

Considerations for selecting sanitary protection and incontinence materials for refugee contexts

(Adapted for UNHCR, 2016: From House, S. 2013)

The table which follows provides an overview of the consideration for selecting sanitary protection and incontinence materials and associated NFIs for refugee responses.

Following the table there are two pages which have images of a) re-usable sanitary pads; and b) incontinence materials; which aim to introduce the reader to terminologies that may otherwise sometimes cause confusion.

Notes:

1. Refer to pages 64-73, Module 3, in the [Menstrual Hygiene Matters manual](#) for pictures of options of types of menstrual materials and further information.
2. This table only considers re-usable cloth or pads or disposable pads for menstrual hygiene. It does not consider tampons, menstrual cups, menstrual sponges or other alternative products, as these are less likely to be acceptable or available in low income contexts (except perhaps for people affected by the emergency from medium / higher income urban contexts, who already utilise them prior to the emergency).
3. Specifications for the material type and weight for cloth for inclusion in pre-stocks, or the minimum number of re-usable launch pads/holders or liners still vary by context and agency and no standard specification currently exists – either for menstrual hygiene or incontinence. UNHCR has a Minimum Commitment to women related to sanitary protection materials, which is identified below.
4. It is very important to ensure decisions on sanitary and incontinence protection materials and associated NFIs are made:
 - a) After consultation with women and girls or people with incontinence or their carers;
 - b) In consultation with other sectors working in the emergency response. These may include: shelter, camp management, community services, logistics, health, education and protection.
5. The availability of appropriate WASH and disposal facilities for the same can influence preference on sanitary protection material types; care is needed to ensure that responses are coherent; and also that distribution channels are discrete and appropriate (such as through community based distributions, health centres, protection spaces, schools etc). For incontinence, household distribution may be the most appropriate mechanism, particularly if the person also has mobility limitations.

UNHCR has made Five Commitments to Refugee Women

One of them is:

‘The provision of sanitary materials to all women and girls of concern will become standard practice in all UNHCR assistance programs. This is central to women’s dignity and health’.

The commitment is to provide:

1. Either absorbent cotton material (4 sqm/year) or disposable napkins (12/month)
2. Underwear (6/year)
3. Soap (250g/month) – *in addition to the general soap distributions*

Table 1 - Considerations for sanitary and incontinence protection materials for emergencies

Criteria	Considerations for menstrual hygiene materials ¹	Considerations for incontinence materials ²
Core considerations		
The preferences of the women and girls or people with incontinence / what they are used to	<p>This may vary by age, income and social or cultural backgrounds of the women and girls.</p> <p>Women and girls may not know how to use a particular product without clear information. In Uganda, girls were washing disposable pads because they saw that their mothers washed their cloths. This example highlights the need for appropriate demonstration and promotion with any distribution.</p>	<p>People with incontinence may have materials they are used to for managing their incontinence, but they may have lost access to the supply or ability to keep their materials clean, hygienic and dry. Or they may appreciate being introduced to improved options.</p>
<p>The thickness, type and absorbency of the material</p> <p>And number of pieces needed for each menstrual cycle or per month for incontinence</p> <p><i>(Note – Pictures showing the different designs and pieces in a re-usable kit follow at the end of this table)</i></p>	<p>This will affect how many times a woman or girl needs to change the cloth or pad per day. The more absorbent the material the less time the cloth/pad will need to be changed, but the drying time is likely to increase.</p> <p>If the drying time is too long the girl or woman may be tempted to use the cloth before it is completely dry which will be uncomfortable and risks irritations.</p> <p>The absorbency and / or number of pads will also vary depending on whether the woman or girl has a day of light flow or heavier flow on that particular day. Both should therefore be considered when determining the number of pieces to be included for each menstrual cycle. i.e. to consider that more changes of pad will be needed on heavy days and less on low flow days and not to just assume one pad for every day.</p> <p>When considering packs of re-usable pads, the absorbency will also have an impact on how many liners are needed in the kit for a girl or women to be able to manage a menstrual cycle. If the woman or girl has to buy their own packs then the cost and what she can afford will impact on how many pieces she can purchase.</p> <p>Particular care is needed to establish the number of pieces required to allow the girl or woman to manage their menses continually. For example <u>it is not adequate</u> to only provide one pad holder / launchpad even if liners are placed on top, as mistakes can be made and the pad holder / launch pad can become soiled and need to be washed mid-cycle. In the meantime the girl / woman will then still need to continue protecting herself. A minimum of two pad holders of launchpad style will be required.</p> <p>In relation to re-usable pads involving complete pads or of envelope style minimum suggested minimum of 6 would be needed. This would allow for three changes on a high flow day and to allow for these to be washed while the girl or woman continues to protect herself. But exact numbers needed must be checked</p>	<p>The fluid flows from incontinence are likely to be much higher than for menstrual periods. Flows will vary significantly depending on the type of incontinence.</p> <p>Guidance will be needed from the individual incontinence sufferer as to how many pads would be needed, per day / per month and whether s/he suffers from light, medium or heavy flows and whether it is intermittent or continuous.</p> <p>The user may need to try some samples out and provide feedback as to whether they are adequate or otherwise.</p> <p>The numbers of pads required are likely to be much higher for incontinence than menstrual hygiene.</p> <p>If someone has severe incontinence such as fistula or is immobile and also has incontinence, it is important to put the person in contact with a health or disability related organisation who can provide specialist care on the use of catheters</p>

