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**„A Bloody Human Right –
Improving Education on Menstruation in Austria
to Tackle Taboo and Stigmatisation“**

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II List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

BZgA	Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung
CCPR	Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CESCR	Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
EU	European Union
MHM	Menstrual Hygiene Management
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PE	Physical Education
PMDD	Pre-menstrual Dysphoric Disorder
PMS	Pre-menstrual Syndrome
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WHO	World Health Organisation
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

1 Talking about a Taboo Topic

‘I’m not crying because I’m on my period, or anything (...) I can’t believe a film about menstruation just won an Oscar!’¹ That is what director *Rayka Zehtabchi* said when accepting the prize for best Documentary Short at the 2019 Oscars. She was surprised that a film about a taboo topic that is allegedly disgusting and a “women’s issue” could win such a prestigious prize. Her short film titled *Period. End of Sentence.* broached the subject of stigma against menstruation in India and accessibility of menstrual products, especially in rural areas. *Zehtabchi*’s partner, producer *Melissa Berton* concluded her speech with the following statement: ‘A period should end a sentence — not a girl’s education.’² By this, she referenced to the fact that many girls in rural India miss school or even drop out because they have no means to manage their periods as there is a lack of menstrual materials (“period poverty”) and hygiene facilities are insufficient.

In these small extracts of their acceptance speech, the two women already address quite a few issues around the topic of menstruation. Amongst them are stigma and taboo, education or the gender dimension. As boys and men do not experience menstruation, primarily girls and women³ are at risk of being affected by stigmatisation, school absenteeism or period poverty. Although the two women do not explicitly use human rights language, they are indeed talking about human rights issues. The right to education, the right to sanitation as well as gender equality are only a few concrete examples.

As a result of the taboo, menstruation has been neglected for many decades in policies, research, education, projects or resource distribution. It has generally been given a low priority – also in human rights.⁴ Only recently, the topic has come on the agenda, mainly as an issue in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector in development

¹ O. G. Lawler, 'A Film About Periods Just Won an Oscar', *The Cut*, 24 February 2019, <https://www.thecut.com/2019/02/a-film-about-periods-just-won-at-the-2019-oscars.html>, (accessed 23 June 2019).

² N. Aizenman, 'A 'Period' Movie Won The Oscar! So Why Are Some Menstrual Health Experts Ambivalent?', *npr*, 28 February 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2019/02/28/694733979/a-period-movie-won-the-oscar-so-why-are-some-menstrual-health-experts-ambivalent?t=1561282854384>, (accessed 23 June 2019).

³ For a differentiation see Chapter 2.

⁴ I. T. Winkler and V. Roaf, 'Taking the Bloody Linen out of the Closet: Menstrual Hygiene as a Priority for Achieving Gender Equality', *Cardozo Journal of Law & Gender*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2014, p. 11.

cooperation, with attention on period poverty. The issue has also slowly made its way to the United Nations (UN) and their human rights bodies. In addition to development cooperation and human rights work, also activist and artists have addressed the menstrual taboo and aspired to break it. In recent years, also academic work has increased. Environmentally aware actors have joined the debate by promoting sustainable menstrual products and materials in an attempt to reduce global waste production. Other actors have addressed the pricing issue and taxation on tampons and other menstrual products.

Noting the current rise of attention and awareness, this thesis aims to contribute to the removal of the taboo and the current discussions in an academic way: First, by analysing the menstrual stigma and taboo and their consequences in a human rights context. And second, by breaking the global perspective down to a very concrete and practical level, taking menstrual education in Austria as an example.

In fact, issues like period poverty, school absenteeism or lack of knowledge about menstruation are often dismissed as problems of low-income countries. However, recent studies have shown that this is not the case. These challenges also affect high-income industrial countries, like the United Kingdom (UK) or Austria, albeit not in that scale.⁵ Furthermore, these are not the only problems arising from the menstrual stigma and taboo. Many more issues, affecting women all over the world, are linked to it, including pricing and taxation, negative attitudes, shame and embarrassment as well as gender equality.

Director *Zehtabchi* outlines: ‘After seeing the film I hope people understand this period stigma doesn’t just affect those in India, we experience it in the United States and in other cultures as well.’⁶ What she means is that almost global stereotypes dictate that women should be fresh and beautiful and smell well, but menstruation is considered disgusting, smelly and sometimes impure. It is rather seen as a “hygienic crisis” of women or a

⁵ erdbeerwoche, *1. Umfrage zu Menstruation unter Jugendlichen zeigt: Jungs ist das Thema peinlich und Mädchen wissen nicht über ihren Körper Bescheid*, [website], 2017, <https://meineregelmeinplanet.wordpress.com/2017/07/04/1-umfrage-zu-menstruation-unter-jugendlichen-zeigt-jungs-ist-das-thema-peinlich-und-maedchen-wissen-nicht-ueber-ihren-koerper-bescheid/>, (accessed 27 January 2019); Plan International UK, *Break the Barriers: Girls’ Experience of Menstruation in the UK*, London, 2018, p. 10.

⁶ O. G. Lawler, ‘A Film About Periods Just Won an Oscar’, *The Cut*, 24 February 2019, <https://www.thecut.com/2019/02/a-film-about-periods-just-won-at-the-2019-oscars.html>, (accessed 23 June 2019).

weakness, also associated with emotional instability. This leads to the social rules of hiding menstruation and all products associated to it. The topic is not discussed openly in public and it should not concern boys and men. It is a classic example of a taboo topic.⁷

The taboo and embarrassment also impede good education about the topic, leading to myths, insecurity and lack of knowledge among girls and women, but also among boys and men. At the same time, the taboo, negative attitudes and stigma remain unchallenged.

Taking the concrete example of Austria, a survey conducted in 2017 showed that teenagers between 13-17 years had considerable knowledge gaps and that negative attitudes and embarrassment overweight neutral and positive ones. Although education on menstruation takes place in school, the survey conducted by the social business “erbeerwoche” revealed a need for better information for this target group and more efforts to break the taboo.⁸ In an attempt to achieve this, “erbeerwoche” launched an online-based learning platform called READY FOR RED, where girls and boys can learn about menstruation in a playful and interactive way.

Researching the question “*How can education on the topic of menstruation in Austria be improved so as to reach more girls and remove the taboo?*”, this academic work seeks to produce scientific knowledge that can be used in practice. Interviews are conducted with girls, teachers and experts to find out what kind of improvements are needed in Austria. Next to looking at the school context, the thesis also considers the project READY FOR RED and evaluates its potentials and shortcomings. At the end of the process, recommendations are formulated on the basis of the theoretical and empirical findings. The long-term goal is to improve access to information for all girls (in Austria) and consequently improve their human rights situation.

Bringing together the global and the practical perspective, the thesis will have the following structure: First, definitions and the research design will be elaborated, including a reflecting on language. Second, the human rights analysis will be conducted based on legal documents, documents published by UN human rights treaty bodies as well as

⁷ Winkler and Roaf, p. 36.

⁸ Erdbeerwoche, 2017.

academic publications. Examining the menstrual taboo and stigma from the human rights perspective, human rights obligations and challenges will be pointed out. In the next step, quality education on menstruation is argued as a possible solution for several issues. Taking the example of Austria, I will present the current situation, the mentioned survey and the project READY FOR RED. Afterwards, the findings of the interviews will be discussed, taking into account the theoretical considerations. Finally, I will formulate recommendations based on the results of the previous chapters and draw a conclusion.

2 Conceptual Framework and Research Design

Before the research design is introduced, important terms need to be defined. It is also crucial to have a brief reflection about the language that is used in the debate.

2.1 Definitions

2.1.1 Menstruation and Related Terms

Before science was able to understand the physiology of menstruation and the menstrual cycle, people did not know why women bleed every month without being injured. In many cultures, menstruation was therefore believed to be something magical, but at the same time menstrual blood was considered poisonous. Some of these connotations exist still today.⁹ Despite the increased amount of biological information, myths, misinformation and knowledge gaps about menstruation persist around the world.¹⁰ Prior to the discussion about the taboo, it is crucial to depict the biological process behind it and understand menstruation as a normal, natural body function of women.

The term *menstruation* stems from the Latin word “mens”, meaning “month”. It refers to the natural process of ‘regular discharge of blood and mucosal tissue from the inner lining of the uterus through the vagina’.¹¹ As it is part of the female (menstrual) cycle, the

⁹ I. Johnston-Robledo and J. C. Chrisler, 'The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma', *Sex Roles*, vol. 68, no. 1-2, 2013, p. 10.

¹⁰ Plan International UK, p. 4; B. Redl, 'Wiener Start-up: "Buben verwechseln Menstruation mit Masturbation"', *Der Standard*, 9. März 2018, <https://derstandard.at/2000075658427/Jugendliche-wissen-zu-wenig-ueber-die-Menstruation>, (accessed 27 January 2019).

¹¹ Period., *A Global Glossary: The Menstrual Movement*, [website], 2017, <https://www.period.org/blog/glossary>, (accessed 27 February 2019).

bleeding returns periodically “every month”, lasting usually for two to seven days. The menstrual cycle is normally between 26 and 32 days long (28 in average), differing from individual to individual.¹² All the processes of the cycle are governed by hormones, which can also have other impacts on women’s bodies and psyche. Another part of the cycle and important step of reproduction is ovulation. During ovulation a female egg cell travels from the oviduct to the uterus. If it gets fertilized by a sperm cell, the fertilized cell settles in the uterine endometrium and a baby can grow. If the egg does not get fertilized, the top layer of the endometrium sheds and menstrual blood takes the cells from the endometrium out of the body by flowing out of the vagina together with vaginal fluid. Menstruation is therefore a natural cleansing process. Regular menstruation is a sign of health and of fertility. On average, girls experience their first period, called menarche, between the age of 11-15 years. Menstruation ends when women reach menopause.¹³

However, it is not this biological definition that is at the centre of attention. Menstruation also has a societal and cultural meaning, shaped by ideological interpretation. It is the cultural definition that needs to be looked at with scrutiny.¹⁴ On the one hand, women’s capacity to bear children is glorified by societies around the world. As menstruation symbolizes female health and fertility, one should think that this process should also be glorified.¹⁵ Yet, menstruating women are often stigmatized and devalued as unclean and dirty, and are supposed to feel ashamed of their body functions. Narratives in different religions reinforce this notion of being “unclean”.¹⁶ Some cultures and religions continue to see menstrual blood as dangerous or contaminating.¹⁷

The first menstruation – *the menarche* – is often considered as a rite of passage between being a girl and womanhood. In some cultures it is a very important “event” and even

¹² pro familia, *Menstruation*, Frankfurt am Main, 2018, pp. 2, 13.

¹³ *ibid.*, 5-9, 13-14, 35. pro familia, pp. 5-9, 13-14; Period.

¹⁴ D. Merskin, 'Adolescence, Advertising, and the Ideology of Menstruation', *Sex Roles*, vol. 40, no. 11-12, 1999, p. 942; E. A. Kissling, 'Bleeding Out Loud: Communication about Menstruation', *Feminism & Psychology*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1996, p. 481.

¹⁵ Kissling, 1996, p. 482; L. Fingerson, 'Agency and the Body in Adolescent Menstrual Talk', *Childhood*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2005, p. 104; T.-A. Roberts, J. L. Goldenberg, C. Power and T. Pyszczynski, "Feminine Protection": The Effects of Menstruation on Attitudes Towards Women', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2002, p. 131.

¹⁶ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, p. 10.

¹⁷ *ibid*; Roberts, Goldenberg, Power and Pyszczynski, pp. 132-133.

celebrated or accompanied with rites. Estimations suggest that half of the world has rituals for menarche.¹⁸ For example, in the Jewish tradition it brings luck to slap the girl in the face when she started menstruating.¹⁹ Menarche is often as a sign of sexual maturity as it symbolizes the start of the capability to reproduce.²⁰

The term *menstrual hygiene management (MHM)* can be widely found in academic work and policy documents. It stems from field of development work, more concretely the WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) sector, and refers to the processes by which women are able to adequately deal with their menstruation. It also includes the enabling environment and materials for this.²¹ The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have established the following working definition to show which elements are incorporated in MHM:

Women and adolescent girls use a clean material to absorb or collect menstrual blood, and this material can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of menstruation. MHM also includes using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having access to facilities to dispose of used menstrual management material.²²

Period poverty is a term that is predominantly shaped by activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It describes a situation in which a girl or a woman lacks (access to) appropriate materials to deal with her menstruation. Period poverty can take different forms and reasons for it might be various, for example inability to afford products due to poverty or no availability of adequate materials.²³ Ignorance of menstrual needs or low prioritization by decision-makers might further contribute to period poverty, just like the prevalence of stigma and taboo.²⁴

¹⁸ E. A. Kissling, 'On the Rag on Screen: Menarche in Film and Television', *Sex Roles*, vol. 46, no. 1-2, 2002, p. 5; K. R. Allen, C. E. Kaestle and A. E. Goldberg, 'More Than Just a Punctuation Mark: How Boys and Young Men Learn About Menstruation', *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2011, p. 131.

¹⁹ D. Costos, R. Ackerman and L. Paradis, 'Recollections of Menarche: Communication Between Mothers and Daughters Regarding Menstruation', *Sex Roles*, vol. 46, no. 1-2, 2002, p. 55.

²⁰ Fingerson, p. 91; Kissling, 2002, p. 5.

²¹ UNICEF, *WASH in Schools, Empower Girls' Education*, New York, 2012, p. 2.

²² *ibid.*

²³ Plan International UK, pp. 42-43.

²⁴ Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation*, Geneva, 2016, p. 11; Winkler and Roaf, p. 36.

Menstrual health is a broader term that refers not only to the management of menstruation, but includes social, political, psychological and environmental factors. It describes a holistic approach that also looks at menstruation in the context of gender, education, equality, rights, dignity and empowerment in addition to hygiene and well-being.²⁵ It takes into account the definition of “health” by the World Health Organisation (WHO), which reads: ‘Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’.²⁶

Menstrual education – sometimes also referred to as *menstrual health education* – is education on the topic of menstruation. Incorporating the holistic approach of menstrual health, it does not only cover biological knowledge or practical information about MHM, but also other issues. Exact contents and criteria of quality menstrual education will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.²⁷

2.1.2 Taboo and Stigmatisation

It is considered that taboos concerning menstruation are widespread. With *menstrual taboos* we generally mean prohibitions and rules related to menstruation that can come in different shapes.²⁸ Whereas some societies express uneasiness and distrust when it comes to menstrual blood, others impose far-reaching restrictions on menstruating women.²⁹

The menstrual taboo includes the activity taboo and the communication taboo: The *activity taboo* means that certain activities and actions are restricted or prohibited during menstruation. Often, swimming is a prominent example for this, or physical exercise in general.³⁰ In some cultures, women are even expected to leave the community during menstruation because they are considered unclean and there is a risk that they contaminate others. As a consequence, they have to stay in menstrual huts. Other examples are that

²⁵ Period.

²⁶ WHO, *Constitution of WHO: Principles*, [website], 2019, <https://www.who.int/about/mission/en/>, (accessed 05 March 2019).

²⁷ Although the expression is not as established as “sex education”, it is already used by some actors in their publications (see for example Plan International UK, p. 14) and will also be used in this thesis.

²⁸ P. J. Frandsen, 'The Menstrual “Taboo” in Ancient Egypt', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2007, p. 81.

²⁹ R. E. Montgomery, 'A Cross-Cultural Study of Menstruation, Menstrual Taboos, and Related Social Variables', *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1974, p. 138.

³⁰ Kissling, 1996, p. 484.

women should not grow crops, cook, preserve food or serve it during menstruation.³¹ In many cultures, also based on religious writings, women should not have sex during their menstruation, because they could make the men unclean, too.³² In some religious context (e.g. Hindu, Muslim, also Jewish), women face several restriction when it comes to (religious) activities and participation in religious life. This may include the prohibition to perform religious duties during menstruation or enter religious buildings, touch religious objects or participate in fasting.³³

The *communication taboo* prescribes that menstruation should not be discussed in public and especially not with men. Some societies dictate that it should not be addressed at all but should be treated with utmost secrecy. Therefore, euphemisms exist in many languages in order to avoid the term menstruation – such as “being on the rag”, “visited by Auntie Flo(w)”, “that time of the month” or “the curse”.³⁴ In her study, *Ernster* found existing 128 terms for menstruation in the United States, some of them more descriptive euphemisms, and others derogatory.³⁵ The name of the above mentioned Austrian social business “erdbeerwoche” is also based on a euphemism. Meaning “strawberry week” in English, the term rather triggers positive associations and hides aspects about blood or the female cycle. Only the red colour of strawberries builds the link to menstruation.

Menstrual etiquette is a set of rules concerning behaviour and communication, mostly for women, in relation to menstruation. Although the taboo may differ from culture to culture, with some having more or different rules and rites than the others, the underlying principles are often similar. *Kissling* argues that the menstrual taboo, respectively menstrual etiquette can be found across cultures³⁶. Whereas *Frandsen* agrees that menstrual taboos are nearly universal, *Montgomery* counters that they are not universal, as some cultures are said to impose no taboos.³⁷

³¹ Roberts, Goldenberg, Power and Pyszczyński, p. 132.

³² *ibid*; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, p. 13.

³³ Costos, Ackerman and Paradis, p. 54; Plan International UK, p. 40.

³⁴ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, p. 12; Roberts, Goldenberg, Power and Pyszczyński, pp. 132-133; Kissling, 1996, p. 484; Winkler and Roaf, p. 6.

³⁵ V. L. Ernster, 'American Menstrual Expressions', *Sex Roles*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1975, 3-5, p. 10.

³⁶ Kissling, 1996, p. 482.

³⁷ Frandsen, p. 81; Montgomery, p. 138.

A *stigma* is a characteristic, a mark that differentiates a group of people from the others. It is usually interpreted in a way that the body or character of those people is somehow deficient, spoiling their whole appearance.³⁸ Different cultures stigmatize menstruation in different ways, but common stigmas are: menstruation as a curse or disease, connected to impurity, or other. These stigmas are used to legitimize different treatment of people who menstruate (see also list of stereotypes below).³⁹ As a consequence, being in the state of menstruation is connected to shame and must be hidden.⁴⁰

2.2 Language

Language can be powerful means of exclusion or inclusion. It is therefore crucial to reflect on the use of words. When it comes to menstruation, mostly women and girls are at the centre of the debate. However, it has to be acknowledged that not every person who menstruates is a woman. Transgender, intersex and non-binary persons whose bodies carry out menstruation are often excluded from the debate. At the same time, not every woman or everyone identifying as a woman menstruates.⁴¹ This may be due to absence or removal of the uterus, sickness or the taking of hormones which suppress menstruation.⁴² Girls who are too young and women who have entered menopause are also not menstruating. Therefore, some activists or scholars suggest the use of alternative terms to refer to the group of people who menstruate, for example “menstruators”⁴³, “people with periods”⁴⁴ or “women, girls and people who menstruate”.⁴⁵

Moreover, “women” or “girls” are very generalizing terms. It has to be recognized that there is great diversity within the groups and that each woman or girl has individual experiences with her menstruation. All these individual experiences cannot be captured in this thesis, neither can the particular challenges of individuals who menstruate but do

³⁸ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler., p. 9.

³⁹ Period.

⁴⁰ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, p. 11.

⁴¹ Plan International UK, p. 8.

⁴² J. C. Chrisler, 'Teaching Taboo Topics', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2013, p. 130; D. Keiser, *Speech on Menstrual Health*, Berlin, 02 February 2019.

⁴³ T. Peranovic and B. Bentley, 'Men and Menstruation: A Qualitative Exploration of Beliefs, Attitudes and Experiences', *Sex Roles*, vol. 77, 1-2, 2017, p. 113.

⁴⁴ THINX, *Underwear for People with Periods*, [website], <https://www.shethinx.com/pages/people-with-periods>, (accessed 23 February 2019).

⁴⁵ Cp. also Period.

not identify as girls or women. The thesis looks at a more structural level and tries to analyse the topic from a perspective of gender equality and human rights. It therefore has to resort to simplifications and the use of non-inclusive and general terms like “women” and “girls”, yet always bearing in mind the explained complexity and diversity within the group.

In common speech, menstruation goes by various names, such as period or menses, as well as colloquial expressions such as “being on the rag” (see above). This thesis uses mostly “menstruation” as this is the neutral and professional term.

Moreover, some activists have expressed criticism concerning the use of the terms “management” as well as “hygiene” as in “menstrual hygiene management”, because they reinforce the perception of menstruation as a “hygienic crisis”. This further implies that menstruation is disgusting and needs to be “managed”, namely contained and “cleaned up”. A preferred term is “menstrual health”.⁴⁶ Similarly, the use of “female sanitary products” or “feminine hygiene products” when referring to pads, tampons, sanitary towels etc. can be seen as problematic, again due to its negative connotations to being dirty. At the same time, it suggests that it is only a “women’s issue”.⁴⁷ On the one hand, this is not inclusive language, as not only women menstruate. On the other hand, “women’s issue” implies that it is not an issue of general concern, and that society and men do not need to pay attention. As a more suitable and inclusive alternative, the thesis uses “menstrual products or -materials”, but, although being aware of the negative connotation, sometimes resorts to the abbreviation MHM, because it is widely used and despite its shortness contains a lot of elements.

2.3 Research Question

The thesis is guided by the following research question: *How can education on the topic of menstruation in Austria be improved so as to reach more girls and remove the taboo?*

Although menstruation not only concerns girls and women and education about the topic should not be directed only at girls and women (cp. above and below), this research

⁴⁶ Keiser.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

focuses on the target group of girls between 11-17 years. School is an important channel for education – although not the only one discussed in this thesis – and the target group can be reached in school. Girls are given priority in this case, but other target groups could be subjects of follow-up academic work.

As research suggests, menstruation is still a taboo topic and knowledge gaps as well as negative attitudes persist (see also below).⁴⁸ Education must not only transfer knowledge, but also contribute to normalisation and removal of the taboo (cp. Chapter 4.1). Whereas the human rights analysis in the following chapter looks at the issue from a global perspective, the research focuses on Austria. The project READY FOR RED serves as one existing example of how menstrual education could be improved or complemented.

To answer the research question, the following sub-questions need to be addressed:

- 1) What are human rights implications of the menstruation taboo?
- 2) How should menstrual education ideally look like?
- 3) What practical challenges exist in relation to menstrual education (in school)? How can they be overcome?
- 4) What are strengths and weaknesses of the platform READY FOR RED? How can it be used in school and how can it be improved to reach more girls?

2.4 Aims of the Research

Raising awareness about the topic and current problems, the thesis aims at revealing persisting taboos, stigma and negative attitudes towards menstruation and showing their consequences. By analysing the menstrual taboo from a human rights perspective, the thesis seeks to explain why it is a human rights issue. It further aims at contributing to the reduction of the taboo and improving education about this topic by analysing challenges and making practice-relevant suggestions how menstrual education in Austria can be improved. By evaluating the project READY FOR RED, the thesis analyses what needs to be done so that the project and menstrual education in general reach a wider audience. Improving education has the long-term goal to positively impact daily lives of girls (and

⁴⁸ RedI; Plan International UK, p. 4.

everyone else) by closing knowledge gaps, challenging negative attitudes and removing the taboo. Ultimately, this leads to an improvement of their human rights situation.

2.5 Methodology

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative approach was chosen, using expert interviews with three different groups as suitable means to obtain data on this specific topic. Girls aged 11-17 years were questioned as members of the target group, for which the menstrual education is designed. The age group was geared to the target group of the project READY FOR RED. In addition, teachers and external workshop providers (external trainers) were interviewed as experts with practical experiences. Biology teachers are experts when it comes to school education on menstruation, also in the face of student behaviour and parent reactions. They can offer their perspectives and share their experience from teaching practice. External trainers can complement this with their expert views, coming to schools to do workshops on sex education and menstruation and having a different perspective on education. Interviewing these practitioners and the girls helps confirming or refuting theoretical findings and assumptions as well as developing ideas, identifying challenges and giving practical examples.⁴⁹

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as suitable means, because they provide structure on the one hand, but flexibility on the other hand to react to upcoming answers in the interview. For semi-structured interviews, a collection of guiding interview questions is prepared beforehand. However, derogation from it is possible if deemed appropriate in the situation of the interview. This includes changes of order or adding and deleting questions.⁵⁰ The interviews were done in person to allow better reaction. They were recorded for transcription. Data protection regulations were followed.

All the interviews were divided into three parts: First, general questions about menstruation, the taboo, attitudes and knowledge (among girls) were asked. Second, the participants looked at the platform READY FOR RED independently. In the third part, evaluating questions about the platform were posed. In some cases, the interviews with

⁴⁹ J. Gläser and G. Laudel, *Experteninterviews und qualitative Inhaltsanalyse als Instrumente rekonstruierender Untersuchungen*, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag, 2010, pp. 11-13.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 41-43.

the girls were part of workshop on the topic of menstruation, which took place in the respective institutions (e.g. youth club).

2.6 Procedure

The research question was inspired by practical needs identified by “erdbeerwoche” and formulated in accordance with scientific standards. The aims of the research as well as existing research guided the development of a collection of possible interview questions.⁵¹ In order to find suitable interview partners, different organisations working with girls were approached. Among them were learning cafés, youth clubs/girls clubs, residential homes operated by private and public institutions as well as church-based organisations like Caritas. Besides that, schools, individual teachers and online platforms for teachers were contacted as well as organisations working in sex education and providing workshops in schools (found through online-research).

Information leaflets were designed in German for girls and their parents/legal guardians as well as for teachers and external trainers. In these documents, the most important aspects of the research were summarized, including aims and foreseen procedure of the interviews. Interviewees were informed about anonymity, recording of the session, their right to withdraw and data protection. Each person (and, if necessary, the legal representative) signed a declarations of consent before participating in the research. After a first feedback from institutions working with (younger) girls, the information leaflets for girls and their parents were simplified and shortened for better understanding.

