

# Availability of Menstrual Hygiene products among Female students

February, 2023







ქაღთა ფონდი საქართველოში  
**WOMEN'S FUND IN GEORGIA**

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The views and opinions expressed herein belong to the authors of the study and should not be perceived as the position of "Women's Fund in Georgia".

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## Executive Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the availability of menstrual hygiene products and relevant information to female undergraduate students and to analyze the existing economic, socio-cultural barriers.

To do this, the research team reviewed existing literature and practices, surveyed 440 students via an electronic survey, conducted 11 in-depth interviews with female students, including the representatives of non-dominant ethnic groups and women with disabilities, conducted 4 face-to-face interviews with experts of the field, and solicited information from public universities.

During the course of the research, the following key issues were identified:

### ➤ Awareness about Menstruation and Menstrual Hygiene Products

The level of knowledge about menstruation and menstrual hygiene materials among young female students is inadequate. Although 87% of survey participants believe that they possess comprehensive information on menstruation, in-depth interviews have revealed that their understanding is incomplete, and they face many obstacles in acquiring complete information.

The primary sources of information are as follows: the Internet (70%), social networks (51%), and mothers (37%). In contrast, doctors/pharmacists (2%) and teachers (1%) are the least common sources of knowledge about menstruation. Consequently, survey respondents mostly rely on informal sources, which could be inaccurate and incomplete.

Schools do not typically function as institutions that provide information. In fact, it is often the teachers who contribute to perpetuating taboos and creating stereotypical attitudes surrounding menstruation.

Additionally, women with disabilities, members of non-dominant ethnic groups, and women residing in rural areas face dual barriers in obtaining information due to widespread stereotypes and taboos associated with women's sexuality.

Research participants are eager to learn more about menstruation and believe it is crucial that all young women have access to reliable sources that can provide full answers to any queries they may have.

### ➤ Stigma and Stereotypes Related to Menstruation

Most of the respondents interviewed do not hold stereotypical beliefs about menstruation and even distance themselves from them. However, societal misconceptions continue to impact their daily lives, constraining their actions in different ways. For example, refraining from using tampons, refusing to participate in religious rituals during menstruation, and feeling uncomfortable while purchasing menstrual hygiene products.

Menstruation is often accompanied by a feeling of shame, which is linked to the curbing of women's autonomy and is frequently employed as a tool to discredit them.

The perception of women with disabilities and their sexuality is also based on stereotypical notions. It is commonly assumed that individuals with disabilities do not have a sexuality, and the use of certain menstrual hygiene products is deemed inappropriate for them.

### ➤ Consumption Patterns and Selection Criteria for Menstrual Hygiene Products

The majority of students who participated in the study received information about menstrual hygiene products only after the onset of menstruation. In their earlier years, most of the respondents had knowledge only about sanitary pads. Information about tampons and menstrual cups was typically received at a later stage.

Regarding the usage of menstrual hygiene products, students who took part in the survey primarily used pads (87%). Female students typically purchased menstrual products from pharmacies (69%), and the monthly cost of such products ranged between 6 and 20 GEL.

According to the survey, a large number of respondents (78%) receive financial assistance from someone else, and most of them rely on their mothers (71%) as the main provider of support.

When purchasing menstrual hygiene products, survey respondents prioritize quality (51%), duration of protection (42%), and affordability (29%).

### ➤ Barriers Related to the Purchase and Consumption of Menstrual Hygiene Products

Over the past year, approximately one-quarter of the research participants (23%) have faced various obstacles such as financial, physical, geographical, and social barriers when attempting to purchase menstrual hygiene products.

The primary obstacle encountered is a lack of funds, with 43% of respondents indicating that they did not have sufficient funds to purchase menstrual hygiene products over the last year.

Women living in rural areas face a geographical barrier, as pharmacies and shops are far from the settlement, and women do not have the opportunity to travel there.

Inaccessible environments, in particular, inaccessible public toilets, educational spaces, medical institutions and pharmacies, create a barrier to physical accessibility for people with disabilities, and especially for women using wheelchairs.

Women also encounter social barriers. 10% of the respondents who have faced a social barrier in the last year report feeling embarrassed when purchasing menstrual hygiene products, which is often due to prevalent societal beliefs and taboos.

### ➤ Support from the University

Universities have not given priority to policies and programs related to sexual and reproductive health, considering them less significant.





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Information sessions on women's sexual and reproductive health and rights are rarely held in universities.

Many students are in favor of increased focus on sexual and reproductive health in universities. 8 out of 10 students who were interviewed believe that universities should provide menstrual hygiene products for students. 64% of the respondents in the study expressed their willingness to use hygienic facilities provided by universities. Furthermore, restrooms are the preferred location for placing menstrual hygiene products.

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## Research Problem

Menstrual health and hygiene are crucial for the well-being and empowerment of women and adolescent girls. It is a natural bodily function that cannot be ignored. On average, women spend 7 years of their lives menstruating (UNICEF, 2018). To effectively manage menstruation, it is essential for girls and women to have access to water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities, appropriate menstrual hygiene materials, information on effective practices, and a supportive environment where they can manage menstruation without stigma (The World Bank, 2022). Approximately 800 million individuals menstruate every day (UNFPA, 2022), of which 500 million women lack access to menstrual and hygiene products (The World Bank, 2018).

Period poverty is a term that refers to social, economic, political, and cultural barriers that hinder access to menstrual hygiene facilities, education, and sanitation (Geng, 2021). Under this concept, it is not only menstrual pads and tampons that are lacking, but also painkillers, underwear (UNFPA, 2021).

Menstrual poverty is a global issue that affects those who are unable to manage their periods with dignity due to limited access to menstrual hygiene products. As a result, some individuals resort to prolonged use of tampons and pads, which can lead to various infections (ActionAid, 2022). In addition to financial barriers, managing menstruation also poses challenges such as inconvenience caused by the presence of men in pharmacies, which can prevent girls from buying hygiene products. Women living in rural areas may also have less access to menstrual products as the stores may not stock the specific product they require. Furthermore, lack of awareness is also a significant challenge, as teenagers mostly rely on disposable pads and lack knowledge about alternative menstrual products (Kaikhosroshvili, Imerlishvili, 2020).

Currently, there is a lack of information on the prevalence of menstrual poverty among young girls and women in Georgia. This is because, unlike other countries, the issue has never been addressed. In Kenya, for instance, there is a bill that requires schools to provide menstrual hygiene products to students (Galer, 2019), while in Great Britain, hygiene products are available for free in public schools (Marsh, 2019). Scotland also introduced a policy in 2020 that provides free menstrual products to all individuals (Diamond, 2020).

It is worth noting that girls and women with disabilities encounter greater challenges in managing menstruation with dignity, as they face dual stigma resulting from gendered social norms and disability (UNICEF, 2022). Furthermore, menstruation practices of girls and women from non-dominant ethnic groups are deemed acceptable, as ensuring their sexual and reproductive rights and health is linked with additional obstacles due to language barriers (Imerlishvili, 2022).

Students are considered one of the most vulnerable groups affected by menstrual poverty. 1 in 4 American students do not have access to menstrual hygiene products (Thinx & PERIOD, 2021). Although we do not have specific data regarding menstrual product availability in Georgia, the 6th wave of the "Eurostudent" international survey in 2021 revealed that 35% of Georgian students are facing serious or very serious financial difficulties (Hauschildt, Gwosć, Schirmer, Wartenbergh-Cras, 2021). Therefore, it is likely that these students may struggle to

purchase menstrual products as well. For these reasons, this study aims to examine the access of female students to menstrual hygiene products and relevant information, taking into account existing economic, socio-cultural barriers, and university practices.

## Literature Review

### Global Context

Menstrual poverty is a pervasive issue that affects not only developing nations but also the developed world (TIME 2022). This term refers to the lack of resources necessary to manage menstruation, including appropriate restrooms, personal hygiene products, detergents, insufficient education and knowledge about menstruation (Casola, Luber, Riley, Medley, 2021). The United Nations has recognized menstrual poverty as a public health, gender equality, and human rights concern (Haneman, 2021). The Central University of Eastern Europe asserts that every human right is based on the fundamental right to dignity (Montano, 2018). When an individual who experiences menstruation is compelled to use unsanitary and unhygienic materials, their dignity is compromised, and they are treated as second-class citizens (Ibid. p. 385).

Menstrual poverty is a widespread issue that impacts all menstruating individuals. It is crucial for them to have access to menstrual hygiene products and safe, hygienic spaces where they can manage their periods without stigma (Actionaid, 2022). Shockingly, 500 million women worldwide lack this opportunity (OHCHR, 2022), and 1.25 billion women do not have access to safe, private toilets (ActionAid, 2022). Furthermore, 2.3 billion people globally suffer from a lack of sanitation (UNICEF, 2018). The absence of adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services is linked to reduced human dignity and agency, as well as an increased risk of various diseases for women and girls (Pouramin, Nagabhatla, & Miletto, 2020).

Menstrual poverty is accompanied by a number of side effects, such as girls missing school or other educational activities for several days, feeling shame and fear during menstruation due to societal stigma (ActionAid, 2022), and compromising their health by using unsanitary alternatives such as dirty cloths, plants, or paper, or by resorting to baby diapers due to lack of funds to buy menstrual hygiene products (Actionaid, 2022). In addition, menstrual poverty has been linked to an increased risk of depression (ASTHO, 2021).

Due to the seriousness of the problem, various practices have been implemented around the world to overcome menstrual poverty. Scotland was the first country to make menstrual hygiene products free for all, setting a significant precedent (TIME, 2022). Scotland was joined by New Zealand, making these products available to all students in schools (BBC, 2021). In 2004, Kenya was the first country to eliminate import taxes on menstrual hygiene products (Masterson, 2022), while the Seoul government launched a program to provide menstrual hygiene products in public spaces, including museums, for anyone to use (Koreaherald, 2018). Additionally, the Belgian government made menstrual hygiene products available free of charge to inmates in prisons (Klingert, 2022).

It is worth noting that certain social groups are more vulnerable to menstrual poverty than others. Specifically, students have been identified as a particularly at-risk group. Recent studies have highlighted the extent of this problem, revealing that a significant percentage of female undergraduate students in the United States have experienced difficulty purchasing menstrual products. For instance, a study of 471 female undergraduate students found that 14.2% of respondents were unable to purchase menstrual products at some point in the past year, and 10% were unable to purchase menstrual products every month (Gruer, Goss, Schmitt, Sommer, 2021). Moreover, according to a study by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor



and Welfare, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the issue of poverty among young girls and women. 12% of women over the age of 20 reported having difficulty purchasing menstrual hygiene products in recent months (Japantimes, 2022). It is worth noting that certain sub-groups of university students may be particularly vulnerable to menstrual poverty, including first-year students (Gupta, 2021).

Numerous universities across the world have begun providing menstrual hygiene products to their students, staff, and visitors, recognizing the need to address menstrual poverty. Liverpool John Moores University was the first institution in England to take this step (Ennis, Donovan-Hall, Standing, & Mistry, 2020). The French government has also committed to providing free menstrual hygiene products to university students (Elzas, 2021). Other leading universities, including Yale, Columbia, Harvard, and Brown, have also implemented similar measures (Mohammad, 2019).

Student unions have been at the forefront of implementing programs to address issues faced by students in universities (Edge Hills Students Union, 2022). One such issue is the burden of purchasing menstrual products, which has been a shared experience for students across various campuses. For instance, at Cambridge University, students launched extensive campaigns, which included conducting surveys with up to 600 students and preparing an open letter to the Vice-Chancellor, signed by over 1,400 individuals (Shorrocks, 2022). These efforts resulted in the provision of free menstrual hygiene products to Cambridge students from 2021.

Before delving into the needs of vulnerable students, it is essential to understand the range of menstrual hygiene products available and their usage. The market offers various options such as disposable pads, tampons, menstrual cups, menstrual discs, and specialized underwear (UT Health Austin, 2019). The choice of menstrual hygiene products depends on several factors such as cultural beliefs, affordability, personal preference, and financial status (Jadwat, Bassa, Rungsumy, Rughoputh, 2021). Tampons are the preferred choice of over 70% of American women, who spend an estimated \$2,000 on these products during their lifetime. It is predicted that by 2025, businesses that cater to women's health and wellness will generate profits worth \$51.3 billion (Duquense School of Nursing, 2022). Menstrual pads and tampons remain the most widely used menstrual hygiene products (UT Health Austin 2019), with Always being the most popular brand, followed by Kotex (Statista 2022). However, it is important to note that each menstrual hygiene product has its own user base, and this diversity should be considered while providing hygiene products to university students (EIS, 2017). For instance, the University of Dundee offers a comprehensive range of menstrual hygiene products, including menstrual cups, reusable pads, organic cotton tampons, and several sizes of menstrual panties (University of Dundee, 2022). In comparison, Utrecht University provides only pads and tampons (Utrecht University, 2022).

It is crucial for universities to consider and explore suitable spaces for placing menstrual hygiene products, such as aid boxes or dispensers. Access to these products should be ensured for all students, including those with disabilities and transgender students. Different universities have adopted diverse approaches, such as the University of Glasgow, which provides menstrual hygiene products in toilets and common laundries (University of Glasgow, 2022), while York University has installed special dispensers for these products (University of York Students Union, 2022). Additionally, universities must communicate and provide information to all students about the availability of menstrual hygiene products (EIS, 2017).

The distribution of menstrual hygiene products free of cost in educational settings has been a practice for several years, with some accumulated experience in this area. In fact, some



guidelines have been created to encourage and support universities in implementing this practice (Auntflow, 2022). A report that evaluated the provision of free menstrual hygiene products in Scotland revealed that over 80% of pupils and students had access to menstrual products of their choice at no cost, with reusable menstrual cups being the most preferred option (Scottish Government, 2022). Researchers have also identified factors that contribute to the successful adoption of this practice:

- The involvement of students in the implementation process;
- Easy accessibility of menstrual hygiene products, allowing individuals to access these products without having to rely on someone else for assistance;
- Initiatives of advertising and marketing activities;
- Overcoming stigma and normalizing menstruation

As a result of these efforts, students are no longer burdened with anxiety related to menstruation, enabling them to freely engage in their daily activities. This positive change in menstrual management has contributed to the improvement of their mental health and overall well-being (ibid).

