



Preliminary Analysis: Sustainable Period Product Use in the Caribbean

**A report by the Caribbean Coalition for Maternal and
Reproductive Health and Sustainabelle TT**

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Caribbean Coalition for Maternal and Reproductive Health



The Caribbean Coalition for Maternal and Reproductive Health (CCMRH), founded by Aliya Allen-Valley and Khalida Saalim (est. 2020), is a regional network of individuals and organizations from across the Caribbean region that conducts research and creates safe spaces to for individuals to share experiences and information related to maternal and reproductive health.



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Caribbean Coalition for Maternal and Reproductive Health
Community Group

Sustainabelle TT



Founded by Chantal Laing, Sustainabelle TT is an organization, based in Trinidad and Tobago which works to guide, educate, and motivate menstruators to adopt sustainable menstrual hygiene practices. Sustainabelle TT is a member of CCMRH.



@sustainabelle_tt

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sustainable and organic period products hold many benefits for the health of menstruators as well as for the health of the environment. The use of these products is of key importance, especially in the Caribbean region, which is being greatly affected by waste management challenges and their environmental consequences.

In early 2023, the Caribbean Coalition for Maternal and Reproductive Health (CCMRH) and Sustainabelle TT conducted a preliminary analysis of sustainable and organic period product use in the Caribbean. We received 100 individual survey responses and conducted 12 interviews with individuals from across the region pertaining to their use of and access to sustainable and organic products.

The following report summarizes the findings from this preliminary analysis and demonstrates that while many menstruators may have an interest in using these products, the "learning curve" associated with their use, as well as pricing and availability are major barriers. For these reasons, we know that more work is needed to increase the use of these products throughout the region. The following report shares more insight into our findings and key takeaways.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable period products are products which reduce waste and limit harm to the environment. These products may include reusable products such as menstrual cups, menstrual discs, period underwear, and cloth pads/liners. There are also some disposable period products that are classified as sustainable period products, including disposable pads and tampons that are made out of 100% organic unbleached cotton, and consequently decompose in a shorter period of time than traditional period products.

Sustainable period products hold a host of benefits for personal health and hygiene. Many traditional sanitary napkins/pads contain dioxin, a byproduct of chlorine bleaching to whiten the product, a known carcinogen and endocrine disruptor which causes adverse reproductive health effects, including reduced fertility. Tampons are associated with a higher risk of toxic shock syndrome (TSS) than menstrual cups, and whilst tampons may contain substances that can harm the vaginal flora, menstrual cups are designed using medical-grade silicone that is safer for vaginal health.

In addition to their benefits for personal health, we also know that sustainable and organic period products have many environmental benefits, which is also important for the Caribbean region [1]. Disposable period pads and tampons can contain up to 90% plastic [2]. According to the World Bank, over 320,000 tons of plastic waste remains uncollected annually in the region, which has been linked to coral reef degradation [3]. Sustainable period products are therefore beneficial due to their ability to reduce waste, as menstrual cups used for just one year had less than 1.5% of the environmental impact of disposable products and only 10% of the cost [4].

This report summarizes findings from a preliminary analysis of survey responses and interviews pertaining to self-reported rates of sustainable period product use and barriers and incentives to use among Caribbean menstruators. We hope that these findings may serve as a catalyst for the increased accessibility to sustainable and organic products, as well as for future research and partnership in this space.

