

The Embodied Experience of Menstruation:
Critically Examining Class and Gender Inequality
Through Period Products

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Abstract

Menstruation has gained increasing visibility in public discourse, yet significant gaps remain in understanding the role of period products beyond functionality. While much of the literature focuses on period poverty—primarily framed as a lack of financial resources—feminist scholars and activists have expanded this definition to include broader accessibility, stigma, and class-based barriers (Bobel, 2018; Crawford et al., 2021). However, less attention has been given to the role of menstrual products themselves in shaping gendered, classed, and environmental responsibilities. This study addresses this gap by examining how period products are embedded in larger socio-political and cultural norms, influencing menstruation as an embodied experience.

Drawing on qualitative research with 27 participants across Scotland, this study employs an inductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), enriched by feminist methodologies (Riessman, 2008; Olesen, 2011). Findings reveal that period products function as critical sites where societal norms are both reinforced and resisted. As menstrual studies evolve—particularly through feminist activism on menstrual education, period poverty, and sustainability—these discussions shape how individuals experience and perceive menstruation. Period products emerge not only as material goods but as mechanisms through which social norms around respectability, sexualisation, and appropriateness are enacted. Furthermore, these products serve as markers of class and environmental responsibility, reflecting broader systemic inequalities.

This research contributes to feminist scholarship by illuminating the ways in which gender, class, and environmental responsibilities are intertwined with menstrual experiences. It challenges the supposed neutrality of menstrual products, arguing that they are deeply embedded in social structures that regulate bodies and identities. By situating period products within broader discussions of girlhood, policy, and environmentalism, this study offers a critical insight for future research and for addressing menstrual inequality and promoting sustainable, inclusive practices.

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Signed: Kate Molyneaux

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Chapter1: Introduction

Menstruation happens in and through the spaces where we live, influenced by the social, cultural, and political forces surrounding us. Menstruation, while personal, is also deeply social. The physiological occurrence is confined and constructed by cultural norms and social structures. In spaces loaded with expectations, participants navigate menstruation by deciding how much to disclose, how to manage their bodies, and how to navigate the stigma or agency tied to their period. As individuals navigate the world with their periods, this is influenced by gender, class, and race. In this way, menstruation is an embodied experience that is lived out through the spaces we exist in, where personal experiences are shaped by social pressures and norms. Menstruation happens not only to bodies but also in the spaces we occupy. The social, cultural, and political landscape significantly impacts experiences with menstruation; therefore, understanding these contexts is crucial. Through this lens, menstruation becomes a site where individual bodies and collective identities intersect, revealing both the personal and political dimensions of this natural, yet socially constructed, bodily experience.

This research aims to uncover the complex ways in which period products shape the embodied experience of menstruation. Participants position period products as deeply intertwined with the social, political, and cultural pressures that individuals face. My findings suggest that products function as critical sites where societal norms are both reinforced and resisted. As public and political discourse around menstruation has grown, particularly through feminist movements addressing menstrual learning and knowledge, period poverty, and environmental impact, these have become

increasingly significant in shaping participants' experiences and perceptions. My aim is to move beyond traditional narratives of stigma and taboo. I will instead focus on how social structures and inequalities are deeply embedded within the experience of menstruation, thereby exploring the nuanced patterns and pressures individuals face.

I examine how the embodied experience of menstruation—how menstruators feel their periods—intersects with social structures and inequalities. I interviewed 27 women and non-binary people in Scotland. Drawing on feminist scholarship, my goal was to question and broaden the current understanding of menstruation in academic, popular, and political realms. Throughout the interviews and analysis, period products, beyond serving a functional purpose, also act as markers of gender and class constructions. Throughout this thesis, I delve into how period products serve as mediators of these embodied experiences, both reflecting and influencing broader societal forces. Period products are not neutral; they act as mechanisms through which gender, class, and environmental consciousness intersect, shaping how individuals experience their menstruating bodies. By using a feminist framework, I explore participants' account of products that both enable and constrain them to negotiate social norms related to respectability and responsibility.

Gaps in Knowledge

While menstruation has gained greater visibility in public discourse, there remains a significant gap in understanding how period products mediate complex embodied experiences. Much of the current literature and media attention focuses on period poverty, often framed as a lack of the financial resources necessary to access menstrual products. Scholars and activists have worked to expand this definition to

encompass issues beyond affordability, acknowledging that accessibility, stigma, and class-based barriers all contribute to menstrual inequality (Bobel, 2018; Crawford et al., 2021). Numerous studies explore the stigma and taboo surrounding menstruation (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Fahs, 2016), but there is less focus on how menstrual products themselves—often regarded as neutral tools—play a role in shaping gendered and class-based experiences of the body. Similarly, while feminist scholars have long analysed the objectification and control of women's bodies (Bordo, 1993), few have examined how these forces manifest specifically through the products used to manage menstruation.

The symbolic weight of period products in reflecting social and cultural pressures remains underexplored. Individuals face not just economic pressure but also social expectations, emphasising respectability and the concealment of menstruation (Chrisler, 2011). For example, women feel pressure to use specific types of menstrual products that align with notions of cleanliness and middle-class respectability (Simes & Berg, 2021). My research aims to add to the scholarship through filling these gaps, by focusing on how period products are embedded in larger gendered, classed, and environmental norms and pressures, and furthering understanding of how they shape menstruation as an embodied experience.

Social, Political, and Cultural Pressures on Menstruation

Social, cultural, and political forces influence how menstruators behave, manage their bodies, and speak about menstruation in public and private spaces. Stigma and taboo surrounding menstruation remain pervasive, despite increasing visibility and activism (Weiss-Wolf, 2017). Menstruation has long been framed as unclean, and to be hidden

and managed discreetly, reinforcing notions of gendered and classed 'respectability' (Laws, 1990; Bobel, 2010). This ongoing stigma burdens individuals with discreetly managing menstruation, ensuring periods and products remain invisible, and reinforcing societal expectations of respectability. This creates a hierarchy of menstrual experience, privileging those who are willing and able to conform, while others are unwilling, excluded, or marginalised.

Tomlinson's (2021) and Rostvik's (2022) recent work on menstrual activism, media representation, and the historical and cultural perspectives of menstruation have significantly advanced our understanding of these issues. The work of these researchers, along with others in the UK and US, emphasises menstruation's importance for socio-political research and public health concerns (Bobel, 2018; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Crawford & Popp, 2020). The surge in menstruation-related research reflects feminist campaigns against the systemic marginalisation of bodily experiences historically deemed private, trivial, or shameful.

Scotland's Period Products (Free Provision) Act (2021) is celebrated for challenging menstrual inequities by making period products freely available and promising an end to menstrual stigma. The legislation ensures that local authorities, educational providers, and specified public service bodies make period products obtainable for any person who needs them, free of charge. Started by Scottish Labour MSP Monica Lennon, who submitted the 'Ending Period Poverty' proposal to the Scottish Parliament in 2017, the Act sought to address the occurrence and impact of period poverty within Scotland. In response, the Scottish Government allocated funding for providing menstrual products in schools, colleges, universities, and charities working with low-income households and local authorities (SPICe, 2020).

The Act targets three key areas: period poverty, period stigma, and the impact of menstruation on education (SPICe, 2020). In Scotland, the menstrual product landscape is shaped by a mix of disposable pads and tampons, alongside reusable items such as menstrual cups, washable pads, and period underwear. The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021 established Scotland as the first country in the world to legislate for universal free access to these products. Local authorities and education providers carry responsibility for distribution, ensuring products are available in schools, colleges, universities, and community settings such as libraries and leisure centres. Implementation has been heavily supported by third-sector actors, with Hey Girls emerging as a dominant supplier due to its established links with government and commitment to social enterprise models. Commercial actors such as Always and Tampax continue to shape the wider consumer market, though the Act has redirected attention towards equity of access rather than brand dominance. This context situates Scotland as both a global leader in menstrual equity policy and a site where questions of provision, product choice, and social justice intersect.

While such policies represent significant strides, they often fail to address the deeper systemic forces shaping the complex intersections between class, gender, and race within and against which menstruation occurs (Crawford et al., 2021). These pressures transcend issues of accessibility, revealing hidden challenges such as limited product choices and societal expectations around menstruation, which perpetuate cultural conformity (Bobel, 2018). The cultural and political significance of menstruation has also been transformed by individualised environmental pressure, which highlights the environmental impacts of disposable menstrual products and advocacy for sustainable alternatives. However, this push for sustainability often neglects the classed and

gendered realities of menstrual management (Simes & Berg, 2021). Allowing menstruation to become a site where class, gender, and environmental responsibility intersect creates further pressure on women and nonbinary people to do their best to uphold normative menstrual management practices, not only for their bodies but also for the environment.

Embodiment and Period Products

Central to my research is embodiment, foregrounding an understanding of how menstruation is experienced not only as a physiological process but as something that is shaped by the social and material world (Young, 2005). Period products are one such material mediator: they are used to manage bleeding, but they also carry symbolic weight tied to class, gender, and environmental responsibility. Drawing on Vitellone's (2017) insights, such objects are far from neutral; they are laden with social meanings and power, revealing how material items mediate our embodied experiences and reinforce societal norms. Period products are deeply embedded in social and power relations, structuring expectations around menstruating bodies while exposing inequalities and social hierarchies. By framing period products as mediators of embodiment, my research will explore how they shape the way individuals feel about their bodies, and how they navigate both public and private spaces and societal pressures. This also enables analysis of how access to these products affects ability to (dis)engage with societal expectations of cleanliness and respectability (Crawford et al., 2021). Period products are not only functional materials but also sites to express and challenge gendered, classed, and environmental pressures. My research highlights how period products are intertwined with broader systems of power, both

reinforcing and resisting cultural norms around menstruation, gender, and class. This framework allows for a deeper understanding of menstruation as an embodied social experience, influenced by material goods, cultural expectations, and political discourse.

Research Questions

Menstruation, though often seen as a private experience, is profoundly shaped by social, political, and cultural forces, including class dynamics, gender norms, and growing environmental pressure. My research seeks to understand how menstruators manage these pressures, from the products they use to the political landscape they inhabit, and how these factors intersect to shape the menstrual experience. In order to explore these dynamics, I have developed three central research questions that focus on the impact of menstrual products, the role of Scottish menstrual politics, and the growing environmental pressures that menstruators face. These questions aim to fill key gaps in understandings of menstruation, particularly in terms of how material goods, politics, and environmental concerns mediate the experience of menstruation.

The Use and Impact of Menstrual Products

Period products, whether disposable pads, tampons, or reusable options like menstrual cups, play a crucial role in how people manage menstruation. Yet, these products are far from neutral; they are deeply embedded within societal narratives surrounding gender, class, and sexuality. How menstruators perceive and interact with their bodies is often mediated by these products, shaped by the cultural expectations and material conditions that accompany their use.

My first research question seeks to examine how menstrual products mediate the embodied experience of menstruation, particularly in relation to class and gender. This focus recognises that period products are not merely functional items but tools that may reflect and reproduce social norms. Through this inquiry, I aim to explore the ways in which choices—or the lack thereof—regarding period products intersect with broader issues of gender, age, respectability, and class. This analysis will illuminate how period products influence both the private and public dimensions of menstrual management, shedding light on the complex interplay between material goods and embodied experiences.

Scottish Menstrual Politics and their Impact

Scotland has been positioned as a global leader in addressing menstrual inequality, most notably with the passage of the Period Products (Free Provision) Act in 2021. This policy, celebrated as a victory over period poverty, has sought to make free menstrual products widely accessible across Scotland. While the policy represents a significant step forward, it is critical to explore how these measures are perceived by those they are intended to benefit, and the extent to which they address the lived realities of menstruators.

My second research question investigates how participants interpret Scottish menstrual policies and the impact these initiatives have had on their lived experiences, particularly in relation to class. This focus aims to critically assess the policy's success in dismantling structural barriers and whether deeper cultural and economic inequalities persist. By examining participants' perspectives, this research will explore whether Scotland's progressive stance has reshaped or reinforced existing norms. My

analysis will also consider how policy intersects with broader narratives of respectability, stigma, and access to resources.

The Influence of Environmental Pressures on Menstruation

In recent years, environmental sustainability has become a dominant discourse, extending into the realm of menstrual products. Disposable pads and tampons have faced growing criticism for their environmental footprint, with ecological campaigns encouraging the adoption of reusable products such as menstrual cups or period underwear. While this shift reflects a crucial response to environmental concerns, it also places additional pressures on menstruators to align their choices with sustainability goals, often without considering the practical, economic, and bodily barriers involved.

My third research question explores how environmental pressures surrounding menstruation influence embodied practices, menstrual norms, and individuals' sense of agency. This inquiry will consider whether these pressures result in feelings of empowerment, constraint, or ambivalence, particularly for those navigating intersecting issues of class, gender, and environmental awareness. By investigating participants' experiences, I aim to uncover how discourses surrounding sustainability shape menstrual choices and whether they add to the existing complexity of menstrual management. The research will also explore how individuals negotiate the tension between environmental responsibility and personal needs, offering critical insight into the broader cultural shift toward eco-consciousness in menstruation.

Question 1. How do period products mediate the embodied experience of menstruation in relation to class and gender?

Question 2. How do participants interpret Scottish Period Poverty policy, and how has this policy shaped their classed lived experiences?

Question 3. What is the impact of environmental pressures on menstruation, and how do these pressures influence embodied practices and menstrual norms?

These research questions reflect the core objectives of my study: to analyse how menstrual products influence lived experiences of menstruation; to critically evaluate the impact of period products and Scottish menstrual politics; and to examine the pressures menstruators face, including environmental concerns. By exploring these interconnected factors, my research aims to provide a broader understanding of menstruation as both a personal and political experience, shaped by an interplay of factors. This thesis sheds light on the gendered and classed inequalities that are woven through experiences of menstruation, offering a more nuanced perspective on how societal forces shape individual choices and experiences.

Note on Language

Menstruation encompasses more than just monthly bleeding, which is commonly called a period. From a medical perspective, menstruation is part of the reproductive cycle (NHS, 2023), involving a series of processes that prepare the body for potential conception. The ovaries, fallopian tubes, uterus, and vagina are all involved in the menstrual cycle, with changes in hormone levels, specifically oestrogen, typically

causing a thickening of the uterine lining in anticipation of a fertilised egg. If fertilisation does not occur, the egg and uterine lining break down, causing hormone levels to drop and resulting in the shedding of tissue, which exits through the vagina. This process of bleeding marks the start of a new menstrual cycle, day zero of the cycle.

Throughout this thesis, I interchangeably use the terms period and menstruating to reflect their common usage in everyday language. When I refer to menstruation, I am referring to the period itself, rather than the entire menstrual cycle. However, it is important that I acknowledge menstruation involves more than just bleeding, such as when discharge occurs during ovulation. The menstrual cycle, of which bleeding is only one aspect, was unknown to several participants prior to our interviews. Awareness of and fluency with respect to the menstrual cycle were much greater for participants with menstrual disorders. Many participants experience menstrual symptoms such as cramps, headaches, back pain, nausea, vomiting, mood swings, and digestive issues. Furthermore, symptoms vary from month to month, impacted by wellness and stress (Rafique & Al-Sheikh, 2018). Menstrual bleeding can also stop entirely if the body is unwell, for example, due to extreme exercise, or eating disorders. The level of bleeding, the impact of hormones throughout the cycle, and symptoms change over time. I will explain any menstrual disorders as applicable throughout the thesis.

Throughout this thesis, I use the terms menstrual products and period products, referring to any and all material commercially manufactured for the purpose of collecting or absorbing menstrual blood. I consciously don't use the terms 'feminine hygiene products' or 'sanitary products', which carry associations of lacking cleanliness, sanitation, and impurity, all of which reflect harmful implications about

menstruation. This linguistic shift over the last number of years has also been taken up and changed by many large retailers and in advertisements for period products. However, several participants still used these terms, as they have long been the norm in our shared menstrual lexicon.

I will outline the most common menstrual products used by participants (Appendix 8). Tampons are made largely of processed cotton or rayon and inserted into the vagina to absorb blood before it exits the body. Tampons are available in two forms: applicator tampons, which come with a plastic or cardboard tube to assist insertion, and non-applicator tampons, which are self-inserted using fingers. Disposable period pads (sanitary towels) are strips of absorbent material, largely made from processed cotton or rayon and plastics, with an adhesive backing and sides that stick to the inside and fold around underwear. Pads come in various sizes and absorbencies to accommodate different levels of bleeding. Menstrual cups are bell-shaped, made from silicone or rubber, and inserted into the vagina to collect menstrual blood. Reusable period pants are absorbent underwear, eliminating the need for pads or tampons, and come in various sizes and absorbencies to accommodate different levels of bleeding. Reusable period pads are strips of material, made from absorbent substances such as cotton and polyurethane laminate, which are attached to underwear and come in various sizes and absorbencies to accommodate different levels of bleeding. The language surrounding period products is complex and mutable, and, aligning with feminist academic and political efforts, it is essential that I reflect on its evolution, as normalised terms are re-examined to negotiate boundaries of identity, inclusivity, and power in diverse contexts.

Thesis Outline

The literature review, Chapter 1, engages with and situates this research within feminist activism and scholarship, examining how menstruation has been framed as a feminist issue over the decades, particularly in relation to post-feminism and fourth wave feminism. It provides a comprehensive overview of the academic literature and research underpinning this study (Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 1997, 2012; Reay, 2004; Taylor, 2007, 2012; Lawler, 2008). I then unpack how menstrual stigmas and taboos shape bodily experiences and societal perceptions, focusing on their construction and perpetuation. Furthermore, I analyse the pressures surrounding menstruation etiquette and class. This leads to a discussion and critical review of menstruation as a 'women's issue', with a focus on the gendered nature of stigma and how an intersectional feminist approach can provide a more inclusive understanding of these challenges. I also delve into the (in)visibility of menstrual blood and its policy implications, particularly in Scotland's unique context as a 'leader' in tackling period poverty. Finally, I address the environmental impact of menstrual products, incorporating ecofeminist critiques and exploring how class influences access to sustainable menstrual products. By integrating these perspectives, I aim to highlight how class, gender, and environmental concerns shape menstrual experiences, setting the stage for my analysis of participants' accounts in later chapters.

The methods chapter outlines the methodological approach and research design that guide this study, exploring the lived experiences of women, trans and nonbinary people who menstruate in Scotland via feminist scholarship. First, I situate the research within the framework of feminist methodology, emphasising the importance

of positionality and reflexivity in the research process. I challenge the insider/outsider binary, highlighting that researchers navigate complex identities and relationships with participants. Next, I discuss the research design, detailing how the decision to adopt a feminist epistemology was informed by the interpretivist paradigm. This approach prioritises the personal and subjective experiences of participants, focusing on how their accounts reveal broader social, political, and class dynamics. I then discuss the method of data collection in depth, with a focus on semi-structured interviews as the primary tool for capturing these nuanced experiences. Complicating and considering the potential of menstruation to be a sensitive topic, I address the nature of this topic and the unique challenges posed by conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic. To navigate these obstacles, I adopt a flexible and inclusive approach, combining virtual and in-person interviews to accommodate diverse participant needs and circumstances.

The chapter further reflects on sample selection, and participants' navigation of gendered language and class identification, offering insight into researcher-participant relationships throughout the study. Chapter 3 concludes by addressing the ethical considerations involved in conducting this research, particularly in relation to the sensitive nature of menstruation and class issues. By providing an overview of the transcription and analysis process, this chapter lays the foundation for an understanding of how my methodological choices align with the broader aims of the research.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of my thesis are structured around three research questions examining how menstruation is influenced by period products, Scottish Period Poverty policy, and environmental pressures. Together, these chapters analyse the interplay

of gender, class, and environmental responsibility in positioning menstrual experiences within broader social structures.

Chapter 4 explores how menstrual norms are (re)produced within the home, with a particular focus on girlhood. Drawing from participant accounts, I explore how mothers are positioned as (un)consciously passing down menstrual norms—such as the need to conceal menstruation. Participants interpreted their fathers' actions as restrictive toward menstruating bodies, positioning menstruation as something shameful and inappropriate. This chapter highlights how participants internalise gendered and classed norms regarding menstruation from an early age, and how these norms shape their understanding and management of their menstruating bodies. Drawing from the research of Skeggs (1997) and McRobbie (2009), this chapter investigates the societal expectations imposed on mothers, who are often burdened with the task of upholding social order.

In Chapter 5 the discussion revolves around the impact of class and gender on period products and policy, with a specific focus on Scotland's Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2021). I critically assess how the provision of free menstrual products, while a positive development, also creates new dynamics of social distinction. Participants' accounts reveal how reusable products are inscribed with higher social status, accumulating symbolic value that reinforces class hierarchies. Furthermore, this chapter criticises the political framing of period poverty, asserting that the invisibility of class in discussions surrounding product distribution only exacerbates existing social divides. I analyse how individuals navigate these complexities, refusing to simplify period poverty while balancing their social status through managing menstruation.

Chapter 6 addresses the environmental pressures associated with menstrual products, exploring how participants navigate the pressure to make environmentally responsible choices. This chapter highlights the gendered burden of environmental responsibility, as participants describe feeling pressure to use sustainable menstrual products and practices, often at the expense of personal comfort or convenience. I unpack how class plays a significant role in shaping access to and understanding of eco-friendly products. Furthermore, I critically engage with the rhetoric around environmentalism, questioning the emphasis on individual responsibility for environmental change and examining how this pressure reinforces capitalist and classed dynamics. By focusing on how participants navigate these tensions, this chapter situates menstrual practices within broader societal expectations around gender, class, and environmentalism.

In Chapter 7 I synthesise the key insights of my research, discussing the dislocation of menstrual policy from feminist politics, with a focus on the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2021) and its implications for systemic inequalities. I will begin by highlighting how the bill and its interpretation by participants exemplify a disconnection between menstrual advocacy and feminist principles, particularly considering Levine's (1979) critique of public feminism and the limitations of its liberal governance framework. I address participants' dissatisfaction, stemming from the bill's inability to confront structural inequalities, and how this reflects broader tensions between feminist policy and its glossing over in policy (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016a; Sundaram & Saunton, 2016). Exploring the complexities of dislocating the embodied experience of menstruation highlights the need to move beyond individual experiences, shifting towards systemic critiques and fostering

collective care and action. Finally, I will reflect on the importance of integrating feminist and menstrual research to provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between period products, gender, and class.

I argue that menstruation functions as a key site where social norms, political agendas, and economic systems intersect, reproducing and amplifying gendered and classed inequalities. By examining menstruation through the lens of products, policy and environmental, this thesis moves beyond accounts that frame it only as a stigmatised biological process, instead foregrounding how it is lived, negotiated, and contested within broader social structures. In doing so, the research makes an original contribution to menstrual scholarship by positioning menstruation as central to understanding how inequality is embodied and reproduced in everyday life.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter summarises the academic literature and existing research to interrogate the relationships between feminism, menstruation, period products, and resistance in the negotiation of gender, class, and politics within the Scottish context. Through my review, I discovered the separation and dislocation of menstruation and period products from gender, class, and environmentalism. An aim of this research is to pull together these experiences, as recounted by those who participated in this research project. As an interdisciplinary project, this research straddles both feminism and menstrual scholarship. Despite menstrual scholarship currently undergoing a boom of attention and research (HOPE, 2024; Menstruation Research Network, 2024), I doubt this will result in it gaining a field of its own, in the same way as feminist studies and queer studies have shifted from societal to academic consideration. The exclusion of menstruation from liberal leaning feminist scholarship is a factor in feminist critiques of menstrual policies, as I will argue. A review of feminist scholarship alongside critical menstrual scholarship will highlight a significant disparity.

In this chapter, I first outline feminist menstrual activism and scholarship, situating the complexity of this research. I will consider recent feminist and menstrual scholarship, including how post-feminism and fourth wave feminism weave through menstruation activism and scholarship, shifting and reshaping feminist menstrual norms. In the first section, I unpack literature that conducts a feminist analysis of menstruation. The second section of this literature review delves into the construction of stigma and taboo

surrounding menstruation. It explores the deep connection between gender norms and menstrual stigma, where menstruation is often portrayed as a cause for shame and concealment. This section will discuss how these stigmas shape women's bodily experiences and societal perceptions to discuss the theory and literature on respectability, which will highlight the pressures of menstruation etiquette and examine how class dynamics influence these pressures. Lastly, I explore the idea of menstruation as a 'women's issue'. This section emphasises the gendered nature of menstrual stigma and its impact on women's lives, and how, with an intersectional and inclusive approach, we can better understand these issues.

The third section of this review addresses the (in)visibility of menstrual blood, focusing on class and policy implications. It will lay out the ways in which socioeconomic policy shapes the experiences of menstruating individuals, particularly in Scotland, positioned as a pioneering country in tackling period poverty. This section will explore how class distinctions and policy interventions mediate menstrual norms. By examining the class-based narratives around menstrual products and their accessibility, this section aims to reveal the underlying class and gender inequalities that persist within policy purporting to tackle exactly these issues.

The fourth and final section of this review shifts focus to the environmental impact of menstrual products, incorporating ecofeminist critiques and discussion of classed access. This section will discuss the sustainability issues associated with various menstrual products and how (eco)feminist perspectives challenge the consumption practices linked to menstruation. This discussion will highlight the intersections of environmental concerns with feminist critiques of consumerism. Furthermore, it will also consider how class influences access to sustainable menstrual products,

highlighting disparities in who can afford and prioritise eco-friendly options. Overall, this roadmap through existing literature sets the stage for a thorough examination of the ways class and gender shape menstrual stigma, visibility, and environmental concerns, providing a critical lens through which to understand these ongoing debates.

Navigating the Tide: Feminism Then and Now.

My aim in discussing a timeline of feminist theory, considering the debate, convergence, and juxtaposition of alternate waves and/or branches of feminism, lies in situating my research. As Jackson (1998) notes, these complexities often overlap or polarise. In outlining the shifts between periods of feminist theory, I recognise that drawing definitive lines between and around feminisms is an oversimplification. As feminist scholars have made clear, any retelling involves oversimplification (Stanley & Wise, 1993; Hemmings, 2005); however, while it will be an oversimplification, a retelling using broad collective terms like waves will help in explaining the trends, debates, and repetitions that have shaped feminism.

Feminist research in the UK has undergone significant changes, marked by distinct periods of theorising and critical reflection. The initial period, termed 'difference feminism,' emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and encompassed both Anglo-American and French theorists who asserted the fundamental difference between the gender categories of men and women, although in different ways. This period saw the development of social and symbolic feminist theory, divided into the 'Big Three' strands of liberal, Marxist, and radical feminism (Maynard, 1995; Whelehan, 1995; Jackson, 1998).

Feminist theory during this time primarily viewed gender as a social construct, while many French feminists, such as Irigaray, approached it as a psychological, linguistic, and symbolic construction. Irigaray critiqued the linguistic privilege afforded to men, arguing that this rendered women an absent category within language (Irigaray, 1996). Similarly, de Beauvoir (1952) analysed how women are positioned as the 'Other' in opposition to men, reinforcing binary gender categories. Some scholars have critiqued the theorists of this period for their simplified views, with others arguing that these critiques may not fully consider the historical context (Stanley & Wise, 1993; Whelehan, 1995; Butler, 1999).

The 1970s and 1980s brought the second wave of feminism, characterised by more explicit social movements. Radical writings by Millett (1970) and socialist-Marxist perspectives from Rowbotham (1972) emphasised material differences, leading to the solidification of the 'Big Three' feminist branches (Jackson, 1998; Dietz, 2003). Liberal feminism focused on individual rights and equality through legal and policy reforms, while Marxist feminism challenged capitalist exploitation, and the gender divide in the labour market. Radical feminism sought to challenge hetero-normative understandings of women's roles in both the private and public spheres (Maynard, 1995).

Consciousness-raising practices were foundational during second wave feminism, in the shape of semi-structured workshops that facilitated connection among women (Saraschild, 2000). These practices worked to deconstruct the notion that women's struggles were private or individual issues, revealing them instead as social issues requiring political solutions (Whelehan, 1995). Over the last two decades, there has been an increase in studies of DIY culture (Downes, 2009; Breeze, 2014), as in

purposefully created subcultures that disrupt boundaries, producing space and support networks for identities and practices (Downes, 2009). Both consciousness-raising and DIY spaces continue to create understanding and action in situationally specific ways, centring a feminist collective capability to disrupt, create, and act.

During this period, critiques were raised by marginalised voices, particularly those of black and lesbian feminists, who argued that mainstream feminism excluded their experiences due to its focus on white and/or heterosexual experiences (Whelehan, 1995; Lorde, 2017). Black feminist scholars like hooks highlighted the invisibility of black women within mainstream feminist discourse, critiquing the assumption that 'woman' equated to 'white woman' and 'black' to 'black men' (hooks, 1982). Lorde further criticised feminisms for neglecting differences of race, sexuality, and class, emphasising that failure to recognise these differences perpetuated exclusion (Lorde, 2017). These critiques provided a foundation for the development of intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989), which emphasises the need to account for the multiple and intersecting forms of inequality, such as those rooted in gender and class, that shape individuals' experiences. The subsequent deconstruction of gender and identities marked a third shift in feminist theory, influenced by the 'cultural turn' towards postmodern perspectives. This period saw feminist theorising shift beyond binary understandings of gender to embrace more nuanced and inclusive perspectives on identity and power (Dietz, 2003).

Lorde's (1980) words criticised the neglect of race, sexuality, and class differences within feminism. As a Black lesbian woman, Lorde highlighted that dominant feminist narratives failed to relate to her experiences, stating that 'refusing to recognise difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as

women' (Lorde, 2017: 99). She emphasised that any feminism which failed to address the interconnected nature of these inequalities was fundamentally insufficient. Her critique facilitates a deeper understanding of how intersections shape experiences of inequality and identity, challenging simplistic or isolated views of oppression, and arguing that identities can be constituted through one another. Crenshaw (1989) encapsulated this sentiment, asserting, 'the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism' (1989: 140).

The late 1980s and early 1990s marked a pivotal transition from second- to third-wave feminism, characterised by the greater inclusion of racial and queer politics, feminism's institutionalisation within academia, and a decisive move away from essentialist views of the body (Whelehan, 1995; Jackson, 1998; Fahs, 2015). This period saw a significant challenge to binary understandings of gender and sexuality. Early critiques of such binaries emerged from materialist feminists such as Delphy (1993), who argued that gender is a social construct rooted in material conditions and the division of labour, rather than an inherent or biological reality. Delphy's materialist feminism reframed gender as a system imposed through patriarchal and economic structures, emphasising its social production rather than its biological inevitability. Similarly, Kessler and McKenna (1978) contested binary conceptions of gender, arguing that gender is not a natural or fixed attribute but a social attribution. They highlighted how society constructs and maintains the idea of gender through social practices and interactions, challenging the essentialist view that gender directly correlates with biological sex. These foundational critiques paved the way for subsequent feminist work that problematised binary frameworks of gender and sexuality.

This rejection of binaries gained further momentum with the rise of post-structuralist feminism, particularly Judith Butler's theorisation of gender as performative (1999, 2004). Butler reconfigured the relationships between materiality and discourse, sex and gender, by arguing that gender is constituted through repeated acts within a cultural framework, rather than being an innate identity. They further cautioned against defining 'woman' as a homogeneous category, asserting that such definitions risk bolstering exclusionary boundaries and undermining feminist efforts to address diverse forms of oppression (Butler, 1999). Butler's emphasis on language and discourse as central to the construction and performance of gender has been profoundly influential in feminist theory. However, Butler's framework has faced significant critique for its perceived limitations. Hawkesworth (1997) argues that feminist theorists, including Butler, are 'haunted by the spectre of biological determinism' (1997: 674), contending that Butler's focus on performativity privatises gender and offers limited tools for addressing its broader structures and symbolisms. For Hawkesworth, this discourse-oriented approach provides little utility for analysing the structural and material dimensions of inequality.

Hawkesworth further critiques Butler for narrowing the scope of gender analysis rather than embracing its complexity. She suggests that concepts such as 'sexed embodiedness, sexuality, sexual identity, gender identity, gendered divisions of labour, gendered social relations, and gender symbolism' are essential for capturing the multifaceted nature of gender beyond Butler's framework (Hawkesworth, 1997: 682). However, this critique may misrepresent Butler's intention to reject binary constraints and engage with the complexities surrounding gender, the body, and their sociocultural production.

These complexities are central to third-wave feminism and its recognition of diversity within feminist theory. While Hawkesworth's critique is valuable in drawing attention to potential limitations in Butler's approach, it also underscores the necessity of engaging with Butler's emphasis on performativity and the cultural regulation of gender. By situating these perspectives in dialogue, we gain a richer understanding of gender as a multifaceted and deeply contextual construct, shaped by intersecting structures and cultural practices.

Many contemporary feminist scholars maintain the importance of bodies and caution against the over-abstraction and deconstruction of gender identities. They employ an understanding of both the sexed body and social construction as the best means of comprehending an embodied experience (Fahs, 2015). When considering menstruation as an embodied experience, we can observe the intertwining of the body and gender. 'Menstrual bleeding in this sense is complex: it both highly reflects gender and is not exclusively associated with one gender as a material reality' (Przybylo & Fahs, 2018: 209). Fahs (2015) proposes combining approaches from both second- and third-wave feminism, utilising knowledge of identities and intersectionality to better address the corporal body.

The radical, critical challenge to norms posed by queer theory, much like the ever-evolving nature of feminism, can be traced back to earlier feminist thought. Adrienne Rich, for instance, critiqued the institution of compulsory heterosexuality, emphasising how heteronormativity shapes and constrains women's lives (Rich, 1980). Rich's insights, along with the broader feminist critique of systemic oppression, laid the groundwork for the challenges queer theory would later pose to normative frameworks. Emerging prior to the late 1980s (Miller, 2022), queer theory diverged from traditional

feminist concerns by shifting the focus from patriarchy to heteronormativity as the dominant oppressive institution (Jackson, 1998, 2001). Queer theory's critique of heteronormativity destabilises traditional understandings of sexuality and gender by deconstructing fixed identities and employing post-structuralist tools to question symbolic frameworks (Barker & Scheele, 2016). This approach not only interrogates the centrality of heterosexuality but also critiques the essentialist underpinnings of identity itself. In doing so, queer theory highlights the fluidity of identities, challenging the binary constructions of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual.

The 1990s saw queer theory gain prominence, coinciding with the academic shift from women's studies to gender studies. This transition reflected a broader move away from the essentialist notion of 'woman' as a singular, universal category, instead embracing more inclusive and intersectional approaches to gender and sexuality (McLaughlin, 2006). This period also witnessed challenges to identity politics by queer activists who critiqued the reification of identity categories as exclusionary and reductive. For queer theorists, the emphasis was not merely on expanding who was included within identity frameworks but on dismantling the frameworks themselves as tools of regulation and normativity.

While feminism at the time was engaged with critiques from intersectional perspectives regarding race, class, and sexuality (hooks, 1982; Crenshaw, 1989), queer theory's deconstructive approach further challenged the stability of identity categories. This tension between feminist and queer theoretical frameworks underscored a broader theoretical shift, where attention moved from understanding the structures of oppression to interrogating the very categories through which oppression operates. By disrupting the binaries of identity, queer theory deepened feminist debates, pushing

for an understanding of gender and sexuality as deeply contextual, fluid, and resistant to simplification.

While feminist and queer theorists both challenge social norms, dismantling the divisions between heterosexuality and homosexuality and questioning the binary gender division, it is crucial to avoid homogenising these groups. Within feminism, there are diverse perspectives, and the field remains complex and contested, with ongoing debates at its core. My research wades through and situates itself within these debates (Chapter 3, Methods), while not assuming to offer a resolution.

Mapping feminist theory through phases provides a simplified yet useful retrospective viewpoint. These phases, as Hemmings (2005) notes, serve as markers of specific moments that are better understood as ongoing contexts and relationships, rather than following a linear progression. By tracking these shifts and debates within feminist theory, I aim to highlight the benefits and limitations of various movements. Understanding the history of feminist theory allows this research to build upon the foundational tools of second-wave feminists who emphasised that the personal is political and viewed gender as a difference. Incorporating the insights of third-wave feminists, who focused on gender as an aspect of diversity and the complexities of identities, including lessons on exclusion and intersectionality, enables a more comprehensive approach to dismantling inequalities, such as those around menstruation. Fahs (2015) underscores the importance of combining these perspectives to address the body effectively. Recognising the body as both agentic and discursively constructed (Haraway, 1991) is crucial to avoiding deterministic or essentialist tendencies. As I will discuss below, menstruation is an embodied

experience that is highly gendered yet not only tied to one gender (Przybylo & Fahs, 2018).

Feminist Perspectives on Class and Identity

The consideration of social figures and types of women has long been central to feminist and sociological research. Key analyses include Hall's (1969) exploration of the 'hippies,' Tyler's (2008) 'chav,' McRobbie's (2007) 'Top Girl,' and Littler's (2013) 'Yummy Mummy.' Littler (2013) examines the Yummy Mummy as a representation of middle-class femininity, which reflects and reproduces cultural and social norms. This archetype, rooted in practices of parenting, lifestyle, and personal appearance, underscores how everyday cultural forms construct classed identities. The pressure to align with the Yummy Mummy ideal can provoke ambivalence, inferiority, or superiority, illustrating the moralisation of class (Walkerdine, 2003; Skeggs, 2004; Friedman & Laurison, 2019).

The interplay between the Yummy Mummy, chav, and Top Girl reveals the intersections of class, gender, and respectability. Tyler (2008) contrasts the chav with the Yummy Mummy, highlighting the stigmatisation of working-class identities as lacking morality, taste, and cultural capital. These representations reinforce class boundaries by elevating middle-class respectability and devaluing the working class. McRobbie's (2007) Top Girl, on the other hand, represents neoliberal pressures on young women to achieve in education, career, and personal life. Unlike the domestic focus of the Yummy Mummy, the Top Girl symbolises aspirational femininity through individual success, aligning with middle-class values of self-discipline and personal responsibility.

Bourdieu's (1985, 1999) concept of cultural capital is pivotal in understanding these figures. The Yummy Mummy accumulates cultural capital through lifestyle and taste, reinforcing middle-class dominance (Adkins, 2007). Conversely, the chav's cultural representation perpetuates exclusion, marking working-class femininity as morally deficient. Skeggs (1997, 2002) expands on this by arguing that respectability is a form of cultural capital accessible primarily to those with economic and social resources. Respectability, deeply tied to middle-class values, legitimises certain groups while marginalising others, thereby reinforcing social hierarchies. Working-class women, constrained by economic and societal barriers, are often stigmatised as lacking respectability, entrenching inequalities and furthering their symbolic 'othering.'

Feminist research underscores how class and gender intersect to shape experiences and representations of respectability. These archetypes reveal the power dynamics embedded in cultural forms and everyday practices. For instance, the Yummy Mummy, with its emphasis on 'correct' parenting and consumption, moralises class through motherhood, while the chav's portrayal highlights the penalisation of working-class women for failing to meet these standards. Meanwhile, the Top Girl demonstrates how neoliberalism individualises structural inequalities, suggesting class transcendence through personal effort.

This framework is particularly relevant for exploring menstruation as a site where gender and class converge. Menstrual products and practices serve as markers of cultural capital, mediating respectability and classed femininity. As Bourdieu (1999) argues, taste and consumption are deeply classed, and menstrual products—from reusable cups to organic pads—are laden with cultural significance. They reflect and perpetuate hierarchies of respectability by positioning certain choices as 'responsible'

or 'respectable' while marginalising others. Skeggs's (1997) insights into respectability's social construction further illuminate how menstrual practices can reinforce or challenge class distinctions, framing menstruation as both a personal and collective navigation of inequality.

By examining menstruation through the lens of archetypes like the Yummy Mummy, chav, and Top Girl, feminist research can critically engage with the moralisation of class and the role of cultural capital in shaping bodily practices. This approach reveals the ways in which menstruation is implicated in broader power dynamics, illustrating how gendered and classed identities are constructed, contested, and maintained in everyday life.

The way we think and feel about everyday activities creates and reinforces classed identities. This reciprocal relationship significantly influences how individuals act, think, and feel (Lawler, 2005; Reay, 2005). The emotional experience of class, encompassing feelings of ambivalence (Walkerdine, 2003), aversion, and distaste for others (Skeggs, 2004), profoundly shapes class identities. These processes are evident in menstruation, where practices and products reflect classed and gendered dynamics. By challenging simplistic class categories and embracing dynamic, processual understandings of class, scholars like Reay (1998), Skeggs (1997, 2011), and Taylor (2007) offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of women. Bourdieu's (1984, 1999) theoretical framework provides a robust foundation for analysing class as a dynamic interplay between practices and institutions, while intersectional approaches highlight the multifaceted burdens faced by marginalised groups. This literature underscores the importance of considering class, gender, and sexuality in feminist analyses, paving the way for more inclusive and comprehensive

understandings of social inequality. In the context of menstruation, such intersectional considerations reveal how class structures and gendered norms shape access to resources and the experience of menstruation. For instance, addressing period poverty requires moving beyond economic deprivation to interrogate how classed and gendered expectations influence societal norms and access to menstrual products.

McKay (2021) delves into the grassroots movements central to the campaign for free menstrual products in Scotland. She illustrates how these movements were driven by the lived experiences of women from various socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly those from marginalised communities. Activists employed a range of tactics, which included direct action, protests, public education campaigns, and policy advocacy. McKay (2021) highlights the importance of coalition-building among different activist groups, which brought together voices from across the spectrum of social justice movements. This intersectional approach ensured that the campaign addressed not only gender inequality but also the compounded effects of race, class, and economic disparities.

Class as Productive and Experienced

Reay (1998, 2005) critiques the reliance on objective, static metrics of class—such as income or occupation—as insufficient for capturing the lived realities and complexities of women's classed experiences. She challenges traditional categories like working and middle class, arguing that they oversimplify women's identities and fail to account for the fluid, relational, and processual aspects of class. These fixed classifications reinforce a reductive dichotomy, obscuring how intersecting factors such as race, education, and cultural capital shape diverse and dynamic classed positionalities. This

critique highlights the need for intersectional and nuanced approaches to understanding class that move beyond static classifications. Skeggs (1997) contends that such descriptions fail to account for the ongoing production and challenging of class distinctions.

This perspective aligns with the revival of interest in the cultural dimensions of class (Devine & Savage, 2005), which recognises the dynamic and lived experiences of class. Reay (1998), Skeggs (1997), and Taylor (2007), along with other scholars, have used and expanded upon Bourdieu's (1984, 1999) social theory to conceptualise class more comprehensively. Bourdieu's work provides a framework for understanding class as dynamic and lived, rather than static. His concepts of field and habitus illustrate how inequalities arise from the interplay between embodied practices and institutional processes (Devine & Savage, 2005). This approach highlights the processes of inclusion and exclusion that shape class experiences.

Taylor's (2007) research explores the intersection of class, gender, and sexuality, particularly within the context of working-class lesbians. Taylor argues that society often frames gendered expectations within a heterosexual construct, considering middle-class experiences as the norm. Her ethnographic study shows the intersecting burdens of class and sexuality, highlighting the dual positioning of working-class lesbians as 'failures' in both respects (Taylor, 2007: 353). This intersectional approach underscores the need to consider multiple axes of identity in feminist analyses of class. Tyler (2015) offers a critical perspective on class as both a description of social hierarchy and a site of political struggle. Class is intertwined with the ability to produce a valued self through differential access to resources (Skeggs, 2004). Lawler (2000) highlights how classed existences shape people's subjectivities, positioning them as

right or wrong based on economic and cultural capital. Scholars like Gillies (2005) and Skeggs (2004) argue that the presentation of middle-class values and standards frame the working class as lacking legitimacy and authenticity.

Skeggs (2011) critiques the notion of the 'possessive individual', who accumulates value through education, work, and consumption; the working class are defined against this middle-class standard and are subsequently perceived as irresponsible for not accruing value in the same way. Yet Skeggs (1997, 2011) has also found that working-class women negotiate, re-evaluate, and reject these social constraints. For instance, the judgement that middle-class mothers may be subject to for spending less time with their children allows working-class women to claim moral value through their own caregiving practices. This reversal of moral value is an example of the way that working-class women can defend themselves against devaluation by the middle-class value system (Skeggs, 2011). Savage (2015) and Walkerdine (2015) argue that the middle-class value system perpetuates contemporary class inequality by designating individuals as morally worthy based on their adherence to middle-class values, designating class as a moralised category. Sayer (2002) argues that this moralisation strongly ties ideas of injustice and moral evaluation to class, making it a highly charged social issue.

Post-feminism and Fourth-Wave Feminism, Considering Menstruation

During the 1990s and 2000s, post-feminism gained traction, paradoxically highlighting feminism's successes while undermining feminist activities and gains by presenting its core issues as already resolved and fully integrated (McRobbie, 2008). Post-feminism promotes the image of women as individuals ready to conquer the world, a notion with is closely tied to capitalism (Rivers, 2016). McRobbie (2008) and Rivers (2016) argue that consumer and popular culture promote this notion. Therefore, it's important to examine how capitalism has commodified and rebranded menstruation, rather than solely focusing on how women interact with it.

Contemporary menstrual activists, much like feminists during the second wave, are pushing back against the co-option and rhetorical manipulation of feminist discourse by large-scale menstrual product manufacturers and advertisers. These corporations often commodify menstruation, framing empowerment through consumerism while neglecting the structural inequalities underpinning menstrual stigma and access (Rostvik, 2022). To resist the influence of post-feminism and the commodification of menstruation, menstrual activists—and myself as a feminist menstrual researcher—must engage in collaborative efforts with other social movements. These include campaigns for LGBTQI+ rights, anti-racism, anti-fatphobia, class struggles, and environmental justice, reflecting an intersectional approach that recognises the interconnectedness of social injustices.

Feminist research has long emphasised the dynamic and necessary relationship between theory and activism, whereby scholarly inquiry informs activist practice, and activism, in turn, reshapes theoretical frameworks (hooks, 1984; Harding, 1987; Mohanty, 2003). In the case of menstrual activism, this interplay is crucial for addressing systemic inequalities and imagining more inclusive and just futures. Bobel and Fahs (2018, 2020) highlight that social inequalities—whether tied to race, gender, class, body size, or environmental degradation—are not isolated phenomena but are rooted in overlapping systems of social and political injustice. Recognising this interconnectedness demands that we move beyond single-issue activism or scholarship to embrace a holistic and collective approach, where solidarity across movements becomes a foundational principle for meaningful change.

In reviewing the scholarship on menstruation, it is clear that feminist menstrual scholars do not agree on a single desired outcome for menstrual activism and research. There are two dominant desired outcomes, namely, period positivity and period neutrality. Period positivity encourages celebrating and rejoicing in menstruation. For instance, Quint (2019) has developed a 'Period Positive Charter and Period Positive Pledge' for organisations and educational facilities. Quint also coined the '#periodpositive' hashtag, which has become popular for promoting a variety of period-related information. By contrast, period neutrality seeks not to promote positivity but to normalise the entire menstrual experience, including conditions like endometriosis that can cause severe pain and make it difficult to feel positive about menstruation. This approach acknowledges the challenges that some people face and aims to foster a more expansive understanding of menstruation.

Tomlinson's (2021) feminist exploration of menstrual memes adds a critical dimension to the discussion of period positivity and period neutrality by illustrating how cultural representations shape and reflect societal attitudes towards menstruation. Her work supports the call for a nuanced and inclusive approach that recognises the diverse realities of menstrual experiences. Incorporating Tomlinson's analysis, we can see that period positivity, while well-intentioned, might inadvertently simplify the menstrual experience by pushing a uniformly celebratory narrative. Period neutrality, which acknowledges the full spectrum of menstrual experiences – including those that are painful or inconvenient – might better normalise menstruation in all its complexity. Tomlinson's (2021) work complements the argument for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to menstrual activism.

