

Sexual and Reproductive Rights on the Flemish Political Agenda

A Case Study of Menstrual Health

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ABSTRACT [ENG]

The uprising of far-right, anti-gender politics in Europe endangers achievements regarding gender equality and women's rights in several of its nation states. A common reaction to this uprising is for other parties to shift their own political programme to the right. The aim of this research is to study whether such an ideological shift has taken place in Flemish politics. More specifically, it wishes to answer the following research question: Which discourses are employed across the Flemish political level to justify the respective parties' standpoints on period poverty in Flanders? A critical discourse analysis was conducted of elite interviews, parliamentary meetings concerning period poverty, and party election programmes. Taking into account the unique discursive elements of each party and the fact that their overall political positions cannot be easily divided between 'the Left' and 'the Right', the findings nevertheless suggest a significant distinction between the four most right-wing parties (Vlaams Belang, N-VA, Open VLD and CD&V) and the three most left-wing parties (PvDA, Vooruit and Groen). The parties in the former group take a communal stance on period poverty that includes several biomedical and neoliberal characteristics consistent with a far-right biopolitical approach to female bodies and thereby reinforcing the anti-gender political aim to reduce gender equality. In contrast, the three most left-wing parties view menstrual health as a basic human right and a symbol of gender equality for which it holds the Flemish government accountable.

Keywords: Menstrual health, period poverty, sexual and reproductive health and rights, anti-gender movement, gender equality, far-right politics, neoliberalism

ABSTRACT [NL]

De opkomst van extreemrechts in Europa brengt reeds verworven gendergelijkheden en vrouwenrechten in gevaar. Een vaak voorkomende reactie van andere partijen op deze opkomst is een verrechtsing van de eigen politieke agenda. Deze thesis beoogt te onderzoeken of dergelijke verrechtsing heeft plaatsgevonden in Vlaanderen. In het bijzonder, wenst het de volgende onderzoeksvraag te beantwoorden: Welke discourses worden gehandhaafd op Vlaams politiek niveau om de standpunten van de respectievelijke partijen omtrent menstruatiermoede te verantwoorden? Een critical discourse analysis van verschillende databronnen werd uitgevoerd, meer bepaald van elite interviews, parlementaire vergaderingen en verkiezingsprogramma's. Rekening houdend met unieke elementen in het discours van iedere partij en de onmogelijkheid om hun algemene politieke agenda te verdelen over 'Links' en 'Rechts', kon er toch een duidelijk onderscheid worden gemaakt tussen de vier meest rechtse partijen (Vlaams Belang, N-VA, Open VLD en CD&V) en de drie meest linkse partijen (PvDA, Vooruit en Groen). Het gedeelde standpunt van de partijen uit de eerste groep bevatte biomedische en neoliberalistische kenmerken consistent met een extreemrechtse en biopolitieke benadering van het vrouwelijk lichaam die het doel van de anti-gender beweging om gendergelijkheid terug te schroeven versterkt. Daartegenover zagen de drie meest linkse partijen menstruele gezondheid als een basisrecht en een teken van gendergelijkheid, waar ze de Vlaamse regering uiterst verantwoordelijk voor achten.

Sleutelwoorden: Menstruele gezondheid, menstruatie armoede, seksuele en reproductieve gezondheid en rechten, anti-gender beweging, extreem-rechts, neoliberalisme

If Men Could Menstruate?

What would happen if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate and women could not?

The answer is clear.

Menstruation would become an enviable, boastworthy, masculine event:

Men would brag about how long and how much.

Boys would mark the onset of menses, that longed-for proof of manhood, with religious rituals and stag parties.

Congress would fund a National Institute of Dysmenorrhea to help stamp out monthly discomforts.

Sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free.

Military men, right-wing politicians, and religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation ("men-struation") as proof that only men could serve in the Army ("you have to give blood to take blood"), occupy political office ("can women be aggressive without that steadfast cycle governed by the planet Mars?"), be priests and ministers ("how could a woman give her blood for our sins?"), or rabbis ("without the monthly loss of impurities, women remain unclean").

[...]

In fact, if men could menstruate, the power justifications could probably go on forever.

If we let them.

- *Gloria Steinem (1978)*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The uprising of the far-right in Europe endangers the achievements regarding gender equality and women's rights in several of its nation states (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Verloo, 2018). A common reaction is for other parties to shift their own political programme to the right (Erel, 2018; Yilmaz, 2012). The aim of this dissertation is to study whether such an ideological shift has taken place in Flemish politics. Since research has found that studying a single gender equality issue rather than gender equality in general might be more effective to uncover political opposition, this thesis will specifically focus on menstrual health (Berqvist et al., 2018). The selection of this topic is based on three scientific knowledge gaps. First, when the effect of far-right politics has been studied in relation to sexual and reproductive rights, it was mostly concerning abortion legislation (see Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020; Cabezas, 2021; Lovenduski, 2022; Möser et al., 2022). Whilst this is an important issue that should be addressed at length, it only impacts a small group of women. The right to menstrual health, rather, has an effect on all women and minority genders who menstruate. Second, Daly (2020) rightfully notes that when progress in gender equality arises, it is often for (financially) privileged white women. Period poverty, which can be understood as the "lack of access to menstrual products, hygiene facilities, waste management, and education" (Michel et al., 2022: 1), instead is an issue mainly prevalent in financially precarious communities (Haneman, 2021). Third, the Global South has long been the focal point of research on menstrual health (Elledge et al., 2018; Rossouw & Ross, 2021; Soeiro et al., 2021). However, in 2015 attention shifted towards Europe and the USA (Bobel, 2015). Studies revealed that in high-income European countries, girls experienced period poverty as well (Caritas, 2020; Plan International, 2019; Plan International UK, 2018). Although this shift has led to more menstrual health studies conducted in the Global North, most have been on the impact of period poverty on menstruators' well-being or concerned menstrual health activism (see Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Dave et al., 2022; Sommer et al., 2016). Political antecedents are rarely considered (Crawford & Waldman, 2021). One of the recent studies on menstrual health in the Global North researched the prevalence of period poverty among Flemish girls between 12 and 24 years old (Caritas, 2020). Its results led to the topic receiving notable public and political attention in Flanders. Until today, however, no further policy actions or governmental interventions have been taken on a political level.