The interviews took place in the time from 27 March 2019 to 29 April 2019 in Vienna and Wolkersdorf.⁵² They were conducted in the local language (German) and in an environment, in which the interviewee felt comfortable. In total, eight girls between the age of 11-17 years, two external trainers and two teachers (one male, one female) participated in the research. Girls who had not yet started menstruation as well as some who already had more knowledge were interviewed. They had different backgrounds.⁵³

⁵¹ For a list of possible interview questions: see annex 1.

⁵² For a list of conducted interviews: see annex 2.

⁵³ Most girls were German natives or fluent in German. Only in one case there were slight language difficulties.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the help of the programs “Express Scribe” and “f4transkript”. In the order in which they took place, the interviews were numbered from 1-12. Separate transcripts were made for each interview, which formed the basis for the analysis. The interviews were transcribed literally, but for better readability, filling words like “ehm” and breaks (marked by “...”) were only transcribed when creating an effect. For the qualitative content analysis, text passages with relevant information were coded according to the guiding questions, using different colours for different aspects. The answers were translated to English and allocated to key words in an Excel sheet. In some cases, important statements were marked as direct quotes.⁵⁴

For anonymization, no names were used. To be able to allocate the answers to the individuals, they were also given numbers within their category (girl, teacher, external trainer). In order to simplify citation, abbreviations were used to identify the correspondent transcript. Each abbreviation contains the number of the interview as well as the category. In addition, the abbreviation for the interviews with girls indicate the age and the ones for the teacher also include their gender.⁵⁵ For example, INT3_GIRL2_13 refers to the third interview, conducted with girl 2 who is aged 13.

As this research takes a qualitative approach with only a few interviewees, it is not representative for all girls and teachers in Austria. At the same time, the selection of individuals of the target group depended on factors like willingness, and availability. One cannot see beforehand how tabooed the topic is within the family while meeting an unknown girl. Their religion and migrant or refugee background was only specified when it played a role for the interview, not in general.

Before the results of the interviews are presented and the research question is answered, it is crucial to take a step back and take a global perspective. Analysing menstruation and the menstrual taboo from a human rights perspective, the following chapter points out global challenges and State obligations.

⁵⁴ cp. H. Moser, *Instrumentenkoffer für die Praxisforschung, Eine Einführung*, Freiburg im Breisgau, Lambertus, 2015, 147, pp. 149-153.

⁵⁵ For a list of interviews and the abbreviations used for citation: see annex 2.

3. Human Rights Analysis

Situating the menstrual taboo and stigma and its consequences in the human rights framework draws attention to this often neglected subject and offers a new perspective. It helps identifying the human rights related to it, analysing challenges and identifying state responsibilities. Before selected human rights are considered in more detailed, a short introduction short into the human rights context will be given.

Human rights are fundamental rights granted to every individual just for the virtue of being human. They are defined in international and regional human rights treaties, which are legally binding to the ratifying States. Treaty monitoring bodies oversee the implementation and make interpretations, for example through General Comments.⁵⁶

State obligations deriving from these treaties are the obligations to respect, protect and fulfil human rights.⁵⁷ It is up to the States – the duty bearers – how they fulfil their obligations, and which means are considered most appropriate for them and their populations. Especially concerning economic, social and cultural rights, States do not have to fully realize all rights immediately but work towards their progressive realization in accordance with their means and resources.⁵⁸

Menstrual health or the right to good MHM as such are not human rights but are related to human rights. The issue is connected to dignity, the right to privacy and gender equality. In addition, it is related to the right to health, education, adequate standard of living, water and sanitation as well as just and favourable conditions of work.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ On the one hand, States must refrain from unjustified actions that interfere with the enjoyment of human rights (obligation to respect). On the other hand, they must become active and protect individuals and group from human rights violations by third parties (obligation to protect). Positive action is also required for the obligation to fulfil, as States must facilitate the enjoyment of human rights.

(OHCHR, *International Human Rights Law*, [website], <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/InternationalLaw.aspx>, (accessed 10 March 2019); J. Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2013, pp. 10, 164, 167.)

⁵⁷ M. Nowak, 'Introduction to Human Rights Theory', in: M. Nowak, K. M. Januszewski, and T. Hofstätter (eds.), *All Human Rights for All, Vienna Manual on Human Rights*, Vienna, Neuer Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2012, pp. 270–271.

⁵⁸ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *CESCR General Comment No. 3: The Nature of States Parties' Obligations*, 1990, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Due to limited space, not all rights can be discussed in detail and a selection had to be made.

Although human rights law requires States to pay attention to most marginalized groups⁶⁰, these groups cannot be focused on in more detail in this thesis. A more generalizing approach was taken. However, as women are not a homogenous group, some might face multiple forms of discrimination (intersectionality)⁶¹ or specific challenges. Examples for groups of women that have to face particular challenges when it comes to MHM, period poverty, discrimination or stigmatisation are homeless women, women in informal settlements, refugees, women in crisis situations (war, natural disaster) as well as women with disabilities, prisoners or sex workers.⁶²

3.1 Dignity

The very first sentence of the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), states that the ‘(...) recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world (...)’⁶³. Every human being is vested with dignity just for the fact of being a human and therefore deserves respect.⁶⁴ The human rights then derive from this concept. The following chapter analyses the former and current treatment of menstruation and menstruating women may pose a threat to women’s dignity – the core of every human right.

3.1.1 Negative Attitudes, Stigma and Taboo

On the occasion of the 2019 International Women’s Day on 8 March, different UN experts came together to give a statement on the menstrual taboo and its impacts on women’s health. One of the main points was: ‘Persistent harmful socio-cultural norms, stigma, misconceptions and taboos around menstruation, continue to lead to exclusion and discrimination of women and girls.’⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 14.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶² Winkler and Roaf, p. 10.

⁶³ United Nations General Assembly Res 217 A (III), 10 December 1948.

⁶⁴ Donnelly, pp. 28-29. Own research could be dedicated to each of these groups.

⁶⁵ I. Radačić, et al., *International Women’s Day, 8 March 2019*, [website], 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24256&LangID=E>, (accessed 16 March 2019).

In fact, negative attributions of dirtiness, embarrassment or shame – just for the fact of being a woman – challenge women’s dignity. The stigma on menstruation implies devaluation of women as “other” and inferior.⁶⁶ Feminist theories, drawn amongst others from writings of *Simone de Beauvoir*⁶⁷, have argued that inferiority of women is legitimized by focusing on the difference between male and female bodies. Menstrual bleeding is seen as a “deficiency”, because it is measured against the male body as the norm. This inferior position of women has been maintained historically and culturally through customs, rules and institutions and passed on through socialization. Menstrual etiquette is one example of these cultural rules that were created to safeguard women’s lower position in society.⁶⁸

One of the stereotypes is that women should be beautiful and attractive, but menstruation is not seen as “feminine”, but rather disgusting.⁶⁹ Negative attitudes have been made visible in the often-cited experiment conducted by *Roberts and colleagues*. The experiment showed that men and women alike rated a female potential lab partner less competent and less likeable after having seen her accidentally drop a tampon compared to having seen her accidentally drop a hairclip from her handbag. For the researchers, this confirms why women try so hard to hide their menstrual status. Negative judgments seem to appear after seeing a reminder of menstrual status.⁷⁰

These negative attitudes as well as societal expectations and the taboo put a constant pressure on women to hide that they are menstruating. The topic creates social discomfort and women are afraid of leaks during their menstruation, because then it would become visible that they have their menses. Stains or odour in clothes may lead to humiliation.⁷¹ Advertisements for pads or tampons reinforce this notion by promoting secrecy and freshness.⁷² This can have negative effects on women’s well-being. Constantly fearing leaks can lead to ‘excessively vigilant self-consciousness and self-monitoring’,⁷³ which

⁶⁶ Winkler and Roaf, pp. 3-4, 14.

⁶⁷ S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, New York, Vintage Books, 1952, p. 354.

⁶⁸ Winkler and Roaf, p. 4; Roberts, Goldenberg, Power and Pyszczynski, p. 136; Kissling, 1996, p. 494.

⁶⁹ Winkler and Roaf, p. 4.

⁷⁰ Roberts, Goldenberg, Power and Pyszczynski, p. 135.

⁷¹ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, p. 10; Roberts, Goldenberg, Power and Pyszczynski, p. 132.

⁷² Winkler and Roaf, p. 6; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, p. 11.

⁷³ Chrisler, p. 130.

also impacts social behaviour. Self-monitoring can be seen in connection with objectification and self-objectification⁷⁴, if women internalize the messages of their bodies as objects in need of “tiding up” and trimming in order to live up to (male) expectations.⁷⁵

Furthermore, there are a lot of degrading attitudes and generalization when it comes to “PMS” or being “hormonal”. The menstrual cycle is guided by hormones, which can have effects on body and mood. Women can show physical symptoms accompanying menstruation, such as cramps, water retention, gain of weight, acne or others.⁷⁶ Already before the beginning of the actual menstruation, many women show physical symptoms or change in mood, which is often summarized under the term “PMS”. The abbreviation stands for pre-menstrual syndrome. PMS is

characterized by physical, affective, and behavioural symptoms that significantly impair the daily lives of women, including work and personal activities, during the luteal phase and spontaneously resolve within a few days of the onset of menstruation.⁷⁷

These symptoms reach from physical ones such as headache and tiredness to behaviour and emotional ones such as mood swings, sadness, isolation or irritability. PMS can appear in very mild forms, hardly interfering with daily lives, but may also be more severe, even amounting to pre-menstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) with more severe symptoms such as functional impairment or depression.⁷⁸

Kissling found out that women having PMS are shown more often in film and on television instead of women who menstruate, which reinforces certain stereotypes.⁷⁹ These stereotypes refer to menstruating (or pre-menstruating) women as ‘tearful, tense, weak, miserable, physically ill, mentally unstable, easily enraged, out of control and potentially violent’⁸⁰. In addition, it is said that their activity is limited, they can be

⁷⁴ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, pp. 13-14.

⁷⁵ C. Bobel and E. A. Kissling, 'Menstruation Matters: Introduction to Representations of the Menstrual Cycle', *Women's Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2011, p. 123.

⁷⁶ Chrisler, pp. 129-130.

⁷⁷ A. Ryu and T. H. Kim, 'Premenstrual syndrome: A mini review', *Maturitas*, vol. 82, no. 4, 2015, p. 437.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Kissling, 2002, p. 5.

⁸⁰ Chrisler, p. 130.

annoying or unpredictable as well as less sexy.⁸¹ Considering (pre-)menstruating women as disabled, uncontrollable or aggressive may even foster hostile sexism. This form of sexism devalues and denigrates women, thereby justifying patriarchy⁸².

In the debate about women in leadership positions, the fact that women menstruate, in connection to stereotypes about PMS, has often been used as an argument. Opponents to women in leadership positions justify their opinion by alleging that menstruation has a negative impact on women's ability to think rationally. Also, women's exclusion in politics or military has been backed up by the argument that menstruation makes women weak or "hormonal" and therefore unfit to fill the position.⁸³

On the one hand, these attitudes and stereotypes about negative impacts of the menstrual cycle on women's capabilities and emotions may induce self-fulfilling prophecies, which may prevent women from actually tapping their full potential in their careers or limit their leisure activities.⁸⁴ On the other hand, negative attitudes of others may impede girls to seek medical help, if they need it. Health care providers may be dismissive of serious health issues and women's symptoms in the context of menstruation. This can hinder the diagnosis of PMDD, but also of other serious conditions, such as endometriosis and dysmenorrhea.⁸⁵

All these examples show that dignity of women is at risk of being under attack by stereotypes and stigma. In fact, dignity does not correspond to one specific article of a human rights treaty. Rather, as an underlying concept, dignity gives coherence to all human rights.⁸⁶ States' obligations concerning the other rights therefore simultaneously entail the obligation to respect, protect and ensure all people's dignity.

In addition to this general approach, concrete State obligations can be derived from human rights treaties, which further concretise the UDHR. For example, the Convention

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² G. B. Forbes, L. E. Adams-Curtis, K. B. White and K. M. Holmgren, 'The Role of Hostile and Benevolent Sexism in Women's and Men's Perceptions of the Menstruating Woman', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2003, p. 58.

⁸³ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, p. 14; Roberts, Goldenberg, Power and Pyszczynski, p. 136.

⁸⁴ Chrisler, p. 130.

⁸⁵ Radačić et al.

⁸⁶ Donnelly, pp. 28-29.

on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) requires States to take measures

[t]o modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.⁸⁷

Stereotypes about menstruation can fall under this category, as they portray women as weak or inferior. Additionally, Art. 10 of CEDAW requires States to eliminate stereotyped concepts in education.⁸⁸ In its General Recommendation No. 36, the CEDAW Committee has further elaborated on how to address and eliminate gender stereotyping. Here, also the link between stereotypes and access to education becomes clear, which will be further analysed below.⁸⁹

3.1.2 Period Poverty

Moving on to another challenge to women's dignity: period poverty. It is not dignified if a woman has to use inappropriate and maybe even itching or infectious materials to absorb the blood if no appropriate supplies are available.⁹⁰ Instead of pads and tampons, women affected by period poverty use tissue paper, newspaper, rags, straw, mud or other material. An additional problem is the lack of safe spaces to wash, change materials and clean and dry reusable materials or dispose of non-reusable ones. This is also linked to the right to privacy, which serves to protect dignity. Feelings of shame and embarrassment complicate the situation further.⁹¹

Period poverty is commonly perceived as a problem of lower income-countries, as poverty is more widespread in general and industrial products are not available everywhere. However, in their recent study, Plan International UK found that it also

⁸⁷ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (adopted 18 December 1979, entered into force 3 September 1981) 1249 UNTS 13, Art. 5 (a).

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, Art 10 (c).

⁸⁹ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *General recommendation No. 36 (2017) on the right of girls and women to education*, 2017, pp. 6-7; Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *General recommendation No. 25, on article 4, paragraph 1, of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, on temporary special measures*, 2004, p. 9.

⁹⁰ Winkler and Roaf, p. 14.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

affects girls in the UK. 92 In 2018, the European Union officially recognized ‘period poverty’ as ‘an ongoing issue in the EU’⁹³, even using the term period poverty. Certain groups of people are especially at risk of facing period poverty – also in “rich” countries – such as homeless people, incarcerated women or refugees.⁹⁴

On the basis of the right to an adequate standard of living⁹⁵ and the right to water and sanitation (cp. below), it has been recognized at UN level, that States need to provide women and girls with affordable, safe and hygienic menstruation materials.⁹⁶ This means that States must progressively eliminate period poverty. How exactly States achieve this, is open for discussion within this chapter (see also Chapters 3.2 and 3.3). One aspect that has already been mentioned is the obligation to reduce stigma and stereotypes. At this point, the interdependence and interconnectedness of human rights becomes visible. Reducing stigma can be an obligation itself (to protect dignity) but also a measure to reduce period poverty.

3.1.3 Segregation and Social Exclusion

Another way in which women’s dignity is affected is by segregation and social exclusion. This may be due to the activity taboo (exclusion from certain activities), physical segregation as well as through self-exclusion (exclusion from social situations due to shame or fear). One example is the prohibition to enter religious sites or participate in religious activities that exists in different religions.⁹⁷ In September 2018, the Indian Supreme Court declared a ban unconstitutional that forbid women in menstrual age to enter one of the holiest Hindu temples, the Sabarimala Ayyappa.⁹⁸

⁹² Plan International UK, p. 10.

⁹³ European Parliament, *European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2019 on gender equality and taxation policies in the EU*, [website], <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P8-TA-2019-0014>, (accessed 09 March 2019).

⁹⁴ Winkler and Roaf, p. 10.

⁹⁵ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 3 January 1976) 993 UNTS 3, Art 11.

⁹⁶ Human Rights Council, 2016, pp. 11-12.

⁹⁷ Costos, Ackerman and Paradis, p. 54.

⁹⁸ Z. Saberlin, 'India Supreme Court overturns ban on women at Sabarimala temple', *Al Jazeera*, 28 September 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/india-supreme-court-overturns-ban-women-sabarimala-temple-180928074701697.html>, (accessed 05 March 2019).

Many women in South-East Asia have to face social exclusion, because they are considered impure or even untouchable.⁹⁹ One extreme example of this are practices in Nepal, where menstruating women are not allowed to physically touch certain people, animals (livestocks), plants or items, such as kitchen items or water sources due to risk of impurification. Consequently, their access to food, drinking water or other necessary items is limited. In far-western Nepal, menstruating women and girls are excluded from the house and banished to huts or sheds. This exile is called *Chhaupadi*. Human rights organisation have criticized these huts for being unhygienic and failing to accommodate basic needs as well as leaving the women exposed and vulnerable to animal attacks or rape. Although the Nepalese Supreme Court has banned *Chhaupadi* in 2005, it is still practiced, especially in the far-West of Nepal.¹⁰⁰

Whereas in the example auf *Chhaupadi* several rights are concerned – such as the right to life, right to health or right to food – the notion of exclusion and segregation in general is linked to the concepts of dignity and non-discrimination (cp. Chapter 3.2). The right to participate – for example in cultural and religious life – further plays a role in this context. It is stipulated in Art. 27 of the UDHR.¹⁰¹ Respective State obligations are again to reduce stigma as well as to eliminate exclusion and discrimination¹⁰².

Concerning cultural prohibitions and restrictions, UN experts summarized:

The patriarchal control exerted to constraint women's behaviour and mobility during menstruation undermines their agency and equality. When combined with the stigma and shame that women and girls are made to feel during that time, it is truly disempowering.¹⁰³

In conclusion, the menstrual stigma and taboo fosters social exclusion, restriction on activities, devaluation of women and discrimination. These examples from all over the world point to the fact that dignity of women is severely under threat, simply because women have certain body functions that men do not have. On a more positive note, the decisions from the Indian and Nepalese Supreme Courts show, that certain bans and

⁹⁹ P. Amatya et al., 'Practice and lived experience of menstrual exiles (Chhaupadi) among adolescent girls in far-western Nepal', *PloS one*, vol. 13, no. 12, 2018, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰¹ United Nations General Assembly Res 217 A (III), 10 December 1948, Art. 27.

¹⁰² See also CEDAW, Art. 2, 3, 5.

¹⁰³ Radačić et al.

restrictions have been identified as human rights violations and that there is a need for change. But this is only possible if women actively claim their rights. Lack of awareness of rights among women and girls affected is one reason why this only happens rarely. Another challenge is that stigma and gender stereotypes can be so powerful that individuals or groups refrain from claiming their rights out of fear or societal pressure.¹⁰⁴ This demonstrates again the need for a change in societal attitudes and combatting stereotypes, in which States must play an active role.

3.2 Gender Equality

Equality is one of the main principles in human rights and various instruments on international and regional level stipulate gender equality. For example, discrimination, inter alia on the basis of sex, is prohibited in Art. 2 and 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR)¹⁰⁵ as well as in Art 2 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)¹⁰⁶.

When it comes to gender equality, it can be distinguished between formal equality and substantive equality. Formal equality in the gender context means that women should not directly discriminated against, e.g. by a law that distinguishes between categories of sex or gender and treats one less favourably. It is more indirect discrimination that plays a role in the context of menstruation, meaning that factually neutral laws or policies can in practice bring about disadvantages for girls or women. Among human rights scholars, it has been recognized that equality does not imply same treatment in any circumstances. Rather, different needs should be acknowledged and consequently, measures need to be adapted in order to reach substantive equality.¹⁰⁷

3.2.1 Menstrual Equity

In order to better advocate for gender equality in the context of menstruation, U.S. lawyer *Jennifer Weiss-Wolf* has shaped the term “menstrual equity”:

¹⁰⁴ Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171.

¹⁰⁶ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 3 January 1976) 993 UNTS 3.

¹⁰⁷ Winkler and Roaf, pp. 15-16.

In order to have a fully equitable and participatory society, we must have laws and policies that ensure menstrual products and related hygiene needs are safe and affordable and available for those who need them. The ability to access these items affects a person's freedom to work and study, to be healthy, and to participate in daily life with basic dignity. And if access is compromised – whether by poverty or stigma or lack of education and resources – it is in all of our interests to ensure those needs are met.¹⁰⁸

While she clearly addresses period poverty in material terms, she also takes stigma and inadequate education into account. In line with CEDAW, the Convention specifically dealing with discrimination against women, States are in general required to promote gender equality and ensure non-discrimination in all areas, including education and health.¹⁰⁹ In their General Comment No. 25, the CEDAW Committee again clarified that with regard to biological and socially constructed differences between women and men, there are cases when the State needs to abstain from identical treatment and explicitly treat women differently according to their different needs.¹¹⁰ With regard to menstruation, this means that States must recognize needs of women, that men do not have in general, and enable them to deal with their menstruation adequately.¹¹¹

3.2.2 Affordability of MHM materials

Whereas reduction of stereotypes and stigma has been discussed above already, the issue of access to and affordability of MHM materials should be considered in more detail from the gender equality perspective.

As explained above, States must ensure that all women must have access to affordable menstruation materials.¹¹² Yet, “affordable” does not mean free of charge and “materials” does not only refer to tampons and (disposable) pads: ‘While human rights neither require nor prescribe the use of disposable commercial sanitary products, they do require that materials are safe, hygienic, and culturally acceptable’.¹¹³ Women and girls should not be denied the opportunity to use the products that they deem most suitable for themselves. At the same time, commercial products are not always available in rural areas of low-

¹⁰⁸ Period.

¹⁰⁹ See for example Art. 2, 4, 5, 10, 12.

¹¹⁰ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2004, p. 3.

¹¹¹ Winkler and Roaf, pp. 16-17.

¹¹² Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 12.

¹¹³ Winkler and Roaf, pp. 22-23.

income countries and often too expensive for those affected (period) poverty. In addition, they produce high amounts of waste.¹¹⁴ Reusable pads or menstrual cups can be more sustainable alternatives, also for regions where commercial products are widely available and affordable for many. Reusable ones additionally reduce expenses of the individuals using them.¹¹⁵

In fact, women spend a lot of money on menstrual materials during their lifetime. The expenses connected to menstrual materials affect women with low income more than women with higher incomes.¹¹⁶ Some actors have tried to calculate the sum of tampons and pads a woman uses in her life and the corresponding money spent on it. One estimation suggests that women (in Western Europe) use 10,000 – 17,000 tampons or pads¹¹⁷ in their lives.¹¹⁸ A survey in the UK has shown that women spent up to 550 Euros per year (on average 20,500 Euros in their lives) on goods and services relating to menstruation, including in addition to menstrual products also new underwear, pain killers and chocolate.¹¹⁹

Although provision of materials free of charge for everybody is not a direct State obligation, it can be argued that the State should at least provide assistance or subsidies for individuals who cannot afford it and who are most in need.¹²⁰ Furthermore, the State needs to take additional costs for women and girls into account and foster an environment where the importance of women's access to menstrual products is recognized. Period

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*; Winkler and Roaf, pp. 22–24.

¹¹⁵ Winkler and Roaf, p. 22; V. Brüggemann, 'Tampons, Binden, Schmerzmittel: Was kostet die Menstruation?', *Spiegel Online*, 30 August 2018, <http://www.spiegel.de/gesundheit/diagnose/tampons-binden-schmerzmittel-was-kostet-die-menstruation-a-1220188.html>, (accessed 09 March 2019); erdbeerwoche, *Wusstest du, dass...*, [website], <https://www.erdbeerwoche.com/meineregel/wusstest-du.html>, (accessed 10 March 2019).

¹¹⁶ Another perspective to approach the question of gender equality is to turn the situation around. In a famous fictional article, *Gloria Steinem* argues that menstruation is only a "problem", because women do it and not men. If men could menstruate, so Steinem, menstruation would not be a taboo. In contrast, it would be a source of pride, of manhood and male superiority. Menstrual materials would be free and research would be plenty. (G. Steinem, 'If men could menstruate. A political fantasy.', *Ms. Magazine*, 1978, p. 110.)

¹¹⁷ Another issue that comes with menstrual products is the huge amount of waste production. In recent years, more sustainable ways for MHM have been introduced, such as the menstrual cup. Although sustainability with regard to menstrual materials is an important issue, it cannot be addressed in more detail in this thesis due to a lack of space.

¹¹⁸ erdbeerwoche, 2019.

¹¹⁹ Brüggemann.

¹²⁰ Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 12.

poverty does not always result from actual (financial) poverty, but may also be influenced by lack of information, shame as well as ignorance and prioritization issues. Where men are in decision-making positions for budgets for families, projects, schools, companies, or whole States, expenses for MHM might rank very low in priority lists or may not feature at all.¹²¹ These power dynamics must also be considered. Empowering more women to fill decision-making positions, which is also a general demand when it comes to gender equality, can contribute to making menstrual materials more affordable, amongst other things.¹²²

Although it is not a must, Kenya has chosen the free provision of menstrual materials in school as a suitable way to commit to its State obligations.¹²³ To demonstrate once again that this issue not only concerns low-income countries, the State action of Scotland should be mentioned. In 2018, the Scottish Government has started an initiative to make menstrual products freely available to pupils, students and learners across the country. Attempting to fight period poverty, the initiative covers at all kinds of learning facilities, including schools, colleges and universities.¹²⁴

It is not only school that deserves attention, but also places where women cannot leave or buy products easily. Four States in the United States have adopted legislation that ensures women in prison have access to free MHM products. As prisons have originally been designed for men and are still dominated by men in decision-making positions, needs of women have been neglected for a long time and still are in many places.¹²⁵

Next to the price of the materials itself, also taxation issues have to be considered. One example for a measure or law that may appear as equal for all is the added-value tax on certain products. In practice, however, the added-value tax on menstrual products and materials disproportionally affects women and girls, as men do not need these products.

¹²¹ Winkler and Roaf, pp. 22-23.

¹²² See for example *ibid.*, p. 34.

¹²³ Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Health, *Kenya Environmental Sanitation and Hygiene Policy 2016-2030*, Nairobi, p. 38.

¹²⁴ Scottish Government, *Students to get free access to sanitary products*, [website], 2018, <https://news.gov.scot/news/students-to-get-free-access-to-sanitary-products>, (accessed 16 March 2019).

¹²⁵ E. Polka, 'The Monthly Shaming of Women in State Prisons | Public Health Post', *Public Health Post*, 4 September 2018, <https://www.publichealthpost.org/news/sanitary-products-women-state-prisons/>, (accessed 16 March 2019).