### Georgian Context

In Georgia, menstrual poverty has not yet received adequate attention from the government, moreover, menstrual hygiene products are not considered a primary human need. The Tax Code of Georgia imposes an 18% value added tax (VAT) on menstrual hygiene products (Legislative Herald of Georgia, 2010). This, combined with the high inflation rate of 10.4% (Tabula, 2022), creates significant financial difficulties for women in the country. Although some non-governmental organizations have launched initiatives to distribute menstrual hygiene products to Georgian women (GHN, 2021), these one-time efforts are insufficient to address the problem of menstrual poverty. Purchasing menstrual hygiene products, pain relievers, and other related items can be prohibitively expensive for many women, leading them to resort to low-quality alternatives or menstrual cups (Bidzinashvili, 2021).

When it comes to selecting menstrual hygiene products, the experience of Georgian schoolgirls holds considerable importance. According to a 2021 study on menstruation stigma and related rights violations in Georgian public schools, the majority of girls use pads because they lack information about other menstrual hygiene products. Some of them are aware of tampons but do not use them due to the common belief that they are only suitable for those who are sexually active (Kaikhosrovshvili & Imerlishvili, 2021). The same study reveals that the respondents knew people who used reusable pads, cloths, or gauze during menstruation due to financial difficulties (ibid., p. 36).

Financial barriers pose a significant challenge for Georgian students. Despite spending 53 hours per week, studying and working, that is higher number of hours compared to the most of European countries, 35% of students in Georgia face serious or very serious financial problems (Hauschildt, Gwośc, Schirmer, Wartenbergh-Cras, 2021). Additionally, 46% of students in Georgia do not have a paid job, and more than half of internships (54%) are of a voluntary basis and unpaid (ibid., p. 150, 160). As a result, it is not surprising that they rely on financial support from family members or partners for almost half or more of their income (ibid., p. 178). Furthermore, one-third of Georgian students feel that they will not be able to afford unexpected basic expenses (ibid., p. 216).

As previously mentioned, access to menstrual hygiene products is a challenge for students, with some subgroups facing even greater obstacles. One such subgroup is female students belonging to non-dominant ethnic groups. A recent evaluation of the state of sexual and reproductive health and rights for women and girls in these groups in Georgia found that limited access to information was a significant issue, primarily due to language barriers (Imerlishvili, 2022).

For this reason, sometimes representatives of non-dominant ethnic groups refrain from receiving various services, which limits their access to information. Therefore, when receiving services, they are sometimes accompanied by a family member/friend as a translator, in whose presence they are uncomfortable talking about personal issues like sexual and reproductive rights (ibid.). Students representing non-dominant ethnic groups study the state language within the framework of the Georgian language training program ("1+4") (Mikeladze, Dalakishvili, Iremashvili, 2020), however, the lack of knowledge in terms of sexual and reproductive health and rights could also be attributed to the scarcity of materials in the Georgian language (Gogberashvili, Mukeria, Sutidze, 2020).

Regarding marginalization, it is important to specifically acknowledge female students with disabilities. There is a lack of accurate statistics on the number of persons with disabilities in Georgia (Macharashvili, 2020), and there is a lack of information on the number of students with disabilities enrolled in higher education institutions (ask.gov, 2022). However, according to data from 2022, out of the beneficiaries of disability social support, 48,108 are female (Social Services Agency, 2022). It is noteworthy that the "Eurostudent" study found that the percentage of students with disabilities in Georgia is less than 10% (Hauschildt, Gwosć, Schirmer, Wartenbergh-Cras, 2021).

The situation faced by women with disabilities is particularly noteworthy as they encounter additional obstacles related to menstruation management due to the lack of accessible infrastructure. Compared to their non-disabled counterparts, women with disabilities have even less access to hygienic restrooms that are equipped with water and other necessary facilities (UNICEF, 2018). Additionally, accessible pharmacies are scarce, and there have been instances where pharmacists had to provide consultations to individuals with disabilities who were using wheelchairs on the street because they were physically unable to enter the premises. Furthermore, medication instructions are not printed in Braille, which makes it challenging for individuals who are blind (Meshveliani, 2019).

Apart from the challenges posed by inaccessible environments, women with disabilities also face limited access to sexual and reproductive health and rights. Medical practitioners are not legally required to educate women and girls with disabilities about their sexual and reproductive health rights, leading to a lack of awareness. Additionally, state programs do not include provisions for educating disabled individuals about their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Consequently, women with disabilities have limited autonomy in making decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, while others are making choices on their behalf (Jalaghania, Mirzikashvili, 2021).

In some cases, girls with visual impairments may refrain from seeking information on sexual and reproductive health due to social taboos, stigma, and shame. Even if they attempt to search for information, the unavailability of accessible technical equipment often hinders their ability to access this information on the internet (Gogberashvili, Mukeria, Sutidze, 2020). For women with psychosocial needs, there may be instances where they require medication that

can potentially disrupt their menstrual cycle, but they are not provided with sufficient information regarding such effects (Meshveliani, 2019).

## Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate the accessibility of menstrual hygiene products and associated information for female students, while considering the economic, socio-cultural constraints, and existing university policies.

The specific objectives of the research study are as follows:

1. To ascertain the degree to which female students are educated about menstrual hygiene products;
2. To examine the physical, financial, and socio-cultural impediments that female students encounter while purchasing menstrual hygiene products;
3. To identify stereotypes associated with menstrual hygiene products;
4. To uncover the specific experiences of women from diverse social groups, including representatives of non-dominant ethnic groups and women with disabilities, regarding the use of menstrual hygiene products;
5. To investigate the practices and experiences of universities in promoting the sexual and reproductive rights and health of female students.

## Operationalization of Key Concepts

Within the framework of this research, key concepts have been studied with the following meanings assigned to them:

**Awareness** - In this section, we studied the level of awareness of female students regarding menstruation and menstrual hygiene products, namely:

- What was their level of knowledge prior to the onset of menstrual cycle?
- At what age and from whom did they first learn about menstruation and menstrual hygiene products?
- How would they describe their current level of knowledge on the topic?
- What sources do they rely on to obtain information related to menstruation?

**Obstacles** - In this section, we have examined the primary obstacles that female students face in purchasing and using menstrual hygiene products. These obstacles include physical, geographic, financial, and social factors, such as:

- What is the financial cost associated with purchasing menstrual hygiene products on a monthly basis?
- Are female students receiving any financial assistance to cover the cost of these products?
- Are they willing to compromise on quality to purchase lower-priced products?
- Where do they typically purchase menstrual hygiene products and how accessible is the location from their place of residence?
- Are female students receiving any physical assistance to purchase these products?
- To what extent does the environment accommodate the specific needs of women?

- Do female students experience feelings of embarrassment or shame when purchasing menstrual hygiene products?
- What social stigmas and taboos exist in society that prevent women from purchasing and using menstrual hygiene products?

**The Stigma Associated with Menstruation** - In this section, we investigate the myths and stereotypes surrounding menstruation, and how they affect young women.

- What are the prevailing stereotypes surrounding menstruation and menstrual products among different social groups, and how do they impact women's health and rights?

**Support from the University** - In this part, we examine the university's role in promoting and supporting women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. Namely:

- Are there any specific initiatives or programs that the university implements to support women's sexual and reproductive health and rights?
- Assessment of the university's efforts to provide menstrual hygiene products to its students.

## Research Methodology

The study employed a triangulation approach, which involved the use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The combination of these methods enabled researchers to examine the issue from various angles. Moreover, the adoption of a multi-method approach helped to mitigate the limitations of each individual method and enhance the study's internal and external validity.

At the initial stage of the research, face-to-face interviews were conducted with experts in the field. Simultaneously, the researchers requested information electronically from university representatives. Later, in-depth interviews and a quantitative survey were conducted with female students. Each stage of the research is discussed in detail in the following subsections.

### Qualitative Component

As mentioned above, to gather qualitative data for the study, we employed face-to-face and in-depth interview methods. Sexual and reproductive health and rights experts were interviewed through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, while female students from Tbilisi, Kutaisi, and Samtskhe-Javakheti universities, as well as women from non-dominant ethnic groups and women with disabilities, were interviewed through in-depth interviews. Additionally, we requested information electronically from university representatives, with only Kutaisi and Samtskhe-Javakheti state universities agreeing to participate in the research.

Prior to commencing the fieldwork, the research team created interview guides customized for each target group. Two distinct guides were designed for face-to-face interviews - one for university representatives and another for field experts. Additionally, a guide was specifically developed for in-depth interviews, which included supplementary questions for women with disabilities and non-dominant ethnic groups to study their unique experiences.



## Face-to-Face Interviews with Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Experts

In order to obtain general information regarding the availability of menstrual products among female students and to assess the current situation, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts in the field, a total of 4 interviews.

During the interviews, the research team focused on the following key topics:

- Assessment of the present state of menstrual health awareness and access to menstrual products, drawing upon their experience in the field.
- Barriers in terms of purchasing menstrual products across various groups, such as young individuals, women from non-dominant ethnic groups, and those with disabilities.
- Commitment of universities to ensure the sexual and reproductive health and rights of female students.

## Electronic Interview with the Representatives of Universities

As part of the study, interview guides were sent electronically to representatives of four universities, namely Tbilisi Ivane Javakhishvili State University, Ilia State University, Akaki Tsereteli State University, and Samtskhe-Javakheti State University. The interview guides were sent to various departments including the dean's office, administration, and quality assurance staff to obtain the perspectives of university representatives.

The selection of these particular universities was determined by several main factors. Firstly, state universities were chosen as they account for the majority of students enrolled in higher education institutions (Geostat, 2022). Furthermore, fees in state universities are similar across the country (IMEDI, 2018), and some even offer shared accommodation (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2015). Additionally, state universities are the only institutions that offer free programs, which is attractive to many students as it reduces tuition costs (Shvelidze, 2022). Given the limitations of the research scope, it was not feasible to include all universities; therefore, state universities located in major cities were selected. Samtskhe-Javakheti State University was selected due to its ethnic diversity.

The data collected from the chosen university representatives provided valuable insight into their stance on the research focus and the overall policies of their respective institutions. The interview guide focused on two crucial areas:

- Respondent's attitude regarding menstrual poverty;
- University policies and initiatives regarding the sexual and reproductive health and rights of female students.

In the process of the electronic interviewing, the representatives of Kutaisi and Samtskhe-Javakheti universities limited their participation to only a few answers, while the researchers did not receive any feedback at all from Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University. In addition to sending official letters, the researchers contacted the representatives of these universities by phone, but they categorically declined to participate in the study.

## In-Depth Interview

We utilized the in-depth interview technique to investigate the experiences of young women. By conducting in-depth interviews, participants were given the freedom to discuss topics that

are commonly considered as "natural occurrences" in everyday life and are often overlooked. Specifically, we delved into the subject of menstruation and the associated challenges. This research approach is especially crucial in feminist studies, as it enables us to address sensitive issues that are frequently disregarded. Furthermore, through the in-depth interview method, the researchers were able to delve into topics that are typically stigmatized within society.

We used the purposeful sampling method to select the participants of the in-depth interview<sup>1</sup>. The purposive sampling method is widely used in qualitative research and involves purposefully selecting participants according to predetermined criteria.

Within the framework of the research, 11 in-depth interviews were conducted, covering the regions of Tbilisi, Kutaisi, and Samtskhe-Javakheti. The selection criteria for participants were as follows:

- Gender - Female
- Education Level – Undergraduate Students
- University - Tbilisi Ivane Javakhishvili State University, Ilia State University, Akaki Tsereteli State University, and Samtskhe-Javakheti State University.

In order to ensure the principle of intersectionality and to reveal the specific experiences of different social groups within the framework of the research, two in-depth interviews were conducted with female students with disabilities and female students representing non-dominant ethnic groups.

In-depths interviews covered the following principal issues:

- Awareness about menstruation and menstrual hygiene products;
- Access to menstrual hygiene products;
- Costs related to menstrual hygiene products;
- Stereotypes and myths related to menstrual hygiene products;
- Possible support of universities regarding the sexual and reproductive health and rights of female students.

Based on the experience of the researchers, it should be said that the students displayed a keen interest in the research project. With only a few exceptions, all students agreed enthusiastically to participate. In fact, some students were grateful for the opportunity to be part of such a research project, indicating the significance and relevance of the research topic.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Face-to-face and in-depth interviews were conducted online using the Zoom platform. With participant consent, the interviews were recorded and included as part of the study data. The qualitative content analysis method was employed to analyze the collected data. Specifically, a hybrid inductive and deductive thematic coding method was utilized. This approach involved the development of primary codes based on the research's purpose and objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Purposive or judgmental sampling involves selecting specific cases to be studied either for a particular purpose or based on expert evaluations. This sampling method is frequently utilized in pilot studies and is particularly beneficial when the individuals within the community being surveyed are part of a unique and difficult-to-access population.

Throughout the analysis process, the researcher identified new codes and integrated them with the original codes.

### Quantitative Component

As part of the quantitative component of the research, the research team utilized the online survey method. This approach was employed to study female students' awareness of menstruation, menstrual hygiene products, barriers, preferences, and attitudes related to menstrual hygiene product usage. Additionally, the researchers evaluated the specific steps and actions taken by the university to support women's sexual and reproductive health. Through this quantitative research method, the researchers were able to gain comprehensive knowledge about the issues mentioned above and identify general trends in this area.

### Description of the Method

As part of the survey, we utilized an online self-administered questionnaire. We chose this method due to its various strengths, including its ability to reach a large number of respondents in a short amount of time with minimal resources. Additionally, the use of a self-administered questionnaire ensured greater confidentiality and honesty from the respondents, as they completed the questionnaire independently and “interviewer effect” disappeared.<sup>2</sup> However, this method also has some limitations. For example, we were unable to monitor the interview process and verify who filled out the questionnaire or how they completed it. Furthermore, a low response rate and a large number of unfinished interviews were also considered as potential weaknesses of this method.

### Research Instrument

As previously mentioned, we utilized a self-administered structured questionnaire as our research tool. The questionnaire contained closed and semi-closed questions, as well as 5-point scales, to measure respondents' attitudes and level of awareness.

The questionnaire was built by the research team on the Questionpro online platform, which allowed them to make the questionnaire highly flexible: respondents only saw the questions that were relevant to them, minimizing the likelihood of posing inappropriate questions.

The questionnaire was finalized based on the key issues identified during the face-to-face interviews with experts, namely: the questionnaire structure was refined, and the information requiring expert knowledge was specified.

### Data Collection and Analysis

As part of the research methodology, we utilized a non-probability sampling technique<sup>3</sup>, which was carried out in two stages. Initially, we sent the questionnaire to the administration

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<sup>2</sup> The interviewer effect is a type of bias that occurs when a characteristic of the interviewer (race, age, gender identity, etc.) influences the respondent's responses.

<sup>3</sup> Non-probability sampling is a method of selecting units from a population using a subjective (i.e. non-random) method. In non-probability sampling, the sample is selected based on non-random criteria, and not every member of the population has a chance of being included.