This dissertation will attempt to bridge the aforementioned scientific knowledge gaps. Through critical discourse analysis of elite interviews, parliamentary meetings and election programmes, the study wishes

to answer the following main research question: Which discourses are employed across the Flemish political level to justify the respective parties' standpoints on period poverty in Flanders? More specifically, it will examine whether the discourse used by the far-right party, Vlaams Belang, is similar to the one of the broader far-right, anti-gender movement in Europe (Foucault, 1976; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). By analysing the entire political spectrum, the thesis aims to research whether other political parties make use of a similar discourse as Vlaams Belang, potentially referring to an overall ideological shift to the right (Erel, 2018; Yilmaz, 2012). Finally, it will look for additional discourses, such as the human rights discourse frequently used in literature and activism (see Sommer, et al., 2015; Sommer et al., 2021; Rossouw & Ross, 2021).

This master's thesis will start with a theoretical framework in which the existing literature on far-right, anti-genderist ideology and menstrual health are outlined in detail. It will then continue with an overview of EU policy recommendations towards its nation states regarding menstrual health. This is followed by a detailed case description of Belgium and Flanders, including their far-right landscape, latest developments regarding menstrual health and their political structure. After this, it will elaborate on the research methodology and the reasoning behind the chosen data analysis method, critical discourse analysis. Thereafter, an extensive section on the research findings analyses the discursive characteristics of each party's position. This dissertation concludes with the study's limitations, future recommendations and an overall discussion of the findings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Anti-Gender Politics in the European Union

The European Union (EU) and its institutions have prided themselves on being long-term promoters of gender equality (Ahrens et al., 2022; Hertner, 2021). However, the so-called 'gender equality regime' of the EU and its member states, a regime that emphasizes the relevance of (inter)national gender equality policies, has come under strain in recent years because of the Eurozone, refugee and COVID crises, far-right populist risings and Brexit (Hertner, 2021; von Wahl, 2021; Walby, 2004). Hertner (2021) states these crises "have exacerbated existing structural and cultural problems, leading to cost-cutting, democratic backsliding (alongside anti-gender equality discourses), downgrading, and even dismantling certain aspects of the existing gender equality architecture" (p. 512). The polycrisis has taken attention away from (gender) equality and democracy, and has shifted it towards a restructured EU characterized by increased authoritarianism, austerity policies and neoliberal crisis management (Cincu, 2017; Guerrina et al., 2022; MacRae et al., 2021).

This political climate proves to be effective for grassroots and political movements that hold a strong far-right anti-genderist ideology (Hertner, 2021; Sauer, 2020). Through masculine identity politics, such movements frame the increased social and economic inequality as a 'crisis of masculinity' caused by a gender ideology that is being promoted by corrupt neoliberal elites and totalitarian feminist- and gay-led movements (Erel, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Möser et al., 2022; Sauer, 2020). Their struggle against this so-called gender ideology is strategically used to legitimize backward reform of LGBTQI+ rights, women's rights, and sex and gender education (Erel, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Kane, 2018; Möser et al., 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). For instance, by frequently referring to outcomes of science and 'human ecology', they aim to promote heteronormativity and gender binarity (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Gender is thus used as an "empty signifier" (Laclau, 1996, as cited in Sauer, 2020: 34) to achieve gender inequality and an anti-democracy.

The term 'gender ideology' was used by the Vatican to condemn the outcome of the 1994 United Nations (UN) conference in Cairo, which put the importance of sexual and reproductive rights on the international agenda (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Today, it is no longer solely used by the Catholic church but instead became part of the discourse of a transnational and globally funded anti-gender movement (Datta, 2018;

Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). In this movement, one can distinguish two main forces: the far-right, extreme right and populist radical rights and organized religion (especially the Roman Catholic church) (Verloo, 2018). The first anti-gender demonstration in Europe was the protest against same-sex marriage legislation of the Zapatero government in Spain in 2004 (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). However, the 'Manif pour Tous' movement in France in 2012 (also protesting same-sex marriage legislation) led to an accelerated prevalence across the continent.

In 2013, the ultra-conservative and religious project 'Restoring the Natural Order: an Agenda for Europe' was established, with the primary purpose of rolling back sexual and reproductive rights in Europe (European Parliamentary Forum, 2018). This resulted in a quadrupling of the funding aimed at overturning laws regarding sexual and reproductive health in Europe between 2009 and 2018 (Datta, 2021). The movement consists of more than 100 anti-women's and anti-LGBTQI+'s rights groups and is funded by various Russian oligarchs, US Christian Right organizations and European anti-gender movements. They have been the force behind several proposals to abolish women's rights, including the 2016 bill to ban abortion in Poland and the prevention of ratifying the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria (European Parliamentary Forum, 2018; UN Human Rights, 2019).

