

‘How Period Poverty Impacts Secondary Level Education in Ireland’
A Research Project by Georgia Dillon
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Introduction

My research will analyse how period poverty impacts educational participation in Ireland. Period poverty is defined as “the lack of access to sanitary products, menstrual hygiene education, toilets, hand washing facilities, and, or, waste management.”¹ This is an issue that prevents menstruating individuals from going to school and work every day. The aim of my research is to collect data from students about how period poverty has impacted their secondary level education, participation in education and extra-curricular activities, their access (or lack of) to period products in schools, menstrual education and how students believe these issues can be best solved.

I chose this research question as it is a pressing issue and one that I am involved in in my local and global community. This is an issue that is highly relevant in Ireland. The current government’s Programme for Government includes a plan to “provide a range of free, adequate, safe, and suitable period products in all educational publicly funded settings (including schools, and colleges and HEIs), to ensure that no students are disadvantaged in their education by period poverty.” However, the plan has not translated to action, and it is clear that this is not a priority. The research gathered as to how period poverty impacts secondary level education in Ireland will hopefully encourage the government to take this action if it is presented to them with recommendations for implementation from those most impacted, as has occurred in countries such as Scotland and New Zealand.

Methodology

I wish to find out how a lack of menstrual equity impacts education in Irish secondary schools. I will collect data to establish if students’ education has been impacted due to period poverty. For example, if they have missed school due to not being able to afford sanitary products and if so, how much school they have missed, if they have missed out on extra-curricular learning and sport, if they have not felt able to fully participate in classes due to menstruation and how they believe these issues could be solved. The data will be a combination of qualitative and quantitative data as I aim to produce statistics on the impacts of period poverty in secondary schools and also gather information on attitudes towards menstrual equity, and recommendations from those most effected, on how the government could alleviate this.

¹ Global Citizen. “Period Poverty: Everything You Need to Know”, viewed May 3rd 2021, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/period-poverty-everything-you-need-to-know/>

I will prepare the study, with reference to past studies, and contact bodies who have carried out similar research in other countries before the research period. The research must be a retrospective study due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the research timeframe. The research will take place through online surveys distributed to students from colleges across the country, with the help of their Student Unions and Access Programmes, which I will then analyse. It could be conducted entirely online if this is necessary due to COVID-19.

This data will be collected in survey form in accordance with ethical and GDPR guidelines. Anonymity will be guaranteed, and context provided to help maximise the response rates. I will ask students to disclose whether they attended DEIS initiative schools, public schools or private schools in order to sort and analyse the data into a report.

I aim to collect this data from students across Ireland to avoid bias in regard to urban vs. rural lifestyle, proximity to resources such as the Homeless Period Ireland and explore a number of diverse perspectives.

Timeline

I will reach out to a number of university Students Unions to ask for help distributing the surveys amongst students.

May 31st – June 11th: I will first create the qualitative survey. I will do this by looking at past studies, such as studies done by Plan International (Ireland) and Youth-19 (New Zealand). I will also read the National Strategy for Women and Girls' 'Period Poverty in Ireland' Discussion Paper and include questions that centre around their recommendations. I will also include questions that have come up for discussion within the wider sphere of period poverty advocacy, that I have come across whilst working as the Irish Ambassador for The Pad Project. I will also insert a section asking participants to elect themselves for interview on the subject, so I can engage in active listening on the subject. I will send the study on to my advisor for any corrections or advice.

I will then disseminate the study through the Trinity College Student's Union and contact other Student's Unions across the country (through the USI) and ask them to share it. I will also contact charities like Anytime of the Month and The Homeless Period Ireland about disseminating the study through their social media channels. I will also send it on to legislator's working on the issue and ask them to share it.

June 12th - July 12th: In the 4 weeks that the survey is open, I will spend 3 weeks reading relevant literature on the subject, such as the Columbia Journal of Gender & Law, Volume 41 on menstruation and the law and the book 'Period. End of Sentence'.

I will take a week off of the Laidlaw work July 4th -12th but will keep the survey open to maximise participation – despite not counting this week towards my 6 weeks.

July 12th – 18th: When the survey closes, I will use my final weeks to analyse the data, figure out how to present it in an accessible format, curate the results and any interview material and then create my poster and report. I will send the results to relevant legislators working on the Free Provision of Period Products Bill 2021 and other legislation put forward in the Seanad on the issue. I will also send the results to relevant NGOs and charities working on the issue to help strengthen their evidence base on the issue.

Interdisciplinary and/or international focus of your research and Collaboration

Period poverty is an issue that is relevant in many different disciplines: politics, law, health sciences and gender studies. As a law student interested in pursuing policy reform, the Scottish government inspired me to partake in this research as they passed the Period Products Bill to “allow anyone who needs period products to get them free of charge” including providing products in schools.

Columbia University has a research team studying how period poverty effects U.S. adolescents in low-income areas and as a fellow Laidlaw college we could form connections as our respective research may compliment and strengthen each other's. I will also contact Youth19, a research cohort from New Zealand who conducted successful research on this issue that led to a campaign for policy reform.

I aim to collaborate with The Pad Project and The Homeless Period Ireland, with whom I have worked on this issue, for guidance.

Outcomes and Impact

The key aim of this research is to gather robust evidence of the impact of period poverty on the education of individuals in secondary schools. Gathering this information will hopefully encourage the government to take action on this issue, (a goal committed to in the 2020 programme for government but which has not yet been acted on sufficiently), therefore ensuring a more equal standard of education for all. It will also help charities such as the Homeless Period Ireland in their fundraising efforts as it will illustrate the extent of this issue in Ireland.

I will reference the National Strategy for Women and Girls' Period Poverty Discussion Paper, recommendation 1.1-1.3 in particular, to frame my research.

These recommendations set the scope of what information is needed to create adequate law on this issue in Ireland.

Pre-clearance requirements

Ethical approval will be needed as the research involves a survey of an array of people and may be perceived as questions of a sensitive or private nature. This will be possible through the school of public health within the timeframe.