Reflecting on these shifts and debates allows us to understand the iterative nature of feminist theory. Breeze and Taylor (2020) encapsulate this, offering nuanced work which emphasises both feminist theory's transformative power and the ongoing need for critical reflection and inclusive practices within feminist movements (see also River, 2017). Illustrating the ways in which feminists/isms repeat and interrupt, their dual focus highlights the strength of and need for feminism while engaging critically with its complexities. This critical examination of the evolution of feminist theory highlights the need to both incorporate diverse perspectives and recognise the complexities both within feminist theory and in its intersections with queer theory. By embracing this approach, we can more effectively tackle ongoing challenges and continue to strengthen an inclusive and comprehensive feminist praxis. This research is rooted in feminist scholarship, providing a clear understanding of the intertwined achievements and challenges of feminist activism and academic work. This context is essential for

engaging with and understanding the complexities surrounding menstrual activism, scholarship, and politics.

Menstruation as a Feminist Issue

As I have briefly mapped out, 'feminist theorising is a continuum of overlapping ideas and priorities' (McLaughlin, 2003: 186). Despite these variations, the positionality and treatment of women and marginalised groups in society – whether in public or private contexts – remain central to feminism. From my own feminist perspective, the status and boundaries drawn around women are largely based on socially constructed norms that distinguish between women and men, reinforcing a gender binary and leading to inequalities.

Over the last seven decades, scholars have documented the menstruation-related inequalities that women experience (De Beauvoir, 1952; Laws, 1990; Bobel, 2018). The problematisation of norms and the gender binary lies at the centre of more recent critical menstrual research, allowing for menstruation to become an activist and academic issue. This is not only because women predominantly experience menstruation but also because society constructs and perceives its positionality and understanding as lesser, delegitimised embodied experiences. Women's bodies are significant in menstrual research, as menstruation is inherently a physiological and lived experience. I explore menstrual taboos, stigma, theories with respect to menstruating woman, and the different ways in which menstruation is experienced and embodied depending on varying circumstances.

In the following section, I provide an overview of menstruation research, highlighting significant and revealing research topics, as well as the methodological and theoretical approaches employed. I critique recent studies and academic literature, along with scholarship spanning the last several decades. Although the academic sphere has critically considered menstruation for the past 70 years, the past six years have seen substantial momentum, resulting in a significant uptake of related topics such as menopause, and hormonal shifts of the menstrual cycle due to participation in sports. Nevertheless, as I have outlined above through unpacking and situating the importance of early feminist work, it is crucial to revisit research from the 1980s and earlier. Theories concerning menstruating women and menstruation itself remain important in our understanding and experience of menstruation today.

Historical scholarship has explored individuals' changing experiences of menstruation, providing valuable context for how menstruation has been socially and culturally constructed over time. Freidenfelds (2009) examines how social and medical discourses in twentieth-century America shaped expectations around menstrual hygiene, propriety, and the regulation of women's bodies, highlighting the pressures individuals faced to conform to emerging norms of femininity. Marland (2013) investigates girls' health and hygiene practices in Britain, revealing how education and health authorities sought to guide behaviour and manage menstrual experiences within broader social and moral frameworks. While these studies offer important insights into historical experiences of menstruation, they do not extensively address individuals' interactions with specific menstrual products. This leaves a gap that the present study engages by exploring how period products themselves mediate embodied, intersectional experiences, shaping identity, social norms, and

understandings of class, gender, and environmental responsibility. It is important to note that my review contains largely Western social and cultural understandings of menstruation, particularly those found in Scotland and the UK. This geographical and demographic emphasis aligns predominantly, but not entirely, with my empirical data, which also includes stories of women who grew up in Pakistan, China, and Dubai (although each now live in Scotland).

Much of the literature on menstruation primarily addresses the experiences of white women and girls, often failing to engage critically with race or intersectional perspectives. Additionally, menstrual research conducted in the Global South by scholars from Western contexts has been critiqued for perpetuating 'victim narratives' that portray women and girls as passive recipients of aid or inherently in need, rather than as agents of change (McCarthy & Lahiri-Dutt, 2020). Such narratives risk reinforcing colonialist and paternalistic frameworks, thereby marginalising the voices and experiences of those directly affected while privileging Western perspectives in the production of knowledge (Chant, 2008). These limitations in the literature situate my review within a predominantly Western and Eurocentric framework. In this way, my research is open to critique, yet it is consciously situated within its boundaries and possible scope.

Mapping the Construction of Stigma and Taboo on the Bodies of Women

Stigma and taboo dominate menstrual research, often serving as foundational premises or primary findings. I initially set out with the idea of stigma as a framework,

particularly as it relates to menstrual products and blood. This section unpacks how stigma and taboo operate in the context of menstruation, enabling a deeper exploration of the broader social, cultural, and individual factors shaping menstrual experiences. Through this analysis, a more holistic understanding of the intersections of stigma, taboo, and menstrual experiences emerges.

Menstruation and Stigma: Gender

Goffman's (1963) work on stigma referred to 'we normals', as a benevolent normative group positioned at the top of a social hierarchy. Goffman's terminology and framing uphold the boundaries and hierarchies of a patriarchal society, implying that those outside these boundaries are liable to be stigmatised. He argues that concealment of stigma is necessary to maintain social boundaries, easing the comfort of 'normals'. Tyler (2018) critiques Goffman's focus on how norms function rather than their impact, arguing that his work inadvertently legitimises stigma by reinforcing societal categorisation processes controlled by 'knowers'. In particular, Tyler (2018) highlights the need to address the essentialist assumptions underlying Goffman's stigma theory, where categories of stigmatisation are treated as fixed and unchanging, rather than as socially constructed and contested.

Howarth (2006) also critiques Goffman's early writing on stigma, advocating for integrating anti-racist scholarship to better understand and mobilise against stigma. Stigma, and its historical construction, impact identity and collective resistance. Howarth argues that Goffman's work portrays stigmatised individuals as passive and lacking agency, failing to acknowledge the collective resistance required to challenge and resist stigma. In his investigation, Howarth (2006) utilises Moscovici's (1984)

Social Representation Theory to explore how knowledge systems are created, defended, and changed in social contexts. This theory highlights the dynamic and collective nature of knowledge, emphasising its ongoing resistance and transformation. Howarth (2016) uses examples of racial stigmatisation to illustrate stigma's role in justifying hierarchy and inequality, and argues that the visibility and social recognition of stigma obscure its social construction and inherent symbolic violence.

To integrate Goffman's work into a feminist framework, it is necessary to reconfigure it in the ways these scholars have indicated. We must allow for the agency of individuals, understanding that people are not passive receptacles of social stigma, and that people, both individually and collectively, not only navigate but also resist stigma. People must be understood beyond Goffman's (1963) presentation of a one-dimensional person in opposition to 'normals'. Within feminist research, such as mine, re-conceptualising stigma is essential; I draw on the work of Tyler (2018) and Howarth (2006) to view Goffman's (1963) theory from the perspective of the 'Other', mobilising against the very idea of 'normal' that Goffman centres.

Feminist scholars re-mobilising Goffman's (1963) stigma theory have long recognised and documented the stigmatisation of menstruation, noting how its social construction acts as a disqualifying stain upon women's identity (de Beauvoir, 1952; Roberts et al., 2002; Bobel, 2010). The stigmatisation of women due to the process of menstruation has led to the development and inculcation of behaviours to conceal this process, known as 'menstrual etiquette' (Laws, 1990). Examination of menstrual stigma and etiquette draws attention to the complexity and paradoxical efforts tied up with the mitigation of menstrual stigma. It is with an understanding of these complexities that

we can re-conceptualise menstrual stigma as a material mechanism of power. In comparison, we can consider taboo as a symbolic mechanism of power, working co-morbidly.

Contemporary scholars continue to utilise stigma to understand the oppression and demarcation of women due to the occurrence of menstruation (Kissling, 2006; Bobel, 2010; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011). Scholars have found that menstruation is stigmatised, and that this occurs in various social spaces (Kowalski & Chapple, 2000, 2002; Bobel, 2010; Grose & Grabe, 2014; Sveinsdóttir, 2017).

Laws (1990), a feminist activist and women's health researcher, coined the term 'menstrual etiquette' to describe the behaviours women perform during menstruation to avoid being discredited and stigmatised. This etiquette 'governs how menstruation should be dealt with and spoken of' (Laws, 1990: 29) through cultural norms that dictate the correct way to manage and conceal menstruation. These behaviours include micromanagement of language, products, and actions, relying heavily on individually made decisions (Seear, 2009). Leaking menstrual blood is seen as both a failure in the personal performance of menstrual etiquette and in keeping oneself clean, tidy, and under control (Young, 2005; O'Flynn, 2006; Ussher, 2006; Kissling, 2013). The avoidance of leaking is described as a dual behaviour, preventing embarrassing others with the sight of menstrual blood and avoiding the failure to keep oneself clean (Lee, 1994; Dahlqvist, 2018). The centrality of menstrual blood with respect to the stigma surrounding menstruation is unquestionable. Whether it is present or conspicuously absent, menstrual blood is a focal point of both tangible and symbolic stigmatisation. Researchers have found that internalising negative social

attitudes towards menstruation leads to the production of shame and self-surveillance (Roberts, 2004; Johnston-Robledo et al., 2003, 2018).

Menstrual stigma and etiquette are pervasive constructs that negatively affect women (Kowalski & Chapple, 2000; Roberts et al., 2002; Kissling, 2006; Bobel, 2010). Menstrual shame continues to be perpetuated through advertisements, media representations, and the reproduction of norms (Kissling, 2013; Fahs & Przybylo, 2020; Campbell et al., 2021). The fear of being stigmatised because of menstruation has led to the concealment of menstruation through menstrual etiquette (Laws, 1990; O'Flynn, 2006), facilitating gendered inequality (Bobel, 2018). By compelling individuals to conform to rigid norms of concealment and control, menstrual etiquette reinforces societal expectations that disproportionately burden women, framing menstruation as a private issue rather than a shared biological reality, and further marginalising those who fail to meet these expectations. This exploration of menstrual stigma and etiquette reveals the inherent public/private power dynamics in the stigmatisation of menstruation, aligning with Bobel and Fahs' (2018) assertion that 'menstruation unites the personal and the political, the intimate and the public, the minutiae and the bigger stories about the body' (151).

Respectability: The Pressure of Menstruation Etiquette and Class.

This section works to position respectability in and amongst literature on menstrual concealment norms. In my exploration of respectability, class, and menstrual activism, it is crucial to consider how these concepts intersect and shape women's experiences.

Skeggs (1997) identifies respectability as an important signifier of class and argues that respectability is often a concern for those perceived not to have it. Through her ethnographic study of 83 working-class women in the care sector in North-West England, she demonstrates how these women strive to be perceived as respectable, while simultaneously resisting this designation across different contexts. Respectability, in this sense, denotes moral character, self-worth, and social value. Skeggs' work highlights the drawing of a moral boundary that positions working-class women as the 'Other' in opposition to the respectable middle-class.

Within classed social structure, working-class femininity historically developed within a masculine economic labour context and has undergone re-creation and repositioning. Taking the example of the hen party, Skeggs (2016) shows how white working-class women are portrayed as vulgar and excessive, while the middle-class woman is seen as respectable, contained, and educated. Working-class women were historically depicted as vulgar and excessive, contrasting sharply with the respectable, educated middle-class woman, a portrayal that reinforced existing moral boundaries and reflected the biases of symbolic value systems.

Rhodes' (2022) thesis builds on Skeggs' insights, emphasising how respectability is constructed and perceived specifically within the UK, including through the framing of period poverty. Rhodes argues that middle-class norms continue to dominate societal perceptions of respectability, marginalising working-class behaviours and lifestyles. Her research shows that menstrual practices, she terms menstrual performative acts, are central to how working-class women negotiate this. These acts include practices of concealment, silence, and the careful management of menstrual blood and products, all of which serve to distance themselves from negative stereotypes such as

excessive, or uncontrolled. In this way, menstruation becomes another embodied site where working-class women must work harder to present themselves as “respectable” in the face of pre-existing classed and gendered stigmas.

Douglas’ (1976) theory of purity and pollution helps illuminate these dynamics. Menstrual blood, positioned as “dirt” because it disrupts bodily and social boundaries, is especially potent when linked to classed judgements about cleanliness and propriety. For working-class women, any visible “failure” of menstrual etiquette risks compounding the disrespect and moral suspicion they already face, reinforcing their social marginalisation. Rhodes’ analysis shows how menstrual management becomes bound up in these moral judgements, sustaining class boundaries and legitimising broader social disparities. By situating her findings within feminist theories of respectability and pollution, Rhodes demonstrates how deeply gendered and classed hierarchies are reproduced through the everyday regulation of menstruation.

Taylor’s (2007) research aligns with and builds upon this feminist work on respectability and failure. Skeggs (1997, 2012) highlights that societal expectations tightly regulate women’s conduct, appearance, and roles, deepening the gendered nature of respectability. Taylor’s (2007) findings reveal that while working-class lesbians face additional pressures due to their sexuality, many participants in her study actively resisted middle-class ideals of respectability and the gendered norms of (hetero)femininity, challenging these standards rather than striving to conform to them. This dual burden reinforces respectability as a constructed impossibility. Society deeply genders respectability by placing policed expectations on women regarding their conduct, appearance, and roles. According to Walkerdine (2003), class identity has always held an ambivalent position in relation to working-class femininity. Taylor’s

(2007) study echoes Walkerdine's analysis, demonstrating how working-class lesbians navigate their identities amidst changing class dynamics while being subjected to multiple expectations, thus deepening our understanding of the multifaceted pressures faced by women in navigating respectability within a classed and gendered framework.

Respectability intertwines with menstrual politics and its academic study. Bobel and Fahs (2020) critique the way in which menstrual activism often reinforces respectability politics, arguing that focusing on menstrual products and etiquette perpetuates gendered social requirements and incremental changes rather than addressing the root causes of menstrual stigma. Their call is for a radical feminist agenda to challenge assumptions about the body and dismantle menstrual stigma at its core; however, they acknowledge the limitations of this approach, noting that for women in precarious social positions, adhering to respectability politics can be a strategic mechanism. Their critique emphasises a tension within menstrual activism, namely the requirement to address immediate practical concerns, like access to menstrual products, versus pursuing more extensive systemic change. Bobel and Fahs' (2020) concept of 'bloodless politics' critiques the potential for menstrual activism to become a neoliberal enterprise, focused on social acceptability rather than radical transformation. This critique resonates with the argument made by De Benedictis (2020) regarding UK newspaper coverage of menstruation, which often emphasises product provision over structural analysis.

While Bobel and Fahs' (2020) radical feminist critique is situated in and advances menstrual scholarship, it overlooks the practical realities faced by many women, particularly working-class women. Rhodes (2022) found that working-class women

often lack the symbolic or cultural capital to engage in radical activism. While critics argue that menstrual activism perpetuates gendered norms by focusing on respectability, one can also view it as a response to the immediate needs and strategies of marginalised women. The critique that menstrual activism does not address the structural reasons behind the lack of access to menstrual products is theoretically sound but practically limited. While it is essential to challenge systemic inequalities, it is equally important to provide immediate relief to those affected by menstrual poverty (Rhodes, 2022). It is important to temper our analysis with an understanding of the lived realities of marginalised women. A comprehensive feminist approach to menstrual research and policy should balance immediate practical solutions with long-term systemic change, acknowledging the diverse needs and strategies of women across different social contexts.

Menstrual stigma is multifaceted and challenging to navigate because of the pervasive and often unattainable expectations surrounding it. Menstruation is a shared experience among individuals who may face various other forms of inequality, and it is important to recognise that women, trans, and nonbinary people who menstruate are not a homogeneous group. Their experiences intersect with many social structures. Parker and Aggleton (2003) note that 'stigma feeds upon, strengthens, and reproduces existing inequalities of class, race, gender, and sexuality' (2003: 13). This is equally true for menstrual stigma, such that individuals suffering from other social injustices may feel the personal and social ramifications of menstrual stigma even more acutely.

As many feminist and menstrual scholars argue, it is essential to consider the complex, embodied experience of menstruation as deeply embedded within our wider

sociopolitical context. Skeggs (1997) and Rhodes (2022) highlight the role of respectability in reinforcing class distinctions, which is relevant in understanding how menstrual etiquette can police and regulate women's bodies, further entrenching social inequalities. This complexity is something I hope to unpack and explore throughout my research. Moving forward, I will build upon the foundation of feminist scholarship and the understanding of menstruation as a gendered inequality, to unpack and critique the notion of menstruation as solely a women's issue.

Menstruation as a 'Women's Issue'

Significant changes in political and social issues related to the reproductive body emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, driven by women's health and women's rights activists. This period, marked by the concept of gender as difference, played a key role in the development of feminist understandings of gender and identity. As a result, menstruation is no longer considered solely a women's issue. Not all women menstruate, and many women, whether assigned female or male at birth, may not have the biological or physiological capacity to do so. Factors like diet, athleticism, contraception, and medication can prevent menstruation. Conversely, not everyone who menstruates is a woman; many trans men and nonbinary individuals also experience menstruation. This inclusive consideration of menstruation is central to my thesis.

My firm understanding of menstruation as a feminist issue does not restrict care, activism, and consideration to women alone, but includes the intersectional identities of all who menstruate. The predominant association of menstruation with women has led to its stigmatisation; however, a nonbinary person who menstruates faces similar

stigmatisation because of the societal binary assignation of menstruation to women. Feminism, therefore, now works on behalf of any marginalised person, regardless of gender. The pervasive stigma and shame surrounding menstruation have made this issue relevant to all who experience it, transcending the gender binary.

In their discussion, Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo (2018) explore the work of the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1962) on embodiment. Merleau-Ponty argued that our bodies mediate and define how we interpret our environment. The body never isolates itself from the world but always engages with it, while others also observe and touch it; the body is a social entity mediating all our interactions. A person's experience of menstruation – from menarche to menopause – is affected not only by gender but also by structures such as race, class, sexuality, and religion. The interplay between physical occurrence and lived experience underscores the complexity of menstruation as an embodied experience (Crenshaw, 1989; Gagne & Tewksbury, 1998; Collins, 2000; Barker & Scheele, 2016).

Butler (1990) argues that individuals construct gender through performance. The commodification of 'womanhood' acts as a mechanism to reproduce gendered boundaries and power relations around menstruation. Feminist menstrual activists and researchers, recognising the shame, stigma, and inequality experienced because of menstruation, have moved the menstruating body into political relevance. They emphasise the impact of social, political, and economic inequalities on women and marginalised people. Keeping menstruation in the shadows perpetuates its understanding as a private issue rather than a social or political one. Recognising the entanglement of the private and public, and of the political and social, is paramount to

feminist research and activism, and menstruation as a feminist issue is situated within a wide body of feminist theory.

Period Products

During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a surge of feminist activity specifically challenging women's roles within the private sphere. It addressed their place in family life in the roles of housewife and mother, while fighting for women's space in the labour market (Whelehan, 1995). Period product manufacturers co-opted this feminist discourse and rebranded their products to suit the 'new' woman. The marketing of menstrual products as tools of liberation highlighted their role in providing greater freedom. For instance, the introduction of pads that adhered directly to underwear, rather than requiring a belt around the waist, was promoted as a crucial innovation for women's liberation (Patterson, 2013). Period product providers suggested that with these new products women could fully take part in the public sphere while menstruating. They sold the illusion that purchasing these products could grant women freedom and empowerment (Kissling, 2006).

This co-opting of feminism has been evident over the past six decades (Kissling, 2006). Period product companies absorb popular ideas of women's lives and bodies, reinterpret them, and then market their products as solutions. Kissling (2006) posits that the menstrual product industry mediates the relationship between women and their menstruation. Writing in 2013, Kissling (2013) further suggests that period product advertisements create cultural scripts that shape the way women relate to their bodies during menstruation. This distinction is crucial, as it highlights two relationships at play: the individual's relationship with their bleeding body and their

relationship with the societal context in which they navigate this bleeding body. This nuanced understanding of menstruation remains under-explored in current scholarship.

Recent marketing campaigns by menstrual product manufacturers and advertisers in the 2010s illustrate the intense competition for consumer business. Dominant global brands, such as Procter and Gamble (P&G), exemplify this trend. P&G, which produces Always and Tampax, leads in tampon and pad sales in the UK (Statista, 2021a, 2021b). P&G's history with the Rely tampon is a stark reminder of the potential dangers of period products. The Rely tampon infamously leached magnesium into users' vaginas, which facilitated the growth of streptococcus and staphylococci bacteria and caused alarmingly high rates of the life-threatening toxic shock syndrome (TSS). In 1983, the United States saw 2,200 cases of TSS, resulting in over 30 deaths (Bobel, 2010). This crisis propelled period products into the public eye, sparking activist backlash and legal battles that led to mandatory absorbency ratings and TSS warnings on all tampon packaging (Bobel, 2006). The ubiquity of dominant brands like P&G reinforces their influence over menstrual norms and behaviours, often perpetuating harmful and negative messages about menstruation (Kissling, 2007; Bobel, 2010; Erchull, 2013; Bobel, 2018).

Menstrual product manufacturers' and advertisers' marketing campaigns not only co-opt feminism and popular social rhetoric to sell products, they also work to present idealised types for customers to identify with, such as 'fit bleeding' or 'preppy performers' (Fahs & Przybylo, 2020). Depictions of 'fit bleeding' act to remove the association of menstruation with overt femininity and delicacy – the subject of mockery in preppy performances – instead offering a narrative of masculinity and toughness.

The P&G-owned brand Always, a leader in the period product industry, ran the marketing campaign 'Like a Girl' which depicts girls as capable of engaging in physical and sporting activities. Without a critical eye, this may appear in line with feminist principles, and may even be considered positive for encouraging a diverse narrative of women's and girls' capabilities, working against the trope of throwing like a girl, which implies weakness and inability. Nevertheless, the messaging conveys that Always products are the solution to the drop in physical confidence girls experience at puberty. A secondary issue with the campaign is the use of masculinity and toughness as indicators of bodily empowerment and the capability of young girls (Fahs & Przybylo, 2020).

In the 2010s, the hyper-gendered notion of the 'girl boss' became mainstream, suggesting that young women could achieve professional success through sheer hard work and perseverance in society's meritocracy. This concept aligned seamlessly with Western neoliberal ideals and was epitomised by figures like Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg. P&G's 2014 'Like A Girl' campaign embodied this notion, portraying the confident girl child growing up to become a powerful corporate woman, unaffected by menstruation (Rostvik, 2020). By (re)constructing and capitalising on menstrual stigma and shame, while also marketing empowerment as something achievable through their specific products, period product companies effectively commodify empowerment itself (Fahs & Przybylo, 2020). Centring products alone at the heart of feminist menstrual activism allows capitalism and brands to dominate, or at the very least participate in, the discourse around menstruation and the bodies of those who menstruate. As they gain traction, calls for change are swiftly co-opted and capitalised

upon, creating an illusion of revolution that aligns with post-feminist individualising narratives.

The (In)Visibility of Menstrual Blood

As I have discussed in the previous sections, menstrual and feminist scholarships recognise that menstrual blood, because of its social construction, acts as a literal and symbolic signifier of failed menstrual etiquette, indicating an unruly, uncontrolled body. Social anthropologist Douglas (1976) posited that the body is a bounded system representing social order. Menstruating bodies threaten these boundaries, as order inherently implies restrictions requiring policing and being upheld. Douglas argues that '[i]deas about separating, purifying, demarcating, and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience' (1976: 5). This suggests that society perceives menstrual blood as a pollutant, a threat to social order.

As I have discussed in the previous sections, feminist scholarship has long recognised that menstrual blood, because of its social construction, functions as both a literal and symbolic signifier of failed menstrual etiquette, marking the body as unruly or uncontrolled. Social anthropologist Mary Douglas (1976) argued that the body operates as a bounded system representing wider social order, where boundaries must be carefully maintained. Menstruating bodies threaten these boundaries, as order inherently depends on restrictions that require policing and reinforcement. Douglas contends that '[i]deas about separating, purifying, demarcating, and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience' (1976: 5).

Her theory of purity and dirt is particularly valuable for feminist understandings of menstruation as a site where social, moral, and classed orders converge. Menstrual blood is positioned as “dirt” not because it is a bodily fluid but because it disrupts norms of containment and propriety, reinforcing expectations of feminine respectability. Skeggs’ (1997, 2004) analysis of how working-class women navigate moral regulation and the pursuit of respectability complements Douglas’ account by demonstrating how respectability itself functions as a gendered and classed project, shaping women’s bodily practices and self-presentations. From this perspective, menstrual management is not about hygiene but about upholding moral and classed norms of femininity. Women, trans, and nonbinary people who menstruate learn to distance themselves from their menstrual blood, holding it as something separate from their bodies to detach themselves from the social positioning of menstrual blood (Guthrie, 2007). This distancing is clear in the social norms, advertising, and language surrounding menstruation (Stein & Kim, 2009; Bobel, 2010; Kissling, 2013; Newson, 2017). The anxiety around leaking blood underscores the societal pressure to conceal menstruation, as ‘the power of embarrassing stories in guides is to remind girls that, if they cannot (or will not) control their bodies, they can be socially excluded’ (Guthrie, 2007: 30). This rejection of menstrual blood as part of the self allows the transfer of disgust from the person to the blood itself, preserving social order and reinforcing stigma and menstrual etiquette.

Advertising perpetuates the invisibility of menstrual blood by avoiding the portrayal of the reality of menstruation. Instead, it uses symbols like flowers and hearts to obscure the reality of bleeding, thereby aligning menstruation with socially constructed notions of femininity (Merskin, 1999). While some media representations are beginning to

challenge this, it is often because of the co-opting of feminist discourse by menstrual product companies, rather than reflecting a genuine effort to support menstruators. Visible menstrual blood challenges the norms of menstrual etiquette, which demand the hiding of menstrual products and the reality of menstruation (Kissling, 2006; Vostral, 2008). For instance, a UK and Ireland TV commercial informed users they should not feel their tampon once inserted. This direct message led to the ad being banned from Irish television, with 83% of the complainants being women (McCathaigh, 2020). This highlights entrenched norms of menstrual concealment and distancing, emphasising the disruptive potential of even implicit references to the menstruating body, without the need for explicit discussion or visuals of menstrual blood, to challenge societal taboos and provoke discomfort.

Rivers (2017) describes this fourth wave as characterised by micro-changes, situated in everyday conversations, decisions, and disruptions made by women, trans, and nonbinary people who often do not have the conscious intent to be part of a larger menstrual movement. The (in)visibility, shame, and stigma surrounding menstruation are well documented (Kissling, 2006; Bobel, 2010; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011). Now, individual, everyday micro-changes – in conversations (Quint, 2019), behaviours and interactions (Persdotter, 2013), and online activities (Tomlinson, 2021) – are disturbing previous boundaries. The lived experiences of individuals navigating menstruation in this evolving context can provide valuable insights into the spectrum of menstrual relationships, negotiations, and resistances.

Policy and Period Poverty

The aim of this section is to conduct a critical analysis of the existing literature on menstruation and period poverty, focusing particularly on the influence of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (Scottish Parliament, 2020). By examining the interplay between symbolic representations and material realities, this review seeks to uncover the broader implications of policy-driven changes in the menstrual landscape. Plan UK conducted the first research on period poverty in the UK in 2017. Their survey of 1,000 girls revealed alarming statistics: 27% had to use menstrual products for longer than recommended due to affordability issues, 42% had to improvise menstrual wear, and one in ten girls could not afford menstrual products at all. Another report by Plan UK, in 2018, used focus groups in England and Wales to explore girls' lived experiences of menstrual stigma and taboo. It examined myths such as, for example, not swimming during your period, and that you cannot use a tampon if you are a virgin. The study highlighted the significant impact these myths and taboos have on young women's everyday lives at school and at home.

Plan International UK's report (Tingle & Vora, 2018) highlights both the support needed by people experiencing period poverty within the UK and the need for this support to reach beyond social discourse to address menstruation broadly. The report is widely used by commercial organisations (Bodyform, 2020; Hey Girls, 2020), the media (Mail, 2020; Mirror, 2020), Scottish policy writers (Burn-Murdoch & McTaggart, 2019; SPICe, 2019) and academics (Punzi & Werner, 2020) when discussing period poverty within the UK and its effect on lived experience. Vora's (2020) phenomenological research explores the experiences of menstruating homeless women in Bristol. Vora describes

period poverty as 'the state in which people who menstruate find themselves without the financial resources to access suitable menstrual products' (2020: 32). This concept highlights the tension between the visible presence of homelessness and societal expectations to conceal menstruation, considering both the bleeding body and its presence in public spaces as socially 'unacceptable' (Kristeva, 1982; Longhurst, 1996). This dual marginalisation exposes the harsh reality that homeless women face. Gruer et al. (2021) further found that homeless shelters are unreliable sources of menstrual products, with inconsistent supplies and strict monitoring by staff meaning they often fail to meet women's individual menstrual needs. This research critically underscores the compounded vulnerabilities experienced by homeless menstruators.

Williams et al. (2022) examined the concept of period poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic, adopting qualitative methods to capture experiences from both affected individuals and professionals within related service organisations. Their findings reveal an increase in period poverty linked to factors like panic buying and disrupted access to healthcare, particularly GP services. This underscores how crises exacerbate existing inequalities, placing additional strain on those already marginalised. Briggs (2020) offers complementary insights, focusing on period poverty in the UK through three interconnected themes. Briggs highlights the practical challenges of managing menstrual concealment due to limited financial resources, which, though not explicit, underscore the role of respectability in shaping menstrual stigma. Emotions, such as heightened anxiety from unmet menstrual management needs, further illustrate the deeply gendered and classed nature of period poverty.

Williams et al. (2022) also provide a broad definition of period poverty, encompassing not just the financial constraints around accessing menstrual products but also

inequalities tied to education, stigma, and rights. While comprehensive, this framing risks overgeneralising distinct experiences, prompting further critical engagement with how period poverty intersects with systemic inequities. Despite this, policies aimed at combating period poverty do not currently address this wide range of issues, often focusing narrowly on product provision without engaging broader systemic concerns.

The work of menstrual activists, picked up by policymakers in Scotland, led to the implementation of 'Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill 45b' (Scottish Parliament, 2021), hereafter referred to as the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act. This legislation mandates that period products be freely available in local authorities, educational institutions, and specified public service bodies. Tax relief and the free provision of menstrual products are crucial for those who menstruate, as is the availability of a variety of disposable and reusable period products for everyone. McKay (2021), and Bildhauer, Rostvik, and Vostral (2022) provide a comprehensive understanding of how collective social movements laid the groundwork for the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act in Scotland. By leveraging media to shape public discourse and employing intersectional, grassroots activism, these movements created a powerful, inclusive narrative; however, both sets of authors caution that the work does not end with passing the bill. Bobel and Fahs (2018) argue that the dominance of period poverty discourse and reliance on product availability to dissolve societal menstrual norms is reductive. It acts as a mere sticking plaster placed over deeply entrenched stigmatisation and shame (Kowalski & Chapple, 2000; Roberts et al., 2002). Quint (2019) also contends that menstrual activism has become overly focused on the costs associated with menstruation, addressing only 'arm's length issues that conveniently avoid addressing embodied attitudes' (Quint, 2019: 973). In

their master's thesis, Smith (2020) analysed the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020) through the lens of Agenda-Setting Theories and discourse analysis. Their aim was to unravel definitions, interconnectivity, and discourse (re)production, and subsequently to address how these elements influenced the bill's progression and success. Smith (2020) identifies stigma as the primary mystifying factor that has historically veiled the relationship between poverty and menstrual inequality. They argue that stigma has previously rendered invisible the need for period products, as well as the link between menstruation and poverty. By obscuring the necessity for these products, stigma effectively clouds the recognition of a solution. Smith posits that by exposing the issue hidden beneath the stigma, the bill merges two social struggles: the feminist fight against gender inequality and the class-based struggle for socioeconomic equality (2020: 24). I concur that stigma increases the likelihood of topics being ignored by policymakers; however, it does not render social issues invisible. The conflation of ignorance due to stigma with the invisibility of social issues undermines the duty of care expected from elected policymakers.

Similarly, Bildhauer's (2021) research positions the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020) within the context of historical perceptions of both menstruation and Scotland's national identity. Bildhauer argues that, despite lawmakers' intentions, menstrual stigma still permeates the bill and its parliamentary debates. This stigma enables politicians to distance themselves from those who menstruate, positioning themselves within a privileged, authoritative community. Associating menstruation with being part of 'underprivileged' groups who would 'benefit most' from the legislation has the unintended effect of associating menstruation even more strongly with the 'Other' (2021: 6).

Smith (2020) and Bildhauer (2021) write that the policy aims to uncover and tackle stigma, but is neither tactful nor successful. We can best understand this problematic situation through considering Tyler and Slater's (2018) work on mental health stigma. Their findings suggest that the top-down approach to dismantling stigma through authority and hierarchy cannot effectively deconstruct it. Instead, such methods overlook the structural aspects of stigma as a form of power (Tyler & Slater, 2018: 729). Smith's analysis offers an understanding of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (Scottish Parliament, 2020), but their research methods and approach place trust in the language and construction of the bill, which does not align seamlessly with the critical feminist perspective of their thesis. As bell hooks (1990) articulates, subversion or disruption 'happens much more easily in the realm of "texts" than in the world of human interaction [...] in which such moves challenge, disrupt, threaten, where repression is real' (1990: 22). While Smith's (2020) thesis makes significant strides in highlighting the interplay of stigma, poverty, and menstrual inequality within the context of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act, it also underscores the limitations of addressing stigma through policy alone.

As the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (Scottish Parliament, 2020a) progressed through years of debate and parliamentary discussion from 2017 to 2020, the language used to describe the purpose of period products shifted from 'blood' to 'flow'. This rephrasing shifts the symbolic representation to a more palatable, sanitised version. 'Flow' is not synonymous with blood, rather acting as a euphemism within the context of menstruation (Newton, 2016). Menstrual blood does not merely flow out of a vagina; it leaks, seeps, and sometimes drops. Omitting the word 'blood' from the bill exemplifies the continued (in)visibility of menstrual blood and the material

reality of menstruation at a time when increased attention shapes rhetoric and (re)produces norms for women, trans, and nonbinary people who menstruate (Bildhauer, 2021). The invisibility of the material bodily experience of menstrual bleeding runs counter to a feminist vision of menstruation and, by extension, to ending period poverty.

Scotland is not the first country to provide free menstrual products, although it is the first to make this provision a universal legal requirement, not limited to specific settings (Rostvik, 2022). The Kenyan Parliament passed the Kenyan Basic Education (Amendment) Act in 2017, making it the first national law to require free period products, despite its sole application to schools. Framing Scotland as the 'first' overlooks Kenya's global leadership, privileging a small country in the Global North over a larger nation in the Global South. New York City also passed a law in 2016 requiring free menstrual products in settings such as schools and homeless shelters, but this did not apply nationwide (Weiss-Wolf, 2020).

Exploring international approaches to period poverty reveals diverse strategies beyond product provision, recognising it as a complex and systematic issue. Many countries implement measures like menstrual leave, tax-free products, menstrual education, and WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities (Williams, Huff & Meier, 2021). In India, where absolute poverty rates are higher than in Scotland, priorities include safe washing facilities, waste management, and promoting reusable products (Chowdhury, 2020). Meanwhile, some countries, such as Indonesia, have laws mandating menstrual leave for employees (Kridasaksana et al., 2020). The various international approaches underscore the multifaceted nature of period poverty and accentuate the significance of comprehensive solutions.

The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (Scottish Parliament, 2021) 'aims to end (and yet is complicit in) the invisibility of menstruation in the public sphere' (Røstvik, Hughes & Spencer, 2022: 4). Feminists and menstrual activists are deeply concerned with the politicisation of menstruation, spanning the works of de Beauvoir (1952) and Douglas (1976) to the research of contemporary feminist scholars (Kissling, 2006; Bobel, 2010; Campbell, Freeman & Gannon, 2021). Despite this, there remains a gap in the literature regarding how the newly implemented Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (Scottish Parliament, 2021) has affected the menstrual context in Scotland, both materially and symbolically.

The Environmental Impact of Menstrual Products

The intersection of feminist scholarship, ecofeminism, and menstrual health research offers a critical lens for exploring the environmental impact of menstrual products. Disposable products, such as pads and tampons, contribute significantly to pollution, with up to 90% of pads containing non-biodegradable plastics and tampons often featuring plastic applicators. Over 11,000 disposable menstrual products are used on average during a person's lifetime, most of which end up in landfills or oceans (WEN, 2018). These products also demand extensive resources; for instance, cotton production for tampons involves high water use and harmful pesticides, while manufacturing processes contribute to greenhouse gas emissions (Hawkins & Murnaghan, 2018).

Menstrual scholars (Bobel, 2019; Bobel & Fahs, 2020) critique the dominance of disposable products in menstrual activism, arguing that it upholds gendered norms of menstrual etiquette while exacerbating environmental harm. They advocate for

sustainable alternatives like menstrual cups, reusable pads, and period underwear. Menstrual cups, for example, can last up to ten years, reducing both waste and long-term costs (Howard et al., 2011). However, the adoption of such products is constrained by cultural stigma, lack of resources, and limited access to washing facilities, especially in marginalised communities (Kissling, 2013; Rhodes, 2022).

Ecofeminism, first conceptualised by d'Eaubonne in 1974, examines the interconnectedness of environmental degradation and women's oppression under patriarchal systems. D'Eaubonne (2022) critiques capitalist consumption cycles, arguing for systemic change rather than mere replacement of power holders. While foundational, her work has been critiqued for essentialising traits like motherhood. Recent ecofeminist scholars like Gaard (2021) and Foster (2021) expand the field by rejecting essentialist views and proposing nuanced, intersectional approaches that consider the interplay of gender, class, race, and species within environmental contexts.

Douglas' (1976) framework also offers a bridge to the environmental dimensions of this research: the categorisation of disposable products as "waste" mirrors the classification of menstrual blood as pollutant, highlighting how notions of dirt and pollution extend beyond the body to the ecological sphere. When combined with feminist critiques of respectability, this perspective makes visible how women and people who menstruate are positioned at the intersection of bodily, moral, and environmental responsibility. Here, the policing of "dirt" becomes both a classed and gendered burden, individuals are compelled to manage their menstruation in ways that maintain not only personal respectability but also environmental responsibility. The environmental toll of disposable menstrual products reflects broader capitalist

priorities that dismiss sustainability for convenience and profit (Merchant, 1980; Shiva, 1989). Merchant emphasises shared feminist goals across ideologies to restore environmental and social justice. Meanwhile, Gaard (2021) critiques postmodernist dismissals of ecofeminism, advocating for its materialist and intersectional strengths in addressing environmental challenges.

In Scotland, recent studies highlight how structural barriers, stigma, and menstrual norms shape attitudes toward sustainable products. Reusable options like cloth pads and period underwear face resistance due to stigma around menstruation and discomfort with handling blood, which is often viewed as unclean (Moffat & Pickering, 2019). These cultural forces, combined with financial barriers, limit the accessibility of sustainable solutions for working-class women (Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Rhodes, 2022).

Addressing the environmental impact of menstrual products requires integrating feminist and ecofeminist insights into policy and activism. Solutions must challenge both the stigma and class inequalities that hinder the adoption of sustainable alternatives. By coupling environmental care with intersectional feminist goals, a holistic approach can pave the way for more equitable and sustainable menstrual practices.

Theoretical Framework

The study of menstruation, gender, and class demands a theoretical framework that centres on the interplay of embodiment and intersectionality. Feminist sociology provides critical tools to examine how identities and inequalities are constructed and maintained across social and cultural contexts. Grounded in the works of Bourdieu

(1984, 1999) which have been drawn apart and built upon by feminist academics (Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Reay, 1998; Taylor, 2007, 2012; Tyler, 2008), my framework approaches menstruation as a deeply embodied and classed experience, shaped by intersecting systems of power.

Embodiment, as a feminist theoretical lens, highlights how social structures are lived and felt through the body. Menstruation is not merely a biological phenomenon but a site where cultural norms, gendered expectations, and class inequalities converge. Following Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural capital, menstruation becomes a means through which distinctions of class and respectability are reproduced. Menstrual practices and products are imbued with symbolic and material significance, reflecting broader societal dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and moral judgment (Skeggs, 1997; Ahmed, 2010).

Informed by Butler's (1999, 2004) concept of performativity, menstruation can be understood as a performance of femininity regulated by social norms. Norms around menstrual concealment and hygiene reinforce notions of 'respectable' femininity, linking bodily practices to classed and gendered ideals. Skeggs's (1997) critique of respectability as a classed construct reveals how menstrual practices often delineate boundaries of moral and social value. This insight is crucial for interrogating the ways in which menstrual products—whether disposable pads, tampons, or reusable cups—mediate access to cultural capital and influence perceptions of respectability.

Building on Bourdieu's (1984, 1999) theories of capital, this framework situates menstrual products and practices as markers of cultural and symbolic capital. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital extends beyond economic resources to include

cultural and social forms, which are contextually valued and differentially accessible across class lines. For instance, reusable menstrual cups and organic pads may be positioned as environmentally responsible choices, aligning with middle-class values of sustainability and self-discipline. Conversely, less costly products often carry associations of disposability and waste, reinforcing stereotypes about working-class consumption.

Taylor's (2007, 2012) feminist writings further extend Bourdieu's analysis, highlighting how cultural capital is unequally distributed and differently experienced based on intersecting identities. She argues that cultural capital is not only accumulated but also relationally enacted, producing hierarchies of value and belonging that are deeply tied to gender and sexuality. Skeggs's (1997, 2004) analysis of respectability further elucidates the moralisation of menstrual practices. Respectability functions as a mechanism of class distinction, where the ability to perform respectable femininity is contingent upon access to economic and cultural resources. As Skeggs (1997) observes, consumption practices are central to the maintenance of class hierarchies:

Consumption practices are a key mechanism through which class distinctions are maintained and reproduced; some individuals can actively choose and express themselves through products, while others are constrained and defined by the limited choices available to them. (96)

This dynamic is evident in menstruation, where the commodification of period products mirrors broader trends of moralisation and class differentiation. Period products, as material goods, both mediate embodied experiences and serve as tools of class distinction, reflecting the social pressures and inequalities women navigate.

An intersectional feminist lens is indispensable for capturing the complexities of menstruation as a site of classed and gendered inequality. Intersectionality, as articulated by scholars like hooks (1981) and Collins (1990), emphasises the interlocking systems of oppression that shape lived experiences. Tyler's (2008) analysis of social figures like the 'chav' exemplifies how class, race, and gender intersect to stigmatise certain groups, constructing them as morally and culturally deficient.

Feminist academics like Reay (1998) and Skeggs (1997, 2011) further challenge reductive understandings of class by highlighting the emotional and relational dimensions of inequality. For instance, Reay's (2005) exploration of classed feelings—such as ambivalence, distaste, and aspiration—sheds light on how menstruation is experienced not only as a physical process but also as an emotional and social event, laden with classed significance. These insights are critical for understanding how menstrual stigma operates at the intersection of material deprivation, cultural expectations, and embodied experience.

Material goods, including period products, are central to the mediation of embodiment and social power. Haraway's (1985) notion of the cyborg emphasises the interconnection between human and technological agency, framing material goods as both empowering and constraining. This duality is evident in the realm of menstrual products, which can offer women greater autonomy over their bodies while simultaneously reinforcing societal norms of hygiene and respectability (Martin, 2001).

Ahmed's (2010) analysis of materiality and emotion further highlights how objects shape affective experiences and social relations. Period products are not merely

practical items, also acting as socially charged objects that influence women's sense of self and agency. By integrating Ahmed's insights with Skeggs's (1997, 2004) critique of respectability, this framework interrogates how menstrual products mediate classed and gendered experiences, shaping both the constraints and possibilities of embodied life. By synthesising these theoretical perspectives, this framework positions menstruation as a site where class, gender, and materiality intersect to produce unequal access to resources and capital. Feminist scholars like Butler (1999), Skeggs (1997, 2004), and Reay (2005) underscore the importance of examining the lived realities of women through an intersectional and embodied lens. This approach challenges simplistic categorisations of class and gender, emphasising the dynamic and relational nature of inequality. Knowledge production is not devoid from methodological decisions, and as such, the approach I outline in the following section is shaped by these feminist commitments—to intersectionality, embodiment, and the situated nature of experience—as both an ethical and political stance on how research is conducted.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter charts the methods employed in my research project, which is aiming to explore and broaden our understanding of how gender and class are mediated through

menstruation. My research focuses on investigating lived experiences related to period products, as well as the social and political influences surrounding menstruation. I recognise the importance of situating myself within the field, particularly as a feminist researcher committed to exploring the intricate dynamics of power, identity, and reflexivity. From the outset, I was conscious of the profound influence my positionality would have on the process, guiding my approach to interviews, data collection, and analysis. Feminist scholarship, with its emphasis on power relations and the situated knowledge of researchers, provided a crucial framework for understanding how my identity and experiences would shape the research journey (Stanley & Wise, 1993; Adkins, 2002; Hemmings, 2012). This methodological orientation required me to engage in ongoing critical reflection, ensuring that my research maintained its feminist integrity by acknowledging and addressing the complexities, challenges, and contradictions inherent in the research topic.

The decision to employ a feminist methodology stemmed from my commitment to understanding the diverse lived experiences of women, trans, and nonbinary individuals who menstruate within the specific socio-political context of Scotland. This approach, rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, prioritised the richness and complexity of personal narratives over the imposition of rigid analytical frameworks. Feminist epistemology underpinned this methodological choice, challenging dominant power and knowledge structures and striving to amplify often marginalised voices. However, it is important to acknowledge that this focus necessarily excluded perspectives from those whose experiences fall outside the perceived 'norm' of menstruation, or who may not menstruate at all, yet are equally impacted by societal attitudes and policies surrounding menstruation. In reality, there is no singular or typical shared experience

of menstruation; rather, it encompasses a spectrum shaped by intersecting factors such as gender identity, disability, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. By recognising these exclusions, this research seeks to emphasise the multiplicity and variability of menstruation experiences while reflecting critically on the limitations of its scope.

This chapter introduces the ethical and practical considerations that guided the research process, particularly in relation to the sensitive nature of the topic. The unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic further shaped my methodological approach, necessitating flexibility and adaptability with respect to data collection. A combination of virtual and in-person interviews allowed the research to remain responsive to the evolving contexts and diverse needs of participants, thus aligning it with a feminist commitment to inclusivity and respect for a range of perspectives.

The analysis drew on an inductive approach to thematic analysis, grounded in the influential work of Braun and Clarke (2021). This process was further enriched by the feminist insights of scholars such as Riessman (2008) and Olesen (2011), whose contributions underscore the importance of embedding a critical feminist lens in qualitative research. The use of NVivo software facilitated a systematic and rigorous approach to coding, while manual coding complemented this by fostering a close and reflective engagement with the data. This integrated approach ensured a balance between analytical depth and methodological flexibility, which was essential for capturing the nuanced and multifaceted lived experiences at the heart of this study.

The structure of this chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the methodological approach that underpins this research. It begins by situating the study

within the broader context of feminist research, emphasising the significance of positionality, reflexivity, and power dynamics in shaping the research process. Following this, the chapter delves into the specific research design and methodology employed, detailing the rationale for selecting a feminist epistemological framework and the interpretivist paradigm. The chapter then discusses my methods of data collection, with a focus on semi-structured interviews and ethical considerations.

