Framing Period Poverty:

An Analysis of the Limitations of the UK Government's Policy Strategy for Menstrual Equity

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ABSTRACT

Menstrual inequity is a pervasive, yet neglected, structural injustice that hinders the physical, sexual, reproductive, mental, social and emotional health of menstruators (Boyers *et al*., 2022; Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025). Growing awareness of extreme period poverty and menstrual inequity in LMICs has triggered increased attention to the needs of menstruators in LMICs. However, despite an increase in menstrual policy, trends show that LMICs are now experiencing the negative effects of commodified menstrual concealment, which were predominantly experienced in HICs. Thus, a greater focus on the limitations of menstrual policy is necessary, for both LMICs and HICs. However, menstrual equity literature is limited on interrogating the role of governmental policy for achieving menstrual equity and whilst Critical Menstruation Studies (CMS) conceptualises a poststructuralist, feminist understanding of menstrual equity, there is limited practical applications of this. Therefore, this dissertation applies a CMS framework to UK governmental policy to interrogate how the framing of period poverty in policy is limited for achieving the aims of menstrual equity, contributing to menstrual equity literature by examining the governmental role in menstrual inequity, and contributing to CMS literature by applying the framework in a practical context. This research adopts Carol Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to be" (Bacchi, 2012; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) policy analysis framework to apply the CMS framework onto two key policies in the UK Government's menstrual policy strategy: The 2021 removal of VAT on menstrual products and the 2019 updated menstrual education curriculum. My research finds that UK governmental policy, informed by neoliberalism, frames period poverty as individualised, disembodied and decontextualised. This framing does not adequately challenge the structural causes of menstrual inequity, and instead reaffirms the culture of concealment. Thus, the framing perpetuates menstrual stigma, maintains the requirement of extensive self-policing by menstruators, disregards the needs of menstruators, and adheres to the single-use product mandate, exacerbating environmental harm; ultimately failing to advance menstrual equity. This research finds suggestive evidence that UK governmental

policy needs to reframe the issue of period poverty to produce policy that facilitates change for menstruators. Thus, this dissertation provides a framework for interrogating menstrual policy to ensure that it is considerate, informed, sustainable, and effective at advancing menstrual equity.

Word Count: 9999

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BAME: Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

BIPOC: Black, Indigenous and other Persons Of Colour

CMS: Critical Menstruation Studies

EU: European Union

HIC: Higher Income Country

LMIC: Lower- and Middle Income Country

MCI: Menstrual Concealment Imperative

MHM: Menstrual Hygiene Management

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

NHS: National Health Service

UN: United Nations

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

VAT: Value-Added Tax

WASH: Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

WPR: What's the Problem Represented to be

INTRODUCTION

i. Period Poverty and Menstrual Equity

Period poverty is the 'lack of sufficient resources needed to manage menses' (Casola *et al*., 2022: 375), such as the lack of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities, menstrual supplies, and menstrual education. Experienced in both high-income countries (HICs) and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) by millions of menstruators, period poverty adversely affects physical and mental health, limits rights, and disrupts lives (Flinders & Lowery, 2023). Period poverty is both a product and a perpetuator of menstrual inequity, a structural injustice in which non-menstruating bodies are privileged, hindering the physical, sexual, reproductive, mental, social and emotional health of menstruators (Boyers *et al*., 2022; Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025). Menstrual inequity and period poverty are seldom addressed due to prevalent menstrual stigma, the negative perceptions 'ranging from mild disgust to overpowering revulsion' (Bobel, 2019: 221) of menstruation, and menstrual illiteracy, the lack of knowledge of menstruation (UN Women, 2024a; Boyers *et al*., 2022). Menstrual stigma, positioning menstruators as unclean and unfeminine (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2020) promotes what Karen Houppert conceptualised as the 'culture of concealment' (Bobel, 2019; Wood, 2020), in which menstruators adhere to a strict menstrual mandate to present as non-menstruating, undergoing severe self-surveillance and policing, thereby privatising menstrual concerns.

Despite the culture of concealment typically forcing menstruation into the private sphere, a growing awareness of extreme period poverty in LMICs (Barrington *et al*., 2021; UN Women, 2024b), has encouraged an engagement with period poverty globally, with 2015 titled "The Year of the Period" (Gharib, 2015). For example, Niger introduced a National Gender Policy and Sectoral Programme for Water, Hygiene and Sanitation, allocating funding for menstrual hygiene, Kenya began distributing free menstrual products in schools in 2017, and countries such as India, Jamacia, Lebanon, Malaysia, Nicaragua & Uganda have lowered or scrapped added tax on menstrual products (UN Women, 2024b). However, despite this progress,

trends show that LMICs are experiencing the negative effects of commodified menstrual concealment, predominantly experienced in HICs (Barrington *et al*., 2021). Therefore, there is a need to interrogate why existing menstrual governmental policies are limited for challenging menstrual stigma and addressing menstrual inequity.

The aim of menstrual policies should be 'menstrual equity', coined by lawyer and menstrual activist Jennifer Weiss-Wolf to develop an alternative advocacy basis to the health, hygiene, or human rights framework (2020). Whilst Weiss-Wolf's initial conception of menstrual equity was 'safe and affordable and available' (Weiss-Wolf, 2017: 7) menstrual products, the term currently signifies the broader concept (Crawford & Waldman, 2022; Weiss-Wolf, 2020) that 'people who menstruate should be able to freely manage one's menstrual cycle safely, with dignity, and free of discrimination' (Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025: 67). Therefore, menstrual equity is the framing shift of menstruation from the 'monstrous to merely different' (Young, 2005: 117), encompassing a responsive and attentive healthcare response to menstrual health, fully informed and agential menstruators, the elimination of menstrual stigma, and appropriate accommodations in schools and workplaces (Weiss-Wolf, 2020).

ii. Menstrual Inequity in the UK

Period poverty exists in the UK, evidenced by how 'one in ten girls and women aged between 14 and 21 were unable to afford menstrual products' (Flinders & Lowery, 2023: 253) in the UK. The UK adopts a product-centric framing to address period poverty: VAT on menstrual products was abolished in 2021 (Boyers *et al*., 2022), the NHS and schools supply free menstrual products (Flinders & Lowery, 2023), and Scotland signals a new era (Crawford & Waldman, 2021) as 'the first country to make period products free for all' (Boyers *et al*., 2022: 2). The UK has implemented the End Period Poverty initiative, a 'wider strategy to make sanitary products affordable and available' (HM Treasury, 2021: para.4), which included the establishment of the "Period Poverty Task Force", which brought together 'government, business and third sector' (Flinders & Lowery, 2023: 254) organisations, including the corporation Proctor & Gamble, who have a 25% share of the global menstrual

product market (Crawford & Waldman, 2022). As such, the policy strategy aligns with a neoliberal understanding of menstrual equity. Neoliberalism is the hegemonic discourse that 'human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework' (Harvey, 2007: 2). Under a neoliberal interpretation of menstrual equity, the subject is instructed to consume (menstrual products) to self-transform (into a concealed menstruating body) to assimilate (with non-menstruating bodies). Thus, the UK's menstrual policy strategy follows a neoliberal understanding that menstrual equity is achievable through greater concealment, primarily by increasing the accessibility of products (Bobel & Fahs, 2020), echoing Weiss-Wolf's starting assessment. Therefore, the UK, adopting a neoliberal framing, is a strong focus for analysing the limitations of the framing of menstrual policies for achieving menstrual equity.

