

Proposed Sanitary Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill

Page 2: About you

Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

on behalf of an organisation

Which of the following best describes you? (If you are a professional or academic, but not in a subject relevant to the consultation, please choose "Member of the public".)

No Response

Please select the category which best describes your organisation

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

Please choose one of the following; if you choose the first option, please provide your name or the name of your organisation as you wish it to be published.

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

Please insert your name or the name of your organisation. If you choose the first option above, this should be the name as you wish it to be published. If you choose the second or third option, a name is still required, but it will not be published.

Scottish Women's Convention

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.

Page 7: Your views on the proposal

Q1. Which of the following best expresses your view of the proposed Bill?

Fully Supportive

Q1. Which of the following best expresses your view of the proposed Bill?

Please explain the reasons for your response

The SWC welcomes the chance to respond to this vital consultation on eliminating a side of poverty that is continuously hidden yet remains so pervasive within our society. Taking steps to fight period poverty is one step forward in producing a strategic and cohesive framework that will take serious strides forward in tackling gender inequality. The continuing stigma attached to something as natural as menstruation, even without the added pressure of having to cope with not being able to afford essential items vital for the process is unwarranted, unjustified and unnecessary. The high level of shame felt by many is a clear indicator of gender inequality and outdated patriarchal notions that have no place in a progressive and modern society. This Bill has the potential to significantly alter attitudes towards provision of sanitary products. Women have noted that if this was provided to all women as well as the likes of education establishments throughout Scotland, this not only helps to alleviate "period stigma" but also issues related to poverty stigma rather significantly as a direct result. A common theme relating to sanitary provision is the health implications that this Bill has the potential to put right. For example, the SWC has spoken to many women throughout Scotland about the continuing rise in food bank usage. A central discussion around this, but one rarely mentioned in political dialogue, is hygiene poverty and reliance on food banks for daily products such as shampoo – or sanitary provision. "We don't really talk about hygiene poverty, but it's just as big a problem as not being able to eat." For instance, medical problems such as the likes of endometriosis and other health conditions have the potential to make periods even heavier, leading to further financial stress for many women already struggling. People must remember there are a wide variety of reasons for menstruation including post-natal bleeding and health issues. Additionally, rise in street based homelessness for women has meant even less access to products, forcing people to use objects come across such as old newspapers in an effort to provide some relief. Not only is this seriously damaging to health, it reinforces the overwhelmingly negative stigma attached to some of the most vulnerable people. Ongoing discrimination against women simply for a natural biological process also has the potential to creep into and harm other areas of life too. Coercive and controlling behaviour within a domestic abuse situation, for instance, can include bullying, manipulation and even abuse by exploiting the menstruation process. This includes the likes of forceful behaviour and limiting access to products as a form of invoking embarrassment and having the potential to seriously affect a woman's health.

Page 8: Universal provision of sanitary products

Q2. Do you think a universal, card-based system (modelled on the c-card system for free condoms) would be an effective means of providing sanitary products for free to those who need them?

Please explain the reasons for your response

Yes. Universality of products is an extremely important point. In order to tackle stigma related to these issues, it must be emphasized that products should be free and accessible to all. "Period poverty", or "the hidden female side of poverty", is barely mentioned when it comes to discussions of tackling inequality in terms of gender and economic status. Many are unaware of how much such a routine monthly aspect can impact on someone's life and managing menstruation. It is hoped that in putting this Bill forth, it will encourage dialogue and debate on the subject. A common theme many women say they have heard is that sanitary products are not that expensive. Given that so many women are struggling to cope as it is, this simply adds another dimension to the ever widening economic and social gap. Having to take time off can lead to divergences in educational attainment and work related stress. This is particularly acute for the likes of zero hour contracts, where many have to make a choice between suffering at work or calling in sick with fear they will get no pay or be put down the list of what shifts they can then do. This has an explicit effect on many women. More than just the menstruation dimension, it adds significant knock on effects onto employment, economics and educational-related matters. "How can something which affects such a huge proportion of the population not be taken more seriously?"

Q3. Which of the following best expresses your view in relation to a card-based system?

The card should be available to anyone; card-holders should have unlimited access to free sanitary products

Q3. Which of the following best expresses your view in relation to a card-based system?

Please explain the reasons for your response.

As stated before, given that menstruation affects all women, many have commented in consultation that access should be free and unlimited. This is seen as not only breaking down barriers in relation to stigma attached to periods but also has the opportunity to further debate and dialogue connected to gender equality in general.

Q4. Do you have a view on which locations would be most suitable for dispensing free sanitary products (e.g. GP surgeries, pharmacies, community centres, health clinics)?

In relation to dispensing of products, a number of women commented that the likes of GP surgeries would be extremely beneficial. It was felt that given that most feel comfortable around their own doctors and within their own local surgery, this would be seen as an advantageous place for those who may feel hesitant to ask for access to items in other surroundings. Others noted food banks, noting the outreach this had to those most in need of assistance. A number also mentioned sexual health clinics, however, it was noted that this had to also be seen in light of rural locations where access may be harder given geography in more rural localities.

