

Change begins at home

The ban on a raft of plastics, including non-biodegradable carrybags, is a little over a month away. With the clock beginning to tick faster and louder, a few residents' groups across the city are trying to be as plastic-free as possible.

Hindu
28/11/18

A strategy called **HelpHer**

Here is an initiative that promotes the use of cloth bags through women's self-help groups



"SHG members have stitched more than 2,000 bags so far. We mostly sell the upcycled bags which come in three sizes - small, medium and large - to commercial establishments."

Sofia Juliet R.

Sumitra Srikanth avoids plastic material wherever she can. When she can't, she recycles them. Though she had put her house in order, aligning it with a zero-waste philosophy, she felt utterly powerless when she saw plastic material floating around her neighbourhood.

She knew it was futile to ask people to stop using plastic without offering them a sustainable alternative. She took her time, and chiselled out a strategy. It is called HelpHER initiative.

Launched in July, it serves two purposes: promoting alternatives to single use and throwaway plastic including non-biodegradable bags and providing underprivileged women with a steady source of income.

For the past six months, Sumitra has been sourcing unused and unwanted fabric and swatches from furnishing stores and giving them to members of women self-help groups who stitch them into bags. Several others donated their sparsely-used curtains and other cloth material.

"SHG members have stitched more than 2,000 bags so far. We mostly sell the upcycled bags which come in three sizes - small, medium and large - to commercial establishments for Rs. 15, Rs. 25 and Rs. 40 respectively. The bags are sold at zero profit as the material is mostly donated. The charges are only for the stitching and the time and effort these women put in. By buying these bags, each person helps two causes: environment and women empowerment," says Sumitra.

Resistance to change

Though the public is aware of the harmful effects of plastic, Sumitra finds the resistance to switch over to sustainable options baffling. "I still see people hesitating to buy a cloth bag for Rs. 10 or Rs. 15 but readily buy a single-use plastic bag for Rs. 2 saying it is cheaper. A cloth bag lasts long but a person has to pay Rs. 2 each time for a plastic bag. Do the math and you'll know which is cheaper," she says.

Need more donors

Several furnishing stores and individuals have donated material to stitch the cloth bags but it needs to be sustained, which is a challenge since the material is donated and not bought, says Sumitra. The idea is to shun plastic as well as prevent fabric and clothing material from ending up as waste, and provide these women a stable livelihood. HelpHER is seeking more individuals to donate these material. Besides individuals, its target group includes upholstery outlets and cloth manufacturers. Swatches, small cloth, saris and veshtis, bedsheets and old fabric are accepted.

Here's how you can HelpHER?

Place orders for HelpHER bags and motivate your nearby stores to do away with plastic carry bags.

Organisations can lead support by either donating material or sponsoring the stitching and labour cost through corporate social responsibility initiatives.

If you wish to donate or buy HelpHER bags, contact Sumitra at 9962654868.

Bag it right

Sofia Juliet R.

For three years now, Ceebros Boulevard in Thoraipakkam has been trying to keep single-use plastic out of its premises. Given the fact that its residents' association has not imposed this goal on its residents, the results so far have been impressive. It has successfully encouraged many households to steer away from non-biodegradable bags.

The effort began in 2015, when it launched Boulevard is Green (BIG) to promote environment-friendly practices in the neighbourhood. Soon, they understood that the health and environmental hazards caused by plastic outbalances its benefits. When BIG started, it promoted the practice of recycling non-degradable waste, composting biowaste and using the compost to raise kitchen gardens, carrying cloth bags while shopping, among the residents of Ceebros Boulevard, which has more than 300 families.

Taking the initiative forward, the residents encouraged the lady who sells flowers at the complex to put them in the cloth bags and pouches that are left in front of the houses. "We want to keep every form of single-use plastic from entering or leaving our premises. Almost all our residents now carry a cloth bag and refuse plastic bags from commercial establishments," said a resident of Ceebros Boulevard.

Within the community, there are many such no-plastic initiatives. Ceebros Boulevard has an in-house convenience store that strives to avoid plastic to the maximum.

"Eggs, for example, which are usually put in small plastic covers are given in the egg car-



tons, for which there is a charge. The amount is refunded once we return the carton. We also leave the unused or extra plastic covers at the shop for those who may not have brought any bags to use. We encourage them to return the covers back to the store. This way, we ensure that there is minimum non-biodegradable waste going from our community to the landfill," she added.

We are willing to cooperate with government agencies to try other sustainable alternatives too, if that would help the environment, another resident said.

Say 'NO' to plastics

In December 2017, the Federation of South Madipakkam Residents' Welfare Association (FSMRWA), distributed around 1,500 cloth bags to discourage its members from using non-recyclable plastic bags.

Residents of Kamalotti Nagar, Thanthai Periyar Nagar Extension, Sri MadhuraKali Nagar, Enfield Avenue, Thilagar Avenue, and Rajalakshmi Nagar, Madipakkam received these bags.

(With inputs from Atul Swaminathan)



Awareness meetings with residents, traders

D. Madhavan

Greater Chennai Corporation has directed each zonal officer to conduct regular meetings with residents' welfare associations and traders regarding the switchover to non-plastic alternatives.

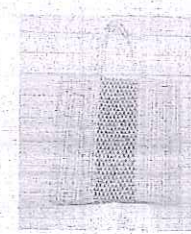
The sanitary staff in each zone collect plastic waste only on Wednesdays. Civic officials say the total collection of plastic waste on Wednesdays have shrunk considerably.

Interestingly, municipalities in the city's outskirts including Pallavaram,

Anakaputhur, Panimalar, Poonamallee, Kundrathur, Avadi, Tiruverukadu and Tiruvallur have taken small traders from their localities to exhibitions against plastic organised by the respective district collectorate offices - Kancheepuram and Tiruvallur last month.

These exhibitions showcased bags and plates made with alternative material such as banana and betelnut plates.

On an average, each municipality in the city's outskirts has at least 2,000 traders including tea shop sellers and roadside



vendors.

As per norms, those traders who dispose of five kilograms of garbage are considered small traders. In bigger municipalities

outside Chennai, including Avadi, Tambaram and Kundrathur, over 10,000 traders exist in each of these local bodies.

Besides creating awareness against plastics, civic officials also enforce the existing ban on plastic that are below 40 microns with continuous raids and seizures.

"Plastic cups and bags are the major plastic pollutant in drains and other water channels in the city. They choke the drains leading to inundation during monsoon," says a Corporation official.



Cloth bags AGS Colony

The local Association residents off plastic

L. Kanthimathi

In the third week of October 300 cloth bags to families in "Custom-made, these bags departments, one for fruits, as secretary, AGS Colony Resident. The Association also approach neighbourhood and educated on January 1, 2019.

"We were happy to note that a board in front of their shops (Ganesh. AGS Colony Residents' shops-cum-competitions for plastic, hazards of using plastic. AGS Colony Residents Welfare

SHGs to help to plastic it

D. Madhavan

The Greater Chennai Corporation make alternatives to plastic to small traders are. Forty percent of the small traders, including tea shops among the biggest users of plastic which were banned by the comprehensive ban on single use a

"We have roped in SHGs to paper, at a nominal cost. Miscellaneous other covering materials."