

# MENSTRUATION: EMPOWERMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

SURVEY REPORT  
2024

**#Sustainable  
Menstruation**



Rezero

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This study was conducted as part of the activities of the Erasmus+ Project Mensy - Menstruation: Empowerment and Sustainability, which involves eight project partners in Croatia, Spain, Portugal, Netherlands, Ireland, UK, Hungary, and Ukraine.

The work began in early 2024 with a survey of young people's attitudes to menstruation, education and period products. The survey will inform our work and menstrual education training program to train young people across 8 countries to act as menstrual ambassadors in their own schools, institutions and communities.

### **Age range and country**

The respondents were 90% female with 86% identifying as women, they ranged in age from 20 years old (16%) to between 21-25 (33%) and the largest group was aged between 25-30 (40%) years old. Most participants have a university degree (60%), followed by those with a secondary school diploma (21%). In terms of countries, 34% of the participants are currently living in Portugal, 24% in Croatia, 12% in Spain, 6% in Hungary, 5% in the UK, 5% in Ireland, 4% in the Netherlands and 2% in Ukraine.

### **Period product usage**

Given the survey was distributed among the partners' networks, most of which would be familiar with reusables and the NGO campaigns about the benefits, it is not surprising that a relatively high number of respondents already use reusables. Thirty-two percent claim to use menstrual cups (32%), menstrual underwear (22%), and reusable menstrual pads (17%). Overall, 46% of respondents use reusable solutions, either as a mix (27%) or by themselves (19%).

### **Age and attending university**

Age and the number of school years are two very important factors that influence the use of reusables, with those older and with a higher education expressing more support for reusable menstrual solutions and using them more frequently. As 60% of the respondents had a university education, we acknowledge that the results may be somewhat skewed in this favor. But other studies have also pointed to older age groups and having attended university as factors in the choice of reusable period products.

### **Financial independence**

We should also consider that an increase in age and education is usually associated with more opportunities to access information on menstruation, sharing experiences more broadly and better financial situations. Therefore, we suspect that it is not the university degree per se that makes a difference, but mostly the social and economic context that older and highly educated young people live in.

### **Product advice**

Product advice from a close relative was far more common among the younger respondents, with over 70% of those under 20 following this advice. For older young adults, the information regarding the environmental impact (mentioned by 35% of the respondents), health concerns, and recommendations from friends become more relevant.

### **Environmental concerns**

Regarding environmental issues, there was a strong concern about the environmental impact of disposable products with 79% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that damage to the environment from

menstrual products is a big concern for them. This combined with the health impacts from the use of toxic chemicals found in period products causing adverse health reactions and allergies, influenced their choice of products. Seventy-four percent claimed to consider this when buying menstrual products. When asked about concerns with the environmental impact of period products, 75% of respondents expressed a wish to reduce the number of disposable period products they used, and 66% claimed the presence of plastic was an issue for them.

## **Barriers**

When questioned about barriers and the impact they can have on the opportunity to try reusable menstrual products, not feeling comfortable changing them in public facilities, having to take care of them (e.g. cleaning/sterilizing), the fear they'll leak are the most frequently highlighted.

## **Usability of reusables**

Not knowing how to use them (23%) and not knowing which products are best for each person and their menstrual cycle (24%) although not among the most highlighted criteria, show that there are still a lot of doubts surrounding the diversity of reusable menstrual products. Therefore, initiatives aiming at increasing the use of reusable solutions should consider the need for education, especially peer-to-peer and direct contact with the range of products and different experiences while using them.

## **Visibility**

In the Mensy survey, the initial costs of the reusable products were not highlighted as a barrier as it so frequently is in other studies, only 19% of respondents cited it as a disincentive. The limited visibility of reusable menstrual products in mainstream advertisements and their absence from mainstream supermarkets limit consumers' awareness and knowledge of them, which may explain low usage rates.

## **Lack of educational programs**

Since younger and less educated participants tend to use fewer reusables, they seem to express higher concerns with the more negative elements, than those older and with a university degree. Lesser use and stronger negative perceptions of reusables among young people can be influenced by the lack of educational programs and initiatives to bring the theme of menstruation and sustainable alternatives that exist, to the school environment, prior and during the first years of menstruation.

## **Menstrual myths**

Considering the debunking of myths, those who use reusables or a mix of products seem to feel more well-informed than those who use only disposables. This is also the case when the environmental impacts of menstrual products are considered as well as the presence of harmful chemicals. These results seem to indicate that the step towards reusables implies more knowledge and understanding of different issues around menstruation, allowing for a higher awareness on different aspects that are usually highlighted when comparing reusable and disposable menstrual products.

## **A human rights and public health issue**

Menstruation is not just a health issue but also a human rights and public health issue. Lack of education, prevailing stigma and taboos around menstruation, cultural and religious influences, availability of products and confidence about using reusable menstrual products all affect how we experience menstruation. Despite being a natural and universal process, menstruation remains a hushed topic, leading to inadequate conditions and a lack of systemic support for women, girls and people who menstruate worldwide.

# INTRODUCTION

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## INTRODUCTION

The survey was prepared under the Erasmus+ Project Mensy - Menstruation: Empowerment and Sustainability. The Mensy project is a groundbreaking initiative working across 8 different countries and is designed to amplify the

impact of partner organisations in the feminist and environmental sectors, focusing on youth engagement.

Our mission is to create a comprehensive suite of training resources on menstruation and sustainability, incorporating proven elements from existing programmes and scaling them for use across Europe and beyond.

At the heart of MENSY is our commitment to contribute to the capacitation of young people on the different options regarding menstruation products and by breaking the taboo surrounding menstruation. Despite being a natural and universal process, menstruation remains a hushed topic, leading to inadequate conditions and a lack of systemic support for women, girls and people who menstruate worldwide.

The survey was available to respondents from May to July 2024, and available in all seven languages of the eight project partners – Croatia, Spain, Portugal, Netherlands, Ireland, UK, Hungary, and Ukraine. The data collection was only online, and the respondents had to meet two criteria: to have had a menstrual period in the last three months and to be between 16 and 30 years old.

The respondents were reached mostly through the project partners' social media and several networks each partner activated to reach a wider and more balanced audience. Despite the efforts to diversify the sample, all data should be interpreted as expressing a specific social group, with a higher awareness of the issues around sustainable menstruation.

In total, more than 2000 answers were collected but, after careful analysis, only 1311 were considered to fulfil the quality criteria. All those surveys that had more than half of the questions unanswered were removed.

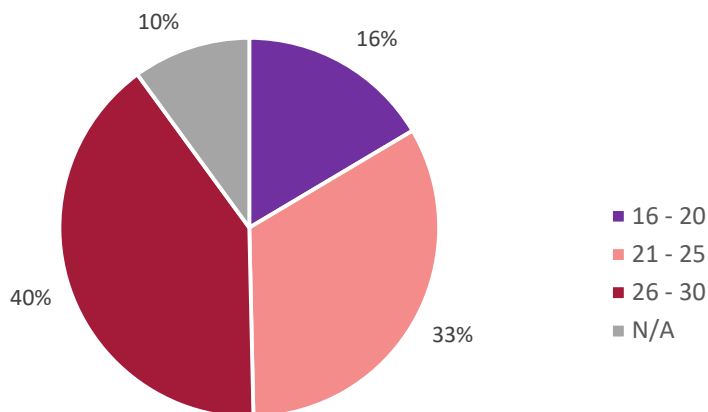
This report starts by presenting the main characteristics of the sample. In chapter one current practices around menstruation are addressed, focusing on the menstrual products used, the reasons for choosing and using specific menstrual products, experiences on menstruation, where products are bought, and who is responsible for such a task. The following chapter explores the main barriers and incentives when choosing and using reusable menstrual products. The third chapter refers to the level of information and myths surrounding menstruation, with the final chapter focusing on health considerations regarding menstruation.



## THE SAMPLE

As mentioned above, the sample cannot be considered representative of the national realities in each of the partner countries, or the EU overall, but a proxy of a more well-informed and mostly educated group of the population. This is confirmed by the fact that, even among such a young group, most participants have a university degree (60%), followed by those with a secondary school diploma (21%). Regarding age, 16% are under 20 years old, 33% are between 21 and 25 and the larger group (40%) are between 25 – 30 years old (Fig. 1). Most participants are female (90%), and 86% of the total identify as women.

Fig. 1 - "What is your age?"



N = 1311

Considering religion, more than half (51%) express that they do not follow any religion, 16% consider themselves Catholics and 14% Christians. Regarding ethnicity, the vast majority identify as white/Caucasian (81%).

