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Desire for Diverse Menstrual Care: Contextualizing Period Poverty with Turkish Menstruators

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ABSTRACT

Period poverty, a term originating in the United Kingdom, refers to the inadequate access to essential products and services for menstrual care.

It has been a prominent focus in menstruation scholarship for over a decade. To persuade decision-makers and donors, civil society organizations and scholars have often highlighted the negative consequences of the lack of access to commercial menstrual products like sanitary pads and tampons. In recent years, critical menstruation scholars and activists within the menstruation discourse have raised concerns about the excessive emphasis placed on the products. They argue that this narrow focus has constrained attention and hindered efforts toward achieving menstrual justice. However, the movement and scholarly discourse remain predominantly centered on the availability and accessibility of menstrual products. In this paper, I leverage my eight years of experience as a local menstrual justice leader, having served as a co-founder of *Konuşmamız Gerek*, the sole organization in Türkiye dedicated to addressing period poverty and combating menstruation stigma. Based on an online survey with 4,108 Turkish menstruators, this research aims to understand local menstrual experiences without solely focusing on expected period poverty narratives. Instead, it explores potential areas for improvement within the local menstrual justice movement, moving beyond mere product availability. The results reveal various ways to link the menstrual justice movement with reproductive justice, feminist health, and consumer and environmental rights. Additionally, it offers 10 policy recommendations targeted at civil society and grassroots organizations, government entities, donors, and menstrual product companies in Türkiye.

Keywords: Period poverty, menstrual justice, Türkiye

PERIOD POVERTY

Almost 1.8 billion people of reproductive age menstruate¹ — having their period — worldwide (UNICEF 2019) and on any given day, more than 800 million people are menstruating (Cousins 2020). Although menstrual blood exists widely in our everyday life, it is a stigmatizing mark (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler 2020). Because of the stigma around menstruating and menstrual blood, people who menstruate have been positioned as monsters when they expel a ‘dirty’ fluid from their body (Persdotter 2020). To hide this fluid, menstruators follow complex sets of rules, termed an “etiquette of menstruation” (Laws 1990; Kissling 1996), such as who is allowed to speak to whom when one is menstruating and how menstrual care products should be used, carried, and disposed of (Briggs 2021). 500 million menstruators face “period poverty,” lacking access to commercial menstrual products (Cardoso et al. 2021). The term “period poverty,” coined in the United Kingdom, refers to the inability to afford menstrual care products like pads and tampons (Vora 2020). Initially originating in the UK, it primarily addressed the lack of access to menstrual products, overlooking other essential menstrual care needs.

The intellectual and humanitarian discussions around period poverty have led to a broader definition that includes the lack of access to clean water, safe, private, and clean latrines, disinfectant, soap, and other personal cleaning products, as well as engaging in risky activities such as transactional sex for menstrual products and lack of reliable information and safe space to talk about menstruation (Baker et al. 2017; Phillips et al. 2015; Rossouw & Ross 2021; Sommer 2016). Non-profit organizations and scholars (Briggs 2021; Moffat & Pickering 2019; Wall 2020; Sommer 2016) globally have predominantly emphasized the effects of product inaccessibility, as it is more quantifiable and measurable compared to the taboo and stigma associated with menstruation.

As a response, Bobel (2019) and Bobel & Fahs (2020) showed the impacts of neoliberal capitalism and colonialism on menstrual activism, which is “fixated on sanitizing the menstrual experience, avoiding the root causes of stigma, and eschewing radical activist politics in favor of changing the system from within” (955). They claimed that menstrual activism is overly concerned with the “politics of respectability” instead of embodied resistance. At the end of their article, Bobel & Fahs (2020: 975) suggest activists to “turn to the available research to ground their efforts.” Like menstrual activism, menstrual scholarship is also extremely concerned with “politics of respectability.” Winkler (2021) pointed out the lack

1 When blood and tissue from your uterus comes out of your vagina.

of agency and autonomy in the available menstruation research, even among the ones addressing the socio-cultural dimension of menstruation due to the usage of human rights and dignity frameworks in efforts to decrease period poverty — which are at risk of instrumentalization, tokenism, and reductionism.

In emphasizing the negative outcomes of inaccessibility of menstrual products, the ultimate solution is defined as making menstrual products more available and accessible for all (Cousins 2020) especially for “the poor who, it is feared, will develop illness if they do not use hygienic means to absorb their flow (Bobel & Fahs 2020).” So, although the definition of period poverty has expanded, existing global systems regulate period poverty through two central interventions: removing the taxation on menstrual products and providing free products in public areas (especially in schools). With these two widely celebrated policy solutions, menstrual justice activists and experts were able to find funding and donations to conduct fieldwork, distribute menstrual products, create content, and disseminate reliable information about menstruation. However, all these actions assume that there are menstruators who are (or will be) damaged for not menstruating in menstrunormative² ways, specifically relying on the usage of commercial menstrual products. Recently, Olson et al. (2022) analyzed 34 menstruation-related policy

documents and conducted in-depth interviews with policymakers and advocates in India, Kenya, Senegal, and the United States. The results reveal that although policies recognize menstrual stigma as a social problem, the efforts are stuck in “material solutions focused on the hygienic management

of menstruation” (23). Policymakers and advocates are “unprepared to accept that breaking the silence (for dismantling menstrual stigma) means “there will be blood” (Newsweek 2016; Olson et al. 2022). Olson et al. (2022) claim that to disentangle the stigma around menstruation, we need to better understand the lived experiences of menstruators.

This research aims to illustrate the significance of diverse menstrual care beyond just products, drawing from the lived experiences of 4,108 Turkish menstruators. Importantly, the sampling is not limited solely to those expected to face period poverty.

2 Persdotter (2020: 358) proposes a new term, menstrunormativity, to refer to “the hegemonic social system of multiple and contradictory normativities that order and stratify menstruation and menstruating”. The author uses the term to explain how some menstrual bodies and menstruating behaviors are seen as ideal, correct, and good while others are abnormal, unhealthy, and disgusting.

Amidst the global discourse on period poverty regulations, in 2016, I co-founded Konuşmamız Gerek (We Need to Talk),³ the sole organization in Türkiye dedicated to combating period poverty and menstruation stigma. Engaging actively in both academic research and advocacy in menstrual activism across the United States and Türkiye, I've had the opportunity to observe similarities, differences, and potential areas for improvement in addressing period poverty. While some existing feminist organizations in Türkiye included sanitary pad distribution in their projects before 2016, there was no singular organization focused on raising awareness about period poverty. However, within just eight years, our efforts have substantially transformed the discourse on menstrual justice activism in Türkiye. Presently, we collaborate with over 20 local feminist organizations to provide training on menstrual justice and advocacy, develop informative content and reports on menstruation, and conduct fieldwork in 32 cities nationwide. Since 2016, Konuşmamız Gerek has reached over 1.2 million menstruators nationwide. We spearheaded menstruation-focused disaster relief efforts following the recent earthquakes in Kahramanmaraş, published the first children's book about menstruation in Turkish, and were featured in a live interview by CNN⁴ International during our disaster response efforts. With these accomplishments, securing funding and product donations from companies as well as international donors has become easier over time. Nevertheless, despite our efforts to extend the movement beyond mere product availability, the focus of both the public and potential collaborators remains solely on the donation of commercial menstrual products, rather than pursuing long-term policy changes or creating informative content on menstrual care and needs.

