

‘Period Poverty’ in Scotland

Summary of a roundtable discussion held by Engender in June 2017

INTRODUCTION

In June 2017 Engender held a roundtable discussion to gain a better understanding of ‘period poverty’ in Scotland: the issue of women not having adequate access to sanitary products. The event brought together a small number of specialists and practitioners from the women’s sector, education and homelessness to get an overview of what information and evidence currently exists on the scale and nature of the problem, and where we can act as individual organisations and in collaboration to build the evidence base for specific interventions.

Participating organisations included: Homeless Period Edinburgh, Oxfam, Trussell Trust, Turning Point Scotland, Educational Institute of Scotland, Scottish Women’s Convention, NUS Scotland, Simon Community Scotland and Free Period Campaign / Women for Independence and Sacro. South Lanarkshire College, Women’s Aid South Lanarkshire and East Renfrewshire (WASLER) and the Willow Centre made contributions by email.

The following is a summary of discussions, and doesn’t necessarily represent the views or future plans of Engender or other organisations present.

SESSION 1: What do we know?

The session began with participants sharing their findings from evidence they’d started collecting on women’s access to menstrual hygiene products, and their experiences of running various formal and informal initiatives to provide women with free or affordable sanitary products. Also added to this section are examples sent in to Engender by email, from invited participants who were not able to attend.

National surveys

The **Free Period Scotland campaign** (started by Women for Independence) has been encouraging women from all over Scotland, from all political and social backgrounds, to fill in a 12 question survey on their experiences accessing sanitary products. 400 responses were received in the first 4 days; it’s now up to 747 responses. Of these, 35% of survey respondents lived in a household with more than one person who menstruates. 8% have

issues accessing sanitary products, and 4% women said they couldn't access products at all. Over 20% responded that they haven't been able to access activities such as work or education. A few women said they'd been getting Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) as a result of using products inappropriate for needs (for example, they can only afford to buy one sort of product, so just buy heavy flow products). To date, there have not been very many 13-17 year olds engaging with survey, and the plan is to go out to youth organisations and do some face to face interviews with young women. They also didn't receive any requests for additional support to fill in the survey, which means that the diversity of respondents – particularly in terms of disabled people and women whose first language is not English – could be improved.

The Trussell Trust has sent out a survey to their foodbank network – information will be made available once they've heard back from everyone. It's clear that the different foodbanks give out sanitary products in different ways – some place sanitary items in every parcel, others will wait until sanitary products are requested, but most will directly ask women. One food bank reported that they didn't receive any donations. Food banks don't record items separately, making it difficult to get quantitative data to measure need and uptake.

Schools and colleges

South Lanarkshire College has been piloting a programme aimed to 'stamp out period poverty', and free sanitary products have been available to all students and staff from 9 January 2017.¹ The focus has been on accessibility and affordability, and products are available from Student Services; Annexe Building Reception; Hair and Beauty Reception; the Student Association Office and are also available from free dispensing machines that are installed in toilets across the college campus. This covers all floors in the Main Building and on the Ground Floor in the Annexe and includes fully accessible toilet options. The impact that South Lanarkshire college believes this programme has had (gained through feedback from staff, students and the students association) includes: staff and students feeling valued; greater awareness that many women and girls can't afford essential sanitary products; full and productive student/work experience; and improvements in learning and attainment/work productivity through increased attendance. One particular comment from a student really stood out when they described the impact for her of introducing such an important initiative when she said "this has made a huge difference to my situation - to be able to get free sanitary products and not to lose my dignity in the process".