The Researcher: Positionality

As a feminist researcher I realised that consideration of power and reflexivity play crucial roles during the research process, interviews, and analysis (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Adkins, 2002; Hemmings, 2012). A PhD begins and ends in my hands, yet acknowledging this does not release the weight of it. I work to pull apart aspects of how, why and when my position within the research needs to be reflected upon. Being a researcher and a menstruating woman in Scotland myself significantly influenced the study. This influence extends into the inevitable twists and turns of the research process, including the ways I am revealed, concealed, or assumed throughout the project. My positionality as a researcher is, like the participants', fluid and contextually variable, taking many shapes and forms in different spaces. Undeniably, I'm in a privileged position as a white, middle-class, able-bodied woman. I have a learning disability, dyslexia, which affects my reading, writing, spelling, and my working memory, also struggling with ongoing mental health difficulties, specifically anxiety (alleviated by medication) and depression. Of each of these aspects of my identity, my gender, sexuality, and learning disability feel at the forefront, with me either being

underestimated because of gender or misunderstood because of my learning disability.

Over the past eight years living in Edinburgh, I have found that being Irish establishes an outsider status. Initially, it means I'm not English, which, for some, passes an ideological test. For others, I am met with one of two questions: 'Catholic or Protestant?' or 'Celtic or Rangers?' ¹ While I hold generational anger towards the English powers that were, for the colonisation and enforced famine in Ireland during the 1800s and the subsequent Troubles², the expectation that all Irish people harbour religious football-based passions is reductionist. This experience has highlighted to me how people may differently perceive identity. The way others perceive me—whether accurately or not —shifts depending on which of my characteristics are most prominent in the particular social context I am in.

¹ The phrases 'Catholic or Protestant?' and 'Celtic or Rangers?' are shorthand references to historical deep-rooted sectarian divisions. These divisions often manifest in both religious and cultural identities, with Catholicism commonly linked to Irish immigrant communities and Protestantism tied to Scottish traditions. The rivalry between the football clubs Celtic FC and Rangers FC symbolises and perpetuates these divides, with Celtic traditionally associated with Catholic and Irish heritage, and Rangers with Protestant and Unionist identities. While these binaries oversimplify the complex interplay of religion, politics, and sport in Scotland, they remain potent markers of social and cultural identity, reflecting historical tensions that persist in certain contexts today.

² The Troubles refers to the period of conflict in, and along the border of, Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Rooted in centuries of British colonial rule, partition, and systemic discrimination against Irish communities, the Troubles were marked by violent clashes between unionists/loyalists (predominantly Protestant, seeking to remain part of the United Kingdom) and nationalists/republicans (predominantly Catholic, striving for a united Ireland). For many Irish people, the Troubles represent a painful legacy of occupation, division, and loss, with its impacts felt across the island and its diaspora. Despite progress toward peace, the conflict remains a significant part of Ireland's collective memory and identity.

During my undergraduate studies in psychology with sociology, the emphasis on removing the self, positivism, and objectivity in psychology, along with the rigid categorisation of participant qualities to produce population-wide results, felt increasingly problematic. Fortunately, my exposure to the sociological imagination (Mills, 2000) provided a contrasting perspective. This sociological lens revealed that psychology, if it ceased striving to be recognised as a 'hard science,' could complement sociology. Rather than dismissing one another, psychology and sociology could enhance each other's insights. Coinciding with my developing research interest, I encountered a lecturer who explicitly dismissed feminist theory, claiming it did not exist. He stated that if my group used feminist theory in our work, he would have the female module lecturer grade it instead. Using exaggerated hand movements, he would explain epistemology and ontology in convoluted ways in his classes, often making grandiose statements. He attributed our lack of understanding to the inherent complexity of philosophical ideas, rather than clarifying his teachings. Sociology modules not only debunked the illusion of grandeur in certain approaches, but also strengthened my commitment to subjectivity, reflexivity, experience, culture, and theory—elements central to interviewing. This experience shaped my belief in the importance of challenging and dissolving the rigid boundaries around participant categorisation, such as gendered and class-segmented categories, wherever possible. This perspective underpins my current research approach, striving for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of participant identities.

My undergraduate studies also offered me the time and space for my interest in researching menstruation to begin. In 2018, during my third year, the Irish government held a referendum to repeal its constitutional ban on abortion under almost all

circumstances. My parents' generation experienced smuggled condoms, illegal divorce, and forced birth at the hands of Mother and Baby Institutions and similar religious institutions, the atrocities of which are still coming to light. Growing up, I knew if I became pregnant, I would need to fly to England to access an abortion. Not an abstract threat but a practical reality; my friends and I discussed and trusted that we would pool our resources to support each other, as we were all under the same risk (a risk mitigated by using condoms and being on the contraceptive pill). We knew girls who travelled to England for abortions, one who did not go through with it and now has a teenage son, and others who took matters into their own hands. For example, inflicting physical harm upon themselves, taking upwards of 9 contraceptive pills at once (combination of estrogen and progestin) or inserting unsafe objects into the vulva with the intention to cause trauma to the uterus. In the 1960s, my grandmother, a strong-willed woman much younger than my grandfather, a politician, adopted my mother in rural Kerry. My only insight into her adoption is that my grandfather 'knew the local bishop'. While academics detail the progress and purpose of the #Repealthe8th³ referendum (Field, 2018; Fletcher, 2018), Ireland's history of forced childbirth contributes to a deep intergenerational trauma.

³ The hashtag #Repealthe8th refers to the campaign to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland. The Eighth Amendment, added in 1983, recognised the equal right to life of the mother and the unborn child, effectively making abortion illegal in Ireland. The campaign gained widespread support, culminating in a national referendum held on May 25, 2018. The result was a historic vote in favour of repealing the Eighth Amendment, mandating the Irish government to pass legislation legalising abortion under certain conditions.

This backdrop underscores the profound significance of the #RepealThe8th referendum, which coincided with the initial phase of free period products in Scottish universities (Scottish Parliament, 2018). This convergence of pivotal events, alongside my immersion in feminist sociology, ignited a passion that has driven my research and solidified my feminist approach. The intersection of these social and political movements revealed the deep interconnections between cultural norms, gender inequality, and feminist theory, shaping my commitment to exploring these critical issues through a feminist lens.

Insider/Outsider: Yet Another Binary

As a feminist researcher, I recognise the complexity of insider and outsider positions, understanding that this dichotomy has oversimplified the intricate dynamics of power and identity. Feminist scholars like Hill Collins (1990) and Haraway (1988) emphasised the fluidity and intersectionality of positionality. Rather than approaching insider and outsider as fixed categories, I consider them part of a continuum where one's identity and relationship with the research context continuously shift. This approach has allowed me to engage in critical reflection on my own biases and privileges, recognising their impact on my interactions and interpretations within the research. Ultimately, this nuanced understanding challenged the binary assumption and fostered a more reflective and inclusive feminist methodology.

Exploring participants' menstrual experiences prompted me to question my positionality as an insider, particularly given my shared experience as a menstruating woman within the same political and sociocultural climate. As Oakley (1981) argues, feminist research often involves a deep connection between the researcher and the

participants, emphasising the importance of subjective experience in understanding social realities. This alignment with participants' experiences challenges the notion of researcher objectivity, as the researcher's own subjectivity—rooted in shared gendered experiences—becomes a vital part of the inquiry. According to Oakley (1985, in Reinharz, 1992), treating women as 'data providers' in interviews undermines the significance of their personal, embodied experiences in understanding the social world. Moreover, the concept of insider/outsider positionality is fluid, as noted by Merton (1972) and Oakley (1981), where shared experiences—such as menstruation in this case—can influence how the researcher relates to the participants, blurring traditional boundaries between insider and outsider perspectives (Collins, 1986). Thus, my own experience of menstruation within the same political and cultural context as the participants calls into question the extent to which I, as a researcher, can be considered an 'outsider'.

Building on the literature review, many participants describe navigating the shame and desire to conceal menstrual blood that has leaked through period products onto clothing, an experience they encountered from girlhood into adulthood—an experience I share as well. I have walked to a bathroom with a tampon shoved up my sleeve or hidden in my bra. I've walked away from a table of friends, backpack in hand, thinking 'shite! this is even more obvious than hiding it up my sleeve'. Social norms of menstrual concealment and etiquette run deep whether I consider participant accounts based in Scotland or my own experience growing up in Ireland. The prospect of leaking while on my period has only over the last number of years become less burdensome with respect to menstrual management, less feared. A fear of incorrect management,

the failure of some elusive, never pinned down but always present pressure, instilled during girlhood.

I recall a time when I spent Saturday afternoons loitering around my friends' estate, sitting in the fairy fort drinking cans of cheap beer and naggins of vodka. My three friends and I, all dressed in baby pink or baby blue velour tracksuits (velour is not a fabric I would like to leak menstrual blood onto). On the occasion one of us leaked through our product onto our tracksuit, the initial response was always panic, followed by a huddle away from the boys to assess how she felt. Could we stay? Should we all retreat to the closest house? How bad was the leak? How long until we all had to go home? As a group of 15/16-year-old girls determined to not end a Saturday of drinking early, on the few occasions this happened, the result was a jumper tied around the waist and close monitoring of her 'situation' for the rest of the day.

Throughout the research project, I encountered numerous moments of reflection. These experiences highlighted the complexity of menstruation, illustrating how fear of 'failing' could foster a sense of shared experience. Many participants noted this shared understanding, sometimes through their willingness to always share products with someone in need, and through the description of 'can you check?' practices. 'Can you check?' is the practice of asking a friend to look at your clothing to check if menstrual blood has leaked through and become visible. Twenty of the 27 participants mentioned asking other girls and women to 'check'. The lack of understanding of this common behaviour amongst boys and men, as emphasised by participants, resulted in a viral social media trend, showcasing the disparity of understanding around this behaviour.

Participants often assumed my shared knowledge and experience, which facilitated open discussions about menstruation, gender, and bodily experiences. However, this also led to assumptions about my identity. For instance, Jo (26, middle class) mentioning her contraceptive implant, 'I don't know what you use yourself?' assuming I used one as well. While such assumptions were understandable given our shared experiences, I remained cautious not to make similar assumptions about participants. I was careful not to fill in gaps based on shared knowledge and lived experiences. Embodied differences and similarities can play a role in shaping the interview dynamic, as noted by Sturges and Hanrahan (2004), and Stephens (2010). Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) highlight that researchers must be mindful of the ways in which their own embodied experiences—whether shared or different from those of the participants—can influence the flow and interpretation of interviews. Their research indicates that relying on shared identities can create oversimplified assumptions, potentially overlooking individual perspectives. Similarly, Stephens (2010) explores how researchers' positionalities, particularly when embodied experiences are involved, shape the interview process and the knowledge produced. She argues that while similarities between researcher and participant can facilitate trust and rapport, they may also lead to the imposition of the researcher's perspectives, thus limiting the depth of understanding.

As Taylor (2011) has described, insiderness involves a

contemporary cultural space with which the researcher has regular and ongoing contact; where the researcher's personal relationships are deeply embedded in the field [...] and where the researcher is privy to undocumented historical knowledge of the people and the cultural phenomenon being studied (9).

This insider position could sometimes blur the lines between personal experiences and research data, making it challenging to separate my experiences from my understanding of the participants' accounts. As Merton (1972) noted, these positions and relations were permeable and transgressed the supposed boundaries that separated them. Expecting a simplistic separation between researcher and participant was reductionist, as there would be moments of outsider positionality with presumed intimate insiders and vice versa. Therefore, maintaining a critical awareness of my positionality was crucial to upholding the feminist integrity of my research and understanding my presence and influence within it. In practice, this involved building relationships and creating a safe space for participants, through trying to facilitate a space where they felt free from judgment and the pressure of providing 'correct' or 'desired' responses. Although I shared similar experiences with the participants, I remained cautious not to make assumptions based on my own perspective. I made a conscious effort to avoid presuming that all, or any, participants would have the same views on menstrual experiences or reproductive rights simply because I could relate to some aspects of those experiences.

During the research process, I recognised that simply acknowledging autobiographical or personal information was insufficient to ensure truly reflexive research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It is not enough to merely be aware of my position; reflexivity demands a deeper engagement with the complex and nuanced processes, which involves an acute awareness of the power dynamics and differences between myself and the participants. These moments require careful consideration and preparation wherever possible, yet unexpected divergences sometimes caught me off guard.

For example, during one interview, a participant expressed pro-life, anti-abortion views, which starkly contrasted with my own. In that moment, I experienced a brief internal jolt as I recognised and absorbed this difference. However, I consciously chose to respond with respect and smoothly transitioned to the next question. One advantage of employing a semi-structured interview format was the flexibility it provided, allowing me to move fluidly through such moments. Instances of conflict between my personal politics and those of my participants created moments of discomfort, but it was essential to my practice not to let these feelings disrupt the participant's experience. Maintaining this balance required a commitment to upholding the integrity of the research and fostering a space where participants could freely share their perspectives, regardless of whether they aligned with my own.

Reflexivity demanded a critical perspective towards the data and an understanding of the impact of various factors, such as the research setting, the sensitivity of the topic, power relations in the field, and the nature of social interactions between me and the participants (Brewer, 2000). This level of reflexivity necessitated time—time for thinking and time for critical reflection. Delamont emphasised the importance of reflexivity in data analysis: 'Reflexivity in the collection of material, and analysing it as it comes in, not letting it pile up unread, are the two most essential things' (2002: 67). Throughout my research, I followed this principle by continuously reflecting on the data as I collected it, ensuring I stayed engaged and critically aware. I transcribed and considered initial thematic trends during data collection.

In adopting a feminist approach, I continually kept in mind the question, 'Who speaks for whom, why, how, and when?' (Probyn, 1993: 2) to ensure that my research was both reflexive and critically aware of hierarchies and power dynamics. Feminist

research necessitates an interrogation of how power is distributed between the researcher and participants, as well as how social arrangements and norms shape these dynamics. Adkins (2003) underscores the importance of reflexivity as a tool to critically examine prevailing social structures, hierarchies, and expectations. This approach involves recognising that the researcher's role is not neutral but is shaped by their positionality within existing systems of privilege and oppression.

For example, as a researcher, I occupied a position of power in designing the study, setting the questions, and interpreting the data. This hierarchical relationship inherently gave me power, as I determined the direction of the interviews and ultimately shaped how their experiences were represented in my research. Probyn (1993) warns against the risks of 'speaking for' others without accounting for these power differentials, emphasising that even well-intentioned researchers can inadvertently perpetuate unequal dynamics if they fail to critically engage with their position. Further, Adkins (2003) highlights that reflexivity must extend beyond surface-level awareness to critically engaging with the norms and expectations that influence research interactions. In my study, these norms included societal expectations around gender, reproductive rights, and menstruation. For instance, some participants may have felt constrained by cultural taboos when discussing menstruation, while I, as the researcher, might have unconsciously shaped the conversation through my own assumptions about the importance of these topics. Recognising and interrogating these dynamics required a constant balancing act: creating space for participants to articulate their perspectives while being vigilant not to impose my own interpretations or inadvertently silence their voices.

Lastly, I had to be mindful of the risk of reflexivity collapsing into objectivity or egotism, as Adkins (2003) cautions. Reflexivity can inadvertently become performative if it centres the researcher's own self-awareness at the expense of genuinely engaging with participants' experiences. To avoid this, I worked to ensure that my reflexive practice remained grounded in the participants' narratives, continually revisiting and questioning how my own biases and positionality might influence the research process and outcomes. By actively engaging with these hierarchies and power dynamics, I sought to uphold the integrity of a feminist approach, striving to create research that was both ethically grounded and deeply reflective of the complexities involved in representing others' voices.

Feminist scholars have discussed how symbolic violence, appropriation of information, and failed empathy can result from the improper use of reflexivity (Stanley & Wise, 1993; Skeggs, 1997, 2002; Adkins, 2012; Hemmings, 2012). Skeggs (2002) highlighted that placing the self within research, originally intended to disrupt objectivism and the production of 'value-free' research, could inadvertently facilitate the researcher's privileged position. This form of 'reflexivity' shifted from reporting a 'global objective truth' to the overt insertion of the researcher, resulting in objective egotism. This act of claiming reflexivity without truly enacting it did not negate privilege or power over the participants (Skeggs, 2002).

Reflecting on my work, I recognised that reflexivity needed to be more than just an acknowledgment of my position; it required a responsible and ethical engagement with the power dynamics inherent in the research process. Skeggs (1997) emphasised that participants themselves act reflexively in their daily lives and within interviews. Acknowledging this, I sought to use reflexivity to understand my position of power and

the resources it afforded me responsibly, to best produce work that holds space for participants' accounts. Skeggs (1997) highlighted the pitfalls and 'occupational hazards' of trying to impose coherence on participants' accounts without paying close attention to their complexities. This reflexive process helped me appreciate the importance of making the processes of knowledge production transparent and accountable. In my research practice, I committed to not making assumptions about participants or presuming that theoretical frameworks should dominate their data (Riessman, 1987; Scott, 1991; Skeggs, 1997). I recognised that experience recounted is always emergent in the moment, shaped by both the teller and the listener, and influenced by discursive histories (DeVault & Gross, 2012). This understanding underscored the importance of considering my embodied presence and discursive impact throughout the research process.

During data collection, analysis, and presentation, I engaged in active listening, careful reading, and attention to language. I remained open to the possibility that the format or content of the research (e.g., question order, wording, prompts) might need to be altered (Appendix 6). This ongoing engagement with reflexivity within my feminist approach allowed me to consider and reconfigure my research practices. By understanding that participants perform reflexivity in their interactions and accounts, I worked to avoid holding them as fixed entities. Instead, I asked what or who was being held rigid during reflection and analysis (Adkins, 2002; Skeggs, 2002). This approach ensured that my research practice remained dynamic and responsive, grounded in ethical reflexivity.

Research Design

Methodology - Epistemology

Feminist epistemology, ontology, and methodology are deeply intertwined, with each influencing and shaping the others in significant ways. Stanley and Wise (1993), and Hesse-Biber (2012) emphasise that feminist praxis is grounded in the interconnectedness of these dimensions, which I see as dynamically related rather than isolated. Harding's (1992) work resonates with me, as she suggests that feminist ontology is rooted in lived experience. These experiences intertwine with the process of discovery, forming a vital connection between our knowledge (epistemology) and existence (ontology). I believe that this perspective highlights the intricate connection between knowledge and the lived realities of its producers, rather than presenting it as abstract or detached from reality. Hemmings' (2012) emphasis on subjectivity in feminist ontology has deeply shaped my perspective. Reflecting on my research journey, I recognised and addressed a sense of disconnection by deliberately integrating epistemological and ontological considerations. This integration enabled me to develop a more holistic and engaged understanding of my subject matter.

Barad (2007) further influenced my thinking by arguing that she establishes a connection between the practices of knowing and being, demonstrating that they are not merely related but mutually implicated. I appreciate her view that ontology and epistemology are so entangled that each continuously informs and reshapes the other. This perspective resonates with my commitment to comprehending the world not only through perception but also through experience and living, reflecting a profound interest in both the nature of reality and the processes we use to understand it. In

considering these theoretical positions, it is important to consider how the lived experiences of individuals influence knowledge production and how these experiences shape our understanding of the world. This approach aligns with my broader commitment to feminist scholarship's goal of challenging traditional power structures and recognising the validity of diverse voices and perspectives in the pursuit of knowledge, through inclusive recruitment practices, and handling lived experience with purposeful care – centring the complexity of experiences.

As a feminist researcher, I have navigated the challenges posed by positivist claims of universal 'truths.' Positivism, which is based on belief in a singular truth and objective logic, often creates hierarchies and reinforces hegemonic practices (Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993). This framework marginalises subjective experiences, prioritises quantifiable data over nuanced narratives, and perpetuates the illusion of neutrality, which obscures power dynamics in knowledge production. By privileging dominant paradigms, positivism homogenises knowledge and silences the voices of those who do not conform to hegemonic norms, such as considering women and nonbinary people's lived experiences with menstruation.

Feminist research seeks to challenge oppressive structures through diverse lenses (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Stanley and Wise (1993) outline key aspects of feminist epistemology, including recognising material differences among women and the critical analysis of social inequalities. These positions guide my research, focusing on the social world and understanding rather than explanation. Epistemology, the theory of knowledge, sets assumptions about the social world (Hesse-Biber, 2012), while ontology concerns understanding the world and theories of reality (Stanley & Wise, 1993). Feminist ontology emphasises the interconnectedness of experience and

knowledge, viewing the body as a material site imbued with meaning, as contrasted with purely material or socially constructed views of the body. Feminist methodology, interconnected with feminist epistemology and ontology, is committed to addressing inequalities rather than following a universal methodological approach (Reinharz, 1992). Haraway (1988) critiques the objectivity of positivism, advocating for 'strong objectivity,' which involves critical reflection on researchers' values and practices (Harding, 1993). Reinharz (1992) describes how feminist researchers situate themselves within their research, acknowledging their embeddedness in their studies. This reflexive approach, as Oakley (1981), and Allen and Piercy (2005) suggest, enhances understanding by demystifying how researchers generate knowledge. Haraway (1988) argues for transparency, opposing the disembodied objectivity that often masks patriarchal biases (Oakley, 1974).

Methods

Interviews

Interviews, as opposed to other qualitative and quantitative research methods, are best suited to my research into the lived experiences of people who menstruate in Scotland because of their ability to capture the depth and nuance of how participants account for and reflect upon their personal experiences. Unlike surveys or structured questionnaires, interviews provide the flexibility to explore complex and sensitive topics (Seidman, 2013). Interviews can capture personal accounts and contextual aspects of menstruation that other methods might overlook. For example, the impact of sociocultural factors on menstruation practices and beliefs can be more thoroughly explored through personal accounts and stories (Smith, 2007). By using interviews, I

hoped to capture the full complexity of the lived experiences of people who menstruate in Scotland, providing insights that are both deep and contextually grounded. Participants also received a demographic questionnaire, asking their name, age, council area, length of time in Scotland, race, or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, education, occupation, salary, and disability status. The framing of these questions was carefully constructed and guided by a range of applicable institutions (Stonewall, 2016; LGBT Foundation, 2021; National Records of Scotland, 2021; ONS, 2021; Scotland's Census. 2022) (Appendix 6). This method's flexibility and depth aligns with feminist research principles, offering insights into people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words (Reinharz, 1992, Rubin & Rubin, 2011). I will explore why semi-structured interviews are particularly effective in feminist research practices, highlighting both their strengths and potential limitations with respect to this research project.

One of the primary advantages of semi-structured interviews is their balance between structured and unstructured approaches. Semi-structured interviews offer a framework to guide the conversation, ensuring that key topics are covered, while also allowing the interviewer to explore new avenues of inquiry that may arise during the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This flexibility is crucial in feminist research, which seeks to understand the complexity of women's experiences and avoid imposing rigid, predefined categories on their accounts (Oakley, 1981). Open-ended questions, a hallmark of semi-structured interviews, allow for the exploration of diverse perspectives and experiences, facilitating theory generation (Reinharz, 1992). This inductive approach is consistent with feminist epistemologies that prioritise the development of theories grounded in women's lived experiences (Harding, 1992).

Focusing on how individuals make sense of their social worlds allows patterns and insights that more rigid, deductive methodologies might overlook to present themselves (Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured interviews facilitate this by allowing participants to steer the conversation in directions that are meaningful to them, rather than being confined to the researcher's agenda (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

Potentially Sensitive Subjects

Addressing the issue of sensitivity around menstruation during the interview process was central to creating an environment where participants felt comfortable, enabling the collection of meaningful and nuanced data. Establishing rapport is foundational in qualitative research, as it fosters trust and facilitates open dialogue. Seidman (2000) underscores that trust is essential to supporting participants in sharing their experiences authentically. To enhance this process, strategies such as open-ended questioning, creating a comfortable setting, and careful timing were employed, all of which contribute to a space where participants feel valued and respected (Elmir et al., 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

At the same time, sensitivity to the emotional complexities of discussing private topics is crucial. Providing participants with the freedom to pause, decline questions, or take breaks acknowledges their autonomy and ensures that no undue pressure is placed on them to disclose personal experiences. Creating such an environment prioritises ethical considerations and promotes well-being, both of which are integral to the research process. Additionally, employing small talk or referencing shared experiences can alleviate participants' anxiety, encouraging a sense of connection and mutual respect (Stanley & Wise, 1983; Reinhartz, 1992).

Self-disclosure on the part of the researcher offers another layer of complexity. While sharing personal details can humanise the researcher and foster reciprocity, it risks blurring boundaries and complicating the participant-researcher relationship (Lee, 1993; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). Managing these dynamics requires ongoing reflexivity and careful consideration of the ethical implications of such interactions. Reflexivity extends to the researchers' own emotional responses, which can be significant when exploring sensitive topics. Incorporating debriefing sessions with supervisors offers a structured opportunity to process these responses and ensure that emotional labour is acknowledged and supported (Bondi, 2005). Interviewing people about potentially sensitive topics demands a delicate balance of empathy, reflexivity, and ethical consideration. By integrating these considerations, the research process becomes a thoughtful and iterative practice, designed to elicit rich, authentic insights while safeguarding the dignity and comfort of participants.

Power dynamics, inherent in any research interaction, further complicate this process. While semi-structured interviews cannot entirely eliminate hierarchical imbalances, they offer an opportunity to address them. Haraway (1988) critiques the ideal of objectivity, arguing that it often reinforces traditional hierarchies. In contrast, semi-structured interviews allow for a more dialogic and egalitarian exchange, recognising the mutual contributions of researcher and participant (Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993). This approach challenges the conventional researcher-subject divide, highlighting the co-construction of knowledge as central to feminist qualitative research. Ultimately, the research process is a nuanced and multifaceted project, requiring an ongoing commitment to reflexivity and ethics. By embedding these principles, researchers can

navigate the complexities of exploring potentially sensitive topics and contribute to a deeper understanding of people's lived experiences.

Limitations and Considerations

Semi-structured interviews are not without limitations. One such challenge is the potential for interviewer bias, where the researcher's own perspectives and preconceptions might influence the direction of the conversation (Finlay, 2002). Feminist researchers strive to remain reflexive, continuously examining their own positionality and its impact on the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2012). A limitation is the potential for variability in data quality. Since semi-structured interviews rely on dynamic interaction between interviewer and participant, the quality of data can vary depending on the rapport established and the skills of the interviewer (Smith, 2003).

Training and experience are vital for interviewers to navigate complex interactions and elicit nuanced, meaningful responses. A particularly revealing moment in the research process occurred when Erin asked me to rephrase a question. Initially, I simplified the question to 'What would you have liked to have been told?' Erin responded by asserting that she knew everything she needed to know—despite having earlier described receiving minimal menstrual education. This discrepancy underscores the intricate interplay of dynamics in qualitative interviews. Participants may consciously or unconsciously reshape their narratives based on subtle shifts in the conversational context, interviewer phrasing, or the emotional tone of the exchange. Erin's response suggests a moment of self-reflection shaped by the immediacy of the question and the intimate space we had co-created. Her earlier narrative, focused on a lack of education, was perhaps more aligned with the exploratory, open-ended flow of the

interview, while the directness of my rephrased question may have invited her to reframe her experience as one of sufficiency.

This moment highlights the fluid nature of participant accounts and how the interview dynamic itself becomes part of the meaning-making process. It also points to the role of power and agency within the interview setting. Erin's redirection of the conversation reflected her autonomy in defining her narrative, subtly asserting control over how her experiences were represented. For the researcher, this interaction becomes an opportunity to interrogate not just the content of the response, but the relational dynamics that shaped its delivery. These moments emphasise the importance of reflexivity in the research process. They remind us that interviews are not merely sites for extracting data but co-constructed spaces where narratives are negotiated, shaped, and sometimes contested. By remaining attentive to these shifts, researchers can better appreciate the layers of complexity inherent in qualitative interviewing, ultimately leading to richer and more nuanced interpretations.

Interviews involve power dynamics that ebb and flow, reshaping from moment to moment as identities and positions are constructed and deconstructed. This is particularly evident when participants share intimately connected stories from different perspectives. Within an interview, participants can understand stories shared as a 'dance of revealing and protecting', a process of doing and undoing, presence, and absence (Pascoe Leahy, 2021: 788). This reflection underscores the importance of recognising the vulnerability and fluidity within the interview process, providing momentary insights into the deeply personal spaces created when participants feel comfortable enough to share their experiences. Semi-structured interviews are a powerful tool in feminist research, offering the flexibility, depth, and participant

empowerment necessary to explore complex, intersectional experiences. By adopting semi-structured interviews, my aim was to develop nuanced, grounded theories that reflect the diverse realities of participants' lives. This method not only aligns with feminist epistemological and ontological commitments but also contributes to the broader goal of challenging oppressive and regressive structures. These include patriarchal norms that stigmatise menstruation and restrict open conversations, educational systems that fail to provide comprehensive menstrual education, and broader societal frameworks that prioritise male-centric experiences while dismissing or devaluing those of women and individuals with marginalised genders.

Virtual Interviews

Considering the global crisis of COVID-19, I planned my research with participants' and my safety as a priority. Research into various video conferencing services available to researchers, particularly the study by Lobe et al. (2020), highlighted the benefits of using Zoom because of its ability to record, security, and accessibility. I therefore chose Zoom for the interviews, conducting interviews virtually using its video conferencing software. Thankfully during field research regulations on meeting others indoors changed. This shift to online, then to online and in person, brought both advantages and challenges. Given the feminist commitment to inclusive research, I needed to consider whether online methods would facilitate or inhibit participation (DeVault & Gross, 2012). In planning my approach, I also drew on insights from Waugh (2023), who reflects on the methodological opportunities and limitations of video-call interviewing during the pandemic, highlighting issues around rapport, participant engagement, and the embodied nature of responses in virtual spaces.

During data collection, January to June 2022, I gave each participant the choice of whether to meet in person or online. Eighteen of the 27 participants chose to meet online, some because of their distance from Edinburgh where I live. For example, Emily, who lives in the Argyll and Bute Council area, turned down my offer for me to travel to her and opted to meet online. I had planned to meet Beatrix in person, however on the morning of our scheduled interview she tested positive for COVID, so we rescheduled to an online interview. I found online platforms to be useful in changing COVID-19 circumstances.

The flexibility of video conferencing allowed participants to choose their interview location, provided they had stable internet access and minimal noise interference (Howlett, 2020). However, this flexibility raised concerns about participants' privacy and their comfort in discussing sensitive topics openly (Jenner & Myers, 2019). To address this, I communicated with participants beforehand, suggesting private locations for the interviews. During interviews, if circumstances changed, I ensured participants could pause or reschedule the interview. For example, during my interview with Zoe, the fire alarm in my building went off. Because of ongoing issues with my fire alarm, we attempted to pause, waiting for it to be turned off, but it persisted – interrupting our interview. We continued the interview the same afternoon. Aside from this rather sizable one, participants' dogs were the only other interruption during interviews. Attention being drawn to dogs and people in cafes during in-person interviews presented the same momentary distraction – this was, however, not very disruptive to the interview flow. While I could not control participants' internet connections or hardware, I provided guidance to ensure the best possible conditions for the interviews.

Overall, conducting virtual interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic required careful consideration of privacy, technological limitations, and the balance of maintaining rapport and boundaries. I aimed to create a supportive and respectful research environment that considered and mitigated the complexities of participants' shifting everyday within the context of COVID-19. I believe that virtually mediated interviews work as a successful platform, as with in-person face-to-face interviews – naturally sometimes the rapport between the researcher and participant works better than others, because of interpersonal difference, not necessarily online facilitation.

Sample

Initially, I aimed to gather a sample of 30 participants who currently menstruate, ranging from post-menarche (the onset of the first menstrual cycle) to pre-menopausal (the end of the menstrual cycle). I concluded data gathering after 27 interviews (for participant thumbnails, see Appendix 2) as I reached saturation, having obtained a nuanced, rich data set. Braun and Clark (2021) highlight the value of embracing the complexity and fluidity of qualitative research, which can offer deeper and more meaningful insights than strictly adhering to the idea of saturation. To access participants, I used convenience and targeted snowball sampling techniques (Braun & Clark, 2021). Phase one involved mobilising both my professional and personal networks to gather participants. Given the study's aims and ethical considerations, I excluded participants younger than 18 years old. I expected that including participants aged 18 to approximately 51 (the average age for menopause onset, according to NHS, 2021) would provide a wide range of menstrual experiences and temporal differences, potentially offering comparative narratives.

As data gathering progressed, a woman who was post-menopausal participated. She had completed all the documents prior to participation, and I initially assumed, based on her age, that she was still menstruating. However, during the interview, Jodie revealed that she had undergone medical menopause, and no longer experienced periods. My assumption that Jodie was still menstruating, based solely on her age, underscores the necessity of interrogating my own preconceptions and assumptions when engaging with participants. This moment serves as a reminder that participants' realities may diverge significantly from the categories or expectations we bring to the research process. This was an important point of reflection for me. I recognised that while I would have consciously allowed for wide and varied experiences in identifying other demographic categories, such as gender, sexuality, or race, I had unconsciously limited my perspective in relation to age.

Upon discovering this aspect of Jodie's experience, we continued the interview with alterations to its structure. This unexpected inclusion enriched the study by providing a unique perspective on the transition from menstruation to menopause. Feminist scholarship underscores the importance of including diverse and intersectional perspectives in research to challenge traditional narratives and highlight marginalised voices (Haraway, 1988; Crenshaw, 1989). As such, by adapting the interview process to accommodate Jodie's experiences, I adhered to feminist principles of flexibility and inclusivity in research (Reinharz, 1992). This approach ensured that the study remained open to diverse menstrual experiences, reflecting the fluid and varied nature of menstruation and its impact on individuals.

As explored in the literature review, societal norms have conditioned the widespread misunderstanding of menstruation as an exclusively 'women's issue.' Along with

feminist and menstrual scholars, I recognise gender as a construct that is fluid and not confined to a single gender expression (Chrisler et al., 2016; Frank, 2020; Frank & Dellaria, 2020; Rydström, 2020). My research aims to consider the experiences of all people who menstruate, regardless of their gender identity. To achieve this, I used inclusive, non-specific gender language in my call for participants on social media, and the circulated poster (Appendix 3). I made this conscious decision to ensure that anyone with menstruation experience would feel eligible to take part. In exploring the experiences of people in Scotland, it was essential to cast a broad inclusive net. Among the participants, 25 identified as women, one as nonbinary, and one as a gender-fluid woman/nonbinary. Both nonbinary/gender-fluid participants informed me they use she/they pronouns. When referring directly to these participants throughout the findings chapters, I alternate between she and they.

Throughout this thesis, I use the term 'woman' broadly to refer to all people who menstruate, but this is not to exclude or draw boundaries. I do not want to labour this point too much; my language and approach are intentionally inclusive of all individuals who menstruate. This inclusive framework aligns with feminist scholarship that advocates for recognising the diversity and complexity of gender and menstruation experiences alongside the importance of the category 'woman' (hooks, 1984; Haraway, 1988; Butler, 1990). By adopting this approach, my research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of menstruation—one that questions traditional gender boundaries while acknowledging that participants' experiences are often shaped by normative gender binaries.

In gathering my research sample using convenience and snowball sampling, I anticipated varying levels of prior relationships with participants, as well as a variety

of relationships among the participants themselves. This dynamic unfolded in several ways—some straightforward, others more complex. For example, Farah (43, middle class) and Zada (19, working class) are mother and daughter. Farah participated first and, during her interview, discussed and referred to her daughter's menstrual habits. At Farah's suggestion, Zada also participated in my research. Farah acted as an intermediary, passing information, pre-interview documents, and scheduling details between Zada and me. During her interview, Zada frequently referred to her mother, discussing how they had experienced different menstrual cultures after moving from the United Arab Emirates to Scotland. She also mentioned that her mum encouraged her to use organic menstrual materials, though she herself preferred not to at the moment. These moments of reference illustrate the caring push and pull of their mother-daughter relationship from my perspective as a researcher.

Tolman's (2002) research highlights the role of power dynamics, emotional bonds, and personal histories in shaping interview processes between family members. Her work provides valuable insights into how such relationships can simultaneously enrich and complicate research findings. For instance, the intimacy and trust inherent in mother-daughter relationships can foster deeper disclosures, yet this same closeness may also introduce challenges in discussing sensitive topics (Tolman, 2002). Considering these dynamics, I remained open to snowball sampling leading to familial referrals for the study. However, ensuring participants' privacy and maintaining close attention to preserving individual agency, without conflating their accounts, was a critical aspect of my approach.

Participants included parents in their responses to questions on early menstrual experiences, remembered with or without generosity (Barnwell & Ravn, 2021). The

purpose of interviews, and therefore my research broadly, is to access participants' experiences, not to examine the truth or fairness of their stories. However, it is worth reflecting on how participants relay stories with different levels of meaning or consideration. While Farah and Zada, as mother and daughter, participated in this study, stories about family members were present in almost every interview. Intergenerationally, through granddaughters recalling grandmothers' retellings, and mothers reflecting on daughters' current behaviours, intergenerational (mis)remembering was present throughout the dataset. Walkerdine (1997) and Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) have made significant contributions to understanding intergenerational relationships and the complexities of interviewing within these dynamics, particularly between mothers and daughters.

During several interviews, participants disclosed deeply personal and emotional experiences related to menstruation, including accounts of abortions and emotional abuse. At these moments, I prioritised the participants' wellbeing by checking in with them to confirm their desire to continue the interview or proceed to the next question. This approach reflects the principles of ongoing consent and ethical practice, aligning with feminist research ethics that emphasise empathy, respect, and the protection of participants' emotional and psychological safety (Reinharz, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Considering the relationship between sample participants, it is important to also reflect on an unexpected relationship between myself and a participant. A mutual friend who had taken part early in the study referred Leigh to me. I had met Leigh once before at a small birthday party but had interacted little with her. We scheduled an interview, initially planning to meet at her flat. However, on the day of the interview, the sun was

shining, so Leigh suggested we meet in a nearby park instead. This outdoor setting provided a peaceful and comfortable environment for our interview. Leigh had not completed the demographic information form before our meeting. She had signed and returned the consent form and read the Participant Information Sheet (PIS). Given her busy schedule as an NHS consultant and her active social life, I agreed she could fill out the demographic form later. The interview itself went well; Leigh and I shared a cultural background, both being from Ireland, which facilitated an easy understanding of shared experiences and rapport. For example, '[a]nd as you'll know yourself in the west of Ireland, Irish mummies are a little bit ah [. . .]'. Leigh's note on Irish mummies, depicts a certain character to me, mummies being the specific indicator of parenting style, in place of mams or mothers. Similarly, locating this Irish mammy in the west of Ireland allows me the shorthand understanding of a rural place where conservative norms are to be expected.

After the interview, I reminded her to fill out the demographic information and resent the link. Leigh agreed to fill it out and suggested we meet again soon for a drink. I agreed that would be nice, and we would likely see each other at the mutual friend's upcoming event. A week passed, I had received no notification that Leigh had filled out the form; I sent a quick text to remind her, now becoming cautious that I was bothering her. Leigh again agreed to fill it out and immediately suggested we meet for a coffee. This is where I began to feel uneasy. It felt that in exchange for filling out the demographic information, I would need to meet Leigh socially. Despite making tentative plans to meet, neither the demographic questionnaire nor the social meeting materialised. This situation left me feeling uncomfortable and reflecting on the nature of our exchange. On one hand, Leigh's participation in my research might warrant a

reciprocal gesture of my time and social commitment. On the other hand, I felt there was an imbalance, as it seemed she might leverage the completion of the form for social interaction.

Perhaps it is a fair exchange. I do not have the answer, and also do not have Leigh's demographic information, aside from the snippets that came up during our interview. While I felt entangled in this pending social transaction, it is feasible that Leigh did not wish to provide any demographic information. I have wondered on reflection if this may not have happened if I had paid participants for their time. Of course, I paid for any drinks /snacks consumed during in-person interviews, but this is not quite the same. As a self-funded PhD student, I had no resources to offer to compensate participants. This experience underscores the complexities and potential power dynamics involved in research relationships, and the unexpected nature of data collection.

Class Identification

Bringing my framework and approach to class to life, I consider the limitations and considerations of participants' self-identification. Skeggs (1997) argues that class identity is not merely an economic status but is intricately linked to social interactions and cultural representations, which often reinforce power dynamics and inequalities. She highlights that class positioning is not static but is instead continually negotiated and redefined through everyday practices and societal expectations. Skeggs emphasises the importance of viewing class as both a personal identity and a social position, deeply embedded in power relations and cultural practices.

Building on this, I reflect extensively on Taylor's (2007, 2010) work regarding class identity and its representation in research. Taylor (2007) frames class as a fluid and context-dependent category, underscoring the importance of acknowledging the subjective nature of class identification. This perspective has been crucial in shaping my understanding of how participants navigate and articulate their class categories. Taylor (2010) further broadens this framework by emphasising that class is a dynamic and relational concept. It encompasses not only economic factors but also cultural practices, educational backgrounds, and social interactions. This broader understanding of class encourages a nuanced approach to examining how participants identify and discuss their class positions. By paying close attention to both explicit statements and subtle cues, I aim to capture the multifaceted ways in which individuals experience and negotiate their class identities.

Being aware of my own class position and how it influenced my interactions with participants and interpretations of data is crucial. Accents carry various place-based, class, and cultural meanings (Skeggs, 2004; Hall, 2020). While I recognise the Edinburgh accent, softer, with drawn out vowels, I cannot discern the nuances of Scottish accents. Participants from Scotland had a variety of accents, some including the use of Scots language, such as bairn (child) or teuchter (rural highlander). I am conscious that my accent may convey classed codes to participants, though I cannot know what these messages are. My embodied positionality, including my voice, is crucial to my reflexivity and ethical praxis.

The dry and abstract classification tables miss out any sense of what class means for working class people and overlook the tensions, uncertainties, as

well as pleasures, within this: class is not just a set of statistics, a series of boxes to tick, it lives and breathes (Taylor, 2007: 41).

Asking participants to fill in their class identification, to literally tick a box in a questionnaire, may appear to counter my understanding and mobilisation of class, yet as both Taylor (2007) and Skeggs (1997, 2002) assert, class needs to be captured so it can be researched to produce understanding of nuance, of this lack of singularity.

In my consideration of participant responses, it is evident that most identified themselves within the spectrum of working class (six), upper working class (one), lower middle class (three), and middle class (13). Two participants opted not to identify with any category of class, choosing 'prefer not to say', and one participant provided no demographic information. Emily, for instance, situates herself at the upper working-class/lower middle-class boundary, illustrating the difficulty of distinguishing class identity. Zoe and Siobhan meanwhile distinguish their class identities from those of their parents. Taylor (2009) discusses how individuals negotiate their class identities in relation to their parents, examining the fluidity of class and how personal experiences, such as education and employment, can lead to a shift in class identity. Taylor emphasises the importance of understanding these changes within the broader context of family dynamics and societal expectations.

Lamont's (2000) research on class boundaries and social recognition provides insight into how individuals from different class backgrounds interact and perceive each other. She explores how middle-class children of working-class parents navigate their identities, often feeling caught between two worlds and experiencing a sense of cultural and social dislocation. Both Siobhan and Zoe have master's degrees, with Zoe

currently working towards a PhD qualification. While Siobhan works full-time in a management role, Zoe describes her employment as 'precarious postgraduate part-time fixed contract and zero hours employment'. Considering Reay's (2005) work on the intergenerational aspects of class, children from working-class families who enter higher education or professional occupations may find themselves in a different class position to their parents. Reay provides insight into how this can cause feelings of dislocation from identity and uncertainty. For the purpose of situating participants within the framework of this research, I have coded Zoe and Siobhan as middle class. This categorisation is not to deny their working-class identity or their experiences growing up, but to acknowledge their current access to middle-class resources.

Jo and Faye chose not to disclose their class identity, opting for 'prefer not to say'. This decision aligns with the observations of several feminist scholars who highlight the complexities and sensitivities surrounding class identification (Skeggs, 1997), leading to it being a sensitive and stigmatised topic, such that some individuals avoid categorising themselves within traditional class labels. Class avoidance can be a form of resistance against the rigid and often oppressive structures of class stratification. Elaborating further, Skeggs (2004) argues that middle-class individuals often conceal their class privileges to evade social stigma or guilt tied to their economic and social advantages. To avoid social stigma or guilt associated with their economic and social advantages, middle-class individuals often employ the strategy of masking their class privileges during social interactions. Reay (2017) echoes this idea, emphasising that individuals from privileged backgrounds may downplay their class status to fit in with peers from less privileged backgrounds or to avoid the discomfort of being perceived as out of touch.

Lurie (2020) describes how middle- and upper-class individuals often benefit from the 'privilege of invisibility', where society does not overtly scrutinise their class status. This invisibility allows them to navigate social spaces without the burden of class-based stereotypes. Collectively, Skeggs (1997, 2004), Taylor (2009), Reay (2005, 2017), and Lurie (2020) emphasise that the reluctance to identify with a specific class is often a response to the complex and intersectional nature of class positionality. They argue for a more nuanced and flexible understanding of class, one that respects individual experiences and considers the salience of categorisations. Participants like Jo and Faye choosing 'prefer not to say' can thus be seen as a legitimate response to the complexities and potential stigmas associated with class identification.

To accurately categorise class identities, I use qualitative methods of in-depth interviews, supported by demographic information. Discussing classed identities, incorporating direct quotes from participants, is vital, as it gives voice to their perspectives and illustrates the diversity within class categories (Taylor, 2007, 2010). I emphasise the complexity of class identity and the importance of a sensitive and reflexive approach in research by respecting and accurately representing participants' self-identifications in my findings. This framework is integral to my methodology, guiding my analysis and interpretation of class in my research.

Participant Recruitment

I initially conducted two pilot interviews with friends who had previously expressed an interest in participating. I carefully transcribed these interviews, reflecting on what worked well and what did not. My next step was to post a call for participants on X, previously known as Twitter (Appendix 3). I included my contact details, an outline of

participant requirements, and the aim of the research. Ninety-eight other users circulated this post, resulting in 34 potential participants reaching out to me, through the provided email or direct message on Twitter. Out of these, 4 participants were from Scotland but lived abroad, so I excluded them from the study. Some individuals lost interest upon learning there was no payment for participation, and a few did not respond after receiving the Participant Information Sheet (PIS). Others referred additional participants, and two contacted me after attending a university event where I presented on my research. Throughout this process, I maintained a detailed spreadsheet and stayed in clear communication with all potential participants, thanking and explaining to participants who did not meet the requirements why this was the case.

Participants had the choice of meeting online or in person, deciding on the time and location that suited them best. On two occasions, I suggested a quiet cafe in Glasgow when they were unsure of a meeting place. Each interview began with introductions and small talk, followed by an explanation that I would record the interview on an external device. I assured them we could pause or stop the recording at any time and that they were not obligated to answer any questions. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two and a half hours. These were outliers, with interviews mostly lasting around an hour and a half. I informed all participants that they could use pseudonyms and gave them the option to choose their own. Only one participant

declined a pseudonym⁴, opting to use their real name, some opted for random allocation, and several participants self-selected pseudonyms. For example, at the end of our interview, Lucia opted for a random pseudonym to be assigned to her. She later emailed me with additions to her interview and requesting the use of Lucia as her pseudonym, 'I'd like to go by "Lucia" in the transcripts, it's my confirmation name and it'd amuse me to use it to talk about "inappropriate" topics'. This was a notable moment, as Lucia, a feminist PhD researcher, showed her awareness of data production and the notion that discussing menstruation could be considered to be countering or challenging appropriateness.

Transcription

During the interviews, I took careful notes, capturing moments and words that stood out, including reminders, clarifications, and instances of silence or inflection (see Appendix 7). I transcribed the interviews myself, a process that, although incredibly time-consuming and occasionally frustrating, was deeply beneficial. By transcribing the interviews, I maintained a close connection with the data, which enhanced my understanding and interpretation of the participants' experiences. This close engagement with the data is essential in thematic analysis, as it facilitates the identification of nuanced patterns and themes that may otherwise go unnoticed (Fine, 1992; Reinharz, 1992; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Transcribing interviews is not a

⁴ I took particular care when working with this participant's transcript to ensure confidentiality, especially in instances where references to other individuals, places, or specific contexts could risk indirect identification. Where necessary, details have been modified or omitted.

neutral act; it is inherently a representational process that mirrors the research goals and aims (Davidson, 2009). Throughout this process, I was mindful of the selective and constructive nature of transcription, understanding that my choices in what to include or emphasise would inevitably shape the research output (Du Bois, 1991). I took great care to ensure that my transcriptions were accurate and reflective of the participants' voices, incorporating the ethical considerations of care-based transcribing, as discussed by feminist scholars such as Tilley (2003). Tilley emphasises the importance of acknowledging the power dynamics inherent in transcription and advocates for a practice that is both ethical and reflective of participants' lived experiences. I captured colloquialisms, pauses, laughter, and other nuances that conveyed the tone and texture of interviews.

