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SCOTLAND AND PERIOD POVERTY: A CASE STUDY OF MEDIA AND POLITICAL AGENDA-SETTING

Dr Fiona McKay

Abstract: Grassroot-led global social movements have become increasingly prominent on mainstream media and political agendas. In Scotland, several of these have resulted in significant policy change, including the period poverty movement, which addresses inequalities relating to menstruation. The chapter looks to this movement as a case study, showing how several interventions have led the country to be hailed a world leader in policies providing free access to menstrual products. It will analyse the conditions under which this movement first took hold in Scotland in 2016, moving chronologically from the first mention of the term "period poverty" in legacy media. It will show how the increasing visibility and discursive realisation, or crystallization, of the term itself fuelled further activism to influence the political agenda. In doing so, it will show the increasingly hybrid and circuitous dynamic of contemporary political communication and how taking a holistic approach to viewing this may give added insight to appraisals of media and political agenda setting.

Introduction

Recent social justice movements, such #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion, have captured the attention of global publics. The ways in which these have come to prominence has varied, but they are illustrative of the increasing influence of these kind of activist movements on media and political agendas. Crucial to their efficacy has been engagement with, and framing by, the "mainstream" or legacy news media, seen as a dominant site of struggle for social movement organisations (SMO) seeking meaningful socio-political change. The changes wrought by digitisation, however, mean that grassroot movements can now influence media and political agendas in different ways, operating in a hybridized media environment that allows for engagement across multiple platforms. Social media networks have been important in creating networked activist publics and giving a sense of unity across global social justice movements, while also allowing for personalisation at the local and/or national level. However, how these movements may then influence the democratic agenda is still context-specific to the attitudes and practices of the countries where they may occur.

Scotland, as a devolved nation of the UK, operates within a multilevel political system and partly devolved media context. As a nation, it holds several powers, including matters relating to healthcare and social services, while the UK Parliament retains those over reserved matters, such as defence and immigration. Scottish nationals may vote on matters relating to both Scotland and the UK, while legislature may be introduced in either the Scottish or UK parliament. They also have access to a variety of national, "indigenous" Scottish newspapers, Scottish or "tartanised" versions of British papers, as well as the UK-wide press.

This unique socio-political situation has often contributed to an ebb and flow of perceptions of the nation being "more left-wing, more europhile, more civic" than its counterparts (Harvey 2020). As Harvey notes, however, arguments around Scottish exceptionalism are not new and remain contestable. Yet there still exists an undeniable difference in the recent voting behaviours of the Scottish people and other parts of UK, most notably the success of the SNP in general election cycles following the independence referendum of 2014 (ibid), and during the 2016 European Union (EU) referendum, where Scotland voted 62% in favour of Remain (Higgins 2016).

This has also coincided with the growing prominence of several national, grassroots-led campaigns, that often focus on socio-economic stigma. These include the Poverty Alliance's "Stick Your Labels" campaign, which implored policy makers, employers and local authorities to challenge the stigma of poverty through language and practices (Armour 2016), and the TIE (Time for Inclusive Education) campaign for the introduction of LGBT-inclusive education practices (Haggerty 2018). As such, these campaigns suggest that a specific national context may have contributed to their influence on media and political agendas.

This argument can also be extended to the role of gender representation, with recent political events, including the reinstatement of Holyrood as a devolved government in 1999 and the Scottish referendum on independence, creating energised publics committed to gender advocacy and wider social justice in the country (Ritch 2019). This chapter looks at a prominent movement in the Scottish public sphere which sits within this trajectory: the drive to end "Period Poverty". It analyses the conditions under which this movement took hold in Scotland in 2016, examining why it became one of the first countries to implement significant schemes addressing period poverty at the national level, leading it to be hailed a world leader in policies providing free access to menstrual products (Yeginsu 2020). Using a combination of keyword searches and appraisal of sources in the press, social media, as well as policy documents, it moves chronologically to show how the movement evolved over time on media and political agendas. In doing so, it will show how a combination of interventions can increase mobilization of both grassroots and political campaigns, showing the increasingly hybrid and circuitous dynamic of the contemporary political information cycle (Chadwick 2017) as well as the role this may play in meaningful policy change.