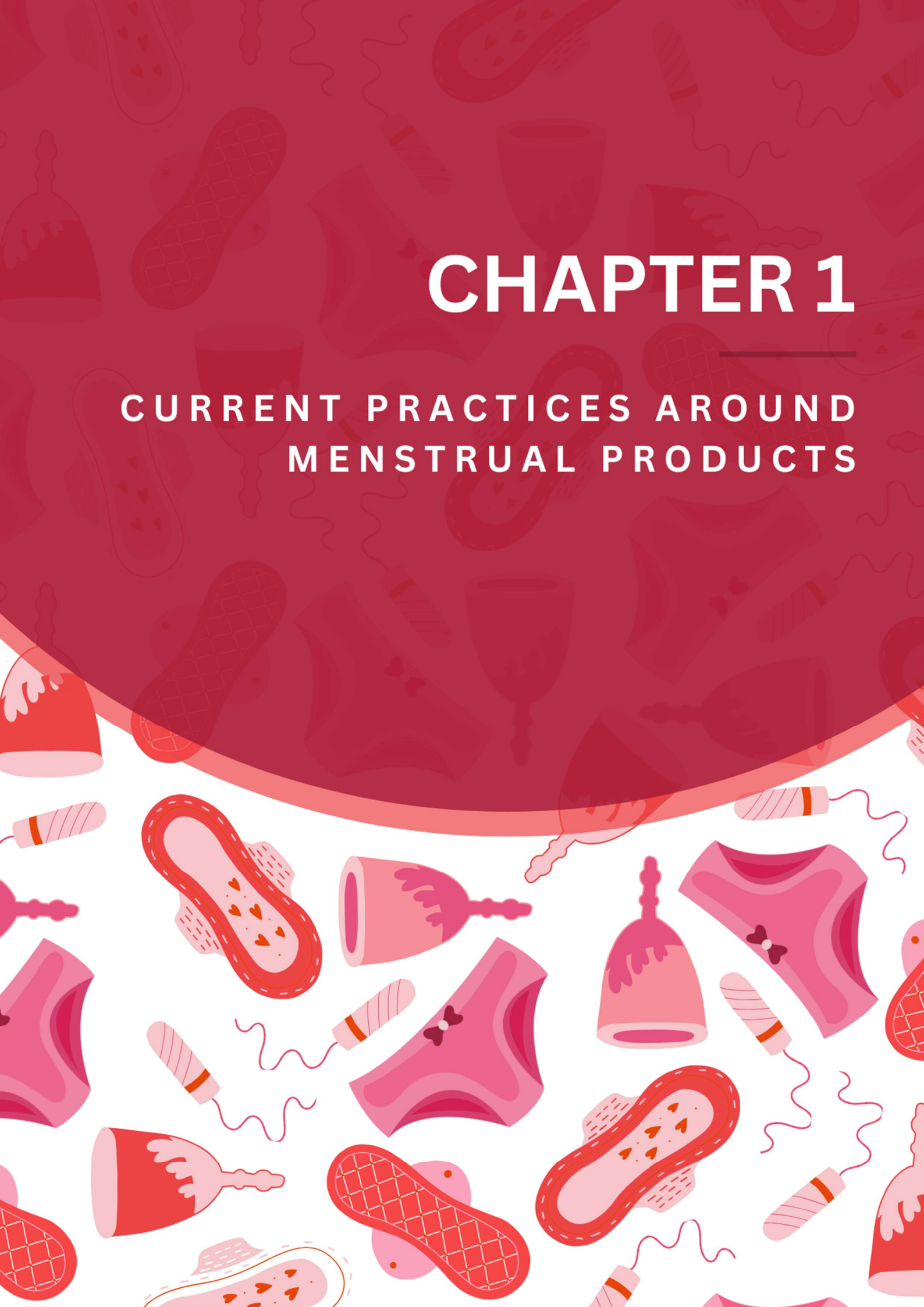
The most common living situations were with parents (38%) or with a partner (22%).

In terms of countries, 34% of the participants are currently living in Portugal, 24% in Croatia, 12% in Spain, 6% in Hungary, 5% in the UK, 5% in Ireland, 4% in the Netherlands and 2% in Ukraine.

# CHAPTER 1

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## CURRENT PRACTICES AROUND MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS



## 1.1. MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS USED

When questioned about what menstrual products they currently use, the data indicates a strong preference for non-organic disposable menstrual products (only 11% refer to the use of organic disposable menstrual pads, and 7% use organic tampons), with disposable pads being the most common choice (69%), followed by disposable tampons (36%). However, several participants use reusable alternatives, such as menstrual cups (32%), menstrual underwear (22%), and reusable menstrual pads (17%). Materials such as toilet paper or other improvised materials such as clothes, cloth, or cotton wool are regularly used by 6% and 1% of respondents, respectively, and 4% also use regular underwear or bleed freely.

Less conventional products for collecting menstruation included the menstrual disc (2%) and reusable tampons (less than 1%) are also mentioned, but by a small fraction of the respondents.

Table 1 - "What menstrual products do you currently use?"

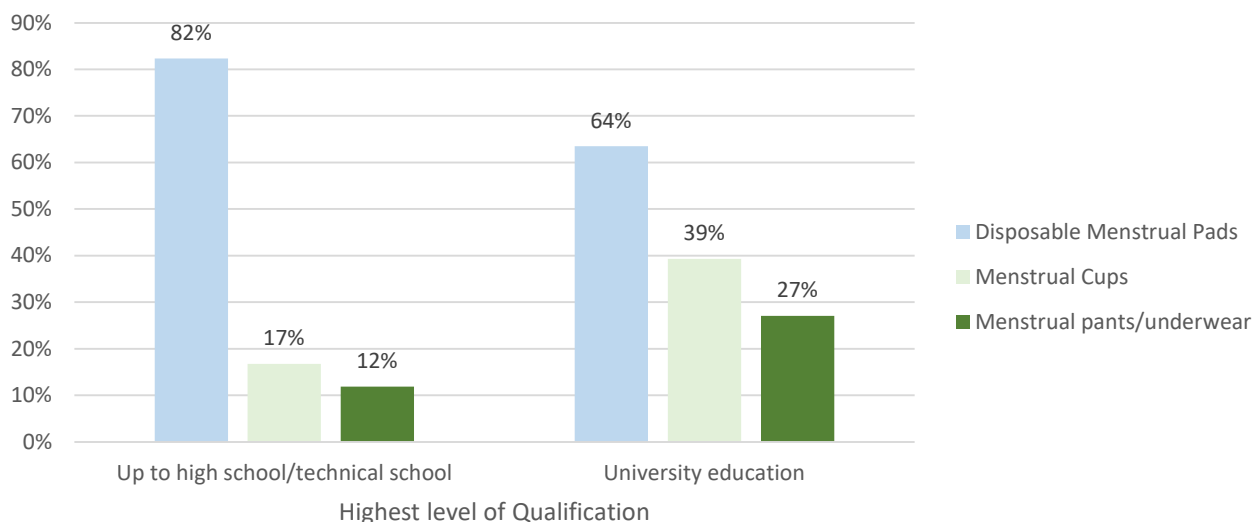
Currently used products	Relative frequency
Disposable menstrual pads	69%
Disposable tampons	36%
Menstrual cups	32%
Menstrual pants/underwear	22%
Reusable menstrual pads	17%
Organic disposable menstrual pads	11%
Organic disposable tampons	7%
Toilet paper	6%
Regular underwear/free bleeding	4%
Menstrual disc	2%
Other improvised materials: clothes, cloth, cotton wool	1%
Reusable tampons	0%

N = 2704

When we analysed the influence of the years of schooling in relation to the type of menstrual solutions used (Fig. 2) it becomes clear that reusable options are used much more often by respondents with higher education than by those with a high school diploma or a technical education. This influence can also be related to another variable – age – that, as we can see in Fig. 3 Fig. 3, clearly influences the type of menstrual products used. The fact that there is some overlapping of schooling and certain age groups (the older you are, the more likely to have a university degree), makes it difficult to distinguish between the influence of age and education. Both are relevant and, in a group where most respondents (60%) had attended university the influence of education becomes clearer. But age has also been identified in other studies as a defining factor in terms of reusable usage. For example, an Australian study found age and disposable income to be important factors when choosing reusable menstrual products (Ramsay et al. 2023).

