



Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Response to: A proposal for a Bill to ensure free access to sanitary products, including in schools, colleges and universities

Issued by: Pat Catney MLA

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**Foyle Women's
Information
Network**



Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas

1. Introduction

1.1 This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.¹ The seven groups are as follows:

- ♀ Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project lead
- ♀ Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- ♀ Women's Support Network (WSN)
- ♀ Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- ♀ Women's TEC
- ♀ Women's Centre Derry
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

¹ Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisation

1.3 The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two-way flow of information between government and the sector. It also ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately results in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the proposal for a Bill to ensure free access to sanitary products, including in schools, colleges and universities issued by Pat Catney, MLA. This is a gendered issue and one which can create financial and wellbeing challenges for women and girls seriously impacting on their ability to participate in society and reach their full potential.

2.0 General Comments

A period is a natural biological function which women and girls cannot control and which can sometimes be very inconvenient. Despite the fact that a period is a natural bodily function it continues to be a taboo subject meaning that issues around periods are rarely discussed or given the attention that they need. The stigma around periods allows issues like affordability to go under the radar and can keep women and girls, trans and non-binary people struggling to manage their period on a monthly basis. This can have the result of limiting their potential and ability to participate in everyday life and can further exacerbate gender inequalities.

Period poverty is the term used to describe a lack of access to sanitary products due to financial restrictions. In other words, women and girls are unable to use sanitary

products because they can't afford them. There may be many reasons for this including low income, homelessness, abuse, health conditions which make a period more painful/heavy or because they have no income of their own. With an average period lasting around five days it can cost up to £8 a month for tampons and pads and some women and girls struggle to afford the cost. This leaves some women and girls forced to use toilet roll, socks or even newspaper because they have been unable to pay for the sanitary products they need.

For younger women the inability to access these products can be detrimental to a girl's ability to learn and to actively participate in everyday life. It makes it difficult for girls to concentrate properly in school if they are worried about leaking or having to spend their lunch money on sanitary products.

There can be particular issues around access to period products for women and others. For some with certain health conditions such as endometriosis or polycystic ovary syndrome this can mean heavier or irregular periods requiring more period products and expense. In addition, pregnant women and those who have recently given birth often also need to use sanitary products to cope with bleeding. For older women who are going through the menopause there can be increased need for period products. As periods become more unpredictable during the menopause many women choose to wear period products such as sanitary pads on a more regular basis so that they feel more comfortable and will not be caught out. As one woman said *"I wore a pad to work every day and felt completely confident."* It is also the case that many trans men and non-binary people also menstruate and need access to period products.

Access to period products is therefore essential to the health and wellbeing of women and girls, trans and non-binary people to ensure that they can reach their full potential and enable them to fully grasp the opportunities available to them. It is therefore important that any Bill that is developed is as inclusive as possible from the outset and does not create barriers for anyone.

In November 2020, Scotland became the first country in the world to make period products free for all. There is now a legal duty² on local authorities in Scotland to ensure that free period products such as tampons and sanitary pads are available to anyone who needs them. The Bill also enshrines in law the free provision of period products in schools, colleges and universities which is already in place in Scotland. England and Wales have also introduced funding to provide free period products in schools and colleges. That leaves Northern Ireland as the only place in the UK where girls do not have access to free sanitary products in schools a situation which cannot and should not be allowed to continue.

Women's Vulnerability to Poverty

Women are more likely to be in receipt of social security benefits, more likely to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work and also more likely to be providing care either for children or other family members which limits their ability to carry out paid work. This contributes to keeping women's incomes generally lower over their lifetimes and therefore puts them at greater risk of poverty. These existing gender inequalities are also likely to be further worsened due to the Covid19 pandemic.