Again, it especially burdens those living in poverty.¹²⁶ In Germany, tampons and other menstrual products are regarded as “luxury goods” and therefore taxed with 19 %, instead of 7 % reduced tax on goods essential for daily life, such as bread. The high taxation of menstrual products is often commonly referred to as “tampon tax”.¹²⁷

Whereas some States like France or the United Kingdom, have already reduced “tampon tax” (now at 5,5 %), others have completely abolished taxation on menstrual products. Among these countries are Kenya, Canada, Ireland, India and Mauritius.¹²⁸

When it comes to the European Union (EU), different countries have different taxation policies. However, in a recent resolution (January 2019), the European Parliament took a clear stand:

[The European Parliament] calls on all Member States to eliminate the so-called ‘care and tampon tax’ by making use of the flexibility introduced in the VAT Directive and applying exemptions or 0 % VAT rates to these essential basic goods; recognises that a reduction in price due to an exemption of VAT on these products would have an immeasurable benefit for young women; supports the movements undertaken to promote widespread sanitary supply availability and encourages Member States to provide complementary feminine hygiene supplies in certain (public) spaces such as schools, universities and homeless shelters, and for women from low-income backgrounds, with the aim of eradicating period poverty completely across EU public bathrooms.¹²⁹

These developments are often encouraged and accompanied by civil society action. Different initiatives have been started by activists or NGOs all over the world, advocating for the reduction of the “tampon tax”. Others call for free provision of menstrual supplies in places like hospitals or prisons, as well as in schools or for women and girls who cannot afford it. Some have even gone further and demanded universal access to free menstrual materials for all women, regardless of their income.¹³⁰ This shows, that these issues

¹²⁶ Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 12; Human Rights Council, *Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council, The human right to safe drinking water and sanitation*, Geneva, 2014, p. 23.

¹²⁷ L. Dahmer, 'Diese Frauen kämpfen dagegen, dass Tampons und Binden immer noch als Luxusgut gelten', *ze.tt*, 27 January 2019, <https://ze.tt/diese-frauen-kaempfen-dagegen-dass-tampons-und-binden-immer-noch-als-luxusgut-gelten/>, (accessed 09 March 2019).

¹²⁸ Brüggemann.

¹²⁹ European Parliament.

¹³⁰ A. Rimmer, 'Period poverty: five minutes with . . . Eleanor Wilson', *BMJ (Clinical research ed.)*, vol. 362, 2018; Polka; Dahmer.

concern women all over the world and inspire them to act – based on the pursuit of gender equality.

3.3 Right to Water and Sanitation

The right to water and sanitation is not an explicit right in the human rights treaties, but can be derived from many human rights instruments, most prominently from the right to an adequate standard of living (Art 11 of CESCR¹³¹). In 2010, the General Assembly of the UN eventually recognized the right to water and sanitation as a human right.¹³²

There is a tendency that people living in low-income countries or the so-called “global South” are more affected by lack of access to water and sanitation than people in the “global North”. It is exactly under this right, in the framework of development cooperation, that the prevalence of the menstruation taboo and issues with MHM have been globally recognized and most academic work and projects have been produced. The first time menstruation and the menstrual taboo have been addressed at the UN level was in a resolution by the Human Rights Council in 2014, where the Council recognized the link between menstrual hygiene and access to water and sanitation.¹³³

In 2016, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation (*Léo Heller*, herein after referred to as Special Rapporteur) published an important report, where menstruation was put in the focus. He emphasized that under human rights obligations ‘[w]ater and sanitation facilities must be safe, available, accessible, socially and culturally acceptable, provide privacy and ensure dignity for all individuals.’¹³⁴

If there is a lack of access to water, sanitation and hygiene of women are more affected, as they have different needs than men, including MHM.¹³⁵ On the practical level, women need access to materials to absorb the blood, next to private space for washing and

¹³¹ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 3 January 1976) 993 UNTS 3, Art 11.

¹³² United Nations General Assembly Res 10967 (LXIV), 28 July 2010.

¹³³ Human Rights Council, 2014, p. 3.

¹³⁴ Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 4.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 6.

changing materials as well as facilities to dispose of materials or wash and dry them.¹³⁶ Linked to dignity and the right to privacy, these sanitary facilities need to be adequate to protect privacy of girls and women, which may include lockable doors and gender-separate rooms.¹³⁷ When talking about access to sanitary facilities, it does not only mean the existence of facilities (availability) but also issues such as risk of gender-based violence, harassment, wild animals or barriers to use facilities must be taken into account (safety and accessibility).¹³⁸

One of these barriers is the stigma as well as stereotypes attached to menstruation. The resulting effort to always hide it may result in girls and women avoiding certain sanitary facilities, staying at home or being afraid to wash menstrual materials. Also drying these materials in plain sight is connected to shame, which is why some women dry materials in hidden and dark places or even under pillows instead of the sunlight, which increases risks of infections.¹³⁹ In addition, exclusion from sanitary facilities – due to notions of “contamination” – hinders women’s access to this right. Within the scope of State obligations is not only that States must ensure that safe and adequate facilities exist, but also that women can actually use them during their menstruation.¹⁴⁰ A sub-case of this is the provision of WASH facilities in school, which will be elaborated in more detail under the right to education (see Chapter 3.3).

Linked to sanitation is also the use of sanitary products or menstrual materials. If there is a lack of hygienic methods and materials to absorb menstrual fluid (period poverty, cp. above), women and girls have to resort to more unhygienic methods, such as dirty rags or newspaper. Stigma contributes to unavailability and unaffordability of suitable materials next to lack of information about them.¹⁴¹ The situation deteriorates in times of crisis, conflict or natural disaster, as specific MHM needs are often especially neglected in these times.¹⁴²

¹³⁶ Winkler and Roaf, p. 21.

¹³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 23.

¹³⁸ Human Rights Council, 2016, pp. 9-10.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁰ Winkler and Roaf, p. 21.

¹⁴¹ Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 11.

¹⁴² *ibid.*, p. 5.

The Special Rapporteur explains that poor MHM has far-reaching negative impacts on women and society at large.¹⁴³ Most importantly, he argues that the ‘human rights to water and sanitation include the right of all to affordable, safe and hygienic menstruation materials.’¹⁴⁴ Therefore, States have the obligation to make menstrual materials accessible, taking into account issues of affordability, safety and hygiene. For those who cannot afford it, the Special Rapporteur suggests subsidy of products or provision free of charge.¹⁴⁵

Taking into account these strong statements from the Special Rapporteur, the Human Rights Council brought the matter to the attention of the UN General Assembly in 2018. The Council expressed their concern about the stigma and neglect surrounding menstruation and acknowledged lack of information for women and girls. They also recognized that lack of access to sanitation with regard to MHM negatively affects gender equality and human rights.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, the Council calls upon States

[t]o address the widespread stigma and shame surrounding menstruation and menstrual hygiene by ensuring access to factual information thereon, addressing the negative social norms around the issue and ensuring universal access to hygienic products and gender-sensitive facilities, including disposal options for menstrual products.¹⁴⁷

In summary, State obligations to protect and fulfil the right to water and sanitation include the obligation to provide adequate sanitary facilities as well as access to menstrual products and taking measures to reduce stigma on menstruation, which is at the core of many of the problems. An obligation to give away menstrual products for free cannot be directly deduced from the overall State obligations. Neither is the State required to provide all services itself. Rather, the authorities have to create an enabling environment and act as a facilitator (obligation to fulfil). Identifying needs and developing adequate measures as well as raising awareness and creating a framework for other actors such as companies are also within the State’s duties.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁶ General Assembly, *Report of the Human Rights Council, Thirty-ninth session*, New York, 2018, p. 46.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁴⁸ Winkler and Roaf, pp. 26-27; Kissling, 1996, p. 494.

3.4 Right to Education

Everybody's right to education and the prohibition to discriminate against women in education is stipulated in various international human rights treaties.¹⁴⁹ Also regional treaties guarantee this right. Education is a means of empowerment of human beings and fosters the exercise of other human rights¹⁵⁰. The scope of the right includes inter alia free and compulsory primary education. Secondary education should be generally available and accessible for all.¹⁵¹ Two issues are especially relevant with regard to menstruation and the right to education: (1) School absenteeism among girls due to menstruation, (2) Access to quality education on the topic of menstruation.

3.4.1 School Absenteeism

Some studies have been made, especially in connection to development cooperation, concerning the link between menstruation and school attendance. Just to name two examples: According to *Hennegan et al.* (2016), roughly 20 % of girls interviewed in Uganda reported missing school due to menstruation.¹⁵² Regarding Western Kenia, *Wilson, Reeve and Pitt* found that half of the girls had missed some school because they were menstruating. 35.5% of the girls had missed school once or twice and 17 % of the interviewees had missed class several times.¹⁵³

Whereas *Oster and Thornton* argue that menstruation does not significantly reduce school attendance in Nepal and that improving menstrual supplies does not improve school attendance¹⁵⁴, other researchers find a clear link between improvement of MHM and sanitary facilities and school attendance. For example, a two-year study in Uganda

¹⁴⁹ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 3 January 1976) 993 UNTS 3, Art 13; Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Art. 24, 18; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (adopted 18 December 1979, entered into force 3 September 1981) 1249 UNTS 13, Art 10.

¹⁵⁰ B. Ferenci, 'Right to Education', in: *All Human Rights for All, Vienna Manual on Human Rights*, Manfred Nowak, Karolina M. Januszewski and Tina Hofstätter (eds.), Vienna, Neuer Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2012, p. 328.

¹⁵¹ Art. 13 CESC

¹⁵² J. Hennegan et al., 'Measuring the prevalence and impact of poor menstrual hygiene management: a quantitative survey of schoolgirls in rural Uganda', *BMJ open*, vol. 6, no. 12, 2016, p. 7.

¹⁵³ E. Wilson, J. Reeve and A. Pitt, 'Education. Period. Developing an acceptable and replicable menstrual hygiene intervention', *Development in Practice*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2014, p. 72.

¹⁵⁴ E. Oster and R. Thornton, 'Menstruation, Sanitary Products and School Attendance: Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation', *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 3, vol. 3, no. 1, 2011, p. 91.

showed that supplying girls with better sanitary care and education had increased school attendance rate of girls – on average by 17 %.¹⁵⁵

Just like period poverty, school absenteeism is easily being dismissed as a problem in low-income countries. Although absence rates of girls may be significantly higher in those countries, partly also due to other reasons, the existence of the issue in middle- and high-income countries should not be overlooked. In their research, Plan International UK found out that also girls in England and Northern Ireland miss school due to their periods.¹⁵⁶ According to a survey by “erbeerwoche”, conducted in Austria, every third girl interviewed had missed class at least once because of menstrual pain.¹⁵⁷ Due to the fact that MHM and period poverty are concepts stemming from development cooperation, research focuses very much on so-called “developing countries”, especially in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁵⁸ More empirical (quantitative) research would be needed in other countries, as of now it is only punctual (see UK or Austria).

Reasons why girls are absent from school during menstruation might be various: period poverty, lack of WASH facilities at school as well as physical pain.¹⁵⁹ In addition, negative feelings such as embarrassment, shame, fear of leaking as well as devaluating attitudes and reactions from others – including teasing and harassment – contribute further to discomfort of girls in school.¹⁶⁰ In some cultures, girls are not allowed to leave their menstrual huts and therefore are excluded from school during this time.¹⁶¹

Being absent from school can have various negative consequences: Missing individual classes, whole days or even a week every month can lead to falling behind in class. It can impede learning and reduce performance in school. In the worst case, it may even contribute to school drop-out.¹⁶² Another reason why girls might drop out of school when

¹⁵⁵ E. Tofaris, *Keeping African Girls In School with Better Sanitary Care*, London, 2018, p. 1.

¹⁵⁶ Plan UK, pp. 35, 43.

¹⁵⁷ erdbeerwoche, 2017.

¹⁵⁸ Cp. for example Wilson, Reeve and Pitt, p. 64.

¹⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch and WASH United, *Understanding Menstrual Hygiene Management and Human Rights*, 2017, p. 5; Wilson, Reeve and Pitt, p. 64.

¹⁶⁰ Hennegan et al., p. 7; Winkler and Roaf, pp. 8, 14, General Assembly, *The Girl Child. Report of the Secretary-General*, New York, 2017, p. 5.

¹⁶¹ Amatya et al., p. 2.

¹⁶² Wilson Reeve and Pitt, p. 64.

they start their period is societal pressure to marry, especially in cultures where menarche indicates beginning of womanhood and sexual maturity.¹⁶³

School absenteeism and other problems stemming from the social taboo have been addressed in the UN human rights system, for example in recent alternative reports from civil society to the CEDAW Committee.¹⁶⁴ In reaction, the CEDAW Committee itself has taken up the issue in its concluding observations, for example for Rwanda and Mauritius.¹⁶⁵ Even the UN General Assembly, in their resolution passed on 17 December 2018, recognized that school attendance can be negatively affected by negative perceptions of menstruation and lack of means for MHM.¹⁶⁶

In fact, a reduction of the length of school education or entire school drop outs seriously impacts girls' future and access to other rights, such as the right to work. It has been recognized

that educational possibilities and opportunities are directly related to the empowerment of women and girls, their employment and economic opportunities and their active participation in economic, social and cultural development, governance and decision-making.¹⁶⁷

Therefore, States have obligations respect, protect and fulfil the right to education, with particular importance of the two latter. In order to live up to their obligation to protect, States must ensure that girls' access to education is not prevented by a third party¹⁶⁸, for example families or society at large. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has recognized that social stigma on menstruation may prevent girls from going to school.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³ Human Rights Watch and WASH United, p. 11.

¹⁶⁴ For example: Women's Equality Network Wales, *Shadow Report June 2018*, Cardiff, 2018, pp. 8-9; Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights Watch Submission to the CEDAW Committee on Nepal's Periodic Review for the 71st Session*, 2018, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶⁵ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Concluding observations on the combined seventh to ninth periodic reports of Rwanda*, 2017, p. 9; Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Mauritius*, 2018, p. 7.

¹⁶⁶ United Nations General Assembly Res 12107 (LXXIII), 17 December 2018.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment No. 13. The right to education*, 1999, pp. 10-11.

¹⁶⁹ Human Rights Council, *Realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl, Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, Geneva, 2017, p. 7.

It is therefore the State's duty to reduce the taboo, stigma and stereotypes surrounding menstruation, which is in line with the elaborations made above.¹⁷⁰

Reducing taboo and stigma can also be considered as falling under the obligation to fulfil, as taboo and stigma are at the root of many other issues. The obligation to fulfil entails positive measures that the State has to take in order to facilitate and provide, e.g. by building WASH facilities in school and reducing school drop-out and absenteeism.¹⁷¹

In this regard, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights clarifies State obligations: 'States should ensure that schools have adequate and safe drinking water; separate, accessible and sheltered toilets for girls; and hygiene education and resources for menstrual hygiene, with attention to girls with disabilities'.¹⁷² The link can be seen between the right to water and sanitation and the right to education. Adequate facilities for MHM are crucial for the enjoyment of both rights.

Another important UN document is the "The Girl Child" report. In this document, the Secretary-General acknowledges the inattention to menstruation as well as the issue of period poverty.¹⁷³ Based on this report, the UN General Assembly, adopted a resolution in 2017, where the General Assembly

Calls upon States, in collaboration with civil society and other relevant actors, to promote educational and health practices in order to foster a culture in which menstruation is recognized as healthy and natural, and girls are not stigmatized on this basis, recognizing that girls' attendance at school can be affected by negative perceptions of menstruation and lack of means to maintain safe personal hygiene, such as water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in schools that meet the needs of girls.¹⁷⁴

Some States have already started to implement these obligations. For example, in their Environmental Sanitation and Hygiene Strategic Framework (2016-2020), Kenya outlines comprehensive measures to tackle issues like period poverty, school absenteeism, lack of WASH facilities, amongst others. By 2020, women's access to safe

¹⁷⁰ General Assembly, 2017, p. 17.

¹⁷¹ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999, pp. 10-11; Ferenci, 'Right to Education', p. 330.

¹⁷² Human Rights Council, 2017, p. 7.

¹⁷³ General Assembly, *The Girl Child. Report of the Secretary-General*, New York, 2017, pp. 5, 9, 17.

¹⁷⁴ United Nations General Assembly Res 11993 (LXXII), 19 December 2017 (emphasis in original).

and affordable menstrual materials should be increased by at least 30 %. All public schools should have MHM adequate facilities, such as toilets. Additionally, they should receive regular supplies with sanitary products.¹⁷⁵

Similar State obligations can be identified with regard to older girls and adult women at the workplace. Women's absenteeism from work is comparably linked to period poverty and lack of adequate facilities at the workplace in combination with cultural expectations and negative attitudes.¹⁷⁶ This is connected to the right to just and favourable conditions of work and non-discrimination with regard to work (Art 6-7 CDESCR).¹⁷⁷

3.4.2 Access to Menstrual Education

There is no right to menstrual education as such. However, education on menstruation often falls under the scope of education on reproduction and the right to comprehensive sex education, which again has been recognized as falling under the scope of the right to education¹⁷⁸ (see also Art 10 CEDAW). The importance of comprehensive sex education, especially in the context of patriarchal societies, has been highlighted by the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, although not explicitly mentioning menstruation in 2010.¹⁷⁹

Having access to adequate information and education on topics of reproductive health is interlinked with other rights. In conjunction of women's reproductive rights and the right to health, the CEDAW Committee and the Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights both reiterate that the right to sexual and reproductive health includes access to health-related education and information.¹⁸⁰ The Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights explicitly mentions menstruation: 'Social misconceptions, prejudices and

¹⁷⁵ Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Health, pp. 34, 38.

¹⁷⁶ Cp. also Winkler and Roaf, p. 19.

¹⁷⁷ For reasons of length, this cannot be elaborated in more detail.

¹⁷⁸ General Assembly, *Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education*, New York, 2010, p. 7.

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁸⁰ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General comment No. 22 (2016) on the right to sexual and reproductive health*, 2016, p. 3; Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *CEDAW General Recommendation No. 24: Article 12 of the Convention (Women and Health)*, 1999, p. 5.

taboos about menstruation (...) should be modified so that these do not obstruct an individual's enjoyment of the right to sexual and reproductive health'¹⁸¹.

As mentioned above, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called on States to ensure 'hygiene education'.¹⁸² In "The Girl Child", the UN Secretary-General stated: 'Contexts need to be created in which menstruation is viewed as healthy and normal, and not stigmatized. Girls should be informed about menstruation'¹⁸³. Also, the Human Rights Council explicitly called on States to provide access to factual information on menstruation (cp. above).¹⁸⁴

In summary, it has been shown that adequate menstrual education falls under the scope of the right to education in combination the right to health. Providing education on menstruation, in addition to reduction of stereotypes and fostering the perception of menstruation as normal, is part of human rights obligations. This topic will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 4.

3.5 Conclusion of the Analysis

Although there is no explicit human right to menstrual health or even menstrual equity, these issues are undeniably linked to human rights. The chapter made clear that menstruation and MHM are not only issues of health and hygiene. Rather, a holistic approach is needed in order to address all the challenges on the practical level of MHM and stemming from taboo and stigmatisation. States have comprehensive obligations:¹⁸⁵

The right to affordable, safe and hygienic menstruation materials has explicitly been label as being included in the human rights to water and sanitation.¹⁸⁶ Therefore, States have to facilitate access to these materials. At the same time, they must ensure that WASH facilities are available, accessible, affordable and acceptable for all women. A further important point is the provision of adequate education on the subject, based on the right

¹⁸¹ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2016, p. 12.

¹⁸² Human Rights Council, 2017, p. 7.

¹⁸³ General Assembly, 2017, p. 17.

¹⁸⁴ General Assembly, 2018, p. 48.

¹⁸⁵ Cp. Winkler and Roaf, p. 22.

¹⁸⁶ CESCR, Art. 11 together with United Nations General Assembly Res 10967 (LXIV), 28 July 2010 and Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 12.

to education and the right to sexual and reproductive health¹⁸⁷. Facilitating the modification of cultural beliefs and stigma as well as reducing the taboo are State obligations that condition the fulfilment of many other rights, such as the right to education, right to water and sanitation (ending period poverty) or gender equality.¹⁸⁸ Linked to that States have the obligation to prevent school absenteeism.¹⁸⁹

Many of the restrictions, prohibitions and rules during menstruation, which can affect human rights, go under the umbrella of culture and religion. *Chhaupadi* is only one example. However, culture and cultural diversity should not be used as legitimation and excuse for the infringement of fundamental rights. Culture is not static, its norms and beliefs can change. It takes long-term effort, empowerment and participation of women as well as the involvement of men to reach this change, but it has been made clear that States need to play a role in this change if it effects enjoyment of human rights.¹⁹⁰

During the analysis, underlying principles of human rights, such as non-discrimination as well as indivisibility of rights and interlinkages between rights have become visible. For example, if the right to education is infringed, this has consequences on the right to health, the right to work and other rights. At the same time, one measure, such as reducing negative attitudes, taboo and stigma may positively affect enjoyment of several rights like the right to education, the right to water and sanitation or gender equality.¹⁹¹

To conclude this chapter, the statement made by UN experts for the International Women's Day should be referenced once more. UN experts recognized that attention has increased on the subjects and that some States and non-governmental actors have already become active. At the same time, they state that the current efforts are not enough:

More needs to be done globally to address the menstrual health needs of women and girls and transform the systems, norms and attitudes to support women's and girls' menstrual health and well-being. A global shift in cultures is needed to

¹⁸⁷ CESCR, Art. 12, 13; CRC, Art. 24, 28, 29; CEDAW, Art. 10, 12.

¹⁸⁸ CEDAW, Art. 2, 5; CESCR, Art. 11.

¹⁸⁹ CESCR, Art. 13; CRC, Art. 28.

¹⁹⁰ Winkler and Roaf, pp. 31-33.

¹⁹¹ The human rights analysis has been conducted in the context of UN bodies and legally binding human rights treaties. However, it should not be neglected that non-binding commitments of States can also be powerful tools to promote human rights. One example is the concept of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by UN member States in 2015.

affirm the importance of respecting menstruation, acknowledge it as a human rights issue and eliminate discrimination, shame and stigma too often attached to it.¹⁹²

4 Improving Menstrual Education

As outlined above, States have the obligation to provide adequate education on menstruation. The following chapter looks at how menstrual education takes place and what challenges exist in practice. It furthermore discusses contents and target groups, before presenting the example of Austria and the project READY FOR RED.

4.1 Education on the Topic of Menstruation

One of the consequences of the communication taboo around menstruation is that it may hinder access to accurate information, for example on body processes, coping strategies as well as practical knowledge for MHM and menstrual health. At the same time, it prevents exchange among individuals who make similar experiences and may foster worrying whether the own experiences are normal.¹⁹³ Another implication of the taboo is that women and girls are inhibited to seek assistance with their menstrual troubles and often suffer in silence through their period pain or other problems. From female peers or mothers, but also from men and society they might receive the message to just “bear it”.¹⁹⁴ This creates (often unnecessary) sufferings for the girls and women, as menstrual troubles are often treatable or can at least be relieved with some advice on behaviour or nutrition.¹⁹⁵

The need for better education or issues like school absenteeism and period poverty are often regarded as problems of low-income countries or the so-called “global South”. Yet, some studies have shown that also adolescents, women and men in the “global North” have significant knowledge gaps. At the same time, myths and misinformation persist.¹⁹⁶ One of the most prominent myths is that virginity – which plays an important role in many

¹⁹² Radačić et al.

¹⁹³ Chrisler, p. 130.

¹⁹⁴ Costos, Ackerman and Paradis, p. 55.

¹⁹⁵ Winkler and Roaf, p. 6.

¹⁹⁶ RedI; Plan International UK, p. 4.

cultures and religions – will be lost if a tampon is inserted, because the hymen will break.¹⁹⁷ Other myths occur in the context of contraception and menstruation as well as that certain activities cannot be done while menstruation, most prominently sports and sex.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, there exists confusion about PMS.¹⁹⁹ One myth that has been mentioned several times is the myth that menstrual blood is somehow poisonous or magical.²⁰⁰ In addition to that, there are various religious myths.²⁰¹

Chrisler outlined that discomforts on both sides leads to limits in extent of teaching about this topic, even in higher education facilities. This discomfort leads to absenteeism from the side of the students as well as the attempt to keep teaching on this topic to a minimum from the side of the teacher, lecturer or instructor.²⁰²

Education on puberty and menstruation is in practice often linked to sex education or education on reproductive health, which is by itself a taboo topic in many cultures.²⁰³ Different States or even communities might have different approaches on how education on menstruation takes place and how it is incorporated in the school curricular (if at all). In many cases, these topics are placed within the subject of biology or are covered in workshops by external trainers. As another consequence of the taboo, boys and girls are often separated for education on this topic.²⁰⁴

Yet, learning about menstruation might happen through various channels, not only in school. Some academic work has been produced on how girls and boys learn about menstruation (with a focus on the U.S.). For the girls, several researchers have identified mothers as primary source, followed by sisters and female peers. However, the topic often creates feelings of embarrassment, awkwardness or shame in family conversations.²⁰⁵ Other sources of information can also be advertisement and mass media.²⁰⁶

¹⁹⁷ Merskin, p. 941.

¹⁹⁸ Kissling, 1996, p. 484.

¹⁹⁹ Chrisler, p. 130.

²⁰⁰ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, p. 10.

²⁰¹ Costos, Ackerman and Paradis, p. 54.

²⁰² Chrisler, p. 129.

²⁰³ Costos, Ackerman and Paradis, p. 51.

²⁰⁴ Peranovic and Bentley, p. 114.

²⁰⁵ Costos, Ackerman and Paradis, p. 50; Kissling, 1996, p. 489; Plan International UK, p. 24.

²⁰⁶ Kissling, 1996, p. 489.