To ensure the security and confidentiality of the data, I saved each transcription under the participants' pseudonyms on the secure university OneDrive, while physical materials were stored in a secure, locked storage unit within my home office, an area accessible only to me. Digital information, such as audio recordings, was kept in a password-protected folder on Strathclyde Strathcloud ShareFile, which only I could access. These data storage practices adhered to the University of Strathclyde Data Protection Policy and complied with the Data Protection Act 1998 and General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). All participants, whether interviewed virtually or in person, were within Scotland, ensuring consistent application of the same data protection regulations. These measures safeguarded the data and respected the privacy and anonymity of the participants, a core tenet of ethical research practices.

By transcribing the interviews myself and maintaining rigorous data security protocols, I ensured a close connection to the data while upholding the ethical standards outlined in the BERA guidelines. This approach also reflected broader feminist ethical principles, which advocate for the minimisation of harm and the safeguarding of participants' confidentiality and autonomy (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

Analysis

Throughout the research process, I consistently engaged in early thematic considerations and grouping, diligently recording notes and reflections in my research journal. As I approached the analysis phase, I did so with a sense of eager anticipation, fuelled by the excitement of entering a new stage. This marked one of the many deceptively celebratory milestones one encounters during the PhD process, where each new phase feels like a significant achievement, yet also brings with it new challenges, complexities, and unknown mistakes ahead. Initially, I made the mistake of printing off 13 interview transcripts, hoping for a traditional romanticised research interaction. I bought highlighters and sticky notes, spending a week poring over pages, underlining, circling, and feeling academic. However, this method did not suit my thought process and quickly I realised was not a sustainable approach for the size of my dataset, as I felt it dispersed codes and possible themes too broadly. Realising this approach was inefficient, I stored the printed transcripts securely in my office for a period before later shredding and disposing of them at the university.

Once I transcribed all 27 interviews and completed an online course on effectively using NVivo, I uploaded the dataset. I began thematic analysis, which provides a flexible yet rigorous framework for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within

my dataset. I approached the process inductively, deriving themes directly from the data itself rather than pre-determining them. In the first phase of data analysis, I familiarised myself with the data; I did this through transcribing interviews, which not only provided a written record but also facilitated a deeper understanding of the nuances and context of each participant's response. During this phase, I repeatedly read through the transcripts, keeping notes of ideas and potential codes that emerged (Appendix 7). I used freewriting and tiny texts to assist my familiarisation with the dataset (Thompson, 2019). Freewriting involves writing continuously and in an unfiltered way about a particular topic, allowing ideas to flow without concern for grammar or structure, while tiny texts are concise summaries or reflections that capture key themes or insights in a few sentences. These techniques helped me to engage deeply with the data and identify emerging patterns in a way that complemented my learning style.

As someone with dyslexia, I found these methods particularly valuable in this context. Freewriting provided a low-pressure way to articulate my thoughts and interpretations, while tiny texts helped me focus on clarity and brevity, which was especially useful in organising and distilling complex information. Together, these strategies enabled me to approach the dataset with both creativity and precision, ensuring a meaningful and thorough analysis

As I became familiar with the data, I started generating initial codes by synthesising notes, reflections, and marginalia. Codes represent the smallest units of meaningful content that can be assessed in relation to the research questions. Using a combination of manual coding and the NVivo software, I systematically worked through the entire dataset, inductively coding interesting aspects. I utilised a

combination of manual coding and the NVivo software to code each data segment relevant to the research question, sometimes assigning multiple codes to a single piece of data. This iterative process involved constant refinement of the codes as new insights emerged.

However, using NVivo for thematic coding presented a challenge. I felt it fragmented my participants' experiences, undermining the interconnectedness of shared experiences of menstruation. It felt contradictory to argue that menstruation is a personal experience while reducing complex accounts to categories. At this stage, coding made participants' accounts feel abstract and disconnected from the lived experiences they represented. Supervisory discussions helped me resituate my findings within the reality of the participants' experiences rather than abstracting quotes that felt separate from participants' accounts. With my initial codes established, I moved on to searching for themes. This phase involved organising codes into potential themes and collating relevant coded data extracts within identified themes. I looked for broader patterns in the data, grouping similar codes together under umbrella terms that represented a shared meaning, and I frequently utilised mind-mapping and visual aids to facilitate the grouping of different codes into overarching themes.

Reflecting on this stage, I realised it was one of the more challenging aspects of the research process. Braun and Clarke (2021), and Thompson (2019) rightly advised that it requires significant time and exploration. This involves going back and forth between the data and existing scholarship, allowing my thought process ample time and space, and balancing the detailed, granular view of the data (down in the weeds) with the broader, overarching perspective (birds-eye view). Navigating this process required time, patience, and a willingness to embrace frustration. I frequently returned to

thematic methodology, revisiting my initial codes and rewriting to determine which codes connected to emerging themes. This iterative approach proved to be the most effective way to overcome sticking points. I reviewed the extracts for each theme, checking if they formed coherent patterns and considering the validity of individual themes in relation to the entire dataset. At this stage, I merged themes, refined, or discarded, if they did not have sufficient data to support them.

The final phase involved weaving the themes into coherent and representative threads and contextualising the findings within broader scholarship. Writing and developing compelling extracts from the data supported each theme, illustrating the analytic points being made. I ensured that the analysis provided insights into the research questions and contributed to the existing body of knowledge, reflecting the depth and complexity of participants' lived menstrual experiences. Throughout the process, I maintained reflexivity, considering my impact on the research and ensuring that the analysis was based on the participants' accounts.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have reflected on the methodological journey that shaped my research, highlighting the crucial role of feminist epistemology and reflexivity in guiding my approach. I integrated feminist principles into every stage of the research process, from data collection to analysis, to ensure that the study remained grounded in the lived realities of the participants. This commitment to feminist scholarship not only influenced the research design but also required me to continuously interrogate my positionality, recognising how my identity as a white, middle-class woman, my experiences, and the power dynamics inherent to this shaped the research process.

By prioritising informed consent, confidentiality, and participant wellbeing, I aimed to uphold the ethical integrity of the research and honour the trust participants placed in me. Using semi-structured interviews, along with a flexible and responsive approach to data collection, I focused on amplifying the voices of participants, uncovering the complexities of their experiences in ways that more rigid methodologies might have overlooked. This approach underscored the value of feminist methodologies in producing knowledge that is both reflective and inclusive, thereby challenging traditional hierarchies and power structures within research.

The inductive nature of my analysis, combined with the ethical considerations that informed the entire research process, ensured that the study not only contributed to academic knowledge but also remained true to feminist principles of justice, equity, and respect for diversity. In conclusion, this chapter has highlighted the methodological foundation that underpinned my research, emphasising the significance of reflexivity, feminist epistemology, and the detailed exploration of lived experiences. These elements were not just methodological choices but were integral to the ethical and scholarly integrity of the research, ensuring that it contributed meaningfully to ongoing conversations within feminist scholarship and beyond.

Chapter 4: Bodies, Boundaries, and Becoming: The Role of Menstruation in Shaping Girlhood

The overarching aim of this chapter is to explore the role of period products during girlhood. I found that through the reaction to and positioning of period products within the home early menstrual norms and boundaries are (re)produced. Participants described menarche as a distinct shift in identity, shaped by social narratives and information shared within the home. Participants experience pressures and the construction of appropriate, respectable bodies through period products. Bodies navigating through spaces and locations are influenced by menarche and its social implications, particularly the weight of sexualisation both within and outside the home. It is through, with, and against period products that participants account for the push and pull of intertwining social structures of gender, age, sexuality, and class. Skeggs (1997, 2003) and Lawler (2000) provide insights into the themes emerging from participants' accounts, shedding light on the construction and normalisation of parameters around physical and embodied experiences within and outside of the home. I will explore how society constructs, confines, and shapes girls' bodies to reveal the powers, norms, and 'ideals' that influence and surround them.

Throughout participants' accounts, the terms girl and teen are used interchangeably within the same story or context, without clear boundaries or distinct categorisation. As I will explain further, participants describe womanhood as a distinct, symbolic, and materially embodied difference, irrespective of its association with their life stage. In contrast, girl and teen appear as fluid identities, with participants situating themselves

within and between these categories without clear distinction. The term tween is sometimes used to describe this transitional period, referring to someone on the cusp of their teenage years, typically around 12 or 13 years old (Steffler, 2018). However, girlhood itself is not a fixed identity or group; the categories of girl and woman are not binary or rigid but serve as analytical tools to capture patterns and provide clarity in repetition (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004; Taylor, 2012).

Participants experienced menarche, referred to as 'coming on' or their first period, between the ages of eight and 15, with 11 being the most common age. The self-descriptors they used, girl, teen, and adolescent, varied significantly, often reflecting fluid and overlapping understandings of their identities at different stages. In my writing, I adopt the terms and self-identifications expressed by participants, moving between girl, teen, and young woman to mirror the fluidity present in their accounts.

All participants described their family as central to menstrual experiences during girlhood and beyond. Participants account for this influence as ranging from shared experience through absence, accommodation, resistance, and support. The home is a space of social and political importance, one influential to embodied experience (Smith, 1987). Participants generally describe their families as conforming to normative roles, often including a mother and father, though they do not explicitly label them as heterosexual. These normative roles typically reflect traditional expectations of a nuclear family structure, as characterised by distinct, gendered responsibilities within the household (hooks, 2000). However, the forms of family described vary widely, encompassing single-parent households, households with step-parents, separated parents, and families with both parents present.

First-hand stories of participants are reflected in the literature (Britton, 1996; Stubbs & Costos, 2008; Bobel, 2010), placing mothers in a central position with respect to girls' menstrual experiences. Reflecting on the social expectation placed on mothers to bear the responsibility to care for and educate children about menstruation is important, with attention paid to how and what this (re)produces (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). The positioning of mothers as benevolently dealing with education and care around menstruation works to reinforce the separation and (re)production of gendered norms. Fathers were absent from participants' menstrual stories until I explicitly asked whether they had a father and whether he was involved in their menstrual experiences. It is important to pause as the stories that unfold when prompted construct several roles and imaginings of fathers. However, had I not explicitly asked participants about their fathers, their expectations and perceptions of fathers would likely have remained absent from the discussion.

This chapter will first explore the participants' experiences within the family home. Families enact a pivotal role in participants' menstrual experiences, influencing social ordering, respectability, and responsibility with respect to the self (Douglas, 1960; Skeggs, 1997, 2001; Tarrant, 2010). During girlhood, participants learn about the spaces within the home where they should hide their menstruating body, and from whom, through the display of disgust manifested through reprimands. Through the cypher of period products, participants expressed social ordering and gender inequality. In the second section of this chapter, I unpack participant experiences of identity shifts due to menarche. Through exploring participant accounts of their own identity and their 'new' embodied self in the eyes of others (and mothers), I argue that the (hetero)sexualisation of girls and interactions with menstruation and period

products act as a mechanism for both confinement and resistance. The (dis)identification with womanhood, gender, sexualisation, age, and class relations is (re)produced. In the final section of this chapter, I examine how contraceptives function similarly to period products, serving as mechanisms through which social structures of gender, sexuality, and class are regulated, and influencing the behaviours and experiences of participants.

The Menstruating Body, in the Home Yet Out of Bounds.

The home played a central role in participants' early menstrual experiences. As mentioned in the literature review, girls often learn to occupy space differently from their male peers, including how they move, sit, and play (Butler, 1990; Young, 1990). Menstrual scholarship also explores how girls and women often conceal and contain their menstruating bodies in different spaces, for example in private areas, like bathrooms or bedrooms, and in public settings, such as schools or workplaces, highlighting how they resist and/or reconstruct these spaces (Fingerson, 2006; Bobel, 2010). In exploring the social and material significance of menstrual products during girlhood, I found that the home is a key site of learning, often through the restriction of their use by participants. This restriction provides insight into the sociocultural norms that (re)construct menstruation as something that is permissible only within confined and controlled spaces. Participants frequently described restrictions being enforced at home, with products and practices associated with menstruation often leading to reprimands, such as being given out to, their behaviour corrected and shouted at by family members due to the literal or implied presence of menstruation be it blood or management products within the home. This suggests that girls and women are

expected to exist in these spaces under constant vigilance, with reprimands often given against reminders of menstruation.

This finding adds to Young's (2005) work on the early construction of gender through regulation of physical space. Young (2005) explores how girls receive guidance in their movements and play, and how they internalise these directions as beliefs about their bodily capacities. My findings expand on Young's work by showing that participants are further 'guided' through reprimands and the expectations of others within the home. The perception of menstruation as 'dirty' creates additional boundaries and restrictions with respect to the embodied menstrual experience, leading to further confinement and restriction.

Zoe (27, middle class) reflects on her experience of navigating period products while living with her family, which included her parents and brothers. She grew up in a rural environment, where her mother worked in a male-dominated local business. Zoe describes the men her mother worked with and those in her local community growing up, as 'teuchters' (a Scottish term often used to refer to rural people, previously used as a word to describe rural highlanders by the lowlanders to infer superiority). Throughout our interview, Zoe identifies herself as a feminist and discusses how her feminist beliefs have shaped her reflections on gender inequality throughout her life. Her feminist perspective informs how she interacts with and challenges different environments, both personally and socially. Zoe connects these feminist views to her upbringing in a rural area and her experiences with the 'teuchter' men she grew up around.

Like when I lived at home I used a pot for it [to clean her menstrual cup] and like my dad just got so angry about it, and so angry that sometimes I put it in the dishwasher. Yeah, and I tried to point out this very much like is a stigmatised thing because it is a feminine hygiene product. And they're [father and brother] like, 'No, it's because it's dirty' and I'm like, 'you and my brothers spit in the sink constantly!' So yeah, that's kind of, that's kind of wild. (Zoe, 27, working class)

In discussing her father's reaction to her using a menstrual cup, Zoe notes the inconsistency in how he and her brothers view various bodily fluids. She questions why he finds it acceptable to spit into the kitchen sink but considers sterilising a menstrual cup in a pot to be impermissible. Zoe also notes that in her home it was inappropriate to have menstrual blood in the shared bathroom, extending the distinction beyond the kitchen. 'If there was like splashback from emptying my moon cup', her dad 'really didn't like that'. She explains that this was 'specifically because it's like menstrual blood, like if somebody cut their hand and it was bleeding, that wouldn't be an issue.' The perception of menstrual blood as 'dirty' is well documented in the academic literature, which often contrasts it with other bodily fluids. Here, Zoe depicts her father and brother as viewing menstrual blood as a transgression against the perceived cleanliness of the kitchen and bathroom. Douglas (1966) discusses how society categorises bodily fluids to create a hierarchy, stating that '[w]here there is dirt, there is a system. Dirt[y] is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter. In so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements' (1966: 35).

The labelling of shared spaces, such as the bathroom, as inappropriate for menstruation-related items was clear in Jo's (25, prefer not to say) experience. She discussed the absence of a bin in the family bathroom for getting rid of period products,

which served as an illustration of the unspoken rules that governed the use of shared spaces in her household. This included the avoidance of visible period products on shelves, the concealment of blood at the bottom of the toilet that persisted after flushing, and the use of a bin specifically for disposing of period products. Jo (25, prefer not to say) recalls that her mother was notably uncomfortable and cautious about discussing topics like menstruation and sex in the presence of Jo's father and younger brothers. Suspecting that her mother's discomfort around men and these topics had a deeper cause and may be a response to harm inflicted upon her mother as a teen/child, Jo acknowledges the challenges her mum may experience living with constant awareness and avoidance. Jo reflects on the difficulties she experienced during her early menstrual years while living in her family home:

When I was younger, I felt that like, 'oh, that's something I should keep', like we didn't have a [...] she's never [...] had like a little bin in the bathroom, in our house. Like for sanitary towels and stuff like that was never there and so like, I would have to put like a plastic bag on my door, like in my room. Like if I was on a period or something. So it's very much like hidden away out of the family bathroom so that they couldn't, not going make anyone uncomfortable. (Jo, 25, prefer not to say)

Through Jo's words 'we didn't have a [...] she's never [...]', she appears to be working through the decision-making in her home, around the responsibility to provide a bin in the shared family bathroom to dispose of period products. Revealing her ongoing process of coming to terms with the expectations and norms that were silently enforced within her home, Jo's experience highlights the challenges of growing up in a space where her menstruating body was subtly but persistently treated as different,

and where she had to keep it hidden in private areas of the home to avoid making others uncomfortable. This reinforces the idea that even within the seemingly neutral and functional space of a bathroom, expectations continue to dictate what is considered appropriate. Jo's account of spatial limitation as a girl, within her home, depicts that it is far from solely in typically shared spaces such as kitchens that boundaries of appropriateness are drawn.

It becomes apparent that the issue is not whether menstrual blood or products were in the kitchen, bathroom, or bedroom, or even a question of menstrual blood versus spit, rather the more significant understanding of her father's, mother's, and brothers' belief that menstrual blood is dirty and should not be seen or managed in the home. Ideally periods would not be present within any room of the home, with the bathroom, or in Jo's case her bedroom, simply being the least offensive space for management of menstruation. I propose that this not only works to highlight limitations around the menstruating body, but through this depiction, that there is no space where periods could comfortably exist, rather there are more or less appropriate areas.

While Zoe speaks throughout our interview with critical feminist reflection, she acknowledges that her experience of blame and restrictions based on disgust affected her relationship with menstruation and her body negatively. Johnston-Robledo et al. (2007) found that shame of menstruation, even in those who understand it to be socially constructed, influences internal dialogue and behaviour. Zoe describes her efforts in recent years to 'become more comfortable' with her body and menstruation, disrupting expectations of concealment in social and work environments. However, she remains cautious of intentionally provoking her father and brothers, as 'that will

ignite or spark an argument', pointing towards the complication of navigating family life, and its impact on experiences beyond the home.

Reflecting on Zoe's and Jo's experiences, two key points of analysis emerge concerning the dynamics within their households. First, there is a clear presence of active gender inequality. Both women recognised that their fathers and brothers occupied positions of power, enabling them to impose their preferences on the participants' behaviour within the home, and even on how they managed their own bodies. As a result, they were pressured to put others' needs before their own comfort. Second, they cordon off a space where menstruation is expected to exist. This dynamic of power and social ordering within the family home, which positions girls as responsible for concealing evidence of menstruation, is also clear in Robin's narrative.

Robin (25, middle class) has menorrhagia, or very heavy bleeding. She shared her experience of receiving no support from her mother, who Robin pointedly informed me, works as a midwife, 'my mum was a midwife! She has never said the word period, she won't even say the word tampon, really uptight!' Robin expressed the disconnect she felt between her mother's career, which centres women's health, and her reluctance to engage with or discuss menstruation. Robin was direct in explaining how her mother was unhelpful, emphasising her expectation that her mother, normatively responsible for the emotional and mental load of the family, would be the one to provide care and education.

By focusing on her mother and excusing her father, Robin reinforces gendered expectations and norms. Her father was so notably absent from her story that I had to ask if she had a father and whether he lived with her during that time. Robin tells me

that the only time her father ever mentioned menstruation was ‘when somebody flushed a tampon down the toilet, and it blocked the toilet, and he was like, “there are things in the toilet I should not have to see!!”’. Robin's account of someone in her household being reprimanded because of a tampon in the toilet highlights the enforcement of hyper-vigilance and concealment. Through Robin's experiences, we can see that people are increasingly restricting girls' bodies from existing comfortably without the fear of being labelled as 'inappropriate' or 'dirty'. The power and hierarchy depicted in Robin's story, similarly to Zoe's, reveal how their fathers have the power to determine what constitutes appropriate menstrual behaviour for their daughters. The ways in which the participants were reprimanded and corrected during their girlhood led them to describe feelings of shame that persisted both during that time and into adulthood.

It's Not All Fun and Games; Words Matter.

As discussed in the literature review, jokes, and slang terms related to menstruation are widespread, often functioning as euphemisms that ‘provide distance from the reality of what they represent’ (Newton, 2016: 107). Participants noted that during their girlhood and teenage years, they primarily used euphemisms to discreetly communicate with peers about menstruation. While the use of slang can sometimes involve humour to relieve pressure or facilitate social communication about menstruation, it can also undermine women. For example, phrases like ‘on the rag’ and ‘time of the month’ are often used to suggest irrationality in a woman's words or behaviour (Newton, 2016).

I argue that in contexts of gender inequality, such as those described by participants within the home, euphemisms and slang terms can mask harmful intent. Niamh (30, middle class) describes how her father used harmful stereotypes about menstruation against her to discredit her. Niamh clearly articulates her experience of a gendered hierarchy within her home, where her father positioned himself as the authoritative and reliable narrator of familial events. In contrast, he depicted Niamh as unreliable, weaponising menstruation to assert gendered power, which resulted in her internalising this shame.

If I ever tried to confront him or got upset or angry, he would always go to 'oh has somebody got her period? Is it that time?' and it was so humiliating, and so kind of delegitimising, as if your anger is - it just takes the wind out of your sails, and I sort of realised that that had fed into me feeling like periods were a vulnerability. (Niamh, 31, middle class)

During our interview, Niamh detailed her past struggle with an eating disorder, which she partly attributed to the vulnerability she felt because of her father's words. She explained that this led her to manage her body through hyper-control. Because of her eating disorder, Niamh developed amenorrhoea, meaning her body stopped menstruating for a time. She now describes herself as being on a 'journey of period positivity', where she embraces her period and her body. Niamh reflected on her experience with misogyny, particularly how people made derogatory comments and insinuations about her menstruating body, and expressed a desire for a world where such behaviour is no longer tolerated:

I would like us to get to a world where you think that's not a joke, that's not an opportunity anymore. If that's how you've decided you're going to be, you can't be a good man and behave like that. You can't pass it off as funny anymore.'

Niamh described her father as abusive, which prompted me to consider how best to represent her story within the broader findings on the limitations and restrictions imposed within the home. These limitations have significant ramifications for the bodies of girls, their construction through gender inequality, and the enforcement of hegemonic menstrual norms. I spent a long time considering whether Niamh's experience of having an abusive father made her story an ill fit for this analysis category. However, separating Niamh's experience because she labelled her father as abusive would achieve two problematic outcomes. First, it would disregard the prevalence of domestic abuse. Second, it would suggest that the actions of other fathers, who were not identified as abusive by their daughters, were somehow different or acceptable. My analysis found that the language Niamh described was extremely common, not only from fathers and brothers but from all family members, as Zoe described: 'My parents and like, my mom, mouthing "she's got her period"—like, how patronising is that?'

As discussed in the literature review, society expects people to adhere to and perpetuate menstrual etiquette and norms. Violating these norms is often viewed as disrupting acceptable feminine behaviour and body management. Participants frequently positioned their fathers as the most uncomfortable with their resistance to and navigation of menstrual norms. This discomfort was described as manifesting in disgust, anger, and a lack of support or care.

Schebeling's (2022) research, similarly to this research project, examines how individuals navigate and respond to deviations from traditional gender norms, highlighting the discomfort such transgressions often evoke and the role of societal expectations in shaping parental responses. Both studies explore how parent-child dynamics interpret and respond to deviations from traditional gender norms, focusing specifically on the attitudes and behaviours of parents toward children's gender expression. This finding builds upon Schebeling's (2022) research, which used Kane's (2012) gender trap theory to explore how fathers interpret and respond to gender non-conformity. Schebeling collected data from online blogs written by fathers in North America, observing that the accounts shared online might be shaped to align with the purpose of the story rather than accurately representing real events. This suggests that fathers are more comfortable with daughters transgressing gender norms and displaying 'masculine' traits or interests than with sons exhibiting or preferring 'feminine' traits or behaviours.

Management and etiquette practices around menstruation uphold gender norms and social constructs of femininity and 'womanhood' (Merskin, 1999). This creates an interesting contradiction when considering Schebeling's findings that fathers are more comfortable with their daughters' non-conformity to feminine norms, alongside my finding that fathers are not comfortable with their daughters' non-conformity to menstrual norms, which are inherently tied to femininity and gendered expectations. Participants illustrated this through their accounts of highly gendered bodily management imposed by fathers during their girlhood. Within the home, fathers expected participants to conform to menstrual norms of femininity, regardless of the traits they displayed or the activities they engaged in. Participants often described their

fathers as external monitors, enforcing limits on the 'appropriate' spaces for their bodies and behaviours during menstruation.

Various participants, including Niamh, expressed caution about using explicit or direct language about menstruation around men or people they were unsure would be comfortable discussing it. Several participants noted undoing, unlearning, and resisting these boundaries, which they had learned within the home. Adrienne (30, middle class) reflected on this process: 'Not thinking that the blood is dirty anymore because honestly, before, that's the way my brain was programmed'. These accounts highlight the barriers and restrictions participants have had to navigate in their homes. Participants identified that the limitations placed on menstruating girls' bodies lead to the perception that the body, blood, and emotional experience of menstruation should be confined. Within the home, we cannot assume that people always view the bathroom as an 'appropriate' space for managing menstruation or that girls have the space to do so. The physical and explicit boundaries felt within the home caused participants to minimise their use of space, becoming hyper-vigilant about signs of their menstruating body and the social ordering of gender inequality.

Challenging Menstrual Messaging through Gossip

Engaging in gossip, actively seeking answers, and sharing knowledge—including searching for information—offers a contrasting approach to the norms of secrecy and restriction participants experienced within the home. Gossip moves between private and public spheres, historically used by women and marginalised groups to share information safely. It serves as an important informal space to transgress social norms, facilitating collective communication. Scholars suggest that gossip plays a role in

cementing social bonds (Baumeister, Zhang & Vohs, 2004), rooted in both safety and understanding. While contemporary academic and media discourse often use the term 'whisper network' to describe gossip, I argue against renaming the term because of its vilification. Gossip disrupts power and hierarchy, producing agency over information and knowledge production.

Participants' accounts of early menstrual learning highlight gossip as a means of countering individualised experiences. Gossip facilitates knowledge-sharing through organic, peer-to-peer learning, fostering solidarity and collective action. For instance, Tara (29, middle class) recalls, 'when girls started getting their period in class, it was like, "Oh my god, did you hear that so-and-so got her period?" "Do you know what happened?"' Similarly, Niamh recalls,

We were in a group talking about the school run and getting ready for that, and periods came up. They ask, 'Anyone started?' and I say, 'I might have...', even though I knew I had. They then ask, 'Does it hurt?'

These examples highlight explicit gossip, direct questioning, and knowledge acquisition. Tara and Niamh demonstrate the seeking of information from peers outside close friendships, underscoring the value of such communication in understanding and preparation. This inquisitive gossip serves as a means of gathering critical information, enabling people to draw conclusions and build knowledge (Code, 1995). People exchange and pass along knowledge based on lived experiences, which are then spread into smaller social groups through shared spaces. Sharing and critically exploring information through informal channels not only disseminates knowledge but also fosters an early understanding of safe spaces within communities.

This active seeking and accumulation of information leads to constructive learning. However, unsupported informal information may also contribute to insecurities and concerns, forming the foundation upon which harmful menstrual norms grow. I argue that girlhood and teenagerhood are challenging periods, marked by changing familial and social circumstances, due to menstruation and the onset of (hetero)gendered pressures. Gossip can also transgress the public/private boundary, suggesting its importance for feminism and this research. Validating personal experience as evidence amplifies informal, non-normative ways of knowing. These collective spaces of communication are not gender-specific but may relate to gender construction, demonstrating that these feminist ways of knowing are possible for all via a radical shift in gender and social norms. By relocating feminist principles into menstrual practices, we can better address the complex realities of menstruation, challenge stigmas, and foster a more inclusive feminist movement.

'I'm no longer a child, [...] I'm not the person who left the house two hours ago!'; Enter Womanhood!

Participants' accounts reveal varied ages at which mothers first (hetero)sexualised their bodies, subjectively feeling the division between girl, tween, and teen. Evident through participants' accounts is their discomfort with attaching womanhood and sexualisation to their bodies when these concepts feel misplaced and unwanted. Cultural and historical contexts shape sexuality, closely tied to gender, as a social construct, as scholars have long understood (Foucault, 1978; Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). This construct is predominantly, and often unconsciously, aligned with heterosexual norms (Young, 1990; Lee, 1994). Puberty, particularly menarche, closely

links sexualisation to a culturally defined marker between childhood and adulthood. As individuals transition into new identity categories, society plays a role in influencing how they are perceived and treated (Robertson & Davies, 2008; McRobbie, 2009)

Lucia's (24, working class) panicked words, used as the title for this section, capture the sudden shift experienced by some participants at the onset of menarche. In Lucia's case, she experienced a seismic shift in her sense of self—how she related to the world and, importantly, how the world now related to her. Menstruation, beginning with menarche, is strongly associated with the act of becoming, as in becoming a woman. Participants' subjective (dis)identification with womanhood takes various forms, producing a (dis)connection with respect to gender, age, and self. Lucia recalled feeling distressed, crying to her older sister, 'I'm no longer a child, [...] I'm not the person who left the house two hours ago!' While Lucia felt panicked and unsure of who she was—no longer a child and now a different person—Adrienne described feeling a sense of power and a change in identity that expanded her place in the world. 'After it happened, I remember feeling like the shit, like, you know, I went to school with my pad on, and I was like, "I'm a woman!"' Adrienne's account of feeling like 'the shit', empowered as a new, bigger and better version of herself suggests an elevated social status, no longer a child simply because she had a pad in her underwear.

The participants who were mothers also described menarche as more than a physiological change; reflecting on their daughters' menarche as a pivotal moment shaping identity and lived experience. Both Jessie (54, middle class) and Sonia (42, middle class) described themselves as departing from their felt identity, of a menstruating woman, as their daughters 'become' just that. Jessie, who went through medically induced menopause, and Sonia, who describes herself as perimenopausal,

reflected on their daughters as soon-to-be or newly menstruating, contrasting this with their own positions at the other end of the spectrum.

'I think as well, for my girls, as mum, they've never known me having a period': Jessie's daughters were very young when she went through medically induced menopause, young enough that they won't recall her having had periods. Jessie's description of this as a way in which her daughter did not know her, indicates a sense of shared identity missed out on. 'They probably don't even think about it (menstruating) for me, I think actually, but it's never, it's not ever been the three of us'. Both spoke of 'shifting, becoming a woman, and then becoming again', though neither Jessie nor Sonia put words to this second becoming. Menstruation seems to be tied to both the development and loss of identity, according to their experiences. While I am not suggesting that this attachment or change in felt identity is inherently problematic, my argument is that the normative identity associated with menstruation imposes a gender binary and heterosexuality, directly linking it to femininity and womanhood. These constructs deeply embed and often become tied to menarche and early menstruation through sexualisation, and later desexualisation and identity loss, as participants noted.

People feel the onset of menstruation as a 'becoming', the beginning of womanhood, either as an embodied shift or as a marked identity change in the eyes of others. Participants described the transformed body as an object of heterosexual sexual desire. To continue to unpack the misogyny, gender inequality, and sexualisation involved in 'becoming' a woman, I will explore the experiences of Erika and Emma. Erika (36, lower middle class) grew up in France and now studies and works part-time in Glasgow, where she and her partner are raising their young son. Erika describes

herself as very open about her period within her household, even collecting her menstrual blood in containers in the bathroom to feed her plants. In contrast, she describes her partner, a 'Scottish male', as 'fairly uncomfortable discussing pretty much anything to do with the body; in that, we are very different'. Erika shared her fear of leaking menstrual blood during her girlhood and teenage years:

When you're a teenager wearing these really sexy trousers that are not forgiving at all, if you're going to spot it's just going to be visible. I do remember this kind of fear, my memory of teenage years is that it was such a hyper-sexualised environment. Like, boys trying to touch you when, I hope it's changed, but my memory is of being touched a lot by boys. My bum, my boobs, trying. They would touch it, or they would try. And so, you're being looked at a lot and wearing the mini skirt you're called this and that, there's just so much being constantly reminded of your body that then I think when there is this blood flow that you don't, you're not very familiar yet how to best handle. There's just a lot of fear around it being visible, just feel so much shame and to happen in this environment of constant talking and touching and claiming the female body, yeah.

Erika situates the discomfort she felt not in her body itself, as she wore the clothes she desired—tight trousers and miniskirts—but in the hands and words of others, who caused the discomfort and sexualisation. Leaking menstrual blood was especially unwelcome, as it would draw additional attention when she had not yet learned how to manage her bleeding. Her tight trousers and miniskirts would make any leaked blood more obvious. Before Erika could understand her own body, she felt others claimed it. Erika's words depict the feeling of being, as Lee (1994) wrote, an object of

sexual desire, with her body available to be touched and claimed. Erika's discomfort within this story is clear; as she tells it, her language stops and starts mid-sentence, and she interjects with 'I hope it's changed, but my memory is of being touched'.

Emma (24, middle-class) grew up in South Africa and now lives in Glasgow, working as a scientist. Although Emma rarely talks to her male partner about her period, she mentioned it once when her bleeding became very heavy after starting the pill, because she was concerned, and her partner is a medical doctor. Emma spoke about her first period and how she felt it altered her way of being in the world:

I do feel like my mom was very much there to kind of talk me through it. So yeah, that was, it was a positive thing. It wasn't a negative thing, but maybe a bit scary. But yeah, I guess it was like the start of time like a woman now, which comes with responsibilities.

The fact that like, you are more vulnerable. You hear a lot of rape and, and those kinds of things. But you do hear of a lot of girls who are raped, even very young girls, like they've just started menstruating at the age of nine or something. Yeah, so they [men] can kind of, very much abuse your body.

Yeah, it also makes us vulnerable, because men then have the power to kind of abuse our bodies and, and to use that against us. I mean, rape and then, or kind of just sleep with a woman, then she ends up pregnant, and she has to then deal with the child or go through the abortion process or whatever and the trauma of that and the guy just gets off and he doesn't have to worry about anything.

Emma rarely talked to her mother about periods unless she had a concern, but she learned from her about the responsibilities of being a woman, including the possibility of pregnancy from menarche. Particularly, the responsibility to not be sexually assaulted, that because of her menstruating body, if she was sexually assaulted she may become pregnant – an added responsibility. This lays on her the responsibility not only for the sexualisation of her body but for the unwanted actions and repercussions of others. Like Erika's experience of her body being claimed by others, Emma described her newly menstruating body as sexualised and something others could use against her. Emma saw 'becoming' a woman as a direct connection to the responsibility of safeguarding her body and the potential for others to use it against her, through holding her accountable for the consequences if she failed. She located the threat of unwanted sexual attention—whether it be name-calling, rape, or countless other misogynistic behaviours—as part of a girl's responsibility, something attached to womanhood, which is socially expected of girls at menarche, which marks their entry into womanhood.

Emma and Erika contrast with each other both in how they expressed themselves during interviews and in their backgrounds—Erika from France and Emma from South Africa, both now living in Glasgow. However, both women recall being made to feel like objects of others' desire, beginning with the onset of menstruation. Their 'becoming' women situated them within the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990), categorising them as objects of male desire, regardless of their own sexual identity. This process not only sexualised their bodies but also embedded vulnerability into their embodied experience, shaping their way of being in the world. They also felt compelled to make efforts to lessen attention and contain their bodies.

Robin's experience adds another layer to this narrative. Robin (25, middle class) felt that men and boys were different, and sometimes even a threat. In other cases, they were different in a way that highlighted her own changing body. She explains,

It's like the first point when you feel like you're not. When you have a group of all girls and boys together, it sets you apart. You know, you're running around—in my case, rustling [...] I had been going around like one of the boys, and then suddenly I've got this thing pressing on my chest, and I was like, 'Well, everyone—every woman—is going through this; I guess I'm going to have to get used to it'.

Robin clearly identifies the moment when a distinction suddenly arose between herself and her friends—because she was wearing a pad and a bra, such that her embodied experience had shifted. Instead, she was moving more cautiously, her pad making noise, her chest compressed by the bra. What was once a group of friends had reshaped itself into a group of boys, with Robin now feeling different and somehow 'less than'. This experience echoes the broader theme of how 'becoming' a woman embeds the gender binary and works to sexualise, placing fear and self-consciousness onto the bodies of girls. The body, once a source of carefree movement and identity, becomes a concern, a liability. Feminist theorists like Rich (1975) and Martin (1992) have documented and contested this shift, highlighting how gender attaches to the experience and identification of one's body, reinforcing societal norms and expectations that profoundly impact the lived experiences of girls and women.

The idealised social progression from girl to teen to woman coincides with a pattern of product use that appears throughout the dataset. All participants initially used

disposable pads almost exclusively for the first few years, with many then transitioning to tampons, and some later adopting reusable products like menstrual cups, period pads, and discs. As adults, most participants used a mixture of products, such as pads and tampons, or tampons and period pants. Unlike the implicit or unremembered early memories of first using menstrual products, whether self-selected or provided, participants distinctly recalled the transition from disposable pads to tampons.

Jo describes an experience recounted by several participants, that the discovery of tampons brought a sense of liberation from disposable pads, enabling them to embody an older, more agentic version of themselves:

It was really awkward and quite yeah just quite uncomfortable, you have to touch yourself and so it is a lot more difficult than just putting like a period liner on. and then eventually it became something I was, 'oh my god, this is amazing, like, wow!' It takes away having to remember that you're on your period.

Learning about tampons and how to use them was a memorable experience, whether it was isolating, communal, or empowering. When exploring the feedback from mothers regarding these experiences, a common thread emerges in the understanding and construction of girls' bodies, as well as ideas surrounding age, gender, and sexualisation.

I think I mentioned to my mum 'oh like, I can use a tampon' and she was like, horrified. She was like, 'That's terrible, like why would you do that? I don't even want to talk about it!' (Jo, 26, prefer not to say)

She [Robins's mother] was just like 'Why do you want those? Are you able to shove them up there?' (Robin, 27, middle class)

I remember my mum freaking out when I suggested trying tampons [. . .] I think I remember her saying something like [...] 'maybe this isn't appropriate?'

KM: No, it's all appropriate as long as you're comfortable.

Leigh: Yeah totally. She said something about 'it'll make your hole really big'.(Leigh, 41, unknown class)

These accounts reveal the shared perceived sense of their mothers' discomfort regarding tampons, as distinct from their views on disposable pads. This was presented as mothers feeling a sense of difference when they inserted tampons into their bodies, leading to an unwanted bodily shift or experience. Robin, for instance, made a point of mentioning that her mother was a midwife, yet she recalled her mother's reaction to her use of tampons as one of disgust, questioning whether she could 'shove them up there'. This mirrors Leigh's mother, a nurse, who expressed concern that tampons would 'make your hole really big'. Although differently voiced, both concerns revolved around the idea that a young girl's vagina might not be big enough for a tampon or that using one would make it too large. Framing a girl's vagina as transformable yet inappropriate at specific ages highlights an underlying anxiety about premature sexualisation.

The unspoken implication is that the body, particularly the vagina, undergoes changes during a specific age or life stage, compounding the early gendered construction of girls' bodies. Discouraging reactions around using a tampon at a young age suggests a body perceived as not yet ready for sexualization. Discomfort around the physical

changes associated with a girl's age stems from a broader cultural concern, or perhaps even a desire, to preserve their innocence, with tampons perceived as a possible threat to that innocence.

These excerpts reveal a deeper disgust directed towards the body, specifically the vulva and vagina. Jo described her mother as ashamed of her own body and menstruation, which taught Jo to feel similarly about herself. Jo's mother questioned why she would want to use a tampon, suggesting that a young girl shouldn't want to interact with her body in that way: 'That's terrible, like why would you do that?' In this context, tampons symbolise a challenge to idealised notions of appropriateness and respectability.

It's notable that both Robin and Leigh emphasised their mothers' medical professions, yet their reactions to their daughters using tampons overshadowed their medical knowledge. This adds to Lawler's (2000) work on how mothers manage not only their daughters' environments but also their bodies. Skeggs' (1997) work helps us understand the actions of mothers in this context, as mothers in Skeggs' and this research project are recounted as navigating barriers and ideologies to construct respectable girls with 'good' bodies. Skeggs (1997) describes feminine capital as something constructed and invested in through tactical manoeuvring within and between constraints, acting as a regulation that distinguishes respectability and defines what constitutes an appropriate or 'good' body. The way participants describe their mothers' reactions to period products, especially tampons, vividly illustrates this.

The Mother, a Woman.

Lawler argues that ‘there is more to the subjectivity of women who are mothers than “mother”. But in so far as they are [being] mothers, there is extraordinarily little space for manoeuvre’ (2000: 171). This sheds light on the restrictive ways in which mothers are often perceived. The portrayal of mothers by individual participants, and when viewed collectively as a dataset, can quickly merge into a generalised, omnipresent image of ‘the mother’, overshadowing their individuality. Throughout the data, insights into mothers as women—women who must navigate complex social structures while bearing the additional pressure of guiding their children's development—are less frequent. As discussed, mothers closely link the management of their daughters' environments and bodies to producing daughters who will then regulate themselves according to societal norms, as displayed through both participant accounts and the literature (Skeggs, 1997). Lawler (2000) explores the responsibility placed on mothers to raise good children and maintain a ‘proper’ family, often understood as a heteronormative unit. She notes, ‘[m]others—most of whom do nearly all the child-care, whether or not they live with their children's fathers—bear the ultimate responsibility for the production of not only the “good citizen” but the ‘good society’ (2000: 39).

This dynamic highlights the interplay between societal expectations of motherhood and the intimate, sometimes surprising, realities of mother-daughter relationships. Lucia's experience underscores how her mother's guidance simultaneously adhered to traditional caregiving roles while challenging taboos around reproductive health and autonomy.

I was looking up the pill on her [mother's] iPad and forgot to close the thing. So, I get back in from wherever I've been and she just says like, 'so is there something that you need to tell me?' 'No, no, no, no, no, just looking', and then after that, I think she'd says, 'look that's absolutely fine. We'll get you sorted out. We'll do this, We'll do that.' And I remember being very very surprised! [. . .] But then I always remember she says to me 'you know, the reason Sarah [older sister] didn't get born until six years after your dad and I got married, there was a reason, I know your gran thinks it was the divine purpose, but there was a reason.' So that really surprised me, and I remember thinking 'Oh god, it's not something to be worried about'. (Lucia, 24, working class)

Lucia describes her household growing up as 'generally open', where discussions about menstruation were functional and period products were readily available in the shared bathroom. Before the event she recounted, Lucia viewed her mother as an authority figure—aligned with doctors and other adults—who lacked understanding of her subjective experiences as a girl and teenager. Lucia felt that her mother, along with others, desired for her to embody the ideal of a respectable girl, teen, or young woman, which stood in opposition to Lucia's own resistance and agency over her body and sexuality. However, during this encounter, Lucia gained a new perspective, seeing her mother as someone with shared experiences. She describes this moment as 'connecting with the person who has had a similar experience'. Similarly, Zoe's account resonates with and builds upon Lucia's shifting perspective and relationship with her mother.

We really bonded over our experiences of having an abortion. So that's something that definitely brought us closer together [...] So, I got pregnant on

my 20th birthday and was working in Christmas retail, I postponed it until the January time, but I knew how excited mom was about Christmas and everything. So, I just kept it to myself, I was always going to tell her. So, I told her [...] and that was comforting in that she shared her own experiences, like whilst she was younger at school, and she didn't tell anyone. And so yeah, I think it was cathartic for both of us in that she was able to be more present because like being more open. (Zoe, 27, working class)

Due to a fire alarm that interrupted our Zoom interview for several hours, Zoe's contribution to our conversation was particularly unique. During the delay, she discussed her early menstrual experiences with her mother and was able to share her mother's responses on the day of the interview. Before the interruption, we discussed her early menstrual experiences at home, particularly her memories of menarche. She vividly recalled,

I remember just wedging this gigantic nappy thing in my knickers and feeling so much shame and stigma, and the patronising look I got. I asked one thing of you [her mother]—not to tell anybody. And that was the first thing she did.

Zoe described the menstrual environment in her home, which was heavily influenced by her father and brother, as I unpacked earlier. When we resumed our interview later that day, Zoe mentioned she had asked her mother about her first period. Her mother's response was, 'I probably said, "You're fucked now"'. Whether or not this was an accurate reflection, Zoe interpreted this response as solidifying her experience of their relationship during that time. Zoe's feelings of shame and vulnerability are deeply tied to her mother's reaction nearly a decade after her menarche, which she describes as

lessening over time but nonetheless enduring. Like Lucia, Zoe saw the shared story of abortion as marking a shift in their relationship—a transformation of her mother from an authority figure into a woman with shared experiences.

As I examined how participants constructed their mothers within their menstrual journeys, it became clear that generational differences and shared experiences played a key role in deconstructing the idealised or blame-centred image of the mother. These moments of expressed discomfort and shared vulnerability revealed the woman behind the maternal role, highlighting her complexities and challenges. Jo (25, prefer not to say) reflected on her mother's discomfort with sexual expression, particularly masturbation: 'She found a vibrator or something in my room, and anything to do with that makes her uncomfortable. Maybe it was a little triggering for her, it's a lot, there's a lot of issues for my mum around that'. This moment of reflection and compassion depicts Jo as understanding her mother not just as a parent but as a woman navigating similar societal pressures related to gender, age, sexualisation, and class. Such stories highlighted how participants, through a feminist lens, began to see their mothers as individuals shaped by their own lived experiences and constraints. By recognising these shared struggles, the identity of the mother became more relatable and comprehensible.

Products and Contraception, It's Business as Usual.

While hormonal contraceptives or contraceptives more broadly may not immediately appear to align with the primary focus of this research, or this chapter specifically, I argue that the social constructions surrounding contraceptives function similarly to period products, in that they regulate (re)productive binary gender norms, compulsory

heterosexuality, and class-based distinctions. Contraceptives encompass a range of methods, including barrier methods like condoms and chemical methods like spermicides. However, this discussion will centre on hormonal contraceptives, which alter the physiological conditions within the ovaries and womb, and immune response contraceptives, such as the copper IUD, which induce an immune response to create an infertile state (NHS, 2021). Throughout participant accounts, contraceptives evoked both personal and structural discussions, contributing to the (re)construction and reinforcement of class, gender, and sexuality norms.

As I will explore in the following chapter, menstrual products became available, in specific locations, for free in 2020. Under the NHS, contraceptives are also available and accessible for free in Scotland. I found that this accessibility deepens the connection between participants and contraceptives, as reflected in their accounts. Of the 27 participants, 23 have used or continue to use contraceptives for a prolonged period, embedding these products firmly within their menstrual narratives and life courses. I will argue that social meaning weighs on contraceptives and period products, (re)constructing class and gender inequalities.

I was on the pill for that time [of difficult mental health] and then I tried an implant and then I was on the progesterone only pill. It was just regulated, so I wasn't really thinking about it, I didn't look into it. (Siobhan, 32, middle class)

Siobhan's experience is common among participants, who often change contraceptives, moving from one method to another to regulate bleeding without considering the broader impacts, such as the impact of the contraceptive pill on physical and mental health, which is a well-researched area (Ott et al., 2008; Kissling,

2013; Mu & Kulkarni, 2022). Nine participants mentioned the negative effects of hormonal contraceptives on their mental and physical health over prolonged periods, highlighting not only hormonal changes but also other adverse side effects. Participants widely acknowledged and experienced these negative side effects, forming a shared understanding of the harmful impact of hormonal contraceptives. However, the experience of discontinuing the pill is often individualised, with participants framing their decision to change contraceptive methods as a responsible choice.

