**Period Poverty: End the shame now! By Esmee O’Donnell, St. Catherine’s College, Armagh**

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen of the audience, esteemed Panellists and Ms Yiasouma.

Thank you for giving me this platform to speak and for giving up your time to listen to the voices of young people in Northern Ireland about issues that matter to us.

To begin, I would like you to imagine a scenario. Apologies in advance if this scenario makes you feel in anyway uncomfortable or embarrassed – but discomfort and shame are at the heart of the issue I am discussing.

Now, picture yourself at work; on your way to a very important meeting, when you experience an urgent ‘call of nature’! You make with haste to the nearest toilets only to find that, in order to get access to the toilet paper, you must put a pound in a toilet paper vending machine. But… you don’t have a pound with you! What do you **do**? How would you **feel**?

The feeling you might imagine is the lived experience of 1,000s of girls in Northern Ireland. However, it is not toilet paper that they are expected to pay for, it is sanitary products.

This situation is what leads Period Poverty.

Period Poverty is when women and girls are unable to afford period products such as sanitary towels and tampons; this can result in us having to create our own crude form of protection. Using toilet paper, using newspaper, using socks – all of which are completely ineffective and shameful.

In the case of girls, Period Poverty can result in them repeatedly missing school for days at a time. Over the years I have heard of the issue of Period Poverty in relation to girls and their access to education in less economically developed countries. Recently however, I have come to realise that this is no less of an issue for girls in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Assembly Blog, Research Matters, reported in September this year that one nationally representative study, found that ‘…one in seven girls and women said they had struggled to afford sanitary wear’ and, even worse, ‘one in ten said they had been unable to afford it.’

It is critical that you, our political representatives, now prioritise the issue of Period Poverty.

Prioritise Period Poverty **NOW** because it directly affects girls’ rates of absenteeism from school in NI. The study cited in the blog also outlines how ‘…there is concern that girls are missing school – with impacts on attainment and life chances.’

Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulate that there should be no barriers to accessing a broad education which encourages the development of talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. Article 31 **explicitly** asserts the corresponding **right** to engage in play and recreational activities must be supported by ensuring that children have access to appropriate and sufficient products to manage their periods.”

Prioritise Period Poverty now because, 110,000 children live in poverty in Northern Ireland. The gap in educational attainment among richer and poorer children remains too wide.

Only 47% of children eligible for free school meals achieved five or more A\* - C grades at GCSE in 2016, compared with 68% of all children according to a 2018 Joseph Rowntree Foundation Report looking at poverty in Northern Ireland. At least half, if not more than half, of the children living in poverty will be girls. These girls are **doubly** disadvantaged due to the impact of Period Poverty.

Evidence from the Child Poverty Action Group shows that children can be acutely aware of money problems within their home and may not wish to ask parents for money. The ongoing effects of the culture of shame surrounding periods mean they are too embarrassed and too ashamed to ask for pads or tampons.

Prioritise Period Poverty now because, from January 2020 – in 2 months’ time – Northern Ireland will be the **only** region in the UK where girls will not have access to free period products in schools.

In April 2019, the Westminster Government announced that sanitary products would be made available in secondary and primary schools in England from early 2020; a scheme that will be fully funded by the UK Department for Education.

Last year the Scottish Government unveiled a £5.2m scheme to provide free products in schools, colleges and universities. Also, in April 2019, the Welsh Government welcomed a £2.3m grant for free sanitary products in all primary and secondary schools.

I am sure you will agree that this discrimination against girls in Northern Ireland is unacceptable and needs to be rectified immediately. Menstruation is a natural process which all girls go through. No girl chooses to start having periods and no girl can prevent it from happening – it is simply part of our biological development. Why then should we be penalised for this? As the Northern Ireland Assembly Blog also highlights, “Sanitary products are essential goods. This means girls and women MUST buy them…”

I ask again: Why is a difference made between the need for period products and the need for toilet paper?

The significance of this issue is demonstrated in the proposal to end Period Poverty by the Children and Young People’s Commissioner, Scotland, the ‘issue should be seen in the context of the duty on the State to take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure human dignity and the **realisation of rights**.’

Article 16 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly outlines the rights of girls includes the right to manage their periods discreetly and with privacy; and that making tampons and sanitary towels available to children and young people in education settings supports the realisation of children’s rights.’

I am calling on you, here, today as representatives of the population of Northern Ireland, over 50% of whom are women and girls

* to bring an end to the disadvantage and discrimination faced by 1000s of girls every month;
* bring an end to girls missing out on their education and the knock-on implications this has for their life-chances;
* to bring an end to the stigma and taboo associated with periods and Period Poverty.

I ask you to make free period products available in all schools in Northern Ireland. By doing so, you will not only bring Northern Ireland in line with the rest of the UK, but you will also become leaders in a worldwide movement to challenge discrimination faced by women and girls; and be instrumental in protecting and upholding our rights.

We should never be made to feel ashamed for having a period or for being a girl.

We should never be made to feel ashamed for not being able to afford sanitary products.

But if you, **our** politicians, do not prioritise the elimination of Period Poverty after today, then it is **you** who should feel ashamed.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to hearing about the initiatives you put in place to eradicate Period Poverty in Northern Ireland.