By inducing fear of 'the other', far-right and anti-gender movements aim to push their own political agenda as the solution to current socio-political and economic issues (Möser et al., 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). This 'other' includes migrants, LGBTQI+ communities, Muslims, but also women. Consequently, "the 'we,' emerging in these right-wing antagonisms, is a homogenous, morally pure, and ethnicised people" (Mudde, 2004, as cited in Sauer, 2020). Women of colour living in poverty are the ultimate scapegoat because of their gender, ethnicity, religion and class (Steiner, 2017). Not surprisingly, they are also the group most at risk to experience period poverty and bad menstrual health (Cardoso et al., 2021).

Gender and policy have an important impact on one another (Hearn & McKie, 2008). Policies are decided upon by governmental institutions still largely consisting of middle- to upper-class white, cis-gender, heterosexual men (Gains & Annesley, 2013). According to Connell, "the state is historically patriarchal, patriarchal as a matter of concrete social practices. State structures in recent history institutionalize the European equation between authority and a dominating masculinity; they are effectively controlled by men; and they operate with a massive bias towards heterosexual men's interests" (1990: 535). Anti-

genderism has been found to be a widespread phenomenon in this “capitalist patriarchy” (Eisenstein, 1979, as cited in Dietze & Roth, 2020: 10), where “men's overall social supremacy is embedded in face-to-face settings such as the family and the workplace, generated by the functioning of the economy, reproduced over time by the normal operation of schools, media, and churches” (Connell, 1990: 514). Family thus plays an essential role as it has the responsibility to maintain a social order based on clearly defined gender roles (Erel, 2018; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2014). More specifically, a family should be a heterosexual household led by a patriarch who prioritizes providing for and protecting his children. Such indirect interventions allow the state to appear gender-neutral, positively impacting their claim of legitimacy. However, in reality, they produce and reproduce what it means to be a (wo)man through gendered state policies and structures. Additionally, anti-gender movements politicize the neoliberal critique on human rights movements and the welfare state, directed towards capitalism and individual responsibility (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Sauer, 2020). Hence, the rise of far-right ideologies in our already neoliberal and patriarchal society during times of economic recession and increased social inequality could challenge policy making directed towards gender equality, and thus also on menstrual health.

2.2 The Right to Menstrual Health

The first term used to increase attention to menstrual health was Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF during their Joint Monitoring Programme for drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH; Consultation on draft long list of goal, target and indicator options for future global monitoring of water, sanitation and hygiene, 2012). According to these institutions, good MHM means that “women and adolescent girls are using a *clean* menstrual management material to absorb or collect blood that can be changed in *privacy* as often as necessary for the duration of the menstruation period, using *soap and water for washing* the body as required, and having access to *facilities to dispose* of used menstrual management materials” (p. 16, italics added). However, after research found that a sole focus on hygiene negates the existence of social, cultural and religious taboos regarding menstruation and prevents a more holistic approach to gender discrimination and inequality, ‘Menstrual Health and Hygiene’ (MHH) was suggested as an alternative term (McLaren & Padhee, 2021; Sommer et al., 2015). MHH allows for a broader overview of factors impacting menstruators including access to clear *information* and the *systemic factors* that connect menstruation with healthcare, gender equality and empowerment (Sommer, et al., 2015; Sommer et al., 2021; Rossouw & Ross, 2021). For reasons of clarity and consistency, the general term ‘menstrual health’ will be used throughout this dissertation. Additionally, ‘period poverty’, which can be defined as the “lack of access to

menstrual products, hygiene facilities, waste management, and education” (Michel et al., 2022: 1), is frequently used by activists and scholars in Europe alike (Weiss-Wolf, 2020). Importantly, whilst menstrual health is the overarching term (including other problems such as endometriosis), period poverty refers to not having the products, information or infrastructure needed for a safe and clean menstruation.

One of the aspects said to cause period poverty is menstruators’ dependency on private companies due to the Western consumer society and the consequent commodification of menstrual products (van Eerdewijk, 2001; Winkler, 2020; Wood, 2020). Especially for lower-class people who struggle financially, this could mean deciding between food and menstrual products on a monthly basis (Dave et al., 2022; Vora, 2020). Menstruators experiencing period poverty find themselves in a double stigmatized position inducing shame about both menstruation and poverty (Caritas, 2020; Michel et al., 2022; Vora, 2020). Additionally, using unhygienic alternatives because of the lack of right menstrual products can lead to several physical health risks, such as reproductive and urinary tract infections and the Toxic Shock Syndrome (Enright, 2019; Sumpter & Torondel, 2013). Thus, period poverty can have a detrimental impact on menstruators’ physical, social and mental well-being.

Several international institutions such as the United Nations have stated that menstrual health, and more broadly sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), should be understood as a human right (Hennegan, 2017; McLaren & Padhee, 2021). This approach gained global significance during the 1994 United Nations (UN) conference on Population and Development in Cairo, shifting attention towards individual health and needs (van Eerdewijk, 2001; Yilmaz & Willis, 2020). In line with the third and fifth Sustainable Development Goals, respectively ‘healthy lives and wellbeing for all at all ages’ and ‘gender equality’, sexual and reproductive health is defined by the UN as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being in all matters relating to the reproductive system. It implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life, the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so” (UNFPA, 2022; United Nations, n.d.). This implies a holistic governmental approach, ensuring not only reactive services for a better sexual and reproductive health, but also tackling higher-level social factors aimed towards prevention (Yilmaz & Willis, 2020).