Social movements setting the media and political agenda

Securing media coverage on issues is important for amplifying the messages of SMOs, with visibility a "highly contested currency" (McCosker 2015). How certain publics or movements, which have previously been active but had little or no attention, can suddenly make gains on both media and political agendas, and consequently affect the prominence of specific issues, is a significant area of study in the realm of political communication. The role of the news media has long been considered an important influence in shaping public opinion (McCombs & Shaw

1972), with media-political agenda-setting studies looking to how this influence can lead to policy change (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2016). The changes wrought by the digitisation of media and the advent of Web 2.0, however, has complicated traditional gatekeeping and agenda-setting flows, shifting perspectives to view these processes in more holistic ways (Chadwick 2017). In the digital media landscape, new media logics collide and converge with legacy or "mainstream" media logics in a hybrid system, with traditional understandings of the news cycle now seen to operate in broader information cycles (ibid). In this way, various interactions between elite and non-elite actors, groups and citizens, as well as a broad range of media types, can be seen to influence the salience of certain issues on media and political agendas.

Over the last few decades, as movements have increasingly exploited networked technologies, the range of voices responding publicly to social and political issues has broadened. Social media has given a platform to movements that may be overlooked by mainstream media (Rogstad 2016), as well as offer a form of affective engagement (Papacharissi 2014) that can lend itself to a personalised framing of protest amid collective action (Blevins et al 2019). Indeed, the communicative style of social media has increased the interaction of movements, with the organisational tool of the hashtag instrumental in the formation of such publics (Higgins and Smith 2014). Hashtags allow for networks to be searched and curated, giving a sense of unification to global or transnational social justice movements, while also allowing for personalisation and nuance at the national or local level. The linguistic mechanism of the hashtag can also act as a form of discursive realisation, giving legitimacy to movements, the efficacy of which can also be seen in political branding and the formation of policy ideas (Jeffares 2014, Caleffi 2015).

Nonetheless, intermedia agenda setting studies in the hybrid media system show how different media may still be interdependent. Langer and Gruber (2020) show the legacy media still holds an instrumental role in political agenda setting, though this can be energised in a strategic alliance with a variety of actors. In their comprehensive analysis of the Windrush scandal, they show how a "campaign assemblage of investigative journalism, political and advocacy elites, and digitally-enabled crowds" came to compel the UK government to respond (ibid). Issues, such as the above, may not be given enough attention until the conditions are just right, in a "media storm" (Boydstun et al. 2014). Attention may also be cyclical, with different conditions reframing similar areas which have been given less attention in public consciousness, such as the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag which was created in 2013, but did not come to signify a movement in the US until the Ferguson protests in 2014 (Freelon et al 2016) then gained greater global resonance following the death of George Floyd at the knee of a police officer in 2020. This shows the need to appraise a broad range of actors and platforms when looking to the conditions by which a campaign may influence or re-set agendas.

Menstrual Activism

During the latter half of the last decade, there has been a surge in global activism relating to the health, social, and economic inequalities relating to menstruation. These have included: a focus on the cost of and access to menstrual products (particularly for those in poverty); the associated healthcare for those who do, and do not, menstruate; and scrutiny of the wider attitudes, visibility and stigma relating to menstrual cycle-related issues. This subject appeared to break on to the global media agenda in 2015, with various news outlets defining it as "the Year of the Period" (see for example Hinde 2016). Though discussion and social movements around the inequalities relating to menstruation are not new, these have often been relegated to

the fringes of research and advocacy, with this focus only reaching more mainstream audiences in both popular and political discourse in recent years.