iii. Research Question and Structure

This thesis aims to examine how current menstrual policies are limited for achieving menstrual inequity, asking: In what ways are the current framings of menstrual policies in the UK unfit for achieving menstrual equity? In chapter 1, a menstrual equity literature review reveals a gap of an interrogation of the framing of menstrual policy in the UK. In chapter 2, the theoretical framework of Critical Menstruation Studies (CMS) is outlined, a poststructuralist account, problematising menstrual stigma instead of menstruation. Iris Marion Young's 'Social Connection Model' (Young, 2006) is additionally embedded in the framework, as an account in which shared responsibility for structural injustice is distributed according to agency, and thus as a facilitator of change, the UK Government should address menstrual inequity. Next, the methodology of Carol Bacchi's poststructuralist 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR) policy analysis (Bacchi, 2012), is established, in which two policies, the abolition of VAT on menstrual products and the current menstrual education curriculum, are the focus. These two policy framings are analysed in chapters 3 and 4 respectively, revealing that the UK's policy framing for period poverty problematises an inaccessibility to products and a lack of biological knowledge, which both perpetuate the

culture of concealment and are therefore limited in dismantling menstrual stigma. This dissertation concludes that policies that follow a neoliberal understanding of menstrual equity uphold the culture of concealment, and thus cannot adequately achieve menstrual equity. Therefore, menstrual equity should be reframed in UK governmental policy, providing suggestive evidence that the framing of menstrual equity in menstrual policies contributes to the limited effectiveness of menstrual policies globally. To disrupt the trajectory of further embedding the culture of concealment, particularly for LMICs, menstrual policy framing needs to be interrogated with a CMS framework to ensure that policy is capable of advancing menstrual equity.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores two key branches of menstrual equity literature: Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) which adopts a product-centric definition of menstrual equity, and a CMS framework, a poststructuralist, feminist account that centres the social construction of menstrual inequity. An MHM approach is limited by positioning menstrual equity as greater concealment, and CMS literature reveals a gap in its application to a policy context. Therefore, this research aims to address these limitations by adopting a CMS framework to interrogate the limitations of the framing of menstrual policy in the UK for achieving menstrual equity.

1.1 Menstrual Hygiene Management

Menstrual equity measures predominantly concentrate on MHM in LMICs (Bobel, 2019; Sommer *et al*., 2015; Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025). MHM focuses on the 'provision of puberty guidance, sanitary materials, and water and sanitation facilities' (Sommer *et al*., 2015: 1302), typically for school-aged menstruators (ActionAid, 2025b; UN Women, 2024b). MHM measures emphasis the exclusion from education as a detrimental effect of menstrual inequity (Barrington *et al*., 2021; Bowen-Viner, Symonds & Watson, 2022), and thus greater product accessibility is a central aspect of MHM as menstruators need to conceal their menstruation for educational opportunities (Barrington *et al*., 2021; Bowen-Viner, Symonds & Watson, 2022). Therefore, MHM measures aligns with a neoliberal understanding of menstrual equity as a dignified, implied concealed, menstruation (Sommer *et al*., 2015), a framing used by NGOs such as 50 Cents Period, The Cup, Femme International, the Cup Effect (Bobel, 2019) and ActionAid (ActionAid, 2025a). Through the focus on extreme period poverty in LMICs, MHM approaches encourage a uniting 'of academics, donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), United Nations agencies, grassroots women's organisations, multinational feminine hygiene companies, and social entrepreneurs' (Sommer *et al*., 2015: 1302). Therefore, MHM literature assumes menstrual equity as

greater product accessibility, and facilities greater awareness of menstrual inequity on the global stage.

Menstrual equity literature in HICs have adopted the emphasis on product accessibility of MHM, applying it to HICs that are ‘overdue addressing the menstruation-related needs of girls’ (Brown *et al*., 2022: 2). This research primarily offers intersectional analyses of menstrual inequity in HICs. For example, Casola *et al*. stresses menstrual inequity as racialised, greatly impacting BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other persons of colour) menstruators in America (2022), whilst De Benedictis emphasises austerity as a driver of period poverty in the UK, marginalising impoverished menstruators (2023). Both accounts situate period poverty as a health risk, as prolonged use of products can ‘increase skin-chafing, disruption of vaginal flora, and intravaginal toxin overgrowth’ (Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025: 65) and a source of greater marginalisation for BICOP and impoverished menstruators. This analysis is essential for nuanced, intersectional understandings of menstrual inequity.

Menstrual equity literature in both LMICs and HICs rarely interrogate the framing of menstrual equity in the policy initiatives they promote. However, the framing of menstrual equity as achievable through greater product access in LMICs has led to research on menstrual experiences in LMICs detailing a ‘pressure to carry on with expected activities while concealing menstruation’ (Barrington *et al*., 2021: 25), reflecting the menstrual mandate of endurance of ‘discomfort or pain to maintain participation in work or other activities during menstruation’ (Barrington *et al*., 2021: 25) in HICs. Therefore, there is a clear limitation of the framing of menstrual equity in menstrual policies in both LMICs and HICs, as this menstrual mandate of enduring menstrual pain to uphold concealment is sustained. Despite this, there is limited literature interrogating the framing of menstrual policies. Instead, it is understood that menstrual equity is the wider dispersion of single-use menstrual products, namely disposable pads and tampons, as illustrated by Casola *et al*’s recommendations of donation sites, resource networks for menstrual products, and tax-free

products and free products (2022). This uninterrogated assumption has led to ‘little improvement in reproductive health literacy or access to effective treatments for related conditions, or meaningful reduction in stigma and associated societal inequalities’ (King, 2024: 2072). Therefore, whilst crucially raising global awareness of menstrual inequity, current literature on MHM and product-based understandings of menstrual equity do not adequately interrogate the framing of menstrual equity in policies, instead assuming that menstrual equity is greater concealment.

1.2 Critical Menstruation Studies

CMS scholars interrogate a product-based definition of menstrual equity by examining the structures, such as the patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism that uphold menstrual equity (Bobel, 2020). Through this lens, a product-based definition of menstrual equity is limited as it positions menstrual inequity as ‘best solved through consumption’ (Bobel & Fahs, 2020: 971), thereby maintaining menstrual capitalism, the interaction of ‘profit motives’, ‘the history of stigma and shame around menstruation’ and the ‘technological advances that simultaneously enhance management of menstruation while increasing scrutiny of the menstruating body’ (Crawford & Waldman, 2022: 172). Therefore, CMS literature offers a framework in which to critically analyse understandings of menstrual equity.

However, CMS approaches can be ‘overly academic, even preciously abstract’ (Bobel, 2019: 212) and ‘largely conceptual’ (Bobel & Fahs, 2020: 958), with a CMS framework rarely implemented in a practical, policy context (Barrington *et al*., 2021), undervaluing the role that public policy can have in ‘promoting norm evolution’ (Olson *et al.*, 2022: 4) through the ability to ‘actively challenge and denounce’ (Olson *et al.*, 2022: 4) menstrual stigma. However, in a recent study, Olson *et al*. applied a CMS framework to an interrogation of the framing of menstrual policies in India, Kenya, Senegal and the United States, finding that they did not disrupt ‘the status quo of the pernicious control of menstruators’ bodies’ focusing instead on ‘management and concealment’ (Olson *et al*., 2022: 18). This critical review of the framing of

policy initiatives thus recognises the role policy plays in facilitating change, whilst interrogating the framing of menstrual policy through a CMS lens. Therefore, this research aims to similarly implement a CMS framework in a policy context, to interrogate how current menstrual policy framings are limited for achieving menstrual equity. However, this research focuses on the UK, to critically analysis the limitations of a neoliberal understanding of menstrual equity in policy.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Critical Menstruation Studies