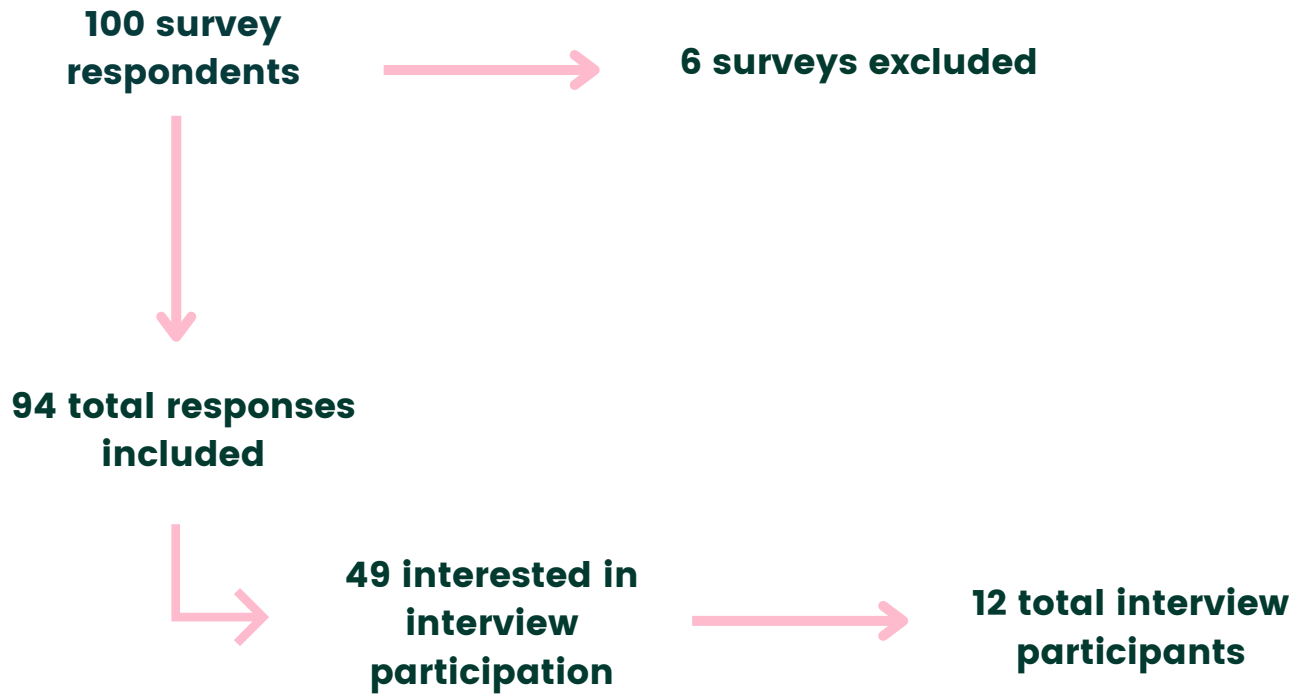
METHODS

A mixed-methods approach comprised of a survey component as well as in-depth, semi-structured interviews (IDIs) was utilized for this study. Specifically, the study team elected to use a survey approach to ensure further reach and participation from individuals across the region, while in-depth interviews conducted one-on-one were employed to supplement survey data. These methods were used as opposed to other qualitative approaches such as focus groups, to ensure that participants were able to feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and perspectives, while simultaneously allowing the study team to gain more detailed qualitative data pertaining to perspectives around sustainable products in the region. These methods were utilized consecutively, such that all survey responses were received prior to the start of interviews. This process is outlined in further detail below.

Survey Approach

Surveys were collected from participants across the Caribbean region and were open for a period of one month (February 13th - March 13th, 2023). In total, we received 100 completed surveys. Of these completed surveys, 6 were excluded. Exclusion criteria included i) individuals who indicated that they had not used or purchased period products in the past year and ii) individuals who did not live in the Caribbean. 94 surveys were then included for analysis, and data were analyzed using Google Sheets. Surveys also asked participants if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview to gain more insight into their perspectives and experiences with sustainable period products. In total, 49 participants expressed interest in participating in a follow-up interview.

METHODS CONT.



Interview Approach

Interviews were conducted between March 28th and April 13th, 2023. To identify participants, survey data was filtered by participants who indicated an interest in participating in surveys (N=49). The team then sorted these participants by country and randomly selected participants for outreach, keeping in mind both country representation and representation of individuals that both did and did not use sustainable products. In total, the study team conducted 12 interviews with participants from 10 different Caribbean countries. Of the 12 interviews conducted, 6 participants indicated that they did not use sustainable products, and 6 participants did use sustainable products. A table highlighting interview participants by country and sustainable product use is available below.

METHODS CONT.

