforts and gained strength.



Demanding a regulation on the use of noxious chemicals in sanitary napkins

Until now, however, neither the issue of identifying hazardous properties of sanitary napkins nor the issue of preparing safety measures has been practically solved. In the past year, Ministry of Food and Drug Safety (MFDS) has consistently been slow in responding to the incidents and keen on reducing the impacts. Consolidating the press reports circulated some time ago, a question arises over the credibility of the results of the first and second experiments. The system of labeling all ingredients of sanitary napkins, which is expected to be implemented in October this year, does not oblige manufacturers to disclose the properties of ingredients including carcinogenicity, reproductive toxicity, and allergen-inducing substances such as polymer absorbers and fragrances, citing technical difficulties and trade secrets as excuses. Even if the system is implemented in this way, it will be difficult to know the ingredients completely.

Companies are also adopting 'ecological', 'organic', 'safe' and other advertising phrases

rather than actual changes and improvements in their products against the backdrop of the debate over women's health and safety. They are using the controversy about women's anxiety and safety only as a way to raise prices. Organic sanitary napkins released at premium prices have not been proven to be really safe.

On the other hand, certain companies have even filed lawsuits claiming large sums of money against civic groups and researchers who have raised the issue to bring justice to the women's voices. Beyond individual groups and researchers, it is the act of threatening the voluntary voices and legitimate demands of women and citizens with the logic of capital and unjust lawsuits.

After the controversy on the story of 'insole sanitary napkins' (It was found that many low-income girls cannot afford actual napkins and use shoe insoles as cheap alternatives.), the issue of the sanitary napkins for the homeless women has recently come under the spotlight, revealing that the trend of high prices of sanitary napkins is still underway. Some municipalities and political parties have promised the provision of free sanitary napkins in advance of the June 13 local elections, but most of the beneficiaries are limited to female youths and their pledges are also being attacked as mere populism. Menstruation is a fundamental right and a right to life that must be respected regardless of income and age. The central government must allocate and guarantee funds for the public hygiene issue.

May 28 is World Menstrual Hygiene Day. It symbolizes that women have menstrual cycles every 28 days for an average of 5 days. In the Korean society where prejudice and abhorrence of women and menstruation are prevalent, the dignified and natural menstruation is an issue of women's human rights, and ensuring easy access to safe sanitary napkins is the departure point. As menstruation continues, our anxiety about sanitary napkins continues.

Even though disposable sanitary napkins are still filled with hazardous chemicals that harm women's health, governments and businesses neither investigate their health risks properly nor provide safety measures. We demand that governments and businesses be more responsible and quick to secure sanitary napkins. Also we protest against this unjust reality, and want to express our sense of urgency about making safe sanitary napkins more accessible for everyone.



Workshop to create alternative sanitary napkins



Making cotton napkins