CMS emerges from menstrual activism within second-wave feminism and environmentalist movements in the 1970s, centred around the promotion of reusable or biodegradable menstrual products (Kotler, 2018). Menstrual activism encompasses two schools of thought: feminist-spiritualists and radical menstrual activists. The former aligns with the sexual difference tradition, drawing ‘strength from their identities as women’ (Bobel, 2010: 167), by celebrating menstruation as a ‘sacred [and] honourable’ (Bobel, 2010: 158) ‘rite of passage’ (Bobel, 2010: 11) for women. However, this essentialist view of menstruation is a ‘false assumption of the unity of women’ (Bobel, 2010: 156), as not all women menstruate, and not just women menstruate. This critique informs radical menstrual activists, like Marie Abbondanza, Yonah EtShalom and Bloodsisters (Bobel, 2010), who ‘refuse to equate menstruation with womanhood’ (Bobel, 2010: 12). This school is guided by Judith Butler’s critique that positioning the subject of feminism as “woman” reaffirms the gender binary feminism claims to wish to dismantle (Butler, 2007). Therefore, they refer to “menstruator” as the subject of menstrual inequity, as an alternative to the gender-binary affirming label, “woman”. This translates Butler’s principles into practice, as the gender binary is strengthened when biological processes like menstruation are ‘held up as proof of sexual difference’ (Bobel, 2010: 166). This follows Diana Fuss’s notion that feminist action is ‘the working knowledge that changes in social, economic, political, and historical contexts produce’ (Bobel, 2010: 168) gendered differences. Thus, this thesis uses menstruators as the primary subjects of menstrual inequity to implement Butler’s gender-binary challenging theory.

CMS scholars adopt a poststructuralist feminist lens, questioning how ‘systems of power and knowledge are built’ (Bobel, 2010: 3) and therefore ‘reject the construction of menstruation as a problem’ (Bobel, 2010: 7) that relies ‘on women’s resilience and endurance’ (Carneiro,

2021: 722). To illustrate, a CMS framework regards menstrual illiteracy as indicative of 'the power of misogyny and stigma to suppress knowledge production' (Bobel, 2010: 1). As such, period poverty is conceptualised as 'a multidisciplinary social construct impacted by multiple layers of oppression' (Casola *et al*., 2022: 375), rather than an isolated phenomenon. An inaccessibility to menstrual products is interpreted as 'part of a complex system' (Bobel, 2019: 365), demonstrated by Gloria Steinem in her 1978 article "If Men Could Menstruate", which speculates that if men menstruated, 'sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free' (1978: 354), illustrating the gendered nature of menstrual inequity. To conduct a poststructuralist interrogation of knowledge production, this thesis analyses the framing of menstrual policy, rather than the implementation.

2.1.2 The Social Connection Model

This thesis adopts Iris Marion Young's 'Social Connection Model' to inform the analytical focus. Young's model proposes that structural injustice, a 'specific kind of moral wrong' (Young, 2011: 44), is caused by individuals and institutions acting within accepted norms, understood as 'implicit rules' (Young, 2011: 55) followed through habit, constraint or perceived advantage (Young, 2011), and whilst actors may not consciously cause harm, this does not reduce responsibility (Lim, 2020). Menstrual inequity is a structural injustice as menstrual norms of stigmatisation result in manufacturers producing single-use products, advertisements presenting bloodless representations of menstruation, and menstruators' adoption of the menstrual mandate to avoid stigmatisation, or violence (Bobel, 2019). This reinforcement of the culture of concealment is unjust, as for menstruators, 'options are unfairly constrained and they are threatened with deprivation, while others derive significant benefits' (Young, 2011: 52), as they undergo expensive and demanding self-policing to adhere to the menstrual mandate, while non-menstruators adhere to it naturally. All agents who uphold structural injustice share responsibility in addressing injustice, which is distributed according to agency (Young, 2006). As menstruators, notably marginalised menstruators facing classed, racialised, and ableist conceptions of femininity and hygiene,

have limited agency to challenge menstrual inequity, other agents, such as manufacturers, advertisers, and governments hold greater responsibility. Thus, this thesis centres the UK government for bearing greater responsibility to challenge menstrual norms than menstruators. This does not diminish the responsibility of menstruators to challenge injustice where possible, such as through opening dialogues on menstruation or using reusable products.

2.2 Methodology

This research deploys a desk-based, qualitative methodology, adopting Carol Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to be" (WPR) policy analysis framework to interrogate two landmark policies in the UK Government's menstrual policy strategy: the abolition of the "tampon tax" (HM Treasury, 2021) and the updated relationships, sex and health education curriculum (Department for Education, 2019). As recommended by CMS scholar Sally King (King, 2024), Bacchi's poststructuralist WPR framework is suited for CMS-informed policy analysis, as WPR's emphasis on the influence of policy on public knowledge (Bacchi, 2012) means both frameworks 'reflect critically on the deep-seated assumptions' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016: 17) of menstrual equity framings.

Bacchi's WPR framework targets problematisation in policy, as 'what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic' (Bacchi, 2012: 21). Therefore, this analytical framework aligns with the aims of this dissertation as it interrogates how menstrual inequity is framed within policy, and how this framing impacts menstrual equity strategies. I have adapted Bacchi's six question sets for analysis (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) into five themes, to align with the structure of my research: (1) problem framing; (2) framing construction; (3) framing production; (4) effects and; (5) alternative framings. These thematic groupings are as follows:

1. What's the "problem" represented to be in a specific policy or policies?

2. What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the "problem"? What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences?
3. How has this representation of the "problem" come about? How and where has this representation of the "problem" been produced, disseminated and defended?
4. What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the "problem"?
5. Can the "problem" be conceptualised differently? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?

WPR uses a policy document as the 'starting point' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016: 18), with analysis drawn from public, academic and research sources. I chose two policy documents for their significance as revelatory case studies: 'cases that are original in some aspect' (Clark, Foster & Bryman, 2019: 117).

First, the UK Government abolished VAT on menstrual products in 2021 (Flinders & Lowery, 2023), terminating the tampon tax, a VAT on menstrual products whilst other "basic necessities" have a tax-exempt status (Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025). The policy, whilst the centre of the menstrual equity campaign in the UK (De Benedictis, 2023), has 'not been the focus of extensive academic inquiry' (Flinders & Lowery, 2023: 238). Therefore, this policy was chosen as a prominent, yet under-researched, menstrual policy.

In 2019, the menstrual education guidance was updated to mandate menstrual education (Bowen-Viner, Symonds & Watson, 2022). Menstrual education has a 'direct impact on young peoples' quality of life, academic, and professional performance' (Brown *et al*., 2024: 10), with curriculums influencing understandings of menstruation (Olsson *et al*., 2024). De Benedictis critiques the framing of period poverty as an issue 'experienced by girls, and largely schoolgirls in the UK' (De Benedictis, 2023: 886) as it obscures 'the structural components' (De Benedictis, 2023: 887) by taking the school girl out of her contextual background. Whilst a focus on a school-based policy could drive this narrative, CMS

scholars, namely Chris Bobel, believe ‘menstrual literacy is the best vaccine against body shame and neoliberal quick fixes’ (2019: 314), and therefore, menstrual education is a necessary focus. As this is desk-based research, there are no ethical considerations.

CHAPTER 3: THE TAMPON TAX

3.1 Policy Context

The focus of this policy analysis is the removal of 5% VAT on menstrual products (HM Treasury, 2021), known as the “tampon tax”: the “luxury” tax rate on menstrual products, whilst non-essential products, such as ‘crocodile meat’ (Coryton & Russell, 2021: 2), and ‘male shaving products’ (Flinders & Lowery, 2023: 242) are tax-free “necessities” (Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025). VAT on menstrual products was reduced from 17.5% to 5% in 2001 (Coryton & Russell, 2021), after being first tabled by Labour backbench MP Christine McCafferty in 1998 (Childs & Withey, 2006). Due to EU regulations, the final 5% could not be scrapped (Flinders & Lowery, 2023). Activist Laura Coryton reestablished the issue, with her 2015 petition mobilising ‘large public protests outside Downing Street’ (Flinders & Lowery, 2023: 254). The final 5% VAT was abolished in 2021, following the UK’s exit from the EU (Flinders & Lowery, 2023).