This research aims to illustrate the significance of diverse menstrual care beyond just products, drawing from the lived experiences of 4,108 Turkish menstruators. Importantly, the sampling is not limited solely to those expected to face period poverty.

3 <http://www.konusmamizgerek.org/>.

4 <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/02/23/exp-turkey-quake-bashir-fidan-aid-022203aseg1-cnni-world.cnn>.

COMMON APPROACHES TO ADDRESS PERIOD POVERTY

Prior to the official establishment of critical menstruation studies with an open-source handbook in 2020, a significant portion of the existing research on period poverty was overly fixated on demonstrating the adverse consequences of lacking access to commercial menstrual products. It was predominantly focused on a program-oriented approach, seeking to compile a list of “global” factors deemed essential for an idealized menstrual experience (Hennegan 2019), rather than delving into the diverse range of menstrual subjectivities across different contexts. For instance, while the integrated models of menstrual experience in High-Income Countries (HICs) (Barrington et al. 2021) and Low-Income Countries (LICs) (Hennegan et al. 2019) provide insights on menstrual experiences in some countries, the binary approach toward countries as “high” income and “low” income assumes a direct connection between menstrual experiences and financial income, without taking other contextual differences into account.

The existing research on period poverty predominantly focuses on menstruators recruited from marginalized communities, identified by various demographic factors indicating period poverty. These factors include geographical location, age, socioeconomic class, immigration status, race, gender identity, and education level. While it is crucial to highlight the adverse effects of period poverty within marginalized communities, such as menstruators in humanitarian settings (Soeiro 2021), refugee menstruators (Tellier et al. 2020), menstruators with disabilities (Steele & Goldblatt 2020), homeless menstruators (Vora 2020), as well as non-binary and transgender menstruators (Frank 2020), this approach can sometimes create fantasies of outsiders (Tuck 2009), who were invited to speak solely about the challenges they face, in this case, the struggle of not having access to commercial menstrual products.

In my eight years of experience in Türkiye as a leader in the menstrual movement, particularly during my time spent in the field, I observed that menstruators facing deep poverty, lacking access to commercial menstrual products, still possess agency in meeting their menstrual care needs. They were seeking assistance in understanding their menstruating bodies and learning proper hygienic practices for using cloth. Sometimes, they opt not to use commercial menstrual products, such as sanitary pads, due to sociocultural practices involving the use of cloth. Reflecting on these local realities, my proposed approach to addressing period poverty acknowledges that the choice of menstrual product may not always be available to all menstruators. On the other hand, it also recognizes the

effectiveness of alternative products like cloth and toilet paper, which may not be specifically manufactured for menstrual care. Moreover, it respects the decision of menstruators who may choose not to use commercial menstrual products even when accessible. This approach embodies the concept of ‘radical menstrual embodiment’ (Bobel & Fahs 2020), challenging societal norms surrounding menstruation and its intersections with fertility, sexuality, gender, race, and other social movements. It opposes any form of menstrual mandate (Bobel 2019).

STUDY DESIGN

This research is a mixed-methods study. The quantitative data allows me to critically engage with the generalized assumptions about how period poverty is experienced. On the other hand, the qualitative data provides a richer understanding of how Turkish menstruators experience period poverty and what aspects of menstruation call for attention.

CASE SELECTION: TÜRKİYE

As a co-founder of Konuşmamız Gerek, the only organization dedicated to combating period poverty and menstruation stigma in Türkiye, I have the opportunity to gather data from a substantial sample of Turkish menstruators. Furthermore, I have been actively involved in the process of social change and possess a unique perspective to analyze menstrual experiences in Türkiye. As this is the first data collected regarding period poverty in Türkiye, and due to the unique position of the association, I relied on convenience sampling to increase the number of participants as much as possible. Additionally, Türkiye occupies an intermediate position between the Global North and South, a binary that period poverty research has been stuck in for a long period of time.

Period Poverty Survey

The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Boston University (Protocol #6490E). In collaboration with a non-profit organization called “Konuşmamız Gerek (in English, We Need to Talk)”⁵ based in Türkiye, I created a non-standardized questionnaire, consisting of 17 questions, to

5 I am one of the co-founders of Konuşmamız Gerek. [The findings](#) from this data are disseminated in Turkish through its website for public. Throughout the survey, I was the sole individual responsible for both data collection and analysis.

understand the lived realities of menstruators in Türkiye in relation to the generalized assumptions about period poverty. I created a recruitment poster with the QR code of the survey link and shared the poster on Konuşmamız Gerek’s Instagram and Twitter accounts. The survey was open for participants between 20 January 2022 and 6 April 2022. Although I was aware of the limitations of using an online survey, since this is the first period poverty data collected in Türkiye, I aimed to survey as many menstruators as possible. To be able to create a space for menstruators to share their stories, I added an open-ended question at the end of the survey, which allowed us to collect qualitative data. The topics covered in survey questions are represented in Table 1.

Table 1. Topics Covered in the Period Poverty Survey

TOPICS	SUBTOPICS
Demographics	City, Age, Menstrual Identity
Product and Place Accessibility	Soap Clean Water Trash bin Private/Safe Toilet Clean Toilet Paper Health Facility Some type of Menstrual Product
Menstrual Product Preference	Sanitary pads Tampons Menstrual cups Menstrual discs Period underwear Reusable sanitary pads Cloth Toilet paper Other (_____)
Financial Difficulty/Income	Average amount spent on menstrual products per month Perceived financial difficulty level Financial support status
Personal Story	Space was provided for menstruators to share their menstruation experiences and stories

DATA ANALYSIS

The survey was implemented via Qualtrics. I used Qualtrics' data analysis tools to filter the quantitative data, explore descriptive statistics and further conduct cross-tabulations to understand menstrual care practices in Türkiye. Following the analysis of quantitative data, Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to analyze the qualitative data shared by the menstruators who participated in the survey.

Descriptive Statistics

4,875 people participated in the survey. Out of 4,875, 211 of them opted-out after reading the consent form, which decreased the total number of participants to 4,664. Since I was only interested in recruiting people who menstruate, I also ended the survey for those who responded “no” to the question “Do you menstruate?”. There were three available responses to this question “yes,” “no,” and “I don’t know.” I did not eliminate participants who answered, “I don’t know” (N=18) since they may be menstruating but do not know what that means or use another word for menstruation. I relied on our field experiences that showed many young people do not know what ‘menstruation’ means even though they menstruate. After ending the survey for participants who reported that they do not menstruate (N=132), the number of participants ended up being 4,532. Additionally, due to IRB concerns, I eliminated the data of participants who are younger than 18. In the end, after eliminating based on consent, menstrual identity, and age, the sample consisted of 4,108 individuals who are older than 18, living in Türkiye, and identify as a menstruator or are unsure about their menstrual identity.

