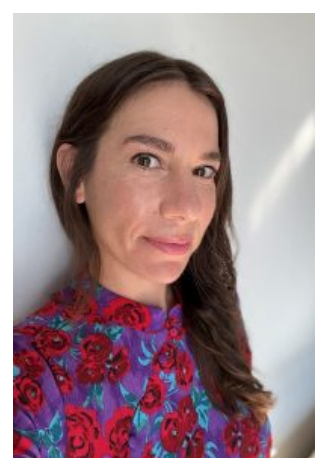




PERIOD POVERTY IS POLITICAL!

January 30, 2023 | by MM | No Comments



[Guest blog by [Dr Sara De Benedictis](#), Brunel University London]

Over the past few years, the term 'period poverty' has been in the news a lot. It refers to how some people are unable to access or afford menstrual products [1]. The issue of period poverty has attracted much attention from UK politicians, celebrities, charities and human rights activists since 2016 [2]. You may remember hashtags like #freeperiods [3], political party manifestos pledging to solve period poverty [4] or companies promising to donate products to those in need [5]?

The level of coverage was a little surprising because the topic combines two powerful social taboos (usually kept quiet): **periods and poverty** [6]. So, I thought it might be interesting to see how the media has communicated and shaped the issue of period poverty in the UK. Last month, my research findings were published in a free article called '[Periods of Austerity](#)' in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* [7]. You can access the [full article here](#).

In short, the article describes the themes emerging from news media representations of period poverty. It was important to explore this because news coverage can help to validate and justify social justice issues and put them on to national political/ public agendas. I focused on two years of UK national newspaper items using the term 'period poverty' from 2016-2018.

Through the analysis of 154 news articles, I found that **working-class schoolgirls** were positioned as the main type of people experiencing period poverty. Importantly, they were consistently framed as the **'deserving' poor**. Distinctions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor has long been a way to place poverty as the fault of individuals, rather than due to social and structural inequalities e.g., changes in social welfare policies [8].



Photo: Pexels- by RODNAE Productions

In the article, I discuss how the individualising of poverty changed over time as the coverage went on. Period poverty became spoken about as a form of gender inequality. While it definitely *is* related to gender inequality, **period poverty is also related to factors such as the unequal distribution of wealth, social 'class' and previous Coalition government and the current Conservative government's austerity policies** [9]. This all became lost in the news coverage and soon period poverty was seen as a totally separate thing from the wider issue of increasing UK poverty.

Finally, I found that the news coverage of period poverty distinctly emphasised '*brand aid*' and '*causerism*', where **the selling of products is made to seem like the answer to social issues and inequalities** [10].

The donation of period products and the celebration of individuals or organisations – often profit-driven companies – that provide these products was offered as the solution to period poverty [11]. But what this celebration



A better solution to period poverty- reusable cups!
Photo: Pexels- by Cliff Booth

masks is **the role that period product companies play in worsening period poverty** and reproducing social inequalities, such as fixing the price of products or providing unsafe and inferior products to African customers [12].

To conclude, even though period poverty surfaced as a national discourse in the UK news, it was not a straightforwardly 'good' thing. The news coverage successfully depoliticised and decontextualised (separated) the issue of period poverty. Overall, it shifted the blame for period poverty onto individuals, clouded the role of period product companies in shaping period poverty and masked the impact of worsening social inequalities in the context of the UK government's austerity agenda.

For more information and free access to the article in full- [click here](#).

References and notes:

[1] As defined by Alison Briggs, in this great article about period poverty: [Briggs A \(2021\) 'Period poverty' in Stoke-on-Trent, UK: New insights into gendered poverty and the lived experiences of austerity. Journal of Poverty and Social Justice 29\(1\): 85–102.](#)

[2] Prompting, for example, the Plan UK '[Breaking Barriers Report](#)' on the state of menstrual education.

[3] #FreePeriods was started by Amika George in April 2017, after the BBC published a report that 1 in 10 girls in the UK can't afford to buy menstrual products. See <https://www.freeperiods.org/>

[4] In the run up to the 2019 general election (after the Brexit referendum in 2016), period poverty was mentioned in the Conservative, Labour and Green Party policy manifestos...

