

MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS, STIGMA, AND NORMATIVITIES: A STUDY ON  
PRACTICES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ANKARA

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**MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS, STIGMA, AND NORMATIVITIES: A STUDY ON  
PRACTICES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ANKARA**

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**I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS, STIGMA, AND NORMATIVITIES: A STUDY ON PRACTICES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ANKARA**

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This study seeks to problematize menstruation as a source of social stigma and norms through investigating menstrual product consumption practices in Turkey. Despite being experienced by the half of the population, studies on menstrual stigma, norms and product consumption practices in Turkey are limited. Grounding on the semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with twenty-six menstruators between the ages of 18-23 and studying in Ankara, disposable and alternative menstrual product consumption practices constitute the focus of this study. As the research findings indicate, disposable and alternative menstrual product consumption practices interrelate with the menstrual stigma and dominant gender ideology in Turkey. Research participants living in a society where menstrual stigma is communicated with them through various channels, adopt several stigma coping mechanisms. Alternative menstrual product consumption practices, which include connections to sustainability, affordability, maintenance, feminist intentions and convenience, not only result in a normalized and destigmatized period experience but also create a new ideal menstrual subjectivity against the dominant menstrunormate of the Turkish society.

**Keywords:** menstruation, menstrual stigma, menstrunormativities, menstrual products, consumption practices

## ÖZ

### MENSTRÜEL ÜRÜNLER, DAMGA VE NORMATİVİTELER: ANKARA'DAKİ ÜNİVERSİTE ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN PRATİKLERİ ÜZERİNE BİR ÇALIŞMA

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Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de menstrüel ürün tüketim pratiklerini inceleyerek, bir sosyal damgalama ve norm kaynağı olarak regli sorunsallaştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Nüfusun yarısı tarafından deneyimlense de Türkiye’de menstrüel damga, normlar ve ürün tüketim pratikleri ile ilgili çalışmalar sınırlıdır. Ankara’da öğrenim gören 18-23 yaş arası yirmi altı menstüratör ile yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmelere dayanan bu çalışmanın odak noktası tek kullanımlık ve alternatif menstrüel ürün tüketim pratikleridir. Araştırma bulgularının gösterdiği üzere, tek kullanımlık ve alternatif adet ürünü tüketim pratikleri, Türkiye’deki menstrüel damga ve hâkim cinsiyet ideolojisi ile ilişkilidir. Menstrüel damgalamanın çeşitli kanallar aracılığıyla kendilerine iletildiği bir toplumda yaşayan araştırma katılımcıları, damgalamayla başa çıkmada çeşitli mekanizmalar benimsemektedir. Sürdürülebilirlik, satın alınabilirlik, bakım, feminist niyetler ve rahatlık ile bağlantılar içeren alternatif menstrüel ürün tüketim pratikleri, yalnızca normalleştirilmiş ve destigmatize edilmiş bir regl deneyimine yol açmaz, aynı zamanda Türk toplumunun baskın menstrüel öznelliğine karşı yeni bir ideal menstrüel öznellik yaratır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** regl, regl damgası, menstrunormativiteler, menstrüel ürünler, tüketim pratikleri

*To all menstruators around the world*



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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

BWHBC	Boston Women's Health Book Collective
DIY	Do-It-Yourself
FDA	United States Food and Drug Administration
FSH	Follicle-Stimulating hormone
JDP	Justice and Development Party
LH	Luteinizing Hormone
METU	Middle East Technical University
MHM	Menstrual Health Management
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
P&G	Procter and Gamble
PCDA	Project of Change During Adolescence
PRP	People's Republican Party
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
TRT	Turkish Radio and Television
TSS	Toxic Shock Syndrome
UN	United Nations
US	United States
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Health
WHO	World Health Organization
WNTA	We Need to Talk Association

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkish government bodies have taken several precautions to prevent the further spread of the virus. Among these policies was the Notice of Market Measures, a circular letter issued by the Turkish Ministry of Interior on May 4, 2022 (Turkish Ministry of Interior, 2021). Aiming to avert any possible crowd in stores, chain- and supermarkets during the curfew hours, the sale of any product other than the goods within the “compulsory basic needs” of the citizens were prohibited, as declared in this notice. The items allowed for sale from May 7, 2021 were listed as staple food and cleaning materials, animal food, and cosmetic goods, except perfumery and make-up products stated in the parenthesis.

Shortly after the notice was shared with the markets and the necessary measures were actualized, a nationwide outrage outburst through social media posts, including photographs of menstrual products –mostly menstrual pads– on supermarket shelves, taped off with cross-shaped red and white warning bands. A tweet with over fourteen-thousand likes has spilled out the hatred with the words “Marketten ped alamadım ya, MARKETTEN PED ALAMADIM. Sıfır şaka [I could not buy a pad from market, I COULD NOT BUY A PAD FROM MARKET. Zero jokes]” (Selin, 2021) whereas another user tweeted with the visuals of market shelves as “Kadın olmak yasaklanmış... Oldu olucak bir de yok edin bizi #PedYasaklanamaz [Being a woman was banned... There is no reason not to do away with us #PadCannotBeBanned]” (Sedaa, 2021). Besides thousands of tweets, Instagram posts, and Ekşi Sözlük<sup>1</sup> entries protesting the suspension of menstrual product sales, there was news reflecting the confusion of supermarket workers and the arbitrary treatment of several shops due to this confusion with other stores continuing to sell menstrual pads and preservatives. (“Marketleri dolaştık: Ped satışı yasak mı, değil mi?”, 2021; Çelik, 2021) After the issue had

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<sup>1</sup> Ekşi Sözlük or in English, “Sour Dictionary” is a website which could be described as “Wikipedia, a social network, and Reddit rolled into one” in sociologist Zeynep Tüfekçi’s words (Kantrowitz, 2013). For the page about the above issue on menstrual pad sales during COVID-19 pandemic, the following reference may be visited: Ekşi Sözlük. (May 7, 2021). *7 Mayıs 2021 ped satışı yasaklanması* [Online forum post]. <https://eksisozluk.com/7-mayis-2021-ped-satisi-yasaklanmasi--6908013>



aroused this significant reaction, the representatives of the *Konuřmamız Gerek Derneęi* [We Need to Talk Association], an initiative aiming to combat menstrual poverty and menstrual stigma in Turkey, included the following statement in one of the interviews conducted with them: “We are well aware that such photographs do not reflect all stores in Turkey and the sales of menstrual products continue in many places. It shows a confusion which might have been caused by not writing clearly ‘hygienic and menstrual products’ in the circular letter, in a word, not openly talking about menstruating and menstrual products” (Mert, 2021).

Another incident that made a strong impression on the Turkish public occurred two months after the previous one. Firstly shared through a Reddit post with a security camera footage of the incident and later deleted, the words of a cashier whom a male customer physically attacked after saying menstrual pad has been shared in several news portals. This 19-year-old university student working in a supermarket as a cashier tried to inform a married couple buying from them about the special offer products, including *Orkids*<sup>2</sup>. After the women left and the payment was received, the man objected to the cashier, saying “You cannot say a lady *Orkid*.” The incident continued as the cashier narrated with the following words: “(...) After I told him, ‘First of all, it is not *lady*, it is *woman*<sup>3</sup>’ and he started cursing me saying, ‘Lady or woman, they are both the same, you cannot say my wife *Orkid*.’ and later, as you see, it is batter. (...) So I went to the police, and they said they would take care of me. The only reason I am posting is to make my voice heard and expose these stupid people. Do not bother with these people, do not even take them seriously, because these are the leftovers of this country; it is not worth dealing with (...)” (“Genç kasiyer, indirimleri ürünleri sayarken ‘Orkid var’ dedięi için müşterinin saldırısına uğradı”, 2021).

These two consecutive incidents happening in a two months’ time epitomize how the bodily process of menstruation and the products being used during “that time of the month”<sup>4</sup> are not isolated from the menstrual norms circulating within Turkish society. In the first incident,

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<sup>2</sup> *Orkid* is the Turkish local brand name of *Always* menstrual pad brand of Procter & Gamble.

<sup>3</sup> “*Bayan deęil, kadın.*” or in English, “*It’s not lady, it’s woman.*” is a trending discourse adopted within gender equality related discussions in Turkey. This sentence is mostly uttered and advocated by people who refuse to use the word “lady” –which is actually a term of address– instead of “woman”. Further discussion on this term will be touched upon in second chapter.

<sup>4</sup> “Time of the month” is an informal phrase to address to “the time when a woman has her period” (Macmillan, n.d.). I find a synonymity between this phrase and the Turkish “*muayyen gün*” in terms of the metaphor construction and usage frequency. The adjective *muayyen* has the following meanings: 1. certain, 2. specified, 3. known. (Türk Dil Kurumu, n.d.) However, the phrase *muayyen gün* has been used as “menstruating, women’s monthly bleeding” by both women and men. (Bingölçe, 2020, p. 188) The euphemism of menstruation in Turkish language will be mentioned later in the second chapter more broadly.

government agencies did not make an attempt to include menstrual products, which are among the basic compulsory needs. Either it may be the neglect of the patriarchal state which is not oblivious of the needs of menstruating individuals, or a deliberate silence regarding talking about menstruation as shameful or inappropriate, the motivation behind not mentioning menstrual products in such public document is nourished by the stigmatized understanding of the menses. In addition, the second incident reveals which behaviors related to menstruation are acceptable and which are not during everyday encounters in public spaces. The existing menstrual stigma in this context characterizes it as a disgrace for a male salesperson to mention a pad brand to a “lady”—not even expressing the word pad directly. Especially if that woman is subjected to this in the presence of her husband, the salesperson may even face physical violence. Also, as it is considered inappropriate to talk about a pad in the presence of a woman, and because the patriarch of the family claims right over the female members’ body, it is deemed appropriate to settle the matter man-to-man after the woman leaves the store. When these two incidents are read together, an unachievable, contradictory menstrunormate identity emerges—a “woman” who is expected to bleed monthly but also able to something to bleed on under the extraordinary circumstances, a “lady” who needs to keep her period under control but avoiding to utter the products making that possible, as it may be perceived vulgar.

What the above-mentioned happenings show is that menstruation and menstrual product consumption practices cannot be considered as mere biological or medical matters and apart from the avoidant and concealing approach of the societies. As a matter of fact, since the last century, menstruation has started to be considered “as a subject of research and advocacy” (Bobel, 2020, p. 1) and the social, cultural, political and aesthetic aspects of this experience has become to attract the attention of menstruating individuals, academe, activists, and artists. Especially since the 1970s, menstruation has been a topic that is talked more openly about, as Bobel provides several examples of events and works—for instance, Judy Chicago’s groundbreaking lithograph “Red Flag”, which depicts the moment a tampon is removed, met the audience in 1971 and was followed by the foundation of The Society for Menstrual Cycle Research by feminist scholars in 1977 and the publishing of Gloria Steinem’s striking essay “If Men Could Menstruate” in 1978. At the beginning of the following decade, numerous Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) cases arose, and the usage of super-absorbent tampons was shown as the reason for this outbreak. These crowd-pulling, scientific, well-known, and grievous events have constituted a history of what we talk about menstruation in the current century. Over the past two decades, various grassroots movements were launched to abolish the tax on menstrual products, and some of them have succeeded – such as Kenya in 2004, Canada in 2015, Malaysia, India, and Australia in 2018. In 2020, menstrual products started

to be provided entirely free in Scotland (Diamond, 2020). On the other hand, in 2019, “Period. End of Sentence.”, a documentary about a small business producing sanitary pads in India, won the Academy Award for Best Short Documentary. The academic endeavor could not remain indifferent to all these incidents, and since the last century, an interdisciplinary field named “critical menstruation studies” has emerged due to efforts of scholars studying various topics from menstrual poverty to the use of menstrual blood in art, from menarche experiences to menopause experiences, and from menstrual practices in various cultures to WASH (water, sanitation, and health) initiatives (see Bobel et al., 2020).

In the light of this growing research area, this thesis aims to examine menstruation through the consumption of conventional –or disposable– and alternative –or reusable–menstrual products in Turkey, where the research and advocacy on menstruation have only recently bloomed. The primary aim of this study is to unravel how conventional and alternative menstrual product consumption practices in Turkey interrelate with the fact that menstruation as “a source of social stigma” (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2013, p. 9) and the notion of menstrunormativity, which is “the hegemonic social system of multiple and contradictory normativities that order and stratify menstruation and menstruating” (Persdotter, 2020, p. 358). Although experienced by a considerable part of the population, menstruation is a stigmatized and normative concept in contemporary Turkey. Prior research on menstrual products and their consumption practices remains to be limited and prioritizing medical purposes, despite societal norms of menstruation has engrained into menstrual technologies such as menstrual products, restrooms, medications, and period tracking apps (Persdotter, 2020). While this research area was getting off the ground, menstruators were also starting to adopt new practices to cope with the menstrual stigma, increase their knowledge of their bodies, and use alternative menstrual products such as menstrual cups or cloth pads.

Between December 2021 and March 2022, as the restrictions of COVID-19 global pandemic were still retaining over, I have conducted twenty-six online semi-structured in-depth interviews with twenty-three women, two non-binary people and one genderqueer person between the ages of 18–23 and studying in Ankara who have ever consumed an alternative menstrual product at least once and who are considering consuming them. After directing questions to find out how interviewee menstruators experienced their first periods –or menarches– and how they are experiencing menstrual bleedings currently, I have tried to understand their perceptions of and attitudes toward being a menstruator. Later, I have addressed questions on menstrual stigma and aimed to collect their experiences of being stigmatized due to their bleeding and their stances on this social stigma. Finally, I requested

the participants to narrate their experiences with disposable and/or alternative menstrual products from their first encounter with the products, information gathering, and deciding, to purchasing, adapting, maintaining and experience sharing processes.

In this introductory chapter, I briefly opened up the matter with two recent incidents related to menstruation and put my research objective forward with the importance of the research. In the following chapter, I will start operationalizing and contextualizing menstruation by defining the bodily process itself, the menstruating subject, and menstrual products. Furthermore, since menstruation is a cisnormative phenomenon in Turkey, and to better understand the menstrual stigma with its relation to gender identities, I will try to address how gender ideology takes shape in contemporary Turkish society. In the following sections of this second chapter, I will include the response to this oppression in terms of menstrual activism with examples from Turkey, which may overlap with the attitudes of women, genderqueers, and non-binary people I have interviewed in the scope of this study. At the end of this second chapter, I aim to include the related studies and significance of the research. In the third chapter, I will draw my theoretical framework around the concepts of menstrual stigma, menstrunormativity, and practices. In the fourth part, I will introduce my methodology, give information about the demographics of the people I have interviewed, and share my reflections on maintaining this research during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the findings chapter, the fifth part, I will start with the participants' menarche experiences, their physical experiences and conceptualization of menstruation, and experience menstrual stigma through various menstrual stigma transmission routes. Then I will start illuminating the menstrual stigma coping mechanisms of the research participants. After briefly touching upon the disposable menstrual product consumption practices, I aim to shift my focus to the alternative menstrual product consumption practices, their possibilities and limitations. Within the alternative menstrual product consumption practices, the subtopic I aim to focus will be the information gathering processes, ecologist and vegan motivations, affordability and maintenance challenges, virginity, normalizing periods and the cyclical bodies, and the production and reproduction of old stigma and new menstrunormativities. In the conclusion part, which is the last part of the thesis, I will combine the original data of the research with the existing literature and talk about the conclusions and limitations related to this research topic.

## CHAPTER 2

### OPERATIONALIZING AND CONTEXTUALIZING MENSTRUATION

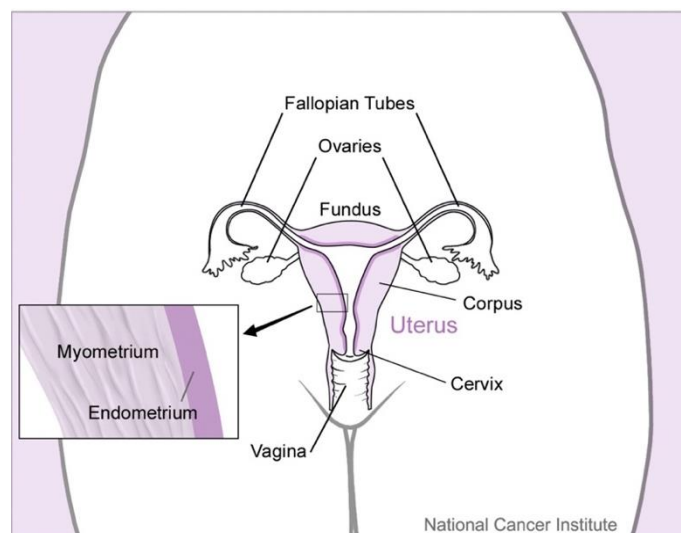
Before delving into the bodily and menstrual experiences of the research participants, understanding their consumption of different menstrual products, illuminating the menstrual stigma and mensturnormativity they experience or struggle with, and addressing how they experience their periods through the products they use; it is necessary to define the concepts that will enable to concretize and interpret these issues. Hence, I consider it essential to firstly define menstruation as a bodily process and exemplify some of the disposable and alternative products used during periods to collect menstrual discharge. Following that, I will try to answer the question of who the menstruating subject is by touching upon the current discussions revolving around the Turkish words corresponding woman, girl and lady, besides mentioning the recent terminology of menstruators interiorized by the scholars endeavoring critical menstruation studies. This will eventually bring me to discuss the existing gender ideology in contemporary Turkey with a brief overview of its historical development, while including its possible influence on the menstruation experience of the members of this society. Later, I will show how menstruators respond to the stigma toward their periods with menstrual activism by mentioning the recent examples in different parts of the world. In the final part of this chapter, I aim to show some examples of the prior research in this area and define the significance of this research.

#### 2.1. Defining Menstruation and Menstrual Products

In the latest printed version of pioneer women's health book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* menstruation or menstrual periods are defined with a quite conventional terminology—a part of the menstrual cycles that women experience between adolescence and menopause (The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 2011). This definition is followed by various statistical and medical data, and when these data are combined, they construct a menstruation-normal comprising the average of everything: when a girl is born, she carries about 2 million cells in her ovaries, called follicles, containing immature eggs. Over time, their number decreases to about 400.000, and 300 to 500 of these follicles turn into mature eggs after

puberty. Although each body has its own rhythm, a menstrual cycle is expected to be completed every twenty-three or thirty-six days. On the other hand, the menstrual periods may last between two and eight days and four to six days on average (The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 2011).

The initial phase of a menstrual cycle is named after the follicles mentioned in the above paragraph, as the "follicular phase", which corresponds to the first 14 days of a cycle (Menstrual Cycle Basics, n.d.). This phase starts with the discharge of menstrual bleeding, marking the finishing of the previous cycle, and ends with ovulation. After the rise of follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH), usually one follicle develops in the ovaries and contains a maturing egg. Also, the rise of estrogen, luteinizing hormone (LH), and testosterone in the following days of this cycle lead to the thickening of the uterus lining. In the "ovulatory phase" around Day 14, the egg is released and ready for fertilization while moving from the fallopian tubes down to the uterus. Finally, the cycle is completed with the "luteal phase", as the levels of FSH and LH start to decline. If fertilization does not occur, the progesterone levels also reduce, and the endometrial lining begins to shed and prepares to be discharged with the mature egg and menstrual fluids. The new cycle starts with the bleeding once again. These menstrual cycles reoccur between puberty and menopause, usually roughly translated into the period between the ages of twelve and fifty-one. Visuals such as the image below are used frequently to illustrate the female reproductive system, where this process occurs.



*Figure 1 Uterus and nearby organs. (NIH Medical Arts, 2001)*

This data enables making a simple calculation. According to the resources mentioned above, if it is assumed that a woman menstruates every twenty-eight days and for five days, it makes

sixty-five days of menstruation per year. Furthermore, if the phase between twelve and fifty-one ages are accepted as reproductive ages, this makes 2.535 days in total—meaning that a woman menstruates for about seven years during her lifetime. This would also be equal to 8,61% of the lifespan of a Turkish woman since life expectancy at birth in Turkey for females is about 81 years (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2021). In addition, according to the data from the Turkish Statistical Institute, approximately 21 million women are between the ages of 15 and 49, which can be accepted as the reproductive ages (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2022). In conclusion, it will be noticed that a quarter of the Turkish population is menstruating at the moment, and about half of the population has once menstruated or is expected to menstruate during their lifetime.<sup>5</sup>

Menstruation is a process that involves the use of various menstrual products by every individual who wants to and has the opportunity to maintain it in a healthy way. Some commonly used materials to collect menstrual discharge are menstrual pads (or sanitary napkins), tampons, menstrual cups, menstrual discs, cloths, reusable cloth pads, and menstrual underwear. Menstrual pads, one of the conventional or disposable menstrual goods, are concave rectangular-shaped products made of absorbent materials and can be attached to the underwear with their adhesive wings on their long sides (Anzilotti, 2019). These pads have different types depending on their dimensions and absorbing capacity and are recommended to be replaced every 3 to 4 hours. Conversely, tampons are cylindrical absorbent materials that may be inserted into the vagina either with plastic applicators or with the help of fingers. This single-use product also has varieties for different severity of the flows and should be changed every 4 to 6 hours.

Besides the single-use products, there are reusable –or alternative– menstrual products to collect the discharge during the periods. For instance, menstrual cups are funnel-shaped products, usually made from medical silicone, vary in length and rim diameter, and inserted into the vagina with various folding methods (Değirmenci and Vefikuluçay Yılmaz, 2019; Anzilotti, 2019). Advised to be emptied about every 12 hours, menstrual cups should be sanitized in the boiling water at the beginning and end of each period and washed with tap water and mild cleansers after each emptying during the period. A menstrual cup is expected to last for a decade when used accordingly (Kakani and Bhatt, 2017; Oster and Thornton,

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<sup>5</sup> Although this calculation may serve in terms of practicality in guessing the number of individuals menstruating in Turkey, such a statistical shortcut may not be equal to including all menstruators. I will mention the perspectives confuting the menstrual norms inherent such data, which may be strengthened by medicine and government agencies, as menstrunormativity has long been permeated in them.

2012). Menstrual discs also work more or less like menstrual cups, but as the name suggests, these products are disc-shaped and are positioned to stay under the cervix and against the pubic bone, rather than being placed like cups, with a vacuum created by the cup holes to the vagina walls (Period Nirvana, 2021). Reusable cloth pads or menstrual underwear can be shown as alternative menstrual products that are not placed inside the vagina. Cloth pads work like single-use pads; however, they are made from natural or synthetic fabrics and should be cleaned with water, detergent, or soap and dried after being used for 3 to 6 hours (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2019). Menstrual underwear is among the newest alternative products, both sold by menstrual underwear brands and clothing firms as multiple-ply, absorbent briefs with 6 to 12 hours of wear (“Teknoloji”, n.d.; “Peddon Nasıl Çalışır?”, n.d.). The photograph below shows three of alternative menstrual products: a menstrual cup, a reusable cloth pad, and menstrual underwear.



*Figure 2 Mixing and matching period products. (Vulvani, n.d.)*

Before defining the menstruating individual, I consider it necessary to point out that there is neither publicly available data on the launch dates of specific menstrual products to the Turkish market nor on sales volumes of different product types. For example, while the introduction of disposable pads to the Turkish market is known as 1978 (Cengiz, 2018), there is no precise data regarding the introduction of tampons in this market. The data on alternative menstrual products also get its share of this uncertainty problem – while menstrual cups entered the Turkish market in 2018 (Değirmenci and Vefikuluçay Yılmaz, 2019), there is no date related to menstrual discs. On the other hand, according to the result of my research on the establishment dates of different brands, it can be said that cloth pads started to be sold at the end of the 2000s, and menstrual underwear only in 2021. (“Biz Kimiz?”, n.d.) In short, it does



not seem possible to reach up-to-date, publicly available, and sourced data on the first sale dates of different types of menstrual products in Turkey, how much they are consumed by whom, and their total market share. This lack of data is a deficiency that can be included in countless cases revealing the existence of menstrual stigma in Turkish society. Just as the former incident shared in the first chapter, the menstrual products not being mentioned in the Notice of Market Measures of the Turkish Ministry of Interior, the lack of data in the sector reports of various government organs and also private initiatives is an indication of the attitude avoiding to talk about menstruation, and therefore doing research on this phenomenon. The conceptualization and other aspects of menstrual stigma in Turkish society will be addressed in the third chapter; however, while exemplifying different products to collect menstrual discharge, I considered it accurate to mention this issue.

## 2.2. Defining the Menstruating Subject

According to the *Türk Dil Kurumu* [Turkish Language Society – TDK], the word *kadın* has the following meanings: “1. *noun* adult female human, female, female person; 2. *adjective* having the virtues and skills required for maternity or household management; 3. *noun, figurative* maid lady; 4. *noun, old* lady” (Türk Dil Kurumu, n.d.). On the other hand, the word *bayan* started to be used in the 1930s –as a part of modernization reforms of the young Turkish Republic– to ban the titles showing class distinction and address females with this word and their surname. (Anadolu Ajansı, 1934) According to the Nişanyan Etymology Dictionary (2015), the word *bayan* is defined with the following sentence “Derived from the New Turkish *bay* “term of address, *bey* [mister].” and a further note: “The *+an* suffix in the word *bayan*, which was arbitrarily produced during the Language Revolution (1928), was never recorded as a feminine suffix in Turkish.” In recent decades, there has been a tendency in everyday language to use the word *bayan* instead of *kadın*, although *bayan* is a term of address and *kadın* is a gender category.

To oppose this disposition, the sentence “*bayan değil kadın* [(it is) not lady, (it is) woman]” has become sloganized. It should also be noted that the word *bay* is not mostly preferred when talking about men. In that case, it will be inevitable for the following question to appear in minds: why is a word of address being used while denoting a gender? And why only women? A BBC News Türkçe file on this discussion dwells on the same questions and asks them within a street interview. A middle-aged woman answers as “In my opinion, I would choose *bayan*. (...) Since it is more courteous [than saying *kadın*].” and another one says, “Saying *kadın*, I do not know. Means like more oppressed.” (BBC News Türkçe, 2021). Another one interprets

the difference like this: “There is no difference between *bayan* and *kadın*, but some women are a little bit different. Then, it is said, ‘look at that *kadın*’. To [exemplify the usage of] *bayan*, ‘this *bayan*’ for instance, ‘is a good *bayan*’.”

Albeit today’s widespread discussion revolves around the words *bayan* and *kadın*, almost a century ago, late Ottoman period feminists were putting up a similar fight as they obstinately adopted *kadın* against *hanım* or *nisvân*<sup>6</sup>, too. According to Bora (2021), the reason behind so many feminist newspapers and journals being published during the early 1900s bearing the name *kadın* is a manifestation of readopting the name of the gender and rejecting the fragile identity that womanhood had been trying to be squeezed into. Writer-translator Mahir Ünsal Eriş addresses a similar motivation of *bayan* versus *kadın* discussion during this interview within the news file mentioned above: “The motivation behind the insistence on the word *kadın* rather than the use of *bayan* points to the identity struggle.” (BBC News Türkçe, 2021) Before this statement, Eriş also claims that there is no distinct semantic difference between these two words; however, there is a difference of intention, because a discourse interiorizing lady [*bayan*] is one that adopts a separation between woman [*kadın*] and girl [*kız*].

In the following sequences of the news video, Rûmeysa Çamdereli, the steering committee member of the Havle Association, points out the existence of a relationship built in Turkish society between the concept of *kadın*, sex, and marriage. Aslı Karataş, lawyer and the founder of *Sebuka* Platform, handles the issue with an analogous view, and despite there is an actual difference between *kadın* and *kız* in terms of age, the meaning built in Turkish society for *kadın* is an implication of a sexual intercourse experience—therefore, saying *kadın* is strictly avoided. However, like many Turkish feminists, Karataş advocates the readaptation of the word *kadın*, to purge the redundant and negative meanings attached to it, to explain that it does not bear any class or sexual indicators, and make the word woman and the woman identity visible.

While there is a non-semantic difference established between these two words, in terms of their implication for adulthood and childhood, the vernacular classification of *kadın* and *kız* is concretized in the Turkish language with an experience of sexual intercourse—or in more straightforward terms, with the existence or non-existence of an intact hymen (Özyeğin, 2009). Thus, discussing the concept of virginity while defining the agents among the menstruating

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<sup>6</sup> Whereas the word *hanım* has evolved from the word Middle Turkish word *ḫānum* meaning “the term of address to sovereign’s wife [with first person possessive suffix]” (Nişanyan Sözlük, 2017), the word *nisvân* is the plural form of the Arabic word *nisâ* [نساء], meaning woman. (Nişanyan Sözlük, 2014)

subjects is necessary. Understanding what female virginity means in Turkey can shed light on the entangled reality of menstruation established in this society in two ways. First, the categorization of women based on virginity and the continuing significance of this concept over multiple decades and during the execution of diverse political agendas may provide a picture of the dominant gender ideology in Turkey –which will be touched upon in this section and thoroughly analyzed in the following one– and eventually the menstrual stigma pervasive in this society. Secondly, the meaning an intact hymen bears in this society can also provide insight into the menstrual product consumption choices of the masses.

The prevalent concept of virginity in Turkey imposes the preservation of the hymen until the bonds of marriage are established. (Özyeğin, 2009) This societal norm enables a transition from *kız* to *kadın* with two consecutive circumstances: marriage and the loss of hymen. With the identity of *kızlık*, the preservation of chastity and innocence are imposed; furthermore, female sexuality becomes only acceptable after the institution of marriage is formed. Thus, unmarried women who disobey this delimitation are condemned to be ostracized. It should also be noted that only women are subject to the social rules set out here. For instance, focusing on a relatively close –Mediterranean-Arab– context and grounding on a Freudian interpretation, Fatima Mernissi (1982) regards various forms of the sexual act as “schizophrenic transactions” (p. 191), since women are held responsible and considered guilty for devirgination, although it requires two sides as Mernissi formulates, a female and a male in heterosexual relationships. To elucidate this social schizophrenia again with Turkish words, it can be highlighted that there is no chastity-based distinction between the concepts of *erkek* [man] and *oğlan* [boy] to lead to an adoption of the usage of *bay* [mister], unlike the case of *kadın*, *kız* and *bayan*. To illuminate this dichotomy between the sexes, the gender relations in Turkish society need to be read through the concepts of honor and shame.

According to Carol Delaney (1987), who maintained an anthropological fieldwork during the early 1980s in rural Central Anatolia, Turkey as a Mediterranean society has a culture where sexuality is seen as an integral component of the honor and shame notions. She illustrates her claim with the Turkish word *namus*, which corresponds to a specific honor concept based on sexuality. *Namus* becomes an important term in a context where parts taken in the procreation by men and women are likened to the relationship between the seed and the soil. Rooting back to the surahs in Quran and even further to the objectified status of women and the masculine image of God in the scriptures of the divine religions, Delaney claims that the belief system in the Turkish village shapes the understanding of the sexes’ roles in procreation and also the gender norms in general. The man has the seed, the absolute core of life shaping the

characteristics of posterity. This makes him the creative, life-giving actor in procreation and even “God’s representatives” (p. 44) in the ephemeral world. On the other hand, the woman serves as the soil—a medium that nourishes the seed but cannot alter its mold, a field that should be fertile to be valued, and a property that the patriarch of the family should own. Under this hierarchical seed-soil relationship, what makes the soil precious is its ability “to guarantee the security of a man’s seed” (p. 39). In other words, what determines Turkish villager women’s value in society is whether she can avert any doubt on the legitimacy of her child.

In the following parts of her analysis, Delaney dwells on the roots of such a hierarchical relationship between the two sexes by going over several interrelated aspects shaping women’s shameful nature, as perceived in the Turkish village society. For instance, women are perceived as vulnerable beings since their creation is after men’s and since Eve’s rebelliousness against Allah has been regarded to be resulted in the defilement of the world—*pislik*, a Turkish word corresponding to the bodily wastes, represents “the mutability, corruption, and decay of earthly life” (p. 41) in contrast to the afterlife. Besides that, women experience menstruation, a bodily process strengthening their similarity to earthly life. Menstruation is understood as a degrading feature symbolizing the female impurity, but also as a necessary phase for the purification of the womb to make it flawless for the sowing of the seed. Since this faulty nature, and besides their ease of being persuaded, women should be under constant control, and this social control necessitates various forms of enclosure practices, such as veiling. Delaney’s research in rural Central Anatolia during the early 1980s indeed brings up an anthropological perspective on the understanding of female virginity. Nevertheless, the current meaning of this concept requires a reading of the sociopolitical factors shaping gender roles since the early years of the Turkish Republic. The founding fathers of the Republic and the Young Ottoman thinkers who had a massive influence on the political order have put a specific emphasis on women’s transformation into modern citizens (Parla, 2001). As these political and intellectual actors advocate, the Ottoman Empire should be buried to the ground with all its elements, including the social order and values of the Western world needs to be adopted to create a progressing, modern nation. This has led to massive reforms in the political, legal, and social spheres by the hand of the founding government, and one of the primary motivations behind these alterations was to emancipate women by enabling them to receive education and enter the public space.

Nevertheless, by depicting the gender ideology of Turkish nationalism, Parla (ibid.) shows an internal and also a deliberate discrepancy in the new citizen-woman image: a woman who has been liberated from myriad social obstacles, including the physical veil, and expected to

maintain a modern, intellectual lifestyle; yet a citizen who is obliged to be virtuous and chaste, following the existing honor and shame codes secured and applied by the government, and undertaking the future generations' –especially boys'– mothering and socialization according to the patriotic values of the Republic. This construction of the Turkish citizen-woman, which needs to be maintained as delicately as the balance of a tightrope walker, has been once again under the influence of complex and even opposing forces, especially as major social changes took place during the 1980s. For instance, the gradual transition to the liberal market economy, the rise of Islamization, and the acceleration of globalization and European Union harmonization policies necessitated a reconceptualization of gender relations and sexuality within the Turkish context (Özyeğin, 2009). Furthermore, the ruptures caused by the feminist movement of the post-1980s have led to an even more heterogeneity compared to the modern Turkish woman image of the early Republican era (Parla, *ibid.*).

The modern but chaste womanhood concept created by the nationalist ideology and later followed by other governments was not only a prerequisite for the development and modernization of the nation. The efforts to sustain this particular form of femininity in the vastly-changing conjuncture of the post-1980s era have also led to the adoption of control mechanisms over women's sexuality, such as forced virginity examinations. It is worth noting that until 1999, forced virginity examinations were legal in Turkey and practiced on female students in dormitories, secondary schoolers, orphanage habitants, women doubted of prostitution, and political prisoners (Parla, 2001). Besides that, it has turned out to be that the then Health Minister, Yıldırım Aktuna, used to request monthly virginity examinations of the female residents in Bakırköy Mental Hospital, where he used to be the physician in chief (Cindoğlu, 1997).

In the late 1990s, after two high school students, who were accused of unchastity and requested to go through a virginity examination, have ended their own lives and one of the student's fathers requested the examination to be practiced on her daughter's dead body (Parla, *ibid.*; Özyeğin, 2009). These tragic events had wide media coverage and later led to the awakening of a national and international feminist outrage, followed by the illegalization of the civil servants' virginity examination inquiries without the approval of the relevant individual (Özyeğin, *ibid.*). However, it should be noted that virginity examinations were not completely banned, so although individual consent has begun to be taken, the circumstances under which this consent might be taken remain a question mark. Parla (*ibid.*) further points out how virginity perception in society exists within the Turkish legal system of the 1990s. For instance, although all kinds of violations against a person were identified as "Felonies against

Individuals”, only forms of sexual violence against women were termed “Felonies against Public Decency and Family Order”. Furthermore, a woman’s state of virginity, non-virginity, marital status, or her possibility of engaging in prostitution may have shaped the understanding of the crime that the convict committed.

Besides the virginity examinations, hymenoplasty –or artificial virginity surgeries, as some scholars mention<sup>7</sup>– has taken place for over half a century (Güzel, 2020). Artificial virginity surgeries, intended to cause bleeding on the nuptial night, may lead to an understanding of medicine as an institution regenerating the patriarchal norms and preserving the virginity concept dominant in Turkish society, as Cindoğlu (1997) argues. On the other hand, when standing in the women’s shoes who are requesting such procedures, this concept of artificial virginity surgeries could be understood as “a survival strategy for women who are living in patriarchal gender ideologies with double standards” (p. 260). Just like the nationalist ideology, the liberal view requests women to be liberal and chaste simultaneously. Indeed, as Güzel (ibid.) theorizes, although a superficial generalization may parallel re-virginization with traditionalism and sexual freedom with modernity, re-virginization practices are not in contradiction with the values of the Turkish modernization, therefore a modern procedure. Güzel bases upon two arguments while conceptualizing re-virginization as a modern procedure. Firstly, such practices further obscure the tangled distinction between natural and artificial hymen since both of them are “social constructs” (p. 130) which could not be equated to virginity. Even though the general opinion of virginity is characterized by not being engaged in penetrative sexual intercourse, hymen and blood cannot be accepted as indicators of virginity. Secondly, the Turkish state does not intervene in these medical operations—there are no constraints or instructions on the re-virginization approaches. The absence of medical or legal definitions and limitations of this practice is more likely to be an intentional aversion rather than a simple coincidence or neglect, as Güzel elucidates with the following words: “The reason is that the production of hymeneal blood contributes to stability in the familial body, hence ensuring the continuance of the nation-state, which takes the family as its core institution. Therefore, what matters is not whether the woman has had a premarital sexual relationship or what kind of hymen she has. What matters is that she bleeds.” (p. 132). Still, the state bodies remain indifferent in the case of ensuring sex education to its citizens since

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<sup>7</sup> I am more inclined to choose hymenoplasty over artificial virginity surgery, since the former kind of breaks the hymen-virginity linkage in the level of language. However, there are apparently other methods to imitate the hymenal blood besides temporary and permanent hymenoplasties. Some practices include using “the so-called artificial hymen” (p. 127) to be put inside the vagina and imitate bleeding with a red liquid after the intercourse, making a small cut on the labium, utilizing animal blood or engaging in sexual intercourse at the end of menstruation. Therefore, re-virginization practices will be a more comprehensive term to mention such acts, as Güzel (2020) uses.

this will eventually make them acknowledge both genders' freedom of sexuality and contradict the neo-conservative temperament of the ruling party. Also, it does not intend to break the blood-virginity linkage because this would cause a loss of control imposed on women's sexuality.

Gender relations and sexuality, which had altered under the influence of mostly incompatible sociopolitical changes during the 1980s and 1990s, have undergone an even greater transformation with the turn of the century. Some examples of various factors which are the catalysts of this change are as follows: the acceleration of globalization, increasing communication due to the high adoption of various social media platforms, the changing policies of the state going between liberalism and neo-conservatism/authoritarianism, and the rising voice of feminism and LGBT+ activism.

In this context where conflicting messages on sexuality are circulating, while virginity tests and re-virginization practices are part of the social phenomena, young Turkish women resort to obscure identities on their virginity—or virginal facades, as Gül Özyeğin (2009) points out. In her research, where she examines the opinions on sexuality among young secular Turkish women and men, Özyeğin indicates a changing pattern of ideas compared to the traditional perceptions of virginity in their parents' or grandparents' generations. For instance, the young generation perceives the affirmation of female virginity or an intact hymen as a sign of conventionalism. They refuse to act according to the societal codes of sexuality, which are limiting and oppressive towards premarital sexual engagements.

However, it could be mentioned that instead of an advocacy of a hymenocentric view, there is sympathy towards a morality-based concept of virginity, which is summarized in the following motto: “virginity is not between the legs; it resides in the brain” (Özyeğin, 2009, p. 109). Although being sexually active is acceptable for the young elite Turkish women, they also should refrain from casual encounters which will stigmatize them as “*motor*” [engine] or “*tek gecelik kız*” [one-night girls]. Indeed, this latest conceptualization of chastity regards “losing ones' virginity” during a committed, love relationship as acceptable, whereas having the first vaginal-penile intercourse within a different setting would be considered immoral. For this reason, sexually active women adopt virginal facades to prevent being labeled with unpleasant characteristics by their peers or boyfriends, avoid embarrassment against their families, and protect themselves from their reactions. They talk about their parents on their current relationships only if it is a committed one with an acceptable potential groom. In Özyeğin's research, all of the young women she interviewed were Boğaziçi University students, which

is an elite university. Therefore, she mentions a sense of gratitude of young women to their parents, who have been behind their children with moral and material support. According to Özyeğin, this gratitude is common among women from non-metropolitan areas and relatively less educated, class disadvantaged families. Finally, the researcher also mentions that the virginal facades are not only maintained by the women in question, but also their parents and boyfriends at times since it may be too overwhelming to face their daughter's or girlfriend's sexuality exceeding their acceptable boundaries.

Based on her research with young female university students and feminist activists in Istanbul during the early 2010s, Patricia Scalco (2016) points out a similar picture of virginity to the previous research of Özyeğin. Even though hymen as an indicator of virginity has lost its significance in the eyes of the younger generation, Scalco still underlines the importance of hymenocentric virginity for marriageability in Turkish society. In other words, to be claimed as an acceptable member of the society, to not to forsake the emotional support of their families, and to gain the rights of marriage, socio-biological reproduction, and safety, young women should follow the rules of preserving their virginity before getting married. However, in fact they reject the societal pressure on their sexuality, they choose to regulate and maintain separate identities in two different social spaces, namely “home” and “away from home” (p. 325). Whether it is the family home or their hometown, home is the space where young women –and men– feel the restriction of the constant gaze of their families, relatives, or neighbors. On the other hand, the space away from home, such as a metropolitan like Istanbul or even a foreign country where students visit for educational purposes, provides confidentiality since away from home has an “ethos of anonymity and impersonality” (p. 328).

In terms of the acceptability shown by the families, on the other hand, approaches somewhat differ, and even positions containing internal contradictions may be mentioned. For example, according to a quantitative study conducted with university students living in Ankara, individuals who admit that they had sexual intercourse to their parents receive less emotional support from their families (Yalçın, Arıcıoğlu & Malkoç, 2012). Other examples of virginity bearing significance for Turkish families are the ones that gynecologists have told during Güzel's (2020) interviews with them. Although newly-wed couples do not mind such a concern, they still request re-virginization applications from their gynecologists to be able to provide a “blooded sheet” to their parents after the nuptial night.

In other respects, the existence of families rejecting the prevailing societal view of protecting hymen before marriage and their differing stances on the issue of virginity should not be



overlooked. For example, Aygüneş and Golombisky (2020), based on their interviews with university graduate, white-collar, secular, Muslim women, theorize that these mothers adopt “tactical subjectivities” previously conceptualized by Chela Sandoval. As they shift between these subjectivities, the participating mothers are first “modern women”, who defend female sexual freedom and reject the conception of not having sexual intercourse before marriage since it is old-fashioned and oppressive. These mothers are also “modern mothers” who do not behave in a restrictive manner toward their children’s sexuality and do not withhold emotional support for their children despite their daughter or son having premarital sexual intercourse. However, “caring mother” subjectivity limits sexual freedom so that their children are not marginalized in a conservative society. In fact, caring mothers regard their daughter’s sexual freedom as acceptable if it is practiced in a devoted love relationship.

In conclusion, just as there may be different views on virginity and re-virginization practices among young women or their choices on falling back upon virginal facades at home and claiming their sexual freedom away from home; families may also differ in their perspectives on female virginity, and they may choose to tactically alternate between different subjectivities as individuals and parents. Herein, as pointed out in the previous studies mentioned in the above paragraphs, the driving force of the varying attitudes towards virginity is shown as social class differences—living in a metropolitan or small town/rural area, maintaining a conservative or secular lifestyle, and education levels of parents and children are thought to shape the perspectives of young women and of their families and determine the extent of possible disagreements between them.

While trying to define the menstruating subjects in this section, the reason why I devoted such ample space for discussing the approaches to virginity is, as I mentioned at the beginning of the section, both to shed light on a grain of the entangled gender issue in Turkey based on this concept, and to allege that virginity as a social construct has the significance to shape the menstrual product consumption preferences. Before concluding this section by inquiring about a relatively-new concept used in addressing menstruating subjects, I consider it necessary to hypothesize that the hymenocentric understanding of virginity and the societal norm of preserving an intact hymen may affect menstrual product consumption practices in many respects. First, unmarried women may avoid using intravaginal products, such as tampons, menstrual cups, or menstrual discs, to avoid harming their hymen before marriage. They may do so as they share the hymenocentric virginity conceptualization of the Turkish society, or they may not agree with it but prefer to preserve virginal facades to avoid being marginalized or alienated by their families, neighborhoods, or close friends circles. In a context where the

preservation of hymen until marriage is constantly dictated to the unmarried female members of the society, placing an object inside the vagina may become a matter in itself, independent from an experience of penile-vaginal intercourse. Indeed, Aygüneş and Golombisky (2020) address the prior research on vaginismus cases in Turkey as they claim that the societal expectation of premarital virginity is among the reasons behind the high prevalence of this psychological condition.

Before finalizing my attempt to describe the menstruating subject, I would like to draw attention to my estimation of the number of menstruating individuals in the previous chapter. Based on a rough calculation of state-provided statistics, I concluded that approximately a quarter of the Turkish population is currently menstruating, and about half of the population has menstruated or is expected to menstruate at least once during their lifetime. Since neither the Turkish Statistical Institute provides data on menstruating people nor adopts a gender definition other than gender binary in its statistics, I was constrained to make my estimation by considering women's population. Furthermore, the menstruating subjects in the some resources I referred to in the previous section, such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* book, or YourPeriod.ca initiative of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, are "women" and "girls". However, a brand-new conception reflects the inefficiency of restricting menstruation into or generalizing this experience for a gender identity. This new subject nomenclature is called "menstruator."

After the rise of third-wave feminism and the emergence of the radical menstrual movement, the word menstruator has become widely preferable among menstrual activists to "express solidarity with women who do not menstruate, transgender men who do, and intersexual and genderqueer individuals" (Bobel, 2010, p. 12), since "not all women menstruate, not all people who menstruate are women"<sup>8</sup> ("Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC)" 2004, as cited in Bobel 2010, p. 159). "Not all women menstruate" phrase aims to state the people who are trans women or intersex people, as well as women who have not started to menstruate yet or experienced menopause. Furthermore, several illnesses or treatments, changes in hormone levels, pregnancy, breastfeeding, being a sportswoman, losing body weight in a short time, having undergone a hysterectomy, or applying specific birth control methods may also be

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<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging this, I have requested from the participants of my study to answer an open-ended question asking about their gender within the preliminary survey of the interviews, and twenty-three of them identified themselves as woman, whereas one participant identified themselves as genderfluid and two of them as non-binary. Hence, within this thesis, the objects of the study are planned to be defined as "menstruators" when they are mentioned generally, whereas their gender and pronouns will be named as their narratives are mentioned individually. Also, as should be done, I have followed and will follow the subject definition of the previous research while citing and referring to them.

included in the factors stopping menstruation. On the other hand, “not all people who menstruate are women” part of the statement involves the menstruating transgender people, trans men, genderqueer people, and intersex people (Guilló-Arakistain, 2020; EtShalom, 2005, as cited in Bobel, 2010).

Guilló-Arakistain (2020) challenges the menstrual normativity inherent in medical literature by indicating that Western medicine seems to fall short of grasping the variety of menses and follows strict definitions while pathologizing experiences deviant from the so-called normal menstruation. Indeed, menstruation is a criterion used to differentiate female and male bodies, eventually contributing to the understanding of menstruation as the essence of femininity. Instead of understanding menstruation in a holistic manner considering its metabolic, osseous, vascular, or dermic effects, the medical literature favors the reproductive aspect of menstruation. As Guilló-Arakistain points out, a reproduction-focused understanding of menstruation leads to two issues on women’s side. Firstly, women who do not experience menstruation may regard their situation as a failure of their bodily functions. Secondly, such an understanding contributes to one of the ancient biases on women: their function is equalized to reproduction. Therefore, the term “menstruator” comes with the rejection of woman as the ultimate menstruating subject whose bodies should obey the universal standards of menstruation.

