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Microplastic Pollution as an Emerging Global Health and Climate Threat: Concentrations, Biochemical Impacts, and Future Risks- A Review.

Georgina O. Erifeta[1], Kingsley E. Erifeta[2], Folasade Osagie[3], Bakare Victoria[4], Josiah J. Sunday[5], Imesidayo O. Eborieme-Oikeh[6], Dominic Ativie[7], Stephen U. Obasi[8], and Lawrence, I. Ezemonye[9].

[1] *Department of Biochemistry, Igbinedion University, Edo State.*
[2]Oando Energy Resources Nigeria Limited, Rivers State, Nigeria.
[3]Mid Atlantic Permanente physician group, Largo MD, USA.
[4]Department of Microbiology, Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, Nigeria.
[5] *Department of Biochemistry, Igbinedion University, Edo State.*
[6] *Department of Internal Medicine, Igbinedion University Teaching Hospital, Edo State.*
7FederalAirports Authority of Nigeria (FAAN)
[8] *Department of Biochemistry, Igbinedion University, Edo State.*
[9] *Department of Biological Sciences, Igbinedion University, Edo State.*

Corresponding Author: Georgina O. Erifeta.
erifeta.georgina@iuokada.edu.ng

ABSTRACT
Microplastic pollution has become a critical global concern as concentrations continue to rise across air, water, soil, and food systems, increasing human exposure through inhalation, ingestion, and dermal contact. These particles, typically less than 5 mm exert significant biochemical effects once inside the body, including impaired digestion, gut-lining damage, microbiome disruption, inflammation, and nutrient malabsorption, with heightened risks for vulnerable populations such as children and pregnant women. Recent evidence shows that microplastics may cross biological barriers, including the placenta and possibly the blood–brain barrier, raising fears of neuroinflammation, oxidative stress, and long-term links to neurodegenerative and metabolic disorders. Their ability to absorb and transport toxic chemicals, heavy metals, and pathogenic microorganisms further amplifies their health impacts. Beyond direct human effects, microplastics also influence climate processes by altering marine productivity, disturbing carbon cycling, and emitting greenhouse gases during degradation. Understanding their environmental concentrations, biochemical interactions, and future risks is therefore essential for safeguarding global health and strengthening climate resilience.

Keywords: Microplastics, Toxicity, Human Health, Environmental Pollution, Climate Change.

INTRODUCTION
Plastic pollution has become one of the most persistent and rapidly escalating environmental crises of the 21st century. Global plastic production now exceeds 400 million tonnes annually, driven by population growth, urbanisation, industrial expansion, and increasing demand for low-cost disposable products (UNEP, 2018). Nearly half of all produced plastics are designed for single-use applications, resulting in enormous waste volumes that enter landfills, aquatic systems, farmlands, and the atmosphere. Due to inadequate waste management systems and inefficient recycling infrastructures, particularly in developing countries, plastics undergo fragmentation into microplastics (MPs), which are particles smaller than 5 mm that persist and disperse across ecosystems. In Nigeria, plastic consumption and disposal have intensified in recent decades, with more than 2.5 million tonnes of plastic waste generated annually, yet less than 12% is recycled (Ogunleye et al., 2021). As a result, microplastics

infiltrate waterways, soils, food systems, and urban air, increasing both environmental contamination and human exposure. Microplastics represent a unique environmental threat because of their persistence, chemical complexity, ability to adsorb pollutants, and capacity to cross biological barriers. Beyond environmental degradation, microplastics pose emerging risks to human health, with studies linking exposure to oxidative stress, inflammation, endocrine disruption, mitochondrial dysfunction, reproductive harm, and potential neurotoxicity. Their ability to interact with climate-relevant processes such as greenhouse gas emissions, ocean carbon cycling, and atmospheric dynamics positions microplastics as a critical but understudied component in climate change discourse.

This article provides a comprehensive synthesis of microplastic concentrations across environmental compartments, their transport and fate, exposure routes, biochemical mechanisms of toxicity, health implications, and linkages to climate change. It also proposes mitigation strategies and identifies research gaps necessary for safeguarding planetary and public health.

2. Microplastics: Characteristics, Sources and Classification

Microplastics are a diverse group of plastic particles differing in size, shape, origin, and chemical composition. Their classification has significant implications for understanding environmental behaviour, biological interactions, and toxicity.

