



UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG

A Bloody Waste

Embodied perspectives on menstrual materials, waste and
responsibility among Swedish menstruators

Daniela Holmberg

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Supervisor: Anna Bohlin

Abstract

Every day, hundreds of millions of people around the world are menstruating. While questions around menstruation have gained a growing public and academic interest in recent years, which has successfully emphasized and included various perspectives, the waste dimension remains largely neglected. Accordingly, this thesis aims to explore embodied perspectives on the relationship between menstrual materials, waste and responsibility among Swedish menstruators. The intersection between these cross-cutting themes forms an increasingly important topic, and is closely related to the global challenges we are facing related to menstrual health, waste management and environmental sustainability.

The study combines perspectives from two academic fields: critical menstruation studies and discard studies. A qualitative method is adopted, using online focus groups, and the empirical data is thematically analyzed according to scholarship on radical menstrual embodiment as well as theories on waste and responsibility. The results show that choices of menstrual materials and the perceptions of waste and responsibility are complex and multifaceted matters. While the participants exhibit both an awareness and a sense of responsibility for menstrual materials and sustainability issues, the personal wellbeing is the primary priority. Hence, the use of a certain menstrual material cannot be investigated in isolation from other experiences and realities, nor can the use of disposable products be equated with not taking responsibility and not caring about the environment and sustainability issues.

Keywords: *menstruation, menstruators, menstrual materials, embodied experience, waste, responsibility, sustainability, Sweden*

Acknowledgements

Considering the time we live in, it is hardly surprising that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the work with this thesis in more than one way. While my intention not is to list these aspects here, let me just state that writing this thesis has been one of the hardest things I have done. Yet, it has also been sincerely interesting, and I have learned a lot.

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Last of all, a special thanks to the thirteen participants who took the time to contribute to this study. Listening to you was truly rewarding and I admire your courage and generosity to share your stories. This thesis is for you, and for everyone out there likewise dealing with menstruation and the many questions and aspects that come along. Nevertheless, this thesis is also for those who never have and never will menstruate.

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1. Introduction

Every day, hundreds of millions of people around the world are menstruating. Over the course of a lifetime, a typical menstruator in the Global North will use somewhere between 5 and 15 thousand disposable pads and tampons, whereof the vast majority of these products will end up in landfills as plastic waste. During 2018, an estimated 17,4 billion tampons were sold all over the world (Borunda, 6th September 2019). Although we can put rough figures on these products, it remains a challenge to get a handle on exactly how much plastic waste originates from them. One reason for this is because it is labeled as ‘medical waste’ that does not need to be tracked, another reason is that little research has looked at the scope of the problem (ibid.).

On a positive note, the interest in and research about menstruation has emerged ever since the mid-2000s. In fact, 2015 is by some referred to as ‘The year the period went public’ (Thomson et al., 2019, p.12). This is admittedly good, however, the research about menstruation has a history of being relatively narrow, primarily focusing on the Global South, the so-called Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)-sector and the linkage to education (ibid.; see also Girod, Ellis, Andes et al., 2017; Alam, Luby, Halder et al., 2017). In recent times, the focus has broadened somewhat to also include economic aspects, and to a certain extent, Global North contexts. One example of this trend is the launch of the term *period poverty*, which refers to a person’s inability to afford or access sanitary products and WASH-facilities. This is often counteracted by focusing on eliminating the sales tax on menstrual products and advocating for free single-use menstrual materials in schools, prisons, shelters et cetera (Bobel & Fahs, 2020, p.962).

Nevertheless, as previously highlighted, the waste dimension of menstruation remains a neglected area and it is clear that more research on the connection between menstruation and environmental aspects is needed. In addition, the world’s largest alliance for women’s, children’s and adolescents’ health describes the unmet needs for essential health interventions, access to sanitation and hygiene systems, and the widespread lack of knowledge surrounding menstruation as an unacceptable crisis (The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, 2020). With this thesis I argue that the aspects of menstrual products that relate to their potential for contributing to waste also can be seen as a part of this crisis.

2. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to provide a contribution to the growing research field on menstruation through investigating experiences and perceptions of different menstrual materials in Sweden. In addition, the research aims to contribute to close the existing research and knowledge gaps related to the intersection between menstruation and environmental sustainability by exploring the attitudes to responsibility for menstrual waste. The three research questions guiding the study are:

1. How do embodied experiences of menstruation shape decisions regarding the choice of menstrual materials among Swedish menstruators?
2. What are their perceptions of menstrual waste and responsibility?
3. How can scholarship on radical menstrual embodiment and theories on waste help us understand such decisions and perceptions?

3. Background

The central way in which work around menstruation has been framed and measured, both in academic and practical work, is through a concept called menstrual hygiene management (MHM) (Thomson et al., 2019). The popularity for the term and the attention to incorporate it globally is increasing. MHM is commonly referred to as:

Women and adolescent girls using a clean menstrual management material to absorb and collect blood, that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of the period, using soap and water for washing the body as required and having access to facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials.

(SIDA, 2016, p.1).

Even though it is important to establish a definition (Sommer et al., 2015, p.1308), many now agree this conventional definition leaves out important aspects. There is an ongoing critical conversation regarding whether it covers all the spectrums of menstruation, as it is a multi-sectoral matter (Thomson et al., 2019; Bobel & Fahs, 2020, pp. 961, 968f). According to

Thomson et al. (2019, p.12f), this approach towards menstruation excludes as much as it includes. First, the authors problematize that the current definition of MHM completely excludes transgender men and others who menstruate. Further, they point out that it mainly is presented in a mainstream international development discourse in which the WASH-sector and the school sphere often are given focus areas (ibid.). These focus areas are with no hesitation important. However, recognizing the established criticism against the shortcomings with the concept, I will not be using the MHM conceptualization or definition in this thesis.

Instead, this study intends to highlight aspects of menstruation that has tended to fall outside this focus. First, this thesis rejects a narrow focus on WASH, women, schools and a Global South context, and instead wishes to place the concept of menstruation within a broader framework, considering it as phenomenon that impacts people in different ways in many aspects of life. One way this thesis has aimed to conceptualize and approach menstruation beyond MHM, is to adopt an inclusive approach towards all menstruators and not solely women (something further discussed under section ‘6.3 Sampling’). Second, this study specifically examines the waste aspect of menstruation. This is an increasingly important topic given the enormous problems with growing waste mountains and the frequency of environmental issues on the top global news stories (Campbell, MacKinnon & Stevens, 2010, p.147). While it, once again, remains a challenge to get a handle on exactly how much waste that comes from menstrual products, we do know that an estimated 17,4 billion tampons were sold in the world during 2018, and that a vast majority of them will wind up in landfills¹ (Borunda, 6th September 2019). This underlines that the waste aspect is a challenge also within menstruation as a category. Further, as waste and waste management has become a rather wide field within social sciences as well as in other disciplines, Schmitt et al. (2020, p.31) suggests that it can be helpful to treat menstrual waste as a separate category of waste, a so-called *Menstrual Waste*. A suggestion further explored in this thesis. Lastly, as the current two main strategies to dispose waste each have concerns, governments often struggle to manage their solid waste. While incineration leads to air pollution and the release of toxins, landfills leach toxins into surrounding soil and water (Campbell et al., 2010, p.147). As a result, they can both be considered a danger to public health and a threat to the environment (Corvellec, 2019, p.217f). The best way to tackle this dilemma is said to be to recycle when possible, but also to produce less waste in the first place (Campbell et al., 2010, p.147).

¹ Note that this only applies for the consumption of tampons and not pads or other options.

3.1 Relevance and the case of Sweden

The relevance and affiliation towards Social Sciences and the field of Global Studies is manifested through the global nature of the challenges that exist with respect to sustainability and waste management. Regarding the 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) situated within Agenda 2030, the following goals have a direct and intimate connection to this thesis: #3. *Good health and well-being*, #6. *Clean water and sanitation*, #12. *Responsible consumption and production* and #13. *Climate action* (United Nations, n.d.). Therefore, the study can be considered interesting also within a transnational context.

In light of the discussion above, Sweden makes an interesting case to look at from several points of views. For one thing Sweden is one of the fifteen countries in the world with the biggest ecological footprint. If everyone would adapt the same lifestyle as swedes, we would need not just two, but four globes (WWF, 2019). Put differently, the earth's ecological resources and services would had exceeded by the 6th of April during 2021 (Earth Overshoot Day, 2021). Simultaneously, Sweden has reached farthest in the work with the SDGs according to last year's Sustainable Development Report, in which a list of 166 countries is presented (Sachs et al., 2020, p.434f). 'The study of Sweden' [Sverigestudien] is carried out annually with the purpose to map which values, behaviors and characteristics that embosses the Swedish citizens. As of February 2020, the importance of *sustainability* marked a distinct upcoming trend among the citizens, followed by *values about environmental awareness* and *responsibility towards the next generation*. For the first time since the study began in 2009, responsibility towards the next generation was valued higher than *job opportunities* (Sverigestudien, 2020).

