

OPINION

Need to refuse plastics in Pakistan

PLASTICS have been used as the basis of a wide range of industrial products. This is due to its unique characteristics, including being lightweight, strong, durable and cheap. However, what is beneficial for the manufacture of industrial products is also a reason of concern for the environment. Due to the buoyant characteristics of plastics, they are able to be transported easily from one place to another. Plastic pollution has been known to be and still is a major environmental concern across the globe. Plastic particles can be found in even the most remote areas due to winds and currents. Plastic litter was observed in the marine environment for the first time in the 1970s, however little attention was paid to this issue then. More attention was drawn towards the topic in later decades with increasing evidence of the harmful effects of plastics. Most people around the world only know how to change what they can see. People's initial reaction when it comes to plastic waste in the environment is to clean it up, however, this practice results in a very minor amount of a difference in the fight towards mitigating the harmful effects of plastics on the environment.

Plastic does not decompose, but is degraded into smaller and smaller fragments. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration defined micro-plastics as plastic particles that are <5 mm in diameter, while nano-plastics are plastic particles that are < 100 nm in diameter. Although most research on plastic in the marine environment has been based on the entanglement of marine organisms, the harms of micro and nano plastics on organisms are also vital to research. Both micro and nano plastics may enter an organism through various pathways, including via dermal exposure, oral exposure and through inhalation. They can be ingested by aquatic organisms for example invertebrates such as crustaceans, echinoderms, bryozoans and bivalves, and vertebrates such as fish and sea birds. Planktonic organisms such as zooplankton, chaetognaths, larval fish, copepods and salps have also been noted to accumulate micro and nano plastics within them. Furthermore, they can accumulate up the food chain and wind up in humans. Plastics can be hazardous to organisms in several ways; these include growth inhibition, behavioural, reproductive dysfunction, feeding disorders, reduced viability, and mortality.

In Pakistan, even if awareness surrounding plastic waste exists, levels of apathy towards the harms it causes the environment are high. It is the norm to shop using plastic bags, grab a plastic bottle for water, use straws, buy lunch wrapped in plastic, etc. without a second thought. The current government of Pakistan is the most environmentally active government in Pakistan till date. It has taken various initiatives for the reduction of plastic waste in the environment including the ban on plastic bags and the recently introduced reverse vending machine at the Jinnah Super Market in Islamabad to recycle plastic bottles. This reverse vending machine is currently being studied in Pakistan and more will be installed following its success. While these efforts are great towards reducing the plastic waste problem and will have a very positive impact on the environment, it is vital to realize that while the world is struggling to manage billions of tons of plastic waste that has already been generated over the past decades - it is not only the government's responsibility to control the level of plastic being discarded in the country. Reducing, reusing and recycling is not enough to mitigate the problem of plastic pollution; refusing to buy any kinds of plastics, especially single-use plastics in the first place will have the most beneficial impact on the environment in the long term.

Pakistan's population can employ various means in order to refuse the use of plastic products in the first place. A reusable and biodegradable bag can be carried when intending to shop, even if the shop offers free plastic bags; metal straws can be carried to reduce the waste from single-use straws; packaged fruits and vegetables should not be bought from the grocery store; products such as laundry detergents which are packaged in boxes instead of bottles should be used; a reusable bottle or mug should be used for beverages such as coffee, even while ordering on the go; a reusable container can be taken along while eating out to avoid packaging leftovers in Styrofoam boxes; matches instead of disposable plastic lighters should be used; frozen foods should be avoided as they are packaged in plastic; cloth diapers could be used instead of disposable ones; using razors with replaceable blades could be used instead of disposable razors; gum should be avoided as it also contains plastic particles. If awareness about the detrimental effects of plastic pollution is spread across Pakistan and the Pakistani population starts to care about this serious issue and refuse the use of plastics, not only for today's day and age, but also for future generations, Pakistan and the entire globe could be a much better place to live in.

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VIEW



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