2.1 Origin-Based Classification

Primary Microplastics

Primary microplastics are intentionally manufactured small-sized particles used in industrial processes, pharmaceuticals, and cosmetic formulations. Examples include microbeads in personal care products and microfibers shed from synthetic textiles during washing (Arthur et al., 2009). Due to their small size, these particles frequently bypass wastewater treatment systems, entering rivers and oceans directly. Their persistence and tendency to accumulate in aquatic organisms make them a significant environmental concern.

Secondary Microplastics

Secondary microplastics form when larger plastic waste fragments through ultraviolet radiation, mechanical abrasion, photo-oxidation, and chemical weathering (Andrady, 2017). These particles occur in diverse shapes, fragments, films, pellets, fibers, and originate from improperly disposed plastic bags, packaging materials, fishing nets, and tire wear. Secondary microplastics dominate environmental samples globally due to the massive accumulation of mismanaged plastic waste.

2.2 Polymer Composition

Microplastics consist of various polymers, including:

- Polyethylene (PE) – lightweight, floats easily, prevalent in packaging
- Polypropylene (PP) – widely used in containers and textiles
- Polystyrene (PS) – found in disposable foodware and foam packaging
- Polyethylene terephthalate (PET) – used in beverage bottles
- Polyvinyl chloride (PVC) – used in pipes, flooring, and medical devices

Each polymer interacts differently with environmental conditions, pollutants, and biological systems. Hydrophobic polymers, for instance, readily bind organic contaminants such as pesticides and PAHs, enhancing their toxicity.

2.3 Chemical Additives and Adsorbed Pollutants

Plastics release chemical additives such as phthalates, bisphenols, and flame retardants that can leach into the environment and biological tissues. Microplastics also carry external pollutants including heavy metals, PAHs, and persistent organic pollutants. These combined contaminants greatly amplify microplastic toxicity and make health risk assessments more complex.

3. Environmental Distribution and Concentration of Microplastics.

Microplastics are now found in virtually all environmental compartments. Their widespread presence stems from prolonged plastic durability, environmental fragmentation, and long-distance transport mechanisms.

3.1 Marine Environment

Marine ecosystems are the largest sinks for microplastics, receiving about 8 million tonnes of plastic annually from land- and sea-based activities. Low-density polymers such as polyethylene and polystyrene disperse widely across ocean surfaces. Marine organisms ingest microplastics directly or through contaminated prey, leading to reduced feeding, oxidative stress, and impaired reproduction. These particles accumulate in tissues and disrupt metabolic and endocrine functions. Overall, microplastics destabilize marine food webs, threatening fisheries, biodiversity, and human nutrition (Jambeck et al., 2015).

3.2 Terrestrial Environment

Terrestrial environments, particularly agricultural soils, receive microplastics from wastewater irrigation, sludge use, plastic mulching, atmospheric deposition, and urban littering. These particles alter soil structure, reduce water infiltration, and disrupt microbial processes vital for nutrient cycling (Rillig et al., 2020). Their strong adsorption capacity increases the transfer of pesticides and heavy metals into crops. Nigerian coastal studies report 121–170 particles per 50 g of sediment, highlighting significant contamination levels (Ogunleye et al., 2021). Overall, terrestrial microplastics pose growing risks to soil health, food safety, and agricultural productivity.

3.3 Atmospheric Environment

Microplastics have been increasingly documented in the atmosphere, originating from tire wear, textile shedding, abrasion of outdoor plastics, and industrial processes (Allen et al., 2019). These particles can travel across cities, seas, and continents through wind currents, depositing in both urban and remote regions (Evangeliou et al., 2020).

Airborne microplastics pose respiratory health risks, contributing to: airway inflammation, oxidative stress, impaired lung function, potential translocation into the bloodstream. Their role as cloud condensation nuclei suggests possible implications for atmospheric chemistry and weather patterns.

3.4 Global Concentration Patterns

Environmental microplastic concentrations vary greatly depending on region, population density, plastic use, and measurement methods. Reported levels range from 10^{-3}–10 particles per litre in surface waters to as high as 160,000 particles per litre in drinking water. These wide disparities underscore the need for standardized global monitoring and reporting protocols.

4. Transport and Fate of Microplastics

Microplastics move dynamically across environmental compartments due to variations in size, density, and interactions with biological and physical processes. Their persistence enables long-distance transport and accumulation across ecosystems.

