

Menstrual Equity in Irish Schools: Participation, Dignity, and Substantive Equality

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Abstract

Menstruation remains an under-recognised but significant factor shaping students' participation, wellbeing, and attendance in Irish primary and post-primary schools. While recent policy attention has focused on period poverty and access to menstrual products, evidence suggests that product provision alone does not address the broader structural, cultural, and organisational barriers experienced by students who menstruate. Drawing on Irish education policy, national data, and international comparative evidence, this article advances an evidence-based policy commentary on menstrual equity in schools. Using a substantive equality perspective aligned with established Irish approaches to disadvantage, inclusion, and wellbeing, it examines how current policy responses fall short and what a more coherent, system-level approach might entail. Comparative analysis of the New South Wales Menstrual Hygiene Program illustrates how integrated provision, curriculum reform, and student participation can be embedded within education systems to address menstruation-related challenges in schools. The article concludes by outlining implications for policy, school leadership, and inspection within the Irish context.

Keywords: menstrual equity, educational participation, wellbeing, school policy

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Menstruation is a routine aspect of life for many students, yet it continues to shape educational participation in ways that remain largely invisible within Irish schooling. National and international research consistently shows that students who menstruate may miss school, struggle to concentrate, or experience anxiety and embarrassment during their periods (Gavin et al., 2024; Plan International UK, 2018). Evidence from Plan International Ireland (n.d.), based on national survey data collected in 2018, highlights experiences of stigma, embarrassment, and financial barriers among girls in Ireland. However, the absence of a formally published report underscores broader limitations in the Irish evidence base on menstruation and school participation.

In recent years, Irish policy discourse has increasingly acknowledged period poverty, most notably through the Period Poverty in Ireland discussion paper (Period Poverty Sub-Committee of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020, 2021) and commitments in successive Programmes for Government. The *National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020* set out a broader framework for advancing gender equality across areas including health and wellbeing (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017). More recent policy developments continue to engage with menstrual health and period dignity, as reflected in the *National Strategy for Women and Girls 2025-2030* (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2025). While the strategy acknowledges menstrual health within its discussion of health literacy and education, engagement with the issue remains relatively limited. Nonetheless, menstrual health and period dignity can be understood as part of the strategy's broader focus on women's health, wellbeing, and participation, recognising menstruation as a public policy concern.

This article adopts a substantive equality perspective to conceptualise menstruation as an issue of educational equality within Irish education, consistent with existing policy approaches to disadvantage, inclusion, and wellbeing. Within this framework, equitable support requires more than equal treatment; it requires attention to difference, proportionality, and the removal of barriers to participation (Fredman, 2016). This reflects a shift from formal equality, concerned with treating individuals the same, towards substantive equality, which seeks to address structural disadvantage and differential impact. As Sandra Fredman (2011) argues, substantive equality encompasses a multi-dimensional framework concerned with redressing disadvantage, addressing stigma and stereotyping, enhancing participation, and accommodating difference. This approach aligns with feminist scholarship that highlights how ostensibly neutral institutional norms can reproduce gendered inequalities by privileging dominant experiences as the implicit standard (MacKinnon, 1987; Young, 1990). More recent intersectional feminist work further emphasises how such inequalities are shaped by the interaction of gender with other axes of disadvantage, including socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and disability (Collins, 2019). From this perspective, menstruation is not simply a biological issue, but a socially mediated experience shaped by institutional structures that can either enable or constrain participation. This understanding of

equality reflects well-established approaches that emphasise the need to address structural disadvantage and differential impact, rather than relying solely on formal equality. Drawing on Irish policy frameworks and comparative analysis of the New South Wales (NSW) Menstrual Hygiene Program, the article explores how menstrual equity can be more coherently embedded within the Irish education system.