One important source of information that was not featured in the older research is the internet. Especially young people use it as source of information, but also as a platform for exchange. The research by Plan International UK showed that in the UK and Northern Ireland, YouTube was used as the main source of information on reusable products.²⁰⁷ In addition, social media, platforms, blogs, chat rooms and other online-based exchange formats are used by adolescent girls to exchange practical advice or even to challenge prevailing norms and negative attitudes. The anonymity in the online space encourages people to speak more openly about it and others can then read or hear about real-life experiences and engage in discussions. These discussions and other online interaction are also a way for boys and men to be confronted with these issues. In addition, it is a channel for activist and artists to organize and spread their messages (like #periodpositive). At the same time, there is a risk that inaccurate information is spread in online spaces as well as “scary” stories, which can cause distress for girls around the age of menarche.²⁰⁸

Other actors that have great influence on education and attitudes about menstruation are corporation that sell menstrual products like tampons and pads, as they spread implicit and explicit messages through their advertisements and leaflets. With names like “Discreet” and by euphemistically using blue colour instead of red in the advertisements, they often reinforce the taboo and the notion that the “hygienic crisis” needs to be treated in a way that no one knows.²⁰⁹ Although some companies have begun trying to break this tradition and remove taboo and stigma, others still very much rely on it.²¹⁰

Many of these companies are directly involved in menstrual education by providing schools with packages of free samples and educational material.²¹¹ However, this is seen critically by some adolescents and activists because they fear that building brand loyalty and the interest in selling their products is more important to these companies than neutral and qualitative education which does not reinforce stigma. These companies may also

²⁰⁷ Plan International UK, pp. 20-21.

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 19.

²¹⁰ *ibid.*; E. Morray, *A History of Menstrual Messages*, [website], <https://www.ubykotex.com/en-us/periods/period-advice/a-history-of-menstrual-messages>, (accessed 19 March 2019).

²¹¹ Johnson & Johnson GmbH, *o.b.®-Service für Schulen und Praxen*, [website], 2019, <https://www.ob.de/service-fuer-schulen-und-praxen>, (accessed 19 March 2019).

(exclusively) focus on products, which they produce, instead of promoting reusable alternatives. The environmental problems of waste production and plastic contents in the products are less likely to be discussed by these companies.²¹²

Educational leaflets, which can be one source of information, are not always neutral. *Costos, Ackerman and Paradis* concluded from the analysis of information pamphlets in the United States that the “medical model” is at the focus and girls’ psychological experiences, especially with menarche, are neglected.²¹³ Information is not provided in an age-sensitive manner and the pamphlets tend to reproduce taboo, negative attitudes, restrictions as well as the notion of menstruation as a “hygienic crisis”.²¹⁴ *Kissling* made the observations that in U.S. American leaflets and school, menstruation was rather dealt with from a professional scientific point of view. What usually lacks is talking about concrete experiences and feelings of the girls or what exactly to do.²¹⁵

Boys learn about menstruation in family conversations, especially if they have sisters, as well as from peers and relationships with female friends and girlfriends. Magazines and the internet are further sources of information.²¹⁶ However, some sources for boys may be less reliable and there is sometimes inaccuracy in information received by peers, which fosters the spread of myths.²¹⁷ Furthermore, it has been identified that men and boys are given less or no education on menstruation.²¹⁸ The notion that menstruation is a “women’s issue” leads to boys’ and men’s avoiding attitudes and notions that it is “not their problem”.²¹⁹ This information difference can have various consequences on the power dynamics and relation between adolescent boys and girls. On the one hand, boys use the taboo and discomfort to make fun of girls (e.g. in school) and embarrass them. On the other hand, girls use the difference in information to gain upper hand (especially when they are in a group of girls). They use their knowledge against the boys who have less

²¹² Plan International UK, pp. 19–20.

²¹³ *Costos, Ackerman and Paradis*, p. 50.

²¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

²¹⁵ *Kissling*, 1996, pp. 491–493.

²¹⁶ *Peranovic and Bentley*, p. 119; *Allen, Kaestle and Goldberg*, p. 151.

²¹⁷ *Allen, Kaestle and Goldberg*, p. 151.

²¹⁸ *Kissling*, 1996, p. 488.

²¹⁹ *Allen, Kaestle and Goldberg*, pp. 144–145.

knowledge and make them uncomfortable.²²⁰ These dynamics legitimize the idea that boys (and girls) should feel discomfort when the topic comes up.²²¹

It has been shown above that scholars and the UN bodies have explicitly recognized the need for (better) menstrual education. Providing adequate information on menstrual health has even been identified as a State obligation. In fact, education can be a powerful tool to combat lack of information and misinformation as well as negative attitudes, stigma and stereotypes. *Allen, Kaestle and Goldberg* went so far as describing menstrual education as ‘battleground in efforts to confront and overcome gender inequalities’²²². Not only the existence of menstrual education is important, but also the content and quality.

4.1.1 How should Menstrual Education look like?

Especially for young girls experiencing their first periods, pragmatic and non-judgmental guidance is crucial. *Winkler and Roaf* suggest that the information provided should include scientific biological and physical information in combination with practical guidance how to deal with menstruation and also psychological aspects.²²³ There is no one-size-fits-all solution, as education needs to be culturally sensitive and taking into account the local context.²²⁴ In addition, it needs to be age-sensitive, suiting the cognitive development of the target group.²²⁵ Some suggest to start in primary school already to avoid formation of shame and avoid distress later. Menstrual education should not be a one-time lesson, but an ongoing process, which allows girls (and boys) to ask questions that only come up when they grow up and make certain experiences themselves.²²⁶

The discussion about separation of boys in and class is controversial. On the one hand, safe and private spaces for girls should be created to discuss worries. On the other hand, it is agreed on that boys should not be excluded from menstrual education. At the contrary, it is crucial that they also receive education (cp. above).²²⁷

²²⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 143-145.

²²¹ *ibid.*, p. 152.

²²² *ibid.*, p. 133.

²²³ *Winkler and Roaf*, p. 28.

²²⁴ *ibid.*

²²⁵ *Costos, Ackerman and Paradis*, p. 50.

²²⁶ *Plan International UK*, p. 29.

²²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 27.

In line with findings from the academic work, the content of menstrual education should cover biological and physiological facts, but also practical knowledge. Awareness and knowledge about one's own body is the basis to understand the biological processes going on. Lack of education on the female genital anatomy may lead to distress in class, when the topic of menstruation is covered. However, it is critical that the information provided on the menstrual cycle should not be disconnected from girls' practical experience and social context. Biological information is often abstract, but it needs to be linked to daily live experiences, including feelings, mood swings, pain and bleeding.²²⁸

The practical knowledge should include information about all the products and menstrual materials, including disposable and reusable ones, so that girls can choose the most suitable for them. Linked to that is practical guidance on how to correctly use the products. For example, for tampons that may include information on how they are inserted and removed – using washed hands or applicators – when to change them and how to dispose of them correctly. In general, how to wash properly and how to avoid infections should also be addressed, just like other issues relating to menstrual health.²²⁹

Information on correct disposal or cleaning of material is just as crucial as their usage. For the reusable ones like the menstrual cup, period panties or reusable pads, instructions on how to use, wash, dry and store them properly need to be provided in a non-tabooed and non-judgemental way. For the disposable ones, their correct disposal in bins instead of toilets needs to be taught, also when bins are not directly in reach.²³⁰ Incorrect disposal of menstrual products can result in sewage problems and blockings, which again creates other problems for the buildings in which the blocked toilets are located.²³¹

As the experience of menstruation does not only exist of blood flow, education should also focus on side-effects before or during menstruation that are common, but yet differ from woman to woman. Next to information on how to deal with the blood flow, also advice on dealing with cramps, pain or hormonal changes should be provided.²³²

²²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 17.

²²⁹ Winkler and Roaf, pp. 28–29; Plan International UK, p. 27.

²³⁰ Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 11.

²³¹ Winkler and Roaf, p. 24.

²³² Plan International UK, p. 27.

Menstrual education should furthermore emphasize that every girl and women makes individual experiences with menstruation. The number of 28 day for a menstrual cycle is just an average. For younger girls it is normal that their cycle is not yet regular or that the time between periods is longer than for adults. Also the number of days of the bleeding can be different from girl to girl, so can the side effects and existence or extent of PMS symptoms.²³³ This can then set a vague framework for girls to judge if their experiences are within this margin or if they need to consult a doctor.

Sustainability issues should ideally also be included in menstrual education. This encompasses awareness of waste production of disposable products and reusable alternatives. In fact, menstrual products contain a lot of plastic. For example, pads are lined in plastic to reduce leaking, they are wrapped in plastic packaging and are made with ‘nonbiodegradable, petroleum-based polyacrylate super-absorbent polymer gels’²³⁴. Estimations in the UK suggest, that all menstruating persons together have to dispose of 3,750 million tampons or pads each year, in addition to 300 million plastic bags or boxes and about 1,500 million tampon applicators. In order to decompose, these products need at least 800 years. If they are burnt, emissions of toxic gases occur.²³⁵ Education can help raising awareness about environmental issues and reusable materials.

Not only the content, but also the way information is presented plays an important role. The attitudes that are conveyed directly or indirectly need special attention. Menstruation should change from being connected to impurity, embarrassment and shame to being normal. The taboo must be reduced and ultimately removed to promote open dialogue and enable individuals to seek assistance, if needed. Stereotypes and stigmas need to be challenged and removed, as they are at the root of many other problems. In order to reach this, education and awareness-raising should not only be directed at girls, women and those experiencing menstruation, but also at men and society at large.²³⁶

²³³ cp. for example pro familia, p. 13; Plan International UK, p. 27.

²³⁴ Plan International UK, p. 20.

²³⁵ *ibid.*

²³⁶ Winkler and Roaf, pp. 29-30.

Introducing the term of “menstrual literacy”, the UN experts remind States of their human rights obligation in this context:

Myths and misinformation need to be combated through comprehensive, non-judgmental, accurate and accessible information to improve menstrual literacy. States, who have international human rights obligations to eliminate discrimination against women, should take transformative measures, in cooperation with UN entities, independent women’s rights mechanisms, CSOs, women’s organisations and the business sector.²³⁷

Human rights do not prescribe who exactly should conduct menstrual education. States need to provide a framework where quality menstrual education can take place. Surely, they can also provide menstrual education themselves through (State) schools or government programs. If quality is ensured, they can also delegate this task to third parties like NGOs. The involvement of companies producing menstrual products has to be scrutinized (cp. above).

As teachers – not only those who are involved in teaching menstruation – play an important part as well, they should receive special training. In school, teachers need to be sensitive to needs of girls, like access to sanitary facilities during class, mood changes or lack of concentration. Also, they need to be aware not reinforce stigma and stereotypes.²³⁸ Other relevant professionals that should receive training are amongst others health workers, government officials or development staff.²³⁹

4.1.2 Men and Menstruation

As mentioned several times, it is crucial to also involve boys and men in menstrual education, which should be done in a culturally sensitive manner.²⁴⁰ Yet, men and boys are often excluded from discussions about menstruation in society, media, school and family as well as science. In school, they are mostly separated from girls’ lessons about menstruation.²⁴¹ According to *Allen, Kaestle and Goldberg*, there are no clear educators for boys. Rather they learn about menstruation from various sources: parents and family,

²³⁷ Radačić et al.

²³⁸ Plan International UK, p. 29; Winkler and Roaf, p. 29.

²³⁹ Human Rights Council, 2016, p. 8.

²⁴⁰ *ibid.*

²⁴¹ Peranovic and Bentley, p. 114.

friends, school (biology teacher) or the media.²⁴² There is only a very limited amount of research concerning menstruation and men.²⁴³

It is important to educate men and boys and include them in debates for various reasons. On the individual level, lack of knowledge and understanding about menstruation can have negative impacts on interpersonal relationships between them and female partners or other women, also relating to contraception and health. Men can influence women and their health and well-being as partners, fathers, brothers and friends and use this in a positive way. On a more structural level, attitudes and knowledge about menstruation might have an impact on how men and boys – and society at large – see and treat women. If a change of the discourse around menstruation is aspired, they need to be addressed. Argued from a different perspective, their exclusion could foster the idea of irrelevance and unimportance of women's (menstrual) health to men.²⁴⁴

Education and awareness-raising about menstrual health is also crucial for men, as they are often in power positions in government, politics, economy, school or even families and have influence on budget decisions. If decision-makers were more aware of needs of MHM and its importance, and it was less tabooed and uncomfortable, hopefully the topic would rank higher in priority lists and receive more resources. Even on a very small level, in the family, fathers and brothers need to be aware of menstrual health and incorporate it in family decisions.

In conclusion, societal change – such as the removal of the taboo – can only be reached when education is not limited to one target group but addresses society at large.²⁴⁵

4.2 The Situation in Austria

As the interviews reflect on practical experiences in Austria, the following introduction to the situation in this specific country helps to better understand the context. The

²⁴² Allen, Kaestle and Goldberg, p. 132.

²⁴³ Peranovic and Bentley, p. 113.

²⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 114.

²⁴⁵ This does not only mean boys and men, but also other age groups. Due to a limited page count, the thesis could only focus on one target group, which is the group of girls between 11-17 years. How to educate and sensitize adults could be the subject of further research.

overview also covers details about the above-mentioned survey among teenagers and the online platform READY FOR RED.

4.2.1 Menstrual Education in Austria

In Austria, education on menstruation is mostly linked to sex education and education about puberty. For these kinds of subjects, school plays an important role in educating children and adolescents, next to parents. In order to ensure contemporary up-to-date sex education, the Austrian Ministry for Education passed a new “general ordinance on sex education” (“Grundsatzterlass Sexualpädagogik”) in 2015.²⁴⁶ It is based on international standards, such as the “standards of sex education for Europe”, developed by the WHO, the German Federal Centre of Health Education (Bundeszentrale für Gesundheitliche Aufklärung, BZgA) in cooperation with other experts.²⁴⁷

The ordinance sets the framework with regard to content and form of sex education in Austrian schools. It stipulates that education should be age-sensitive, based on scientific information and take into account the practical realities of children’s and adolescents’ lives. The aim is to convey reliable information, but also practical competences. A precondition are positive attitudes of teachers and other staff.²⁴⁸ Education should promote communication competences as well as the ability to critically reflect, e.g. on information provided by the internet. Knowledge should also be enhanced with regard to health-related competences and contact persons and points.²⁴⁹

Reproductive health education is embedded in the school curricular in primary and secondary education. Interlinkages between school subjects should be used to build up interdisciplinary competences. In primary schools, topics of sex education are covered in the subject of “social studies” (in German: Sachkunde); in secondary schools mostly in biology lessons. Schools have some flexibility when it comes to implementing the given curricular.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁶ Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, *Grundsatzterlass Sexualpädagogik*, Wien, 2018, p. 3.

²⁴⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

²⁴⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

²⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 8-10.

The Austrian Ministry of Education also notes that good collaboration with parents and custodians can be achieved through parent-teacher conferences. It also recommends collaboration with other school staff like nurses/health workers, social workers, school psychologists, but also with out-of-school organisations and institutions. Sex education should be conducted in a way that it is in line with other educational principles such as promotion of gender equality, health education, media competences as well as sustainability or political education. The role of the headmaster is also important. As all teachers in a school should contribute to positive attitudes and quality sex education, the Ministry suggests trainings for teachers.²⁵¹

Although menstruation is not explicitly mentioned in the “general ordinance”, it is featured in the list of topics in elaborations for teachers provided by Austrian authorities.²⁵² When asked about the inclusion of the topic menstruation, the Ministry of Education replied that the topic of menstruation is embedded in the curricular with sex education topics in various school levels. It emphasized that the precise design of the lesson is within the responsibility of the individual teacher.²⁵³

The Austrian law on school education allows for the possibility of inviting external trainers and experts to speak in class and conduct workshops, if the teachers and headmasters have reviewed their quality. Under certain conditions, the pupils are obliged to participate in these workshops just like they are obliged to participate in regular sessions.²⁵⁴ Parents should receive information about content and aims of sex education prior to its conduction, for example during well-prepared teacher-parents conferences.²⁵⁵

However, the invitation of external trainers and the general ordinance itself have sparked some public controversy. Especially the workshop provider “TeenStar” was criticized as it preached no sex before marriage and made homophobic statements, while claiming that

²⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp. 10-12.

²⁵² GIVE-Servicestelle für Gesundheitsbildung, eine Initiative von Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, Bundesministerium für Gesundheit und Österreichischem Jugendrotkreuz, *Sexualerziehung in der Schule*, Wien, 2015, p. 6.

²⁵³ Bundesministerium für Bildung, *Antwort auf die schriftliche parlamentarische Anfrage Nr. 14010/J-NR/2017*, Wien, 2017, pp. 2-3.

²⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁵⁵ GIVE-Servicestelle für Gesundheitsbildung, eine Initiative von Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, Bundesministerium für Gesundheit und Österreichischem Jugendrotkreuz, pp. 11-12.

masturbation was harmful.²⁵⁶ As a reaction, a new general ordinance on collaboration of schools with external organisations in the field of sex education was passed in March 2019 by the Ministry of Education. It states amongst others that no money should be collected from parents for workshops with externals, that the teacher must always be present during the workshop and parents must be informed beforehand.²⁵⁷

In all public schools, school nurses and doctors are available contact persons for girls to turn to with questions or if they have menstrual problems. The State school medical service and the society of school physicians dedicated itself to the topic of information on the menstrual cycle. Therefore, they developed educational material containing information on the menstrual cycle for adolescent girls.²⁵⁸

In addition to formal school education, information on menstruation is spread through information centres, leaflets or webpages.²⁵⁹

In conclusion, the States sets the framework for comprehensive sex education, including the topic of menstruation, although not explicitly referencing it. It acknowledges – in line with the elaborated quality criteria above – that not only biological facts need to be taught, but also practical daily-life related issues. Media competence is also emphasized in the State elaborations.²⁶⁰

With regard to its State obligation to fulfil (menstrual education), one can argue that Austria is not in violation of its State obligations. With its ordinance and other efforts, the State creates facilitating conditions and a framework in which menstrual takes place, although not directly featuring it in the “general ordinance”. Furthermore, by delegating

²⁵⁶ 'Umstrittene Sexualkunde-Vorträge dürfen bleiben', *Heute*, 19 February 2019, <https://www.heute.at/oesterreich/news/story/Bildungsministerium-reagiert-mit-Erlass-auf-umstrittenen-Sexualkunde-Verein-Teenstar-Aufklaerung-an-Schulen-53648231>, (accessed 8 June 2019).

²⁵⁷ Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, *Zusammenarbeit mit außerschulischen Organisationen im Bereich Sexualpädagogik*, [website], 2019, https://bildung.bmbwf.gv.at/ministerium/rs/2019_05.html, (accessed 8 June 2019).

²⁵⁸ Bundesministerium für Bildung, pp. 6-7.

²⁵⁹ See for example Österreichische Gesellschaft für Familienplanung, *Der Körper*, [website], <https://oegf.at/firstlove/wissen-first-love-2/der-koerper/>, (accessed 23 March 2019) or Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (BZgA) and Köln, *SEX 'n' tipps Mädchenfragen*, Köln. As Austria is a German-speaking country, adolescents can also use other German online and offline sources, for example from Germany.

²⁶⁰ GIVE-Servicestelle für Gesundheitsbildung, eine Initiative von Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, Bundesministerium für Gesundheit und Österreichischem Jugendrotkreuz, p. 10.

educational activities to external trainers and experts, Austria moves within the legitimate scope. Under international human rights law, States do not have to provide services on their own. These can be delegated to suitable other actors, if certain standards are ensured. However, in the case of Austria, one must also look at the practice and the practical outcome. As the next chapter reveals that menstrual education is not as effective as it is supposed to be, more efforts by the State are necessary to better promote education about the particular topic of menstruation.

4.2.2 Attitudes and Level of Knowledge among Teenagers in Austria

One of the actors that is specialized on menstrual health in Austria is the Vienna-based social business “erbeerwoche” (in English: “strawberry week”), which uses a known German euphemism for menstruation as its name. Their vision is to break the taboo about menstruation and to promote better menstrual education and menstrual health.²⁶¹

Attitudes and knowledge about menstruation are not easily visible and hard to measure on a large scale. Yet, as a basis for their project, “erbeerwoche” has tried to capture a picture of the current situation in Austria. Between April and May 2017, they conducted an anonymous online survey with 1,100 teenagers (13-17 years) living in Austria.²⁶²

The survey identified that the basic tenor among the interviewees was that menstruation is embarrassing. 60 % of the girls have a negative attitude towards their menstruation and 70 % of the boys consider the topic unimportant and embarrassing. When it comes to the level of knowledge, 50 % “fail” in the category of basic knowledge. Although 85% of the girls and 88% of the boys think that they are sufficiently informed about menstruation, they demonstrate striking gaps in their actual knowledge. 17 % of the girls and 34 % of the boys do not know the meaning of the term menstruation. 53 % of the boys believe that menstruation serves the purpose of contraception. Approximately half of the girls do not know what to do with terms like menstrual cycle or cycle length. Among boys this was partly up to 80 %. More than half of the girls do not know when a tampon should be changed at latest and most have never heard of toxic shock syndrome (TSS).²⁶³

²⁶¹ Ready for Red, [online platform], <https://www.ready-for-red.at/>, (accessed 24 March 2019).

²⁶² erbeerwoche, 2017.

²⁶³ *ibid*; Redl.

88 % of the girls stated that they suffer from menstrual problems. Every third girl has massive period pain, so that she has missed class for at least one time. At the same time, young girls do not know what they can do against the menstrual problems or who to address. Being left alone with pain and inhibitions to talk about it cannot only lead to isolation but can mean a restriction of life quality and school performance.²⁶⁴

When it comes to environmental issues, “erdbeerwoche” identified a need for better information on this topic. Every third girl has considered environmental impacts from menstrual products. 73 % of the girls mainly use pads, 44% use tampons. More than every third girl knows menstrual cups, but only 2 % use these. 83 % of the girls dump their used period products in the toilet. This is not only an environmental problem, but also an economic one, as plastic, chemicals and synthetic additives in conventional pads and tampons create cost-intensive problems for sewage treatment plants. Lack of knowledge in combination with shame of discarding products outside of toilet cabins (if there are no bins provided inside of the cabin) are root causes of the problem. When being asked why they do so, almost 20 % answered that the reason was the lack of bins directly next to the toilet, and 25 % that the disposal outside the toilet cabin would be embarrassing.²⁶⁵

Concerning the menstrual taboo, 53 % of the girls stated that they have no problem talking about menstruation. However, almost 18 % feel uncomfortable and want to avoid the topic. Girls mostly talk with their female friends about their periods, as well as their own mothers. The most popular sources for information for girls concerning the topic menstruation are: family (62 %), internet (32%), and school (10%). For 93% of the boys, the topic is not discussed (openly) in the family. Almost 30 % of the boys think that school informs teenagers best about menstruation. 52 % of the boys stated that they would be willing to support girls suffering from severe menstrual problems.²⁶⁶

One conclusion of the survey is that knowledge gaps exist among girls and boys and that attitudes towards menstruation are mostly negative. The survey supports the notion that menstruation and menstrual hygiene tend to be marginalized and only mentioned

²⁶⁴ erdbeerwoche, 2017.

²⁶⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶⁶ *ibid.*

marginally in lessons. Some topics such as correct use of products and impacts on health and environments are often left out. As a result, girls seek information from other sources, the internet being an important channel. However, there is the risk that circulating misinformation and myths are spread, e.g. through platforms. This makes quality education in school all the more necessary. All the results lead to the conclusion that menstruation is still a taboo topic in our society, especially among teenagers. The need for information is high and the way of conveying information must be improved.²⁶⁷ Although the representativity of the survey by “erdbeerwoche” needs to be critically scrutinized, it can be used to get a general overview.

4.2.3 Challenges for Education on Menstruation

The data of the survey by “erdbeerwoche” was only segregated by gender and not other criteria such a social or religious background. There are no other scientific studies, for example on where and how teenage boys and girls receive menstrual education in Austria. The education of the individual depends on many factors, such as family, peers, school education, religious community and personal attitudes. Although technically all children and adolescents in Austria have to attend school, including also sex education classes, that does not mean that all receive the same amount and quality of education on the topic of menstruation.

As mentioned above, individual teachers have flexibility in the concrete conduction of the lesson. Their own gender, attitudes and embarrassment as well as commitment to the topic and conviction of its importance play a role in how well the topic is discussed in class. As headmasters are in powerful decision-making positions, issues of prioritization and funding partly depend on their individual commitment (cp. also results of the interviews below).

On a global level, challenges for existence and quality of menstrual education can be various, also dependent on the local context. One of the main challenges is that it is mainly linked to sex education, which itself is a taboo topic and seen critically by some groups, as it touches on cultural and religious values. In addition, some religious and cultural

²⁶⁷ *ibid*; Redl.

contexts renounce the use of tampons for girls, which is connected to the myth of loss of virginity or its presumed relation to sex. The connotation of being sexually mature from menarche is also problematic.

Looking at the example of Austria, with a catholic majority, challenges can for example arise from particularly conservative environments and schools. It was already discussed above that external trainers can initiate public controversy. Also, the ordinance on sex education passed in 2015 was fiercely debated in the media, especially by conservative actors. Critical topics were sexual diversity, values and concerning the role of family and parents.²⁶⁸ While these attitudes are primarily related to sex education and issues like sexual diversity, intercourse, contraception and masturbation, this may nevertheless affect menstrual education. On the one hand, female genitals are discussed, and words like “vagina” are used. On the other hand, family planning and contraception are also elements that may be talked about in the context of menstrual education. For example, whereas for some girl the contraceptive pill might be an option to control particularly painful periods, this is not allowed by conservative families, as the pill is also used for contraception and might – in their view – encourage girls to engage in sexual intercourse.²⁶⁹

Migrant and refugee families are often highlighted as being more “resistant” to such kind of education in the host country or having broader knowledge gaps. For example, the above mentioned BZgA writes in a publication that taboos about sex education and menstruation might be more pronounced in migrant families. In addition, they might have more knowledge gaps; persisting gender roles and traditions may be more prominent factors. They explicitly also focus on Muslim families.²⁷⁰ Similarly, the Austrian service centre for health education (GIVE) assumes that pupils with migrant background might cause some discussions or resistance in class and gives tips how to handle them.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ 'Sexualerziehung: Erlass wurde geändert', *Kurier*, 23 June 2019, <https://kurier.at/leben/sexualerziehung-erlass-wurde-geaendert/137.746.484>, (accessed 8 June 2019). Initiative wertvolle Sexualerziehung, *Analyse Erlass zur Sexualpädagogik*, [website], 2015, <http://www.sexualerziehung.at/kritik-am-neuen-erlass/>, (accessed 8 June 2019).

