

Disposable nappies: a looming environmental threat?

Third World mothers have always managed fine without disposable nappies. But if a big new marketing push succeeds, says Hilary Solly, it could spell disaster for the environment

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How do mothers survive without disposable nappies? In India, parents use either cloth nappies for their babies or leave their bottoms bare. During the first six months a mother usually stays with her baby and rarely leaves the house, making the practicalities of toilet care easier. As soon as the baby pees or poos, she cleans it up.

The concept of a disposable nappy, which holds urine or faeces close to a baby's genitals, is perceived as unclean. When nappies are used they are often made from the old clothes of older relatives or friends.

Lucy Norris, a social anthropologist at University College London, says there is a widespread belief in India that material things absorb and transmit the essence of the person who owns them. In this way, these cloth nappies also provide a form of spiritual protection for the child's wellbeing.

In China, toddlers wear kaidangku or "split pants" (trousers open at the crotch so that youngsters can pee or poo when they like). Split pants have been popular in China for decades and are still the norm in rural areas. In the 1970s, when Mao-suit greys and blues were worn by adults, children's vividly hued kaidangku were often the only splashes of colour on the drab streets.

In both countries, parents are likely to reject throwaway products as a waste of money. But two big producers of nappies want to change all that. At a time when many eco-conscious Westerners are switching to reusable nappies, they've got their sights set on massive new potential markets in low-income countries.

There are an estimated 321 million babies aged under two-and-a-half in the world. If each of those babies wore disposable nappies, assuming an average of 4.2 daily nappy changes, 6,000 tonnes of nappies would need to be disposed of every day. That's an awful lot of nappies and an awful lot of landfill.

Fortunately, this is not yet the case. But major nappy producers such as Procter & Gamble (Pampers) and Kimberly-Clark (Huggies) want to break into the world's fastest-growing segment of consumers - low-income people in developing countries.

The focus is on India and China as these countries contain the largest infant populations combined with a growing middle class. If you look at population figures

versus market penetration, it is clear to see why the nappy industry is so keen to market its products. India has an estimated 55 million children under two years old, China 40 million. However, of these children, only around 2 per cent in India and 6 per cent in China use disposable nappies.

Compare these figures with the UK, which has only 1.7 million children under two, with at least 90 per cent using disposables, and you can see why the nappy industry wants to head east.

However, to increase market penetration, nappy manufacturers need to overcome cultural and economic blocks, so the nappy lobby is using a form of cultural imperialism to convince Indian and Chinese parents that their babies' bottoms require the superior qualities of a disposable nappy. P&G devotes about 30 per cent of its \$1.9bn annual research and development spending on low-income markets, a 50 per cent increase from five years ago.

P&G researchers have gone into the poorest homes in Shanghai to understand childcare habits and the potential nappy users' attitudes and preconceptions. They found that most mothers used either split pants or cloth rags as nappies, and that cultural barriers to using disposable nappies included the belief that they caused infertility and bow-leggedness. These notions might be ill-conceived, but it does not mean that the Chinese population requires disposable nappies.

To counteract economic reticence, P&G's brief is to produce a nappy that should cost a Chinese parent no more than a fresh egg (around 6p). The present average cost (around 10p) remains unaffordable for many Chinese, particularly in rural areas.

But in the cities, the marketing activities of the nappy industry are setting into motion a change in habits. Increased disposable income among the middle-class has led to an acceptance of the concept of throwaway products. Split pants are starting to be seen as unhygienic and old-fashioned, associated with poverty, and rural backwardness.

The Chinese government, in its quest to reduce "unclean" practices, is indirectly supporting the argument. Many cities have outlawed garbage dumping, public urination and spitting. And a country that's inviting the world in for the Olympics in 2008 hardly wants visitors to see public spaces used as toilets.

Other ploys used by nappy companies in China include questionable baby-development arguments. "Pampers promote overnight dryness, and help baby have a good night's sleep," says Yvonne Pei, associate director of external relations for P&G in China. "If baby doesn't have good sleep, baby doesn't have good mental development." A giant blue nappy-wearing elephant, "Bang Bang", promotes the company's nappies in department stores, playing with children and touting special deals. There has been a surge of images and talk about nappies on TV, in newspapers and parenting magazines. The more upmarket shops are no longer carrying split pants but rather shelves full of nappies.

In India, resistance seems stronger. "They are more concerned about throwing into the trash something as expensive as a diaper - they are used to recycling everything," says Carlos Richer, a nappy consultant from the US. Srikanth Srinivasamadhavan, sales

and marketing manager for Kimberly-Clark, agrees. Speaking to The Hindu, he said: "The Indian consumer has an attitudinal barrier towards disposables ... The Indian mother is cost-conscious and likes to recycle most of the products used for her household."

The approach in India has been to introduce a disposable pad that is placed inside the cloth nappy, the idea being that once this has been accepted it could be replaced by a complete disposable nappy.

The intense marketing pressure of the disposable-nappy industry is already reaping benefits. In China, P&G claims that annual sales of Pampers are growing by more than 50 per cent each year. In India cultural resistance is stronger, but a nappy explosion is predicted nevertheless.

According to Carlos Richer, India is set to become the largest consumer of throwaway nappies in the world, with disposable income being enough to support a market penetration of 10-12 per cent. This means big bucks for Pampers and Huggies, but at what cultural and environmental cost for India and China?

"Disposable nappies are a completely unnecessary product for these two countries that have raised babies perfectly well using existing methods for centuries. They will create millions of tonnes of waste and potentially deepen poverty, as parents will be hooked into buying products they have not had to buy before," says Liz Sutton from the Women's Environmental Network (WEN).

Already campaigning to change Western parents' attitudes to nappies, WEN, the Real Nappy Campaign and other environmentalists now have to counteract the marketing of the disposable nappy in countries such as India and China, to ensure that western notions of hygiene and "convenience" do not degrade their cultural traditions.

Nappies - what every parent needs to know

DISPOSABLES

The environment

A baby will use around 5,000 nappies over their nappy-wearing life. That produces a mountain of waste equivalent to 130 black bin-bags full.

Nearly 8 million nappies are thrown away every day in the UK; that's 3 billion a year.

More disposable nappies are found in UK household waste than anything else. It is thought the plastics in disposable nappies could take hundreds of years to decompose.

Your pocket

Disposable nappies cost more than £900, based on six changes a day at 16.9p per nappy for two and a half years.

SHAPED REUSABLES

The environment

While disposable nappies are made of chemicals, paper pulp, plastics and adhesives, real nappies are mostly natural. Organic cotton and hemp nappies and organic wool over-pants are ideal.

The Women's Environmental Network (WEN) says that by using 24 nappies and laundering them in an energy-efficient washing machine at 60C, parents can reduce global warming by 24 per cent.

Your pocket

Using home-laundered shaped reusable nappies for two and a half years will cost around £350, including all laundering and energy costs (according to WEN calculations based on three popular brands). This is £500 cheaper than disposables.

Commercial nappy laundering costs from £6 to £11.50 per week. This makes the cost to you comparable with using disposable nappies (but with big savings on landfill).

TOWELLING NAPPIES

The environment

The cheapest option. You can kit out your baby in real nappies, including fastenings and coverings, for under £50.

The cost of keeping a baby in

terry nappies for two and a half years, including laundry and energy costs, is calculated by WEN as only £182.50.