Although the sample is not nationally representative and consisted mostly of menstruators from the five cities with the largest populations in Türkiye (TUIK 2021), it is the first survey representing the period poverty experiences of Turkish menstruators. In the sample, Istanbul (40.8%, N=1,673) being the first, Ankara (15.6%, N=638), Izmir (8.2%, N=334), Adana (6.5%, N=268), Bursa (2.9%, N=119) and Antalya (2.3%, N=93) are represented the most with the highest number of participants. The average age of the menstruators participated in the study (Figure 2) was 28 with the range of 18 to 53. Only 3,741 menstruators responded the monthly income question. Out of those who responded 13.2% have no income, 23.1% have 1–2,500 Turkish lira (TL)⁶ monthly income, 21.7% have 2,500–5,000 TL monthly income, 15.4% have 5,000–7,500

6 On July 6 2022 (date of data collection), 1 USD equals to 17.21 TL. On April 30, 2024, 1 USD equals to 32.39 TL.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

CATEGORY	COUNT (N)	PERCENTAGE (%)
Total participants	4,875	
Participants after Opt-Out	4,664	
Participants who menstruate	4,532	
Participants 18 and older	4108	
Geographical distribution		
Istanbul	1,673	40.8%
Ankara	638	15.6%
Izmir	334	8.2%
Adana	268	6.5%
Bursa	119	2.9%
Antalya	93	2.3%
Other cities	983	23.7%
Age distribution		
Age range	18-53	
Average age	28	
Monthly income	3741	
No income		13.2%
1-2,500 TL*		23.1%
2,500-5,000 TL		21.7%
5,000-7,500 TL		15.4%
7,500-10,000 TL		12.5%
10,000-15,000 TL		7.4%
15,000+ TL		7.4%
Financial support status		
No support		91.6%
Financial support		7.6%
Only aid package		0.6%
Both aid package and financial support		0.2%

*On July 6 2022 (date of data collection), 1 USD is equal to 17.21 TL. On April 30, 2024, 1 USD is equal to 32.39 TL.

TL monthly income, 12.5% (N=461) have 7,500–10,000 TL monthly income, 7.4% have 10,000–15,000 TL monthly income, and finally 6.8% have more than 15,000 TL monthly income. In addition to their monthly income, we also asked about their financial support status, if they receive any financial or package aid from some institution. Out of 3,722 participants who responded this question, 7.6% receive financial aid, 0.6% receive only package aid, and 0.2% receive both financial and package aid. Financial aid status is an important demographical factor that could open new intervention areas.

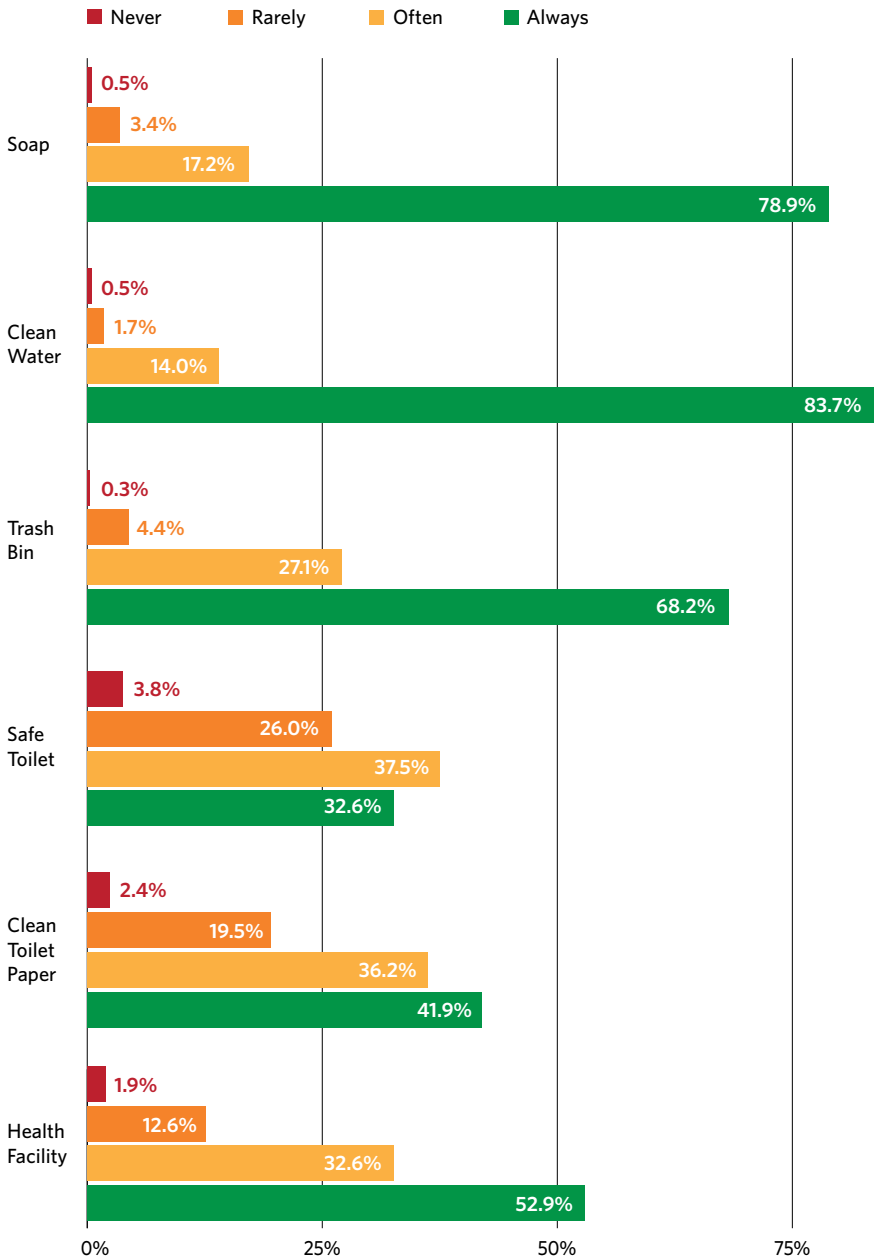
RESULTS

Side Products for Menstrual Care

The widely used definition of period poverty refers to the state in which menstruators cannot access commercial menstrual care products and side products used for menstrual care such as soap, clean water, trash bin, and a safe toilet. I asked Turkish menstruators how frequently they have access to soap, clean water, trash bin, safe toilet, clean toilet paper, and some form of health facility. In this question, I aimed to assess the accessibility of products and places that are needed for menstrual care beyond the menstrual product itself since they have not been included to the policy solutions against period poverty. 3,863 participants responded to the question. Figure 1 shows that 21.1% do not always have access to soap, 16.3% do not always have access to clean water, and 31.8% do not always have access to trash bin. This data tells us that approximately 1 in 5 of the menstruators do not always have access to these side products that are widely used for menstrual care. Moreover, 67.4% of the menstruators do not always have access to a safe toilet, 58.1% do not always have access to clean toilet paper, and 47.1% do not always have access to some form of health facility.

