

Engender response to the consultation on the Proposed Sanitary Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill

1. INTRODUCTION

Engender works in Scotland to advance women's equality, which includes advocating for the improvement of women's access to health care services in Scotland and building capacity to respond to women's mental and physical health care needs.

Engender welcomes the opportunity to respond to Monica Lennon MSP consultation titled 'Ending Period Poverty', which proposes to introduce a Bill in the Scottish Parliament which would provide women and girls with access to free menstrual products.

2. PERIOD POVERTY: WHAT IS IT?

Over the course of their lives, women and girls will face different and greater health care needs than men. A primary example of women and girls' unique needs is menstruation. While not all women menstruate, and while some men do, the topic and reality of menstruation remains at best invisible and, at worst, stigmatised. Menstruation is painful, inconvenient and expensive. It is estimated that over 20 percent of women suffer each month from such severe menstrual cramps that it interferes with their daily activities.¹ The pain can prevent girls from attending school, preclude young women from participating in university or college classes, and can be a significant barrier to women making the commute to work and finding the stamina to last a full day at the office.

However, menstrual pain is not the only barrier to women's full participation in society. For the half of the population that experiences menstruation, there are significant costs involved. It is estimated that a woman will, over her lifetime, spend approximately £5,000 on tampons, pads or other sanitary products. As such, the ability to manage menstruation with dignity is a privilege reserved for those who can access and afford menstrual products.

'Period poverty' is a phrase heard frequently in Scotland over the past year, and not before time. It refers to the phenomenon of women and girls being unable to afford sanitary products and therefore being pushed to the margins of society, unable to participate fully in public life. The term gained traction after anecdotal evidence of girls missing school while on

¹ American Family Physician. (2012). Dysmenorrhea.

their period, and increased requests for tampons and towels at foodbanks across the UK. In December 2016, the Guardian reported that women living in poverty and women who were homeless were forced to use newspapers and socks during their periods.² Since the publication of these realities for women living in the UK, various initiatives in Scotland have begun to try to tackle the problem.

One of the challenges to understanding the scope of period poverty in Scotland has been the lack of evidence base. More research is needed on period poverty to gain a fuller picture of access to menstrual products around the country, and the impacts resulting from lack of access. There is a need to hear the voices of young women, disabled women, and women for whom English is not their first language, who have been underrepresented in research completed so far. Further, while period poverty has predominantly been covered as an issue for women and girls, it bears remembering that there are significant barriers to trans men and people of non-binary gender who menstruate in accessing products without stigma. Yet there remains little research to date on their experiences of period poverty. While there is work to be done, Engender is encouraged by the various commitments made by the Scottish Government (e.g., instituting a pilot to tackle period poverty), which we view as opportunities to gather more robust data on the impacts of period poverty in Scotland.

3. PROPOSALS FOR REFORM

Engender supports increasing women and girls' access to menstrual products across Scotland. Our view is that any such initiative would benefit women and girls' health, promote their right to human dignity, and remove an existing barrier to their full participation in public life.

In June 2017 Engender held a roundtable discussion to gain a better understanding of period poverty in Scotland. The meeting was attended by educational, homelessness, poverty and women's organisations, who came together to discuss how to inform policy to improve access to menstrual products. Though part of the discussion was focused on the scale of the problem in Scotland, reforms were also discussed, including how best to facilitate access to period products when needed. One suggestion made was the introduction of a scheme which would operate similarly to the C-card scheme (i.e., the system for free condoms in Scotland). The scheme discussed during the roundtable is similar to the universal access scheme being proposed by Ms. Lennon.

While participants at the roundtable provided support for such a scheme, a few points were made which we believe are worth considering in the policy development process:

- Would the scheme give women and girls choice of a range of period products? Engender is aware that, due to the cost of tampons, women can sometimes only afford to buy heavy flow tampons, which they continue to use towards the end of their period when their flow is lighter. Due to the unaffordability of tampon products, the exclusive dependence on heavy flow items for the length of a period can result in

² The Guardian. (2016). Period poverty: call to tackle the hidden side of inequality. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/dec/12/period-poverty-call-to-tackle-the-hidden-side-of-inequality>

infections (e.g., bacterial vaginosis) and – worse – put women at risk of the potentially fatal Toxic Shock Syndrome. Improvement in access should be coupled with a right to choose which product or products are needed during menstruation (e.g., tampons/pads of varying absorbency).

- Roundtable participants spoke of the trauma experienced by women and girls living in poverty, including the example of the stigma associated with food vouchers. Of importance to the group was how a universal access scheme could limit the stigma already experienced by women and girls living in poverty.
- On a similar note, women and girls reported to various equalities and poverty organisations that they would not feel comfortable presenting a card for free period products to men. As plans progress to introduce the provision of free sanitary products in Scotland, it will be important to engage in discussions on what spaces should be used to distribute free menstrual products to ensure those in need of them feel safe and able to access free products without consequence. As one consideration, how will the location of free period products facilitate safe access for any trans person who menstruates?
- It is vital that the provision of free period products not be linked to, for example, the social security system. Poverty is not the sole 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 roundtable participants, who explained that the denial of access to products can be a method of control by an abusive partner.
- Income and other resources are often not controlled or shared equally within the household. In many cases, women take on the role of acting as the buffer between their children and the impact of household poverty.³ Put simply, mothers forego their own consumption to meet the needs of their children. Whilst income level may be one of the contributing factors to period poverty in Scotland, the solutions developed to meet women and girls’ menstrual needs must recognise that slightly increasing household income (e.g., by the cost of menstrual products) will not directly result in women gaining greater access to period products.

Whilst Engender supports the recent announcement by the Scottish Government that free menstrual products will be provided in schools and universities, we believe that the scope of this initiative should be extended to include any person in Scotland who faces barriers to menstruating in a safe, healthy and dignified way. Menstrual cups, tampons and pads are all essential healthcare products and there should be no barriers to their access or use. Menstrual care is health care.

One of the so-called challenges to the provision of free menstrual products has been the cost of the initiative. We support the view that, while costs must be considered, they must not be considered in isolation. On balance, the fiscal cost of pursuing the provision of free menstrual products cannot outweigh the human cost of failing to increase access to tampons and other period products. The proposed menstrual health initiative will have a myriad of individual and societal benefits, including:

³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (2014). *Poverty through a gender lens: Evidence and policy review on gender and poverty*.

- It will facilitate women and girls' participation in education and work;
- It will eliminate the need to rely on inappropriate products (e.g., socks, newspaper) to manage a period and therefore reduce health risks posed to women and girls;
- It will reduce the stigma experienced by those who are forced to rely on charity donations for menstrual products; and
- It will start a much needed public dialogue on menstrual care. There is a poverty of understanding menstruation which needs tackling, and stigma which needs challenging.

4. CONCLUSION

We believe that it is essential to recognise that period poverty, as with so many other aspects of reproductive health, is a gendered issue. As such, solutions must recognise the impact menstruation has on women's equality. Period poverty is a symptom of women's poverty. While tackling period poverty will not solve women's poverty, to ignore it is to ignore women's lived experiences of inequality.

Engender welcomes and supports any progress in challenging women's inequality, and we view this proposal as one that meets a most basic need for women and girls. Funding menstrual products is a step towards improving women and girls' health; further securing a woman's right to human dignity; and facilitating women and girls' fuller participation in public life.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT US

Engender is a membership organisation working on feminist agendas in Scotland and Europe, to increase women's power and influence and to make visible the impact of sexism on women, men and society. We provide support to individuals, organisations and institutions who seek to achieve gender equality and justice.