The social security system has a vital role to play in easing the impact of poverty on people and families. As the Covid19 pandemic has shown, people need to be able to rely on the social security system when times get tough and they are hit by unexpected costs or lost earnings. However, the welfare reform and austerity measures introduced have tended to limit the ability of the system to protect against poverty.³ Many of these changes have had more negative impacts on women than

² [Period Products \(Free Provision\) \(Scotland\) Bill - Parliamentary Business : Scottish Parliament](#)

³ Protecting dignity, fighting poverty and promoting social inclusion in devolved social security, Dr Mark Simpson, Ulster University, June 2018
http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/knowledge_exchange/briefing_papers/series_7/simpson060618.pdf

men. The House of Commons Library reported that 86% of the savings to the Treasury from the tax and benefit changes since 2010 will have come from women.⁴

Locally an analysis of the impact of the reforms by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC)⁵ showed that across most income levels the overall cash impact of the reforms is more negative for women than for men.

Research carried out by the Women's Regional Consortium on the impact of austerity and welfare reform on women⁶ and on the impact of Universal Credit on women⁷ paints an overwhelmingly negative picture of life for women on social security benefits including Universal Credit and for those in low paid work. Their lives are fraught with financial insecurity, worry, debt and in some cases cold and hunger. Period poverty is just one symptom of the wider impacts of poverty on women's lives.

Period Poverty Research

There is a lack of data on period poverty but research by Plan International UK⁸ has found that:

- one in ten girls (10%) said they had been unable to afford sanitary wear;
- one in seven girls (15%) said they had struggled to afford it;
- one in five girls (19%) have changed to a less suitable sanitary product due to cost;

⁴ Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes, Richard Cracknell, Richard Keen, Commons Briefing Papers SN06758, December 2017

<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06758/SN06758.pdf>

⁵ Cumulative impact assessment of tax and social security reforms in Northern Ireland, NIHRC, November 2019

https://www.nihrc.org/uploads/publications/Final_CIA_report_Oct_2019.pdf

⁶ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives, Women's Regional Consortium Northern Ireland, March 2019

<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Impact%20of%20Ongoing%20Austerity%20Women%27s%20Perspectives.pdf>

⁷ The Impact of Universal Credit on Women, Women's Regional Consortium Northern Ireland, September 2020

<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/node/150>

⁸ [Plan International UK's research on period poverty and stigma | Plan International UK \(plan-uk.org\)](#)

- more than one in ten girls (12%) has had to improvise sanitary wear due to affordability issues.

This research also highlighted some further statistics on taboo and stigma surrounding periods and menstruation which are important considerations in taking action in this area:

- nearly half (48%) of girls aged 14-21 in the UK are embarrassed by their periods;
- only one in five (22%) girls feel comfortable discussing their period with their teacher;
- almost three quarters (71%) of girls admitted that they have felt embarrassed buying sanitary products;
- 49% of girls have missed an entire day of school because of their period, of which 59% have made up a lie or an alternate excuse;
- 64% of girls have missed a PE or sport lesson because of their period, of which 52% of girls have made up a lie or excuse.

Locally, a survey carried out by Homeless Period Belfast⁹ with 200 school students across Northern Ireland found that:

- 74% have had to leave a lesson, school or miss a day entirely because of a lack of access to products;
- 53% have had to ask their teacher for period products due to not having any;
- 87% said that a lack of access to period products has negatively impacted their attention in class and/or school attendance;
- 91% have had to use toilet roll as a temporary measure at school;
- 89% stated that a lack of access to period products has affected their mental and emotional wellbeing.

⁹ [The Homeless Period Belfast - Home | Facebook](#)

Homeless Period Belfast also carried out a survey of 100 teachers across Northern Ireland and found that:

- 84% said that they have witnessed how the ongoing pandemic has exacerbated the need for period products in schools;
- 60% of teachers have had to buy period products out of their own wages.

In asking teachers how they felt about using their own money to stock period products in their classroom a teacher told Homeless Period Belfast: *“It made me realise that families are really struggling to buy basic products for their daughters.”*

In talking to students about how being able to access free period products in toilets in school would impact on their experience in school a student told Homeless Period Belfast: *“I wouldn’t miss as much class time and I would feel a lot happier knowing the products are in toilets so I don’t have to feel embarrassed approaching the school nurse or my teachers.”*

Evidence provided to Homeless Period Belfast as part of their research included the following testimony from a 15-year old school girl:

“I dread getting my period in school. I have to make up that I am sick so I can go home because I’m too embarrassed to tell my friends that I don’t have any money for pads and I can’t ask my mummy because she’s just lost her job and she’s already struggling to do a food shop for me and my younger brother. I use toilet roll instead and I’d much rather use that at home and risk leaking in my own house than in school where everyone could see.”