Megan (31, working class) deeply intertwines her account of contraceptives with her connection to the idea of pregnancy, both as a classed experience and a future desire. Contraception, menstruation, and childbirth are tightly interwoven for Megan. I asked how she would explain menstruation to a young girl, and at this probe Megan became emotional at the prospect of a daughter:

I think there a lot to be said about this 'age of going on contraception' thing. Because in my head I think it was kind of taken as, if you go on this it'll 'sort out your periods' and again this might reflect a real sinister thing in my head. I think there's two parts, one of them is Catholic schools or depending on your circumstances-my environment where the rather than talking and educating about pregnancy, periods and all the things sex education, well we'll just put them on this thing as a rite of passage.

If we can put certain people on contraception, this will prevent pregnancy rather than educate holistically everything that goes along with sex.

Megan's reflection and questioning reveal her class consciousness and awareness, as she shifts from discussing her understanding of class to her personal, class-based experiences. She moves from the more abstract idea of 'your circumstances' to the specificity of 'my experience'. Megan's account reflects the experiences of various participants who described their use of contraception to 'sort out your period'. This narrative is common among both working- and middle-class participants, but they rarely provide clear explanations as to why they need to 'sort out' their periods. Adrienne (31, middle class) recalls feeling that she needed to 'do everything in my power to hide it and take medication to get it under control'. This highlights the need for hyper-management and concealment expressed by participants, which is further reinforced by their use of period products. Hormonal contraceptives may even serve as a substitute for these products, as several participants mentioned having little to no menstrual bleeding while on contraceptives, suggesting that their bleeding is being 'managed'.

The notion that menstruation among teenage girls and young women needs 'sorting out' underscores class-based constructions of this experience. Megan (31, working class) believed that healthcare professionals 'put' her on contraceptives to evade educating her about sex, thus ultimately shifting the responsibility away from her. Participants beyond their teenage years feel and acknowledge this sense of responsibility. This is also reflected in the working-class based account of Lucia (24, working class), who shared that she felt the medical institution assumed responsibility for her. During the COVID-19 restrictions Lucia stopped taking the pill because she was at home and not seeing her partner. She describes the interaction with her doctor when she informed him of her decision to discontinue the contraceptive pill:

They were fine, I did maybe slightly get told off, not told off but, it kind of lapsed more than anything else and it was during the time when you couldn't get access to the GP at all, but then once I explained 'no, I'm not at any risk' quote-unquote, they were fine about it [...] maybe it's an element of, not that it's their responsibility but they don't want me saying 'well I couldn't get the pill at the doctor, so this happened' so not covering their back but making sure that's not something that happens so you have to say, 'no don't worry that's not going to happen'. (Lucia, 24, working class)

The signifiers and coded language in Megan's and Lucia's excerpts provide critical insight into the (re)construction and positioning of classed subjects. Lucia's perception of being 'at risk' without contraceptive protection from her doctor highlights not only the structurally supported choice to use contraception but also the class-based inscriptions of institutional responsibility. For Lucia, a working-class woman, the pill represents protection against the 'risk' of motherhood. This is not a risk to her personally, but 'risk' circulates through the imagining of the young working-class mother and the associated moral panic (Tyler, 2008; Pearce, 2019). This aligns with my earlier argument about how girls' bodies are sources of panic and sexualisation at menarche, a pattern that persists at different life stages.

The academic literature reflects the class expectation that working-class women should avoid becoming mothers in order to maintain responsibility and respectability (Skeggs, 1997; Lawler, 2000). This shift from mothers overseeing their daughters' bodies to the bearing of personal responsibility for not becoming mothers underscores the onset of social responsibility because of class, in the transition from girlhood to young womanhood. Megan's awareness as a working-class woman and the daughter

of a working-class mother, and her perception of contraception as a 'rite of passage', noting there was something 'quite sinister' about it, reflects this pattern, one which was not reflected in middle-class participants' accounts, such as Rory's:

I was like, 'I'll go on the pill', he said 'I'll buy condoms as well' like it'll be really nice. (Rory, 25, middle class)

In contrast, for Rory (25, middle class), the pill serves as a means of sexual engagement and freedom during her teenage years. She describes her decision to take the pill as a choice she made to facilitate having sex with her boyfriend. This narrative contrasts sharply with the experience of being 'put on' the pill because of concerns that young women might have sex. Rory's statement, 'I'll go on the pill' and 'it'll be really nice', reflects her sense of agency in making this decision. Similarly, Hannah (32, middle class) began using the pill to regulate her periods, which allowed her greater sexual freedom while travelling. Hannah, who used the pill for many years and now has an IUD, describes the daily routine of taking the pill as 'boredom', illustrating the mundane aspect of contraception for her. Both Rory's and Hannah's accounts show a level of autonomy in their contraceptive choices, contrasting with the feelings of risk and responsibility experienced by Megan and Lucia.

While the sense of agency and choice regarding contraception differs between these middle- and working-class participants, this does not equate to an inherently empowered sexual engagement, as suggested by middle-class positions. Rory's proactive decision to take the pill, aimed at avoiding young motherhood and fostering sexual agency (Kissling, 2009), seems empowered in isolation. However, Rory also reflects on her risky sexual behaviour:

I had a lot of risky sexual engagement in my adolescence, I didn't use condoms nearly enough [...] a lot of that came from like, am, like the whole thing about wanting to make the other person, wanting to make them more comfortable so not wanting to ask and them not being forthcoming and bla bla bla and never having the voice or the words to stand up for myself so that's why I had so much risky sexual behaviour.

Through Rory's account of her experiences following the decision to take the contraceptive pill, the pressure to be an ideal sexual partner is clear. Rory felt compelled to prioritise her partner's pleasure and experience, which led her to engage in risky sexual activity. This behaviour brought with it the potential for unintended pregnancies or exposure to sexually transmitted infections. The dynamics of her experiences highlight that lived experiences are shaped by more than just class-based resources. Rory's middle-class status did not relieve her from the pressures she faced as a teenager and young woman in an environment where her body was objectified and controlled from a young age. The imbalance of power and gender inequality shaped her sexual experiences, emphasising the prioritisation of male sexual pleasure and the normalisation of heterosexual activity (Hirst, 2013; Lewis, Marston, & Wellings, 2013). Despite having access to contraceptive resources, Rory's experiences underscore how class-based advantages do not necessarily mitigate the broader societal pressures that influence sexual behaviour. Thus, her narrative illustrates that, while middle-class resources may offer certain freedoms, they do not fully shield individuals from the complex interplay of societal expectations and gendered power dynamics.

Using Skeggs' (2004) framework, I argue that certain classed identities not only impact upon choices but also lead to distinct experiences, in this case with respect to contraception. Participants from middle-class backgrounds often perceive the decision to use contraception as an autonomous, individual choice, a perspective which emphasises personal agency in managing reproductive health. However, a closer analysis reveals that broader structural factors also influence decision making (Chen, 2013), as indicated by common patterns and trends related to life stages and contraceptive use. While contraceptives are prevalent, and integral to managing the menstrual cycle, social inequalities are deeply intertwined with their use. This suggests that underlying social structures, which variously impact different classed identities, shape access to and experiences with contraception.

Through my exploration of participant accounts of contraceptives, I have uncovered reflections of class positionality related to period products, which I will examine further in the following chapter. Participants' accounts of contraceptives mirror this disparity. For middle-class participants, taking contraception is framed as empowering, and is associated with the freedom and pleasure of sexual activity. In contrast, working-class participants often receive prescriptions for the pill primarily to avoid unwanted pregnancies and prevent young motherhood. This comparison shows that the messaging creates a distinction between middle-class women, who are directly addressed as individuals with decision-making power, and working-class women, who are talked about in terms of preventing negative outcomes. This messaging is received from medical professionals, as displayed through policy, as I will unpack in the following chapter. This analysis emphasises the role of underlying social inequalities in shaping and reflecting contraceptive accounts.

(Re)Inscribing Heterosexuality through Contraception

Continuing with the discussion of girlhood, I observed that the stories provided by participants contained encoded messages about gender and heterosexuality. As discussed earlier in this chapter, pregnancy emerges as a central concern, inherently assuming heterosexual sex and its association with menarche. Menarche signifies 'both emerging sexual availability and reproductive potential' (Lee, 1994: 344), thus centring on heteronormative desires and sexualisation.

Niamh (30, middle class), an author with a passion for lesbian feminist politics, explores these literary themes through historical fiction and her research on prominent Scottish lesbians. She notes the significance of *Carmilla*⁵ (Le Fanu, 1872) before Stoker's *Dracula*⁶ (1897), commenting,

I don't think it was a vampire. But she was a young woman who kind of seduced other young women [...] The idea of blood and biting [...] all sorts of strands there that I think are quite sexualised, but also quite women-centric.

Niamh points out that in *Carmilla*, women's sexual attraction to one another's blood hints at menstrual sex. For Niamh, the lack of 'societal comfort' with menstrual sex

⁵ *Carmilla*, written by Le Fanu in 1872, is a pioneering work in the Gothic vampire genre, predating Bram Stoker's more famous *Dracula* by over two decades. This novella explores themes of female sexuality, repression, and the supernatural through the story of a young woman, Laura, and her mysterious friendship with the enigmatic Carmilla, who is later revealed to be a vampire. *Carmilla* is notable for its early portrayal of a lesbian vampire, challenging Victorian norms and providing a foundation for later Gothic literature.

⁶ *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker, expanded the vampire mythos, introducing Count Dracula as a figure of malevolent power and charisma. Stoker's work became the definitive vampire novel, influencing countless adaptations and cementing the vampire's place in popular culture.

represents a political issue deeply rooted in heteronormativity, which has influenced her perception of menstrual and sexual information throughout her life. Despite several participants identifying as bisexual and having sexual relationships with men, Niamh, as the only lesbian participant, expressed frustration with the frequent questions from medical professionals about taking hormonal contraceptives. Her account highlights how the prevailing expectation of heterosexuality is embedded in medical discourse surrounding contraception and reveals annoyance with the frequent inquiries about taking hormonal contraceptives.

I've said that I'm a lesbian, and their next question is, 'what pill are you on?' not, 'are you on a pill?' but 'what pill?' [. . .] they're so in the headspace that this is the path, this is the default path for women. I'm like, 'what would this pill be doing?' (Niamh, 30, middle class)

Niamh's response to this situation - 'what would this pill be doing?' - highlights that her sexual activity does not pose a risk of pregnancy, meaning there is no need for 'protection.' This is reminiscent of Jackson's (2006) expansion of Rich's (1980) theory of 'compulsory heterosexuality,' which posits that heterosexuality is considered the norm, thus positioning lesbian identity as outside this norm. Jackson argues that heteronormativity creates constraints for those who conform and barriers for those who do not, reinforcing the hegemonic regulation of gender and sexuality. She writes, 'the connections [between] heterosexuality and gender are much tighter and much more reciprocal than the links between gender and sexuality or sexuality and heterosexuality' (Jackson, 2006: 117). Emphasising the pervasive and reciprocal relationship between heterosexuality and gender and underscoring how societal norms tightly intertwine these constructs, Jackson (2017) argues that heterosexuality

is not merely one form of sexual orientation among others. It is rather a dominant framework that shapes and regulates both gender and sexual identities.

This hegemony reinforces compulsory heterosexuality, a concept originally articulated by Rich (1980), who asserted that heterosexuality is institutionalised as the default or expected orientation, marginalising other sexual identities, and particularly lesbianism. Jackson's argument that the links between heterosexuality and gender are 'much tighter' suggests that societal structures enforce heterosexuality as integral to normative gender roles. This enforcement creates significant constraints, as girls and women are expected to conform to heterosexual norms, which include the use of contraception.

Niamh's experiences illustrate how her gender leads to an assumed connection to heterosexuality. As a result, she feels that her identity as a lesbian woman is devalued because society positions heterosexuality as the 'normal way of life' (Jackson, 2006: 107). This assumption underscores the societal expectation that women, by default, are heterosexual, thereby marginalising non-heteronormative identities, like Niamh's.

Adrienne (30, middle class) recalls being on the pill by the time she was 14, noting that it was commonplace for girls she knew in their early teens to use contraception: 'I know when I was a teenager it was pretty much everyone. I'm going to be bold and say 80% of girls my age were on contraception'. Her recollection reinforces the connection between gender and (hetero)sexuality, suggesting that her peers at a young age extensively utilised hormonal contraception. According to McKinnon (1996), society often assumes that reproduction is an inevitable consequence of the menstruating body, controlling the process within the norms of gender and sexuality.

Through the stories of Niamh and Adrienne, the dominant force of heterosexuality becomes clear in the construction of identities (see Grigg-Spall, 2013; Kissling, 2013). Through their accounts Niamh and Adrienne reveal the pervasive influence of heterosexuality in constructing identities. Adrienne emphasises that gender, sexuality, and age play a dominant role in determining contraception use, while Niamh's experience as a woman is primarily viewed through the perspective of her presumed ability to conceive, rather than her actual sexuality. Within the framework of compulsory heterosexuality, this illustrates how identities such as gender are constructed and deconstructed within this normative system.

Exploring the influence of relationship status on contraceptive use further deepens my argument on how compulsory heteronormativity is maintained. Heterosexuality, as an institution, is based on social norms rather than on individual sexuality or gender identification (Jackson, 2006). Throughout participant accounts, the norms surrounding sexual activity within a relationship are evident, with terms like 'long-term' or 'serious' frequently used to describe relationships. Eimear (25, upper middle-class) reflects this when she states, 'I started a serious relationship and I wasn't on the pill at the time'. This reinforces gender stereotypes, placing girls and women on hormonal contraceptives based on their gender and life stage rather than on personal desire or sexual activity. Eimear's experience illustrates how relationship status can influence contraceptive choices, with the seriousness of a relationship legitimising or even necessitating certain contraceptive practices. This connection between contraception and relationship status produces normative conditions coded with compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980; Jackson, 2006), as women's sexual health decisions are

framed within the expectations of heterosexual norms rather than individual needs or preferences.

Conclusion

The gendered roles and division of enforcement of external and internal restrictions by mothers and fathers within the home are clear and, given our understanding of menstrual norms, perhaps not surprising. The patterned (re)production of menstrual norms, ideologies, and fears is clear in the experiences of participants. However, it is important to note that the passing down of these menstrual norms is not always an intentional or purposeful process, although it can sometimes be explicit. As O'Flynn (2006) found in her research, mothers may not fully understand why they teach their daughters to conceal menstruation, thereby unintentionally reinforcing societal norms. Fathers, on the other hand, might be unaware of the reasons behind the (re)production of menstruation as something deemed disgusting or inappropriate in certain spaces. The lack of malice in these actions does not diminish the impact of parental reactions to menstruation and period products, as evidenced through participant accounts. The way parents, and in particular mothers, approach menstruation has significant ramifications for how their children perceive and manage their own menstrual experiences.

Skeggs (1997) shows how women, particularly as mothers, are seen as responsible for the social ordering of the family, which extends to the social regulation of the menstruating body (Douglas, 1966). The reproduction of menstrual norms within the family is a complex process shaped by gender roles, social expectations, and class dynamics. While parents may not consciously intend to pass down these norms, their

actions and attitudes significantly influence how the next generation understands and manages menstruation. Participants' reflections highlight broader social pressures, particularly on working-class mothers, as they navigate their roles within both the family and society.

Although womanhood is a complex and multifaceted identity that is not easily defined, menstruation has often been constructed as inherently linked to this identity. Through participants' accounts, I observed how the categorisation and construction of gender were experienced and understood through menstruation, serving as a critical point. This aligned with Lee's (1994) assertion that the onset of menstruation 'signifies both emerging sexual availability and reproductive potential' (1994: 344). As a result, I noted girls were compelled to navigate their newly embodied identities within existing structures of inequality, feeling vulnerable within a cultural context fraught with over-sexualisation (McRobbie, 2009; Jackson & Vares, 2015).

By unpacking participants' experiences as girls in their homes, I developed a deeper understanding of the norms that circulated around and within the lives of girls. This exploration revealed that these forces worked intricately to construct the embodied experience of being a menstruating girl. I observed that the nuanced responsibilities and choices imposed on girls during this critical life stage were not merely personal but deeply embedded within broader societal expectations.

The onset of menstruation served as a critical juncture where girls were socialised into gender roles, often reinforcing traditional notions of femininity and heterosexuality. The panic surrounding sexualisation amplified girls' sense of vulnerability, as they contended with the weight of societal expectations that demanded they conform to

ideals of womanhood, purity, and sexual propriety. The pressures associated with menstruation and the accompanying responsibilities were shaped by intersecting factors such as class, age, and sexual orientation, such that experiences of menstruation become a site for the reproduction and reinforcement of broader social inequalities.

In conclusion, participants' experience indicated that menstruation was not just a physical change or moment, but a deeply social one, marking a significant moment in the construction of gendered identities. This understanding challenges the notion of menstruation as a purely physiological process, instead positioning it as a key element in the socialisation of girls. My findings explore how this socialisation occurs, particularly through the lens of period products and contraceptives. The use, accessibility and messaging, such as 'at risk', around period products and contraceptives play a pivotal role in shaping girls' experiences of the embodied experience of menstruation, reinforcing societal norms. The pressures and responsibilities associated with menstruation are influenced by intersecting factors of gender, class, age and sexuality, and these influences are evident in the ways period products and contraceptives are framed and interacted with.

Through this exploration, I advocate for a critical examination of how menstruation is discussed and supported within the home and family, paying particular attention to the role of period products and contraceptives. This nuanced approach seeks to move beyond seeing menstruation as solely a biological event, instead recognising its social dimensions and their impact. By doing so, we can work towards a more equitable understanding and support system for girls during this pivotal time in their lives.

Chapter 5: Period Politics; Contrasting Lived Experiences with Policy Constructs

The aim of this chapter is to examine the experiences of participants in Scotland during the implementation of new menstrual policy and provision. I will analyse participants' interpretations of these policies and examine the impact, if any, on their lives. Recently, the concept of 'period poverty' has received heightened recognition in political and public domains, as highlighted by Tomlinson (2021). In Scotland and across the UK, it has emerged as a key political concern, primarily framed as a problem to be addressed through the provision of free period products (Lennon, 2017; SPICe, 2020). The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act of 2020 sets out to tackle three main issues: period poverty, period stigma, and the impact of periods on education (SPICe, 2020).

Monica Lennon (MSP) introduced and championed the bill, framing it as a critical step towards combating gender inequality (Lennon, 2017). Positioned as a progressive landmark achievement, it had been argued that providing free menstrual products inherently empowers women and advances feminist goals (Scottish Parliament, 2020). However, examining participants' lived experiences with the bill shows that this celebratory narrative faces challenges. Despite its intentions, the actual impact of free menstrual products often falls short of the bill's feminist promises. Participants frequently perceive these products as less valuable compared to other menstrual options, highlighting a gap between the bill's objectives and its real-world effects. This critique challenges the claim that "Scotland's world-first Period Products Act is

feminism in action" (Waddell, 2022), raising questions about the extent to which the policy truly addresses deeper structural inequalities.

I draw on Skeggs' (1997, 2004) work on class, which builds on Bourdieu's (1987) theory of capital, to understand the pivotal role period products play in the (re)construction of class inequalities. The focus of this chapter extends beyond the initial objectives of the policy, delving into a critical examination of participant responses and interpretations. My goal is to explore how people live, experience, and navigate menstrual policy.

When assessing the political menstrual climate in Scotland, I will adopt a critical perspective and explore the structural forces that shape individual experiences. Despite the differences between participants' current experiences and their memories of girlhood, it becomes clear that similar dynamics, in the form of social norms and pressures, are in operation. The presence of free period products serves as a mechanism for assigning social significance to participants across the lifespan. Products, whether free or paid, disposable or reusable, can enable some individuals to mobilise the self, while shaping or restricting others' identities and relationships with these products (Skeggs, 1997).

In this chapter, I explore how participants establish, interpret, and utilise the symbolic and cultural significance of menstrual products within the context of recent legislative changes. Coinciding with the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020), two intersecting figures emerge: one developed through policy representing the 'woman in need,' and another constructed by participants in their accounts of engaging, or not, with free products—each reflecting different dimensions of need. The

policy-driven figure, often pathologised, is used to frame both feminist achievements and political success. In contrast, participants articulated a figure who requires more than what these provisions offer, highlighting intersecting yet distinct representations of the imagined recipient of free products, working-class women. These constructions serve as cyphers for understanding the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2021) and its provisions. Through these figures, participants articulate classed positions, both reinforcing and disrupting dominant tastes and practices through processes of (dis)identification (Lindell & Kass, 2023).

Taylor's (2010, 2018) research on the intersections of class and gender offers a valuable understanding of how social inequalities are both reproduced and resisted. Taylor's work provides a critical feminist perspective on how policies intended to address inequality can often reinforce existing class and gender divides. This theoretical framework is essential for analysing both participant accounts and the broader context of menstrual policy. As established in both the literature review and theoretical chapter, the process of 'othering' often emerges at points of inequality, creating conceptual and symbolic distinctions (Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Othering facilitates the formation of an in-group, defined by its disidentification from the real or imagined 'Other.' Drawing on Skeggs' (1997) expansion of Goffman's (1966) work, I argue that disidentification and othering function as mechanisms through which middle-class participants' engagement with policy ultimately reinforces inequality. Although Taylor does not explicitly use the term 'Other,' her analysis of inequality expands this understanding. These divisions—between 'us' and 'them,' creating difference and distance between the deserving and the undeserving—are

critical for grasping how policy perpetuates social inequality (Bourdieu, 1986, 1989; Lister, 2004).

Participants often describe inequality as the result of personal choice, which reflects individualisation alongside the context and environment they navigate (Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2001). The focus on personal responsibility coincides with the misconception that there is choice involved, implying that individuals hold full responsibility for the outcome and repercussions of personal decisions. Feminist scholars contend that these so-called 'choices' are more freely available to individuals who have the required resources, emphasising the systemic disparities that restrict personal autonomy (McRobbie, 2009). Collins (1989) further highlights that marginalised groups are disproportionately affected by these conditions, illustrating how systemic power dynamics impact upon choices rather than being solely based on individual decisions.

Middle-class individuals are likely to have the resources, and power, to make 'proper' choices, whilst also possessing the knowledge and legitimacy to make the 'correct' choices (Adkins, 2018). In the second section of this chapter, these 'choices' enhance individuals' resources, perpetuating class distinctions and inequality (Addison, 2007; Lindell and Kass, 2023). Participant accounts reveal patterns of resource access and accumulation, particularly with respect to the use of those period products considered and socially constructed as 'higher quality'. This shows how both individual and policy-driven constructions of available 'choices' perpetuate class inequalities, reinforcing the social structures that marginalise working-class identities while legitimising the 'choices' and 'tastes' of the middle class. Sonia highlights how these dynamics play out in practice, particularly in relation to free provision. Demonstrating how classed

assumptions and moral reasoning inform her decision-making around whether and how to access publicly provided menstrual products:

I wasn't sure whether the staff were allowed to use them (free products). I was like, well, the moon cups aren't disappearing fast. So I did take, I took one. [...] I thought, oh, it's free and I'll steal one [...] there's less women over 30 that have had children, I wasn't stealing it from an impoverished student. (Sonia, 42, middle class)

Sonia's account provides an illustrative example of policy, patriarchy and capitalism. Reflecting on the decision-making process of whether to take a product from the provision available, she contemplates her choices. Her reasoning reveals her nuanced beliefs about the distribution of free menstrual cups at the university where she works. She initially views taking a menstrual cup from the available stock as akin to theft but rationalises her actions by contrasting herself with an imagined demographic—specifically, women over 30 who have given birth, whom she perceives as less represented in this shared space. In doing so, she constructs the Other as someone she perceives to be more in need than herself, the imagined impoverished student. Sonia also assigns age and identity to this imagined Other, suggesting that their body is unsuitable for a menstrual cup, as it is neither over 30 nor has experienced vaginal childbirth.

This depiction also uncovers Sonia's broader assumptions about the provision of free period products. First, she justifies her actions by constructing a figure of an impoverished student, who she perceives as more in need, creating a moral rationale for her decision. Second, her positioning of menstrual cups reflects a belief that they

are less suitable for younger women's bodies, reinforcing a limited view of the products' usability across different demographics, despite the availability of multiple sizes. Through the use of period products, there are underlying assumptions about the sexualisation and appropriateness of girls' bodies.

Most importantly, Sonia perceives that free products are intended for 'impoverished students', introducing a class-based distinction. She associates the free products at her workplace, a large university, with such students, thereby, revealing a limited and perhaps reductive understanding of class realities. This viewpoint reveals a limited understanding of class realities by simplifying the complexity of class. That students are impoverished, while staff and colleagues are not, is encompassed in her idea of who may need free products due to financial constraints. This highlights the dissonance felt through the construction of the Other and practices of (dis)identification through emphasising the tension Sonia experiences while navigating herself in relation to those more deserving. I argue that 'othering' practices are present and mobilised in participants' accounts. The construction of the Other, even subtly, has a significant impact on how participants perceive and interact with period products, as well as the broader class dynamics that these products expose.

Negotiating Dignity and Disgust: Unravelling Class and Gender in the Context of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act

The term period poverty operates as a buzzword and rhetorical device, shifting responsibility for systemic inequalities onto individuals while producing the

pathologisation of a working-class woman, figured as Other. This political othering, facilitated by the language of policy, creates distinctions and hierarchies that obscure deeper structural issues (Coffey, 2023). By mobilising period poverty as a rhetorical construct, policy discourse separates the individual—the ‘in need’ Other, experiencing the so-called indignity of menstruating without access to products—from the social structures that perpetuate the conditions under which individuals cannot afford these materials. During parliamentary debates over the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act, Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) recognised the importance of addressing the separation of individual experience from structural analysis. During the parliamentary debates, they explicitly discussed the framing of period poverty as part of a wider trend to label and compartmentalise various forms of poverty.

These days it is fashionable to label the consequences of poverty. We have food poverty, fuel poverty, funeral poverty, and at the heart of today's debate, period poverty. (Constance, 2020)

The phrase 'period poverty' is a useful device: we should not ignore the fact that we are talking about poverty. (Dickson, 2020)

As the above quotations illustrate, the act of labelling forms of poverty—whether food poverty, fuel poverty, or period poverty—creates categories that set the terminology and patterns for considering issues. As such, public attention is focused on the symptoms of structural inequality rather than on its root causes (Crossley, Garthwaite & Patrick, 2019). In the case of period poverty, this term shifts responsibility for addressing structural inequalities, framing them instead as individual experiences, and thus creating a category of Other—the working-class menstruating woman. For

example, Megan (31, working class) offers a revealing account that demonstrates this. She described her experience of poverty at various points in her life, noting times when she lacked access to period products directly as a result of finances. Reflecting on her knowledge of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act and activism in Scotland, Megan stated:

I've learned in the past couple of years about period poverty and stuff like that, the words for period poverty, like having experienced when I was younger as well like, she [aunt who Megan lived with] did live in poverty and had a few kids, not having enough money to buy tampons for us basically. Now, as an adult, I don't feel it as much, but like I mean, don't get me wrong, every time I go into uni the period products are free, I fill my bag with tampons, it's a scarcity thing (Megan, 31, working class)

Megan's phrasing is critical here, as it demonstrates how policy and public discourse have redefined the experience of poverty, as period poverty. Her identification with this category shows how policy frameworks, shaped by processes of individualisation, enable people to retroactively interpret their lived experiences as fitting into the mould of period poverty. The logic of individualisation categorises and isolates specific experiences of scarcity, detaching them from the broader context of poverty and making them manageable as discrete, individualised policy issues (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). By identifying with the rudimentary construction of period poverty, Megan's reflection demonstrates how she has revalued and reinterpreted her past experiences through the lens of a concept that policy has framed as distinct and identifiable. However, as an adult working-class woman who still navigates concerns around potential scarcity, Megan expresses a sense of disassociation from the

experience of period poverty. This disassociation highlights the limitations and oversimplifications inherent in the constructed narrative of period poverty. Throughout our interview, Megan positions herself as deeply engaged with and knowledgeable about social inequalities, suggesting that her nuanced understanding of the complexities of working-class lived experiences may underpin her disassociation from the simplified notion of period poverty.

Using indignity as a framework for understanding period poverty further exemplifies this rhetorical shift. Monica Lennon (MSP), a central figure in the campaign for the bill, frequently uses the term to evoke feelings of shame due to lack of access to menstrual products. However, caution is necessary when using the term indignity, as it risks reinforcing the notion that there is an inherently undignified way to menstruate. This framing can perpetuate harmful stigmas around menstruation, further implying that those who experience period poverty are somehow less dignified. Young (2005) has critiqued the ways in which societal norms impose restrictive standards of dignity, particularly around bodily functions, reinforcing gendered and class-based inequalities.

Moreover, relying on the state to confer dignity through access to menstrual products can be problematic, as it frames dignity as something granted externally. This approach can depoliticise the issue by focusing on individual solutions rather than addressing the broader structural inequalities that perpetuate period poverty. Therefore, it is crucial to interrogate the implications of state-sponsored dignity and challenge the notion that menstruation, in any form, lacks dignity. Monica Lennon, a key advocate for the Period Products Act, reinforced this framing in her public statements: 'I've been speaking to thousands of people across Scotland who have

experienced the indignity of period poverty themselves and told me what that was like.’ (Monica Lennon, in *The Press and Journal*, 2020), and ‘Women, girls, and people who menstruate should never face the indignity of period poverty.’ (Monica Lennon, Twitter, 2020) By emphasizing the word dignity, Lennon portrayed Scotland as a global leader in menstrual justice, but this framing also stigmatises a group—women and girls who were denied their dignity because they lacked access to period products. This paternalistic orientation reinforces the power structures that maintain control over how products are distributed and how need is defined. Using dignity implies that menstruation without products is inherently shameful, further entrenching the stigma that the policy seeks to resolve.

Recent feminist scholarship has critiqued how welfare state policies often exert control over women's bodies, framing their needs in terms of paternalistic dignity rather than rights. Green (2020) argues that welfare provisions can infantilise and dehumanise women, positioning them as dependent on the state rather than recognising their inherent autonomy. This dynamic reinforces gendered and class-based inequalities by perpetuating women's reliance on state-determined standards of dignity and need. In the context of menstrual policy, messaging that uses (in)dignity, shapes experiences based on external, gendered ideas of what is ‘acceptable’ or ‘dignified’. Walby (1990) has long critiqued this reliance on state provisions, highlighting how such policies maintain patriarchal power structures and limit women's rights, further entrenching inequality.

The imagined recipient of period products—constructed as an undignified Other—becomes central to the narrative of period poverty. According to Lennon (2017, 2020), this portrayal often depicts the Other as a woman who lacks control over her

menstruating body and cannot afford the products necessary for dignified menstrual management. This construction not only pathologises the recipients of period products but also reinforces broader structural inequalities. Here, Skeggs' (1993) concept of devaluing and pathologising marginalised groups offers a useful lens. She describes how political tools rework existing social hierarchies, using descriptors to construct a 'culture of poverty,' and thereby making certain groups responsible for their own deprivation. In this context, period poverty becomes framed as an issue not of systemic inequality or injustice but as a failure of the individuals experiencing it. This narrative shifts responsibility onto the recipients, subtly suggesting that their lack of access to period products reflects personal deficiency or poor life choices, rather than being the result of wider economic or social forces.

Simultaneously, this framing elevates the state or charitable organisations to the role of saviours, positioning the provision of period products as a benevolent act of restoring dignity to those deemed undeserving or incapable of managing their bodies. This dynamic aligns with Skeggs' (2004) and Tyler's (2013) work on the intersection of class, morality, and welfare. Skeggs argues that welfare provisions often construct certain groups as 'deserving' or 'undeserving', based on moral judgements about their ability to manage their own lives, and thus reinforcing a hierarchy of dignity. Similarly, Tyler's work critiques how policies and welfare structures can produce 'good' and 'bad' subjects by assigning moral worth, which positions the state as the moral authority that bestows dignity on those it deems worthy. This framing not only reinforces existing power structures but also perpetuates the notion that those in need require external intervention to restore their dignity.

Megan's account complicates this reductive narrative. By highlighting the lived experiences of those affected by period poverty, she reveals the inadequacies of a model that seeks to 'restore' dignity through products alone. Her story highlights that dignity is not dependent on the provision of products. Rather, ongoing structural inequalities, specifically those related to gender and class, shape the idea of dignity by devaluing and pathologising certain groups, as Skeggs (1997, 2001) has argued. Therefore, they do not tackle the deeper social, economic, and political forces that produce period poverty in the first place. While discussing different menstrual products, Megan reflects on her friend's decision to use toilet paper instead of period products during menstruation: 'She was like "aw hen I don't have tampons", saying to my other friend and they were like "what do you use?" and she was like "toilet roll", but it's not a period poverty thing'. (Megan, 31, working class) This statement reveals the limitations of the period poverty framework and highlights the agency that individuals maintain. The statement describes Megan's friend's choice to use toilet paper as a practical decision, not as a lack of choice or a product of poverty. This nuance is essential—it challenges the construction of women and girls that use toilet paper as helpless or without agency. By framing the use of toilet paper as a choice, rather than an undignified necessity, Megan distances her friend's decision from the pathologised image of period poverty. By resisting menstrual norms, it becomes clear how the bill uses the imagined Other to simplify and pathologise behaviours that are pragmatic responses to various material circumstances (Smith, 2020; SPICe, 2020; Plan International, 2021).

Using toilet paper is attached to the 'indignity of period poverty' throughout policy and media coverage of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (Pycroft, 2022;

Hailes; 2023). The discourse surrounding the usage of toilet paper for managing menstruation offers a deeper understanding of how period poverty discourse constructs an experience as lacking in dignity. This construction is evident in both policy debates and public accounts:

Period poverty can often mean that some girls have to use toilet paper as a period product, which is shocking in itself. (Smith, 2020)

We've heard stories of women forced to use socks, newspaper, toilet roll, or even bread to absorb their period. (HeyGirls, 2022)

The first quote is from the parliamentary debate on the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act, where Smith (2020) highlights the perceived shock of using toilet paper in place of period products. This usage is framed as 'shocking', implying that such practices deviate from what is considered appropriate or dignified. The second excerpt comes from a blog written by HeyGirls, a Scottish social enterprise working closely with the Scottish Government, which supplies products to local authorities, as well as large businesses, colleges, and universities (HeyGirls, 2024). In this post, HeyGirls likens the use of toilet paper to using rags or bread to collect menstrual blood by those unable to afford period products. These examples support my argument that period poverty is used as a buzzword – so successful in its messaging that it is taken up by companies, organisations and charities as a term to provoke a reaction, inferring a shocking and undignified experience.

The comparison of toilet paper with bread or rags, while dramatic, reveals a hyperbolic tendency in the discourse surrounding period poverty, and the mobilisation of it as a buzzword. Equating the use of toilet paper, a material already involved in 'private'

bodily management, with bread, a foodstuff, plays into the creation of a social shock around period poverty. This broad generalisation leads to the moralisation of menstrual practices, where any deviation from mainstream products is stigmatised and framed as emblematic of period poverty. By categorising alternative menstrual management within the framework of indignity, the narrative amplifies societal taboos, reinforcing ideas that link bodily functions to notions of disgust and impurity.

Using toilet paper, as noted by several participants, was not always a result of lack of access to products, but often a matter of convenience or preference. Megan's (re)evaluation and relocation of her experiences within these new politically derived frameworks—where period poverty has become an experience in itself—shows how she (dis)identifies with period poverty as a category. However, she distinguishes her friend's choice to use toilet paper as 'not a period poverty thing', framing it as a decision based on practicalities rather than an imposed lack of choice. This seemingly throwaway remark provides a significant insight into the pathologisation of the imagined Other, as Megan distances her friend's choice from the closely associated narrative of period poverty. She resists the reduction of her friend's decision to the notion that any non-commercial menstrual management practice indicates poverty (Smith, 2020; SPICe, 2020; Plan International, 2021).

Megan's reflections also reveal another characteristic of the 'in-need' figure constructed through policy. Her friend does not align with the working-class woman figure or the experience of period poverty because of her ability to exercise power and agency in choosing her preferred method of managing menstruation. Megan, recognising herself as more akin to the constructed figure of the woman experiencing period poverty, creates a distinction between her friend and the imagined working-

class figure in need. For the imagined working-class woman in need of assistance, using toilet paper is framed as shocking and undignified (SPICe, 2020). Yet Megan recognises her friend's use of toilet paper as a legitimate, considered decision—an act of agency based on resources and personal preferences. She explains: 'I think it's just her way of being like, I'm not wasting the time and energy on you [menstrual bleeding]'. In this statement, Megan resists the categorisation and pathologisation of individuals who are experiencing period poverty, as well as those who choose alternative menstrual management methods like toilet paper. Rather than reducing these practices to sensationalist symbols of poverty, Megan's reflections challenge the assumption that using toilet paper is always tied to economic deprivation, suggesting instead that it can be a rational choice made by individuals exercising autonomy over their menstrual practices.

Similarly, Lucia describes her decision to use toilet paper when menstrual products are unavailable: 'God I just went into the drawer and there's none there, what will I do? Then it's the classic, toilet paper, and let's go for it'. (Lucia, 24, working class) Lucia described her experiences before switching to reusable menstrual products, recounting when she would go to grab a tampon or pad only to find none available, with the frustration with herself for not remembering to buy products removed by reusables. In these situations, she would automatically turn to toilet paper as the next readily accessible resource. By calling this practice 'the classic', Lucia normalised the use of toilet paper, framing it as a routine and commonplace solution when menstrual products were unavailable. Her use of this term emphasises the habitual nature of this behaviour, positioning toilet paper as an obvious alternative. Eleven participants shared similar stories, noting how they frequently relied on toilet paper because of its

accessibility and their unfamiliarity with other menstrual products. This reliance was not marked by shame or indignity, but rather by a sense of comfort and practicality, as toilet paper was always within reach and easy to use for these participants. The only notable concern raised by participants came from Emma (24, middle class), who expressed apprehension about the possibility of the toilet paper shifting or falling out, unlike commercial pads that have adhesive to keep them securely in place.

These accounts underscore a significant ideological and practical misalignment between the lived experiences of participants who use toilet paper when without period products and the imagined in-need recipient promoted by the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act [2020]) and its supporting documentation. In the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020), toilet paper is depicted as a shocking, undignified, and shameful solution when used to address period poverty. However, participants paint a contrasting picture, as they locate toilet paper as a convenient and practical option.

These accounts reveal that the use of toilet paper during menstruation is a pragmatic and logical response driven by accessibility and comfort. This stands in contrast to the narrative perpetuated by the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020), which pathologises such behaviours as degrading and undignified. In failing to recognise the agency behind these choices, The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020) ignores the nuanced realities of menstrual management, reducing complex decisions to simplified, moralistic binaries of dignity versus indignity.

Participants' experiences highlight that the terminology and discourse surrounding period poverty pathologises what are, in fact, commonplace menstrual behaviours. By

framing the use of toilet paper as shocking, policies, such as the Period Product Bill (2020), contribute to the stigmatisation of everyday menstrual management strategies. This is particularly evident in how HeyGirls (2023) and Lennon (2019) frame women who use rags or newspapers, portraying such actions as symbols of deprivation. In reality, participants viewed these strategies through a practical lens, making choices based on immediate needs and available resources, rather than as reflections of shame or indignity. A truly feminist bill or provision should not infer negative implications on individuals' menstrual management choices. A feminist approach to addressing period poverty must focus on alleviating structural inequalities rather than stigmatising the choices of individuals.

Enacting such legislation would acknowledge that the issue is not solely linked to personal choices, but rather to the societal and economic conditions that limit access to resources. It also questions the assumption that commercially produced menstrual products are the only viable choice. If feminism and agency around choice are to align with menstrual product provision, it is important to recognise that both using period products and choosing not to use them are equally valid decisions. The framing of period poverty as a moral issue rather than a structural one limits the scope of feminist intervention, reducing a complex social problem to a matter of individual product access.

Productivity and Paternalism: Critical Analysis of Period Poverty Policy versus Lived Experience

To further explore the contrast between participants' lived experiences and the framework set out by the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020) and its supporting documents, I focus here on the construction of an imagined in-need Other. Central to this discourse is the concept of period poverty, which, beyond the shock factor of individuals lacking access to period products, also invokes the indignity of such deprivation. In this section, I highlight the disparity between the politically and socially constructed subject of the bill's provisions and the lived experiences of participants in Scotland. The following excerpt from the Scottish Parliament (2019a) encapsulates the policy's logic:

The Bill should have a positive impact for those on low incomes. By providing them with the period products they need they will be less likely to take time off sick because of a lack of suitable period products. This will be of particular benefit to those on zero-hour contracts who do not get paid if they do not work. Besides the benefits to those making use of the scheme, a reduction in staff absence rates should also increase productivity and ultimately benefit the wider economy. (Scottish Parliament, 2019: 21)

This quote reveals that, even within the narrow framing of period poverty, the bill's aim is tied to producing a capable, economically productive subject. The bill presents the relief of period poverty as a strategy to enhance productivity and contribute to the overall economy. The language used in the policy casts the provision of free period

products as an opportunity to assist workers, especially those on precarious contracts like zero-hour employment, which disproportionately affect marginalised communities (Lopes & Dewan, 2015; Pearson and Elson, 2015). The policy's purported goal is to address the 'low income' woman's inability to attend work because of a lack of products, framing this as a barrier to productivity. The final sentence underscores the paternalistic nature of the rhetoric, explicitly linking the provision of menstrual products to an increase in workplace productivity. This positions the working-class woman as a subject whose primary value lies in her capacity to contribute to the economy, rather than acknowledging the precarious and harmful nature of zero-hour contracts themselves.

This framing raises several issues. Firstly, it renders class invisible. Instead of addressing the structural inequalities that shape these working conditions, the policy focuses on an individualised solution—providing products—rather than tackling the root causes of poverty and marginalisation. As Skeggs (1997) asserts, the focus on educational opportunities and social mobility often replaces discussions of class in such contexts, thereby sidelining the structural dimensions of inequality.

While I have argued that the construction of the in-need subject within the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020) aligns with class distinctions and resistance, it is important to note that gender inequality was a prominent theme across both working- and middle-class participants' experiences. Whether or not they had limited access to products, participants consistently described menstruation as a factor that negatively impacted their working and educational experiences. For example, Stevie (26, working class) recounted her early experiences of menstruating with limited

resources. She recalled using toilet paper both at school and at home to manage her periods:

I remember when I first got them [periods], it was like toilet paper and the like, just loads of it. I don't think I ever bought them [products] myself, or like, my friend would give me them at school.

Stevie explained that menstrual products were neither purchased for her nor easily accessible at home, making it challenging to manage her periods. Despite this, she continued attending school, relying on improvised solutions like toilet paper, which she used for years before feeling comfortable enough to ask her mother for products. Similarly, Emily (26, working class) shared a distressing account of her severe menstrual cramps during school, which left her unable to move: 'I was curled up in a ball, unable to cope with the excruciating pain. The teacher told me to get up and go to class, like I was being dramatic'. Emily, who suffers from a menstrual disorder, described the teacher's response as demeaning and lacking empathy. Her experience underscores the lack of understanding surrounding menstruation within the educational system, compounding her physical discomfort with social humiliation. These stories from Stevie and Emily illustrate how gender inequality, specifically related to menstruation, affects educational experiences. Despite their continued attendance at school, the absence of adequate support systems and accessible products made their lives significantly more difficult. In Stevie's case, the lack of products led to improvisation, while unsympathetic teachers dismissed Emily's severe pain. Inadequate support and resource scarcity perpetuate a cycle of shame and confusion around menstruation—an issue long linked to gender inequality.

Zoe (27, working class), who works as both a teacher and researcher, further illuminates the intersection of gender inequality and employment precarity. Her employment is based on short-term contracts, which creates constant job insecurity, described by Zoe as precarious work. Zoe recounts worrying, 'do I tell them [employer]? Or do you think it will hinder future job prospects?' Her anxiety about disclosing her menstrual disorder underscores her sense of job insecurity given the precarious nature of her employment. Despite knowing her rights in her current role, Zoe remains fearful that being open about her condition might affect future job opportunities. This exemplifies how gendered experiences of menstruation intersect with employment, creating additional professional risks for individuals with menstrual disorders.

The experiences of individuals like Niamh and Adrienne vividly illustrated gender inequality in the workplace. Niamh (30, middle class) works full-time in a library and wishes for a work environment where discussing menstruation without stigma is possible. She tells me she is concerned that discussing menstruation may be perceived as a sign of weakness by others. Adrienne (30, middle class), who works in a tech startup, also deliberately avoids referring to her period at work. She discreetly makes her way to the bathroom and hides her menstrual products from male colleagues, concerned that being open about her menstruation could undermine her professional standing. As she puts it, 'Yeah, it is a stigma, but I guess when we're out at work or with men in a professional setting, it is a concern, and you don't want it to happen'.

The experiences of Zoe, Niamh, and Adrienne reveal their views on the persistent gender inequality and ableism in the workplace, despite policies that aim to improve

economic participation for women and menstruators by providing free menstrual products. While these policies are intended to address period poverty and promote better engagement with respect to work and educational opportunities, they often fall short of addressing the underlying structural inequalities. The paternalistic narrative suggesting that providing menstrual products alone is a solution fails to tackle the broader systemic issues that contribute to gender inequality. Thus, while policies may address some aspects of period poverty, they frequently overlook the need for comprehensive systemic change to support menstruating individuals in both educational and workplace settings.

This gap is particularly evident when considering the broader impacts of menstrual support on opportunities for education and economic mobility. As Monica Lennon stated in 2017, there is '[p]otential for increased attendance and therefore educational attainment in schools, colleges, and universities, subsequently leading to better prospects and the opportunity to get out of poverty'. This statement summarises the idealised vision of the in-need recipient promoted by the bill—an individual whose access to products will increase productivity, attendance, and social mobility. However, this construction starkly contrasts with participants' lived realities and any meaningful intersectional feminist agenda. The framing of period poverty as a barrier to productivity positions individuals as valuable primarily for their potential economic output. My critique relates to policies' problematisation of missed school or work opportunities for young girls and women with no serious discussion of class inequality.

As Skeggs (1997) argues, educational opportunity and social mobility are often used to deflect from meaningful political discussions about class. The construction of period poverty within the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020) reflects a

focus on individualised solutions, offering relief on a personal level while overlooking the broader systemic issues at play. This approach aligns with individualisation, which emphasises personal responsibility and dislocates social issues from structural inequalities (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). I describe this as 'plug up and go back to work', a dismissive solution, where the policy uses feminist language to promote individualised responses without addressing the root causes of inequality. Rather than focusing on economic participation as the end goal, a feminist approach would prioritise the rights, care, and autonomy of menstruating individuals. Simply providing period products is insufficient to address the deeper, systemic barriers that (re)construct gender and class inequality; meaningful change requires addressing these structural factors (Fraser, 2009; McRobbie, 2009).

Navigating Menstrual Capital: Agency, Choice, and Structural Constraints

I have explored how policy, through the provision of period products, and participants, through their interpretation of policy implementation, shape understandings of an imagined recipient. Participants' experiences of menstruating without products across various spaces in Scotland often contradict and resist the imagined Other. Participants describe the availability of free products, despite the empowering language used in policy and supporting documents, as impacting the perceived value and classed capital associated with these products. This insight reveals how participants construct and reinforce the value of period products, leading to the reinforcement of class distinctions. Participants depict the accumulation of value and capital in two ways: through the ideological value or quality of period products and through the construction

of experiences, including menstrual journeys, menstrual self-care, and the development or loss of a connection to menstruation.