On the other side of the coin, trans and non-binary people’s periods have gripped the academic endeavor during the past two decades (see Chrisler et al., 2016; Frank, 2020; Lowik, 2020). Klara Rydström (2020), rooting her arguments to Persdotter’s (2020) concept of *menstrunormativity*, underlines the societal norm that just as cis-gendered women are regarded as monstrous beings since their presumed similarity to nature and difference from men, trans people are also deemed to be deviant due to their unnaturality. Such a judgment derives from the cisnormative norms of the societies, which reckon for distinguishing all individuals, either female/woman or male/man, and suppose that all members of the society associate themselves with the sex assigned to them when they were born. This cisnormativity leads ciswomen menstruators to be accepted as the normative menstruators, whereas trans or non-binary menstruators are established as the Other.

Despite and with this othering, these menstruators deal with the gender-related experiences of their periods (Frank & Dellaria, 2020; Rydström, 2020). For instance, trans and genderqueer people are constantly exposed to the femininity discourse encircling menstruation, which may make them remember their rejected identity. During the activities related to menstruation in

public spaces, such as changing a pad or tampon in a gendered public bathroom, they may disclose their identity as people who do not hold to the cisnormative norms of society. How menstrual products are designed and marketed maintains and strengthens the femininity discourse on menstruation, which excludes trans and genderqueer experiences. Finally, they may face transphobic reactions from health care providers since they get frequently exposed to misgendering or irrelevant questions that have nothing to do with their current health concerns. The term menstruator enables us to embark on a gender-inclusive approach in talking and inquiring about menstruation, rather than an essentialist one. In addition, Bobel (2010) remarks that radical menstrual activists, who emerged with the rise of third-wave feminism, instrumentalize this gender-neutral term “to queer the gender binary” and “to educate others about the fluidity of gender” (p. 164). In other words, the term menstruator overturns the societal expectation of a cisnormative concept of menstruation.

However, the intention of smashing this expectation together with the gender concept may not be an approach favored by all menstrual and feminist activist groups. While discussing this matter, Bobel reminds the fiery debate on the category of woman between the camps embracing sexual difference theory and gender theory, whose discussions have become a current issue of feminist academic endeavor during the past three decades. Whereas the sexual difference theory, followed by feminist-spiritualists, advocates the embracement and revaluation of the woman category; the gender theory, accepted by the radical menstruation activists, seeks the demolition of the gender categorizations entirely<sup>9</sup>. The ever-mounting research and debates on menstruation seem to fuel this dispute even further.

Although adopting the relatively-new radical menstrual term “menstruators,” as I aim to do in this study, Bobel argues that rather than leading to a crisis in terms of defining the menstruating subject, such a contrast between these two approaches may create variety in dealing with the relationship between gender, bodily experiences, and menstruation. Referring to Diana Fuss’ discussion on this conflict, Bobel says that instead of rejecting or embracing embodied differences, feminist action may be based on the understanding that they are a result of transformations in social, economic, political, and historical circumstances. That means the tomorrow of feminism rests not on eliminating or praising “sexed differences” but rather on creating a feminist sensibility that theorizes and takes action on social systems and their consequences. Therefore, instead of considering the term menstruator as a universal set including women, trans men, and nonbinary individuals and invalidating the use of all these

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<sup>9</sup> The above-mentioned approaches of menstrual activism will be discussed in the fourth section of this chapter more broadly.

gender identities, it would be more accurate to use this word while discussing and researching this bodily process, and to define a fluid subset where menstruating women, trans men, and nonbinary individuals could be included.

Finally, although I choose to utilize the term menstruators as the subject of menstruation in this study, I should also state that this conceptualization is not a common nomenclature in Turkish society and that menstruation is still seen as a cisnormative and reproduction-related concept in this society. This reality also brings me to discuss the existing gender ideology under which women and LGBT+ individuals live in today's Turkey, as I aim to examine the social norms and sociopolitical oppressions that menstruators may quite likely face. Therefore, in the next section, I will address the historical development of this matter and specifically address the shrinking space of women and LGBT+ individuals in the past two decades and their mechanisms for coping with the current gender ideology.

### **2.3. The Gender Ideology in Turkey**

In 2021, a statement declared by the Turkish government on a human rights treaty had taken the debate on this contract, which has been maintained for a long time by the anti-gender movement and gender activist groups, to a new level. Given the persistence of women and LGBT+ rights activists to continue the struggle for the Convention, this statement could have put a semicolon to the discussions at the utmost, not a full stop. With a presidential decree issued by the government, Turkey became the first country to withdraw from that Convention on July 1, 2021 (Güneş & Ezikoğlu, 2022). The Convention was the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence—a comprehensive international agreement on domestic violence and violence against women, made available for signature in May 2011 (Ünal Abaday, 2021). The Convention necessitates a monitoring system and mandates that states fully address male violence as a form of gender-based violence, take action to stop it, and hold offenders accountable. What makes the backward step from this Convention even more interesting is that the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence is better known as Istanbul Convention since it was opened for signatures in Istanbul and Turkish Republic was the first country to ratify it. So, why a contract, which was signed and ratified with the support of all political parties in the Turkish parliament in the early 2010s, is decided to exit with a presidential decree, while the number of femicides in the last ten years was above three thousand? (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu, 2022) Why is there a talk of a backlash, especially in the previous two decades,

while women's rights and gender equality have progressed in Turkey during the last hundred years? How can the domination of women's and LGBT+ individuals' rights, sexualities, and bodies, under the influence of a neo-liberal and neo-conservatist political climate, affect the handling of menstruation and menstrual products? To answer all these questions, it is necessary to examine the transformation of women and gender issues in Turkey during the last century, but especially with a focus on the previous twenty years.

Although I have introduced this matter in the previous chapter by discussing the concepts of "virginity" and "menstruator", I would like to discuss the existing gender order in Turkey by portraying how the "benevolent state" has constructed a hierarchy within the gender binary according to its political agenda and how women and LGBT+ individuals revolted against this intervention to their rights, bodies, and sexualities. Inevitably, the question of how the state can be involved in a biological process such as menstruation, seemingly carried out in personal space, may appear in minds. However, if it is considered that menstrual products are not distributed free of charge in health centers or other institutions in Turkey and that until a very short time ago, sex-enhancing drugs for men were taxed at the rate of 8%, as 18% tax was levied on menstrual products, the very position that the state takes up on this inequality surfaces (BİA Haber Merkezi, 2019). Indeed, it was until March 2022 that menstrual products began to be taxed at a rate of 8%, with an extensive tax reduction where "sanitary pads" were included in various hygiene and paper products benefitting from the decision. ("Önemli Bir Kazanım: Menstrüel Ürünlerde KDV Yüzde 8'e İndirildi", 2022) Nevertheless, the decision neither includes any reference to the numerous legislative proposals on tax reduction in menstrual products waiting in the parliament for years, nor an explicit connection to the recently risen demands of menstruators or the arguments of menstrual activists. Instead, this tax reduction would be better read among the series of actions taken by the Turkish government to compensate for the rising cost of living under the increasing inflation rates and worsening US Dollar and Turkish Lira parity. As portrayed in this case, the inertia of the state bodies in relation to women's and LGBT+ people's issues may be grounded on the role cast on genders since the early years of the Turkish Republic. The more current versions of these roles bear significant importance in figuring out the menstrual norms one may face in contemporary Turkey. However, since menstruation is understood as a cisnormative, peculiar-to-women phenomenon in Turkish society, it is inevitable for me to primarily analyze the women issue in this context.

Indeed the modernization of Turkish women, which has been carried out since the late nineteenth century and accelerated after the establishment of the Turkish Republic, has equipped

women with various rights they have not obtained before. As the decadent Ottoman empire was in a soul-searching era to prevent the inevitable collapse, mostly male thinkers of the time had suggested drastic changes in the social order, and women's emancipation was among such alterations (Kandiyoti, 1991). During the first two decades of the twentieth century, several female thinkers became prominent in the struggle for women's rights with their journals and organizations. In addition to and overriding this, the conditions of the period enabled women to take part in the public sphere and were seen as justifications for women to acquire their fundamental human rights. Among these conditions were the ideas of the Turkist thinkers, who asserted gender equality that they claimed to be existing in pre-Islamic Turks but initially emulated the Western values, women's very much praised participation in battlefronts, supporting services, and other jobs vacated by men during the Balkan Wars, First World War and the War of Independence, and the political agenda of the Committee of Union and Progress, which was the ruling power during the Second Constitutional Period (Kandiyoti, 1991; Parla, 2001).

The social and economic rights women acquired after the proclamation of the Republic are the outcome of a series of unprecedented Kemalist reforms. The most prominent examples of such Westernization steps regulating gender relations are the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 and the adoption of the Turkish Civil Code in 1926, which canceled the Sharia laws applied under the Ottoman rule and guaranteed women the rights they struggled for such as the right of monogamy, divorce, inheritance, and employment (Sirman, 1989; Kandiyoti, 1991). However, the rapid and radical realization of these legal and social reforms during the early Republican period, which pursued rights-based equality between the sexes and was often criticized for appealing to the urban elite women, should not be solely understood as actions slaking the need for women's emancipation. For instance, the enfranchisement of women in 1934 is evaluated by Şirin Tekeli as a move which has done to avert the risk of being misunderstood as one of the emerging fascist orders in Europe which stuck women inside the triangle of children, kitchen, and church (Sirman, 1989). Indeed, it is fair to claim that one of the leading forces that will enable the new Republic to reject its Ottoman past based on religious and traditional values and become one among the Western, secular, and modern civilizations adopting the values of the Enlightenment, is the incarnation of these values in the presence of the new Turkish woman (Kandiyoti, 1991). This liberated feminine persona is demanded to fulfill their civic duties in the public sphere by being educated and starting a career.

However, the extreme Westernization of the new Turkish woman is also undesirable (Kandiyoti, *ibid.*). She has to preserve her virtue and chastity just like her pre-Islamic Turkish

ancestors because she is also tasked with the motherhood and socialization of new patriotic generations. To cope with all these primarily contradictory duties and to protect her dignity, which is constantly imposed in various ways, the new Turkish woman will have to develop different tactics, and all roads will lead to putting on a symbolic veil instead of a bodily cover—which of sexual repression (Sirman, 1989; Parla, 2001). Therefore, Kandiyoti (1987) regards Turkish women's situation "as emancipated but unliberated" (p.324) since crucial rights were obtained, yet the traditional values attached to women were not wholly challenged. This emancipated but unliberated "asexual sister-in-arms" of the early Republican period has retained over the political climate during the single-party era of the 1930s and 1940s, especially in cases where the danger of reactionism emerged as a threat against Kemalist values and existing social order. Yet, with the influence of leftist thought during the 1960s and 1970s, a movement apart from the former "state feminism" began to emerge.

According to Sirman (1989), the post-1980 era might be seen as a time when fresh attempts were made to define and control social order by reevaluating acceptable forms of political engagement. Notions such as Turkish democracy, being a Turkish citizen, and the Turkish women's identity were challenged throughout this procedure. Eventually, from the 1980s, feminists influenced the political and intellectual climate of Istanbul and Ankara through several publications and open forums. Some of the earliest impactful actions of feminist circles during the second half of the 1980s were collecting seven thousand signs for the petition requesting the enforcement of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and finally succeeding in its approval, introducing the "Temporary Modern Women's Museum" where commodities being used by women in their everyday lives were exhibited, and arranging "Purple Needle" event to hand out purple needles to be used against sexual harassment in public spaces (Sirman, 1989; Parla, 2001; Bora, 2021). Probably, the most outstanding among these steps was the march organized in Istanbul in 1987 to demonstrate against male violence toward women. "The March for Solidarity against Battering" was a historic milestone of Turkish women entering the stage of history as a defender of their own rights with their woman identity. Following these, various written resources such as original or translated periodicals, fictional books, and leaflets started accumulating. Domestic violence against women, gender representation in the media, legal texts, pressure and harassment on the female body, and state-sponsored virginity examinations were publicly discussed at various conferences and panels, and this context led to the emergence of multiple women's organizations. At that time, this newly-emerging feminist movement was criticized by two dissident groups, namely socialist organizations labeling feminism as a bourgeoisie ideology and indicating that a separate women's activism may divide



the fight against capitalism; and the Islamist circles, which were inherently against modernization and its burden on women's shoulders that eventually results in the way of living contrary to God-given nature. Concurrently, such tensions between the feminist, socialist and Islamic intellectuals have also bred Turkish socialist feminism, building ties between feminist practice and socialist theory and led Muslim women to bring forth their views bearing common points with the radical feminist approach. Besides the rising feminist awareness, LGBT activist groups have also gathered during the 1980s and protested the police violence, particularly towards transsexual and transvestite people (Ünan, 2015). Their first demonstration, which was against social oppression and police brutality they were facing, was held in Gezi Park, Taksim, in 1987. Almost thirty years from that protest, the same square would become the location of a drastic transformation for the Turkish LGBT+ movement, and it would gain more visibility and collaborate with different identity groups.

The 1990s has been another decade of women coming together under the roof of various organizations to voice their demands in the public sphere, not as wives, mothers, citizens, or comrades, but as women. According to Esim and Cindoğlu (1999), despite the differences in ideological motivations, women's organizations established in that period have begun advocating for two common purposes: practically being change agents to resolve inadequacies in medical, educational, and vocational spheres and strategically representing women's collective ability to influence gender politics in modern Turkey. These organizations, which Esim and Cindoğlu categorize according to their ideological objectives as Kemalist, Islamist, and Feminist, either criticized or advocated the modernization project of the Republican ideals. They aimed to prosper despite limited financial resources and a political climate that mostly male and elite politicians governed. However, they have also been criticized for approaching only a limited number of women. For instance, Şirin Tekeli stated three lacks of the women's movement as not reaching the lower classes, being stuck into relatively small groups, and not being able to develop a movement leader (Bora, 2021). However, it would be unfair to label the 1990s as a barren decade for the women's movement in Turkey. Some crucial advances of that period were the establishment of numerous consciousness-raising groups, organizations such as *Mor Çatı* [Purple Roof], journals such as *Pazartesi* [Monday], and Women's Issues Research and Application Centers in several universities. Probably, the most outstanding advancement was the foundation of the General Directorate for the Status and Problems of Women in 1990. In addition, the LGBT+ movement, which had sprouted in the previous decade, started to gather under the roof of numerous organizations for the first time during the 1990s. The first examples of such organizations were Lambda Istanbul, founded in 1993, and KaosGL, founded in 1994 (Ünan, 2015). Along with women's rights activists, they

endeavored in the actualization of universal human rights, made an effort to flourish their movement, and campaigned for equal rights for LGBT+ people in social, cultural, and economic fields. Although homosexuality is not illegal and transsexuality is legally recognized in Turkish law, LGBT+ organizations aimed to struggle against the social ostracization and hostility they have been facing—such experiences include but are not limited to isolation from one's family, neighborhood, and social circle, higher risks of unemployment, being obliged to sex work, victimization from government institutions, physical assault and hate crimes incidents such as rape and murder (Ünan, 2015; Şansal, 2021).

With the beginning of the twenty-first century, not only Turkish women's movement and LGBT+ activism have gained momentum, but also state efforts to slow their pace began to increase gradually. Several scholars agree that women and gender issues in Turkey during the last two decades were vastly influenced by the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* [Justice and Development Party – JDP], which has been in power for more than twenty years with a complex cumulation of neo-liberal, neo-conservative, authoritarian, nationalist, pro-Islamist, familialist, pro-natalist, and anti-feminist policies (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011; Dedeoğlu, 2013; Acar & Altunok, 2013; Kandiyoti, 2016; Cindoğlu & Ünal, 2017; Ünal Abaday, 2021). Despite the neo-liberalization process driven since the 1980s and the European Union harmonization policies accelerated during the JDP rule, the legal changes during the early 2000s remained only on paper. Actually, the constitutional alterations were promising as they were initiated—new regulations paved the way for holding the state responsible for gender equality, men were no longer the natural head of the family, and the division of the property acquired during marriage began to be made equally in case of divorce and women were equipped with improved employment rights. However, the enforcement of these laws and the complementary steps that should be taken accordingly remained insufficient.

According to Dedeoğlu (2013), these reforms stayed at the level of superficial improvements, which the government perceived to handle as a formality while fulfilling the European Union obligations in the harmonization process. In her study on the welfare policies of the JDP government, she likens the situation of women's issues during the 2000s to a pendulum swinging between European Union legislative standards and the conservative rhetoric of the ruling party. Indeed, just as Kemalist women's rights reforms at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a priority of realizing a modernization/Westernization project through women's embodiment, the legal regulations amended at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were made for the sake of achieving the European Union dream and inherently, the gender policy of JDP was reluctant to challenge the existing gender norms and ensure a pro-women gender policy. For

instance, requests from feminist groups imposing gender quotas in political parties, opening more women's shelters, and changing the legal approach to debated concepts such as so-called honor crimes, sexual orientation-based discriminatory acts, hymen examinations, and legally-defined abortion durations remained unseen (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011). This contradictory attitude was also explicit in discussions regarding LGBT+ rights. In a TV program aired in 2002, after a question on the issue was directed to him, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated the necessity of enfranchising homosexual rights. However, just a year before his answer, the members of JDP made it clear that homosexual individuals could not become a member of their party (Şansal, 2021).

This reluctance to handle existing gender norms and inequalities during the 2000s has evolved into an obvious, intentional neglect during the 2010s. Eventually, the state regulation of bodies, sexualities, and reproductive issues in Turkey was instrumentalized to exercise power over groups deemed to be outside of a *yerli ve milli* [native and national] generation and consolidate the citizens with a populist discourse. Cindoğlu and Ünal (2017) highlight the post-2011 period where these significant shifts in political discourse happen. Following the national elections in the mentioned year, the JDP's third term in the rule was characterized by electoral hegemony and a concentration of political power. During this time, the party's social engineering shifted toward a widespread conservatism, with worrisome repercussions for women's autonomy in making decisions about their own lives. During the early years of this new gender policy, Coşar and Yeğenoğlu (2011) capture its core characteristic of it as a "new rightism" (p. 563) unlike its prior patchwork of "sociocultural conservatism, liberal free-market discourse, and nationalistic reflexes" (p. 555) and allege that JDP's new patriarchal path may be grasped by taking a glance at its discursive and policy choices on feminism, gender equality, and family structure. For example, the demands of feminist activist groups to ensure gender quotas in political parties have eventually led to a declaration of the Presidency of Religious Affairs claiming being occupied with feminism would mean unlimited liberty, rejecting rules and values essential for the family. Furthermore, the party discourse only managed to discuss women's issues within the boundaries of the family, and this portrayal of the Turkish family was usually defined in a traditional and nationalistic manner.

One of the first indicators of this new rightist approach to gender policy revealed itself in 2010, as then Prime Minister, now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan shared his views that he did not believe that men and women should be treated as equals. He asserted that women's primary and, ideally only occupations, which are house chores and motherhood, are consistent with both their biological and God-given disposition [*fitrat*] (Kandiyoti, 2016). During the same

year, the former Minister of State in Charge of Women and Family Affairs, Selma Aliye Kavaf, declared their perspective neglecting LGBT+ rights as human rights and pathologizing them as a biological disorder that needs to be cured (Bildirici, 2010). Following these, on May 25, 2012, Erdoğan stated that abortion is homicide and, therefore wholly unacceptable, moreover claimed that he is personally against Cesarean section operations (Acar and Altunok, 2013). In a TV talk show episode aired in 2012, the then mayor of Ankara from JDP, Melih Gökçek, after a pricking question on when cities of Turkey will have a homosexual ruler, said that Turkey having its unique lifestyle and traditions, will not and should not have a gay mayor (Akpınar, 2012). In 2013, after a party meeting, Erdoğan highlighted the need for state intervention in the co-ed student dormitories since they are contrary to their “conservative, democratic character” and it is a state duty to protect the young generations (Cindoğlu & Ünal, 2017). Also, in 2013, actress and TV presenter Güzde Kansu got fired from the show she hosted after the JDP spokesperson Hüseyin Çelik criticized her low-cut dress by indicating that it was “too much”. Following year, a widespread protest of women sharing their laughing pictures on social media platforms has risen after the former Vice Prime Minister Bülent Arınç’s remarks on women’s sexuality and chastity “She will not laugh in public. She will not be inviting in her attitude and will protect her chasteness... Where are our girls, who slightly blush, lower their eyes away when we look at their face, becoming a symbol of chastity?” (“Women should not laugh in public, Turkish deputy PM says”, 2014). Other examples of JDP member’s declarations on gender and sexuality were criticizing the intolerable youth dramas on Turkish TV channels promoting an urban lifestyle where young women and men live in the same place and former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s efforts to normalize his match-making promises to the young people since JDP expects the young generations to get married and have children (Cindoğlu & Ünal, 2017).

Whether these statements were deliberately made to signal shifts in the politics of the intimate or not, they are clearly epitomizing the oncoming increasing state hegemony on the gendered bodies during the present decade. Judging by this statement, Acar and Altunok (2013) claim by analyzing the current politics of intimate, blooming over the terrain of neo-liberalist and neo-conservatist political climate, trivializes the concept of gender equality and increases the vulnerability of disadvantaged groups under the existing power relations. Some examples of the politics of intimate may be provided in its three components: politics of reproduction, politics of family/partnership, and politics of sexuality. Being a clearly pro-natalist one, the politics of reproduction grounds on the “at least three children” [*en az üç çocuk*] idiom of President Erdoğan, which became an unofficial policy. Both Erdoğan and other ruling party members have repeatedly asserted the complementary nature of both sexes and emphasized

the caregiving and mothering duties of women—such statements, besides the existing incentives for couples desiring to have a child, have led to an understanding of reproduction rights are only defined for married, heterosexual couples and a sexual health discourse without a family context is nonexistent. Within the scope of politics of family/partnership, on the other hand, Acar and Altunok discuss the neo-liberal and neo-conservative perspectives of the JDP rule on the welfare regime and violence against women. They underline that despite the promising legal adjustments such as the adoption of the Istanbul Convention, women began to lose significant welfare benefits and the inadequate social policy improvements in childcare risked women's employment. Furthermore, in terms of political discourse on male violence, women were regarded as sacred mothers being the lynchpin of the families. The policy-making initiatives lacked the perspective of connecting the dots between violence against women and the existing gender inequality, besides trying to prevent violence types other than the physical one and breaking down the types located in the collective mind as cultural and traditional. Finally, in the politics of sexuality, again, despite some minor legal improvements, it is evident that LGBT+ rights are not a concern of the existing rule, and even LGBT+ people are seen as a threat to the neo-conservative efforts to promote traditional Turkish family. Although LGBT+ rights groups raised their voices with women's rights groups on campaigns such as Penal Code changes, their voices remain unheard.

One of the most sufficient analyses of the post-2010 period comes from Deniz Kandiyoti (2016), as she states that the gender ideology shaping today's Turkey could not be blamed solely on cultural patriarchy. Instead, it is "intrinsic rather than incidental to a characterization of its [Turkey's] ruling ideology" (p. 105). After the first terms of the JDP during the 2000s, it seems to have experienced every illiberal consequence that might have occurred in officially democratic systems. This era has witnessed the development of a majoritarianist and populist political climate and a narrowly-defined oligarchic power structure. The authoritarian move in Turkey has gone beyond a political regime change; it also denotes widespread support for extreme right-wing ideologies and the increasing enmeshing of radical Islamist cadres to maintain a mobilized base, which will eventually lead to a neo-fascist trend (Tuğal, as cited in Kandiyoti, 2016).

Under such circumstances, the politics of gender being incidental to a characterization of Turkey's ruling ideology reveals itself in three central realms. First, gender has become a crucial component of the populist rhetoric in terms of marking off the difference between "us" or JDP supporters and "them" composed of all political opponents portrayed as possibly traitorous and corrupt. For instance, in 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan has addressed a woman

demonstrator undergone a hip fracture during a protest as “was she a girl or a woman, I don’t know” [*kız mıdır kadın mıdır, bilemem*]; whereas another woman alleging that she was attacked by protestors of the Occupy Gezi movement in Kabataş was called by Erdoğan as “my sister” [*benim bacım*]. Secondly, further strengthened by the global tendencies, the conjunction of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism led the state rhetoric and social welfare system to shift its focus to the empowerment of the family rather than the individuals. This coalition aimed to gather control over women’s bodies with the reinvention and reengineering of the sociocultural context, disguised as the recovery of traditional values. It further shrank the space for diverse lifestyles or even liberal rights-based demands of the citizens—only acceptable actors having the ability to claim rights from the government became the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of the new Islamic elite. Also, women and children, the legitimate rightsholders, were seen as helpless victims in need of the protection of the benevolent state.

The third and last sphere where gender politics is intrinsic to the ruling ideology is the normalization of violence. This concept could be exemplified by the difference between the regulations to secure women’s rights and their actual implementation. Despite the existing laws protecting women, there are execution issues such as “good conduct time” applied to the perpetrators due to their clothing, declaring remorse, and alleging an attack on their male honor. Here, Kandiyoti asserts that the only cases where the public outrage and calls for legal and social changes rise are the ones where the woman in question “fit[s] the profile of the ‘innocent victim’ to perfection”, such as in Özgecan Aslan’s case, in which a twenty-year-old college student was brutally killed in her way home, after her resistance to an attempted rape (Kandiyoti, 2016, p. 109). Indeed, the coverage of violence against women incidents is done in a way that makes the audience almost think that female disobedience and insubordination are the actual starters. The press narrates the stories of women killed by spouses on the eve of a divorce, by ex-spouses, by jilted suitors, or by any male kin whom they have disobeyed their demands and expectations. Recalling recent research data on violence against women, Kandiyoti remarks that women’s attempt to make independent decisions about their own lives was the most frequently mentioned contributing factor to femicide.

Herein, the term “masculinist restoration” coined by Kandiyoti (2013) explains the increasing trend of normalization of violence—the resort to or overlook of violence neither indicates a conventional functioning of patriarchy nor a comeback of traditions rather, it shows its death threat at a degree that the idea of female subordination is no longer firmly established as the norm. As Ünal Abaday (2021) puts forward, the masculinist restoration project in Turkey

manifests itself in the public discourse as anti-gender actors appeal to rejecting the “gender ideology” via restoring “cultural authenticity” through Islamic tradition and anti-Western nationalism. This movement marginalizes feminism as an anti-family and anti-Islam viewpoint and indicts it of incarcerating men in a disadvantageous position. Additionally, such anti-gender organizations spread the view that men’s rights are in peril and demand that recent feminist achievements in the legal arena be abandoned. The three concepts feeding these masculinist restoration arguments are “contextual specificities” that prioritize the cultivation of a *yerli ve milli* [native and national] generation by separating Turkey from the West and Europe in sociocultural character, “essentialist framing” based on the labeling of feminism against the ontological security of the country, and “post-truth epistemology” which resorts to distorted stories as powerful discursive instruments to demonize feminists and gender ideology. Two of the heated and recent debates among anti-gender groups and gender activists are the discussions on the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence and women’s right to maintenance payment. The former of these discussions has eventually led to an extent where Turkey becomes the first country ever to withdraw from the aforementioned human rights treaty. The anti-gender groups have benefitted from both contextual specificities and essentialist framings mentioned above, as for instance, the followers of this movement from the printed media sued the Convention of being the *Truva atı* [Trojan horse] of the Western powers attacking the Turkish nation, family and morality, furthermore labeled it as being engrained *Haçlı zihniyeti* [the mentality of the Crusades].

Despite the pressure created by the authoritarianist and new-rightist political actors, exemplified by the myriad cases above, and their continuous endeavor of resorting to populist discourses and masculinist restoration, it will not be accurate to claim that women’s and LGBT+ movements in Turkey have slowed their pace. Indeed, the anti-patriarchal resistance constantly seeks new opportunities to flourish in contemporary Turkey. Starting as a demonstration against governmental bodies being the sole decision-maker of urban planning actions on a green public space with a political-symbolic significance, the Occupy Gezi Movement have evolved into one of the most significant uprisings of the country’s history against state authoritarianism (Ünan, 2015). These protests, where different political and identity groups found a prolific terrain to flourish, have witnessed feminist organizations and LGBT+ activists acted in solidarity with groups such as socialists, Turkish nationalists, Kurdish movement groups, and anti-capitalist Muslims. Such collaboration implied “the possibility of a grass-roots politics of democratic participation and new civic sensibilities” (Kandiyoti, 2016, p. 110). Furthermore, it created encounters of different identity

groups, which has further increased the visibility of LGBT+ individuals (Ünan, 2015). In parallel with this collaboration, more than 100.000 people walked in the Istanbul Pride March in 2014, whereas this number was only about 10.000 demonstrators in 2011 (Şansal, 2021). The March in 2015, two years after Gezi Park Protests, encountered police intervention, and a year later, the March was banned due to security and public order concerns. The March 8 Feminist Night Walks, on the other hand, has the distinction of being the highest participatory feminist protest in Turkey every year since it was first organized in 2003, and it continues to be a march where tens of thousands of women –and after 2016, LGBT+ people– gather to target patriarchy and voice feminist demands, despite the declaration of governorate bans and soaring police violence during the post-Gezi period (Büyükgöze, 2021).

Nevertheless, how the transformation of gender ideology since the establishment of the Republic and especially after the 2000s under the JDP government affects the menstruation experience and shapes consumption practices during this phase still remains a question that needs to be answered. How do authoritarianism, conservatism, and masculinist restoration, which have gradually risen during the last two decades in Turkey, reveal themselves in the menstruation experiences of the individuals and interfere with their bodily processes? Undoubtedly, the fundamental effect of the current gender order on the way menstrual periods are lived and perceived is related to how frequently and in which contexts menstruation can be talked about. In a context where neo-liberal and neo-conservative values coexist and intersect, there are specific ways of addressing menstruation in the public sphere. A perfect example that incorporates such seemingly-conflicting notions is the *Ergenlik Döneminde Değişim Projesi* [Project of Change During Adolescence – PCDA], which is organized with the collaboration of the Turkish Ministry of Education and Procter and Gamble’s famous pad brand *Orkid* (ORKID Okul Eğitim Projesi (ERDEP), n. d.). The primary aim of this project appealing to secondary school students is to educate adolescents about the physical, mental, and social transformations they undergo as they reach puberty. The program targets helping teenagers maintain a healthy and happy life as they reach young adulthood and therefore “create a more conscious society”. However, despite the consciousness-raising efforts of these meetings, it would be wrong to say that this training project has no flaws. In fact, it is mainly shaped by a mensturnormative perspective, which, being carried out for secondary school students, imposes that menstruation is an issue that can only be talked about at a ‘certain age’. Thus, individuals who enter puberty before secondary school are left alone with their bodies, their transformations, and the risks of stigmatization towards these transformations, especially if their families or close circles have not informed them before. Another and perhaps more serious indicator of the mensturnormative perspective of this project is that the trainings are



not provided to the students as a single group, but after dividing by their gender. The PCDA stakeholders, ensuring that male and female students receive training in separate classrooms, consider menstruation as an issue only “between girls<sup>10</sup>” and thus, the norm that menstruation can only be explained to specific people is reinforced via these trainings. Finally, the distribution of the products of the sponsoring pad brand at the end of these trainings is an indication of the menstrual norm that ‘specific products’ should be used during menstruation. In conclusion, the appreciation of neo-liberal values enables programs to render a talk on menstruation possible and the involvement of the private sector in such programs, whereas the neo-conservative approach limits how broadly and with whom menstrual periods are discussed.

The second sphere where raising authoritarianism, conservatism, and masculinist restoration reveal themselves within the menstruation phenomenon is the statements of the pro-government and state actors, as their populist discourses are intended to unite their party alignments with conservatist, nationalist, anti-feminist, and anti-gender rhetoric. Prof. Dr. Ahmet Maranki, a columnist in pro-government *Yeni Akit* newspaper and mostly known for his herbalist identity, has penned an article filled with such statements. The column bearing the name “An Open Letter to Our President”, starts as a kind reproach and gentle call for duty to President Erdoğan by underlining the significance of being native and national against the Crusader Zionist alliance [*Haçlı Siyonist ittifakı*] to prevent destruction and cultural imperialism. This valor piece goes with the following statements, as Maranki targets the state television *Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu* [Turkish Radio and Television Institution – TRT]: “[People being responsible for TRT] should be certainly beheaded, who shut their eyes to the [advertisements of] soft drinks feeding and declaring feeding the Crusader Zionist alliance, the lingerie advertisements such as *Orkid* that cause moral degradation, and [women] appearing on screen in clothes that a Muslim woman may not even wear at night; placed among the shows such as *Payitaht* and *Diriliş*<sup>11</sup>, which are television series published with the covert support of our President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and our government, for the resurrection of the national spirit” (Maranki, 2018). Being obvious in Maranki’s words, menstrual pad brands are sexualized in purpose as women’s underwear, and their commercials airing on the national television channel are claimed to be morally degrading. As mentioned in a couple of

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<sup>10</sup> Turkish version of *Always* pad brand *Orkid*’s website, appealing to newly-menstruating teenager girls, is initially named *www.kizlararasinda.com* [between girls] (“Ana Sayfa”, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> *Payitaht Abdülhamid* and *Diriliş Ertuğrul* are among the growing body of Turkish historical period dramas, the former tells the story of thirty-fourth Ottoman emperor Abdülhamid II and the latter is on the establishment of Ottoman Empire. For an analysis of these series, see Carney (2018) and Bulut and İleri (2019).

paragraphs above, the populist urge to raise native and national generations protecting the national spirit necessitates combat against the alleged undomestic and unnational. The social groups being turned into the undomestic and unnational targets involve women and LGBT+ people not fitting the desired profile—inherently individuals who are openly talking about their periods and menstrual products.

Finally, the third area where JDP's gender regime becomes visible in menstruation phenomena is the current welfare policies. Obviously, in a context where women's rights are mostly debated within the realm of family, LGBT+ individuals' rights are largely denied, and sexual and reproductive health policies are directed at married heterosexual couples, the menstruators' demand for more accessible period products, besides the term menstruator, will not be a concern of governmental bodies. As stated earlier, the tax decrease on menstrual products may seem like a feminist achievement; nevertheless, the reduction was not declared with mentioning the menstrual equality of Turkish citizens, and the timing of the decision was meaningful in terms of being made during the hardening economic conditions. Another example of this welfare policy became apparent after a proposal of Deniz Yavuzylmaz, an MP of *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* [People's Republican Party – PRP], asking Derya Yanık, Minister of Family and Social Policies, the reasons behind the price increase of baby diapers and menstrual pads, and whether these products were provided to low-income families and women in the past two years (Yüce, 2022). In response to this motion, Yanık did not explain the reasons for the price increases and instead stated that they are running social assistance programs through numerous foundations and besides that, financially aiding families after the birth of children. As Yanık's statement shows, the familialist, pro-natalist, and conservatist welfare policies put the wellbeing of families before the wellbeing of individuals. Within this equation, menstrual health and accessibility of period products remain neglected. Furthermore, the menstrual stigma delimits the public talk on menstruation, and this eventually leads to unanswered questions of deputies and unarticulated product types in circular letters, as the opening case of the introduction of this thesis shows.

So, aside from the menstrual norms reinforced by all before-mentioned social, cultural, and political forces, is it possible to talk about a formation of an activism challenging menstrual stigma both on a universal scale and in specific cultures, struggling against menstrual poverty, demanding the development of more accessible, comfortable and environmentally-friendly menstrual products, and pondering on menstrual health? The answer is yes, and in the following chapter, I aim to define what menstrual activism is and exemplify such activist groups with numerous instances, both from Turkey and other geographies.

## 2.4. Menstrual Activism in the World and Turkey

Before exemplifying the current menstrual activism in Turkey and from which aspects activists manage to discuss menstruation as a political matter, I consider it illustrative to touch upon the emergence of the Western –particularly of United States– menstrual activism since the movements of different contexts converge in multiple objectives. The Western menstrual activist movement, rooted back to the 1970s, had emerged concurrently with the increasing awareness of feminist groups in women’s health due to the negligence of modern medicine in female bodily experiences and being based upon the male body as the essential human being (Bobel, 2008). It was the early 1970s when a group of women from Boston had been organized under the roof of Boston Women’s Health Book Collective (BWHBC) to raise discussions on their knowledge of their bodies and their prior encounters with medical staff. Soon after, realizing that the so-called objective medical science will not consider their bodily experiences and answer their questions until they roll up their sleeves, the collective has published the world-renowned reference book of women’s health, “*Our Bodies, Ourselves: Women & Their Bodies*” in 1970. (Bobel, *ibid.*) Back then, the commercial menstrual products available to be mentioned in this book were disposable pads and tampons, besides a disposable menstrual cup named “Tassaway”.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the publishment of this guidebook, menstrual activists of that time gathered in each other’s houses at “Bleed-In” events to share menstrual experiences and knowledge, filmed educational content, and invented brand-new menstrual products, such as the one called “Sea Pearls” made of natural sea sponges. Alongside such activist endeavors, scholarly research on menstruation began to accumulate. In one of such resources, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation*, Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth have shown one of the earliest examples of commercial menstrual product criticism for making up an artificial demand for scented products to supply it later on, besides underlining how convenient an industrial menstrual pad is for bacterial growth. However, the activist endeavor for safer and healthier menstrual products rose during the 1980s after a tragic scandal became the death of tampon consumers.

Before 1979, only a small number of patients contracted toxic shock syndrome (TSS), an uncommon but potentially deadly condition brought on by bacterial toxins, most frequently streptococci and staphylococci. Following the release of P&G’s Rely, a very absorbent tampon

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<sup>12</sup> Disposable pads were put on US market in 1896, whereas tampons in 1934 and Tassaway in 1970 (Bobel, 2014). As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, the introduction of disposable pads to the Turkish market is as recent as 1978 (Cengiz, 2018). There is no exact data on the introduction of tampons in this market, whereas menstrual cups were launched in 2018 (Değirmenci and Vefikuluçay Yılmaz, 2019).

having the capacity to soak up the liquids of one entire period, cases rose: 55 TSS cases and seven fatalities were reported to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) between October 1979 and May 1980. With a total of 813 instances of menstrual-related TSS, including 38 fatalities, the TSS pandemic peaked in 1980 (Meadows, 2000). More than 2,200 cases had been reported to the CDC by 1983 (Tierno, 2001). This TSS epidemic has resulted in P&G's choice of withdrawing Rely from the market shelves, CDC scientists to maintain research finding out a relation between superabsorbent synthetic tampons and TSS, and after all press coverage and public reaction, US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) altered the classification of tampons, which eventually led stricter controls in product safety (Bobel, 2008).

Being aware that menstrual products need further federal regulations, menstrual activists shifted their efforts to the persuasion of government bodies, especially the FDA (Bobel, *ibid.*) Despite the reluctance of the FDA to take rapid action on product safety, menstrual activists finally convinced the administration to oblige tampon packages to carry a sentence to suggest women choose the lowest absorbency tampons to fulfill their needs. Again, since the administration does not define the absorbency levels of tampons, one brand's superabsorbent is another's normal, and high absorbency increases the risk of TSS, this decision of the FDA did not mean an end in the efforts of activist bodies such as BWHBC, Women Health International or Public Citizen groups. Indeed, the latter even issued a legal lawsuit against FDA.

The following decade has witnessed the continuation of activist efforts, both in the United States and abroad. Increasing research has warned the public about the potential hazards of tampon consumption. Ecofeminist groups have begun to discuss the environmental harm caused by single-use products. Furthermore, a bleaching agent used in the production of menstrual pads and tampons, dioxin, was shown to have links with cancer, liver and skin damage, and possibly reproductive health (Armstrong & Scott, 1992; Costello, Vallely & Young, 1989; Houppert, 1999). Despite the challenges in the United States (US) context, the British public managed to ensure state regulations forbidding chlorine-bleaching in paper products in less than two months (Bobel, 2008). The slow pace of legal accomplishments in the US led to an upsurge in numbers of brands producing products to collect menstrual discharge, except for the commercial options offered by personal care conglomerates, such as nonchlorine-bleached pads and tampons or menstrual cups with various sizes.

After ten years of struggle, FDA finally soothed menstrual and consumer activist groups by introducing two standards for tampon producers—suggesting the use of the lowest absorbency

options on the packages and putting the absorbency ranges on a standard. Nevertheless, going by this final decision, it would be a mistake to assume that this regulation meant a change of heart for the administration. Indeed, their study showing no link between cancer risk and dioxin tampons had the data provided by the femcare industry, and the research was on the risks of skin contact, not a vaginal one (Houppert, 1999). Such conclusions based on suspicious and lacking data led to growing doubt about the femcare industry in menstrual activist groups. Indeed, from the early 1990s, there was a significant shift in activist efforts from reforming corporations and governmental organs to criticizing them and seeking alternative products or Do-It-Yourself (DIY) techniques (Bobel, 2008). The time for negotiation and reform was over, and the turn of the 21st century signified a more radical tone.

Although being a diverse community of students, teachers, academicians, DIY campaigners, health care providers, anarchists, anti-consumerism supporters, and many others (Fahs, 2016), Chris Bobel (2010) depicts the contemporary menstrual activism by mentioning two cliques in her influential work, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*. Although starting with the questions “Why, exactly, do nearly all women hate their periods more than their other bodily processes? How do culture, gender ideology, and consumerism shape these reactions?” (p. 7), these two activist groups differ in the way they perceive menstruation, besides their generational backgrounds. The first of them, to which Bobel refers as “feminist spiritualists”, endeavor to reinterpret menstruation as a “healthy, spiritual, empowering, and even pleasurable experience of women” (ibid, p. 66). According to feminist spiritualists, menstruation should not be understood as a curse yet as a sacred, mystical, unique-to-biological-women experience uniting all female bodies with each other and femininity. Instead of putting effort into changing the femcare industry or governmental bodies, feminist spiritualists seek a relatively gradual and individual awakening process by aiming at the emancipation of one woman at a time. Some of the actions of this activist group include creating menarche kits for adolescents to welcome their menstruation with a period-positive attitude or reestablishing the meaning of menstruation by searching the essence of it in pre-patriarchal, pre-Christian, and preindustrial times. Also, their intention of being more connected and aligned with nature –and the nature of their bodies– leads them to switch to natural options such as sea sponges. Indeed, some feminist spiritualists claim that this enables them to be more “in touch” with their menstrual discharge, contrary to the menstruation-averse sense embedded in single-use goods.

Despite the affirmative perspective they have brought, feminist spiritualists are criticized for some shortcomings of their activism. First and foremost, building such a strong alliance

between menstruation experience and womanhood not only ostracizes women who do not menstruate due to various health factors but also leaves out menstruating LGBT+ folks from the movement. Secondly, as Bobel (2010) states, it is difficult to speak of a feminist spiritualist group inclusive of various classes, ethnicities, educational statuses, and political agendas. Without such inclusion, this particular movement depicts a group of white, middle-class, university-graduate women idealizing and instrumentalizing religious or cultural symbols, for example Hindu bindis, as a sign of menstruators in a group gathering, which has initially no connection with periods. In short, due to individualistic, limited, and romanticizing ways of doing activism, feminist spiritualists were unable to have a tremendous impact on younger generations, despite being credited with reinterpreting menstruation.

The second, the more impactful, and the younger faction of the movement are “radical menstruation activists” (ibid, 2010). Although the wordage radical may sound tricky, this group of menstrual activists has nothing to do with reclaiming feminine values or adopting the “I bleed, therefore I am a woman” motto. Instead, radical menstruators are inclined to frame menstruation as a healthy physical experience and a vital sign, which should neither be understood as trouble nor a blessing. Being heavily impacted by third-wave feminist values, radical menstruators aim to build a movement inclusive of experiences of all sexualities, races, ethnicities, ages, and classes and exclusive of the corporate domination over menstruating bodies. In today’s menstrual movement, radical menstruators criticize multinational corporations by three main themes: including harmful chemicals such as chlorine gas or rayon in the production of disposable pads and tampons, harming the environment with supply chain processes and their non-biodegradable goods, and strengthening the menstrual stigma with their product design and marketing discourse which handle periods as something have to be managed (Bobel, 2006). Alongside this criticism, contemporary menstrual activists advocate for cheaper –and even free– menstrual products, let alone aiming to abolish the tax on them. However, contrary to their antecedents, radical menstruators reject engaging in negotiations with the industry. Instead, they heavily rely on DIY methods for creating their menstrual products. For instance, they organize DIY cloth pad sewing workshops on college campuses, where they critically reapproach commercial menstrual pads, their ingredients, and their way of marketing, and introduce students to reusable cloth pads by providing instructions and helping with sewing machines (Bobel, 2010).

Another strategy of radical menstruators is publishing zines or e-zines, a familiar intermediate of the Punk movement (Bobel, 2006; Bobel, 2010). This unconventional, hand-made publishing provides a medium through which menstruators expose their experiences with cloth

pads and menstrual cups. In these zines, it unravels that, through the cloths and cups involving familiarizing contact with body parts and bodily fluids, radical menstruators admit that there is nothing to be scared, ashamed, or disgusted of, as the multinational corporates have imposed upon them (Bobel, 2006). Furthermore, since these zines are mainly based upon personal narratives, their content is a trustworthy resource for fellow menstruators, which activists try to persuade to switch to reusable options. These personal narratives are also written by zine writers acting as sort of “lab rats” not “experts”, so this helps in both empowering the audience by encouraging them to regard their experiences as valuable and disenfranchising the scientific authorities.

In addition to using DIY techniques and e-zines as means of activism, this generation of activists perform radical cheerleading and put numerous examples of menstrual art by which they aim to attract the attention of their audience. As Fahs (2016) highlights, everyday acts of resistance play a critical role in menstrual activism within this new epoch, and such moves vary from watching less television to engaging in talks on taboo topics such as sexual intercourse during menstruation. However, probably the groundbreaking tactic of radical menstrual activists was introducing the term “menstruator”—a wording emphasizing the sexed aspect of periods, an experience not separate from but related to the gendered body (Bobel, 2010). As mentioned in the second section of this chapter, this terminology breaks the essentialist framing of periods by acknowledging women who do not menstruate and menstruating people who are not identified as women. Furthermore, embarking on a gender-neutral term enables menstrual activists “to queer the gender binary” (ibid, p. 164). As the third-wave feminist activist’s impact on menstrual activism is considered, this intention behind adopting the word “menstruator” will seem aligned with their core characteristics.

Considering the colossal progress of menstrual activism in reframing menstruation as politically relevant signals the accomplishment of the above-mentioned political actions and everyday practices. Menstruation and menstrual stigma catapulted into well-known periodicals such as *Cosmopolitan* or *Newsweek* during the last decade (Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). The tax imposed on menstrual products was repealed in Australia, Canada, Colombia, Kenya, India, Malaysia, and several states of the United States, whereas in 2020, Scotland became the first country to distribute its citizens’ menstrual products entirely free (Bobel, 2020; Diamond, 2020; Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). 28th of May has begun to be celebrated as Menstrual Hygiene Day since 2013 (Gaybor & Haycourt, 2021). In 2019, as Indian people set off protests to advocate the rights of menstruating women entering the shrines, the “Period. End of Sentence.” documentary of Indian women owning a low-cost,

biodegradable sanitary pad business won the Academy Award for Best Short Documentary of that year (India Today, 2019; Vadakkiniyil, 2019). Besides these achievements, there were gains in academical and social policy fields. Numerous courses were held on menstrual studies in universities worldwide (Gaybor & Haycourt, 2021). Feminist activist involvement in global public health at the United Nations level during the 1990s led to the establishment of global body politics in development policy settings and raising discussions on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), which eventually led to the works on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) area, and finally WASH adopted Menstrual Health Management (MHM) as a topic of research and intervention during 2010s. Besides being criticized for not paying enough attention to the social aspect of periods, imposing a Western notion of hygiene, and even falling into the trap of victimization; WASH and MHM policies put effort into providing free menstrual products, hygiene kits, education, and improved infrastructure in Global South.

Albeit the late achievements of menstrual activism have shown a leap in recent years, it could not evade some strong criticism due to needing to be more radical as this kind of activism may necessitate. Bobel and Fahs (2020) underline that contemporary menstrual activism has become a product-based activism more than a stigma-based activism, which indirectly reproduces the menstrual concealment narrative and attitude instead of challenging them and shaping a body-positive or body-natural discourse. As these two scholars point out, today's menstrual activism seemingly seeks the empowerment of menstruators by promoting more innovative products in Global North to improve users' life quality and menstrual experiences, and by supplying single-use menstrual goods in Global South as if such campaign would suffice to eliminate the stigma. Falling in the trap of political respectability, such relatively minor steps neither challenge the ongoing menstrual-averse rhetoric in the way some alternative menstrual products are marketed nor question why menstruators in certain cultures cannot reach single-use menstrual products—which both lead to questioning menstrual stigma.