“Access to safe and clean toilets, along with clean toilet paper, poses a significant challenge for menstrual care.”

Figure 1. Accessibility of Side Products/Places for Menstrual Care



Products Used for Menstrual Care

A globally proposed solution to address period poverty involves either reducing or eliminating taxes imposed on menstrual products, commonly referred to as the “tampon tax.” However, using the term “tampon” to define this tax focuses solely on tampon users and simplifies menstrual care practices to conform to moral ideals that accept tampon usage only in the context of heterosexual intercourse.

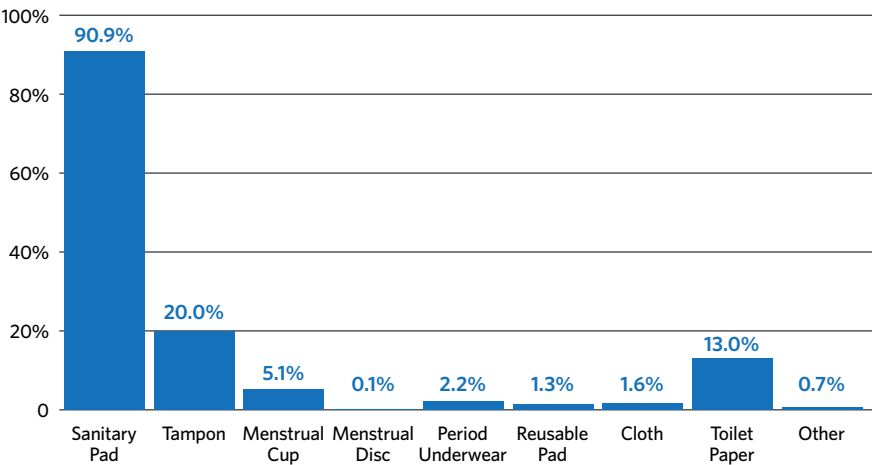
“While sanitary pads are widely used for menstrual care, toilet paper sees more use than menstrual cups.”

This perspective overlooks the diverse array of menstrual products utilized by menstruators in different regions. For example, in Türkiye, there is a prevalent understanding that menstruators are socialized to use sanitary pads rather than tampons due to the cultural and contextual significance placed on maintaining “virginity” before marriage (Ozyegin 2009). Despite this common knowledge, there is a lack of data

regarding the specific products used by menstruators in Türkiye. To address this gap, I added a question about the products they use for menstrual care, allowing participants to select more than one answer.

Figure 2 shows 90.9% use sanitary pads, 20.0% use tampons, and 5.1% use menstrual cups. Very few respondents reported that they use menstrual discs (0.1%), period underwear (2.2%), reusable pads (1.3%), and cloths (1.6%). However, 13.0% of the menstruators use toilet paper to provide menstrual care. Participants were also asked to specify if they chose “other” as an option. Twenty-nine of the menstruators who picked other (N=29) specified the products they use when bleeding. Eight of them reported using diapers, four using an old underwear, three using cotton balls, eight using panty liners, and six of them reported using paper towels. 13.7% of menstruators reported they use at least cloth or toilet paper for menstrual care. The average age of these menstruators turned out to be younger (26.2) than the sample average (28).

Figure 2. Product Used for Menstrual Care

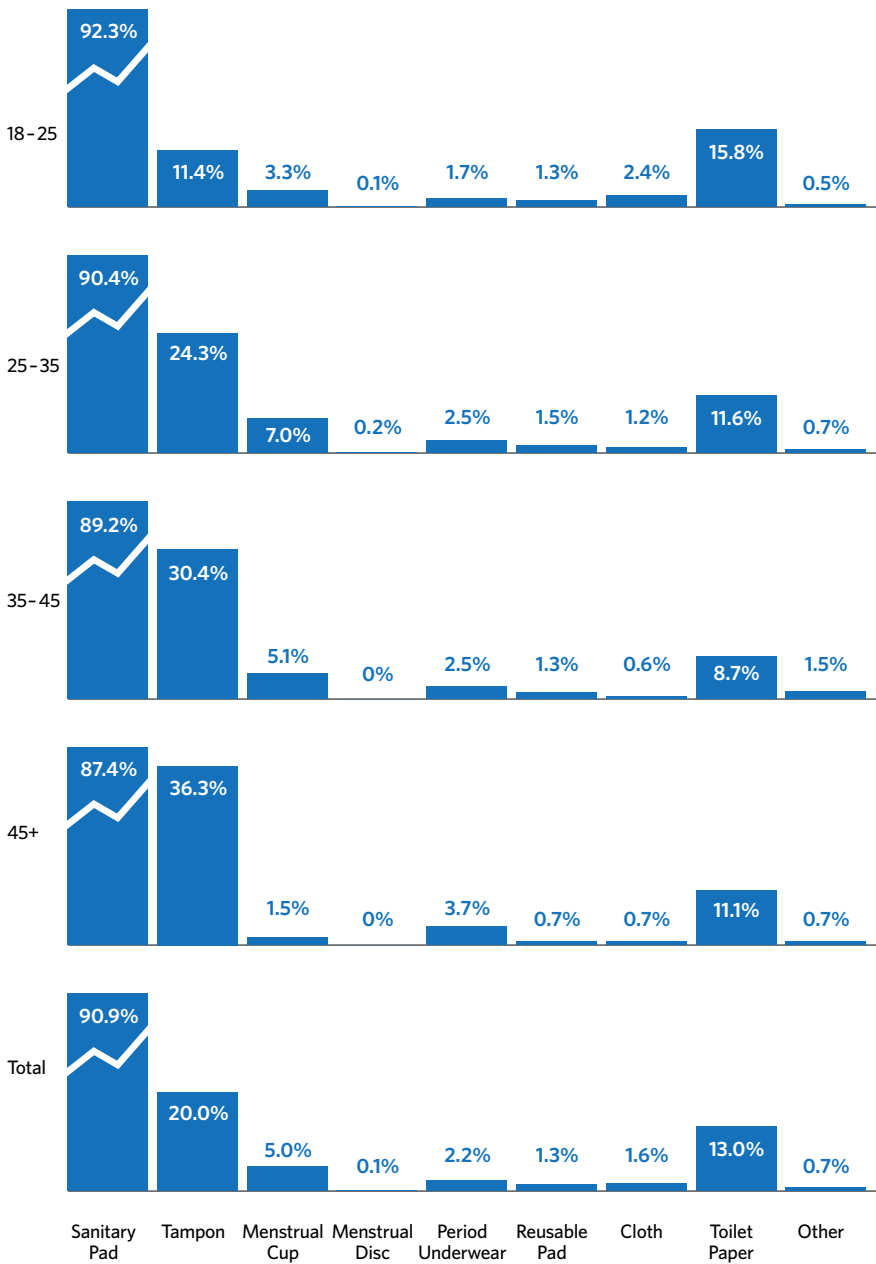


Age and Menstrual Product

To understand the generational difference, I also looked at the age breakdown in relation to the products used for menstrual care, see Figure 3. The use of sanitary pads decreases as the age increases and the use of tampons increases with age. Sanitary pads turned out to be more popular among menstruators between the ages of 18 and 25 compared to older menstruators. While the use of menstrual cup is more common in the 25–35 age group, the use of period underwear is more common in the age of 45 and above. Finally, the usage of cloth is seen to be more common between the ages of 18 and 25 while the usage of toilet paper for menstrual care is more common between the ages of 18 and 25, its usage is widely seen in all age ranges.