¹ The points noted in this table have come from a range of sources and learning which was gathered in the development of the publication: House, S, Cavill, S, Mahon, T (2012) Menstrual hygiene matters: A resource for improving menstrual hygiene around the world, WaterAid & co-published by a range of organisations. In particular the AFRIPads team in Uganda kindly shared their learning from detailed trials with women and girls in Uganda on their preferences for material specifications and designs (p253-4) and UNHCR shared their experiences of providing sanitary materials to women and girls in the camps in Uganda.

² The WASH sector is still learning about WASH needs for incontinence; the recommendations noted here are based on a basic level of discussion between sectors and on the learning related to menstrual hygiene. It is intended to keep updating this guidance as learning from the field increases.

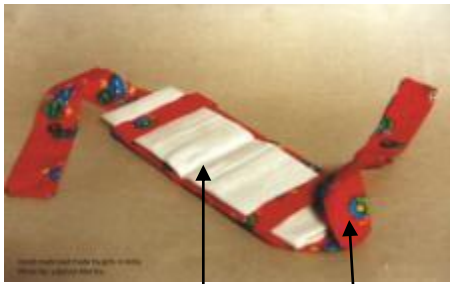
	with women and girls. Also an option could be to distribute a basic 'base' kit and then based on feedback from women and girls to have a follow up distribution with more pieces.	and pressure pads.
The softness of the material	<p>Rough materials such as towelling would be absorbent but too rough to have against the skin. Flannel (brushed), cotton or some synthetic cloths tend to be softer. Rougher fabrics can be used inside an envelope style pad holder.</p> <p>Note that 'flannel' is <u>not the same</u> as 'towelling' (confusion could occur because in the English language a 'flannel' for washing a face is made of towelling). 'Flannel' is a soft woven fabric and can be 'brushed' to create extra softness (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flannel).</p> <p>Materials such as towelling with higher absorbency can be used inside a softer fabric that is placed against the skin.</p>	
How quickly the material will dry	<p>In Uganda, the AFRIPads team learnt that overwhelming feedback from the women who tested the material options was that they valued drying time over absorbency. Because menstruation is a sensitive subject, reducing the time that pads or cloths have to be drying in the open reduces the risks that others will see them (which is often considered as shameful / embarrassing).</p> <p>Cotton fabrics tend to take longer to dry, synthetic fabrics less time. Care must be taken when utilising synthetic fabrics or a mixture of fibres to ensure that they still have adequate absorbency. It could be advisable to pre-wash them before supply which makes them more absorbent before the first use, or ensure that the women / girls are clearly instructed on washing them before first use.</p>	
The colour of the material and how easily the blood and stains will be washed out from the material	<p>This point is important because of the sensitivity and stigma associated with menstruation. Drying a blood stained cloth in the open air under the sun is more risky (for embarrassment) than drying a cloth where the stains have been removed.</p> <p>Blood stains are usually easier to wash out of synthetic material than cotton. Darker or patterned cloths are likely to hide stains better than light or plain cloth. The AFRIPad team noted however that when dark fabrics are washed they tend to look darker with water when washing and hence it is more difficult to know if you have washed the fabric well and hence they went for a lighter colour fabric.</p> <p>There may also be colours which are acceptable or unacceptable to women and girls based on their culture or traditions. In Uganda, UNHCR found that even though a colour of cloth was identified as being acceptable by some women and girls, that it was not necessarily the same when new groups of women and girls arrived in the camps from different backgrounds. The preference of the women and girls will be very important when choosing the colour.</p>	<p>The issue of stains on cloths or materials is also likely to be important for incontinence sufferers, although a different colour of stain than for menstrual hygiene.</p> <p>The issue of smell is likely to be of particular concern in relation to incontinence – the ability to minimise the smell of urine or faeces when wearing the protection materials and when they have been washed and stored should be considered when selecting materials.</p>
Will the material be biodegradable	For disposable products will the material be biodegradable or otherwise? Most commercially available pads are not fully biodegradable because of a plastic lining inside the pad. Some products are available which are mostly biodegradable (95%) such as the MakaPads from Uganda which are produced from Papyrus and waste paper as a social venture, and others are available on the internet.	Information not known on the availability of biodegradable incontinence materials.
Design and how the material will be held in place <i>(Note – Pictures showing the different designs and pieces in a re-usable kit follow at the end</i>	<p>The material needs to be held in place to safely catch the blood. This may be done by attaching the pad to underwear / panties using a popper fixing, by suspending around the waist using some form of belt with the pad placed in a pad holder hung from the belt. For disposable pads they may be held in place using an adhesive strip (although adhesive may weaken after long storage periods), or also held in place with loops at the end and a belt around the waist.</p> <p>Re-usable pads may be with a pad / liner and holder or launch pad; or an envelope style where the absorbent pad goes inside the envelope; or a solid pad style. The pad / liner which sits on top of a holder / launchpad can be washed separately to the holder, whereas for the other two designs the</p>	<p>There are various types of disposable and re-usable incontinence pads and pockets. See the images which follow. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pull up pants for men or women – both re-usable or disposable • Pouches / pockets for men • Pads for women like menstrual hygiene pads but with small additional elasticated 'walls' that