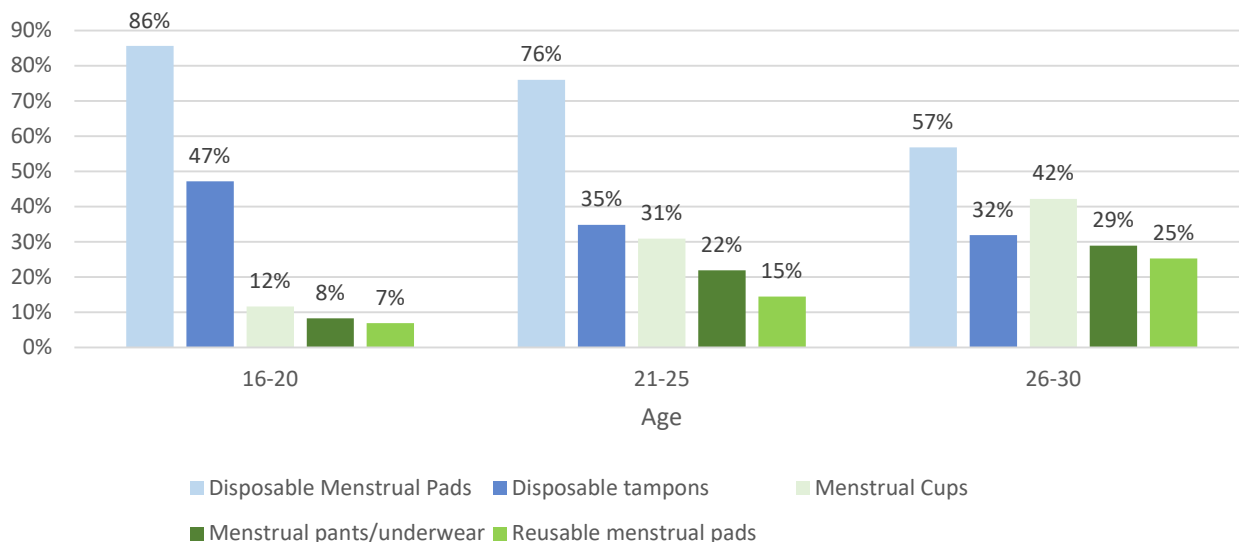
We should also consider that an increase in age and education is usually associated with more opportunities to access information on menstruation, sharing experiences more broadly, and better financial situations. Therefore, it is not only the university degree per se, that has a big influence, but mostly the social and economic context that older and highly educated young people live in. A study in Spain also found usage of reusable products was also more common among participants who had completed university education, compared to those who did not. (Medina-Perucha, Laura 2022). In another study, looking at consumer attitudes to reusable period products, the results showed that there was greater awareness of these products in the universities. (Zero Waste Scotland. 2019). This can be related to access but also socio-economic factors as university education can be dependent on financial circumstances.

Fig. 2 - "What menstrual products do you currently use according to schooling?"



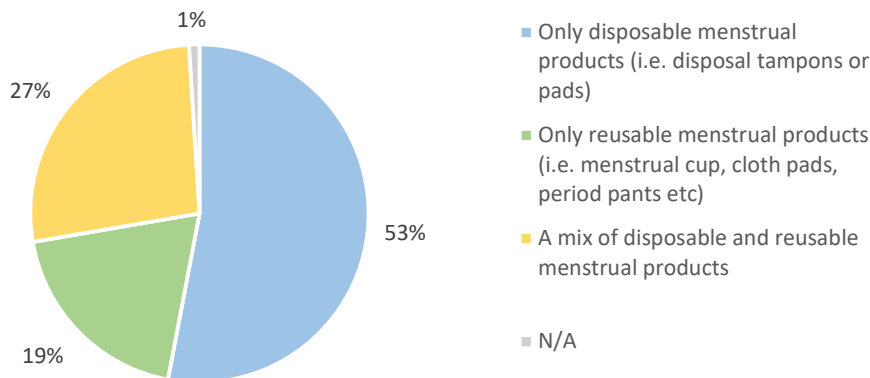
When the age groups are considered, it becomes clear that the use of reusable menstrual solutions increases with age and there is a clear reduction in disposables. For example, for disposable menstrual pads, 85,6% of those in the younger group refer to using them, whereas only 57% of those older than 26 years have the same answer. In fact, age also seems to be relevant for women, girls and those who menstruate to diversify the type of menstrual product used, with a lesser focus on the traditional disposable pad and tampon and into a more diverse range of products used regularly.

Fig. 3 - "What menstrual products do you currently use" according to age.



When asked whether they use only disposable menstrual products, they combine with reusables or use only reusables, around half of the participants (53%) only use disposable menstrual products, which stands out from those who only use reusable products (19%) or a mixture of both types (27%) (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 – “Usually do you use:”



N = 1311

Once again, age and schooling help to identify the same trend, with older and more educated respondents representing the groups where reusables, either on their own or combined with disposable products, are more common. Between the ages of 16 and 20 years, 81% only use disposables, but only 38% of those aged 26-30 years opt to use only disposables. Similarly, 73% with a school degree up to high school or technical school say they use only disposable menstrual products whereas only 44% of those who attended university responded they did.

Fig. 5 - Type of products usually used by the participants according to age.

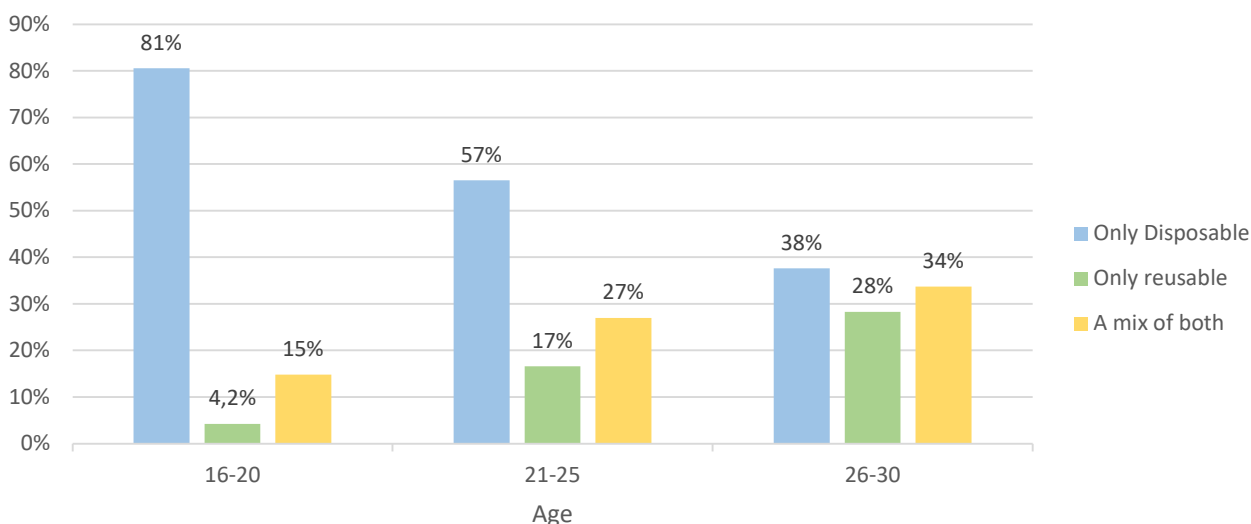
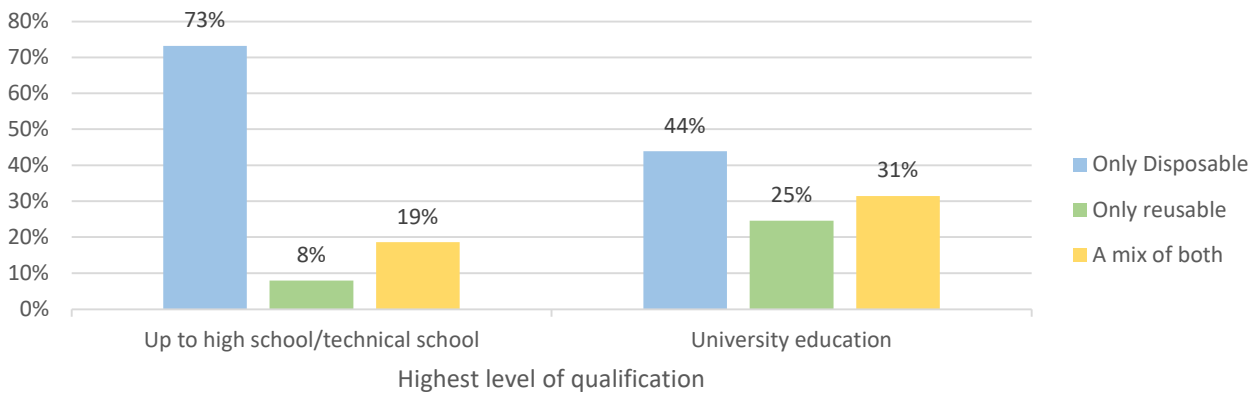


Fig. 6 - Type of products usually used by the participants according to level of qualification.



