



Sheosk

A Study on the Importance of
Choice in Menstrual Health Products

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About The Case for Her

The Case for Her is a funding collaborative that invests in for-profit social enterprises and nonprofit initiatives working in female menstrual health and sexual pleasure. We believe in an equal world where women and girls can thrive, and our dynamic portfolio of partners across the globe—from product companies to tech innovators to research and education initiatives to grassroots organizations—are all working towards this vision. Learn more at thecaseforher.com.

Special Thanks

This study would not have been possible without the generous partnership of [Femme International](#), a leader in women's menstrual health education who facilitated the trainings and improved the outcomes of the study through their strong community relationships. [Echo Mobile](#), a mobile survey deployment platform, was also essential to the project in developing innovative ways to consistently reach adolescent participants.

We would also like to thank our three partners who supplied the products and gave valuable inputs to this project: [Ruby Cup](#) (menstrual cups), [AFRIPads](#) (So Sure reusable pads), and [ZanaAfrica](#) (Nia disposable pads).

Finally, thank you to Sarah Anwar, who contributed her time to coordinate this project.



The Sheosk study team in Nairobi.

Executive Summary

Until recently, the leading solution to the problems of the menstrual health sector has been to provide women and girls with menstrual hygiene products. While these products are not a silver bullet solution, they are a much-needed intervention. However, too often, the decision-making around which products are available to consumers lies with the producers and distributors rather than the women themselves.

There is an urgent need in the menstrual health sector for research to understand which products women want from providers. In 2018, The Case for Her undertook a small-scale pilot study with 443 young female students in the Mathare area of Nairobi to understand their menstrual product preferences—and how choice could play a larger role in product-based menstrual health interventions. We partnered with Femme International, a local menstrual health educator, Echo Mobile, a survey deployment company, and three menstrual product companies to offer the girls a choice between a free reusable pad, disposable pad, or menstrual cup.

While the Sheosk study was small, the results were clear: girls' preferences vary and they want to choose among multiple menstrual health products—or even to combine multiple products. These choices are influenced by a variety of factors including age, familiarity and habit, peers and, most importantly, cost.

We also found that, unlike in some other cases of consumer self-reporting, the girls buy what they say they will buy. This further validates the importance of such studies, demonstrating that girls' preferences are reliable predictors of their actual choices and purchasing decisions.

With these and the Sheosk project's other key findings, we aim to highlight the importance of choice, and encourage fellow menstrual health catalysts and providers to undertake similar and larger-scale consumer studies. In this regard, we also hope that the lessons we learned in the process of running the project will serve useful in informing others' future work to better understand women's needs.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gerda Larsson', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending from the end.

Gerda Larsson
Managing Director and Co-Founder
The Case for Her

Introduction

At The Case for Her, we believe in girls' right to choose. We support unbiased education in the benefits, limitations, and safe care of all types of menstrual products, and the expansion of marketplaces to enable equal access to them. We believe that this combination of education and access empowers girls to make their own informed choices about their menstrual health.

We also believe that, as investors choosing and developing a portfolio of menstrual health partners, we need to keep girls' needs at the center of our decision-making. This requires better preference and impact data in the sector as a whole.

Taking a step in this direction, **in 2018 The Case for Her conducted a study in the Mathare area of Nairobi to learn more about girls' educated preferences and menstrual product choices.**

The study included a training on three different menstrual products made available at nearby kiosks. The participating girls were then encouraged to purchase whichever product they preferred, and reimbursed for the cost.



A kiosk shelf stocked with all three products from the Sheosk study.

Our goal was to answer four main questions:

- If a girl was taught about three product categories simultaneously—in an unbiased curriculum explaining the personal, economic and environmental benefits of each—which product would the educated girl consider purchasing?
- If local kiosks carried each of the three product categories at near-equivalent prices, which product would the girl purchase after training?
- What would influence her final product choice?
- Would she be happy with her choice after using the product?

Methodology

In undertaking this study, we were aware of its limitations: this was a test of methodology as much as premise.