With these statistics in mind, the Women’s Regional Consortium supports the Homeless Period Belfast campaign not only to eradicate period poverty but also to consider the needs of all women and girls who are caught out when away from home without access to these essential items. We support Homeless Period Belfast in urging the Department of Education to follow the lead of England, Scotland and Wales in providing free period products so that all schools across Northern Ireland

can meet the needs of their female students. This will relieve the financial pressure on parents and ensure that every young person can learn and be their very best without the worry of their next pad or tampon holding them back.

Covid-19

New research from Plan International UK¹⁰ reveals the extent of period poverty in lockdown. It showed that almost a third (30%) of girls aged 14-21 have had issues either affording or accessing sanitary wear in lockdown. Over half (54%) of these girls have used toilet paper as an alternative to period products. However, lockdown has meant that toilet paper hasn't always been an option as one in five girls (20%) said their periods had been harder to manage due to the lack of toilet roll available.

Period products are freely available in schools in England, Wales and Scotland but with most schools and youth centres closed many girls have not had this option available to them. This research¹¹ found that of the 17% of girls who said they had been unable to or struggled to afford sanitary wear in lockdown:

- over a third (37%) did not try to access free sources of products;
- two-fifths (42%) of those said they did not know where to go to get them;
- a third (30%) felt too embarrassed to seek out a source of free products;
- 30% did not know who to ask.

Locally, Homeless Period Belfast have seen a significant increase in demand and requests for their period packs as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In April to June 2020 Homeless Period Belfast experienced three times the demand for their packs that they had in previous years.

Lockdown has undoubtedly made the problem of period poverty worse. While the issue of access to toilet roll has been highlighted during the pandemic little has been said about access to period products for women and girls even though these are essential products.

¹⁰ <https://plan-uk.org/period-poverty-in-lockdown#:~:text=New%20research%20from%20Plan%20International%20UK%20reveals%20true,by%20global%20children%E2%80%99s%20charity%20Plan%20International%20UK%20reveal.>

¹¹ Ibid

Research is also showing that women are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and in particular younger women who are more likely to be working in the sectors most affected by the lockdown such as retail, hospitality and travel. Many more women are therefore likely to have difficulty affording the period products they need. There will be an ongoing need to support these women in the longer term as we face what is likely to be a deep recession, growing job losses and increased reliance on food banks. With many local support services being cut families are under greater financial pressure than ever and this is likely to impact on women's financial wellbeing long into the future.

Actions Required:

- No girl's education should be disrupted by their period and girls should not miss education/opportunities as a result of not being able to access period products. A free period products scheme should be introduced in schools across Northern Ireland without delay to relieve the financial pressure on individuals and families purchasing these products.
- Given the impact of a decade of austerity cuts which have disproportionately impacted on women followed by the Covid-19 pandemic which is also impacting more on women there is a need to ensure widespread free access to period products to all those who need them.
- There is still a significant amount of shame and stigma around the issue of periods and therefore around period poverty also. Education and public awareness campaigns around periods and period poverty are needed to help ensure women and girls can talk about the issues they face without fear of shame or stigma.

3.0 Specific Comments

Section 1 – About You

1. Are you responding as:

☐ **An individual**

☒ **On behalf of an organisation – in which case go to Q3**

3. Please select a category which best describes your organisation (If you are responding as an individual, please go to section two)

☐ **Public sector body (NI/UK Government or local authority)**

☐ **School, college or university**

☐ **A commercial organisation (company, business)**

☐ **Representative organisation (trade union, professional association)**

☒ **Third sector (charitable, campaigning, social enterprise, voluntary, non-profit)**

☐ **Other (e.g. club's local groups, groups of individuals, etc.)**

4. Please choose one of the following: (Any data collected will only be used for the purpose of this consultation and will not be held when it is over).