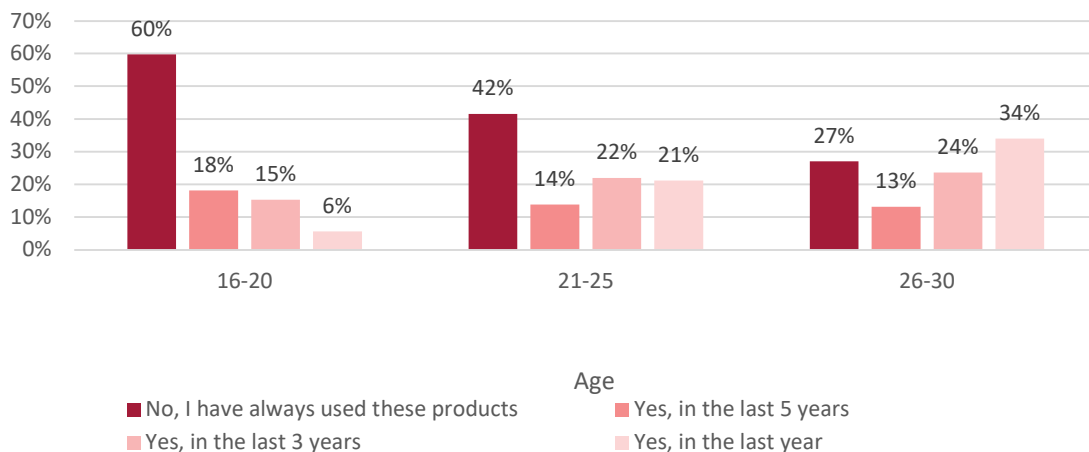
The question remains what happens in university that increases the use of reusables? Is it connected to the actual course study or the environment in the university? Few studies have considered what influences environmental behaviours in university students. However, one study has looked at environmental knowledge and how it influenced behaviour in Spanish University students. The study found that ambient intelligence and its ability to transform environmental knowledge into a more intense environmental attitude for university students had a more significant impact than the environmental knowledge or attitude, causing a double positive effect on environmental attitude. (Torroba Diaz, M. et al 2023).

Even though reusable menstrual products are not the most popular option, only 4% have not seen information on the subject. The most common sources of information about reusable menstrual products are social media, videos on YouTube/TikTok/etc. and word of mouth (friends and family) (all around 50%). Retailers that sell reusable products (31%) and environmental organizations (19%) come next as the main sources of information.

Social media is an amazing tool to raise awareness of reusables, but, it does not necessarily lead to higher usage. Recent studies show that great familiarity and availability of reusables combined with the influence of social media appears more likely to influence choice. Reusables appealed to Gen Z not only because of their environmental benefits but also the less stigmatising way they are advertised. (Tomlinson M et al 2023).

In terms of changes in the use of menstrual products, 59% refer to having made changes in the last one to five years. Only 38% mentioned they have not made any change, and this is more common among those under 26 years old and with a non-university degree.

Fig. 7 - "Have you changed the menstrual products you use?" according to age



## 1.2. CHOICE OF PRODUCTS – WHY THEY USE WHAT THEY USE

When asked if there was something that made them start using the products they currently use, almost half of the participants said that it was the advice from their mother, parent, or a carer (49%) that was the main reason. It becomes clear that advice from a close relative is far more common among the younger respondents, with 71% of those under the age of 20 following this advice, whereas only 37% of those over the age of 26 do. This seems to indicate that during the first menstruation years, the experiences, and exchanges of information seem to be within the family circle. For young adults, the information regarding the environmental impact (mentioned by 35% of the respondents), health concerns, and recommendations from friends become more relevant.

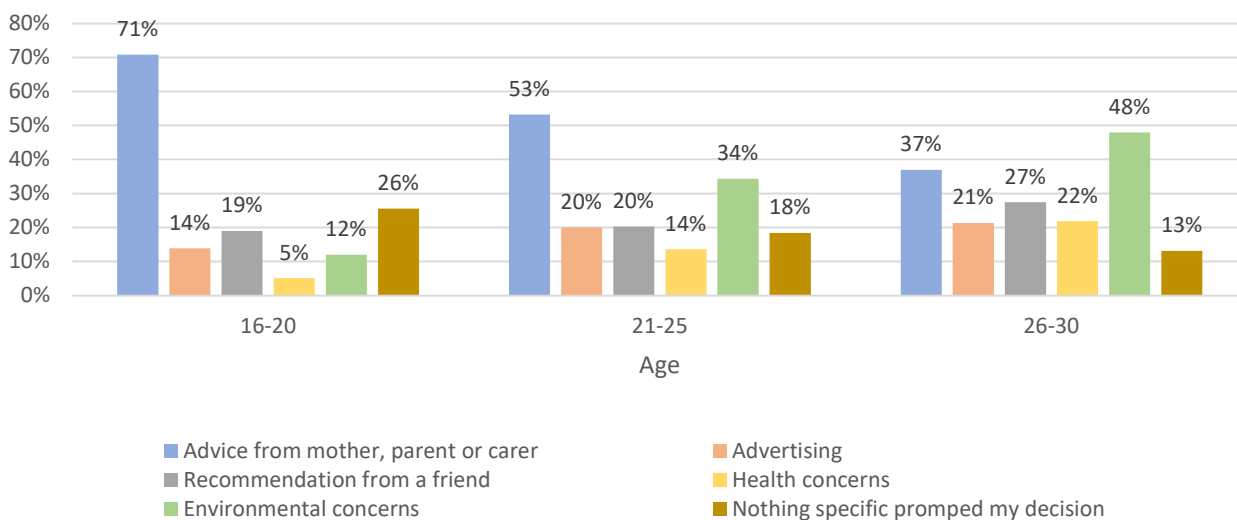
Another relevant observation is that as respondents grow older, they tend to make more conscious choices, with the percentage of people stating that nothing specific prompted their menstrual product decision decreasing as they age.

Table 2 - "What, if anything, prompted you to start using the products you currently use?"

What led the participant to start using the products they use	Relative frequency
Advice from my mother, parent, or carer	49%
Environmental concerns	35%
Recommendation from a friend	22%
Advertising	19%
Nothing specific prompted my decision	17%
Health concerns	15%
Other	10%
Can't remember/don't know	4%
Free trial at school/college/university	4%
Recommendation from a healthcare professional	4%
Advice from school/teacher	2%
NGO's advice/recommendation	2%
Rather not say	0,20%

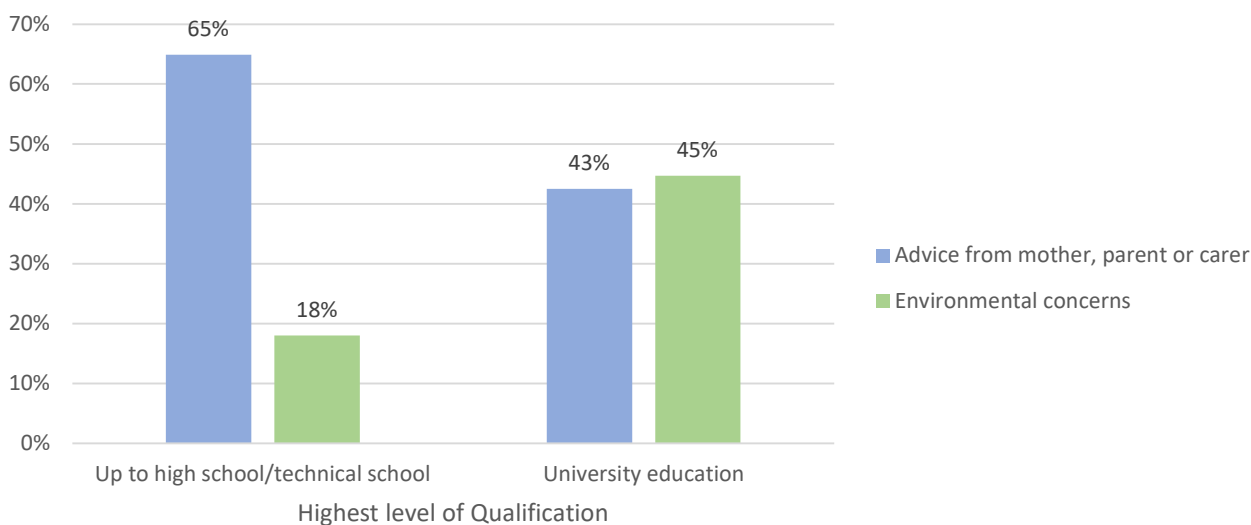
N = 2421

Fig. 8 - "What prompted you to start using the products you currently use?" according to age.



Considering the pattern we have seen in this study, it is no surprise that attending university and spending longer in school (that mostly overlaps with being older and also increases the opportunities to become more familiar with other forms of period management), also influences the distribution of the answers. The following graphic clearly shows this when we compare the two most common answering options.