According to Bobel and Fahs, menstrual activism has begun to be problematic in three spheres. Firstly, the public health perspective focuses on merely providing the necessary products rather than inquiring about inequalities and marginalization; besides medicalizes and labels menstruation as a sign of fertility rather than as the “fifth vital sign”<sup>13</sup>. Secondly, the human

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<sup>13</sup> Since its cruciality to general health, many experts and supporters refer to the menstrual and ovulatory system as the “fifth vital sign”. Blood pressure, temperature, breathing rate, and heartbeat make up the other four symptoms. (Bobel & Fahs, 2020)



rights viewpoint enunciates the word “dignity”, such as in the UN’s dignity kits containing hygiene materials for women and girls in the Global South, which reproduces the menstrual stigma and imposes a Western notion of stainless, in-control bodies being conveyed in other contexts. Thirdly, as if it was the only way to overcome the menstrual stigma, the overemphasis on pursuing more convenient and lifestyle-friendly menstrual products instead of gender equality, eventually leads to the marketization of menstrual activism. To survive such limitations put in the fields of public health, human rights, and gender equality, menstrual activism should broaden its perspective, as the authors claim. For instance, rather than only spotlighting the bleeding process, menstruation should be understood as a life phase between menarche and menopause, being experienced by diverse bodies and subjectivities. While opening space for such diverse experiences, radical menstrual activism must not force menstruators to necessarily love their bodies as a counterattack to the dominant discourse of menstruation-averseness—instead, it could unveil the countless possibilities of engaging with one’s menstruating body. Such activism becomes possible, as scholars claim, by putting stigma on the focal point while nourishing the movement with academic research on menstruation and being in contact with other activist groups fostering the field, such as environmentalists, consumer activists, women’s health movement, anticapitalist, punk, and anarchist groups.

Considering the undeniable current impact of menstrual activism on the production and marketing of commercial and alternative menstrual products, it appears that Bobel and Fahs’ concerns about menstrual activism falling into the marketization trap are justified. Large Western megacorporations, which have portrayed menstruation as a burden to be managed, seen bleeding vaginas as a source of pollution, regard leaks and blood stains as shameful, and used phrases such as “special day” or substitute a mysterious blue liquid for menstruation for decades; now instrumentalize feminist or menstrual activist discourse in their advertisements, without showing any self-criticism on their share in the perpetuation of menstrual stigma. Such corporations have a long history of communicating contradictory images of menstruation by normalizing and hindering it, by trying to feminize it but also perceiving it as flawing femininity, and eventually by imposing its management through their foolproof products, which are expected to be empowering and liberating their consumers in participating a physically active life (Raftos, Jackson & Mannix, 1998).

On the other hand, according to Przybylo and Fahs (2020), contemporary commercial menstrual product brands such as *Always*, *Kotex*, or *Libresse* have begun to circulate their quasi-feminist advertisements, in which they communicate a seemingly empowering talk of

menstruation, as they continue to maintain either negative or limiting tone of menstruation experiences or who actually menstruators are. It is possible to cluster these “new” messages under two different themes: the first is the theme of “peppy performance”, which suggests that menstruation should be a liberating and happy experience, and the second is the theme of “fit bleeding”, which associates femininity with sports, grit, and competence. While adopting such themes, these advertisements build their content on white girlhood, maintain a feminine image of menstruation and fail to realize menstrual injustices. Almost every person appearing in these commercial films is suitable to the white, middle-class woman or girl who maintains a fit figure and grounds her femininity in her sportiveness. As Przybylo and Fahs underline, such advertisements miss many points on periods—high sports performance or fitness may not be a relevant aim for all menstruators, menstruation may not necessarily be a source of bliss for many, besides there are pain-experiencing, disabled, or gender nonconforming menstruators.

So, is there a way of going beyond the sexist, ableist, ageist, racist, fatphobic, and transphobic messages that commercial menstrual products include? Przybylo and Fahs (ibid, 2020) suggest that concentrating on the experiences of “cranky menstruators” may be helpful in this inquiry. Neo-liberal marketing discourse, loaded with messages of self-love, imposes the responsibility of accepting oneself as one is, whereas the problem is a systemic one. At this point, although the body and menstrual positivity are accepted as liberating and empowering in feminist thought, making space for unconventional, negative, and even traumatic or painful experiences will be equally crucial in body and embodiment issues. However, despite all its accuracy and necessity, the possibility of cranky menstruators appearing in commercial product advertisements, as Przybylo and Fahs suggest, is highly unlikely. As expected, those profit-oriented conglomerates will continue to portray their products as the ultimate way of conforming to the unrealistic and mensturnormative standards they impose upon individuals. After all, such companies do not follow the menstrual activist agenda, and this movement is indeed harmful to them, as the activist endeavor to abolish menstrual stigma will ultimately reduce the demand and greed for commercial period goods.

On the other hand, one may expect a reverse attitude portrayed by alternative menstrual product brands, as their demand has risen with the menstrual activism, and some products were invented by social entrepreneurs who seek to achieve the period revolution by breaking the stigma with selling their products. Punzi and Werner (2020) mention such companies, which of them operating in the Global South, provide menstrual cups or cloth pads to the consumers there since their cost-per-use is less than single-use options in the long term. Furthermore, they

facilitate educational sessions on the menstrual cycle and how to use their products. In Global North, on the other hand, their product margins are higher to supply other marketplaces with lower prices. In this context, they operate as “lifestyle brands”, trying to improve their products continuously, serving with delivery options and client support, and maintaining a sense of a larger community. One of the most significant differences between alternative and commercial menstrual product brands is that the former seeks to spark a discussion around menstrual stigma and menstrual health, and they try to do so by sharing manifestos or thought-provoking cases on their websites or social media profiles. They maintain this focus by approaching menstruation as a social matter and a sign of well-being rather than a women’s or hygiene problem, establishing global linkages via their experience-sharing platforms to show that menstrual stigma is not a personal but a global issue, investing in developing more ergonomic, cheap, easy-to-use and eco-friendly products, and attracting attention to the relation between menstrual taboo and sparseness of product innovation.

Despite the innovative perspective it offers and the give-back culture it supports, social entrepreneurs of alternative menstrual products are also faced with skepticism and criticism (ibid, 2020). The first is the extent to which activist efforts remain sincere when the profit is involved in their movement and the hazard of menstrual activist discourse being instrumentalized due to business purposes. Another concern is the questionable ecological impact of product features such as organic and biodegradable. For instance, although organic cotton is an option that the individual consumer can choose for health purposes, it is still unclear whether this material is less harmful to the environment than non-organic cotton or not. The third criticism directed at social entrepreneurs is that the social enterprise model is not scalable enough to cause a considerable impact, and they do not have the resources to go beyond the local projects. Finally, there is the risk of social entrepreneurs operating in the Global South labeling the use of pieces of cloth –not cloth pads produced by them– during menstruation with words such as “unhygienic” or “primitive”.

It can be understood that some of the concerns mentioned above and further worries about the production and marketing of alternative menstrual products were justified by Koskenniemi (2021), with a thematic analysis of the websites where such goods are sold. According to Koskenniemi, the online platforms where these products are sold are in line with menstrual activist ideals, as their content emphasizes the need for normalizing and destigmatizing menstruation, underlines and instantiates their products’ environment-friendliness, highlights menstrual injustices, and tries to cover diverse menstrual experiences. Nevertheless, it is not possible to say that the content creators of the brand wholly adopt the viewpoint advocated in

these contents. For example, of the 852 images on the fifty alternative product sites Koskenniemi reviewed in her research, only four contained explicit depictions of blood or blood-like fluids, whereas, in the case of menstruating bodies, white people constituted the majority of images, despite the discourse of inclusivity. Also, while mentioning alternative products' long-term protection against leaks, there are also examples implying that leaks are embarrassing, such as the menstrual underwear site having a piece mentioning it would be undesirable to leave someone else's seat "like a murder scene". To conclude, although alternative period product manufacturers are far better at showing menstruation/body-neutrality/positivity and opening space for diverse menstrual experiences compared to commercial product marketers, the image created and promoted by the former still has opportunities for improvement. Indeed, menstrual or feminist activists are expected to continue their criticisms of both product lines, since settling for the lesser of two evils may be contradictory to the radicality of these movements.

As I mentioned more than once in the paragraphs above, menstrual activism is a movement that necessitates an extensive focus since it uncovers how commercial menstrual products produce and reproduce menstrual taboos, connects the lack of innovation in this field to the current stigma, and plays a pivotal role in the invention and improvement of alternative products. Nevertheless, since the main priority of menstrual activism is to make the experiences of menstruators a politically relevant issue rather than focusing on products, I consider it necessary to mention how menstrual activism is shaped in the Turkish context as I come to the end of this section.

Menstrual activism in the Global North could be dated to the 1970s, whereas in the Global South, this activism and following social policy programs accelerated with the 1990s. However, Turkey has a fairly new history of this particular movement, which could be dated as late as the second half of the 2010s. Probably, one of the reasons behind this late development is the fact that Turkey is a peripheral country—neither from Global North having these products in the market for almost a century and having been the scene of menstrual activism for five decades, nor from Global South where is the target of programs such as Menstrual Health Management.

Still, various activists or research groups in this context have demonstrated many actions and studies aimed at making menstruation politically relevant. Two of the current examples of these are the *Mor Dayanışma* [Purple Solidarity] and *Kampüs Cadıları* [Campus Witches] groups, which gather in front of the national parliament, tax offices and main streets to express

their demands for the abolition of the tax on menstrual products and even free distribution of these products (“Regl ürünlerine gelen zamları protesto eden kadınlar serbest bırakıldı”, 2022; “Ankara’da ‘regl ürünleri ücretsiz olsun’ diyen kadınlara gözüaltı”, 2022; “İzmir’de kadınlardan hijyenik ped eylemi: Vergi dışı bırakılsın”, 2022). On the other hand, at the local government level, upon the request of the students participating in the İzmir Metropolitan Municipality 2022 Youth Strategy Action Plan Workshop, it was decided by the municipality to organize a fabric pad-making workshop with the participation of women aged 18-29 to produce an alternative to disposable pads due to their increasing prices (“‘Adettendir Üretiyoruz’ atölyesi için başvurular başladı”, 2022). One of the most recent achievements came upon the application of Özyeğin Law Clinic and the Ombudsman Institution’s request for information and documents. The Republic of Turkey Ministry of Justice General Directorate of Prisons and Detention Houses ordered all penal institutions to provide free menstrual products to all incarcerated women (Konuşmamız Gerek / We Need to Talk, 2023).

However, when it comes to defining an organization in Turkey with menstrual activism as the main agenda, Konuşmamız Gerek Derneği [We Need To Talk Association – WNTA] stands out. Founded by human rights lawyer İlayda Eskitaşçıoğlu and sociologist Bahar Aldanmaz Fidan in 2017, WNTA is described as “the first and only association that fights against menstrual poverty and taboo in Turkey”. The three main goals of this organization are augmenting the availability, quality, and sustainability of menstrual goods in Turkey, increasing data collection and content creation on period poverty and experiences in this specific geography and advocating for the inclusion of comprehensive sex and menstrual education into Turkish national education curriculum (“Ana Sayfa”, n. d.).

To realize this mission, the members of the association have reached more than 50,000 beneficiaries, more than 250 volunteers, 15 collaborations, and 20 cities as of the end of 2022. One of the most prominent actions taken by this platform is to organize fieldworks by which they achieve to supply menstrual products to those in need, besides providing safe zones to talk about menstruation and menstrual care, to normalize and answer questions about periods. In these field works, WNTA’s prioritized groups are the seasonal agricultural workers, refugees, and school children living in rural areas. Another collaboration of WNTA is with Molped, a Turkish-originated single-use pad brand, and Getir, a mobile application for food and grocery delivery services. With this *Regl Kardeşliği* [Period Sisterhood] partnership, for every pad bought through the app between 15-21 March 2022, another pad package was donated to the WNTA from the partners to be reached those who are in need (Story Studio, 2022). Besides this fieldwork and collaborations, WNTA contributes to the accumulation of

informational content and research data on menstrual experiences in Turkey. For instance, their Period Poverty Research in Turkey study, which is based on an online survey conducted with more than four thousand menstruators over 18 years of age and living in Turkey, shows that 73.6% of the participants encounter some degree of availability issues as they try to procure menstrual products (Eskitaşçioğlu & Aldanmaz Fidan, 2022). The same research revealed that 21.1% of the participants do not have constant access to soap, 16.3% to clean water, and 31.8% to trash, which are other critical components of the menstrual hygiene management.

In addition to this research, WNTA also has three mini-guides, named the Menstruation Awareness Series, prepared with the EMpower Foundation's Girl Fund and available to all stakeholders working on menstruation. The first of these resources consist of data on menstrual poverty and menstrual taboo in Turkey and the world, the second one reflects the results of field research on the menstrual experiences and views of young girls in a village in Bursa, and the third one is a menstrual education guide designed according to the local context of Turkey ("The 'Girls Are Talking' Application Guide", n. d.). Other resources developed by WNTA are Menstruation Guide for Non-Menstruators published on their website, *Oyunbozan* [Killjoy] newsletter published through Aposto News Platform, and *Haydi Konuşalım* [Let's Talk] children's book on menstruation available on bookstores, aiming to prepare and work as a guidebook for young menstruators before menarche. In addition to the subjects that WNTA deals with in its current works, the subjects that the association wants to work on in the future are stated as the menstrual experiences of individuals with disabilities, menstrual product production processes, the supply chains of these products, toxic components in products and plastic waste, and the discourses of menstrual product companies ("Menstrüel Adalet mi? Başka Derdiniz mi Yok?", 2022).

Emerging as one of the numerous branches of the feminist health movement in the 1970s, the menstrual activist movement has been the pioneer of various entitlements in different geographies, contributed to the rise and flourishing of critical menstrual studies, and opened a space for discussion of menstrual experiences, varying by religion, race, ethnicity, culture, class, sexual orientation, and gender. Although being a relatively recent movement that has developed in the last five years, it is evident that Turkish menstrual activism will make its mark with the influence of various factors such as the dominant gender ideology and rising authoritarianism in Turkey, the transformations of feminist and LGBT+ movements, intensifying local economic conditions, and the pressure of global supply chain crises on the country.

## 2.5. Related Studies and Significance of the Research

As mentioned in the earlier sections, the studies on menstruation have begun to emerge after the upheaval of the second-wave feminist movement and especially with the rise of the feminist health movement (Bobel, 2008). It was the 1970s when feminist began to question the safety of the commercial menstrual products, as well as the shame and hiding discourse attached to menstruation. Since then, the growing literature has accumulated with studies on diverse subjects on the social meaning of menstruation and eventually, an interdisciplinary field of “critical menstrual studies” has flourished after the aggregation of works on menstruation, from branches such as sociology, anthropology, history and psychology (see Bobel et al., 2020). Yet since this thesis has a concern on changing menstrual product consumption patterns and menstrual stigma experiences embedded in these practices, I would like to mention the prominent research covering these topics, both from the Turkish and other contexts.

The early research in the field examining the interrelation of menstrual stigma and period products is mostly interested in the way the commercial menstrual good manufacturers, the way they designed and marketed their products. One of the preliminary pieces in the field, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* was published in 1976. With an adoption of the feminist perspective and covering taboos, rituals, myths and symbolism of the menstruation, Delaney, Lupton and Toth (1988) presented a historical view on the menstrual goods industry, following one of the earliest criticisms directed towards it (Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 1988). According to the scholars, the manufacturers made use of gimmickry to increase their sales and have created an artificial demand for products such as scented tampons and pads through deceiving the public.

In her pioneer work *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology* (2008), Sharra Vostral builds a comprehensive gaze at the history of menstrual hygiene technology as well. In her book, Vostral builds a panorama of menstrual hygiene management products and technologies from cloth pads of the ancient times to the latest technology pads and tampons of the contemporary world, and defines menstrual products as “technologies of passing”, since these products enable women to hide their stigmatized bodily processes containing images on femininity and pass as non-menstruators in the society.

In *Capitalizing on the Curse: The Business of Menstruation* (2006), Elizabeth Arveda Kissling analyzes the historical progress of menstrual product development in United States and reveals

how it has been molded by the interests of megacorporations. As Kissling shows, women's bodies and labor were exploited by the menstrual product industry and pharmaceutical companies to keep sell women's bodies and sexualities under control. The author also puts some examples of menstrual product advertisements reproducing and strengthening the menstrual stigma.

On the other hand, in one of the rare material culture studies on the menstrual products, Ginsburg (1996) also detects the menstrual concealment attitude being embedded in the way menstrual products were designed and marketed. After her research conducted on the examination of over 150 packages of sanitary goods, Ginsburg claims that the design of the menstrual goods and their boxes can be understood as promoting private, discreet consumption, which reflects the expectation from women to hide their periods and the equipment during that timeframe. Packages of the products such as pads and tampons overemphasize absorbing the blood and smell, their design prioritizes hiding well in one's clothes, and the goods can easily and secretly be stored in one's bag and separately be thrown in the trashcan. The external packaging of menstrual products is mostly designed with plain, light colors and simple, unassertive patterns, with the motivation of reflecting a so-called feminine style, with little or no visible information on the product type or function. According to Ginsburg, just as the menstrual etiquette reminds the women their object status in society and makes them look at themselves through male gaze, menstrual products as material culture helps reflecting and ratifying the dominant ideology on womanhood.

This menstrual rhetoric including negativity and concealment is inevitably reflected in the marketing discourse of menstrual products as well, as several studies put an emphasis on (see Courts & Berg, 1993; Simes & Berg, 2001; Erchull, 2013). For instance, according to Malefyt and McCabe (2016), although women enunciate the naturalness of menstruation, the marketing content of these goods are dominated by protection, which leads to a binary understanding of menstrual periods and stronger linkages between menstruation, shame and secrecy. On the other hand, Raftos, Jackson & Mannix (1998) illuminate how menstrual product advertisements communicate conflicting depictions of menstruation, in terms of both encouraging the normalization and hindering of the products. Such advertisements, as the authors' inquiry on magazine content show, not only aim to feminize periods but also show the images of a flawed femininity. As these advertisements try to convince, the only way to live an empowered and liberated life for the consumers is claimed to be the consumption of their leak-free products. In one of the recent studies on menstrual good advertisements, Przybylo and Fahs (2020) allege that although contemporary commercial menstrual product



brands' so-called feminist advertisements exemplify a quasi-empowering discourse of menstruation, such pieces continue to portray negative or limiting view on periods, which necessitates a menstrual experience either being an empowering or positive one, or strongly tied to physical activities, strength and capability.

Whereas works related to commercial menstrual products are mostly based on their design and advertisements' connection to the stigma and concealment surrounding menstruation, studies on alternative menstrual products involve these matters, besides the motivation behind the switch from one product type to other, and how the consumption of alternative menstrual products is related to the greater value systems of the menstruators. This occurs mostly because menstrual pads and tampons are obtained right after menarche with the instructions of the mothers, sisters, female friends, teachers, and medical practitioners, while reusable menstrual product consumption becomes an alternative at later stages in life.

One of the earliest studies on considering and shifting to the consumption of alternative menstrual products is written by Anne-Marie Long (1999). In her thesis conducted with North American women using alternative products or considering using them, Long illuminates the differences between single-use and alternative menstrual products by arguing that the former ones are designed to absorb the menstrual liquids and be thrown away, hence they limit contact with one's own body and bodily discharges, which eventually leads to a menstrual aversiveness. Since such mainstream goods are designed, packaged and distributed in a climate of shame and secrecy, menstruating women's experiences are influenced by that. On the other hand, as Long (ibid.) argues, women articulate their dissatisfaction with the conventional products in terms of health and environmental consciousness and thus consider consuming alternative options. Since alternative menstrual products are new to the market and against the interests of megacorporations, Long emphasizes that even many women are displeased with the single-use products, they may not be aware of alternatives do exist, so better education mechanisms are needed. Indeed, women adopting alternative methods mention the help of feminist and queer/lesbian communities they are a part of. Although Long has discovered that women consuming alternative products experience physical comfort and being more in touch with their bodies, she still asserts that the optimal solution does not exist. Even the agency is essentially important in terms of product choices, the issue is more than the individual choice and has extensive social meanings, returns and dangers.

In a context having similarities with Turkey in terms of attitudes towards menstruation, Nagarajan Meenakshi's (2020) interviews with Indian environment-conscious women from

middle- and upper-income classes show that alternative menstrual product consumption motivations are undermined within the patriarchal society engaging in a symbolic violence towards menstruating women. Meenakshi argues that women having environmental consciousness and engaging in many sustainable consumption practices show reluctance towards alternative options. As the research shows, this hesitancy grows upon women's willingness to not to make their periods a matter of struggle again, which they have already faced with various hostilities for years, or to cause possible tension with their partners. Hence, women seek to protect boundaries and preserve the stability in their life at the risk of conforming to patriarchal subordination and reinforcing the existing gender dynamics. When it comes to delivering of the inconsistencies in their consumption practices, they accept making compromises by reshaping their environmental consciousness concept and thus avoid the pain of challenging the status quo.

Among the current studies is Ellen Catherine Roberts' (2021) thesis on the discussions in online channels on menstrual cup consumers from developed countries. Based on her focus group study with women from such online communities, Roberts captured three themes in menstrual cup using women's discourses. The first of them is "the modern (neo-liberal) woman", who savors the benefits of the free product choice, articulates having individual control and independence over their bodies and hence hold the socially favored position of the liberated modern women, yet still continue to rearticulate the existing menstrual concealment imperative and do not challenge the existing medical practices. The second theme, "the self-sacrificing activist" comes to the forefront as menstrual cup using women voice getting out of their comfort zone for the sake of making more environmental conscious product choices. Whereas these two themes being affected by neo-liberalism, environmentalism and healthism build up a new experience, this experience seems to be mostly on the consumption of the appropriate goods. However, the third theme of "the 'cupverting' trailblazer" is detected in women who intent to construct a less antagonistic menstrual experience for others to follow in the face of negative menstrual rhetoric. These women deliberately share their menstrual cup experiences with their friends or coworkers and carry a seemingly-personal practice into the public sphere to actively oppose the menstrual stigma with a brand-new discourse. Thus, according to Roberts, although the first two themes of "the modern (neo-liberal) woman" and "the self-sacrificing activist" do exist, adopting menstrual cups may act as a way of achieving control and agency in a menstrual-averse social setting.

One of the recent studies, which are concerning very similar topics with this study, Lara Owen (2022) reflects upon the stigma, capitals, and the female reproductive body, discovered with a

mixed analysis of participants' diaries and interviews on the routines of menstrual cup use. According to this study conducted with eleven university students from Melbourne, there are several themes reflecting menstrual cup users' motivations of and reflections on these specific products. First and foremost, menstrual cups being a sustainability menstrual hygiene technology was appealing to the participants while considering a switch from conventional methods. Besides this environment conscious impulse, participant women were attracted to the convenience and the low cost-per-use of menstrual cups. While discussing the convenience element prominent in participants' narratives, Owen recognizes a reflection of the neo-liberal capitalist conceptualization of the ordered reproductive body, which obeys a scheduled and organized daily routine—thanks to the adoption of the cups, the female worker will be able of shuttling between domestic and formal work without any backset. This convenience is also defined by the cup users in terms of “not thinking about” and even “forgetting” the cup, which not only means a lessened emotional labor, but also a menstrual minimization. Paradoxically to this forgetting while running the daily errands, participants faced their menstrual liquids in the discharge and cleaning processes, which opens the way for many participants more contact with their blood, and a neutralized or even a positive perception of menstrual blood. Furthermore, while participants forgot about their periods in the practical level, adopting cup usage has built new opportunities for them to engage in more menstrual talk, as they disclose this new experience with their immediate circles. Indeed, this desire to openly speak about menstruation with family members, close friends, and even boyfriends stem from the “coolness” of menstrual cups and thus this new menstrual experience, which is fed by all remarkable aspects of sustainability, thrift, feminist-alignment, convenience, and forgetting, as put forward by the research participants.

Last but not least, Josefin Persdotter's (2022) inquiry of contemporary menstrual hygiene practices in Sweden deserves to be spoken of in the course of reviewing the prior research on menstrual stigma and menstrual product consumption practices. Adopting Mary Douglas's theorization of dirt, Persdotter focuses on how everyday consumption practices of pads and menstrual cups “(re)create and (re)enforce menstrual pollution beliefs” (ibid., p. 180). As Persdotter shows, menstrual hygiene technologies should be perceived within the complex web of menstruating bodies, physical materialities, social norms of menstrual dirt, individuals and their emotional receptions, besides a wide variety of technologies and commodities. Within this background, pads are socially contextualized as products carrying tactable dirt “with a telos of disposal” (ibid., 181), whereas cups create dirt in terms of bacteria and mess “with a telos of reuse”. The symbolical pollution narratives surrounding pads and cups are both existent in the narratives of product manufacturers and participant individuals, and

likewise, both technologies generate “pollution dangers” in social and medical terms. These dangers drive menstrual product users to act and feel in certain ways—to reduce the risks of menstrual stigmatization, individuals experience anxiety and fear of being marked as menstrually dirty and endeavor to avoid or eliminate such dirt.

In Persdotter's study (ibid.), based on Mary Douglas's conceptualization of dirt, the processes of eliminating dirt with pads or from cups are identified as purification rituals. However, unlike Douglas's conceptualization of dirt becoming dangerless when once entering into the trash is not valid for the single-use pads, as Persdotter's work shows. When it comes to the menstrual cups, on the other hand, since they violate the rules of inside and outside the body and surpasses the gendered bodily margins, cups become highly marginal objects with symbolic pollution. Hence, as Persdotter's research shows as well, alternative menstrual technologies seem to be not the ideal choice for many people, as they are deemed to be unhygienic or disgusting. Indeed, even menstruators opting for alternative methods in menstrual hygiene technologies do not share the menstrual pollution beliefs, they regulate their behavior -such as sanitizing a cup in a designated cooker- to not to offend people who are thinking otherwise.

Whereas research on menstruation has emerged during 1970s and since then, a literature on critical menstrual studies has grown with a major leap with third-wave feminism, the works of this interdisciplinary field is recently burgeoning in the Turkish context. The majority of the studies on menstruation in Turkey are conducted with medical purposes by the disciplines such as gynecology and nursing, yet few of them mention the social meanings of menstruation and women's attitudes during their menses. For instance, a study by Sakar and her colleagues (2015) conducted with midwifery students of a university show that majority of the research participants refrain from cutting their hair or nails, epilating, engaging in worship rituals such as Hajj or Umrah, and reciting the Quran. Furthermore, about half of them conceal their menstruating status from others and about one-third of them mention their periods with words *regl* [from the French *régle*, meaning rule, order, and menses], *adet* [from the Arabic *ʿāda(t)* meaning recurrent], and *hasta* [being ill]. In another study of Dünder and Aksu (2022), some of the abstained behaviors during menstruation are discovered as visiting an infant, pickling, taking a shower, attending to a funeral, and expressing their own menstrual status to men.

Carol Delaney's field research on the gender hierarchy and its cosmological meanings in rural Central Anatolia during early 1980s can be mentioned as the first anthropological study on the social meanings of menstruation in Turkey (Delaney 1987; 1988). As mentioned in the earlier

sections, men's and women's role in procreation are similar to the relationship between the seed and the soil. The seed is understood as "life-generating" and thus connected to the ephemeral world, whereas the "life-supporting" soil is responsible of nurturing and growing the seed without any effect on its identity and related to the earthly and temporary life. Hence, menstruation is closely tied to corporeality, temporality and decay, dissimilar to the seed bearing the symbolism of creativity, spirituality, and the eternal. In such a meaning system, menstruation is not only grasped as a sign of female impurity being attributed to Eve's disobedience against Allah, but also as a crucial process for the purification of the womb for the seed. As Delaney's (1988) research shows, all of such cosmological meanings have reflections in the everyday lives of the women and men. Unless an adolescent girl experiences her menarche, menstruation remains a topic of unspoken. Besides the lack of experience sharing between younger and elder sisters in some cases, menstruation should be strictly hidden from the male members of the family. As mentioned in the Quran, women are believed to be unclean and ill during their menses, and since procreation should take place in a pure environment, sexual intercourse during menstruation is prohibited. Furthermore, women are also expected to refrain from any religious rituals, secretly eat and drink if it is Ramazan, touching pregnant women and bake breads. Here, the concept of pollution caused by menstrual blood is perceived as "the contamination of the spiritual realm by the physical" (ibid., p. 91).

Another study in the Turkish context covering the social and cultural meanings of menstruation is Aylın Dikmen Özarslan's (2004) *Kırmızı Kar: Toplumsal ve Kültürel Açından Ayhali* [Red Snow: Social and Cultural Aspects of Menstruation, translation by me]. In the research covering a multigenerational sample of daughters, mothers and maternal grandmothers, Dikmen Özarslan aims to uncover the menstruation narratives of women from different age groups having different educational statuses. As Dikmen Özarslan's research shows, menstrual stigma is prominent as participant women resort various euphemisms and these euphemisms are mostly the various forms of *kirlenmek* [being dirty] and *hastalanmak* [being ill]. Yet, the youngest generation consisting of university students chooses to refer menstruation with *regl* or *adet*, which are neutral terms. Another point Dikmen Özarslan refers is the lack of information in all generations on what menstruation is and why it occurs, for instance one participant from the youngest generation refers the periods' function as "the elimination of dirty blood from the body".

This information inadequacy is also visible in participant women's first menstrual experience, and besides that, participants stated that they had preferred to disclose their menarche to female members of their families, mostly mothers (ibid., 2004). Both the reactions of the person with

whom the menarche was shared and participants' feelings experienced after the first blood are quite compatible to the concept of "ambivalence" that Young (2005) mentions—girls are first slapped and then congratulated by their mothers and menstruation mean both an ordeal and a source of womanly pride. Still, it can be argued that the experience of menarche symbolizes a transitional period and it correlates menstruation with growing up. As a consequence of this, as well as to prevent the contamination of menstrual blood, participants had begun to self-monitor their movements and reshaped their relationships with women and men. When it comes to women's current willingness of sharing their menstrual status with people, it becomes obvious that the youngest generation is more vocal and experiences less shame. In brief, Dikmen Özarslan's study demonstrates an intergenerational transfer of social and cultural meanings attached to menstruation, as well as the inevitable changes in such meanings knowingly or unintentionally carried out by the youngest generation, especially in terms of breaking the illness and shame discourses around periods.

Before wrapping up this final section of this chapter, still a few questions require answers: What is the significance of this research? Where does this work locate within the above-mentioned studies on the social and cultural meaning of menstruation and menstrual products? As overt from this and the previous sections, sociological and anthropological studies with the purpose of understanding menstruation through a feminist kaleidoscope are the works of the last fifty years. The first handbook on critical menstruation studies was published as late as 2020, although menstrual periods have been experienced since the emergence of humanity. As Chris Bobel (2020) points out, the negligence and derision of menstruation as a bodily experience and a vital sign shows both "a profound knowledge gap" and "the power of misogyny and stigma to suppress knowledge production" (p. 1). Nevertheless, the cumulation of the feminist criticism and knowledge, besides the increased popularity of the period activism has lighted the touchpaper and an interdisciplinary field has emerged.

This study, as an attempt of problematizing menstrual stigma and normativities by grounding on disposable and alternative menstrual product consumption practices in Turkey, drives its significance from this growing critical menstrual studies literature. Albeit studies inquiring similar issues have been conducted in diverse social and cultural settings, academic work on menstrual stigma, menstrual norms, and menstrual product consumption practices in the Turkish context remain stagnant. As I have built linkages in the previous parts, it will be even more critical to fill this gap in the research considering Turkey's social order and gender ideology, which has been undergone massive transformations in the last two decades and will eventually influence menstrual experiences and product consumption practices. In this regard,

disposable and alternative menstrual product consumption practices and one's shift from the former to the latter signals the challenges and opportunities along this alteration, stemming from the changing social structure.

Besides being a work to be classified under the critical menstruation studies, this research also contributes to the sociology of consumption through practices being the unit of analysis of this inquiry. As it will be further mentioned in the theoretical framework chapter, especially after the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a critical focus has been generated in consumption studies to the habitual, sequential, embodied and collective practices (see Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2014). This recent analytical structure keeps its concentration on the embodied practices, which are maintained through the collective knowledge, intentions and mental models, with the routinized utilization of things by bodies and minds (Reckwitz, 2002). This work contributes to the practice theory of consumption through two different means, which are illuminated by Warde (2014) as essential gaps in the research. Firstly, although theories of practice have maintained its focus on the several bodily practices such as clothing, doing sports and going to the gym, there is still a gap to be filled through a specific focus on the embodied practices and daily routines, since they directly shape one's body, represent one's cultural capital and impact the place one holds in business life and romantic relationships. Secondly, approaching to the practices as a proper medium to capture the changing social structure, this study seeks to detect how old norms and standards shaping the common routines have been broken and how new ones were built, which is an understudied pattern in theories of practice.

In this second chapter of this thesis, I have set the scene for the entire research by describing the main concepts upon which I will build my study. Firstly, I introduced menstruation and menstrual cycles as biological processes and defined disposable and alternative menstrual products by providing frequently used examples of such goods. Secondly, by discussing the Turkish terms corresponding to woman, girl, and lady and mentioning the most recent terminology menstruator, I tried to illuminate the complex question of who the menstruating subject is, precisely within the Turkish context. Discussing these terms and illuminating how these identities differ from each other has inescapably made me discuss the historical development of the gender ideology in Turkey with a focus on the last twenty years, which have passed under the governance of neo-liberal and neo-conservatist JDP rule, and it was a critical emphasis since it shapes the everyday realities of all above-mentioned identities experiencing menstruation. Following that, I provided a brief overview of menstrual activism by focusing on the developments in Western countries and mentioning the recent upheavals in Turkey since this movement directly influences menstrual product developments,

availabilities, and choices. In the final section of this chapter, I exemplified the prior research in this area and covered the significance of this research. In the next chapter of this thesis, I aim to provide the theoretical framework, which constitutes the backbone of this study.



## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, I seek to problematize menstruation as a source of social stigma and menstrual normativities, by grounding on disposable and alternative menstrual product consumption practices in Turkey. Menstruation, by not being a mere biological process, shapes the everyday reality of the menstruators with the social norms ingrained to this cycle. Following the diverse personal narratives of the menstruators, this research primarily targets to illuminate the research question of how menstrual stigma and menstrunormativity interrelates with the periods maintained with different kinds of menstrual products. In this regard, differing perspectives against one's body and bodily experiences upon the varying consumption practices they have adopted after menarche holds a crucial position in this research. Indeed, how alternative menstrual product consumption practices constitute a new experience of menstruation and a new identity of menstruator is worth focusing on. Finally, the newly forming menstrunormativity around the recently emerging practices requires elaboration. Before providing answers to these research questions in the light of this thesis' original research data, I consider it essential to provide the theoretical framework of this study and which definitions of menstrual stigma, menstrunormativity and practices this research follows.

Undoubtedly, one of the fundamental catalysts of menstrual cycles being the subject of social research is the rise of feminist theory. Criticizing the mainstream theory's perspective of women "as either second-rate men or as the Other (not-men)" (p. 11), majority of feminist theorizers comprehend this situation as a facet of the women's marginalized position in society (Beasley, 1999). This fact has been motivating for the followers of feminist thought to disengage from the traditional social and political theory and aspire to focus on and overcome women's marginalization. Although the feminist theory shows varieties in approaching to womanhood and marginalization and feminism's concerns are not solely directed at women, one characteristic almost all approaches agree upon is regarding women as the subject of the analysis. Holding this unique position in terms of the subject of the scientific inquiry, feminist thought separates itself from the mainstream theory in describing major concepts such as "politics" and "social life". Eventually, a critical glance to notions which were not regarded as

concepts to be put in the center of social research before, such as the domestic and/or private space, bodies, sexuality, reproduction, male violence, emotionality, motherhood, childcare, domestic labor and women's work, has developed (Beasley, 1999; Ramazanoğlu, 1989). This perspective is encapsulated in the illustrious expression “the personal is political”—as feminist knowledge seeks the roots of women's oppression in these so-called individual realms and underlines the structural inequalities rooted in subjective experiences. Thus, it was inevitable that menstruation, as one of the processes has been mostly stuck in the private realm, came into prominence with the acceleration of the second wave feminist movement. Due to modern medicine's disregard for female bodily experiences and its understanding of the male body as the fundamental human being, women's health movement emanated during 1970s, and foreshadowed the feminist inquiry on menstruation (Bobel, 2008).

Although it is certain that feminist theory will have a distinction from mainstream social and political theory, there are differing perspectives of feminist thinkers about the extent of divergence between these approaches. While some feminist scholars see themselves in continuity with the traditional theory, others consider it essential to actualize a fundamental break between these two thoughts. However, as Beasley (1999) argues, it is almost inevitable of the feminist thought, regardless of its distance from mainstream theory, to acquire concepts of it with a “tactical use”. While this tactical use refuses to holistically adapt the value framework of the traditional theory marked with the masculine bias that feminist perspective opposes, it grows upon strategic borrowings from it. Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) engage in such tactical use as they theorize menstruation as a source of social stigma for women, by borrowing the term stigma from Erving Goffman's conceptualization. Goffman (1963) identifies stigma “as an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (p. 3) and asserts three kinds of the term. The first type of the stigma is formed as “abominations of the body” (p. 4), loosely defined as the defects in one's physical characteristics. As the second type, Goffman mentions the “blemishes of the individual character” understood as frailty, imperious or unusual passions, unreliable and inflexible beliefs, and deceit implied from a history of cases such as having a mental illness, engaging in crime or being jobless. Finally, a third type of stigma is specified as the “tribal stigma”, which can be passed down through generations and affect each member of the family.

According to Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler's review of feminist scholarship (2013), menstrual blood as a stigmatizing mark suits all three of the categories of Goffman. Firstly, as menstrual customs and hygiene practices such as ritual bath processes of numerous belief systems show that menstrual blood is perceived as an “abomination of the body”. Secondly,

menstrual blood as a “blemish of the individual character” emerges when women fail to hide such an aversive sign. This registers on menstrual product advertisements, as having leaks and stains regarded as harmful to femininity and such risks can be managed with right product alternatives (Lee, 1994). Even the visibility of menstrual products evoking the discharge may result in avoidance and social distancing (see Roberts et al., 2002). Lastly, Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler claim that menstrual blood is an indicative of “a tribal identity of femaleness”, which is transferred to post-menarcheal adolescents with changing attitudes of parents and other society members, encouragements of acting more “lady-like”, and warnings about sexuality (see Lee & Sasser-Coen, 1996). Besides differentiating pre- and post-menarcheal eras of life and expectations surrounding them, pre-menstrual and menstrual phases themselves are viewed as sources of bodily or psychological disorder, which are inherent to such tribal identity. For instance, as Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) underline, in the works of popular culture, women in premenstrual phase are portrayed as being out of control and prone to violence or verbal abuse.

Another feminist scholar choosing the word stigma while problematizing the social meaning of menstruation, Iris Marion Young (2005), conceptualizes menstruation with reference to the works of feminist-existentialist thinker Simone de Beauvoir. Although Young criticizes the tacit denigration behind Beauvoir’s understanding of female bodily experiences and how her thought falters between seeking the sources of negative attitude towards menstruation in social relations and in women’s nature, Young does not refrain herself of giving credit to the vividness of Beauvoir’s work. For instance, according to Beauvoir, the pre-menarche era could be defined as “a crisis for the girl” (p. 100), since she is ill-prepared for menstruation, experiences anxiety, embarrassment, and abomination, but on the other hand, feeling the pride of evolving into a woman stands there as a possibility (Beauvoir, as cited in Young, 2005). Hence, in Beauvoir’s terms, post-menarcheal life could be defined with the concept of “ambivalence”—a split and alienated identity of women, both ratified and rejected by adolescent girls. Again, although Young rejects the intensity of the crisis stemming from menstrual experiences as defined by Beauvoir, she admits the alienating and ambivalent social meanings attached to menstruation are being reflected in various communication channels, such as mainstream media or educative brochures carrying mixed messages on menstruation or medical literature portraying menstruation as failed production. Such alienating messages are included in the menstrual products and their advertisements as well. Albeit some experts assume that women and girls already have the scientific knowledge of menstruation, Young (ibid.) points out that in contemporary advanced industrial capitalistic societies, the majority of the knowledge acquired is on the consumption of menstrual goods and adolescents mostly

seek practical information. Irrespectively of the changes in the discourses of popular culture and medical literature with the influence of feminist achievements, menstrual product advertisement rhetoric still continues to portray menstruation as “a hygiene problem that needs managing with their products” (p. 103).

Young (ibid.) indicates that women’s status as menstruators appears to be paradoxical in last century’s and contemporary civilizations that purport to treat women as the social equals of men. Women live in societies where it is known that there is no behavioral or intellectual capacity difference between those who experience menstruation and those who do not experience it, however, they face the menstrual concealment imperative in order to continue their lives without being marginalized by the society. The societal expectance advises women not to speak of menstruation except their mothers, sisters, close female friends and sometimes their partners, not to show a single drop of menstrual discharge and even do their best to prevent any visible lines of a menstrual pad outside their clothes, because periods are “dirty, disgusting, defiling, and thus must be hidden” (p. 107). Young reads this seemingly-contradictory messages with borrowing the term “closet experience” from Eve Sedgwick (1990) and holding a queer perspective to challenge the notion of normality in contemporary society:

*While there is an apparent friction between them, in fact these two messages easily cohere. The message that a menstruating woman is perfectly normal entails that she hide the signs of her menstruation. The normal body, the default body, the body that every body is assumed to be, is a body not bleeding from the vagina. Thus to be normal and to be taken as normal, the menstruating woman must not speak about her bleeding and must conceal evidence of it. The message that the menstruating woman is normal makes her deviant, a deviance that each month puts her on the other side of a fear of disorder, or the subversion of what is right and proper. It seems apt, then, in this normatively masculine, supposedly gender-egalitarian society, to say that the menstruating woman is queer. As with other queers, the price of a woman’s acceptance as normal is that she stay in the closet as a menstruator. (Young, 2005, p. 107)*

In her theorization, Young (ibid.) mainly focuses on the two consequences of this menstrual closet. The first of them is women experiencing a sense of self loaded with shame and abjectness. Grounding on Julia Kristeva’s “theory of abjection” (1982), Young asserts that menstrual discharge is the main indicator of sexual difference. It symbolizes that every human being has once existed in and later ejected from the female body. Here, abjection emerges with the anxiety of erasing the line individuals have drawn separating themselves from others during their infancy, as they put effort to separate from the comfort and care of the mother. Since menstruation involves this horror, it is hardly approached to menstruation as is

approached to other bodily fluids such as earwax or mucus, and Kristeva asserts that the feminine and the maternal is usually confused in contemporary civilizations, which eventually leads such anxiety being directed at all women. To cope with this anxiety, societies seek the solution in separating the feminine and the masculine, and thereby force woman to either hide themselves from other members of the society while menstruating, or act among them as non-menstruators—which leads to the adoption of “menstrual etiquette”. Firstly conceptualized by Sophie Laws (1990) and incorporated in Young’s theorization, menstrual etiquettes are a series of practices defining the subjects, the audience, the content, the tone of talks on menstruation. It also governs which tools and goods should be used during the periods and the supply, carrying, storage, disposal and mentioning of such products. Menstrual etiquette necessitates “a micromanagement of behavior” (Young, 2005, p. 112) and results in a mental and disciplinary stress, which Young identifies as an injustice directed towards woman, since menstruation is a bodily process cannot be hold unlike urination or defecation.

The second materialization of the menstrual closet and reflection of injustice towards women as menstruators is the “institutional nonacceptance”. According to Young (ibid.), public spaces are not designed considering the needs of menstruating individuals since the default body is a non-menstruating one, and this injustice has three different forms. Firstly, public places lack the time, space and equipment that menstruating individuals need to maintain their periods at ease and hide it from others. For instance, public bathrooms are mostly run out of critical materials such as water or toilet paper -not to mention the lack of menstrual products- and the use of bathrooms are limited to specific time spans in public areas such as schools and workplaces. Secondly, having the “default norm of the public person as in a male body” (p. 116), institutions ignore the probability of women experiencing physical or mental discomfort due to menstruation may not perform at their fullest potential and they cannot even share the reason behind the fluctuation behind their performance, since the menstrual etiquette advices them not to do so. Finally, no matter how much women comply with the concealment imperative of the menstrual etiquette, people around them and especially non-menstruating men insist to seek the motivation behind women’s behavior in hormones fluctuating with menstruation, and even harass and humiliate them. Such harassing and humiliating actions may vary from jokes by colleagues about menstruation to vaginal exams obliged by supervisors to find out one’s menstrual status.

When it comes to the transmission and consequences of menstrual stigma framed previously, Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) mention four various sociocultural routes by which such norms are communicated: media, education materials, silence and euphemisms. Even if

menstrual product advertisements in itself play a major role in communicating the menstrual stigma with a discourse full of secrecy, restraint of embarrassment and feeling fresh (see Coutts and Berg 1993; Delaney, Lupton, and Toth 1988; Houppert 1999; Merskin 1999), other forms of media such as books, periodical articles, comics and other forms of humorous material convey a stereotypical image of menstruating women, particularly a premenstrual women as aggressive, illogical, emotionally volatile, out of control, and physically or psychologically sick (Chrisler 2002, 2007 and 2008; as cited in Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2013). Another medium of transferring menstrual stigma is educational content, which are prepared by menstrual good manufacturers in collaboration with health practitioners<sup>14</sup>. Last but not least, not openly talking about menstruation and adopting euphemisms instead of uttering the “m-word” shows how stigmatized condition menstruation is in many cultures. Some alternatives from Turkish language indicating menstruation are *anavatan kan ağlıyor* [the motherland is bleeding / crying its heart out], *halam geldi* [my aunt has arrived], *hastalanmak* [being ill], and *kirlenmek* [being polluted] (Bingölçe, 2020), which are mostly loaded with negative implications.

As Young’s theorization of menstruation is built upon the ambivalent, seemingly-paradoxical meanings attached to this bodily process, Persdotter follows a similar path as she conceptualizes the neologism “menstrunormativity” as “the hegemonic social system of multiple and contradictory normativities that order and stratify menstruation and menstruating” (Persdotter, 2020, p. 358). According to Persdotter, this menstrunormativities work in mixed, complicated and paradoxical meanings, which impose “an impossible ideal subjectivity” (ibid., p. 358), an imaginary menstrunormate, put up against every menstruating individual, who constitute the crowd of menstrual monsters.

Within this social system, intricate social, medical and statistical values, rhetoric and necessities shape a concept of “ideal/correct/healthy/normal and morally superior” (p. 358) way of menstruation, and ostracize all other experiences non-compliant to these norms as anomalous, unhealthy and abominable. For instance, as the statistical information on menstruation circulates, the statistical becomes the normative and a sentence such as “the majority of women have periods” would mean “women who do not have periods must have abnormal bodies” or “menstruating individuals rarely discuss their menses” would correspond to “people who talk about their menses are strange”. In short, the “right way to menstruate”

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<sup>14</sup> For an example of such educational content and criticism of it, see the paragraph on *Ergenlik Döneminde Değişim Projesi* [Project of Change During Adolescence – PCDA] in page 33 of this thesis.

(p. 359) is imposed with menstrual norms. Besides the statistics effect on this normativity, adjectives such as natural, unhealthy and medically normal constitute the normative understanding of periods.

As the antecedents of the menstrunormativity concept, Persdotter (ibid.) addresses heteronormativity, cishnormativity, homonormativity and bodynormativity, which all sculpture the perfectly menstruating opus of the society—a heterosexual, ciswoman experiencing periods in every 28 days and hides all clues of her bodily processes. Within a society with such a menstrunormate is enforced, menstrual norms operate in a clustered manner, approaching menstruators from all directions and exerting conflicting and even paradoxical pressure on, compressing, and restricting menstrual life. Contradictory messages in a menstrunormative world concurrently advise menstruators to act in public spaces as non-menstruators and tell them menstruating is perfectly normal and natural, they admonish to keep “menstrusilent” obeying to the menstrual etiquettes and encourage “menstrutalking” as feminist spirits do.

Eventually, under the influence of so many interrelated and contradictory messages on menstruation, speaking of a menstrunormate becomes impossible and all menstruators become menstrual monsters. When it comes to the menstrual shame, menstrual monsters are either too little ashamed of her periods, or too little proud of them. On the one part, today’s menstrual monster does not follow menstrual etiquette, has no issues with mentioning their periods, and confidently carries menstrual products in their hand. On the other part, this menstrual monster does not want to talk about their periods in public because it is not sufficiently pride itself on them.