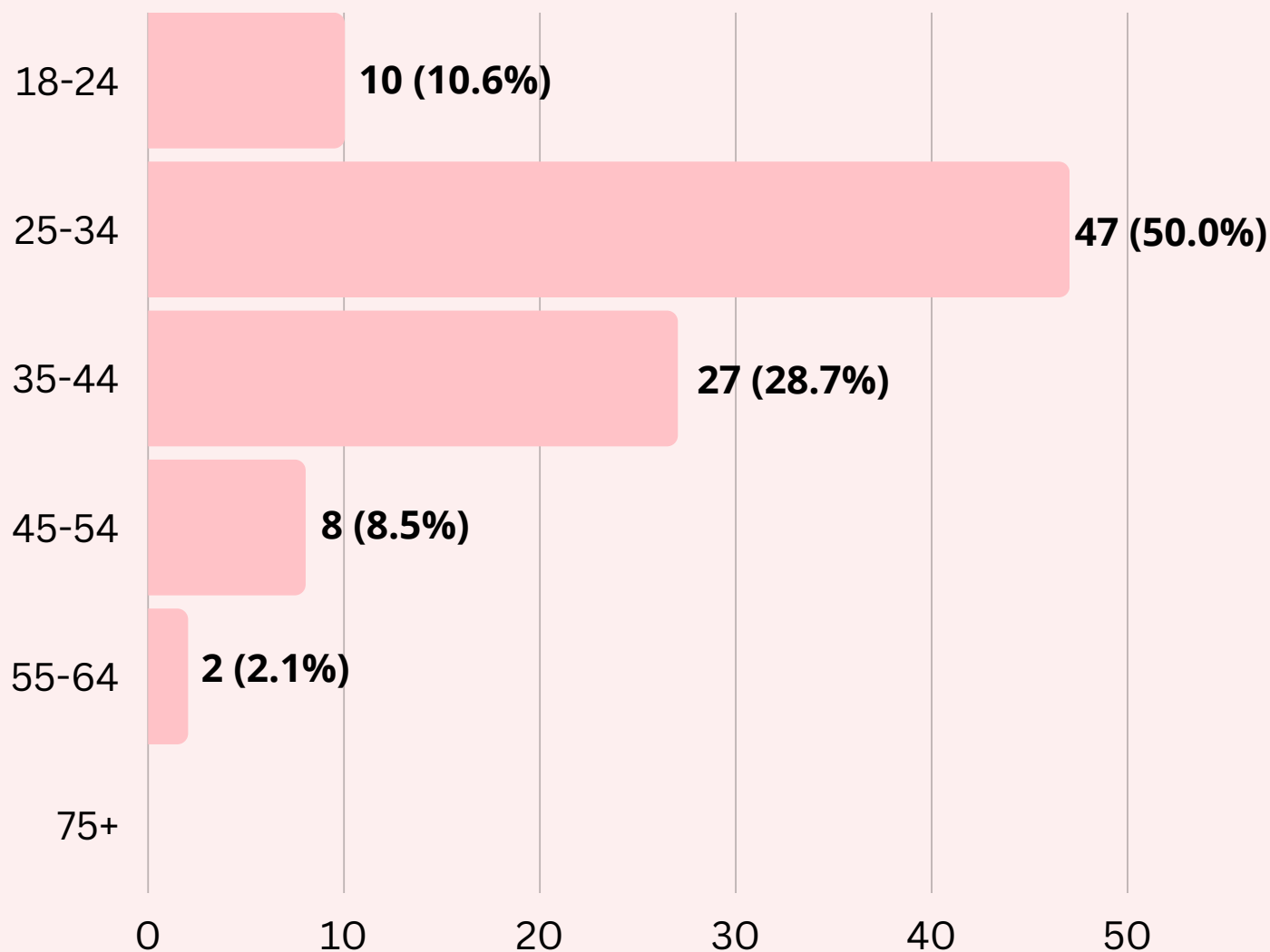
Description of interview participants by country and sustainable product use

Country	# of participants that used sustainable products	# of participants that did not use sustainable products	Total
Antigua and Barbuda	1	0	1
Aruba	1	0	1
The Bahamas	0	1	1
Dominica	0	1	1
Grenada	1	0	1
Haiti	1	0	1
Jamaica	0	1	1
St. Lucia	0	1	1
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	0	1	1
Trinidad and Tobago	2	1	3
Grand Total			12

DEMOGRAPHICS

Participant Age and Gender

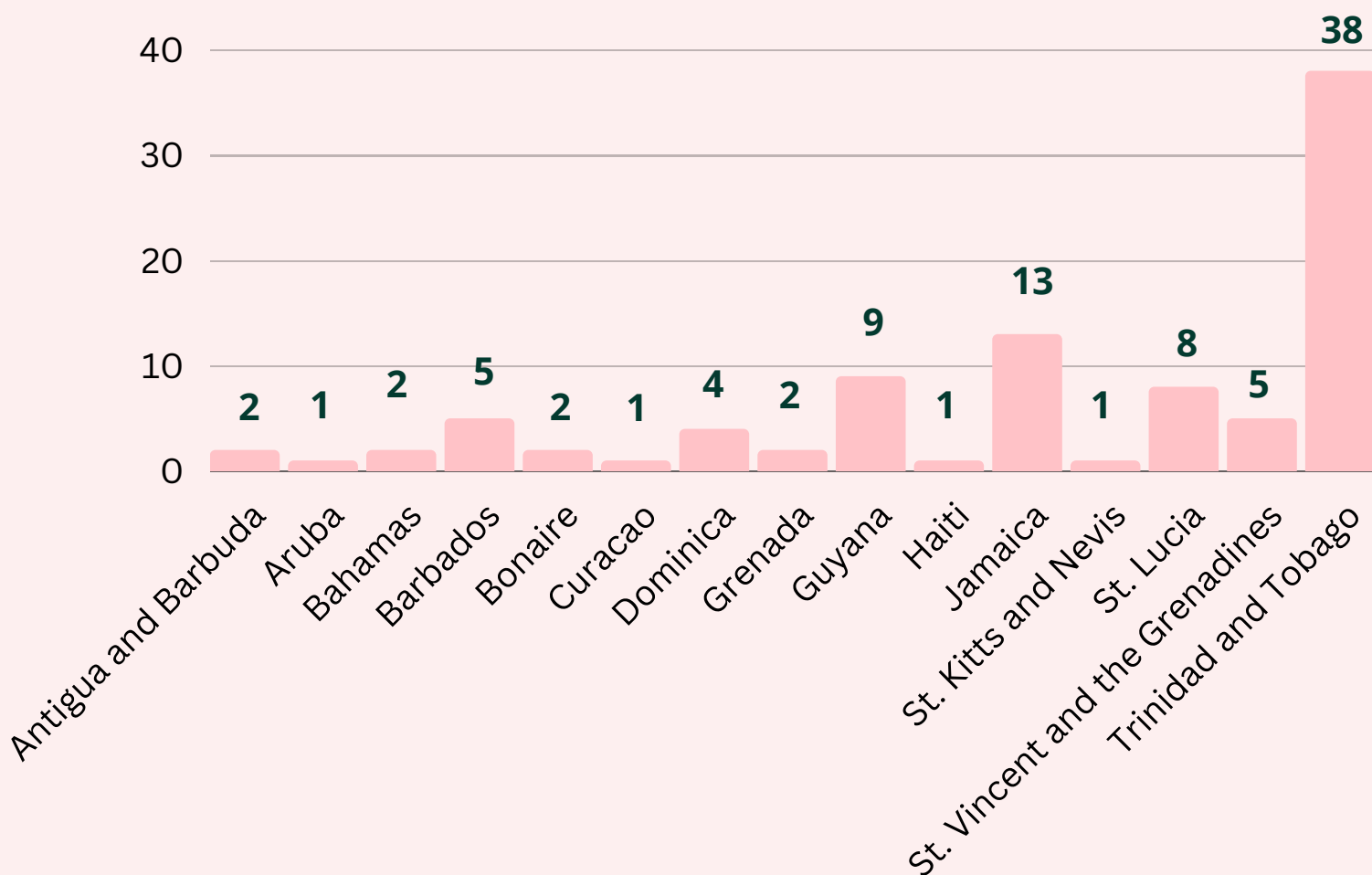
96.8% of participants identified as women and 2.1% of participants identified as non-binary. Half of all participants fell between the ages of 25 and 34.