Menstruation, Participation, and Wellbeing in Irish Schools

Irish data indicate that menstruation affects school participation for a significant proportion of students across both primary and post-primary education. Findings from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study show that many girls report missing school due to menstrual symptoms, including pain, stomach cramps, and mood changes (Gavin et al., 2024). These findings are consistent with survey-based evidence collected in 2018 by Plan International Ireland (n.d.), which indicated experiences of menstruation-related anxiety, stigma, and challenges managing periods in school among girls in Ireland, as well as with findings from the *Break the Barriers* study conducted by Plan International UK (2018). International research from other high-income education systems similarly links menstruation with absenteeism, stigma, and reduced participation (Barrington et al., 2021; Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020).

While Irish research on menstruation in school contexts remains limited, available evidence indicates that students experience embarrassment, stigma, and challenges managing menstruation within school environments (Gavin et al., 2024; Plan International Ireland, n.d.). Qualitative and mixed-method research from international contexts provides further insight into how menstruation shapes everyday school experiences. Studies consistently highlight concerns regarding inadequate privacy in school toilets, lack of disposal facilities, restrictive bathroom policies, and embarrassment when seeking support or menstrual products (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Sommer et al., 2015). Research demonstrates that menstruation is shaped by stigma and sociocultural norms, which can limit knowledge and social support while contributing to shame, distress, and reduced confidence, with documented impacts on education and social participation (Hennegan et al., 2019). While these challenges are not confined to those experiencing economic disadvantage, they are often more acute in under-resourced school environments and among students facing intersecting forms of inequality. In addition, evidence indicates that students experiencing severe menstrual pain, chronic conditions, or heavy bleeding may face significant disruption to concentration, attendance, and participation in school life (Armour et al., 2020; Hennegan et al., 2019). Together, these findings suggest that menstruation constitutes a meaningful but often overlooked factor shaping students' participation and wellbeing in school, particularly in the absence of systematic and

actionable national data on menstruation-related school experiences, as is the case in Ireland. These issues also intersect directly with core Irish education policy priorities. Attendance and engagement are central concerns within DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) planning (Department of Education and Skills, 2017), while student wellbeing is a stated pillar of educational provision under the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023* (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). Despite this, menstruation is rarely explicitly named within school wellbeing plans, self-evaluation processes, or inspection discourse. As a result, a factor that clearly affects participation and wellbeing remains largely unexamined within formal policy and accountability structures.

A substantive equality perspective helps to explain this gap. Policies and practices that appear neutral, such as uniform attendance requirements, standardised bathroom rules, or expectations around classroom participation may have unequal effects on students managing menstruation. Without deliberate attention to these differential impacts, schools risk unintentionally reproducing patterns of exclusion. This is particularly relevant for students attending DEIS schools, Traveller students, migrant students, and those with additional learning or health needs, for whom menstruation-related barriers may compound existing inequalities.

Policy Responses and Their Limits

Policy responses to menstruation in Irish schools have, to date, been shaped primarily through the lens of period poverty. While this focus has brought important visibility to issues of affordability and access to menstrual products, culminating in the work of the Period Poverty Sub-Committee and commitments to free provision in certain public settings (Period Poverty Sub-Committee of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020, 2021), it has also narrowed the scope of policy intervention. Within education, implementation remains limited and inconsistent. Although some schools have introduced informal systems for product availability, there is no statutory requirement for universal provision in primary or post-primary schools, nor is uptake systematically monitored. As a result, responsibility is effectively devolved to individual schools, leading to uneven provision and limited accountability.

This emphasis on product access reflects a broader tendency within policy to frame menstruation as a discrete material need rather than as an issue embedded in the organisation of schooling. From an education policy perspective, this is a significant limitation. Evidence indicates that even where products are available, students may still miss school or disengage from learning due to pain, stigma, lack of privacy, or restrictive institutional practices (Barrington et al., 2021; Hennegan et al., 2019). Research on menstrual pain and chronic conditions further highlights the limits of product-only responses for supporting participation in school (Hennegan et al., 2019). Product-focused interventions therefore risk offering partial solutions to what is, in

practice, a multi-dimensional barrier to participation.