Within this complex, clustered system of meanings, Persdotter highlights the fact that from the statements of medical authorities and “leak-free” labeled menstrual goods, to motion-picture films and menstrual activist movement, every actor within this system consequently co-creates the menstrunormativities. Here, Persdotter illuminates the potential perils of building new menstrunormativies as existing normative forces were aimed to be destroyed:

*But in the process of dismantling these normative powers we also created new menstrunormativities where for example talking about menstruation was positioned as better than not talking about it; loving one’s period was more feminist than hating one’s period; cups were cooler than pads; and not using hormonal birth control was healthier than “pill-popping.” In that, the movement created many a menstrual monster: those who think periods are gross, who have serious problems with cyclical depression, who use menstrual suppressants, etcetera. Monstering was never our intent but it was a consequence all the same. Some were, and are, left out, rendered less “real,” less “feminist,” less “possible.” With this example I want to say that we*

*all, even grass-root menstrual activists with the best of intentions, create monsters.*  
(Persdotter, 2020, p. 365)

According to Persdotter, because of this trap to be easily and inevitably fallen into, a menstrual countermovement narrative that puts breaking taboos to the center will lead to an overlook to the very fact that menstrual norms are being constantly re-produced by multiple actors and things and communicated from various channels. Also, an approach assuming that abolishing menstrual taboos will suffice to ensure a better menstrual experience for everyone risks creating artificial polarizations such as us-them, good-evil, and repressed-emancipated. Instead, a perspective acknowledging the potential of new menstrual norms and menstrual monsters being created constantly, avoiding an approach enforcing any correct form of menstruation is possible, and conversely, opening up space for the diversity of menstrual experiences can help one to better understand this embodied process. Indeed, Persdotter emphasizes the capacity of every individual in the co-production of menstrunormativity to alleviate the burden and suffering of the monstrous, broaden the space for menstrual existence, and improve the quality of life for more people.

Before coming to the end of this theoretical framework chapter, I would finally like to specify from which element I am reading the social meaning of menstruation, which are practices. After two major waves in sociology of consumption theories, the concentrating on the individual consumer the culture, a new perspective putting theories to the center has emerged (Warde, 2014). After the dominance of the cultural turn in theory has come to an end, criticisms towards the cultural perspective have caused the emergence of a theory reprioritizing the routine, mundane, automatic and unnoticed elements of the consumption, class inequalities and distribution.

Owing its fundamentals to works of scholars such as Reckwitz, Bourdieu, Giddens, Sahlins, Foucault, and later Schatzki, Lyotard, Garfinkel, Taylor and Butler, the practical turn in consumption begun to focus on “practical and routine activity, embodied procedures, the material and instrumental aspects of life and mechanisms for the transmission of culture into action” (ibid., p. 282) after early 2000s. Warde summarizes the focal point of this theory with the following words:

*Against the model of sovereign consumer, practice theories emphasize routine over actions, flow and sequence over discrete acts, dispositions over decisions, and practical consciousness over deliberation. In reaction to the cultural turn, emphasis is placed upon doing over thinking, the material over the symbolic, and embodied*



*practical competence over expressive virtuosity in the fashioned presentation of self.*  
(Warde, 2014, p. 286)

This theory has developed its own conceptualizations of body, mind, things, knowledge, discourse/language and structure/process (Reckwitz, 2002). A practice, which is the primary analysis unit of this theory, is defined by Andreas Reckwitz, as a behavior having a regular procedure and interconnected components such as different kinds of embodied and intellectual activities, objects and their utilization, a baseline knowledge in terms of understanding, know-how, emotional circumstances and motivational knowledge. In the foundation of the practice theory stands a way of understanding the body—indeed, as individuals obtain a practice, they “learn to be bodies in a certain way” (ibid., p. 251).

In this equation, bodies are not mere instruments which is used by the agents in the performance of several practices, but these routinized practices are actually bodily performances. In short, not only practices, but also bodily performances are the site of the social and the social order. On the other hand, as Reckwitz underlines, if one among many components of practices is that the body, another component is the mind, including the formation of a specific and routine-put understanding, know-how, desire forms which fall under the collective essence of the practices, not the individual. The “things” or objects, are among the vital elements of the practices as essential as the bodily and mental actions and even the social practices could be defined as the “routinized relations between several agents (body/minds) and objects” (ibid., p. 253).

Although a theory prioritizing the habitual, sequential, embodied and collective claims to be sufficient in many ways of shedding light on consumption, the theory of practice has its own limits and pitfalls. Some of the criticisms collected by Warde (2014) are the challenge of identifying practices and making them the main element of the sociological analysis, defining the regularity and repetition of these practices, the missing focus on the embodied processes and possible failure of capturing the social change since this theory is based on the routines.

As this study centers menstrual product consumption practices and reads how changing consumption routines reflect the major social changes to the bodies more. At this point, the fact that our bodies are almost a product of our daily routines, that these frequently repetitive activities position the individual in social space and structure, it actually represents as an exemplar of what Warde tries to put forward as he replies the criticisms towards the practices theory. While mentioning the significant attention that practice theory puts on the embodiment and equipment, Warde appreciates the work on everyday clothing, gym practices and sports—

yet, he illuminates that theories of practice should direct its attention, that they reflect the cultural capital of the individuals, and that they have a direct effect on arenas such as job market and marriageability make the bodily processes worth studying.

Another common criticism, the fact that focusing on routines would not reflect the social change, is also refuted by Warde, with the claim of “practices lend themselves to narrative forms of explanation of change” (ibid., p. 295). Besides that, although Reckwitz (2002) puts forward that the essence of social structure is contingent upon routinization, he also illuminates that in practice theory, the “breaking” and “shifting” of structures happens in everyday crises of routines, in patterns of interpretive indeterminacy, and in “situations” when the agent engaging in a practice is confronted by knowledge gaps. In addition to that, Warde (2014) underscores that practice theory should also pay attention to how norms, standards and institutions creating the shared routines were developed. For that purpose, I have set the scene for menstrual product consumption practices with providing the social, political and economic circumstances in the former chapters, and also aim to connect them in the data analysis part of the research, and eventually, I purpose to build connections between “the personal” and “the political”. Alongside that, as Reckwitz (2002) emphasized, I seek to illuminate the collapsing and altering structures via in crises of everyday routines and in circumstances individuals experiencing knowledge gaps.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **METHODOLOGY**

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the main objective of this thesis is to investigate the interrelation of alternative and disposable menstrual product consumption practices with menstrual stigma and mensturnormativities dominant in the Turkish society. Although I intend to combine and contrast alternative and disposable menstrual product consumption practices in this study, my primary concentration is on the alternative menstrual product consumption processes, since in the consideration and decision of switching for a new type of product, I hypothesize a pursuit for more convenient and eventually more positive menstrual experiences.

Considering that the use of alternative products, which has become widespread in the last few decades and is the practice of the last few years in Turkey (see Chapter 2.1), it can be said that despite the increasing popularity of menstrual cups and cloth pads, these product consumption practices are still the routine of a small community, when compared to the disposable pads and tampons. In addition to this, the use of observational methods such as ethnographic research may provide limited data for observing this stigmatized and individual practice, unless the focus is for instance a menstrual activist group organizing in the public space. Hence, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews as the most proper research method to interrogate alternative and disposable menstrual product consumption practices, following the narratives of the menstruators.

Thus, I have conducted twenty-six online semi-structured in-depth interviews with twenty-three women, two non-binary people and one genderqueer person between the ages of 18–23 and studying in Ankara. Albeit I did not restrict the sample on their gender and instead asked their gender identity through a pre-interview form, I limited the age range as such, because I thought that this five-year interval being both the five years following becoming a major and roughly equivalent to one's undergraduate years would mean a period in which many experiences, and ultimately the menstrual experience, might be reinterpreted and reshaped. Furthermore, I also followed a sample limitation in terms of educational level and geography

with reaching to individuals maintaining their studies in one of the universities in Ankara. My intention behind that is to ease the sampling process, and since the researched practice is a stigmatized and niche one, I saw that I would need snowballing at a certain point.

The initial design of this research was to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with individuals who have ever consumed an alternative menstrual product, yet following the recommendation of my thesis advisor, I later talked with individuals who are aware of alternative products and consider using them at a certain point in their lives, to compare and contrast their menstrual experiences. In total, I have conducted sixteen interviews with *users*, and ten interviews with the *considerers*. To reach these participants, I have firstly prepared two digital pamphlets and posted them in Facebook groups, which are commonly affiliated by the students from Middle East Technical University (METU) and many other universities in Ankara, for diverse purposes from asking for a drill to be used in the student houses located in 100. Yıl district, to seeking an “AA-guaranteed” free elective course advice. Among the Facebook groups I have posted there was *100. Yıl Evleri* [100. Yıl Houses] having over 29.000 members, *100. Yıl Sakinleri* [100. Yıl Residents] having over 25.000 members and *ODTÜ Kadın Dayanışması* [METU Women’s Solidarity] having about 1.800 members.

The latest group differs from the other two, since this one is a woman+ only group where participants mostly ask some questions they beware asking in the larger groups. I have also posted these pamphlets on my Twitter account as a tweet and on my Instagram account as a story. The persistent raid of my social media posts must have attracted my friends’ attention, as I reached some participants through their resharing on several university Whatsapp groups and I got some messages from them “I have a friend using/considering these products and I told of your research, so here is the number”. In sum, I have reached twelve participants through direct messages or e-mails I have received after my social media posts, ten participants through my friends’ resharing of these posts, and four participants through other participants’ referrals.

The first interview took place in December 2021 and the last one in March 2022. The interview process was a two-stage procedure. In the first meeting with the research participants, we only spent ten minutes together. The intention was to break the ice since our subject matter is a stigma topic, inform the participants about the research and request them to fill out a personal information form and sign the voluntary participation letter. We came together for the second meeting, at most one week after the first meeting, and I have conducted the semi-structured interviews with research participants. However, these interviews were not completed in face-

to-face meetings and there was a major driver which has forced me to choose completing my research via online meetings. This inevitable consequence shaping my study was maintaining the interviews during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

#### **4.1. Researching Menstruation During a Global Pandemic**

It was the last day of 2019 when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that extraordinary pneumonia cases were discovered in Wuhan, China (Gözler & İzci, 2022) and a week later, it is understood that a new type of Corona virus, 2019-nCoV has caused these cases. In March 11, 2020, at the same day that WHO has defined the outbreak as a pandemic, the first case of COVID-19 in Turkey was declared by the Ministry of Health. Just five days later, the *Yükseköğretim Kurulu* [Council of Higher Education] issued a decision of a three-week break for all higher educational institutions, which later evolved into a policy of maintaining higher education through online mediums and closing the university campuses (“Koronavirüs (Covid-19) Bilgilendirme Notu: 1”, 2020). This distance learning process continued for three semesters and followed by one managed with hybrid methods in 2021-2022 Fall semester, while cases of this virus’ Omicron variant was burgeoning among Turkey.

It was during these semesters of distance learning process when I have determined my thesis topic and designed my research. In 2019-2020 Spring semester, whilst I was taking Material Culture and Consumption in Everyday Life course from the Industrial Design department, my first thoughts have fleshed out to study on menstrual product consumption practices. By the end of this semester, I have conducted a pilot study with seven menstruating women between the ages of 20–26, with the intent of understanding their menstrual practices and their thoughts on and engagements with the menstrual stigma. This pilot study was my first encounter with an experience difference between periods maintained with conventional products and alternative methods, so that eventually drove me to maintain a thesis study with a focus on transition to alternative menstrual products. Besides reaching a clarification in terms of the research matter, I had an opportunity to test-drive conducting online in-depth interviews via Zoom video communication program, identify the potential setbacks and figure out how to prevent or fix them.

Trying to investigate menstrual product consumption practices through online in-depth interviews had inevitable difficulties. One of the hardships was the fact that me as a stranger researcher making the participants to talk about a bodily process managed behind the closed doors of one’s bathroom and laden with a hidden stigma meaning, although we were

maintaining the very same practice almost every single month. At this point, meeting with the participants in two separate Zoom video conference calls and briefly talking about my research in the first meeting made me familiarize them to and think about the issue until our second and main meeting. In addition, in this first gathering, I have declared that our second meeting may take hours and we could meet in a time interval where they will not be disturbed by household members and talk comfortably and uninterruptedly. Furthermore, I find it important to have added that the research was carried out by a researcher having menstruation and using the same kind of products in the volunteer participation form I shared with the participants during our first gathering.

Still, as I finished just the first two or three interviews, I felt something was missing in the way I maintained the interviews with the research participants. There was a feeling of formality during the sessions and something was just not clicking until I recognized that I was addressing the research participants with the formal second-person singular pronoun in Turkish, *siz*, instead of the informal one, *sen*. After I noticed this pattern in my approach, I began to say in the early minutes of our gatherings to the participants “May I call you *sen* instead of *siz*, and you can call me so as well”. As we were gathering for a study on a stigma topic, taking this step towards informality has resulted in instant relief of the participants with a bright smile on their faces and a reply to me: “Sure!”. Alongside with accustoming to conducting these interviews after a couple sessions, breaking the ice with such minimal but significant steps helped a smoother interview experience.

Unfortunately, the thought flow of some participants was inescapably interrupted due to several factors. Since the sample of this research was menstruators between the ages of 18–23, roughly corresponding to the undergraduate years, a considerable amount of the research participants was connecting me from their parents’ home. Although some of them had no issues with talking on menstruation with their parents and even intentionally share their menstrual management processes to break the stigma with them, there were participants whose families approach menstruation as a taboo, shameful or abominable subject. Indeed, some participants’ families do not know that their child is using menstrual cups and tampons, even if they live in the same house. The intent behind this concealment of intravaginal menstrual product consumption jibes with Gül Özyeğin’s (2009) “virginal facades” concept I have mentioned in the second chapter as I underscored the significance of one’s preservation of hymen before marriage in Turkish society. Resorting virginal facades to avoid being ostracized by their families and relatives is perceived as a reasonable practice, since inserting a cup inside the vagina may mean a history of penile-vaginal intercourse for Turkish parents. One of the

research participants, Şafak, for instance, chose to meet for our interview after the dinner, since their household members might have let themselves into their rooms. However, while telling me their experiences with menstrual cup, they occasionally interrupted their conversation by trying to catch noises from the aisle to find out whether someone is approaching toward them and lowered down their voice not to be heard by their parents. Thus, the research method itself provided material to witness how virginal facades and menstrual silence is maintained in Turkish menstruators' residences. The only disturbance was not caused by parents whose steps echo in the hallway or dropping by flat mates, but time to time poor connection has spoilt the narrative of the interviewees. In such cases, I inevitably had to interrupt the participant's talk and ask my question once more.

So, was conducting online in-depth interviews nothing but a mess? I would rather not say so. Indeed, there were some advantages of conducting interviews through online means. The first of them was convenience provided in terms of time and money. If I had conducted this research through face-to-face interviews, me and participants should determine a time and place for the first meeting, spend some time going there, meet for only ten minutes to introduce myself and the research topic and then go back the same road, and do this for a second time. In this online research instead, the participants did not spend extra time except finding a quiet place in their room and turning on their computer. I think this encouraged many interviewees to agree participating the research and not to hesitate much on the resources they invest by participating. Hence for the future research, I regard doing the first ice-breaker meeting online in the cases the two-stage interview process is followed.

The second advantage I may mention is the comfort I suppose the interviewees enjoyed as they connected from their own rooms. Some interviewees deployed their laptops in front of their favorite couch, took a sip from their coffee as they listen my questions, light up a cigarette while mentioning tough memories, and stroke their pet's head. Even two of the interviewees grabbed their menstrual cups and cloth pads from drawers and showed them to me from their cameras while answering my questions. With reference to a study of psychology department that I participated before, I can clearly say that, instead of encouraging research participants to share highly personal details of their lives in a cold room of a department building, approaching interviewees from the comfort of a home can facilitate their sharing on silenced topics such as periods. Thus, I think it might be functional for future researchers of stigma subjects as menstruation to keep hosting the participants in their mind as an option, rather than opting for an empty classroom or a student community room.

#### 4.2. “*One having the wound, works on that wound*”: Researcher’s Positionality

In the social science studies of late years, there has been an ever-growing space for researcher’s reflections on how their self-identifications, marginalization experiences and professional advantages affect the study objectives, information gathering and data analysis (Massoud, 2022). Being a menstruating woman, it would not be surprising of me to admit that the fountain head of this research had been my own bodily processes, the stigmatization I faced in everyday life and the reactions I have developed in time.

My fifteen-year-old teenage self could tell she was beyond ready for her menarche. Since childhood, I used to find menstruation mesmerizing and indeed I was looking forward to start bleeding, since menstruation for me was loaded with meanings of *genç kız olmak* [becoming a young girl]. Waiting for my first period, I memorized all information I could get in biology classes, dreamt of purchasing a “mother-and-daughter-package” of menstrual pads and keenly listened as my friends mentioned their pre-menstrual symptoms. Even once, I had wet, cut and teared down a disposable pad with one of my friends as if we were conducting a scientific experience.

Nevertheless, my first period was beyond my expectations. The night before my menarche, I recognized a slight, pale brown discharge and thought that something is wrong with my bowels or I might be having internal bleeding, since no one has told me that was expected in the first days of the menstruation. Feeling scared enough not to tell anyone what is going on, I slept that night and went to school in the morning. After I came home that Friday afternoon, I encountered a pond of brown discharge in the bathroom and called out to my mother. Her reactions had intensified my emotional roller-coaster—she first enthusiastically congratulated me, then gave me her first (and hopefully the last) slap on my face to “make my cheeks rosy”, showed me how to use a menstrual pad and rushed to the living room to let my father know what has happened.

Next Monday, I broke the news to my female classmates, with the pride of being welcomed to the “girls’ club”. I remember myself that day walking in the school highway with my friends, feeling that honor, besides a huge disappointment. Let alone playing volleyball or doing a cartwheel, which were among the physical activities that I was not capable of doing even in my non-menstruating days, I was waddling around like a penguin with the discomfort caused by the pads, far from the cottony feeling, which was promised to be provided by numerous disposable pad brands. Apparently, menstruating was not as described in the



menstrual pad advertisements. Thus my menarche was not only the first encounter with my own blood, but the myth of menstrunormate—an utterly happy, physically active, social, young woman in white jeans, riding a pink Vespa.

My relationship with my menses even got weirder when I noted few but significant symptoms in my body five years ago: hair fall blocking the shower drain, acne getting all-time bad, sudden hypoglycemia attacks, and an ever-thinning blood amount during my periods. Not surprisingly, I was diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome from the gynecologist I went to, yet I could not predict that I would be left alone by the medical practitioners after the diagnosis. I left many gynecologists' doors with suggestions that I should start taking birth control pills to regulate my hormones, that it “will go away when I get married”, and that I should not have any worries about becoming a mother. None of the doctors felt the need to say anything about my declining sleep quality and increased stress levels, nor did they mention any lifestyle and dietary changes I came across in my later research, which are perceived as successful treatments in America and Europe. In the end, I started to feel the anger and disappointment I felt for the pad commercials I watched years ago, this time at the biased medical science that represented me drugs with pages and pages of side effects as the only remedy—not to mention that birth control pills are not covered by the national health insurance. After all, I recognized that the menstrunormativity of medical science prevented the development of a holistic approach toward menstruation. Instead, it was solely perceived as an indicator of reproductive health and becomes a matter within the boundaries of reproduction.

When I was in the early semesters of my masters study and I conducted the research that would be later constitute the pilot research of this thesis, I thought that there is more to discover through menstrual product consumption practices. At that moment, there were several questions running on my mind. Was this mundane practice really *worth* of studying? Could I inquire menstruation as a research topic despite its *stigma* position? When I shared my hesitations with Lect. Figen Işık, who has already read my pilot study replied with a statement that she heard from one of her professors: “Yarası olan çalışıyor.” (One having the wound, works on that wound.”) Nevertheless, it was my liability of not to conduct any misconception due to my own wounds, although my starting point hinges upon that.

During the early times of my research, as I decided to put the shift to alternative menstrual products to the focal point, I was not a user, but a considerer of these goods. However, while maintaining the literature review and designing my research, I thought that beginning to use

these products would be helpful for me as a researcher in two ways. First, since being engaged to this consumption practice already, I would not miss any uncovered points during the in-depth interviews or express a sign of surprise if I encounter any unknown details of this practice. Secondly, since the alternative menstrual products are not a widespread choice within the society and thus have a high potential of strengthening an already stigmatized bodily process, being a user of disposable menstrual products would produce the risk of reproducing the existent social dynamics.

Thus, I bought my first pack of cloth pads in November 2020, my menstrual cup in April 2021, and started using them. I opened cargo packages with no sign of the package content, I soaked the used cloth pads when my father was not at home, and I had a long talk on the false facts on hymen with my mother after I sanitized my cup in a pot on the kitchen oven—and I was not the only one going through that. After I began interviewing the research participants, I was once again shaken by the validity of the feminist saying “the personal is the political”. Although me and all research participants were maintaining these practices in private settings, there practice and its components were connecting us.

However, a risk due to my researcher position has revealed itself during these early days of the study as well. As I continued the literature review and research design, besides buying these products and using them, suddenly my menstruating close friends began to direct me questions on menstruation, different from the casual conversations we hold on our periods. Some considerers asked the details of menstrual cups and cloth pads, such as cleaning the materials or physical activities they enable. Alongside that, some friends –irrespectively of their product choice– directed me questions on their medical concerns, for instance on their period irregularities, forthcoming gynecologist appointments, and even their sexual intercourses. Although I was just someone wondering menstrual product consumption practices, being seen as a sort of authority made me think of a similar pattern may be aroused during in-depth interviews.

Hence, besides enabling a conceptualization of the newly emerging menstrual norms in the practices of the research participants, reading Persdotter’s piece on menstrunormativities (2020) aided me with a reflexive position. Acknowledging that menstrunormativities are being constantly and unintentionally produced and reproduced, opening space for diverse experiences was my North star while conducting this research. Therefore, with every follow-up question during the in-depth interviews, I paid attention to show a sincere yet unbiased curiosity to comprehend the participants’ intention and motivation behind certain action

patterns. Despite we were experiencing similar bodily practices and maintaining them with similar products, I put effort to not let my personal history of menstruation overshadow theirs. Albeit I later stated that it was not among my research objectives, the fact that many participants stated at the end of the meeting that this interview has been a therapeutic, relieving experience for them gives me hope that I was somewhat successful in this intention.

### 4.3. Research Participants

As mentioned in the previous sections, I have conducted twenty-six interviews with *users*, who have at least once tried one of the alternative menstrual products and ten interviews with the *considerers*, who are thinking of using alternative menstrual products in the future. The following first table summarizes the personal information of the *users* and the second one carries the personal information of the *considerers*.

Pseudonym of the user <sup>15</sup>	Age	Gender (Pronouns)	Institution	Consumed Products	Residence Type	Income per capita	Health Condition Affecting Menstruation
Azra	22	Woman (she/her)	Middle East Technical University	13-22 ages: disposable pad (nine years) 22 age: menstrual cup (three months)	Dormitory (with shared bathroom)	>4000₺	Polycystic ovary syndrome
Barçın	21	Woman (she/her)	Middle East Technical University	13-18 ages: disposable pad (five years) 18-21 ages: tampon (three years) 21 age: menstrual cup (three months)	Flat (student home), has her own room	2250-3000₺	None
Derya	18	Woman (she/her)	Middle East Technical University	12-18 ages: disposable pad (six years) 18 age: menstrual cup (a year)	Dormitory (with shared bathroom)	600-1200₺	None
Dilşad	21	Woman (she/her)	Atılım University	13-21 ages: disposable pad (eight years) 21 age: menstrual cup (six months)	Dormitory (with shared bathroom and kitchen with two)	0-1000₺	None

*Table 1 Participant information of alternative menstrual product users.*

<sup>15</sup> All names of the research participants in the original research, including names of family members, friends and acquaintances mentioned by the participants are pseudonyms.

Table 1 (continued)

Eda	23	Woman (she/her)	Atılım University	14-22 ages: disposable pad (eight years) 22-23 ages: menstrual cup (one and a half year)	Flat (family home), has her own room	1500-2250₺	Endometriosis
Gökşen	23	Woman (she/her)	Middle East Technical University	13-21 ages: disposable pad (eight years) 21-22 ages: menstrual cup (one year) 22-23 ages: tampon (one year)	Flat (student home), has her own room	2000-3000₺	None
Günel	20	Woman (she/her)	Hacettepe University	14-20 ages: disposable pad (six years) 20 age: old cloths (one period)	Flat (family home), has her own room	750-1500₺	Uterus cyst
İrem	22	Woman (she/her)	Middle East Technical University	14-16 ages: disposable pad (two years) 16-22 ages: menstrual cup (six years)	Flat (living alone)	0-3000₺	None
Karaca	22	Woman (she/her)	TED University	11-22 ages: disposable pad (eleven years) 11-22 ages: pantyliners (eleven years) 11-13 ages: cloth pads (two years)	Flat (family home), has her own room	1500-2250₺	Polycystic ovary syndrome, ovary cysts
Nehir	21	Woman (she/her)	Middle East Technical University	12-20 ages: disposable pad (eight years) 20-21 ages: menstrual cup (one year)	Flat (student home), has her own room	3000-4000₺	None
Neslihan	23	Woman (she/they)	Middle East Technical University	11-20 ages: disposable pad (nine years) 20-21 ages: tampon (one year) 21 age: menstrual cup (six months)	Flat (family home), has her own room	1500-2250₺	None
Nil	22	Woman (she/her)	Middle East Technical University	10-20 ages: disposable pad (ten years) 20-22 ages: menstrual cup (two years) 21-22 ages: reusable cloth pad (one year)	Flat (with her brother), has her own room	3000-4000₺	None

Table 1 (continued)

Öykü	22	Woman (she/her)	Middle East Technical University	13-19 ages: disposable pad (six years) 19-21 ages: tampon (two years) 21-22 ages: menstrual cup (one year)	Flat (student home), has her own room	2000-3000₺	None
Rukiye	20	Woman (she/her)	Middle East Technical University	12-20 ages: disposable pad (eight years) 20 age: menstrual cup (six months)	Flat (student home), has her own room	0-750₺	None
Şafak	22	Genderfluid (they/their)	Middle East Technical University	14-18 and 20-22 ages: disposable pad (six years) 18-19 and 20-22 ages: tampon (three years) 20-21: menstrual cup (one year)	Flat (student home), has her own room	1500-3000₺	None
Zehra	22	Woman (she/her)	Middle East Technical University	11-22 ages: disposable pad (eleven years) 20-22 ages: tampon (two years) 22 age: menstrual cup (three months)	Flat (family home), has her own room	9000-12000₺	Hypophysis cyst

Pseudonym of the considerer	Age	Gender (Pronouns)	Institution	Consumed Products	Residence Type	Income per capita	Health Condition Affecting Menstruation
Asude	23	Woman (she/her)	Hacettepe University	12-23 ages: disposable pad (eleven years) 23 age: tampon (three months)	Flat (student home), has her own room	0-1000₺	None
Ebrar	22	Woman (she/her)	Hacettepe University	13-22 ages: disposable pad (nine years)	Flat (family home), has her own room	1000-2000₺	Polycystic ovary syndrome
Helin	22	Woman (they/their)	Middle East Technical University	15-19 ages: disposable pad (four years) 19-22 ages: tampon (three years)	Flat (student home), has her own room	1000-2000₺	None

Table 2 Participant information of alternative menstrual product considerers.

Table 2 (continued)

Kayra	23	Non-binary (they/their)	Middle East Technical University	11-23 ages: disposable pad (twelve years) 19-23 ages: tampon (four years)	Flat (family home), has her own room	1500-3000₺	None
Leyla	22	Woman (she/her)	Middle East Technical University	12-22 ages: disposable pad (ten years)	Flat (student home), has her own room	>4000₺	None
Melike	22	Woman (she/her)	Hacettepe University	12-22 ages: disposable pad (ten years) 17-20 ages: tampon (three years)	Dormitory (with shared bathroom)	>3000₺	Polycystic ovary syndrome
Özge	22	Woman (she/her)	Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University	15-22 ages: disposable pad (seven years) 22 age: tampon (six months)	Flat (family home), has her own room	1200-1800₺	None
Selvi	23	Woman (she/her)	Ankara University	11-23 ages: disposable pad (twelve years) 23 age: tampon (two months)	Flat (family home), has her own room	1000-2000₺	None
Süreyya	22	Non-binary (she/her)	Middle East Technical University	13-18 ages: disposable pad (five years) 18-22 ages: tampon (three years)	Flat (living with her partner)	2250-3000₺	None
Şevval	22	Woman (she/her)	Lokman Hekim University	11-22 ages: disposable pad (eleven years)	Flat (living with her partner)	>3000₺	None

Before moving to the discussion of the original research findings, there are several elements on research participants deserving some accentuation and clarification. As could be read from these two tables, research participants were classified according to the types of consumed products, besides their current resident types, income per capita and any health condition affecting menstruation, since these factors are directly or indirectly related to the period experiences. In addition to that, in the questionnaire I sent to all participants before our second meeting, I asked whether they had any experiences of living with their family members during the COVID-19 pandemic different from the pre-pandemic period. My intention behind that was to mind these changes in residence during this period and direct some additional questions to illuminate whether this change led to a difference in their menstrual practices. After this

inquiry, I learned that ten participants have been already living with their families and thirteen participants had to stay in their family homes during the pandemic, for periods ranging from three months to two years.

As mentioned in the previous sections, four participants were reached through other participants' referrals: Gökşen brought Şafak, Barçın brought Helin and Nehir, Ebrar brought Melike and Karaca brought Özge. A final but significant remark on the research participants is the fact that among sixteen alternative menstrual product users, menstrual cup consumption was the most commonly used alternative and only three of the users opted for different type of materials—Günel cut herself old sheets, Karaca's mother has sewn her cloth pads at home, and only Nil had bought ready-made cloth pads. A similar pattern of “one product to rule them all” is also present in the consumption of single-use products with disposable pads being the most popular kind of them. In fact, this understanding of menstrual cups and disposable pads as the optimal alternative materials to maintain periods is evident in the narratives of both users and considerers and the whys and hows of these choices will be examined thoroughly in the following findings chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS

This chapter is dedicated to the presentation and discussion of the twenty-six interviews conducted with alternative menstrual product users and considerers, with certain connections to the menstrual stigma and recently-emerging menstrual norms. Building such a connection necessitates essential returns to the beforementioned social, political and economic conditions influencing the dominant gender ideology in Turkey and the period experiences of Turkish menstruators. In this chapter, I primarily aim to mention the first menstruation experiences of the menstruators, besides depicting the bodily, emotionally and mentally reflections on one's periods. Secondly, I intend to summarize the participants' viewpoints on their menstrual stigma experiences by mainly mentioning the encounters through family, educational sessions, medicine, product advertisements and disposable product purchasing and consumption practices. Later, I will illuminate the stigma coping mechanisms of the menstruators and their altering reactions to the menstrual-averse position of the society. After briefly mentioning the disposable menstrual product consumption practices, I will allocate a relatively broader space for the discussion of alternative menstrual product consumption practices, their possibilities and limitations.

#### 5.1. “No matter how much you imagine”: Menarche Experiences

*Sihirli Annem* [My Fairy Mother], a famous television series aired in early 2000s, was not only among the first Turkish productions in children and fantastic genres, but also became the scene for one of the rare representations where a teenager girl has her first period. In one of the episodes filmed during 2010s, Çilek, the youngest child of a half human-half fairy couple wakes up in the morning with a stomach ache. Moving her hand under bedcover, suddenly her shock becomes visible from her face. She wakes up her elder sister without telling what had happened, but showing her bed covers. Çilek's sister, Ceren realizes everything and smilingly says “you are now a *genç kız* [young girl] too”, later adds “there is nothing to do, it is perfectly normal, it happens to everyone at your age” and rushes to the living room to tell the news to their mother, not their father. Although Çilek's sister and mother welcomes her menarche with



a positive mood and showing a kind of “menstrual pep-talk”, she is anxious that her father will find out. Later that day, their neighbor Zeyno comes for a visit and after finding out Çilek’s menarcheal status, she slaps on Çilek’s face. As Çilek and Ceren were shocked, the maid of the family, Firuze tries to calm them down: “This is actually an old tradition. In old days, when we were at your ages, our mothers, grandmothers, aunts used to swack us, as a welcome to the women’s tough world in this moment of us transitioning from young girlhood to womanhood.” (Sihirli Annem, 2022)

Çilek’s menarche experience, which is among the uncommon portrayals of menstrual periods in Turkish media, bears similarities with the first bleeding experiences narrated by the research participants. The first menstrual period does not only mean the first encounter with their menstruating bodies, but also the first confrontation with the menstrual stigma. Although all menarche experiences are unique, the “average first period” of the research participants loaded with astonishment and disfavor goes like this: either in the comfort of a home or in public spaces such as schools, young menstruators recognize a few drops of odd-smelling, mostly brown discharge on their underwear in the bathroom. Since the educational sessions in their schools did not fully prepare them or their mothers have engaged in a very superficial menstrual talk, if they have done any, menstruators think periods should not lead to a discharge consisting of various fluids and intrauterine tissues, but only bleeding. Hence, anxious menstruators consult one of the females around them and this person is a female acquaintance usually at the same age or older than them, such as classmates, teachers, aunts or grandmothers and mostly mothers. This consulted individual firstly lets young menstruators know that they have experienced their first period with the euphemism of *hastalanmak* (becoming ill), they have become a *genç kız* (young girl) now and hands them a disposable pad with roughly describing how to use it. Letting fathers or other male family members know young menstruators’ menarcheal experience is a rare situation. Either mothers inform fathers without the young menstruator’s consent, leading to an intense feeling of embarrassment, or the silence is maintained in the presence of men.

Following Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler’s (2013) conceptualization, the social meaning of menstrual blood as a stigmatizing mark emerges even during the very first bleeding experiences of the participants. Menstruation is reflected as an “abomination of the body” in form of menstrual blood and liquid driving young menstruators’ shock and fear. This liquid being a “blemish of the individual character” unveils itself as after the first bleeding, young menstruators mostly shown how to use disposable pads before and better than how their bodies actually work, which signals the significance of hiding such an aversive sign in various social

settings. Menarche also signals “a tribal identity”, as majority of the friends, family members and other acquaintances conceptualize the first menstruation a sign of growing up, becoming a *genç kız*, and thus, young menstruators experience a sense of recognition from fellow menstruators around them, as Azra’s words portray it well:

Azra (22, woman, user): *It's just the thing, maybe that is the thing, something like “I am a woman now, I have things to hide too”, as a desire, as an emulation. The excitement of sneaking out a pad and going like this, you know that tension as an excitement, you know, as a woman... I guess it was after I got older or before my period, we had a girl group of two or three, I must have been twelve years old. We used to say “Which of us will have ‘regl’ first?” – of course, then we were saying adet, like “Which of us will have ‘adet’ first?” or something. “Oh look, she has had her period, her breasts have grown”, a desire towards being a woman, growing up, puberty...*

This conceptualization of menstrual blood as a stigmatizing mark is ironically communicated through menstrual silence—almost all participants indicate that they suffered from the lack of receiving correct information. For instance, Azra mentions her menarche as a “shocking experience”, since although she was aware of a menstrual period concept, she acted as if it will not happen to her and pushed the concept to her unconscious. Rukiye, on the other hand, although being heard of menstruation from her female cousins, recalls a sense of confusion: “It does not matter how much you imagine before you actually witness such a thing.” Although there are myriad ways of transmitting information on menstruation to teenagers, menstrual stigma and silence block these channels. Educational curriculum does not suffice, reluctant mothers glancingly mention menses, and young menstruators, with a sense of not digging it, try to find their ways with fumbling around.

Almost every menarcheal experience collected during the interviews could be summarized with the Beauvoiran concept of “ambivalence” (Young, 2005), a split and alienated identity, both ratified and rejected by the young menstruators. Dilşad’s words perfectly summarize this ambivalent mood dominating the post-menarcheal era:

Dilşad (21, woman, user): *Well, physically there were not much difference, but I did not exactly know what I should think about my feelings. Should I be proud, be very happy, or be afraid and think something like “Oh, this is really a very bad thing, I am now in a different phase [in my life]”? Actually, there was confusion, I think.*

This ambivalence regarding the embracement and escapism of being a menstruator or becoming a *genç kız* intensifies if menstruators were not prepared to leave their child identity behind and settles if menstruators have been looking forward to growing up as soon as possible. Here, two factors play a pivotal role in ones’ attitude towards their first menstruation,

as menstruators narratives show. The first one is the menarche age and its relative earliness or lateness compared to the fellow menstruators around. For instance, Gökşen, experiencing her initial bleeding at the age of thirteen, recalls positive memories of becoming a *genç kız*, since at that time her classmates, close friends circle, and cousins have already started menstruating, and she was aware of how menstrual periods work, at least in practical terms. In her case, being thirteen and *still* not getting her period was a matter of concern as she remembers being left out of menstrual talk and “being late to grow up”. On the contrary, Karaca mentions a very depressing menarche experience, as she started bleeding in the summer of the fifth grade, although she waited her first period to take place in high school, based on her mother’s menstrual history. According to Karaca, it was a traumatizing experience making her cry, cuddle her mother and not leave the bed all day long. Despite she describes her response back then as strange and overreacting, she grounds her panic on not being aware of their close friends’ menarcheal statuses.

The second factor having an influence on menstruators’ perceptions on their menarche is having received enough and relatively neutral or positive menstrual knowledge or not. Research participants indicating that they have already had a relatively comprehensive information on what menstrual periods are, how they occur, and what their symptoms are, indicated that they were already waiting for their periods to take place and requested help from fellow menstruators with an awareness or at least a suspicion of menstruating at that certain moment. At this point, it can be generalized that experiencing menarche at a relatively late age will inevitably imply a certain amount of information obtained from various sources such as the narratives of close friends, research on the internet, and biology lessons. Nevertheless, in the narratives of participants who experience menarche at a relatively early age where they cannot obtain information from menstruating close friends or high school biology courses that have not yet begun, the importance of *having received* sufficient and comprehensive information on this process comes to the fore. In below quotations, there are menarche stories of Neslihan and Nil, two women starting menstruating at the ages of eleven and ten. These two narratives exemplify the power of engaging in detailed and explicit menstrual talk with children at an early age and how menstrual silence isolates young menstruators with fear and ignorance.

Neslihan (23, woman, user): *I had my first period at a very early age. I was about eleven. It was a good experience. Well, it was a good experience, I can describe it like that, I did not have any fear because my mother had already told me. I knew it should happen. Since I knew it, I did not have any fear and I went to my mother and said “I got my period”. [...] It was as described, because my mother was really realistic with it. [Laughs.] “Your back may hurt, your stomach may hurt, this may continue for days,*

*maybe more. Hence, you may take a rest. You may have extensive bleeding.” Something like that, so it was as I expected and I was not shocked.*

Nil (22, woman, user): *I was ten or something like that... I was at home; it was very traumatic for me. Terrible, I mean. I did not understand what actually happened. I did not know what to do, it was a terrible experience for me. [After being asked whether someone has talked with her about menstruation before or not.] No, never... Actually, I recognized [the discharge]. For several days, I tried to hide it with my own endeavor. Somehow, I spent days like that. Finally, I said it. I was using the small pantyliners in the cabinet and napkins. I thought I was constantly soiling my cloths. I thought it was poop. Because I had no idea... When it was not over, after a few days, when I started to get bored, I said, “I thought I was pooping in my pants for a few days, but what is this?” I asked. They instantly laughed. I asked to my mother. She immediately laughed, “Oh, okay, this is a normal thing” she said, later we told that to my father. They bought me a teddy bear.*

This ambivalent mood, being constantly fed by the pride of becoming a *genç kız* and the shame of starting to carry this stigmatizing mark every month, is also rooted to the religious meanings attached to the menstruation, especially for the participants grown up in Islamist or conservative families. For example, Şevval mentions finding herself thinking as “Some things are starting to become a sin now, should I perform salah, or should I start wearing hijab?” whereas Süreyya remembers her Quran course teacher mother refrains from touching to the religious scripts during her menstruation. The performance or the suspension of such religious practices are related to the Islamic understanding of menstruation as a source of dirt, hence the motivation of separating the earthly and the divine, and the fact that believers being hold responsible of their sins after puberty, which corresponds to the production of semen and menstruation (Delaney, 1988). Young menstruators living within such a meaning system not only grasp their so-called juvenescence after their menarche, but also sense being held liable of their sins and it is time to practice veiling in post-menarcheal era of their lives, as Asude mentions:

Asude (23, woman, considerer): *I started to wear hijab at thirteen, because you know, “Sister you got your period, you are a woman now, you can have sex, you can even have a child”. Why? Our Prophet married Hazrat Aisha. So, what is it? If we do not live in a really proper country abiding law, you are marriageable too. So, what does that mean? You should not be ‘açık’ [open/uncovered], you should perform salah. By the way, no one has told me to wear hijab, I can never lie about this. But you sense it, you know what I mean? I should wear hijab now, I should be like that, now I am in such a life. Because my father has a saying, “My daughters cannot be açık, they know themselves when to do it, but they will wear hijab”. Well, you do not recognize it with that pressure and it sounds quite normal.*

In summary, menarche stories narrated by the research participants are filled with meanings of growing up and evolving into a young girl, often fraught with uncertainty, lack of

knowledge, and sometimes emerging responsibilities of the religious obligations, and an ambivalence shaped by both the pride and shame menstruation brings. Being introduced to a new chapter in their life loaded with such complex and oftenly contradicting meanings, menstruators of young age begin to experience their bodily processes in a cultural context maintaining and protecting menstrual stigma, menstrunormativities, and silence, which will later to be challenged, breached and even reproduced by menstruators themselves.

## **5.2. Physical Experiences and Meaning of Menstruation**

After collecting the first bleeding experiences of the participants, I have shifted the focus to the physical experiences of menstruation and investigate the positive and negative attitudes and thoughts on one's own periods, since both of these focal points reveal more about how menstrual stigma shapes the everyday realities of the cyclical bodies. As I initially asked the physical experiences of menstruators before, during and after menstruation, the vast majority of the menstrual symptoms and changes named by participants were conceptualized as negative bodily experiences. Stomachache is the most common negative bodily experience pre-menstrual and menstrual periods, usually accompanied with pain in groin, ovaries, back, waist, breast, joints and head. The severity of these aches varies from mild cramps far from deteriorating the daily routines to intense pain ending with nausea, vomiting and even being put on a drip. In addition to those pains, bloating and oedema appear mostly on belly and breast areas. Hormonal fluctuations before and during menses lead to frequent needs of urinating and defecating, changing levels of appetite, sugar cravings, acne on face, increased perspiration, and sometimes vaginal fungal infections. General bodily sensations are defined with the words of somnolence, reducing energy levels and increasing bodily sensitivity. Besides their physiology, the wavering hormones affect the psychology of the menstruators as well—emotional volatility, sentimentality, sorrow, weepiness, petulance, aggression, tension, stress, obsessions and laziness are among the mentioned feelings dominating pre-menstruation and menstruation.

Considering the above-mentioned physical and mental symptoms and effects of menstruation, it can be said that menstruation results in a bundle of several negative physical experiences for many participants. Especially, the research participants who do not want or unsure about having children in the future and experience the physical influence of this process intensely, defined this process as “unnecessary”, “a drag”, “overwhelming”, “troublesome”, and even “a torture”, while describing living in a menstruating body as “unjust” and “painful”. Intense negative physical experiences are coexistent with a feeling of illness, dirtiness and even some

extreme cases, an urge to end menstrual periods completely. For example, Özge mentions going to her gynecologist and saying that she does not want to menstruate, since she has severe symptoms such as attention deficiency, emotional volatility, headache and stomachache. After her doctor's recommendation, she opts for birth control pills to reduce the amount of bleeding and intensity of the symptoms. Nevertheless, experiencing emotional blunting and absence of sexual drive, she consults her gynecologist once more and changes her medication.

Albeit the physical and emotional burden of experiencing menstrual periods each and every month was a dominant theme in participants' discourses, and even take the form of a "menstrual monsterring" of the self since their bodies are incomplicant to the default body being a non-menstruating one (see Young, 2005; Persdotter, 2020), narratives circling around naturalness, menstrual/body neutrality and even menstrual/body positivity were remarkably prevalent. It appears that several research participants have found or opened ways to approach their periods not a mere source of shame, pain and trouble, but reinterpreted their cyclical bodies as a site of a natural, extraordinary, and even miraculous process, especially when they are not experiencing the intense bodily sensations of the menstrual phase. Indeed, it can be stated that a significant amount of the research participants had discourses in line with menstrual activist perspectives toward menstruation, despite none of them define themselves as such. For instance, as feminist-spiritualist branch of the movement does, correlating menstruation with the capability of childbearing, womanhood, and being connected to the nature (see Bobel, 2010) were indeed evident in a couple of narratives—Öykü defines menstruation as a "primitive experience" showing that she shares "femininity with other animals", whereas Asude thinks that menstruation "spreads feminine, womanly vibes".

Albeit, what was even more interesting in this reinterpretation was the understanding of menstruation as "a vital sign" as radical menstruators of menstrual activists do (Bobel, 2010; Bobel & Fahs, 2020), and even a reconceptualization of spirit changes during menses as "menstrual moods" (Young, 2005) allowing a monthly reflection on one's own life. Although the menarcheal experiences are shaped with the theme of evolving into a *genç kız*, the general inclination of the participants was not to associate menses to womanhood. This separation takes place for a couple of reasons and one of them is the consciousness of the variety of menstrual experiences. For example, indicating that she does not equalize menstruation to womanhood, Ebrar says that "I have a female body and although everyone has a female body, they may not feel as a woman". On the other hand, Melike articulates the menstrual activist slogan "not all women menstruate and not all people who menstruate are women" almost word-for-word, whereas she still indicates a sense of solidarity since it is a common experience

among women. However, as mentioned before, the vast majority of the participants perceive that the miraculousness and significance of menstruation derives from the continuity of the cycles, its relationship with general health, and the uniqueness of this cycle for every menstruator, rather than being linked to concepts such as femininity, motherhood or fertility. Gökşen's words below summarize the characteristics of menstruation and how it is an extraordinary bodily process:

Gökşen (23, woman, user): *In terms of human nature, female nature, it is a surprising, miraculous thing. Well, first of all, we bleed but we do not die. [Laughs.] This is such an unusual thing, normally a bleeding person, somewhere bleeding, being cut happens because of bad things... This is the only exception and female-specific thing in the world. I think this part is miraculous. Besides, we experience it every month and every day is different and it is unique for everybody, this is miraculous too, I think. Some menstruate for five days, some for ten, some for two. Some people menstruate painfully, some more intense, and so on... I think it is miraculous that it is different for everyone, but as an individual, every day of my menstruation is different, like the pain at first, then it goes away, and the bleeding slows down... Also, observing that several things affecting menstruation is miraculous too, in my opinion. For example, when I am stressed the fact that my period delays, or my nutrition style affecting the cramps, so and so... These are the things mesmerizing me.*

The perception of menstruation as “a vital sign” equips menstruators with a sort of bodily and mental literacy. According to Nil, menstruating each and every month indicates that she has taken good care of herself after herself and got enough nutrition for the past weeks, whereas Rukiye monitors her behavior and recognizes that her anger rises during pre-menstrual few days and her decision-making skills sharpen during post-menstrual few days. Besides this increasing awareness of one's physical and psychological state, “menstrual moods” enable menstruators to “take a distance and reflect on how things are going” with them (Young, 2005), since this monthly flow with its beginning, progress and ending makes menstruators to recall the cyclical flow of time, as İrem states. Nonetheless, while making sense of self and time through menstrual periods enables exceptional feelings of menstruation, “institutional nonacceptance” (see Young 2004) still stands there as a catalyst of negative experiences rooting from menstruation, as Leyla's reflections show:

Leyla (22, woman, considerer): *It is nice to slow down a bit. I thought that too, like “Why something that bad happens?” Because it is like “rat-tat-tat”, life does not allow swallowing things down. This [menstruation] stops me forcibly. I look around myself to see what is happening, I become more emotional, and that is a better thing in some cases. For instance it allows you to feel things more intense and experience better in human relations. Things like love, empathy... [...] Actually I sometimes love being in that cycle. It is mine. Because when it is over, I know my energy will be refreshed, the first week is so good, I am happy no matter I do... This is so nice but not nice in current world, because in currently I do not work freelance, for instance. Therefore, I do not have a chance to choose the right time for the task I want. If I had*

*worked more independently, it would be a very good thing actually. Once I read something about this and after reading this, I recognized I understood myself better. I used to think 'am I exaggerating' on menstruation would be so influential, because suddenly the perception changes. But I liked this thing actually, you really are renewing, maybe that pain feeling is a thing, you feel your body. It would be a nice thing if I did not have responsibilities in my life. [Laughs.]*

As embodied in Leyla's reflections, the sense of injustice created by living in a cyclical body actually intensifies with the neglect of negative bodily sensations due to institutional nonacceptance. Because of this denial, menstruators, who eventually have to blend in the public space, are deprived of time, space and equipment to assist them while they are bleeding. Furthermore, since the assumed public person is a non-menstruating one, the bodily and emotional distress of menstruation behind the fluctuating performance levels remains disregarded and unspoken, due to menstrual etiquette promoting silence. Hence, taking a step back from the hectic everyday life, reflecting on bodies, emotions and time becomes a tough task for the menstruators, in a society where a menstrual-averse culture is dominant.