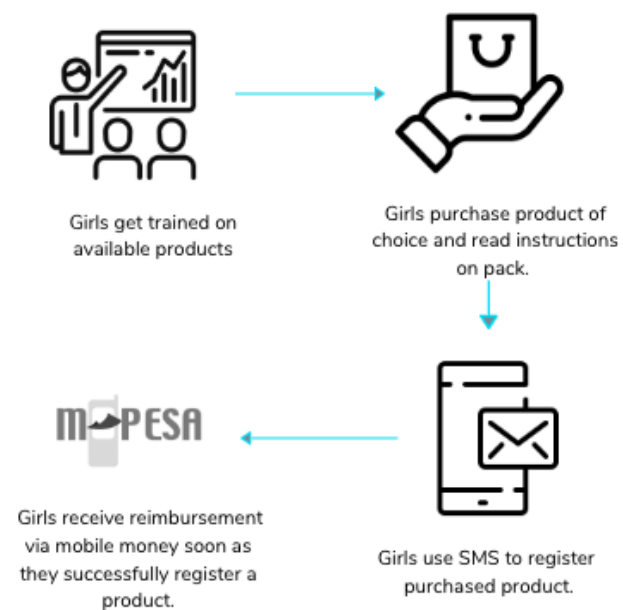
I. Training

From the start, we knew that the validity of the study depended on limiting bias in the trainings, as any indicated trainer preference could influence girls' purchase choices.

Based on our relationships with product providers in Nairobi, we decided to survey adolescent girls in Mathare. Due to its strong reputation, we chose Femme International, a local organization that regularly offers menstrual and reproductive health trainings, with trainers prepared to provide unbiased, balanced information in a sensitive manner.

The trainers taught 443 girls at 14 Mathare schools about menstruation, hygiene and three different menstrual products: disposable pads, reusable pads, and menstrual cups.

The schoolgirls in this area had already seen and been exposed to these three products through organizations distributing menstrual cups through their schools, and local stores stocking both reusable and disposable pads.



Source: Echo Mobile

II. Technical Platform and Methodology

After the training, we collected data through a 5-step process:

- Step 1: Each participant privately shared her menstrual product preference¹ and a personally-selected password with the trainer in person. The trainers logged each participant's stated preference and password.
- Step 2: After purchasing her product, the participant sent an SMS to the Echo Mobile platform with the survey codeword "Girl," entering her unique password along with the purchased product's code as listed on its packaging.
- Step 3: Echo Mobile then reimbursed each participant for her specific purchase through M-PESA mobile money.

¹ Question posed: "Which product do you think you will choose to buy?"

- Step 4: Two months later, we completed a follow-up survey with the girls on their choice, satisfaction with the product, and use experience.

We developed SMS-based survey questions using the rigorous Lean DataSM impact measurement methodology. Echo Mobile, a Kenyan research and information management company, managed the survey deployment process, including sending SMS survey questions, logging response data, and facilitating purchase reimbursements.

While most mobile surveys typically use phone numbers to identify participants, the adolescent girls in the study were highly unlikely to have access to one dedicated mobile phone, using multiple friends' and family members' phones instead. To solve for this, Echo Mobile developed a password system to identify users independent of their mobile phone numbers.

III. Product Pricing Methodology

At the girls' local kiosks, menstrual cups were the most expensive, and disposable pads the least expensive. Given the inherent pricing differences within the three product categories, we maintained an equivalent price point for each of the products in the study. By removing the price differential as the major determining factor in product choice, we aimed to separate the girls' preferences from price, increasing the role of the product itself and its characteristics in their decision-making.

It was important, however, to not drastically distort product pricing from current market prices in order to gain a clear comparative analysis between the girls' product preferences. An analysis of menstrual products available in 10 kiosks in Mathare as of November 2017 indicated that disposable pads were the main product available, with an eight-pack of Always disposable pads costing an average of 80KES and a 10-pack of Sunny Girl pads an average of 50KES. We accordingly priced disposable pads between 50-80KES per pad as a baseline measure.

The Case for Her's partners supplied the products: Ruby menstrual cups, So Sure reusable pads and Nia disposable pads. At the time of study in 2018, the market price of one two-pack of So Sure reusable pads was 250KES, resulting in a fair market price equivalent to 30 disposable Nia pads. Although typically sold in a package of 10 pads, for the purposes of the study, Nia bundled and stocked packs of 30 pads (3x10 pack bundles).

Menstrual cups were not sold in Mathare kiosks at the time, so the Ruby Cup was subsidized to a price of 250KES.

Results and Outcomes

I. Trained Girls Who Purchased Products

Of the 443 girls who attended the trainings, 111, or 25%, made a purchase. Of the purchasers, 80% had previously had a period.