Regarding said actions toward prevention, the United Nations has stated that “the stigma and shame generated by stereotypes around menstruation have severe impacts on all aspects of women’s and girls’ human rights, including their human rights to equality, health, housing, water, sanitation, education,

freedom of religion or belief, safe and healthy working conditions, and to take part in cultural life and public life without discrimination” (United Nations, 2019). Hence, although menstrual health is not a separate human right as established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is intrinsically part of many others which are part of legally binding international treaties (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 2022). For instance, the right to the highest attainable standard of health demands a gendered approach encompassing “the removal of all barriers interfering with access to health services, education and information, including in the area of sexual and reproductive health” (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2000: 8).

In 2021, the Human Rights Council (HRC) adopted a resolution on menstrual health, human rights and gender equality, which included an elaboration of what the right to health means in relation to menstrual health: “Access to medical care and medicines to identify and treat menstruation-related health issues or pain, and to information relating to menstrual hygiene management, expressing concern at the adverse effect of the health issues relating to menstrual hygiene, and the lack of access to appropriate information and treatment in this regard [...] Mindful that the silence, stigma, misconceptions and taboos around menstruation, the lack of adequate access to menstrual hygiene products or to medical care and medicines to identify and treat health issues relating to menstrual hygiene, and the absence of appropriate information and education on menstrual hygiene management undermine the dignity, rights and well-being of women and girls, and constitute therefore an obstacle to the achievement of gender equality” (Human Rights Council, 2021: 2). Further, the right to education and the right to work are compromised when menstruators are absent due to fear of leakage, pain, discrimination and shame, lack of menstrual products or hygienic and private sanitation facilities (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 2022). The latter is in its turn related to the human right to water and sanitation (General Assembly, 2010).

The 2021 HRC resolution proposes several guidelines to its member states as to improve menstrual health, including access to sanitation facilities in private and public, economic support to them who cannot afford menstrual hygiene products, a choice of products that are culturally sensitive and environmentally friendly, free access to healthcare services and medicine, awareness-raising campaigns to tackle stigma and shame surrounding menstruation and to include menstrual health in relevant national policies (Human Rights Council, 2021).

Following this meeting of the Human Rights Council, the World Health Organisation called for three actions from nation states (WHO Statement on menstrual health and rights, 2022). First, the recognition of menstruation as a physical, psychological and social health issue. Second, menstruators are educated and informed and have access to the necessary products, facilities, care, and a positive environment that does not see menstruation as shameful but instead encourages full participation in work and social activities. Third, these activities are measured and included in budget plans. Importantly, it stresses that “governments could and should do more than improve access to menstrual products. They should make schools, workplaces and public institutions supportive of managing menstruation with comfort and dignity. More importantly, they should normalize menstruation and break the silence around it” (WHO statement on menstrual health and rights, 2022). Hence, menstrual health is essential for menstruators in order to live a healthy and dignified life.

Based on these findings, the current thesis assumes that political parties striving towards more governmental interventions regarding period poverty will likely employ a human rights approach to justify their standpoints. In contrast, since the far-right uprising in Europe could have led to an overall shift to the right, opponents might rely on discursive characteristics similar to the ones used by the European far-right, anti-gender movement to justify backward reform of sexual and reproductive rights.

2.3 The Political Control of Female Bodies

Women can be perceived as a threat to the patriarchal, far-right and anti-genderist agenda (Erel, 2018). This threat can be restrained through biomedical and biopolitical control of the rights to female bodies, including menstrual health and the related shame and discrimination still present on both a societal and interpersonal level.

2.3.1 Biomedicalization

Biomedicalization is a Western hegemonic discourse that conceives processes typical to the biological female body, such as menstruation, as pathologically deviant and consequently disregards the individual’s experience (Blázquez Rodríguez, 2021; van Eerdewijk 2001). It justifies the control of female bodies by doctors and other health professionals whilst simultaneously making them dependent on external profit-seeking actors (van Eerdewijk, 2001; Wood, 2020). In the case of menstruation, the latter is shown by the primary advertising of disposable menstrual products such as tampons and pads as opposed to, for instance, sustainable menstrual cups or washable underwear (Koskenniemi, 2021). Important to note

here is that such sustainable alternatives are affordable to middle- and high-class menstruators whilst they could be too expensive for those with less financial means (Divakar et al., 2020).

From the first advertisements for sanitary towels and tampons in the 1920s, menstruation has been depicted as shameful and horrifying (Enright, 2019). Up until today, advertisements maintain the image of menstruation as something dirty that should remain invisible by centering the need to be discrete and prevent leakage and odours, even though perfume-induced menstrual products can disturb the natural balance of one's vaginal area (Koskenniemi, 2021; Wood, 2020).¹ The global feminine hygiene industry continues to grow because increasingly more menstruators from developing countries are able to buy the products (RoSa, 2020). In other words, throughout the years, more and more menstruators became dependent on big corporations of this extremely profitable industry and the shaming narrative it continues to hold (Enright, 2019). Moreover, many of the menstrual pads and tampons sold, contain chemicals such as carcinogens and reproductive toxins that might be 'safe' when applied on regular skin but can lead to several health risks, such as cancer or hormone disruption, when applied on or in the absorbent vaginal area (Women's voices for the Earth, 2013). The fact that it is not obligated for companies to mention these components on the product's packaging makes it nearly impossible for menstruators to find a safe alternative (RoSa, 2020).

The removal of Rupi Kaur's blood-stained pictures from Instagram in 2015 is another example of the misogynist narrative on menstrual bleeding (Bobel et al., 2020). Houppert (1999) calls this emphasis on secrecy and its impact on menstrual shame 'the culture of concealment'. The internalization of this 'culture of concealment' by menstruators is a gendered body political strategy aimed at their oppression and social control. According to Macdonald (2007), it suggests that "women are not men, cannot be men, and as so cannot exist in the world as men do" (p. 348). Hence, even though menstruation is a private process, the abovementioned factors make it both public and political.