### **5.3. Sociocultural Routes of Menstrual Stigma Transmission**

While conceptualizing menstrual blood as a stigmatizing mark, Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) specify four sociocultural routes of menstrual stigma transmission: media, educational materials, euphemisms and silence. Based on the analysis of research on menstruation mostly conducted in United States context, Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler's categorization is useful in analyzing the research participants' encounters with menstrual stigma. Yet, grounding on the narratives of research participants, I would like to make a slight alteration and specify the dominating sociocultural routes of menstrual stigma transmission as following—silence and euphemisms, family, education sessions, and media.

#### **5.3.1. Silence and Euphemisms**

The most prevalent of these stigma-communicating sociocultural routes that participant menstruators suffer and complain from is the menstrual silence. As I have asked their thoughts on the social meaning of menstrual periods, majority of the replies were criticisms of the menstrual-averse attitude of the society concretized in the silencing of menstruations, especially in public settings or in the presence of non-menstruating individuals, mostly men. While criticizing this stance, participants emphasized the normalcy and naturality of menstrual periods and likened the process to other bodily functions, like Öykü paralleling menses to eating and drinking, Azra to going to bathroom or producing mucus, and Günel to a sudden



urge to cough, which could not be hold back. A bodily process being such a normal, healthy and natural experience according to them is marked by the society as something “disgraceful”, “disgusting”, “abominable”, and requires to be “hidden”, which are the labels heavily criticized within menstruators’ narratives.

This menstrual concealment imperative restricting the public talk on menstruation leads to the adoption of euphemisms, instead of openly mentioning the “m-word”. Filiz Bingölçe’s *Kadın Argosu Sözlüğü* [Women’s Slang Vocabulary] displays ninety-four unique euphemisms corresponding to menstruation (Bingölçe, 2020). Some of these tacit phrases are similar to the ones in different cultures, such as *halam geldi* (my aunt has arrived). Even some of these phrases involve humorous metaphors, like *hava yağmurlu zemin çamurlu* (weather is rainy, ground is muddy) and *salça üretmek* (cooking tomato paste). Nevertheless, widely used euphemisms such as *hastalanmak* (being ill), *kirlenmek* (being polluted), and *namazsız olmak* (being without salah) not only indicate menstruation without actually saying it due to menstrual silence, but also connotates a negative experience. Rukiye, who has first learnt menstruating as “being ill”, criticizes this societal understanding of menses and admits that it was a term she used to utter and she have recently recognized the falsehood and sexism inherent it.

For this reason, although most of the participants learned to express menstruation as *hastalanmak* after their menarche, they currently prefer to use words such as *adet* (from the Arabic *‘āda(t)* meaning recurrent), *regl* (from the French *régle*, meaning rule, order, and menses), or *kanamak* (bleeding) and insist on using these three expressions to their close circles such as family members and friends. According to the them, choosing these three words and rejecting euphemisms are having stance against menstrual stigma.

Yet, it is worth to notice that, neither *adet* nor *regl* are the ideal terms in naming menstruation, as participants indicate. For instance, since the word *adet* also means custom in Turkish, Özge finds this word “repellant” and regards it as another euphemism connotating tradition and culture. On the other hand, Derya prefers *adet* over *regl*, since Turkish language does not have two consonants coming one after another at the end of a word and thus, it is hard to pronounce the latter. Considering that the words of Turkish origin such as *ay hali* (monthly state) or *ay başı* (beginning of the month) are now outdated and not used by the age group I have interviewed, the fact that the absence of an easy to pronounce Turkish word without a secondary meaning indicates the power of menstrual concealment imperative in society.

### 5.3.2. Silent Mothers and Absent Fathers: Family

The menarche experience of Azra, who was shocked at her first period because she buried that she would one day have her period deep in her mind, became an experience that makes her smile when she remembers it now, with a family ritual. After receiving the big news, Azra's maternal grandmother insisted her to put her two fingers in the flour jar, since it is believed to lead painless menstrual periods, only lasting for two days. Despite describing herself as the rebellious, unorthodox child of the family even at the age of thirteen, Azra could not withstand her grandmothers insistence and joined the family tradition with soaking her two fingers in the flour jar her mother brought. Being far from the gimmickry of a boy's circumcision ceremony, Azra receives a warm welcome by the women of her family, as she transitioned from her childhood to her young girlhood.

Nevertheless, not every menstrual experience is like Azra's floury memory. As mentioned in the menarche section of this chapter, although there are mothers, other family members and even educators engaging in extensive menstrual talks at an early age and this eventually leads to a relatively positive menarche experience, many participants mentioned the heartbreak of their family members' attitude reproducing menstrual stigma. Various levels of anger and resentment are usually directed to the mothers, as they advise their menstruating child to remain silent, not to tell that anything to their father or brother, and hide all clues of menstrual blood or products. In the first years following menarche, menstruation is a topic only to be discussed with mothers, sisters, and other female members of the family, if it is talked at all. At this point, menstruators who do not receive enough information about periods and face with the silence of their mothers, hold a very thin hope on the breaking of menstrual stigma, as Dilşad wonders how she can change other people, if she cannot change her own mother.

Dilşad (21, woman, user): *For example, my mother never said to me, I mean for menstruation, she never told me anything like, "You will experience something like this, we will do something like this, we will do it like this, you will use such and such things". She did not communicate me that way. As if I was researching something illegal, as if using drugs, "How should I use this, is that normal, how often should I change it"... I heard from my friends. I researched. You know, because it is like that, if someone did not grow up in such family, that is, if she did not grow up in a family where people talk very comfortably, I think that [menstrual aversiveness] is in people's heads a little bit... Of course, we can overcome it with a lot of effort. Maybe we cannot completely destroy it, but I think it is necessary to constantly put an effort to change it. And it can be [possible], of course... Family is very important, I think.*

While mentioning the stigma encounters within family, especially during the early years of the periods, participants oftenly highlight the contradiction between the pompous ceremonies

done to celebrate a boy's circumcision with the absence of any kind of celebration for a girl's menarche. Slightly emulating to such festivities, participants praise the families organizing small celebrations after their daughter's first menstruation and find such parties beneficial in terms of breaking the menstrual stigma. Indeed, even if their families did not engage in such celebrations for their menarche, some menstruators buy cakes after their friends first periods, as one of the research participants, Selvi has done in her teenage years. Nevertheless, the prevalent reluctance of celebrating menarche and indeed putting effort in hiding it dovetails with the honor and shame notions in Turkey as a Mediterranean society, where the "pride is focused on the penis" and "female genitals are [...] the seat of shame" (Delaney, 1987, p. 39).

Within a society where female body is associated with shame and menstruation remains an unspoken topic between parents and children, the line separating inside and outside the home fades, and resentful menstruators experience difficulties in reconciling with their mothers, although they share the experience of being subject of menstrual stigma. As the contradictory feelings of having compassion to the older generation and criticizing them for reproducing menstrual stigma put on the scale, the anger of being exposed to stigmatization overweighs and menstruators put effort to change their families, especially mothers:

*Zehra (22, woman, user): Well, I realize some things at this age, both about society and my own family. Especially after my education, after studying sociology I begun to realize things. For instance, it is a really bad thing growing up like this when you are a child. It is an injustice and also women, for instance my mother raising me like that, believing that, I mean, interiorizing that... It really makes me sorry, I am actually sorry for my mother, I cannot be mad at her. Because sometimes she seems like a victim to me. But on the one hand, I get angry. Because, why cannot she break this, why did she tell that us like that, why did she raise us like that? If I could break it, why could not she—these are different topics, but... In general, I can say that I am really angry about this attitude of the society. [...] Or, like, when I have stomach ache, my mother asks me "What happened, does your stomach ache, are you ill?". I used to say "yes" because I used to think it was an illness, "Are you ill?" did not sound me weird back then. Now, I say "No, I am not ill" and argue about that. I know my mom gets upset but there is nothing to do, I started to fight the battle. You know, my father is not involved in this anyway, and it really pisses me off, it pisses me off so much, this thing of society. I can give more examples to this, but it really disappoints me that in general, something that we are not guilty of, something that happens naturally, is dictated as if we are dirty, as if we are guilty. Especially if I encounter that from my family. I am disregarding the society at some point, because I have to, but...*

This anger, rooting from being subject of an injustice and coexisting with compassion, drives menstruators to construct their own coping mechanisms with menstrual stigma and normativities, later to be communicated with their family members, friends, and other members of the menstruators' social circles. The emergence of a new menstrunormate

prerequisites several turning points in menstruators lives, which alters the perspectives towards their own body and bleeding. The opportunities for menstrual solidarity and potential of rising tensions between generations will be portrayed in detail with the determination of such turning points, after two sections where educational sessions and representations in media are discussed.

### 5.3.3. Girls In, Boys Out: Educational Sessions

One of the most striking findings on the sociocultural routes communicating menstrual stigma in Turkey appears to be the educational sessions held in secondary schools. While I was trying to uncover the encounters with menstrual stigma during the interviews, I frequently came across vivid memories of menstruators, in which some people come to their schools, gather all female students whose age is eligible to a class or conference room, talk about topics like puberty, menstruation, female physiology, and personal care. What was interesting in the narratives of such sessions expected to be useful is the fact that none of the research interviewees who participated in these trainings mention it with positive words. Some of the adjectives preferred to describe such sessions were “weird”, “insufficient”, “silly”, “awful” and “embarrassing”. Although these sessions equipped some menstruators with how to properly use disposable pads, it apparently did more harm than good, as Neslihan shares her own reflections:

Neslihan (23, woman, user): *Because at our home, there is nothing like this, no one told me to be embarrassed and after that we had a session under the name of sexual health education, which was not a sexual health education at all, and I remember that... All girls in the class were gathered and boys were left out. When boys were waiting extremely curious, they handed us disposable pads and I was totally embarrassed. We all thought that we should hide our pads, we were hiding and concealing. Because they put us in separate rooms. So it was something they should not have heard, it was something they should not have seen... I remember being embarrassed after that. When that thing happened, I was already having my period and I did not have anything. I used to have no shame or reservation but I started feeling embarrassed after that and I felt so hard to change my pad at school. Because I had to carry my pad to bathroom. How should I? What if someone sees, something happens? And menstruating at school was really difficult for me. Because what if it stains my cloth, my discharge intensifies, it becomes understood? This thing made me feel really nervous. As I was younger back then I could not say “No, it is not something to be embarrassed of, it is OK”. [...] We were gathered into a room, well, they said to us “Female students may come.” and we went. We did not know why we are going. We just went and when it was asked “Why boys are not coming too?” they said something like “It is something you should not know, you should not speak about such topics, you should not know such topics.” and they really wondered, we did too... And it was said “You should not know these” and let us in. We did not know what it is. Later I remember talks like “You may menstruate every month”, they showed us how*

*to use a pad, and I remember something like “If you do this like that, it will not be visible from your pants”. Therefore... They gave us a thing, a pad case... [Laughs.] Something like a bag, a flowery thing. Therefore, I thought “Probably I should hide it”. Later, after that session, my female friends said “Since we all have this, they may recognize, let’s do not use it all”. So, It has been thought, because they took us and we covered it, hide it.*

As once again understood from Neslihan’s and other menstruators’ memories of educational sessions, menstrual silence and stigma is reinforced with the trainings per state with a collaboration with personal care conglomerates. Within the dominant gender order shaped by neo-conservative and neo-liberal values, menstruation is perceived as a bodily process in which only certain product consumption practices are spoken with certain people, with certain words. These conferences, conducted under the name *Ergenlik Döneminde Değişim Projesi* [Project of Change During Adolescence – PCDA] and maintained by the Turkish Ministry of Education and Procter and Gamble’s *Orkid*, has reached more than 88.000 schools and 14 million students between 1999 and 2014 (ORKID Okul Eğitim Projesi (ERDEP), n. d.). The preliminary objective of this project is to train secondary schoolers on the physiological, psychological, and social alterations they experience after adolescence. As defined by the program stakeholders, the eventual aim is to help young people to have a healthy and happy life when they become young adults and hence “create a more conscious society”.

Grounding on the narratives and criticism of the research participants on PCDA, the project imposes a certain menstrunormate and reproduces the stigma condition of menstrual periods. First of all, targeting secondary schoolers leads to the construction of a menstrunormate, whose periods starts around the age of twelve, and pushes menstruators whose periods begin earlier such as Nil to a loneliness that they do not even realize that they start menstruating. Secondly, separating female students from males and speaking on menstruation only with them reinforces the stigma condition of menstruation, with a subtext of obeying the menstrual concealment imperative in the presence of males and keeping menstruation “between girls”. Such separation, combined with the handing out of disposable pad cases, strengthens meaning of periods being something to be hidden. Last but not least, the creation of the project making the menstrual talk possible in public arena and the involvement of Procter and Gamble’s *Orkid* as a stakeholder in this project aligns with the neo-liberal values of the state. Yet, disposable pads being the sole product being promoted in these sessions leaves young menstruators choiceless, since for a long time, research participants indicate thinking that disposable pads are the only option for the collection of menstrual discharge. Hence, according to some menstruators, these sessions are not educational sessions but “something like a product campaign”, like Azra describes. In fact, disposable pads being the only product to be

mentioned in these trainings despite the existence of intravaginal products indicates the existence of a menstrunormate prioritizing premarital virginity based on preserving the hymen, which is correlated to the neo-conservative values imposed by the state organs. Combining all these above-mentioned factors renders Project of Change During Adolescence trainings a missed opportunity of delivering necessary information to all members of society and breaking the menstrual stigma.

#### **5.3.4. “I am not that pink and purple”: Representations on Media**

“We, women, want some things to be zero” says Hande Baladın, the first-string outside hitter of Eczacıbaşı Sports Club and Turkey women’s national volleyball team, in one of the advertisements of a well-known disposable pad brands. We see her dashing across the court, making successful receptions and defenses, and spiking the ball in slow motion, with her voice in the background: “Like anxiety and discomfort being zero in our *special days*, and playing with zero mistakes in my most important game day...” Hande’s match performance sequences is followed by the animation of the advertised pad, absorbing a mysterious blue liquid and being stretched, with a voice-over indicating it is all possible with “almost zero leaks, zero odor, and zero aggregation” of their pads. (Orkid Türkiye, 2021). Nevertheless, one of the top comments written in all capitals below the video shows that everything is not always possible during periods: “I do not want to jump and leap on my periods, I do not want to see advertisements like this, you know we cannot do any of these while suffering (like volleyball, running, jumping)”.

While talking about the social stigmatization of menstrual products, the last topic frequently mentioned by research participants was the representations in media, particularly the portrayal of menstruation in disposable pad advertisements, since they constitute the majority of representations and film or television series scenes or other media depicting periods are extremely rare. Participant menstruators’ complaint about the concealment practices of advertisements such as showing a blue liquid during picturing absorbency and naming menstruation as *özel gün* [special days], in fact there is no special feeling about periods, as Melike laughingly says. The participants also frequently indicated having some issues with such representations in advertisements imposing a menstrunormate, which is a “utopian”, “soft”, yet a “strong woman”, doing sports, “fluttering around like a butterfly”, and definitely consuming menstrual pads. However, menstruators’ experiences are mostly different from such portrayals, leaving many of them like Leyla with feelings of anger, alienation and being left out, since they are “not that pink and purple”:

Leyla (22, woman, considerer): *Generally there is a scenario they stick to, I guess. There is a strong woman scenario, like some romanticized situations. Well, pink and purple- eventually, I would like to be seen as a person differently from such advertisements but they put a new color forward. Actually you want to enter a colorless bathroom, you want to experience something like “It does not matter [whether you are] girl and boy”, it is precious. But there, you again become pink. Well, it does that thing and softens the situation. Actually, the situation is pure science, spotless, a biologic reaction we could talk about. But it is romanticized. The true context seems to be not like that. It really complicates understanding myself as well... Because seeing a head ache [in advertisements] would make me feel better handling the situation by myself. [...] I immediately think of a young girl, holding a basketball in her hands, menstruating at that moment and using pads. There is something like this and we are exposed to it too much, we do. There are very beautiful designs, something pretty, vivid, but I first- for instance I used to fall for them a lot, like “Look we are strong woman”. But I recognized that they do not give me a good feeling, it is something like a toxic feeling. Like, it gives a feeling of “I am different from you” in minor key, at that point I cannot see the real problem. The real problem is the fact that, actual factual I need to sleep that they. Very basic things, like having less conversation, and so on... You know, drawing these things to fanaticism, you know, a fanatic image. Also, it does not appeal as aesthetic to me anymore, so it oversimplifies it. There are so many types of women. There are women who love flowers, but there are other women as well.*

As evident in Leyla’s statements, menstrual advertisements communicate a menstrunormate, who is a both sensitive and strong woman, successfully undertaking the bodily and mental tasks with the performance of non-menstruating days. Disposable pad advertisements, in which the word menstruation is barely uttered, not only reproduces the menstrual stigma through the use of *özel gün* euphemism and changing the color of the menstrual discharge, but also reflects the “institutional nonacceptance” expecting menstruators showing high levels of performance despite their bodily and mental discomfort, since the assumed public person is a non-menstruating one (see Young, 2005). Considering these high societal expectations being reflected in the advertisement campaigns, but not their unconventional, negative, traumatic and painful experiences as “cranky menstruators” (Przybylo and Fahs, 2020), research participants share the feelings of being annoyed, shunned, and alienated towards their own body.

#### **5.4. Menstrual Stigma Coping Mechanisms**

The stigmatized status of menstruation and a menstrunormate created and imposed by the society haunts the bodily and mental experiences of menstruators since the early days of their menstruating ages. Sticking them with the ambivalence caused by the coexistence of the pride and embarrassment, menstrual stigma leads to a menarche experience where uncoun-  
 ted questions on how bodies work and how should menstrual discharge be dealt with. In later

times, menstrual stigma is kept being communicated through the use of euphemisms, silence of the mothers and non-involvement of the fathers, improper educational sessions, and non-inclusive product advertisements. The combination of all these elements creates an imaginary and unrealistic menstrunormate being imposed upon the research participants: a *genç kız* who successfully hides her period, abstains menstrual talk with men, exhibits her cognitive and physical performance on non-menstrual days during her period, and uses only disposable pads to collect the menstrual flow.

Nevertheless, another outstanding theme in the narratives of research participant menstruators was them portraying the agency in trying to break or breach the menstrual stigma they suffer from, rather than being passive recipients and reproducers of these taboo and norms. Indeed, none of the participants considered the maintenance of the menstrual concealment imperative necessary, at least in the discursal level. İrem's perspective on the menstrual stigma in Turkish society below summarizes the general approach of the research participants towards menstrual stigma and their recognition of menstrual aversity as a political matter, instead of a personal one:

İrem (22, woman, user): *Well, it is like a hidden, covered thing. I will not say that people's perception is like that, the society's perception is like that. When you evaluate every person individually and tell them, we recognize that they take it very natural and do not react it too much. But if we think it collectively, majority of the people are inclined to hiding it, or mentioning it implicitly, if they do. But in fact, as we produce the discourse on this issue, something will change, and I honestly do not think that this will change much unless we do this collectively, that is, unless we talk about it in public.*

Despite living in a society where menstrual concealment imperative is the dominant approach towards periods, what actually contributing factors and breaking points are for menstruators in rejecting the pressure created by this taboo and producing a new discourse stands out as a question that needs to be answered. Therefore, in the following two paragraphs, the primary focus will be on how menstruation becomes an effable topic and how opportunities of solidarity arise.

The sociocultural routes such as silence, euphemisms, attitudes of family members, educational content, and representations in media implicitly direct the menstruators to hide both their periods and the products they use throughout the flow. Yet, if menstruators do not comply with the “menstrual etiquette” (Laws, 1990) and taking a step forward from the “menstrual closet” (see Young, 2005) by revealing their cycles or goods they use, they come up against the fact that their bleeding bodies are not accepted as normal and receive various



reactions reminding the menstrual etiquette. Participant menstruators indicate stories of revealing the menstrual status to non-menstruating people, which eventually caused eyebrows to raise. For example, when Zehra was in high school and they were having a talk with the five female classmates about naturality and mundanity of menstruation, the only male student in her class responded as “Vomiting is also natural, so should I vomit right here?”. Şevval has received a similar reaction from her father when she told she was menstruating, “Okay Şevval, what does that have to do with anything?” Apparently, the menstruating bodies are held normal only in cases where the menstruator hides the signs of the bleeding, which necessitates hiding in the menstrual closet.

Since the visibility of menstrual goods consumed during this phase is a sign of bleeding besides the blood itself, carrying menstrual products becomes a challenge in the public spaces, and even in the presence of the household. The most popular experience that participants mention while they are narrating the stories of facing public reaction while they are consuming menstrual products is the responses they face during the product purchase process from *bakkals*<sup>16</sup> (grocery stores). As menstruators picked a disposable pad package and went to the checkout to finish the transaction, they usually encountered a *bakkal amca* (grocer uncle) trying to cover up the package with a newspaper page, put it on a black opaque nylon bag<sup>17</sup>, or even do both. Here, the dominant menstrunormate which strictly obeys the menstrual concealment imperative is imposed by the grocer and indeed the neighborhood or village residents, who do not want to face the reality of seeing a community dweller with a disposable pad package, which would reveal the menstrual status to everyone around.

Similar encounters with a reaction against showing and purchasing menstrual products are shown by the men around the research participants. For instance, Özge recalls requesting pocket money from her father with the words of “I have girly needs” and when her father grumbled of her daughter having too much makeup products, she had to disclose that she will buy disposable pads. This resulted in a reaction from her nuclear family members of “being bashless”. As this incident shows, albeit Özge tried to act according to the menstrual etiquette,

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<sup>16</sup> Generally being common in densely populated neighborhoods or in villages, where the chain supermarkets do not prefer to open a branch, *bakkals* are among the stores that local people can purchase their needs such as staple food, personal care products, newspaper, and cigarettes. A common practice in these *bakkals* is the *veresiye* [on account] purchases, in which local residents buy some goods and the *bakkal* keeps an informal credit record on a notebook, which will be paid later when the resident has money. *Veresiye* payments become possible through the acquaintanceship and reliability that small neighborhoods provide.

<sup>17</sup> In the *bakkals*, mostly two products are put in black opaque nylon bags: alcoholic beverages and disposable pads.

she got reactions of being too vocal. Some male family members, such as Nil's teenage brother or Şevval's father, become uncomfortable as participants tried to buy disposable pad packages in their presence as they go for shopping. Even a single disposable pad being randomly visible raises the tensions—Eda's father asks angrily to her mother after seeing a pad somewhere in home like "There is a *thing* right there, can you explain it?", whereas Karaca's classmate shouts "What are you doing, get away with it, what is that?" pointing at a pad on the desk.

So, how could the research participants, being the members of a society where the menstrual concealment imperative is so powerful and let alone talking about menstruation, that even carrying menstrual products by hand in public space becomes an issue, managed to establish a new discourse against the necessities of the dominant menstrual norms? In Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler's (2013) piece on menstrual stigma, the ways of challenging menstrual stigma are listed as simply talking about menstruation through face-to-face and online mediums, altering the representations in media, celebrating menses, creation of a menstrual counterculture through various art forms, initiatives of health care providers and engaging in menstrual activism. Although none of the research participants have identified themselves as a menstrual activist, many of them indeliberately adopted "everyday acts of resistance" (see Fahs, 2016) of this movement, such as making themselves less exposed to the media channels articulating menstrual stigma or encouraging menstrual talk in everyday encounters. Aligned with Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler's (ibid.) emphasis on being more vocal on the periods, the break in menstrual stigma happens to take place as young menstruators recognize other menstruating people around them and engage in menstrual talk. For instance, Karaca, having her first period at the age of eleven and experiencing very negative feelings about it since she does not feel herself ready to grow up, mentions her relief as she eavesdropped her mother and her classmates' mother talking on their daughters having their period. The feeling of not being alone become especially heightened when young menstruators pass the secondary school and reach to high school ages. Rukiye, to illustrate, experiencing severe stomach ache during periods and hence needing some alone time in school infirmary time to time, recalls herself normalizing periods during these leaves as her friends wishing her a speedy recovery. Neslihan, on the other hand, experienced her "sisterhood moments" during her years in boarding high school:

Neslihan (23, woman, user): *In high school I started doing it, because at high school I was at a boarding school and there were lots of women in the dorm and everyday one used to get her period. Therefore I was like "Everybody has it, so why do we hinder it, what is the point", because we all see each other, we always- some runs out of pads, some has stomach ache, some has something and we are in a constant mood of solidarity since we were in a dormitory. When I had these many interactions with*

*my peers, my embarrassment reduced drastically. It did not disappear completely. I cannot say it is totally over, because when I needed pads, I went to a female friend and asked her "Do you have pads?" but it was lessened. At least I could talk, not text it or say it in a hidden way. I came near her and asked her. [...] I mean, it [peer support] was rather emotional. Because everyone knew which time, we got more emotional and because we lived together, we had very little tolerance for each other anyway. But we were tolerating each other a little more during these cycles, because, well, we knew how it is, we knew how it feels. And it was not like solely passing each other pads either, I mean, we were all really young and kids actually, because we went [the boarding school] a little too young, and it was like we were trying to constantly—like, parenting.*

Besides these ordinary yet significant menstrual solidarity moments, the participants ground their perspective being different from their parents, extended family members, neighborhoods, and friends to a similar mismatch between their viewpoints on the gender issues and the knowledge they have acquired through their relatively higher levels of education. The evolution of their personal values and “their rising consciousness” in terms of gender equality eventually led to the development of a perspective different from what is imposed to them. Several menstruators, as they reached the late high school and early undergraduate ages, mention their encounter with the feminist thought through several mediums, such as Şafak and Kayra firstly coming across feminist content on online media such as Twitter, Facebook and online blogs, while Leyla remembers herself reading *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir.

The departures from the mensturnormate imposed by the immediate circles becomes even more intense in the narratives of the menstruators grown up in Islamist or conservative families, as I found out that three women within the considerer group, Şevval, Ebrar and Asude, used to wear hijab but later discontinued this practice willingly after attending university. Şevval, who used to practice veiling between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, describes her willingness of covering her head with an emulation to other women in her social circle, yet decides to unveil after attending to high school and discovering other lifestyles. Ebrar, as another example, notes her family members requesting her to wear hijab after her breasts enlarged in puberty, points out the widening contrast between her worldview and what has been taught to her in a religious vocational high school, and indicates going to university for the sake of leaving her hometown and unveiling in Ankara. Asude, raised in a family where wearing hijab is expected after menarche, denotes discovering other lifestyles through the materials she read and watched, having done with her family’s oppressive behavior, and mentioned herself having discontinued veiling just a couple of months ago.

Inevitably, the differing understandings in terms of gender equality, female sexuality, or menstruation results in risen tensions between menstruators and their families and a

discrepancy between the feelings, thoughts and behaviors in and out the family home. Scalco's (2020) conceptualization of the "home" and "away from home" as two different and even contradictory social spaces, where young Turkish females maintain two separate identities, emerges in the discourses of the research participants as well. Azra highlights this discrepancy as not experiencing an oppression in the spaces she has "her authority", like her close friends circle, her university campus, or in Tunalı Hilmi Street, which is a famous locale of Ankara where college students hang out a lot, yet she faces the menstrual concealment imperative in her hometown. Reflecting on her differences compared to her family, she mentions the following words, besides a name-calling labeled on her:

Azra (22, woman, user): Why is this like that? I was born with internet, there was internet and computer in our home since I was five and I grew up watching foreign television series after a certain age. Constantly reading and watching foreign television series... I guess I am a little bit assimilated. [*Laughs.*] I think so... Because in terms of menstruation and sexuality, I have more information than my grandmother, mother and aunt being married for twenty-five, thirty, forty, fifty years and I take no offence for that. I think these should be learnt. But they find these series immoral and find us knowing such things weird. Indeed, my nickname in the family is *Yallı* Azra. *Yallı* means *yollu* in us, *yollu* is, you know, loose [women]...

With reference to the menstruators' standpoints, it can be said that, in the cases where the new perspective they have developed towards their cyclical bodies and gender identities by reading, watching, following online content, and engaging with feminist thought comes up against to the shock, disgust or alienation of their families, this crisis moments does not prevent research participants from engaging in various arguments with their families. In fact, for research participants, normalizing through openly talking about menses with mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers avoiding menstrual talk or exhibiting menstrual-averse behavior is one of the most widespread menstrual stigma coping mechanisms. Despite being raised in a traditionalist family in her own words, Gökşen mentions her approaching period as they are planning for a seaside holiday with her family and asks her father and uncles "to check whether her pants are stained or not". After I wonderingly reminded her portrayal of her family being conservative, she smilingly and proudly added that "getting on them and educating them" brought results, which are relatively mild reactions. According to Gökşen, becoming more radical on gender issues, doing her undergraduate study in sociology department, learning "how to talk with certain people", and increasing her knowledge on her claims all contributed her being vocal and self-confident in such confrontations.

For research participants, having talks on menstruation with little sisters, brothers, and cousins are especially important for not leaving the younger generations in the silence and

stigmatization they have long suffered from. In accordance with this purpose, many participants recalled their menstrual talk memories with teenagers around them. For instance, Günel talks on menstruation with her little ballet students, Derya comforts her pre-menarche sister on her fear from menstrual pain, Şevval describes her brother how female reproductive system works and requests his help in running errands during her period, and Selvi tries to prepare her female cousins for their menarche. Besides the children within their family and social circles, research participants frequently talk on menstruation with their peers or confront them with menstrual products as well. As well as occasionally letting them know their flows during chitchats, menstruators bring up the conversation to menstruation consciously to challenge the stigma or even show their menstrual products to their friends—Nil goes to the bathroom with a disposable pad on her hand, “waving it like a flag” to show people, Karaca introduces alternative menstrual products to her female and male peers, and Şevval deliberately talks on menstruation when her boy friends are around, oftenly resorting humor. Indeed, with an impish smile on her face, Azra shares her plans of chasing her elder sister in their home with a menstrual cup in her hand, since her sister finds periods and hence cups abominable.

Besides the face-to-face confrontations they try to spark off, research participants also indicated that they causally engage in online sharing on menstrual periods. Such online discussions vary from tweeting with trending topic hashtags such as #18kdvkaldırılın [#18vatshouldbeabolished] or #pedliksdeğilihtiyaçtır [#padsareneednotluxury], to sharing their experiences with menstrual cups, such as Dilşad tweeting on her long nails making the removal of cups harder, or Nehir removing her male friends from her close friends list on Instagram and publishing stories of how satisfied she is with her cup.

In addition to the everyday resistance actions of simply talking on menstruation during face-to-face or online conversations, some of the research participants indicated that they are or were actively engaged in political struggle with a feminist lens. Eda, for instance, a member of the socialist youth organization *Fikir Kulüpleri Federasyonu* [Ideology Clubs Federation]<sup>18</sup> and later *Ankara Kadın Platformu* [Ankara Women’s Platform]<sup>19</sup>, indicates being politicized at the end of high school and shifting to the women’s movement in university, with reference

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<sup>18</sup> *Fikir Kulüpleri Federasyonu* is a leftist youth organization founded by university and high school students to “fight for freedom, liberty, republic and socialism”. (*Fikir Kulüpleri Federasyonu*, 2019)

<sup>19</sup> *Ankara Kadın Platformu* is an organization consisting of more than forty women’s and LGBTI organizations and independent feminists. (*Ankara Kadın Platformu*, n.d.)

to the oppression of other women in her family. As part of the feminist discussions they engage in Ankara Women's Platform, she recalls their discussions on the high prices of menstrual products and the period tax. Gökşen, as an attendee of *Ekmek ve Gül* [Bread and Rose]<sup>20</sup> and *ODTÜ Toplumsal Cinsiyet Topluluğu* [METU Gender Club]<sup>21</sup> student organizations during her early undergraduate years, mentions their experience sharing meetings on menstruation and admits that she still uses the health tips she has learnt there to have a comfortable period. Helin, a member of *Emek Gençliği*, the youth branch of the socialist party *Emek Partisi* [Labor Party] later initiated *Biyolojik Bilimler Kadınları* [Women from Biological Sciences] group with her friends such as Barçın, to resist against sexism in science and harassment they encounter in campus. Süreyya mentions joining to *Üniversiteli Kadın Kolektifi* [College Women's Collective]<sup>22</sup> and *ODTÜ LGBT+ Dayanışması* [METU LGBT+ Solidarity]<sup>23</sup> and exemplified one of their protests in College Women's Collective as hanging disposable pads around the campus cafeteria to draw attention to menstrual stigma and poverty.

Nevertheless, constantly driving menstrual talk in their nuclear families and close friends circles, sharing on their social media accounts tweets and stories on periods, and even being a part of the organized struggle in leftist or feminist organizations, there was a certain boundary of where research participants were constrained to obey the dominant menstrunormate of the Turkish society and act according to the menstrual etiquette. Zehra's below hesitations picture the general standpoint of the research participants on with whom to talk about menstruation:

Zehra (22, woman, user): *I have one close male friend, so I can easily disclose him [that I am menstruating]. I think I have some privilege in this, being a Middle East Technical University student... Again, there are some people I cannot tell, but I think most of them are at least knowledgeable on these issues. I think they already know what a period is and how things are going because of the level of education... And yes, I can easily say this to my closest friends. I can cry the blues. [After being asked if she can disclose it to her professors or her employers.] I guess this also has to do with my environment. It depends a lot on my working environment. For example, I do*

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<sup>20</sup> *Ekmek ve Gül* is a feminist organization starting from namesake women's television program and later turning into a community of worker, unemployed, civil servant, student and artist women publishing through paper and online mediums. ("We are here... Women's solidarity is just one click away...", 2017)

<sup>21</sup> *ODTÜ Toplumsal Cinsiyet Topluluğu* is an official student club of Middle East Technical University, which is aimed to discuss and organize events on gender studies. (Kaos GL, 2018)

<sup>22</sup> *Üniversiteli Kadın Kolektifi* is a college women's organization battling against reactionism, misogyny, sexism, harassment, rape, and male violence since March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007. (Akyol Oktan & Oktan, 2017)

<sup>23</sup> *ODTÜ LGBT+ Dayanışması* is a student club of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, asexual, queer and heterosexual students, organized for struggle against heterosexism and all kinds of discrimination. (Köse, 2013)

*not think there is a professor at my university that I would not be able to tell if something like this happened. I mean, it feels like I can tell them all because they give me that trust. Well, I cannot think of a professor that I would be afraid to say because they give the trust of “Look, we are all social scientists here, we are working on that, we are talking about that, we cannot hurt you about this, we will contradict ourselves if we hurt you”. But if my environment will not like this when I graduate from here and start working, it would probably be like my grandfather. So I do not think I can say it, it feels like if I am going to work in such a masculine environment, in an uncomfortable environment, I would go to hide a little bit.*

Albeit family members, friends, and faculty members are categorized as the people to have talk on menstruation or to let know of their menstrual status, research participant menstruators noticed their reluctance of speaking with their distant relatives, people in their current or future workplace, and the “*sokaktan geçen amca/dayı*” (a random elderly male crossing the street). The silence maintained in the extended family gatherings, especially with the older generations, are mostly due to the contrast between their perception of periods and their relatives’ menstrual-averse attitude, having less intimacy with and influence over distant relatives compared to the household, and aiming to not lead to potential tensions between the nuclear and extended family. On the other hand, the openness of talking about menstruation in the workplace or taking leave from work due to menstrual pain is correlated to the tendency of fellow employees and employers’ rejection of the menstrual concealment imperative. Stranger and relatively older men -or in several narratives, women- passing by on the street stand out as the subjects who are described as the least likely to talk about menstruation by the research participants. The reason behind participants refraining from menstrual talk with stranger, elderly, and mostly male people seems to be the fear of menstruators that their periods will be sexualized by these people and therefore their potential of experiencing any kind of harassment, condemning, and humiliation. Even if they engage in menstrual talk with these subjects, research participants do not act as radical as they discuss with their parents, siblings, friends, and other people in their campuses, since they believe that being *too* radical with people having more conservative attitude in terms of gender equality or menstruation would eventually backfire and result in these people becoming more conservative, as Dilşad points out.

At this point, in addition to the informality that close relations bring up, it can be said that the characteristics of “away from home” social space of the research participants is also determinant in terms of their willingness of encouraging menstrual talk and visibility. It is not a coincidence that many participants acknowledge choosing to make up their social circles outside of their families from people who share similar perspectives with them on matters such as female sexuality, women’s and LGBT+ rights or menstruation. For example, Süreyya,

grown up in a conservative family and received secondary and high school education from an institution owned by a religious community, defines her current social environment in university with the following words:

Süreyya (22, non-binary, considerer): *For instance, I think that the society I am currently living in, the social circle I live in perceives menstruation from a much healthier standpoint. It is full of people who argue that it is our right to have access to menstrual products and that it should not have anything to do with uncleanness, honor or any social concept. I am mentioning women being at peace with themselves, having active sexual life. Of course the milieu I grew up, I came from was nothing like this.*

In conclusion, menstruators who have raised up in a society loaded with meanings of menstruation as a stigmatized condition, find making ways for reconceptualizing their periods with positive or neutral meanings. This perspective shift becomes possible through not only experience sharing with fellow menstruators, but also through engagements with feminist thought and finding a way around their milieu constantly imposing a menstrual-averse attitude. After developing their menstrual/body neutral/positive mindset, research participants engage in menstrual talk with their parents, siblings, younger relatives, and friends to expose and destigmatize menstruation, besides joining to online discussions and showing activist endeavor. Nevertheless, the social environment they acquire in their campus life, which is pointedly summarized by Şafak as “a bubble”, includes people who have already rejected the menstrual concealment imperative or have a high potential of breaking it and leaves behind the people being aligned with the menstrual-averse attitude of the society. Considering the effects of rising neo-conservatist and neo-liberal trend in Turkey deliberately shaping the gender order, the construction of such “bubble” or self-censoring among strangers becomes a self-protection mechanism against the menstrual stigma. Yet, since the individual efforts of breaking the menstrual stigma remains limited to the research participants’ immediate social circles, the contributions and achievements of local menstrual activism still remains as a potential to be utilized.

### **5.5. Disposable Menstrual Product Consumption Practices**

Before delving into alternative menstrual product consumption practices, I would like to mention the single-use menstrual product consumption practices briefly, since their differences from the alternative products create both the willingness and reluctance of the search for new ways to collect menstrual discharge. Among the research participants, the most popular disposable menstrual product type was disposable or single-use menstrual pads, which



research participants have used for time periods ranging from two to twelve years. However, it would be wrong to allege that using disposable pads has been an informed choice for menstruators. Indeed, research participants mentioned that they have started using disposable pads with menarche because they have been taught how to use only this specific product by their mothers or others around them and even until a certain age, they were not aware of other options existed. Few participants knew that elder menstruators in their families have used old cloth pieces to collect the menstrual discharge, yet they did not run the risk of blood stains in their school uniforms caused by slippery cloths or could not estimate how to carry the bloody rags with them to home.

Albeit disposable pads were the most prevalent menstrual flow collecting method among research participants, it was also the least favorable option among all. When I have asked whether disposable pads have caused them any kind of discomfort or disadvantage, the participants had lot to tell. First of all, as participants mention, the feeling of discomfort created by disposable pads is great enough to erase all the advantages it creates. The existence of a disposable pad felt as uncomfortable as “wearing more than one underwear” or “diapering”, especially if the pad is worn more than a couple of hours and super or extra flow models were used. The discomfort also leads to decreased mobility of menstruators during everyday activities such as walking or sleeping, not to mention the difficulties of doing sports and the impossibility of swimming. Secondly, since disposable pads are mostly composed of synthetic materials, they cause friction and sweating, which eventually creates irritation, rashes and allergies, increasing the discomfort. As the menstrual discharge spreads on the surface of the menstrual pads, menstruators mention a feeling of “bleeding too much” during the periods, which later turns out to be untrue. Participants also mention a feeling of “dirtiness” caused by menstrual pads, since pads lead the menstrual discharge to spread all around their vagina, making them constantly sitting on a “waste”, and since blood remaining for a couple of hours on these pads react with oxygen, the risks of unpleasant odor and bacterial or fungal infections raise.

What menstruators also found disturbing about disposable pads was their risk of revealing the periods, through the rustling sound they make during movements, becoming visible through tighter clothes thus necessitate wearing looser pieces, and having the potential of overflow or staining during heavy days. Furthermore, since menstrual pads requires being replaced in every three to four hours, menstruators who have already switched to disposable materials speak of the challenge of searching a bathroom in public space and the increased hazard of getting vaginal infections through not clean enough toilets. The need of changing a menstrual

pad in every three to four hours also means constantly buying menstrual pads, which means a significant expense for menstruators. Based on an approximate calculation with online prices (Orkid Platinum Normal Boy 1 Hijyenik Ped 14'lü, 2023), as of March 2023, the price of a single normal sized pad is 2 Turkish liras and a single night pad is 2.5 Turkish liras. Supposing a daily consumption of five normal and three night pads during a day and a period of seven days, the monthly cost of menstrual pad would be equal to 122.5 Turkish liras and yearly it would be equal to 1,470 Turkish liras.

So, do disposable menstrual pads causing such discomfort, decreased mobility, feeling of uncleanliness, potential health issues, and expenditure have any advantages to menstruators making them use this type of product for years? At this point, one of the factors making research participants having used menstrual pads for a long time or even still using is the fact that menstrual pads being the first products introduced to them. However, the key factor in the consumption of disposable menstrual products is the ease of maintenance. First of all, disposable menstrual pads neither require the sanitation and insertion process of a menstrual cup, nor the soaking, cleaning, and drying steps of a cloth pad or menstrual underwear. Secondly, especially in the cases of a change is needed in public bathrooms where toilets and sinks are in separate places, disposable pads are the lesser of the two evils compared to the tampons, since they do not require direct touch with the vaginal entrance, hence minimal hygiene issues do not cause much problem. Thirdly, compared to the insertion and fitting process of the tampons and menstrual cups, sticking a pad on an underwear and attaching the pad wings take less than ten seconds. Besides the eases of maintenance, disposable pads are the most available type of product in the category. As many research participants mention, they may reach menstrual pads easily than any other kind of product, since they are accessible in every supermarket, beauty shop, pharmacist, and even *bakkal*.

Here, I would like to link the ostensible ease of maintenance and availability advantages of the pad to the dominant menstrunormate of the Turkish society. Disposable pads, perceived as the product easiest to maintain in public, are considered to be so due to the “institutional nonacceptance” Young (2005) mentions within her reflections on the menstrual stigma. Since the default body is presumed to be not bleeding from the vagina, menstruators lack the time, space, and equipment they need to have a period at ease—within the hectic schedule of a university student living in a dormitory or frequently using the toilet cabins of the campus buildings, disposable pads become the optimal solution to continue their everyday routines without interruption. Indeed, the relation Owen (2022) recognized between the consumption of menstrual cup consumption and the neo-liberal conceptualization of the ordered

reproductive body, which sticks to the scheduled and organized daily routine, exists in a lesser degree within the relation between disposable pads and menstruating bodies. Unless a menstrual cup requiring to be emptied in every twelve hours is used, disposable pads seem to be the second product type that causes least friction in the daily life.

Besides causing a relatively minor interruption in menstruators' schedules, what makes the disposable pads as the default tool of collecting menstrual discharge is not being an intravaginal product such as tampons and menstrual cups. Considering the social construction of virginity in Turkish society, which is based on an hymenocentric conceptualization, imposes the necessity of preserving an intact hymen before marriage (see Parla, 2001). This societal norm drives young females who have engaged in pre-marital sex to choose maintaining "virginal facades" (Özyeğin, 2009) or even a consideration of hymenoplasty surgeries (see Cindoğlu, 1997; Güzel, 2020), on the purpose of not endangering familial or social support and marriageability.

When the long-existing hymenocentric conceptualization of the pre-marital virginity is evaluated within the rising conservatism in Turkey producing a "masculinist restoration" (Kandiyoti, 2013), which eventually leads to the proliferation of anti-gender discourses and rejection of feminist achievements (Ünal Abaday, 2021), opting for a product other than disposable pads becomes a challenge for menstruators. Indeed, in a society where the importance of an intact hymen is continuously emphasized, irrespectively of a history of penetrative sexual intercourse, consuming an intravaginal menstrual product may have its hardships, since as prior research shows, the prevalence of vaginismus in Turkish society could be correlated to this societal norm of virginity (see Aygüneş and Golombisky, 2020).

When all these are put together, the menstrunormate imposed within the Turkish society becomes as following: an individual, secretly bleeding in the public space designed for non-menstruating bodies, while minimally disrupting the daily routine of the neo-liberal order, and collecting the discharge after it flows outside the vaginal canal by force of adhering to neo-conservatist values. This menstrual norm also interacts with the market availability—similar to the product advertisements aired on televisions being only the ones of disposable pads, the supermarket shelves are filled with assorted single-use pad packages, as below photographs I have taken in a grocery store chain located in central Izmir, August 2021.



*Figure 3 Supermarket shelves filled with disposable pads*



*Figure 4 Tampons having a relatively small space on supermarket shelves*

Due to above-mentioned social meaning of using an intravaginal menstrual product, the research participants indicate their relatively late awareness, consideration and adoption of the tampons—while the average menarche age of the research participants is 12.5, the mean age of tampon adoption was 19. Many of the research participants indicated their encounters with tampons during their high school years on internet or in their elderly female acquaintances' drawers and conversations. Nevertheless, they remember themselves either finding putting something inside their vagina or trying to pull it out from there scary, or heard from their mothers or other elderly people that tampons are not for “them”, or “*genç kızlar*” or “unmarried women”. Considering the consumption of tampons mostly falls on the first couple of years of menstruators' undergraduate studies. Besides having fellow menstruators suggesting them using tampons since it provides more comfort and mobility, some affecting factors behind this consideration is having generated their own perspective on their bodies and sexuality, thus no longer being aligned with preserving an intact hymen before marriage. Although research participants comfortably claimed that they do not care for the hymenocentric virginity

conceptualization, both in the consideration of tampon and menstrual cup consumption, having a penetrative sexual intercourse appeared as a prerequisite for many. Grounding on the narratives of the several participants, this is not due to attaching importance to an intact hymen, yet having difficulties with touching their own bodies before a partner does. For instance, Barçın admits that not starting using tampons before her first penetrative sexual intercourse was not because of the existence of an intact hymen, but “herself not wanting to deal with down there”, while laughingly adding that the biggest favor that her preparatory year partner done to her was herself beginning to use tampons. At this point, the fact that research participants generally prefer to use tampons after having a vaginal-penile intercourse both reveals their reservations about being in touch with their own bodies and reproduces the societal perception of tampons indicating a prior sexual activity. Nevertheless, the challenges of using an intravaginal menstrual product are also evident in menstrual cups, indeed with new possibilities of intrafamilial crises, which will be mentioned in the following sections.