²⁶⁹ Plan International UK, p. 39.

²⁷⁰ Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (BZgA), *Migrantinnen und Migranten als Zielgruppe in der Sexualaufklärung und Familienplanung*, Köln, 2011, pp. 18–20.

²⁷¹ GIVE-Servicestelle für Gesundheitsbildung, eine Initiative von Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, Bundesministerium für Gesundheit und Österreichischem Jugendrotkreuz, p. 10.

Yet, one has to take into account the diversity within the group of migrants and the group of refugees itself. Therefore, no general statements can be made. The empirical research of this thesis will give more insights about the assumption that migrant or refugee children are more effected by the taboo.

4.3 The Project READY FOR RED

As one example on what can be done to foster menstrual education, the online platform READY FOR RED should be presented. READY FOR RED is an online-based learning platform, where German-speaking girls and boys between 11-16 years can learn all the relevant facts concerning the topic of menstruation and menstrual health. The project was developed by the team of “erdbeerwoche“ in cooperation with teenagers, (sex) pedagogues, gynaecologists, graphic designers, software engineers and other experts.²⁷²

The aim of the project is not only to provide reliable and practical information, but also to encourage self-reflection and engagement with the topic. Next to the clarification of myths, the platform aspires to decrease shame, fear and disgust as well as to break the communication taboo. In the end, attitudes towards menstruation should become more positive. Although boys are not the main target group, the project also engages boys to increase awareness and knowledge among this group. As “erbeerwoche” works on environmental issues, the platform also contains elements to raise environmental concerns and promote sustainable solutions.²⁷³

As for now, the use of the platform is not free of charge. On the one hand, the platform can be used privately by individuals or families after purchasing the access. On the other hand, it can be integrated into school lessons by teachers (suggested length: 2-4 lessons), for example in 5th and 7th grade. In this case, a license can be bought for the whole school. Teachers are trained in an online seminar.²⁷⁴

The online platform consists of four levels. In *Level 1* (cycle) the female body and menarche are thematized as well as their societal interpretation. Basic knowledge on the

²⁷² Ready for Red.

²⁷³ *ibid*; Redl.

²⁷⁴ Redl; Ready for Red.

female body is conveyed. The use of different menstrual products and materials is subject of *Level 2*. In *Level 3* the focus is set on menstrual health, addressing topics like period pain and other side effects, the contraceptive pill and the first appointment at the gynaecologist. In the most advanced level, *Level 4*, the social interaction with the taboo topic menstruation is further thematized, including social and cultural norms as well as political and economic aspects. Sustainability issues are also covered.²⁷⁵

In each level, there are different interactive tools for participants that encourage them to engage with the topic in a creative and playful way. Amongst others, there are quizzes, puzzles, videos, role plays, tips, brainstorming activities and creative tasks. Each level ends with a quiz where participants can check their knowledge. In addition to the online platform, there is a FAQ section (free of charge). Adolescents have the opportunity to ask questions anonymously in a “question zone”.²⁷⁶

This chapter has provided background information on the situation of menstrual education in Austria and the project READY FOR RED. In order to be able to evaluate the platform and find out how education can be improved, it is essential to directly ask the target group, as well as to incorporating expert opinions. Therefore interviews, have been conducted with girls between 11-17 years, teachers and external trainers. They will be discussed in the following.

5 Discussion of the Findings

In this chapter, first the results of the interviews will be presented separately in their category (girls, teachers, external trainers). Afterwards, they are brought together to draw conclusions. The evaluation of the online platform READY FOR RED is a third point of this chapter.

²⁷⁵ Ready for Red.

²⁷⁶ *ibid.*

5.1 Interviews with Girls

In total, eight girls aged between 11-17 years were interviewed. Half of them had already experienced their periods, whereas the other half has not yet started menstruating.²⁷⁷

Among all the girls, the wording of “seine Tage haben” (“it’s that time of the month”) is most common for describing that someone is menstruating. For three girls aged 11-12, the term “menstruation” was unknown, although they had at least a little talked about it in school.²⁷⁸ The popular phrase “seine Tage haben” neither mentions blood nor menstruation. In line with the theoretical findings explained above, it can be considered a typical euphemistical circumscription and makes the taboo visible in German language.

One girl claims that she heard about menstruation for the first time when she was aged 6-7, through her parents.²⁷⁹ Girl 4 learned about it in school and had no previous knowledge before the teacher talked about it in class.²⁸⁰ Among the others, friends and family were the most common sources for coming to know that women bleed, although not everyone could remember where they had heard about it for the very first time: Whereas girl 2 only mentioned friends, girl 7 exclusively heard about it from her older sister.²⁸¹ The mother played a central role in “breaking the news” for girls 5 and 8, whereas both parents were part of the conversation for girl 1.²⁸² Girl 3 only got to know from her dad, as the relationship to her mother is not that good.²⁸³

Only one girl, a 17-year old who had fled from Syria to Austria with her family (girl 8), did not have any information beforehand and was surprised by her first period. When she discovered that she was bleeding, she did not know what it was and she was scared, before

²⁷⁷ Interview with girl 1, Vienna, 27 March 2019, p. 1 (INT2_GIRL1_16); Interview with girl 2, Vienna, 27 March 2019, p. 1 (INT3_GIRL2_13); Interview with girl 3, Vienna, 4 April 2019, p. 1 (INT5_GIRL3_16); Interview with girl 4, Vienna, 23 April 2019, p. 1 (INT7_GIRL4_11); Interview with girl 5, Vienna, 23 April 2019, p. 1 (INT8_GIRL5_11); Interview with girl 6, Wolkersdorf, 29 April 2019, p. 1 (INT9_GIRL6_15); Interview with girl 7, Wolkersdorf, 29 April 2019, p. 1 (INT10_GIRL7_12); Interview with girl 8, Wolkersdorf, 29 April 2019, p. 1 (INT11_GIRL8_17).

²⁷⁸ INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 1; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 1; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 1.

²⁷⁹ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 1.

²⁸⁰ INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 1.

²⁸¹ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 1; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 1.

²⁸² INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 1; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 1; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 1.

²⁸³ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 1.

calling her mother for help.²⁸⁴ In contrast, her younger sister (girl 7), has received information on what to expect from her sister and from Austrian school.²⁸⁵ In addition to girl 8, also girls 3 and 6 shared their menarche story.²⁸⁶ Those who have not yet started menstruation claim that they would know what it is when they got it.²⁸⁷ Whereas girl 5 is not looking forward to menarche, girls 2 and 7 are curious how it is going to be.²⁸⁸

Concerning formal school education, all but one (the older Syrian girl) had talked about it in school, as foreseen by the curricular, although girls 5 and 6 cannot remember exactly what was taught.²⁸⁹ When it comes to looking for or receiving information outside school, the younger girls in general had not looked for or received information through other sources than their mother.²⁹⁰ Whereas girl 1 uses the internet to find information, girls 2 and 3 would not use this source.²⁹¹ Two mention drug stores that sell menstrual materials as other potential sources of information.²⁹² Girls 4 and 8 gained practical knowledge from their mothers and girl 1 explicitly mentions television and online ads.²⁹³ In contrast to findings of Plan International UK²⁹⁴, the internet does not seem as popular for accessing information among this small sample of girls.

In a try to measure the extent of the taboo, the girls were asked whom they talk to and whom not. All but one girl, girl 5, would talk to female friends.²⁹⁵ Girls 4 and 7 explicitly state that they would only talk to girls they trust.²⁹⁶ In addition, girl 3 explains that as she

²⁸⁴ INT11_GIRL8_17, pp. 1-2.

²⁸⁵ INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 1.

²⁸⁶ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 2; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 1.

²⁸⁷ INT3_GIRL2_13, pp. 1, 5; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 2; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 1; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 2.

²⁸⁸ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 2; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 2; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 2.

²⁸⁹ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 1; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 1; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 1; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 1; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 1; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 1; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 1; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 1;

However, more information would be needed to judge if the lessons were of bad quality or had didactical problems, if the girls just did not listen or actually had knowledge and could just not reproduce it in the interview situation.

²⁹⁰ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 1; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 1; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 1; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 1.

²⁹¹ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 1; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 2; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 2.

²⁹² INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 1; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 1.

²⁹³ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 1; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 1; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 1.

²⁹⁴ Plan International UK, pp. 20-21.

²⁹⁵ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 2; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 2; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 3; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 2; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 1; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 3; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 2; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 3.

²⁹⁶ INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 2; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 2.

is the oldest in her class, others come to her to ask questions about menstruation. She feels okay with it most of the time and would tell them directly if she was not.²⁹⁷

If necessary, e.g. in case of problems or lack of supplies, some of the girls would also talk to teachers, with girl 7 excluding male teachers.²⁹⁸ Only two girls mention gynaecologists in the interview: Girl 3 would also consult a gynaecologist and girl 2 would choose the same gynaecologist as her mother.²⁹⁹

The mother is cited as the primary contact person or person of trust in all cases but one.³⁰⁰ This confirms findings from several researchers.³⁰¹ For girl 3, her dad is the person of trust, because the relationship to her mother is not that good and they do not always have contact.³⁰² Three of the interviewees would exclusively talk to the mother, whereas girls 7 and 8 would also talk to sisters.³⁰³ This may also be due to the reason that the others are only children or only have brothers or baby siblings. Whereas girls 1 and 2 would feel rather uncomfortable talking to their father, girls 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 would not at all talk to their fathers about menstruation and girls 7 and 8 would neither talk to their brothers.³⁰⁴ For girl 4 it is a factor that her father is only her stepfather.³⁰⁵

The communication taboo became visible in many interviews. Although some talk openly with their mothers or sisters, the underlying tone was that it is not a topic that is discussed openly, without judgment, in public. It was implied that menstruation is better discussed among females, more precisely those who are trustworthy. With the exception of girl 3, for whom her father is the primary attachment figure, all girls preferred confiding in other girls and women.³⁰⁶ This reinforces the problematic notion that menstruation is a

²⁹⁷ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 3.

²⁹⁸ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 1-2; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 2; INT5_GIRL3_16, pp. 2-3; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 3; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 2.

²⁹⁹ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 1; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 3.

³⁰⁰ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 2; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 2; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 2; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 1; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 2; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 2; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 2.

³⁰¹ Kissling, 1996, p. 489; Costos, Ackerman and Paradis, p. 50; Plan International UK, p. 24.

³⁰² INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 3.

³⁰³ INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 2; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 1; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 2; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 2; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 2.

³⁰⁴ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 2; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 2; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 2; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 1; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 2; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 2; INT11_GIRL8_17, pp. 2, 4.

³⁰⁵ INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 2.

³⁰⁶ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 2.

“women’s issue”. Yet, the taboo was pronounced differently from individual to individual.³⁰⁷ For example, for girl 1, shame was less of an issue. For her, the only thing that was a little uncomfortable was talking to her dad about menstruation. At the same time, she explicitly thinks that it is a shame that the topic is a taboo topic.³⁰⁸ For girls 7 and 8 it is very embarrassing to talk to men and boys about it, including fathers and brothers.³⁰⁹

The mother-daughter relationship is also stressed when talking about an ideal way how a young girl should learn about menstruation. All but girl 4 would talk to their daughter about menstruation, best before menarche, either by answering questions honestly or taking a more active role, like girl 3.³¹⁰ Only girl 4 would want her daughter to learn about it primarily in school.³¹¹

Concerning the menstrual materials, everyone knows sanitary towels and how to use and dispose of them, although two did not know the correct name for it³¹² (girl 4 called them “these strange things that you can roll”³¹³). All of the girls who are past menarche know tampons and three out of the four who had never menstruated had at least seen tampons, but many girls pre and post menarche would rather not use them.³¹⁴ Girl 2 states: „In case, I would rather use sanitary towels, because I imagine it to be uncomfortable with tampons.”³¹⁵ Whereas some girls cannot imagine how it should work to insert the tampons, girl 3 prefers them over sanitary towels, because she does not like the feeling of having material in her underwear, as they might get out of place or scratch.³¹⁶ Only girl 6 mentions panty liners.³¹⁷ The knowledge about reusable alternative is less widespread.

³⁰⁷ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 2; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 2; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 2; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 2; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 1; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 2; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 2; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 2.

³⁰⁸ INT2_GIRL1_16, pp. 2, 4.

³⁰⁹ INT10_GIRL7_12, pp. 2, 4, 6; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 2.

³¹⁰ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 4; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 4; INT5_GIRL3_16, pp. 5-6; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 3; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 4; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 4; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 2.

³¹¹ INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 3.

³¹² INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 3; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 3; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 4; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 4; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 3; INT9_GIRL6_15, pp. 3-4; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 3; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 4.

³¹³ INT8_GIRL4_11, p. 4.

³¹⁴ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 3; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 3; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 4; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 4; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 3; INT9_GIRL6_15, pp. 3 and 6; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 3; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 4.

³¹⁵ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 3.

³¹⁶ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 3; INT5_GIRL3_16, pp. 6-7; INT8_GIRL4_11, p. 6.

³¹⁷ INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 3.

Girls 1 and 3 had heard of the menstrual cup before the interview, but had never used it: Girl 1 knows in theory how it works, but girl 3 cannot imagine very well how it should work, neither can girls 6 and 8.³¹⁸ Girl 6 knows about reusable towels, because she has seen them in a drug store, but girl 3 imagines reusable towels to be gross.³¹⁹

Pain was mentioned as a side effect by all girls, with some being more differentiating (abdomen, back pain, headache). The girls included personal experiences, but also what they know from others and in general.³²⁰ In addition, girl 6 considers worries about staining as negative side effect of periods.³²¹

When explicitly being asked for the attitudes towards menstruation, three of the younger girls state that they had not really thought about it or that they cannot judge it.³²² For the two sisters, there is a rather positive attitude towards menstruation. Girl 8 sees it as healthy and girl 7 states that she had learned that it was a cleaning process and somehow connected to pregnancy, although not knowing the details.³²³ Girl 6 has mixed feeling, seeing menstruation as limiting her by worrying about stains and leaking and not being able to wear everything.³²⁴ Although recognizing that menstruation belongs to growing up and is a part of women's body (functions), it is personally very annoying for girl 3 because of the side effects.³²⁵ For girl 1, it is not such a big deal, because she does not have pain. But in general, she thinks that it is more complicated with menstruation, she is happier when she is not menstruating.³²⁶

In addition, one also has to look at the views and attitudes that are implicit and expressed in other ways. Shame and embarrassment play an important role, but also disgust. At the same time, some contradictions could be found. For example, girl 4 first said she does not feel ashamed, but later states that one should feel ashamed when there is a blood stain in

³¹⁸ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 3; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 4; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 5; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 6.

³¹⁹ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 4; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 3.

³²⁰ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 3; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 3; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 3; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 2; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 2; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 3; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 3; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 3.

³²¹ INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 3.

³²² INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 2; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 2; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 2.

³²³ INT10_GIRL7_12, pp. 2-3; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 3.

³²⁴ INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 3.

³²⁵ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 3.

³²⁶ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 2.

school. Although she claims that it is not embarrassing for her and implies that she is cool with talking about it, she laughed a lot during the interview. When being asked why, she answered that it is not because it is uncomfortable or embarrassing, but because she finds it funny. However, later she says that some videos they watched in school were embarrassing.³²⁷ This shows that behaviour might show something else than spoken words or that there might be some controversy or insecurity within the girls themselves.

As outlined in the theoretical part, secrecy and hiding that one is menstruating are important concerns for women. Constantly worrying about blood flow, leaking and stains was also mentioned as a central issue by girl 6.³²⁸ Girl 2 is also afraid of stains in her clothes and getting her first period in school.³²⁹ Girl 7 is equally worried that visibility of periods and products, e.g. when changing for physical education (PE) lessons, may be the source of being laughed at from boys but also other girls.³³⁰ Even buying products can be embarrassing, as mentioned by girl 3. She felt ashamed when buying menstrual supplies for the first time and knows many who still feel ashamed (to buy products) when they are older.³³¹

Menstruation as a sign of sexual maturity was mentioned by girl 6.³³² The sex taboo was referenced by girl 1.³³³ However, the sports limitation came up directly and indirectly in several interviews. According to girl 2, some girls might find physical exercise during menstruation uncomfortable.³³⁴ Absence or refusal of participation in PE lessons was mentioned in three cases.³³⁵ On the one hand, girl 3 thinks that menstruation might also be used as an excuse to skip class or PE lessons.³³⁶ On the other hand, girl 2 points out that sometimes the teacher does not accept menstruation as a reason for not participation and says: "Come on, it's not that bad".³³⁷ When it comes to missing school in general,

³²⁷ INT7_GIRL4_11, pp. 4, 6-8.

³²⁸ INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 3.

³²⁹ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 2.

³³⁰ INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 8.

³³¹ INT5_GIRL3_16, pp. 2, 5.

³³² INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 4.

³³³ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 2.

³³⁴ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 3.

³³⁵ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 3; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 8; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 4.

³³⁶ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 3.

³³⁷ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 8.

answers were mixed. Whereas some of the younger ones did not know, others had missed school themselves or knew someone who did.³³⁸

In addition, disgust was another issue. Girl 5 says that when she first heard about it, she thought "yuck" and still thinks that a little today.³³⁹ Although the other girls do not directly state that they find menstruation disgusting, some say that the use of products like tampons or reusable products are gross or disgusting.³⁴⁰ At the same time, this was a more prominent issue when talking about views of the boys. Three of the girls stress that boys find menstruation disgusting, according to their impressions and experiences.³⁴¹

Next to disgust the most pressing issues when talking about boys' and men's behaviour and opinion were lack of interest/indifference or teasing.³⁴² Being asked if they are "on the rag" in connection to having a bad day or being moody – which can be one way of making fun – was mentioned by two girls, laughing by further three.³⁴³ Girls 3 and 4 point out that boys cannot really know what it is like, because they do not have it.³⁴⁴ Girl 3 further elaborates that men might underestimate the pain and therefore might think that women act out or not take it seriously.³⁴⁵ On a different note, girl 1 suggests that not being able to have sex might be a concern for men.³⁴⁶

When asking for restrictions and rules during menstruation, the majority of the interviewees answer with "non" (with girl 1 later mentioning the sex taboo).³⁴⁷ Only some of the girls with a Muslim background point to some aspects. Girl 6 mentions ritual washing – "otherwise it is a sin".³⁴⁸ As girl 5 has not started menstruating, her mother

³³⁸ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 3; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 3; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 3; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 2; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 3; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 3; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 3; INT11_GIRL8_17, pp. 3-4.

³³⁹ INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 4.

³⁴⁰ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 4; INT7_GIRL4_11, pp. 4, 6.

³⁴¹ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 4; INT7_GIRL4_11, pp. 3, 7; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 4.

³⁴² INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 4; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 4; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 5; INT7_GIRL4_11, pp. 3, 7; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 8; INT9_GIRL6_15, pp. 4, 7; INT10_GIRL7_12, pp. 4, 7.

³⁴³ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 4; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 4; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 7; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 8; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 7.

³⁴⁴ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 5; INT7_GIRL4_11, pp. 3, 7.

³⁴⁵ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 5.

³⁴⁶ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 4.

³⁴⁷ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 1; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 2; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 2; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 2.

³⁴⁸ INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 3.

has not told her yet, but she had heard that one should not pray.³⁴⁹ Exemption from praying was also cited by girl 8, which she feels okay with. Although her sister, girl 7, lives in the same family and belongs to the same religion, she answered with “none”.³⁵⁰ This may be due to the reason that she has not yet had menarche, so she is not familiar with the rules yet. Girl 1 thinks that in the Jewish tradition there are some rules. She guesses it has something to do with diet regulations but is unsure. She is the only one to mention that some families celebrate menarche.³⁵¹ When being asked to compare their own experiences to how the topic is dealt with in other families, e.g. friends or classmates, some do not know the situation in other families.³⁵² Others point out that some might be more open with the topic and others more reserved, but they could not imagine a complete taboo or problematic issues (e.g. prohibitions/restrictions).³⁵³

With the exception of girl 3, no one had known “erdbeerwoche” before they read the information sheet about the interview.³⁵⁴

5.2 Interviews with Teachers

Two biology teachers were interviewed for the thesis, one male and one female. They both teach at a public secondary school (in German: Allgemeine Höhere Schule).³⁵⁵ They report that the topic menstruation is situated within sex education, which is taught in three class levels: 1st, 4th and 6th grade of secondary school. The information taught becomes more and more specific the older the pupils get: In the 1st grade (age 10), it is introduced that menstruation exists, and is going to happen to the girls. In the 4th grade (age 14), the cycle is discussed in more detail, with hormones and how it is connected to pregnancy

³⁴⁹ INT8_GIRL5_11, pp.1-2.

³⁵⁰ INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 2; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 3.

³⁵¹ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 2.

³⁵² INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 5; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 3.

³⁵³ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 2; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 4; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 3; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 4; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 4.

³⁵⁴ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 4; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 5; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 6; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 3; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 4; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 4; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 4.

³⁵⁵ Interview with teacher 1, Vienna, 11 April 2019, p. 1 (INT6_TEACH1_M); Interview with teacher 2, Vienna, 29 April 2019, p. 1 (INT12_TEACH2_F).

and birth. In 6th grade it is even more specific, dealing in more detail with hormones and contraception.³⁵⁶ One teacher explains that she also compares it to processes in animals.³⁵⁷

In practice, menstruation is not treated separately, but as part of sex education, when female sex organs are discussed. However, teacher 1 has experienced that sexual intercourse is more exciting for the pupils.³⁵⁸ Whereas one teacher thinks that it belongs to sex education and reproduction, the other one could also imagine that menstruation could be dealt with in the context of other topics like health (menstrual pain), nutrition, human body etc.³⁵⁹ Yet, both teachers agree, that the responsibility to teach menstruation is shifted to biology. They strongly support the idea to incorporate it also in other subjects.³⁶⁰ Teacher 1 suggests that it could be incorporated into English and German lessons with texts or maybe even Mathematics (e.g. calculation of cycle).³⁶¹ As suggested by teacher 2, menstruation could be part of Geography lessons, talking about menstrual huts and the situation in other countries, as well as ethics or religion classes, discussing taboos stemming from religion.³⁶²

When being asked for the content of the lessons on menstruation, teacher 1 answered: "Of course, it depends a lot on who is teaching, I think"³⁶³. The character or motivation of an individual teacher came up several times in connection to teaching taboo topics. He thinks it is difficult when it is embarrassing for the teacher himself/herself. He or she must have the ability to deal openly with questions from the pupils. Therefore, exchange with colleagues can help to gain confidence in using certain words and speaking openly.³⁶⁴

Demonstration materials such as tampons or pads play an important role when it comes to teaching materials. The available schoolbooks are rated as being of good quality by both teachers, because menstruation is well-portrayed. Videos are also used in school.³⁶⁵

³⁵⁶ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 1; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 1.

³⁵⁷ INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 1.

³⁵⁸ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 1.

³⁵⁹ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 10; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 2.

³⁶⁰ INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 1, 4; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 2.

³⁶¹ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 4.

³⁶² INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 2.

³⁶³ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 2.

³⁶⁴ INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 2, 8, 11.

³⁶⁵ INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 2-3, 6; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 1.

Whereas teacher 1 is satisfied with the way menstruation is portrayed as normal in the schoolbook, teacher 2 would like to see some more content or clearer attitude in the materials in connection to the removal of taboo, mentioning also blue liquid in ads.³⁶⁶

What school education can actually achieve and what not, is a pedagogical question for teacher 1. He has the impression that there is a trend that parents try to yield as much as possible to school and are rather happy that school covers menstruation.³⁶⁷ Both teachers agree that school can provide basic information on the process and also cover menstrual materials. However, the teacher cannot talk to every individual girl and give emotional support, as there is not enough space to build a trustful relationship.³⁶⁸ Teacher 1 adds that it would be helpful to offer more information and support to reduce insecurity during puberty, as (in)security is a central element for adolescents.³⁶⁹

The interviewees name similar headwords when it comes to attitudes about menstruation. The taboo plays an important role, as well as disgust, especially for the boys. Teacher 2 describes that sometimes boys cry out loud "yuck". Some even display a refusing attitude, which is also encouraged by society, telling them *inter alia* it is a women's issue.³⁷⁰ Teacher 1 adds that there is a lack of understanding among the boys and that they see menstruation as strange. According to his experience, also the younger girls find it strange, it is an invisible, unclear thing which should apparently happen to them. For him, (school) education has a clear task to take away their fear of menstruation.³⁷¹ Embarrassment, which was a central element in the interviews with girls, was also cited by teacher 2. She states that especially young girls are shy and ashamed, in general it is embarrassing for the girls and that they do not want anyone to see that they menstruate.³⁷²

These attitudes also translate to behaviour in class. Teacher 1 explains that among the younger pupils some do not want to be confronted with the topic, while others are very interested. In general, laughing and giggling is always an issue. Different individuals cope

³⁶⁶ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 3; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 1.

³⁶⁷ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 3.

³⁶⁸ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 3; INT12_TEACH2_F, pp. 2-3.

³⁶⁹ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 4.

³⁷⁰ INT12_TEACH2_F, pp. 1, 3.

³⁷¹ INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 1, 3.