In addition, biomedicalization reduces menstruation to the female body, however there are women who do not menstruate, and transgender men and non-binary people who do (Bobel, 2010; Guilló-Arakistain, 2020; Wood, 2020). Consequently, it constructs a dichotomous and heteronormative understanding of gender, very much in line with the far-right, anti-genderist agenda (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020;

¹ For some examples of menstrual product advertisements, see appendix 2

Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Feminist scholars and activists have proposed moving away from this essentialist and naturalistic approach to the human body and recognize the impact of the social, political and cultural context (Harcourt, 2009). For these reasons, I use the term ‘menstruators’ instead of ‘women who menstruate’ throughout the dissertation.

2.3.2 Body Politics

Biomedicalization can be seen through the lens of body politics. Body politics refers to the operations of power instances aimed at regulating and controlling the human body, often discriminating against bodies that transgress cultural, social, sexual, and/or political normative boundaries (e.g. transgender, female, homosexual) (Brown & Gershon, 2017; DiPalma, 2002). This relation between body and power was first discussed by thinkers such as Marx and Foucault (Brown & Gershon, 2017). Marx stressed the importance of the labourer’s body (more specifically his labour power) to achieve the rise of the proletariat in society (Marx et al., 1848). Foucault (1976) introduced the term biopolitics to describe the way modern Western power systems target the human body as their object of administration and control (Harcourt, 2009; Parchev, 2014). They aim to control the population at “the level of life itself” which has led to the bodies equated with reproduction, mainly considered to be women’s bodies, becoming targets for governmental intervention (Foucault et al., 2009, as cited in Alavi, 2021). Biopower, also coined by Foucault, refers to the (re)production of this discourse through everyday power relations making it seem as a given rather than a social construct (Harcourt, 2009).

2.3.3 Biopolitics and Biopower

Far-right and anti-gender organisations aim to politically control both the individual body (i.e. anatomo-politics) and the wider human population (i.e. biopolitics) (Foucault, 1976; Senellart et al., 2008). Foucault primarily addresses the biopolitics of sexuality, prevalent in the nineteenth century, arguing its ability to connect the control of individual bodies with the life of the entire human species through a focus on reproduction (Repo, 2013). Thus, heteronormativity is the “way of organizing knowledge regarding human reproduction, labour, pleasure, mental health, and so forth” (McWhorter, 2004: 40).

Repo (2015) builds upon Foucault’s biopolitics of sexuality and offers ‘gender’ as today’s alternative of biopolitical state control. Her genealogy of gender traces the concept back to its medical use during the study of intersex children with ambiguous genitalia by Money, Hampson and Hampson in 1955 (Bogle, 2018). They found that psychological sex (i.e. one’s gender, which includes one’s thoughts and behaviours)

cannot be predicted by biological factors (i.e. one's biological sex), but can be learned through processes of conditioning. Thus, "gender was born in the clinic to discipline the reproduction of life in new ways. The truth of sex was no longer found in the genitals or mind, but in the contingent cognitive processes of a behavioural control system [...] all to ensure that children were socialized into normative gender roles guaranteeing the continued reproduction of the life of the species" (Repo, 2013: 24). In order to "discipline nonconforming bodies into socially acceptable binaries", one's family played an important role in upholding the apparatus of biopower through normalization of gender roles and correcting 'wrong' behaviour (Bogle, 2018; Deller, 2016). Indeed, just as the far-right, anti-genderist movement today, biopolitical discourse in the 20th century used the nuclear family as a way to reproduce strict gender roles throughout society (Erel, 2018; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2014). This sexual and social order reproduced and operationalized by sex and gender was necessary in the chaotic aftermath of the Second World War in liberal, Western society (Repo, 2015). Since the polycrisis of previous years has led to chaos in its own manner, one could argue a similar heteropatriarchal order is now desired and conveyed by anti-gender campaigns.

Important to note is that Repo's biopolitics of gender puts into question the frequent use of the concept by feminist gender theory as an argument against biological determinism. One could argue that "feminism and liberalism are entangled in a common genealogy of biopower" (Repo, 2015, as cited in Deller, 2016). A biopower that is "steeped in physically and psychologically violent normalization projects that served to enforce male/female binaries and to support a historically specific post-war liberal democratic social-economic structure" (Bogle, 2018). Since 'gender' is abundantly used by Western institutions, political parties, feminist grassroots initiatives and scholars when addressing equality issues, this critique is important to keep in mind throughout the dissertation (Repo, 2015). This thesis tries to be conscious of the biopolitical origin of 'gender' by making a distinction between 'women' and 'menstruators'. Additionally, gender is understood as a social construct of which the alleged 'correct and objective' expression is determined by the dominant power structure (Butler, 1990). Responding to the critique of Repo on the feminist use of 'gender', Tazzioli refers to several theories and writers that argue against a universal use of 'gender' or 'woman' and instead propose to focus on specific conditions and practices (Mohanty, 2003; Tazzioli, 2016). Intersectionality theory, for instance, "has historically represented a concrete way of de-essentializing gender, positing it as inherently entangled with racial and class issues" (Tazzioli, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991).

In sum, biomedicalization, gendered body politics and biopolitics all contribute to the pathologizing and control of the female body and its processes, such as menstruation. Since the second-wave feminist movement in the 1970s, this issue has been addressed by several activists and scholars connecting movements on women's health (importance of safety and health during menstruation), the environment (more sustainable menstrual products), and against a capitalist consumer society (against the provider-dependency of menstruators) (Bobel, 2010; Jieun, 2019; Winkler, 2020). The academic field, called critical menstruation studies, uses menstruation as the primary point of analysis to study how power relations and knowledge frameworks are established in the current political and societal approach to menstruation. Next, this thesis will elaborate on the European, Belgian and Flemish political context related to menstrual health.

3. CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Menstrual Health in the European Union

The 2019 European Parliament resolution on gender equality and taxation policies in the European Union issued a call towards its member states to lift all taxes on menstrual products in order to make them more affordable (European Parliament, 2019). The resolution also encouraged states to provide menstrual products in public spaces such as schools and homeless shelters, and to women from a less advantaged background “with the aim of eradicating period poverty completely across EU public bathrooms”. Concrete national practices include better and safer facilities for changing and cleaning menstrual products, free sanitary products (e.g. Scotland offers tampons and menstrual pads in certain public spaces since 2020; France and UK offer free menstrual products in schools since 2021 and 2022 respectively), improvement of menstrual education, strategies to lower menstrual taboo and shame, and introducing menstrual leave in the professional sphere (e.g. implemented in Spain since 2022) (France 24, 2021; UK Government, 2022; Trio, 2020; The unsanitary truth about period poverty and how governments are fighting back, 2022; Patten, 2022). Nevertheless, and I argue partially due to gender equality becoming a topic of clear polarization in politics, many countries have not yet implemented said recommendations.

3.2 Menstrual Health in Belgium

3.2.1 Anti-Gender politics

According to extensive research by Paternotte and Kuhar in 2017, anti-gender campaigns were unable to gain popularity in Belgium. This was mainly caused by the linguistic, religious and nationalist distinction between its two main regions: Flanders and Wallonia. In addition to Flanders scoring higher on religiosity and nationalism, it is also the only region in Belgium with a populist right-wing political party, Vlaams Belang. However, Vlaams Belang has adjusted itself significantly since 2017. With Tom Van Grieken becoming the youngest party president in history after the 2014 elections, the party went through a rejuvenation and increased its social media presence (Sokol, 2019). In 2019, it became the second biggest party in Flanders (De Jonge, 2021) and the third biggest party on a federal level (De Kamer, 2023). A recent poll on the population’s political preference showed that around 25% would vote for Vlaams Belang in the upcoming 2024 elections, possibly making it the new dominant party in Flanders (Arnoudt, 2023). Their focus on ‘gender ideology’ has also increased throughout the past five years. In the election

programme of 2019, the party already suggested that gender studies should receive significantly less funding because it provides no added value to society (Vlaams Belang, 2019). Moreover, their website has published several opinion pieces criticizing the ‘woke madness’ and ‘gender ideology’ of today (Vlaams Belang, 2021; Vlaams Belang, 2022a; Vlaams Belang, 2022b). This evolution increases the likelihood of finding far-right, anti-gender discursive characteristics in the party’s justification of its standpoint on period poverty.

3.2.2 Menstrual Health Policy

Women in Belgium have a significantly higher risk of falling into poverty than men, making menstrual health and period poverty important topics to be tackled on a structural level (StatBel, 2019). However, to date no Belgian legislation exists that specifies one’s right to menstrual health (Belgisch Staatsblad, n.d.). Some legal adaptations and actions have been implemented which are related to menstrual health, though not up to the standard that the European Parliament has proposed (European Parliament, 2019). Attention to menstrual health has risen in the public and political space after research conducted by Caritas, a Christian non-profit organization fighting poverty (Caritas, 2020). Its study found that 12% of Flemish girls between the age of 12 and 24 years old have experienced the inability to pay for menstrual products (Caritas, 2020). This increased up to 45% when specifically girls living in poverty were considered. Consequences were school absenteeism, skipping hobbies, using unhealthy alternatives such as tissues, experiencing stress and anxiety for leakages, and continued birth control intake because it is cheaper than buying menstrual products. Based on these results, Caritas proposed five policy recommendations: (1) increase resources for public welfare organisations, (2) offer free menstrual products in secondary schools (cost estimate of 9,5 million euro per year if offered through menstrual product dispensers), (3) abolish taxes for menstrual products, (4) ensure complete reimbursement of these products through social security, and (5) increase incomes and benefits so they transcend the European poverty line.

Following Caritas’ study, some actions were taken on a national level. First, the Belgian Minister of Retirement and Societal Integration who is also responsible for poverty reduction, Karine Lalieux, invested 200.000 euro in several pilot projects on period poverty across Belgium in 2020 (Vrouwenraad, 2020). In Flanders, this resulted in 15 projects being funded that focused on menstrual education, sensibilization, communication and/or product distribution. Second, Minister Lalieux made 285.000 tampons and menstrual pads freely available to female prisoners in 2022 (Lalieux, 2022). According to her, “whether on the job, at school or in prison, women should be able to protect themselves during menstruation and

be able to live a dignified life. Access to menstrual products is a basic need, not a luxury or something vain. For a woman, menstruating is completely normal and still it remains a source of shame for some. Due to a lack of effective protection, they become isolated” (Lalieux, 2022). On a Flemish political level, in contrast, no alterations have been made to legislation and/or political funding related to menstrual health. Below is an overview of the policy proposals and parliamentary debates on the topic in Belgium and Flanders.