Policy classifies the imagined recipient by presuming her needs and practices, thereby fixing her relationship to the products (Lindell & Kass, 2023). It assumes that she needs products to access opportunities and that the 'undignified' use of toilet paper is a result of a lack of products. Working-class women are seen as the primary recipients of free period products, while participants who have classed resources mobilise the self via their relationship to these products (Skeggs, 1997, 2001; Taylor, 2007). For example, middle-class participants use their class status as a resource to generate capital and establish an authentic self, as contrasted with the imagined working-class woman for whom free products are intended. My dataset does not provide insights into the experiences of women, trans, and nonbinary people who cannot use free products because of factors such as mobility, disability, size, or lack of information, because my sample does not include these individuals.

Walking down the supermarket going 'What do I want to buy?' That's a valid thing [...] I've got no problem with the bland white packaging, these freebies that you get, but you know, that might not be the experience of my daughter, she might want to kind of have a bit more choice of what she uses. (Sonia, 42, middle class)

Sonia is a mother of two teenage girls, providing an interesting perspective. During our interview, she shared her interpretation of her daughters' experiences in response to questions about her own experiences. Sonia describes purchasing period products as a choice, albeit an (un)conscious one. Drawing on Strathern's (1992) concept of

consumption as a technology of choice reinforces my understanding of choice itself as a limited resource. Cronin (2006) elaborates that choice serves as a signifier of resources and is not accessible to everyone, thus creating exclusions from self and individuality. For Sonia, purchasing period products is not about necessity but about the autonomy and agency associated with making a deliberate choice. The act of choosing, and the experience of making that choice, holds value compared to accepting 'freebies'. Sonia's description of period products as 'freebies' reflects her perception of these products as lower in value, akin to sample-sized products or unwanted goods outside a charity shop. Sonia's narrative shows that she perceives choosing period products as an act imbued with entitlement and value, as compared to using free products.

Sonia's account, which values the process of purchasing period products over using 'freebies', underscores the new classed codes and signifiers attached to this act. I argue that the provision of free period products is associated with the figure of the working-class woman, who participants articulate as a figure requiring both more than them and more than provisions offer. This figure is strategically fixed and mobilised against to establish value and authenticity for those who have the resources to access provisions (Skeggs, 2004). By associating free products with working-class women and validating her daughter's preference for products with aesthetic value, Sonia reinforces social inequality. The choice to purchase period products, rather than using free products, constructs classed identities and impacts the capital and exchange value of such products (Adkins, 2002).

The emerging attribution of value based on the aesthetics of period products—previously something to conceal—reflects a struggle to develop new, higher value

aspects and qualities. Those participants seeking a valued, respectable self, in relation to menstruation, appear to achieve this by devaluing free period products. These products are marked by their colour, lack of choice, and lower exchange value due to being free, diminishing the perceived worth of the user. This struggle to establish value aligns with what Skeggs (2004) describes as the ‘paperchase effect’, where goods previously of material, social, or political value become devalued due to new associations with lower status groups, such as working-class women. There is a need to establish value and quality in adjacent goods, with new signifiers and codes—such as colour and excitement—produced to create distinction and confer higher value (Adkins, 2002; Litter, 2013).

I'd feel quite icky if I've used them. If I've had a period because of the plastic itself, it just feels not very nice, it feels quite cheap. [...] it's (menstruation) like such a sacred thing and yet you're putting these cheap products like on you or inside you and there's something about that I don't like it. (Jo, 25, prefer not to say)

Jo's language reveals much about the intersection of class, the perceived value of period products, and the identities tied to them. She describes disposable pads as ‘icky’ and ‘quite cheap’, explicitly indicating her view of their lower worth. In analysing this, I found terms related to quality and value—like those used by Jo—resonate with scholarly discussions on morality and respectability. These terms serve as cyphers for middle-class capital, legitimisation, and accumulation. Both Douglas (1966) and Strathern (1992) use ‘moral’ or ‘morality’ to explain how the (de)valuation of goods and practices reflects the capacity to gain individual resources. When individuals choose more expensive products, deemed higher quality, they signal value, which positions

them as 'worthy' within social systems of knowledge, resources, and power. This process (re)produces class divisions, as access to these products depends on economic privilege. For example, three participants noted that they couldn't find reusable products available for free, highlighting the exclusionary nature of higher-end consumption. This form of valued consumption signals cultural capital which legitimises the self (Strathern, 1992; Skeggs, 1997; Addison, 2007).

Value and quality are established not only through the products themselves but also through the experiences tied to them. Jo's preference for 'different colours' in period products, which she finds 'exciting', demonstrates how aesthetic and affective qualities enhance her experience, prompting her to invest in these products both financially and symbolically. This reflects how commodities are revalued and transformed into consumable forms of personal capital, where personal identity and social status are linked to consumer choices (Franklin et al., 2000; Skeggs, 2004). McRobbie's (2009) critique of neoliberal feminist discourse reveals how economic narratives shift the focus from structural inequalities to individual consumer empowerment. In this framework, consumer choices are framed as expressions of personal freedom and self-determination, obscuring the broader systemic issues that shape access and opportunity. Emphasising individual agency through consumption works to mask the underlying economic and social inequalities at play.

In the context of period products, the devaluation of free items as 'cheap' or mere 'freebies' reflects this neoliberal framing. Such perceptions reinforce the idea that higher value, paid-for products confer greater social capital to the individualised self. The struggle and desire to establish new markers of value due to the provision of free period products underscores the persistent influence of class and gender distinctions.

These dynamics are subtly reinforced by policies like the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020), which do not dismantle the societal structures that perpetuate inequality. Instead, consumerist logic becomes embedded into the realm of menstrual equity, further entrenching the notion that personal value is tied to economic participation and consumption.

Menstrual Empowerment: Establishing Class and Self(care) through Menstrual Products

The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2021) posits that the provision of free menstrual products will enable women and girls to engage more fully in education and other opportunities. However, the idea of 'empowerment', especially when analysed through the lens of lived experience, is complex and difficult to define. These concepts materialise in relation to menstrual products, often complicating and deepening existing inequalities rather than alleviating them.

The bill promises that providing period products, a material resource, will automatically grant women and girls the ability to participate in education and employment. However, I am cautious of both the paternalistic approach embedded in this policy and the notion of empowerment it purports to offer. This approach reflects a longstanding feminist critique of the welfare state, which often positions women as passive recipients of aid rather than active agents of change. Feminist scholars have argued that such policies frequently reinforce gendered and class-based dependencies, framing state assistance as a benevolent gesture rather than addressing deeper

structural inequalities (Lister, 2004; Taylor, 2008). This critique underscores the need to move beyond surface-level 'empowerment' as a policy goal.

Empowerment in the context of menstruation has been sold as an individualised achievement, marketed ideologically and materially to women and girls (Fahs & Przybylo, 2020). Participants' accounts demonstrate that empowerment is not experienced in the straightforward way described by the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020). Instead, a depiction of value and quality emerge, tied to feelings of connection or disconnection to menstruation. These are deeply entwined with ideas of self-empowerment, class, and authenticity.

Focusing on leaking as a visual symbol of menstrual 'empowerment' risks diverting attention from the broader, structural issues that underpin menstrual inequality as intersectionally experienced. By emphasising leaking as a powerful and disruptive image, we allow the commodification of menstruation to dominate the story in play. Menstrual blood, whether it is leaking through clothes, spilling from a menstrual cup, or soaking into a pad, has become a commodified image. It is printed on t-shirts, mugs, earrings, posters, and even tampon-shaped statues, all available for purchase in high street stores. The market is flooded with consumable products, turning menstruation into a tool of 'commodity activism', a concept discussed by Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012), which refers to the practice of converting social and political movements into products for consumption. The co-opting of menstrual activism into popular political discourse creates a feedback loop that simultaneously generates and constrains (Dazey, 202). While this commercialisation allows for a wider reach of menstruation as a popular image, it threatens activist work by addressing the systemic inequalities tied to menstruation. As critics like O'Keefe (2014) have noted, this may

divert attention away from the structural and intersectional nature of inequality, limiting the potential for transformative change.

The reclassification of period products' value serves to infer and establish the classed positions of their users. This process reflects the logic of individualisation, where class hierarchies are reinforced through personal consumer choices (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Participants' accounts reveal moments of struggling to construct a connected self, a goal they pursue through the acquisition of symbolically coded material goods, such as period products. Mirroring Skeggs' (2004) analysis of class struggles for authenticity, I highlight how individual empowerment is used not only to confer personal worth but also to draw distinctions between individuals. This reinforces class boundaries through individualised consumption practices, illustrating how empowerment, in this context, operates as both a marker of value and a tool of social differentiation.

For example, participants locate this empowered connection to menstruation as accessible through the use of specific period products, with Adrienne (30, middle class) describing herself as 'grounded' through this connection. This positioning reveals how period products become symbolic of class and power, as Douglas (1976) suggests, treading the line between connection and disconnection. Products, then, are not neutral; they work to signify power and class. Accessing 'high-quality', reusable products is a way to connect to one's body and affirm a valued self, while disconnection—perceived as using lower-value or 'cheap' products—symbolises a lack of access to this classed, embodied empowerment.

The term 'empowerment', like 'period poverty', becomes a buzzword mobilised to uphold ideals rooted in individualisation and consumer choice. The belief that acquiring material goods provides access to social, political, or economic resources (Domingo & O'Neill, 2014) oversimplifies the complexity of empowerment. Empowerment does not stem from merely having access to a brightly coloured, reusable menstrual pad made from organic materials, nor from a basket of tampons in a public restroom. Instead, the perceived value attached to these products, and the inferences made about their users, reflect the individualisation of responsibility and reinforce class distinctions, influencing one's potential for capital accumulation and social mobility (Adkins, 2002; Skeggs, 2004). The focus on individual consumer choices obscures the broader structural inequalities that shape access to resources and opportunities.

Jo (25, prefer not to say) illustrates this dynamic in contrasting her use of reusable menstrual pads with tampons, remarking, 'I think it would be very, like sad to be quite disconnected from that [menstruation] now. Yeah, I just think it cuts out, like so much [...] I wouldn't want to like lose that by using tampons'. For Jo, tampons symbolise disconnection from her body and the 'sacred' experience of menstruation, while reusable pads provide a sense of connection and authenticity. This narrative highlights the symbolic value attached to certain period products, where the fear of losing connection reinforces the classed discourse of menstruation. Tampons are devalued and distanced from what is perceived as an 'authentic' menstrual experience, creating new markers of distinction. This reinforces inequality between those who can afford choice and those who rely on free products.

Similarly, Erin (29, working class) describes a profound connection to her body, tied not to self-care products but to extreme pain caused by a contraceptive coil. She describes the pain as 'the pain that women bear', a gendered experience she believes connects her to other women. After the coil's removal, she felt 'disconnected again'. Erin's narrative, which highlights the loss of connection, illustrates how menstrual pain became a legitimate, valued experience for her, affirming her gendered identity. Unlike other participants, Erin does not see this connection as something inherently possessed. For Erin, connection to self and womanhood is accessed through bodily experience, which can also be lost. This contrasts with Jo's account of fear around disconnection, which is more speculative, suggesting that middle-class women perceive connection as an entitlement that can be maintained through consumption.

Erin's perspective offers a key insight into the politics of connection and disconnection in menstrual experiences. While many participants describe their menstruation as part of an evolving journey of self-care and connection, Erin's account reveals a different reality. For her, connection is something temporary, tied to pain, and its loss feels like a personal failure. This experience highlights a broader issue: the individualised framing of empowerment and connection places the responsibility on individuals to maintain their wellbeing, while neglecting to address structural inequalities (Peck, 1995; Gill & Orgad, 2022).

This disconnection is fixed and solidified through the provision of free period products, which many participants perceive as low-value and undesirable. Sixteen participants describe products as inferring value or a lack thereof. Adkins (2002) and Skeggs (2004) argue that class inequality is embedded in the material goods we consume, and these goods actively reinforce social hierarchies. The free provision of period

products, despite its intentions, has the potential to deepen class distinctions rather than equalising access to opportunities. The rhetoric of choice, empowerment, and connection obscures the reality that class fundamentally shapes one's relationship to period products, power, and resources.

Ultimately, the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020), while well-intentioned, does not dismantle gender and class inequalities. Instead, it reinforces them through the ways in which individuals judge and utilise free and purchased products. The provision of free products, when viewed through participants' lived experiences and the broader social and political context, embeds social inequalities more deeply, establishing class hierarchies through processes of distinction and individualisation. Feminist scholars have long critiqued individualistic discourses of choice and empowerment, and my analysis aligns with their work in showing how the (re)valuation of period products serves to reinforce, rather than challenge, these systems of inequality (McRobbie, 2009; Silva, 2013).

The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act: A Feminist Triumph or Superficial Success?

This section evaluates the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020) and its portrayal as a progressive feminist initiative aimed at addressing gender inequality. The framing of the Period Product Bill (2020) within both the media and politics often oversimplifies its success by assuming that addressing menstrual needs equates to feminist progress. This section reveals that while the bill aims to tackle period poverty, it does not fully address the complexities of how menstrual products are experienced

and valued. The apparent feminist success of the Period Product Bill (2020) thus merits closer scrutiny, especially considering how it intersects with issues of class, choice, and the notion of empowerment.

Participant accounts reveal a more complex and conflicting picture. The experiences and needs of individuals in Scotland often diverge from the policy's constructed image of addressing gender inequality. While the bill's intent and public perception are, I argue, tactically rooted in feminist ideals, participant responses present a higher bar for what is considered feminist political action.

If I see a basket, that's like 'free to take' I'm always like fucking yes! I love you, which is stupid because it should be, because you know I think we're all infuriated we have to pay for shit that we don't get a choice in and men get condoms for free and we can't get period products for free, fucker! But I do, it's that thing where the bar is in hell, but I really do like it. (Rory, 25, middle class)

I feel when it first came out, I felt really proud in terms of women's rights. Then as I kept seeing them, I'm like 'Why should I feel proud? That should be a normal thing' You know, they can give out like free condoms and stuff, why can't women have free period products? It shouldn't be like, oh, you know, this is the 21st century thing we finally have a breakthrough. It shouldn't have to be a big thing to begin with, it should be normal. So, at first, I felt really proud. But now I feel like you know, these things should be everywhere. (Zada, 19, working class)

Rory and Zada express similar feelings towards the provision of free period products in various spaces, those mandated by the Period Product Bill (2020) and more broadly.

Participants noted that businesses such as bars, cafes, and shared workspaces often provide these products for free, reflecting the political and social impact of the bill. Initially, both women described their feelings of happiness and pride in seeing free period products available.

After celebrating the provision of free period products and commenting on the gendered quality of the policy, of not having to pay for them, both participants reflect on how little is required for this to be seen as a landmark feminist success. Zada tells me that in an ideal world, period products should never have been commercialised and should have always been free, eliminating the need to respond to 'period poverty'. Rory echoes this sentiment, saying, 'the bar is in hell'. Ahmed (2017) argues that the feminist killjoy refuses to accept the limited scope of mainstream successes, pushing for deeper and more substantial changes. Their critique resonates with Ahmed's concept, disrupting the celebration of minimal progress by pointing out ongoing inadequacies and injustices. They critique the social and media representation of free products as a success, arguing that this ignores past and present inequalities.

This critique supports my argument that the capitalist, patriarchal, individualised context which participants navigate, resist, and sometimes merely attempt to exist within, influences menstrual behaviours, value attribution, gender equality, and inclusion. It also influences what is accepted and celebrated within these confines. Zada's and Rory's observations point to the limited social imagination allowed within these structures, yet their feminist perspectives provide the critical imagination necessary to critique these celebrations while acknowledging the positive steps within the available confines. While progress is indeed happening, their reflections emphasise that this remains insufficient.

Below, Emma's shift in language illustrates this dynamic. When considering the imagined recipient of policy assistance, she describes it as 'really wonderful' for 'them'—the imagined others benefiting from the policy. Without a critical perspective, this appears positive. However, when Emma discusses her experiences of threat and gendered harm, her language becomes collective and protective, using phrases like 'makes us [girls/women] vulnerable' and 'abuse our bodies'. This shift underscores the importance of an intersectional approach; without it, addressing categorical inequalities can draw attention to some issues while neglecting others.

I think that's really wonderful for people who may not be able to afford the necessary sanitary towels or tampons or whatever. I mean, they wouldn't be able to buy the period panties, but then at least they can have something else.
(Emma, 24, middle class)

It [post menarche] also makes us vulnerable, because men then have the power to kind of abuse our bodies and, and to use that against us. (Emma, 24, middle class)

Participants often positioned themselves in relation to the 'Other,' an archetypal construct emerging from welfare state policies and reflected in society and the participants' narratives, personified through the working-class woman. Although the Other is distinctly defined with specific qualities that facilitate (dis)identification and resource accumulation, participants rarely directly acknowledge her, instead positioning themselves either alongside or against her. My findings show that when participants identify or draw attention to the imagined Other in need, a shift towards a collective experience becomes apparent. This shift in participants' accounts, from

individual self to collective 'us,' suggests that participants experience pressures of individualisation, which depoliticise them and ultimately hinder the potential for collective recognition and mobilisation.

The appeal to an imagined collective highlights how participants, while invoking a collective 'us,' still articulate their engagement through the lens of individual pressures and responsibilities. Rather than fostering genuine collective solidarity, this shift reveals that participants grapple with the expectations of individualisation—where personal experiences and actions are prioritised over collective identity. Consequently, this individualisation frames collective needs and struggles in terms of personal responsibility, undermining the potential for true collective recognition and mobilisation (Fraser, 2013; McRobbie, 2013).

When participants directly describe and consider the experience of the Other in relation to policy and structural power, they express protective and collective emotions. Rather than using the working-class Other as a static baseline, participants reflect on the inequalities that produce her, actualising her within the middle-class imagination. This analysis reveals frequent shifts between individual and collective positions, highlighting a notable finding: how participants direct their attention—either towards themselves as individuals or as part of a collective—significantly shapes their interaction with the imagined Other in their accounts.

While the imagined recipient of free products is often portrayed through behaviours as being in more need than 'me', allowing participants and policies to (dis)identify and shift value accordingly, she is rarely directly named. When participants focus on this imagined recipient, their accounts and language shift from individual to collective. This

shift highlights the pressures of individualisation, which are leveraged to depoliticise, thus hindering collective recognition. Participants exhibit protective and collaborative emotions when they identify with the Other, positioning her within the framework of societal and state inequality. When the Other is actualised rather than serving as a baseline, participants consider the inequalities that construct her. This movement between self and the collective is a key finding in my analysis, demonstrating the dual locations participants occupy. Depending on their focus, participants' language shifts from 'she', 'they', or 'someone', when referring to the imagined working-class woman, to 'I' or 'for me' when discussing 'higher-quality' choices. When reflecting on inequality within structures, policies, patriarchy, or capitalism, their language shifts to a collective 'we' or 'us'.

Dazey (2021) critiques how policies and societal norms often promote superficial standards of progress that reinforce existing social hierarchies. My participants' accounts reflect this dynamic, highlighting how minimal policy efforts are celebrated as significant achievements, which can depoliticise and individualise issues rather than fostering collective care and action. Building on Dazey's (2021) examination of respectability politics, my analysis shows how the bill indirectly sustains class distinctions and obstructs broader feminist goals of intersectional and systemic change. By encouraging marginalised groups to conform to dominant norms, respectability politics reinforces hierarchies instead of challenging the systemic inequalities underpinning them. This is evident in the bill's framing of menstrual product access as a marker of respectability and individual responsibility, which diverts attention from deeper structural issues of class and gender inequality. The politicisation of menstruation, as demonstrated in participant accounts, reveals the

‘simultaneous generative and constraining power of social conformity’ (Dazey, 2021: 581), illustrating how social and structural pressures shape this discourse.

Conclusion

Discussion of class is missing from the provision of period products. My findings highlight that the political construction of period poverty renders class invisible while working to ‘abdicate responsibility from the effects it produces’ (Skeggs, 1997: 7). Ignoring class and the subjective experiences of people in classed positions means ignoring structural inequality and the power dynamics that (re)construct class. While the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020) addresses an immediate need for access to period products, it fails to confront embedded systemic gender and class inequalities. This detachment is evident in the bill's limited scope and its lack of a resulting shift in collective consciousness. Participants' responses underscore this disconnect. Jessie (54, middle class), for example, comments, ‘I'm aware of it. I don't know a huge amount about it. I mean, it's interesting. But I don't hear of it every day, if you know what I mean’. The bill functions as a type of ‘gateway advocacy’, comparable to the abolition of the tampon tax in the U.S. Weiss-Wolf (2020) characterises such acts as entry points to broader political engagement and critical menstrual consciousness rather than final solutions. Similarly, Lennon's (2020) assertion that the bill would ‘consign period poverty to history’ underscores a rhetorical overreach that my findings do not support. Instead, participants reframe the experience of menstruation and period products in ways that resist these simplified narratives, revealing the limitations of policies that name symptoms of inequality without addressing their root causes.

The provision of free products comes with significant limitations, particularly the lack of intersectional consideration for menstruating bodies. By naming the symptom of gender and class inequality rather than addressing the cause, period poverty becomes attached to an imagined Other as recipient. This Other—the working-class woman—is both identified with and positioned against by participants, providing critical insight into class distinctions drawn through the experience and management of menstruation, particularly via period products. Participants' evaluations of products reinforce these dynamics, such as the perception of disposables as accessible but inferior, while reusable products are seen as of higher quality and symbolically greater value. This creates a dynamic where individual choices, shaped by access to resources, reinforce structural inequalities. As I have shown, these choices constrain working-class women while benefiting those who can mobilise resources as opposed to utilising free products. The capitalist, individualistic context in which participants' resources, class, and gender operate either facilitates or hinders their navigation through these systems. This dynamic exemplifies how the accumulation of value with respect to the self reinforces inequality, bolstered by the fallacy of choice (Strathern, 1992; Tayler, 2012).

This chapter has examined the complex realities of how the provision of period products affects participants' lived experiences. The construction of the Other—the working-class recipient suffering the indignity of menstruating without products and requiring state-provided items to access opportunities—emerges as performative. Participants' accounts resist this construction, highlighting that using toilet paper, for instance, is common and not necessarily perceived as undignified. Similarly, participants reported continuing in education and employment regardless of

menstruation's impact on their wellbeing, challenging the narrative that lack of products alone hinders opportunity. Instead, they view gender inequality and sexism around menstruation as more pressing issues.

My overarching argument posits that period products function as mechanisms through which social structures shape participants' experiences, particularly in terms of class and gender. Participants actively negotiate and resist these dynamics, navigating the tension between norms, choice, individualisation, and collectivism. Period products create distinctions that engender 'social difference,' a foundation of class and gender inequality (Fiske, 1993; Adkins, 2004). Megan's association with period poverty exemplifies this dynamic, where naming and framing the experience as a dislocation from the larger social system is performative—a buzzword that shapes the social realities participants navigate (Butler, 1997). Naming issues alone does not dismantle the systemic conditions sustaining these inequalities (Skeggs, 1997). Selective feminist inclusion, in place of engaged feminist policy, enshrines hierarchies and perpetuates inequality. This analysis uncovers the pressures of individualisation imposed by policies like the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020), which depoliticise and hinder collective mobilisation while co-opting feminism. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse how social inequalities are lived, enacted, and made real through period product 'choices' and the policies surrounding them.

Chapter 6: Period Pressure; Navigating Environmental Responsibility through Menstrual Products.

The initial aim of this research project was to expand understanding of the pressure individuals face to conform to societal norms surrounding menstruation. However, as I conducted interviews and engaged in a detailed analysis of the dataset, it became increasingly apparent that participants experience significant pressure to be responsible for and change behaviour based upon environmental pressure. In this chapter, I highlight the intersections of environmental responsibility, gender, and class, embedded in ideologies of depoliticisation. Participant accounts reveal a profound sense of responsibility to manage menstruation in environmentally conscious ways, through which we gain insight into broader societal expectations and pressures. Throughout this chapter, I explore how period products act as markers of response to environmentalism, engendering social capital, reinforcing class distinctions, and enforcing gendered responsibilities.

Based on Lorde's (1984, 1995) work, Johnson's (2020) research draws upon insights into the relentlessness of capitalism. My aim is to explore participant accounts of how these pressures were reinforced and redirected during the COVID-19 lockdowns. During the pandemic, I will explore how these norms were challenged and/or reinforced, as it provided a unique opportunity for potential change (Johnson, 2020). In a parallel to the previous chapter's exploration of the co-opting of feminist politics, advertising presents itself as supportive of feminist objectives but primarily promotes

consumerism. By examining these dynamics, I highlight how capitalist and depoliticising ideologies subsume and redirect opportunities for genuine societal change.

I found participants to be in receipt of, and therefore responding to, the social and ecological weight to 'do your bit' to save the planet, not only in terms of a personal undertaking but also as a societal expectation. This burden particularly targets women, reflecting the intertwining of broader patterns of environmental exploitation with feminised ecological care, which places disproportionate responsibility on women to uphold environmental integrity, reflecting how larger trends of environmental exploitation are intertwined with feminized ecological care. (Plumwood, 1993; MacGregor, 2006). Gaard's (2011) work on ecofeminism echoes this dynamic, revealing that society positions women as the primary stewards of the environment. This can often work to compromise their autonomy and wellbeing, reflecting broader patterns of gendered responsibility and environmental caregiving.

Participants encountered complex pressures to choose sustainable products, and through examining these accounts, my aim is to uncover how participants feel and enact environmental responsibility, with a particular focus on highlighting the gendered and class-based dimensions of these pressures. Using McRobbie's (2007) work alongside Skeggs' (1997, 2004) expansion of Bourdieu's (1979) theory on capital I develop my argument that participants enact environmentalism in relation to menstruation as a form of capital.

These theoretical lenses collectively reveal how the ‘EcoGirl’ identity emerges as a valued, environmentally conscious counterpart to the stigmatised ‘hippie’ stereotype, highlighting the gendered and classed inequalities embedded in both.

I use the term EcoGirl as opposed to EcoWoman for two key reasons, both of which underscore the ways in which environmental responsibility is shaped by age, gender, and social expectations. First, participants positioned the EcoGirl identity as distinct from the hippie—a term that spans generations but is often associated with outdated environmentalism. By contrast, the label of EcoGirl reflects a more socially acceptable, polished, and contemporary version of environmental consciousness, more aligned with middle-class ideals of respectability and consumer-driven sustainability. Secondly, the use of girl rather than woman reflects a broader generational shift in the discourse around environmental responsibility. Older participants, particularly those with children, frequently referenced their daughters when discussing sustainability, suggesting a heightened sense of responsibility being placed onto younger generations. This framing reinforces the idea that environmental consciousness is not only feminised but also increasingly expected of younger generations (Gray et al., 2019; Twenge, 2023).

The first section of this chapter delves into the shared pressure participants encounter to self-manage their environmental impact through the use and selection of menstrual products. This section demonstrates how such products serve as a technology through which social pressures and inequalities manifest, significantly shaping the embodied experience of menstruation. This aligns with the findings in Chapter 4, underscoring the role of products as mediators of social norms and inequities.

Following this, I address the commonality of these pressures, highlighting the pervasive nature of environmental pressures and their widespread influence on menstrual practices. I explore the period of COVID-19 lockdown as a distinctive moment that intensified existing pressures on individuals. The restrictions imposed by the pandemic accentuated the pre-existing depoliticisation dynamics governing everyday life. This moment in time allowed participants to experience a heightened awareness of the environmental pressures that usually enforce gendered menstrual performances.

However, it is critical to recognise that this period did not signify a break from depoliticisation, but a continuation and deepening of its influence. The lockdown provided a unique context where participants could engage with, and potentially reframe, their managed selves, presenting an 'opportunity' to make the 'right' choices. This shift reflects a move away from addressing systemic political issues, focusing instead on individual responsibility and personal choices, rather than indicating any significant political engagement or transformation. In the third and final section, I explore how the pressure to be environmentally conscious during menstruation intersects with classed and gendered processes. With the growing emphasis on eco-friendly choices, menstrual cups have become a popular and accepted alternative. The longstanding shame and societal judgement surrounding menstruation, in combination with gender-based expectations, shapes those aspects of environmental consciousness that are emphasised and valued by individuals.

'How Much Waste Is Created in Every Period?' Menstrual Products and Environmental Responsibility

This section takes its title from Sonia (42, middle class), who expressed concern about the environmental impact of disposable menstrual products, a recurring theme throughout the interviews. A shared account emerged among participants, with 22 of 27 feeling a collective responsibility to 'save' the environment through their choice of period products. Ironically, those who most require and/or desire products during menstruation are responsible for 'saving' the planet through their choices. Participants' comments reflect the well documented harmful environmental effects of mass-produced, single-use menstrual products. According to Weir (2015), the widespread use of disposable period products has significantly contributed to environmental degradation by increasing waste generation and overburdening landfills. The convenience of single-use items often obscures their long-term ecological impact, which includes not only the pollution of land and water but also the depletion of those natural resources required for their production. Peberdy et al. (2019) further highlight the harm caused by disposable products, particularly plastics, emphasising their contribution to the growing issue of microplastic contamination in marine ecosystems. These products, as with any designed for short-term singular use, ultimately pose a long-lasting threat to biodiversity and environmental health.

Participants framed their responses to environmental pressure through intentional, rather than habitual, use of period products. For example, they might opt for disposable tampons with cardboard applicators instead of plastic or choose reusable products over single-use disposables. Those who did not use what they perceived as

the most environmentally conscious products expressed feelings of guilt and personal responsibility, telling me they felt they should make 'better' choices. This sense of pressure reflects a broader environmental consciousness that intersects with the embodied experience of menstruation, adding a new layer of responsibility to existing societal expectations about menstrual norms.

It is important to recognise that consumer choices signal moral worth and taste. Both personal beliefs and broader social expectations shaped participants' responses. Interviews conducted within this context capture how participants navigate these normative pressures, shaping their responses based on a desire to provide socially preferable answers. This dynamic is significant in feminist methodology, where the researcher must consider that respondents are not sharing objective "truths" but are also engaging in storytelling that responds to shifting social norms (Gillies & Alldred, 2012). Here, respondents may frame their choices in alignment with what is morally or socially acceptable, reflecting both their personal beliefs and broader societal pressures.

I argue that the emotional weight of environmental pressure worsens the feelings of guilt and shame associated with menstruation, emotions that frequently begin in girlhood and are strongly ingrained in menstrual norms. In this sense, participants' stories of product choice and environmental responsibility are part of a larger cultural account that connects consumer behaviour with moral judgement, a connection that is significant for menstruation (Smith & Wetherell, 2001). The ongoing environmental crisis exacerbates these pressures, making them a significant aspect of the participants' lived experiences. Participants described the expectation to 'save' the environment through lower waste production and more sustainable choices as an

additional burden. They portrayed this responsibility as a personal political decision to 'do your bit' for the planet, emphasising the individualisation of environmental responsibility within the context of menstruation.

I found that the pressure participants recalled feeling during their girlhood about product use and selection does not diminish with age; rather, it persists and can even intensify into adulthood. This individualisation of the political and cultural significance of material goods, such as tampons or menstrual cups, demonstrates that while specific attachments may change, the external pressures influencing product selection decisions remain. From the social construction of tampons as sexualising objects to later concerns about the environmental impact of disposable pads, the markers that influence how bodies conform to or resist societal norms are constantly evolving. The shifting standards as to what constitutes the 'best' menstrual product highlight the impossibility of a single correct or optimal choice. This dilemma, mostly centred on the debate between disposable and reusable products, illuminates the cultural associations attached to these items, and therefore their users. The 'appropriate' choice involves not only individual capital and empowerment but also environmental responsibility.

Despite not asking participants about environmentalism, many brought up the topic, thus underscoring the pervasive influence of environmental awareness and pressure. Below, Megan's reflection offers an example of this, as she articulates her awareness of the environmental impact of her tampon use, grappling with the tension between convenience and environmental responsibility.

I am aware of the environment and I care about it and actually you know when you think about how many tampons I've used in my lifetime and would continue to use of the next however many years I'm menstruating, I would like to [...] and I think [...] as I've said it out loud to you my rationale for not using a Mooncup is [...] isn't great. (Megan, 31, working class)

Megan articulates her awareness of and concern for the environment, reflecting on the number of tampons she has used and will use throughout her life. She acknowledges the environmental impact of her choices and, despite her preference for tampons because of their accessibility and comfort, feels conflicted. The decision as to which period product to use intertwines bodily, emotional, and social considerations. While Megan's choice of tampons is initially driven by practical reasons, verbalising it leads to self-doubt and criticism, revealing the pervasive influence of environmental pressure that often outweighs personal preferences. The constructed menstrual environmental value places a significant burden on individuals to 'do your bit' for the planet, as Megan demonstrates.

This conflict between bodily comfort and environmental responsibility is a shared experience among participants, who are 'very conscious of the environmental cost' (Niamh, 30, middle class). The possibility of feeling satisfied that they are doing their best remains distant, with feelings like 'but I could be' or 'I should be' more environmentally friendly lingering in the background. Messages on the need to act and the severity of the environmental situation are well documented as stemming from news media, social media, and popular culture (Anderson, 1997, 2013; Bobel, 2010; Boulianne & Ohme, 2022). Interestingly, participants did not specify where or why they felt this pressure, nor did I ask them to. Upon reflection, I should have probed into

participants' perceived origin of pressure. I suspect this is because of a shared recognition of and resignation toward the precarious state of our environment.

Megan's reflection on environmental pressure surrounding menstrual product usage mirrors Sonia's earlier concerns about their future impact. She highlights the regularity of menstruation as a key factor contributing to environmental harm, with phrases like 'over time' and 'every period' serving not only as markers of self-accountability but also as evidence of careful self-regulation. Individualised environmentalism typically emphasises market-based solutions, individual consumer responsibility, and the privatisation of natural resources as key strategies for addressing environmental issues (Rose, 1999, 2000). It frames environmental responsibility as a personal obligation, pushing individuals to make 'better' choices within a capitalist system that often limits those very choices.

In contrast, feminist environmentalist approaches focus on collective action, systemic change, and social justice, often challenging the structures upheld by depoliticisation and capitalism (Shiva, 1988, 2005; Gaard, 2011). For example, many indigenous communities around the world enact long traditions of environmental stewardship that are deeply rooted in their cultures, spirituality, and ways of life. Indigenous environmentalism emphasises harmony with nature, collective responsibility, and the recognition of the interconnectedness of all life forms, often opposing the capitalist exploitation of land and resources (Whyte, 2018). Similarly, ecofeminism draws a link between environmental degradation and the oppression of women and marginalised groups. Ecofeminists argue that the same patriarchal systems dominating society also exploit nature. They advocate for dismantling these hierarchies, promoting a relational, rather than exploitative, approach to both society and the environment (Graad, 2011).

Feminist approaches emphasise systemic change, collective action, and the redistribution of power and resources, rejecting the idea that market-based solutions alone can resolve the environmental crisis. Instead, they argue for more democratic, equitable, and sustainable systems of governance and resource management.

Feminist environmentalist perspectives highlight a significant issue when juxtaposed with initiatives like the Scottish Government's promotion of free access to disposable menstrual products (SPICe, 2020). This policy creates a double bind for individuals: they need these products for personal use, but they also face guilt about contributing to environmental waste. This quandary underscores the complex interplay between personal necessity, environmental awareness, gender expectations, and systemic inequalities.

In a similar vein to my arguments about how people's classed (dis)identification with products can influence their experiences, the widespread availability of disposable menstrual products has led to a situation where individuals face conflicting pressure. Managing menstruation while grappling with the environmental impact of these products highlights the difficult conditions and conflicts experienced in balancing personal needs with ecological concerns. This highlights the impossibility of achieving an environmentally friendly and politically aligned approach to menstrual management. The expressed pressure to 'do your bit' to 'save' the environment while managing menstruation is complex and contradictory. For example, using applicator-free organic cotton tampons may be seen as a more sustainable choice, but what about the environmental impact of the box they come in? This dilemma illustrates the broader issue that even seemingly eco-friendly options are not without their own

environmental costs. Such complexities reflect a broader unliveable menstrual space where perfect environmental responsibility is unattainable.

Shotwell (2016) draws attention to the impossibility of achieving and maintaining pure, uncontaminated practices in a complex world, stating that ‘we live in a world where it's impossible to live without causing harm, and yet we are still responsible for how we live’ (Shotwell, 2016: 2). This paradox is particularly evident in the messaging surrounding sustainable menstrual practices, where environmental responsibility is laden with contradictions and pressures that extend beyond individual choice. Adrienne (31, middle class) describes this tension, acknowledging the availability of more sustainable options while simultaneously recognising the inescapable waste associated with any disposable product: ‘I know that HeyGirls, they do sustainable cotton [tampons] and things like that. But of course, any disposable product, there's going to be, even the box itself, which is going to be a lot of waste involved’. Adrienne's reflection highlights the pervasive sense of environmental responsibility, and the expectation to minimise waste even within the impossibility of achieving a fully sustainable practice. No matter how environmentally conscious you are there is always an aspect of waste to account for, reinforcing an ongoing cycle of scrutiny and responsibility. Shotwell's framework is useful here in illustrating how this pursuit of purity—zero-waste menstruation—becomes an unattainable ideal, generating pressure rather than offering a solution.

Similarly, Stevie (26, working class) recounts their switch to a menstrual cup, a decision made in response to the felt environmental burden of using disposable products: ‘I was quite into like environmentalism and like the waste, I know it created a lot of like unnecessary waste, like pads, and tampons. Especially like flushing them

down the toilet. So yeah, that's why I kinda switched'. Stevie's framing of disposable products as producing 'unnecessary waste' reflects the logic of sustainability, where waste is not merely an outcome but a failing to be actively avoided. However, as Shotwell (2016) suggests, such ethical imperatives are shaped by broader social, cultural, and political structures rather than being purely individual concerns. While reusable products may reduce waste, they are not universally accessible or practical. These accounts highlight that menstrual sustainability is experienced as a form of embodied responsibility, leading to feelings of constantly negotiating their choices within a framework that demands environmental consciousness despite its impossibility.

Scholarship on environmentalism discusses individual pressures and concerns, labelled as eco-anxiety. Pihkala (2020) and Rousseau (2023) discuss how environmental pressure and concern can have severe implications, arguing that the fear of environmental doom and related overwhelming stress may also lead to an inability to mitigate damage. The pressure to conform to environmentally sustainable practices in every aspect of life, including menstrual management, led to feelings of helplessness and guilt among participants. This underscores the concept of reflexive impotence, which describes a state where individuals are acutely aware of the problems and contradictions they face but feel powerless to enact meaningful change. Plumwood's (1992) work on ecofeminism emphasises the necessity for collective, systemic transformations rather than burdening individuals exclusively with the responsibility for addressing these issues, thus advocating for a relational and ecological approach.

In my sample, two participants identified as having a long-term illness or condition, while an additional five recounted having a menstrual disorder. The Equality Act (2010) recognises certain aspects of these disorders as disabilities, offering limited insight into the ableism embedded within the individualised environmental pressures associated with menstrual product choices. The experiences of participants with menstrual disorders intensify the pressure to use environmentally friendly menstrual products. Participants reported conditions such as extremely painful cramping, heavy bleeding, chronic fatigue, and physical challenges like vaginismus. There are various personal and political reasons individuals may choose not to identify as having a long-term illness, disease, or condition. A lack of medical recognition and social understanding of menstrual conditions complicates identification with or against such labels, which can influence this decision (Przybylo & Fahs, 2018; Guidone, 2020).

Robin (25, middle class) has menorrhagia, a condition that causes prolonged and very heavy menstrual bleeding, leading to excruciating pain, and inflammation. She tells me that these symptoms make it very difficult to use a menstrual cup. She expresses frustration over the amount of waste she generates but also acknowledges the necessity of using plastic applicator tampons for ease and comfort, explaining, 'I was really upset about how much I was using but like I do have a [menstrual] condition and sometimes I need the plastic applicator just to help me'. Robin uses a menstrual cup when she can, as it lowers her 'environmental impact because [she] get through so many tampons'. Participant accounts, including Robin's, shed light on the pressure to decrease waste production individually, regardless of one's bodily comfort and capacity, demonstrating the interplay of politics with personal experiences of the body.

Yet, as recounted by participants and scholarship, there is not a standard typical bodily experience, and pressure and politics do not land upon bodies uniformly.

While I do not have access to or accounts of the experiences of a range of disabled participants in a broader menstrual context, this perspective creates crucial space to consider the prevalence of idealised, typical menstruating bodies within popular, consumer, and cultural accounts of environmentally beneficial products.

I was just like, you know what this is just such a [...] it's bad enough when I have to do it in the bathroom at home but in a cubicle and I'm getting all sweaty and can't like-no! just let me use a tampon'. (Emily, 26, upper working class, lower middle class).

Emily has endometriosis and, due to medication for this condition, bleeds only a few times each year. She is explicit about her frustration with the pressure to use the most environmentally friendly products. As a self-described autistic fat person, she finds changing reusable products at home difficult, and outside the home in a cubicle it feels physically confining. She compares her need for disposable plastic products to the needs of some disabled individuals who require plastic straws that bend for easier drinking. Similarly, she highlights the necessity of tampons with plastic applicators to facilitate insertion. Without consideration and attention to these needs, 'we're just singling out disabled people who need these'. The experiences of Robin and Emily underscore the importance of inclusivity in discussions about environmentally friendly menstrual products, revealing that reusable options may be impractical or impossible for some. By only incorporating the needs of the perceived typical menstruating body,

lines are drawn around normative expectations and experiences, marginalising while maintaining pressure to 'do your bit' to save the environment.

Menstruation and Environmental Pressure during COVID-19 Restrictions

Some participants used the lockdown period to better understand their bodies, becoming more aware of pain levels and hormonal fluctuations. Others engaged with menstruation through political and feminist perspectives. Participants noted the passage of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act in Scotland in 2020, as well as the increased visibility of menstruation in popular culture and on social media, topics that were explored in the previous chapter. This visibility was amplified by the rise in online engagement during lockdowns, exposing participants to menstrual activism, politics, and entertainment (Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Tomlinson, 2021; Neill et al., 2023). For instance, Beatrix (30, prefer not to say) told me about social media clips of men using cramp simulators, the comedy factor being that they couldn't handle the pain. Similarly, Emily (26, working class) mentioned an informative TikTok that was 'spreading information about periods and periods products', and Robin (25, middle class), in looking into IUDs when her sister was considering one, found a helpful 'TikTok that's going around right now that shows the process'.

Some participants reported feeling increased environmental pressure related to menstruation during lockdown restrictions. The lockdowns offered an opportunity for certain individuals to reassess personal habits, with success and failure framed in terms of environmental responsibility. However, it is crucial to critique this emphasis

on individual introspection and self-improvement. Having time for personal reflection assumes a shared experience which overlooks the realities faced by those who could not retreat, such as individuals providing frontline care or managing household responsibilities. For some, lockdowns worsened their social and personal conditions, such that framing lockdown as a time of personal reflection without acknowledging the diverse experiences of other risks presenting a narrow view of how people navigated these challenges.

The impact of menstrual products extends well beyond the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting broader pressures that emphasise individual responsibility. Achieving environmental sustainability via menstruation remains an elusive goal. Participants consistently report feeling that there is always more they could do to 'be better'. This creates an ongoing battle against potential failure, rooted in the individualising pressures that prioritise personal accountability over systemic solutions. I found that participants' habits during COVID-19 did not develop solely because of physical space and distance, but also with respect to time, with seemingly endless opportunities to reflect on options and habits.

Zoe's description of her menstrual management during COVID-19 restrictions as 'more disgusting, I've definitely become lazier' conveys a notable shift in her perception and handling of her menstruating body. This shift provides valuable insight into the physical and mental energy required to manage menstruation and the implications of failing to uphold these routines. The terms 'disgusting' and 'lazy' not only convey a negative self-assessment but also reflect the internalisation of societal expectations about maintaining a respectable menstrual body and self. Here, Douglas' (1976) analysis of pollution is particularly illuminating: menstruation is positioned as

“dirt” because it threatens the symbolic and material boundaries of the body, and by extension, of social order. When Zoe describes herself as “disgusting,” she reveals how deeply these cultural associations of pollution and disorder shape her self-perception.

During the lockdown, Zoe became more comfortable with what she termed her ‘messy menstruating body’. This newfound comfort contrasts with her pre-pandemic behaviour, when she felt compelled to address any menstrual stains or leaks immediately. Under restrictions, she felt at ease walking around her home in pyjamas with stains: ‘Like if there's stains in my pyjamas, whereas before I would have been like, “must change, must vanish immediately.”’ This behavioural shift, which could be read as a momentary release from hyper-vigilant bodily management, was nevertheless accompanied by feelings of failure. Skeggs’ (1997) notion of failed femininity helps explain this tension: Zoe’s comfort with bodily “mess” temporarily disrupted the demands of respectable femininity, yet she still judged herself harshly, labelling this relaxation as “lazy” and “disgusting.” Her account thus reveals how menstrual stigma and the wider politics of respectability converge, positioning lapses in strict menstrual management not simply as personal failures but as transgressions against broader classed and gendered ideals of femininity.

Zoe's experience offers an initial insight into the specific pressures related to managing one's body, particularly during periods of heightened stress and isolation, such as COVID-19. Her disengagement from typical menstrual management practices is also marked by feelings of feminine failure, echoing the cultural norms discussed in Chapter 3. Her home enforced gender and disgust during girlhood, dictating where and how she should manage and conceal her body and menstruation. The paradox

Zoe describes reflects broader societal pressures faced by individuals who menstruate, including the need to balance personal comfort with societal expectations of concealment. My analysis of Zoe's account builds on Skeggs's concept of 'failed femininity' (Skeggs, 1997), where societal norms impose stringent standards for bodily management and cleanliness. According to Skeggs, these norms create a framework that individuals must navigate, leading to internalised standards of behaviour that are challenging to deviate from without experiencing guilt or shame. While Skeggs's (1997) concept can be applied broadly, it takes on additional complexities for queer individuals. Queer participants often face heightened scrutiny for not conforming to traditional gender norms and sexual orientations, which can amplify feelings of guilt and shame. They contend with a broader set of expectations around gender expression and sexuality, leading to distinct struggles and resistance (Taylor, 2013, 2016).

In Zoe's case, the COVID-19 restrictions temporarily relaxed these societal norms, giving her the opportunity to prioritise her own comfort over societal expectations. While this relaxation was liberating, it also induced guilt for Zoe, illustrating the pervasive nature of societal norms and the internal conflict that arises when deviating from them. Zoe's experience underscores how deeply ingrained cultural expectations surrounding menstruation influence not only public behaviour but also personal feelings of adequacy and failure. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the enforced temporal and spatial distance from others, apart from those within one's household, significantly impacted menstrual management practices, as reported by 13 participants. Zoe's account highlights the pressures menstruating individuals face to conform to societal norms of management and concealment. The extended time spent

at home served as a major motivator for heightened engagement with menstrual practices and changes.

I used to use tampons, and then when lockdown started and I was at home, I've always kind of had a pretty light flow. So, I just started free bleeding, because I knew I was in the flat, like in my sweatpants all the time. And so I started free bleeding and like kind of testing it out. (Faye, 28, no class identification)

Participants frequently cited blood leakage through products or clothing as a major concern, reflecting an intense fear of violating menstrual norms of concealment. Faye recounts her freeing experiences of experimentation with free bleeding during the lockdown, demonstrating how the unique temporal and spatial circumstances allowed her to explore this practice without fear of judgement. The separation from others reduced her anxiety about breaking menstrual concealment norms, and wearing comfortable clothing more often eased her experimentation.

This fear is deeply ingrained in the stigma surrounding menstruation and the societal pressure to manage it discreetly. Participants, including Faye, expressed a reluctance to feel embarrassed or as though they were compromising their feminist ideals by admitting to something negatively perceived as menstrual leakage. Sam's response illustrates this conflict when reflecting on the worst possible outcome related to menstruation: 'The worst thing, after I've literally just said I wouldn't care, is that my mind immediately goes to bleeding [leaking] in public' (Sam, 23, middle class). This inner conflict is shaped by societal conditioning, aligning with 'failed femininity' (Skeggs, 1997), where societal norms impose standards for bodily management and

cleanliness. However, the lockdown created a unique space for these participants. The physical distance from others removed the immediate possibility of experiencing shame or stigma around menstrual leaks. This COVID-19 environment provided individuals with the freedom to experiment with new menstrual products, or even to go without products entirely, without the usual social consequences.