During a follow-up discussion, training attendees shared the following reasons for not purchasing a product:

- Mistrust of program as a potential scam
- Product price point was too high
- Product was desired, but upfront funds were not available
- Lack of parental support or approval
- Already had access to products

It is also likely that some girls who bought products failed to register their purchase through Echo Mobile.

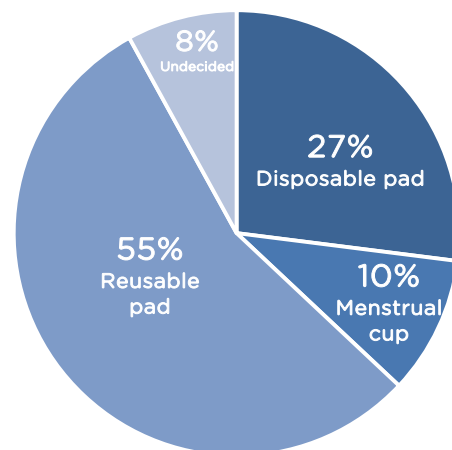
II. Stated Product Preference vs. Actual Purchase

We compared participants' stated product preference with their actual product purchase (where applicable).²

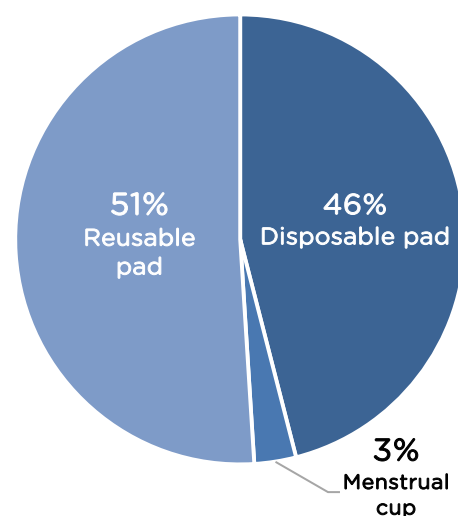
The girls who stated a preference for reusable pads (55%) were most likely to purchase accordingly, with 51% of these same participants buying reusable pads.

The girls understated their interest in disposable pads (27%), with disposable pad purchases (46%) exceeding communicated interest by 19%. The girls overstated their interest in menstrual cups (10%), with cup purchases 7% lower than communicated interest. One possible explanation for this is that the information stressed for each product in the training could have influenced some girls not to share their true preference with the trainer after the session. It is also possible that the girls changed their minds about their preferences after the training upon consultation with peers or parents.

Product Preferences



Products Purchased



² Note: Both graphs include data from only the 111 girls who purchased a product.

III. Period vs No Period

82% of the study's 443 participants had experienced at least one menstrual period.³ Among the girls who had had a menstrual period, 50% bought reusable pads and 48% purchased disposable pads in the study. Among the girls who had not yet experienced a menstrual period, 58% bought reusable pads and 37% bought disposable pads.

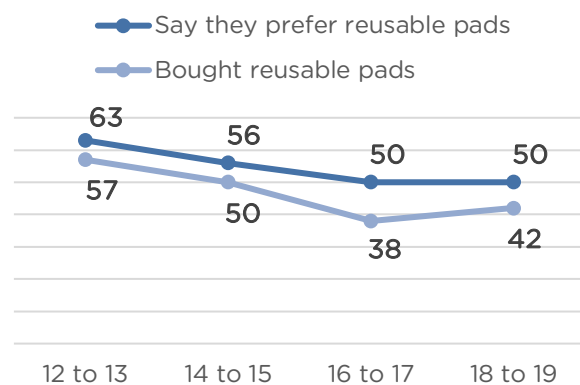
These differences in purchasing behavior as correlated with menstrual experience are worth noting and further investigating.

IV. Product Preference by Age Group

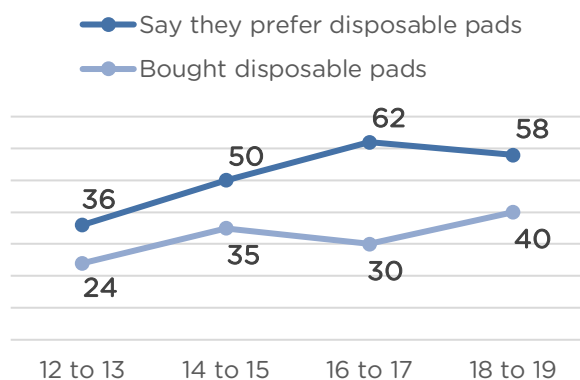
There are clear product preference trends according to age group.