A search across the database of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives resulted in 23 documents including ‘menstruation’ over the past 20 years (De Kamer, 2023). Only four documents were relevant to menstrual health, others were about pregnancy, certain pathologies that led to the stopping of menstruation, transgender legislation, etc. Two of the four relevant ones were resolutions by the Walloon (PS) and Flemish (Vooruit) social-democratic parties in 2016, directed towards tax reduction for menstrual products. The result was the Royal Decree of 10th of December 2017 decreasing the so-called ‘tampon tax’ from 21% (for luxury goods) to 6% (Belgisch Staatsblad, 2017). The other two documents were resolutions calling for the free availability of menstrual products and were submitted by the Walloon social-democratic party in September 2020 and by the Walloon (Ecolo) and Flemish (Groen) ecological parties in June 2021 respectively. Both are still being held under consideration by the Belgian Parliament (De Kamer, 2020; De Kamer, 2021).

A search across the Flemish Parliament’s database of the topic of menstruation over the past 20 years led to 40 results (Vlaams Parlement, 2023a). Whilst most were about pregnancy, birth control, transgender rights and general educational planning, ten were focussed on the topic of menstrual health. From the end of 2020 onwards (so after Caritas’ study was published), a total of eleven questions were raised by the Marxist (PvDA), social-democratic (Vooruit) and ecological (Groen) parties to the respective ministers of Education (N-VA); Well-Being, Health, Family and Poverty reduction (CD&V); and Domestic Governance, Equal Opportunities and Integration (Open VLD). These questions mainly touched upon the ministers’ plans to offer free menstrual products in schools. Important to note is that these parliamentary questions are purely targeted towards raising attention to the topic and therefore have no impact on policy or other political actions (Vlaams Parlement, 2022a). In addition to these questions, two formal proposals for resolution were submitted at the end of 2020 by Groen and Vooruit, and PvDA respectively (Vlaams Parlement, 2020a; Vlaams Parlement, 2020b). Similar to the parliamentary questions, these proposals suggested the free availability of menstrual products in schools. However, both have been rejected during

the parliamentary committee meeting of Well-Being, Health, Family and Poverty Reduction (CWHFP) on 15 January 2021 (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a). Finally, in October 2022, ad-interim Flemish minister of Well-Being, Benjamin Dalle (CD&V), suggested collaborating with Sensoa, a Belgian non-profit organisation focused on sexual and reproductive health, to build a digital knowledge platform containing all civil society initiatives regarding period poverty (Vlaams Parlement, 2022b). However, no updates have been provided to date (Vooruit, written communication, May 16, 2023). Additionally, it solely comprises information centralization and therefore does not promise a Flemish-wide solution to period poverty nor bad menstrual health.

In contrast, many actions have been undertaken the past three years on a local and civil society level. First, many local administrations in Flanders have invested in several projects to reduce period poverty. Aarschot conducted a pilot project in 2021 offering free menstrual products in all secondary schools (Caritas, 2022a). Civil society organization, BruZelle, provides free menstrual products to schools in several cities (Leuven, Tienen, Landen and Diest). However, it experiences the limits of what it can do and has mentioned governmental support to be necessary for its continuation (Caritas, 2022b). In Mechelen, a discussion group has been established for women in poverty to talk about menstruation (De Jonghe, 2022). The universities of applied science, Karel de Grote Hogeschool and Odisee Hogeschool, offer free menstrual products to their students (Odisee, 2021; Bellon, 2022). Other projects included one-time distributions of free menstrual products (Caritas, 2022c). More recently, the Flemish Association of Schools ('Vlaamse Scholierenkoepel') has started a campaign against period poverty including the provision of free menstrual products and information regarding menstrual health (Vlaamse Scholierenkoepel, 2023).

To allow for comparison, an overview of political actions in other regions throughout the country is provided. First, the Walloon government started a pilot project in 2022 in collaboration with civil society partners (women's rights organizations Synergie Wallonie and Femmes Prévoyantes Socialistes) to offer free menstrual products to women living in poverty (Précarité menstruelle: distribution de protections hygiéniques à grande échelle, 2022; Caritas, 2022c). A budget of 440.000 euro was allocated to three regions in Wallonia to distribute 2,5 million menstrual pads and create awareness campaigns on menstrual health. Further, in 2021, the parliament of the German-speaking community of Belgium approved the offering of free menstrual products in schools and public spaces (Parlament der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens, 2021). Finally, the Wallonia-Brussels federation has developed the "Plan Droits

des Femmes 2020-2024”, which is directed towards women’s rights in Brussels and Wallonia (Plan Droits des Femmes 2020-2024, n.d.). It specifically aims to tackle violence against women (including bad menstrual health), decrease gendered stereotypes, ensure a better representation of women in all industries and an improved work-life balance. In contrast, the Brussels Parliament has declined a 2022 resolution that proposed free menstrual products in schools and beyond (Brussels Parlement, 2022). In sum, Brussels and Flanders are the regions confronted with the lowest governmental support in Belgium.

3.2.3 Belgian Politics

Belgium is described by the European Union as “a federal constitutional monarchy in which the king is the head of state and the prime minister is the head of government in a multi-party system” (European Union, n.d.). The nation does not have one centralized decision-making institution but is instead divided between the federal government, three language-based communities (Flemish, French and German) and three regional governments (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels Capital). Since the current dissertation concerns period poverty interventions in Flanders, more information of this region’s governmental institutions and duties is provided below.