Fig. 9 – The two most common answering options for "What prompted you to start using the products you currently use" according to level of qualification.



Besides the overall context of why people chose specific menstrual products, which as we have seen above, vary according to age and the life experiences attached to it, it is also very important to explore more day-to-day factors that may be relevant. Therefore, when asked which are the most important factors for each respondent when they choose menstrual products, comfort gets the highest number of answers (83%), followed by ease of use/exchange/transport (70%) and protection from leaks (64%). Cost, usually a key factor in the choice of these consumer products, is mentioned as one of the main factors by a little more than half the respondents (54%) and ranks fourth in terms of importance. Being good for the environment (40%) and allowing easier participation in sports and swimming (26%) are also important factors for some. The fact that the products are not used internally is mentioned by 19% of respondents. The least important aspect seems to be the possibility of using the product without anyone knowing (10%) or the fact that someone they know

uses it (5%). This is a pattern that has been identified in previous studies, namely a study done in Australia, where, when asked to nominate the three most important characteristics in choosing menstrual products, comfort, protection from leakage, and environmental sustainability were endorsed by the greatest proportion of participants, followed by cost, confidence using the materials, ease of changing and ease of mobility when using the product. (Ramsey et al, 2023).

Table 3 - "What are the most important factors to you in choosing menstrual products?"

The most important factors in choosing menstrual products	Relative frequency
Comfortable	83%
Easy to use/change/carry	70%
Protection from leaks	64%
Cost	54%
Good for the environment	40%
Allows me to play sports/swimming	26%
Do not have to insert	19%
Can be used without anyone knowing	10%
Someone I know uses these products	5%
Other	3%

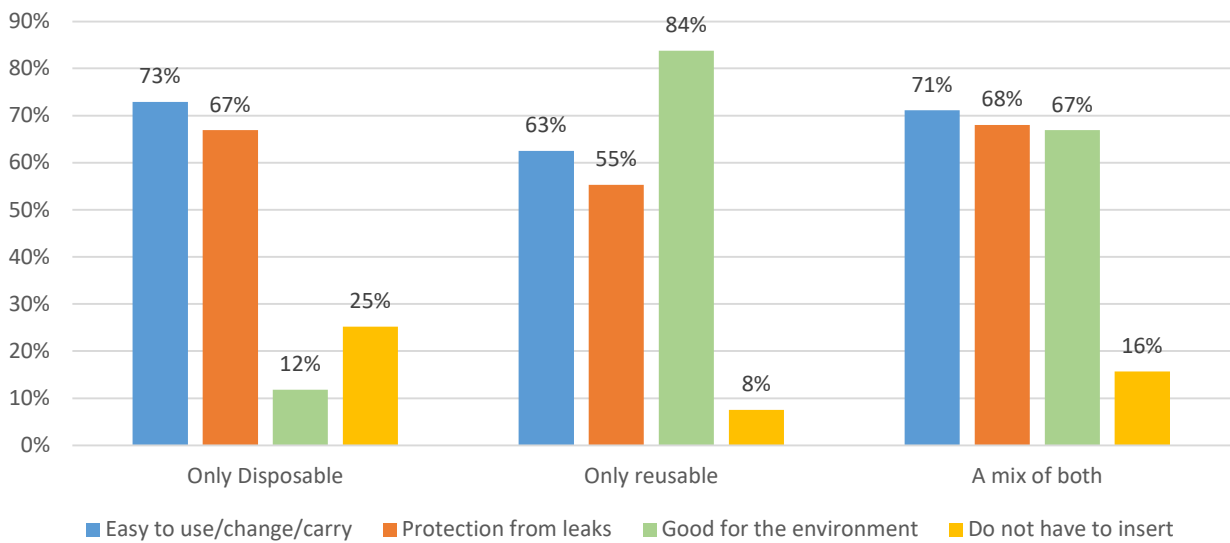
N = 4910

The most relevant factors for choosing a specific menstrual product seem to be less dependent on the schooling or the age of the respondents. Probably, because the main concerns are quite widespread showing that women, girls and people who menstruate look for similar things when choosing which menstrual product to use.

When it comes to school education, the only relevant influence seems to be among those who give relevance to the fact that the product is good for the environment. In this case, it is among those with a university education that this factor is more commonly mentioned (48% vs 28% among those with fewer school years) and, it is also among the older respondents that this concern is more prevalent (22% - 16/20 years | 39% - 21-25 years | 52% - 26-30 years).

When we consider the relationship between the type of products used – only disposables | only reusables | mix – and the factors most relevant for buying menstrual products, those who only use disposables seem to give more importance to the easiness of use/change, carrying and the protection from leaks, than those that use only reusables. For these, using products that are good for the environment (84%) is one of the main factors of choice. They also tend to give less importance to protection from leaks (only 55% mention this factor, whereas 67% of those who only use disposables and 68% of those who use a mix of both, mention it).

Fig. 10 - "What are the most important factors to you in choosing menstrual products?" according to the type of products used.



Being good for the environment is also a relevant factor among those who use disposable and reusable menstrual products – mix - (it is mentioned by 67% of the respondents in this category). Among those who use only disposable menstrual products only 12% mentioned the environmental element as relevant for their choice.

Although only 19% of the respondents considered “not having to insert” as a critical factor for choosing menstrual products, it is interesting to note this is much more valued by those who use only disposable menstrual products (25% - only disposables | 8% - only reusables | 16% - mix). The reasons for this aren't clear from our study but other research points to cultural or religious reasons as well as other health concerns.

Regarding the consistency of the menstrual products used, in contrast to around 38% who have never changed the products they use, 59% have changed in the last 5 years (around 14% in the last year, 21% in the last 3 years, and 24% in the last 5 years). As expected, due to more opportunities to change and experience different solutions, older respondents (71% - 26 to 30 years | 57% - 21 to 25 years | 39% - 16 to 20 years) and those with higher education have changed products more frequently in the last 5 years than younger respondents and those with a non-university degree.

### 1.3. PRODUCT ACQUISITION

When it comes to buying the menstrual products they need, most respondents assume that responsibility, since only 13% mention that someone buys them for them (something that is far more common among the younger respondents). The supermarket is the main source of menstrual products for the participants in this survey (75%), followed by online (17%) and pharmacy (14%) purchases. Only 4% get them for free from institutions such as schools, libraries, health facilities, or pharmacies. Buying online is more common among older respondents (becomes more relevant as age increases).

Regarding the ease with which they have been able to buy products over the last year, most respondents (86%) have always been able to buy them. However, around a tenth experience occasional difficulties with affordability, and 2% experience difficulties frequently. This result expresses the social context of the respondents to this survey. It is to be expected that, in samples that represent national realities, the percentage of women, girls and those who menstruate that recognize to experience difficulties in buying menstrual products to be higher

Being able to afford the menstrual products they use tends to slightly increase with age (83% - 16 to 20 | 86% - 21 to 25 years | 91% - 26 to 30 years) and education (80% below a university degree | 90% with a university degree), but the differences are not very expressive.

Among those who experienced difficulties in buying menstrual products, 42% of people say they ask friends or family for help, and a smaller percentage of participants (21%) use alternative methods, such as cloth, clothes or paper, or obtain them for free at community centers or schools (16%).

### 1.4. EXPERIENCES ASSOCIATED WITH MENSTRUATION

There is a variety of experiences concerning satisfaction with the conditions offered for changing menstrual products at school, university, or at work, with a significant portion of people expressing satisfaction to varying degrees: satisfied all the time (15%), most of the time (31%), satisfied some of the time (24%) and never satisfied (10%).

In addition, a significant percentage (14%) avoid changing in these places, which reveals a possible discomfort or lack of adequate facilities. The act of avoiding changing menstrual products in any of these places does not seem to be influenced by age or education, but it is more frequently mentioned by those who use reusable menstrual products (19%) or a mix of reusables and disposables (18%) (less than 10% of those who use only disposables mentioned this kind of constraint. This might be caused by the more common need to wash or remove clothing to change reusables and the lack of conditions to do so.

This discomfort is confirmed in the results when around 33% don't feel supported at all by their place of work/school and another 35% feel mostly supported mostly, but not always.

Moreover, the dissatisfaction of the participants who reported it comes essentially from the lack of conditions such as cleanliness (29%), and facilities such as the availability of toilet paper (21%), and the presence of bins (19%).

For 15% having no access to water is an issue and for 12% it is the sense of lack of privacy. The identification of the main reasons expressing dissatisfaction with the place to change during menstruation at work, school, or university shows no significant variation with education, age, or even the type of products used, except for the access to water as a dissatisfactory factor, that is mentioned more by those who use only reusable solutions. This is probably related with the use of menstrual cups where there is a need to empty and rinse with water before reinserting.