From the narratives of thirteen tampon-using menstruators among twenty-six participants, the most frequently mentioned advantage of this kind of product is the increased comfort compared to the disposable pads. During the periods maintained with tampons, the feelings of wetness and weight and the risks of irritation and rashes were reduced. The blood flow becomes more “controllable” and neither touches to the vulva, nor scatters around the whole genitals. Since the menstrual discharge is absorbed by the tampons inside the vagina, menstruators feel more comfortable during their movements, since the risks of leakage is minimized. The ease of mobility also makes some activities such as swimming or playing volleyball and basketball possible during the periods. As they mention their experiences with tampons, something attracting my attention within the statements of the menstruators was the appreciation of “non-menstrual feeling” they have whilst their tampon consumption. Although that meant a smoother menstrual period with lessened physical and emotional burden for many menstruators, the convenience of the non-menstrual feeling is also aligned with the social norm of the default body being a non-bleeding one.

On the other hand, one of the most prevalent disadvantages of the tampons was listed as the time and emotional labor required for getting used to the insertion and removal steps of tampon consumption, which becomes even harder during the light flow days, due to the friction caused by a relatively dry vaginal canal. Secondly, since tampons carry the risk of TSS, an uncommon but potentially deadly condition brought on by bacterial toxins proliferating within them, there is a necessity of replacing them every four to eight hours, varying on their absorbency level. At this point, the estimation and tracking of the right time to change tampons becomes a

challenge for menstruators and during the night time, tampon-consuming participants either set an alarm for every couple of hours, or switch to disposable pads. The string sewn to the tampons for an easy removal is another issue for the menstruators, since some of them are afraid of that string being coming off and making removal impossible, whereas others do not like that string getting dirty while they are urinating. The “institutional nonacceptance” becomes a problem for tampon consumption, since replacing a tampon becomes harder during the rapid pace of the daily life and quite prone to infections where toilettes and sinks are separated with cabins in public toilets. Finally, the necessity of replacing a tampon in every four to eight hours also results in a significant amount of expense. As of March 2023, based on an approximate calculation from online prices (Kotex Active Normal 16'lı Tampon, 2023), the price of a single normal tampon is 3.75 Turkish liras and a single super-absorbent tampon 4.85 Turkish liras. Supposing a daily consumption of four normal and two super-absorbent tampons during a day and a period of seven days, the monthly cost of tampons would make around 175 Turkish liras and yearly it would make 2100 Turkish liras.

## **5.6. Alternative Menstrual Product Consumption Practices**

As illuminated in the previous section, disposable menstrual products, namely disposable pads and tampons, are among the menstrual discharge collection methods used by the research participants commonly. Nevertheless, since these products do not suffice sixteen of the research participants to have a relatively comfortable period, they have switched to the alternative menstrual products. Since fourteen of the alternative menstrual product users have selected menstrual cup as the optimal product during their periods, only three of them used cloth pads or old rags to absorb their period, and ten considerers were mostly considering to try menstrual cups, the discussion in the following sections will be mostly on menstrual cups, unless it is stated as otherwise. In the first part of this section, I aim to specify how research participants first learnt that alternative products were existed, how they acquired information on them, and how users tried and got used to them. Later, in the following couple of sections, I purpose to illuminate the factors shaping the consideration, consumption or the non-consumption of alternative menstrual products, namely vegan and environmentalist practices, affordability and maintenance in public and private spaces, the hymenocentric conceptualization of virginity, and bodily knowledge, and vice versa. In the final part of this section, I will briefly touch upon how old menstrual stigma and new menstrual norms emerge through the consumption of alternative menstrual products.

### 5.6.1. Information Gathering Processes during Awareness and Adaptation of Alternative Menstrual Products

When I requested from the research participants to go back in time and recall the first moment they have learnt that they actually have menstrual product alternatives other than disposable pads and tampons, two kinds of information resources became prominent: social media and social circles. Among these two, online content was the more commonly addressed medium, both in terms of coming across to alternative product types and gathering more information about them. At this point, it can be said that the content of the social media accounts that the participants have already been following is also decisive. In fact, if participants have not learnt these alternatives through a random advertisement popping on their timelines, they encountered these products either on accounts opened for the spread of the feminist discourses or on accounts posting about environmentalist/vegan life. For example, Öykü remembers menstrual cups being praised in one of the social media accounts of the *Kız Başına* Platform, which is a project trying to break violence against women and empowering them, whereas Barçın recalls encountering alternative products in a website called *Trash is for Tossers*, where Zero Waste lifestyle is being encouraged due to initiative of individuals (“Nedir? Nasıl? Hedef?”, n.d.; “Welcome to Trash is for Tossers”, n.d.). Other participants mention randomly coming across alternative menstrual products through the YouTube vloggers they follow, news and entertainment websites such as Buzzfeed, some private Facebook pages such as *ODTÜ Kadın Dayanışması* [METU Women’s Solidarity], being tagged to a menstrual cup draw organized by a cup brand Instagram account, and websites selling ecologic products.

One of such online resources frequently mentioned by the research participants was the vlog recorded by lifestyle influencer Cansu Dengey and sexologist, consultant and educator Rayka Kumru, which is published in two parts, one in Dengey’s account under the name of “*What is menstrual cup, how to use it? Detailed Expression with Rayka Kumru*” and other in Kumru’s account as “*What came out of a tampon? Menstrual Products Test with Cansu Dengey*” (Cansu Dengey, 2020; Rayka Kumru, 2020). The former having nearly 800,000, and the latter having more than a million views since February 2020, these two videos come to the fore as being among the first Turkish-language content on menstrual cups and portrayal of all menstrual products in detail. In the video on menstrual cups, both Cansu and Rayka indicate being the monthly users of this product, and engage in a friendly yet educative discussion on what menstrual cup actually is, from which material are they made of, how they should be cleansed and maintained, and how the insertion and extraction processes take place. To illustrate the usage in detail, two friends show its size and diameter is compared to their hands, show

different folding methods, and even Rayka opens a book having a three-dimensional model of the female reproductive system and shows where menstrual cup needs to sit in. Towards the end of the video, Rayka makes a detailed explanation that menstrual cups will not lead to the ruption of an individual's hymen if it exists, yet it may cause some stretches of it like many other physical activities. Besides that, she also discloses that there is no one product fits for all, so it is perfectly alright if any other type of product is used. In the second video, Cansu and Rayka make an absorptance and capacity test with a regular disposable pad, a normal tampon, a menstrual cup, a cloth pad and a menstrual underwear, by applying each product cherry juice being equal to the average amount of menstrual discharge for a whole period. Later, they also break the tested disposable pad and tampon into pieces to see what is inside.

Cansu and Rayka's two-part video series become a reference guide in terms of curious menstruators exploring which menstrual products exist in the Turkish market and how they are used. First of all, they include the expert opinion combined with user experience in two entertaining and descriptive videos, which is ideal for menstruators who are trying to get the needed information as compactly as possible. Secondly, since the alternative menstrual products are still "alternatives" and not as widespread as the single-use ones, acquiring user experience from acquaintances may be not possible for every individual. Finally, behind the menstruators' decision to break their old habits and buy alternative products, the experiences of real users rather than product promotion videos were more effective, as research participants indicate. Therefore, if menstruators do not have any alternative product user friend around; YouTube videos, blog posts and Instagram posts where reliable influencers share candid content about these products stand out as an important source of information.

Before gathering user experiences through social media platforms, blog posts, shopping website comments, and online dictionary/discussion websites such as *Ekşisözlük*, *Süslüsözlük*, and *Kızlar Soruyor*<sup>24</sup> and skimming through Google search results, product websites, and some news articles, consumption of a specific alternative, the menstrual cup, seemed a little bit "inconceivable" for many research participants. Some of them had the anxieties of putting something seemingly larger than tampons inside of their vagina and constantly feeling them, whereas some of them wondered how something sitting there for twelve hours will not leak

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<sup>24</sup> As explained in the first footnote, *Ekşi Sözlük* (Sour Dictionary) is a website which could be described as "Wikipedia, a social network, and Reddit rolled into one" in sociologist Zeynep Tüfekçi's words (Kantrowitz, 2013) *Süslü Sözlük* (Fancy Dictionary) is a similar website, where registered users entry content on beauty and personal care related topics (*Süslü Sözlük*, n.d.). *Kızlar Soruyor*, first starting as a platform where girls direct questions toward boys, is an online platform where both genders anonymously address questions to each other and have an exchange of ideas in a wide variety of topics (Ulukan, 2020).



since they are absolutely sure of bleeding too much. Some of them could not picture completely sanitizing menstrual cups, whereas some of them did not like the idea of touching themselves, since they did not practice tampons as well before. However, together with other factors which will be mentioned in the following sessions, acquiring more and more information on products made considering menstrual cups easier.

The second resource, where research participants firstly encountered alternative products and gathered information from happens to be their social milieu. For instance, Rukiye mentions being introduced to alternative products within her theater group and later finding out that her elder sister living abroad have also started using menstrual cups. Several months later, Rukiye's sister not only brought her experiences with her cup to their hometown, but a menstrual cup for Rukiye as a birthday present. Ebrar learnt about alternative products through a discussion with a friend of hers, who is vegetarian and interested in ecologic consumption, and agreed with her on the high costs of pads both to the environment and their purses. Leyla recalls encountering a menstrual cup up for sale in the canteen of the humanities department in her university campus and later doing online research on it, whereas Süreyya has a friends circle asking each other "Are we buying cups through 'buy one get one' campaign this 8<sup>th</sup> March?" Gökşen and Şafak shared their menstrual cup consumption practices with each other as they bought their cups at about the same time, whereas Nehir's Instagram story posts to her close friends list influenced Barçın, who has later helped Helin in her purchase decision.

The existence of a friend using alternative products is so important that, from the considerers group of the research participants, despite being almost convinced by the benefits that such a switch might bring, one of the most prevalent reasons of not having already bought a menstrual cup is not having a close friend or family member using cups. Being able to direct the questions on alternative products to a real person may not only help menstruators to learn things they do not encounter on internet, as Gökşen once asked Şafak whether they feel when a menstrual cup is filled or not, but also in the cases where an urgent help is needed, such as Nil could not removing her menstrual cup and eventually requesting her boyfriends' help, since no other menstruator was around to give her tactics. Nevertheless, for some user participants, being alone in the adoption of alternative menstrual products was not an unsurmountable thing, since a greater purpose was already motivating them—which was protecting environment through eco-friendly consumption.

### **5.6.2. “To the environment before myself”: Ecologist and Vegan Consumption Practices**

The concern on the disposable menstrual product safety was among the pioneer driving factors of the Western menstrual activism, since the chlorine-bleaching process done on single-use pads and tampons were found to have connections with cancer, liver and skin damage, and reproductive health, whereas the toxic shock syndrome epidemic caused by the super-absorbent tampons during 1980s (see Bobel, 2008). The unsafety of disposable products was also articulated by the research participants, as being among the contributors behind their switch for an alternative. For instance, Zehra indicates coming across to a social media posting indicating the plastic content of single-use products and hence carrying potential harms to the human health, whereas Karaca recalls of her conviction of using the cloth pads sewn by her mother, since she experienced severe rashes due to nylon content of disposable pads. Indeed, Nil refers the only reason behind her non-consideration of tampons and straightly opting for alternative products as her unwillingness of taking the risk of toxic shock syndrome.

Nevertheless, in the decision of switching to alternative menstrual products, the existence of ecologist and vegan consumption practices were more influential, rather than the consideration of one's own health. Taking into account the destructive effect of disposable menstrual products on the environment, it seems inevitable that menstruators with environmental concerns should prioritize this issue over other things. Disposable products, containing cotton, rayon, or other synthetic fibers and plastic products like polyester, are made up as much as 90% of plastic, not to mention the outer packaging and plastic applicators of tampons (Harrison & Tyson, 2022). Single-use pads and their packs are predicted to decompose in landfills between 500 and 800 years, and even materials like plastic never really biodegrade. The waste of pads and tampons also cause to the nascency of microplastics, which is a danger for the marine life. Considering a consumption of between five thousand to fifteen thousand disposable products per individual during the menstruating years, the environmental impact becomes expansive. Besides these disposal issues, the production of these products results in great environmental impact due to fossil fuel depletion, carbon footprint and waste during production.

Although not being as explicit as above, the concern for environmental degradation in research participants statements was a driving factor of using alternative menstrual products. Nevertheless, the catalyst of the environmental-consciousness was the prior adoption of another philosophy and way of living, which is veganism. Advocating the eschewal of all

versions of animal exploitation and cruelty for nutrition, clothing and any other purpose and prioritizing the production and choice of animal-free options for the interest of animals, human beings and nature (“Definition of veganism”, n.d.), veganism was a popular lifestyle among the alternative menstrual product users interviewed for this research—ten of the sixteen participants in the user group were vegans, one of them was a vegetarian, and one of them was considering vegan diet, whereas only two of the ten participants in the considerer group was vegan, one of them has already bought a menstrual cup, yet could not try it yet.

The veganism/vegetarianism journey of the research participants generally starts within a year or two after they became university students. Although choosing vegan life may happen due to diverse reasons from health concerns to environmental-consciousness, the primary motivation of research participants behind interiorizing veganism comes forward as witnessing animal cruelty, whether through various media or real-life examples. For example, Eda, Neslihan and Nehir indicate starting vegan diet with concerns of animal ethics, after they adopted cats and dogs and started to feel as hypocrites, since they used to pet some animals, while continuing to eat others. Similarly, Melike mentions her milestone of choosing veganism as coming across the videos of Yulin Dog Meat Festival in China, being horrified after the footages, and started considering after a women’s comment under video as “You all eat cattle, what is the difference?”. Gökşen, on the other hand, recalls herself as a child constantly questioning the meat they eat during Eid al-Adha, watching some documentaries and reading *The Sexual Politics of Meat* by Carol Adams and eating her last portion of meat in the summer of her undergraduate education.

Probably one of the most intense witnessing of animal cruelty is experienced by Rukiye, since her family from a small district of southwestern Turkey lives off stockbreeding. Telling herself being traumatized from her childhood, Rukiye recognized she could not stand one day developing an emotional bond with an animal and the other day finding its meat on the table. Nevertheless, she continued eating animal product in small portions, until she had other people around her practicing vegan lifestyle and had her own home to cook vegan recipes:

*Rukiye (20, woman, user): Later, when I started university- by the way, my elder sister has also started a vegan or vegetarian diet when I was in the tenth grade and back then I could not understand my sister. I used to ask questions like “Why did you [started this], what happened?” She told me why and I put that at the back of my head and continued my life. When I started university, I had too much opportunities of researching diverse things here. And it is like this in my social circle. I first heard veganism and vegetarianism from my sister. Later, I recognized other people like that around me and I also starting researching. Because they were the people I value and trust, and if they made such a decision, I could not say “no” or “I will not be” and*

*put myself in the research process. I watched documentaries or something, and it was the December of 2019. I became a vegetarian in December 2019. I can say that I became vegan when I had my own house in 2021, in February 2021, February 2021... [After being asked of the reason behind that wait.] So that is completely due to the family structure. We have been already farming. Our milk, our butter, everything has been already made by my mother, it is organic once and for all, and when that happens, it is like... You know, they do not think greatly of me not eating meat. Well, I know how they reacted to my sister three years ago. [Laughs.] They were so upset because she was vegan and all...*

As apparent from Rukiye's above words, having a supportive social circle and her own kitchen to cook her vegan meals made her step from consideration to the adoption of the vegan lifestyle. This pattern was visible in the narratives of other participants as well—Neslihan mentioned following LGBT+ activists on social media and influenced by their postings since there were lots of vegans and vegetarians among them, whereas Nehir first thought of going vegan in eleventh grade, yet since her family did not allow her back then, she had to wait joining a vegan group in her campus, and Şafak started vegan diet as they made Erasmus student exchange program in Germany and vegan food was more common and affordable there. At this point, what becomes visible in terms of adopting vegan lifestyle and therefore being highly motivated for reusable alternatives are the existences of a supportive social and physical environment, the financial resources to maintain such lifestyle, and an ethical perspective.

Veganism, which research participants have adopted based on animal ethics, has implied a sensitivity and concern on the ecosystem, in which all animals, people and other living or non-living creatures—İrem and Eda describe environmental-consciousness being subsequent to veganism with the words of two things coming as “a package” or “a set”. After discontinuing the use of animal products, research participants indicate themselves starting following several social media accounts in which some tips on vegan life are published, and coming across content on environment-consciousness as well. Soon, these contents have begun to shape the everyday practices of the research participants. Rukiye mentions adopting a Zero Waste lifestyle and separating recyclable waste to be later picked up by the municipality officers, Zehra states discontinuing plastic consumption as much as she can do, Gökşen admits utilizing old items and plastic waste in DIY projects, and Nil and Asude speak of usually thrifting from second hand shops. Indeed, İrem defines herself as an environmental activist and mentions attending protests against hydroelectric power stations and promoting menstrual cups in the vegan/environmentalist blog she kept for about three years. All these environment-conscious acts are the part of a sense of responsibility, which are summarized in Zehra's below quotation:

Zehra (22, woman, user): *I think there is [a responsibility]... [Laughs.] Well, would I call it a responsibility, but I think I would call it so. I think there is, there should be. Even if it is not a responsibility, there should be a consciousness of not doing worse. Saying people “Do this, do that” may sound like insistence. It is okay, you cannot tell everyone “Do not eat meat” or “Do not buy plastic bottles”. Sometimes it [environment-harming products] is more accessible, sometimes you have to, you do it. But I think something needs to change, a consciousness needs to emerge, so I think responsibility comes with it.*

### 5.6.3. Affordability and Maintenance Challenges

As the beginning of year signals the financial performance reports being declared to the public, the headline-grabbing news of the domestic and foreign media was on the annual inflation rate in Turkey surpassing 83%, which is the highest record for two and a half decades (Thomas, 2022). The Inflation Research Group, which is consisted of independent researchers and scholars, predicted the annual rate for 2022 as 186.27%. Although the general tendency of central banks in combatting such high inflation rates is raising the interest rates, the economy staff of the ruling party JDP has promulgated an unorthodox fiscal policy of doing the opposite. The reduction of interest rates by 5% during 2022 has resulted in a drastical drop in the value of the Turkish lira, leading to the increasing costs of importing products from other countries—as of March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023, one United States dollar is equal to 18.98 Turkish liras and one Euro is equal to 20.26 Turkish liras (“Indicative Exchange Rates”, 2023). This levels of high inflation in Turkey, being a result of a currency and debt crisis of five years, is expected to be stay in the “abnormally high range” until traditional measures are implemented, as economy authorities indicate. The context-specific economic conditions are also stroked with the increasing prices around the world, caused by the pandemic-related supply shortages and the upsurged energy and food prices due to war in Ukraine (Thomas, *ibid.*).

The cost increases due to high inflation rates and lowering value of the Turkish lira have also influenced the menstrual product prices. Based on year-over-year increase calculations I made from the historical price data I acquired from a price comparison website, the selling price of a pack of fourteen regular sized disposable pads have risen from 28 to 48.90 Turkish liras with a 74.64% year-over-year increase, whereas the selling price of a package of sixteen normal absorbency tampons have risen from 29.90 to 59.90 Turkish liras with a 100.33% year-over-year increase (“Kotex Active Normal 16’lı Tampon”, 2023; “Orkid Platinum Normal Boy 1 Hijyenik Ped 14’lü, 2023). A similar picture was evident for the disposable menstrual products. The selling price of a regular size menstrual cup has raised from 187.99 to 449.99 Turkish liras with a 139.37% year-over-year increase and the selling price of a single cloth pad has raised from 15 to 26.50 Turkish liras with a 76.67% year-over-year increase (“Organicup

Model A Regl Kabı Menstrual Kap”, 2023; “Ponped Desenli Bambu Yıkanabilir Organik Kadın Pedi (Normal)”, 2023). Hence, the average annual price increase of the mentioned menstrual products equals to 97.07%, which is slightly under the 100% annual increase rate of the minimum wage in Turkey, and quite higher than the 47.05% annual increase rate of the undergraduate student loans given by the *Kredi ve Yurtlar Kurumu Genel Müdürlüğü* [General Directorate of Credit and Dormitories Agency] (see “Asgari ücret 2023 belli oldu! İşte zam oranı...”, 2022; “2023 KYK burs ve kredileri ne kadar? Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan 2023 KYK burs ve kredi miktarını açıkladı...”, 2022).

The alternative menstrual product prices, being increased rapidly due to the local economic factors, has imposed several challenges to the users during their consideration phase before purchasing the product they use. What was common in the statement of both users and considerers was the fact that the price of alternative menstrual products lasting for years are equivalent to the price of disposable menstrual products for about half a year, and therefore reusable options are more economical, but spending about 500 Turkish liras for a menstrual cup, 1000 Turkish liras for four or five pieces of menstrual underwear, and 300 Turkish liras for eight or ten cloth pads has not been a preferable situation. For many menstruators, paying relatively small amounts of money for disposable pads and tampons seem to be a more affordable option compared to paying hundreds of liras at one time. The below picture I have taken in November 2022, at a drugstore chain in one of the shopping centers of central İzmir, shows how menstrual cups are treated as luxury items due to their high prices compared to disposable items and attached with security tags like designer perfumes.



Figure 5 Menstrual cups with security tags on drugstore shelves

Aligned with this situation, Öykü mentions being able to buy a menstrual cup for herself only after a brand has announced a “buy one get one” campaign and she bought her cup with one

of her friends. Mentioning paying the actual list price of a cup was not possible for her back then, paying the half-price was more negligible and considered as a kind of “investment for herself”. Neslihan watched the prices of menstrual cups for a year, recognized that they are constantly increasing, made up her mind with the argument of “economy is very bad, if I do not buy this product now, I will not be able to buy it forever”, and finally bought herself the cup of a relatively cheaper local brand. Nil stated putting some money by for months to finally be able to buy a menstrual cup, whereas Rukiye indicates evading a potential expense thanks to her sister bringing a cup for her from abroad.

The high prices of alternative menstrual products also pose an obstacle for the considerers, despite they are all convinced of the advantages they may bring. Asude indicates the risk of not getting used to cup usage, that the price of a menstrual cup is not an amount to be “thrown in the trash” and she barely makes both ends meet as a university student. Similarly, Kayra recalls being shocked of the menstrual underwear prices and they could not give it a try although they want it, since they are not earning their own money currently. Leyla also waits for becoming a salaried employee to purchase an alternative menstrual product, because she is a student being dependent on their parents and she already gets too much money from them.

Indeed, Gökşen and Şafak, the only participants who started using menstrual cups and then quit, had to give up this practice because the former dropped it in the trash and the latter in the toilet bowl, and the sole reason why they cannot buy a new cup is the expensiveness of cups in Turkey, as Şafak’s below words explain:

Şafak (22, genderfluid, user): *In Europe, there are some very cheap brands which do not exist in Turkey. The brands entering in Turkey, the popular ones in Turkey were expensive in Europe too. Therefore, when I was in Erasmus, I did not consider buying them either. I used to think like “I cannot buy it”. After I found something below 10 Euros, something like 6 or 8 Euros, maybe it was in sale as I remember... I purchased a cheap thing there, saying “Wow, it has been a nice coincidence”. Actually, if these products were sold in Turkey, I would buy that, I would buy it in its price converted to Turkish liras. But since the brands sold in Turkey are the most popular and more expensive brands— probably they are better, the opening inside is easier. I have a problem with spending that money but I can still buy it, so I am thinking of getting it one day. [Laughs.] It is because the fact that, since I received scholarship there in Euros, I did not hesitate buying it there. Now, I will.*

While it is unjust that the participant menstruators cannot experience a natural and inevitable bodily process in comfort with an affordable alternative, another injustice on the flip side of the coin is millions who cannot reach any kind of menstrual products due to the rising cost of living and decreasing value of the Turkish lira. Menstrual poverty, defined as being unable to

reach basic needs such as period products, water, soap, and toilets during the menstrual flow, has become a challenge for Turkish menstruators (Yılmaz, 2022). As the research conducted by the Deep Poverty Network shows, 82% of the Turkish women could not reach menstrual pads during the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas the survey of We Need to Talk Association shows that 16.3% of the participants do not always have access to the clean water and 21.9% of them to toilet papers (“Derin Yoksulluk Ağı: Kadınların yüzde 82’si hijyenik pede erişemiyor”, 2022; Yılmaz, 2022). In the lack of menstrual products, menstruators opt for unhygienic solutions such as seasonal agricultural workers using leaves with soil to provide absorbency and university students having to maintain their periods with rags and napkins (“Derin Yoksulluk Ağı: Kadınların yüzde 82’si hijyenik pede erişemiyor”, 2022; Kaplan, 2022). Although after March 2022 the tax on menstrual products is reduced to 8% through a general amendment on several hygiene and paper products (“Önemli Bir Kazanım: Menstrüel Ürünlerde KDV Yüzde 8’e İndirildi”, 2022), a tax decrease of 10% would eventually appear as a small amount, when the rapid pace of inflation is considered. Considering all these facts on menstrual poverty, research participants who are able to use alternative options, and even the ones regularly reaching to disposable products, form a “fortunate minority”. Nevertheless, the hesitance they face during the purchase of the alternative goods is not completely unconnected with the social negligence of menstrual poverty.

In addition to the affordability challenge of alternative menstrual products, one of the problems faced by individuals who use or intend to use these products is the maintenance process of them. Unlike pads and tampons, being replaced and thrown to the trash in less than ten seconds, alternative options require extra work before and after usage. For instance, before insertion in the first day of the monthly flow, menstrual cups should be sanitized in a pot of boiling water for three to five minutes. After being used up to twelve hours, the cup should be removed, emptied, swilled out with tap water and reinserted. At the end of the period, the menstrual cup should be sanitized in boiling water again (AllMatters Türkiye (OrganiCup), 2021). On the other hand, cloth pads should be soaked in a bowl of cold water for an hour and menstrual underwear should be bathed in running water, before machine or hand washing (Pamucco, 2019; “Kullanım ve Bakım Rehberi”, n.d.).

The maintenance processes of the above-mentioned menstrual products intimidate several considerers and lead many users to develop new routines and tactics to have a comfortable and smooth alternative menstrual product usage. The first challenge that users experience and considerers are afraid of experiencing is the sanitization of alternative products in public places, which is a problem caused by the “institutional nonacceptance”, the deficiency of time,



space and equipment required to have a period at ease and without revealing the menstruation (see Young, 2005). Staying in dormitories was a common accommodation among research participants and many of them complained about the difficulties of boiling a cup in the shared kitchen which is not always so clean and then going to the shared bathrooms with little surface contact, in order to minimize the risks of contamination. Flush toilets in separate cabins, which are the common types of toilets in dormitories and other public spaces, are another source of frustration for research participants, since the sinks being outside the lavatory disable the washing of cups or bloody hands, and cleaning cups through bidet nozzles are prone to contamination and dropping cups in the toilet bowl.

Due to maintenance challenges mentioned above, Neslihan tells of being frustrated in outdoors during the first few months of her cup consumption and remembers looking for squatting toilets in public spaces, since rinsing the cups and cleaning any blood drops on the floor is easier with the sink and stoup existing in this type of toilets. İrem, on the other hand, chose to emptying the cup in the shower during the years she stayed at the dormitory. Melike, a considerer of alternatives who has already bought a cup, yet could not try it, postpones her consumption to the days when she will have her own home, since the shared kitchen of her dormitory is “filthy” and hence not appropriate for sanitization.

The second challenge that maintenance of the alternative menstrual products bring to the users is the anxiety of coming across to a dormitory mate during the sanitization process, as Şafak and Azra’s cautious maintenance steps in shared kitchens and bathrooms reveal:

Şafak (22, genderfluid, user): *My main reservation- the first reservation was toilets without a sink. So, I did not have the opportunity of rinsing and reinserting it. [...] Well, I used to enter [to lavatory] with an alcohol-free wet wipe and wipe it with that during the removal and insertion process. I did not used to rinse it each and every time. When it [period] was over, I remember that- the bathroom was for eight people, I used to get out, no one was there- so I already wiped it. My first concern was that it [cup] did not look that way. I used to make sure that no one is around, if someone was there, I tried to finish it quickly. But as I boil it, I did not have much reservations. Because it is clean now, I washed it, I soaped it... Also, not everyone knew what the product is. So, I did not have much reservation. [...] For example, I used to stay in dormitory during Erasmus as well, but since the sink was at the same place with the toilet seat, I did not have any problems there. I did not have any problems in terms of boiling it either. We used to share a kitchen as three people. I did not have [the thought of] “They will ask this, what should I tell?” in my mind back then.*

Azra (22, woman, user): *I was a little bit embarrassed, but why? After all, I put it inside me, and when you think about it with food, food and menstrual cup together, it can be disgusting... Well, I was scared of having a reaction like “What is this, what are you doing in the kitchen, why do you boil it here?”. I was afraid that I would get*

*a reaction because it is not hygienic. But no one approached and asked me “What is that?”. [...] Besides that I should tell- okay, this might sound a little weird... We use shared bathroom. I do not want to rinse it [menstrual cup] with the bidet nozzle of the flush toilet. [...] I empty the cup into the toilet. Then I go out, rinse that bloody thing in the sink without soapless water, go back, and insert. [After being asked whether she came across someone while doing this.] No. Well, it is like that, I make an effort not to come across someone. Because I really do not want to see something that is covered with blood on someone’s hand. I am doing this out of respect, so that someone does not get uncomfortable.*

Maintaining alternative products in public spaces such as dormitories does not only imply constantly being subject to the inadequate facilities as individuals in cyclical bodies, but also facing the risk of being stigmatized by other people. Throwing cloth pads and menstrual underwear previously soaked in dark-reddish water into the washing machine or leaving the lavatory with a bloody menstrual cup would actually mean leaving the “menstrual closet” as well, since alternative product using individuals fail to hide a bodily process labeled as “dirty, disgusting, defiling” (Young, 2005, p. 107). Even if users of alternative products disclose their consumption to others having periods or not having them, and in this way cause a crack in the menstrual stigma, they remain adhered to not directly showing them, since that would have more serious outcomes.

In terms of the availability and maintenance of the alternative goods, Nil claims that menstrual cups “are not for everyone”, since a stabilized home environment, a kitchen to boil them easily, and a place for insertion and removal are the prerequisites. Even though Barçın accommodates a flat with her friends, she admits keeping a one-and-a-half-liter water bottle in the bathroom to rinse her cup after every twelve hours, since she does not trust the safety of the tap water pouring from the old pipes of her home in 100. Yıl district.

In short, just as Virginia Woolf claims that a woman needs money and a room of her own to write fiction (Woolf [1929] 2012), a menstruator needs the money and a room which will render possible the purchasing and maintenance of alternative products, and hence having the possibility of experiencing a new period. Considering the reluctance of the neo-liberal and neo-conservatist state bodies in remediating the product availability issues, this need will remain to be an issue for Turkish menstruators.

#### **5.6.4. “Shame on you, mom!”: Virginité and Virginal Facades**

While the public visibility of all period products signals the menstruating status of the individuals and hence crosses the lines drawn with menstrual stigma, intravaginal menstrual

products, such as tampons and menstrual cups, also may bear the meanings evoking another taboo in the Turkish society, which is the hymenocentric conceptualization of virginity. As I have mentioned in the menstruating subject section within the second chapter of this thesis, in a context where the difference between *kadın* and *kız* is being read from the subjects' sexual behavior and not an age difference, virginity as a social construction and a significant concept within the gender issue in Turkey, influences the menstrual product choices and consumption practices.

Through the citizen-women image being communicated with the gender ideology of Turkish nationalism, the women of the new republic were demanded to be modern and intellectual citizens, yet act virtuously and chastely while enjoying their new freedoms, including the removal of the physical veil as a social obstacle (Parla, 2001). This persona of Turkish woman has encountered myriad messages, which often clash with each other, such as the shift to the liberal market economy, emergence of Islamization, speeding globalization, European Union harmonization policies affecting the gender policies of the Turkish government (Özyeğin, 2009). Especially after the turn of 21<sup>st</sup> century, an ever-growing local feminist and LGBT+ movement have been coexisting with the long-haul effects of these forces, besides the masculinist restoration, aiming to cause a setback to these movements (see Parla, 2001; Kandiyoti, 2013; Şansal, 2021; Ünal Abaday, 2021). Within the Turkish society, where such heterogenous values on female sexuality are disseminated, young and secular Turkish women incline choosing obscure identities on their virginity through virginal facades (Özyeğin, 2009). Although this younger generation do not share the traditional values of virginity, which means preserving an intact hymen until marriage, sexually active young women benefit from virginal facades, in order not to be mentioned by their peers and partners with ungracious characteristics and abstain any humiliating and reaction by their families. Therefore, development and perpetuation of two separate identities in different social spaces of “home” and “away from home” becomes necessary to protect one's social acceptability (Scalco, 2020). In that case, the emergence of young women's double-lives is also connected to whether their families put importance on the virginity or not. Parents who are aligned with this prevailing attitude may lead to consequences varying from decreased emotional support to the suicide of their children, whereas the ones who do not adopt the traditional values of virginity may still show some concern on the potential ostracization of their children (see Parla, 2001; Özyeğin, 2009; Yalçın, Arıcıoğlu & Malkoç, 2012; Aygüneş & Golombisky, 2020).

The research participants statements were in line with the prior research, which is pointing out to the disappearing importance of the hymenocentric conceptualization of virginity. Eda, for

instance, declared having no reservations on the hymen as she already knew that its role is limited to “protecting girls from the bacteria until a certain age”, whereas Derya labels hymen as an exaggerated body part, which indeed functions as a protective barrier against infections. Nevertheless, the hymenocentric conceptualization of virginity has been imposed to the research participants numerous times, especially when they uttered their wonder of tampon consumption during their teenage years. In such memories of the participants, there has been an elderly female family member, usually a mother, warning against the use of tampons with the words “*kızlığın bozulur*” (you may become deflorated), “*öyle şeyler kullanılmaz*” (such goods cannot be used), and “it is not for you/girls”. As Rukiye points out, due this attitude, the “right product” for young girls become disposable pads. Therefore, consumption of intravaginal products had become something to be put aside until the perspective shift on virginity during takes place during the late adolescence and young adulthood of the menstruators. Following the abandonment of traditional values on virginity, some research participants mention their trials of tampon usage, due to practical reasons such as avoiding the rashes on vulva or being able to swim during periods. These consumption practices mostly occur in the “away from home” social space, such as a friend’s flat or a girl-to-girl holiday destination.

As research participants come back “home”, their willingness to reveal their consumption of intravaginal menstrual product consumption practices depends on the potential reactions they may receive from their household. In cases of tampons, the consumption practice is relatively more concealable, as Şafak put their tampons to an old disposable pad package. However, since menstrual cups require a sanitation process in the kitchen, the obfuscation of cup consumption becomes harder. Hence Melike, who faced with her mother’s outrage after finding out her tampon consumption, and now postpones menstrual cup consumption to a time when she has her own home. On the other hand Azra, having received a more manageable reaction from her mother and aunts, continues cup consumption at her family home. These two examples picture the variety of reactions one may receive from their family members:

Melike (22, woman, considerer): *I had a huge moment with my mother once. I was considering using tampons and later I did. I was away back then, not in my home. Later, I came back to Turkey. We were supposed to go to a vacation with my family, I was expecting my period probably, and I did some shopping. My mom asked me something like “Oh, what have you bought?”, later saw the tampons and all hell broke loose. An extremely long, weeklong chaos has begun. [After being asked why her mother was mad at her.] Because- well, first she did not frankly say why she was mad at me. Actually, she never did. But in my mothers’ words, “People who are not married”- I already remember that, I found a tampon at my mother’s drawer when I was a kid. I asked what this is and she answered ‘married women use that’. [Laughs.] So, since she thought that product could not be used by a virgin and since she became*

worried on my usage might have caused a damage on my hymen. In fact, I have a doctor cousin and she talked with them. They said “I wish she had not used it”. [Laughs.] It was actually a really chaotic process. I remember that, I remember her breaking down in the shopping center, as she saw tampons in my shopping bag. Later she went and bought some pads. [After being asked what happened next.] I remembered so many things... We came back home; we were packaging for the holiday. My mother was packing some things, and at the same time grumbling, shouting, things like that... She even said “I am not your mother anymore”, she said “If you have used it, who knows what else you have done”. She came to my home while I was crying, she shut the curtains so the neighbors could not see. By the way, that was a strange behavior, because we were living in a building complex, the view was open and we were at the eleventh floor. I do not know which neighbor would see. [...] I remember being very upset to that. I was seventeen years old then.

Azra (22, woman, user): *There is a perception in my family. If you are using tampons, “Wow, you are not virgin, loose women use tampons”. My mother cannot even look at my menstrual cup! [Laughs.] Well, it is such a big thing, there is “Never tell anyone you are using it, they may find out you are not a virgin”. [...] I only did not tell it to my grandmother. Well, my mom did not want me to tell, since she may find out that I am not a virgin anymore. She says “Virgins cannot use that”, even if I have said “Yes, they can”... I told my mom, everyone. Because it was an exciting thing. My mom got mad at me; I became upset. But I mean, the world is becoming such a place now, mom, and that is what you have to learn. [A bittersweet smile.] I told it after I bought it, because if I told that before she would challenge it. [...] I did not tell anybody, if I would they would object it, like “Rubbish, what do you need something like this”... I told it on the phone, she was like “What is that my daughter?”, exactly, “What is that my daughter?”. I replied, “I have mentioned you before, it is made of medical silicone, you put it there”, and I got something like “How do you insert it there, I cannot believe you!”, like “Do not be silly, why do you do something like that!”, like “Why bother, what a strange daughter I have!”. I received similar reactions from my aunt as well, “Azra, what a strange person are you, we always see thing like that from you, I am a woman at that age and never heard of it.*

At this point, the attitudes of the participants on the use of intravaginal menstrual product are divided into two, according to the possible reactions of their households, mainly their parents, just like it does for Melike and Azra. Intravaginal product users or considerers who most likely “get away cheap” with a slight humiliation and alienation from their family members, like Azra, talk about the products to their families, explain that a hymenocentric understanding of virginity has no medical foundation, or imply that the concept of virginity is not important to them or will not be important for the partners they may come in their lives in the future, since they would not consider marrying someone who is caring about the existence of an intact hymen.

On the other hand, the ones predicting the risk of psychological violence, loss of emotional support, or rejection from their family members or future partners, postponing the purchase of these products or not considering it at all are among the approaches. For example, Leyla does not regard menstrual cup consumption for herself since it may mean being sexually active for

people around her, just like a pack of contraceptive pills used for hormonal purposes would mean having a regular sex life for many. Hence, not being labeled as a “*kolay kız*” [frivolous girl] by her boyfriend and not frighten her family members, she seeks to remain in line with the dominant discourse of virginity. The second way of avoiding the potentially agonizing reactions of the family members is to adopt “virginal facades” when they are “at home”. For instance, Zehra narrates her reaction after her mother seeing her tampon and asking “Are you not a virgin?” with the equivocal answer of “Shame on you mom!”, leaving the meaning to the interpretation of her mother as “Shame on you mom, of course I am a virgin.” and “Shame on you mom, of course I am not a virgin.”. Maintaining the menstrual cup consumption practice secretly is another method of obscuring identities on research participants virginity, as Şafak and Dilşad wait for their parents to leave home for their work in the mornings and later go to the kitchen to sanitize their menstrual cups, and hence, do not let their family know their menstrual cup consumption. While hiding intravaginal menstrual product consumption from mothers and other female family members requires disinfecting them while nobody is around or hiding the products in hidden depths of the drawers, maintaining virginal facades in the presence of fathers or male household is apparently much easier, due to men keeping themselves apart from the menstruation processes of their daughters or sisters, and even being not aware of a menstrual product any other than disposable pads.

In conclusion, although the younger generation of menstruators show an inclination to the rejection of the traditional meanings attached to hymen, virginity, and female sexuality, in a context where the honor and shame notions are conceptualized around sexuality and blood stain on the bedsheets on a nuptial night carries a meaning completely different than the blood stains on one’s cloths due to menstrual flow, the consumption of intravaginal menstrual products becomes a challenging practice for many. First of all, unmarried young menstruators may not use intravaginal products, such as tampons, menstrual cups, or menstrual discs, to abstain any harm on their hymen before they get married. The motivation behind that may be the adoption of hymenocentric virginity conceptualization in the Turkish context, or maintaining virginal facades to elude any ostracization from their families, partners, or friends. Besides that, in a society that female genitals are considered to be “the seat of shame” (Delaney, 1987, p. 39) and protection of an intact hymen is communicated to the unmarried females, one touching at their vagina, being in contact with its liquids, and placing an object inside it may become a complicated matter for menstruators, which will be among the points referred in the next section.

### **5.6.5. Learning and Making Peace with the Menstruating Body**

As I have drawn the picture in the previous chapters, living in a cyclical body indicates producing a stigmatizing mark, which is the menstrual discharge (see Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Young, 2005). Despite the contemporary civilizations' ostensible standpoint in terms of gender equality, the marginalization of menstruation only becomes avertible if periods remain hidden, or in other words, they are experienced in a closet (Sedgwick 1990; Young 2005). As Kristeva (1982) formulates in her "theory of abjection", the anxiety of being separated by the care of the mother is generalized to everyone living in a female body and what separates the female from the male becomes the menstrual discharge (Young, *ibid.*). To avoid this anxiety, societies draw strict lines between the feminine and the masculine, which results in the menstruators' acting as non-menstruators through the following of the "menstrual etiquette" (Laws, 1990).

In addition to the alienated position that cyclical bodies hold due to the menstrual stigma, the sexuality-based notions of honor and shame in Turkish society leads to a conceptualization of female body, which becomes valued according to its ability "to guarantee the security of a man's seed" (Delaney, 1987, p. 39). This restrictedness of female sexuality experiences further tension as the dominant gender ideology in Turkey, which is imposed by the political power practicing a composite of neo-liberal, neo-conservative, authoritarian, nationalist, pro-Islamist, familialist, pro-natalist, and anti-feminist policies (see Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011; Dedeoğlu, 2013; Acar & Altunok, 2013; Kandiyoti, 2016; Cindoğlu & Ünal, 2017; Ünal Abaday, 2021) obstructs the possibilities of being connected with the menstrual body, building an either neutral or positive relationship with it, or accumulating knowledge on it. In fact, within this new gender policy, the educational sessions on menstruation reproduce the menstrual silence in the presence of non-menstruators and are limited to the how to use a disposable pad correctly. Furthermore, the public visibility of menstruation or menstrual product advertisements results in the instrumentalization of period in the populist, conservatist, nationalist, anti-feminist, and anti-gender discourses of the pro-government actors. Finally, the needs and problems of cyclical bodies remain ignored in the family-oriented welfare policies (see Chapter 2.3).

Albeit living in a society where cyclical bodies experience stigmatization and oppression, the adoption of alternative menstrual product consumption practices has the potential of illuminating the unknowns for research participants about their bodies and paved the way for them to establish a new, more positive or neutral language in their communication with their

bodies. These information-gathering and normalization processes have emerged both for the menstrual blood and cyclical bodies. For instance, unlike disposable pads, which absorb menses and thus spread the blood widely on the surface, or tampons bulging after all the liquids they take in, menstrual cups collect the discharge as it leaves the vaginal canal, without any contact with an absorbent material. Thus, the menstrual discharge in cups becomes visible, smellable, and touchable for the menstruators.

A commonly mentioned feeling of menstrual cup users about their first cycle with this product has been “astonishment”—participants usually surprised by how less they bleed, which corresponds to roughly two to three tablespoons of liquid for the whole period (“Heavy Menstrual Bleeding”, 2022). Some research participants mentioned that they have realized the menstrual discharge was indeed odorless and found out that disposable options cause that foul smell due to being composed of synthetical materials and prone to bacterial growth, doing some online research afterwards. Furthermore, since menstrual cups enable an observation on the discharge, cup users begun examining their flow throughout the cycle and become mesmerized of the color and texture changes, besides its heterogeneity.

Enabling the above realizations, the consumption of alternative products has become a practice that equips menstruators with new information about their menses that they have not learnt from their family members, friends or educators, and that they have not been curious about before, because of the stigmatization of the periods. Gathering the information on the texture, smell, and appearance of the periods bears significant importance, since they provide meaningful information on one’s menstruation. For instance, increased amount of discharge may be a symptom of fibroids, endometriosis, pelvic inflammatory disease, and rarely womb cancer, whereas lightened periods may signal thyroid dysfunction, polycystic ovary syndrome, perimenopause and Cushing’s syndrome (“Heavy Menstrual Bleeding”, 2022; Heningsman, 2021). Even if there is no underlying medical condition, menstrual flow amount may fluctuate with increasing stress levels. Hence, being able to see up to which line the menstrual discharge is piled up on a menstrual cup may indicate whether menstruators have taken good care of themselves in the past month or not.

The byproduct of being able to see, smell and touch menstrual discharge, recognizing that it was not actually that severe, stinky, and homogenous as it once thought to be, and gathering information on it, was the normalization, or so to say, destigmatization of the menstruation. Such normalization and destigmatization patterns were familiar and evident in the experiences of menstrual activists, who are constantly endeavoring the adoption of these alternatives due



to environmentalist, feminist, and anti-capitalist objectives, and indeed taken part in the development processes of such products (see Bobel 2010). The feminist-spiritualists of this activism, inclining to the consumption of natural materials such as sea sponges to be more connected with their bodies and the nature, mention being more “in touch” with their bodies unlike the menstruation-averse sense the single-use goods products bring; whereas the radical menstruator group share the adoption of “messy” cloths and cups and show that there is nothing to be afraid, embarrassed, or disgusted of, differently from what disposable product manufacturers have been dictating (Bobel, 2006; Bobel, 2010).

Similar moments of period normalization and destigmatization were frequently mentioned by the research participants. For instance, Neslihan, who used to carefully clean her vulva during the times she was using disposable pads in order not to cause a stain on her underwear, started to “accept” her menstrual discharge during cup consumption, since a little amount of blood there helps an easier insertion. Karaca, who had a negative attitude towards her period since it meant growing up for her and started using cloth pads at an age as early as eleven, thinks that bathing her cloth pads in running water may have contributed her later understanding of periods as not being much different from her arm or hand being scratched and bled. Şafak’s below narrative on altering views after cup consumption illuminates how single-use and alternative products provide a different experience, since the former restrains the contact with one’s own body and discharges through its disposability and designed, packaged and distributed in a context of shame and secrecy, which result in menstrual aversiveness (see Long, 1999):

Şafak (22, genderfluid, user): *It was a normal thing in my head, but there was something- actually, it used to be, I recognized it much later. Well, eventually blood is a dirty thing, a discharge, it smells, therefore we need to dispose it as fast as we can. I mean, it used to be like something we need to get rid of somehow. Well, in my mind, it used to be something like we should not touch and dispose it as contact-free as we can. But after buying [a cup] I got to “Yes, there might be blood on our hands, it would not be the end of the world, it is something of our body”... I used to be something less [tolerant] on that matter. In terms of menstruating and bleeding, [I came from] “Oh my God, it flows, it is everywhere”, to less minding it. Because when it flows, it flows with the cup as well. I mean, it became more okay. Touching it a little, being in relation with it, seeing- I guess it was like a process of getting closer to myself.*

The secondary enlightenment that alternative menstrual product –specifically menstrual cup– consumption brings to the users was getting closer to their own bodies and how it works, as Şafak’s above words signal. Through the consumption of menstrual cups, alternative product users mention not only recognizing the unique texture, smell and amount of their menstrual blood and so normalize their periods, but also learning and recognizing the parts of their

reproductive system and thus familiarizing with their own bodies. An example of acquiring knowledge on the female reproductive system through the use of a menstrual cup occurs as the question of “What if the cup gets lost inside of me?” appears in menstruators’ minds. After this question is directed to a cup user friend or typed into Google or YouTube search bar, menstruators admit learning what a cervix is. Being a narrow structure under the uterus and above the vaginal canal (see Figure 1 in Chapter 2.1), cervix is the point where a fetus, menstrual discharge or uterine lining leave the womb (Rosas, 2020). Since cervix divides the vagina and the uterus by its nature, it also becomes the highest point of where a menstrual cup, disk or tampon might go.

As they narrate their research and consideration process, menstruators using cups mention being relieved of such answers, besides learning how their bodies work. Nil, for instance, describes her pre-existing knowledge of the cervix next to nothing, as she had once asked herself “Is there such a thing?” and recalls being upset because of her prior ignorance. Furthermore, she adds discovering her current cup is not the perfect match for her while practicing the cup consumption and continuing her online research, since she also learnt that her long cervical length requires a longer cup.