3.2 Problem Framing

This policy represents the problem of period poverty as a gendered, EU-imposed tax on menstrual products, and as part of a wider menstrual inequity problem of inaccessible menstrual products. The problem is represented as EU-imposed, as the policy is said to be ‘made possible’ by ‘freedom from EU law’ (HM Treasury, 2021: para. 3). The policy is positioned within the End Period Poverty initiative (HM Treasury, 2021), which aims ‘to make sanitary products affordable and available for all women’ (HM Treasury, 2021: para.4), alongside the period poverty task force (Mordaunt & Government Equalities Office, 2019), a free product scheme in English secondary schools and colleges, and provision of free menstrual products through NHS England (Flinders & Lowery, 2023). This initiative recognises menstrual inequity, as the task force outlines the aims of ‘tackling stigma and education’ (Mordaunt & Government Equalities Office, 2019: para.5) and addressing the ‘unnecessary adversity’ (Mordaunt & Government Equalities Office, 2019: para.11) for

menstruators. Thus the problem is represented as gendered, as the initiative is for women, and part of a greater problem of product inaccessibility, linked through the initiative aims to menstrual inequity. This problem representation is distinct from alternative framing of the tampon tax, such as McCafferty's campaign, which was 'not part of a wider feminist advocacy coalition' (Childs & Withey, 2006: 17), much less a menstrual inequity initiative, and tampon tax campaigns in the US (Crawford & Waldman, 2022), Canada (Scala, 2023) and Australia (James, 2022), which represent the problem as gender injustice, rather than menstrual inequity. Thus, the problem is represented as a gendered, EU-imposed tax which contributes to a wider issue of menstrual product inaccessibility.

3.3 Framing Construction

The problem representation, a tax that hinders menstrual product accessibility, presupposes that product accessibility is necessary for menstrual equity. Menstrual products are essential for menstrual management, as inaccessibility causes misuse or overuse of products, potentially resulting in 'infections that can progress to extremely painful pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) or require surgical intervention such as hysterectomy' (Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025: 69). CMS scholars further emphasis that products are required to adhere to the menstrual mandate of concealment, and thus product accessibility enables menstruators to 'access education and the economy, broader physical safety, and emotional and economic wellbeing' (Goldblatt & Steele, 2021: 117-118), thus protecting menstruators from stigmatisation and even violence (Bobel, 2019). Marginalised menstruators emphasis the need for product accessibility, as a study of the menstrual experiences of impoverished menstruators in the UK found that participants believed 'better access to products would have a significant influence' (Boyers *et al*., 2022: 14) on their experiences. Furthermore, college women experiencing product inaccessibility due to period poverty were found 'more likely to report moderate or severe depression' (Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025: 66) as product inaccessibility prevents 'access to full and equal educational opportunities' (Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025: 69). It is important to note that the problem representation assumes products as

single-use products, as the policy applied to ‘conventional period products, such as sanitary pads and tampons, and some reusable products’ (HM Revenue & Customs, 2023: para.3): the policy did not remove the 20% VAT (Huddleston & HM Treasury, 2024) on period pants, a clothing item designed to absorb menstrual blood. Thus, product, assumed single-use product, inaccessibility is necessary for menstrual equity, as significant dangers are posed to menstruators who cannot access products. However, the problem is represented as EU-imposed, thereby decontextualising product inaccessibility from its classed and gendered structured roots, instead problematising EU law.

The problem representation assumes that VAT hinders menstrual product accessibility. This is demonstrably true, as VAT adds an estimated ‘$20-$145’ (Crawford & Waldman, 2022: 28) to the cost of menstrual products over a lifetime in the US. This is a significant cost, particularly for impoverished menstruators. Furthermore, VAT implies that the product is not essential. When VAT is applied to products used to ‘manage an involuntary biological function’ (Crawford & Waldman, 2022: 28) and ‘purchased almost exclusively by women’ (James, 2022: 193), this signals that menstrual concerns, and broadly, women’s interests, are not important, bolstering an atmosphere in which menstrual concerns are overlooked. Thus, the assumption that VAT removal is necessary for menstrual equity is substantiated, as VAT hinders product accessibility; superficially through increased cost and symbolically through reflecting the disregard of menstrual concerns.

Therefore, the problem representation assumes that increased product accessibility is a necessary aim of menstrual equity, that VAT hinders product accessibility and that menstrual products are single-use. However, the policy remains silent on the causes of product inaccessibility, beyond the noted factor of the EU.

3.4 Framing Production

The problem representation originates from feminist activism, neoliberalism and consumerism, and pro-Brexit politicians. Framing the tampon tax as linked to menstrual

equity was proposed by feminist activists, such as Jennifer Weiss-Wolf. Weiss-Wolf centred her menstrual equity movement on the tax as a ‘visible and tangible’ (2020: 546) example of inequity, demonstrated ‘in a dollars-and-cents way’ (Crawford & Waldman, 2022: 57). This was necessitated by two factors: the nature of the movement and menstrual stigma. First, the menstrual equity movement was predominantly internet advocacy (Crawford & Waldman, 2022), and thus required a clear, mobilising cause. The focus on the tampon tax was effective in this regard, as period poverty was first featured in UK national newspapers in September 2016 (De Benedictis, 2023), following the internet campaign. Second, menstrual stigma cultivates the desire to obscure menstrual concerns. The tax focus devised a disembodied, bloodless way to discuss menstrual concerns, without directly publicising menstruation. This again proved effective, as efforts to remove the tampon tax are now embedded in the menstrual equity movement, as illustrated by Francesca Scala, who described the primary purposes of the movement: ‘tackle the tampon tax and fight menstruation inequalities’ (2023: 234). Thus the representation of the tampon tax as symbolic for menstrual equity emerges from feminist activism.

The representation of menstrual products as necessary for menstrual management originates from advertising narratives encouraging women to work during WWII (Freidenfelds, 2009; Kotler, 2018; Vostral, 2022), by positioning menstrual products as tools that grant access to the public sphere. Advertising narratives have historically constructed understandings of menstruation: corporation Kimberly-Clark established the representation of menstruation as a ‘hygienic crisis’ (Freidenfelds, 2009: 57), solvable through consumption. Today, advertising narratives present menstrual products as empowering (Kotler, 2018; Vostral, 2019) as they allow menstruators to fulfil the menstrual mandate of concealment, illustrated by the prominence of period product manufacturers Always in the tampon tax campaign news coverage (De Benedictis, 2023). This exemplifies neoliberal feminism. Catherine Rottenberg defines neoliberal feminism as the reduction of gender inequality ‘from a structural problem into an individual affair’ (Rottenberg, 2018: 55). Therefore, gender

equality is framed as solvable through individual ‘participation in consumer culture’ (McRobbie, 2009: 1). In this context, menstrual inequity is solvable through increased product accessibility, to enable more menstruators to consume and adhere to the menstrual mandate. Thus, the representation of product accessibility as critical to menstrual equity originates from neoliberal advertising narratives.

Finally, the representation of the problem as EU-imposed, abstaining responsibility from structural causes, was facilitated by Brexit. The Leave camp adopted the tampon tax, as it symbolised ‘the impotence and inequalities they argue were structurally imposed by membership of the European Union’ (Flinders & Lowery, 2023: 251). For example, UKIP, a pro-Brexit, right-wing political party, supported the abolition of the tampon tax in their 2015 manifesto (UKIP, 2015). Therefore, the political aims of pro-Brexit politicians framed the problem as EU-imposed, decontextualising the issue from the structural causes of menstrual inequity.

