



The Impact of the Inability to Access Period Products on the Irish Educational Experience

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Definition

Period poverty is defined as "inadequate access to menstrual hygiene, including period products (e.g. sanitary towels and tampons), washing and waste management facilities and education"¹.

The World Bank estimates that 500 million women and girls globally do not have access to menstrual hygiene products as a direct result of poverty.²

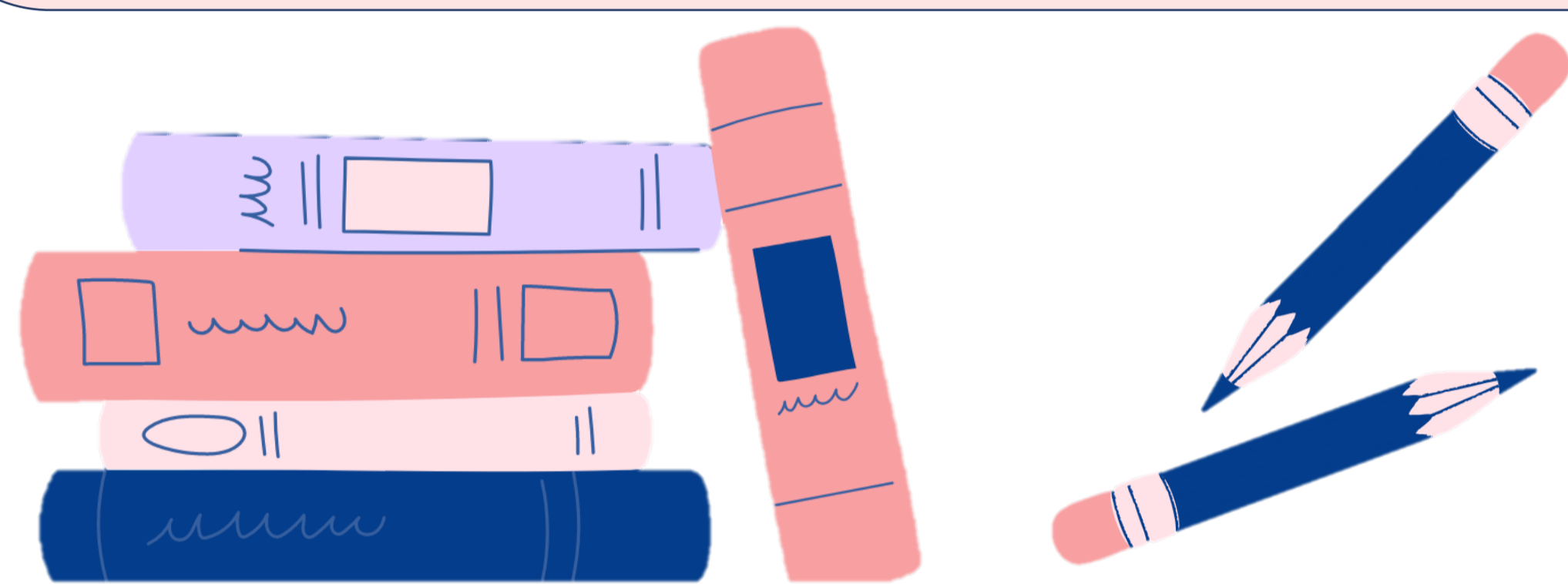
Research method

For this qualitative study, I completed a scoping of literature, analysing the strengths and shortcomings of existing literature on period poverty and the impact it has on education. I then undertook eleven qualitative interviews, influenced by gaps in existing literature, to establish how the inability to access period products has impacted the experience of each participant in the Irish education system. I then analysed the anonymised data using the Braun and Clarke thematic analysis method. Of the eleven interviewees, eight had experienced period poverty. Their experiences and recommendations are detailed on this poster.

