

Change mindsets to change cities say wastepickers

PUNE: "Yeh aadat se majboor nahi, aadat se majboot hai," said Rebecca Kedari, a worker with Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), amid laughter from the participants that had gathered in Yashada on day two of the workshop conducted by KKPKP, SWaCH and earth and us together with MIT-Tata Center.

Participants discussed the issue of sanitary waste through the various sessions. The panels discussed the journey of discarded sanitary waste which is not only a concern of health and dignity for waste workers but also a chronic environmental concern. Another important topic of discussion was alternatives (cloth pads and menstrual cups), which will have to be the way forward towards a sustainable, environmental friendly system.

Nobody wants to deal with sanitary waste due to repulsion and cultural taboo, but it is collected by the wastepickers and handled on multiple levels with bare hands and no other protection. These used sanitary napkins and diapers which become the bulk of such waste are made of plastic and materials that are neither recyclable nor compostable. These products eventually wind up in dumps in the city or worse, in incinerators where they are burned, releasing toxins along with other pollutants into the air.

The sessions started in the morning with an introduction by Lakshmi Narayan of SWaCH and KKPKP, followed by sessions conducted by Anne Scheinberg of WASTE from the Netherlands, and Rachel Perlman, a fellow at the MIT-TATA Center. Anne presented a thesis conducted by her student on 'Local Production And Waste Management Of Sanitary Towels For Women In India' where she showed that financial inclusion improves sanitation and health, especially in rural India, and menstrual health is an integral part of total sanitation. She concluded with a hypothesis that local producers could produce compostable towels which could be co-managed with organic waste.