A prominent part of this has been to challenge the taxation policies around menstrual products. Though gendered taxation policies are different from country to country, there have been similar campaigns in areas where menstrual products, such as sanitary pads, tampons and menstrual cups, have been classed as 'luxury items' and therefore taxed at higher rates than 'necessary items'. As menstruation is viewed as a biological process that affects specific groups of people (cisgender women, trans-men, intersex, genderqueer or nonbinary individuals), this is argued to be a form of gendered discrimination. This has become known in the US, UK, and Canada (among others) as the "tampon tax" and has become the focus of various national movements campaigning for tax reform. In the UK, this campaigning has taken place for more than two decades, culminating in more sustained attention in 2014 until it was announced the UK would abolish the tax on leaving the EU (Gallagher 2020).

The fight to abolish the "tampon tax" has since been considered a form of "gateway advocacy" into scrutiny of the broader, structural challenges around menstruation (Weiss-Wolf 2020). In the US, the term "menstrual equity" has been used as a frame of reference for this movement, which, as Weiss-Wolf argues, was a deliberate discursive choice to capture the broad focus around menstruation and sanitation, hygiene and public health (ibid). In the UK, there has been a similar movement with several SMOs and campaigns created around wider menstrual activism in recent years, though these have tended to gather collectively under the umbrella term of the "period poverty" movement instead. The galvanising effects of this movement has been seen across civil society in all the devolved nations of the UK, with a focus on the specific socio-economic impact menstruation has on those living in poverty. The has included the

creation of several prolific SMOs, including campaigns and social enterprises such as #FreePeriods, Freedom4Girls, the Red Box Project, and Hey Girls.

It is perhaps unsurprising that this particular term has been embedded in the lexicon in Scotland and the wider UK, as opposed to the alternative US-based "menstrual equity". Much of the campaigning around menstrual activism has sought to normalise the attitudes around menstruation, and the use of the colloquial and more accessible term for menstruation – period – would be familiar to UK audiences. While the use of this euphemism also suggests a hesitancy around the use of the medicalised term "menstruation" in public discourse, arguably still associated with ongoing stigma, the alliterative pairing with the term "poverty", similar to the precursive "tampon tax", serves as an evocative and visceral shorthand for a range of interconnected issues, appealing to journalistic and social media conversational norms. The use of this term also developed during a period of heightened grassroots and third sector responses to the austerity programme and welfare cuts of 2013 (Morrison 2019). Initially, the term "tampon tax" was more prominent in mainstream media discourse between the years of 2014 and 2016, however "period poverty" has since overtaken this after a series of taxation changes in 2016 and the announcement the tampon tax would be abolished following the UK's departure from the EU (Gallagher 2020).

The construction of the term "period poverty", as such, works in much the same way as other fragmented aspects of poverty, such as "fuel poverty", "food poverty", and "funeral poverty", all of which have been operationalised to give a sense of the different ways structural poverty may manifest (Crossley et al 2019). Like the term menstrual activism, however, the definition of period poverty is now being complicated, with some arguing for a reframing the movement in more encompassing terms, such as "period dignity", "period pride" and being "period

positive". Yet, as this case study shows, the way a campaign and term may take hold and galvanise action may be dependent on several contextual and discursive factors to ensure their efficacy in the nascent stage.

"Period Poverty" and its beginnings in Scotland

Though there have been similar trajectories in the implementation of comparable policies relating to free menstrual products across the devolved nations, the movement in Scotland has moved quickest on the political agenda. Described as a "world first", in August 2018, the Scottish Government announced a £5.2 million pledge to offer free sanitary products to all school, college and university students across the country to "banish the scourge of period poverty" (Scottish Government 2018). Policy such as this had only been rivalled in a handful of smaller pilot schemes across the world, including in New York City in June 2016 (Weiss-Wolf 2016), and also follows Kenya's amendment to legislate the provision of sanitary towels to school-going adolescent girls (BBC News 2017). Scotland, however, has positioned itself at the forefront of this area in the UK and globally with the introduction of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill (SP Bill 45) in the Scottish Parliament in April 2019. With the passing of the bill in November 2020, and becoming an Act on January 2021, it has since become the first country in the world to legally enshrine free universal access to menstrual products for those that need them (Scottish Parliament 2021).