Öykü, on the other hand, indicates being hesitant of cup consumption at first, but after finding out that the cervix moves a lower position during periods and reaching her cup will not as hard as she thought, she became more comfortable in using her cup. Eda remembers having difficulties while inserting her cup, yet after consulting one of her doctor friends and opening an anatomy book together, she learnt that the vaginal canal was not 90-degrees vertical, but a little bit tilted towards the tailbone, so she should insert the cup accordingly. Probably one of the most striking enlightenments is experienced by Nehir, when she as a vegan and environmentalist set her mind to using cups and did research on it:

Nehir (21, woman, user): *At least I found out that it could not get lost inside! [Laughs.] Especially you become more “hand in glove” with the vagina, because you require more research. What is where, so and so... For example, it might sound a little benightedly but I did not know that, I did not know that urine comes from a different spot, it was not thought to me and I was like shocked. In fact, my mom did not know it either, because when I told it [using a cup] she asked “What if you need to go to bathroom?”. I said “It comes from different places”, and she was like “What?”. I mean, you are a fifty-year-old woman, how could you not know! We both did not know... Even this was a huge awareness. Generally, that place belongs to my body a huckleberry more and I can control that place as well. For example, if I get comfortable, I can insert it easier or remove it easier. Because that place is also an extension of my body and what I feel, what I think makes so much difference.*

Acquiring more knowledge on and constantly being in touch with them have also caused a sort of normalization of cyclical bodies, which have always been in a taboo condition through honor, shame and virginity notions of the Turkish society, and constantly repressed under the state hegemony of gendered bodies in the consolidation of their base through a populist, anti-gender and anti-feminist rhetoric. Within this social context and political climate, alternative product consumption practices pave the way for menstruators to find out what is “down there” and experience a normalization or affirmation of their bodies, emotions, and even sexualities. Many menstrual cup users indicated that a practice once being so unimaginable, since it involves touching themselves, became a monthly habit for them through routinization. Menstruators share their experiences of feeling more knowledgeable of their bodies and how it works, become more able to detect any changes of it, and even be more self-confident with their sexualities, as Eda mentions now being able to warn her boyfriend as “no, not there” during the sexual intercourse. The below narratives also exemplify the changing relationships with cyclical bodies:

Rukiye (20, woman, user): *When I was in high school, I used to think how impossible or undoable it was to put something inside the vagina, to take something in, but now, for example, after using this, my taboos have been broken a lot and now I am very aware of my own body. I know where my vagina is, I am aware of my biological makeup and I am not shy about it. I am much more comfortable while talking about it or doing something. Now, I have some sort of taboo relief in terms of using the vagina. [After being asked the root of such a taboo.] Well, because there are women and things like namus and your genitals are your taboo areas and there is something like you should not touch them, nobody should touch or see them. Yeah, as I say, I noticed my own body. I know what I have where, but I have never looked at myself in that sense until the end of high school and this is a deficiency, actually. A high-schooler needs to know their bodies, and we have classes on that but you never look yourself that way, because it is taboo. But how wrong it is...*

Şafak (22, genderfluid, user): *In my prior sexual encounters- well, I do not know, maybe it is unrelated, maybe I just grew up and was not ready back then. I mean, I used to feel more pain, sometimes it would not happen, I had to be drunk, even if I was drunk, I used to experience pain during that, penetration... There was something like that. Later, I had dated for a long time with a guy and after menstrual cup- so, is it related? There is a correlation, I do not know whether it is a causation but there were moments it felt easier, I recognized it worked easier in the later penetrations. I recognized it became less of a problem and I was not experiencing that much physical pain anymore.*

On the other side, while I was conducting the interviews with the users who have passed only two or three periods with their cups and the considerers, the restricted, stigmatized and alien condition of the cyclical bodies were more palpable in the narratives they share, words they chose, their voices rumbling, and the shy smiles in their faces. Two menstruators among the

research participants, who are at the third period with their menstrual cups, portray the awkward feeling of touching themselves during the adoption of this new practice. Azra, who watched tons of videos on YouTube where long-term cup users share their experiences, indicated being fooled on the ease of usage, since the insertion and removal processes were far more difficult than she once heard of. Furthermore, despite being more comfortable on touching her vulva, she mentions seeing there is still a discomfortable thing. Similarly Zehra, who mentions “growing up while being uncomfortable in her own skin” due to the oppressed sexuality of the female body in the milieu she was brought up, narrates her experiences like following:

*Zehra (22, woman, user): I am not accustomed of that, to be honest... I am still not, I mean, to put something inside me like this, to touch myself like that, because it is taboo. It is still a taboo, it has been, touching myself, touching there- in fact, there used to be a thing like “Oh, it will get ruined, you may become deflowered” ... Now, I do not have such worries but it is like I am doing something I am not supposed to do, or I am playing with something very delicate, or I feel sick. Actually, it is my own body, but... [...] Recently, in my last period actually, I get tired of that and I said “Why I cannot do this again?”. There was a suggestion of someone I followed on Instagram. It was a suggestion like that, “First of all, learn about your vagina with your finger in the shower, try to understand what its structure is, then insert it”. I tried that, but I did it now because I thought I had to. [Laughs.] I did it since I thought I was boggling it, if I could [insert] it, I would not do it. It was something like that, and it did not happen again. [After being asked how taking that advice felt for her.] It was a strange feeling for me. The structure there is strange, in fact, me doing that feels strange.*

The inertia and timidity being experienced in terms of the bodily practices was vividly existent in considerers’ statements as well. For example, Melike mentions being “not so good at doing something” with her body and enviously exemplifies how her boyfriend is far much better and insightful than her in things like estimating when he will get well after a sickness. However, in a world where the default body is a non-menstruating one (see Young, 2005), considering the medical science and everyday practices shaped accordingly, it can be understood that why Melike approaches her own body as if approaching an unknown and could not predict whether she will get used to a cup or not. The hesitancy of considerers also grows upon the unacquaintance of how their bodies work—Kayra cannot picture how something in the size of a menstrual cup would enter the vagina, whereas Günel wonders how it becomes possible to urinate during a cup wear, although knowing the urethral orifice and vaginal opening are two separate things.

Although the hymenocentric concept of virginity lost its significance in their eyes, the idea of it still haunts some of the considerers, since it precludes research participants’ contact with their own genitals. Hence, Şevval attributes her worries on the cups to the virginity oppression

in the society and could not imagine herself touching on her vagina or inserting a cup in it, even if she would not let anyone know that she is using cups. In such cases, where the menstruators cannot dare to roll up their sleeves, choosing menstrual cup usage after a penetrative intercourse and shifting off the burden of dealing their bodies to a partner becomes a preferable option. For example, Gökşen mentions buying her cup the morning she had her first sexual intercourse, since she did not want to risk the insertion of the product, whereas Ebrar worries about causing a harm to her body while trying inserting a cup and prefers to try it after having a regular sex life. Therefore, the participants' necessitation of a penetrative sexual intercourse as a prerequisite of the intravaginal alternative menstrual product consumption reproduces the alienation of and pressure on the cyclical bodies and so limits the possibilities of normalizing and destigmatizing the menstrual flow.

#### **5.6.6. Old Stigma and New Menstrunormate**

A common pattern in the narratives of the alternative menstrual product users is their high satisfaction levels with the new materials they use—even some of them go as far as separating their periods as before menstrual cups and cloth pads and after them. This improved menstruation experience has relieved their minds as they do less harm on the environment, relieved their pockets as they discontinued buying disposable products every month and relieved their bodies as they became more comfortable with them and the menstrual blood. The high satisfaction levels from the performance of the product, and also the feminist / environmentalist / body-positive / body-natural mindset, made many accustomed alternative menstrual product users to take this personal matter to the public spaces and try to break the taboo around these products, like they did for menstrual stigma. Yet, similarly to the menstrual talk, the alternative menstrual product consumption talks and advices kept circulating mostly in close friends and acquaintances circles, including people who have already rejected the menstrual concealment imperative or have a high potential of breaking it. Having touched upon the environmentalist/vegan motivations, availability and maintenance concerns, virginity concept and destigmatization of the cyclical body in the previous sections, I would like to dwell upon the “convenience” that alternative menstrual product users experience, since it indicates something more than the ease of usage.

The “convenience” narrative, which roughly corresponds to the transformation of periods into a less troublesome and less intervening process for menstruators, makes ground in almost every user's “life after cups” narratives as an unexpected or underestimated outcome. Although convenience was not the first or second reason for preference for many and indeed

the familiarizing process of cups intimidated them, accustomed cup users seem to have reached an unforeseen level of comfort. Especially for the menstruators doing sports regularly, such as İrem playing basketball and swimming and Nil doing fitness and American football, menstrual periods are no longer a matter of concern. In fact, the movement capacity of cup user menstruators has increased in general, as Nehir, who mentioned her period used to mean immobility for her, yet after cups she can move freely, take a long shower and sit for minutes with a bathrobe. As some menstruators indicate, since the material of the menstrual cups and cloth pads are medical silicone and natural materials such as cotton and bamboo, alternative options led to fungal and bacterial infection-free, odorless and sweatless periods. Even, Azra indicated that her period has shortened a day and Eda mentioned that her menstruation became less painful for her, which are among the outcomes mentioned by some cup users sharing their menstrual cup experiences in online discussions and social media postings.

Besides these physical changes, for all menstruators using cups, emptying them in every twelve hours even in the heavy flow days lessen the times they spend for the maintenance of the product, compared to the replacement of disposable options in every three to four hours. Besides spending less time in the bathroom, the consideration of a leaking disposable pad or a tampon passing its eighth hour has vanished away, so the emotional labor put in the periods have also been reduced for alternative option users. Indeed, what I have frequently encountered in the statements of the cup users was the “forgetting” (see Owen, 2022). Since during cup usage, menstrual discharge is collected within the vaginal canal, individuals neither feel the flowing liquid nor the irritant, humid pads, and the product removal only happens two times during the day, cup users utter that periods became so comfortable that they forget their cups being inside, or even that they are menstruating.

Despite the lessened emotional and physical labor may sound as advantages of menstrual cups and indeed, they ease the participation of menstruators to the public spaces, the participants’ inclination of representing their “forgetting” as a favorable outcome echoes the menstrual-averse attitude entrenched in the society. In addition, considering that cup users empty their cups in the morning and evening in the private spaces such as home or dormitory, it can be said that menstrual cups do not have the public visibility that a hand-held disposable pad has. On the other hand, emphasis on the leak-proofness of menstrual cups as a marketing discourse (see Koskenniemi, 2021) often seems to have helped some users move from considering to purchasing. For example, Dilşad states having researched the menstrual cup for a long time, but the purchasing decision took place after her light-colored trousers were stained with menstrual blood during a gathering with her friends. Hence, menstrual cup becomes the perfect

match for those like Dilşad, since cups function as a “technology of passing” (Vostral, 2008) in such cases, where stigmatized menstruators seek to pass as non-menstruators in the society.

In terms of the cloth pads and menstrual underwear, on the other hand, both users and considerers found these options’ maintenance processes intimidating, since they do not provide much difference compared to the disposable pads and only become preferable in the first and last days of the period, where the flow is relatively scant. Firstly, the risk of humid and heavy feeling, overflow and leakage is still there with them even with the natural materials. Secondly, putting a used cloth pad or menstrual underwear to their bags while they are out of their homes were or sounded challenging for many. Thirdly, the cleaning process needs time and effort, besides a single wash may not suffice in getting rid of blood stains. Albeit the last two factors of not choosing an absorbent alternative menstrual product seems like concerns on the maintenance of these materials, the feelings of dirtiness and abomination were evident in the narratives of both alternative product users and considerers. For instance, despite Azra does not indicate any abomination of cleaning her used menstrual cup and overcame her fear of seeing blood through cup consumption, she is not very inclined to the use of cloth pads, since “they are troublesome in terms of hygiene” and she does not want to come across a stain on them after washing.

Apparently, the convenience of the menstrual cups since they cause less intervention during menstruators’ hectic everyday life as university students and are marketed as a leak-proof option, besides the absorbent alternatives seemingly being prone to leaks, waste of time, and dirt, reveals the fact that alternative menstrual product consumption does not necessarily result in the destigmatization and normalization of the periods, and even these alternatives may lead to the reproduction of the existing stigma. Nevertheless, if there is something to “blame” in this reproduction, that would not be the menstruators trying to continue their daily lives in the public spaces while bleeding, yet the neo-liberal valuing of the ordered reproductive body, which supposed to stick to a scheduled and structured routine (Owen, 2022) and the institutional nonacceptance, which expects a stable high performance from menstruators despite their hormonal fluctuations and fails to equip them with the time, space and instruments they need (Young, 2005).

Besides the age-old menstrual stigma being prone a reproduction through the consumption of alternative menstrual products, the emergence of new menstrual norms becomes possible as individuals adopt new practices around their norms. Just as their theoretical antecedents heteronormativity, cisnormativity, homonormativity, and bodynormativity do, menstrual

norms impose certain menstrual subjectivities, embodiments and actions “as ideal, correct and good” and remaining “as abnormal, unhealthy, disgusting”, as Josefin Persdotter (2020, p. 358) conceptualizes. These clustered norms constantly enforce a “right way to menstruate” (ibid., p. 359) while restricting and narrowing the menstrual existence. These menstrunormativities head towards menstruators from various directions and are complex and oftenly contradicting—such as the medical science drawing the lines of the bodily normalcy, conventional menstrual product conglomerates talking of a normal flow, patriarchal values of male as norm, and feminist perspective regarding menstrual talk as liberating. Nevertheless, beneath such interrelated and contradictory messages on menstruation, a “menstrunormate” becomes an inconceivable, non-existing persona, whereas all menstruators become the boundless “menstrual monster”.

Speaking of a so-called right type of menstruator, Persdotter renders “a ciswoman with a regular 28-day cycle, who obscures all evidence of menstruation” (ibid., p. 361). Broadening the definition of the right type of the menstruator grounding on the qualifications having emerged during the interviews, the dominant menstrunormate of the Turkish society would be like following—a ciswoman or *genç kız* with a regular 28-day cycle, who obscures all evidence of menstruation, chooses the words *hasta* or *adet* to mention her period, does not start any menstrual talk with people except from her mother, close friends, and other female acquaintances, uses only disposable pads since she should not insert something inside her vagina and not to harm her hymen before marriage, and successfully keeps her pads out of sight. Nevertheless, against this dominant menstrunormate, new menstrunormativities were created, as research participants’ statements unravel—menstrual talk became better than menstrual silence, menstrual-neutrality/positivity was the inevitable standpoint, ignorant family members needed education on periods, waving a pad like a flag was a way of protesting the stigma, prioritizing environment over the self was an ethical choice, purchasing a cup was the financially wiser decision, the lack of time and favorable accommodation should not be an obstacle for seeking alternatives, having worries on the hymen was narrow-mindedness, one had to be at peace with their own body since it is more feminist, and alternative products are more convenient than disposable ones.

Despite the “monsterring” has not shown deliberately by the menstruators, the new menstrunormativities around alternative menstrual product consumption were inevitably produced within the narratives of the research participants, irrespectively of the type of the product they use. The two different types of sanctions through which new stigmatizations and marginalizations are communicated, external sanctions and internal sanctions (see Persdotter,



ibid.), were evident in the statements, yet sanctioning others externally was more common on the user participants, whereas internal sanctions were shown by considerers or the users being in the early stages of their alternative product consumption. Below narratives serve as examples of cases where alternative menstrual cup users show external sanctions, as a result of this new menstrunormate.

Azra (22, woman, user): *Because, I am an ordinary citizen. I am a student of psychology in Middle East Technical University. I was willing to use this cup for a long time, since I was fourteen. I became able to afford this economically recently, I was economically sufficient [a little time ago]. I bought it and majority of the people around me either say "I want to buy it but I have so many questions in my mind" or abhor touching themselves, be afraid of it, or it is too obnoxious for them, facing the blood, holding that much of your liquids in a cup... These people for instance do not go and buy despite me being a user, they do not prioritize it. I mean, if that much people bought menstrual cups, we are learning economics, and they [menstrual cup manufacturers] would have produce a higher level of it to sell more. I mean, more people would produce menstrual cups and more firms would produce it to get ahead and each firm would add an enhancement to get ahead maybe. It would be cheaper, after all. [...] There is something like that, a tail it has, you know- I call it a tail. [Smiles.] You may feel that a little. It is a thing that depends on individual to individual, to the vagina length. I feel that a little, I stand up and sit, and I feel it a little. But this does not bother me, I am not a princess. [Laughs.] I am not that fond of comfort, not that much... I mean, comparing to pads, it feels like a tiny discomfort.*

Eda (23, woman, user): *I can shoot the breeze with anyone. I may not count that but until today I had conversations with many women or girl, like she is so anxious, I ask "What happened?", "I got my period", "So what, calm down, it is so normal", I had lots of conversations like this. I mean, when my friends got their periods and said "Let's not go out today", I had to drag them by force. I used to say 'there is nothing to be upset about, you know, none of your family members are dead, come back to yourself or something. These were some small examples. [...] Sometimes I can talk about it [menstrual cup] with my friends from university that I am not very close to. For example, I am from Communication [faculty] and she is from Engineering. Suppose we do not come across each other that much, I even talked to them. There was something like that, I said "Oh, how ignorant you are!", I humiliated them since they do not know. [...] I talk about it [menstrual cup] with my doctor. While she was examining me, she said "This may hurt a little" and I said "It is okay, I am accustomed from the cup", she suddenly raised her head and said "Oh, are you using a cup, I want to use it so much, but I cannot dare to try"- you are a gynecologist, how could not you dare it? [Laughs.] It was quite bizarre that she said that. I talked about it with her. [...] I cannot understand, how can my gynecologist not know that? She was like "I am anxious", how can be you anxious? All in all, it is made of a material you keep using your whole life.*

As above-mentioned narratives show, the new menstrunormativities have been emerging through the alternative menstrual consumption practices and these practices evolve into an unintended "monsterring" through the external sanctions. In the first narrative, Azra's menstrunormate echoes the neo-liberal discourses of supply demand equilibrium and free

choice and holds responsible her fellow menstruators to “demand” better menstrual products for themselves, since she, as an “ordinary citizen” is able to buy a cup and talk about it in public. Nevertheless, if it is considered that Azra first sees menstrual cups at the age of fourteen in an English-language television series, is an elite university student in a country where college education rate among females is 20,9% (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2023), and prefers to show her menstrual cup to her friends from campus in the dormitory cafeteria, not her father at home, show that the adoption of and talking about this specific practice is not merely a result of individual choice, yet connected to Azra’s “away from home” social space. Besides that, her description of menstruators being afraid of experiencing any discomfort during alternative product consumption as “princesses” includes a glorification of going out of one’s own comfort zone, like Eda trying to normalize periods in her friends circle “by force” and wishes every menstruator to experience the comfort and painlessness she experienced with menstrual cups. Nevertheless, in a cultural context where the importance of the pre-marital protection of an intact hymen is continuously imposed through various communication routes, or menstruation may not pass as physically or emotionally painless as it does for Azra and Eda, taking a step out from one’s own comfort zone may not be an option for everyone.

In addition to the new marginalizations and stigmatizations being produced through external sanctions by the accustomed cup users, the menstruators who have recently engaged this consumption practice or considering to engage it impose them through internal sanctions on themselves, mostly circulating around ineligibility and obligation narratives, such as “Something must be wrong with me.” and “I have to do this for myself / others / nature”. The first theme of internal sanctions, ineligibility, becomes apparent in the cases where a menstruator has an experience relatively different from the experiences collected from social media postings, usage instructions of product manufacturers, or conversations with fellow menstruators. For example, during her first couple of months with menstrual cup, Rukiye remembers of occasionally feeling the cup during walking and lying on her bed and questioning herself as “Oh, I was not supposed to feel it right now but I am feeling it, something must me wrong with me.”.

Similarly Zehra, a recent cup user who is experiencing hardships, admits that she thought cup usage would be much easier than tampon insertion, since “in the videos they tell it like it is easy”. However, since her experience turned out to be much different from what she had heard, she mentioned feeling frustrated and sad, while saying “It is like everybody can do it but I cannot, it feels like something is wrong with me.”. Besides the feelings of anger and sorrow, Zehra also describes feeling “ridden with contradictions”—for Zehra, who defines herself as

an “open-minded” person, a student of Sociology at Middle East Technical University, and someone constantly challenging her mother's stigmatizing attitude on menstruation and virginity, it is a contradictory situation that she regards inserting something into her vagina as strange.

Besides this ineligibility narrative, the novice alternative product users and the considerers also sanction themselves the new norm of alternative product consumption practice as an obligation, since they feel a sense of responsibility towards themselves, other menstruators, and nature. For instance, as a vegan and considerer of menstrual cups, Asude foresees that she may feel a sense of discomfort during her first couple of periods with cup, yet she admits that she may even “bully” herself like “Well, matey, the world is getting polluted, so a little discomfort for you should be okay, not a problem. Poor you, but you *should* tolerate it.” Similarly, while narrating the struggles she encountered during menstrual cup usage, Dilşad describes the way of overcoming them through thinking that she should do it since she is a feminist, as she narrates in the following sentences:

Dilşad (21, woman, user): *Yeah, there have been [some difficulties], yet I was thinking I had to do it. Because, well, if we look from a feminist perspective, and also from my perspective- I mean, I thought I should get to know my body back then. I mean, actually, many women are in a position where they have not touched their bodies or tried to discover their bodies and I wanted to experience it and give information to people in that way or perceive it [the practice] that way. My thoughts were in that direction, “I have to do this now, this is my body”. Like, “I must discover it, it is normal”. It is something that another person actually does when we have a sexual intercourse, but we are afraid to do it by ourselves. I mean, this sounded illogical to me. Therefore, I brazened myself, I guess. [...] As I have said, it helps me to be more comfortable in my skin. I mean, I think I need to be able to insert one of those cups, that little cup, into my body, because it is my body. I mean, I should be able to do it in the same way as I can insert a cotton bud in my ear. Without hesitation. There should not be a “Can I?”, in my opinion.*

As mentioned in the above paragraphs, new menstrual normativities emerging during alternative menstrual product consumption practices are imposed on menstruators who do not engage in to this practice willingly or unwillingly due to various reasons or who are new in adopting this practice, with either internal or external sanctions and themes of ineligibility and obligation within them. Just as Persdotter (2020) suggests in her work on menstrunormativities that these norms are constantly created by everyone and everything, similar to the menstrual activists indeliberately contributing to menstrual monstering, as they regard embracing menses is more feminist than hating them, research participants’ conceptualization of alternative options as more feminist, more environmentally-conscious, more economic in long run, more body-friendly or period-friendly and more convenient makes an indirect and unintentional

contribution to the production of new menstrual norms. All these counted advantages, combined with the fact that alternatives being unorthodox products, form a “cool” practice (see Owen, 2022), as Süreyya’s words explain:

Süreyya (22, non-binary, considerer): *My thoughts on [alternative menstrual product consumption] are “What a great idea, what a sustainable idea, I should try this as well, I wonder it.” It is also a cool thing...* [After being asked what makes alternative options cool.] *First of all, I mean, money is a different matter but even if someone has an activist identity of not, it sounds to me like the most sensible option that a menstruator would select. Of course, if they have a setting to clean it... Therefore, it sounds cool.* [Laughs.] *I mean, disposable pads and tampons are thing like fallen through the floor.* [Laughs.] *But these [alternative products] feel like things that only people at a specific consciousness level and having a certain courage would use. At the same time, I regard these as an investment to the self. It is like purchasing a vibrator, I am an admirer of women purchasing themselves a vibrator as well... It is like self-care, actually. On the other hand, since it minimizes the suffering, it means that the person really values themselves, that is its content for me. But most of all I would say courage, above all.*

In conclusion, despite all the benefits and conveniences alternative menstrual product consumption practices may bring to the menstruators, the practice itself is prone to forcing the dominant menstrunormate through menstrual-aversiveness and leak-proofness, which are the desired features in a society, where the neo-liberal valuing of the ordered reproductive body is prevalent and menstrual blood is perceived as a stigmatizing mark. On the other hand, new kind of menstrual norms become constructed during and communicated through alternative menstrual product consumption practices. This brand-new, “cool” menstrunormate is one acting bold, taking initiative and opting for a sustainable, wallet-friendly, feminist, and convenient alternative. This brand new menstrunormate is unintentionally dictated via internal and external sanctions on the menstruators, which misses out the impossibility of the right way of menstruation, builds a counterfeit dichotomy of “us” and “them”, and creates new menstrual monsters—who are not switching to “cool” alternatives. As Persdotter (2020) emphasizes, although it is never the intention, monsterring becomes the consequence.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

#### 6.1. Conclusion and Discussion

In this thesis, through investigating disposable and alternative menstrual product consumption practices in Turkey, I primarily aimed to problematize menstruation as a source of stigma and normativities. Considering the fact that quarter of the population is within the ages between menarche and menopause, and approximately the half of the population is expected to menstruate during their lifetime, menstrual periods are the biological reality of a significant amount of people. Nevertheless, menstruation carries a significance beyond its biological role and structures the day-to-day reality of the people going through it, with stigma and normativities rooted to menstrual periods. Grounding on the cyclical routines and narratives of twenty-three women, two non-binary people, and one genderqueer person, I mainly focused on addressing the research question of how menstrual stigma and menstrunormativities are connected with the periods sustained with disposable and alternative menstrual products. Herein, the menstruators' shifting consumption practices from menarche until today and their altering attitudes towards their cyclical bodies and experiences became the focal point of this study. Moreover, this shift in the menstrual product consumption practices created a menstrual period experience which bearing a substantial difference from what periods used to be, and also, a formed a new menstruator identity, which will be later communicated and reproduced through this practice.

Intending to answer the research question of how menstrual stigma and menstrunormativity interrelates with the periods maintained with different kinds of menstrual products necessitated certain conceptualizations and restrictions. First of all, in terms of defining menstrual stigma, I have applied the theoretical frameworks built by Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) and Young (2005), which conceptualize menstruation as a stigmatizing mark, its stigmatized character is constantly communicated through myriad channels, and leaves cyclical bodies in an alienated and ambivalent position. On the other hand, as an overarching concept involving the entrenched meanings of menstrual stigma and new menstrual norms being risen through

destigmatization endeavors, I considered the utilization of “menstrunormativity” concept put forward by Persdotter (2020), as “the hegemonic social system of multiple and contradictory normativities that order and stratify menstruation and menstruating” (p. 358), which creates an impossible menstrunormate against diverse menstrual experiences. To illuminate “the transmission of culture into action” (Warde, 2014, p. 282), I have chosen the menstrual product consumption practices as the unit of analysis, since practices and bodily performances are the ground of the social and social order. As the shift from the consumption of disposable products such as disposable pads and tampons, to the alternative menstrual products such as menstrual cups, cloth pads, and menstrual underwear being linked to the larger social circumstances, this research eventually contributed to the research gap not only in critical menstrual studies but in the practice theory of consumption, since it focuses on an embodied routine and builds linkages to major social changes.

As research participant menstruators’ personal narratives unravel, menstruation being labeled as a source of social stigma surrounds their menstrual periods as early as their first period. Young menstruators, mostly unprepared to this brand-new bodily experience due to the menstrual silence that the stigmatized condition causes, conceptualize menstruation as the “abomination of the body”. Instead of receiving information on the biological process their cyclical bodies undergo, young menstruators were immediately educated on the disposable pad usage, in order to neither leak a single drop of blood nor show off their pads, since such a mistake would mean the “blemish of the individual character”. Life after menarche also signaled “a tribal identity” for menstruators, as they entered the *genç kız* community, which is composed of young menstruators experiencing ambivalence, the weight of growing up, and even becoming liable from one’s own sins.

The societal conceptualization of menstrual blood as a stigmatizing mark kept being communicated to the menstruators later on through several sociocultural routes. The silencing of menstruation or resorting to euphemisms to refer menses in public spaces or in the sight of non-menstruating men reinforced the stigmatized position of periods. The families of menstruators are another medium for the transmission of the menstrual stigma, since menstruation is barely communicated to female family members and not men, both because menstruation is conceptualized as an abominable process and the female genitals are associated with notions of shame and dignity (see Delaney, 1987). The menstrual stigma is also articulated through educational sessions maintained in the collaboration of state bodies and personal care conglomerates, echoing the neo-liberal values rendering a talk on menstruation possible only around consumption of goods and neo-conservative perspective

engendering how broadly and with whom menstrual periods are discussed. The disposable menstrual product manufacturers further strengthen the menstrual stigma through the use of euphemisms and hiding periods, besides imposing an impossible menstrunormate being soft yet strong, despite the menstruators' diverse and cranky experiences.

Hence, the non-existing ideal menstrunormate of Turkish society bears the following characteristics—a *genç kız* doing her best to conceal her period, adopting menstrual silence unless there is a talkable subject, shows no fluctuations of cognitive and physical performance due to her altering hormone levels, and uses only disposable pads during her menstrual flow. Nevertheless, research participant menstruators were not passive recipients of the menstrual stigma and dominant menstrunormate, and indeed adopted several tactics break the menstrual stigma, although they encountered varying degrees of reactions due to leaving the “menstrual closet” (see Young, 2005). Resembling the “everyday acts of resistance” (see Fahs, 2016) shown by menstrual activists, some of the stigma coping mechanisms followed by menstruators were sharing their experiences with fellow menstruators, talking on menses in the public spaces, expanding their knowledge to younger generations, resorting to humor during menstrual talk, increasing the visibility of menstrual goods through openly carrying them, and even engaging in political struggle. As apparent from the research participants narratives, there has been an engagement with the feminist thought as their college studies begun, which altered their perspectives on matters like gender equality, female sexuality, or menstruation, and later made challenging the menstrual stigma possible. Nevertheless, some menstruators chose to separate their “home” and “away from home” identities (see Scalco, 2020) as a matter of protecting themselves against the harassment, condemning, and humiliation from some male and/or distant family members, besides the strangers, since living in a society where neo-conservatist and neo-liberal values shape the gender order.

When it comes to the question of through which products this stigmatized bodily process is maintained, disposable pads have been, by far, the product that accompanies research participants mostly during their period. Despite all the feelings of discomfort, dirtiness and immobility that disposable pads cause for individuals, there are two prevailing factors making this product the default material of collecting menstrual discharge—ease of maintenance in public spaces and the hymenocentric conceptualization of virginity. The first of these driving forces bears its significance from the “institutional nonacceptance” (see Young, 2005), which deprives individuals of the needed time, space and equipment they require for a period at ease, since the public figure has a non-menstruating body. Furthermore, the neo-liberal capitalist conceptualization of the ordered reproductive body also necessitates minimal friction in the

hectic everyday life of the menstruators (see Owen, 2022). The second of these notions necessitating the use of disposable pads is the significance of the virginity as a social construction in Turkey (see Cindoğlu, 1997; Güzel, 2020), which is further instrumentalized within anti-gender and anti-feminist discourses of the neo-conservatist government actors (see Kandiyoti, 2016). Hence, the predominant menstrunormate communicated to the Turkish menstruators becomes someone bleeding in the public space created for non-menstruating people, while breaking the daily routine of the neo-liberal order as minimal as possible, and collecting the flow through an absorbent menstrual product in order to stick the neo-conservatist values.

Although disposable pads come to the fore as the ideal product to be used by the ideal menstrunormate, whom the society exposes to the cyclical bodies through various routes, it was also evident that research participant menstruators take the bold step of abandoning their use of the conventional products and pursue new alternatives, just as they challenged the menstrual stigma and developed their menstrual/body-neutral/positive perspectives. Among the encouraging factors of this practice shift was the environmental-conscious consumption behavior, which was the inevitable consequence of vegan lifestyle. Many alternative menstrual product users, rooting their choice of veganism to the animal ethics, indicated eventually adopting eco-friendly consumption practices to not cause any harm on the environment, animals and other human beings. As a result of this ecological mindset and sense of responsibility, participant menstruators switch to alternative menstrual products for doing a little good to the environment before themselves.

Nevertheless, the decision taken with altruistic motivations result in an unforeseen or underestimated outcome, which is learning and making peace with the menstruating body. Menstruators, whose cyclical bodies are brought up against a double-ostracization due to abominable and stigmatized menstrual periods and the conceptualization of female body as a source of shame (see Young 2005; Delaney, 1987). The crisis of cyclical bodies emerging from this double-ostracization further intensifies with the ruling ideology in Turkey instrumentalizing an anti-gender and anti-feminist discourse to demarcate the ruling party supporters as “us” and traitorous and corrupt political opponents as “them”, base the welfare policies on the family rather than citizens to control female body and adopt social engineering, and normalizing violence (see Kandiyoti, 2016). Indeed, with the influence of this gender order, the menstruation educational sessions supported by state bodies reproduce the menstrual silence and are based on the disposable pad usage instructions, menstruation becomes instrumentalized in the development of populist, conservatist and nationalist rhetoric, and the



cyclical bodies remain unseen by welfare policies. Hence, in such a context, individuals adapting alternative menstrual product consumption practices establish a new perspective of their bodies and menstrual cycles, as a result of alternative options making menstruators to acquire a certain level of knowledge on their cyclical bodies. First of all, due to contacting more to their menses and being able to see, smell, and touch the discharge encouraged alternative menstrual product users to acquire medical knowledge of menstruation, such as the amount of blood and its possibility of fluctuating due to underlying health conditions. Secondly, on the contrary to the “waste” perception created by limited contact to the menstrual discharge and the shame and secrecy surrounding the design, packaging, distribution, and marketing of disposable products (see Long, 1999; Bobel, 2006; Bobel, 2010), alternative menstrual products helped menstruators in normalizing and destigmatizing their flows due to extensive contact with their own blood during maintenance processes. A third gain comes up after the adoption of alternative menstrual product consumption practices happens to be related to menstrual cups being intravaginal materials, which heartened menstruators to collect medical knowledge on their body parts that they were unaware of, feeling more at ease and familiar with their bodies, feeling more comfortable with their sexualities, and eventually, normalizing and destigmatizing their cyclical bodies as well.

Although alternative menstrual product consumption practices enable ethical consumption for the user menstruators by being a consumption habit that is relatively harmless to the environment, and lead to destigmatization and normalization of menstruation and bodies by increasing familiarity and knowledge of both them, the adaptation of this consumption practice is not devoid of various restrictions based on menstrual stigma and gender order. In a society where menstrual stigma conceals the needs and rights of the menstruators with silence, the affordability of alternative menstrual products becomes a challenge. The researcher participant menstruators mentioned being more or less conceived by the advantages that alternatives may bring, yet cannot follow this practice since paying smaller amounts to disposables are more affordable. Furthermore, the maintenance challenges emerge in terms of the “institutional nonacceptance” (see Young, 2005), since research participants accommodating in the university dormitories lack the time, space and equipment needed for the replacement, cleansing and sanitation of menstrual cups, cloth pads, and menstrual underwear. Besides that, researchers shared their concerns and users indicated the challenges of maintaining their periods with alternative goods in public spaces since that would correspond to leaving the “menstrual closet” (see Young, 2005) through the visibility of bloody menstrual cups, cloth pads or menstrual underwear in a public restroom or laundry. Therefore, although users openly share their alternative menstrual product consumption within

the menstrual talk in public spaces, and so break the menstrual concealment imperative, they abstained of showing such a stigmatizing mark, since leaving the menstrual closet that way would form harsher reactions, as users of alternatives think.

Another restriction, which limits the alternative menstrual product consumption practices, happens to be the hymenocentric conceptualization of virginity in Turkey (see Parla, 2001; Özyeğin, 2009; Güzel, 2020). Despite research participants mention their departure from the traditional understanding of virginity after acquiring medical information on the hymen and engaging with a feminist or body-neutral/positive perspective, the menstruators who cannot afford the risk of facing any humiliation, loss of support and ostracization from their family members chose to obscure identities on their sexuality and followed “virginal facades” (see Özyeğin, 2009). This has eventually resulted for many user menstruators to adopt two contradictory identities in two different social spaces of “home” and “away from home” (see Scalco, 2020) not only in terms of the virginal identity, but in terms of the intravaginal menstrual alternative they opt for, since that would signify the non-existence of an intact hymen, especially for the family members. Therefore, while encouraging friends from the campus through sharing menstrual cup consumption practices, user menstruators hide their consumption practices at “home” and seek hours when nobody is around to sterilize their cups.

Albeit alternative menstrual product consumption, especially the cups, equip users with higher levels of comfort, enables them to engage physical tasks as in non-menstruating days, shortens the flows or lessens the menstrual pain, and even makes individuals to “forget” that they are menstruating, the convenience narrative existing in alternative product users statements implied lessened emotional labor, yet a menstrual minimization, as prior research by Owen (2022) also underlines. Hence, menstrual minimization being a favorable outcome of the menstrual cup consumption reproduces the menstrual-aversive attitude, as the leak-proofness of menstrual cups are oftenly emphasized during the marketing campaigns (see Koskenniemi, 2021), as well as the narratives of the menstruators.

Therefore, for menstruators choosing alternative menstrual products, menstrual cups sounded as better solutions compared to the cloth pads, menstrual underwear, or any other absorbable alternative, since individuals using cups do not feel the discharge on an absorbable material, not have the anxiety of carrying a used pad or underwear in their bags, and not deal with the blood stains, which imply the reproduction of menstrual discharge as a stigmatizing mark. Nevertheless, considering that the menstruators are living in a society where neo-liberal values necessitate them sticking their scheduled and structured routine, and show their highest

performance despite their hormonal changes and inadequacy of time, space, and instruments for a menstrual period at ease, the preference of menstrual cups over absorbable alternatives becomes reasonable for the menstruators.

Besides reproducing the dominant menstrual norms based on the menstrual blood being a source of social stigma, alternative menstrual product consumption practices have also caused to the emergence of new menstrunormativities, imposing the “right way to menstruate” (Persdotter, 2020, p. 359). The menstrunormate, which is communicated with the research participant menstruators from the day they begun to menstruate is a *genç kız* who obeys the menstrual concealment imperative through hiding all signs of menses, resorts to the euphemisms of *hasta* or *adet* to indicate menstruation, avoid menstrual talk except a very close circle comprised of other menstruators, consumes disposable pads in order to preserve an intact hymen before marriage and does not let others to see her pads, since they reveal her menstruating condition. However, based on the user research participants’ statements, new menstrual norms are created with the consumption of alternative menstrual products—talking about menstruation as a stance against menstrual stigma become more preferable than maintaining menstrual silence, developing a menstrual neutrality or positivity is glorified, increasing the product visibility through openly carrying them is done on purpose, animal and environmental ethics outweigh the anxieties of leaving the habitual practices, investing money in alternative options is financially wiser, one should be dedicated enough to adopt the alternative practices despite of the deficiency of time, space and instruments, having worries on the hymen was narrow-mindedness, one had to be at peace with their own body since it is more feminist, and alternative products are better and cooler than mainstream ones.

The emergence of new menstrunormativities during the alternative menstrual product consumption practices indeliberately results in “menstrual monsterings” (Persdotter, 2020), which could be summarized as new stigmatizations and marginalizations that this new practice brings. These new stigmatizations and marginalizations are sanctioned internally, through one’s judgements towards their inability of complying with the impossible menstrunormate and externally, through trying to convince other menstruators to the alternative practices and normalizing and destigmatizing periods. According to Persdotter's conceptualization, achieving an ideal menstrunormate identity is impossible due to the menstrual norms being clustered, complex and oftenly contradictory, and this impossibility inevitably “monsters” every menstrual experience. However, although all menstrual experiences are destined to be faced with menstrual monsterings, “some monsters suffer more from their monstrosity than others” (Persdotter, *ibid.*, p. 367). Hence, despite the alternative menstrual product users are

menstrual monsters due to their stance against the stigmatized position of the periods and conventional consumption practices, the new menstrual norms they communicate also bears the risks of monsterring those who perceive periods as gross, who willingly or unwillingly act according to menstrual concealment imperative, who cannot challenge their menstrual-averse families, friends, and colleagues, who use disposable products fondly, who are not aware of that alternative options exist, who do not follow a vegan/environment-conscious lifestyle, who cannot purchase the alternative products, who do not have the necessary means to use alternatives, who hesitate on the menstrual cups since it necessitates extended familiarity of one's own body.

In conclusion, alternative and disposable menstrual consumption practices, by including unique embodied and intellectual activities, objects and their utilization, a baseline understanding, know-how, emotional circumstances and motivational knowledge as the integral parts of them, made menstruators to “learn to be bodies in a certain way” (see Reckwitz, 2002, p. 251), which is mainly shaped through the interactions with the menstrual stigma and norms. Since bodily performances do not refer to the bodies being mere instruments, yet indicate bodies being the site of the social and the social order, disposable and alternative menstrual product consumption practices emerge as a result of complex forces such as menstrual stigma, new menstrual norms emerging through the criticism of that stigma, the dominant gender order growing upon neo-liberal and neo-conservative values, and the feminist and queer countermovement against that gender order. Hence, it becomes necessary to take into consideration the social forces in Turkish society shaping the experiences and practices of the cyclical bodies, such as the chaste citizen-woman persona, the switch to liberal market economy, rise of Islamization, accelerating globalization, ever-growing feminist and LGBT+ activisms and masculinist restoration aiming to revert back their achievements (see Parla, 2001; Özyeğin, 2009; Kandiyoti, 2013; Şansal, 2021; Ünal Abaday, 2021).

Under the influence of these manifold social forces effecting the menstrual practices, the conceptualization of Persdotter (2020) as *menstrunormativities* operating in clustered, complex, and contradictory manner gains prominence. The imagined *menstrunormate*, as being continuously co-created by everyone and everything -and even indeliberately in this study- under these contradictory social forces, results in monsterring all menstrual existences. At this point, accepting that *menstrunormativities* and menstrual monsters are formed continuously and refraining from imposing any so-called right way to menstruate, and contrarily, making diverse menstrual experiences visible may enhance our understanding of this bodily process—to which I hope that this study has made a minor contribution.

## 6.2. Limitations and Future Research

Before closing the discussion and conclusion part of this thesis, I would like to address some limitations of this work and illuminate some possibilities for the future research. As I have broadly mentioned in the methodology section, conducting this inquiry during the limitations that COVID-19 pandemic imposed has brought some challenges, such as necessitation of reaching the research participants through online means and conducting the interviews through online video communication programs. Despite I was able to partially overcome the limitations that this issue may bring to the interview process through the pilot research I have done before, the research became limited to the university students who were easily reachable through social media postings and who have already broken the ice with the online video communication programs.

Hence, I excluded interviewing with mothers from the research, since I thought that they may apply self-censoring to themselves by following the menstrual stigma more than their children and reaching them during the pandemic was an issue. However, as a result of the interviews I conducted with the university student research participants, the fact that the family appeared as a phenomenon that shapes both the menstruation, menstrual stigma, and menstrual product consumption experiences made me think that intergenerational dynamics would be a seminal focus for the future work. Although Dikmen Özarslan's (2004) study is based on a multigenerational analysis of the social conceptualization of menstruation, a renewal of such study with a focus on the different menstrual product consumption practices may provide a new perspective in understanding menstrual stigma and norms.

On the other hand, one of the factors that making the alternative products remaining as “alternatives” is the availability challenges emerging in the purchase and maintenance of these products, due to the existing gender ideology and menstrual stigma leading to institutional nonacceptance. However, aside from the fact that alternative menstrual products have high selling prices and require a personal space with several maintenance equipment, there are millions of menstruators who suffer from the lack of access to disposable products, water, soap, toilet paper, and bathrooms during their menstrual cycles (see Yılmaz, 2022). Considering the existence of menstrual poverty among the groups such as seasonal agricultural workers and university students, and the escalated needs with the global pandemic and the massive earthquakes affecting the Southeastern Turkey in February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023 (see “Derin Yoksulluk Ağı: Kadınların yüzde 82'si hijyenik pede erişemiyor”, 2022; Kaplan, 2022; Yılmaz, 2022; Aslan, 2023) studies addressing to the menstrual poverty and injustice may bear

significant importance in addressing menstruators' needs. In fact, the linkages to be built between menstrual stigma and menstrual poverty with data acquired from the Turkish context on the availability of menstrual products would fill a research gap that this thesis does not provide an answer.

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## APPENDICES

### A. TURKISH INTERVIEW GUIDE / TÜRKÇE GÖRÜŞME FORMU

#### Alternatif menstrüel ürün kullanıcıları için soru formu:

- a) *Biyolojik bir süreç olarak regl hakkındaki sorular:*
1. İlk reglinizi ne zaman deneyimlediniz?
  2. İlk regliniz nasıl bir deneyimdi?
  3. Regl olmanın size yaşattığı olumlu bir bedensel deneyim var mı? Varsa nedir?
  4. Regl olmanın size yaşattığı olumsuz bir bedensel deneyim var mı? Varsa nedir?
  5. Regl olmanın size getirdiği olumlu bir duygu ya da düşünce var mı? Varsa nedir?
  6. Regl olmanın size getirdiği olumsuz bir duygu ya da düşünce var mı? Varsa nedir?
- b) *Regl tabusuna yönelik deneyimleri ve başa çıkma mekanizmalarını ölçmeye yönelik sorular:*
7. Toplumun regl olmaya yönelik yaklaşımı hakkında ne düşünüyorsunuz?
  8. Regl hakkında konuşurken herhangi bir kişi ya da grubun tepkisiyle karşılaştınız mı?
  9. Tükettiğiniz menstrüel ürünleri satın alırken ve kullanırken herhangi bir kişi ya da grubun tepkisiyle karşılaştınız mı?
  10. Regl olmaya dair toplumsal yaklaşım, tepki ya da baskılarla başa çıkmaya yönelik bir şey yapıyor musunuz? Yapıyorsanız bunlar nelerdir?
  11. Regl olan başka birey(ler)le regl olmaya dair toplumsal yaklaşım, tepki ya da baskılar hakkında konuştunuz mu?
  12. Regl olmayı kimlerle konuşabilirsiniz?
  13. Menstrüel ürünler hakkında kimlerle konuşabilirsiniz?
- c) *Tek kullanımlık menstrüel ürün kullanımına yönelik sorular:*
14. Regl olmaya başladığınızdan beri hangi ürünü/ürünleri kullandınız?
  15. Eğer kullandıysanız, kullandığınız tek kullanımlık menstrüel ürünü / ürünleri tercih etmenizde neler etkili oldu?
  16. Kullandığınız bu ürün / ürünler size bir rahatlık ya da kolaylık yaşattı mı? Yaşattıysa bunlardan bahsedebilir misiniz?
  17. Kullandığınız bu ürün / ürünler size bir rahatsızlık ya da zorluk yaşattı mı? Yaşattıysa bunlardan bahsedebilir misiniz?
- d) *Alternatif (yeniden kullanılabilir) menstrüel ürün kullanımına yönelik sorular:*
18. Yeniden kullanılabilir menstrüel ürünlerden (adet kabı, yıkanabilir kumaş ped, adet süngeri vb.) hangilerini kullanıyorsunuz?
  19. Kullandığınız bu üründen / ürünlerden nasıl haberdar oldunuz?
  20. Bu ürün / ürünler hakkında nasıl bilgi edindiniz?
  21. Bu ürünü / ürünleri denemeye nasıl karar verdiniz?
  22. Neden bu ürünü / ürünleri tercih ettiniz?
  23. Bu ürünü / ürünleri nasıl satın aldınız?

24. Bu ürünü / ürünleri ne zaman denediniz? Deneme ve alışma süreciniz nasıl gelişti?
25. Bu ürünü / ürünleri kullanmaya başladıktan sonra hayatınızda neler değişti?
26. Bu ürünü / ürünleri kullanmaya başlamak size bir rahatlık ya da kolaylık yaşattı mı? Yaşattıysa bunlardan bahsedebilir misiniz?
27. Bu ürünü / ürünleri kullanmaya başlamak size bir rahatsızlık ya da zorluk yaşattı mı? Yaşattıysa bunlardan bahsedebilir misiniz?
28. Bu ürünü / ürünleri başka bir kişiye anlattınız mı?
29. Bu ürünü / ürünleri başka bir kişiye tavsiye ettiniz mi?
30. Denemek istediğiniz başka bir ürün var mı? Varsa nedir?