<i>of this table)</i>	whole unit will need to be washed more regularly. This element of the design will therefore influence the number of pads and or holders required.	enable the capture of higher flows of liquids
Associated considerations when selecting sanitary protection products		
<p>Where / how the women and girls will be able to wash and dry their cloths / re-usable materials</p> <p>Additional NFIs</p>	<p>If reusable cloths or pads are provided, then the women and girls will need to be able to wash their materials and dry them in-between use. This will be difficult when they are living in close proximity with male relative and strangers and make their usual coping mechanisms more difficult due to the emergency situation.</p> <p>The minimum standard NFI items as identified in Sphere do not include a plastic washing bowl in the list (p95, Sphere, 2011)³, although practitioners may provide one per family. However even if one is provided, there are likely to be challenges for women and girls in that they may not feel comfortable to wash their menstrual cloths in the same bowl that is also expected to be used to wash utensils and dishes for eating⁴.</p> <p>To remove blood stains from cloth or pads the easiest practice is to first soak them in cold water. How will women and girls have the capacity to soak their cloths before washing them?</p> <p>Where will they be able to wash them in private? Do showers provide adequate privacy and space to be able to squat down to wash cloths in a bucket or bowl as well as bathing? When the wastewater leaves the shower unit is it hidden from view so that any bloody water will not be seen?</p> <p>Where will the women dry their cloths? Do they need drying lines, pegs or other aids (for both clothes and cloths), or can they manage without?</p> <p>Will women and girls need additional soap for the washing of their cloths? Is the provision of warm water feasible / possible or a luxury only possible in cold climate situations?</p>	<p>People with incontinence are also likely to need additional NFIs, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mattress protectors (several) to enable one to be washed and dried while using another the next night • Bucket with lid for soaking re-usable incontinence materials • Line and pegs • Additional soap <p>For people who are immobile, they are also likely to need pressure pads – but these should be provided by specialist service provides with health or disability expertise who can also provide guidance on their use and other guidance.</p>
Disposal options	<p>What systems are available or which could be established? Bins, transfer of contents, burying, burning or incineration?</p> <p>It is critical to consider management systems and sustainability of these systems for the period of the emergency response.</p> <p>Consider also the privacy issues. Women and girls (for MHM) and all (for incontinence) are unlikely to want men, boys or other women and girls to know they are menstruating or have incontinence. Hence facilities for collection of used materials should ideally be integrated into standard facilities such as latrines or shower blocks where they will also go when not menstruating or managing their incontinence; and where others will not know they are menstruating or have incontinence when disposing of their soiled materials.</p>	

³ The Sphere Project (2011) Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response

⁴ Feedback from women and girls in Jamam IDP camp, South Sudan, research undertaken by Rink de Lange, MSF-Holland

Pictures of re-usable menstrual pad kits and terminology



(Photo: Lakshmi Murthy)