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representatives of pre-selected universities, who were expected to assist in distributing the questionnaire through various online platforms such as email, educational portals, and others. However, only the representative from Samtskhe-Javakheti University expressed willingness to participate (for more details on the university selection process, see the subsection on "Electronic Interview with University Representatives"). Representatives from the other universities declined to distribute the questionnaire to their students due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, believing that it was inappropriate to address such issues to their students.

Accordingly, the research team decided to use the convenience sampling method. At this stage of the research, female undergraduate students of all working universities in Georgia had the opportunity to participate in the survey. The questionnaire was distributed through social networks. In total, 440 respondents took part in the survey.

The researcher utilized the SPSS program to analyze the quantitative data. The research team used descriptive statistics and presented frequencies and cross-tabulations.

## Summary of Fieldwork

Table #1 presents a brief summary of the fieldwork conducted:

*Table 1. Main characteristics of fieldwork*

	Qualitative Research		Quantitative Research
<b>Method</b>	Face-to-face interview /Electronic Interview	In-Depth Interview	Survey
<b>Target Group</b>	Experts of the field, University representatives	Female undergraduate students Female students with disabilities Female students from non-dominant ethnic groups	Female undergraduate students
<b>Sample Size</b>	6 (4 – experts of the field 2 – university representatives)	11 (7 – female students 2 – female students with disability 2 - female students from non-dominant ethnic groups)	440
<b>Sampling Method</b>	Purposive sampling	Purposive sampling	Convenience sampling
<b>Research Instrument</b>	Semi-structured interview guide	Semi-structured interview guide	Self-administered questionnaire
<b>Location</b>	Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Samtskhe- Javakheti	Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Samtskhe-Javakheti	Throughout the country
<b>Duration of the Interview</b>	1 hour	2 hours	15 minutes
<b>Date of Fieldwork</b>	October, 2022		

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## Ethical Considerations

During the research process, the ethical principles of data protection, confidentiality of respondents, and overall ethical standards were given utmost consideration. The research was conducted in adherence to the following ethical principles:

- The research participants, who took part in surveys, in-depth interviews, and face-to-face interviews, were provided with comprehensive information regarding the research's purpose and procedures. Furthermore, the participants were informed of the reason for conducting face-to-face and in-depth interviews, as well as how the researchers planned to utilize the results of the study in the future. The participants were made aware that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any stage.
- All research participants provided informed consent to participate in the study.
- Names of research participants and other information that can be used to identify them are not used anywhere within the scope of the research. Based on the consent of the participants, audio recordings of the interviews were made. Audio recordings will be kept for data verification until the end of the project, and then deleted. In order to ensure the confidentiality of the respondents, in the transcripts made on the basis of audio-recordings, the identifying information was replaced by the appropriate codes.

## Study Limitations

One important limitation of the research is related to the generalizability of the results due to the sampling method used, which limits the ability to apply the findings to female students as a whole. Another limitation of the study is the low response rate that characterizes the online survey method. Despite the planned number of respondents being covered in the quantitative survey, students of the universities of different regions were underrepresented compared to their counterparts from universities in the capital. Furthermore, due to the nature of the online survey, it was difficult to control the interview process, leading to an increased number of unfinished interviews, hindering the fieldwork.

It is important to note that the researchers included women with disabilities and women from non-dominant ethnic groups as representatives of vulnerable social groups in the study. However, the specific experiences of individuals from other social groups, such as internally displaced people, migrants, women living in highland villages, and the members of LGBTQ+ community who menstruate, were not taken into account.

The fact that the representatives from Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University refused to participate in the study is particularly notable. As a result, the perspective of these universities is less covered within the research.

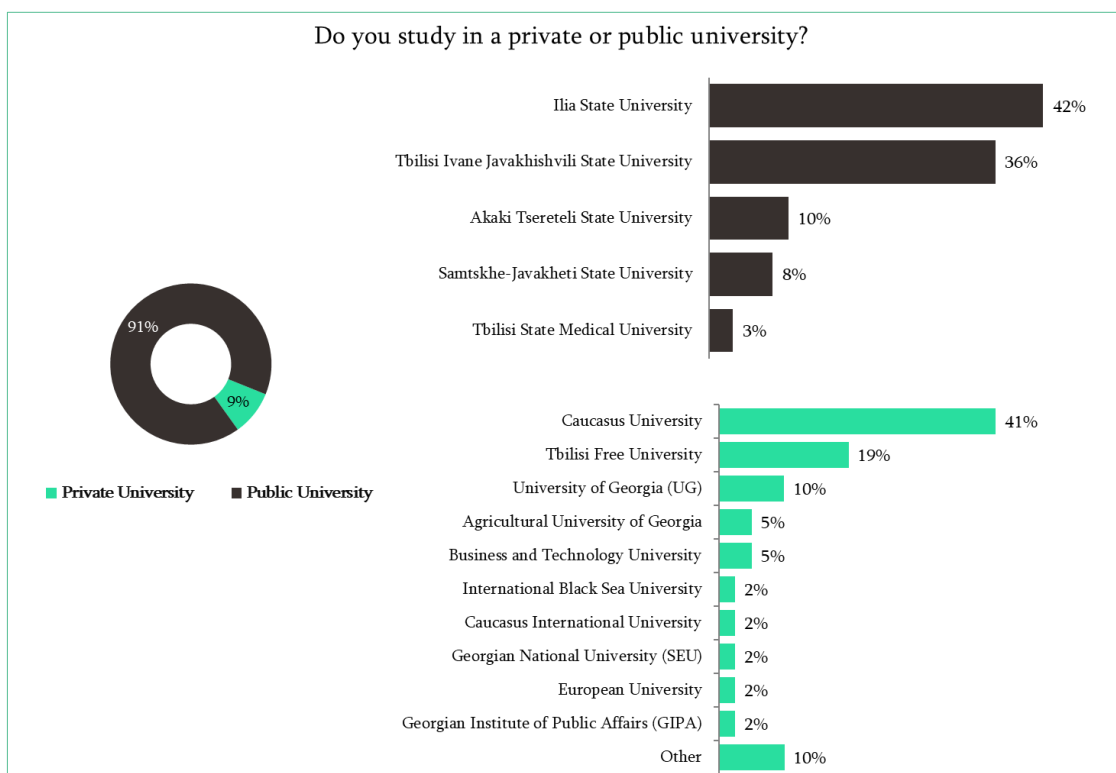
## Research Findings

The primary findings of the study refer to issues such as the awareness of menstruation and menstrual hygiene products among female students, menstruation-related stigma and stereotypes, the use and selection criteria of menstrual hygiene products, barriers related to the purchase of such products, and support from universities. Before delving into these subjects, let us first familiarize ourselves with the demographic characteristics of the participants of the quantitative survey.

### Demographic Profile of Quantitative Research Participants

The target group for the study was female undergraduate students from all universities in Georgia. The majority of research participants (91%) are currently enrolled in public universities, while the remaining 9% are attending private universities. The public university students who were surveyed predominantly represented Ilia State University (42%) and Tbilisi Ivane Javakishvili State University (36%) (refer to diagram N1 for details).

Diagram 1

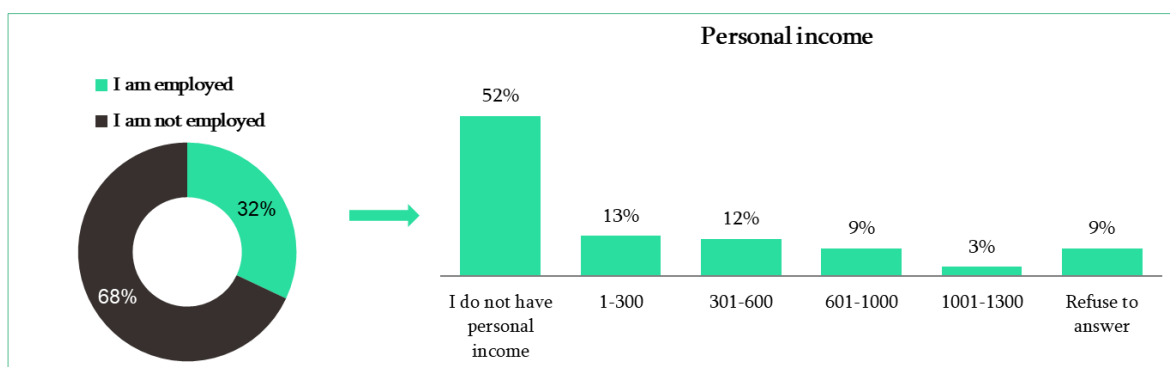


About one-third (34%) of the surveyed students are second-year students, and 38% of the surveyed students study in a program related to humanities. The majority of respondents (68%) are not employed, therefore more than half of respondents (52%) have no personal income (see diagram N2-N3).

Diagram 2

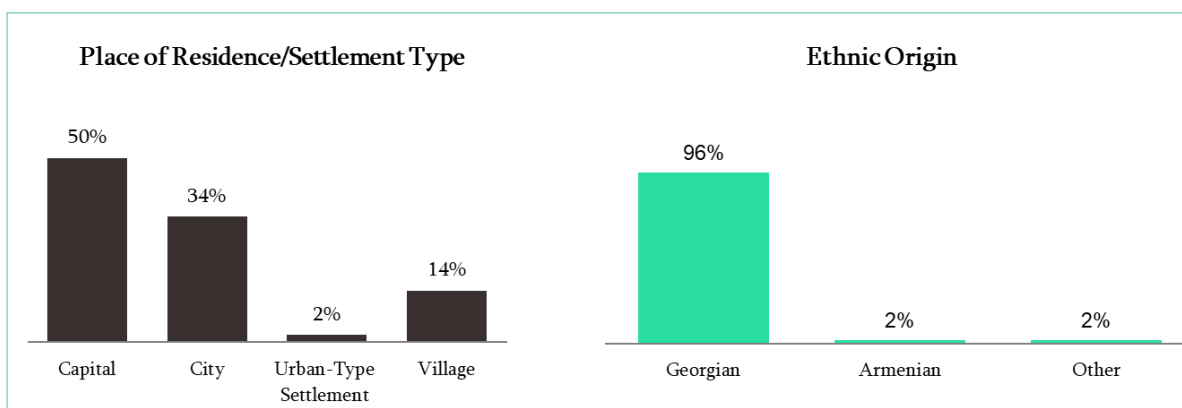


Diagram 3



The geographical distribution of the research participants is as follows - the permanent place of residence of every second respondent (50%) is the capital, and almost a third of the surveyed students (34%) live in the city; As for the settlement and village, this type of settlement is the legal residence of the minority of interviewed female students (16%) (see diagram N4).

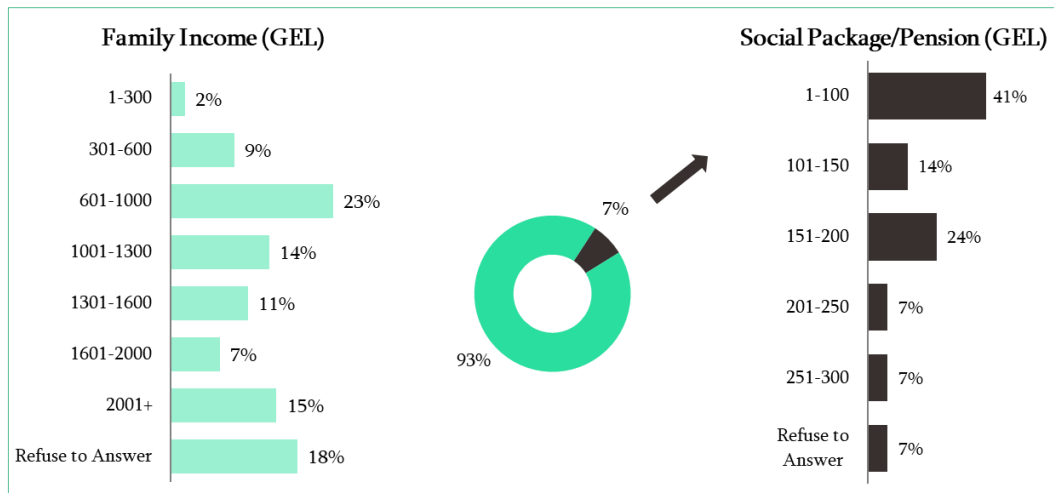
Diagram 4



Nearly a quarter of the respondents (23%) reported a total family income ranging between 600-1000 GEL, while 15% stated that their family income is equal to or exceeds 2000 GEL. Only a small fraction of the research participants (7%) have a social package or pension, with 41% of them receiving an amount up to 100 GEL (refer to diagram N5).