Irish education policy already contains well-established mechanisms for addressing complex disadvantage, particularly through the DEIS programme and associated school planning processes (Department of Education and Skills, 2017; Department of Education, 2022). The DEIS programme, for example, is explicitly grounded in the recognition that educational inequality arises from structural and contextual factors that require proportionate responses. Similarly, inclusion policies emphasise the need to adapt school environments and practices to meet diverse learner needs, rather than expecting students to conform to uniform norms. Viewed through this policy logic, current approaches to menstruation appear under-developed.

Attendance policies provide a useful illustration. While schools are encouraged to promote regular attendance, there is limited guidance on how menstruation-related absence or difficulty should be understood or accommodated. In the absence of explicit recognition, menstruation-related challenges may be interpreted as individual issues rather than as legitimate wellbeing or inclusion concerns. Evidence suggests that students frequently manage menstruation-related difficulties within school environments without adequate institutional support, contributing to absenteeism, reduced participation, and reluctance to seek help (Barrington et al., 2021; Hennegan et al., 2019). This can place students in the position of managing symptoms in silence or risking disciplinary consequences for absence or non-participation.

Similarly, school facilities are rarely considered through a menstrual equity lens. Decisions about toilet access, supervision, and movement during class time are typically framed around behaviour management or safeguarding. Yet, these same arrangements can have unintended consequences for students managing menstruation, particularly in schools with limited facilities or strict access policies. Research has highlighted the importance of adequate toilet facilities, privacy, disposal options, and timely access to bathrooms in enabling students to manage menstruation with dignity and participate fully in school life (Barrington et al., 2021; Hennegan et al., 2019; Sommer et al., 2015). Without policy guidance that acknowledges these impacts, responsibility for accommodation is left to individual discretion, resulting in variable and often inequitable practice.

Curriculum policy presents a further limitation. While Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) within the Irish education system, as delivered through the Primary School Curriculum, the Junior Cycle SPHE specification, and Senior Cycle provision within the Leaving Certificate, include content on puberty and reproduction, menstruation is generally addressed in functional or biological terms, with limited engagement with pain, emotional wellbeing, or social stigma. This reflects longstanding curricular approaches within SPHE, where emphasis has traditionally been placed on physical development and hygiene rather than on the lived experience of menstruation or its implications for participation and

wellbeing. Although recent developments in SPHE at both Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle levels signal a broader shift towards wellbeing, relationships, and student voice (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2023, 2024), explicit engagement with menstruation as a social and educational issue remains limited. This narrow framing sits uneasily alongside broader policy commitments to wellbeing and inclusion and may contribute to the persistence of silence and embarrassment around menstruation in school settings. From a substantive equality perspective, stigma itself constitutes a barrier to participation and cannot be addressed through material provision alone.

Taken together, these policy gaps suggest that menstruation has yet to be fully integrated into Irish education's equality architecture. While product provision initiatives represent an important step, they sit largely outside existing frameworks for disadvantage, wellbeing, and inclusion. As a result, menstrual equity remains peripheral rather than embedded within system-level planning and evaluation.

Comparative Insights from New South Wales

Comparative analysis can illuminate policy possibilities by showing how similar education systems respond differently to shared challenges. In this regard, the NSW Menstrual Hygiene Program offers a useful point of comparison for Ireland. While the social, legal, and governance contexts differ, both systems operate within high-income, publicly funded education frameworks with established commitments to equality, wellbeing, and inclusion.

Introduced in 2023, the NSW programme marked a shift from ad hoc or charity-based responses to a more coordinated, system-level approach to menstrual equity in schools (New South Wales Government, n.d.). Central to the programme is the universal provision of free menstrual products in all public schools, deliberately avoiding means-testing (i.e., restricting access based on income or financial eligibility criteria) in order to reduce stigma and administrative burden. Importantly, this provision is positioned within a broader policy context concerned with participation, wellbeing, and dignity, rather than as a standalone intervention.