4. Previous research

Previous research on menstruation is extensive which illustrates the growing interest in and attention to the topic. The Society for Menstrual Cycle Research (SMCR) was founded in 1977, however, the field went largely unnamed for several years and *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, published in 2020, is the first of its kind (Bobel et al., 2020, p.1f). In the 1037 pages long book, 134 contributors from 23 different countries together presents 72 chapters. The concepts *shame*, *stigma* and *taboo* are mentioned and investigated in 48 of these chapters, whereupon it is reasonable to argue that these three concepts have a remarkable presence in the field, and that writers on menstruation often relate to them.

Menstruation research occurs within many different disciplines, for example anthropology, sociology, and health and medicine. One of the first books to be published on the anthropology of menstruation titled *Blood magic: the anthropology of menstruation*, examines and challenges the widespread image of ‘menstrual taboo’ (Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988). Within sociology, one example is Minakshi Rana’s study on the culture of silence among menstruating women in India (Rana, 2018), and within health and medicine, a recent example is a study about caste/ethnic and religious complexities of menstrual practices in Far-West Nepal (Baumann et al., 2021).

In Sweden, previous research on menstruation also occurs within many different academic disciplines. Most recently, Louise Kliner submitted a dissertation on menstrual product destigmatization from the department of business administration (Kliner, 2021). Starting from the beginning, ethnologist Denise Malmberg’s dissertation *The Red Flower of Shame? Menstruation and the Menstruating Woman in Swedish tradition* (1991) can be seen as a fundamental work. As a result of an identified research gap on menstruation in the Swedish society, Malmberg provides a careful mapping from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, whereof the latter time period is when commercial single-use menstrual products were first introduced to the Swedish market (ibid., p.11). Malmberg’s work has then been followed by health and medicine researcher Gun Rembeck’s work on adolescent’s attitudes towards menstruation, womanhood, and sexual health (2018), thereafter by Klara Rydström and Josefin Persdotter’s contributions in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (Bobel et al., 2020). Rydström’s contribution covers the argument that we should make trans menstruators matter by de-gendering menstruation (2020, pp. 945-959) something that suits my own study well. Persdotter’s chapter challenges the common portrayal of ‘the menstrual monster’ by introducing the concept menstrunormativity (2020, pp. 357-373). Persdotter also has a dissertation about everyday menstrual practices in progress and beyond this is a dedicated menstrual activist in Sweden. She argues that a two-hour long radio show about menstruation, aired during prime time during 2013 constituted a starting shot for the Swedish conversation about the topic (2014). The fact that several fictional books have been written on the subject even outside of the academic sphere² shows that the debate is getting more normalized in many levels of the Swedish society. Menstruation is not seen as strange or awkward anymore, but as gender researchers Breanne Fahs and Chris Bobel so suitably puts

² See for example Olausson & Ulvegren (2014), Henry (2015) and Eriksson Sandberg (2018).

it: ‘while menstruation has come out of the closet, there is still a deep investment in concealing it’ (2020, p.955).

Previous research in Sweden, and elsewhere, nonetheless declares that the nexus between menstruation and waste is a relatively unexplored angle, it is for example not discussed anywhere in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. For this reason, this thesis argues that the conversation needs to move on and discuss other aspects, such as the many different menstrual materials there is, and the question about menstrual waste and responsibility. An American study on environmental and health concerns related to the use of disposable tampons and pads (Borowski, 2011), plus a study from the United Kingdom about the public awareness of the environmental impact on menstrual products and product choice (Peberdy, Jones & Green, 2019) shows two, for this study, inspiring examples on the intersection between critical menstruation studies and discard studies.

5. Theoretical framework

Below follows the assumptions that constitute my theoretical framework. First, an approach of embodiment will be presented, which will be used to analyze the aspects of embodied experiences, choices, and emotions that my interlocutors described, given that menstruation after all distinctly is a bodily event. This will then be followed by a discussion of some of the main scholarship on waste that challenges the mainstream view on waste by exploring dimensions of responsibility towards environmental degradation.

While shame, stigma, and taboo all are central and important concepts in the field for menstruation studies and to a certain extent also within the frames of this thesis, the results are not deeply analyzed in terms of either shame or taboo, as my focus is primarily elsewhere. Given that the notion of stigma however occurs as an important concept in the embodied part of this study, it is relevant to mention Erving Goffman, who’s seminal book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* from 1963 constitutes a recurring reference point in studies that concerns stigma (Lyons et al., 2019). Goffman described stigma as a process when an individual’s social status goes from being ‘normal’ to ‘discredited’ as a result of obtaining certain attributes. This process later forms a relationship between an attribute and a stereotype which guides the discourse and asserts what is considered to be normal in the society (Klinter, 2021, pp.31f, 45).

Turning to scholarship on embodiment, sociologist Kay Inckle provides' an introductory explanation of the meaning on a more fundamental level, namely that '[e]mbodiment incorporates the complexity of lived, human experience and the means by which we represent and reflect upon it' (Inckle, 2009, p.4). Embodiment, Inckle continues, not only is a theoretical reference point, but also a position from which one can engage with human experience in lived and less objectifying terms (ibid., p.87). In relation to menstruation, specifically, Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs presents a model called radical menstrual embodiment (2020). The term radical in this sense does not equal *extreme* but rather *relating to the root* (ibid., p.973). Thus, to return to the historical menstrual movement, which sought to change the system from within using a mix of cultural, artistic and political resistance. This as opposed to some of the modern-day menstruation movements whose resistance is increasingly political (e.g., product-focused initiatives like period poverty, see p.962), as this do not solve the issues with menstrual stigma (pp. 955f, 976). The attempt with radical menstrual embodiment is to highlight embodied experiences of menstruation through an intersectional and feminist lens in which the roots of menstrual stigma are made visible (p.958; p.977). In other words, through being sensitive how social markers such as race, class, sex, gender and age interact, they attempt to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that lead to experiences of menstrual stigma. The authors problematize that when the menstrual cycle is regarded as unpleasant, a foil to femininity and a business opportunity, the idea of menstruation as a merely normal biological process and a vital sign is rejected (p.977). Following this, the attention should not only focus on the shedding of the uterine lining, but more broadly on the entire menstrual cycle across the life span, for diverse bodies. This, Bobel and Fahs explains, makes room for a broader range of experiences related to the many phases of the menstrual cycle in complex and multifaceted ways (ibid.). In this way, the model for radical menstrual embodiment enables bridges to other social movements by promoting the shared goal of agency and liberation from oppressive social norms (p.958). This is in fact something that Bobel and Fahs emphasizes and believes is lacking in the current menstrual movement as they express that '[...] these recommendations are meaningless if menstrual activists do not make a commitment to link arms with neighboring movements' (p.976). While this study does not adopt an activist stance, it nevertheless intends to highlight the importance of building bridges between different academic fields, and therefore links arms with the field for discard studies, in which the waste-matter typically belongs.

Mary Douglas best-known work *Purity and Danger* (2002 [1966]) has gained great attention both in the study of menstruation³ and waste and thereby situates a perfect bridge connecting these fields. Not to mention, Douglas draws some parallels to menstruation herself, albeit briefly (ibid., pp.150, -71, -78, -87, 218). With insights around the concepts *pollution* and *taboo* Douglas described dirt as something that is threatening or violating the order, and therefore constitutes a ‘matter out of place’ (ibid., p.44ff). According to another anthropologist, Joshua Ozias Reno, waste studies is often understood through Douglas analysis of dirt. However, Douglas, he suggests, misses a series of points (2014, p.4f). In an attempt to develop the theorizing around waste, Reno therefore advocates that we change the view on waste from being a ‘Matter out of place’ and instead see it as *Signs of Life*. His suggestion for this new approach is based in scatological science, which research focus is animals and their excrement. The word ‘scat’ is used instead of ‘shit’ or ‘faecal matter’ in order to emphasize the status of waste as a bio-semiotic sign in cross-species communication. Reno argues that this is the perfect starting point for a general theory of waste (2014, p.21), continuing with the following ‘[t]he ineradicable trace of scat is a good metaphor for all waste: a seamless conduction of material expenditure between life processes, which never ceases but only begets more life’ (ibid.). Lastly, Reno states that excrement, unlike garbage, has no clear opposite or symbolic counterparts - it is rejected because it must be, and it is a necessary aspect of living with bodies (ibid., p.6f).

Drawing upon Reno’s work, waste scholar Hervé Corvellec has developed these ideas to think about and engage with waste in what he refers to as a ‘scatolic approach’. Even though Corvellec primarily focuses on organizations and circular economy, topics not of direct or primary relevance within the focus and scope of this study, some of his central arguments are significant for the contexts discussed here. Corvellec’s scatolic approach is based on the idea that central that the contemporary society should move from a logic of dissociation where waste producers dissociate themselves from their waste by removing it from sight to remote waste facilities et cetera. Instead, he argues, we need to move towards a logic of association, whereby societies acknowledge that waste is an inevitable part of being human that we must take greater responsibility for (2019, pp. 217ff, 227f). Then, when does something become ‘waste’? According to the European legislation, materials and artifacts do not become waste until one has to throw them away, intends to throw them away or actually throws them away (Corvellec,

³ See for example Manica & Rios (2017); Persdotter (2020, p.366); Klintner (2021, p.47).