The **Educational Institute of Scotland** (EIS) is increasingly interested in the impact of poverty on education, and the issue of 'period poverty' has come up on the agenda of both the poverty working group and the gender issues working group, in part due to the release of *I, Daniel Blake*, and the pilot work happening at South Lanarkshire college. At their June AGM,

¹ South Lanarkshire College has 5000 students, 2500 of whom are female, and 200 out of 315 staff are female

EIS's Education and Equality department was tasked with reviewing the cost and availability of sanitary products in schools and colleges, and to examine and extend good practice. So far, they've reached out to all colleges, are starting to get some case studies together and hope to do the scoping work and gathering data over the summer. The piece of work hopes to highlight the experiences of both staff and students – noting the likelihood of staff being on part-time temporary contracts and the lack of pay rises while cost of living has rocketed. They've already discovered that new-build colleges have forgotten to put in dispenser machines. Similarly, while there are increased numbers of unisex toilets in order to be more inclusive of non-binary students and students with a trans history, sanitary provision has been forgotten in these toilets.

At **City Glasgow College**, the women's convener did some analysis of what sanitary products were available, and what the need was. At one newly built college, there were only two dispensers for a ten floor building, and at the seven floor riverside campus, which is majority male and includes student accommodation, there was only one dispenser. This campus is also majority international students who aren't able to apply for additional bursary support. Dispensers were also very hard to find – you had to go into each cubicle to find them. They also looked at costings: a packet of sanitary napkins was priced at £2, when their cost to produce is 5 to 6 pence per napkin. Following a unanimous vote at the student union AGM, they put in a funding proposal worth £200 to supply sanitary products for free at the college, and a lot of research went into finding products that would suit everyone. They ended up using an organic, vegetarian-friendly product made available at small cupboards in the bathrooms. Concerns were raised (by male colleagues) that the system would be abused (for example, male students plastering them on walls) but this has not happened. An S-card system, similar to the C-card system, was also considered but girls and young women reported that they wouldn't want to show men a card to access the products.

Homelessness, refugee and violence against women services

At the homeless women's services at **Simon Community Scotland**, they have tampons and wipes readily and freely available and women don't have to ask. The approach is that they shouldn't need to be aware that a woman is on her period. They also provide a welcome pack as a 'gift' which includes pants, jammies, slippers, chocolate and sanitary products. One woman was so taken by it, as no-one had ever gifted her with anything. It is a dignified and discrete system and it is not abused. A lot of women don't have periods as such, so there is also a need to educate around physical difficulties. The Simon Community street teams also now carry sanitary products, although this is a recent development.

There is a small charity in Leith which has a '**Health and Hygiene (H&H) card system**', for men and women aged 16 to 19. It is a specific project aimed at people who are homeless, but they also do work in schools. The card looks like a bank card and is quite discreet. At the moment, it works for a drop in session on Fridays, where you can pick up a range of hygiene products.

A representative from the **Willow Centre** sent us a story of a rough-sleeping woman one of their social workers met. The woman turned down the offer of a coffee and chat in a nearby café because she was on her period, did not have any towels or tampons, and remaining seated on the street would prevent her clothes getting blood stained while her flow was light. This experience resulted in the Willow Centre organising a donation of sanitary products, which they shared with the Access Practice, female hostels and with their clients. They also now have a funded permanent stock in their service user bathrooms.

Women's Aid South Lanarkshire and East Renfrewshire (WASLER) circulate free sanitary wear to their service users and have 'help yourself' baskets in their toilets. They generally distribute all donations including sanitary wears in refuges and taking shopping bags to support sessions in the community. WASLER are in the process of setting up focus group discussions with their young female ambassadors to look at the effect (if any) of period poverty on their lives.

One participant commented that at a shelter for refugee women she'd worked in, women were using unhygienic methods to control the bleeding, as well as some women going on the birth control pill purely to stop their periods, as these were easier than asking for sanitary products.

SESSION 2: What needs to happen next?