4.1 Key Environmental Transport Mechanisms

Microplastics move across ecosystems through several key mechanisms. Buoyant particles drift on water surfaces, accumulating in gyres and reaching distant coastlines. Biofouling can cause them to sink, leading to long-term sediment deposition. Benthic organisms redistribute microplastics within sediments through feeding and movement. Wind also transports microplastics over long distances, depositing them far from their original sources.

4.2 Broader Environmental Context and Relevance

Plastic pollution has become one of the fastest-growing environmental crises of the 21st century. Global plastic production exceeds 400 million tonnes annually, with nearly half intended for single-use purposes (UNEP, 2018). Inadequate waste management, especially in developing regions promotes fragmentation into microplastics that contaminate land, air, and water.

In Nigeria, plastic waste generation surpasses 2.5 million tonnes per year, yet recycling rates remain below 12% (Ogunleye et al., 2021). These conditions enable microplastics to infiltrate rivers, coastal waters, agricultural soils, food systems, and urban air, elevating both ecological and human health risks.

Microplastics pose a distinct threat due to their persistence, chemical complexity, pollutant-adsorption capacity, and ability to cross biological barriers. Emerging studies link exposure to oxidative stress, inflammation, endocrine disruption, mitochondrial damage, reproductive effects, and potential neurotoxicity. Their interactions with climate-relevant processes such as greenhouse gas emissions, ocean carbon cycling, and atmospheric dynamics, further position microplastics as an important but understudied contributor to global climate change.

This article offers a comprehensive synthesis of microplastic concentrations, transport pathways, exposure routes, biochemical toxicity mechanisms, health implications, climate interactions, and mitigation strategies necessary to safeguard both planetary and public health.

5. Chemical Components and Toxicological Relevance

5.1 Polyethylene (PE)

Highly hydrophobic, adsorbs persistent organic pollutants, and leaches toxic additives. PE MPs have been linked to oxidative stress and inflammation in biological systems.

5.2 Polypropylene (PP)

It is lightweight, persistent, and prone to fragmenting into microfibers. It can bind pesticides and organic pollutants.

5.3 Polystyrene (PS)

Aromatic structure enhances chemical sorption. Upon degradation, releases styrene monomers associated with neurotoxicity and endocrine disruption.

5.4 Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET)

It leaches antimony and plasticizers. It is associated with gut inflammation and microbial dysbiosis.

5.5 Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC)

Contains high levels of additives including phthalates and bisphenol A. Releases toxic monomers and is linked with endocrine and reproductive disruptions.

6. Routes of Human Exposure

Humans encounter microplastics through several major pathways that allow these particles to enter the body and interact with biological systems. Understanding these exposure routes is essential for assessing potential health risks and developing mitigation strategies.

6.1 Ingestion

Ingestion is the most documented and quantitatively significant route of microplastic exposure. Microplastics have been consistently detected in a wide range of food items, including seafood, table salt, honey, fruits, vegetables, and processed foods. Drinking water—both bottled and tap—has also been identified as a major contributor. Studies estimate that an average adult may ingest between 39,000 and 52,000 particles annually, a number that increases for individuals who frequently consume bottled water (Cox et al., 2019). Seafood contributes notably due to bioaccumulation in marine organisms, particularly filter feeders such as mussels and oysters. Microplastics can also arise when teabags made of synthetic polymers shed microscopic fibers during steeping. Once ingested, microplastics may interact with gastrointestinal tissues, altering microbiome composition, increasing gut permeability, and enabling the transfer of adsorbed chemicals into systemic circulation.

6.2 Inhalation

Inhalation exposure occurs through airborne microplastics suspended in both indoor and outdoor air. Synthetic textiles, urban dust, vehicle tire wear, and industrial emissions contribute significantly to atmospheric microplastic loads. It is estimated that road traffic accounts for approximately 84% of airborne microplastics (Brahney et al., 2020). Indoors, carpets, furniture, clothing, and heating systems continuously release microfibers that accumulate in household dust. These particles can deposit in the nasal cavity, trachea, and deep lung tissues, depending on their size and shape. Inhaled microplastics may induce respiratory inflammation, oxidative stress, and impaired lung function. Ultrafine microplastics and nanoplastics pose additional risks because they can penetrate alveolar membranes and potentially translocate into the bloodstream.