2019, p.221). Corvellec approaches the question in a slightly different manner by saying ‘[w]hile waste bins and dumpsters may give the impression that the waste disappears, they really are just thresholds. Objects that enter a bin may change definition, but they continue to exist under new premises and in new directions’ (ibid., p. 221). In this way, Corvellec argues that waste remains associated with the one who produced it, even when it is displaced and processed (ibid., p.220), and that as long as there is life, there will be waste (p.227). While waste conventionally is held to be of zero value or sometimes even negative value, the European legislation further states that waste can regain a positive value by re-become usable (p.223). Lastly, as mentioned above, the scatolic approach also raises the question about responsibility for materials, and Corvellec asserts that waste responsibility not is optional (pp.228, 230).

As carbon dioxide proves: all are impacted by the wasting of all. As a result, individual and organizational wasting practices are everybody’s business, inclusive of turtles, rivers, the Earth, and coming generations. Waste is here, and how contemporary organizations and societies are going to approach and deal with it will determine their future.

(Corvellec, 2019, p.229).

While Corvellec as mentioned primarily focuses on the role of organisations in waste management, his discussions of a logic of association also have implications for how we think of individuals’ responsibility. Yet, one question is to what extent the private individual ought to be guided by the logic of association that Corvellec prescribes for organisations. While there are scholars who criticise the tendency to let individuals solve what ostensibly are political problems (Isenhour, 2010, p.456), there are also calls for ethical behaviour and greater awareness of our individual actions (Droz, 2020). However, the latter approach from environmental and ethics researcher Laÿna Droz declares that one can only hold someone responsible if the person is not in a vulnerable position where they are not capable to take reparative and adaptive actions (ibid., p.111). Without going further into this debate, my intention is to complicate the discussion of responsibility with respect to menstrual material through highlighting different aspects that have not been adequately studied in previous research.

6. Method and material

6.1 Delimitations

The first and foremost delimitation of this study was to choose Sweden as a geographical context after the initial plans to investigate similar topics in Zanzibar, Tanzania was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Further, the study initially intended to include not just menstruation, but the more general use of hygiene disposables including for example baby diapers. I saw potential advantages in examining menstruation together with something else, in particular given the still noticeable taboo regarding the subject of menstruation, and imagined that it would be easier to investigate in connection to discussions of a less loaded topic such as baby diapers. However, due to the limits in time and extent of this thesis, this was revised in order to formulate a narrower purpose.

6.2 Empirical method

This study has adopted a qualitative strategy in which focus groups with pre-prepared questions were arranged⁴. The focus group sessions were semi-structured since that allows flexibility and supplementary questions based on what the respondents express during the interviews (Bryman, 2016, p.469f). I applied Steinar Kvale's nine different kinds of questions (referred to in Bryman, 2016, p.472ff), which for example emphasizes the use of open-ended questions in order to allow the respondent to formulate rich and free answers without impact from certain ideas and directions (ibid.). After submitting my interview guide, a pilot group was organized in order to test my questions and practice my role as a moderator. This also allowed me to identify questions that did not seem to be understood and then revise them accordingly (Bryman, 2016, p.260f). Further, the pilot interview also raised new questions that were added to the interview guide. Nevertheless, the material from the pilot focus group does not situate a part of the results and analysis in this paper.

There are many different suggestions and opinions on how many people a focus group should include (Bryman, 2016, p.506). The span goes all the way from three to ten participants, and it is important to find a balance that serves the purpose (ibid.) Whereas bigger groups can offer more opinions, smaller groups can instead offer more intimate and in-debt discussions. By the time that my pilot focus group was arranged, four people had agreed to participate. Later, one

⁴ The interview guide is presented under Appendix.

person declined at short notice, meaning that a total of three people participated. The situation when a person agrees to participate but does not show up is a major problem within focus group-research, which has resulted in that the strategy to consciously over-recruit may be necessary (or even recommended) (ibid.). I had this in mind while planning for my forthcoming three focus groups.

All focus groups were carried out online on Zoom, lasting between 1,5 to 2 hours each. The digital format was a significant reason for the decision of having a maximum of four members per focus group, as it felt difficult to establish a good climate and moderate larger groups. This was a view that the participants in the pilot group shared. The sessions were recorded and thereafter transcribed successively, starting already after the first completed focus group. The process to transcribe the recordings indeed was a time-consuming activity, as I went over the recordings several times in order to determine that my transcriptions were correct, but it simultaneously constituted a great opportunity to realize what some refer to as ‘spending time with the material’ (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015, pp. 80-87). All four focus groups were conducted in Swedish and the quotes that are presented in this paper have been translated as accurately as possible in regard to how they were articulated. To avoid eventual errors and increase member validation, the translation was carried out in consultation with the participants (Bryman, 2016, p.385). This can be considered to be of particular importance in online research as the digital format makes it harder to observe nuances and the body language behind the statements when the one visible part of the participants is their faces (ibid., p.519).

6.3 Sampling

The research questions led the study to a purposive sampling method where respondents were contacted based on a certain criterion (Bryman, 2016, p.408f). In this case, people who currently are menstruating. After all, not all who menstruates are women, nor do all women menstruate (Abbondanza, referred to in Bobel, 2010, p.158f). A snowball sampling technique was also used, according to which people were encouraged to suggest participants who have relevant experience and characteristics for the study (Bryman, 2016, p.415). While the title of this thesis reads ‘Swedish menstruators’ the study does not intend to represent *all* menstruators in Sweden. A more generalizable result would have required a larger number of participants and other sampling techniques (Alvehus, 2013, p.66f). Instead, the aim is to favor an in-depth engagement with a fewer number of participants in order to highlight the research questions

from a qualitative approach. Yet, I nevertheless strived to achieve a spectrum of participants⁵, which are presented in the next section.

The search for participants took place in several different forums: a sewing forum, a sustainability forum, one forum for menstruation, one forum for vaginal health and one for menstrual activism - all of them digital⁶. Noting that this excludes and loses the perspectives from those who do not use the selected digital forums, it was a crucial step in order to find participants who I had no previous connections to and helped maintain an objective distance⁷. The interest to participate in the study and discuss these matters was big, which was gratifying. However, this can also indicate that the forums in which the sample population was recruited predominately generated participants that have a certain interest for the research topic, which may have shaped the results in the study. This all, however, emphasizes the relevance of the topic, and again, invites further research, for example into similar questions but with a larger sample population.

6.4 The participants

A total of nine people between 18 and 38 years have participated in this study⁸. Eight participants identified as women and one participant identified as nonbinary. Thanks to the digital format, it was possible to include participants from various places in Sweden (Bryman, 2016, p.515), as shown in the following table.

⁵ Non-Swedish speakers was invited to participate in the study. However, everyone who expressed an interest to participate in the study spoke Swedish.

⁶ The contact letter is available in the Appendix together with a list of the different online forums.

⁷ I will return to this under section '6.5 Ethical considerations and positionality'.

⁸ Not including the participants in the pilot focus group.

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Place of residence
Group 1	Hanna	31	Female	Stockholm
	Ari	27	Nonbinary	Kalmar
	Louise	32	Female	Lund
	Lena	29	Female	Stockholm
Group 2	Måna	19	Female	Malmö
	Agnes-Cecilia	30	Female	Lia
	Margita	35	Female	Linköping
Group 3	Elsa	38	Female	Umeå
	Malin	26	Female	Gothenburg
	Alice	18	Female	Nödinge

Table 1. Table of participants.

The following menstrual materials were used or had been used by the participants: disposable pads, disposable tampons, menstrual cups, mensdisc/'soft cup', reusable pads and reusable tampons (whereof the two last alternatives were made in textile). Apart from these options, period proof underwear, menstrual sponges, and free bleeding⁹ were also discussed. The focus groups were mixed based on what menstrual material the participants used, which was a bit of a puzzle. Nevertheless, in this way the discussions could thrive from different perspectives.

6.5 Analytical method

In this study, an abductive method was implemented. This in short means that preliminary assumptions have been revised in the light of the empirical findings and an increased understanding of the participants' worldview (Bryman, 2016, p.394). Accordingly, emerging concepts and ideas shaped the onward study in ways that were difficult to predict. According to the intentions to understand the participants own thoughts and experiences of different menstrual materials and how they relate to the phenomenon of waste and responsibility, a so-called argument analysis would not be suitable since it rather focuses on the structure and signification of the explicit arguments in a text (Boréus & Bergström, 2012, p.24). Instead, the empirical findings were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method where the data is examined in search for core themes. One of the main ways to identify themes is

⁹ Free bleeding implies the choice to not use any products or menstrual materials.

through coding, where the data is broken down into different components parts which are given different labels, thus codes. In this way, the data is made more accessible (Bryman, 2016, p.11).