Thus, the problem of menstrual inequity in this policy was ‘framed and legitimised by others’ (De Benedictis, 2023: 888), such as Brexit politicians, product manufactures, and activists. As a result, the problem representation reflects ‘broader political aims in the UK’ (De Benedictis, 2023: 889), such as Brexit and the neoliberal agenda. Feminist and neoliberal feminist forces narrowly focused menstrual aims on the tampon tax, positioning menstrual equity as a consumer-based demand for increased product accessibility, silencing wider issues of ‘menstruation, poverty, or social inequalities’ (De Benedictis, 2023: 889).

3.5 Effects

Bacchi conceptualises three categories of the effects of problem representations: discursive, the effect on knowledge of the problem; subjectification, the production of ‘specific kinds of subjects’ (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016: 23); and lived, the effect on lived experiences. Representing the problem of menstrual inequity as product inaccessibility has three central effects: whilst there is greater menstrual equity awareness, other menstrual equity policy is

sidelined; menstrual stigma remains unchallenged; and period poverty is individualised and decontextualised, disproportionately impacting marginalised menstruators.

3.5.1 Future Menstrual Equity Policy

The problem representation as linked to menstrual inequity creates a discursive effect of greater awareness of menstrual inequity. Similar campaigns that positioned the tax as a gender injustice, such as the US (Crawford & Waldman, 2022), Canada (Scala, 2023), and Australia (James, 2022) neglected menstrual concerns, such as 'period poverty or sustainable menstrual products' (Scala, 2023: 239). Conversely, the UK framing provided a necessary starting point for beginning 'more nuanced policy arguments' (Weiss-Wolf, 2022: 544) by raising awareness for menstrual inequity. However, to reach this position, the problem had to be simplified: the tampon tax exacerbates menstrual inequity. However, this problematisation overshadows other beneficial policies, notably the Tampon Tax Fund. The Fund, introduced in 2016 and withdrawn in 2022 following the repeal of the tampon tax, used menstrual product VAT to grant £86.25 million in funding to charities for women and girls (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport *et al*., 2023: Section 5.5.1), namely charities for 'marginalised groups and survivors of domestic abuse, sexual harassment and/or assault' (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2023: Section 5.5.1). Although 'favouring large charities' (Bagel, Jurga & Yates, 2020: 16) and controversially granting £250,000 to a pro-life charity (BBC News, 2017), the fund increased access to services and improved agency and physical and mental health management for beneficiaries (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2023), aligning with tax scholars Rita de la Feria and Miranda Steward's contention that increased product accessibility could be 'better achieved by taxing broadly and spending directly' (James, 2022: 211). This overshadowing was previously demonstrated in 2001, when plans for the NHS to provide free products were dismissed in favour of lowering VAT to 5% (Flinders & Lowery, 2023). Therefore, the problem representation of the tax as detrimental to menstrual equity can overshadow other measures

necessary for menstrual equity, especially for marginalised menstruators who are unlikely to benefit from a slight price decrease of menstrual products (Flinders & Lowery, 2023).

3.5.2 Menstrual Stigma

The problem representation of products as necessary for menstrual equity produces a discursive effect of reinforced product use to uphold the menstrual mandate, entrenching that 'menstruators require commodities of the market to address their needs' (Goldblatt & Steele, 2021: 121. This notion relies 'too heavily on a narrow consumerist lens' (James, 2022: 216) as products are represented as the solution (Bobel & Fahs, 2020), which alone cannot combat menstrual stigma (Bobel, 2019; Goldblatt & Steele, 2021). This bolsters menstrual capitalism, demonstrated by how the policy unintentionally 'boosted the profits of disposable product manufacturers by about £15 million per year' (King, 2024: 2072) without a substantial reduced cost for consumers. Thus, the problem representation presents a simplistic neoliberal solution to a complex structural injustice, which privileges manufacturers over menstruators and fails to overturn the menstrual mandate.

The problem representation maintaining the menstrual mandate of concealment produces a lived effect of sustained menstrual stigma, missing a valuable opportunity for greater awareness and instead breaking 'the silence to enable menstruators to silence their menstruation' (Bobel, 2019: 234). To illustrate, a fear of leaking, a consistent burden for menstruators (Boyers *et al*., 2022; Brown *et al*., 2024; Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025; Crawford & Waldman, 2022; Elston & Hipkiss, 2020; Tingle & Vora, 2019) is maintained, as problematising product inaccessibility still preserves the notion that through correct consumption, menstruation should be concealed (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2020). Without problematising this notion, menstruators continue a 'conditioned self-silencing of their needs and further perpetuation of a generational and societal spiral of silence' (Casola *et al*., 2022: 374). This burden produces 'detrimental consequences for girls' and women's self-esteem, body image, self-presentation, and sexual health' (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2020: 193), affecting all menstruators, as the culture of concealment was the most

cited menstrual restriction ‘across multiple populations’ (Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025: 69). Therefore, representing products as necessary for menstrual management upholds the culture of concealment, limiting destigmatisation action for menstrual equity.

By affirming the culture of concealment, the problem representation produces a subjectification effect that menstruators are still subject to the menstrual concealment imperative (MCI). The MCI, defined by CMS scholar Jill Wood refers to the voluntary disembodiment of menstruators from their menstruating bodies to be perceived as healthy, attractive, likeable, a “good” woman, clean (Wood, 2020) and even competent (Roberts *et al*., 2002). For example, 14 studies on menstrual experiences in HICs found participants chose products ‘based on whether it would conceal the users’ menstrual status’ (Barrington *et* al., 2021: 30), highlighting the dominance of the MCI. As the culture of concealment is upheld in the problem representation, the incentives, such as to prevent stigmatisation, remain. Thus, the continued MCI results in subjects who undergo extensive self-policing, an obedience to the patriarchy (Bartky, 2012), to ensure menstruation is ‘unobvious’ (Barton, 1942: 710). Therefore, by positioning products as the solution to menstrual equity, the problem representation produces disembodied subjects who undergo severe self-surveillance to present as non-menstruating, functioning to further conceal menstrual concerns.

The problem representation reinforces the dominance of single-use products, referred to as the single-use product mandate, producing a lived effect of environmental harm. Not only does the policy assume menstrual products are solely single-use products, by only removing the VAT for those products, but the unchallenged MCI reinforces the single-use product mandate. Single-use products are ‘designed to absorb fluids and odours, not be visible through one’s clothes, to be small enough to carry unobtrusively in one’s purse, and to be discretely discarded in a bathroom container’ (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2020: 184). As such, single-use products enable technological passing, in which menstruators use menstrual products to access a society where menstruation is highly stigmatised (Vostral,

2022). Therefore, single-use products fulfil the mandate of concealment through enabling technological passing, as opposed to reusable products, that require more visible methods of cleaning and disposal, as well as more contact with menstrual blood, a highly stigmatised substance. Thus, the single-use product mandate, as the only products that allow full concealment, is reinforced by the problem representation. However, single-use products produce 'prolific waste' (Bobel, 2021:1), as menstrual pads alone, in which 3,750 million are disposed of in Britain each year (Tingle & Vora, 2019) are 'packaged separately in plastic, lined in plastic to reduce leaking, and made with non-biodegradable, petroleum-based polyacrylate super-absorbent polymer gels' (Tingle & Vora, 2019: 20). Therefore, the problem representation entrenches the single-use product mandate, resulting in environmental harm.