“Across all age groups, Turkish menstruators predominantly use sanitary pads, while tampon usage rises with age.”

Figure 3. Age and Product Used for Menstrual Care

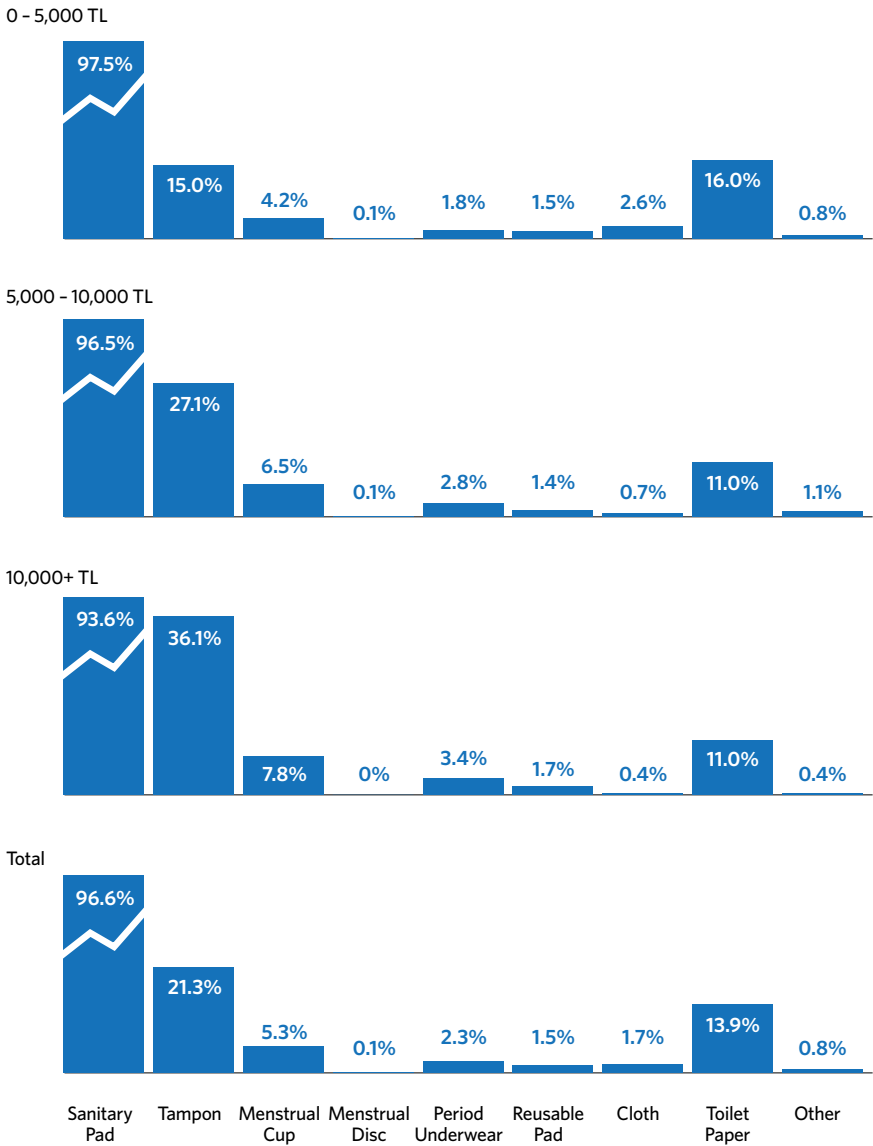


Monthly Income and Menstrual Product

The damage-centered approach (Tuck 2009) to period poverty assumes that only low-income menstruators use the products that are not produced specifically for menstrual care such as cloth and toilet paper. I wanted to understand if these assumptions are correct within the Turkish context. I used cross-tabulation to understand the relationship between monthly income and the used menstrual product. To do so, I combined monthly income in three groups: 0–5,000 TL, 5,000–10,000 TL, and 10,000+ TL. As shown in the Figure 4, menstruators in Türkiye, regardless of their monthly income, use toilet paper and cloth for menstrual care. 16.0% of menstruators with monthly income between 0 and 5,000 TL, 11.0% of menstruators with monthly income between 5,000 and 10,000 TL use toilet paper for menstrual care. This percentage remains the same for menstruators with 10,000 TL and more monthly income, showing that 11.0% of them also use toilet paper for menstrual care.

*“Both the wealthy
and the poor depend
heavily on commercial
menstrual products.”*

Figure 4. Monthly Income and Product Used for Menstrual Care



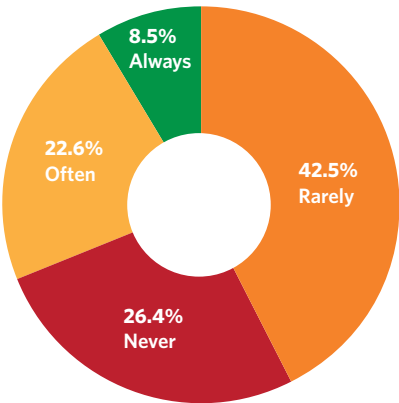
Perceived Difficulty When Purchasing Menstrual Products

The monthly spending on menstrual products is important to understand the required resources for menstrual care. However, the numeric number spent on menstrual products is not enough to understand how Turkish menstruators experience period poverty. In addition to their income and monthly spending, I was interested in their perception of difficulty when purchasing menstrual care products. To understand, I asked “How often do you experience difficulty when purchasing menstrual products?”

“Only 26.4% never struggle to buy menstrual care products.”

3,863 menstruators responded to this question. Results, in Figure 5, show that 42.5% of the menstruators rarely and 22.6% often, whereas 26.4% never and 8.5% always experience financial difficulty when purchasing menstrual products.