The COVID-19 lockdowns offered some the physical and social space for such experimentation, whilst also amplifying the pressure to make more sustainable choices. Faye's decision to experiment with free bleeding was partly driven by a heightened environmental consciousness. She describes the 'unexpected' outcome of this experiment as a deeper understanding of the commercialised, external dynamics involved in menstrual management. Free bleeding eliminates the need to purchase menstrual products, directly challenging the commercial aspects of menstruation. Faye's realisation highlights the entanglement of capitalist consumption patterns with menstrual management. By opting out of purchasing products, Faye engaged in environmentalism while critiquing the economic structures that profit from menstruation. Her decision was not only an act of sustainability but also a statement against the commodification of menstruation.

It is important to note that specific personal and contextual factors shaped Faye's experience. She has light menstrual bleeding, lives alone in her flat, and has the financial capacity to purchase alternative products if desired. These conditions uniquely positioned her to experiment with free bleeding without significant practical or social barriers. For many, a heavier menstrual flow, restrictions or discomfort within the home, or financial constraints might make such experimentation impractical. Faye's account of her experience during the COVID-19 restrictions reveals the

intersections of preference, environmental consciousness, and economic considerations. Her experience highlights how the lockdowns offered space for a rethinking and challenge to normative menstrual management practices.

Adrienne (31, middle class), who works for an environmental tech startup, offers another perspective on sustainable menstrual management. Motivated by a desire to reduce her environmental impact, Adrienne tried using a menstrual cup. Her first experience, however, was difficult—she described it as a ‘nightmare’, with the cup getting stuck and spilling. Despite this initial setback, the break from her usual routine during the lockdown provided her with the opportunity to try again without the pressure of daily responsibilities, and particularly the need to leave the house for work.

Reflecting on this period, Adrienne shared,

I was really excited to actually use the cup. I was very nervous at first, but then during COVID I started to learn how to use it. I was at home, in my home environment, so it's very, like, safe. I didn't feel pressured, like time wise or anything.

Her experience highlights how the pandemic restrictions resulted in a space experiment with sustainable habits. Adrienne's decision to adopt the use of a menstrual cup reflects broader societal trends, emphasising individual responsibility for sustainability. The lockdown offered an opportunity to reassess and experiment with personal practices in a ‘safe environment’, which allowed her to adjust to this new method without the usual pressures of work and social expectations. This period fostered shifts toward sustainable behaviours while also intersecting with the gendered pressures to manage menstruation discreetly. As Zoe's, Faye's and Adrienne's stories

illustrate, the pandemic not only created opportunities for personal experimentation but also reinforced ideals of self-improvement and accountability.

Endless Time, Endless Pressure: Balancing Gendered Expectations, Environmental Consciousness, and Cost

Faye highlights menstruation as a critical issue with respect to her environmental impact, noting, 'periods are a big one'. The amount of bleeding directly affects the number of menstrual products an individual needs, causing additional pressure for women who require more products. This increased demand leads to greater financial and environmental considerations. Faye's account of menstruation during COVID-19 underscores it as a focal point for environmental responsibility, whether actively resisted or unconsciously accepted.

You know, it's not really something I've thought about until the past couple of years. But I think like sustainability has been a big, and periods are a big one. I don't use a lot of, wouldn't normally use a lot of products. But yeah, like it does add up over time, and the cost. (Faye, 28, prefer not to say)

She elaborates on this by stating, 'like an anti-capitalist thing, I don't have to buy these products or, you know, like, stay within a certain boundary like as a woman. I can just bleed and not let it kind of take over my life'. This statement emphasises that the constraints she faces are not inherent to menstruation itself but stem from societal expectations to manage it discreetly. For Faye, free bleeding represents liberation from waste production, gender norms, and capitalist pressures. Her experience

highlights how menstruation can be both a site of environmental impact transformation and a challenge to entrenched capitalist and gendered expectations.

Sonia echoed this sentiment, expressing frustration over the high cost of menstrual products: 'I resent every time I kind of need to buy new period pants like "how much? What? Twenty-five, 30 quid on a pair of [period] knickers', with Adrienne highlighting the financial barrier: 'they're quite expensive and I feel like that's a big barrier because there's a good chance I mightn't like them'. These reflections illustrate the intersection of environmental, gender, and consumption pressures in the management of menstruation.

I do just use tampons and pads, every time I'm like 'next time I'll use the moon cup!' but then I'm like just forget it [...] Everyone is like 'oh which one are you using, use a reusable one or a cardboard one' and look I'll be honest, I'm using the plastic ones from Tampax and, with all due respect I'm not sure that my, I probably use 10 tampons a year if I'm lucky, and I'm not sure that that's going to be doing much harm to the environment compared to Shell and BP and their oil issues, so you know, leave me alone. (Emily, 26, working class)

As much as Emily explicitly claims that individuals should not feel excessive pressure regarding their environmental impact, the language she uses to begin and end this statement adds layers of depth: 'Look, I'll be honest, I'm using plastic ones', and 'leave me alone'. These statements reveal a defensiveness stemming from her choice not to use environmentally friendly products and highlight a reaction to the perceived expectation to conform to environmental pressures. Emily's words suggest she experiences external pressure as surveillance, as if people frequently question her

choice of menstrual products, creating a sense of scrutiny and intrusion. This context illustrates the societal expectation to establish one's self through environmental capital, as signalled by the use of certain eco-friendly products. However, Emily's response challenges this notion, highlighting her personal decision-making process and her rejection of societal judgement.

Emily's refusal underscores the complex struggle between environmental pressure and the framework of depoliticisation. Depoliticisation shifts the focus from systemic and collective solutions to large-scale issues like environmental degradation to individual actions and consumer choices. This focus on personal responsibility not only shifts attention away from structural change but also strips activism of its collective power, making it an individual burden (Shiva, 2003; Fraser, 2019). Emily acknowledges the inherent unfairness of placing women in this difficult position—needing to use period products while simultaneously striving to minimise environmental impact. This concept captures the impossibility of meeting ideal environmental responsibilities because of conflicting expectations with respect to bodily needs, available resources, and social norms (Shotwell, 2016). Emily's plea to be 'left alone' highlights the struggle to navigate this complex space, where environmental sustainability demands clash with personal and practical realities. It underscores the challenge of balancing ecological footprints with menstrual needs, and the related social pressures participants face.

Emily's request for space reveals a deeper conflict, where the emphasis on individual responsibility often overlooks the systemic barriers that complicate personal choices. This situation illustrates the unrealistic expectations placed on individuals to manage their environmental impact perfectly while meeting their physiological needs and

adhering to social norms. It exemplifies how addressing environmental issues prioritises personal action over collective solutions and systemic change.

I am not suggesting that we disregard the impact of disposable products on the environment. Rather, I propose that we expand the range of options available to individuals. Product choices are influenced by various factors, including cultural and religious beliefs, personal experiences, politics, and class constraints. Menstruation is a highly variable process—individual differences in bleeding amount, cramps, cervix position, and other bodily factors all influence product selection. Thus, the privilege of choice or the burden of restriction can vary widely.

The overlap between advertising and advocacy in menstrual product marketing is significant (Rostvik, 2021). This trend extends to broader advertising practices, with eco-friendly campaigns often targeting female audiences (Duckett, 2018). Advertisers frequently respond to and co-opt popular ideologies, creating a feedback loop where the lines between advertising and advocacy blur. Campaigns not only promote eco-friendly products but also reinforce the idea that women should bear responsibility for sustainable practices. This responsibility extends beyond the individual to encompass the environmental impact of their entire household, reinforcing the gendered burden of environmental responsibility (d'Eaubonne, 1974). As I have argued, unless alternative practices like free bleeding are viable and desired, women primarily engage in environmentalism through the consumption of marketed products. My findings suggest that the intersection of gender roles and environmental responsibility places participants under pressure not only to adopt environmentally friendly practices but to embrace the most eco-friendly options available. In this context, the concept of the 'EcoGirl' emerges—a middle class and gendered reconfiguration of the hippie,

representing the establishment of identity, value, and social capital, as configured through environmentalism.

EcoGirl vs. Hippie: Unravelling Gendered Environmental Identities and Capital.

Within the broader theme of environmental pressure and the dominant rhetoric surrounding the use of reusable products, a deeper understanding is required of how individuals accumulate capital, as configured through environmentalism (Bobel, 2019; Punzi & Werner, 2020; Rousseau, 2023). This process reveals that environmental impact is not only a societal pressure urging individuals to 'do their part', but also intersects with and intensifies pre-existing gendered and classed struggles. These pressures manifest as participants navigate sustainability, particularly in relation to menstrual products, which are framed as both environmental and social markers of responsibility and morals.

As established in the previous chapter, participants often view consumption as a mechanism through which they can express and achieve agency. This perspective aligns with Strathern's (1992) argument that consumption operates as a 'technology of choice'—a tool individuals use to perform and construct what they perceive as an 'authentic' self. In relation to menstrual products, this authenticity is frequently pursued through choices that carry symbolic significance, such as using 'higher value' goods, specifically reusable or sustainable products. This finding highlights how the self is shaped not only through purchased products, but also in contrast to free period products, expanding the notion of value in relation to identity formation.

The notion that choosing the ‘right’ period product could save the world seems exaggerated. Haraway (2016) warns against such simplifications, critiquing the idea that individual actions alone can solve complex ecological crises. I argue that the pressure to adopt sustainable menstrual products is part of a broader strategy that shifts responsibility from systemic change to individual actions, reinforcing capitalist consumerism even in the realm of eco-consciousness. McRobbie (2009) also discusses this issue, highlighting how processes of depoliticisation often repackage feminist practices and ideas, stripping them of their collective power and transforming them into individual responsibilities. This process underscores how feminist movements can be depoliticised, turning what were once collective struggles into matters of personal responsibility.

This moralising force—framed as both a gendered expectation and a classed marker of ‘responsibility’—places additional burdens on women. As noted by Skeggs (2004), middle-class individuals often possess the time, money, and cultural knowledge required to navigate and accumulate social and environmental capital through their consumer choices. For working-class women, this pressure can be more difficult to navigate, as they may lack the resources to purchase eco-friendly products, further complicating the idea that these choices are universally accessible or meaningful. Participants described moments of perceived choice and struggle as they sought to create this self through symbolically coded material goods (Skeggs, 2004). The adoption of reusable menstrual products facilitated the exchange of social capital, configured through environmentalism. These products, viewed as a symbol of ethical and environmentally responsible behaviour, became a way for participants to engage in ‘correct’ practices, thereby affirming their values. Choosing such options is not an

isolated act, but rather engagement in a broader social discourse that rewards sustainability with social recognition.

The provision of free period products, as discussed in the previous chapter, has significantly altered the menstrual landscape. This shift has not only changed the material availability of menstrual products but has also transformed the symbolic value attached to individuals' choice of products. While providing free access to menstrual goods may appear to democratise choice, the reality is more complex. The ability to select and use sustainable, reusable products—those that align with environmental values—has become a key marker of social capital. This reinforces class distinctions, as those with greater economic or cultural capital are more likely to have access to and choose these products, further solidifying their social position. The majority of participants who were using environmentally friendly menstrual products, noted that these allowed them to feel more connected to what they described as a 'grounded' and connected self. For instance, Adrienne (30, middle class) emphasised that her use of sustainable period products facilitated a deeper connection to her identity, aligning her with broader environmental values and principles she aspired to embody. This connection illustrates how sustainability is not merely an external pressure but an integral part of the Adrienne's idea of self.

I think it would be very, like sad to be quite disconnected from that now, yeah, I just think it cuts out, like so much. I think yeah, there's a [...] having your period is quite an emotional thing, but it's also it's quite nice though. I wouldn't want to like lose that by using tampons [...] it's such a valuable thing, to feel connected to yourself in that way. (Jo, 25, prefer not to say)

Jo reveals a deep, personal connection to her experience of menstruation, describing it as 'sacred'. This connection is emblematic of the broader story of spiritual feminism, which posits that women possess a unique, intrinsic relationship to their bodies and the natural world (Bobel, 2010). Jo reflects the tension between gendered and environmental pressures, particularly regarding menstrual product choices. She describes a profound connection to her menstrual cycle, one she fears losing through the use of tampons, which she believes would sever her sense of self. Her apprehension about returning to tampons highlights her belief that reusable menstrual pads facilitate a more meaningful relationship with her body—a connection imbued with symbolic value. Jo suggests that tampons, which are available for free, lack the symbolic value of reusable products, which are considered more aligned with a valued self, emphasising the potential loss of this connection. This suggests that using tampons prevents others from establishing a deeper connection with their bodies, which Jo links to her use of eco-friendly, reusable pads.

Jo (25, prefer not to say) elaborates further, explaining that she views her hormonal fluctuations as a reminder of the cyclical nature of her body, offering her a humbling connection to her emotional and physical self. She describes her menstruation as a release, and a spiritual and cyclical experience that grounds her, allowing her to feel more in tune with herself. By using reusable menstrual pads, which she refers to as 'eco pads', Jo feels she is engaging in a practice that aligns not only with her personal values but also with a broader environmental consciousness. This perception is reinforced by the marketing of such products as 'eco', a term that blurs the lines between genuine environmental impact and commercial profitability. Her deliberate, repeated use of 'eco', instead of terms like fabric or reusable, underscores her

emphasis that these are not just reusable pads but 'eco' pads, thereby highlighting their symbolic value and commercialisation.

Farah (43, middle class) echoes similar sentiments by sharing her intention to make her own reusable pads from organic materials. For Farah, the choice to use both reusable and 'organic' menstrual products is grounded in her belief that these materials are better for her body and for the planet. She explains, 'I just do it myself, buy some good organic cotton material, and then just wash it and use it'. While reusable cloth pads are far from a modern innovation, having been the primary option before disposable menstrual products (Kidd & Farrell-Beck, 1997; Bobel, 2010), they are now rebranded as 'eco' within a modern environmentalist framework that adds layers of social capital to their use, association and value.

Farah emphasises the added value of environmental responsibility. Her desire to highlight the eco-friendly nature of her menstrual products serves to distinguish her choices from disposable alternatives, framing her actions as a conscious, ethical choice. Using the term 'eco' here is symbolic, representing a blend of environmental and social capital. It projects an image of responsibility, aligning her identity with broader movements toward sustainability. In this way, the figure of the EcoGirl emerges—a woman constructs her 'self' through her consumer choices, loaded with symbolic feminine capital.

The connection between menstrual products and environmentalism also highlights the inherent relationship between humanity and the natural world. However, my analysis suggests a tendency to romanticise this connection, especially within the framework of second wave spiritual feminism. This movement often portrays menstruation,

childbirth, and menopause as evidence of a divine feminine bond with nature, an account that positions women as inherently more connected to the Earth. Ecofeminist scholars have critiqued this romanticisation, warning that it risks reinforcing existing social inequalities. Commodifying nature and essentialising women's roles can perpetuate social disparities, even within environmental movements (Shiva, 1988, 1993; Merchant, 2003).

A number of participants' accounts frequently reflected elements of spiritual feminism, with its assertions that women's experiences of menstruation, menopause, and childbirth grant them a unique connection to the Earth's cycles and wisdom. Spiritual feminists advocate for change through personal transformation—believing that ‘social change happens slowly but profoundly, one enlightened and empowered woman at a time’ (Bobel, 2010: 69) — thus narrowly focusing on individual experiences. During the second wave of feminism, spiritual feminists were often predominantly middle-class white women, more concerned with their own issues than with broader, systemic inequalities (hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984).

The overlap between environmentalism, nature, ecofeminism, and spiritual feminism is often complex and indistinct. For instance, Zoe, a participant who identifies as a radical feminist, incorporates self-care rituals based on ‘feminine power, moon cycles, and astrology’ into her practices. She describes these rituals as a way of ‘reclaiming’ her feminine power through menstruation, striving for an authentic connection to her body. This self-reclamation echoes critiques from d'Eaubonne (1974), who argued that the co-opting of ecofeminism in France during the 1960s and 1970s often reinforced privilege for certain women, reconnecting them to their bodies in an individualised and depoliticised manner. This, according to d'Eaubonne, resembled personal

development more than a fight against systemic oppression (d'Eaubonne, 1974, p. xxxiv). Her critique aligns with my broader argument that the co-opting of feminist and environmental accounts can depoliticise activism, transforming it into a matter of personal lifestyle 'choices'.

The pressure to engage in environmentally and socially responsible practices can feel overwhelming. The intersection of environmental pressure, gender expectations, and class dynamics complicates the self. This also emphasises the recurring patterns and tensions within feminist discourse, particularly relating to how it frames and practices environmentalism ((Bobel, 2019; Punzi & Werner, 2020; Rousseau, 2023). As participants navigate these multifaceted pressures, their choices around menstrual products reveal how deeply interconnected personal identity, class, and environmental values have become. By understanding these nuanced dynamics, we gain insight into how participants negotiate their identities within the broader societal frameworks that continue to shape their experiences.

This, Not That: (Re)Evaluating to Establish Distinction

Jo navigates a delicate balance between distancing herself from stereotypes associated with nature—such as hippies, tree-hugging, and rituals—and embracing concepts like cycles, spirituality, and self-connection, particularly during menstruation. She articulates this tension in her experience with a menstrual cup: "it [menstrual cup] just makes me feel a little bit more connected with nature in a strange way, and I'm not like a hippie person that's like, you know, hugging trees and stuff" (Jo, 25, prefer not to say). This statement highlights Jo's sense of connection to nature through her menstrual choices, while also emphasising her rejection of the 'hippie' stereotype,

reflecting a broader cultural rhetoric about environmentalism and self-identity. Jo's perception of connection, facilitated by using a menstrual cup, contrasts with the potential disconnection she feels when using disposable products like tampons. For her, this connection is both emotional and natural but also carries a distinction in value between 'eco' reusable pads and traditional disposable products. Her insistence on differentiating herself from the 'hippie' stereotype reflects an awareness of the social stigma associated with such identities. The term 'tree hugger', which Jo seeks to distance herself from, originates from the 1970s grassroots Chipko movement in the Western Himalayas, where women engaged in non-violent protests to prevent deforestation, literally hugging trees to protect them (Mundoli, 2024). Over time, the term has become shorthand for environmental activism, often with a negative connotation in mainstream culture.

Research by Black and Cherrier (2010) found that individuals who engage in conservation efforts often reject labels like 'tree hugger' despite their environmental commitment. The authors argue that the fear of being seen as outside the mainstream inhibits the adoption of environmental practices. Similarly, Bedford et al. (2004) note that in social contexts where environmental actions are not normative, individuals are less likely to align their behaviour with personal environmental values, in order to avoid negative associations with environmentalism. These studies align with Jo's desire to reject the hippie identity, reflecting a tension between enacting environmentally conscious practices and resisting the stereotypes that come with them.

Drawing on Adkins' (2018) feminist interpretation of Bourdieu's (1979) work, individuals strategically use their gender and class resources to construct their identities. In Jo's case, she is carefully negotiating her gendered and environmental

identity, striving to embody the socially valued EcoGirl identity—an environmentally conscious woman—without crossing into the realm of being perceived as an undesirable, overly naturalistic ‘hippie’. This negotiation is echoed by other participants, such as Sonia, who also distances herself from the ‘hippie’ stereotype.

I think there was a reference to a cup, but it was a weird hippie thing that you know, you didn't, just not, not something that was ever talked about certainly sort of in my teens at all, even my 20s. I have to say it wasn't something kind of picked up. (Sonia, 42, middle class)

Sonia reflects on how, during her teens and twenties, she and her friends dismissed the menstrual cup as ‘a weird hippie thing’. The prevailing discourse on menstruation, influenced by product advertising, emphasised concealing and controlling the menstruating body (Campbell et al., 2021). Sonia's earlier rejection of the menstrual cup aligns with the framing of menstruation in postfeminist and menstrual accounts of the 1990s and 2000s as something to be discreetly managed (Chrisler, 2011; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). Further, environmental impact was rarely a concern in discussions of menstrual products (Stevenson, 2012). However, in her 40s Sonia began using a menstrual cup during perimenopause, describing it as revolutionary in helping her better understand her body's changes. Yet, she still identifies as ‘not eco green’, reflecting a mixture of environmental awareness and lingering discomfort with the hippie label. This language shows her attempt to distance the menstrual cup from its past associations with extreme environmentalism or excessive eco-consciousness.

Despite being nearly two decades apart in age, both Jo and Sonia actively distanced themselves from the unwanted 'hippie' label. The growing mainstream acceptance of menstrual cups has normalised their use, removing much of the 'hippie' connotation. Both women closely tie their identities to class and value, relying on the othering of groups they perceive as undesirable (Skeggs, 1997). As menstrual cups have gained popularity for their lower environmental impact (Stewart, Powell, and Greer, 2009; Rousseau, 2023), the association with hippies has diminished, allowing users to align themselves with environmental responsibility without embracing the full 'hippie' identity.

The concept of natural as opposed to artificial, as explored by Skeggs (2004), is central to these participants' accounts. Historically, natural has been associated with closeness to nature, with Wallace (1979) arguing that the boundaries between what is considered natural versus artificial play a significant role in determining what is deemed authentic. This juxtaposition between the natural and the artificial becomes especially pronounced in considering menstruation: 'period pants are, not cleaner, because I don't agree that one is cleaner than another, but that personally I feel less gross about it' (Lucia, 24, working class).

Menstruation, as a naturally occurring phenomenon, should theoretically align with the 'natural' side of the natural/artificial dichotomy. Lucia states that while she does not believe one product is inherently cleaner than another, she feels 'less gross' using period pants, a reusable menstrual product. Similarly, Eimear reflects this sentiment when she says, 'whereas now it's like reusable stuff, I don't know, it feels way more natural against my skin'.

The EcoGirl identity exemplifies this process by positioning sustainable menstrual practices as not just environmentally responsible choices, but as cultural practices that confer social capital. These practices serve as a way for participants to establish their position in the social hierarchy, thus perpetuating and reinforcing class boundaries. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) theories on taste and social distinction, the adoption of reusable menstrual products becomes a marker of cultural capital, associated with middle-class values of environmental sustainability and responsibility, challenging the notion that these practices are solely about personal preference or convenience. Instead, this highlights that menstrual management is deeply embedded in a web of social relations and cultural expectations heavily influenced by class. Class distinctions are evident in how participants like Jo and Sonia navigate their menstrual product choices, reflecting broader societal values and judgments about environmental responsibility and femininity.

Jo and Sonia align themselves with a more 'natural' experience of menstruation while distancing themselves from the 'hippie' stereotype. This negotiation occurs within a context where disposable products are widely available and often free, while reusable products are more expensive and harder to access, as established in Chapter 4. Participants position menstrual products as technologies that shape the embodied experience of menstruation, framing it as either more or less natural. Their preferences, judgments, and associations fall along a spectrum from 'unnatural', as characterised by terms such as 'icky', 'plastic', 'damaging to the body', and 'gross', to 'natural', 'connected', and 'organic', which are seen as more authentic. Importantly, these associations are not neutral but are deeply embedded within broader cultural anxieties surrounding class, gender, and bodily control.

This spectrum of perceived naturalness intersects with notions of respectability and class identity. The interplay between Littler's (2013) *Yummy Mummy*, Tyler's (2008) *Chav*, and McRobbie's (2007) *Top Girl* provides a nuanced framework for understanding how menstrual product choices become markers of cultural capital. These concepts explore how individuals construct and evaluate class identities, often in conflicting ways. Tyler's *Chav* highlights the stigmatisation of working-class identities, portrayed in the media as lacking taste, morality, and cultural capital. This figure reinforces class boundaries by contrasting with the middle-class respectability exemplified by the *Yummy Mummy*, who embodies middle-class virtues through her lifestyle, parenting, and consumption choices—aligning with Bourdieu's (1985, 1999) notion of cultural capital and the 'right' taste (Adkins, 2007).

Menstrual products operate within this classed landscape, reinforcing hierarchies of respectability. Reusable products, such as menstrual cups and organic cotton pads, are framed as 'natural' and 'connected', while disposable products—particularly those deemed excessively 'plastic' or 'damaging to the body'—are marked as undesirable. As Jo and Sonia's accounts illustrate, distancing oneself from the hippie stereotype requires navigating a fine balance between embracing sustainability and maintaining social acceptability. This is particularly salient in relation to McRobbie's *Top Girl*, who embodies neoliberal pressures on young women to succeed in education, career, and personal life, symbolising an aspirational femininity that aligns with middle-class values of individual achievement and self-discipline. The expectation to make 'good' menstrual product choices—those that are sustainable yet not excessively 'natural'—further reinforces these pressures.

Integrating the concept of the EcoGirl invokes an iteration of middle-class identity, one that embodies a strategic balance between naturalness and control. The EcoGirl adopts sustainable practices, such as using reusable menstrual products, as a means of accumulating cultural capital and signifying environmental responsibility. However, she does so in a measured way, distancing herself from the hippie, who is associated with an uncontrolled, excessive naturalness that falls outside the boundaries of respectability. Participants' discourse around menstrual products reflects this distinction—while disposable products are often framed as 'unnatural', fully embracing 'natural' alternatives can risk association with a social category that is devalued. The EcoGirl, much like the Yummy Mummy and Top Girl, represents a controlled, curated approach to environmentalism that aligns with middle-class values and respectability, further emphasising the moralisation of class.

Douglas's (1976) work on the cultural boundaries surrounding the menstruating body, highlights how the rejection of being 'too natural' serves to uphold the social order. Douglas writes that ideas about separating, purifying, and demarcating the body 'have as their main function to impose a system on an inherently untidy experience' (Douglas, 1976: 5). Menstruation, often seen as a chaotic and 'untidy' process, is culturally regulated to maintain order. In this context, menstrual products function as tools used to control the body, shaping embodied experiences in ways that align with broader social structures. The figure of the hippie, with her excessive connection with nature, is devalued, while those who embrace environmentalism in a more measured, controlled way—like the EcoGirl—are celebrated.

This distinction reflects the fine line participants walk between environmentalism, femininity, and class, as they navigate the desire for an authentic self without stepping

outside the boundaries of social respectability. The stereotype of the hippie as tasteless and outside the norm contrasts sharply with the EcoGirl, whose environmental consciousness and menstrual product choices align her with normative values. The cultural framing of menstrual products as either 'natural' or 'unnatural' is not simply about personal preference; it is embedded in broader narratives of class and respectability politics.

Cultural Omnivorousness in Period Products

Erika (36, lower middle class) recalls hearing about menstrual cups in her 20s, 'I remember when I was in 20s I heard this kind of myth that there was this cup you can use, but I wouldn't know someone who had one, I didn't know how to get one'. While the idea resonated with her political beliefs, it felt unattainable because of a lack of information on where to get one, with her describing it as 'like a unicorn thing'. Erika identifies as a hippie, and during her 20s was deeply immersed in this identity. She describes her menstrual hippie ethos with phrases like 'shared experience with many other women', 'reusing my blood for a variety of purposes, mostly for my gardening', and 'not wanting to damage our planet in an unnecessary way'. This ethos reflects a collective, ecofeminist perspective, aligning with d'Eaubonne's (1974) writings on ecofeminism, which emphasise collective care and environmental interconnectedness as opposed to consumption and distinction. Erika has used a menstrual cup for over a decade, well before its recent rise in popularity, stating 'I didn't know if it was going to be particularly weird that I talked about my hippie relationship with my period but it didn't seem weird so it was good'. She expresses gratitude for the opportunity to discuss the 'weird' aspects of her menstrual practices during the interview, noting that

her use of menstrual products and the repurposing of menstrual blood have previously drawn negative responses. She appears unaware of the menstrual cup's swift rise in popularity, questioning if it is still 'a little bit of a unicorn'. This re-evaluation positions menstrual cups as an ideal mechanism for navigating gendered expectations surrounding menstrual management. It aligns with environmental concerns and notions of nature without risking excess or failure, contrasting with the perception of the hippie identity as excessively natural.

Feminist scholarship extensively documents the notion of excess attached to women. Societal regulation often subjects women's bodies to scrutiny, resulting in perceptions of excess—whether it's being too fat, wearing too much makeup, or being overly sexualised. Such perceptions mark a failure to self-manage the body (Bordo, 1993; Harjuen, 2016). As I have argued, the social construction of menstruation leads individuals to manage it in ways that reinforce the complex interplay between gender, the body, and social expectations. Menstruation has been carefully controlled to prevent both symbolic and literal spillover (Bordo, 1993; Bobel, 2010). While a connection to nature is often presented as desirable and valuable, there is a threshold beyond which this connection is deemed excessive. This creates a paradox: observing menstrual blood is acceptable, yet its utilisation is excessive.

Douglas's observation that societies use processes of separation, purification, and demarcation to impose order on inherently untidy experiences is highly relevant to the management of menstruation; 'separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience'. (Douglas, 1976: 5). Society rigorously controls menstruation, viewing it as a messy and potentially disruptive bodily function, to maintain cleanliness and

order. The regulation of menstruation through period products and societal norms reflects a broader effort to systematise and sanitise this natural process, aligning with cultural values that seek to suppress its inherent disorder. This dynamic is clear in the contrast between the 'hippie' ethos, which embraces the natural aspects of menstruation and environmental impact, and the 'EcoGirl', who manages both menstruation and environmental concerns within a framework of self-regulation. Douglas's (1976) framework helps us understand how these control mechanisms address societal anxieties about the messy realities of bodily functions while reinforcing norms of order and cleanliness.

In her exploration of social class dynamics, Skeggs (2004) illustrates how middle-class individuals access and repurpose cultural resources traditionally associated with the working class. This process allows them to accrue social capital in ways that working-class individuals often cannot, due to limitations related to money, time, and knowledge. As Skeggs points out, 'omnivorousness does not work in reverse because of the money, time, and knowledge required to know what to access and how to use what has been accessed (2004:145). The concept of cultural omnivorousness explains how the middle class derives new value from practices once common in other social groups, such as those associated with hippies. In this context, the EcoGirl navigates environmental pressures by incorporating sustainable menstrual practices and products into her routine, transforming them into markers of respectability and environmental consciousness.

McRobbie (2009) examines how middle-class contexts appropriate and redefine feminist ideas and cultural practices, often stripping them of their original meanings and repurposing them for consumption by the middle class. This process aligns with

how EcoGirls adopt menstrual products like the menstrual cup—once deemed ‘weird’ and undesirable, as noted by Sonia and Erika—transforming them into symbols of environmental consciousness and social value. Similarly, Haraway's (2016) work on feminist technoscience highlights how feminist and ecological practices are adapted to align with middle-class values. Haraway's analysis complements the idea that middle-class individuals leverage cultural resources to build and establish capital by reframing environmental and technological practices within their social context. The EcoGirl exemplifies this dynamic by reappropriating menstrual products associated with hippie culture, recontextualising them to enhance her environmental and social capital.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have explored the complex web of responsibility participants feel regarding the environmental impact of their menstruation. Many participants described the environmental harm caused by single-use menstrual products as a significant burden. Twenty-two of 27 participants expressed a deep sense of personal responsibility for addressing the environmental crisis, framing it as an individual obligation. This framing reflects broader societal discourses that emphasise individual accountability, particularly concerning menstruation. At times, participants prioritised sustainable menstrual practices over personal comfort, revealing both the weight of environmental pressure and the gendered dimensions of this responsibility. The expectation to make environmentally friendly choices led to feelings of inadequacy, as participants navigated the tension between bodily comfort and environmental consciousness.

This pressure to 'save' the environment through product choices emerged as a complex, contradictory expectation. Even the most environmentally conscious consumer choices are not without their own ecological impacts. Stowell (2016) argues that striving for purity in environmental practices often results in a paradox: the act of consumption, regardless of intent, contributes to ecological harm. In the case of menstrual products, this highlights the inherent flaw in trying to achieve a truly sustainable menstrual practice through consumerism alone, further emphasising the tension between eco-friendly desires and the reality of consumption.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these bodily management and environmental pressures, offering participants both time and space to reflect on and further embed environmental scrutiny into their lives. The pandemic became an 'opportunity' to reexamine personal practices, intensifying the pressure to constantly reassess and improve one's environmental footprint. Accounts from participants during and after lockdown vividly depict the relentless self-scrutiny involved in striving to meet perceived environmental standards. This constant pressure left participants feeling they were never doing enough to meet these expectations. In examining these dynamics, I identified the emergence of the EcoGirl identity, which serves as a marker of social capital configured through environmentalism. This identity positions sustainable menstrual practices not just as environmentally responsible choices but as cultural practices that confer social distinction. Bourdieu's (1984) theories on taste and social distinction are evident in the ways in which participants described their connection to a 'grounded', authentic self through the use of reusable products. These products, while not new, were reimagined as vehicles for fostering natural and

authentic menstrual practices, reflecting the intersection of environmentalism, ecofeminism, and spiritual feminism.

The adoption of sustainable menstrual products is deeply embedded in social relations and cultural expectations, heavily influenced by class. This research challenges the notion that menstrual practices are solely about personal preference or convenience. Instead, it underscores how they are shaped by the intersection of environmental responsibility, societal expectations, and class-based dynamics.

The desire to adopt sustainable menstrual products reflects broader struggles within the framework of individualisation, where participants face pressure to engage in socially and environmentally responsible practices. Successfully navigating these pressures requires a 'feel for the game' (Adkins, 2018), which includes attaining the necessary resources, knowledge, and social capital. Participants were aware of this, expressing a desire to avoid being labelled as 'tree huggers' or 'weird hippies', while simultaneously striving to establish an ecofriendly self. The stereotypical image of the excessive, tasteless hippie contrasts sharply with the desired identity of the EcoGirl, who achieves environmental credibility through consumption and the adoption of socially valuable menstrual behaviours. This dynamic highlights the reproduction of gender expectations and class distinctions.

In conclusion, the adoption of sustainable menstrual practices is not just an individual decision but a socially loaded act, deeply intertwined with environmental, gendered, and class-based dynamics. By engaging in these practices, individuals navigate a complex terrain of societal expectations, personal identity, and ecological responsibility. Understanding these intersections is essential if we are to develop more

inclusive and supportive approaches to sustainable menstrual practices—ones that acknowledge the limitations of individual consumer actions and advocate for broader systemic change. An essential aspect often overlooked in these discussions is the role of disability, which intersects with gender, class, and broader inequalities in menstruation. Addressing this is vital for future research to understand how menstrual products not only serve practical needs but also (re)construct social structures and hierarchies (Claire, 2017; Steele & Goldblatt, 2020). Disability-inclusive perspectives on menstruation are key to developing a more equitable understanding of how sustainable practices may be accessible or inaccessible across different groups.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This concluding chapter brings together the key arguments and findings of this research, reflecting on how period products shape embodied experiences of menstruation and reveal broader social, political, and cultural pressures. While menstruation is often framed in literature as a gendered experience marked by shame, stigma, and objectification, this study demonstrates the additional intersections of class, sexualisation, and environmental responsibility that complicate participant experiences. By examining how period products and comparable items like contraceptives, mediate identity, social norms, and structural inequalities, this research highlights the ways in which material objects both reinforce and resist systems of gender, class, and consumer expectations.

Through a critical feminist and intersectional lens, this chapter considers the implications of these findings for policy, activism, and future research, illustrating the necessity of linking menstrual advocacy with systemic reform. It reflects on the limitations of interventions such as the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020), showing the risks of detaching policy from the embodied, lived realities of menstruation. Ultimately, this chapter positions the study as a framework for understanding menstruation not merely as a physiological event, but as a deeply social and political experience that demands integrated, intersectional approaches to equity, sustainability, and feminist praxis.

By embedding feminist principles into menstrual practices and addressing both micro- and macro-level inequalities, this research emphasizes the importance of combining

collective grassroots efforts with systemic reform. It also deepens our understanding of the intersections between gender, class, and environmental responsibility, offering a critical framework for future research and interventions aimed at achieving menstrual equity and sustainability.

Contribution

This chapter addresses the central arguments and findings of my research, focusing on the research question regarding the role of period products in shaping embodied experiences of menstruation. These experiences both reflect and resist the social, political, and cultural pressures that individuals face. The growing public and political conversation about menstruation necessitates a deeper exploration of these embodied experiences, focusing on recurring patterns and pressures in everyday settings. A critical review of existing literature revealed a gap in addressing the complex, embodied experiences of menstruation, particularly in the current climate of heightened political and popular engagement. While existing research often frames menstruation as a gendered experience emphasising shame, objectification, and stigma, my study highlights additional intersections—such as class distinctions, sexualisation, and the environmental impact of period products—that further complicate participant experiences.

This study integrates menstrual and feminist research, establishing a framework that uses menstruation as a lens to examine broader social inequities. Shifting the focus from the social construction of menstruation itself, I argue that period products, as sites of interaction, reveal systemic issues of gender, class, norms, and consumerism. My findings emphasise that menstruation is a deeply intersectional experience, shaped

by societal pressures and individualised ideologies that influence perceptions of success, respectability, and environmental responsibility. Despite the existing body of work, researchers often examine menstruation within isolated contexts, neglecting how these elements are interconnected.

Grounded in four years of research and interviews conducted with 27 women and nonbinary people in Scotland, this study drew upon feminist scholarship to explore how these factors converge. My findings challenge initial assumptions, revealing that period products, far from being neutral or purely utilitarian, often function as mechanisms for societal restrictions, pressures, sexualisation, and norms of appropriateness imposed on bodies and identities. These products are imbued with meaning, serving as markers of class and environmental consciousness that attribute value, responsibility, and accountability to individuals. In this sense, period products are not merely tools but sites where menstruation is embodied as a social experience. Participants used these products to express, enact, and resist individual and collective identities while simultaneously reinforcing and reproducing gender and class subjectivities, such as the imagined 'in-need' woman and the 'EcoGirl'. This dual function highlights the complex interplay between personal experiences and structural norms, illustrating how societal constructions reach and influence individuals through material products.

Building on these findings, I explored the multifaceted ways in which menstruation and associated products shape identity formation and social positioning. Participants' accounts underscored the pressures to conform to societal norms, particularly around gender, sexuality, and class. These narratives revealed the critical role of menstrual products in constructing socially acceptable and respectable bodies. My data also

extended to products such as contraceptives, which, like period products, impose and reinforce social structures of gender, sexuality, and class, while simultaneously serving as sites for resistance. This comparison underscores how these items function as both material and symbolic tools of agency and constraint.

Through a critical feminist lens, I examined how these items are imbued with social significance, reinforcing gender and class inequalities while perpetuating the fallacy of individual empowerment. Legislative measures, such as the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020), were scrutinised to uncover how policy initiatives aimed at addressing period poverty, stigma, and educational impacts often reflect a fragmented, liberal feminist approach. While the bill's provision of free products represents a positive step, its focus on consumer-based solutions risks detaching menstrual activism from the embodied, lived realities of menstruation. This analysis highlighted the intricate intersections of environmental responsibility, gender, and class within policy frameworks, as well as the potential consequences of commodifying and commercialising menstruation. To conclude this research, I reflect on the profound insights gained from participants' accounts and the contributions made to feminist and menstrual scholarship. This study deepens our understanding of the complex relationships between gender, class, and environmental responsibility, offering a critical framework for future research and interventions aimed at promoting menstrual equity and environmental sustainability. By examining period products, girlhood, and the policy context, this research underscores the importance of adopting a comprehensive and inclusive approach to addressing the diverse experiences and systemic inequalities that shape menstrual practices and policies.

Scottish Menstrual Politics and Class Reproduction

My research makes several key contributions to the understanding of Scottish menstrual politics, with particular emphasis on the intersection of class and menstruation. By examining the implementation of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020), and how participants interpret its provisions and products, the reproduction of class inequalities through menstrual practices became clear. Through a critical engagement with the concept of 'period poverty,' it becomes clear that the provision of free menstrual products in Scotland is not merely a resolution to a social issue but a political construction that masks the underlying class inequality and experience of poverty that it claims to address.

Building on Skeggs' (1997, 2004) work on class and Bourdieu's (1987) theories, I explored how menstrual products play a pivotal role in classing the self and others, moving beyond the primary objectives of menstrual policies to critically examine participants' responses and interpretations. It became evident that period products are socially weighted and interpreted, with different participants imbuing them with varying values, often linked to their classed positions. Two intersecting figures emerge from this provision: the policy-driven 'in-need' working-class woman and the participant-constructed figure who is more in-need than themselves. The former is often pathologised and presented as the embodiment of both feminist achievement and political success. Participants use this figure to negotiate their own classed identities and relations to free and/or purchased products, both challenging and reproducing dominant class distinctions through (dis)identification. Further, the construction of the imagined recipient of free products by policy, as a person suffering the 'indignity' of

menstruation without access to necessary products, reveals a tension between policy and participants' lived realities, where management of menstruation without products or with substitute material is commonplace.

Additionally, my research explores how participants navigate menstrual practices in a capitalist, individualistic context, where choices around period products become markers of social distinction. This aspect highlighted how, within this framework, period products—particularly reusable products—are seen as symbols of higher value and taste. These choices, while framed as agentic, ultimately reinforce inequalities by attaching value to individual practices, further entrenching hierarchies. This finding critiques the fallacy of choice, as stated by Strathern (1992) and Taylor (2012), where individual choices, though sold as empowering in a capitalist, individualistic context, reflect and reproduce social inequalities. A significant expansion in this research is the exploration of class dynamics within the growing trend of sustainable menstrual practices, particularly through the lens of the 'EcoGirl' identity. This identity, linked to the adoption of eco-friendly menstrual products such as menstrual cups and reusable pads, serves as a symbol of middle-class values. It functions as a cultural practice that signals social capital, aligning with broader societal expectations around environmentalism and self. By positioning sustainable practices as not only environmentally responsible but as markers of higher social standing, the EcoGirl identity reinforces class boundaries, in line with Skeggs' (1997, 2004) analysis of social capital.

This research further contributes to menstrual scholarship by foregrounding the class-based dimensions of menstrual practices, challenging the notion that these practices are solely about personal preference or convenience. Rather, menstrual practices are

deeply embedded in a web of social relations and cultural expectations, with sustainable menstrual products serving as a performance of class identity. This finding extends Bourdieu's (1984) theories on taste and social distinction by illustrating how cultural consumption patterns, such as choosing sustainable menstrual products, can signal and reinforce an individual's social position, marginalising those who cannot afford or access such products.

Environmental Pressure; Gendered Responsibilities, and Individual Ideologies in Menstrual Practices

My research contributes significant insights into the interplay between environmental pressures, gendered responsibilities, and individual ideologies, particularly within the context of menstruation. Chapter 6 investigated the complex pressures participants face in response to environmental demands, emphasising the intersections of environmental responsibility, gender, and class, all navigated through the lens of individualisation. Participants detailed a deep sense of responsibility to manage menstruation in environmentally conscious ways, therein reflecting broader societal expectations and pressures.

Participants described the burden of responsibility to 'do your bit' for the planet, frequently highlighting the environmental harm of single-use products. Nearly all participants noted feeling a personal responsibility to address the environmental crisis, underscoring how discourses of individualisation shift responsibility from systemic solutions to personal action. This adds a gendered dimension to environmental responsibility, as participants grapple with the expectation to align their menstrual practices with eco-conscious ideals, often at the expense of personal comfort and

preferences. Participants often seemed to feel the need to defend their reasoning for not using sustainable products.

The pressure to adopt sustainable menstrual practices, though framed as empowering, led to feelings of ecological inadequacy. This underscores the unsustainable nature of managing eco-conscious menstruation through consumption alone. Adkins (2018) highlights that the resources required to navigate environmental responsibility correlate with organisational obligations to engage in these practices. Participants' desire to avoid the negative connotations associated with 'tree huggers' or 'hippies' while striving for a 'connection' to an eco-conscious self, often found in the notion of the EcoGirl, as a counterpart to the tasteless, excessive 'hippie' stereotype, illustrates the intricate challenges of navigating environmental and social expectations.

This research further explores how the COVID-19 pandemic intensified these pressures, creating a unique opportunity for participants to consider their menstrual practices. The disruptions caused by lockdowns and social distancing measures amplified existing environmental and social pressures, forcing many to adapt to new circumstances. This aligns with Williams et al.'s (2022) study on 'period poverty,' which found a significant rise in menstrual product scarcity and financial barriers during the pandemic. Participants experienced heightened self-scrutiny and a constant sense of falling short in their environmental efforts, as advertising during the pandemic co-opted feminist ideals to promote consumerism and menstrual empowerment. This period of crisis magnified pre-existing issues, providing a critical lens through which to understand the broader impact of the pandemic on menstrual practices. It underscores how crises can exacerbate social pressures and influence ideological shifts, both reinforcing and challenging existing practices. The context of the pandemic intensified

feelings of personal responsibility, often obscuring the structural issues at play. However, it also provided moments for participants to question and resist these pressures, environmentally through practices like free bleeding and in terms of management by shifting their ideas of 'correct' bodily management. This dynamic shows how COVID-19 restrictions worked as both a catalyst for reinforcing existing inequalities and a space for critical reflection and resistance.

Products as Central to the Reproduction of Gender and Class Subjectivities in Menstruation

In Chapter 4, I examined the use and impact of menstrual products on participants' experiences of menstruation, particularly during girlhood. My analysis revealed that these products play a pivotal role in shaping early menstrual norms and boundaries, significantly influencing participants' understanding of menstruation within the home. Period products emerged as tangible mechanisms reflecting societal expectations of appropriate and respectable bodies and thereby reinforcing gender and class subjectivities. Participants' experiences of menarche were marked as pivotal moments in identity formation, laden with familial input regarding respectability. This, coupled with the use of period products, highlighted how societal norms confine and configure girls' bodies. Participants navigated messages of sexualisation and respectability through their use of period products. The fluidity of girl and teen identities was evident in participants' stories, as they placed themselves within and between these categories, while womanhood was experienced as a marked, materially embodied difference.

Family and home spaces played a crucial role in shaping menstrual experiences, with mothers often positioned as expected caregivers and educators, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles. Fathers were largely absent from these accounts, unless noted for their insufficient involvement. This dynamic underscored how period products mediated social ordering within the home, communicating respectability and personal responsibility. Participants learned to navigate spaces within their homes, often concealing their menstruating bodies, further highlighting the reproduction of menstrual norms and associated ideologies of gender and girlhood. An unexpected finding was the role of contraceptives, which participants identified as central. Like period products, contraceptives served as substitutes and were imbued with social meaning, playing a significant role in enacting social structures related to gender, sexuality, and class. This finding revealed how both contraceptives and period products are key to the (re)production of social norms, offering potential sites for agency and resistance.

Throughout my research, menstrual products emerged as mediators of social norms and inequalities, with this critical examination integrating insights from Bourdieu (1984), Haraway (1985), Martin (2001) and Ahmed (2010) to reveal how material goods function as mechanisms of power and inequality, shaping women's lived realities. Material goods like menstrual products directly affect embodied experiences, influencing societal perceptions and valuations of bodies, gender, and class. This analysis underscored the centrality of material goods in shaping participants' subjective experiences, contributing significantly to the reproduction of gender and class subjectivities. My work calls for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to menstrual scholarship, emphasising the need to address the diverse experiences and

systemic inequalities shaping embodied menstrual practices. Menstrual products serve as more than practical necessities; they mediate deeper issues of gender, class, and environmental responsibility. This has critical implications for feminist and menstrual scholarship, particularly in the realms of policy and advocacy. This involves addressing the need for sustainable menstrual solutions while challenging ideologies that place the burden of environmental responsibility on individuals.