3.5.3. Individualisation

By implying product inaccessibility is in part EU-imposed, and positioning menstrual inequity as individual product inaccessibility, the problem representation produces a discursive effect of individualised and decontextualised menstrual inequity. This produces a subjectification effect that marginalised menstruators remain subject to structural disadvantage. Menstrual inequity is upheld by gendered, racialised, classed and ableist political and economic structures (Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025; James, 2022; Flinders & Lowery, 2023), and thus, it disproportionately impacts marginalised menstruators (Carneiro, 2021), such as 'women with disabilities, from BAME communities, asylum seekers, refugees, and homeless women' (Flinders & Lowery, 2023: 253). To illustrate, austerity intensifies menstrual inequity for impoverished menstruators in the UK, as public WASH facilities, which impoverished menstruators rely on for menstrual management, are now either absent or rare in the community due to austerity (Boyers *et al*., 2022). The individualisation of menstrual equity in the problem representation further stigmatises marginalised menstruators, as neoliberal rhetoric of simple, consumerist fixes, such as increased menstrual product consumption, produces 'a form of indifference towards those who are understood as 'bad subjects'

perceived as unable to manage' (Dabrowksi, 2021: 90). Thus, menstrual inequity is depicted as 'a consequence of personal characteristics rather than an outcome of structural inequalities' (Dabrowkski, 2021: 98). As such, the policy does not address the specific needs of marginalised menstruators. For example, the removal of VAT is 'unlikely to be of significant use to women who were trapped in poverty' (Flinders & Lowery, 2023: 256). Therefore, whilst ostensibly addressing menstrual inequity, by decontextualising and individualising the injustice, the problem representation neglects to benefit marginalised menstruators.

Therefore, an analysis of the framing of the removal of VAT on menstrual products reveals that menstrual inequity is individualised and decontextualised by presenting menstrual equity as achievable through a consumerist solution. This upholds the culture of concealment, perpetuating environmental harm through the single-use product mandate, overshadowing policy initiatives that benefit marginalised menstruators, and maintaining the MCI, reinforcing the mental burden of menstrual concealment. Thus, this problem representation is unfit in this capacity for achieving menstrual equity.

3.6 Alternative Framing

The problem representation of menstrual inequity as decontextualised and individualised product inaccessibility, and thus the representation of menstrual equity as achievable through increased consumption of single-use products, can be disrupted by instead problematising the structures that produce or uphold product inaccessibility, such as menstrual capitalism, menstrual stigma, and austerity. A problem representation of menstrual capitalism would promote free product schemes and policies, such as the *Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act* of November 2020, which made Scotland the 'first country in the world to make period products free for all' (Flinders & Lowery, 2023: 257). This problem representation is supported by impoverished menstruators in the UK, who's most common request, 'often said unprompted' (Boyers *et* al, 2022: 13), was for free menstrual products. Whilst challenging the neoliberal 'hopes of a capitalist solution for a socially conscientious

menstrual management' (Vostral, 2019: 5), this representation would still not disrupt the culture of concealment. Alternatively, the problem representation could be menstrual stigma, proposed by CMS scholars (King, 2024; Roaf & Winkler, 2015), who contend that the through the dismantlement of the culture of concealment, issues such as product inaccessibility, 'may not exist' (Boyers *et al*., 2022: 15). This problem representation compassionately addresses menstruation (Vostral, 2019), by not reinforcing 'the norms of disciplined embodiment' (Bobel, 2019: 298), establishing a stronger, more sustainable foundation (Roaf & Winkler, 2015) for the development of menstrual policy. However, this representation may still overlook the needs of marginalised menstruators. Thus, the problem of menstrual inequity could be represented as austerity, as adopted by trade unions in the tampon tax campaign, who understood 'period poverty and its link to low pay and changes to the welfare system' (Flinders & Lowery, 2023: 254). This would prevent the individualisation of menstrual inequity, instead prioritising measures for marginalised menstruators, such as the Tampon Tax Fund and free product schemes.

CHAPTER 4: UPDATED MENSTRUAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

4.1 Policy Context

In 2019, the UK Government introduced a new Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education curriculum (Department for Education, 2019). Endorsed by leader of the #TamponTax campaign, Laura Coryton, as ‘fantastic’ (Coryton & Russell, 2021: 17), the curriculum specifically addressed menstrual health and stigma for the first time (Bowen-Viner, Symonds & Watson, 2022), with mandated education on menstrual well-being for both primary and secondary school pupils (Department for Education, 2019).

4.2 Policy Framing

This policy represents the problem of period poverty to be a lack of biological knowledge of menstruation as the curriculum has a biological and health focus (Brown *et al*., 2022; Bowen-Viner, Symonds & Watson, 2022). The aim of the policy is to ensure that both menstruators and non-menstruators are prepared for and aware of the menstruation (Department for Education, 2021), thereby contributing to menstrual equity aims. The curriculum includes ‘key facts about the menstrual cycle, including what is an average period, range of menstrual products and the implications for emotional and physical health’ (Department for Education, 2019: 31), emphasising the health focus. Teaching is encouraged to be integrated where appropriate (Department for Education, 2019), which for menstrual education, means integration with the national science curriculum, driving the biological focus. The problem is not represented to be a lack of practical knowledge of menstruation, as the curriculum does not discuss ‘the ways in which menstruation and menstrual prejudice may appear in young people’s everyday lives’ (Bowen-Viner, Symonds & Watson, 2022: 80). Thus, the problem is represented to be biological and health-based menstrual illiteracy.

4.3 Framing Construction

The problem representation assumes that menstrual literacy in schools is limited, and this impacts menstrual inequity. Studies have shown an ‘abundance of information requested by pupils’ (Brown *et al*., 2024: 10) on menstruation, thus suggesting limited menstrual literacy. However, Olsson *et al*. found that adolescent menstruators ‘demonstrate improved confidence with adequate menstrual education’ (2024: 356). This reflects the CMS notion that menstrual literacy empowers menstruators to challenge menstrual stigma by granting them tools to question menstrual myths and gain a stronger understanding of their bodies. Therefore, the representation correctly determines that menstrual literacy is lacking, yet is crucial for promoting the confidence of menstruators, and menstrual equity. As teachers are important facilitators of menstrual education (Crawford & Waldman, 2021), the problem representation justifiably situates menstrual education in schools as a necessary aspect for improving menstrual illiteracy. Therefore, the problem representation rightfully assumes that menstrual illiteracy is a necessary factor to address for menstrual inequity. However, the policy framing assumes that improving menstrual illiteracy is a low-effort endeavour. Whilst the RSE curriculum includes ‘facts about the full range of contraceptive choices, efficacy and options available’ (Department for Education, 2019: 29), it only briefly references acknowledgement of a ‘range of menstrual products’ (Department for Education, 2019: 31), without similar considerations of sustainability or usage. Furthermore, by comprising menstrual education as ‘key facts’ (Department for Education, 2019: 31), the policy frames menstrual education as ‘factual, focused on what happens and perceived as a ‘tick box’ lesson’ (Brown *et al*., 2024: 10). Therefore, the problem representation of menstrual illiteracy is not assumed to be a problem that requires careful consideration, despite problematising a lack of biological menstrual knowledge for menstrual inequity.

The problem representation assumes that increased biological knowledge of menstruation is the priority for increasing menstrual literacy. Biological knowledge of menstruation is currently limited, as illustrated by 53 out of 104 studies on menstrual experiences in HICs finding that participants ‘lacked sufficient, accurate knowledge about the biology of

menstruation' (Barrington *et al*., 2021: 28). This knowledge is paramount, as menstruation is a 'robust health marker' (Bobel & Fahs, 2020: 967), an 'important indicator' (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2020: 192), and a vital sign (Bobel, 2010; Bobel, 2019; Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Bobel, 2020; Sterling & Stubbs, 2020; Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2020), and thus menstruators require adequate knowledge of their bodies to understand menstruation, an important bodily process. Therefore, biological knowledge of menstruation enables menstruators greater understanding for an important health indicator, which empowers greater self-advocacy for menstruators of their menstrual health: a necessary task as women's health is 'more likely to be dismissed, or assumed to be psychosomatic in origin' (King, 2020: 291). Therefore, the problem representation rightfully situates increased biological menstrual literacy as necessary.