Pad holder
'launchpad' style

Pad / liner which is inserted on top of the holder (must be very soft)

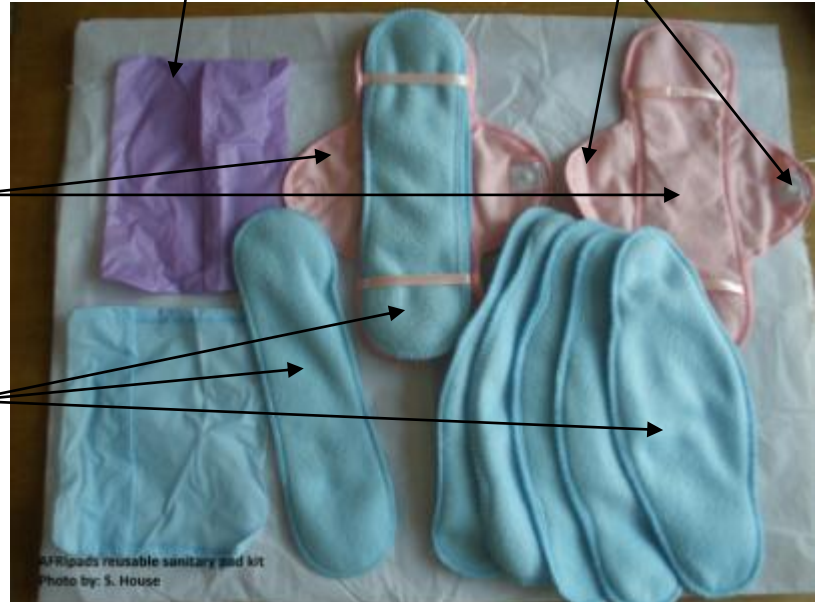
Different shapes are for comfort and high and low flow days. More can be used at one time during high flow days.

The sanitary protection materials above and left are of a 'launchpad' design. The one above as made by women in India. The kit to the right is made by women's workshops established by AFRipads in Uganda.

For this design the pads/liners are placed on top of the pad holder / launchpad and held in place using ribbons / elastic. More pads / liners can be placed on top during high flow days and less on low flow days.

Waterproof bag for storing soiled pads before washing

Poppers to fix the launchpad / holder to the knickers / panties



(Ref: Photo is of the original Afripads re-usable kit; they have since modified their design to an all-in-one design)

The launchpad / holder from India above left is held in place with a belt around the woman's waist which goes through loops in the ends of the launchpad. The launchpad / holders from Uganda above are held in place by poppers which fix under the user's knickers / panties.

The advantage of the launchpad type is that when it is soiled usually only the pad / liners which are placed on top needs to be washed and the launchpad / holder can be re-used. Only on occasions if the girl or woman mis-judges her flow and the launchpad becomes soiled down the sides, will it need to be washed. Hence the importance of having a minimum of two launchpad / holders per kit.



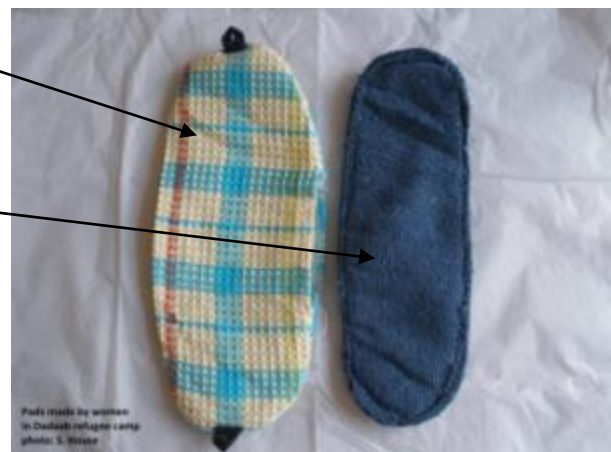
Pad holder
'envelope style'

Absorbent pad /
liner for insertion
into holder

This pad was made by women in Daadab refugee camp in Kenya.

It is of an envelope design. The towelling pad / liner which is absorbent but which is too rough to have next to the woman's body is inserted into the 'envelope' style pad holder. The soft outer pad holder is then next to the woman's body.

The pad holder is held in place by a belt which goes around the woman's waist and which goes through the loops at the end of the pad holder.



The disadvantage of the envelope type is that when it is soiled both the pad / liner inserted inside and the outer holder need to be washed and dried before it can be re-used. Therefore more pieces are needed per menstrual cycle.

Photos of incontinence pads and materials



Mattress protectors