My research highlights the need to redefine environmentalism within feminist contexts, moving beyond individual consumer choices to broader social justice and systemic change. Critiquing the co-option of feminist goals for capitalist agendas, my findings call for an understanding of environmentalism that integrates social justice, collective care, and sustainability. By promoting collective action and systemic change, rather than individual, capitalised efforts, we can better address the complex intersections of gender, class, and environmental responsibility.

Contributing to Feminist Policy and Activism

This research significantly contributes to feminist debates on policy and activism by emphasising the necessity of nuanced and intersectional approaches to menstrual and environmental issues. Current policies, such as the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020), often address only the symptoms—like the lack of access to menstrual products—without challenging the deeper social structures that sustain inequality. This study advocates for feminist policies that simultaneously address systemic structures and individual experiences, promoting a shift from individualised solutions to collective and systemic approaches.

By exploring the intersections of menstrual products, policies, and environmental concerns with gender and class, this research provides critical insights for developing more equitable and effective feminist interventions. The findings underscore the importance of intersectionality in feminist policy and activism, calling for a comprehensive approach that considers diverse experiences and challenges capitalist frameworks that commodify menstrual products and environmental responsibilities. This includes advocating for systemic changes that prioritise collective wellbeing over individualisation. My research highlights the need to move beyond addressing symptoms of inequality to engaging with the underlying structures of power, such as gendered norms, sexualisation, capitalism, and individualisation. By examining how societal norms, political frameworks, and individualised ideologies shape the experiences of menstruating individuals, I argue for an approach that ensures feminist and environmental activism focuses on collective action and systemic change rather than perfunctory, individualised solutions.

Reflecting on the research's significance, it is clear that expanding the ideologies of period positivity and neutrality through intersectional and systemic perspectives is crucial. This approach not only addresses immediate concerns around period products and accessibility but also delves into the socioeconomic and environmental dimensions perpetuating inequality. Acknowledging the diverse experiences shaped by class, gender, disability, and geographic location allows for a more nuanced understanding of embodied experiences.

This study advocates for institutions to move away from top-down, paternalistic approaches toward intersectional, utilitarian information that serves the needs of young women, trans, and nonbinary people who menstruate. The aim is to create safe

community spaces where individuals can discuss and share their embodied knowledge openly, free from shame and societal prejudice. The research highlights the significance of informal education in promoting collective approaches to menstrual activism, thus aligning with feminist traditions of community and shared experiences.

In conclusion, this research makes a multifaceted contribution to feminist and menstrual scholarship. By examining the intersections of menstrual products, policies, and environmental concerns, it offers valuable insights into how societal norms and political frameworks shape participants' experiences across the life course. The study underscores the need for more inclusive and systemic approaches in addressing menstrual and environmental issues, providing critical insights for developing equitable and effective feminist interventions. Through these reflections, I aim to inform feminist policy and activism, advocating for solutions that address the root causes of inequality and promote collective action and systemic change.

Research Design Limitations and Questions for Further Research

Reflection on these aspects is crucial for understanding the scope and impact of my work, as well as acknowledging the inherent complexities and constraints of the research process. Here, I outline the key limitations and considerations that shaped my research, as informed by feminist scholarship and my positionality as a researcher.

Reflexivity in Practice

Reflecting on my research journey, I recognise that my positionality—shaped by my gender, class, race, and cultural background—has been both a constraint and an opportunity. These intersecting identities have inevitably influenced my approach to the research, producing a unique lens through which to interpret and engage with the data. Drawing on feminist scholarship, the process of reflexivity has emerged as a critical methodological and ethical tool, encouraging me to embrace my subjectivity rather than seeking an illusory neutrality. As Haraway (1988) and Harding (1993) argue, the notion of complete objectivity is a myth; instead, ‘strong objectivity’ arises from situating knowledge within one's lived experiences and acknowledging the partiality of all perspectives.

Through this feminist lens, I have come to understand that reflexivity is not a straightforward or easily mastered process. It demands continuous self-interrogation and an awareness of how my positionality influences every aspect of the research—from the questions I pose to the ways in which I interpret participants' accounts. For instance, my interaction with Erin, when she queried my phrasing of a question, revealed the complexities of power dynamics in the research relationship. Her response prompted me to critically examine how my perceived position as a researcher could inadvertently shape participants' answers, highlighting the fluid and context-dependent nature of power relations. This iterative aspect of reflexivity—revisiting and reinterpreting one's role—can be emotionally and intellectually taxing, as it demands ongoing critical reflection on how power and bias manifest throughout the research process.

The works of Crenshaw (1991) and Ahmed (2017), emphasise that reflexivity must account for the multiplicity of identities and experiences that both researchers and participants bring to the table. This scholarship underscores the difficulty of being fully reflexive, as it requires grappling with the often-invisible power structures and biases that permeate the research process. It also involves acknowledging that certain aspects of one's identity or identity markers may remain unexamined, despite efforts to address them. It became clear to me that reflexivity is not just a methodological practice but an ethical and political commitment. This process was not undertaken in isolation. Supervision and peer support were invaluable in identifying potential blind spots and providing alternative perspectives, reinforcing the collective nature of reflexive practice. From a feminist perspective, reflexivity is not just a methodological necessity but an ethical imperative. It holds the complexity of the research process and the lived experiences of participants as integral.

Sampling and Representation

In conducting this research, I employed convenience and targeted snowball sampling methods because of the constraints posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the geographic spread of participants. While these methods were practical, they inevitably introduced potential biases in participant selection, particularly regarding the diversity of experiences among people who menstruate in Scotland. As a qualitative feminist social researcher, it is important to recognise that certain demographics, such as individuals with access to digital technologies, may have been overrepresented in my study. This highlights a significant limitation of the research and underscores the need for more inclusive recruitment strategies in future studies, particularly if the goal is to

capture the experiences of a more diverse and specific group, such as in terms of race, age, and other intersecting identities.

A sample predominantly made up of highly educated individuals can be limiting in feminist research, where inclusivity and diversity are central values. Feminist scholarship has long argued that homogeneity in participant samples, particularly in terms of education and socioeconomic background, restricts our understanding of the phenomena under study. Phipps (2020) critiques how academia often reinforces privilege by focusing on middle-class, educated voices, inadvertently narrowing the scope of feminist research. Ahmed (2017) echoes this, discussing how institutional feminism can unintentionally exclude less privileged groups, leading to a narrower range of perspectives. Crenshaw's (1991) work on intersectional feminist thought highlights the importance of considering diverse social factors—race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability—to achieve a richer understanding of lived experiences.

However, striving for inclusivity in feminist research presents its own set of challenges. A key tension lies in the balance between ensuring diverse representation and avoiding the risk of reducing identities to a 'tick-box' exercise. This approach, sometimes critiqued for oversimplifying complex identities, can inadvertently prioritise diversity as a goal in itself rather than as a means to deepen understanding. To guard against this, feminist research must go beyond superficial representation and actively engage with the nuanced lived experiences of participants. I sought to ensure diversity not by checking boxes, but by employing methods that emphasised relational and contextual understanding, where identities were explored in their fluidity and complexity. However, there were limitations in recruitment—considering efforts to balance snowball sampling with attaining a diverse sample—certain groups have been

underrepresented, reflecting the ongoing challenges in accessing and engaging with certain demographics. Highlighting this is vital as part of reflecting more critically on recruitment strategies, acknowledging structural and practical constraints that prevent researchers from capturing a broader representative spectrum of experiences.

In this research, I worked to ensure that the sample included diverse voices, such as nonbinary, queer, and a diverse age profile of participants. This required ongoing reflexivity, where I critically assessed my own positionality—how my social location, assumptions, and experiences shaped both participant inclusion and the interpretation of their stories. As Haraway (1988) suggests, feminist research demands that we continually question how our positions of power and privilege influence our work. Inclusivity, in this context, was not about fulfilling a diversity quota but about fostering a deeper, more meaningful engagement with the social and political structures that shape the lived experiences of marginalised individuals in my sample. However, I also recognise that this is only a partial step within a broader landscape of feminist menstruation scholarship, where there remains important work to be done—particularly in research in, by, and with queer communities, people of colour, and populations across the Global South. These are urgent directions not just for my own work, but for the field as a whole.

Representation and Diversity

It is important to note and acknowledge a potential limitation of my research, which is the highly educated sample (Appendix 1). A sample composed mainly of highly educated participants may not adequately reflect the experiences of individuals with different classed background. This could lead to a skewed understanding of the issues

at hand because it does not fully represent the experiences and perspectives of differently educated individuals, who might have different constraints and cultural perceptions. Feminist scholars like Smith (1990) and Fraser (1990) have highlighted how academic and professional environments often privilege certain forms of knowledge and discourse, typically those associated with higher education. A highly educated sample may reproduce dominant accounts that align with middle-class values and worldviews, failing to capture the intersectional nature of lived experiences. This invisibility can lead to an incomplete analysis, and not address the full range of issues and concerns relevant to individuals. This limitation can hinder the development of inclusive interventions, not fully accounting for the needs of those who are often marginalised in popular and political discourses.

Hesse-Biber (2012) highlights that feminist approaches emphasise inclusivity and centre the experiences of marginalised communities. A highly educated sample contradicts these principles by potentially excluding the lived realities of a significant portion of the population. Excluding marginalised groups can perpetuate epistemic injustice, as it devalues or ignores certain forms of knowledge and experiences (Fricker, 2007). For feminist research to be genuinely transformative and inclusive, it must strive to include a diverse range of voices, particularly those from underrepresented and marginalised groups. A participant sample that is predominantly highly educated limits the representativeness, diversity, and inclusivity of research findings. This limitation can lead to a biased understanding of the issues under study, particularly in feminist research that aims to address and dismantle structural inequalities. The absence of perspectives from individuals with diverse educational backgrounds in my research could result in the continuation of prevailing

rhetoric and the disregard of the intricate interplay of intersectional identities. It is important to note that my research does not aspire to produce representative analysis.

Impact of COVID-19

The broader effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, on both me and my participants, led to increased stress and emotional strain. While the ability to work from home was both a burden and a blessing, it helped keep the days from blending together. However, this shift in structure caused time to feel fluid, often resulting in periods of detachment from the work and other times of intense engagement. From my perspective, the most significant impact of COVID-19 was the isolation it brought—being physically distanced from peers, institutional support, and the wider academic community. Transitioning to an online environment would have been easier if I had already established connections within that space. Unfortunately, those slightly ahead of me in the PhD timeline, who were facing similar stresses due to COVID-19 restrictions, were less available, contributing to my feelings of isolation. This isolation made the planning and early writing phases of my research more challenging and detached.

Additionally, the shift to online methods may have affected participants' comfort levels, particularly when discussing sensitive topics like menstruation, medical experiences, and sexuality. While I endeavoured to create a supportive and secure virtual space, it's important to recognise the limitations of virtual interactions. External distractions such as dogs, family members, and fire alarms posed challenges that could have impacted the overall experience and the sense of safety for both myself and the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the research design, particularly given the potentially sensitive nature of the primary topic and those that came up as adjacent topics, such as medical and sexual experiences.

Upon reflection, I would have been happier paying participants for participation – both to exhibit thanks and appreciation for their accounts, which became data, albeit my data was handled consciously and ethically. Paying participants aligns with feminist ethics, which prioritise respect, reciprocity, and fair treatment (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Lahman et al., 2015). Compensation can help address power imbalances between researchers and participants, fostering a more collaborative and respectful environment. It also reduces financial barriers to participation, enabling the inclusion and amplification of marginalised voices, which enhances the diversity and inclusivity of research samples (Head, 2009). While I agree with Head (2009) that payment can promote inclusion, I am cautious about participation motivated solely by financial gain. This concern arose when some participants withdrew due to the absence of payment, reflecting the financial pressures many face, rather than any issue with those seeking compensation for their time—which I understand, having participated in focus groups for extra income. However, a significant limitation of this research is its self-funded nature, which restricted my ability to offer payment and, consequently, may have impacted participant diversity and retention.

Reflecting on these limitations and considerations has been an integral part of the research process, guided by a commitment to feminist principles and ethical research practices. Acknowledging the inherent challenges and complexities allows for a more

nuanced and transparent representation of the research findings. While limitations exist, they also offer opportunities for growth and learning, contributing to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of people who menstruate in Scotland. The reflexive nature of this reflection underscores the value of continuous critical engagement in feminist research, striving for inclusivity, transparency, and social justice.

Future Research

Expanding the scope to include different experiences would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by individuals in adopting eco-friendly menstrual practices. Integrating perspectives from girlhood studies could enrich this exploration. Scholars such as Driscoll (2002) and Kearney (2011) emphasise the importance of understanding girlhood as a distinct social category influenced by cultural, economic, and political factors. Future research could examine how young girls and adolescents navigate the pressures of environmental sustainability in their menstrual practices, considering how these pressures intersect with their developing identities and social positions. Understanding the role of girlhood in shaping menstrual experiences can shed light on the specific ways in which young women are socialised into environmental responsibility, potentially revealing age-specific navigation.

Researchers could address these complex intersections by employing a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, would provide rich accounts that capture nuanced experiences. Quantitative methods could then identify

broader trends and correlations, offering a comprehensive view of how different identities influence menstrual practices. This approach not only enriches the data but also allows for a more thorough examination of the systemic issues affecting marginalised groups. Incorporating girlhood studies perspectives would also emphasise the need to understand the unique barriers and facilitators girls face in accessing sustainable menstrual products. According to participants girlhood is often marked by a complex negotiation of cultural expectations and personal identity.

This negotiation becomes applicable in the context of menstrual practices, where societal norms around gender, class, and environmental responsibility converge. By focusing on this demographic, researchers can explore how early exposure to environmental and feminist discourses shape young women's practices with respect to sustainable consumption and their perceptions of their bodies. Future research should incorporate insights from girlhood studies to better understand the complexities of these experiences. Such a comprehensive exploration would not only deepen the understanding of menstrual practices and sustainability but also contribute to more inclusive policy and activism. This aligns with the broader goal of feminist scholarship to challenge systemic inequalities and social structures.

Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis, I have argued that menstruation serves as a site where societal norms, political dynamics, and economic systems converge, perpetuating gender and class inequalities. It is an embodied experience deeply embedded in social structures, extending far beyond a stigmatised physiological process. My findings, drawn from interviews with 27 women and nonbinary people in Scotland, reveal how

period products function not only as material goods but as mechanisms for social norms and pressures. These products play a significant role in shaping embodied experiences. Through the lens of feminist scholarship, my research demonstrates how period products imbue expectations of respectability, sexualisation, and appropriateness, shaping embodied experiences and acting as markers of class and environmental responsibility.

When examining period products as sites where social norms and resistance intersect, it becomes clear that there is a clash between ideas of individual empowerment and the pervasive system of oppression. By considering the larger picture, these objects, along with contraceptives, play a significant role in how social systems (re)construct societal expectations related to gender, sexuality, and class. While participants navigate and resist, they also simultaneously reinforce societal hierarchies, particularly within the context of environmental sustainability, where broader systemic forces and the capitalist landscape shape practices for which individuals are increasingly held accountable. This interaction between personal experiences and structural norms highlights the complex role played by menstruation in reinforcing and resisting societal expectations.

A critical examination of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2021) within this context exposes the limitations of liberal governance in addressing the structural (re)production of period poverty and gender inequality. While providing free period products is an important step, this policy, when viewed through the lens of paternalistic governance risks oversimplification and depoliticisation. The commercialisation of menstrual politics and the focus on product provision without addressing the underlying structures of inequality reflect a fragmented feminism—one

that lacks the capacity to create substantive, long-lasting change. The dislocation of menstruation from feminist politics underscores the need for a more comprehensive approach to menstrual practices and policymaking. This research shows that liberal policies, such as the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2020), alone cannot overcome gender and class inequality. Instead, engagement with grassroots efforts and sustained feminist activism, where collective action challenges the norms, works towards dismantling the systems that (re)construct inequality. By focusing solely on the provision of products, the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act (2021) risks neglecting the broader social, political, and embodied factors that shape menstrual inequality, reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

The significance of this study with respect to feminist and menstrual scholarship is found in its comprehensive analysis of gender, class, and environmental responsibility. Furthermore, it underscores the significance of moving past the mere provision of products and instead directing efforts towards tackling the fundamental systemic factors contributing to inequality. This research emphasises the importance of recognising menstruation as a social experience that is separate from mainstream gender policy, and advocates for the integration of feminist principles into menstrual politics and practices. This involves challenging both individual and systemic factors, with significant implications for how we understand and address gender, class, and environmental responsibility and pressure. The dual role of period products as enforcers of societal norms and tools of resistance underscores the need for feminist scholarship and activism to engage critically with the material and social realities of menstruation.

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Appendix 1: Participant Self-Described Demographic Information and Thumbnails

Adrienne

30, Glasgow City Council, Irish Asian, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Middle-class, Certificate of Higher Education, Employed, £25,000- £49,999, No known disability
February 2022, online via Zoom.

Adrienne is a very close friend, we tried tampons together for the first time – a very uncomfortable day we still cringe and laugh about. Adrienne's recent comfort with menstruation doesn't assume that others feel the same, she views her comfort as a social outlier. She works in an environmental tech start up. For Adrienne, a lack of comfort and education during her early years was compounded by being encouraged to 'deal' with it.

Beatrix

30, South Lanarkshire Council, White Portuguese, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Prefer not to say, Master's degree, Full-time student, £10,000- £24,999, Mental health condition

March 2022, online via Zoom.

We had arranged to meet in person but as I was boarding the train to Glasgow, she tested positive for COVID-19 – we met a week later online. She describes her teenage years and early twenties as a time of constant self-policing, that menstruation is a hassle for her. She started taking the pill at 13 due to menstrual pain which she

described as excruciating. Four years ago, she stopped taking contraceptives – this made her periods very painful again. Beatrix did stop herself talking about blood, saying it would be TMI – too much information.

Eimear

25, Glasgow City Council, Mixed or Multiple, Woman, Bisexual, Middle-upper-class, Honours Degree, Part-time student, £1- £9,999, No known disability

June 2022, online via Zoom.

Eimear described herself as possibly more comfortable discussing periods online than she may be in person. She describes her parents as very traditional, her mother policing her father about menstruation, although he didn't seem to care as much as her mother acted against. Eimear and her sister tried reusables at the same time, although she describes discomfort with the sight of her own menstrual blood.

Emily

26, Argyll and Bute Council, White - Other British, Woman, Bisexual, Upper working class/lower middle class, Master's degree, Full-time: Primary Prevention Worker, £10,000- £24,999, Developmental disorder

March 2022, online via Zoom.

Emily works for a women's charity in rural Scotland, she is passionate about her work and the community she works within. Her dogs appeared a few times, and she was snacking throughout our interview because she'd been too busy beforehand. Neither of these interrupted the flow of our interview. Emily grew up in a home she describes

as matriarchal. Her mum and aunt have endometriosis, which Emily believe she has as well. Emily comes across as confident and outspoken about her feminist approach to all aspects of her life.

Emma

24, Glasgow City Council, White - South African, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Middle-class, Master's degree, Employed, £25,000- £49,999, No known disability

May 2022, online via Zoom.

Emma learnt about periods from school and her mum, she remembers being able to ask her mum if she had any questions, but they wouldn't discuss it unprompted. Emma's period stopped due to an eating disorder, when it began again, she found it stressful but now can tell when it's coming, conscious of her body.

Erika

36, Glasgow City Council, Other, Woman, Bisexual, Lower middle class, Master's degree, Other - Part time student and employed, £10,000- £24,999, Mental health condition

May 2022, online via Zoom.

Erika grew up in France, she recalls drugs, sex and smoking all being very open conversations in her house, but menstruation wasn't possibly because it's not as 'sexy' a topic. Erika provokes friends in social situations by discussing periods and sex. She comes across as a very open, confident woman whose menstruation practices are closely linked with her feminist and environmental ethics.

Erin

25, Glasgow City Council, White - Other British, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Working-class, Master's degree, Full-time student, £10,000- £24,999, No known disability

April 2022, in-person at a café in Glasgow.

It was during our interview that Erin said she realised that her mum is the only person she uses euphemisms with to refer to her period, that they use 'cutesy' language. Erin has experienced suicidal ideations, she does not tell her friends that her mental health is impacted so much by her menstrual cycle, saying she doesn't want to worry them. Erin has not spoken to her doctor about this, as she doesn't believe a doctor would help her. Erin comes across as initially nervous but eager to talk about her menstrual experiences.

Farah

43, Asian – Pakistani, Pakistani Scottish, Pakistani British, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Middle-Class, Doctoral Degree, Full-Time Student, £25,000- £49,999, No known disability

June 2022, online via Zoom

Farah grew up in Pakistan, she recalls receiving no information, and not having female peers to tell her about periods. This lack of information made it a negative, fearful experience. Farah positions menstruation as caught between culture and religion. She talks a lot about her four daughters and their experiences, and her anticipation of future

experiences. Farah was very open and enthusiastic throughout our interview; however, it was the most difficult interview to manage and bring back to the central themes.

Faye

28, Other - White Other, Women, Heterosexual/Straight, Prefer not to say, Master's Degree, Full-time PhD, Part-time Teacher, £10,000-£24,000, No known disability

April 2022, online via Zoom.

Faye grew up in the United States, her early menstrual bleeding was very heavy, which made her anxious about leaking and running out of products. Faye remembers feeling a lot of shame and social confusion around periods during this time. She enjoys talking to other women about periods, describes it as empowering, and something to bond over and share understanding. Faye seems at ease and comfortable talking about all aspects of it during our interview.

Fran

24, White - Other British, Woman, Bisexual, Lower Middle-Class, Master's Degree, Employed, £25,000- £49,999, No known disability

March 2022, in-person in university library, Glasgow.

Our interview took place in a room that was not ideal, it was too small, making the interview seem more jilted, the walls painted bright lime green, with two uncomfortable mismatched chairs. Fran's periods are very heavy, she bleeds through average absorbency products in 20 minutes, which made her feel very vulnerable and without

control during her teens. Frans's bleeding and pain is so severe she would rather have a contraceptive that impacts her mental health to avoid bleeding. Fran's answers are more static, less exploratory or conversational compared to the wider sample group.

Hannah

32, White - Other British, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Middle-Class, Master's Degree, Part-Time Student, £10,000- £24,999, No known disability

April 2022, online via Zoom.

Hannah learnt about periods from teen magazines and books. Hannah recalls waiting to get her period, that is would be a chance that something would happen, but it was just a letdown, which she equates to all of teenhood. Hannah seemed at ease, almost flippant, when discussing periods during our interview.

Jessie

54, White – Scottish, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Middle-class, Bachelors/Ordinary Degree, Employed, £25,000- £49,999, No known disability

May 2022, online via Zoom.

Jessie is the oldest participant, she informed me in the first few minutes that she no longer experiences a menstrual cycle or bleeding due to a medical procedure inducing early menopause. Her identity as a mother was her most common point of discussion, telling me more about her daughter's current experiences than her own. Jessie was very chatty and wanted to be of 'help' to my research.

Jo

25, White – Scottish, Woman, Bisexual, Prefer not to say, Master's Degree, Full-Time Student, £10,000- £24,999, No known disability

May 2022, online via Zoom.

Jo has very painful periods, her doctor told her she just had a low pain threshold because she's a girl. She has the implant although does not like the idea of taking in hormones all the time, but she is in less pain and enjoys contraceptive protection. Jo feels like it's a play-off between getting pregnant or being on contraceptives which may have health risks. Jo says because of her feminist politics, she knows she should be more open and not concerned about the discomfort of men, but she struggles to get over that hurdle. Jo describes automatically hiding and concealing parts of her period from her boyfriend. Jo comes across as confident and proud of herself for changing menstrual patterns.

Leigh

No demographic information provided

June 2022, in-person at a park, Edinburgh.

Leigh grew up in Ireland, putting a lot of her experiences and lack of guidance down to typical Irish cultural beliefs. There were several moments throughout when Leigh pointed towards our shared Irish experiences in order for me to understand her meaning. Leigh is the only participant to use a menstrual disc, proclaiming she loves

it as it works well with her level of bleeding, and it allows penetrative sex while inserted. Leigh appears very open and nonchalant about her period.

Lucia

24, White – Scottish, Woman Bisexual, Working-class, Master's Degree, Full-Time Student, £10,000- £24,999, Mental health condition

July 2022, in-person in a café, Glasgow.

Lucia describes receiving minimal menstrual education; she blames this on the religious ethos of her school. The distance or discomfort of holding religion and menstruation in the same space, lead Lucia to request I use her communion name as her pseudonym name, telling me to read into that what I will. Lucia engages in considered information sharing with peers, feeling some offer personal stories as fact, which may impact others.

Ly

26, Asian - Chinese, Chinese Scottish or Chinese British, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Student, Master's Degree, Full-Time Student, £1- £9,999, No known disability

June 2022, online via Zoom.

Ly is the only participant to recount receiving menstrual education based on emotional shifts, however when she started her period it was very painful but not emotionally taxing. Ly grew up in China and described the pressure of exams overshadowing her menstrual pain. Ly has PCOS, leading to intermittent bleeding due to insufficient

testosterone levels. Ly studies language, she has a particular interest in the importance of menstrual terms and no longer using euphemisms.

Megan

31, White – Scottish, Woman, Working-class, Master's Degree, Full-Time Student, £10,000- £24,999, Mental health condition

February 2022, in -person at Megans flat, Glasgow.

I met Megan through university connections, and she offered to participate in my research. Megan comes across as self-reflective, critically engaged with the words she is speaking. Megan inputs a number of subtle boundaries when recalling her early menstrual experiences. She talks about classed inequalities during our interview and describes her period as part of her feminism, that it connects her with other women and people who have periods.

Niamh

30, White – Scottish, Woman, Gay Woman/Lesbian, Middle-class, Master's Degree, Employed, £10,000- £24,999, No known disability

April 2022, online via Zoom.

Niamh is very close with her mum and grandmother, they discuss generational differences in women's experiences, period products, and menopause. Niamh discusses her feminist perspective, that she dislikes tampons and hiding menstruation, she prefers to see her blood. Niamh is purposeful in telling me it's important we don't

lose the term women when talking about menstruation and similar topics, referring to the previous feminist movements.

Robin

25, White – Scottish, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Middle-class, Master's Degree, Full-Time Student, £1- £9,999, Deafness or partial hearing loss, Mental health condition, Long-term illness, disease or condition

March 2022, in-person at a café, Edinburgh.

Her interview took place in a busy Edinburgh café, nobody seemed to take any notice of us or our conversation. It was very loud at times with passers-by and the coffee machine whirring. Robin has endometriosis and has recently had surgery to remove patches from her womb. Robin was on the pill for a time, but her moods and mental health were impacted so severely she would rather have heavy painful periods. Driven to learn as much as possible about periods, to lessen their impact on her, she uses alternative medicines, herbology, and strongly advocates for reusable products, apps and technology to track her cycle. She is very confident and openly discusses the intricacies of menstruation.

Rory

25, White - Other British, Woman, Bisexual, Middle-class, Master's Degree, Employed, £10,000- £24,999, No known disability

April 2022, in-person at a café, Glasgow.

Her interview took place in busy café in Glasgow, a number of people passing our table appeared to overhear us and turned their heads momentarily, there were a number of distracting moments, a sign noisily fell, and a dog caught our attention, the noise was loud but not to the detriment of our conversation. Rory inserted boundaries around her teenage years, subtly making clear she did not want to discuss this time. Rory comes across as provocative and confident.

Sam

23, White – Scottish, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Middle-class, Honours Degree, Full-Time Student, £10,000- £24,999, No known disability

May 2022, online via Zoom.

Sam has heavy periods, she recently started a new contraceptive but usually has to use two products at once. Sam's experience of managing her period in school was difficult and highly guided by stigma and shame. Sam recently worked up the courage to advocate for herself at the doctor, after reading a list of physical and emotional effects, Sam felt unheard and dismissed but found it difficult after her initial effort to push back on the doctor to try to get a diagnosis. Sam sought me out to take part, she tells me she feels it important more people know and understand the impact of menstruation on people's lives.

Siobhan

32, White - Other British, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Comes from working-class but feels closer to middle-class now, Master's Degree, Full-Time: Key Leader (Retail Supervisor), £10,000- £24,999, Mental health condition

February 2022, in-person at a pub, Edinburgh.

During our discussion on discharge two men sat down next to us, Siobhan quietened for a moment, laughed and continued speaking as she had been before. I didn't have the sense they were paying much attention to our conversation. Siobhan began her period young, 8-years-old, Siobhan's primary school didn't have bins in the toilets, she had to use the staffroom toilet when she was on her period, although this was out of the norm, she recalls feeling special rather than embarrassed. Her mental health is hugely impacted by her menstrual cycle, having previously led to suicidal idealisation, she tells me it took far too long for her and medical professionals to link this to her period. Siobhan comes across as a practical person, she describes managing her period on climbing trips in terms of logistics rather than concealment or awkwardness.

Sonia

42, White - Other British, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Middle-class, Master's Degree, Full-Time: University Manager, £50,000- £74,999, No known disability

April 2022, online via Zoom.

Sonia's mum told her pre-emptively about periods when she was 7 or 8, she spoke with her mum openly when her period started. Sonia's life stage is her focus, she is not ashamed of her period but understands it to be private- she is entering menopause, and the opening of the conversations assisting her agency and mobilisation around that. Sonia talks about how women aren't trusted to know about their own bodies, periods, pregnancies, and menopause, as these events are downplayed and dismissed. Sonia is conscious of combatting stigma and considering how to help her

pre-menstrual daughter and wants to be open and informative with her daughter and son.

Stevie

26, White – Scottish, Nonbinary, Queer, Working-class, Master's Degree, Full-Time Student, £10,000- £24,999, Mental health condition

July 2022, online via Zoom.

Stevie recalls the disconnect with learning about menstruation in school, that it was useful and helpful – but the social disconnect between a 50-year-old teacher and a 12-year-old girl being almost insurmountable. Stevie is very critically engaged and reflective about their menstrual experience as it has been embedded in their gender identity. Stevie comes across as confident and outspoken about their feminist and queer approach to all aspects of life.

Tara

29, White – Scottish, Gender Fluid Woman/Nonbinary, Heterosexual/Straight, Lower middle-class, Honours Degree, Self-Employed, £10,000- £24,999, Learning disability

February 2022, in-person at Taras flat, Edinburgh.

She is a friend of a friend and approached me about participating once she heard what I was researching. Her yoga practice intertwines with her periods, but she purposefully tells me that, unlike some member of the yoga community, it is not gender exclusionary or overly spiritual. Tara grew up in Canada, she describes her family as matriarchal

which impacted her relationship with her body during teenhood. Tara tells me that she was shocked by how cheap boxes of tampons are in Scotland comparatively.

Zada

19, East Renfrewshire Council, Asian - Pakistani, Pakistani, Scottish or Pakistani British, Woman, Heterosexual/Straight, Middle-class, Full-time student, £25,000-£49,999, No known disability

June 2022, online via Zoom

Zada is the youngest participant. She is very well informed, describing learning from her mum and discussing everything with her friends, that they text each other questions about 'private' things all the time. Zada moved from UEA to Scotland, from a segregated to a mixed school - Zada contrasts the benefits of being in a female-only environment, the comfort of not having to think about people who don't understand or share an experience with you, to that of a mixed environment where Zada learned that others had to understand her, like this new world of thinking about how others think about you.

Zoe

27, White – Scottish, Woman, Queer, First-gen working-class parents middle-class opportunities, Master's Degree, Other - Precarious Postgraduate Part-Time fixed contract and zero hours employment, £10,000- £24,999, Mental health condition long-term illness, disease or condition

March 2022, online via Zoom.

Zoe's dogs interrupted and pulled focus a number of times, and during this interview my building fire alarm went off, so we ended the interview early and took it back up later on the same day. Zoe has endometriosis, she describes fighting for a diagnosis as exhausting, and experiences major cyclical shifts in line with her menstrual cycle, she has made attempts to take her own life due to the severity of her mental health issues. She was on both the pill and the injection for a time. Zoe says the more she learned about feminism the less shame and stigma she has felt about her periods. Now she is working on relearning her period and not feeling ashamed.

Appendix 2: Recruitment Poster



Experiences of Menstruation
Will you talk about your period?

If you are 18+ years of age, menstruate, live in Scotland,
and would like to participate in research exploring
experiences of menstruation and period products
contact Kate Molyneaux for more information,
Email kate.molyneaux@strath.ac.uk

This project has been approved by the School of Education Ethics Committee at the
University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

Participant Information Sheet for Participants

Name of department: Education (School of Humanities and Social Sciences)

Title of the study: Experiences of Menstruation.

Introduction

This research is being carried out by Kate Molyneaux as part of a PhD programme at the University of Strathclyde. The aim of this study is to explore menstrual experiences and stigma within the current social and political climate in Scotland. The researcher hopes to use these findings of the study to expand feminist understanding of the experience of menstruation and stigma in Scotland, as well as impact future menstrual education.

Do you have to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to take part, you retain the right to decline to answer questions, stop the interview at any point, withdraw from the research and/or remove your data, until it has been autonomised and analysed. If you choose to decline to answer or withdraw from the study, there will be no repercussions. Your name and any identifiable information will be autonomised and confidential.

What will you do in the project?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete an interview with the primary researcher, Kate Molyneaux.

Interviews may take place virtually using the videoconferencing platform, such as Zoom or Skype. If you choose to participate, it is required that you have access to a smartphone, tablet, laptop or computer that has the ability to access such software. Interviews are expected to last 1-1.5 hours.

If you choose to participate and express a preference to do so in-person, and this is permitted within the University of Strathclyde and Scottish Government Covid-19 guidelines, interviews may take place at a mutually agreed up venue and are expected to last 1-1.5 hours.

Whether online or in-person, interviews will be recorded using an external audio recording device, recordings will be used to allow transcription of the interview.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part as a person who menstruates, who is aged 18 or over, and lives in Scotland.

What information is being collected in the project?

Your name, age, contact information, approximate location in Scotland, demographic information (gender, race/ethnicity, class, employment, approximate income, disability, sexuality) and responses to interview questions will be collected if you choose to participate, no question or information is compulsory outside inclusion criteria. Your personal information will be autonomised by the researcher and kept in a locked cupboard and/or in encrypted and password protected folders in the University of Strathclyde's data storage server, Strathcloud. All personally identifying data will be destroyed by the researcher when it is not needed for the purposes of this specific study.

The University of Strathclyde is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office who implements the Data Protection Act 1998. All personal data on participants will be processed in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Are there any risks to taking part?

The researcher, Kate Molyneaux, does not perceive or intend for you to be subject to any risk if you choose to take part in this study.

With consideration of the Covid-19 pandemic, if you feel unwell prior to or on the day of your interview, please alert the researcher and we can reschedule as appropriate. Any interview taking place in-person will strictly adhere to Covid-19 advice and regulations set out by the University of Strathclyde and Scottish Government.

Who will have access to the information?

If you choose to participate, your data will not be shared or accessible by anyone outside the investigation team, Kate Molyneaux, Professor Yvette Taylor and Dr Maddie Breeze at the University of Strathclyde.

Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept for?

All data will be retained for as long as it is required for the investigation. The data is stored for a period of up to five years upon completion and award of the PhD. This will be reviewed annually by the investigation team. If, in the event the investigator does not complete the programme of study, the data will be destroyed within 28 days of withdrawal from the programme. Data which is presented within the thesis, and any other form of dissemination activity such as an article in an academic journal or a poster or presentation at a conference, will be pseudo-anonymised and participants anonymity will be maintained. The destruction of physical and digital data will be carried out in accordance with the University's Data Protection and Records Management Policies.

The investigator will maintain a record of the content, format, and location of all data, including details of the destruction of data and research records. This record will be stored securely and will only be accessible by the named investigators.

Thank you for reading this information – please ask any questions if you are unsure about what is written here.

All personal data will be processed in accordance with data protection legislation. Please read our [Privacy Notice for Research Participants](#) for more information about your rights under the legislation.

Researcher contact details:

Should you wish to contact the researcher at any time before, or after the study please contact them here:

Kate Molyneaux

Postgraduate Student (PhD Education)

Education Department; School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Telephone +44 (0) 77 65864035

kate.molyneaux@starth.ac.uk

Chief Investigator details:

Should you wish to contact the PhD Supervisor at any time either before or during the study you can contact them here:

Professor Yvette Taylor

Education Department; School of Humanities and Social Sciences

+44 (0)141 444 8048

yvette.taylor@strath.ac.uk

This research was granted ethical approval by the School of Education Ethics Committee.

If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the research, or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought from, please contact:

Secretary to the University Ethics Committee

Research & Knowledge Exchange Services

University of Strathclyde

Graham Hills Building

50 George Street

Glasgow

G1 1QE

Telephone: 0141 548 3707

Email: ethics@strath.ac.uk

Appendix 4: Consent Form



Consent Form for Participants

Name of department: Education (School of Humanities and Social Sciences)

Title of the study: Experiences of Menstruation.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.
- I confirm that I have read and understood the Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects and understand how my personal information will be used and what will happen to it (i.e. how it will be stored and for how long).
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, without having to give a reason and without any consequences.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of some personal information and that whenever possible researchers will comply with my request. This includes the following personal data:
 - audio recordings of interviews that identify me.
 - my demographic information.
 - my personal information from transcripts.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e. data that do not identify me personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study.
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.
- I consent to be a participant in the project.
- I consent to be audio recorded as part of the project **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	Date: 09/05/2022

Appendix 5: Interview Question Guideline

Interview Questions

- What do you call your period? why?
- Do you call it that when talking to friends, family?
- What about at work or more public settings?

- Where or from who did you learn about periods?
 - Could you tell me more about that, what did they tell you?

- Where did you learn about period products?
- What products do you use during your period?
 - Why do you use that?
 - What about it do you like compared to other products?
- What products have you tried or used before?
- Are there other products would like to try?
 - why haven't you tried (product) yet?
 - what about (product) appeals to you or are you curious about?
- Doesn't want to try others
 - - what do you think of (product(s) they don't wish to try)?

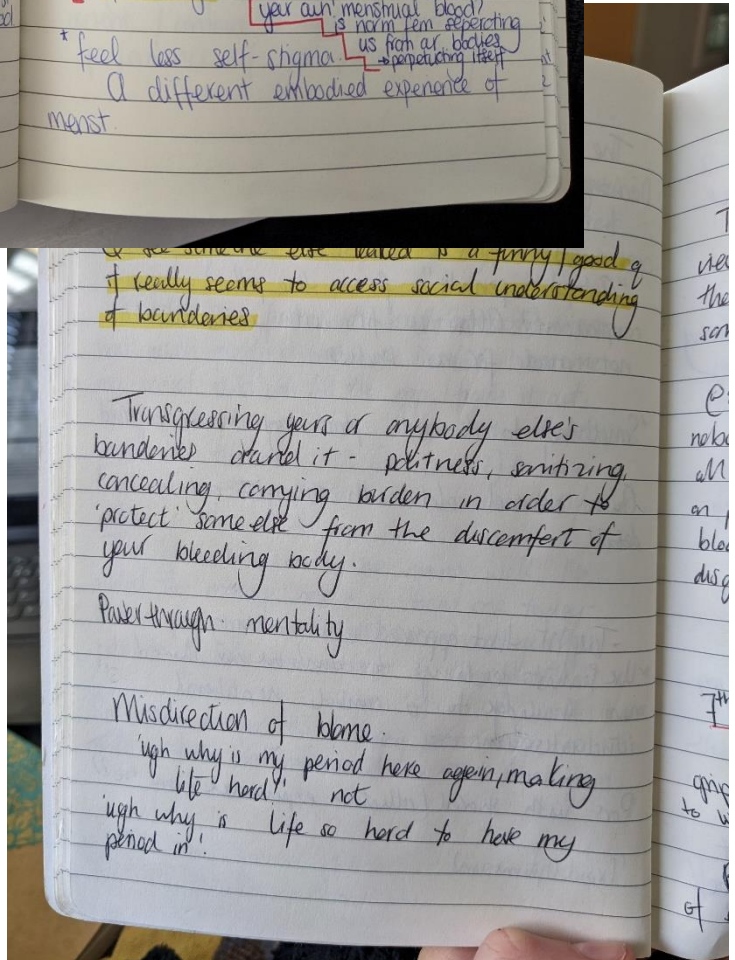
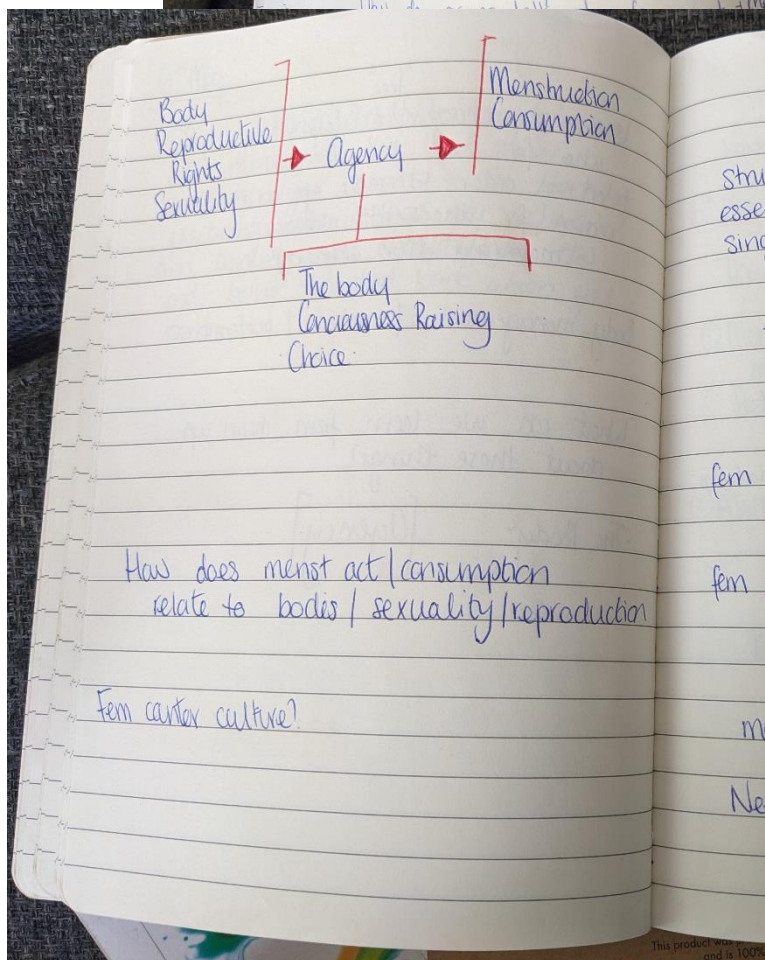
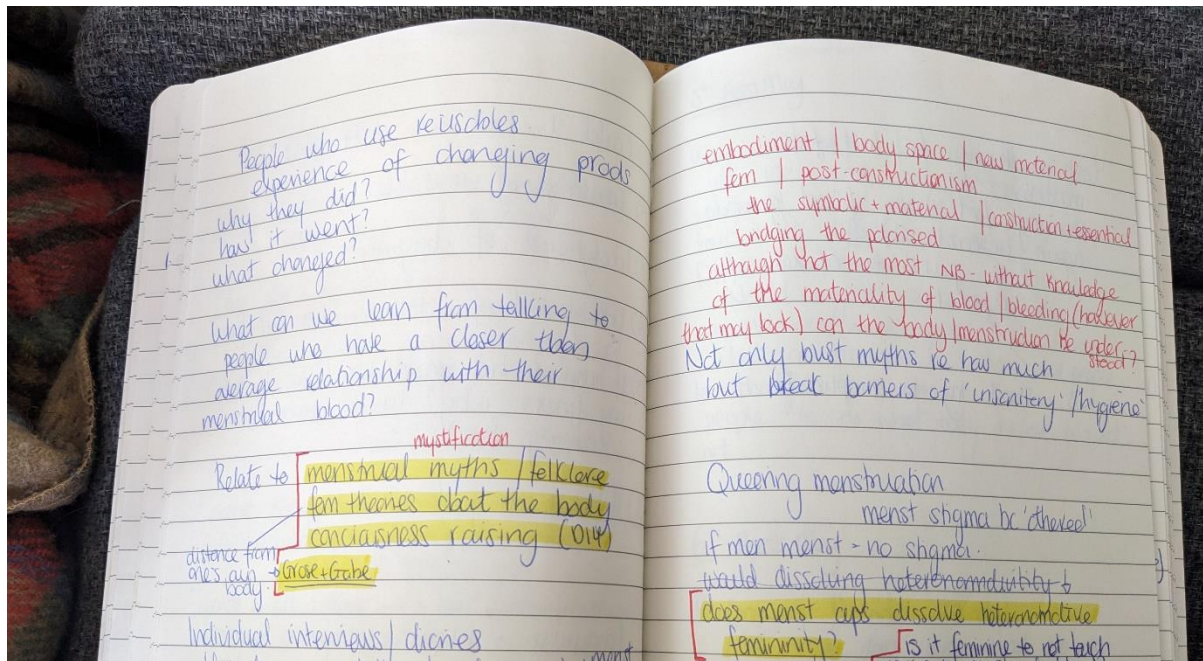
- Have you ever leaked through your product during your period?
- What happened?
 - how did you feel?
 - did it play out as you had expected?
 - how did other people react to you leaking?
- What would you think if you saw someone had leaked menstrual blood? What would you do?

- Do you talk to your friends or family about your period?
 - What do ye talk about?
 - Are there things ye don't talk about or wouldn't?
- Are there people you wouldn't speak to about your period?
 - Why wouldn't you speak to them?

- Do you have periods at the moment?
- Is there a change to how you usually behave/ act when you have your period?
in what way
 - At home, work, out with friends?
- When you have your period, does it affect your day-to-day life?
 - Are there areas it effects more or less?
- Are there areas of your life that impact your period more or less?
- Overall, do you feel your period impacts your environment or that your environment impacts your period?

- Can you tell me about how you feel about managing your period in work - out with friends - at home?
 - Has anything about this ever changed?
 - Do you have any worries or concerns about managing it?
 - Where did these come from?
- How would you explain periods to a young person who is expecting to start having periods?
- How would you explain periods to a young person who won't experience periods?
- How do you think people who do not have periods view/ feel about them?
- In your experience, are there difficulties having a period?
- In your experience, what is the best thing about having a period?
- In your experience, is there anything complicated about having a period?
- How would you describe your relationship with your period, positive, negative, neutral?
- Has your relationship with your period changed or developed?
- Was there a time in your life that you felt differently about your period?
- Has it been an easy or difficult relationship?
- What does menstruation represent to you?
- During the Covid-19 lockdowns, did anything about your period routine or product use change?
- Have you heard of the period positivity movement, if so, what do you think about it?
- Have you heard of the term, or movement against, period poverty in Scotland?
- If yes to above - what do you think about it? The Bill?
- If yes to above - do you feel it affects you?
- Is there anything you expected me to ask that I didn't or anything you would like to share about your experiences of having a period that I didn't touch on?

Appendix 6: Research Diary Examples



Appendix 7: Participants Products Used

Beatrix	Disposable Pads
Farah	Disposable Pads
Ly	Disposable Pads
Niamh	Disposable Pads and Period Underwear
Hannah	Disposable Pads and Tampons
Sam	Disposable Pads and Tampons
Stevie	Disposable Pads and Tampons
Zada	Disposable Pads and Tampons
Emily	Disposable Tampons
Megan	Disposable Tampons
Faye	Free Bleeding
Adrinne	Menstrual Cup
Erika	Menstrual Cup
Sonia	Menstrual Cup
Tyler	Menstrual Cup
Robin	Menstrual Cup and Period Underwear
Eimear	Menstrual Cup and Reusable Pads
Leigh	Menstrual Disc
Jessie	N/A

Siobhan	Period Pants and Tampons
Emma	Period Underwear
Fran	Period Underwear
Lucia	Period Underwear
Rory	Period Underwear and Disposable Tampons
Erin	Reusable Pads
Jo	Reusable Pads
Tara	Reusable Pads and Tampons