Figure 5. Perceived Difficulty When Purchasing Menstrual Care Products



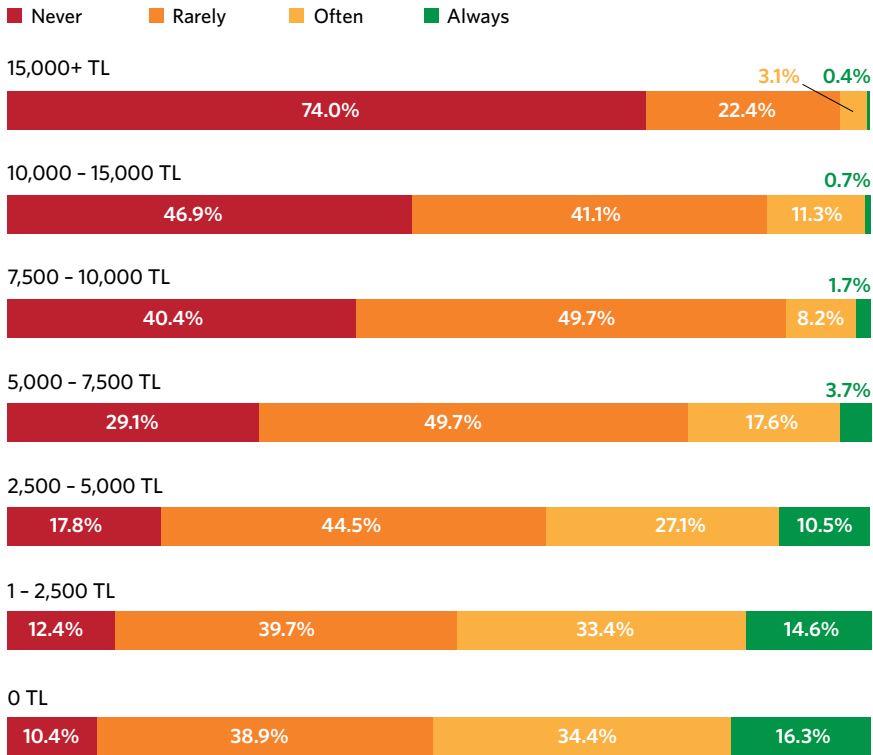
Monthly Income and Perceived Difficulty

As shown in Figure 6, I also explored the general assumption that as one’s monthly income is lower, their perceived difficulty when purchasing menstrual products will be higher. 3,729 responded both questions. The results confirmed the general assumption, menstruators with higher income experience less difficulty compared to menstruators with lower monthly income when purchasing menstrual products. However, results revealed that regardless of the monthly income, all menstruators in Türkiye reported experiencing some level of difficulty

when purchasing menstrual products. To specify, 16.3% of menstruators with no income, 14.6% of menstruators with 1–2,500 TL monthly income, and 10.5% of menstruators with 2,500–5,000 TL monthly income reported they always experience financial difficulty when purchasing menstrual products. In addition to this, even among menstruators with 15,000+ TL monthly income, 26.0% experience some difficulty when purchasing menstrual products. This data reveals that period poverty is not only about financial resources but more.

“The financial burden of purchasing menstrual care products weighs more heavily on those with limited resources.”

Figure 6. Monthly Income and Perceived Difficulty When Purchasing Menstrual Care Products



In addition to asking about the perceived difficulty, I also asked what is included in the aid packages they receive, if any. Unfortunately, none of the aid packages include menstrual care products. Only one menstruator reported that there is a paper towel in the package, which, as our data shows, could be used for menstrual care. The qualitative data on financial support status reveals that metropolitan municipalities and student scholarships are the two main actors providing financial support to menstruators in Türkiye.

QUALITATIVE DATA

At the end of the survey, I asked one open-ended question to Turkish menstruators: “Please use the following blank space for any other menstrual experience that I did not ask but you think it is important to share.” My goal with this question was to explore the unnoticed and ignored menstrual experiences. 588 menstruators used this space and shared additional information. With three cycles of open coding, I constructed 52 codes and identified two themes: menstrual embodiment (Bobel & Fahs 2020) and strategies for menstrual care. The menstrual embodiment theme includes four subthemes: menstrual pain, irregularities, fear, and hope. The strategies for care theme include two subthemes: reducing the cost and questioning the product quality.

Menstrual Embodiment: Pain, Irregularities, Fear, and Hope

Twenty-three percent of these 588 menstruators shared severe menstrual pain experiences. It was interesting to see that some menstruators use the word “ağrı,” which is the direct translation of pain to Turkish while others use “sancı,” which is mostly used for the pain during childbirth and it refers to a deeper, more intense pain. Menstruators shared stories of unpersuasion and suspicion around their stated menstrual pain experiences. People around Turkish menstruators, especially non-menstruator colleagues, employers and healthcare practitioners do not believe in the severance of their pain and look down on them for their “exaggerated behaviors.” They also underscored the need to implement paid menstrual leave at least for one day every month. One of the menstruators comments is line with existing research showing the role of non-menstruators in maintaining menstruation stigma (Olson et al. 2022).

“My first days are very painful in general. Trying to hide it (especially from the male members of the family) while in this pain is so tiring. In any case I must pretend that I am not in pain. I can say it, but I know I will face negative reactions.”

In addition to the discussions around pain and suspicion of the pain, menstruators are frustrated with the normalization of period irregularities and the lack of psychosocial and medical support for people with irregular periods, especially those experiencing PCOS, endometriosis and dysmenorrhea. Menstruators with irregular and/or painful periods want to use additional care such as physical and psychological therapy, however insurance does not cover any of these services in Türkiye and menstruators cannot find response to their menstrual care needs. One of the menstruators summarized the situation as following,

“Yes, menstruation is not something to be ashamed of and it makes us all sad that this is how we grow up. However, a solution needs to be found for menstrual pain. People shouldn’t give money to physiotherapists for menstrual pain anymore. I cannot afford going to a physiotherapist, but I must go to a hospital for a pain relief injection. Even that is so expensive, but I don’t have any other option.”

Finally, fear was another important theme. It was present not only in relation to the fear of menstruating, concealment of menstrual blood or not having access to menstrual products. Turkish menstruators are also afraid of purchasing menstrual products, being judged for the menstrual product they use as an “unmarried” person, and not being able to menstruate since it signals infertility. Menstruators also shared stories of being afraid when they go to toilet more often during menstruation and from their increased sexual desire during menstruation- indicating the lack of comprehensive education on reproductive health and its impact on menstrual experiences. Overall, menstruation goes hand in hand with feelings of fear in Türkiye.

“For women who have an active sexual life and who experience period irregularities, the suspicion of pregnancy is a tiring threat. Because morning after pills and early pregnancy tests are sold at exorbitant prices, unwanted pregnancies are not unexpected. Not having a period, as well as having a period, can cause various psychological and physical problems. Access to the right to abortion is also very important for people with irregular periods. In other words, having or not having a period complicates our lives.”