The problem representation presumes to know what menstruators want: biological knowledge. Conversely, CMS grounds menstrual education in being informed by menstruators, and school-aged menstruators are persistently found to favour practical knowledge of menstruation (Bobel, 2019; Brown *et al.*, 2022; Brown *et al.*, 2024; Olsson *et al*., 2024; Tingle & Vora, 2019). To illustrate, UK school-aged menstruators preferred receiving 'education from female teachers due to their lived experiences' (Brown *et al*., 2024: 5) and requested information on 'different products and how to use them; how to deal with cramps and hormonal changes; and discussion on the variation and individuality of the menstrual experience' (Tingle & Vora, 2019: 27). Therefore, the problem representation does not acknowledge that menstruators request practical knowledge over biological knowledge. Overall, the problem representation assumes biological knowledge as the priority for addressing menstrual illiteracy, and consequently menstrual inequity, which whilst a necessary endeavour, silences the requests of menstruators for embodied menstrual knowledge.

4.4 Framing Production

The problem representation of menstrual literacy as acknowledged but not prioritised derives from the culture of concealment omitting discussions of menstruation, thereby fostering a lack of interest in menstruation (Roaf & Winkler, 2015), resulting in menstrual illiteracy (Olsson *et al*., 2024). Due to the culture of concealment dismissing research on menstruation, there was no consensus on the purpose of menstruation until the 1930s (Freidenfelds, 2009). This manifested into indifference towards menstrual health (Freidenfelds, 2009) that continues today, as 14 studies of menstrual experiences in HICs documented that menstrual concerns were dismissed by healthcare workers (Barrington *et al*., 2021). This dismissal of menstruation as a valuable topic informs menstrual education in schools, as UK teachers relay that menstrual education is limited to one lesson (Brown *et al*., 2022) and school-aged menstruators perceive that 'teachers do not value the importance of lessons' (Brown *et al*., 2024: 6). This disregard meant previously, menstrual education was taught via the National Science Curriculum (Bowen-Viner, Symonds & Watson, 2022), driving the biological focus in the current curriculum. Therefore, the problem representation of menstrual illiteracy as not a priority originates from the culture of concealment diminishing the importance of menstrual discussions.

The culture of concealment further constructs the problem being represented as a lack of biological knowledge. The culture of concealment fosters an 'atmosphere of secrecy and shame' (Olsson *et al*., 2024: 356), dictating that menstruators should present as 'clean, leak-free and blemish-free' (Tingle & Vora, 2019: 10). This restricts shared knowledge of lived experiences of menstruation, instead permitting only disembodied representations of menstruation. A survey of UK teachers found that '23% were not comfortable teaching information about the menstrual cycle' (Brown *et al*., 2022: 4), and pupils noted that male teachers 'displayed feelings of discomfort' (Brown *et al*., 2024: 6), thereby demonstrating the pervasiveness of the culture of concealment within menstrual education itself. Therefore, biological knowledge is prioritised as it enables disembodied discussions of menstruation, without making visible the lived experiences of menstruators. The only practical knowledge

permitted via the culture of concealment is how to use products (Bobel, 2019; Young, 2005). This originates from pamphlets in menstrual product packaging, which historically were the only way to access menstrual information, as menstrual product manufactures broke the culture of concealment to provide much-needed information, encouraging customer loyalty and alleviating fears of product use (Freidenfelds, 2009). Therefore, the culture of concealment produces the problem representation that menstrual literacy is only biological knowledge.

4.5 Effects

4.5.1 Excluding practical knowledge

Representing the problem as a lack of biological knowledge produces a subjectification effect that menstruators are ill-equipped for managing menstruation. Due to the biological and health focus, only 14% of menstrual education lessons cover lived experiences, compared to 56% covering biology and 40% covering product use (Brown *et al*., 2022). Thus, menstruators do not receive the resources required to manage menstruation. However, the menstrual mandate of concealment remains. This tension between the MCI, without the necessary information on how to effectively manage menstruation, means menstruators are more likely to be 'distracted in class and exam situations' (Tingle & Vora, 2019: 27) as they worry other people can recognise that they are menstruating (Elston & Hipkiss, 2020). As such, 45% of UK teachers noted that menstruation harms students' confidence, attendance, learning, and even exam results (Brown *et al*, 2022). This increased mental burden encouraged negative perceptions of menstruation as a 'miserable menace unchallenged' (Sterling & Stubbs, 2020). To illustrate, pupils describe menstruation as "annoying", "inconvenient", "painful", and "uncomfortable" (Tingle & Vora, 2019). Disembodied perceptions of menstruation can enhance the alienation felt from one's body (Young, 2005), further encouraging adherence to the MCI and a lifetime of extensive self-policing for menstruators. This can encourage menstruators to make potentially dangerous medical decisions, such as menstrual suppression (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2020).

Thus, by withholding much-needed practical knowledge, this problem representation fosters negative perceptions of menstruation, reinforcing the culture of concealment.

By not problematising a lack of practical menstrual knowledge in schools, such as information on managing menstrual cramps, heavy flows, or abnormal cycles, this policy produces a lived effect that menstruators seek this information elsewhere. The internet and social media are routinely identified as sources for compensating menstrual education (Brown *et al*., 2024; Olsson *et al*., 2024; Tingle & Vora, 2019). However, it is likely this information is hindered by the culture of concealment. Alternatively, family members are identified as another source, notably for information on single-use products (Tingle & Vora, 2019). In addition to reinforcing the dominance of single-use products, as menstruators will relay information on what products they personally know, which are likely to be single-use products, this isolates menstruators who do not have a menstruator in their life who can invest in the resources and time necessary to supplement menstrual education. As such, 'low-income girls, in particular, often do not receive sufficient education about menstruation' (Crawford & Waldman, 2022: 83). Therefore, this problem representation delegates practical menstrual education, which is inaccessible for some, further embedding menstrual inequity.

Disembodied representations of menstruation produce a lived effect of a limited capacity for health self-advocacy, as adolescents cannot assess the typicality of their menstruation (Brown *et al*., 2024). The American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists urge menstrual education to address 'severe mood symptoms', 'heavy flow' and 'irregular or absent menstruation' (Bobel, 2019: 305), as without contextual knowledge, girls are unable to assess the severity of their menstrual concerns (Sterling & Stubbs, 2020). This is pressing for adolescents, as 'dysmenorrhea (painful menstruation) in adolescent females has been shown to be as high as 93%' (Brown *et al*., 2022: 2), yet menstruators with dysmenorrhea that cannot be treated with standard pain relief medication wait 'an average of seven years before they seek medical assistance' (Roaf & Winkler, 2015: 2), because they cannot assess the typicality of their menstrual experience, and instead embody the menstrual mandate that

menstrual pain should be private. Moreover, as studies routinely show that women's pain is dismissed by medical professionals (Tingle & Vora, 2019), self-advocacy is essential to disrupt a pattern of late diagnosis and dismissal. Therefore, without the embodied knowledge of the typicality and complexity of the menstrual experience, menstruators cannot adequately assess and advocate for their menstrual health, perpetuating a cycle of the dismissal of menstrual concerns.

4.5.2 Menstrual stigma

The problem representation does not encourage in-depth discussions of the menstrual experience, and thus produces a discursive effect that the single-use product mandate is reaffirmed. The simplistic menstrual education promoted by the problem representation does not encourage detailed interrogations into product use, and as such, it is understood that 'the comfort of learners should be a higher priority than being environmentally friendly' (Elston & Hipkiss, 2020: 15) for product choice, without exploration into why single-use products are perceived as more comfortable, for example because they enable successful technological passing. As a result, reusable products are neglected in education, perpetuating a lack of knowledge on the use of reusable products, reinforcing beliefs that reusable products are less sanitary than other products due to the closer contact with menstrual blood (Boyers *et al.*, 2022; Elston & Hipkiss, 2020). Thus the problem representation, by not prioritising menstrual education, defaults to reinforcing the single-use product mandate, perpetuating the environmental harm that accompanies this mandate, and fails to create informed consumers.