6.3 Dermal Exposure

Dermal contact is considered a less dominant but still relevant exposure pathway. Although intact human skin is a strong protective barrier, microplastics present in cosmetics—such as exfoliating scrubs, toothpaste, or foundation—may penetrate through hair follicles, sweat glands, or micro-abrasions. Occupational exposure among workers in plastic manufacturing, textiles, or waste handling increases the likelihood of dermal interaction. While large microplastic particles are unlikely to pass directly through the epidermis, smaller particles and associated chemicals can accumulate on the skin surface and possibly contribute to irritation or inflammation.

7. Absorption and Distribution in the Human Body

Microplastics can enter the human body and cross biological barriers through transcellular absorption, paracellular transport, and phagocytosis by immune cells. Smaller particles are internalized by endocytosis, while barrier disruption can allow larger particles to slip between epithelial cells. Once inside phagocytes, microplastics may resist degradation and trigger chronic inflammation. Evidence shows their presence in the placenta, breast milk, lungs, liver, kidneys, bloodstream, and possibly brain tissues. The detection of microplastics in human blood and placenta raises major concerns about systemic and developmental exposure.

8. Mechanisms of Microplastic Toxicity

Microplastic toxicity arises from both their physical presence and the chemical additives or pollutants they carry. Several well-established biological mechanisms explain how microplastics induce cellular and systemic harm.

8.1 Oxidative Stress

One of the primary mechanisms of microplastic toxicity is the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS). ROS damage cellular components including lipids, DNA, and proteins, leading to oxidative stress and impairing normal cellular function. Microplastics can stimulate ROS production directly through their surfaces or indirectly by carrying toxic chemicals. This oxidative imbalance contributes to inflammation, mitochondrial dysfunction, and potential initiation of chronic diseases.

8.2 Inflammation

Microplastics activate pattern recognition receptors (PRRs) on immune cells, triggering inflammatory signalling pathways. Chronic inflammation is an established risk factor for cardiovascular disease, insulin resistance, and metabolic disorders. Continuous exposure to microplastics—even at low levels—may sustain inflammatory responses, resulting in tissue damage and impaired immune regulation.

8.3 Mitochondrial Dysfunction

Microplastics disrupt mitochondrial activity by interfering with the electron transport chain, reducing ATP synthesis, and promoting mitochondrial ROS production. Energy deficits compromise normal cellular functions, affect organ systems with high energy demands, and contribute to metabolic imbalance.

8.4 Genotoxicity

Microplastics can induce genotoxic effects through physical abrasion of cellular structures or via ROS-mediated DNA damage. DNA strand breaks, chromosomal instability, and mutations may result, potentially altering gene expression and increasing cancer risk. Nanoplastics are particularly concerning because they can interact directly with nuclear material.

8.5 Endocrine Disruption

Microplastics often contain endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs) such as phthalates, bisphenol A, and flame retardants. These chemicals mimic or block hormone receptors, disrupting endocrine pathways that regulate reproduction, growth, metabolism, and thyroid function. EDC exposure is linked to infertility, developmental abnormalities, and hormonal cancers.

9. Links to Chronic Diseases

Research increasingly suggests that microplastics may contribute to a variety of chronic diseases through the mechanisms described above. Although human epidemiological evidence is still developing, experimental findings support several plausible connections.

9.1 Cardiovascular Disease

Microplastic-induced oxidative stress and inflammation promote atherosclerosis, hypertension, and endothelial dysfunction. Animal studies demonstrate that ingestion of microplastics accelerates plaque formation and alters lipid metabolism. Chronic inflammatory signalling may also contribute to heart failure and arrhythmias.

9.2 Neurological Disorders

Microplastics may cross the blood–brain barrier, enabling them to access brain tissues and trigger neuroinflammation. This pathway is implicated in neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. Additionally, oxidative stress and mitochondrial damage induced by microplastics may impair neuronal function and cognitive health.

9.3 Reproductive Toxicity

Microplastics and associated endocrine disruptors interfere with steroid hormone synthesis, spermatogenesis, ovarian development, and menstrual regulation. Animal studies show reduced fertility, altered sex hormone levels, and developmental abnormalities in offspring after microplastic exposure.

9.4 Gastrointestinal Disorders

Microplastics disrupt gut homeostasis by damaging epithelial barriers, altering microbiota composition, and inducing inflammation. These changes can contribute to irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), malabsorption, and increased susceptibility to gastrointestinal infections.