³⁷² INT12_TEACH2_F, pp. 1-2.

with insecurity in different ways: some turn very silent and seem to disappear under the table, others are very loud and noticeable and brag that they know everything already.³⁷³ Teacher 2 has noticed curiosity among some pupils from conservative families. As they do not get information at home, some are even more eager for knowledge in class.³⁷⁴

When it comes to handling the different attitudes and behaviours of boys and girls in class, teacher 2 emphasizes that no one should be forced to say anything but given the chance to say something if they want. Therefore, the teacher needs to have empathy and be sensible for whom it is okay or good to talk about it and for whom not. The teacher has to break the barrier and balance the topic, as all pupils should have the same level of knowledge at the end. When pupils giggle a lot in class, teacher 2 personally lets them finish laughing and stresses how important the topic is for real-life, that it is a normal process and necessary for reproduction.³⁷⁵ Teacher 1 agrees that it is a challenge to create a certain seriousness among the children or teenagers, because they find it funny or cope differently with the insecurity. Some cannot focus enough, because they laugh a lot.³⁷⁶

The separation of boys and girls is controversial in literature, but also in schools. As a class usually consists of boys and girls and they all attend the same biology lesson, they are also together for the lessons on sex education and menstruation. On the one hand, the male teacher considers this a good situation, as boys should also be involved. On the other hand, the female teacher sometimes wishes for an option to separate boys and girls in order to create a safe space for girls to open up.³⁷⁷

In fact, when it comes to involving boys, teacher 1 points out that it is still a strange topic for boys, and many only learn more about it when they are older and in long-term relationships with girlfriends. However, he is convinced that already earlier boys should learn that it is not only a girls' topic, that it also relates to them in some way and that they should be in the know.³⁷⁸ Teacher 2 agrees that the topic is also important for the boys,

³⁷³ INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 2, 6.

³⁷⁴ INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 4.

³⁷⁵ INT12_TEACH2_F, pp. 1, 3-4, 6.

³⁷⁶ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 6.

³⁷⁷ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 2; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 3.

³⁷⁸ INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 2, 7.

because they will need it in later life when they have a wife or when it comes to family planning. She suggests that they could be better involved through a project, which could, for example, also include other perspectives like a historical one.³⁷⁹

Concerning the gender of the teacher, the female interviewee states that women might be considered as more trustworthy and a reliable source of information: 'I think as a woman it is easier to explain, because you know yourself how it is'³⁸⁰. The male teacher admits, that he only has the information second-hand and that he cannot answer all the questions from girls, but he seeks a lot of advice from his female colleagues. He also has the impression that for the younger pupils (age 10), it does not matter that much, but for the 14-15 years old girls it might be a little bit harder to open up to a male teacher.³⁸¹

In relation to the question if the religious or cultural background has something to do with the pupil's attitude and knowledge about menstruation, teacher 1 thinks that it does not matter much, although children are indeed influenced by their parents and maybe unreligious kids might deal with it more openly.³⁸² In contrast to teacher 2, who has experienced some Catholic conservative kids being more curious (cp. above), he has noticed that these pupils rather zoom out and do not listen or participate that much. In addition, he has witnessed different behaviour from pupils with Muslim background: Some are more silent, others more active. In summary, he has the impression that every child is so individual, that the background is only relevant to a certain extent.³⁸³ Teacher 2 agrees that it always depends on the individual child. She has rich and poor people in class and in both social classes there are parents who show effort and are engaged and other parents who are not.³⁸⁴ Also relating to the question of gender, she suggests that more inclusive education can be reached through games or group work, because in smaller groups the atmosphere is more intimate and the groups can be mixed in terms of gender, background, religion, social class.³⁸⁵

³⁷⁹ INT12_TEACH2_F, pp. 3-4.

³⁸⁰ INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 2.

³⁸¹ INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 2-3.

³⁸² INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 6-7.

³⁸³ INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 6-7.

³⁸⁴ INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 4.

³⁸⁵ INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 7.

Both teachers agree that among the most important messages that should come across when teaching menstruation are normalisation as well as reduction of shame and insecurity (next to basic information). In addition, pupils should learn that no one should be made fun of or laughed at because of menstruation.³⁸⁶

Concerning school absenteeism, teacher 2 remembers her own school time when girls sometimes did not attend PE lessons.³⁸⁷ Teacher 1 does not know of any case, but in general he does not know the reason why pupils are absent.³⁸⁸

Both teachers state that the invitation of external trainers for sex education is possible. However, that there have been some complaints from parents in the past because they did not know what to expect from externals or were not satisfied with the contents.³⁸⁹

When it comes to collaboration with parents, both teachers state that they do not hold specific parent-teacher conferences. Whereas teacher 2 informs parents what she is about to teach when the topic is due and a parents' day is happening anyway, teacher 1 would rather keep them out of this, because it is not about them, but the children.³⁹⁰ He has the impression that parents do not want to be involved beforehand. At the same time, he hopes and does not think that there are any parents who would object menstrual education in comparison to other topics of sex education. Maybe only discussing that not only women bleed (but transgender, intersex) might be seen as a "problematic issue" by certain parents. However, it is cumbersome in any case, when parents complain. At his school, there are some very (Catholic) conservative parents.³⁹¹ Both teachers have not experienced but could imagine that conservative parents would keep their children at home if they knew that a sensitive topic like sex education, including menstruation, was going to be taught. In addition, some parents are especially mistrustful concerning external trainers.³⁹²

³⁸⁶ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 5; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 3.

³⁸⁷ INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 4.

³⁸⁸ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 8.

³⁸⁹ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 1; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 3.

³⁹⁰ INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 4 and 12; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 2.

³⁹¹ INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 2, 5-6, 13.

³⁹² INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 8; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 4.

Teacher 2 brings up another point. In general, she thinks that parents are responsible for telling and showing their kids, but some of the parents have a lack of knowledge themselves. Many only have one child and the situation only arises once. They prefer leaving it to the teachers, so that they do not have to talk about this embarrassing topic.³⁹³

The male teacher thinks that further training for all teachers would make sense. In this way, teachers could develop soft skills in dealing with certain situations related to menstruation and also discuss practical things like where menstrual materials can be found in school. At the same time, this could reduce the taboo and address issues related to attitude, because teachers can be a role model and if pupils see that teachers normalise it, they can also do so.³⁹⁴ However, the female teacher points out that probably only women would use such training opportunities, because men would not feel responsible or comfortable with it. The taboo is also present among teachers.³⁹⁵ According to teacher 1, participation of teachers in further training should be based on voluntariness. In his school, they also have school intern teacher training within the school staff. It is usually for computing skills, but one could also offer training on the topic of menstruation on a voluntary basis, for male teachers, but also female teachers, because most say that it is not their topic to teach outside biology.³⁹⁶

In general, teacher 1 thinks that menstruation still is a strange topic. Although reduction of the taboo takes place already, there is still a lot of work to do concerning price and accessibility of products or infrastructure in school. He also mentions that there should be more public options to access menstrual products, maybe even for free in school.³⁹⁷

Both teachers had heard of “erdbeerwoche”, but not of READY FOR RED.³⁹⁸

5.3 Interviews with External Trainers

Two female external trainers (sex educators/ pedagogues) participated in the research. Trainer 1 offers workshops for schools and other institutions next to doing supervision

³⁹³ INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 7.

³⁹⁴ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 12.

³⁹⁵ INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 7.

³⁹⁶ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 13.

³⁹⁷ INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 7,14.

³⁹⁸ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 8; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 5.

and counselling activities.³⁹⁹ The second trainer offers amongst others workshops in the context of countering sexual violence against children and adolescents, where sex education is part of the prevention work.⁴⁰⁰

Trainer 1 explains that they do not have standardized projects, but they rather orient towards the interests and needs of the children and adolescents. In their workshops, they open up room for discussion and create a safe space. Menstruation is only one part of the content. Especially for the 9-10-year-olds the topic is very important, they always bring it up, as they also see products in the advertisements. The older they get, the more specific the questions get, but for 16-17 year old teenagers other topics are more pressing (like first sexual encounters). According to trainer 1, her and her colleagues' tasks are to provide information, diffuse myths and normalise the topic. In addition, a workshop can offer different perspectives.⁴⁰¹

Being in line with the core messages that the teaches wanted to convey, trainer 2 agrees that they want to normalise and foster the notion that there is no need to feel ashamed. They encourage kids not to be shy to ask questions or seek information. She emphasizes that everything is on voluntary basis, they can make offerings and try to answer all the questions, but do not want to impose views.⁴⁰²

When it comes to the understanding of sex education, trainer 1 points out that they use "sexual pedagogy" instead of "sex education", because education is connotated with cognitive transfer of knowledge. Sexual pedagogy, however, looks at the person as a whole and wants to provide pedagogical accompaniment and support throughout a person's life, not only in adolescence.⁴⁰³ For trainer 2, sex education is an important element of prevention, she sees her role as informing and educating children. On the one hand, she has the impression that some teachers have hope to shift responsibility to external trainers, so that they do not have to discuss delicate topics themselves. On the

³⁹⁹ Interview with external trainer 1, Vienna, 27 March 2019, p. 1 (INT1_EXT1).

⁴⁰⁰ Interview with external trainer 2, Vienna, 28 March 2019, p. 1 (INT4_EXT2).

⁴⁰¹ INT1_EXT1, pp. 2-4.

⁴⁰² INT4_EXT2, pp. 1, 3.

⁴⁰³ INT1_EXT1, p. 1-2.

other hand, some adolescents might dare to ask questions if they know that they will never see the external trainer again in comparison to the teacher.⁴⁰⁴

As an additional point, trainer 1 supports that pupils should be trained in media competences in different subject, which they can then apply to seeking or evaluating information and advertisement about menstruation and menstrual materials.⁴⁰⁵

Both trainers agree that the attitude of the person conducting the workshop is very important. For trainer 2 that means a positive and open attitude. Persons working with children and adolescents should have an inclusive, gender-sensitive approach, based on human rights.⁴⁰⁶ Trainer 1 specifies that a humanistic basic attitude is needed, also mentioning the human rights-oriented approach, next to anti-discrimination and resource-orientation instead of deficit-orientation.⁴⁰⁷

The two experts confirm once again the attitudes and feelings of embarrassment and fear of blood stains. Negative connotations and expectations become visible connected to fear of the first period. Taboo and shame were also mentioned.⁴⁰⁸ Trainer 2 further confirms the observation of the teacher, that some kids act as if they know everything already, while others are very reserved or silent and not participating. In addition, menstruation is associated not only with shame, but also with pain. She has experienced that they sometimes have fixed ideas or thoughts and she has the impression that she cannot reach them or convince them that there is no need feel ashamed.⁴⁰⁹ Observing behaviour of adolescents in the workshop, trainer 1 has noticed that in general kids are loyal in their (basic) attitudes. If they learn at home that the topic is delicate, and that it should not be talked about outside of family, they feel uncomfortable in the workshop. Therefore, some have developed coping strategies like zooming out. She has never experienced rejection, but a lot of negative connotation. In addition, advertisements influence sentiments of

⁴⁰⁴ INT4_EXT2, pp. 1-2, 4.

⁴⁰⁵ INT1_EXT1, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁰⁶ INT4_EXT2, p. 7-9.

⁴⁰⁷ INT1_EXT1, p. 10.

⁴⁰⁸ INT1_EXT1, pp- 5-7.

⁴⁰⁹ INT4_EXT2, pp. 1, 3, 6.

girls, for example the ones promoting secrecy, advertising that menstruation should be scentless and invisible.⁴¹⁰

In the office of trainer 2 there is a creative station where kids can design sanitary towels in a creative way by colouring them, adding glitter or other decoration. This is a method to create a casual atmosphere, starting conversation while doing handicrafts, which helps some girls to open up. It is also a way of removal of the taboo, because they touch the menstrual products and make something else out of it. Even if some kids do not participate directly, they might notice what is going on and what is talked about. Knowing where they can access information and support at a later stage is already helpful for them. In the office, they also have a reading corner for the ones who do not want to participate, where they can retreat. Although this trainer has the impression, that she cannot reach some girls, she still offers them a normalizing and shameless perspective, hoping that they might come back to it some time in the future.⁴¹¹

Trainer 1 also made similar experiences that sometimes she cannot reach the children, if their opinion is so indoctrinated by the parents, but at least other perspectives can be offered. It would be disrespectful to say that the experiences are not true (if they have very negative role models), but they should be encouraged to find positive role models or reference persons. She is never afraid of direct statements, because she can work with what is pronounced openly. It is much more difficult to deal with connotations that influence sentiments and behaviour but that cannot be formulated.⁴¹²

Concerning the role of religion and background, trainer 2 draws the following conclusion from her and her colleagues' experiences: 'Well, I have the impression that it just doesn't matter at all what you believe in or where you are from, it is simply a taboo topic.'⁴¹³ She indicated that some people want to believe that origin, religion or migrant background play a relevant role. She sees this critically as they have also seen that it is used as an excuse of teachers or pedagogues not to cover the subject, because they are afraid that Muslim parents would not approve of it. However, this is not the experience of the trainers.

⁴¹⁰ INT1_EXT1, pp. 6, 8.

⁴¹¹ INT4_EXT2, pp. 3-5, 8.

⁴¹² INT1_EXT1, pp. 4, 7-8.

⁴¹³ INT4_EXT2, p. 5.

Trainer 2 thinks that the reluctant teachers have not spoken to the parents, they just assume their views. She has never experienced parents keeping their children at home because of the delicate topic that should be taught.⁴¹⁴ Also trainer 1 has made experiences with institutions or individuals who do not discuss the topic out of the same fear. She states that you also have to respect that for some parents it might be a problem and communicate that respect, but also endure that not everybody is comfortable. At the same time, one should support girls who are not allowed to participate in PE or swimming lessons - for which menstruation is also used as an argument or excuse - because in Austria it is normal that girls can do sports in school. And if some parents really have a problem with it, the girls can at least sit at the side.⁴¹⁵ She further elaborates that religious views play more a role concerning sexuality than menstruation, because it is even a bigger taboo topic. Even if parents would not allow their children to participate in workshops, which only happens rarely according to her experience, still these families would notice that the topic is being treated and discussed. However, she points out that not only conservative views are challenging, but also "progressive" ones saying that women are not made for bleeding that often and that menstruation should be abolished.⁴¹⁶

Concerning the controversial question of separation of boys and girls, trainer 1 states that they separate them under the age of 13, as one group would get bored discussing body changes of the other, not being concerned themselves.⁴¹⁷ Trainer 2 and staff have mixed groups in general, unless they see that it becomes problematic or non-productive.⁴¹⁸

Trainer 2 has the impression that in school, teachers concentrate on the body and biological knowledge, not giving enough space to social, psychological and political aspects. Just like the teachers she thinks that menstruation should be talked more about in school, because it only happens for a few lessons in biology and then it is done.

⁴¹⁴ INT4_EXT2, pp. 4-5.

⁴¹⁵ INT1_EXT1, pp. 13-14.

⁴¹⁶ INT1_EXT1, pp. 4, 6-7.

⁴¹⁷ INT1_EXT1, p. 3.

⁴¹⁸ INT4_EXT2, p. 2.

Furthermore, there should be offers outside school, which should not replace but complement school education.⁴¹⁹

Whereas trainer 1 thinks that menstruation always needs to be part of sex education and should not be singled out as a taboo topic within the taboo topic, trainer 2 sees advantages and disadvantages in de-linking it. One problem is also that sex education is associated with sexual intercourse, which causes defence reaction in some parents.⁴²⁰

On the topic of collaboration with parents, trainer 1 elaborates that they make evening events with parents, also trying to explain what sex education is and how parents can contribute. She is not that happy when teachers do not tell parents or children beforehand what is going to be discussed out of fear they might stay at home. According to her experience, the parents embrace what is offered to them in the evening conferences.⁴²¹ Trainer 2 explains that they sometimes do parent-teacher conferences and inform about the content of the workshop in school. When they tell the parents that "sex education means protection", they usually show understanding (it is meant primarily in the context of sexual violence, but education on the topic of menstruation can also be protection). In her view, parents are quite happy if they do not have to talk about it themselves, which confirms the view of the teacher (cp. above).⁴²²

In addition, trainer 1 points out to other factors that play a role: According to her, clean toilets are very important, because otherwise every opportunity for intimate hygiene is denied. Many schools do not have bins in the toilet cabins. Pupils are not allowed to use the restroom outside of breaks, but breaks are very short (e.g. 5 min) and many times there are only a few toilets. This creates stressful use of toilets. Group showers belonging to gym are neither favourable for intimate hygiene. Furthermore, there are no freely available products in school.⁴²³ She furthermore says that many personal issues do not have space in school, and that adolescents need more room for exchange. In addition, she would like to improve medical and counselling offers and increase hours for school

⁴¹⁹ INT4_EXT2, pp. 2-3.

⁴²⁰ INT1_EXT1, p. 2; INT4_EXT2, pp. 4, 9.

⁴²¹ INT1_EXT1, pp. 1, 6, 13.

⁴²² INT4_EXT2, p. 4.

⁴²³ INT1_EXT1, pp. 4-5.

physicians and nurses, because children need low-level easy access to medical care. There should also be the opportunity for individual talks with children and adolescents and teachers should receive more offers and case supervision.⁴²⁴

Trainer 2 points out that teachers should receive further training, which was also discussed by the interviewed teachers. However, the problem is that they do not reach teachers as easily as a few years ago, as some rules have changed and now teachers have to take days off to participate in their training for teachers.⁴²⁵ Therefore, she demands that teachers should be provided with time during their working hours to do this. Sensitisation is needed among the teachers to recognize that girl makes individual experiences with menstruation. She also thinks that issues like the gender-sensitive approach should be better integrated in formal education of teachers and that teachers should receive more social recognition and better payment.⁴²⁶

Whereas trainer 2 did not know READY FOR RED before the interview, trainer 1 was contacted by “erdbeerwoche” for networking when they first started working.⁴²⁷

5.4 Key Findings of the Interviews

Findings from literature and previous research were mostly confirmed. This included the choice of words describing menstruation, the role of the mother or some of the negative attitudes. The interviews acknowledged that menstruation is still a taboo topic, even though not as strong as it used to be or as it is in other parts of the world. Secrecy, shame and disgust were main aspects of feelings and attitudes among girls and in society. Menstruation is often associated with pain and girls want to hide their periods and are afraid of stains and comments from others. Talking to boys is embarrassing for many and most girls rather confide in trustful female figures, especially mothers. At the same time, the taboo and negative attitudes vary among the individuals and their families. Also positive attitudes – that menstruation is normal, a cleaning process or necessary for reproduction – were mentioned.

⁴²⁴ INT1_EXT1, pp. 10-12.

⁴²⁵ INT4_EXT2, p. 6.

⁴²⁶ INT4_EXT2, pp. 6-9.

⁴²⁷ INT1_EXT1, p. 8; INT4_EXT2, p. 5.

The only time when the interviews partly refuted tendencies from previous research was concerning the role of the internet. The girls demonstrated that they use the internet less as an additional source as suggested by other researchers (cp. above).

The notion that menstruation is only a women's issue was in the room, mostly reinforced by society, but at the same time was countered. Girls, teachers and external trainers alike pointed out that menstruation also concerns boys and men and that they should be included in menstrual education. It was acknowledged by some that lack of understanding and knowledge among boys can reinforce teasing.

Factual knowledge about menstruation and products can still be improved. From the statements of the girls one can conclude that especially more education about reusable products and practical knowledge on how to use these products is needed.

The interviewed experts agreed that taboo and embarrassment also exist on the side of the teachers and adults in general. It was admitted that this can sometime influence the extent and quality of the teaching. To ensure good menstrual education for all pupils, teachers and trainers need to be open for questions and need to have a positive and open attitude. As role models, they should contribute to normalisation. Most experts supported further training for teachers. Therefore, the State and schools need to create favourable conditions to allow teachers to participate in such trainings.

De-linking menstrual education from sex education was not favoured by most experts. However, the teachers complained that responsibility to teach menstrual education is exclusively shifted to biology. To have support from different teachers, the topic should be incorporated in other subjects as well. It was noticeable that no one seemed to want to take responsibility of educating children and adolescents about menstruation. It was reported that (some) parents tend to shift responsibility to school, school hands it to biology teachers and some teachers shift it to external workshop providers. A better distribution of responsibility would be helpful, not only for those who have the duty to teach, but also for those who receive menstrual education to have more contact persons.

Assumptions that the extent of the taboo, restrictions and level of knowledge might be linked to religious and cultural background or immigrant status of the girls and their

families were refuted. Teachers and external trainers agreed that one should refrain from generalizing. How a family discusses menstruation (or not) depends on the individual family and also on the individual child or teenager. It is further important to notice that although the topics are linked, reactions to menstrual education are less critical compared to education about contraception or sexuality. However, some differentiations can be made. Muslim girls were the only ones that reported rules imposed by religion, but it did not seem to be a problematic issue or an important factor.

More than one interviewee pointed out that people want to believe that lack of knowledge, restrictions or resistance to such type of education it is an “immigrant” problem or “Muslim” problem. This is especially dangerous in a situation where Muslim minorities and groups like refugees or migrants are under attack by right-wing politicians and groups.⁴²⁸ Educational projects not being conducted out of alleged fear of complaints by Muslim parents hinders good education about the topic of menstruation.⁴²⁹ Very conservative catholic parents might be less open to the topic, but this can either lead to their children being more shy and reluctant to speak out or being more curious. With the older girl from Syria reporting that she had no education on menstruation in Syria, one might question how the situation is within refugee girls in Austria.⁴³⁰

Collaboration with parents was seen as controversial. Although the Austrian Government stresses that collaboration with parents is crucial, in practice there might be some challenges. Whereas one teacher had the strategy not to involve parents that much beforehand, others, especially external trainers, preferred informing parents prior to the workshop. Worries and views of parents should be taken seriously and respected, but not impact the quality or offers of education. Fear of reaction from parents – also under religious aspects – should never be per se a reason not to offer sex education or menstrual

⁴²⁸ See for example FPÖ, *Die schleichende Islamisierung Österreichs*, [website], 2017, <https://www.fpoe.at/artikel/die-schleichende-islamisierung-oesterreichs/>, (accessed 22 June 2019); P. Gensing, 'Österreich: Strache und der "Bevölkerungsaustausch"', *tagesschau.de*, 24 May 2019, <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/bevoelkerungsaustausch-strache-101.html>, (accessed 22 June 2019).

⁴²⁹ It needs to be scrutinized what parents really think and what is only assumed by the teachers or other professionals who work with children and teenagers. If parents do have objections, constructive dialogue needs to be sought.

⁴³⁰ However, this is not the focus of this thesis. An own academic paper could be dedicated to this sub-group.

education. In cases of conflict, dialogue should be sought with parents and teachers or institutions should not only rely on assumptions or stereotypes.

The second controversial issue was the question whether to separate boys and girls. In conclusion, there is no one-size-fits all solution. Aspects of safe space, feasibility and inclusion need to be considered. In the long run, the goal should be to remove the taboo so that it becomes less embarrassing for girls to talk about it in front of teachers and boys.

Insecurity and embarrassment of the pupils are reflected differently in their behaviour in class. Bragging loudly, laughing and giggling are potential expressions of it, just like growing silent or tuning out. Teachers and external trainers made similar experiences concerning this point. Meeting these challenges, they stressed voluntary participation and explaining the relevance of knowledge about menstruation. Suggestion to ensure inclusive education reached from group work, games and projects to creative working.

Not only quality and quantity of education play a role, but also the framework in which it takes place – in this case at school. How is the topic in general treated in school? Do schools have supplies of menstrual materials to give to girls? This includes also infrastructural aspects like availability, privacy and hygiene of school and gym toilets or bathrooms as well as availability of bins in the cabins. The access to school physicians or nurses furthermore plays a role.

School absenteeism occurs on a small scale as reported by some girls, but it has not been noticed by the teachers. Hence, one should not overlook that it exists, but it is not as big of a problem as in other countries where girls' right to education is infringed.

Furthermore, the role of problematic advertisements was brought up by several experts. Therefore, media competences should be fostered in school and workshops, which is also a part of the official Government ordinance.

To bring the findings back to the human rights dimension, it was noticeable that issues were mostly not framed in human rights terms. Especially the girls did not think of it as a human rights issue. However, they did not reflect on the topic that much, neither did they take it to a meta level, but told about their personal experiences. Only some of the older girls introduced a few considerations about societal views or the taboo. Among the

experts, human rights issues like gender equality explicitly became visible when talking about societal pressure, access to products or taxation and pricing issues. Only the two external trainers explicitly mentioned human rights in the context of having a human rights-oriented approach. They both have a background in pedagogy that encouraged aspects like resource orientation, human rights approach or open attitudes.

The human rights involved in Austria may be different to other parts of the world. The right to education is less relevant in terms of school absenteeism, more in relation to access to quality menstrual education. The right to water and sanitation is only concerned when it comes to conditions of toilets and the debate about free provision of menstrual products at school, which was however not in the focus of the interviews and only mentioned marginally. Period poverty did not come up. It is more dignity and gender equality that are relevant human rights aspects. Menstrual education can still be improved in terms of knowledge, but especially also countering negative attitudes and removing the taboo.

5.4 Evaluating the Platform READY FOR RED

The majority of the participants in all categories gave positive feedback about the platform. All of the girls like the platform and none of them could find anything negative.⁴³¹ Among the videos that were especially appreciated were the videos where men examined menstrual materials.⁴³² Three of the girls named games as their favourite component.⁴³³ In fact, the good mix of different tools (text, videos, games) was praised not only by girls, but also by teachers and external trainers. In this way, participants can learn in an interactive and playful way.⁴³⁴ External trainer 1 stresses that interactive computer-based tools support learning, because ‘learning needs doing’.⁴³⁵ According to teacher 2, the platform is an opportunity for kids to see what they already know and what not and they can also expand their knowledge.⁴³⁶ The male teachers finds it good that

⁴³¹ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 5; p. 3; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 10; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 5; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 5; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 5; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 5; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 6.

⁴³² INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 6; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 5; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 5.

⁴³³ INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 5; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 5; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 5.

⁴³⁴ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 8; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 10; INT1_EXT1, p. 9; INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 10; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 5.

⁴³⁵ INT1_EXT1, p. 9.