Alternatif menstrüel ürün kullanmayı düşünenler için soru formu:

- a) *Biyolojik bir süreç olarak regl hakkındaki sorular:*
  1. İlk reglinizi ne zaman deneyimlediniz?
  2. İlk regliniz nasıl bir deneyimdi?
  3. Regl olmanın size yaşattığı olumlu bir bedensel deneyim var mı? Varsa nedir?
  4. Regl olmanın size yaşattığı olumsuz bir bedensel deneyim var mı? Varsa nedir?
  5. Regl olmanın size getirdiği olumlu bir duygu ya da düşünce var mı? Varsa nedir?
  6. Regl olmanın size getirdiği olumsuz bir duygu ya da düşünce var mı? Varsa nedir?
- b) *Regl tabusuna yönelik deneyimleri ve başa çıkma mekanizmalarını ölçmeye yönelik sorular:*
  1. Toplumun regl olmaya yönelik yaklaşımı hakkında ne düşünüyorsunuz?
  2. Regl hakkında konuşurken herhangi bir kişi ya da grubun tepkisiyle karşılaştınız mı?
  3. Tükettiğiniz menstrüel ürünleri satın alırken ve kullanırken herhangi bir kişi ya da grubun tepkisiyle karşılaştınız mı?
  4. Regl olmaya dair toplumsal yaklaşım, tepki ya da baskılarla başa çıkmaya yönelik bir şey yapıyor musunuz? Yapıyorsanız bunlar nelerdir?
  5. Regl olan başka birey(ler)le regl olmaya dair toplumsal yaklaşım, tepki ya da baskılar hakkında konuştunuz mu?
  6. Regl olmayı kimlerle konuşabilirsiniz?
  7. Menstrüel ürünler hakkında kimlerle konuşabilirsiniz?
- c) *Tek kullanımlık menstrüel ürün kullanımına yönelik sorular:*
  1. Regl olmaya başladığınızdan beri hangi ürünü/ürünleri kullandınız?
  2. Eğer kullandıysanız, kullandığınız tek kullanımlık menstrüel ürünü / ürünleri tercih etmenizde neler etkili oldu?
  3. Kullandığınız bu ürün / ürünler size bir rahatlık ya da kolaylık yaşattı mı? Yaşattıysa bunlardan bahsedebilir misiniz?
  4. Kullandığınız bu ürün / ürünler size bir rahatsızlık ya da zorluk yaşattı mı? Yaşattıysa bunlardan bahsedebilir misiniz?
- d) *Alternatif (yeniden kullanılabilir) menstrüel ürün kullanımına yönelik sorular:*
  1. Yeniden kullanılabilir menstrüel ürünlerden (adet kabı, yıkanabilir kumaş ped, adet süngeri vb.) nasıl haberdar oldunuz?
  2. Bu ürün / ürünler hakkında nasıl bilgi edindiniz?
  3. Bu ürünü / ürünleri denememiş olma sebepleriniz nelerdir?

4. Hangi durum ya da olaylar sizin bu ürün / ürünleri deneme ve kullanma kararı almanıza yol açardı?
5. Sizce bu ürünü / ürünleri kullanmaya başlayınca hayatınızda neler değişebilir? Olası rahatlık ya da kolaylıkları ile rahatsızlık ya da zorlukları neler olabilir?
6. Bu ürün / ürünler hakkında başka bir kişiyle konuştunuz mu?

## B. TURKISH SURVEY / TÜRKÇE ANKET FORMU

1. Yaşınız:

- ☐ 18
- ☐ 19
- ☐ 20
- ☐ 21
- ☐ 22
- ☐ 23

2. Şu anda eğitiminizi sürdürdüğünüz üniversite: .....

3. Şu anda eğitiminizi sürdürdüğünüz bölüm: .....

4. Sınıfınız:

- ☐ Hazırlık
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ Yüksek Lisans
- ☐ Doktora

5. Şu anda yaşadığınız şehir: .....

6. Yaşadığınız yerleşim birimini en iyi tanımlayan seçeneği işaretleyiniz.

- ☐ Büyükşehir
- ☐ Şehir
- ☐ Köy

7. Lütfen aşağıdaki seçeneklerden sizin için en uygun olanı işaretleyiniz.

- ☐ Öğrenci yurdunda yaşıyorum.
- ☐ Ailemle beraber yaşıyorum.
- ☐ Arkadaşlarımla beraber yaşıyorum.
- ☐ Tek başına yaşıyorum.
- ☐ Diğer

8. Yedinci soruya cevabınız “Öğrenci yurdunda yaşıyorum.” ise, lütfen aşağıdaki ifadelerden size uyanların tamamını işaretleyiniz. Yedinci soruya cevabınız bir başka seçenek ise, lütfen dokuzuncu soruya geçiniz.

- ☐ Kaldığım yurt odasını başkalarıyla paylaşıyorum.
- ☐ Kaldığım yurt odasına ait bir tuvalet var.
- ☐ Kaldığım yurt odasına ait bir banyo var.
- ☐ Kaldığım yurt odasına ait bir çamaşır makinesi var.
- ☐ Kaldığım yurt odasına ait bir mutfak var.

9. Yedinci soruya cevabınız “Öğrenci yurdunda yaşıyorum.” ise, lütfen onuncu soruya geçiniz. Yedinci soruya cevabınız bir başka seçenek ise, lütfen bu soruyu cevaplayınız: yaşadığınız evde kendinize ait bir odanız var mı?

- ☐ Evet
- ☐ Hayır

10. COVID-19 küresel salgınının başlangıcından bu yana, salgından önceki rutininizden farklı bir zaman aralığında / sıklıkta olmak üzere ailenizle aynı evi paylaşmak durumunda kaldınız mı?

- ☐ Evet
- ☐ Hayır

11. Onuncu soruya cevabınız “Hayır” ise on ikinci soruya geçiniz. Cevabınız “Evet” ise, salgın döneminde ailenizle aynı evi paylaştığınız süreyi gün ya da ay cinsinden belirtiniz: .....

12. Hane halkı nüfusunuz kaç kişidir? .....

13. Hane halkının aylık toplam geliri ne kadardır?

- ☐ 0 – 3000 ₺
- ☐ 3000 – 6000 ₺
- ☐ 6000 – 9000 ₺
- ☐ 9000 – 12000 ₺
- ☐ 12000 ₺ üzeri

14. Cinsiyet Kimliğiniz: .....

15. Cinsel Yöneliminiz: .....

16. Bu araştırmanın sonunda yazılacak olan tezin dili İngilizce olacaktır. Bu sebeple, çalışma içerisinde sizin ifadelerinize atıfta bulunulurken bir zamir (pronoun) kullanılması gerekmektedir. Lütfen sizin ifadeleriniz aktarılırken kullanılmasını tercih ettiğiniz zamiri seçiniz.

- ☐ she/her
- ☐ he/him
- ☐ they/their
- ☐ Diğer: Lütfen belirtiniz.

## C. APPROVAL OF THE METU HUMAN SUBJECTS ETHICS COMMITTEE

UYGULAMALI ETİK ARAŞTIRMA MERKEZİ  
APPLIED ETHICS RESEARCH CENTER



ORTA DOĞU TEKNİK ÜNİVERSİTESİ  
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Sayı: 28620816 /

15 NİSAN 2021

Konu : Değerlendirme Sonucu

Gönderen: ODTÜ İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (İAEK)

İlgi : İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu Başvurusu

**Sayın Besim Can ZIRH**

Danışmanlığını yürüttüğünüz Perihan Aşlı ÖZDAL'ın "Menstrüel Ürünler, Kimlik ve Kadınların Güçlendirilmesi: Ankaradaki Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Pratikleri Üzerine Bir Çalışma" başlıklı araştırması İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu tarafından uygun görülmüş ve **146-ODTU-2021** protokol numarası ile onaylanmıştır.

Saygılarımızla bilgilerinize sunarız.

Dr.Öğretim Üyesi Ali Emre TURGUT  
İAEK Başkan Vekili



#### **D. TURKISH SUMMARY / TRKE ZET**

Bu tez alışmasında, Ankara’da yaşayan niversite ğrencilerinin pratiklerine odaklanarak, Trkiye’de menstrel rn tketim pratikleri ile menstrel damgalama ve menstrunormativite arasındaki iliřkiyi sorunsallařtırmayı amaladım. Reglin toplumun yaklařık yarısı tarafından yaşanan biyolojik bir sre olmasının yanı sıra, menřtratrlerin gndelik gerekliklerini řekillendiren toplumsal normlarla rl olmasından hareketle, tek kullanımlık ve alternatif menstrel rn kullanım pratiklerinin bu damgalama ve normlarla olan iliřkisini anlamaya alıřtım.

Menřtasyon, regl ya da adet, kadınların yařamlarının menarř ile menopoř dnemleri arasında deneyimledikleri menstrel dnglerinin bir parası olarak tanımlanmıřtır (The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, 2011). Tıbbi verilere ve lkedeki kadın nfusuna dayanarak yapılacak menstrunormatif bir hesaplama ile, Trkiye’de nfusun yarısının hayatının yaklařık yedi senesini âdet kanaması ile geireceėi sylenebilir ki, bu srecin uzunluėu ve yaygınlıėı, meselenin toplumsallıėını anlamının nemine iřaret eder.

Regl esnasında rahimden dıřarı atılan dokular ve eřitli sıvıları toplayan materyaller menstrel rnler olarak adlandırılmaktadır. Bu rnler kullanılabilirlik durumlarına gre iki kategoriye ayrılabilir ve bu kategorilerin ilki, menstrel ped ya da tampon gibi rnleri bnyesinde barındıran tek kullanımlık menstrel rnlerdir. te yandan, menstrel kap, regl klotları, kumař pedler gibi eřitli bakım sreleri ile yeniden kullanılabilen rnler ise alternatif menstrel rnler olarak adlandırılırlar.

Regli ve menstrel rnleri tanımlamak, arařtırma sorusunun odaklandıėı bu biyolojik sreci anlamaya yardımcı olurken, regl olan znenin kim olduėu sorusu ise regli toplumsal aıdan sorunsallařtırır. Zira, Trke kaynaklarda regl olan bireylere karřılık gelen kız ve kadın zneleri, her ne kadar ocukluk ve yetiřkinlik dnemlerine iřaret etmeleri sebebiyle birbirlerinden ayrılırsalar da bu iki kelimenin kullanımının iřaret ettiėi ikincil bir nokta, bireyin bir cinsel birliktelik deneyiminin olup olmamasıdır. Bylelikle Trkede kız ve kadın kelimelerinin, Gzel’in (2020) kullandıėı kavramsallařtırma ile, himenosentrik bir bekaret kavramıyla birbirinden ayrıřtıėını sylemek mmkndr. Kadın bekaretine yklenen nem, Delaney’in (1987) Trkiye’de cinselliėin gurur ve utan kavramlarının temel unsurlarından

biri olduđu savıyla ilişkilidir. Hem İslamiyet'teki hem de diğeri semavi dinlerin kutsal kitaplarındaki kadın ve erkek kavramlarına dayanarak teorisini şekillendiren Delaney, Türkiye toplumdaki cinsiyet ilişkilerinin tohum ve toprak metaforlarıyla açıklanabileceğini ileri sürer. Bu metaforlara göre kadın, tohumu besleyen ancak onun özüne müdahale edemeyen ve değeri görmesi için verimli olması beklenen topraktır ki, bu anlayış Türkiye toplumunda kadın cinselliğinin bastırılmasının ardındaki güdüyü açıklar. Bunun yanı sıra yine Delaney'e göre, kadınlara mahsus bir bedensel süreç olarak görülen regl de hem kadınların murdarlığına işaret eder hem de tohumun temiz bir toprakta filizlenmesi için elzem görülür.

Türkiye'de kadın bekaretine atfedilen toplumsal önem, kadınları fiziksel örtüden kurtarmanın ve onlara çeşitli sosyal, kültürel ve ekonomik hakların tanınmasına karşılık, kadınlardan sembolik bir örtü olan cinsel baskılamayı benimsemelerini bekleyen erken Cumhuriyet döneminden günümüze, değışen politik ajandanın da bir parçası haline gelmiştir. Bu politik ajandaların benimsendiğı toplumsal cinsiyet politikaları, içinde yaşadığımız yüzyıla doğru namuslu yurttaş-kadın personasının idealize edilmesi, liberal pazar ekonomisi, İslamcılığın yükselişı, küreselleşmenin hızlanması, Avrupa Birliğı uyum politikalarının benimsenmesi ve toplumsal cinsiyet hareketlerinin yükselişı gibi başat toplumsal değışimlerin etkisi altında kalmıştır (Sirman, 1989; Parla, 2001; Özyeğın, 2009).

Yirmi birinci yüzyılın başından itibaren Türkiye'de kadın hareketi ve LGBT+ aktivizmin ivme kazanışı, siyasal iktidarın bu hareketlerin hızını kesmeye yönelik, özellikle 2010lu yıllardan itibaren gittikçe yoğunlaşan çabaları ile eşzamanlı bir şekilde gerçekleşmiştir. Türkiye'de toplumsal cinsiyet üzerine çalışan çeşitli akademisyenler, son yirmi yılda Türkiye'de kadın ve toplumsal cinsiyet meselelerinin, bu süre zarfında kesintisiz bir şekilde iktidarda olan Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisinin neo-liberal, neo-muhafazakâr, otoriter, milliyetçi, İslamcı, aileci, pronatalist ve anti-feminist politikalarından etkilendiğı konusunda çalışmalarda bulunmuşlardır (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011; Dedeoğlu, 2013; Acar & Altunok, 2013; Kandiyoti, 2016; Cindoğlu & Ünal, 2017; Ünal Abaday, 2021).

Dedeoğlu'na göre (2013), Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisinin bu politikaları bağlamında 2000li yıllarda toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğine dair atılan ve Avrupa Birliğı uyum politikalarının bir parçası olan çeşitli adımlar kâğıt üzerinde kalmıştır. Cindoğlu ve Ünal'ın araştırmasına göre ise (2017), 2010lu yıllarla beraber Türkiye'de siyasal iktidarın kadın bedeni, cinsellik ve üreme konularına ilişkin düzenlemeleri, “yerli ve milli” bir kuşağın dışında sayılan toplum kesimleri üzerinde güç kullanmak ve popülist bir söylemle parti tabanını konsolide etmek amacıyla araçsallaştırılmıştır. Aynı döneme “eril restorasyon” kavramı ile çığır açıcı bir bakış açısı

getiren Kandiyoti, kültürel ataerkilliğin günümüz Türkiye'sini şekillendiren toplumsal cinsiyet ideolojisinin yegâne sorumlusu sayılamayacağını, aksine bu toplumsal cinsiyet politikalarının Türkiye'nin yönetici ideolojisinin karakterinde rastlantısal değil içkin olarak var olduğunu öne sürer (Kandiyoti, 2013; 2016).

Yukarıda bahsi geçen toplumsal değişimlerin sürekli etkileştiği Türkiye bağlamında, zorunlu bekaret muayeneleri feminist mücadelenin 1990lı yılların başında elde ettiği kazanıma dek zorunlu olarak uygulanmış, himenoplasti ameliyatları 1990lardan günümüze popülerliğini koruyan bir tıbbi prosedür halini almıştır (Cindoğlu 1997; Parla, 2001; Güzel, 2020). Ayrıca, Özyeğin'in (2009) araştırmasına göre, her ne kadar himenosentrik bir bekaret kavramı genç üniversite öğrencileri için önemini yitirmiş bir olgu olsa da cinsel açıdan aktif genç kadınlar, akranları veya partnerleri tarafından damgalanmamak ve ailelerinin olumsuz tepkilerinden kendilerini korumak için "görünürde bakireliği" sürdürürler. Scalco'nun (2016) benzer bir araştırmasına göre, Türkiye'de genç bekar kadınlar, cinsellikleri üzerindeki toplumsal baskıyı reddetmelerine rağmen toplumun kabul edilebilir bir üyesi olabilmek, ailelerinin duygusal desteğinden mahrum kalmamak ve evlilik, sosyobiyolojik üreme ve güvenlik haklarını elde etmek için "ev" ve "evden uzakta" olmak üzere iki farklı sosyal uzamda ayrı kimlikleri sürdürmeyi seçmektedirler.

Türkiye'de kadın bekaretinin yukarıdaki paragraflarda bahsi geçen yansımalarını kavramak, bu toplumda yerleşik olan regl gerçekliğini anlamada, iki açıdan önemlidir. İlk olarak, himene atfedilen önem, regl olan bekar bireylerin tampon ya da menstrüel kap gibi vajina içerisine yerleştirilen ürünlerin kullanımını kısıtlayabileceği için, menstrüel ürün kullanım pratikleri üzerinde doğrudan söz sahibidir. İkinci olarak, kadınların bekaret kavramıyla sınıflandırılması ve bu tutumun ülkedeki çeşitli siyasi iktidarlarca perçinlendirilmesi, Türkiye'deki baskın cinsiyet ideolojisiyle ve nihayetinde bu toplumda mevcut olan menstrüel damgalamayla ilişkilidir.

Kadın bekaretinin Türkiye bağlamındaki anlamının menstrüasyon deneyimlerine ve menstrüel ürün tercihlerine olan etkisinin yanı sıra, Türkiye'deki hâkim toplumsal cinsiyet düzeninin de regl olan bireylerin gündelik hayat deneyimlerine çeşitli açılardan etkisi bulunmaktadır. Bunların ilki, Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı ve kişisel bakım şirketleri ortaklığıyla Ergenlik Döneminde Değişim Projesi adı altında düzenlenen eğitim oturumlarıdır. Bu oturumlar bünyesinde regl üzerine konuşmalar, neo-liberal ve neo-muhafazakâr politikalarla uyum içerisinde olacak şekilde ancak tek kullanımlık ürün tüketim pratikleri üzerine ve sadece kız öğrencilerle mümkün hale gelmektedir. İkincisi, regl, iktidar yanlısı aktörlerin iktidar Partisi

tabanını konsolide etmeye yönelik popülist söylemler içinde araçsallaştırılmakta, cinselleştirilmekte ve ahlaki açıdan uygunsuz olarak gösterilmektedir. Üçüncüsü, iktidar partisin ailelerin refahını önceleyen sosyal politikaları, adet gören bireylerin ihtiyaçlarını göz ardı etmektedir.

Regl olan özneye atıfta bulunulurken tercih edilen ve Türkiye'nin hâkim toplumsal cinsiyet ideolojisi ve bekaret kavramlarına değinmemi gerektiren kavramların sonuncusu olarak üçüncü dalga feminizm ve radikal menstrüel aktivizmin ortaya çıkışıyla “menstüratör” öznesinin kullanılmaya başlanmıştır. Zira bu hareketlerin şiar edindiği gibi, her kadın regl olmaz ve regl olan herkes kadın değildir (Bobel, 2010). Menstrüel aktivizm, özneye dair getirdiği bu bakış açısının yanı sıra, alternatif menstrüel ürün kullanım pratikleri açısından da önemli bir pozisyonda durmaktadır. Zira, 1970lerde kadın sağlığı hareketinin ortaya çıkması ve 1980lerde gerçekleşen Toksik Şok Sendromu epidemisinden sonra temelleri atılan menstrüel aktivizm, hem bu ürünlerin insan ve çevre sağlığına zararlarını, hem de tek kullanımlık menstrüel ürünlerin menstrüel damgalamayı yeniden üreten söylemini sorgulaması açısından önemlidir. Nitekim, bu sorgulamalar menstrüel aktivistlerin çeşitli çevreci, anti-kapitalist ve feminist söylemleri benimseyerek alternatif menstrüel ürünleri geliştirmesi, üretilmesi ve yaygınlaştırılmasına yol açmıştır (Bobel, 2008; Bobel, 2010).

Yine menstrüel aktivizmin hız kazandırdığı interdisipliner bir alan olan eleştirel regl çalışmaları, bu araştırmanın katkı sağlamayı amaçladığı alanı teşkil etmektedir (Bobel ve ark., 2020). Menstrüel ürün teknolojileri ve endüstrisi ile menstrüel damgalama arasındaki bağlantı, başta Delaney, Lupton ve Toth (1988), Ginsburg (1996), Kissling (2006) ve Vostral (2008) gibi isimlerce çalışılmış, ayrıca bu bağlantıyı tek kullanımlık menstrüel ürün reklamlarındaki söylemler üzerinden kurmayı amaçlayan diğer çalışmalar literatüre geniş katkı sağlamıştır. Bunlarla beraber Long (1999), Meenakshi (2020), Roberts (2021), Owen (2022) ve Persdotter'in (2022) çalışmaları, alternatif menstrüel ürün kullanım pratiklerinin, menstrüel damgalamanın hâkim olduğu bağlamlarda taşıdığı anlamlar ve karşılaştıkları sınırlar üzerine yapılan araştırmalar arasında kritik önem taşımaktadır. Ancak Türkiye'de gerek menstrüel damga gerekse menstrüel ürün kullanım pratikleri üzerine yapılan araştırmalar oldukça kısıtlıdır. Türkiye'de son yirmi yılda büyük dönüşümler geçiren ve nihai olarak regl deneyimlerini ve ürün tüketim pratiklerini etkileyen politik düzen ve toplumsal cinsiyet ideolojisi de dikkate alındığında, araştırmadaki bu boşluğu doldurmak önem taşımaktadır.

Bu çalışmada, araştırma soruma cevap ararken teorik çerçeveyi feminist bir perspektifle şekillendirdim. Zira regl, bireysel uzama ait olduğu düşünülen pek çok mesele gibi, feminist

düşüncenin yükselişiyle beraber toplumsal araştırmaların konusu haline gelmiştir ve bu bakış açısı, öznel deneyimlerdeki yapısal eşitsizlikleri tespit etmeye olanak sağlar (Beasley, 1999; Ramazanoğlu, 1989). Araştırmamın teorik çerçevesinde yer verdiğim kavramlardan ilki, Johnston-Robledo ve Chrisler (2013) tarafından ileri sürülen regl kanının “damgalayıcı bir işaret” oluşudur. Bu araştırmacılara göre regl kanı, Erving Goffman tarafından inşa edilen stigma kavramının üç tipine, yani bedenin korkunçlukları, bireysel karakter bozuklukları ve kabile kimliğine uymaktadır. Regli damga (stigma) kavramı üzerinden çalışan bir başka düşünür olan Young’a (2005) göre ise, bu damga regl olanların toplumda queer bir konuma sahip olmalarına ve dolayısıyla gündelik hayatta yer aldıkları toplumsal uzamların “kurumsal ret” ile karakterize olmasına rağmen “menstrüel etikete” uymak mecburiyetinde bırakılmalarıdır.

Araştırmada reglin toplumsal yansımalarını anlamaya çalışırken kullandığım ikinci bir kavram, Persdotter (2020) tarafından “karmaşık, kümelenmiş ve çoğu zaman çelişkili normlardan oluşan hegemonik bir sosyal sistem” olarak tanımlanan menstrunormativitelendir. Persdotter'a göre menstrunormativite, ulaşılması imkânsız bir ideal menstrüel öznellik yaratır ve böylece gerçek hayattaki tüm regl deneyimlerini canavarlaştırır. Teorik çerçeve içerisinde benimsediğim üçüncü pozisyon ise, reglin toplumsal anlamını menstrüel ürün tüketim pratikleri üzerinden okumak ve bu noktada pratik teorisinin yaptığı gibi rutin faaliyetlere ve somutlaştırılmış prosedürlere öncelik vererek damgalama ve normlara odaklanmaktır. Reckwitz’in (2002) altını çizdiği gibi, bu teori çerçevesinde pratikleri “belirli bir şekilde bedenler olmayı öğrenme” yolları olarak görmeyi önemli buldum. Ayrıca, Warde’ın (2014) da vurguladığı gibi, bedensel süreçler üzerinden toplumsal değişimin izini sürerek pratik teorisini benimseyen tüketim araştırmalarına da katkı sağlamayı hedefledim.

Gerek bu araştırmanın önemli bir odak noktası olan alternatif menstrüel ürün kullanım pratiklerinin Türkiye’de henüz kısıtlı sayıda kişi tarafından benimsenmiş olması, gerekse reglin bireysel alanda gözleme kapalı bir şekilde yürütülen bir süreç olması, araştırma yöntemi olarak yarı yapılandırılmış derinlikli mülakatları seçmemle sonuçlandı. Bu nedenle, Ankara’daki herhangi bir üniversitede eğitimine devam eden 18-23 yaş arası yirmi üç kadın, iki non-binary ve bir genderqueer birey ile yirmi altı çevrimiçi yarı yapılandırılmış mülakat gerçekleştirdim. Bu yirmi altı mülakatın on altısı alternatif menstrüel ürünlerden en az bir tanesini en az bir kere kullanmış ya da kullanmayı denemiş kişilerden oluşurken, kalan on tanesi alternatif menstrüel ürünleri kullanmayı düşünen kişilerle gerçekleşti. Bu katılımcılara ulaşmak için, araştırma hakkında iki adet dijital broşür hazırlayıp Ankara’daki üniversite öğrencilerinin kullandıkları sosyal medya gruplarında ve kendi sosyal medya profillerimde

paylaştım. Özetle, sosyal medya paylaşımlarımdan sonra aldığım direkt mesaj veya e-postalar ile on iki katılımcıya, arkadaşlarımdan bu paylaşımları yeniden paylaşmaları ile on katılımcıya ve diğer katılımcıların yönlendirmeleri ile dört katılımcıya ulaştım.

Aralık 2021 ile Mart 2022 arasında yaptığım bu mülakatları, araştırmanın saha aşamasının COVID-19 pandemisine denk gelmesi sebebiyle çevrimiçi konferans programı aracılığıyla gerçekleştirdim. Toplumsal damgalanmaya maruz kalmış bir olgu olan regli, kişilerin aileleri, arkadaşları, ya da partnerleri ile beraber yaşadıkları evlerden ya da yurt odalarından katıldıkları çevrimiçi görüşmelerle gerçekleştirmenin çeşitli meseleler yaratabileceğini düşünerek, araştırma öncesinde bir pilot çalışma yürüttüm, mülakatları iki aşamalı olarak gerçekleştirdim ve mülakatlar esnasında resmi olmayan bir dil benimsedim. Katılımcılara kendi evleri ya da yurt odalarından bağlanıyor olmak, mülakatların zaman zaman hane ya da oda sakinlerince bölünmesi ve katılımcıların anlattıklarının duyulmasından dolayı çeşitli çekinceler yaşamaları gibi kısıtlamaları beraberinde getirdi, ancak katılımcıların evlerinin rahatlığından araştırmaya katılıyor olmaları, araştırmaya informal bir hava katması ve zaman tasarrufu sağlaması açısından imkanlar sağladı. Araştırmacı olarak bu çalışmayı regl olan bir kadın olarak sürdürdüm ve araştırmada çeşitli toplumsal eşitsizlikleri yeniden üretmemek ve alternatif menstrüel ürün kullanım pratiklerini bütünüyle kavramak adına bu ürünleri saha çalışması öncesinde kullanmaya başladım. Ancak hem araştırmacı hem de alternatif ürün kullanan menstüratör kimliklerimin araştırma esnasında yeni normlar üretmemesi adına, Persdotter'in (2020) menstrunormativiteler üzerine olan çalışmasının bana öz-düşünsel bir bakış açısı kattığına inanıyorum.

Çalışmanın saha araştırmasında ilk olarak katılımcıların menarş dönemlerine, regli bedensel ve psikolojik olarak nasıl deneyimlediklerine ve regl olmak hakkında neler düşündüklerine odaklandım. Pek çok araştırma katılımcısının regle dair ilk anılarını teşkil eden menarş anı, katılımcılar için adet damgasıyla ilk karşılaşılacak an olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Öyle ki, menarş deneyimi, Johnston-Robledo ve Chrisler'in (2013) öne sürdüğü gibi, stigmanın üç tipini de bünyesinde barındırır. Birincisi, genç menstüratörlerin yaşadıkları şok ve korku duyguları, reglin beden bir korkunçluğu olarak anlaşıldığını gösterir. İkinci olarak, adet kanının görünürlüğünün kişinin karakterinin bir kusuru olarak görülmesi, katılımcıların çevrelerindeki diğer menstüratörlerin bu değişim hakkında bilgi vermekten çok tek kullanımlık pedin nasıl kullanıldığını öğretmeye öncelik vermesine yansımıştır. Son olarak, reglin beraberinde getirdiği kabile kimliği, genç kız kimliğinin dillendirilmesinde ortaya çıkar. Pek çok araştırma katılımcısı için menstrüasyon Young'ın (2005) Beauvoiryen bakış açısıyla kavramsallaştırdığı "ikircikli" anlamlarla doludur ve katılımcılar için regl olmak hem utanç hem de gurur kaynağı

halini almıştır. Ancak menarşı nispeten ileri yaşlarda deneyimleyen ve menarş öncesinde regl hakkında ayrıntılı tıbbi bilgiye sahip olan katılımcılar daha pozitif menarş deneyimleri aktarmışlardır. Bununla beraber, genç kız olmayla tanımlanan menarş sonrası kabile kimliği, özellikle dindar Müslüman ailelerde yaşayan katılımcılar tarafından günahlardan sorumlu tutulmaya başlamayı, dolayısıyla çeşitli dini ritüellerin uygulanmasını beraberinde getirmiştir.

Araştırmaya katılanların çoğu için regl, olumsuz bedensel ve psikolojik deneyimlerle doludur ve bu nedenle onlar tarafından negatif sözcüklerle etiketlenir ki, bu sıfatlar regl olan bireylerin Persdotter'in kavramıyla (2020) kendi menstrüel deneyimlerini canavarlaştırmalarına örnek teşkil eder. Bununla birlikte, menstüratörlerin bu öz-canavarlaştırma sebebiyle suçlanmaları zordur, çünkü menstüratörler sadece toplumsal öznenin regl olmayan bir özne olarak çizildiği bir toplumda yaşamazlar, aynı zamanda daha rahat bir regl dönemi için gerekli olan yeterli zaman, yer ve ekipmandan yoksun kamusal alanlarda varlık göstermeye çalışırken Young'ın (2005) kavramsallaştırdığı kurumsal ret ile karşılaşır. Bununla beraber menstüratörlerin regl üzerine düşünceleri sadece olumsuz niteliğe sahip değildir. Hatta birkaç araştırma katılımcısı, feminist-spiritüalist menstrüel aktivistler gibi (Bobel, 2010), regl dönemini kadınsı, pozitif, güçlendirici ve doğal bir süreç olarak kavramsallaştırmışlardır. Öte yandan, daha yaygın olarak bazı katılımcıların regli bir hayati bulgu olarak görmeleri, reglin özcü kavramsallaştırmalarından kaçınmaları ve bu süreci hayatlarına yönelik aylık bir tefekkür imkânı olarak değerlendirmeleri, radikal menstüratör perspektifiyle (Bobel, a.g.e.) benzerlik gösterir.

Menarş anıları, reglin bedensel ve psikolojik yansımaları ile regle dair bakış açılarının ardından, araştırma katılımcılarına menstrüel damgalama deneyimleri ve bu damgalama hakkındaki görüşleri üzerine çeşitli sorular yönelttim. Bu noktada, katılımcıların anlatılarında menstrüel damgalamanın onlara dört farklı sosyokültürel yoldan aktarıldığı ön plana çıkmıştır. Bunlardan ilki, araştırma katılımcılarının çoğunlukla kamusal alanda veya regl olmayanların varlığında sergilenen sessizlikler ve kaçınanlıklardan şikâyet ederken çeşitli örneklerini paylaştıkları regl suskunluğu ve örtmecelerdir. İkinci olarak, sadece kadın üyelerin varlığında regl üzerine konuşmayı mümkün kılan, erkeklerin yanında ise susmayı teşvik eden ve başta anneler olmak üzere ailenin diğer regl olan üyelerinden doğru ve yeterli regl bilgisini almayı engelleyen aile kurumu, menstrüel damganın iletildiği önemli bir mecra haline gelmektedir.

Üçüncüsü, devlet kurumları ve kişisel bakım şirketlerinin iş birliğiyle sürdürülen ve neo-liberal ve neo-muhafazakâr değerler ekseninde okullarda gerçekleştirilen oturumları, regli sadece tek kullanımlı ürün pratikleri bağlamında ve sadece regl olan öğrencilerle konuşarak

menstrüel damgayı yeniden üretmektedir. Son olarak, medyadaki temsiller, fiziksel ve zihinsel performansında hiçbir dalgalanma göstermeyen bir ideal menstrüel öznelik varsayarak kurumsal reddi medya aracılığıyla iletmiş olur.

Araştırma katılımcıları reglin damgalandığı bir toplumda yaşamalarına rağmen, onlarla baş etmenin yollarını aramaktadırlar. Yüz yüze veya çevrimiçi mecralarda regl hakkında konuşmak ve menstrüel ürünlerinin görünürlüğünü artırmak gibi, Fahs'ın (2006) menstrüel aktivistlerin yöntemlerinden biri olarak gösterdiği gündelik direniş eylemleri, katılımcıların benimsediği taktiklerden bazılarıdır. Ayrıca, birkaç katılımcı feminist veya sol organizasyonlar içerisinde politik mücadelenin bir parçası olduğunu belirtmiştir. Bu damgalamayla mücadele etmede motivasyon sağlayan faktörler, katılımcıların lise ve sonrası dönemlerde çevrelerindeki menstüratör sayısının artmasıyla deneyim paylaşımına girmeleri ve feminist düşünce ile söylemlere aşinalık kazanmalarındır. Ayrıca birçok katılımcı, “ev” ve “evden uzakta” sosyal uzamlarında iki farklı kimliği benimsemelerine olanak sağlayan üniversiteye geçişin regle dair bakış açılarını değiştirdiğini dile getirmektedir. Ancak yine de reglin toplumun her ferdi ile konuşulabilir bir konu haline geldiğini söylemek güçtür. Katılımcılar anne-babaları, kardeşleri, yakın arkadaşları, partnerleri ve hatta okudukları üniversitelerdeki öğretim görevlileri ile regl hakkında konuştuklarını belirtirken, tanımadıkları kişilerle veya iş gibi daha resmi ortamlarda utandırılma, marjinalleştirilme ve cinselleştirilme riskinden korunmak için regl hakkında konuşmaktan kaçınmaktadırlar.

Menstrüel damgalamaya yönelik sorularımın ardından, araştırma katılımcılarına menstrüel ürün kullanım pratiklerini anlamaya yönelik sorular yönelttim. Araştırma katılımcılarının tamamının ortaklaştığı bir tüketim pratiği olan tek kullanımlık menstrüel ürün kullanımına dair sorularımda, tek kullanımlık pedlerin tüm katılımcıların ilk ve en uzun süreli kullandıkları ürün olduğu, bununla beraber bu ürünlerin yarattığı fiziksel rahatsızlıklar sebebiyle en az sevilen ürün tipi haline geldiği dikkat çekmektedir. Tek kullanımlık pedlerin dezavantajlarına rağmen sıklıkla tercih edilmesinin sebeplerinden biri, Owen'in (2022) de belirttiği gibi, günümüzün neo-liberal bağlamında günlük hayat akışının mümkün olduğunca kısa aralıklarla kesintiye uğratılmasının teşvik edilmesi ve kamusal alanların diğer menstrüel ürünlerin tüketimi için gerekli zaman, mekân ve ekipmandan yoksun olmasıdır. Bununla beraber Türk toplumundaki bekaret kavramı nedeniyle pedler bekar genç kadınlar için tampona kıyasla daha uygun bir seçenek haline gelmektedir.

Araştırma katılımcılarının alternatif menstrüel ürünlerden haberdar olma süreçleri sosyal medya ya da sosyal çevreleri vesilesiyle olmuştur. Bazı katılımcılar alternatif ürünlerin var



olduğunu takip ettikleri feminist, vegan ve çevreci kişi ya da kurumların sosyal medya ve blog gönderileri aracılığıyla öğrenirken, diğerleri bu ürünlerden arkadaşları, kardeşleri ve hatta üniversite kampüsleri sayesinde haberdar olmuştur. Hem alternatif ürünleri kullanan hem de kullanmayı düşünen katılımcılarının paylaşımlarına göre, tek kullanımlık menstrüel ürünlerden alternatif menstrüel ürün kullanım pratiklerine geçişi mümkün kılan bir etken, sosyal çevrelerinde bu alternatifleri kullanan bir menstüratörün varlığıdır. Ancak vegan ve çevreci motivasyona sahip birçok alternatif ürün kullanıcısı katılımcı, bu geçişte sorumluluk duygusunun ağır bastığını ve çevrelerinde kullanıcı kimse olmasa da bu ürünleri satın alıp kullanmaya başladıklarını belirtmişlerdir. Dolayısıyla, araştırma katılımcılarının veganlıkla bir paket halinde geldiğini ileri sürdükleri çevre bilinci, bu tüketim pratiğinin öne çıkan motivasyonlarından biridir.

Araştırma katılımcılarının anlatılarına göre, alternatif menstrüel ürünlerin satın alınması ve kullanılması söz konusu olduğunda, satın alınabilirlik ve bakım zorlukları potansiyel bir sorun olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Türkiye’de son yıllarda yükselen enflasyon oranları, Türk lirasının değer kaybetmesi ve küresel makroekonomik koşullar, pek çok ürün grubunda olduğu gibi menstrüel ürünlerin erişilebilirliğini de zorlaştırmıştır. Böylece hem alternatif ürünlerin kullanıcıları hem de bu ürünleri kullanmayı düşünen katılımcılar, yıllarca kullanabilen alternatif menstrüel ürünlerin, yaklaşık altı aylık tek kullanımlık menstrüel ürünlerin fiyatına eşdeğer olmasıyla daha ekonomik olduğunu, ancak tek seferde bir alternatif ürüne yüzlerce lira harcamanın tercih edilmesi güç bir durum olduğunu belirtmişlerdir.

Öte yandan, alternatif menstrüel ürünlerin bakım süreçleri, birçok kullanıcı için bir zorluk ve endişe kaynağıdır. Örneğin, çoğu katılımcının yaşam alanı olan yurtlarda kurumsal ret sebebiyle musluk ve klozetlerin ayrı yerlerde olması, alternatif ürün kullanım pratiklerine geçmeyi düşünen pek çok katılımcı adına engelleyici bir durumdur. Bunun yanı sıra, alternatiflerin sürdürülmesi diğer bireyler tarafından damgalanma riskini de içermektedir. Kumaş pedleri ve regl külotlarını yurt çamaşırhanelerinde yıkamak veya tuvaletten kanlı bir adet kabıyla çıkmak, bu davranışı sergileyen bireyin tiksindirici bir işareti gizlemekte başarısız olarak “menstrüel dolaptan” (Young, 2005) çıkması anlamına da gelir. Bu nedenle alternatif ürün kullanıcıları, tüketim pratiklerini başkalarına anlatarak menstrüel damgalamada bir çatlak oluştursalar dahi, utandırılma ve ötekileştirilme gibi sonuçlarla karşı karşıya kalmamak adına bu nesneleri gizlemek için çaba harcarlar.

Tüm menstrüel ürünlerin kamusal görünürlüğünün menstrüel stigmaya aykırı olmasının yanı sıra, intravajinal menstrüel ürünler Türk toplumundaki bir başka tabuyu, yani toplumsal bir

kurgu olan bekaret tabusunu da çağrıştırmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, kullanıcıların aile evine geldiklerinde menstrüel kap kullandıklarını açıklayıp açıklamamaları hane halkının olası tepkilerine bağlıdır. Tüketim pratiğinin nispeten daha gizlenebilir olduğu tamponların aksine, çoğunlukla mutfakta yapılmayı gerektiren sanitasyon işlemi sebebiyle menstrüel kapların gizlenmesi zorlaşır. Bu nedenle, menstüratörler aile üyelerinin olası tepkilerinden kaçınmak adına aile evlerinde menstrüel kap kullanım pratiklerini terk edebilirler veya adet kaplarını sterilize etmek için evde yalnız kaldıkları bir zaman aralığını arayarak “görünürde bakireliğe” (Özyeğin, 2009) başvurabilirler.

Döngüsel bir bedende yaşamak, damgalanmış bir işaret olan regli üretmek anlamına gelir, bununla beraber menstüratörler geleneksel ataerkinin empoze ettiği cinsel baskıdan da mustarıptır ve bu baskı, Türkiye'deki hâkim toplumsal cinsiyet ideolojisiyle daha da yoğunlaşır. Ancak tüm bu damgalanma ve baskıya rağmen, alternatif ürün kullanım pratikleri, pek çok araştırma katılımcısı kullanıcı için bedenleriyle iletişimlerinde yeni bir dil kurmalarının yolunu açmıştır. Örneğin, özellikle adet kabı tüketimi ile adet akıntısı görünür, koklanabilir ve dokunulabilir hale gelir. Bu sayede menstüratörler akıntı miktarını ve içeriğini takip edebilir hale gelirler ve akıntıdaki değişiklikler çeşitli hastalıklara veya artan stres seviyelerine işaret edebileceğinden, bu pratik kullanıcıları bedensel süreçlerine dair bilgilerle donatır. Alternatif ürünler ayrıca pek çok katılımcı kullanıcı için adetlerin normalleşmesine ve damgalanmanın kırılmasına yol açar, zira tek kullanımlık menstrüel ürünler, tek kullanımlık olmaları ve utanç ve gizlilik bağlamında tasarlanmaları, paketlenmeleri ve dağıtılmaları yoluyla kişinin kendi vücuduyla ve regl sıvılarıyla temasını kısıtlar. Ancak kumaş pedleri ve menstrüel kapları kullanan araştırma katılımcıları, tek kullanımlık ürün endüstrisinin dikte ettiğinin aksine, regl kanının korkulacak, utanılacak veya tiksiniyecek bir şey olmadığını fark ettiklerini aktarmaktadırlar. Hatta, alternatif menstrüel ürün kullanım pratiklerinin pek çok katılımcı kullanıcının bedenleri üzerinde daha fazla bilgi edinmeye ve bedenleriyle daha sık temas etmeye sebep olması, çoğu menstüratörün bedenleri ve cinsellikleri konusunda daha özgüvenli olduklarını aktarmalarıyla sonuçlanmıştır.

Alternatif ürün kullanıcılarının anlatımlarından da anlaşılacağı üzere bu yeni pratik, çevreye daha az zarar vermesi, aylık ped ve tampon harcamalarını bitirmesi ve kullanıcıların bedenleri ve adet kanları ile daha barışık olmalarını sağlaması açısından daha iyi bir adet deneyimine yol açmıştır. Yüksek memnuniyet seviyeleri ve feminist / çevreci / beden-pozitif bakış açıları, pek çok alışkın kullanıcının bu ürünler hakkında konuşarak menstrüel damgalamayı kırmalarına vesile olmuştur. Öte yandan, alternatif uygulamaların damgalamayı yeniden ürettiği durumlar da bulunmaktadır. Örneğin, pek çok menstrüel kap kullanıcısı, bu ürünün

kullanımı esnasında kimi zaman regl olduklarını unuttuklarını belirterek kapların rahatlığını övmektedir. Menstrüel kapların unutulabilirliği ve sızıntısız bir regl deneyimi sunması ile yüceltilmesi, toplumdaki menstrüel tiksindiriciliği gözler önüne sermekte ve menstrüel stigmaya yeniden üretmektedir. Ancak alternatif ürün kullanıcılarını bu yeniden üretime mecbur bırakan unsurlar, rahat bir deneyimi önceliklendiren bireylerin niyetleri değil, kamusal alanda reproduktif bedenlere neo-liberal değer biçilmesi (Owen, 2022) ve kurumsal rettir (Young, 2005).

Yerleşik stigmanın yeniden üretiminin yanı sıra, katılımcıların anlatılarında ön plana çıkan bir başka unsur alternatif yöntemlerle sürdürülen regl dönemlerinin yeni menstrüel normları yaratmasıdır. Persdotter'in (2020) ideal menstrüel özne kavramından hareketle, Türk toplumundaki hâkim menstrüel öznenin yirmi sekiz günlük düzenli bir döngüye sahip, reglin tüm delillerini gizleyen, reglden bahsederken örtmecelere başvuran, regl hakkında konuşmaktan kaçınan, tek kullanımlık ped kullanan ve âdet kanaması boyunca fiziksel ve zihinsel performans dalgalanmaları olmayan bir cis-kadın veya genç kız olduğu söylenebilir. Buna karşılık, katılımcıların anlatılarından hareketle, alternatif menstrüel ürün kullanım pratikleriyle ortaya çıkan ideal menstrüel özne ise damgalamaya karşı regl hakkında konuşan, regl üzerine nötr ya da pozitif bakış açısına sahip olan, çevrenin yararını kendi konforundan önde tutan, satın alınabilirlik ve bakım zorluklarını aşmanın bir yolunu bulan ve feminist bir duruş gereği kendi bedeniyle barışık olan bir kadın ya da menstüratördür. Alternatif ürün kullanım pratiklerini adapte etmesiyle karakterize bu yeni menstrüel özne, araştırma katılımcılarının anlatılarında cesareti, inisiyatif alması ve daha sürdürülebilir, ekonomik, feminist ve rahat bir pratiği seçmesi sebebiyle "havalı" (Owen, 2022) bir özne olarak öne çıkar ve bu öznenin karakter özellikleri içsel ya da dışsal müeyyidelerle menstüratörlere dayatılmaktadır.

Sonuç olarak, alternatif ve tek kullanımlık menstrüel ürün tüketim pratikleri, kendine has bedensel pratikleri, nesneleri, anlayışı, bilgi birikimi, duyguları ve motivasyonları ile menstüratörlere belirli şekillerde bedenler olmayı öğretir. Bedensel performanslar, bedenlerin toplumsal ve toplumsal düzenin alanı olduğunu gösterdiğinden, bu tüketim pratikleri çeşitli toplumsal olguların bir sonucu olarak ortaya çıkar. Bu pratiklerle bağlantı kurmaya çalıştığım güçlerden bazıları, menstrüel damgalama, yeni menstrunormativiteler, neo-liberal ve neo-muhafazakâr değerler üzerinde büyüyen baskın cinsiyet düzeni ile feminist ve queer hareketlerdir. Bu nedenle, Türkiye'de döngüsel bedenlerin menstrüel ürün kullanım pratikleri üzerine düşünürken, yurttaş-kadın personası, liberal piyasa ekonomisi, İslamlaşmanın yükselişi, hızlanan küreselleşme, etki alanını genişleten feminist ve LGBT+ aktivizmleri ve

bunların hızını kırmayı amaçlayan eril restorasyon gibi toplumsal güçlerin hesaba katılması gerekir. Bu sayısız sosyal gücün etkisi altında, Persdotter'in (2020) kümelenmiş, karmaşık ve çelişkili bir şekilde işleyen menstrunormativiteler kavramsallaştırması önem kazanır. Bu güçler altındaki herkes ve her şey tarafından sürekli olarak yaratılan menstrüel normlar, tüm regl deneyimlerinin canavarlaştırılmasıyla sonuçlanır. Bu noktada menstrüel normların sürekli oluştuğunu kabul etmek, regl olmanın herhangi bir doğru yolu olduğunu dayatmaktan kaçınmak ve farklı adet deneyimlerini görünür kılmak bu bedensel süreci daha iyi anlamayı mümkün kılabilir.

Türkiye'de eleştirel regl çalışmalarının yeni gelişen bir alan olması sebebiyle, gelecekteki araştırmaların sağlayacağı farklı bakış açıları Türkiye'de menstrüel damgalama ve menstrüel ürün kullanım pratikleri arasındaki ilişkinin kavranmasında önemli rol oynayacaktır. Bu bağlamda, gelecekteki araştırmalar COVID-19 pandemisi sırasında gerçekleşen bu araştırmanın içerdiği saha sürecine ve katılımcı profiline yönelik çeşitli kısıtlamaları içermeyebilir. Örneğin, bu araştırma kapsamında üniversite öğrencisi katılımcılar ile yaptığım görüşmelerde, ailenin hem regl hem de menstrüel ürün tüketim deneyimlerini şekillendiren bir olgu olarak ortaya çıkması, kuşaklar arası dinamiklere odaklanan çalışmaların ufuk açıcı olacağına işaret etmektedir. Öte yandan, alternatif ürünlerin "alternatif" olarak kalmasına sebep olan etkenlerden biri de bu ürünlerin satın alınabilirliğinde ve bakımında ortaya çıkan çeşitli zorluklardır. Bu noktada regl yoksulluğu ve adaletsizliğini ele alan çalışmalar, Türkiye'de yaşayan menstüratörlerin ihtiyaçlarına işaret etmede büyük önem taşıyabilir. Regl ürünlerinin erişilebilirliği konusunda Türkiye bağlamından elde edilen verilerle menstrüel damgalama ve regl yoksulluğu arasında kurulacak bağlantılar, bu tezin yanıt vermediği bir araştırma boşluğunu dolduracaktır.

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