Furthermore, I decided to increase the access to the material by printing all my transcripts, as this meant that I really could visually ‘hold’ my material and thus get a better overview and move between the transcripts easier. I read the material several times and identified different codes by using colors and numbers as identity markers, while simultaneously having my research questions in the back of my head. After identifying a certain number of codes in the material, potential links between different codes were examined (Bryman, 2016, p.11). Codes that were considered to have a connection were gathered in clusters. Once a good overview was established, I made a second sorting where clusters that concerned the same subject were collected under a common theme, which were not definitively decided until a later stage in the process (ibid.). This was also a time where the analytical and interpretative process was intensified, which brings me to the second element of my analytical method, hermeneutics.

The key element within hermeneutics is ‘the hermeneutic circle’, where one important aspect is to interpret parts from a text from the entirety and vice versa in a constant process that moves between these two perspectives in order to gain deeper understanding (Boréus & Bergström, 2012, p.31f; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p.252). Furthermore, it emphasizes the interpretative part of an analysis as well as the need to take the specific context into account in order to avoid misunderstandings caused by projection of the personal experiences. Hermeneutics builds on one additional source of knowledge apart from empirics and logic – empathy. The intention is not simply to grasp the width of something, but to understand it (Thurén, 2007, p.95ff). However, the interpreter can never totally conjure away one’s individual experiences and perceptions about the world, also, interpretation is impossible without certain pre-understanding. This makes self-awareness a critical dimension when using hermeneutics (Boréus & Bergström, 2012, p.31f; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p.252).

6.6 Ethical considerations and positionality

Using other people for research initiates the question about ethics and how to give something back to the participants for contributing to the study (Kulick, 2019, p.84ff). One such way will be to share my findings, which I do both by sending the thesis to the participants, and also indirectly, to disseminate the thesis to other audiences. In accordance with standard research ethics etiquette, I asked all my participants for consent, informed them about the study and

their rights, such as the right to withdraw from the study without having to motivate why. Extra care was taken given that the subject of menstruation still is sensitive and often associated with stigma or taboo, something that required particular consideration of me as a researcher. I endeavored to be respectful in my interactions with the participants, knowing that I represent not just myself but also my university (Bryman, 2016, p.125ff). In order to protect the participants from any discomfort or hurt after contributing to the study, all the participants are anonymized. The names are therefore randomly chosen, but nevertheless retained some characteristics. Secondly, I will delete the recordings and transcriptions after finishing my thesis.

As the focus group interviews were conducted online, and as Zoom can be counted as a social media platform, additional ethical concerns have been considered in relation to that. Townsend and Wallace's framework for ethical research with social media data has been helpful (Townsend & Wallace, 2016, p.8). Accordingly, I ensured to be transparent about my own identity and the fact that the data would be used in my bachelor thesis (ibid., p.11). Further, personal meeting links for each focus group were established in order to verify the participants' privacy and reduce the risk that non-invited persons could 'join' the meetings (ibid., p.10). These meeting links were only sent in private messages to the participants, and never shared in open forums et cetera.

Doing research in a group which I am a part of brings up the matter of positionality. I am an insider in this group by being a Swedish person of fertile age with personal experiences of menstruation. I would say that it has been beneficial, if not crucial, to be an insider in this study as I believe that a certain preconception from the researcher can generate a sense of security for the participant and render the participation less exposing. This again, is crucial considering the sensitivity and taboo of the subject. However, the practice to study a country, society or even a group oneself personally belongs to also highlights the importance to maintain an objective distance, as it implies a balance between the personal and the professional (Rolston, 2014, p.25-31). Further, there is a fine line between being an active listener and yet not be mistaken for agreeing or taking a stand, as this can risk affecting the forthcoming answers (Bryman, 2016, p.472). It was particularly challenging to maintain the objective distance and not intervene in the discussions when a participant shared something very personal, brave, or something distinctly relevant for the study. So, it was a great joy to see how the participants looked out for each other in this sense, by giving each other comfort and confirmation.

7. Results and analysis

This section will present the empirical findings and simultaneously apply the chosen analytical tools radical menstrual embodiment and theories on waste and responsibility as a parallel process. According to the previously described thematic approach, the analysis yielded three themes, each including three different subthemes, as presented in the table below.

THEMES	SUBTHEMES
Embodied experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The own body and health as a starting point- Access & awareness- To navigate around norms and algorithms
Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The sight of a period- The sound of a period- Having to pay for it
Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- “Here” VS “There”: Contextual and geographical impacts- The past, the present and the future- Calls for change: Getting to the root with responsibility

Table 2. Table of themes and subthemes.

7.1 Embodied experiences

The own body and health as a starting point

When asking the participants about which different menstrual materials they had used during their lifetime, recurring references were made to the own body and health. Here is what 31-year-old Hanna said:

I am currently using tampons. But in the beginning, when I got my period, I used pads. I moved on to tampons quite fast because I thought that it was uncomfortable to use pads. It felt like they were in the way, and that it was more practically to use tampons. I have tried a menstrual cup, but I have vestibulitis, so it has been difficult to use my menstrual cup sometimes [...].

Another participant touched upon the topic repeatably when opening up about her period-related health issues. She expressed that she was ‘one of those that cannot go out during the first days’ since she experiences such severe pain that makes her vomit and faint. While ‘sustainability’ indeed served as a motivation and important factor for many of the participants in their choice of menstrual material, which will be further discussed in the next section, the vast majority first and foremost answered ‘functionality’ as an important qualification and thereafter ‘comfort’. This was explained in terms of avoiding options that were not sufficiently absorbent, caused leakage, triggered the experience of gender dysphoria¹⁰, or did not remain in its place as this was associated with feelings of fear, worry, anxiety and shame. In the same way, answers that included comfort was explained in terms of avoiding options that caused pain or rashes. This is what Ari said:

A very frustrating thing is the fact that... I pass as a woman. I have that luxury. But there is not every male toilet that has an opportunity to wash oneself and throw away menstrual materials. This is a terribly frustrating aspect for a big trans-community with menstruation [...] Therefore, the lack of places to throw away used menstrual materials is very frustrating, and also one of the reasons that I started to use a menstrual cup [...] I mean sure, one could bring used and bloody pads and tampons with oneself [...], but then it kind of becomes yet another problem.

- Ari, 27 years old.

Despite the shared nature of many of the experiences such as lacking access to a sanitary box or trash can, another participant named Agnes-Cecilia, who sew her own re-usable pads, brought another aspect to the table.

Something that is often discussed among us who use reusable pads are: does one bleed centrally, forward or backwards? And at what time of the day does one bleed the most, and so on [...]. One would have needed so much more information; *we are all different*.

-Agnes-Cecilia, 30 years old.

To summarize, these examples are powerful reminders on what Bobel and Fahs strives to visualize with their model radical menstrual embodiment, namely, that we can not only focus on the bleeding itself when discussing menstruation, or even when discussing menstrual

¹⁰ Gender dysphoria equals the feeling of distress when one’s body does not match one’s gender identity (RFSL, 2021).

materials specifically - we must also acknowledge a broader range of experiences (2020, p.977). Chronical illness and health conditions as described above situates clear examples of aspects that need to be taken into consideration. Seen differently, this also challenges Corvellec's argument that waste responsibility is not optional (2019, s.230), as Hanna declares that the reason for using single-use tampons is her vestibulitis. Hence, one could ask if this motto goes beyond one's own comfort and needs, a discussion I will return to under the latter part of section '7.3 Change'.

The last two statements also highlight another important aspect of radical menstrual embodiment, namely the importance to pay attention to diverse bodies, and the many differences there is (Bobel & Fahs, 2020, p.977). Ari's reflection presents an important perspective spun in the experience of having a trans body in a dichotomous and cisgendered world, where the lack of basins and trash cans in public toilets are described as a 'frustrating thing' that leads to 'yet another problem'. Ultimately, this experience is declared to be one of the reasons behind Ari's decision to use a menstrual cup. Hence, it is important to consider that the intersection between sex and gender may imply different experiences for different people when discussing menstruation. The last quote by Agnes-Cecilia illustrates how the blood flow can be described and experienced in terms of directions, and finishes with the redemptive words 'we are all different'. Thus, different bodies bleed in different ways.

Access and Awareness

Another aspect that was highlighted in the discussion about the use of different menstrual materials was the matter of access to information and different kinds of products. Particularly during the menarche, the use of a certain menstrual material was explained in terms of 'what was available' rather than being an active choice. This further led to discussions about the access to information. This is what Louise said:

Then, when I got my period, I thought that the information was... well it didn't exist [...] I don't remember that they told us about different options and such in school. I knew that there were tampons and pads, but that was it. I didn't know that there were options like reusable pads and other options that don't generate waste in the same way. That is something I had to look up by myself when I got older.

- Louise, 32 years old.

The experience of information shortfall was shared among all participants. Many expressed that their mother had been the biggest source of information about different menstrual materials during menarche, and, as some years went by, the most widely used source for information was the internet. However, the statements here varied due to the age of the participant. While one of the youngest participants stressed that she nowadays could post a question in a Facebook-group and successfully receive one hundred answers, the oldest participant expressed a lack of these forums during her youth, saying that she had to find someone she could trust in person ‘and if it only was one person, well then it was that persons influences you got. You did not get anything else.’

