Pink Present

A silent problem called period poverty is emerging as a major issue for young people across Northern Ireland. The term is generally referred to as being unable to access sanitary products often due to financial constraint; and from having a poor understanding and knowledge of menstruation. Current research and practice suggests that this is having a profound effect on young people's lives.

Research by Plan International UK (2018) *Break the Barriers: Girls' Experiences of Menstruation in the UK* found that, one in ten girls can't afford to buy menstrual products, while one in seven struggles to afford them. Over the course of a year, 137,700 young people in the UK miss school because of period poverty.

Pink Present was recently introduced as a new initiative to the Youth Engagement Service at the Magnet Young Adult Centre, Newry by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. The main focus of the project is to help address the problem; by ensuring that no young person misses out on their education every month because they have their period and cannot afford sanitary items. This pilot project, Pink Present is to complement existing initiatives already in operation such as the Red Box Project (UK wide) which is also being piloted in eleven schools in Northern Ireland.

Although in the early stages, this is the first step for Pink Present in helping to protect the dignity and confidence of a young person in need and to ensure that they have access to safe, hygienic sanitary products. Having limited or no access to these products and insufficient knowledge of how to manage menstruation hygiene and menstruation health can often lead to prolonged use of the same pads or tampons, which can cause various medical infections. In addition to their overall wellbeing been affected through social isolation, body image issues, low self-esteem, lack of exercise and relationship conflict; from the physical and emotional turmoil young people are suffering on a monthly basis. Such is the sense of embarrassment and awkwardness for young people to seek support and to learn about periods because of inadequate provision, services and limited education on the topic.

In 2020, Northern Ireland will be the only part of the UK, where there is no access to free sanitary products in schools because of a non-functioning executive in Stormont. Yet again, young people from Northern Ireland continue to suffer the consequences of austerity and

political wrangling and have their health and wellbeing hindered - something that young people in other parts of the UK are not subjected to.

A stepping stone in addressing period poverty, the opportunity to avail of Pink Present is inviting and appealing to young people. It enables them to feel comfortable and supported in an environment where they feel safe; due to the innovative and adaptive methods of the youth work approach. It is allowing them the opportunity to ask questions, have conversations with others, realise it is a “normal’ part of people’s lives. This project is about providing an open environment to all, by empowering young people to make informed choices and not to miss out on the chances in life, by breaking the silence; and helping to challenge the stigma and taboo surrounding one of the many topics associated with sexual health.

By Lizzy Smyth

Reference: Plan International UK – Break The Barriers: Girls’ Experiences of Menstruation In the UK (2018)