9.5 Immune Dysfunction

Persistent activation of immune pathways may lead to autoimmune reactions, immune exhaustion, or reduced ability to fight infections. Microplastics can overstimulate immune cells—particularly macrophages and T cells—leading to chronic inflammatory conditions.

10. Interactions with Heavy Metals and PAHs

Microplastics (MPs) significantly influence the environmental fate, transport, and toxicity of chemical contaminants. Their physical structure, large surface-area-to-volume ratio, and hydrophobic polymer composition make them highly effective sinks and carriers for hazardous pollutants such as heavy metals and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs).

10.1 Adsorption of Heavy Metals

Microplastics readily bind heavy metals such as Pb, Cd, and Hg through electrostatic attraction and surface complexation. Environmental weathering increases surface roughness, enhancing their sorption capacity. As a result, MPs act as mobile reservoirs transporting metals across water, soil, and sediment. This prolongs metal persistence and reduces natural detoxification in ecosystems. Organisms ingesting contaminated MPs face combined physical and chemical toxicity.

10.2 Adsorption and Transport of PAHs

Hydrophobic PAHs, including benzo[a]pyrene and pyrene, strongly adhere to microplastic surfaces due to chemical compatibility. Once bound, PAHs degrade more slowly, extending their environmental lifespan. Microplastics transport these pollutants over long distances from urban sources to remote ecosystems. Ingested MPs release PAHs in acidic digestive fluids, increasing internal exposure. This process heightens contamination risks for both aquatic and terrestrial organisms.

10.3 Synergistic Toxicity and Bioaccumulation

Pollutant-loaded microplastics create compounded toxicity when ingested by organisms. Adsorbed metals and PAHs amplify oxidative stress, immune disruption, and reproductive harm beyond individual pollutant effects. These contaminants can biomagnify through food webs, posing risks to top predators and humans. Combined physical abrasion and chemical toxicity impair metabolism and feeding behavior. Such interactions intensify ecological and physiological damage across multiple ecosystems.

10.4 Microbial Interactions and Environmental Implications

Microplastics provide surfaces for microbial colonization, forming the “plastisphere” that hosts diverse bacteria and fungi. Some of these microbes degrade pollutants like PAHs, influencing environmental breakdown processes. However, MPs can also transport pathogens and antibiotic-resistant bacteria, increasing ecological and health risks. The plastisphere alters pollutant cycling by modifying toxicity and bioavailability. Overall, MPs function as vectors that reshape microbial dynamics and ecosystem health.

11. Microplastics and Climate Change

Microplastics (MPs) and climate change are increasingly recognized as interconnected global threats. MPs influence greenhouse gas emissions and disrupt major biogeochemical cycles, while climate change accelerates the production, fragmentation, and dispersal of plastic particles. Together, these processes create a reinforcing cycle with profound implications for ecosystems, food security, and human health.

11.1 Contribution to Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Microplastics contribute to atmospheric warming through both direct and indirect mechanisms. Exposure of plastics to sunlight and heat triggers thermal degradation that releases methane (CH_4) and ethylene (C_2H_4), with emission rates increasing as plastics fragment into smaller particles. In soils, microplastics alter microbial activity, enhance respiration, and shift the balance of methanogenic communities, resulting in elevated CO_2 and CH_4 emissions. In many African countries, where open burning remains a major waste-management practice, incomplete combustion of plastics releases greenhouse gases, soot, and secondary microplastics, exacerbating air pollution and climate impacts.

11.2 Disruption of Ocean Carbon Cycling

Oceans absorb roughly one-third of anthropogenic CO_2, but microplastics undermine this climate-regulating function. MPs interfere with phytoplankton—the foundation of marine productivity and oxygen generation—by impairing photosynthesis, nutrient uptake, and growth. This weakens the biological carbon pump that transports CO_2 to deep ocean reservoirs. Microplastics also reduce the efficiency of carbon export by altering the density and sinking behavior of organic particles. Coastal African regions, including the Gulf of Guinea, Red Sea, and Western Indian Ocean, are increasingly reporting microplastic contamination that threatens fisheries, livelihoods, and blue-economy sustainability.

11.3 Influence on Atmospheric Processes

Airborne microplastics are now detected in rainfall, dust plumes, and remote ecosystems. MPs may act as cloud-condensation nuclei, influencing rainfall patterns and local climate dynamics—an issue of particular concern for African regions already experiencing rainfall variability and drought stress. Atmospheric transport carries microplastics across long distances, depositing them on glaciers, farmlands, and water bodies, where they introduce new pollutants and contribute to surface-albedo changes that accelerate warming.