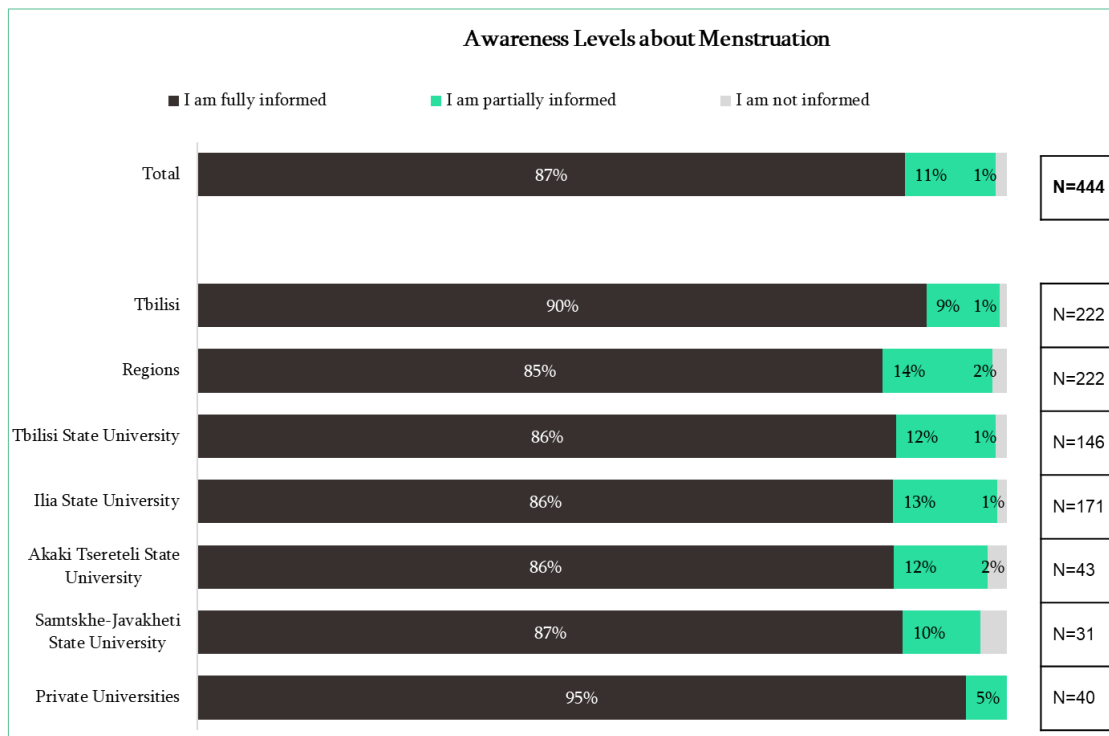
Diagram 5



### Awareness about Menstruation and Menstrual Hygiene Products

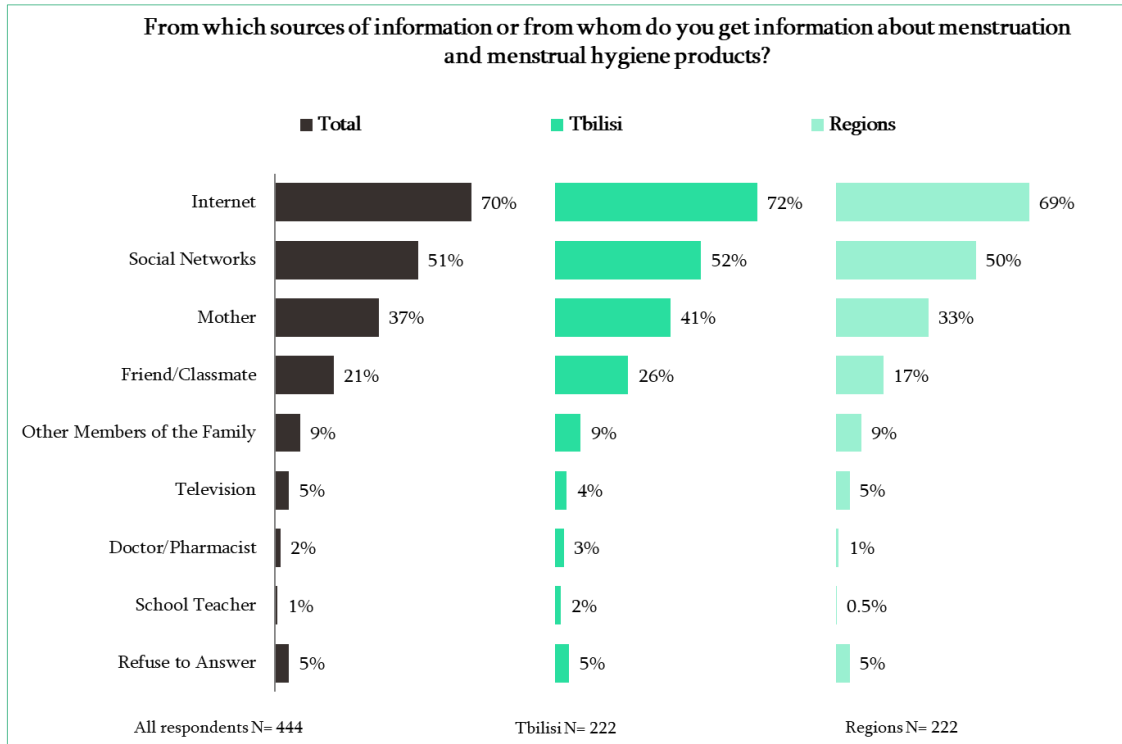
According to the quantitative survey, the vast majority of female students (87%) believe that they are fully informed about menstruation. Based on survey results, the level of awareness of students living in Tbilisi and regions does not statistically differ from each other (see diagram N6). Nevertheless, According to the in-depth interviews, it is evident that the participants' knowledge is insufficient and they encounter a number of obstacles while acquiring information. The lack of information is primarily related to the sources from which young women gather the knowledge.

Diagram 6



The female students who participated in the survey reported that they obtain information about menstruation and menstrual products primarily from the internet, including various websites (70%) and social media platforms (51%) (refer to diagram N7). In-depth interviews revealed that access to the internet has significantly improved young women's knowledge of menstruation. They are no longer reliant on female family members and friends for information and can easily verify any details online.

Diagram 7



Young women not only use the internet to obtain information about menstruation but also consider it a trustworthy source. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that amidst the plethora of information available online, it can be challenging to identify accurate and reliable sources. Additionally, some of the information may be incorrect and fail to meet individual women's needs. Therefore, according to sexual and reproductive health experts, the internet can even be detrimental in many cases.

In addition, there is a scarcity of information in Georgian language, hindering many women. There is also very little information in Azerbaijani and Armenian languages.

*„You get more information in English, not all of which is entirely reliable but there is definitely more information than in my language, there are many Turkish articles as well. There is very little information available in Azerbaijani language and only 1-2 websites in Georgian, like [aversi.ge](http://aversi.ge) and [mkurnali.ge](http://mkurnali.ge). I can't find anything else anywhere” (Ivane Javakhishvili State University Student, ethnically Azerbaijani).*

Aside from [aversi.ge](http://aversi.ge) and [mkurnali.ge](http://mkurnali.ge), experts recommend <https://allaboutyou.ge/> as a trustworthy source of information. This website posts articles related to sexual and reproductive health and rights, which are translated into Georgian. It's worth noting that female students who participated in the study were unaware of this site, despite its potential value. In terms of

information on menstruation and menstrual hygiene products, the materials created by GrizWave are crucial resources for students seeking information.

Apart from the internet, websites, and social media, family members such as mothers (37%) and friends/classmates (21%) are also cited as sources of information. Interestingly, a higher percentage of respondents from Tbilisi (41%) reported receiving information from their mothers compared to those from the regions (33%) (refer to diagram N7). According to in-depth interviews conducted during qualitative research, respondents first received information about menstruation from their mothers or peers at the age of 10-12. However, this information was often superficial and inadequate, or in some cases, completely incorrect. It is a commonly held belief that women mostly pass on inaccurate information about menstruation, which has been passed down from generation to generation (Jadwat, Bassa, Rungusomy, Rughooputh, 2021). Therefore, it is imperative that parents possess accurate and comprehensive knowledge about menstruation to pass on to their children.

Furthermore, the existing stigma surrounding menstruation made female family members feel uncomfortable discussing these issues, which also made the children uncomfortable. As a result, healthy communication and knowledge sharing were hindered. Expert information confirms that girls' awareness of menstrual issues is largely dependent on how open their family members are to discussing the topic.

In fact, some students reported that their mothers or other family members had never broached the topic of menstruation with them, leaving them with little information until they experienced it firsthand. As a result, many girls faced their first menstruation unprepared, causing them a significant amount of stress.

*„I had practically no information about menstruation. The first time I faced the fact, I was lucky to be home with my mother. Like everyone else, I called out to my mother and at that moment I learned that this was a normal occurrence, that every woman had it, and that the process would be over in a few days" (a student of Ivane Javakhishvili State University).*

The majority of students who participated in the study received information about menstrual hygiene products only after they had started menstruating. Knowledge about tampons came even later, either from television commercials or from older friends or family members. Some respondents reported that they only learned about alternative options after graduating from school or becoming a university student. Medical students, on the other hand, received relatively timely and comprehensive information about these topics as it was part of their curriculum. Interestingly, some female students cited TV commercials as a source of information. However, such information cannot be deemed complete since the primary purpose of these commercials is to promote specific brands and increase their profits, rather than to educate young people. Respondents themselves noted that the advertisements were often unrealistic and disconnected from reality.

Doctors/pharmacists (2%) and teachers (1%) were identified as the least common sources of information according to the data (see diagram N7). Consequently, it is safe to say that the majority of respondents obtain information from informal sources such as social networks and immediate social circles, while only a very small, insignificant proportion receive it from formal spaces.

Among the formal spaces, school environments hold significant potential as a source of information. However, studies indicate that there is a lack of education about human sexuality within the Georgian educational system, leaving teenagers and schoolchildren with incomplete knowledge about their own bodies and reproduction (Shengelia, Jalaghania, Dekanosidze, 2019). While some material about menstruation is included in the curriculum to raise awareness about menstrual hygiene (Jokhadze, 2022), schools are among the least reliable sources of information about menstruation and young tend to rely on information from friends, family members, and the internet for this topic (Imerlishvili, Kaikhosroshvili, 2021).

Our research participants confirm that schools do not provide adequate information about menstruation. According to the in-depth interviews, biology teachers in schools tend to avoid discussing topics related to sexual and reproductive health, which reinforces the stigma associated with menstruation and has many negative consequences. The participants emphasized the importance of providing girls with this information at a young age to prevent them from making mistakes and to make their lives easier. Women consider sex education and discussion of menstruation topics to be important in school.

*„All the information I have now, I have been accumulating over the years, so to speak, when I could easily get this information in its entirety, at school age which would have been better” (Kutaisi Akaki Tsereteli State University student).*

Like schools, students are not receiving adequate information from non-governmental and private sectors either. According to experts, non-governmental organizations are taking some steps to raise awareness about menstruation, but they often use harmful practices like separating girls and boys when teaching on these topics. Furthermore, non-governmental organizations are unable to fulfill this mission as they cannot cover a large number of schools. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate evidence-based sex education into school programs. Experts suggest that supportive spaces, such as "women's rooms," should be established even at the university level, which is a precedent in some regions, with the rooms devoted to discussion and educational activities. These spaces may also be used to spread information about sexual and reproductive health and rights.

*“Conversations about menstruation should start in 6-7th grade.<sup>4</sup> These conversations should be based on other information about the body, which should start in earlier years, more sensitive information such as body boundaries, etc. And it has to build slowly and lead to topics like non-toxic relationships, non-violent environment, how to protect oneself, how to preserve bodily autonomy, and the ways in one’s sexuality can be expressed. Sex as a topic comes later in sex education. I think that all these three topics are intertwined” (expert on sexual health and rights).*

The private sector, including pharmaceutical companies and hygiene product manufacturers, can also serve as sources of information by conducting campaigns and raising awareness. Experts suggest creating youth-oriented medical services where both girls and boys can

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<sup>4</sup> It is recommended to provide information about menstruation to school students even prior to the 6th and 7th grades. This is because some students begin menstruating as early as 9 years of age (Suriyaarachchi, 2019).

receive age-appropriate information. Brochures and booklets can also be distributed widely, providing information on basic medical examinations.

Public, private, and non-governmental sectors can use non-formal education resources to disseminate information. For example, information related to menstruation can be distributed on social media platforms, such as YouTube or TikTok, through videos featuring specialists.

Unfortunately, not all women have equal access to information. Women with disabilities, those from non-dominant ethnic groups, and those living in rural areas are particularly at risk of lacking information. Women with disabilities are often not educated about reproduction and sexuality. According to one of the respondents, she was unaware for a long time that fertility was limited in older age.

*“If you ask me, all disabled people face stereotypes like this. The society thinks that disabled women are not capable of reproduction” (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student).*

Women residing in rural areas face specific taboos that are especially strong in rural areas and significantly hinder their ability to acquire information.

*„It’s much harder in the village, there are no classes on topics like these. I remember my teacher ignoring this topic in her/his class. In parallel classes, the teacher was telling boys to go outside so she/he could discuss these topics with girls only. This approach is wrong” (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student, ethnically Azerbaijani).*

Obviously, the lack of knowledge about menstruation has a significant impact on the daily lives of young women, as physical discomfort and poor hygiene can affect their relationships with others.

Research participants express a strong desire to learn more about menstruation, especially in areas where information is difficult to obtain, such as rural areas. They feel that all young women should have access to reliable sources that can fully answer any questions they may have, as formal and non-formal education does not adequately meet their needs. Participants are particularly interested in information about the pros and cons of different menstrual hygiene products to avoid being influenced by myths and stereotypes. In addition to information about the biological significance of menstruation and related physiological processes, female students are also interested in the impact of menstruation on mental health, as depression related to menstruation is a significant problem for some respondents.

*„I wish I had information earlier in life, and I also wish I had information about pains that accompany menstruation, mood changes, there are moments of self-harm too, so I wanted to know how our body, mood and emotions are affected by all these” (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student, ethnically Azerbaijani).*

One of the respondents from Samtskhe-Javakheti State University noted that she had an opportunity to attend an informational training on this topic but rejected it due to embarrassment, which she now considers a big mistake.

*„When I signed up for a training on sexual reproductive health, I was so embarrassed that I didn’t go at all [to the training]. [The training] was for*

*women and girls only, but I was so ashamed that I missed it. After that, I learnt a lot, but I still remember this, being so embarrassed that I refused [to attend the training] and I don't want anyone else to do it" (Akhaltshikhe, Samtskhe-Javakheti State University student).*

Respondents think that information about menstruation should be provided to both boys and girls, as this can change attitudes and improve the lives of women. It is also important to ensure that sources of information are adapted for women with disabilities, such as by providing visual captions for photos for visually impaired or blind women. Unfortunately, due to the lack of accessibility in this area, women with disabilities often become dependent on family members, which limits their independence.