DEMOGRAPHICS

Country

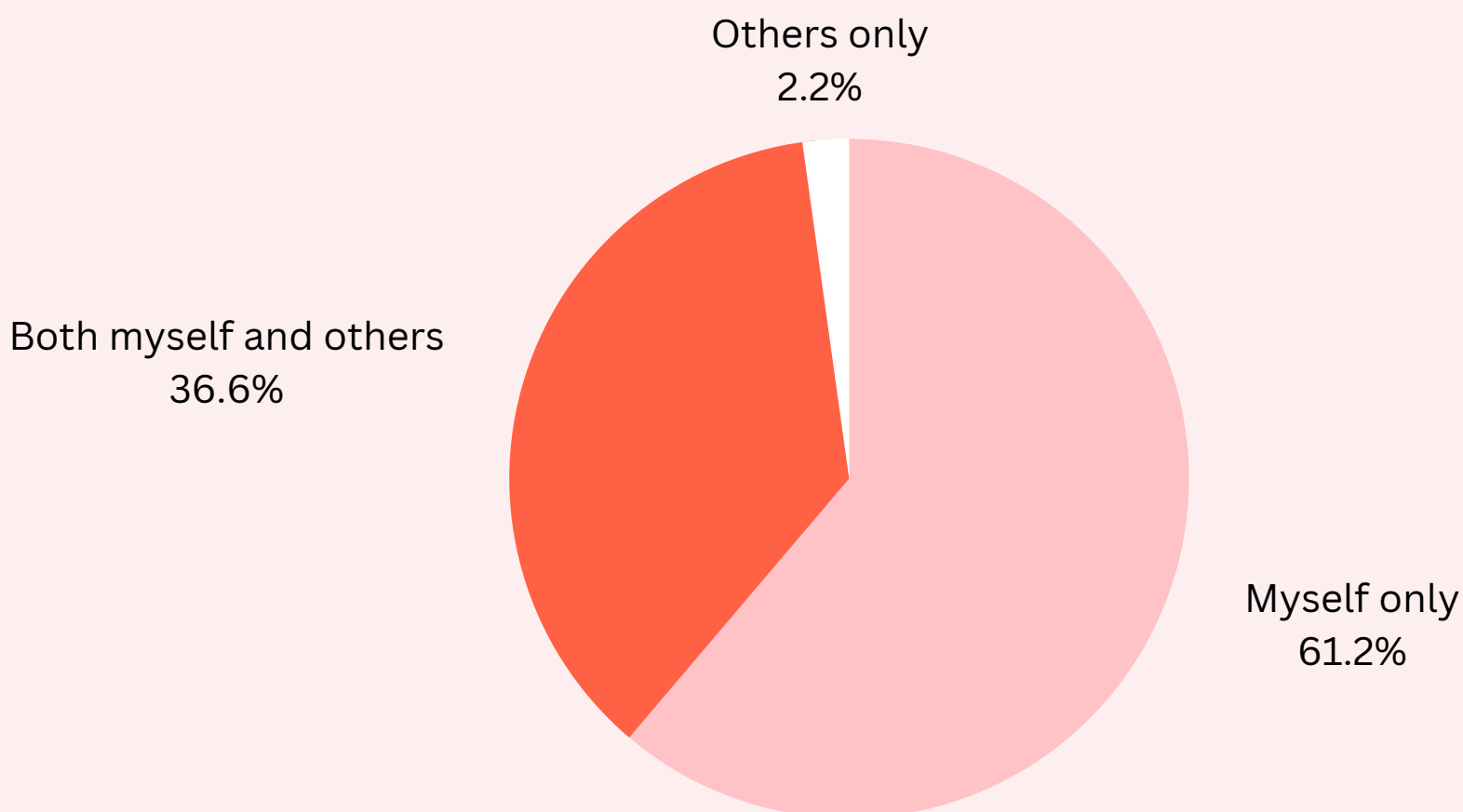
Participants were from a range of 15 countries in the Caribbean, with the highest number of participants from Trinidad and Tobago (n = 38).