A distinguishing feature of the NSW approach is its grounding in data collection and consultation. Large-scale participatory research in Australia, including the "Bloody Big Survey" and related studies, has documented the prevalence of menstruation-related stigma, pain, and school disruption among young people (Armour et al., 2020, 2022). These findings have provided an empirical basis for policy development, helping to frame menstruation as an education issue rather than solely a health or welfare concern. In this way, the NSW approach demonstrates how robust data can support the integration of menstrual equity within mainstream education policy. By contrast, Irish policy development has been constrained by the absence of systematic and actionable national data on menstruation-related school experiences, limiting the

capacity for evidence-informed planning in areas such as attendance, wellbeing, and participation.

Research on Australian school contexts highlights how school-level practices, including facilities, staff support, and school culture, shape students' experiences of menstruation (Ferfolja et al., 2024). While not focused specifically on system-level policy initiatives such as the NSW Menstrual Hygiene Program, this work underscores the importance of whole-school approaches in addressing menstrual stigma and supporting student participation. In NSW, menstruation is addressed within health and wellbeing education as both a biological and social issue, with attention to stigma, pain management, and help-seeking. Programmes such as Periods, Pain and Endometriosis (PPEP Talk) aim to improve menstrual health literacy and support students in managing menstruation in school contexts, particularly at post-primary level (Tomsett et al., 2026). This integrated approach aligns menstrual education with broader wellbeing strategies and acknowledges the impact of pain and chronic conditions on learning.

Student participation is also relevant to the development and implementation of menstrual equity initiatives. Australian research has highlighted the value of incorporating young people's perspectives on how schools can better support students during menstruation (Ferfolja et al., 2024). The NSW Menstrual Hygiene Program programme reflects growing recognition of menstruation as an issue affecting participation, wellbeing, and educational engagement, while allowing schools the flexibility to determine how products are made available based on local needs and preferences (New South Wales Government, n.d.). Consultation and feedback mechanisms at the school level have the potential to inform decisions about product provision, education delivery, and communication strategies, thereby contributing to the normalisation of menstruation within the school environment.

From a substantive equality perspective, the NSW approach recognises that universal provision must be accompanied by attention to the diverse ways in which menstruation is experienced and the barriers faced by different groups. Australian research and policy discussions have highlighted the particular challenges that may be experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally diverse groups, and those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage (Armour et al., 2022). This balance between universality and attention to differential need mirrors principles already embedded in Irish education policy through DEIS and inclusion frameworks, yet these principles have not been systematically applied to menstruation.

The NSW case illustrates how menstrual equity can be embedded within mainstream education governance rather than treated as an ancillary concern. Responsibility for implementation is located within the education system and supported by clear guidance, dedicated funding, and defined accountability mechanisms. By contrast, the Irish case reflects not a lack of policy intent, but a lack of integration. While policy documents increasingly acknowledge period poverty, menstruation has yet

to be incorporated into the core mechanisms through which equality, wellbeing, and participation are planned, monitored, and evaluated. Table 1 summarises these comparative differences across policy approach, product access, curriculum, data, student participation, and accountability, highlighting the contrast between Ireland's more fragmented and product-focused response and the more coordinated, system-level integration evident in NSW education policy.

TABLE 1

Comparative Overview of Menstrual Equity Policy in Ireland and New South Wales

Policy Aspect	Ireland	New South Wales (NSW)
Policy Approach	Fragmented and ad hoc initiatives; no national school strategy	Coordinated, system-level programme embedded in education policy
Product Access	No universal provision in schools; reliance on voluntary or charity-based measures	Free menstrual products in all public schools; no means-testing
Education and Curriculum	Curriculum content focused on biological and hygienic aspects of menstruation	Integrated curriculum addressing stigma, pain, and wellbeing
Data and Evidence	Limited national or disaggregated data	Extensive participatory data collection (e.g., Bloody Big Survey)
Student Participation	Limited formal involvement of students in policy design	Student consultation and feedback mechanisms embedded at school level
Accountability	Limited monitoring or evaluation	Clear governance, funding, and accountability mechanisms

Table 2 extends this analysis by applying a substantive equality framework, drawing on the work of Sandra Fredman (2011, 2016), to examine how menstrual equity is addressed across the dimensions of disadvantage, stigma, participation, and difference. As Fredman argues, substantive equality requires not only the redress of material disadvantage, but also the recognition of difference, the transformation of structural and cultural norms, and the facilitation of full participation. Read in this way, Table 2 highlights the extent to which policy responses move beyond access to address the broader social and institutional conditions shaping students' experiences of menstruation.