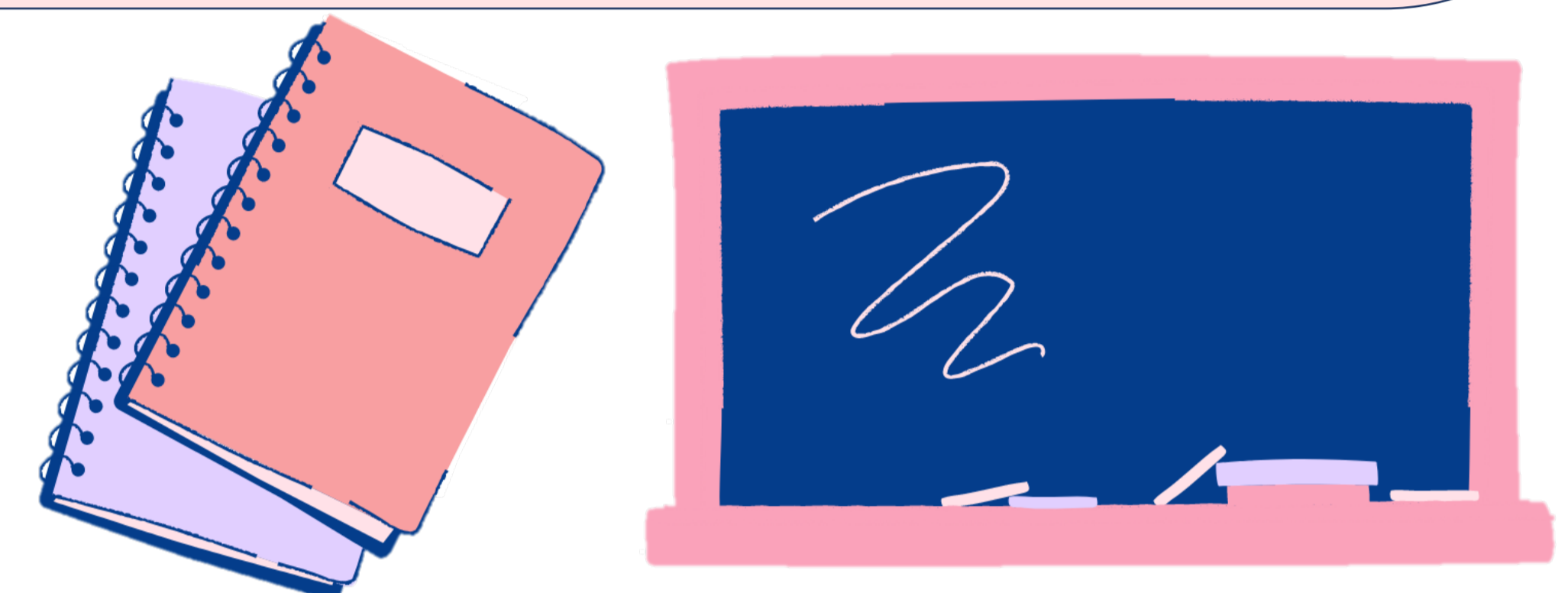
Study Context

In the 2021 'Period Poverty in Ireland' discussion paper, the National Strategy for Women and Girls' Period Poverty Subcommittee stated that "prior to the implementation of any measures to address period poverty that are likely to incur any significant cost" there should be "qualitative research, engaging in active listening to women and girls regarding their experience of menstruation, menstrual health and period poverty in Ireland" conducted to establish "the prevalence of period poverty across all age groups and cohorts."¹

Crichton et al.³ stated that "further research is needed on how menstrual poverty affects girls' psychological and educational outcomes"³. It is suggested that there is a great impact on the education of menstruators without access to period products beyond absenteeism and that "both teachers and pupils explained that discomfort and anxiety during menstruation undermines girls' schooling experience."⁴ This study also classed a lack of concentration in class due to menstrual poverty as a barrier to education.³



Study Findings



Experiences

When speaking about the experience of period poverty in school, one interviewee noted that "there were some weeks where I have to **choose between being able to afford food and being able to buy... a packet of pads.**" Another noted that "there was one time that I had nothing on me, I couldn't afford anything. So, I got the bus home and when I was walking through the bus to my house, I noticed that it had like, leaked all down my leg ...I was just so upset about it, so **I'd always leave (school) for the fear of like people being able to see that.**" Another noted that her "mom got... pampers type like nappies and stuff and she would just cut it up." Another participant stated, "some days **I'd miss school, or I'd have to go home early** ... because I'd have to nip home and... get changed clothes." One participant could no longer attend her extra-curricular activity and stated that she "used to be really into horse riding when (she) was younger and... when I first got my period and for first couple of months, I just missed sessions, but then after that I just stopped going".

Feelings

Participants found the inability to access period products at school upsetting, embarrassing, sad and frustrating. Participants noted feeling "ashamed, worried about leaking," the want to "keep it hidden as much as possible", "really anxious to go home and get a pad", discomfort, miserable, shame, anxiety and dread. One participant noted "kicking (herself) thinking... 'is it my fault...why do I deserve this?'" Another reported feeling "general disappointment in the establishment."

Barriers in the Education System

Inability to Access Period Products

A number of participants noted that they used toilet paper in place of period products whilst on their period. They stated that they would "be uncomfortable in school" and it would "affect your ability to be present in the class." Another participant recalled the barriers to accessing products caused by a lack of availability, "it was like a bit of a disaster as well, so you know the machines with... tampons in it that you put like a euro in? Our ones were broken for four out of the six years I was in secondary school ... so you'd have to either ask a friend or ask a teacher." Another participant noted that when "you're using tissue... it's constant(ly) in the back of your head. Like, what if I leave? what if it goes over me? and you're just not able to concentrate as well."

Stigma

When speaking about P.E., one participant said "it was just **really uncomfortable**... there were changing rooms, everything was like out in the open constantly and... there was **nowhere to have a little bit of privacy**, if you had your period. So yeah... **I'd skip it quite a bit.**" On asking a staff member for a period product, one participant stated "no, I don't think I would have no." Stating that they would feel "vulnerable", and it would "**bring up the feelings of embarrassment.**" Another said "teachers and staff noticed, and nothing was ever done, and my friends definitely noticed. I didn't want to outright talk about it because **it's such a taboo subject.** One participant stated "I think... there's this kind of aura of, it's **something you don't talk about, it's embarrassing, it's dirty**"

Potential Solutions

Free Period Products

All interview participants stated that free period products in schools would have helped to alleviate the barriers to education they experienced. Participants agreed that the initiative should be **government funded**, that each school should be provided with a budget for period products to ensure that there is equitable access to period products. On having access to products, one participant stated, "you're not **wasting time worrying about your periods leaking through**... just knowing you have one, you're just able to **completely focus on your class a lot better.**" Another participant said that this would "**definitely, undoubtedly... saved (them) a lot of embarrassment.**" One participant felt that "having a pad is like an extra layer of security, like it allows you to do a lot more."

Education

Many participants stated that they would have benefited from **better menstrual education**. Many stated that this would destigmatize periods and make it easier to ask for a product if it was needed. One participant stated that "better education for boys, as well as girls, would really help that because... obviously it's just a **normal part of life**, and it really is so stigmatized." One participant suggested that this education should have a "more **nuanced approach** now as we're discovering more...gender identities and sexual identities" instead of splitting classes up by gender.

Conclusions

It is evident from this research that the inability to access period products has a significant impact on the education of menstruators experiencing period poverty across Ireland. It would be hugely beneficial for Irish students if legislation for the free provision of period products, similar to legislation passed in Scotland and France, is passed in Ireland; to ensure that there is equal access to education for all.

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