⁴³⁶ INT4_EXT2, p. 5.

pupils do not only hear the information from him, but also from other persons with different backgrounds or genders.⁴³⁷

Other positive aspects named by the girls were “cool” graphics and a well-elaborated design.⁴³⁸ In her interview, Girl 3 rated the platform as follows: ‘I find the homepage extremely cool, it is also very well built. I am really convinced of it.’⁴³⁹ The design and structure also pleased to both teachers.⁴⁴⁰ Girl 6 explicitly highlighted that she likes the overall message that there is no need to be scared or shy concerning menstruation.⁴⁴¹ Also external trainer 2 appreciated the image it transfers and that it is sometimes funny and not that uptight. A plus for her is also that READY FOR RED is not only about menstruation itself, but also addresses other issues like waste production and contents of tampons, which is interesting knowledge and contributes to removing the taboo.⁴⁴² In level 4, on a more advanced stage, the platform provides a video with a man who used to menstruate to show that not only women are concerned. Girl 3 said that she had respect for this man who shared his story.⁴⁴³

The fact that the target group can work on it by themselves and click through it individually was praised by girls, teachers and external trainers alike.⁴⁴⁴

Most of the girls stated that they learned something new – the younger ones more than the older ones – and many of them cited reusable products as examples for gained knowledge.⁴⁴⁵ When it comes to insecurity, girl 1 said that the platform made her more secure, because she has more knowledge than before.⁴⁴⁶ Also girl 7 expressed that she feels positive that she has learned many new things.⁴⁴⁷ Girl 2 emphasized that she not only gained practical knowledge, but also on the emotional level. It was helpful for her

⁴³⁷ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 9.

⁴³⁸ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 5.

⁴³⁹ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 9.

⁴⁴⁰ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 10; INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 5.

⁴⁴¹ INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 5.

⁴⁴² INT4_EXT2, p. 7.

⁴⁴³ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 7.

⁴⁴⁴ INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 5; INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 9; INT4_EXT2, p. 7.

⁴⁴⁵ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 5; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 5; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 6; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 5; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 5; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 6; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 5.

⁴⁴⁶ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 5;

⁴⁴⁷ INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 6.

to get to know how other women felt about their first periods.⁴⁴⁸ Whereas girl 4 first claimed that she has not learned anything new – showing the "I-know-everything-already"-attitude, she later demonstrated that she did learn something new.⁴⁴⁹

Concerning challenges and weaknesses of the platform, teacher 2 said it is a risk that users might think that they know everything after going through the platform (although they might not).⁴⁵⁰ Access to the platform can be a challenge, as addressed by a teacher and an external trainer, because a computer, internet and login data, connected to costs, are required.⁴⁵¹ Teacher 1 pointed out that the advantage that every participant can click through independently can also be a disadvantage. If children and teenagers do it at home and not at school, the obligation is missing, and some would simply not do it, if it is voluntary. Therefore, not all boys and girls can be reached.⁴⁵²

The platform READY FOR RED places menstruation at the centre. However, external trainer 1 disapproves of picking out a special topic within the taboo topic of body and sexuality, which is a focus and reduction (also used by politics and religion). She thinks that it is problematic that the argument is that women are discriminated because of their menstruation and now they are again reduced to it. It always needs to be embedded in the context of sex education. In addition, there is no opportunity to come into dialogue, hear personal stories of the user and give emotional support. Comparing READY FOR RED to products of Johnson and Johnson (o.b.), she raised questions of corporate interests, advertising and transparency.⁴⁵³

In contrast to the intention of the platform, most girls said that the platform did not reduce their feelings of embarrassment and attitudes.⁴⁵⁴ However, for girl 7 the platform (and the

⁴⁴⁸ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 5.

⁴⁴⁹ INT7_GIRL4_11, pp. 4-5, 7.

⁴⁵⁰ INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 5.

⁴⁵¹ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 9; INT4_EXT2, p. 7.

⁴⁵² INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 9.

⁴⁵³ INT1_EXT1, pp. 9-10.

⁴⁵⁴ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 5; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 6; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 7; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 6; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 6; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 6; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 6; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 6.

workshop) reduced her fear of menarche: Beforehand, she was more scared, but now she is more excited on how it is going to be.⁴⁵⁵

Concerning the language, the non-native speakers said that it was easy to understand, but the two Syrian girls would additionally like an Arabic version to be able to show it to their mother who does not speak German as well as they do.⁴⁵⁶ Girl 1 would have wished more background information on the case of the man who used to menstruate.⁴⁵⁷ Two of the younger girls had challenges with technical terms used by the platform.⁴⁵⁸

If the group of refugee girls should explicitly be addressed, one would need further research about the needs of the target group. A translation of READY FOR RED in other languages could be useful but is connected to expenses.⁴⁵⁹

Although the information on the practical and scientific knowledge was very comprehensive, some of the younger girls would like to have some more emotional aspects integrated. Some of them seemed to be especially concerned about anticipation when menarche comes or what to do when (the first) menstruation happens at school.⁴⁶⁰ As the videos with personal stories were confirmed to work well, it can be suggested to have videos with younger women or girls who tell stories about their first menarche in school, or a teacher speaking and offering to talk about it openly when a girl needs something in school. Also teacher 1 agreed that you could let adolescents speak, as it might be more approachable if the person is the same age and uses adolescent language.⁴⁶¹

Many girls assumed that their mothers would like the platform, but some were not sure about male family members.⁴⁶² Girl 3, who lives with her father, thinks that her dad would find it very supportive, because other male work colleagues address him as they feel a little helpless in relation to talking about menstruation with their daughters.⁴⁶³ The

⁴⁵⁵ INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 6.

⁴⁵⁶ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 5; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 9; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 6.

⁴⁵⁷ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 6.

⁴⁵⁸ INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 6; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 7.

⁴⁵⁹ A cost-benefit analysis would be helpful to determine if an investment in translating the webpage is a good option.

⁴⁶⁰ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 2; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 1; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 7.

⁴⁶¹ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 10.

⁴⁶² INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 6; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 6; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 8; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 7.

⁴⁶³ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 8.

platform could also be a good resource for these fathers. Two of the girls thought that their mothers would not be too fond of them (continue) using the platform: One mother might consider the topic very personal/intimate and the other says that her daughter should better not know.⁴⁶⁴

Five out of the eight girls would continue using the platform and further two would come back at a later stage (after menarche), while one said that she knows enough already.⁴⁶⁵ All but two girls would recommend READY FOR RED to others.⁴⁶⁶ Girl 7 would recommend it especially for younger girls (aged 10-11), so that they can get better access to the topic and to reduce the embarrassment.⁴⁶⁷ However, girl 4 would not tell her friends about it – only if they specifically asked about it – neither would girl 5, without giving specific reasons.⁴⁶⁸

All of the girls agreed that it is important to learn about menstruation. Among the arguments are the aspects that it is normal, connected to reproduction, part of their daily-lives and practical knowledge.⁴⁶⁹ As girl 5 points out, it is important to start early with menstrual education, to prevent girls from getting scared when they see blood – at some point a girl will know anyway.⁴⁷⁰ Girl 2 elaborated that the platform gave her additional knowledge, which is practical to have, but she would "survive" without it.⁴⁷¹ Girl 3 agrees that knowing every detail of it is not necessary (for everyone), but the practical basics are a must. She argues that for women it is good to know a lot, also in the context of the menstrual cycle and family planning (fertile days etc.).⁴⁷²

While girl 8 considered menstruation a women's topic, some of the other girls argue that boys and men should learn more about it.⁴⁷³ REDY FOR RED, which contains tools

⁴⁶⁴ INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 7; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 6.

⁴⁶⁵ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 6; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 7; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 9; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 8; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 8; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 7; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 6; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 7.

⁴⁶⁶ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 6; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 7; INT5_GIRL3_16, pp. 7, 10; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 7; INT10_GIRL7_12, p. 9; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 7.

⁴⁶⁷ INT3_GIRL2_13, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁶⁸ INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 8; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 9;

⁴⁶⁹ INT2_GIRL1_16, p. 6; INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 6; INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 9; INT7_GIRL4_11, p. 7; INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 7; INT9_GIRL6_15, p. 7; INT10_GIRL7_12, pp. 5, 10; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 7.

⁴⁷⁰ INT8_GIRL5_11, p. 7.

⁴⁷¹ INT3_GIRL2_13, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁷² INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 9.

⁴⁷³ INT10_GIRL7_12, pp. 5, 8; INT11_GIRL8_17, p. 7.

explicitly for boys, can be an interactive opportunity for boys to learn more about menstruation. According to girl 3, boys should learn more about hormonal effects on the mood of girls so that they can better understand the girls' behaviour and not dismiss it as acting.⁴⁷⁴ Girl 6 agreed that more education for boys would foster better understanding and cause them to make less fun of it. Furthermore, she raised the argument that the pupils might be parents one day and need to be able to pass on the knowledge to their kids.⁴⁷⁵ According to girl 7, boys and men need to know more to be able to better support women (e.g. when they are in pain) and because they might become husbands one day.⁴⁷⁶

Concerning the use of READY FOR RED in school, all experts agreed that it could be used in school, although external trainer 2 would say that only some parts could be done together, like watching a video, and some others more individually at home.⁴⁷⁷ According to the female teacher's idea, the platform could be used as an introduction in school, so that pupils can check what they already know. After the lesson, they could look at it again, so that they can recognize what they have learned. In school, the platform could be used in computer rooms and those who find it too embarrassing can do it at home.⁴⁷⁸

From the side of the target group, girl 2 suggested to make the use of READY FOR RED voluntary at school, but separate boys and girls. Just like the teacher, she finds it a good idea that those who find it too embarrassing can continue at home.⁴⁷⁹ However, girl 3 raised the concern that pupils would not look at it at home and therefore it should be better done in school (e.g. in pairs).⁴⁸⁰ According to teacher 2, it is a challenge that boys need to be encouraged to engage with it seriously and not only making fun of it.⁴⁸¹

The platform already tries to approach the role of religion by having a video where a Muslim woman shared her experiences and explains the prohibition to pray. However, in order to make the platform even more comprehensive, one could offer more content on

⁴⁷⁴ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 8.

⁴⁷⁵ INT9_GIRL6_15, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁷⁶ INT10_GIRL7_12, pp. 5, 8.

⁴⁷⁷ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 9; INT12_TEACH2_F, p.5; INT1_EXT1, p. 9; INT4_EXT2, p. 8.

⁴⁷⁸ INT12_TEACH2_F, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁷⁹ INT3_GIRL2_13, p. 7.

⁴⁸⁰ INT5_GIRL3_16, p. 9.

⁴⁸¹ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 9.

this topic of religious perspective and include also other religions. Teacher 1 wished that READY FOR RED should also include a video about Christianity – discussing conservative Catholic views which he was confronted with – or other religions. In his view, the contribution of religions to the topic of menstruation is not very positive and education should offer an opportunity to discuss these views.⁴⁸²

In addition, teacher 1 suggested to create a game or a smartphone application (app) for it, as many adolescents, also younger girls, are familiar with app use. The game or app could be more linear, meaning one level after the other, where the user can collect points and become something like “menstruation queen” or “-princess” in the end.⁴⁸³

For promoting good education on menstruation or specifically introducing READY FOR RED, it is also helpful to have the headmaster and colleagues on board.⁴⁸⁴

Adding to the question how menstrual education can be improved with READY FOR RED and in general, teacher 1 stated that the platform should be available free of charge and that the school needs a good infrastructure, including availability of computers and good schoolbooks. Menstrual education should be also be discussed outside biology, so that kids can ask other teachers and not only deal with it once a year.⁴⁸⁵ This yielding of responsibility to other subjects and different sides in general was also supported by external trainer 2.⁴⁸⁶

Although many of the girls interviewed – before using READY FOR RED – stated that they would not see the internet as an important source (yet), it is a source that needs some more consideration. Media use not only encompassed actively searching for information, but also being exposed to advertisements and explicit or implicit messages in films, videos or articles. Online content is accessible for many through computers, tablets and smartphones. Many Austrian families have a TV. Different media are also used in school to support teaching. However, the amount of information and offers are immense, and competences are needed to evaluate sources. Whereas READY FOR RED has been

⁴⁸² INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 10.

⁴⁸³ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 10.

⁴⁸⁴ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 13.

⁴⁸⁵ INT6_TEACH1_M, pp. 7-8, 11-12.

⁴⁸⁶ INT4_EXT2, p. 3.

designed by professionals, not all sources fulfil these standards. According to teacher 1, school needs to support children and adolescents in choosing good webpages among all the offers that are available online.⁴⁸⁷ Both external trainer 1 and teacher 2 mentioned the problematic role of ads.⁴⁸⁸ External trainer 1 supports the idea that media competences, for example critically looking at ads, should be trained in different subjects. At the same time, kids need to know how to link these competences to the topic of menstruation.⁴⁸⁹ Teacher 2 pointed out that in society one does not hear much about menstruation, only through ads. She is of the opinion that instead of showing blue liquor, they should show how it really is, use red colour or show how tampons are actually used. A lot of people can be reached through advertisements and the removal of the taboo should start there, e.g. by making a documentary about it (e.g. menstrual huts) or dedicating one episode in a show to menstruation.⁴⁹⁰

Tampon tax, which is also incorporated in READY FOR RED, was addressed once by the female teacher, but the issue of freely available menstrual products in school was addressed by external trainer 2 and teacher 1.⁴⁹¹ However, these issues are complex topics themselves and cannot be discussed in more detail in this thesis.

As an additional idea, girl 3 proposed the creation of public posters stating that there is no need to feel ashamed and promoting normalisation of menstruation. In her view, this would also bring about that people are confronted with the topic more visibly, who would otherwise not think about it much. Furthermore, the platform could be advertised through social media, because many young people use them.⁴⁹²

In summary, the platform was rated mostly positively. Its good design was praised by several interviewees. The appealing combination of games, text, graphics and videos enables interactive learning. READY FOR RED has the potential to be used in school, but also individually at home. Concerning the question of embedding of the topic in

⁴⁸⁷ INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 11.

⁴⁸⁸ INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 8; INT4_EXT2, p. 12.

⁴⁸⁹ INT4_EXT2, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁹⁰ INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 8.

⁴⁹¹ INT12_TEACH2_F, p. 6; INT1_EXT1, p. 5; INT6_TEACH1_M, p. 14.

⁴⁹² INT5_GIRL3_16, pp. 8-10.

biology lessons/sex education, the platform unties menstrual education a bit from these “traditional” locations. It places menstruation as a subject of its own but keeps links to sex education. Children and adolescents can use it independently at home.

Not only does the platform convey scientific knowledge, but also practical knowledge and it contributes to the removal of the taboo. Other aspects like economic, environmental or global issues are also addressed. However, it can still be improved. Content-wise, additional input could be provided concerning other religions, including a discussion of Catholic conservative views. The stories and voice of younger women and girls could be incorporated to improve access to the topic for younger girls, especially before menarche. A translation of the platform could also be discussed. Better involvement of boys was desired and could also be realized through the platform, as it offers tools especially for boys.

The need for further training of teachers was again mentioned, as well as the role of advertisements and outreach of TV and social media. The latter one could be used in favour of spreading READY FOR RED or other positive messages about menstruation.

The evaluation of READY FOR RED, brought together with the general findings of the interviews, build the basis for the following recommendations. Only a combination of the voices of the target group and experts, in addition to the results from the theoretical part, make it possible to formulate useful recommendations for different actors.

6 Recommendations and Conclusion

In order to answer the research question “*How can education on the topic of menstruation in Austria be improved so as to reach more girls and remove the taboo?*”, 13 recommendations can be formulated.⁴⁹³ As they result directly from the findings of Chapter 5, they will be presented first, before the final conclusion completes the thesis. The 13 recommendations are divided into suggestions for schools, developers of READY FOR RED and civil society, the State of Austria as well as corporations.

⁴⁹³ For the complete list of recommendations: see annex 3.

6.1 Recommendations for Schools and Teachers

First, it needs to be recognized that knowledge conveyed during menstrual education should not only be limited to scientific (biological) knowledge, but also cover practical knowledge and contribute to removal of the taboo and shame.

Recommendation 1: Integration into other subjects

In practice, menstrual education is always linked to sex education and therefore embedded in biology lessons. On the one hand, this can be challenging as sex education is a taboo topic itself and exposed to negative reaction from parents due to religious or cultural views. On the other hand, a reduction to biology gives the impression that it is only a biological issue, neglecting stigma as well as social, economic and other factors. Furthermore, it shifts responsibility to one teacher. In line with the holistic concept of menstrual health, the first recommendation is to integrate menstrual education also into other subjects. Consequently, other persons are available if boys and girls have questions. Concrete suggestions include discussing the topic in ethics or religion, through texts in German and other languages, or in geography (issues like menstrual huts). A change of the curriculum is a long-term endeavour and needs political will. As an intermediate solution, individual teachers can be motivated to integrate the topic in their respective curricular. This could be reached through further training for teachers.

Recommendation 2: Further training for teachers

Further training for teachers could address on one hand attitudes and taboos among the teachers themselves, including also male teachers. Their soft skills can be trained so that they can make themselves available as contact persons, if pupils have questions or problems. On the other hand, educational skills could be trained so that teachers are encouraged to integrate menstruation or menstrual health topics into their subjects. Content of the trainings could also cover adequate methodology, as different formats like group work, creative work, different tools (video, games etc.), or projects might help to involve the whole class. Further training for teachers could be on a voluntary basis and provided internally or by external trainers. It could also include training how to use READY FOR RED and sensitize concerning the promotion of reusable menstrual materials. As a result, the school atmosphere and attitudes towards menstruation could be

positively influenced. Exchange among teachers and trainers can promote competences, which are needed for an inclusive education on the topic of menstruation (see next recommendation). In the best case, this kind of training for teachers is supported by headmasters and ultimately by the State in terms of making teachers available for these trainings or funding.

Recommendation 3: Promoting inclusive education but upholding voluntariness

Practical challenges for teachers and external trainers must be taken into account. Possible behaviour of pupils might be shame to speak out and falling silent or uncomfortable giggling. Mockery or bragging to know everything might be further examples. Boys and girls are influenced by their families, including cultural and religious views, conservatism, gender roles etc., as well as by peers and media. Teachers and trainers need an open and non-judgmental attitude, considering the human rights approach. They should be able to talk about menstruation openly and make themselves available for questions. Even though teachers do not have the capacity to talk to every pupil individually, with their attitude and the right choice of tools, inclusive education can be promoted. Participation should always be on a voluntary basis. Even if pupils cannot be “reached”, they might come back to the different perspective offered at a later state. Explaining the relevance of the topic – to boys and girls – might further help to raise pupils’ attention.

External trainers can be a different contact person other than the teacher. As they leave again after the workshop, some pupils might be more open to confide in them. In addition, they might bring along different formats and tools. Under the aspect of inclusiveness, it is therefore recommended to consider the invitation of external trainers. However, some ground rules need to be respected. The invitation of externals should always be done in consultation with the headmaster and parents. The quality of the workshop providers needs to be scrutinized beforehand.

Recommendation 4: Better involvement and education for boys

All interviewees agree with literature that it is crucial to involve boys in menstrual education. The message that menstruation is a women’s issue and boys should not know about it, needs to be countered. Not only in school, but also in general, boys and men

need to be included in the debates around menstrual health and prevailing societal attitudes need to be challenged. At the same time, a better understanding of the processes, needs and hormonal changes in girls and women, paired with general efforts to reduce stigma and taboo might reduce teasing and mockery in school. This has a positive impact on girls' everyday life. Therefore, Recommendation 4 strongly advocates for menstrual education that explicitly also encompasses boys. Teaching styles and method must also be adapted to this target group.

When it comes to the question of separating boys and girls for teaching menstruation, there is no one-size-fits all solution. On the one hand, the teacher or trainer must consider that girls might feel too embarrassed to speak out in front of boys. But on the other hand, boys should be involved as well. In regular lessons there is often not the opportunity to have two groups. In workshops with externals – with two trainers – separation might be an option to create a safe space for girls. In the long run, if efforts to remove the taboo are successful, girls might also feel more comfortable to speak out in front of boys and a separation will be less necessary.

Recommendation 5: Sensitive parent work

Although it was refuted that the extent of the taboo or knowledge gaps depend heavily on migrant or religious background, some views (e.g. conservative ones) still play a role. Negative reactions and refusal from individual parents⁴⁹⁴ in the context of sex education are practical challenges for teachers and external trainers. Communication with parents should be transparent, especially when it comes to external workshop providers. Not neglecting the controversy among the interviewed experts concerning involvement of parents, it is recommended that parent work should be sensitive, respecting different views, but not impeding quality education. Suspending sex education or menstrual education on the assumption that some parents would not approve, is relying on stereotypes and preventing quality education. Dialogue should be sought with these

⁴⁹⁴ Acknowledging that every child is individual, and it depends on the individual family (and *not* general characteristics like migrant background or religion) how menstruation is discussed, generalizations should not be made.

parents to confirm or refute assumptions and find solutions, e.g. by presenting the educational material beforehand or explaining relevance of menstrual education.

Recommendation 6: Building media competences

Mass media such as the TV or social media like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram are powerful influencers. This can bear risks and potentials for menstrual education. Whereas (social) media and advertising can transfer and reinforce negative messages of shame and secrecy, they can at the same time be used strategically to challenge negative attitudes and spread knowledge about reusable products. The school curricular and the “general ordinance” stipulate that Austrian pupils should build media competences, including critical media literacy. These competences could be used in order to, for example, critically discuss the use of blue liquor in advertisements or the (non-)portrayal of menstruation in films or other media.

Recommendation 7: Ensuring a favourable school environment

Not only the content of school education plays a role, but also the general environment of the school: How is the topic of menstruation treated in the school in general? Can pupils talk to teachers? Moreover, the infrastructure of the school needs to be favourable for menstrual education and menstrual health, which includes adequate and clean toilets with bins or availability of menstrual products (not necessarily for free, but for emergency supply or demonstration material). When it comes to menstrual products, schools should also include reusable products and materials in their demonstrations. Other elements of a favourable infrastructure are internet access and computers to allow access to READY FOR RED or other offers. The availability of school practitioners and nurses is a further factor.

6.2 Recommendations for the Developers of READY FOR RED and Civil Society

Based on the evaluation of the platform, the following suggestions are directed at the developers of READY FOR RED. As some of them include references to further (non-State) action, civil society is also addressed as recipients of the recommendation.

Recommendation 8: Using READY FOR RED in school

The online learning platform READY FOR RED promotes menstrual education in an interactive and playful way. It is a helpful and modern offer for the target group of boys and girls between 11-16 years. In order to use the potential of the platform, it can be used in schools to complement school education. As only voluntary use at home might result in some boys and girls simply not using it, it is recommended that pupils actively engage with READY FOR RED in schools, for example together in class or individually in computer rooms. As described in Recommendation 7, the school must provide certain conditions in order to enable adequate use of the platform, including internet access and available computers or tablets. Teachers can be provided with training on how to effectively use and integrate READY FOR RED. In line with Recommendation 1, the use of READY FOR RED should not be limited to biology lessons.

Recommendation 9: Improving the content of READY FOR RED

Although the platform has been evaluated predominantly positively, some improvements can still be made. First, younger speakers can be better integrated in the different tools, so that the target group can better relate to their situation. Second, the efforts of tackling negative religious or conservative views could still be improved. Although one video specifically tells the story of a Muslim woman, the aspect seems to be underrepresented. At the same time, a focus on the religion of Islam is created. It is therefore recommended⁴⁹⁵ to address and discuss also other religious or cultural restrictions and notions (like conservative catholic ones) or present conflicting perspectives, like conservative, liberal or feminist views. The target group of boys should not be neglected.⁴⁹⁶

Recommendation 10: Enhancing outreach of READY FOR RED

Before boys, girls or teachers can use READY FOR RED, they need to know that the project exists. Promotion through individual teachers, headmasters, school nurses as well

⁴⁹⁵ For example in *Level 4*

⁴⁹⁶ READY FOR RED already offers tools specifically for boys but these have not been evaluated yet. As interviews were only conducted with girls and not with boys, no concrete recommendations can be made on how to improve the content for boys. Further research with a focus on boys would be helpful to determine needs of this target group and improve educational offers accordingly.

as social media can help to make the platform more widely known (see also Recommendation 11). However, schools are not the only institutions where the target group can be found. After-school or holiday programmes, youth clubs, sports clubs, learning cafés, residential homes or other institutions also accommodate boys and girls in their daily lives. Cooperation with these institutions can be strengthened in order to further enhance outreach of the platform.

As of now, READY FOR RED is predominantly used in Austria and in fewer cases also in Germany. However, the current version can be advertised even more in Germany as well as for other German-speaking countries or regions, such as Switzerland, Luxembourg, South Tirol or other. In addition, it can be recommended to translate the platform to other languages, if the resources are available. In this way, language barriers within Austria (also with regard to parents) can be overcome and the platform can be “exported” to other countries.

As the platform is not freely available for all, individuals or schools need to be convinced to buy access. As a consequence, some boys and girls as well as schools could be excluded from the use due to financial issues. To ensure access to good menstrual education for all, and to increase outreach of READY FOR RED, use should be free of charge for the target group. It is therefore recommended to raise State or private funding to make READY FOR RED a free offer and thereby more accessible for everyone.⁴⁹⁷

Recommendation 11: Making use of (social) media to promote positive messages

The outreach and influence of mass media can be used to the advantage of menstrual education. For example, the platform READY FOR RED or individual videos can be spread across borders through social media, where many members of the target group spend a lot of time. Even additional tools like a menstruation game or mobile phone application can be developed. Messages and positive advertisements can be spread, or negative ones can be publicly criticized. This can be done by “erbeerwoche”, civil society organisations, corporations or the State. Next to social media, also television is a way to

⁴⁹⁷ In 2019 “erbeerwoche” has launched a special offer to provide institutions and schools free access to READY FOR RED for a certain period of time. However, in the long run, the platform should be provided free of charge in general and without expiration.

reach and educate adults, as the target group of adults is also included in the wide audience of these media. Complementing online content, also offline options like billboards can be carriers of messages and campaigns.