Table 4 - "What made you dissatisfied with the place you used to change your menstrual products?"

Dissatisfactions with the place of change	% of responses
Lack of cleanliness	29%
No toilet paper	21%
Lack of bins	19%
No access to water	15%
Lack of privacy	12%
Other	4%
Rather not say	1%

N = 1018

# CHAPTER 2

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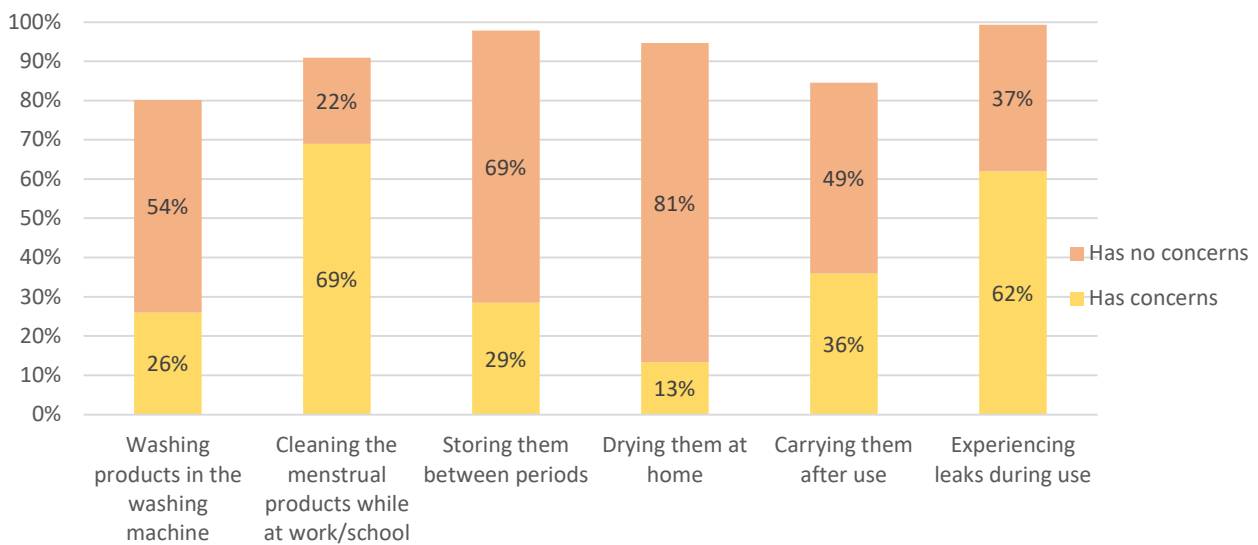
## PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES IN THE USE OF MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS



When we ask those who either only use reusable products or who use a mix of reusable and disposable menstrual products what their possible concerns regarding the use of reusable menstrual products are, those referred to more often are: cleaning the menstrual product while at work or school (69%) and experiencing leaks during use (62%). On the other hand, the least worrying issues were drying them at home or storing them between periods.

For most of the options presented, participants were more likely to say they had no concerns than the other way around.

Fig. 11 - "When you think of reusable menstrual products, do you have any concerns about:"



There is no variation in the level of concern when we consider the influence of the different age groups or schooling.

When asked about their opinion on certain aspects it became clear that among the respondents there was a strong concern with the environmental impact of disposable period products. Overall, 75% express the wish to reduce the number of disposable period products they use (43% strongly agree and 32% agree), and 66% claim to think about the presence of plastics in these products. 79% agree or strongly agree that the damage to the environment caused by disposable menstrual products is a concern for them, and 74% have the same answering pattern when asked about the importance of taking health impacts (chemicals in products, adverse reactions, allergies) into consideration when buying menstrual products.

In terms of reusable menstrual products, respondents highlight some challenges with only 44% agreeing or strongly agreeing that reusable menstrual products are easy to use, and 24% having the opposite opinion. There are also some concerns regarding the ways to keep reusables clean (59% show concern about this). On the positive side, it is widely recognized that using reusable saves money (77% agree or strongly agree with this statement).

Table 5 - "How much do you agree or disagree with the following:"

Point of agreement with the statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
"I'm worried about how disposable period products damage the environment"	3%	4%	12%	38%	41%
"I want to reduce the amount of disposable period products that I use"	4%	6%	11%	32%	43%
"I don't think about the amount of single-use plastic in disposable menstrual products"	37%	29%	11%	15%	5%
"It's easy to use reusable menstrual products"	6%	18%	24%	25%	19%
"I worry about how to keep reusable products cleaned"	6%	9%	13%	31%	28%
"Using reusable menstrual products can save money"	1%	2%	13%	34%	43%
"Health is an important consideration when I choose menstrual products (chemicals in products; reactions; allergies)"	2%	5%	14%	32%	42%

N = 9177

Considering the influence of variables such as age and number of school years, the concerns with the environment and in a not-so-expressive way on health (that seems to be a more widespread concern among the respondents) seem to be higher among a higher level of education and older respondents.

Fig. 12 - "Strongly agree" answers for "I'm worried about how disposable period products damage the environment" according to the level of qualification, age, and chosen products.

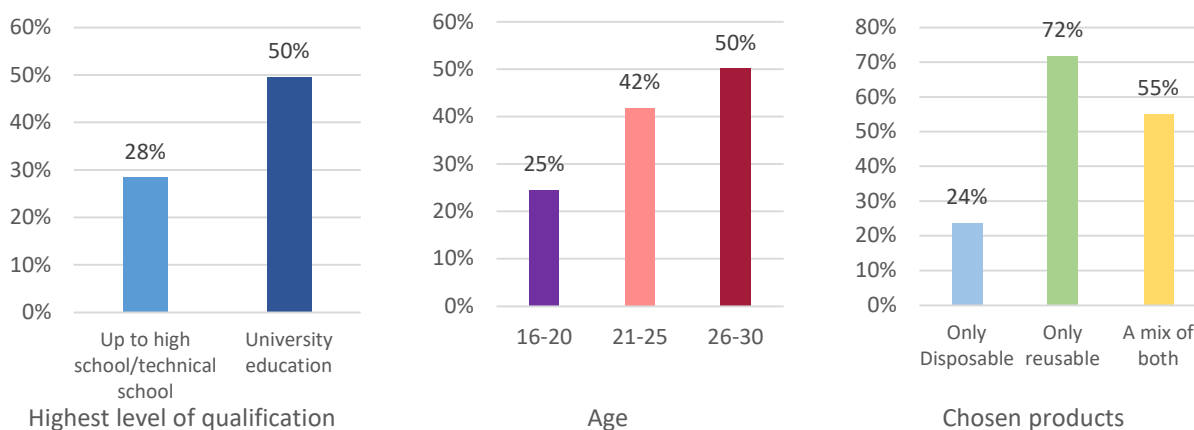
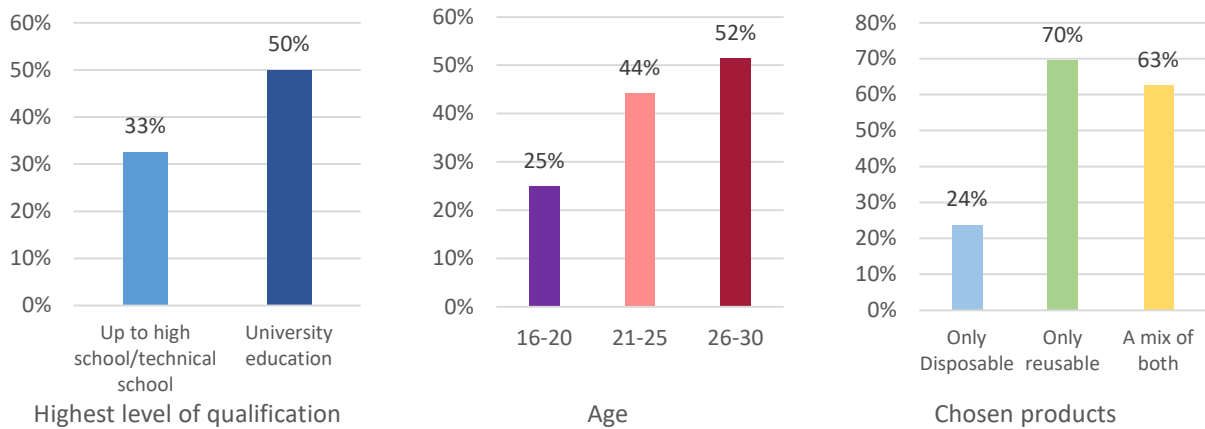
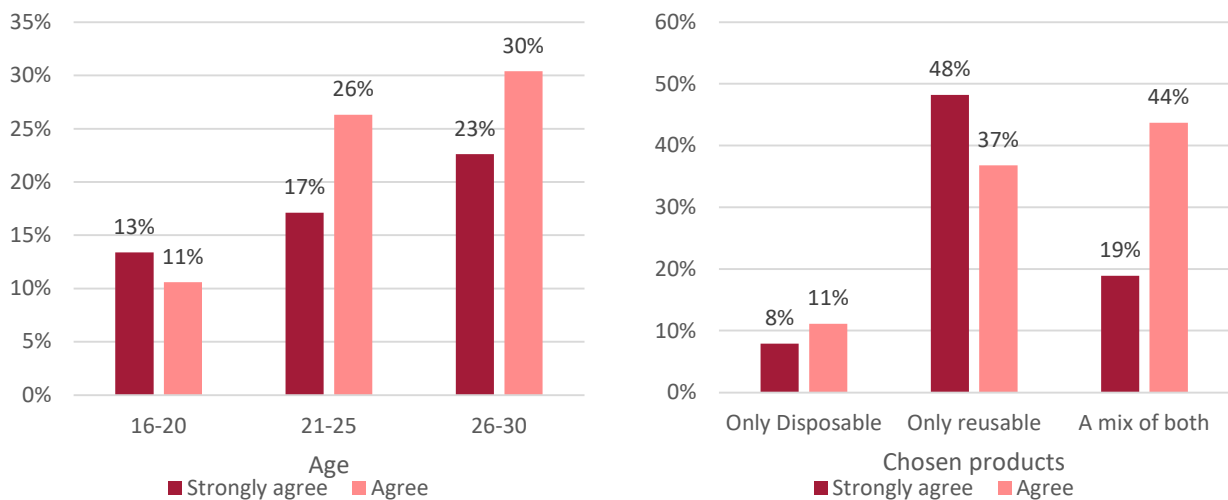