Turkish menstruators have a collective desire and hope for better menstrual care. The lack of support for different menstrual subjectivities created this common

hope. Menstruators imagine a future with fair access to menstrual care that is constructed by potentialities that are not existing in the present time and goes beyond the accessibility and availability of menstrual products. Menstruators with higher income stated that they donate products to certain associations, and they are supporting the campaigns against period poverty and menstruation stigma. This collective consciousness is in line with the recent research that shows in HICs, through sharing menstruation knowledge, cis-women and girls build improved relationships that leads to happiness (Barrington 2021). Although Türkiye would not be considered as a HIC, we still see the desire for a diverse and affordable menstrual care. These shared stories showed that Turkish menstruators desire and seek to provide care for themselves beyond the menstrual products, however, there has not been any action on increasing the accessibility of these services in addition to the menstrual care products.

Strategies for Care

Menstrual care products are significant part of the menstrual experiences, and my research confirms this. Turkish menstruators want to have access to free and high-quality menstrual care products that are good both for them and for the environment. The responses to the open-ended question revealed certain strategies they use for accessing menstrual products. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the high inflation rate in Türkiye, menstruators use certain strategies for continuous access to menstrual products. I categorized these strategies as: (1) changing the menstrual product in less frequency, (2) traveling among different supermarkets to find the best (inexpensive as well as high-quality), (3) using a lower quality brand, and (4) stocking. One of the menstruators said,

"I think there is something missing in this research. I generally think that it is necessary to consider the time spent to find the menstrual product, not the monthly income or spending. For example, I go to four or five different markets and follow their discounts every month."

Finally, Turkish menstruators do not trust the quality of the products they are using, and they want to know the ingredients of these products. Unfortunately, in Türkiye there are no regulations in place that oversees the ingredients and the products labeled as "organic" are more expensive.

"I want to use organic product, but since they are so expensive I have to use products that are harmful both for my skin and nature. Clean and fair menstrual products should be accessible to everyone, I do not need to be rich for basic needs. Fair menstrual products should be the right of every woman."

WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR MENSTRUAL JUSTICE IN TÜRKİYE AND BEYOND?

This research explores the menstrual care practices of Turkish menstruators in comparison to the generalized assumptions about period poverty. Beyond picturing different menstrual experiences, the results provide ways to connect menstrual activism to other social movements (Bobel & Fahs 2020), especially with reproductive justice, feminist health, consumer and environmental rights. Table 3 summarizes the collaboration suggestions for menstrual justice movement with other social movements.

Table 3. Collaboration Suggestions with Other Social Movements

Reproductive Justice	Feminist Health	Consumer & Environmental Rights
Consider non-normative menstrual care habits without stigmatizing them (such as using a toilet paper and cloth)	Consider the menstrual experiences of menstruators in different life stages	Consider equalizing costs of reusable and disposable menstrual care products
Promote all menstrual care products to be free instead of only tampons and sanitary pads	Integrate menstrual care costs as a cost item in designing financial support systems	Integrate regulations to oversee the menstrual care products' ingredients
Include all subjectivities (such as bleeding versus suppressing menstruation) in intervention programs and research	Include menstrual affections (pain, fear, frustration, hope) in period poverty programs	Advise menstrual product companies to include diverse menstrual experiences and care practices in their marketing efforts

Below, I explain how menstrual activism can be more effectively integrated with these broader social movements, along with its implications within the Turkish context.

I. Reproductive Justice

Menstrual experiences of Turkish menstruators provide multiple ways for integrating menstruation to the reproductive justice (RJ) framework.⁷ Although cyclical bodies' reproduction rhythm is very much associated with their menstrual cycle, menstrual experiences have been kept in the background of sociological discussions on reproduction. RJ framework includes rights to have a child, not have a child, and to parent any children (Ross 2006). The RJ and menstrual movements can collaborate to better integrate diverse menstrual subjectivities of all cyclical bodies including (but not limited to) bleeding, not bleeding, choosing not to bleed, and wishing to bleed but can't. Moreover, collaborating with the RJ movement will also support menstrual activism in advocating for all menstrual care practices by highlighting that menstruators do not follow homogenized menstrual care practices either by choice or necessity and all (not only sanitary pads) menstrual care products must be free for all cyclical bodies.

Implications for Türkiye: Although efforts are underway on a small scale, both government agencies (primarily municipalities) and civil society in Türkiye are primarily focused on distributing free menstrual products. Current menstrual justice initiatives largely revolve around product donations, which serve as effective PR campaigns for both organizations and donor companies. However, there is a notable oversight regarding individuals who no longer menstruate due to various reasons, including menopause and the repetitive usage of the pill. It is essential for both civil society and government agencies to broaden their focus beyond those currently menstruating. Furthermore, when distributing menstrual products, they often limit the options to sanitary pads, excluding tampons or reusable pads.

Rather than employing a top-down approach, it is crucial to understand the practices of menstruators and guide them toward potential options while promoting hygienic practices when using non-commercial menstrual products.

7 The term, RJ, was developed by feminists of color to emphasize the need for an intersectional perspective to reconceptualize reproductive rights by emphasizing racism and classism (Ross 2006). It refers to the dynamic relationship between the law, social movements, and academia (Luna & Luker 2013). RJ scholarship has been focused heavily on abortion, (Luna 2009; Price 2010; Smith 2005 in Luna & Luker, 2013), contraception (Littlejohn 2021), rights to have a child, not have a child and to parent any children (Ross 2006). The main objective of RJ research is to undue government interference and emphasize the need for action to create conditions for social justice for all (Luna & Luker, 2013: 328). To do so, RJ scholars' intersectional analysis center "reproductive issues that considers cyclical bodies' race, class, gender, sexuality, ability; community-based identification of problems and leadership in taking action to solve them as well as recognition of the fact that individuals are embedded in communities" (Luna & luker, 2013: 330).

While it may not be possible to provide all products, educational programs should emphasize the variety of menstrual products available and how to use them effectively. Moreover, these efforts contribute to the stigma surrounding menstruators who use cloth, diapers, or toilet paper for menstrual care. Rather than employing a top-down approach, it is crucial to understand the practices of menstruators and guide them toward potential options while promoting hygienic practices when using non-commercial menstrual products.

II. Feminist Health

Biomedical scientists and clinicians have long treated male bodies as standard and female bodies as reproductive (Almeling 2020). Although a lot has been done about female bodies’ reproduction, painful experiences (including but not limited to endometriosis and PCOS) are not adequately researched and advocated for (Short & Zacher 2022). In 2018, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development called for more attention on menstruation science (Short & Zacher 2022).

The results provide collaboration opportunities for the feminist health and menstrual movements.

Firstly, health experiences and needs of all cyclical bodies of all ages, not only people who are currently menstruating, must be

acknowledged, validated, and addressed. The results reveal the lack of attention and normalization of menstrual pain and irregularities. This result is in line with the findings of Pichon et al. (2022). Through the scoping review of available English literature (N=138) about “menstruators” and 85 menstrual tracking apps, they identified menstrual irregularity as a norm, although mobile applications treat users as “regular” menstruators.

Menstruators’ fear, pain, and frustration in relation to menstrual experiences must be included in the education curriculum of all health practitioners, policy proposals and intervention programs.