DEMOGRAPHICS

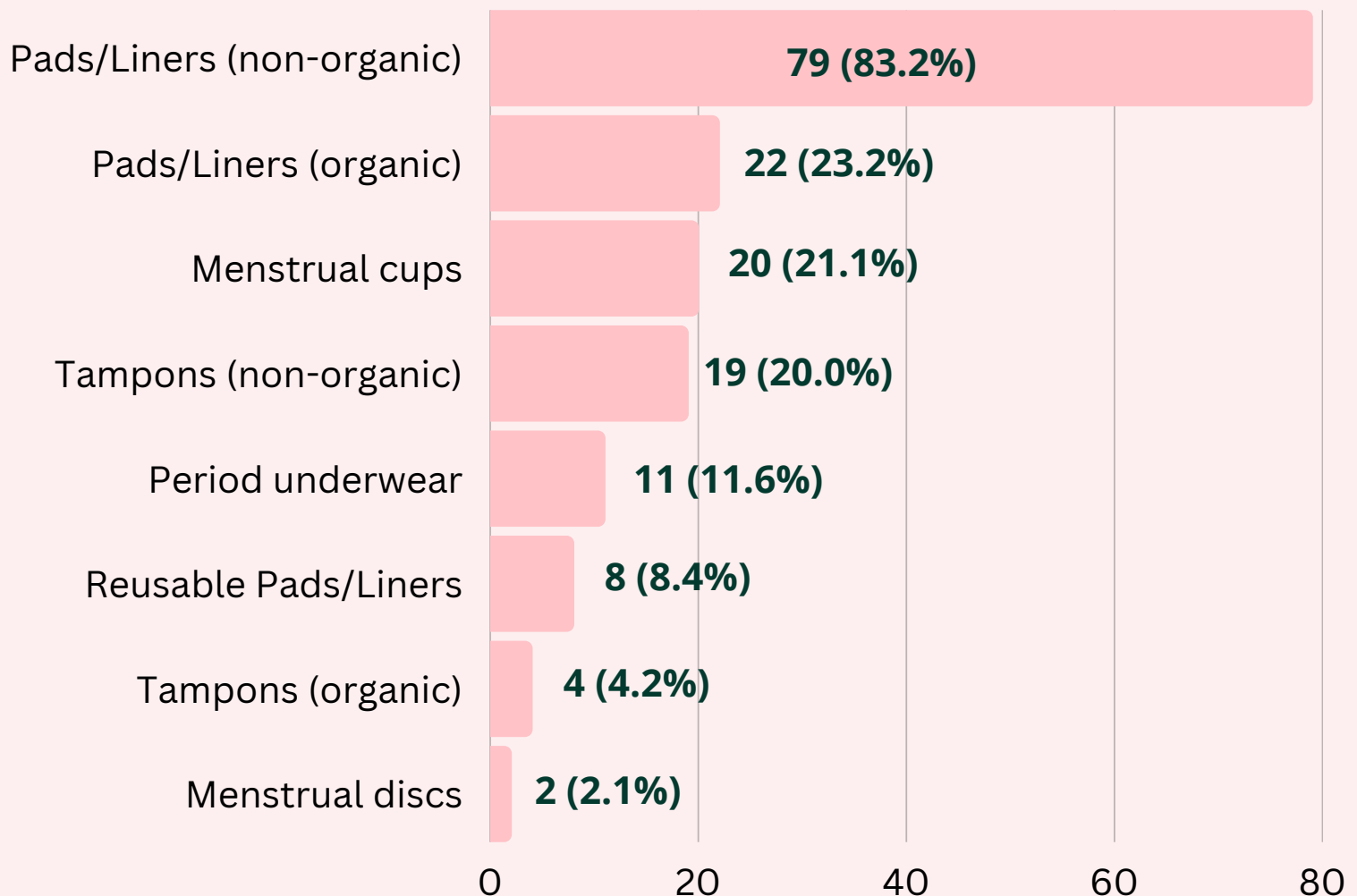
Participant Sustainable Period Product Use

Most participants (61.2%) purchased products for themselves only, while 36.6% purchased products for themselves and others.