6.3 Recommendations for the State

The human rights analysis has shown that the State as a duty bearer has several obligations relating to the context of menstruation, which also apply to Austria. Therefore, the next recommendation is directed at the Austrian State, picking out specific aspects and practical examples.⁴⁹⁸

Recommendation 12: Creating favourable conditions for menstrual education

Regarding the specific issue of education on menstruation, the State has the obligation to ensure favourable conditions for menstrual education and menstrual health. In fact, many of the recommendations above rely on State support, such as development and improvement of school curricular, provision of good school infrastructure and funding as well as ensuring that teachers can participate in further training.

State action can still improve when it comes to facilitating menstrual education. As explained in Chapter 4.2.1, the State provides a developed framework for sex education, in which menstruation is somehow embedded. However, menstrual education is not directly mentioned. It is therefore recommended that in the next revision of the “general ordinance” or other official documents, menstruation should be featured more prominently and given a higher priority. The State can position itself more clearly in support of better menstrual education, not only sex education in general.

Besides that, one can advocate for a more proactive role of the State. The State can itself initiate or (financially) support projects and campaigns that aim at reducing taboo and stigmatisation or improving education on the topic. It already provides funds for promoting education on specific themes – such as the education fund for health and sustainability (“Bildungsförderungsfonds für Gesundheit und Nachhaltige

⁴⁹⁸ Due to the limited page count, a focus had to be set. Many more recommendations for the State can be formulated.

Entwicklung”).⁴⁹⁹ It is recommended that for these kinds of funds, the State should explicitly call for submissions of projects with a focus on sustainable menstrual materials or promoting menstrual health or other topics in this context. This is just one example how the State could give menstruation a higher priority in projects and policies.

As explained above, the “general ordinance” explicitly calls for the strengthening of pupils’ critical media literacy. This is again an area where the State can become active and put more focus on media competences in relation to education on menstruation.⁵⁰⁰ Again, one way how this can be reached is the promotion of respective projects, a clear official statement or the provision of financial means.

Furthermore, the State plays a role in other issues like taxation or availability of menstrual products.⁵⁰¹ Just like the schools, the State should also include the promotion of reusable menstrual materials on its agenda. Although politization of menstruation can be controversial, it needs to be recognized that political decision makers influence a lot of issues relating to menstruation and education. Sometimes activism from civil society is needed to remind the State of its duties or criticize and improve their actions.

6.4 Recommendations for Corporations

So far, recommendations were only directed at teachers, schools or the State as a duty bearer, next to the developers of READY FOR RED. At this point, also the role and duties of corporations should be scrutinized.

Recommendation 13: Corporate responsibility

The advertising of menstrual products has been discussed several times as a problematic issue. Corporations should therefore take responsibility for the messages they are sending and improve their advertising to contribute to removal of the taboo and shame. When

⁴⁹⁹ Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, *Bildungsförderungsfonds für Gesundheit und Nachhaltige Entwicklung (Umwelt- und Gesundheitsbildungsfonds)*, [website], 2018, <https://bildung.bmbwf.gv.at/schulen/pwi/pa/bildungsfoerderungsfonds.html> (accessed 16 July 2019).

⁵⁰⁰ At the same time, the State must better acknowledge links between different fields, such as sustainability, media competences, health and menstruation and take an interdisciplinary and holistic approach. Beginnings of this are already visible in the “general ordinance”, which sees a connection between sex education and media competences as well as in the fund, which acknowledges interlinkages between health and environment/sustainability.

⁵⁰¹ Issues like tampon tax or provision of free materials cannot be dealt with in more details due to the limited page count. These could be subjects for other papers or research.

companies provide education materials promoting disposable menstrual products, these education materials should also include references to reusable ones. In addition, transparency concerning corporate interests is required from companies. As States are the primary duty bearers and not corporations when it comes to human rights, States can create conditions to remind corporations of their responsibility.

6.5 Conclusion

Recapitulating the content of this academic work, the thesis has first looked at the global level. In the course of analysing menstruation and the menstrual taboo from a human rights perspective, the right to water and hygiene, the right to education as well as gender equality and dignity as underlying concepts have been examined.

It has been shown that the right to affordable, safe and hygienic menstruation materials is included in the human right to water and sanitation. Period poverty and school absenteeism are serious human rights problems. At the root of these issues and many other problems and challenges are the menstrual taboo and stigmatisation. As it is uncomfortable to discuss menstruation in public, the topic is given a low priority on political agendas and in projects. Women around hide their menstruation and feel ashamed and embarrassed. The thesis has given different examples on how human rights of girls and women have been infringed or violated. The indivisibility of human rights and interlinkages between different rights have become apparent. In addition, it has been shown that human rights issues with menstruation cannot only be dismissed as a problem of the low-income countries, but that taboo and shame have serious consequences on women's human rights situation around the world.

States – obligated to respect, protect and fulfil human rights – need to play an active role in this regard. Considering the concept of progressive realization, the analysis has also pointed out concrete State obligations, including inter alia the obligation to provide access to menstrual materials, WASH facilities, adequate menstrual education next to modification of stigma and taboo.

Furthermore, menstrual education is impacted by taboo and low prioritization, which leads to knowledge gaps and unchallenged stereotypes or myths. Serious progress in the

removal of the taboo is needed as well as improvement of menstrual education to foster menstrual health and counter myths, stigma, taboo and knowledge gaps. Especially for girls who experience their first period, practical knowledge is important. Therefore, the thesis has elaborated how adequate menstrual education should look like and what challenges exist. Dedicating a chapter to “men and menstruation” underlines that it is crucial to involve boys and men in the debate and in educational approaches as well.

Breaking the global perspective down to a concrete example, the thesis took an in-depth look at the situation of education on menstruation in Austria, which takes place in biology classes in the context of sex education (sometimes with external trainers). In addition, the evaluation of the online learning platform READY FOR RED was subject of the empirical research. Qualitative interviews were conducted with eight girls between 11-17 years of age, two teachers and two external trainers living in Austria. The results partly confirmed theoretical findings about shame and taboo. They pointed out that practical challenges for education arise from the taboo among children, parents and teachers as well as from individual views influenced by conservatism or religion. At the same time, it was shown that one should refrain from generalizing and assuming negative reactions and attitudes from a particular group, e.g. Muslim parents. The quality of menstrual education should neither suffer from the taboo nor from individual reactions or unconfirmed assumptions.

The evaluation of the online platform READY FOR RED showed that the well-designed interactive platform can be a modern opportunity to promote menstrual education. Its strength and weaknesses have been discussed. Moreover, the interviewees contributed suggestions on how to practically improve menstrual education, discussing amongst others further training of teachers, teaching strategies and division of responsibility.

Answering the research question “*How can education on the topic of menstruation in Austria be improved so as to reach more girls and remove the taboo?*”, 13 recommendations have been presented, summarizing the main points.⁵⁰²

⁵⁰² Although the recommendations were written for Austria, they can also be applied to other countries, when their specific local particularities are taken into account.

Several conclusions can be drawn at the end of the thesis. First, a holistic approach to the topic is needed. As reflected in the concept of menstrual health, menstruation should not be reduced to be a biological issue. Besides dealing with the blood flow and side effects, girls and women in Austria are also confronted with shame, taboo and negative attitudes in their daily lives. Therefore, menstruation needs to be looked at from an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing together considerations of biology, health, sanitation, inclusiveness, gender equality, media influence, sustainability or others.

This must also be reflected in menstrual education: Not only should education convey scientific biological knowledge, but also provide practical knowledge how to handle all aspects of menstrual health. It should furthermore cover media competences and contribute to reducing the taboo and stigma by presenting menstruation as normal. Thus, the topic should not be limited to biology lessons in school. Instead of trying to shift responsibility for teaching this supposedly uncomfortable topic to others, actors should embrace its relevance and interdisciplinary nature. Responsibility should be shared among different actors such as teachers, external trainers, parents as well as others. In fact, when it comes to the realisation of these demands and recommendations regarding menstrual education, the thesis has shown that the different actors have to work together. Next to individual teachers, external trainers and schools, the State must play a proactive role. Besides that, also civil society and corporations need to contribute to promoting adequate menstrual education and removal of the taboo.

It is furthermore important that approaches fit to practical challenges of girls and boys living in Austria and take up their daily experiences. As in current times the use of mobile phones, social media and the internet in general is a normal part of daily lives of teenagers, adequate menstrual education needs to adapt accordingly. Modern initiatives such as the interactive online learning platform READY FOR RED can be contemporary solutions that can complement “classical” school education on menstruation. In the future, these kinds of initiatives should be further developed.

The holistic approach also encompasses that education needs to be inclusive. This means not only to include all girls, but also to address other target groups like boys. Adequate methodology needs to be employed to realize inclusive education. Concerns of parents,

teachers or other groups should not be ignored. Although shaping partnerships with parents or external trainers can be challenging and spark controversy, transparent dialogue is needed to make different perspectives visible and discuss solutions. Despite the limited focus of this research, it should be stressed that in the long run, all genders, generations and sectors of society must be involved in education in order to sustainably remove the taboo and reach social change.

On a positive note, it should be acknowledged that recently there has been a lot of movement on the global level concerning the topic of menstruation and menstrual health. With rising attention on sustainability, also reusable menstrual materials like the menstrual cup, reusable pads or period panties have been more and more produced and promoted. Campaigns to reduce the taboo have been launched all over the world. The Austrian social business “erdbeerwoche” is one of these promoters. Another example is the film “Period. End of Sentence”, which was mentioned at the beginning. As it won the Oscar and is available on Netflix, it has the potential to reach people all over the world. Even some companies have tried to change the image of their advertising. For instance, the British company Bodyform has started using red colour instead of blue, which is a part of their #bloodnormal campaign.⁵⁰³ These examples show, that the development goes in the right direction. Yet, much more effort is needed, especially from the political side, to reach social change and remove longstanding taboo and stigmatisation, which are at the root of many human rights issues.

This thesis could only look at a small section of the issue and only take one country as an example. Also, it mainly focused on school and the target group of girls between 11-17 years. Other educational contexts like peer learning, after-school clubs/youth clubs or medical environments like school nurses have only been mentioned briefly. Therefore, suggestions for follow-up research have been made throughout the text. Especially the question how menstrual education can be improved for boys and how men and boys can be better involved in the debate is worth researching.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰³ Bodyform, *Showing Periods Should Be Normal* | #bloodnormal, [website], <https://www.bodyform.co.uk/our-world/bloodnormal/>, (accessed 29 June 2019).

⁵⁰⁴ It would also be interesting to look at adult education or often excluded groups like intersex or transgender persons.

Modifying societal attitudes is a cumbersome undertaking, but it will be worth it: Through a reduction of the taboo, the practical human rights situation in daily life of a huge number of people could be improved around the world. In Austria and other countries, girls would receive adequate information on menstruation and learn not to feel ashamed. At the same time, they could be more open to ask question, improve their well-being during menstruation and teased less. They would know more about themselves and feel more positive about their bodies, ready to pass on their knowledge to their daughters. On a global level, additionally menstruation could gain higher priority on political agendas. Period poverty and school absenteeism could be reduced or even eliminated. Health issues due to inadequate menstrual materials could be decreased. Reusable pads could be cleaned and dried in the open. Cultural and religious restrictions could be challenged and changed. Pricing and taxation issues could be debated. The list of positive impacts could go on and on, ultimately contributing to more gender equality.

Having started with a quote from the producer of the film “Period. End of Sentence”, another quote from the acceptance speech should conclude the thesis. Director *Zehtabchi* said about her film:

I also want viewers to realize that empowering women worldwide really starts with beginning with opening up the conversation around menstruation. We can implement feminine hygiene, but first we have to break the taboo.⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰⁵ Lawler.

Annex

Annex 1: Interview Questions

I) For Girls

Before showing them READY FOR RED:

- Wie sagst du (und deine Freundinnen) dazu, wenn ihr „eure Tage habt“?
- Wie hast du zum ersten Mal davon erfahren?
- Habt ihr in der Schule darüber gesprochen? Wenn ja, wie?
- Wo hast du sonst Informationen über die Periode, Produkte usw. herbekommen?
- Als du das erste Mal deine Periode bekommen hast, wusstest du, was das ist?
Wenn du noch einmal zurückgehen könntest, was hätte anders gemacht werden sollen?
- Wie sprichst du mit deiner Familie darüber?
- Gibt es bestimmte Traditionen oder Verhaltensregeln?
- Gibt es etwas, dass du während deiner Tage nicht tun darfst?
- Mit wem kannst du darüber reden? Mit wem darfst du nicht darüber reden?
- Wie ist deine Einstellung dazu? Findest du es gut oder schlecht, dass fast alle Frauen jeden Monat ihre Periode bekommen?
- Was für Menstruationsbeschwerden kennst du? Bist du davon betroffen? Hast du schonmal Unterricht verpasst wegen Menstruationsbeschwerden?
- Welche Menstruationsprodukte kennst du? Weißt und wie sie benutzt werden? Weißt du, wie sie richtig entsorgt werden?
- Was meinst du, dass Männer bzw. die Gesellschaft über Frauen denken, die gerade ihre Tage haben? Was ist daran negativ? Was positiv?
- Wenn du einmal eine Tochter hast... was würdest du dir wünschen, wie sie über Menstruation lernt?
- Denkst du, dass es bei deinen Klassenkameradinnen anders ist? Gehen ihre Familien anders damit um?
- Hast du schonmal von “erdbeerwoche” oder dem Projekt “READY FOR RED” gehört?

After they have seen READY FOR RED:

- Wie gefällt dir die Plattform (Assoziationen)?
- Erzähle mir, was du neu gelernt hast.
- Was hat dir am besten gefallen?
- Was hat dir nicht gefallen? Warum?
- Verunsichert dich etwas? (Falls ja: was?)
- Kommt dir etwas komisch vor?
- Ist dir das Thema weniger peinlich, nachdem du die Plattform gesehen hast? Was ist dir unangenehm?
- Gibt es etwas, das du nicht verstanden hast?

- Könnte etwas im Widerspruch zu deiner Kultur/Religion stehen?
- Gibt es eine Frage, die die Plattform nicht beantwortet hat? Fehlt etwas?
- Was würden deine Eltern zur Plattform sagen?
- Findest du, dass es wichtig ist, viel über solche Dinge zu lernen? Wenn ja, welche Argumente könntest du benutzen, um deine Eltern bzw. Leute, die anderer Meinung sind, zu überzeugen?
- Denkst du jetzt anders über die Periode? Hat sich deine Meinung/Einstellung geändert?
- Würdest du die Plattform gerne weiter benutzen? Deinen Freundinnen empfehlen?

II) For External Trainers

Before showing them the platform:

- Erzählen Sie mir zum Einstieg kurz über Ihre Arbeit (in Schulen)?
- Wie wird das Thema Menstruation in Ihren Workshops angesprochen? Wie ist ihr Ansatz?
 - Welche Inhalte werden vermittelt (wird auch auf praktische Dinge sowie Vorurteile eingegangen)?
 - Welche Materialien verwenden Sie?
- Welche Aufgabe hat Schulbildung (von Lehrer*innen oder Externen) zum Thema Menstruation? Was sollte alles abgedeckt werden? Was kann sie nicht leisten?
- Sollte es mehr (Schul-)Bildung zum Thema Menstruation geben?
- Was sind die wichtigsten drei Messages, die bei Schüler*innen ankommen sollten, wenn es um das Thema Menstruation geht?
- Wie kann der Stellenwert des Themas Menstruation im Lehrplan aufgewertet werden?
- Welchen Herausforderungen sehen Sie sich als Sexualpädagog*in gegenüber, wenn Sie im Unterricht über dieses Tabu-Thema reden?
- Wissen Sie, ob SchülerInnen schon einmal den Unterricht verlassen oder ganz ausgelassen haben, weil das Thema angekündigt wurde? (externe Trainer*in?)
- Haben Sie schon einmal Widerstand von Schüler*innen und/oder ihren Eltern erfahren? Wenn ja: Wie sind Sie damit umgegangen?
 - Haben sich Eltern direkt an Sie gewandt? Gab es Konflikte?
- Wie verhalten sich Schüler*innen in der Klasse, die einen anderen religiösen oder kulturellen Hintergrund bzw. konservativere Familien haben? Ist ein Unterschied bemerkbar?
- Kennen Sie “READY FOR RED”?

After they have seen the platform:

- Was sind Stärken und Schwächen?
- Kann die Plattform ein geeignetes Werkzeug für den Unterricht sein? Warum (nicht)?
- Was sollte ein*e Sexualpädagog*in mitbringen, um Unterricht zum Thema Menstruation zu machen, der bei den Schüler*innen ankommt?
- Was wird Ihrer Meinung nach seitens der Schule oder der Politik noch gebraucht, damit Bildung zum Thema Menstruation besser und inklusiver gestaltet werden kann? Was würden Sie sich wünschen?
- Haben Sie Ideen, wie der Unterricht einerseits kulturell sensibel gestaltet werden kann und andererseits keine Abstriche am Inhalt gemacht werden?
- In welche Fächer sollte das Thema noch integriert werden (außer Biologie)?
- Sollten Eltern an Bord geholt werden? Wenn ja, mit welchen Argumenten?
- Würden Sie die Lernplattform einsetzen?

III) For Teachers

Before showing them the platform:

- Welche Fächer unterrichtest du⁵⁰⁶? An welcher Art von Schule?
- Wie sieht Bildung zum Thema Menstruation in deiner Schule aus? (Wie unterrichtest du zu dem Thema?)
 - Habt ihr auch externe Sexualpädagog*innen?
 - Welche Inhalte werden vermittelt (wird auch auf praktische Dinge sowie Vorurteile eingegangen)?
 - Wie bewertest du die Materialien, die zur Verfügung stehen (Lehrbücher, Arbeitsblätter etc.)?
 - Wie sieht die Zusammenarbeit mit den Eltern aus?
 - Trennt ihr Buben und Mädchen?
 - Wie ist es für dich als männlicher Lehrer? Macht es einen Unterschied?
- Wie wird allgemein an deiner Schule mit dem Thema Menstruation umgegangen?
- Wie denkst du, dass die österreichische Gesellschaft mit dem Thema Menstruation umgeht?
- Welche Aufgabe hat Schulbildung zum Thema Menstruation? Was sollte alles abgedeckt werden? Was kann sie nicht leisten?
- Ist der aktuelle Unterricht zum Thema Menstruation ausreichend?
- Was sind die wichtigsten drei Messages, die bei Schüler*innen ankommen sollten, wenn es um das Thema Menstruation geht?
- Wie kann der Stellenwert des Themas Menstruation im Lehrplan aufgewertet werden?

⁵⁰⁶ As one of the teachers offered me the “informal” you (in German: Du), the questions are formulated using this informal pronoun.

- Welchen Herausforderungen siehst du dich als Lehrer*in gegenüber, wenn du im Unterricht über dieses Tabu-Thema reden?
- Weißt du, ob Schüler*innen schon einmal den Unterricht verlassen oder ganz ausgelassen haben, weil das Thema angekündigt wurde? (externe Trainer*innen?)
- Hast du schon einmal Widerstand von Schüler*innen und/oder ihren Eltern erfahren? Wenn ja: Wie bist du damit umgegangen?
 - Haben sich Eltern direkt an dich gewandt? Gab es Konflikte?
- Wie verhalten sich Schüler*innen in der Klasse, die einen anderen religiösen oder kulturellen Hintergrund bzw. konservativere Familien haben? Ist ein Unterschied bemerkbar?
- Gibt es Mistkübel in den Kabinen (bei den Mädchen)? Gibt es ausreichend Toiletten für die Mädchen? Sind diese sauber?
- Kennst du “READY FOR RED”?

After they have seen the platform:

- Was gefällt dir am Projekt? (Was sind Stärken und Schwächen)?
- Kann die Plattform ein geeignetes Werkzeug für den Unterricht sein? Warum (nicht)?
- Gibt es Eigenschaften, die ein Lehrer/ eine Lehrerin mitbringen sollte, um Unterricht zum Thema Menstruation zu machen, der bei den Schüler*innen ankommt?
- Was wird Ihrer Meinung nach seitens der Lehrer*innen noch gebraucht, damit Bildung zum Thema Menstruation besser und inklusiver gestaltet werden kann? Was würdest du dir wünschen?
- Sollte es Fortbildungen für Lehrer*innen geben?
- Hast du Ideen, wie der Unterricht einerseits kulturell sensibel gestaltet werden kann und andererseits keine Abstriche am Inhalt gemacht werden?
- In welche Fächer sollte das Thema noch integriert werden (außer Biologie)?
- Sollten Eltern an Bord geholt werden? Wenn ja, mit welchen Argumenten?
- Würdest du die Lernplattform im Unterricht einsetzen?

Annex 2: List of conducted Interviews

No.	Date	Place	Interviewee	Name for Citation
1	27 March 2019	Vienna	External Trainer 1	INT1_EXT1
2	27 March 2019	Vienna	Girl 1 (16 years)	INT2_GIRL1_16
3	27 March 2019	Vienna	Girl 2 (13 years)	INT3_GIRL2_13
4	28 March 2019	Vienna	External trainer 2	INT4_EXT2
5	04 April 2019	Vienna	Girl 3 (16 years)	INT5_GIRL3_16
6	11 April 2019	Vienna	Teacher 1	INT6_TEACH1_M
7	23 April 2019	Vienna	Girl 4 (11 years)	INT7_GIRL4_11
8	23 April 2019	Vienna	Girl 5 (11 years)	INT8_GIRL5_11
9	29 April 2019	Wolkersdorf	Girl 6 (15 years)	INT9_GIRL6_15
10	29 April 2019	Wolkersdorf	Girl 7 (12 years)	INT10_GIRL7_12
11	29 April 2019	Wolkersdorf	Girl 8 (17 years)	INT11_GIRL8_17
12	29 April 2019	Vienna	Teacher 2	INT12_TEACH2_F
In total: 8 girls (11-17 years) + 2 sex educators + 2 teachers				

Annex 3: List of Recommendations

A) For schools and teachers

Recommendation 1: Integration into other subjects

Recommendation 2: Further training for teachers

Recommendation 3: Promoting inclusive education but upholding voluntariness

Recommendation 4: Better involvement and education for boys

Recommendation 5: Sensitive parent work

Recommendation 6: Building media competences

Recommendation 7: Ensuring a favourable school environment

B) For the developers of READY FOR RED and civil society

Recommendation 8: Using READY FOR RED in school

Recommendation 9: Improving the content of READY FOR RED

Recommendation 10: Enhancing outreach of READY FOR RED

Recommendation 11: Making use of (social) media to promote positive messages

C) For the State

Recommendation 12: Creating favourable conditions for menstrual education

D) For Corporations

Recommendation 13: Corporate responsibility

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Abstract

Menstruation affects approximately half of the world's population for a significant period of their lives. However, as a taboo topic, it is not discussed in public. Women and girls often feel ashamed and want to hide their menstruation. This thesis points out that taboo and stigmatisation have negative consequences on women's human rights: Problems on the global level include period poverty, school absenteeism, exclusion or negative societal attitudes. Analysing these issues from the human rights perspective, especially regarding the right to water and sanitation, education, gender equality and dignity, the thesis identifies comprehensive State obligations. Most importantly, girls and women need access to menstrual materials and adequate education on this topic, as education can contribute to challenging the taboo and closing existing knowledge gaps. Taking Austria as an example, the thesis looks at how education on menstruation can be improved to reach more girls and remove the taboo. Using qualitative interviews with girls, teachers and external trainers, school education is scrutinized and the online learning platform "READY FOR RED" is evaluated as one example for contemporary menstrual education. Based on the results, 13 recommendations are formulated, addressing schools and teachers, developers of "READY FOR RED", the State, and corporations. The main findings are that menstrual education should be inclusive and incorporated into different subjects. Training pupils' media competences and sensitive parent work are also relevant. Additionally, school environments should provide favourable conditions, teachers need further training and corporations should improve their advertising strategies.

Key words: menstruation, taboo, period poverty, (sex) education, gender equality

Abstract in German

Menstruation betrifft etwa die Hälfte der Erdbevölkerung eine wesentliche Zeit ihres Lebens. Als Tabu-Thema wird Menstruation jedoch nicht öffentlich diskutiert. Frauen und Mädchen schämen sich oft dafür und wollen verstecken, dass sie menstruieren. Diese Masterarbeit zeigt auf, dass Tabuisierung und Stigmatisierung negative Auswirkungen auf die Menschenrechte von Frauen haben: Zu den globalen Problemen gehören “period poverty”, Schul-Fehlzeiten, Ausgrenzung oder negative gesellschaftlich Einstellungen. In der Menschenrechts-Analyse, besonders in Bezug auf das Recht auf Wasser und Sanitäreinlagen, Bildung sowie Geschlechtergerechtigkeit und Menschenwürde, identifiziert die Masterarbeit umfangreiche Staatenpflichten. Vor allem wird betont, dass Frauen und Mädchen Zugang zu Menstruationsprodukten und -materialien sowie zu angemessener Bildung zu diesem Thema benötigen. Bildung kann dazu beitragen, Tabus zu hinterfragen und bestehende Wissenslücken zu schließen. Am Beispiel von Österreich wird analysiert, wie Bildung zum Thema Menstruation verbessert werden kann, um mehr Mädchen zu erreichen und das Tabu zu beseitigen. Mit Hilfe von qualitativen Interviews mit Mädchen, Lehrkräften und Sexualpädagoginnen wird Schulbildung genauer beleuchtet und die Online-Lernplattform READY FOR RED als ein Beispiel für zeitgemäße Bildung zu diesem Thema evaluiert. Anhand der Resultate werden 13 Empfehlungen formuliert, die sich an Schulen und Lehrkräfte, Entwickler von READY FOR RED, den Staat und Unternehmen richten. Zu den wichtigsten Erkenntnissen gehört, dass Bildung zum Thema Menstruation inklusiver gestaltet und in verschiedene Fächer integriert werden sollte. Die Förderung von Medienkompetenzen und sensible Elternarbeit sind ebenso relevant. Des Weiteren müssen Schulen gute Rahmenbedingungen bereitstellen und Lehrkräfte benötigen Fortbildungen. Zusätzlich sollten Unternehmen ihre Werbestrategien verbessern.

Schlagwörter: Menstruation, Tabu, Period Poverty, Sexualerziehung, Geschlechtergerechtigkeit