In the years preceding the introduction of the Bill, Scotland underwent a significant period of constitutional change. The reinstatement of Holyrood as a devolved government and the creation of the parliament was seen at the time to bring wider and unprecedented opportunities for women's participation and representation (Mackay, Myers and Brown, 2003, Mackay 2014,

Breitenbach 2020). The further constitutional question of independence, put to the Scottish nation in 2014, has also been touted as a prolific period for gender advocacy with a lasting effect (Ritch 2019). Campaigning in this period is said to have encouraged the nation into "a bold period of imagining" of institutional innovation, underpinned by a commitment to human rights and equality (ibid). This included the creation of several new women's grassroots organisations and networks, including Women for Independence (WfI) and Women Together, which were active in the local community and in wider media (Kenny 2014). In contrast to the UK-wide Brexit campaign in 2016 (Ritch 2019), Scottish activism has arguably been energised by grassroots campaigning of the independence referendum, with WfI specifically maintaining momentum, despite the vote to remain, and remaining an active group committed to wider social justice in Scotland (McAngus and Rummery 2018).

During this time, advocacy around the area of menstruation had already been growing at the grassroots level in local voluntary organisations, as well as non-profit organisations, including poverty charities and women's organisations such as Simon Community Scotland, Barnardo's Scotland, Scottish Women's Aid and the Trussell Trust (Brooks 2016a). However, the first mentions of the term "period poverty" can be traced to elements of the Scottish public sphere in 2015 (see Table 1 for a summary of key points during the movement). This was found on the social media platform Twitter, preceding its use in mainstream media or official political policy documents. Using a keyword search in its Advanced API function, the term was found in a Tweet sent on August 2, 2015, in support of a WfI charity drive for menstrual products, saying "please help end 'Period Poverty'" (Gray 2015) and referenced an online donation page that had been created by members of WfI who were fundraising in the area (Dickie 2015, Indiegogo 2015). Though the site doesn't directly employ the term "period poverty", the use of the term in quotation marks in the Tweet suggests the prior use of the phrase in other spaces.

Date	Summary of key points
15 Aug 2015	First mention of "period poverty" in the context of menstrual activism on Twitter in response to WfI charity drive
13 Jul 2016	Scottish Parliament Question on affordability of feminine hygiene products (Monica Lennon)
16 Sep 2016	Tabled Motion on 'Feminine Hygiene Products' in Scottish Parliament (Monica Lennon)
27 Sep 2016	First name-check of 'period poverty' and '#periodpoverty' in Scottish Parliament, UK press (*Guardian*) and Twitter
Oct 2016	*I, Daniel Blake* released, followed by charity screening and Scottish Parliamentary tabled motion
April 2017	#FreePeriodScotland (Victoria Heaney, WfI)
June 2017	'Period Poverty Consultation' (Engender)
Aug 2017	Consultation on Bill for #EndingPeriodPoverty (Lennon MSP)
Sep 2017 to Feb 2018	Six-month pilot in Aberdeen for those in low incomes & education
Mar 2018	Proposed Sanitary Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill lodged and backed by all parties
Aug 2018	Scot Gov's £5.2m scheme announced for free access in School, universities and colleges
January 2019	A further £4 million pledged for the scheme extended to more public spaces including libraries, leisure centres
February 2020	Period Products (Free Provision) Scotland Bill passed first stage in Scottish Parliament
November 2020	Final vote and passing of Period Products (Free Provision) Scotland Bill
January 2021	The Bill becomes an Act on January 12, 2021.