Gathering and collating data

One of the key issues that emerged from the discussion was the need to gather more data and to collate and coordinate the data that is already available, with a focus on the extent and scale of the need in Scotland. Particular gaps in data that need addressed include lack of information on 13-17 year olds, lack of information that looks at particular groups of women (for example, rural women, BME women, survivors of domestic abuse, trans groups or disabled women). The participants agreed that we would:

- Send out the Free Period Scotland campaign survey to our respective networks
- Reach out to Violence Against Women services, services working with BME women and disabled women, and young women's organisations
- Share data gathered (including the data from the Free Period Scotland survey, the Trussell Trust foodbank survey, the City Glasgow college information on product choice, and EIS's scoping) to a central point or platform that is politically neutral. Engender is happy to oversee this and take this forward.
- Start mapping existing provision in Scotland and get a more accurate picture of what is being delivered across various sectors, particularly in schools. We could start by going back to our own organisations as employers, and find out what provision is like in our own toilets. These could be written up as short case studies by Engender.
- Consider organising further workshops to gather more information, perhaps based on Engender's 'What Women Want' model

Supporting and raising awareness of current initiatives

There are multiple small to medium initiatives across Scotland addressing menstrual hygiene or providing free access to sanitary products to particular groups of women. They could benefit having more opportunities to share best practice and coordinate. The participants discussed:

- Establishing a communications group (for example a googlegroup) where we can exchange information about various initiatives, and consider forming an umbrella network to bring this together more formally – the name for this that was floated was ‘Free Flow’

Engaging with parliament and government

Monica Lennon MSP and Gillian Martin MSP are both taking forward the issue of ‘period poverty’ in Scottish Parliament. Monica Lennon is drafting a Member’s Bill to legislate for free provision of sanitary products in Scotland – current possibilities include a C-card style programme, or free provision in schools and colleges. Gillian Martin is also proposing a universal provision scheme to the Scottish Government, something like an S-card system, where cards would be readily available (in baby boxes, shelters, food banks etc) and accessible to anyone.

Participants discussed the relative merits of an S-card system, and the problems around the kind of evidence that is available. It was noted that clear costings may usefully support any proposals to government, but the kind of modelling that looks at the number of menstruating women in Scotland multiplied by number of sanitary products used each month is not helpful, and causes civil servants to back away. Some participants felt that it is too soon to jump to an S-card system as the solution, and had questions around whether there is enough evidence that this would work, and whether it would be additional stigma to people already trapped in poverty (similar to people being uncomfortable with food vouchers). One participant also noted that an S-card system would have to be designed to include men with a trans history or some non-binary people, as they may not want to be identified as menstruating.

It was also noted that poverty is not the only reason behind women’s lack of access to sanitary products. For example, the link between access to sanitary products and domestic abuse was made by a number of participants, who explained that denial of access to products can be a method of control by an abusive partner. It would therefore be important that any system of provision was not linked only to the benefit system, for example.

The feeling in the room was that it is good to continue to engage with the initiatives in parliament and government as they move forward, and help to gather further evidence and data that would help ensure the best possible solutions are proposed.

Need for wider education

One of the key points that emerged from the discussion was the need to not only address provision, but also the need for wider public education on menstruation. This needs to include improved education on menstrual health and the risks associated with using the wrong products, awareness raising initiatives to address the stigma that is still attached to periods and opening up a national conversation about periods more generally. Similarly, to address the potential issue of woman accessing free products experiencing stigma, it needs to become normalised that products are readily available, and for mass education to happen that alerts the Scottish population to this.

A point was also raised about the language used around the issue, and whether the term 'period poverty' pathologises women as being poor. The Free Period Scotland survey has shown that while finance is a massive cause, every single woman has had access issues.

There was an identified need for further discussion on how periods are addressed in Scottish schools.

ABOUT ENGENDER

Engender is Scotland's feminist membership organisation. We have a vision for a Scotland in which women and men have equal opportunities in life, equal access to resources and power, and are equally safe and secure from harm.

For more information about our work, please contact Catriona Kirkpatrick on catriona.kirkpatrick@engender.org.uk or Emma Trottier on emma.trottier@engender.org.uk