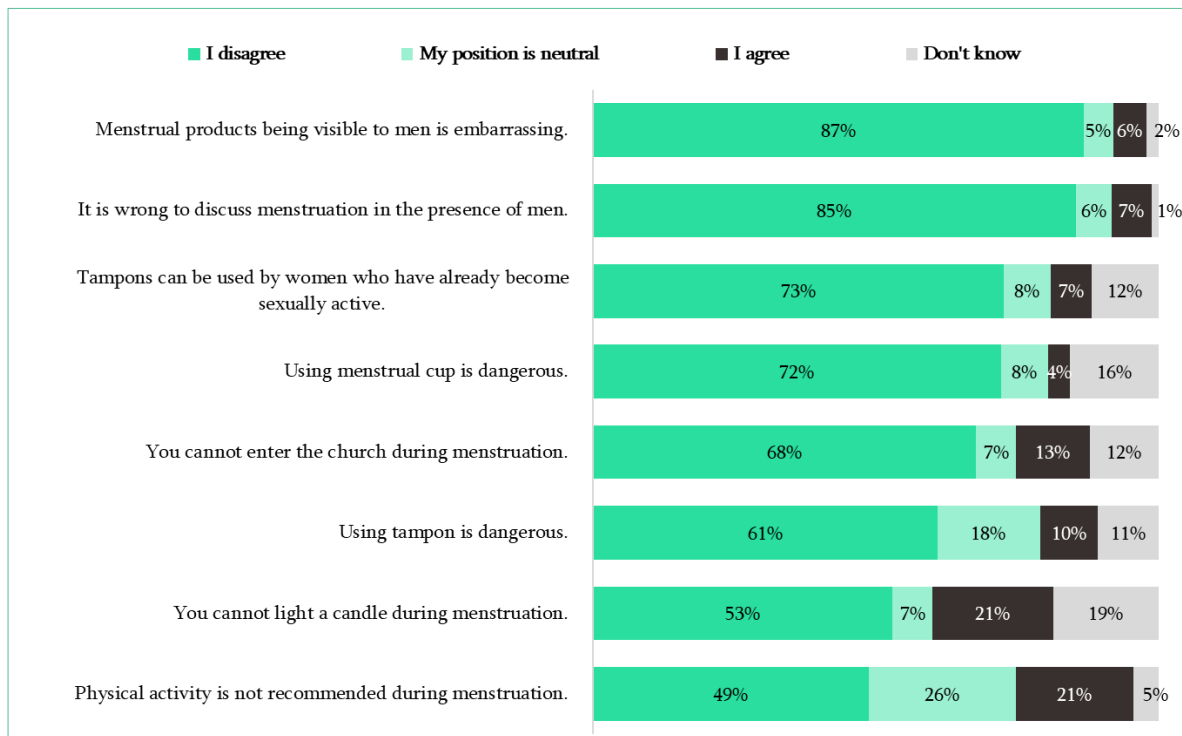
Our analysis shows that female students primarily receive information about menstruation and menstrual hygiene products through informal means, such as the internet and social media. These platforms can be used to provide relevant information, translate already existing, reliable information and make it available for a wider audience. Furthermore, it is worth noting that mothers and peers are often viewed as primary sources of information regarding menstruation. However, it is not uncommon for these individuals to lack a proper understanding of the topic themselves, which can result in misinformation and many risks associated with informal means of acquiring knowledge. Informal sources of information come with risks and may contain inaccuracies. Formal institutions, such as medical facilities and educational spaces should play a greater role in educating young people about menstruation and reproductive health. These institutions are currently perceived as the least likely sources of information on this topic, but they have a responsibility to provide accurate and comprehensive information. Therefore, it is imperative that families, medical professionals, and educational institutions collaborate to address the sexual and reproductive health needs of young people and enhance their understanding of these issues.

### Stigma and Stereotypes Related to Menstruation

In addition to examining awareness and information sources related to menstruation and menstrual hygiene products, our study investigated the attitudes of respondents towards common stereotypes and myths surrounding menstruation. We utilized a 5-point evaluation scale, with 1 indicating disagreement and 5 indicating complete agreement with the given statement.

The research findings revealed that the majority of respondents do not agree with stereotypical views or representations. Notably, a vast majority of participants (87%) did not consider it shameful for menstrual products to be visible in the presence of men. Moreover, a significant proportion of women surveyed (85%) disagreed with the notion that it is inappropriate to discuss menstruation in front of men (refer to Diagram N8).

Diagram 8



The diagram reveals that the majority of respondents reject stereotypical beliefs, indicating their awareness of inaccurate perceptions. However, being informed about such issues does not necessarily eradicate the influence of stereotypes on young people's behavior. In-depth interviews conducted with students highlighted that while purchasing hygiene products is not considered shameful by most, some women still experience embarrassment when buying menstrual products from their local pharmacy. This issue is especially prevalent for women residing in rural areas where access to sanitary facilities is limited.

*„There were no menstrual hygiene products left in our village pharmacy, and I had to buy them either in town or in a village store. When my mother came to the market, she used to buy [menstrual hygiene products] for us. There were cases when my mother had not bought it for us and I had to ask my father, which was embarrassing” (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student, ethnically Azerbaijani).*

It is a well-established fact that menstruation is still widely associated with shame, limiting women's autonomy and serving as a tool for discrediting them. This stigma and related complexes have been perpetuated across generations. Although young women have been empowered with knowledge obtained from the internet and other sources, the stigma continues to affect their daily lives and mental well-being. Young women report avoiding even mentioning the word "menstruation" and resorting to different euphemisms, which is both unnecessary and problematic. Experts note that some young men view menstruation as a process of "cleansing" the body, regarding it as a means of getting rid of "impurities".

*„I also used to view this matter as something negative, dirty and causing me to experience feelings of self-harm . I would try to conceal the fact that*

*I was unwell by wearing dark clothing and avoiding attention” (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student).*

*„The fact that we have never had requests from girls, including students, for access to menstrual pads can be attributed to the [pervasive] stigma surrounding menstruation. Talking about menstruation is considered shameful” (expert on sexual health and rights).*

Despite the majority of surveyed girls rejecting myths and stereotypes surrounding menstrual products, a particular stereotype was identified among a specific group of respondents. For instance, every tenth of surveyed students (10%) believed that tampon use was dangerous, with this opinion more common among respondents living in regions. The number of girls who believed that a menstrual cup is dangerous is smaller (4%), which may be because information about them is less widespread in the media, leading to less knowledge, fears, and stereotypes.

The qualitative component of the research revealed that some respondents did not use tampons due to widespread myths, while many women found certain products difficult to use. There is a prevalent belief that tampons should only be used after starting sexual activity. Although most respondents did not share this myth, they still avoid using anything other than pads. In rural areas, women face myths about the harmful effects of pads, tampons, and menstrual cups on health and fertility, leading them to use cloth pieces that are sterilized in boiling water. Such advice seems absurd to young women, but the existence of such myths still affects their lives. Experts state that using tampons and menstrual cups requires specific knowledge, as they may pose a risk of developing toxic shock syndrome. However, stigma hinders the sharing of correct information about these important issues.

*„To tell you the truth, it has been approximately two years since I heard about the existence of tampons and only two years since I have heard about other products, like that thing made of rubber. Then I heard that only married women can use it, later I heard that being married has nothing to do with it and virgins can use them too” (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student, ethnically Azerbaijani).*

*„For example, I still refuse to use tampons and other products like that. I don't know, being a virgin is really important to us, that's how we were raised, and I developed some kind of a phobia, I feel like I will do something wrong if I use them” (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student, ethnically Azerbaijani).*

A fifth of the respondents (21%) believe that physical activity during menstruation is not recommended, as indicated in diagram N8. One of the participants, who is a disabled woman, was advised to avoid exercise during menstruation at a rehabilitation clinic, which made her feel annoyed and inclined to protest.

In addition, some research participants reported being denied the purchase of tampons at pharmacies without a doctor's prescription, which is discriminatory towards women with disabilities. This reflects a stereotypical attitude from two perspectives: first, the belief that tampons cannot be used by everyone, and second, the perception of disabled people and their sexuality, leading to the assumption that they should not use all menstrual hygiene products.



*„There is a common misconception that women with disabilities cannot have children. Society thinks that women with disabilities do not have the ability to reproduce” (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student, a disabled woman).*

Another harmful stereotype is the attribution of any expression of irritability and emotionality to menstruation, often used to discredit women's feelings and portray them as irrational. Such attitudes subject women to psychological pressure from society and restrict their ability to freely express opinions and emotions. Additionally, menstrual pain is frequently normalized, leading women to avoid seeking medical attention and appropriate treatment. Stigma surrounding menstruation also discourages women from actively seeking information and sharing knowledge with one another. For instance, a respondent mentioned that some of her friends experience excruciating menstrual pain and take painkillers regularly, yet this is viewed as a normal occurrence. As a result, women may avoid going out during menstruation, limiting their social or professional lives.

The prevalence of the abovementioned stereotypes can be attributed to various underlying reasons. Based on the narratives of the students who took part in the qualitative study, it is evident that the stigma associated with menstruation in our culture primarily arises from a misinterpretation of religious teachings. Respondents view the attitudes of certain religious individuals as patriarchal and discriminatory. One participant stated that religious influence translates into social stigma. Despite their understanding of this issue, young women still feel uneasy about entering a church during menstruation. According to the results of the quantitative survey, 21% of respondents believe that lighting a candle during menstruation is inappropriate, and 13% think that it is unacceptable to enter a temple during this time.

*„In Islam, there's a practice of praying 5 times a day, and during menstruation, women are not supposed to perform these rituals. Men are exempt from this rule. If a woman begins her period during the fasting period, she cannot continue fasting. The Quran is considered sacred, and women on their period are not allowed to touch it. I personally feel that this rule is unfair” (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student, ethnically Azerbaijani).*

*„I will share my personal experience. I remember going on school trips and we usually always go to churches on school trips, I remember that if someone refused to enter the church, she would be made fun of” (expert on sexual health and rights).*

The stigma surrounding menstruation is particularly pervasive among older generations, which poses a significant obstacle for younger individuals as well. Respondents argue that in order to bring meaningful change, it is crucial to work with individuals who are responsible for providing information to young people, such as school teachers. However, according to experts, some school teachers who chastise girls for discussing menstruation may contribute to reinforcing the stigma. Other research participants say that attempting to change the attitudes of the older generation may be too difficult and unrealistic, and it would be more productive to allocate time and resources toward educating and providing psychological support for young people. They assert that young women must learn to resist the influence of harmful stereotypes.

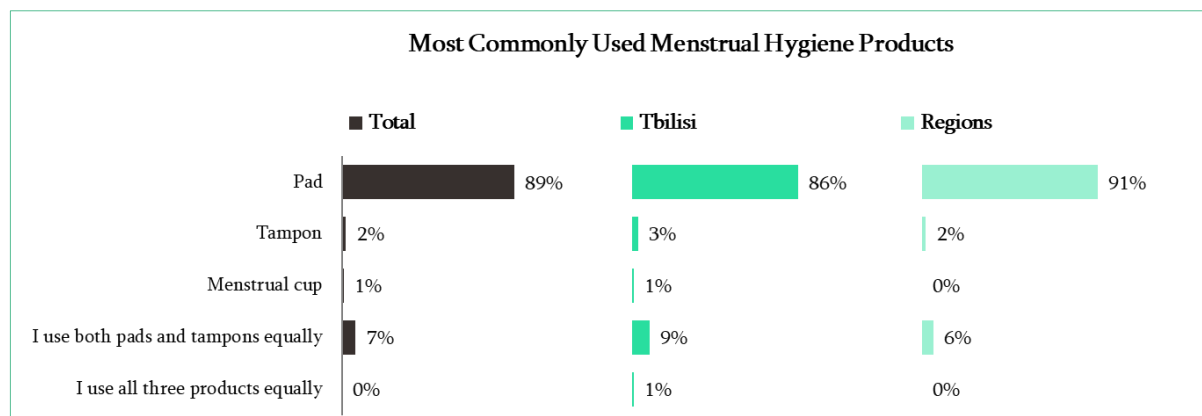
*„In my opinion, as the new generation, it is important for us to prioritize our self-esteem and acknowledge that our menstrual cycle is a natural part of our lives. We should not let others' opinions affect us. To achieve this, we need to have access to comprehensive information and education. Therefore, I see young who work on building their own mental strength as solutions to this problem. I would not tackle the stereotypes of older people as it is a really heavy topic. I always find solutions in young people” (Akhaktsikhe, Samtskhe-Javakheti State University student).*

According to the study, even though the respondents do not fully believe in all the myths and stereotypes surrounding menstruation and menstrual hygiene products, the stigma still heavily impacts their actions. These beliefs have become so internalized in their daily lives that they may be resistant to change, or lack the confidence to challenge societal norms. Therefore, it is crucial to promote widespread awareness and education about menstruation and menstrual hygiene products throughout Georgia, for the betterment of women's overall well-being.

### Menstrual Hygiene Product Usage and Selection Criteria

In the quantitative survey, pads were found to be the most commonly used menstrual hygiene product among the participating students (89%). There was no significant difference in usage between respondents from Tbilisi and those from other regions. It is worth noting that only a small number of respondents reported using tampons (2%) or menstrual cups (1%) (refer to diagram N9). These findings are consistent with global trends, where pads are the most widely used menstrual hygiene product by women (UT Health Austin, 2019).

Diagram 9



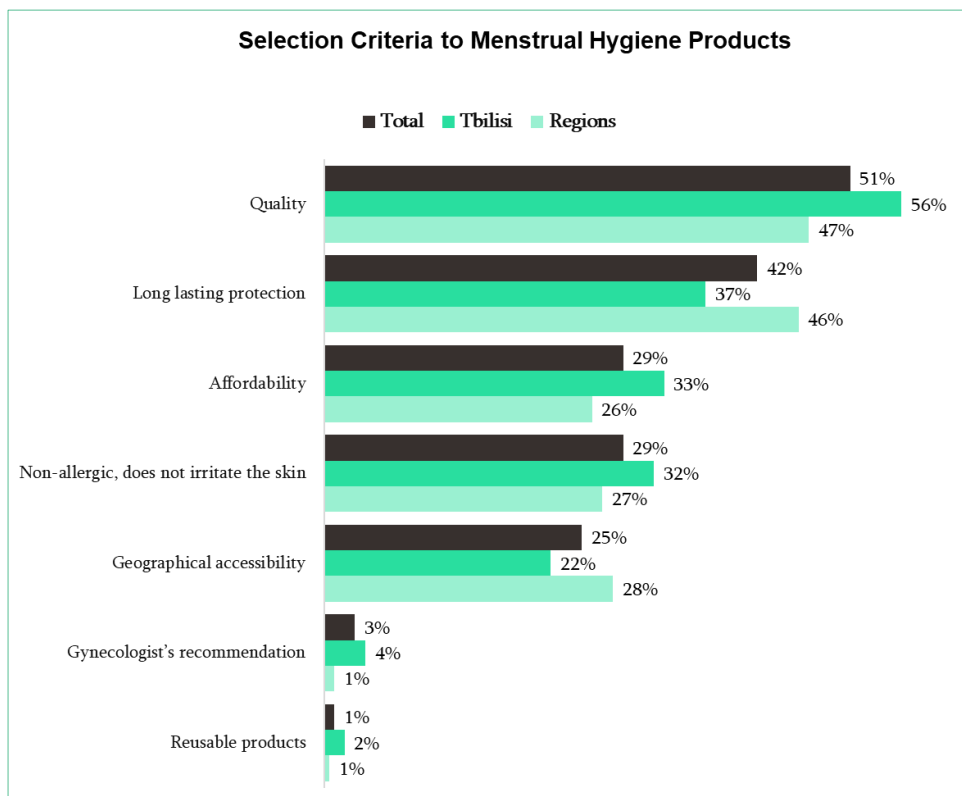
Based on the findings of the qualitative research, it was revealed that a majority of the participating students acquired information about menstrual hygiene products only after the onset of menstruation. During their early years, most of the respondents had limited knowledge about menstrual hygiene products, with pads being the only product they were familiar with, which could explain the high usage of pads among the survey participants. However, it is important to note that their knowledge on the subject was inadequate. For instance, even with disposable pads, many girls were unaware of the proper usage guidelines and timeframes. Furthermore, selecting the right brand was difficult for some as the common ones caused allergies, and they were not aware of alternative options.