PRODUCT USE ACROSS THE REGION

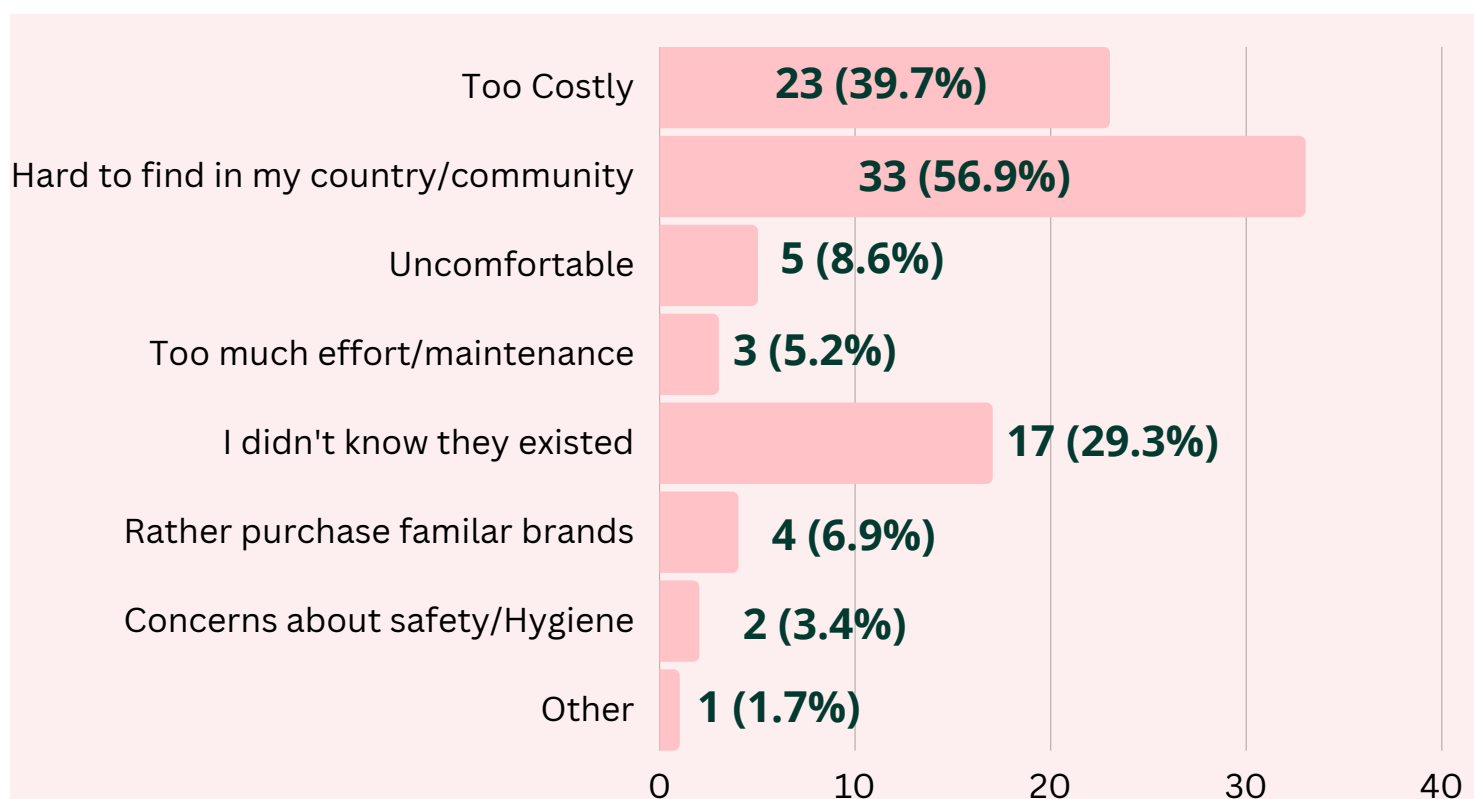
Non-organic pads/liners were the most commonly used, with 83% of participants using these products. Organic pads/liners were the most common sustainable/organic product used (23% of participants).



NON-USE OF SUSTAINABLE AND ORGANIC PERIOD PRODUCTS

61.7% (n=58) of our participants did not use sustainable or organic period products.

Of these participants:



56.9%

found sustainable and organic period products to be too hard to find in their country or community

39.7%

found sustainable and organic period products to be too costly

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

REASONS BEHIND NON-USE

During our interviews, participants that indicated that they did not use sustainable or organic products shared some reasons for their non-use. The most common themes identified in our interviews are outlined below.

— Accessibility

Many participants mentioned that sustainable and organic products were not widely available in their country of residence, making it difficult to use them. Those that did use them often found and purchased these products abroad.

"We don't have those here. If you have them, we have to ship them."

- Participant, St. Vincent and the Grenadines

"Non-sustainable products are available everywhere... however, sustainable products, whether disposable or non-disposable, aren't so available. You have to dig for them."