TABLE 2*Key Dimensions of Menstrual Equity Policy: Ireland and New South Wales*

Equality Dimension	Ireland	New South Wales (NSW)
Redressing Disadvantage	Partial and inconsistent product access	Universal provision with targeted supports
Addressing Stigma	Institutional silence and limited curriculum engagement	Explicit stigma-reduction strategies
Enhancing Participation	Top-down policy development	Participatory, student-centred approaches
Accommodating Difference	Limited recognition of intersectional needs	Tailored supports for diverse communities

Note. Adapted from Fredman's (2011) four-dimensional model of substantive equality.

Implications for Irish Policy, Leadership, and Inspection

Understanding menstruation as an issue of substantive equality has clear implications for education policy, school leadership, and inspection in Ireland. Rather than requiring the creation of entirely new policy domains, menstrual equity can be meaningfully embedded within existing frameworks concerned with participation, wellbeing, and inclusion.

At system level, the most immediate implication is the need for improved data and visibility. Current national datasets on attendance, engagement, and wellbeing do not routinely capture menstruation-related absence or difficulty. This absence limits the capacity of policymakers and system leaders to assess need, allocate resources, or evaluate the impact of interventions. Incorporating menstruation-related indicators into existing surveys and administrative data collection would support more evidence-informed planning, particularly in relation to DEIS schools and other priority contexts.

For school leadership, menstrual equity raises practical questions about how policies and routines operate in everyday school life. Attendance policies, bathroom access arrangements, uniform rules, and wellbeing supports all shape students' capacity to manage menstruation with dignity. A substantive equality approach encourages school leaders to consider whether apparently neutral practices may have unintended differential effects and to identify proportionate adjustments where necessary. Importantly, this does not imply special treatment, but rather the removal of avoidable barriers to participation.

Whole-school wellbeing planning provides a further entry point. The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023* (Department of Education and Skills, 2019) emphasises the creation of inclusive, supportive environments that respond to

students' lived experiences. Explicit consideration of menstruation within wellbeing planning, staff development, and student support structures would align practice more closely with policy intent. This may include staff guidance on responding to menstruation-related needs, clear and discreet systems for accessing support, and age-appropriate curricular engagement that addresses stigma and help-seeking.

Inspection and school self-evaluation processes also have a role to play. Menstrual equity offers a concrete lens through which inspectors and schools can examine how commitments to inclusion, dignity, and participation are enacted in practice. Attention to school climate, student voice, and organisational routines is consistent with existing inspection frameworks and does not require additional compliance mechanisms. Rather, it involves making visible an issue that has traditionally been treated as peripheral.

Finally, the comparative evidence from NSW highlights the value of system coherence. Where responsibility for menstrual equity is clearly located within the education system, supported by guidance, funding, and accountability, practice becomes more consistent and less dependent on individual initiative. For Ireland, embedding menstruation within established equality and wellbeing structures offers a pragmatic route to strengthening policy coherence without over-burdening schools.

Conclusion

Menstrual equity is not a peripheral issue but one that intersects with core priorities in Irish education, including participation, wellbeing, and inclusion. While recent policy attention to period poverty represents progress, a substantive equality approach highlights the need to move beyond product provision towards more integrated, system-level responses. Comparative evidence from NSW demonstrates how menstruation can be addressed coherently within education policy. Aligning Irish policy commitments with students' lived experiences offers an opportunity to strengthen educational equality and wellbeing in a practical and meaningful way.

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