The participants also showed a high level of awareness in which the thought on menstrual materials proved to be present not only during the actual menstruation, but more thoroughly during the entire menstrual cycle, thus, during the whole life in fertile age. For example, one participant described how she used to count her pads before her period, in order to determine if they would be enough or if she had to buy more. The following quote from Måna further demonstrates a sense of awareness over the choice of menstrual material in relation to the environment and health risks.

I use disposable pads 99% of the time. I have big issues with very, very heavy flows, which means that I cannot use tampons, regardless the size of them, because I bleed through them *immediately*. And it is very... I think a lot about the environment, and I think it is very tough to buy so many pads. Especially if I want them in ecological cotton. And I do not want them to be bleached, since that can be very harmful¹¹. So, it is a lot to think about. My goal is to use a menstrual cup, but unfortunately I have a low-seated cervix, so it's very difficult for me to use a menstrual cup.

- Måna, 19 years old.

This quote can however be contrasted with another participants narrative that waste was not something she really thought about, but that the reason she had started to use reusable menstrual materials was due to the health aspects. Still, the majority explicitly expressed or in other ways reflected upon an awareness about the issue.

¹¹ Here, the participant has clarified that she refers to the health risks with using products with chemicals on such a sensitive part of the body.

[...] Since I bleed so little during the first days, it feels unnecessary to use my reusable pads. It kind of becomes like ‘should I waste one of them for this?’. I do not have that many either, as they are quite expensive, and I want them to suffice for the whole cycle before I have to wash them again. But it really is just as wasteful to use the disposable pads. - Lena, 29 years old.

The first quote concerning the inadequate access to information can be analyzed according to Corvellec’s call for greater responsibility for waste (2019, pp. 217ff, 230), and how this may require a certain knowledge. It can be argued that in order to make the ‘right’ choice, one needs certain information, knowledge and understanding about the situation. The second empirical example of using the internet and social media versus having to find someone to trust in person in order to get knowledge further shows differences in experiences over generations, illustrating how age becomes a relevant factor for the individual experience. In the next two examples, starting with the described practice to count the pads before the period and followed by Måna’s quote, the consideration of menstrual materials seems to be of utmost importance. These examples can also provide an illustration of Corvellec’s encouragement that humans should be more engaged in their waste (2019, p.217ff). While Måna’s quote is about unused disposable pads, she still shows awareness that they sooner or later will end up as waste and affect the environment, and therefore tries to take necessary actions in an early step. Her expression ‘It is a lot to think about’ can be interpreted as an example of this. More than being another example of awareness, the last reflection from Lena also illustrates how reusable pads are considered to be of greater value than disposable pads that rather just is viewed as ‘waste’, perhaps even *before* they are used. This illustrates a living example of Corvellec’s observation that something that once was considered to be ‘waste’ can regain its value by becoming usable again (2019, p.223), which defines the life and circumstances for a reusable pad, which repeatably goes from being used to once again being usable.

To navigate around norms and algorithms

The participants used many different adjectives to describe different menstrual materials. In one of the focus groups, one participant described menstrual products in terms of being an ‘aid’¹². A participant from another focus group declared the Swedish menstrual norm to be narrow. Turning to a discussion about different types of menstrual materials, disposable pads were referred to as ‘bricks’ by one participant whilst another participant described her reusable

¹² [ett hjälpmedel].

pads in terms of being ‘large’ and ‘clumsy’ to bring while travelling. Disposable pads were also described in terms of being ‘troublesome’, ‘uncomfortable’ and as the following quote shows, as ‘gross’.

[...] It [the choice of menstrual material] was a bit controlled by what your friends used and such. I often felt, or in my circle of friends it was like this ‘Aha, are you using *pads*? That’s really gross! One should only use tampons.’ So, it kind of became a peer pressure thing. - Lena, 29 years old.

Disposable tampons were also described in terms of being ‘uncomfortable’ by some. However, in contrast to disposable pads, they were also referred to in terms of being ‘cool’ and ‘popular’, yet ‘scary’ to use, particularly during the menstrual onset but also continuous because of the fear to get *Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)*¹³. In the following quote, Lena continues with a perspective on tampon as a source of pain.

One of the reasons that I started to use a menstrual cup was because I was very afraid to get Toxic Shock Syndrome since I had to have my tampons in for so long before I could take them out, without it hurting terribly. I know a lot of others who were also very afraid of all the different things that could happen with tampons. That they get stuck, diseases and so on. - Lena, 29 years old.

When it comes to menstrual cups, norms varied from regarding them as ‘scary’ and ‘expensive’, to an appealing choice among many of the participants. Thereafter as ‘revolutionary’ and a ‘salvation’ for some, but also, as we have seen in the narratives on health and body, ‘painful’ and ‘difficult’ for others. The following quote can, apart from being a reflection on menstrual cups, also be seen as a contrast to the previous presented quote on the lack of information, as it rather expresses the experience of getting *too much* information.

“[...] I thought that it was difficult because I had very many people around me that started to use menstrual cups, and then it was like all the algorithms directed all menstrual cups-ads in my direction. And I always feel that it is hard when it gets to that, that no matter what I choose there is someone making money on my choice. It gets difficult to navigate.” - Elsa, 38 years old.

¹³ Toxic Shock Syndrome, often referred to as ‘the tampon disease’, is a rare but severe infection caused by bacterial toxins. Bobel and Fahs (2020, p.959f) writes that the TSS outbreak during the 1980’s with 812 reported cases and thirty-eight deaths resulted in a turning point in the public discourse about menstruation and product safety.

The choice of menstrual material can in other words be the result of how we talk about and describe different menstrual materials and construct social norms around them. This process connects to stigma and the fear of being viewed as ‘discredited’ instead of ‘normal’ in the context (Klinter, 2021, p.32). Accordingly, this can also be related to the waste question, as a social norm, or public discourse like the one developed from the TSS-outbreak can affect the choice of menstrual material and consequently in a later stage the generation of waste. Further on, the last quote shows how the information and commercial abundance are causing confusion for the person in question. This quote also reveals the business aspect of menstruation and briefly touches upon the multi-billion industry that in fact exists for menstrual products, as the participant utter ‘no matter what I chose there is someone making money of my choice’. This aspect connects to the radical menstrual embodiment’s criticism against the neoliberal enterprise to repeatedly turn to the market in order to solve problems around menstrual stigma (Bobel & Fahs, 2020, p. 956). As multinational companies primarily are driven by financial interest, the market profits on reproducing the view that menstruation needs to be managed with different products. This since an increased consumer interest will result in an increased sale of these goods. However, as Bobel and Fahs puts it, if the focus is exclusively directed on buying or using the ‘right’ menstrual products, the root causes of menstrual stigma remain obscured (ibid., 976). The fact that the participants so often returned to notions of stigma throughout the focus groups indicate that Bobel’s and Fahs’ observation holds true.

7.2 Fear

The sight of a period

Fear was a constantly recurring concept in all of the focus groups. For one participant, it was completely fundamental as she explained that it was the fear that guided her decision of which menstrual material to choose, described as following ‘For me, it is about not having to be afraid when I go out, because it is still a taboo to bleed through.’ Another participant reflected on the practice to hide the menstruation in the following way:

The way I understand it, the separation [of waste] on public toilets is about ‘hygiene’, because it still is something biological coming out, and if it is thrown in the regular trash cans it would be considered unhygienic. Therefore, it should be separated. Also, because it shouldn’t be seen, it is something that one should hide. So, I don’t know, I think that as much as women and others who use pads

wrap them [in paper] ... There is no one that puts a pad openly on the top [of the wastebasket], but maybe one should start to do so, just because? [...] To talk about menstrual waste would only... no but... My menstruation is not waste. The pad is waste, but my menstruation is not. There is a risk that it once again becomes something that should be managed. I think that calling it 'menstrual waste' will only strengthen that. That now we have to manage our menstruation yet another step.

- Margita, 35 years old.

Seen from the perspective of a member in one of the other focus groups, the following was expressed.

When I have seen the small sanitary boxes in public toilets, I always thought that there is something a little shameful about them. That 'here you should throw your shameful menstrual materials, and no one should see that'. One cannot see a little menstrual blood or a used pad or whatever it might be. And many times, in the beginning, I remember that I ignored throwing it [the menstrual material] in the sanitary boxes, I threw it in the regular trash can. I don't know why actually... if it was because it was shameful or so.

- Louise, 32 years old.

The outspoken fear to bleed through while being away from one's own home and the described practice to hide used menstrual materials in the trash can by wrapping them inside paper, can be analyzed for its stigmatic dimensions. Malmberg for example implies that visible menstrual blood can symbolize a loss of control of the own body (1991, p.198), which accordingly can be assumed to discredit the individual's social status (Goffman, referred to in Kliner, 2021, p.31f). Moreover, it demonstrates a fear to be associated with the menstruation and menstrual waste, which can be viewed through Douglas analysis of how pollution and taboo can threaten the order with its characteristic of being a matter out of place (2002 [1966], p.44ff). In the light of these theories, one can interpret the practice to wrap menstrual materials inside paper as an adjustment to not violate the order, as we do not expect to see blood in the trash can. Thus, blood trails in the trash constitutes a matter out of place whereas paper towels do not.