*„At first, I used pads made of rubber material for years, to which I had an allergic reaction. I had no information about other products until I was about 15-16 years old. Then I saw my cousins using a different kind of pads and I asked them for one and realized that cotton pads are much more comfortable for me“ (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student).*

The respondents stated that they learned about tampons even later, either through television advertisements or from older friends or family members. Some respondents mentioned that they only received proper information about alternative menstrual hygiene products after graduating from school or during their time in university. The low usage rate of tampons and menstrual cups could be attributed to the lack of information available to respondents. Many expressed interest in using menstrual cups due to cost-effectiveness, eco-friendliness, and comfort, but their fears related to the product's safety hindered them. For instance, one respondent expressed concern that using a menstrual cup could damage the hymen, which is particularly risky in a patriarchal society. As a result, most students continue to use pads instead.

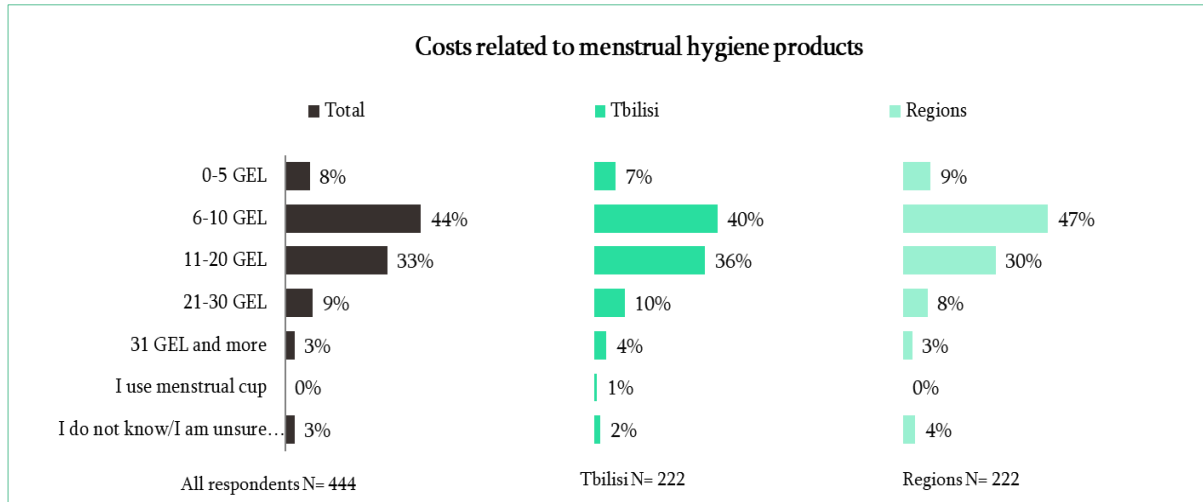
Based on the research findings, half of the students surveyed (51%) consider quality as the primary criterion for choosing menstrual hygiene products. However, respondents from Tbilisi prioritize quality (56%) more than those from the regions (47%). The second most important factor is long-term protection (42%), which is valued more by students from the regions (46%) than those in Tbilisi (37%). In addition, affordable price (29%), composition of the product (fragrance-free and non-irritating to the skin) (29%), and availability in nearby stores (25%) are also significant factors for choosing menstrual hygiene products. Notably, respondents from the regions place greater importance on proximity to their location (see diagram N10).

Diagram 10



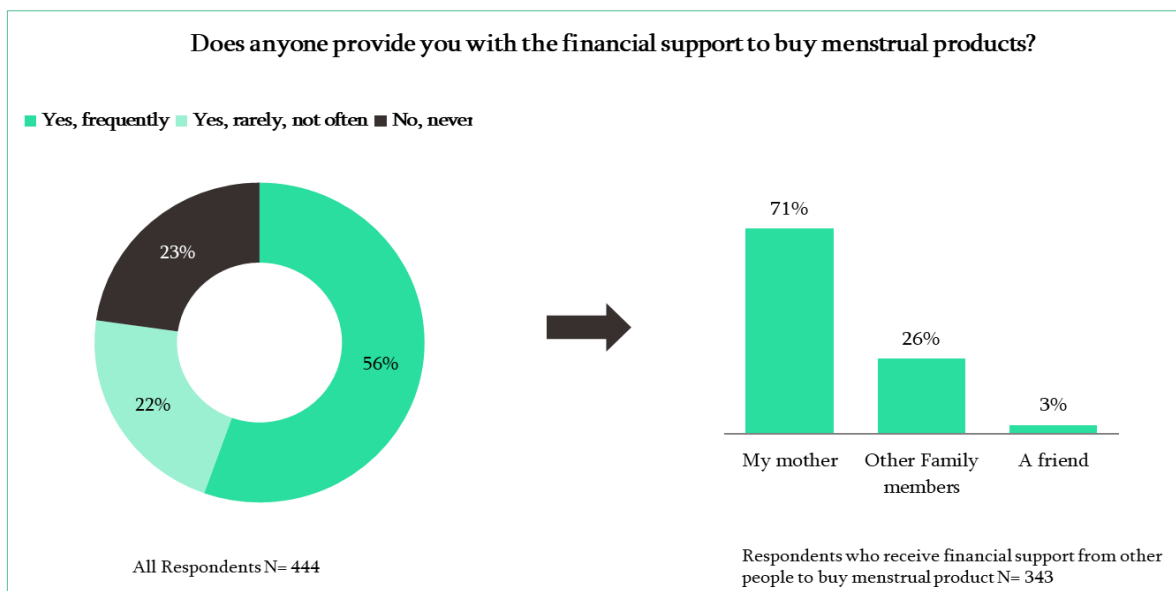
As for the amount paid on menstrual products, the findings of the quantitative research indicate that 77% of the participants spend between 6 to 20 GEL per month. The statistical analysis suggests that there is no significant disparity in spending habits between students residing in Tbilisi and those from other regions (see diagram N11).

Diagram 11



A significant proportion of participants (78%) reported receiving financial assistance to purchase menstrual hygiene products. 7 out of 10 respondents (71%) reported that their mother provides them with financial support, and a small part - by another family member (26%) or a friend (3%) in buying menstrual hygiene products (see diagram N12).

Diagram 12

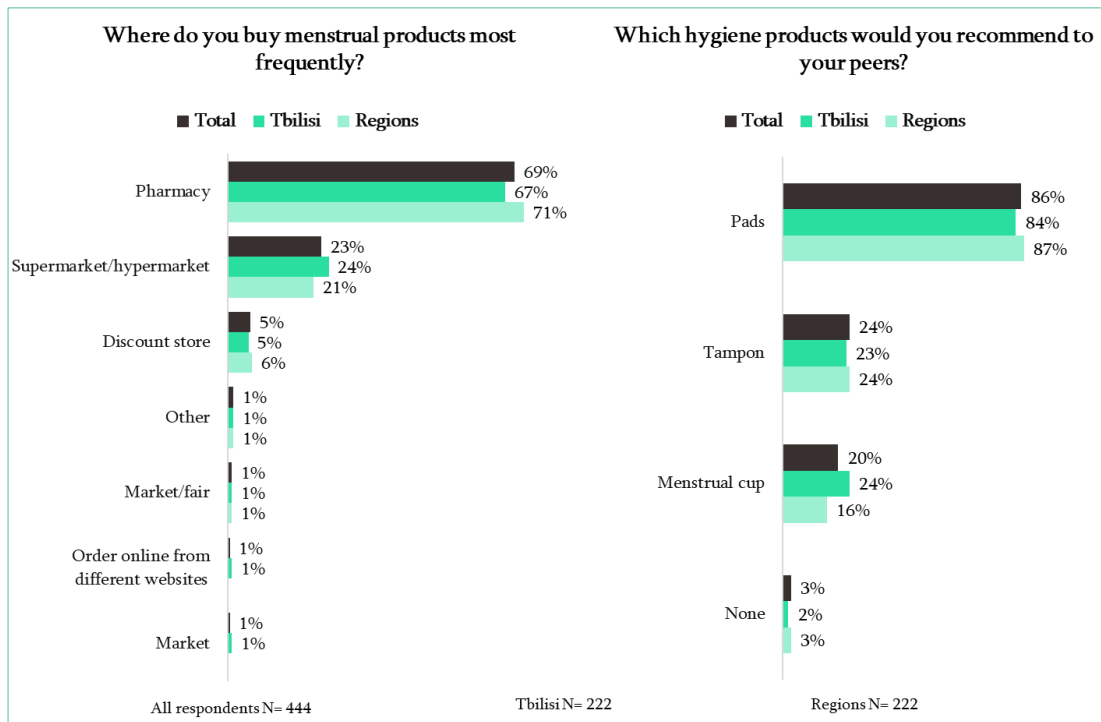


The majority of the surveyed students (69%) buy menstrual hygiene products at a pharmacy, after the pharmacy, students most often go to large supermarkets/hypermarkets. A very small part of students buys menstrual hygiene products in the market (1%) and in a discount store (5%), also a majority of surveyed students (69%) buy menstrual hygiene products at a pharmacy, after the pharmacy, students most often go to large supermarkets/hypermarkets.

A very small part of students buys menstrual hygiene products in the market (1%) and in a discount store (5%), also a very small part (1%) prefers not to buy sanitary products in Georgia and orders online (see diagram N13).

It is worth noting that a significant majority of students (86%) who participated in the study highly recommended the use of pads to their peers. It is also worth noting that most respondents in the study have limited experience with other menstrual hygiene products. Consequently, with few exceptions, they suggest their preferred and tested products to others. Tampons (24%) and menstrual cups (20%) are mentioned in a relatively small number of cases, in addition to pads (see diagram N13).

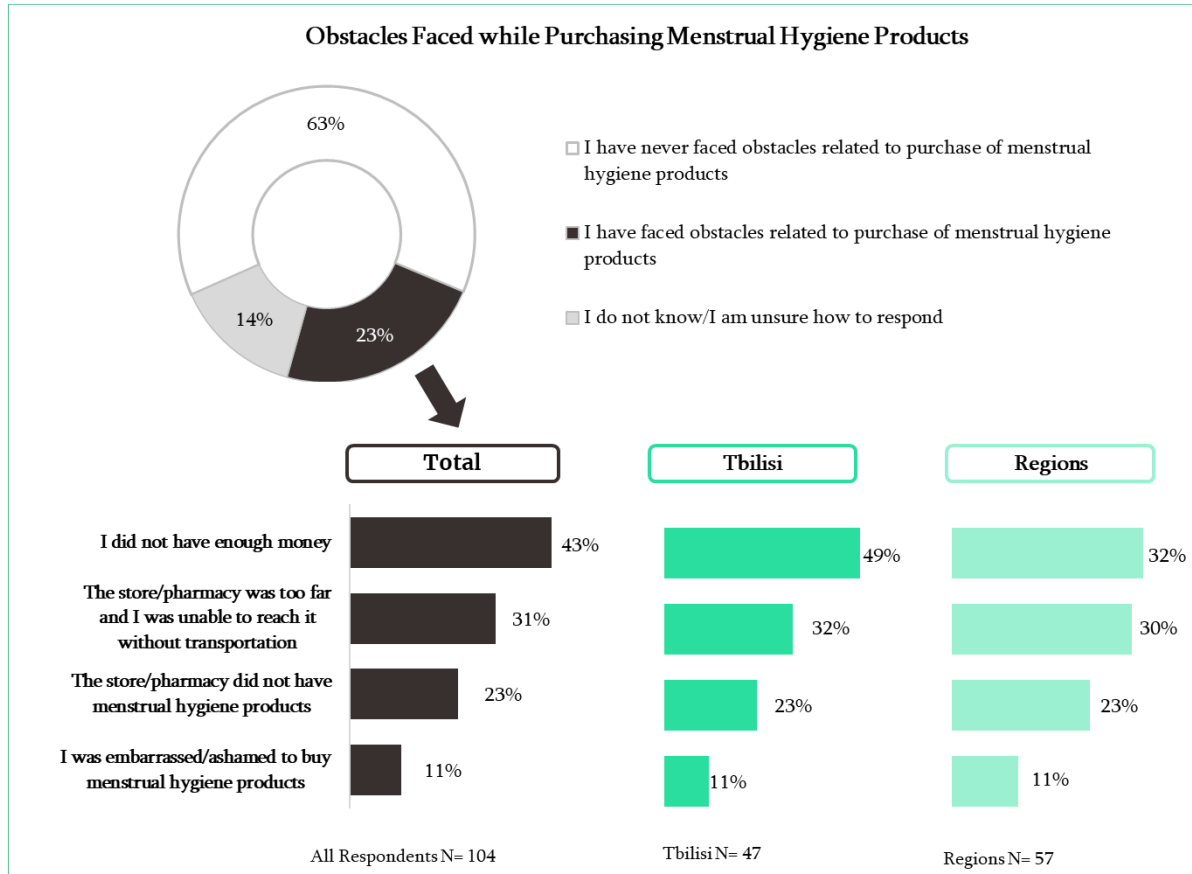
Diagram 13



## Obstacles Related to Purchase and Consumption of Menstrual Hygiene Products

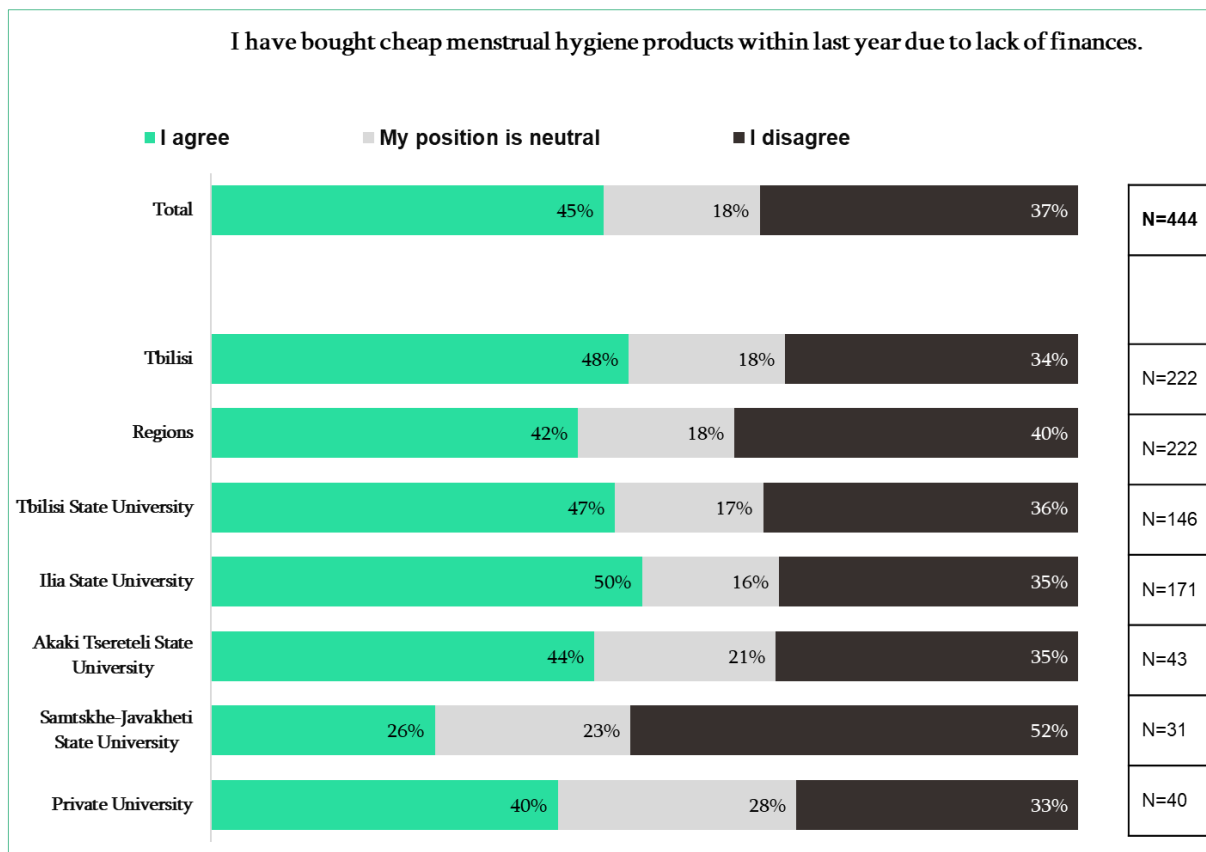
About a quarter of the research participants (23%) have faced some financial, physical, geographical and social barriers in relation to the purchase of menstrual hygiene products in the last 1 year.