Implications for Türkiye: Menstruators’ fear, pain, and frustration in relation to menstrual experiences must be included in the education curriculum of all health practitioners, policy proposals, and intervention programs. Moreover, supportive treatments for menstrual pain and irregularities (such as physical and psychological therapy) must be covered by insurance and menstrual leave should be offered to all cyclical bodies. Second, menstrual justice activists’ collaboration with feminist health experts and practitioners will strengthen the advocacy efforts for the inclusion of menstrual care costs in financial support mechanisms.

The results show that existing financial support systems in Türkiye are ignoring menstrual care needs, and there is room for better integration. Existing financial supports are coming from student scholarships and metropolitan municipalities. There are several ways we can enhance the integration of menstrual care needs into existing financial support systems. Firstly, we can add menstrual care product costs into the calculation of financial support such as student scholarships, unemployment benefits,⁸ and cash assistance for refugees such as the Emergency Social Safety Net Program (ESSN).⁹ Secondly, we can add different types of menstrual care products to aid package supports. The integration of menstrual care products into these financial support systems could help normalization of menstruation by making them more visible beyond the restrooms. As the qualitative data shows, Turkish menstruators experience financial difficulty in purchasing birth control pills, which is widely prescribed for menstrual irregularities particularly for PCOS and endometriosis patients. However, none of these expenses are covered by insurance. Treatments required for these patients must be covered by insurance plans.

III. Consumer & Environmental Rights

Recently, critical menstruation researchers have highlighted the problem of the product-obsession of menstrual justice movement (Bobel & Fahs 2020; Koskeniemi 2021; Olson et al. 2022). While problematizing the overemphasis of products, they accepted that menstruators want to use commercial and disposable menstrual products. My results show no difference in that realm. Turkish menstruators desire, search, and hope for easy, free, and consistent access to high-quality, commercial menstrual care products. While this puts us in the inescapable paradox of menstrual justice movement, in which the products reinforce the stigma while being needed by the menstruators, accepting this paradox could be the first step of moving further than the products by collaborating with consumer and environmental rights movement in a more distinctive way.

The findings indicate that the menstrual justice movement can collaborate with consumer and environmental rights experts to navigate regulations governing the menstrual product market. This movement has gained momentum by advocating for the reduction or elimination of consumption taxes on menstrual

8 As of June 29, 2022, the unemployment benefit of an unemployed who worked with minimum wage in the Last 4 Months in Türkiye is 1986,4 TL (İŞKUR 2022).

9 ESSN is a program funded by the European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid led by the Turkish Red Crescent. Since 2016, it provides cash assistance by uploading 155 TL per person the KIZILAYKART debit card of the household. (KIZILAYKART 2022).

products worldwide. While tax reductions or eliminations are important signals, they often do little to alleviate the financial burden on menstruators, as these products remain expensive. Another approach is to reduce prices across various menstrual products, allowing menstruators to choose products without financial constraints. Additionally, there is still ambiguity surrounding the ingredients of menstrual products, particularly in Türkiye. The menstrual justice movement could collaborate with consumer rights activists to urge companies to provide clearer explanations of product ingredients.

Implications for Türkiye: Turkish menstruators are not passive consumers; they express a need for more information regarding the cost, quality, and sustainability of menstrual care products. However, accessible and reliable information is currently lacking. Establishing

a longitudinal database could address this gap, providing a solution for tracking such information. Moreover, research findings reveal variations in the adoption levels of different menstrual care products within the Turkish context, with sanitary pads and tampons being predominantly used. Notably,

Turkish menstruators are not passive consumers; they express a need for more information regarding the cost, quality, and sustainability of menstrual care products. However, accessible and reliable information is currently lacking.

there have been no television advertisements for tampons or menstrual cups in Türkiye to date. However, recent brands specializing in “alternative products” (Koskenniemi 2021) like menstrual cups and period underwear have emerged. These brands have turned to social media platforms, particularly Instagram, for product promotion since 2021, potentially increasing the uptake of these products. Civil society organizations can contribute significantly by advising menstrual product companies to diversify their marketing campaigns, incorporating a broader range of menstrual experiences and care practices. Additionally, the Turkish government could enhance oversight by implementing clearer regulations regarding the ingredients of menstrual care products.

CONCLUSION

This paper seeks to provide context for the menstrual care experiences of Turkish menstruators without confining the sample to marginalized groups typically associated with experiencing period poverty. While some results align with the available research, they also provide opportunities for a radical menstrual embodiment (Bobel & Fahs 2020) in menstrual scholarship informing policy. There is no single, true way of providing menstrual care; menstruators switch between products, sometimes due to necessity and sometimes by choice. Contrary to the general assumption, toilet paper and cloth are not only used by low-income menstruators in Türkiye. Menstrual experiences and care practices change with age, showing the importance of curating the actions against period poverty according to the age group. Scholars need to contextualize menstrual subjectivities to inform policy according to the contextual desires of menstruators. Results also reveal both negative and positive embodied experiences of menstruators. Turkish menstruators shared stories of collective consciousness and hope toward fair and diverse menstrual care despite the fear of menstruation and frustration due to the systematic neglect of menstrual pain and irregularities. Finally, Turkish menstruators search for cheap, high quality, and safe products for themselves and for the environment. To respond to these desires, since there is no available information, menstruators self-construct time and energy consuming strategies. These neglected desires provide examples for connecting menstruation with other social movements, especially reproductive justice, feminist health, and consumer and environmental rights (Bobel & Fahs 2020).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MENSTRUAL JUSTICE IN TÜRKİYE

1. Government agencies, donors, and menstrual product companies should expand their collaboration with civil society beyond merely distributing free sanitary pads. Instead, they should promote comprehensive menstruation education practices and ensure the development of reliable content and data concerning menstruation experiences in Türkiye.
2. Menstrual justice intervention programs and content should embrace inclusivity, including non-menstruators such as individuals experiencing menopause or those suppressing menstruation for various reasons, as well as boys and men.

3. Although Turkish menstruators primarily use sanitary pads, it is crucial for menstrual product companies, civil society groups, and government organizations involved in fieldwork to ensure the visibility and introduction of all available menstrual care products.
4. Comprehensive menstruation education should be integrated into the curriculum for healthcare practitioners.
5. Supportive treatments for menstrual pain and irregularities (such as physical and psychological therapy and birth control pills) should be covered by insurance.
6. Menstrual leave should be offered to all menstruators in Türkiye.
7. The costs of menstrual care products should be factored into the calculation of financial support, such as student scholarships, unemployment benefits, and cash assistance for refugees, such as the Emergency Social Safety Net Program (ESSN).
8. A longitudinal database ought to be created to monitor information regarding the cost, quality, and sustainability of menstrual care products.
9. Definite regulations need to be put in place to ensure transparent oversight of the ingredients in menstrual care products.
10. Civil society organizations should advocate for inclusive advertising practices, including television commercials for menstrual cups and tampons. ●

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