☒ **I am content for this response to be attributed to me or my organisation**

☐ **I would like this response to be anonymous (the response may be published, but no name)**

☐ **I would like this response to be confidential (no part of the response will be published)**

Please provide the name of the organisation as you wish it to be published:

The Women's Regional Consortium

5. Please provide details of a way in which we can contact you if there are queries regarding your response. (Email is preferred but you can also provide a postal address or phone number. We will not publish these details)

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Section 2 - Your View on the Proposal

6. Which of the following best expresses your view of the proposed Bill?

- ☒ **Supportive**
- ☐ **Neutral (neither support nor oppose)**
- ☐ **Opposed**

7. Do you believe that sanitary products should be free for those who need them?

- ☒ **Yes**
- ☐ **No**
- ☐ **Unsure**

8. Do you agree that there should be a specific obligation on schools, colleges and universities to make sanitary products available for free?

- ☒ **Yes**
- ☐ **No**
- ☐ **Unsure**

9. Would you support a universal sanitary proposal that would ensure that those in need of sanitary products are given them?

- ☒ **Yes**
- ☐ **No**
- ☐ **Unsure**

10. Which best expresses your view concerning a free universal provision of sanitary products?

- ☒ **Free products available to anyone**
- ☐ **Limited use of the system (e.g. limiting the number of products that may be claimed each month)**
- ☐ **Available only to those on low incomes or in receipt of benefits**
- ☐ **There is no need for a universal scheme**

11. Do you have a view on which locations would be most suitable for dispensing free sanitary products?

- ☐ **GP surgeries**
- ☐ **Health centres**
- ☐ **Community hubs**
- ☐ **Women's Refuges**

☐ Homeless shelters

☐ Libraries

☒ All of the above

Other (please specify):

Women's Centres, Sure Start Offices, Women's sector charities/organisations that work with women/children, Foodbanks, Charities/Organisations that work directly with those on low incomes and in poverty, organisations that work with migrants and LGBTQ+ organisations.

12. Where will the Bill have the biggest positive impact?

☐ Equality of women and girls

☐ Relieving pressure on the NHS

☐ Schools (e.g. attendance rates)

☐ Workplaces (e.g. less women taking time off)

☐ Reducing the stigma of periods and period poverty

☒ All of the above

13. Do you think the coronavirus pandemic has made period products harder to access?

☒ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unsure

Yes, as stated in Section 2.0 the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have undoubtedly made the problem of period poverty worse. Women have been disproportionately adversely impacted by the pandemic given their concentration in

the sectors most affected such as retail, hospitality and travel. In addition, worsening job opportunities and the likelihood of a deep recession will put pressure on family and household budgets particularly for those who have lost their jobs. Women have already paid the price for a decade of harsh austerity cuts to social security benefits and are more likely to live in poverty. This is also the case for other marginalised groups such as disabled people, lone parents, LGBTQ+ people and migrants who in addition to austerity cuts will also now be feeling the impacts of the Covid19 pandemic.

14. Would you support a delivery scheme for those unable to leave their home (e.g. isolating, disability, etc.)

- ☒ **Yes**
- ☐ **No**
- ☐ **Unsure**

This should include help for the carers of those who are unable to leave their home. Of the 220,000 carers in Northern Ireland, 64% are women.¹²

15. Do you think local councils should be involved in the management and distribution of sanitary products?

- ☒ **Yes**
- ☐ **No**
- ☐ **Unsure**

¹² <https://www.carersuk.org/northernireland/news-ni/facts-and-figures>

Section 4 - General

22. Do you have any other comments or suggestions on the proposal?

In developing this Bill and the proposals around it the NI Assembly should take a co-design approach and work with a range of stakeholder organisations in the women's sector, LGBTQ+ and migrant sectors as well as schools, local councils, period poverty campaigners/charities and those directly impacted by period poverty to ensure that the proposals effectively meet the needs of women and girls in Northern Ireland.

23. If you do not agree with the proposed Bill can you provide an alternative that would address the issue of period poverty?

N/a