By disembodying menstruation, through prioritising biological over practical knowledge, this problem representation fails to problematise menstrual stigma, instead succumbing to the culture of concealment. This produces a lived effect that menstrual equity schemes in schools are limited. Without centring destigmatisation, menstrual education is hindered. For example, stigmatised responses of boys to menstrual education 'affected the content and reduced the opportunity for conversation and questions' (Brown *et al.*, 2024: 4). Biological

knowledge is not enough to disrupt menstrual stigma, as a study in Northern Tanzania found that despite sufficient biological menstrual knowledge, adolescent boys still engaged in menstrual-related bullying (Crawford & Waldman, 2022). Unchallenged stigma also limits the effectiveness of free product schemes (Bowen-Viner, Symonds & Watson, 2022). A study of menstrual education in the UK found that despite participants' awareness of product schemes, 'there were varying degrees of embarrassment associated with accessing products' (Brown *et al*., 2024: 7). A further study found that participants requested free products 'to be stored in individual toilet cubicles' (Elston & Hipkiss, 2020: 18), highlighting the extremity of embarrassment felt around menstruation. Therefore, by failing to challenge the culture of concealment, the problem representation hinders the effectiveness of both menstrual education and other menstrual equity policies in schools, such as free product schemes.

Therefore, this policy analysis reveals that the current menstrual education curriculum problematises a lack of biological knowledge of menstruation. Whilst this is important, this succumbs to the culture of concealment, withholding necessary practical knowledge and knowledge of lived experiences from menstruators. This reinforces menstrual stigma, a disregard for menstrual health, and the single-use product mandate, and excludes marginalised menstruators. Therefore, by not problematising the culture of concealment through disembodied representations of menstruation, and consequently adhering to a neoliberal understanding of menstrual equity as achievable through greater concealment, this framing is unfit for achieving menstrual equity.

4.6 Alternative Framings

The problem of menstrual illiteracy as a lack of biological knowledge could be disrupted by amplifying the requests of menstruators. Menstrual education, therefore, would entail 'discussions about the realities of the menstrual cycle […] without sliding into the dominant view of menstruation as a burden' (Bobel, 2019: 300), instead promoting the 'emerging agency and self-reflection' (Sterling & Stubbs, 2020: 243). This would result in more effect

and sustainable education, as research shows that education grounded in lived experiences is essential (Tingle & Vora, 2019) and leads to more comfortable discussions around menstruation (Brown *et al*., 2024) with a notable 'absence of euphemisms and even some open dialogue about the extremely stigmatised aspects of menstruation' (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2020: 191). Menstrual education as informed by menstruators would further disrupt menstrual stigma by providing an alternative discourse to menstruation (Bowen-Viner, Symonds & Watson, 2022) through a greater contextualisation of menstruation. Menstruators routinely request information on 'social aspects of menstruation, and the diversity of practices, taboos and beliefs around the world' (Tingle & Vora, 2019: 30), including 'insights about menstrual attitudes and practices from history, mythology and psychosocial research' (Sterling & Stubbs, 2020: 244). This could be expanded to discussions on the intersection of power dynamics within conceptions of menstruation, for example the 'outing' effect of menstruation for transgender men and non-binary people (Bowen-Viner, Symonds & Watson, 2022). Thus, through problematising menstrual education that is uninformed by menstruators, this problem representation would dismantle menstrual stigma by reproducing contextualised and embodied representations of menstruation; a stronger foundation of which to build menstrual policy.

Finally, this problem representation could be disrupted through a challenge to the single-use product mandate through discussions on reusable products (Sterling & Stubbs, 2020), including the 'pros and cons of each product, and advice on how to use them' (Elston & Hipkiss, 2020: 26). This again centres menstruators in the problem representation, as menstruators request and actively seek out this information, with YouTube cited as the central source in the UK and Northern Ireland (Tingle & Vora, 2019). CMS scholars strongly emphasis the need for 'information about environmental issues related to product manufacture and disposal, as well as their accessibility, or not in the lives of girls worldwide' (Sterling & Stubbs, 2020: 244) as this produces informed consumers, contextualises menstruation and provides valuable practical information for menstrual management.

Therefore, whilst a small step, an increased focus on reusable menstrual products will begin to disrupt the culture of concealment the current problem representation adheres to.

CONCLUSION

Menstrual inequity, impacting 2 billion menstruators worldwide (UN Women, 2024a), is a vast, embedded social injustice, which poses multiple risks, from an individual-level, with undiagnosed menstrual health issues and a substantial mental burden from enforced self-policing of the body, to an institutional-level, with limited accommodations of menstruation in the workplace (Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025). However, governments should, as according to Young's Social Connection Model (Young, 2006), address menstrual inequity (Casola, Luber & Riley, 2025; Crawford & Waldman, 2021). The principle aim of this dissertation was to explore how menstrual policy is limited at achieving menstrual equity, in particular examining the limitations of the framing of UK government's menstrual policy for achieving menstrual equity.

Through this aim, applying a CMS framework to WPR policy analysis, I have shown that the framing of period poverty in UK governmental policy is unfit for achieving menstrual equity as it adheres to the culture of concealment. Chapter 3 discovered that the problem of period poverty in the removal of VAT from menstrual products is framed as product inaccessibility. This is limited for achieving menstrual equity as it positions menstrual equity as solvable through increased concealment via consumption, which perpetuates menstrual stigma, causes environmental harm from single-use products and requires self-policing from menstruators. Chapter 4 demonstrated that the problem of period poverty in the current menstrual education curriculum is framed as a lack of biological knowledge of menstruation. This is limited for achieving menstrual equity as it withholds essential knowledge from menstruators in an attempt to adhere to the culture of concealment, resulting in a continued disregard for menstrual health concerns, an atmosphere of secrecy that leads to isolated, ill-prepared, and stigmatised menstruators, and, once again, continued environmental harm from single-use products. Therefore, by not problematising the culture of concealment, the UK government's neoliberal understanding of menstrual equity is individualised and decontextualised. Without structural context, policy will remain limited for achieving

menstrual equity. However, the two policy analyses reveal that the UK Government's policy strategy for menstrual equity could be improved by problematising the structures upholding menstrual inequity. This would centre the experiences of menstruators, elevate the voices of marginalised menstruators, and dismantle the culture of concealment and single-use product mandate.

This thesis has illustrated that a CMS framework offers crucial insights into the limitations of the current policy strategy for menstrual equity in the UK, and consequently this thesis provides a framework for implementing CMS in practice. This is a valuable contribution as trends in LMICs show that MHM approaches with neoliberal, product-focused aims are unlikely to achieve menstrual equity, and therefore a CMS framework in policy is essential to disrupt problematisations, change the trajectory of a consolidated culture of concealment, and produce more sustainable menstrual policy that centres marginalised menstruators.

Whilst this dissertation was limited through only interrogating two UK menstrual policies, my research offers suggestive evidence that period poverty needs to be reframed away from a neoliberal understanding to the structural causes of menstrual inequity for menstrual policy to effectively achieve menstrual equity, providing a framework for interrogating menstrual policy. Further research should expand these findings by applying WPR analysis with a CMS framework to other menstrual policy, both governmental and non-governmental, globally and in UK, to ensure menstrual policy is capable of achieving menstrual equity. Notably, the policy framing of the *Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act* should be analysed to interrogate the tension between formally ending period poverty whilst simultaneously nationalising the menstrual mandate of concealment.

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