Table 1: Key points during the period poverty movement in Scotland

The issue of affordability and access to menstrual products was first raised in a formal political context by newly elected Scottish Labour MSP Monica Lennon in July 2016, who addressed a question to the Scottish Parliament about its plans to introduce free access to products, as well as address health issues and stigma around periods. This was answered by Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Shona Robison, on August 09, 2016, who said the Scottish Government had "no plans to introduce free products, though it understood that menstrual products were being offered in food banks alongside other products such as nappies and soap" (SP WA 13 July 2015 S5W-01459). This sparked a widespread response from the third sector, including Scottish feminist charity, Engender, and given prominence on the front page of the *Herald*

(Sanderson 2016a), with the journalist making a reference to the growing "menstrual equity" movement in the paper's online edition (Sanderson 2016b).

Lennon later tabled a motion about the burden of cost of menstrual products, and amplified claims from the third sector to "consider making feminine hygiene products available free to women in receipt of certain targeted benefits" (Brooks 2016a). This was the first time the phrase was employed in the Scottish Parliament when it was also debated for the first time, gathering cross-party support (SP S5M-01493 2015). This also occasioned the first use of the term "period poverty" in the press in article in the *Guardian* on September 27 by journalist Libby Brooks, the Guardian's Scotland Correspondent (Brooks 2016a). Both Lennon and Brooks used the term on Twitter the following day, with Lennon tweeting that "'Period Poverty' [wa]s forcing women and girls to go without essential sanitary products" (Lennon 2016) and Brooks tweeting "Scottish parliament debates 'period poverty' as @MonicaLennon7 leads campaign for menstrual equality" (Brooks 2016b).

A keyword search on Lexis Library News database (which includes UK national broadsheets, tabloids and regional newspapers), shows that in the months following its first use in September 2016 to December 2016, four articles which reference this term were found and featured prominently in the Scottish press in the *Sunday Herald*, the *Daily Record* and *The Herald*. The growing media attention in Scotland was amplified with the release of the film *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), a fictionalised account of experiences of poverty and the UK welfare system. The film drew a large amount of attention at time, being a catalyst for protests about the lived experience of austerity and poverty in the UK (Ritman 2016). A scene in the film depicts one of the lead characters, Katie, at one point being caught shoplifting tampons. Two articles in the Scottish press featured interviews with the Scottish screenwriter for the film, Paul Laverty, who

highlighted this scene specifically, referencing the campaign to 'end "period poverty"' (Taylor 2016). This was also followed by a motion tabled by the Lennon to commend a charity screening of the film in an Edinburgh cinema, which included a panel discussion with the writer, third sector representatives, and politicians (SP S5M-02612).

From December 2016, there began to be more sustained attention on social media with the use of the hashtag #periodpoverty alongside a greater focus in the UK press with three prominent articles in the *Guardian*. This included one opinion piece (Cosslett 2016) and two stories, again by Brooks, about the increased lobbying of the UK parliament and progress made by the Scottish Parliament (Brooks 2016c) and support of pharmaceutical chain Boots (Brooks 2016f). This coincided with two tweets from Brooks who highlighted this as an issue foregrounded in "I, Daniel Blake" (Brooks 2016d, 2016e). Aside from a Channel 4 news piece on period poverty with campaigners from The Homeless Period, including Laura Coryton, who was already known for her work around the tampon tax (Channel 4 2016), other mentions of this term were largely absent from the rest of the mainstream UK media.