Fig. 13 - "Strongly agree" answers for "I want to reduce the number of disposable period products that I use" according to level of qualification, age and chosen products.



On the other hand, the challenges of keeping reusables clean don't seem to be so clearly influenced by age, education or even by the type of menstrual products used. In terms of ease of usage, it seems to increase with age and among those who have the experience of using reusables, either by themselves or in combination with disposables.

Fig. 14 - "Agree" and "Strongly agree" answers for "It's easy to use reusable menstrual products" according to age and chosen products.



The potential for saving money by using reusables is recognized by those who use them (81% of those only using reusables strongly agree with this statement, but only 56% of those that combine methods or 24% of those that only use disposables). This is not surprising, considering that it is after the purchase and use of reusables that the economic advantages become more visible.

When questioned about barriers and the impact they can have on the opportunity to try reusable menstrual products, not feeling comfortable changing them in public facilities (39%), having to take care of them (e.g. cleaning/sterilizing) (37%), the fear they'll leak or having very heavy periods (35%) and having to carry them after use (e.g. from school/work to home) (35%) are the most frequently highlighted. The initial cost, although usually mentioned as a barrier to trying reusables, was only mentioned by 19% of the respondents, probably due to the specific characteristics of the sample. In fact, other studies have cited cost as a barrier to using reusables. High upfront cost, when compared to SUD's for something they may or may not use, might deter people from investing. (Wen UK 2023)

Not knowing how to use them (23%) and not knowing which products are best for each person and their menstrual cycle (24%) although not among the most highlighted criteria, show that there are still a lot of doubts surrounding the diversity of reusable menstrual products. Therefore, initiatives aimed at increasing the use of reusable solutions should consider the need for education, especially peer-to-peer and direct contact with the range of products and different experiences while using them. An added benefit of trying reusables has been reported as increased comfort, medical and emotional experience of menstruation as well as an increased acceptance of the menstruation body and menstrual products. (Kubovski, A et al 2023).

Table 6 – “Which of the following things, if any, would put you off trying menstrual reusable products?”

Aspects that would prevent trying reusable menstrual products	Relative frequency
I already use reusables	39%
Not feeling comfortable changing them in public facilities	39%
Having to look after them	37%
Worried they'd leak / I have very heavy periods	35%
Having to carry them around after use	35%
Not knowing which products are best for me and my period cycle	24%
Don't know how to use them	23%
Don't want to use a product I have to insert	22%
The initial cost/expense	19%
Worried they would smell	18%
Having to see the collected menstrual blood	8%
Other	3%
I don't think they would work for me because of specific health issues I have	3%
Don't know/not sure	2,50%
Rather not say	0,20%

N = 4018

Since younger and less educated participants tend to use fewer reusables, they seem to express higher concerns with the more negative elements, than the older or those with a university degree. Lesser use and stronger negative perceptions on reusables among young people can be a direct result of the lack of educational programs and initiatives to bring the theme of menstruation and the sustainable alternatives that exist, to the school environment, prior and during the first years of menstruation. This was clear in research conducted in the UK, where just 2% of young women were taught about sustainable period products and for 1 in 10 participants, education was missing altogether and for those who did receive education, up to 1 in 5 did not learn about periods until after they had started menstruating. (Taylor, P. et al 2024)

When asked how it would be possible to encourage the use of reusables, the factors highlighted most frequently were those shown in Table 7.

Table 7 - "Which of the following things, if any, would prompt you to try reusable products?"

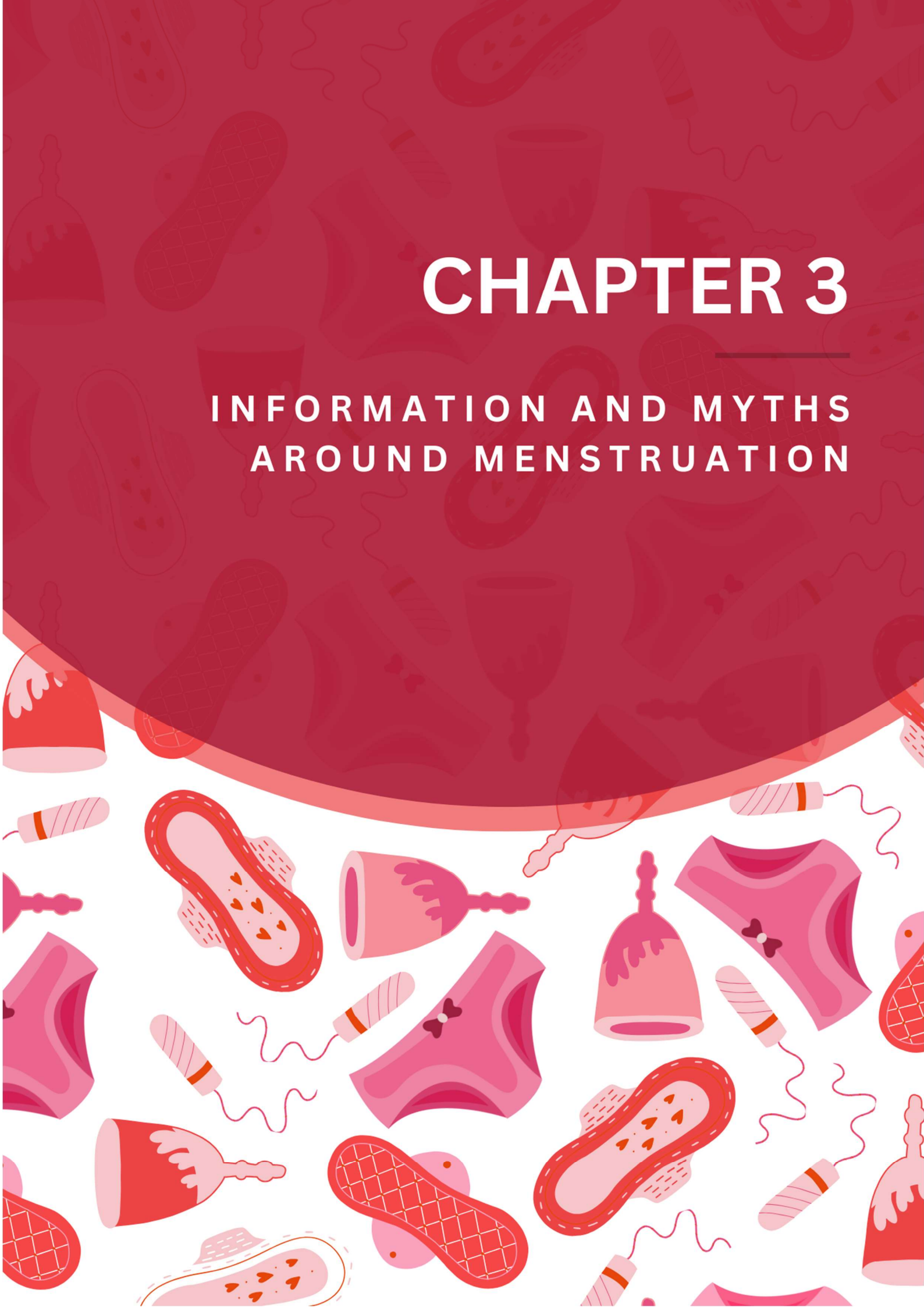
Factors that would lead to trying reusable products	Relative frequency
Knowing how to use them/ deal with them	36%
Free trial at school/college/university so I can test the products out for myself	31%
Saving money in the long run	28%
The peace of mind that I'm doing something good to help the environment	27%
Knowing how long they can be used each time before you must change them	27%
To reduce the impacts on health	26%
Recommendation from a friend/family member or if people I know used them	25%
Recommendation from a healthcare professional	24%

N = 266

# CHAPTER 3

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## INFORMATION AND MYTHS AROUND MENSTRUATION



When asked where they heard information on menstruation for the first time, almost half of the participants (46%) said they first heard about it from their mother. Previous research has shown a strong parental influence when it comes to the choice of period products, but peer-to-peer education was vital when it came to learning about menstrual products. (Peberdy, El et al. 2019). The school follows with 17%.