Page 11: Schools, colleges and universities

Q5. Do you agree that there should be specific obligations on schools, colleges and universities to make sanitary products available for free (via dispensers in toilets)?

Yes

Please explain the reasons for your response

Young women can be particularly hesitant when it comes to sanitary products. This not only comes down to menstruation-related stigma, but also fear of being seen as "poor" by fellow students. In addition, the SWC has heard from many young women around period education which is patchy in many areas. For example, gendering sexual education classes for menstruation not only leads to males believing it is something that shouldn't be discussed, but also socialises females into seeing it as something that should just "be dealt with". Inclusive education should be implemented with a requirement for all schools to take a proactive approach to education about menstruation. Vulnerable young women can feel intimidated through the stigma that is often attached. The education of these young women is at risk if support is not provided. Many young women have talked about feeling "ashamed" and "unsure of what to do" when getting their periods, especially coming from domestic situations where it is not discussed. As discussed previously, it can lead to days having to be taking off. This has serious implications for the education of young women, those from more lower class backgrounds already find themselves at a disadvantage within educational attainment without the added burden of this problem. In addition, not having available funds to buy products means situations have been encountered where items such as toilet paper is used in absence of proper items. "Young girls have enough to deal with these days without the added burden of this."

Page 12: Personal experience (questions 6 and 7 are for individual respondents only)

Q6. Have you ever struggled to access or afford sanitary products during menstruation? (e.g. financial barriers, unexpected circumstances, health issues)

No Response

Q7. If sanitary products were available for free, which of the following would apply to you?

No Response

Page 14: Financial implications

Q8. Taking account of both costs and potential savings, what financial impact would you expect the proposed Bill to have on:

	Significant increase in cost	Some increase in cost	Broadly cost-neutral	Some reduction in cost	Significant reduction in cost	Unsure
(a) Government and the public sector (e.g. local authorities, the NHS)		X				
(b) Colleges and universities		X				
(c) Businesses (including suppliers/retailers of sanitary products)			X			
(d) Individuals (including consumers of sanitary products)					X	

Please explain the reasons for your response

Women throughout Scotland have spoken about the disproportionate impact of many aspects of life which continue to see them pushed into poverty at overwhelmingly higher levels than men. Continuous cycles of low wages, exploitative contracts and ongoing welfare reform all affect women on a level that cannot be looked upon as anything other than gender inequality. Any increases in costs should be viewed in tandem with the potential that free accessibility has on widening dialogue in relation to menstruation, and on gender equality as a whole.

Q9. Are there ways in which the Bill could achieve its aim more cost-effectively (e.g. by reducing costs or increasing savings)?

No Response

Page 16: Equalities

Q10. What overall impact is the proposed Bill likely to have on equality, taking account of the following protected characteristics (under the Equality Act 2010): age, disability, gender re-assignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex, sexual orientation?

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Positive

Please explain the reasons for your response

Anything which seeks to alleviate the continuous discrimination that many face, simply because of a human aspect of their gender is extremely beneficial in advancing equality within this country. Many women have spoken out about the positive aspects that the free, accessible provision of something seen as so simple in society as basic hygiene products can have on so many people.

Q11. In what ways could any negative impact of the proposed Bill on equality be minimised or avoided?

No Response

Page 18: Sustainability

Q12. Do you consider that the proposed Bill can be delivered sustainably i.e. without having likely future disproportionate economic, social and/or environmental impacts?

Yes

Please explain the reasons for your response:

Given that it is many of those that are the most vulnerable in society who would benefit from free access to sanitary provision, any future financial implications should be looked at in regards to the advantageous and long-term aspects. As mentioned previously, encouragement of dialogue around menstruation, heightened awareness by employers and educational establishments, as well as the health benefits for many all contribute to these aspects. For instance, many of those struggling to get by are single mothers, finding themselves in situations where they have extremely limited finances. This can have the double effect of not only having to choose between one's own hygiene and feeding children but increase expense as they do not want to see their own daughters go without sanitary provision for fear of health implications. Having to choose between basic hygiene and eating is not a choice that should be having to be made in a society that strives to be progressive and fair.

Page 19: General

Q13. Do you have any other comments or suggestions on the proposal?

Continued use of campaigns to alleviate stigma around menstrual health for women, as well as funding to ensure ease of access to free products is essential. The humiliation and health implications felt by many women is illustrative of the stigma still attached to women and one of their most basic health needs.

We welcome the increase in dialogue within the media and in general over period poverty that this proposed Bill has generated. Ensuring that it is never far from the news consistently means that this can be ended along with the stigma. This is particularly acute for younger women who are already going through so much growing up without the added problem of difficulty in accessing sanitary products as well.