11.4. Climate Change Feedback on Microplastics

Climate change amplifies microplastic pollution by speeding up the fragmentation of plastic waste through heat and UV radiation. Intensified storms, floods, and cyclones mobilize mismanaged waste into rivers and oceans, while rising temperatures and ocean acidification alter microplastic buoyancy and degradation pathways. Across Africa where waste-collection rates remain low and extreme weather events are increasing, these feedbacks accelerate the spread of microplastics into soils, freshwater resources, and coastal environments that support millions of people.

11.5. Microplastics as an Emerging Global and African Health Threat

Microplastics must now be understood as both a climate stressor and a public-health risk. Their ability to bind heavy metals, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and pathogenic microbes increases toxicity in African water systems, agricultural soils, and food chains. Coastal communities relying heavily on fisheries face heightened exposure, while urban populations—particularly in rapidly growing African megacities—experience combined risks from air pollution, open burning, and contaminated water.

With rising plastic production, limited waste infrastructure, and accelerating climate pressures, Africa is at the frontline of this emerging environmental crisis. Addressing microplastic pollutio requires coordinated strategies that strengthen waste governance, promote circular-economy models, improve wastewater treatment, and integrate climate adaptation planning.

12. Mitigation and Solutions

12.1 Reduce Plastic Use

Reducing plastic consumption—particularly single-use plastics—is one of the most effective long-term strategies for mitigating microplastic pollution. Single-use plastic items, such as plastic bags, straws, cutlery, sachet water wrappers, and packaging materials, rapidly fragment into microplastics due to their short lifespan and high disposal rates. Implementing bans or restrictions on these items can significantly reduce plastic leakage into the environment. Additionally, shifting to biodegradable, compostable, or reusable alternatives helps lower dependence on petroleum-based plastics. Consumer behaviour change is equally important; public education campaigns, eco-labelling, incentives for reusable products, and corporate accountability programs can reshape consumption patterns at scale. Encouraging industries to adopt plastic-free packaging, invest in eco-design, and reduce unnecessary plastic components in products can further accelerate progress toward sustainability. Ultimately, reducing plastic use requires both policy-level interventions and grassroots behavioural shifts.

12.2 Improve Waste Management

Improving waste management is fundamental for preventing plastics from entering natural ecosystems and fragmenting into microplastics. Many countries, including Nigeria, face challenges related to inadequate waste collection, poor segregation practices, insufficient recycling capacity, and limited landfill regulation. Strengthening recycling systems involves establishing formalised recycling infrastructure, supporting private-sector recycling enterprises, and creating financial incentives for plastic buyback schemes. Enforcing proper disposal means implementing regulatory frameworks that discourage open dumping and burning of plastics—both of which contribute to environmental toxicity and greenhouse gas emissions. Upgrading wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) is also critical; modern filtration technologies, including fine screens and membrane bioreactors, can retain microplastics before treated water is discharged into rivers and seas. Additionally, implementing extended producer responsibility (EPR) programs ensures that manufacturers take responsibility for the end-of-life management of their plastic products.

12.3 Technological Innovations

Magnetic Microplastic Capture Devices

Magnetic nanocomposite materials are being developed to bind efficiently to microplastics in water. Once attached, the plastic–magnet complexes can be removed using external magnetic fields. This approach shows strong potential for high-volume purification in wastewater systems and polluted rivers. It represents a scalable, low-chemical method for targeted microplastic removal. Nanofiltration and ultrafiltration membranes can physically trap microplastics and even nanoplastics from water. These systems offer high removal efficiency across a range of particle sizes. Although currently energy-intensive, ongoing improvements in membrane design aim to reduce cost and enhance sustainability. Membrane filtration remains one of the most reliable technologies for microplastic elimination in water treatment.

12.4. Microbial Degradation Research

Biodegradation research explores microorganisms capable of breaking down plastic polymers into harmless byproducts. Bacteria such as *Ideonella sakaiensis* and certain fungal species have demonstrated the ability to degrade PET and other plastics. Genetic engineering, enzyme optimization, and synthetic biology approaches could accelerate the breakdown of difficult-to-degrade plastics and reduce microplastic persistence in the environment. However, ensuring ecological safety and scalability remains a priority for future research.