The older the girls were, the more likely they were to both indicate a preference for and purchase a disposable pad.⁴ The older girls were also less likely to prefer or purchase a reusable pad.

Popularity (%) of Reusable Pads by Age Group



Popularity (%) of Disposable Pads by Age Group



V. Confidence of Choice by Age Group

There is a strong relationship across age groups between what the girls say they will choose and what they buy.

With reusable pads, there is an extremely strong relationship across age groups between what the girls' stated preference is and what they purchase, with a correlation coefficient of .97 indicating a very strong linear relationship between these two sets of data. With disposable pads, there is a strong linear relationship between the stated preference and the purchase, with a correlation coefficient of .64.

This analysis finds reliability in what the girls say they will buy as a predictor of what they buy.

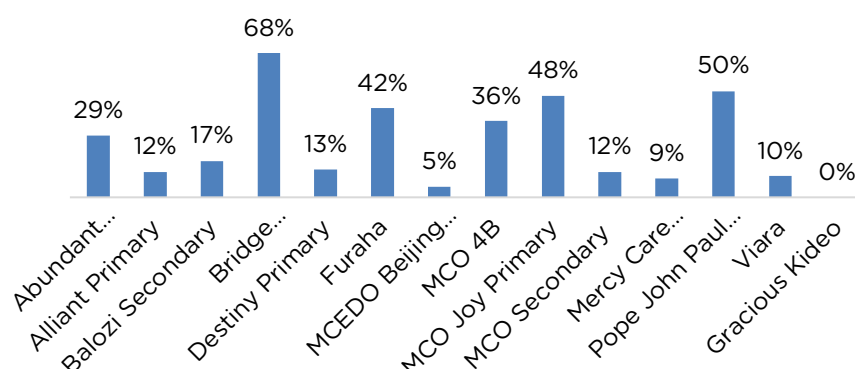
VI. Product Purchases by School

The number of girls who purchased products varied widely across the 14 schools participating in the study.

³ An attempt was made to avoid having too many girls participate who were not able to use the product.

⁴ The average age of the girls who purchased products was 14 years old.

Girls (%) Who Purchased Products by School



Six of the 14 schools had a higher rate of purchase than the average, indicating that there were one or more conditions met by these schools which the others lacked, and which made participation

in the study easier or more appealing to the participants.

Follow-Up Survey Results

We conducted a follow-up survey among the 111 participants who purchased a product to understand the factors motivating their product choice, and how they used and experienced the product after purchase.

I. Reasons for Choice

The most common reason given for choosing any particular product was, “It saves me money.” This suggested that economic factors are an important deciding factor for the girls.

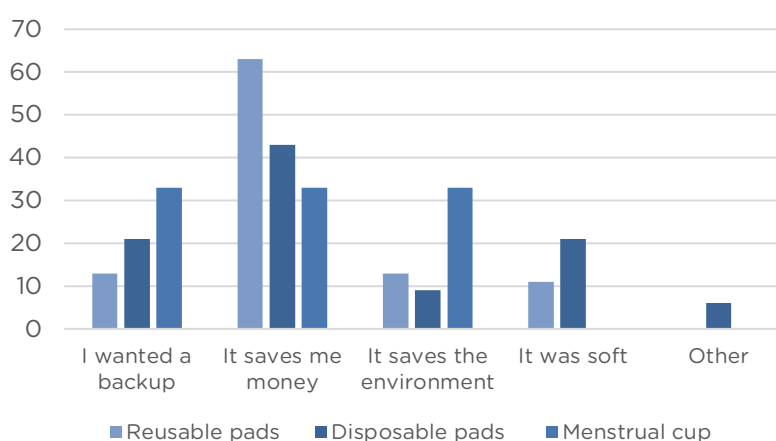
The second most common reason was “I use another product and wanted a backup.” This may indicate a desire for using a combination of products.⁵

II. So Sure Reusable Pads

Of the girls who bought the So Sure reusable pads, 82% used them for their last period. Nine girls used the reusable pads in combination with other products, with the majority combining them with disposable pads.

82% of the girls reported that they were satisfied with the So Sure reusable pad (with 18% giving no response), but 100% of the girls said they would recommend the reusable pads to family and friends. This highlights a possible issue with an

Reasons for Choosing Each Product



⁵ The menstrual cup data should be interpreted with caution as it was derived from only three data points.

incentive-based study, as there may have been a hesitation to express dissatisfaction.