Period Poverty, 2017 onwards

In 2017, more sustained media attention coincided with the growth of the "period poverty" movement across Scotland as well as other areas of the UK, however this appeared to progress on the Scottish political agenda at a much faster rate. In March 2017, Lennon announced her bid to bring forward a members' bill at Holyrood (*The Herald* 2017), which also drew considerable attention in the Scottish media. This was followed by several notable consultations in Scotland. First was the launch of the nationwide campaign, #FreePeriodScotland in April 2017, a WfI initiative created by national committee member,

Victoria Heaney. This was established with the aim of capturing an evidence-based picture of the experiences of those who menstruate in Scotland. The survey was facilitated most effectively through supporters sharing the hashtag on Twitter and other social media networks and went on to attract more than 1,000 respondents (Brooks 2018). Then came a "Period Poverty Consultation" by Engender in June 2017, which also attempted to capture the scale and impact of period poverty in the country. This was attended by educational, homelessness, poverty, and women's organisations, who came together to discuss how to inform policy to improve access to menstrual products (Engender 2017).

In August, 2017, Lennon then launched a formal political consultation for "Ending Period Poverty", saying that Scotland could "lead the way" in tackling what we have come to recognise in our own communities as period poverty" including introducing a legislative duty for a universal system for free products and statutory duty for schools, colleges and universities to provide free sanitary products (Scottish Parliament 2017). This was also endorsed online with the hashtag, #EndingPeriodPoverty and followed with a six-month pilot in the city of Aberdeen for those on low incomes and in education from September 2017 to February 2018. It was then in August 2018 that the "world first" £5.2 million scheme was introduced, soon to be followed by an extension of the scheme to more public spaces in January 2019 including libraries and leisure centres (BBC News 2019). This was instrumental in providing a foothold for a plethora of other SMOs and campaigns to develop around the issue including many "firsts", such as the social media-based "On The Baw" campaign which petitioned Celtic Football Club to become the first football stadium to provide free products and prompted a further 110 clubs across the UK to follow suit (Kennedy 2018). Alongside this was several voluntary initiatives in places such as hospitals, railway stations and shopping centres.

By comparison, “period poverty” was first used in the UK Parliament on 16 March 2017 by the Labour MP for Dewsbury, Paula Sherriff, who referenced the “significant” number of girls “playing truant because they do not have any sanitary protection around the time of their period” (Hansard, 2017). Sherriff, who had campaigned against the tampon tax, had already been mentioned by Brooks (2016b) in her article in the *Guardian*, however the discussion and subsequent media coverage in the rest of UK media was only amplified in April 2017 by the campaigning of Amika George, founder of the #FreePeriods campaign. Though this had initially been mentioned previously by Brooks in 2016 (Brooks 2016c), when discussing the inspiration for the project, George referenced Leeds-based charity, Freedom4Girls, and recent news reports that girls had been using socks because they couldn’t afford sanitary towels (Mann 2017), indicating the different levels of visibility and information flows of the campaign across the different geographical areas of Scotland and other parts of the UK.

Conclusion

This chapter looks to the Scottish context of the movement alongside the wider trajectory of the rest of the UK, showing how the trajectories of similar campaigns may differ in multilevel media and political systems. As this is only a small snapshot of the period poverty movement in Scotland, the nuance of how this differs across the other UK nations has not been explored. Nonetheless, this analysis shows how a global social movement may come to be collectivised differently in very similar political contexts, illustrating the increasingly hybrid, circuitous and complex dynamic of media and political agenda setting. It also points to the role political institutions, and in particular new parliaments, may play in facilitating trailblazing policy change.

This case study, therefore, illustrates the usefulness in considering the interplay of contextual factors in influencing media and political agendas. These include analysis of previous civic engagement, wider socio-political contexts and different forms of media interventions. It also demonstrates how the efficacy of a movement may rest on how it appeals to the norms of both legacy and new media logics. Though the specific origin of the term remains unclear and bears further scrutiny, online interactions suggest this emerged in the Scottish public sphere from activist publics offline. Yet, similar to the findings of Langer and Gruber (2020), interventions from media and political actors then amplified the issue online and in the press, subsequently increasing the mobilization of further SMOs. In this case, this also contributed to the discursive realisation or "crystallization" of the concept, fuelling further activism and policy change.

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