In relation to Reno's description of animal scats as a bio-semiotic sign (2014, p.7), used (thus bloody) menstrual materials can extend this example as Reno later adds that blood trails can be viewed as a bio-semiotic sign in the same way as scats (ibid., p.16). Accordingly, the sight of a used menstrual materials in for instance public toilets, sends the signal that another body has

passed by, and can thereby be seen as a sign of life (ibid., p.9). Further, whereas Reno emphasizes the status of waste as a bio-semiotic sign in cross-species communication (ibid, p.7), I want to argue that these quotes demonstrate how waste can constitute a sign of communication not just between species, but also within them. As an example, Margitas suggestion that menstruators maybe should start to leave their menstrual materials openly on top of the waste baskets, can be interpreted as a will to communicate something, in this case the presence of a menstruating body. This can further be interpreted as a form of resistance against the widespread practice to hide the signs of the menstruation, which brings me to my next point.

In the same way that Bobel and Fahs argue that there is a risk that the complicated needs of menstruators are reduced to simply needing something to bleed on (2020, p.971), Margita, the participant behind the first quote, fears that by embracing a concept like menstrual waste, menstruation solely will be viewed as waste, hence her expression ‘[m]y menstruation is not waste’. This statement underscores a sense of wanting to resist this dominant view, which brings us to the resistance part of the model for radical menstrual embodiment (ibid., p. 962). While the first quote by Margita expresses resistance in a more explicit way, as suggested above, the second quote by Louise is more explorative as she reflects upon the etiquette rules for how one should manage the period in a discrete way. Yet, the reply ‘I remember that I ignored throwing it in the sanitary boxes [...]’, can be understood as an expression of resistance on the same basis as Margitas reflection.

The sound of a period

Not only is the period visible, it is also audible. This is demonstrated in the following quote, which is a continuation of Louise’s reflection in the previous section.

[...] I remember when I went to primary school, that I was afraid that it [the sanitary boxes] would sound. There are often metal lids on them and I didn’t want it to be heard that I dropped the lid, because then the others would realize that ‘aha, you have your period’. It felt awkward. - Louise, 32 years old.

The audible aspect of menstruation was further discussed in this focus group. The discussion revealed that the practice to dampen the sound of the period was not solely limited to throwing away a used menstrual product - it reached all the way to consciously controlling the sound from breaking the sealing or opening a new menstrual product. With disposable pads

specifically, it was also a matter about removing it from the underwear's as quiet as possible, as this too, could be heard by others and reveal the fact that one was having a period.

This again illustrates the process of stigma - as making sounds of these kind in the bathroom does not belong to the 'normal', the person gets discredited and stigma is generated (Goffman, referred to in Klinter, 2020, p.32). By linking back to the discussion in the previous section, the audible aspect of the period can also be analyzed as yet another sign of life and communication (Reno, 2014, pp.7, 9). In this case, the fear of making sounds demonstrates a very *unwanted* sign of life. The person behind this quote, as well as the peer participants in the focus group, clearly did not want to communicate to others that they were having their period. Accordingly, menstrual waste can therefore, whether the intention is to hide or display it, be understood as a sign of life and a way to communicate the presence of a living menstruating body. Similarly, the actions described above of trying to silence or make the menstruation invisible, can be regarded as expressions of the logic of dissociation from waste described by Corvellec (2019, p.217ff), which promotes a behavior governed by norms of avoidance and of keeping a distance. One could argue that in this instance, the logic of dissociation and the attempts to hide these signs of menstruation and disconnect from them, does not fully work. The communication is too loud and too visual. In other words, there is a gap between the logic of dissociation and the communication that follows these signs of life (making sounds or leave blood trails behind) (Reno, 2014, p.7), which can be understood as a breeding ground for stigma.

Having to pay for it

When discussing the debate on subsidy and elimination of the sales tax on menstrual products and how this potentially could impact the waste issue, a few participants stated that Sweden is not one of those countries where people are facing the ultimatum to either buy menstrual products or buy 'this or that' instead. These views are understandable due to Sweden's status as a well-off welfare state. Still, the economic aspect was widely discussed throughout the focus groups by some participants. This is what 19-year-old Måna said.

[...] It's also important for me that they [the pads] have certain sustainability-labels, which makes them more expensive. The amount of money that I have spent on menstrual materials is insane, and this is also a fear. Currently, I live with my dad, but I will move during the summer. So, I have been counting on

how much it [the pads] cost, and it's much in the long run. [...] Sometimes when I am about to buy pads, it costs 70 SEK for a package with twelve pads, and then I just feel... how fun is it to spend 70 SEK on that. Then I will choose a cheaper package as I can't always afford to buy the more expensive ones, or, that I would simply rather spend the money that I have saved on something else.

Moving on, Måna continued to talk about how she has been forced to throw away clothes that have been destroyed by stains of blood that was not possible to wash away and how this, too, is a cost. In the same focus group, 30-year-old Agnes-Cecilia accordingly shared her perception and experience.

I have just become alone with my daughter every other week, with a new accommodation, double rents, and all of this 'funny' things that it implies *irony*. I would have panicked so much, since it gets so tight [with money] in the beginning, if I would have to go and buy several different pads that I needed. My flow is quite light now, but a regular pad is not enough during nighttime for example, so in that regard I would have needed more. If I would have to count that into the cost as well... I am happy that reusable pads work for me, from the economic perspective. Because it is awfully expensive to menstruate.

Going forward, a third participant from another focus group described how she successfully found a menstrual cup that suited her by exchanging and borrowing menstrual cups with her friends. This practice however was explained to not be founded in an economic perspective, but rather in a perspective that the menstrual cups should not be thrown away and wasted. Though, the following was added '[...] but when I hear you talk [the other participants in the group], I think like this... I wouldn't have bought a menstrual cup when I went to High School. Because I wouldn't be able to afford that, and I had not wanted to ask my parents for money for it.'

This visualizes yet another embodied perspective, in which the embodied experience of menstruation also is linked to economical assets. Thus, it is important to adopt the intersectional perspective of radical menstrual embodiment, in which social markers such as class and age are taken into consideration (Bobel & Fahs, 2020, pp. 958,971). This issue is likewise addressed in the Gothenburg founded campaign 'Mensfadder' [Menstrual sponsor], where the initiators collect monthly donations to enable young people to buy menstrual products

(Mensfadder, n.d.). Accordingly, this shows that the economic perspective matter even in a country like Sweden. And as we have seen in the statements above, this will further on influence the choice of menstrual material, and in the long run consequently the waste mountain, as the lack of sufficient economic resources, or the desire to spend the money otherwise, can affect the choice of a less sustainable thus more environmental harmful product. Finally, the last narrative on how a participant and her friends are borrowing and testing each other's menstrual cup can be seen as a way to engage with waste (Corvellec, 2019, p.217ff), as this practice was explained to originate from a waste perspective. They wanted to prevent that the menstrual cups would be thrown away and wasted.

7.3 Change

“Here” VS “There”: Contextual and geographical impacts

This section will feature a presentation and analysis of narratives concerning matters of context and geographical location. While a question whether the choice of menstrual material differed from one context to another was posed in the focus groups, the matter of context was also mentioned in discussion about other things. For example, two participants discussed how their first confrontation with applicator tampons in the United States had served as an eye opener to the waste aspect of menstruation materials as they found the applicator to be an ‘unnecessary extra plastic waste’. Another participant shared her strategy to use a menstrual cup when being on a music festival and in the following quote, a description how it can be to bring a menstrual cup to a military camp is offered.

[...] you kind of have to think more. But at the same time, I was happy that I brought my menstrual cup, because we had very long days with a strict schedule. And it is exactly like this that ‘Alright, now you will go to the shooting range and you have five minutes to pee, then you won’t be able to pee until you get back’. So, I created a routine where I woke up, ran to the toilet, peed, emptied my menstrual cup, and then maybe I didn’t empty it again until late in the evening. Or the day after. [...] One part of it was that we should be in the field, so then we went to a more secluded area. There, I thought that it was a bit tough, I had to disinfect my hands and hope that my mucous membranes wouldn’t get in touch with the alcohol. Then I emptied it [the menstrual cup] and cleaned it with some water from my water bottle.

- Alice, 18 years old.

Alice then continued with a reflection about the reusable pads, which she had sewn herself.

I feel that I have been a bit worried to bring my reusable pads to my home country, because we usually stay there quite long, and I don't really know how to wash them while I'm there. But I still use to bring them, and fortunately I usually only get my period once while we are there, and the next one once we are back home [in Sweden] again. And then I have had the opportunity to wash them. But my mum always brings single use products either way, so that there is always something available and so I don't have to think about that. - *Alice, 18 years old.*

In one of the other two focus groups, Louise reflected upon the matter of context and geographical location as follows:

I have traveled quite a lot, both in developed and developing countries. I used single use menstrual materials the most. And now, when I think back, I don't think that it would have been possible to bring my... well sure, I could have brought my menstrual cup and my reusable pads, but it's difficult to wash. I traveled the world for a year, and I seldom had access to a washing machine. Sometimes we found self-service laundromats. But even if I would have access to it [a laundromat] it probably would have felt a little bit like 'well, should I stand here, with my bloody pads, besides others, and wash them', I think it would have felt weird. A menstrual cup is different because you can clean it and such, but you seldom had access to clean water... very rarely actually. So, I would probably have been afraid to get an infection. So, I think that, even today, I probably still would have used single use products, unfortunately.