Diagram 14



Several research findings reveal that a significant portion of Georgian students (35%) are facing severe financial difficulties (Eurostudent, 2019-2021). Given this context, the research team assumed that students might face economic barriers in accessing menstrual hygiene products. The research confirmed this assumption, with the most frequent barrier being the lack of funds to purchase these products (43%). Furthermore, a considerable number of respondents (44%) reported spending 6-10 GEL on menstrual hygiene products each month, which is a challenging amount for them to cover. Respondents mentioned that the price of menstrual hygiene products has doubled recently, making it a significant challenge for those without financial independence. This issue is especially problematic for women who prefer pads made from organic materials due to allergies or comfort reasons, as these options are more expensive. Many respondents (45%) reported purchasing cheaper menstrual hygiene products in the last year due to a lack of funds (see diagram 15).

Diagram 15



According to experts, financial difficulties are the primary cause of menstrual and sexual and reproductive health issues. The survey results from student respondents indicate that they often cannot afford full packages of menstrual hygiene products, and as a result, must purchase individual pads.

*„Back when I wasn't working, I had to save just to be able to buy menstrual hygiene products. There were times when I didn't have enough cash, so I had to settle for the cheaper brands. I had friends who were in a similar situation - they were raised by their father and were too embarrassed to ask him for money. They would buy individual pads because they could not scrape together enough cash to buy a package” (Akhaltsikhe, Samtskhe-Javakheti State University student).*

Experts in the field also confirm that students are one of the most vulnerable groups:

*„Female students are among the most vulnerable groups in Georgia, primarily due to their high levels of poverty. The main challenge for these girls and boys is that they often do not even have money for food, not to mention additional needs. In the case of girls, when they have a small amount of money set aside for the week, if they are menstruating, of course they choose to spend that money on hygiene products rather than spending the same even on food” (expert on sexual health and rights).*

It's important to note that women who experience excessive and/or prolonged menstruation are at a higher risk of facing menstrual poverty.

In addition to this, there are other groups of marginalized students, such as women living in rural areas, people with disabilities, non-dominant ethnic groups, and LBT individuals, who are also at increased risk of menstrual poverty. Women with disabilities may not have menstrual hygiene products included in their social package, which puts them at a disadvantage. Similarly, women from non-dominant ethnic groups and LBT individuals may have limited financial autonomy and rely on family members for access to sexual and reproductive health services and products (Public Defender of Georgia, 2022), while one in five LGBTQI individuals have been homeless at least once due to financial constraints (UN Women, 2021).

Another challenge faced by female students in rural areas is geographical access to menstrual hygiene products. Rural areas often have limited options for products, and women may not have the means to travel to larger stores or pharmacies. The quantitative survey revealed that 28% of respondents prefer to buy products in a nearby location, but 31% of those who faced barriers when purchasing menstrual hygiene products in the last year (104 respondents) agreed that the store/pharmacy was too far to reach without transportation. Additionally, 23% of respondents agreed that the store/pharmacy did not have menstrual hygiene products available.

Experts agree that menstrual poverty is a problem in both urban and rural areas, but the situation is more acute for women in rural areas due to financial constraints, dependence on family members, and geographical barriers. This issue was further exacerbated during the pandemic.

*„During the Covid period, we faced a difficult situation. Our city was declared a red zone and was completely shut down, including several villages that were only accessible through Tetrtskaro. These villages did not have any stores or facilities, so the villagers had to call the village leaders to buy basic necessities for everyone. Only one person with a pass was allowed to enter the city to purchase essential items, and they were mostly men who were not familiar with menstrual hygiene products. Pharmacies were also closed in the city, making it even more difficult for people in the villages to access these products” (sexual and reproductive health and rights expert with the experience of working with women from non-dominant ethnic groups).*

Physical barriers pose significant challenges for women, particularly those with disabilities. One example of such barriers is the inadequacy of public restrooms that do not cater to the specific needs of women, especially wheelchair users. In addition to violating sanitary norms, accessibility to such facilities remains a persistent challenge. Women with disabilities face similar challenges in all settings, including educational institutions, pharmacies, and shops.

Apart from the aforementioned economic, geographic, and physical challenges, women also encounter social obstacles when purchasing menstrual hygiene products. In a quantitative study conducted, 10% of the respondents reported feeling ashamed while buying menstrual hygiene products. As previously noted, menstrual-related taboos and stereotypes contribute to this feeling of shame.

Furthermore, the absence of menstrual hygiene products in day-care centers and mental health facilities poses a challenge for women with disabilities. The situation in these institutions



is difficult as patients lack adequate access to enough menstrual hygiene products and have to cut their pads for longer use.

*“They have an obligation to provide hygiene products to patients, but it is not taken into account that women with disabilities need hygiene products more than men with disabilities - the budget is not gender sensitive and therefore women and girls with disabilities face oppression” (expert on sexual health and rights, with the experience of working with disabled women).*

Apart from the challenges of getting menstrual hygiene products, the study found that women also face other daily difficulties. When analyzing the stories shared by the respondents, it was evident that workspaces and work culture do not cater to women's needs.

*„Sometimes we have sat on work meetings for 3-4 consecutive hours and it was very uncomfortable for me during that period, when you don't have the opportunity to leave, when you have no free moment because the situation is tense and you can't leave” (Kutaisi, Akaki Tsereteli State University student).*

The lack of assistance can create an additional social obstacle for people with disabilities. One of the respondents disclosed that due to her limited physical ability, she requires help with using menstrual hygiene products. When in school, a personal assistant assisted her with adjusting the menstrual hygiene product. Now, family members perform this role since she no longer has access to a personal assistant after graduating school. This reliance on family members for assistance when using menstrual hygiene products can limit their independence and autonomy. It may also result in women with disabilities changing their menstrual hygiene products less frequently than recommended and avoiding certain products, such as menstrual cups, because they find them difficult to use (Wilbur, Kayastha, Mahon, Torondel, Hameed, Sigdel, 2021).

*„I can't use [menstrual hygiene products] on my own, I get help mostly from family members. I used to have a personal assistant when I went to school who helped me with everything” (Ilia State University Student).*

The condition of blind women should also be taken into account. The challenge for them is that hygiene products rarely come with proper instructions for use and even when they do, these instructions are not available in Braille.

*„When we purchase a hygiene product, it usually comes with instructions on how to use it. A sighted person can easily follow the instructions by looking at the pictures or reading the text. However, blind people need additional information on how to use the product since they cannot rely on visuals alone” (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student).*

After analyzing both the quantitative and qualitative components of the research, it is clear that women face numerous economic, physical, and social obstacles when buying menstrual hygiene products, which make them even more disadvantaged and vulnerable.

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## Support from the University

To gather information about the sexual and reproductive rights and health support provided to students by universities, the research team contacted university representatives. However, Tbilisi Ivane Javakhishvili State University and Ilia State University declined to participate in the research, so only the experiences and opinions of Samtskhe-Javakheti State University and Akaki Tsereteli State University are included in this report.

According to the representative of Samtskhe-Javakheti State University, menstrual poverty is not a priority for students. The representative of Akaki Tsereteli State University disagrees and believes that economically vulnerable students may be more affected by this issue. Both university representatives agree that state universities are not obligated to ensure the sexual and reproductive rights of female students. However, the representative of Samtskhe-Javakheti University would like to see the university provide appropriate services, such as financial support from the state for menstrual hygiene products and more involvement in informing students and providing relevant services.

Neither university has a policy to ensure sexual and reproductive health of their students, but they do hold informational meetings on women's rights or mechanisms to combat various diseases, especially on international days of various diseases and health conditions. However, 97% of the interviewed female students do not remember any project implemented by their university to support women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. Only a few students mentioned training sessions, psychological support, reproductive and gynecologist support, and distribution of menstrual hygiene products. These types of projects are more often remembered by students of universities operating in the regions, but they are still rare, and universities are generally passive in this area. The universities may also have a communication issue while disseminating information. (See diagram N16 for more information.)

Diagram 16

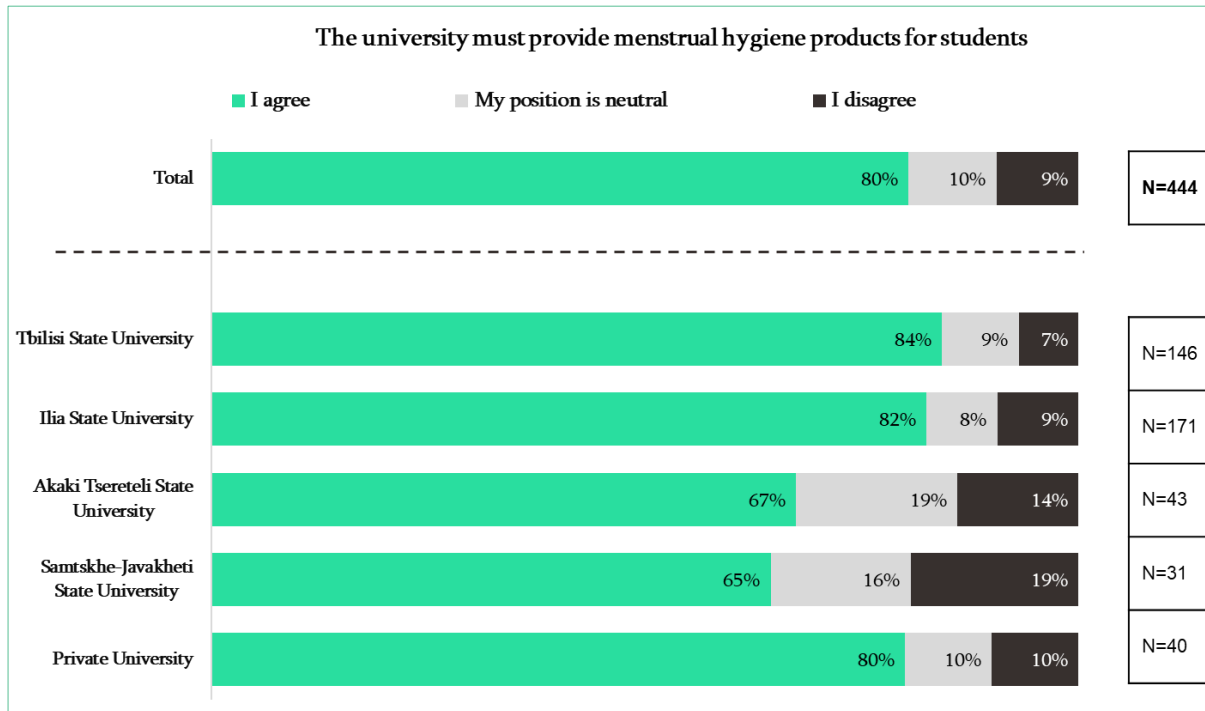


During the qualitative research, the students mentioned that universities do not hold information sessions on sexually transmitted infections and contraception, they do not offer menstrual products, contraceptives, or mobile clinics. There are no partnerships between clinics and universities, and students do not have access to various types of consultations with professionals. Only one student from Samtskhe-Javakheti State University reported attending an information meeting with an endocrinologist. Medical students are an exception, as they cover these topics as part of their program. They expressed great motivation to work on these issues and spread information, and they would be happy to participate in information campaigns if the university initiates them. Since primary and secondary education students do not receive information on sexual and reproductive health, such initiatives from university administration and students are crucial.

*„A broader understanding of the university's responsibilities to both the state and society is needed. Just as medical assistance is necessary when a student becomes ill, the same applies during menstruation. While these issues are interconnected, it should be noted that the university does not have a clear obligation in this regard, nor is it explicitly stated in any official documents. However, the university can take steps to address this issue, including co-financing initiatives with the state to ensure proper support for students in need” (expert on sexual health and rights).*

Female students are not provided with menstrual hygiene products by any university. This poses a major problem for women, as in some instances, the nearest pharmacies and shops are located several kilometers away from university buildings, which can be a big problem for women in unforeseen situations. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that 8 out of 10 (80%) of surveyed students would appreciate the university providing menstrual hygiene products to them (refer to diagram N17).