12.5 Monitoring and Standardisation

Reliable detection and monitoring of microplastics is essential for assessing environmental risks, exposure pathways, and policy effectiveness. However, the lack of standardisation across sampling and analytical techniques has led to inconsistent reporting and difficulty comparing results globally. Adopting internationally standardised methods—such as those under development by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)—would facilitate comparable, high-quality data collection. Standard protocols should cover sampling procedures, particle isolation, polymer identification (e.g., FTIR, Raman spectroscopy), and reporting units. Continuous monitoring of water bodies, soils, air, and food products would enable early detection of contamination hotspots and guide targeted interventions. Establishing national and regional microplastic monitoring frameworks would also support long-term environmental management.

12.6 Policy and Governance

Strong environmental governance is essential for reducing plastic pollution and preventing microplastic formation. Several countries provide successful examples:

12.7. International and Regional Examples. Rwanda's plastic bag ban demonstrates the effectiveness of strict national legislation, resulting in cleaner cities and reduced environmental leakage. The European Union's microbead restrictions eliminated microplastic-containing cosmetics, significantly reducing primary microplastic sources. South Korea's rigorous recycling enforcement and mandatory waste segregation contribute to some of the highest recycling rates globally.

12. 8. Recommendations for Nigeria

Nigeria faces unique challenges including rapid urbanisation, inadequate waste management infrastructure, and widespread use of low-cost plastics. Effective governance should include:

a. Banning free plastic bags and implementing levies on single-use plastics to discourage overconsumption.
b. Promoting biodegradable and compostable materials, especially for packaging, food service, and agricultural applications.
c. Strengthening waste collection and recycling infrastructure, including establishing formal recycling hubs, supporting local collectors, and investing in mechanical and chemical recycling technologies.
d. Adopting extended producer responsibility (EPR) policies to shift cleanup and disposal costs back to manufacturers.
e. Implementing nationwide public education campaigns to foster behavioural change, reduce littering, and promote recycling.

13. CONCLUSION

Microplastic pollution has emerged as one of the most pervasive and multifaceted environmental challenges of the modern era, intersecting directly with global health, ecological stability, and climate change. As demonstrated throughout this paper, microplastics are now present in virtually every environmental compartment; air, water, soil, and even remote ecosystems, reflecting the scale of plastic dependence and the inadequacy of global waste management systems. Their persistence, buoyancy, and chemical versatility allow them to disperse widely, infiltrate food webs, and accumulate in human tissues, raising concerns about long-term exposure and disease development.

The biochemical mechanisms underlying microplastic toxicity such as oxidative stress, inflammation, endocrine disruption, mitochondrial damage, and genotoxicity, underscore the plausibility of microplastics contributing to chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disorders, metabolic syndromes, reproductive dysfunction, and neurodegenerative conditions. While epidemiological evidence is still emerging, strong mechanistic and experimental findings highlight the urgent need for precautionary approaches, especially for vulnerable populations such as children, pregnant women, and communities with high exposure burdens.

The interactions between microplastics and climate change further expand the scope of concern. Microplastics contribute to greenhouse gas emissions throughout the plastic life cycle, disrupt marine carbon sequestration processes, influence microbial respiration in soils, and may even alter atmospheric dynamics. Conversely, climate-induced changes in temperature, precipitation patterns, and extreme weather events can accelerate microplastic fragmentation and redistribution, creating a dangerous feedback loop that threatens environmental stability and human well-being.

Addressing this growing crisis requires a multi-layered response. At the global level, transitions toward circular economy models, reduction of single-use plastics, implementation of extended producer responsibility (EPR), and harmonisation of microplastic monitoring standards are essential. At the national and regional levels, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria, strengthened waste management infrastructure, public education campaigns, enforcement of plastic restrictions, and investment in alternative materials remain critical for reducing environmental burdens. Scientific innovation must continue to advance detection methods, explore safe biodegradation technologies, and deepen understanding of human exposure pathways and health outcomes.

Ultimately, microplastic pollution is not an isolated problem but part of a broader planetary health crisis that links human behaviour, industrial production, environmental resilience, and climate stability. Mitigating its impacts requires coordinated action across disciplines, sectors, and borders. By reducing plastic dependency, improving environmental stewardship, and prioritising sustainable practices, societies can reduce the risks posed by microplastics and move toward a cleaner, healthier, and more climate-resilient world. The choices made today will determine whether microplastics remain a manageable pollutant or evolve into a defining global threat for future generations.

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