- *Louise, 32 years old.*

Rather than focusing primarily on the shedding of the uterine lining, radical menstrual embodiment advocates for a consideration of a broader range of experiences that relates to the many phases of the menstrual cycle in complex and multifaceted ways (2020, p.977). Given that the theory is broad and dynamic it can highlight contextual aspects, such as the different norms and expectations that can be found in different places. This makes it possible to acknowledge and explore differences over time in a menstruating person's life, such as travelling or spending time in different places, and how this affects their experiences of menstruating and their choice of menstrual materials. The empirical data above provide us with

narratives on how different menstrual materials are experienced and managed while travelling abroad, going to a festival or being in a military field. Thus, the choice of menstrual material is sensitive to the context. Further, the practice to spend time in different places can also increase the use of disposable products, as both Alice and Louise stated that they found it hard to use reusable options in certain contexts and therefore, periodically, turned to single-use products instead. Altogether, these quotes also authorize an opportunity to nuance the discussion about sustainability and menstrual materials. Both menstrual cups and reusable pads require additional resources (e.g. water) in order to be cleaned and sterilized between the uses, which can be problematized. However, these requirements for water resources have to be compared to the required resources, and effort, to manage the waste produced by disposable single-use options.

Louise quote also weaves in perspectives about norms and stigma, as she describes the thought of washing her reusable pads in a laundromat by saying that it would have felt weird to stand there beside others, with her bloody pads. In other words, this could demonstrate Goffman's process on when a person goes from being normal into being discredited and stigma is created (Klinter, 2021, p.32). One can wonder whether it would be stigmatic in the same way if it was blood stains on another piece of cloth, such as a pillowcase with nosebleed. Since menstruation still partly is considered as polluting in many cultures, and in some societies even dangerous (Douglas (2002 [1966], pp, 150, 218), this might be the case. Lastly, the quote also highlights that in the end, menstruation is an embodied experience (Bobel & Fahs, 2020), as Louise refers to her fear of getting an infection if she were to use reusable menstrual materials abroad where the access wash reusable menstrual materials in clean water was scarce. In other words, her choice of menstrual materials is here perceived to have possible risks for her bodily health.

The past, the present and the future

References to differences among generations and change over time were frequent in the focus groups. One participant talked about how surprised her mother had been when she had told her that she used a menstrual cup, as her mother did not think that they still existed. Another participant shared a story about when she told her old teacher that she used reusable pads. The teacher thought that the textile pads corresponded to the ones that she herself had used when she was younger, whereas the participant said, 'but they are completely different now, they

have changed'. This view can be expanded with the following quote from 38-year-old Elsa, as she reflects upon menstruation and waste.

I think that it has... that it has changed. When I started to menstruate, it was my last thought, that 'will this generate waste?'. And I think that for me it also became clear once I got my first child and saw every single diaper that was thrown away, and it got to me like 'yeah, right, I also throw away a kind of diaper, and have done so since I was 10 years and first got my period'. What I mean is that it is the same kind of material, so it became more obvious. And now I think that is nice that I don't contribute [with waste] in the same way anymore, since I mostly use a menstrual cup.

In a later discussion about the future, Elsa continued:

I think that reusable menstrual materials will dominate if not take over completely [in the future]. I sometimes think about how it was in the 1950's when it became popular with canned food, and the housewives also were encouraged to set the table with a paper cloth and single use products 'and then after the dinner it is just to wrap it up and throw it away – super handy!'. And now we think like 'WHAT, how on earth were they thinking?'. I think that it will come to such a thing, exactly this 'How were we thinking, when we threw so much away?'. At the same time as it might be some kind of utopia that it will come to this.

These narratives can however be contrasted with the following reflection.

I think that the old classics 'pads and tampons', that people think that they are more hygienic because they are *not* reusable. One throws them away and uses a *new* one. These newer options with menstrual cups and textile are still a little bit more for people that are *interested* and want something different from the usual.

- Margita, 35 years old.

What is noteworthy here is how the different statements witness how the attitudes and menstrual materials has changed over time, which answers to the radical menstrual embodiment's exhortation to consider the entire life span of a menstruating person (Bobel & Fahs, 2020, p.977). Not only does the empirical data touch upon the norms and notions of menstruation, but more generally about bodies, waste, and sustainability. However, due to

limitations such changes cannot be explored in detail here. Yet, what is significant is that there seems to be a rather fundamental shift underway, and that new questions regarding responsibility seems to affect the way menstruation and menstrual materials is perceived and experienced. Hence, a parallel to ‘The study of Sweden’ can be drawn, whose most recent results reflect this, as it shows how the notion of sustainability, the sense of environmental awareness and responsibility towards the next generation are increasing in value among Swedish citizens (Sverigestudien, 2020). Still, as the last statement suggests, the use of reusable options might only apply to a delimited ‘interested’ group of menstruators.

Calls for change: Getting to the root with responsibility

While the previous section suggests that some things already have changed if we look at the time perspective, the participants in all three focus groups agreed that additional changes are needed. So, if something has to change, who is responsible? Recurring references were made to the school as an institution as the participants reflected back on their inadequate sex education. One participant stressed that ‘[i]t was more focus on sexual transmitted diseases than there were on anything else. And there is a lot of weight in what you learn in school.’ Similar to this point of view that addresses a structural responsibility rather than an individual one, Ari argued that we first of all have a global responsibility to talk about menstruation.

[...] This is seldom discussed in open forums. It’s discussed in different ‘menstruation forums’ or separatist women-groups, but very rarely in public. [...] I think that it’s hard to introduce a sustainable thinking if we do not discuss menstruation first. Because we need be honest and clear about the fact that it isn’t an exception, half of the world’s population are menstruating sometime in their lives. And yet it is treated like a niched special issue, that one does not need to show that much consideration. [...] I personally have a responsibility for the waste I produce, and there I have to look at myself and my own body. What works and how can I minimize waste in my life, on all fronts. But if I for example must use disposable products due to hygiene or medical reasons, it doesn’t mean that I am an inferior person. It simply means that my body works that way.

- Ari, 27 years old.

This is what Hanna said in the same focus group.

Something needs to happen from above. The menstrual materials that are on the market, that is easily accessible and maybe even free, will be used. It's a heavy question to place on individuals. If there are plastic straws in restaurants then we will use them, if there are plastic bags in [name of grocery store] we will use them. [...] If states globally are dealing with the question, it will be possible for things to happen, but then it must be available to us. - *Hanna, 31 years old.*

In another focus group, 38-year-old Elsa acknowledged yet problematized the individual responsibility.

Of course there is responsibility, but it bothers me to say that everyone that menstruates has a responsibility for their waste and how they handle it. At the same time as this is the case. But we kind of don't have a choice. We are menstruating and we need to manage it somehow. And I don't think that the way forward is shaming people, we already experience that on all possible fronts. It is rather about opening up for the many different aspects of menstruation there is.

Following this, Malin reflected upon the bigger picture and whether Sweden has a bigger responsibility than other countries.

All countries should take their responsibility, but at the same time Sweden could be... well there are a lot of countries looking at Sweden, for a lot of reasons. One example is for our laws around parental leave [...] Which is why I think that Sweden can use that and take a bigger responsibility for waste [...] But it wouldn't be enough if Sweden were in the top if other countries wouldn't help as well. - *Malin, 26 years old.*

Comparing these narratives, we see a wide span connecting responsibility all the way from individuals, to schools, to companies and lastly to states. The first two examples suggest that we should talk about and engage with menstruation and menstrual materials more. This can be seen through a parallel to Corvellec's scatolic approach and call for a logic of association and the stress that humans should be more engaged in their waste (2019, p.219). As the participants behind these quotes suggest, everyone - people, states and actors in society, should be more engaged with menstruation and menstrual materials. Thus, there might be a potential to

combine these two goals by increasing the engagement with waste and menstruation jointly. This would further situate an example of how two movements can be more successful by linking arms with each other, as stressed in the model for radical menstrual embodiment (Bobel & Fahs, 2020, p.976). Hanna's statement about access and human behaviors explicitly questions the individual responsibility, which relates to Isenhour's criticism against the tendency to place responsibility for the environment squarely on the shoulders of individuals rather than on states and politicians (2010, p.456). This, as Hannah concludes, means that if things are available to us, we will use them. Following this argument, states have a responsibility to provide more sustainable options.