- Participant, Jamaica

— Discomfort in use

Some participants mentioned feeling uncomfortable using and cleaning the reusable products.

"I think it seems weird to me and then to clean it I have to pour my blood."

-Participant, St. Vincent.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

REASONS BEHIND NON-USE

— Lack of Knowledge Regarding Product Use

Some participants cited a lack of knowledge about sustainable and organic products and how to use them as barriers. Education was cited as a key next step to inform individuals about how to use these products.

"For a long time, I didn't know about them [sustainable and organic period products]. I only know them recently"

-Participant, Trinidad and Tobago

— Financial Cost

While some interviewees indicated an interest in switching to sustainable and organic products, the initial financial cost was often cited as a barrier to using these products.

"I have thought about it [using a menstrual cup] but it seems to be expensive."

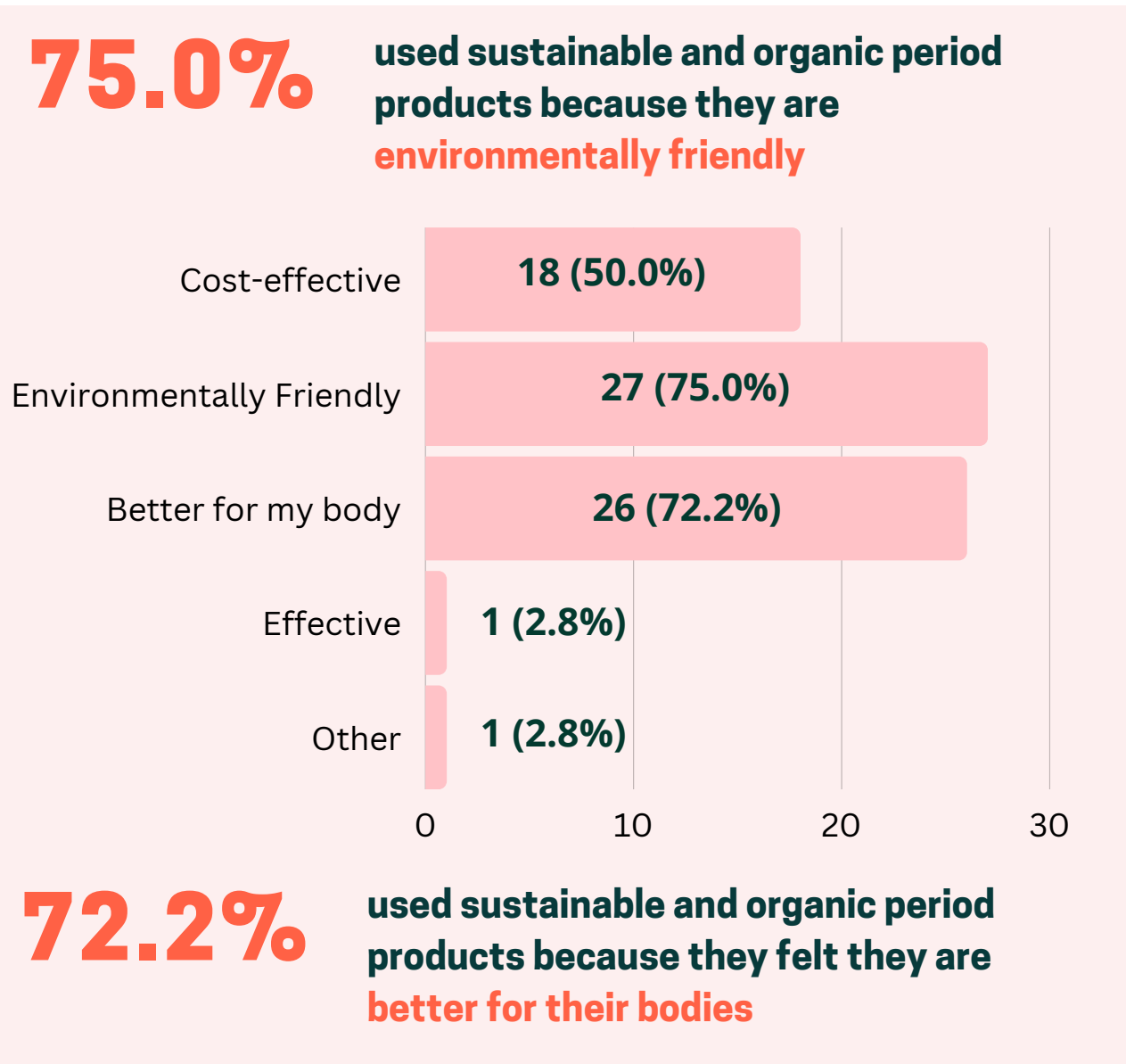
- Participant, St. Vincent and the Grenadines

"The cost of disposable, non-sustainable products I currently use [...] every month that I go to the supermarket to buy them, I just say 'oh it's cheaper, let me buy one more.'"