III. Disposable Nia Pads

88% of the girls used the disposable Nia pads they bought for their last period. 82% used only the disposable Nia pads from the study, whereas 18% used them in combination with other products. Of those who combined the disposable Nia pads with other products, two used reusable pads, one used a menstrual cup and three used disposable pads.

85% were satisfied with the disposable Nia pads, 12% had no response and one participant (3%) was not happy with them. The one girl who said she was not happy with the disposable Nia pads wished she had chosen the menstrual cup instead. However, 100% of the girls said they would recommend the Nia disposable pads to family and friends.

IV. Ruby Menstrual Cup

Only three girls purchased the Ruby menstrual cup, representing 2% of the total products purchased. Each of the three girls had a different reason for choosing the menstrual cup: “It saves the environment,” “I use another product but wanted back up,” and “It saves me money.” Only one of the girls actually used the menstrual cup for her last period and did not combine it with any other products. All three girls were satisfied with the menstrual cup and would recommend it to family and friends.

Key Findings

I. Girls will buy what they say they will buy.

In the study, we saw a strong correlation—across age and school groups—between participants’ stated preference after the training and their actual purchases. **This shows that, when given a choice, what girls say they are going to buy is a reliable predictor of their actual choice.** This supports the effectiveness of choice-based menstrual health studies for learning about this age group.

Taken a step further, the girls’ different preferences and



The Sheosk team preparing Ruby Cups for the kiosk shelves.

purchases support the idea that they want choices, and that it would behoove providers to offer menstrual products based on a population's indicated preferences rather than their own projections. For example, in Mathare, many menstrual health programs offer free menstrual cups as a low-maintenance, durable reusable option that appears to be a fit from an outside perspective. However, as the study results show, even when informed about these benefits, most girls interested in reusable options prefer the reusable pads that they are accustomed to using rather than switching to new menstrual cups.

II. Age influences choice and purchasing behavior.

The older girls in the study both preferred and purchased disposable pads whereas younger girls preferred and purchased reusable pads.

Among the younger girls who had not yet started menstruating, 58% bought reusable pads—a higher share than the 50% of girls who had started menstruating and bought reusable pads. In contrast, 37% purchased disposable pads among those that had not had their periods, compared to 48% among those that had their period. This suggests a stronger preference for disposable pads for girls that have gotten into ingrained behavior habits of purchasing period products.

III. Habit and familiarity affect choice.

Independent of age, 97% of the girls who made purchases chose to buy either reusable or disposable pads—products that are most commonly available in stores and kiosks. Of the 89 purchasers who had menstruated before, 52% chose to buy the same type of product that they had used for their last period (for example, those who used disposable pads for their last period chose to buy disposable pads in the study). These decisions could have been influenced in part by the girls' familiarity with and previous knowledge of and comfort with using these types of products in the past.

IV. Peers are important influencers.

The importance of social belonging and peer influence are heightened in adolescence,⁶ and this came through as a key phenomenon in the study. **Peer influence was a powerful determinant for the girls in both deciding whether to participate in making a purchase and which product to buy.** Only when a few girls at a school started buying products did others begin to trust the process and start buying as well. It is possible that some girls were more influenced by their peers in their preferences and purchase decisions than by the training. This peer influence factor partially explains the stark difference in purchasing rates between schools, and the popularity of particular product choices among peers within the same school.

V. Girls choose based on cost and combining with other products.

When asked in the follow-up survey why they chose a particular product, the girls' overwhelmingly most cited reason for both the disposable and reusable pads was, "It saves me money." The second most popular reason was "I use another product but wanted a backup." Both of these purchasing reasons demonstrate that **the**

⁶ [Age Differences in Resistance to Peer Influence](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19111111/), Ncbi.nlm.nih.gov, Nov 2009.

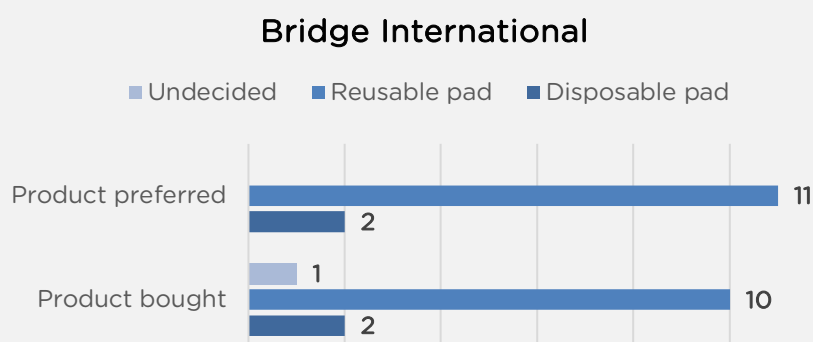
girls' decision-making is heavily influenced by a desire to be cost-effective in the long run.