The survey results also reveal that there is a relatively solid understanding of how to prevent and act in situations of pain and discomfort, how to debunk myths, the effects of hormonal contraceptives on menstruation, and the environmental impact of single-use products. However, there is a significant gap in knowledge about participants' rights, as well as about the presence of harmful chemicals in menstrual products.

Table 8 - "Considering the information you have on menstruation, how informed do you feel about the following aspects:"

<b>How informed the participant feels about the following aspects:</b>	Very well informed	Well informed	Not very well-informed	Not informed at all
Their rights	5%	14%	41%	30%
How to prevent and when to act on pain and discomfort	14%	47%	24%	6%
How to debunk myths	15%	40%	23%	6%
How hormonal contraceptives like the pill/coil affect menstruation	18%	37%	27%	9%
Environmental impacts of single-use products	19%	35%	28%	9%
Presence of harmful chemicals in menstrual products that might affect your health	9%	21%	37%	23%

N = 786

Considering the debunking of myths, those who use reusables or a mix of products seem to feel more well-informed than those who use only disposables. This is also the case when the environmental impacts of menstrual products are considered as well as the presence of harmful chemicals. These results seem to indicate that the step towards reusables implies more knowledge and understanding of different issues around menstruation, allowing for a higher awareness of different aspects that are usually highlighted when comparing reusable and disposable menstrual products.

Regarding the meanings attributed to menstruation by the participants, it is mostly associated with moments with less energy (54%), painful days (49%), a messy moment of the month (30%), and limiting physical activity (26%).

Table 9 - "What does menstruation mean to you?"

<b>Menstruation's meanings</b>	<b>Relative frequency</b>
Days that I feel with less energy	54%
Being a woman	52%
Painful days	49%
Being healthy	33%
A messy moment in the month	30%
Being able to be a mother or a parent	30%

A moment in the month when I have to limit my physical activities	26%
Being grown up	14%
Fear of getting pregnant	14%
It is costly/expensive	14%
Having to stay at home / not hanging out with friends	7%
Causes gender dysphoria (feeling discomfort with my gender/body)	7%
Affirms I menstruate regardless of my gender identity	5%
Other	5%
Rather not say	1%

N = 4487

However, from a more positive perspective, being a woman (52%) is seen as important, followed by being healthy (33%) and the ability to be a parent (30%).

The sense of being healthy increases with age (42% - 26 to 30 years | 31% - 21 to 25 years | 29% - less than 20 years) and pain seems more associated with menstruation among the younger respondents.

In an open format, we also tried to identify common words or expressions used to refer to menstruation. The main objective was to identify hidden meanings and taboos often associated with this theme. There was a wide variety of expressions used in the different partner countries. Of the participants who answered this question, more than half (62%) referred to neutral terms such as “Mensis”, “Menstruation” and “Period”, indicating a more direct and less stigmatized acceptance of menstruation. However, the range of other terms associated with menstruation was significant.

Terms associated with the color red such as “Red sea”, “red days”, “Benfica” (a Portuguese football team that has red as its color), “little red riding hood”, “Red flag”, “Red lady” or “Santa Claus”, are referenced by (27%), demonstrating a significant tendency to soften the conversation about menstruation through visual associations with the color of menstrual blood. This choice may suggest a more indirect approach and possibly an attempt to make the topic more accessible or less uncomfortable.

Terms like “These/Those days” or “Time of the month” (16%) which avoid direct mention of menstruation, suggest that for a considerable part of the population sampled, the subject still carries a certain degree of taboo or discomfort. Similarly, 13% of participants prefer vague expressions such as “I’m on” or “That”, reinforcing the idea that menstruation remains a sensitive topic for many.

Associations with blood such as “Shark week” or “Bloody Mary”, present in 8% of responses, and references to “Aunt” in 6% of cases, are examples of euphemisms that, although creative, can perpetuate negative or humorous perceptions of menstruation.

The use of brand names (“Always”, “Diva cup”, “Luna cup”, “Me Luna”, “Stayfree”, “ob”, etc.), mentioned by 6% of participants, indicates a less direct association between menstrual products and the menstrual process, perhaps reflecting a dissociation between the physiological experience and the marketing of products.

In addition, terms related to illness or discomfort, used by 4% of participants, suggest that a small portion of the population views menstruation as a problematic condition. 5% of participants also referred to terms such as “female problems” or “women's problems”, which may reflect and perpetuate gender stereotypes that see menstruation as a weakness or a limited view of gender that promotes exclusion of trans and non-binary people who also menstruate.

In summary, the data indicates that while many participants use direct terms, there is still a significant tendency to use euphemisms that can perpetuate negative or ambivalent perceptions about menstruation. These results highlight the need to promote more direct and positive language to destigmatize the topic and normalize the discourse on menstruation.

Although around a quarter of the participants said that they did not impose limitations on any specific activity, it is still clear that many people experience physical and social restrictions during their menstrual period. Around a third of respondents reported restrictions concerning physical activities such as sports (33%) and swimming (29%), and a large proportion of participants restricted sexual activity during menstruation (43%).

Table 10 - "Are there any limitations set by yourself or others on any of the following activities when you have your period?"

Activity limitations	Relative frequency
Sexual activity	43%
Physical (sports)	33%
Swimming	29%
None	26%
Avoiding certain foods	9%
Showering	3%
Other	3%
Baking/cooking	1%
Praying or worship activities	1%
Rather not say	1%

N = 1944

The only variable with a slight influence is age. Younger respondents seem to limit physical activities more often than older ones, but the opposite happens with sexual activity, which tends to be more restricted during menstruation by those over 21 years old. This could be because, given that respondents could select all applicable options, sexual activity becomes more common as age increases and is therefore more frequently mentioned by older respondents.

# CHAPTER 4

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## HEALTH ISSUES



Regarding health issues, there are various menstrual symptoms experienced by the participants, the most prevalent being period pain (78%), discomfort (67%), and premenstrual syndrome (PMS) / mood swings (65%).

Table 11 - "What menstrual symptoms do you have?"

Menstrual symptoms	Relative frequency
Period pain	78%
Discomfort	67%
Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) / mood swings	65%
Cramps	48%
Clots	32%
Prolonged bleeding	24%
Other	5%
None	2%
Rather not say	0,20%

N = 4209

Even though a fifth of the participants have experienced skin irritation from a menstrual product, 66% of those surveyed have never had an adverse reaction and only 8% say they have been diagnosed with a health condition that has impacted their choice of products.

# CONCLUSION

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The study results show that education is key, not only to inform women, girls and people who menstruate before their first period about what to expect in terms of menstrual symptoms but also to provide accurate information about the range of period products available including reusables. There needs to be opportunities to handle the products and address any concerns about how to use and care for them. This education needs to begin in primary school settings and continue throughout their education.

Our survey points to age and attending university as being pivotal factors that influence the use of reusables. It's not clear how the university environment influences choice, we cannot conclude from our survey that any area of study increases environmental awareness. However, studies have pointed to ambient intelligence and its ability to build on environmental knowledge intensifying environmental attitudes among university students. Therefore, embedding this education in the school curriculum and young people at the earliest possible opportunity is paramount.

Given the importance of advice from a mother, parent, or close relative – education needs to extend to parents and carers to raise awareness about reusables and their beneficial impact on health and the environment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Government-funded, factually accurate, high quality and freely available period education and lessons for women, girls, and people who menstruate on how best to manage their period before and when it does start, to ensure it does not negatively impact their life.
- Engage young people in education around menstruation and associated gynaecological conditions, including peer-to-peer training on the use and care of a wide range of healthy, sustainable and reusable period products.

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