In the short space of a few years, menstrual health in developing countries has gone from being a non-issue to occupying significant space in the public health narrative. Poor women and girls rely on improvised materials for their menstrual hygiene management (MHM) and this prompted state and civic society projects to popularise commercial menstrual products. In countries like India, where patriarchal norms make insertion products like menstrual cups less acceptable, the dominant policy paradigm was to popularise single-use pads. Last ten years have witnessed national and international stakeholders in India push initiatives that build awareness around the use of sanitary pads and subsidise their production and distribution. These initiatives have become somewhat controversial given that single-use pads are highly polluting and unsustainable ecologically and financially. This is especially so for a populous urban areas where urban wet waste management systems are severely challenged. There is an urgent need to understand the state of affairs with respect to MHM amongst poor women and explore alternatives to single-use pads. This study examines the impact of India’s policy push for adoption of single-use pads on MHM practices among some of the most marginalised women in India. We interview 180 women from six slums across the city of Hyderabad to understand how MHM practices have shifted in recent years. The study also presents results from a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to understand if recent innovations in sustainable non-insertion products might present a more viable alternative for a country like India. Two products are experimented with: a reusable anti-microbial cloth pad that does not require sun drying and a 100% biodegradable single-use pad that needs deep burial. Our results suggest that pad usage has penetrated even amongst the ultra-poor. There is an emerging but significant ‘pad cult’ where cloth usage is seen as a taboo and women are prepared to make real sacrifices in order to buy pads. This phenomenon resonates with the policy environment where we find India’s MHM policy makes no mention of reusable products. Results from RCT suggest that reusable products will struggle to penetrate the market without subsidy and institutional backing.