


Chapter 9

Exploring Indigenous Ways of Managing Informal Diapers Disposal in the Vhembe Biosphere Reserve

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore indigenous ways in managing informal diapers disposal in the Vhembe Biosphere Reserve. Disposable diapers are increasingly popular within the Vhembe biosphere reserve. However, the disposal of these diapers in areas without access to solid waste management infrastructure has become a scourge upon, low-income communities, presenting a multitude of health and environmental risks. As such, indigenous knowledge seems to have potential to address this challenge. This is because indigenous methods for waste management are environmentally friendly and sustainable. Indigenous knowledge systems play a crucial role in communities worldwide. However, the indigenous knowledge in communities is rarely known as people are more exposed to modern culture. The objectives of this study was to determine causes of informal diapers disposal and to determine ways of managing informal diaper disposal in indigenous communities in the Vhembe Biosphere Reserve. The findings of this study provided awareness on the importance of indigenous ways in managing informal diapers disposal.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Waste disposal is a growing crisis in many developing countries (Ferronato & Torretta, 2019). In South Africa, the lack of access to reliable and efficient waste disposal systems continues to pose human and environmental health risks, as is the case in many rural communities in the developing world (Muranko, 2021). Diapers are one of the waste streams contributing to increasing landfill inputs in both

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urban and rural areas. In most areas, there are poor or no proper waste management systems for diapers, thus contributing to the pollution of the environment.

Disposal of nappies (or children's faecal waste) continues to be a major environmental health issue in low-income communities and particularly informal settlements in SA (Haywood et al., 2021). The disposal of used disposable diapers has become an uncontrolled environmental health issue. These diapers are often discarded informally and illegally, littering open spaces across various areas. The informal disposal of diapers seems to be worsened by the lack of African ways of understanding waste management that have been useful in the indigenous communities for years. As a result, there is an urgent need to address illegal dumping of diapers as it possesses significant challenge to the well-being and livelihoods of the people.

OVERVIEW ON THE MANAGEMENT OF WASTE

Many local authorities in the developing world lack the adequate means to handle and dispose of waste in an environmentally friendly manner (Wambui & Makindi, 2015). According to Wambui and Makindi (2015), because of this, cities are grappling with the management of used disposable diapers, often referred to as an absorbent hygienic product. Whereas UNICEF (2019) says that "it is common to see these absorbent hygienic products thrown away at undesignated places. The practice has created unsightly images in town, especially in the developing world".

According to Manyele, (2018), the use and disposal of soiled diapers in rural areas represent a lack of Environmental Health Literacy. This is usually observed in disadvantaged communities with low socio-economic status and lack of environmental health risk awareness programs. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), especially in the rural areas, waste management has become a serious challenge (Kumar & Smith, 2017) This is evident in most areas where communities lack appropriate services and find their own means of managing waste, which has left these communities with serious environmental health risks (Agyei-Mensah & Oteng-Ababio, 2012)

South Africa has established various policies and laws aimed at environmental waste management, as highlighted by (Seopa, 2023). According to Seopa (2023), the South African constitution guarantees everyone the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health. Furthermore, it places an obligation on the government to enact legislation and implement policies to protect this right (DEAT, 2007). Key legislation supporting waste management includes the Waste Act of 2008 (Act No. 59 of 2008), the Local Government Transition Act of 1993 (Act No. 209 of 1993), the Municipal Structures Act of 1998 (Act No. 117 of 1998), and the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000). Despite these legal frameworks, it is concerning that the management of used disposable diapers as solid waste remains inadequately addressed in South Africa.

Disposable diapers are increasingly popular in rural areas in Ghana and other African countries (Oteng-Ababio, 2018). Kordecki et al. (2022) emphasize the urgency of an enhanced understanding of purchasing and disposal practices, including economic, socio-behavioral, and cultural factors, to guide interventions that seek to curb the use of disposable diapers or promote more sustainable practices regarding these diapers. Indigenous knowledge is attached with valuable insights into sustainable waste management practices that can be adapted to address contemporary challenges, such as diaper disposal (Zazu, 2007; Kosoe, 2019).

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