- Participant, Jamaica

USE OF SUSTAINABLE AND ORGANIC PERIOD PRODUCTS

38.3% (n=36) of our participants used sustainable and organic period products. Of these participants:



QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

REASONS BEHIND USE

— Environmental Reasons

Many interviewees had an environmental reason to begin using sustainable and organic products.

"I go to the supermarket and I see all the brands and [...] they smell nice [...] and then I started thinking [...] It's all going to go to the landfill."

- Participant, Grenada

"I watched somebody throw a bunch of diapers into the ocean...and I started to wonder more what are people doing with their sanitary care."

- Participant, Haiti

— Impact on the body

Individuals also mentioned using sustainable and organic products because they felt they were better for their bodies.

"I used to be irritated a lot with the other [non-organic disposable] pads. I never realized that it was an allergic reaction. When I started using the cloth pads [...] that irritation [...] gradually decreased."

- Participant, Antigua and Barbuda

— Financial Cost

Although the upfront costs of sustainable and organic products can be more expensive, many participants cited the long-term financial benefits.

"It is expensive depending on the type of cloth pad that you buy, but it is an investment."

- Participant, Trinidad and Tobago

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

CHALLENGES IN USE

— Learning Curve

While participants liked using sustainable products, some mentioned that it could be hard to learn how to use some sustainable products (i.e., menstrual discs, menstrual cups).

"With a cup, it does take a little bit more practice and it takes a little bit more time to get it right than if you were just wearing a pad or if you were just putting in a tampon."

"After a few tries or after a month of practice, you finally just get around to it, and it becomes the norm. So that's why I stick with it."

- Participant, Grenada

— Accessibility

Although participants switched to sustainable period products, there was a lack of access to these products in their respective countries.

"Sometimes it's really hard to find products. And then the range of products can be diminished in certain stores which makes it even harder."

- Participant, Trinidad and Tobago

ACCESSIBILITY

WHERE DO YOU FIND SUSTAINABLE AND ORGANIC PERIOD PRODUCTS IN YOUR COUNTRY?

No idea

Do not find locally

Pennywise

Supermarkets

Diva Cup

Woman's
Touch

Lily Pads

Outside of my country

Online

Jars Zero Waste

Feminine Haven

Instagram

Honey Pot

Natural Health Stores

Private pharmacies

Had to order from the U.S.

Starlite pharmacy

Most participants who used them had challenges finding sustainable and organic period products locally and instead ordered online (generally from the U.S.) or purchased them when they traveled to the U.S.

Participants listed the brands they used: **Woman's Touch, Honey Pot, Lily Pads, Jars Zero Waste, Diva Cup.**

Some participants provided a list of supermarkets and private pharmacies where they found them locally, including **Pennywise, Starlite Pharmacy, Natural Health Stores.**

NEXT STEPS

Where do we go from here? Increasing sustainable and organic period product use in the Caribbean is a continuous work in progress. We've outlined a few next steps based on our research findings.



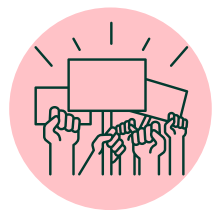
01 — Scale up the research

Partner with universities to scale up this research to have more robust quantitative and qualitative data.



02 — Map vendor locations

Map out the various locations where sustainable period products can be purchased within the Caribbean and identify areas where there are availability gaps.



03 — Continue the fight against period stigma

Continue normalizing conversations on periods and period products through events and communications.



04 — Educate on sustainable period products

Educate menstruators on the use and maintenance of sustainable and organic period products.



05 — Engage local period product companies

Engage companies based in the Caribbean to continue or begin to design and supply sustainable and organic period products.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the use of sustainable and organic period products in the Caribbean. It is important to note that while we did, to the best of our ability, use strategic methods to limit the amount of bias in our study, we faced challenges in reducing bias in both survey and interview participation. Our survey was promoted across our social media pages as a survey assessing sustainable and organic period product use in the Caribbean, which may have resulted in volunteer bias and in attracting a higher number of participants who use these products.

While 12 participants shared their thoughts through in-depth interviews, it is important to note the limited representation across countries, and that our survey, as well as our interviews, were solely conducted in English. While we received great feedback from participants pertaining to the barriers and facilitators to their use of sustainable period products, we know that there is certainly more work to be done to ensure further representation across countries in this data, including gaining insights from individuals in languages other than English. A key component of the future work that we aim to complete following this preliminary analysis will involve broadening country and linguistic representation to ensure more widespread participation.

Nonetheless, we believe our findings provide useful, preliminary insights into trends in sustainable period product use across the region. Future work should aim to reduce barriers to use and to ensure that sustainable period products are more readily available and accessible within Caribbean countries. CCMRH and Sustainabelle remain committed to work in this area, and to partnership with other organizations that are also interested in advancing this very important work as we strive towards our outlined next steps.

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