Diagram 17



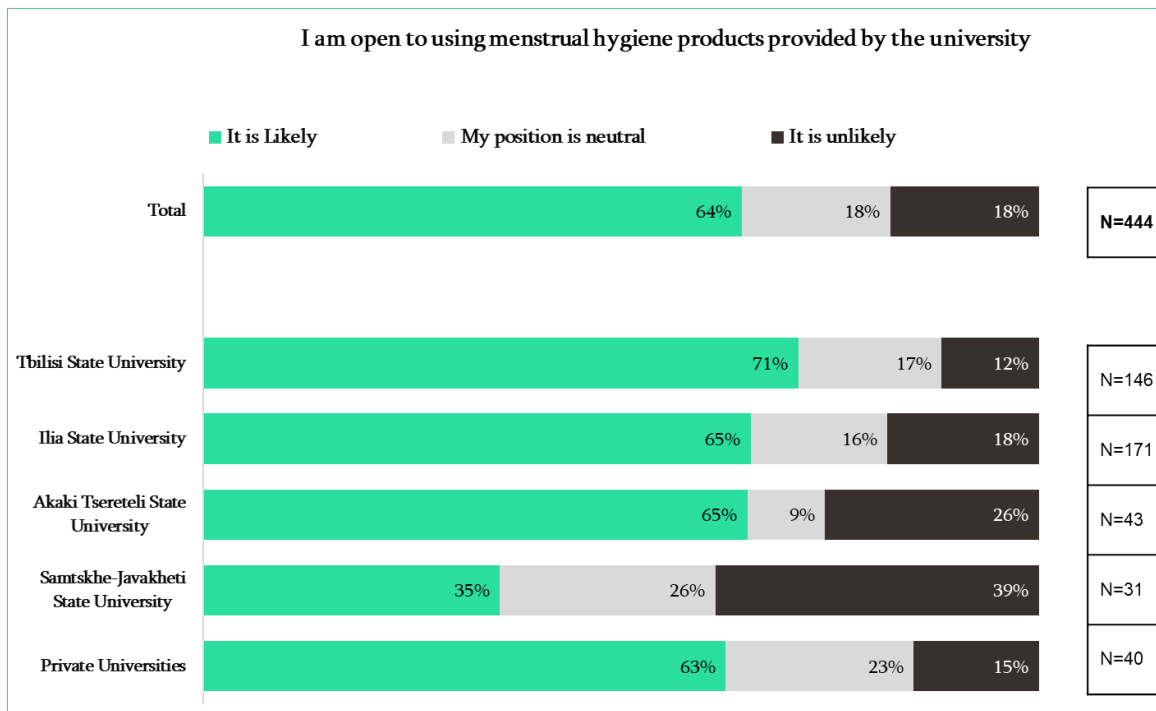
However, there was a notable difference between universities located in Tbilisi and those in regional areas. Specifically, students from Akaki Tsereteli State University (67%) and Samtskhe-Javakheti State University (65%) were less in favor of the idea of universities providing menstrual hygiene facilities, compared to those in Tbilisi universities (see diagram N17). This finding is interesting given that the representative of Samtskhe-Javakheti University stated that menstrual hygiene products are not included in this year's program, although pads have been provided through independent support from a doctor and the university in the past.

This trend is also reflected in the students' attitudes towards the university providing menstrual hygiene products in the future. A significant proportion of the surveyed students (64%) indicated that they would use menstrual hygiene products provided by the university. Tbilisi State University students expressed the highest willingness to benefit from such an offer (71%), while Samtskhe-Javakheti State University students were the least likely to take advantage of it (see diagram N18). The representative of Samtskhe-Javakheti State University explained that students do not approach the university for menstrual hygiene products due to feelings of embarrassment.

*„Even though I have sufficient information, I'm sure many students are still uncomfortable talking about menstruation. Therefore, I think it is important for the university to work on raising awareness first, and then*

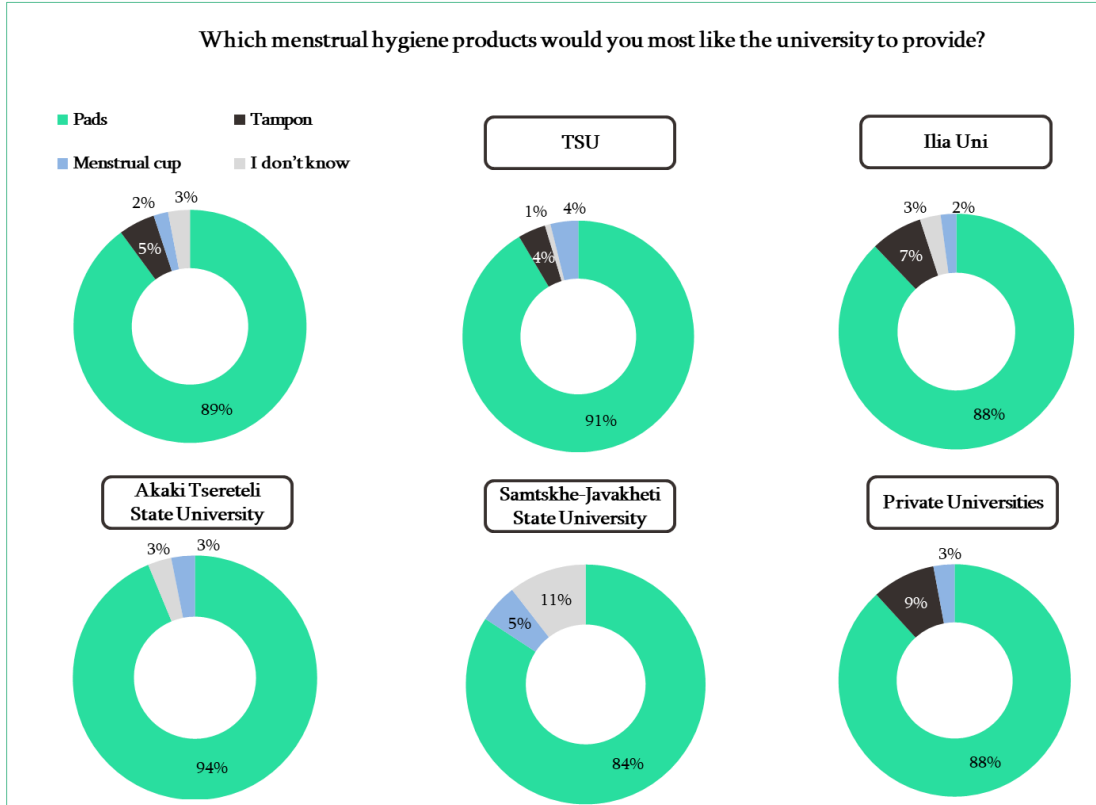
to offer services to students” (Akhaltshikhe, Samtskhe-Javakheti State University student).

Diagram 18



A large majority of students (89%) who participated in the study expressed that they would prefer if the university to provided pads, as they are the most commonly used menstrual product among women in Georgia. Menstrual cups and tampons were mentioned by only a few respondents. Notably, tampons were not mentioned by students of Akaki Tsereteli State University and Samtskhe-Javakheti State University. Among those who named a specific product, students of private universities were most likely to mention tampons (9%) (refer to diagram N19).

Diagram 19



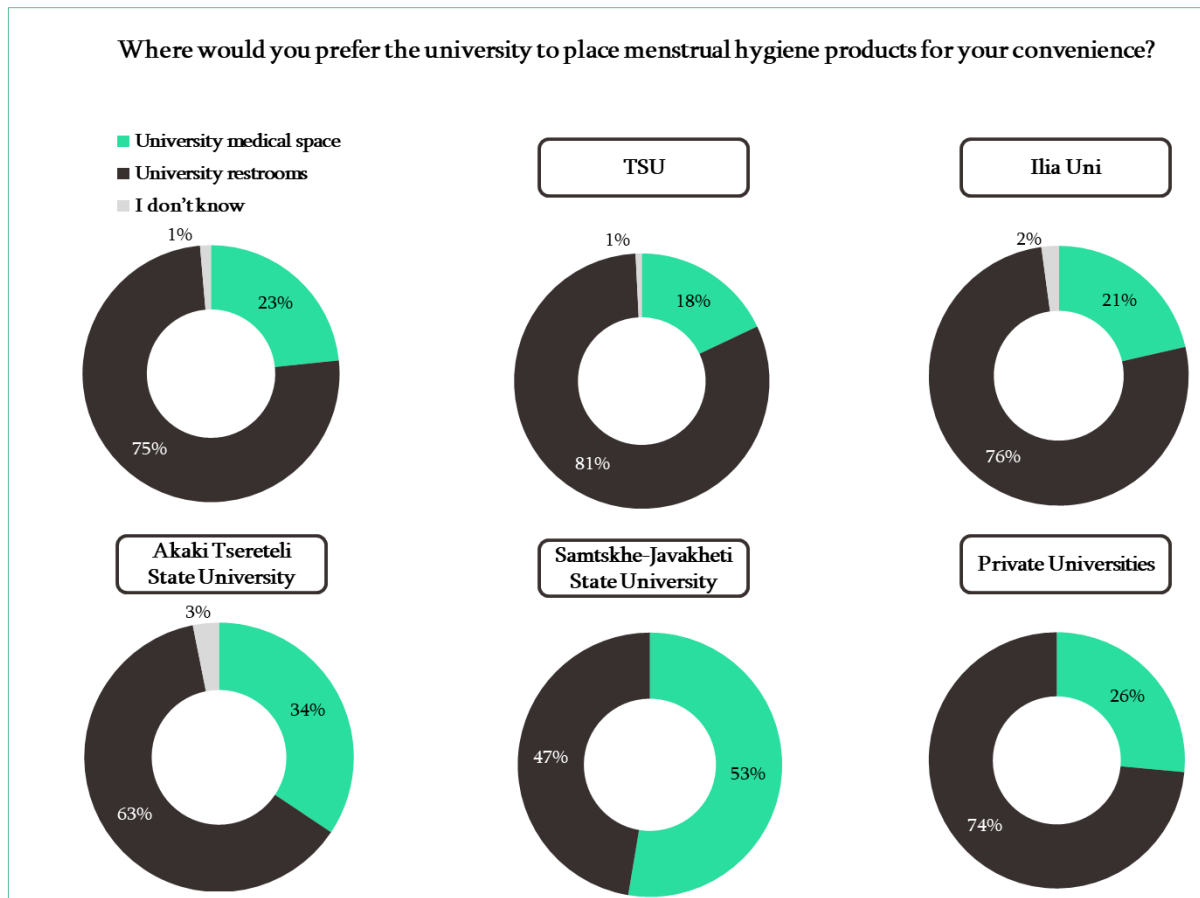
Regarding the optimal location to store menstrual hygiene products offered by the university, 75% of students indicated the university restroom as the most convenient option. However, for universities located in regions, the university medical area is more commonly preferred (see diagram N20).

*„If there were a designated area in the restrooms where individuals could easily access and use menstrual hygiene products like toilet paper, it would not only be acceptable, but great” (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student).*

One of the participants had the idea of a special voucher, with which a female student would be able to purchase a certain amount of menstrual hygiene products and have a choice.

*„The voucher can either be completely electronic or the university can enter into an agreement with a company so that when a student presents their student card, they can get a discount immediately. This is also a viable option. (Ivane Javakhishvili State University student, a disabled woman).*

Diagram 20



The lack of a reproductive and sexual health policy in universities has resulted in the issue being deemed less important. Although informational meetings are occasionally held, female students have expressed a desire for more accessible menstrual hygiene products on campus. A considerable portion of students have shown support for universities taking action in this area.

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## Conclusions and Recommendations

**Conclusion:** The research findings highlight the incomplete knowledge of student girls about menstruation and menstrual hygiene products. They face several barriers to accessing information.

**Recommendation:** Implement a systematic approach to provide accurate and reliable information about menstruation to young people, involving various social circles such as families, medical professionals, and educational institutions, including schools and universities.

**Conclusion:** Formal institutions such as schools and medical facilities are not frequently consulted as sources of information on menstruation and menstrual hygiene products.

**Recommendation:** It is crucial to enhance the role of formal educational spaces in sharing information about menstrual health, with a particular focus on schools. It is suggested to integrate sexual and reproductive education in the school curriculum and include information on modern menstrual hygiene products.

**Conclusion:** Although the respondents showed a great interest, they lacked comprehensive information on the advantages and disadvantages of various menstrual hygiene products, which in turn limited their choices.

**Recommendation:** Stakeholders should prioritize informing young people about menstrual hygiene products by emphasizing their characteristics such as comfort, health risks, costs, and environmental impact.

**Conclusion:** The respondents primarily rely on informal sources, such as the internet, social networks, family members, and friends, for information about menstruation and menstrual hygiene.

**Recommendation:** To effectively provide information about menstruation and menstrual hygiene to young people, stakeholders should leverage informal spaces such as social media platforms like YouTube and TikTok.

It is also important to expand the target audience of information campaigns to include both boys and parents of girls to ensure they have current knowledge about menstruation and menstrual hygiene products.

**Conclusion:** Medical university students know more about sexual and reproductive health compared to other students. They are also keen to share their knowledge and work on these issues.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended, based on the principle of peer-education, to organize information campaigns within which medical university students will share their knowledge with other students.



**Conclusion:** Accessing information on menstruation and menstrual hygiene products is particularly challenging for certain social groups, such as women from non-dominant ethnic backgrounds and those with disabilities.

**Recommendation:** Stakeholders should ensure that information dissemination takes into account the unique needs of these groups.

To increase access to information, it is recommended to translate [allaboutyou.ge](http://allaboutyou.ge) into Armenian and Azerbaijani languages and to develop materials adapted for disabled individuals on menstruation and menstrual hygiene products in Georgian. Such materials could include special guides and diagrams of the female anatomy, which outline major organs and their functions, making it easier to remember.

**Conclusion:** The study found that while the research participants themselves do not hold stereotypical ideas, they are still influenced by these ideas in their daily lives, and often behave within certain prescribed frameworks. Stereotypical attitudes were found to be particularly strong in rural areas. Disabled women face double the burden of stereotypes, as their attitudes towards sexuality are also influenced by societal stereotypes.

**Recommendation:** To combat these stereotypes, it is important to continue with large-scale awareness campaigns aimed at changing existing societal attitudes and taboos.

In particular, information campaigns should be conducted in rural areas and villages, which are often far from urban centers.

**Conclusion:** The primary obstacle to obtaining menstrual hygiene products is a lack of financial resources.

**Recommendation:** The costs of menstrual hygiene products should be included in the social package for women with disabilities.

**Conclusion:** Universities lack a specific policy on sexual and reproductive health, and they do not consider it as a crucial matter. However, most students support universities' engagement in this field.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that both public and private universities develop policies and strategies for promoting sexual and reproductive health among students. Universities should also create spaces or centers where students can access information on sexual and reproductive rights and health.

Moreover, universities should provide menstrual hygiene products to students and ensure that they are easily accessible in the university premises. To achieve this, it is essential to conduct a thorough study to identify the preferred locations of students and consider the special needs of disabled and transgender female students.

Finally, universities should disseminate information on the availability and proper use of menstrual hygiene products among students to increase awareness and encourage their use.

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