Elsa's expression 'we kind of don't have a choice' in the third quote relates to Reno's argument that excrement, unlike garbage, is not optional - it is rejected because it must be (Reno, 2014, p.6f). According to Elsa, it is the same with menstrual blood. Further, not having a choice also connects to the matter of responsibility (Corvellec, 2019, pp.217ff, 230). If you don't have a choice to do otherwise, is it then your responsibility? By referring back to Droz and her emphasis on individual responsibility (2020), menstruation seems like an appropriate phenomenon to consider a person's position and investigate whether someone has an opportunity to take reparative and adaptive actions, or, if this is prevented by a vulnerable position (ibid., p.111). Going forward, this also inserts the matter of privilege, which as previously mentioned can be identified by using radical menstrual embodiment and its central intersectional perspective (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). However, in order to really get to the root of responsibility for menstrual waste, the research needs to be continued.

8. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this study was to provide a contribution to the growing research field on menstruation by investigating experiences and perceptions of different menstrual materials among Swedish menstruators and their attitudes to responsibility for menstrual waste. In order to answer this purpose, a combination of scholarship on critical menstruation studies and discard studies were used. The chosen theoretical perspectives on radical menstrual embodiment and waste demonstrate some overall similarities. To begin with, they both draw upon bodily occurrences. Secondly, both perspectives emphasize a focus on life. Whereas radical menstrual embodiment describes menstruation as a vital sign, waste is argued to illustrate signs of life.

Menstrual materials can, both literally and metaphorically, be considered a bloody waste. The results show that disposable menstrual products, on account of their bloody characteristics, are considered to be waste of a particularly filthy and shameful kind. It is not just waste, it is bloody waste. Nor should it be seen or heard. Secondly, repeatedly spending money on menstrual materials throughout life has proven to be experienced as one, could say, 'bloody' waste of money for some. Similarly, it could furthermore be viewed as a bloody waste in an environmental perspective as additional waste is added to the waste mountains. But what are the alternatives? As the results demonstrated, menstruation is not optional. Still, the participants exhibited a high level of awareness as well as creative strategies to engage with their menstrual waste. The efforts went from borrowing each other's menstrual cups within a group of friends, to sew own reusable pads, to find new ways to clean the menstrual cup when being on a festival or in the military field, into buying sustainability-labeled pads. Nevertheless, this creativity and engagement has boundaries. In the end, the personal wellbeing was the primary priority in the choice of menstrual products. Hence, the fear of getting an infection, the lack of access to adequate resources and the avoidance of pain and discomfort, consequently implied that disposable options - in some cases rather reluctantly- were used instead of reusable ones. This tendency was particularly manifest in occasions that included a location or context beyond the ordinary.

To conclude, the results of this study reveal that the choice of menstrual materials among Swedish menstruators is a complex and multifaceted question. It includes a variety of matters such as body, health, access, fear, knowledge, and affordability. It is also proved to be sensitive

to norms, stigma, privilege, and context - issues that were identified and explored through the lens of radical menstrual embodiment and its features of an intersectional perspective. Thus, the usage of a certain menstrual material cannot be isolated from other experiences, and accordingly, the freedom of choice for an individual is somewhat reduced. Further on, the participants emphasized the need for societal change and suggested a variety of stakeholders that, according to them, have a responsibility to reduce menstrual waste. While the results of this study show that there is a great deal of environmental awareness behind the choice of menstrual material, an important conclusion to draw is that the usage of disposable products cannot be equated with not taking responsibility and not caring about the environment and sustainability issues. The complexity does in other words also apply to the questions about waste and responsibility. Henceforth, the results confirm the importance to go beyond a narrow focus on women when discussing menstrual matters and instead consider the lived experiences of all menstruators, since our experiences are rooted in our individual bodies and health as a starting point. All menstruators are different: some bleed much, some bleed less, some bleed backwards and some bleed forwards et cetera. Nevertheless, the results also indicate that there are experiences that seem to be common to menstruators, such as issues of surrounding practical challenges, the cost of menstruating and stigmatizing societal norms.

Lastly, there are some perspectives and ideas that were discussed in the focus groups that due to space limitations could not be presented in this thesis. These discussions related to changes of the body and the menstrual flow after giving birth, experiences from seeking menstrual-related healthcare at the hospital, corporate and media responsibility and the more profound role of the school as an institution. These are all interesting topics that constitute important pillars in the overall experience of menstruation. In addition, this study also generated more data on each of the central themes, something that shows that there are significant opportunities for future research to dive deeper into each of these different aspects. By using the qualitative findings in this study as a foundation, further studies can include a larger sample population and investigate additional actors and parameters. This can for instance be realized by adopting a mixed methods research tradition where more quantitative elements, such as questionnaires, are implemented - which will generate more generalizable results. Another suggestion for further research is to, with the same approach, implement a discourse analysis and investigate how media portrays these issues. This, since this too can reveal how individuals, and consequently, how the society understands and reflects upon it.

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10. Appendix

10.1 Contact letter¹⁴

You who use pads, tampons, or other menstrual materials!

I am currently writing my bachelor thesis about menstrual materials in relation to waste and responsibility in Sweden, - do you want to participate in a conversation and share your thoughts on the topic?

Interviews will mainly be held in focus groups, but individual interviews might also be relevant, so feel free to reach out even if you don't want to participate in a group interview. However, focus groups are usually very fun and interesting, and therefore might be fun to try out. The interviews will be held online through "Zoom" and the sessions will be recorded. All participants will be anonymized, and all recordings will of course be deleted after finished thesis.

In order to increase the quality of the study, it's valuable to feature a variation of participants in terms of for example age, menstrual materials and place of residence – so please fill me in on these details when contacting me so that I can take it into consideration. You don't have to identify as a woman - what's relevant for the study is that you menstruate. The thesis will be written in English. It's a bonus if you have experience of travelling and/or living in another country than Sweden for quite some time, as parallels to other contexts can occur. But this is not a demand. Time scope: 1-2 hours, including a break. I will start with my interviews already next week (week 14), so please reach out asap if you are interested to discuss these matters. Specific time and date will be determined as soon as possible. You can contact me here on fb or via my e-mail *****@hotmail.com.

PS. Just to clarify, users of all different types of menstrual materials are of interest! Maybe you are using one kind of menstrual material but are curious about another alternative. Regardless, you are welcome to join! Feel free to spread the word, it's most appreciated!

All the best!

¹⁴ The contact letter was distributed in both Swedish and English.

List of forums in which the contact letter was distributed

[FITTLIFE - Underliv & hälsa | Facebook](#) (A forum where women and other with vaginas discuss vaginal health).

[Fluff DIY! \[Sweden\] | Facebook](#) (A group for those who sew or are interested in sewing their own cloth pads and diapers et cetera).

[Hållbarhetsgäris och -icke-binäris | Facebook](#) (A group for women and non-binaries to discuss sustainability and how to live more environmentally friendly).

[Mensaktivism \[Menstrual activism\] | Facebook](#) (A group for everyone who is passionate about increasing the understanding about menstrual-related injustices).

[MENSEN: forum för menstruation \(@mensen.se\) Instagram](#) (A forum for menstruation).

Apart from these forums, I also shared the contact letter in my own digital channels.

Thanks to everyone who helped me spread the word about the study!

10.2 Interview guide [translated from Swedish] ¹⁵

Introduction:

- Hello and welcome! Information about the agenda.
- Clarification about consent to record the sessions, *recording begins*
- Information about the routines for anonymization and removal of files.
- As a participant one is free to answer as much or as little as one wish. Participants have the right to discontinue if desired, without explaining why. However, as the format is digital, I would like you to say ‘Goodbye’ if you choose to withdraw from the study, so I know that it isn’t due to technical issues.
- Discussions are great - but try to not interrupt each other (this is off course more challenging due to the digital format).
- There is no ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ answers and it is of the utmost importance to show respect towards other participants.
- Clarification about consent to be quoted.
- Opportunity to raise additional questions to me.

¹⁵ Smaller deviations in terms of question order and follow up questions occurred between the different focus groups.

Themes:

1. Background

- Short presentation round. Name, gender, pronoun, age, where one lives.
- General information about the study and the field of menstruation research, plus the chosen connection to waste and responsibility.

2. Menstrual materials

- Your menstrual material-journey: What menstrual material have you used, what do you currently use, and why?
 - What are the pros and cons with the different alternatives?
- How do you find the information on different menstrual materials in Sweden?
 - Where do you find most information?
- What would you say are is most popular menstrual material in Sweden?
- What would you say are is most modern menstrual material in Sweden?

3. Waste

- What are your thoughts around the relation between menstruation and waste? Is it something that you have thought about? (If so: Please share. If not: what are your spontaneous thoughts?).
 - Should menstrual products and materials be seen as an own category of waste, thus as 'menstrual waste'? What are the pros and cons?
- How do you handle your menstrual materials at home VS 'away'?
(It could be a travel within Sweden or abroad)
 - Does the choice of menstrual material differ, or does it stay the same?
- What are your opinions in the debate to subsidize or offer free menstrual materials?
 - What effect can this have on the waste issue?

4. Responsibility

- What's your thought on menstrual waste and responsibility, does that exist? For whom?
- Does Sweden have a bigger responsibility than other countries to deal with the waste issue?
- What do you think about the future? Which menstrual products will dominate in Sweden?

5. Other

- Additions or questions from the group.
- Thoughts and opinions about the session.

6. Closure

- Thank everyone for their participation and repeat relevant information.