[5] Many big period product companies got involved in 'donating' products to those in need [even if they continued to overcharge consumers & make billions in profit – this was a nice thing to do, but remember that it provided a lot of free marketing and news coverage of their brands, too – Ed] [6] As noted by Victoria Haneman in this article about menstruation and capitalism: [Haneman VJ \(2021\) Menstrual capitalism, period poverty, and the role of the B Corporation. Columbia Journal of Gender and Law. Epub ahead of print 1 February.](#)

[7] Here is the full citation: De Benedictis, S. (2022) '[Periods of Austerity: The emergence of "period poverty" in UK news-media](#)'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 0 10.1177/13675494221133131 pp. 1 – 17. ISSN: 1367-5494

[8] As pointed out in this book by Tracey Jensen that traces how this discourse plays out through parenting: Jensen T (2018) *Parenting the Crisis: The Cultural Politics of Parent Blame*. Bristol: Polity.

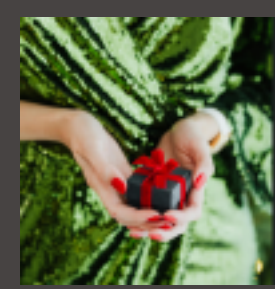
[9] See Alison Briggs' article for a longer discussion about this relationship: [Briggs A \(2021\) 'Period poverty' in Stoke-on-Trent, UK: New insights into gendered poverty and the lived experiences of austerity. Journal of Poverty and Social Justice 29\(1\): 85–102.](#)

[10] As argued in this book by Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte: Richey LA, Ponte S (2011) *Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. [We see this a lot in relation to menstrual and menopausal health! Everybody rushes in to make even more money from women as consumers rather than fund much needed research and education initiatives...- Ed.] [11] As pointed out and analysed in depth in Camilla Røstvik's book: Røstvik CM (2022) *Cash Flow: The Businesses of Menstruation*. London: UCL Press.

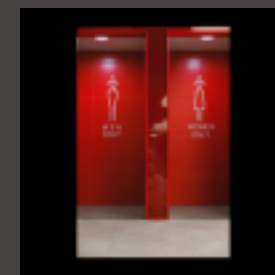
[12] For more information on these issues please see this article about the high cost of products in Nigeria- <https://thisisafrika.me/lifestyle/high-cost-of-menstrual-products-leading-to-period-poverty/> and more about the campaign started by Scheaffer Okore regarding substandard period products distributed in Africa and Asia- <https://www.wen.org.uk/2022/11/07/whys-menstruation-a-human-rights-issue-scheaffer-okore/>

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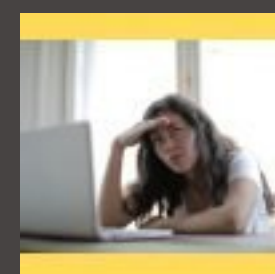
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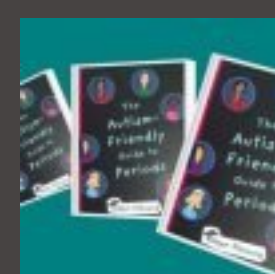
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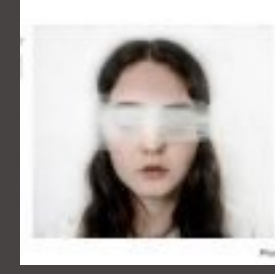
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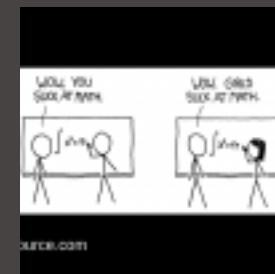
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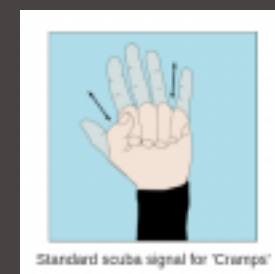
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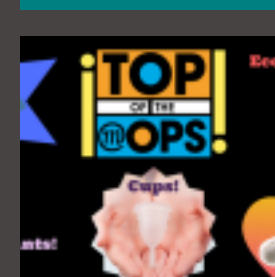
THE 'VIRGINITY' MYTH...



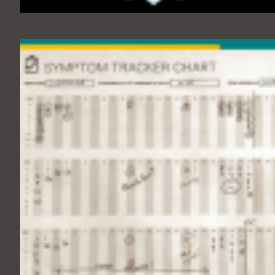
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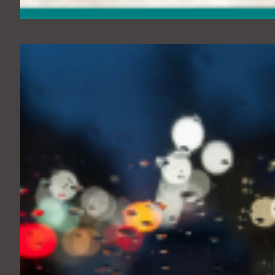
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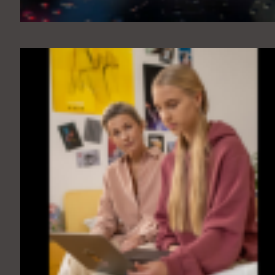
PERIOD PRODUCT COMPARISON...



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