VI. Support systems are key.

Across the 14 participating schools, we saw that **the amount of information provided, parent and influencer involvement, and better resources such as financial and sanitary conditions predict higher purchasing rates among participants**. Therefore, a strong support system with clear information provided to the influencers and girls is key for the success of such a study. In the future, it may be beneficial to work with fewer schools but build up stronger support systems and engagement around the study.

School Engagement: A Case Study

Bridge International School had the highest participation rate in the study, with 68% of the girls who attended the training purchasing a product.



The principal at Bridge International was highly engaged, supporting a parental meeting hosted at the school with a teacher. The school has a strong academic record, and good toilet facilities. In addition, it was also the closest to the Femme International office, making communication and follow-ups easy.

In contrast, none of the girls from Gracious Kideo School made a registered purchase following the training. At Gracious Kidea, it was difficult to schedule training sessions and the toilet and hygiene facilities available to the girls were of poor quality.

This suggests that schools with fewer resources or support structures may need additional support and attention in order to fully participate in such a

VII. Reimbursement methods can limit participation.

We think that the low purchase rates could, in part, be attributed to the study's reimbursement structure. In Mathare, the average household income is only

8,500KES or \$100 per month.⁷ **Some girls did not purchase a product because they were not able to cover the upfront cost before reimbursement.** In addition, given the prevalence of corruption in Kenya,⁸ **some girls thought that the reimbursement was a false promise or scam,** and decided not to take the risk. A further limitation was that, there was a small fee borne by the girls in order to transfer the reimbursed M-PESA mobile money payment to cash they could use for their purchases. This may have financially discouraged them from participating. We plan to explore alternative payment strategies (such as a voucher system) in future studies to account for these considerations.



Students engaging in a Femme International training.

VIII. Simple and lean survey processes are essential.

Conducting a choice-based study using SMS-based data collection with this age group was harder than we anticipated. As a result, **we needed to adjust the survey design as issues arose, resulting in additional complexity in implementation.**

Examples of issues:

1. While Echo Mobile designed an efficient password identifier system to simplify the mobile survey process and allow the girls to participate through borrowed cellphones, this created significant complications in the follow-up survey and data merge process.
2. Reimbursement was also a labor-intensive process for both the Femme International team and Echo Mobile, from helping the girls understand the reimbursement instructions to reminding them of their passwords. However, we learned that providing the instructions and information through various forms (including on an attractive printed diploma) and following up with participating schools to support girls in getting their reimbursement (which then caused others to follow suit) helped move the process forward.

⁷ [Collaborative Upgrading Plan](#), HealthyCities.Berkeley.edu, 2011.

⁸ [Corruption Perceptions Index 2018](#), Transparency.org, 2018.

Further Research and Development

There is a need for further research to gain a deeper understanding of which menstrual health products girls want, and the social, psychological, physical or economic barriers in the way of their purchasing those products.

There are many trends that were evident in the data presented in this study that should be investigated further, particularly those related to age. Can we dig deeper to understand if and why older girls may prefer disposable pads whereas younger girls may prefer reusable pads? What are the main determinants of their preferences? Do these preferences change with age?

The Sheosk data showed that some girls preferred to use a combination of menstrual products: the second most popular reason for purchase from the mobile follow-up survey was “I use another product but wanted a backup.” This finding defies the idea that girls need only one product type to meet their needs. It would be valuable to further research how girls combine menstrual products and their reasons for doing so.

There is also huge scope to improve the quality of the questions in subsequent mobile follow-up surveys. How can we optimize the limitations and parameters of a mobile survey (i.e. short questions, multiple choice or yes and no answers) to get the most useful responses? How do we or should we work with incentives?

With these findings, The Case for Her hopes to push the menstrual health sector towards a stronger focus on impact measurement and consumer voice. We hope that the learnings from this small-scale, collaborative study will encourage others to conduct similar studies on choice in the menstrual health sector at a larger scale, surveying girls and women around the world to understand their wants and needs in order to best serve them.