3.2.3.1 Flemish Government

The Flemish government consists of the Flemish Parliament, the Flemish Government and the Flemish administration (Vlaanderen, n.d.). Whilst the Flemish Government is responsible for the execution of legislation and the daily governance of Flanders, the Flemish Parliament is the governmental body responsible for development and approval of decrees. Since the previous elections of 2019 (and until the coming election of 2024), the government consists of N-VA (right-wing, Flemish-nationalist), Open VLD (centre-right, liberal) and CD&V (centre-right, Christian-democratic). The ministers relevant to this dissertation are Ben Weyts (minister of Education, N-VA), Hilde Crevits (minister of Well-Being, Health and Family, CD&V), Benjamin Dalle (minister of Brussels, Youth, Media and Poverty Reduction, CD&V), and Bart Somers (minister of Internal Affairs, Integration and Equal Opportunities, Open VLD). The opposition is formed by Vlaams Belang (far-right, nationalist and right-populist), Groen (centre-left, ecological), Vooruit (left, social-democratic) and PvDA (far-left, Marxist). With the next federal and Flemish elections approaching, a recent poll measured the political preferences of around 2000 Flemish citizens (Arnoudt, 2023). If its results are representative to the voting behaviour in 2024, the four biggest parties (from most to least popular) would be Vlaams Belang, N-VA, Vooruit and PvDA. Popularity of centre parties is decreasing whilst the parties of either side of the political spectrum are gaining votes.

Since Flanders is part of Belgium, a clear distinction is made between responsibilities of the Flemish and national government. Domains that do not fall under Flemish jurisdiction are related to the general interest of the entire Belgian population, such as justice, finance, and nation-wide social security and health (Belgium, n.d.; Vlaanderen, n.d.). For instance, the tax reduction on menstrual products, implemented in 2017, was a federal decision (Belgisch Staatsblad, 2017).

At the beginning of each legislature a governmental agreement is made, which delineates policy topics and decisions for the entire legislative period (Vlaanderen, n.d.). This makes it difficult for parties to add, adjust or delete specific topics to policy-making (Parlement, n.d.). No policy related to menstrual health was included in the current agreement (Vlaanderen, 2019). It does include the aim to achieve radical equality between men and women, the responsibility of local administrations to fight poverty on a local level and governmental financial support of these local administrations. Additionally, the Flemish government made a 'poverty reduction plan' to execute during the current legislative period. It mentions that, in 2018, 10% of Flemish citizens had an income below the European poverty line (Vlaanderen, 2020). This number increases up to 12,9% if people at risk of poverty, material deprivation and unemployment are also included. Demographic groups who are most at risk of living in poverty include families with low employment and people born outside of the EU. Consequences of living in poverty are dropping out of school, health inequality and child poverty. Some strategic goals the Flemish government aims to achieve are decreasing underprotection and child poverty, and investing in a qualitative, healthy environment. One could suggest that decreasing period poverty in Flanders lineates well with both the governmental agreement (when understanding it as an issue of gender inequality) and the poverty reduction plan (when focusing on the aspect of poverty).

3.2.3.2 The Flemish Parliament

The Flemish Parliament, responsible for all policy and legislation on a Flemish level, consists of 124 people representatives (Vlaams Parlement, n.d.). These representatives are democratically elected every five years with the next election being held in May 2024. Currently the seats are divided as follows: 35 seats for N-VA, 23 for Vlaams Belang, 19 for CD&V, 15 for Open VLD, 14 for Groen, 13 for Vooruit and four for

PvDA.^{2,3}

The Flemish Parliament contains 26 committees, each specialized in a certain policy domain. A committee exists out of 30 people's representatives (15 permanent and 15 replacement positions) (Vlaams Parlement, 2022). Because of the current composition of the Flemish Parliament, seats are divided as follows: Six seats for Vlaams Belang, nine for N-VA, four for CD&V, four for Open VLD, four for Groen, two for Vooruit, and one for PVDA (only in the Committee for Education, three instead of four representatives of Groen are included). The committees which have discussed the topic of menstrual health are: (1) Committee for Well-Being, Health, Family and Poverty Reduction (CWHFP; from now one referred to as Committee for Well-Being); (2) Committee for Education (CE); and (3) Committee for Domestic Governance, Equal Opportunities and Integration (CDGEOI; from now on referred to as Committee for Equal Opportunities). Regarding demographic distribution, all but two members in the committees are white (one Moroccan-Belgian and one Turkish-Belgian), 59% are women, two out of the three presidents are cis-gender men, and the four ministers relevant for these committees consist of three cis-gender men and one cis-gender woman (all white).⁴ The next section elaborates on the methodology used for data collection, selection and analysis.

² One seat is currently defined as independent due to a recent alleged case of money-laundering. More information can be found on <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/dossiers/2021/02/zaak-sihame-el-kaouakibi/>

³ For visual presentation of parliamentary distribution, see appendix 3

⁴ For more information, see appendix 4

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Applied Methods

This dissertation aims to provide insights into the discourses used by Flemish political parties when justifying their respective standpoints on how to best tackle period poverty in the region. More specifically, it studies whether discursive characteristics of the European far-right, anti-gender movement are reproduced by the far-right party, Vlaams Belang, with regards to period poverty. Additionally, it examines existing discursive commonalities and differences between Vlaams Belang and the other parties, and whether any other discourses are employed.

To this end, the thesis wishes to answer the following main research question:

Which discourses are employed across the Flemish political level to justify the respective parties' standpoints on period poverty in Flanders?

There will be three additional sub-questions:

1. *What are the similarities and/or differences between the far-right, anti-gender discourse and the discourse employed by the far-right party, Vlaams Belang, when justifying its position on period poverty?*

Vlaams Belang has frequently criticized the overall increased prevalence of the so-called gender ideology in Flemish society (Vlaams Belang, 2019; Vlaams Belang, 2021; Vlaams Belang, 2022a; Vlaams Belang, 2022b). Although menstrual health might be a less controversial topic than others related to sexual and reproductive health, the party's position could still provide useful insights into their general stance towards gender equality. Since a recent poll suggested Vlaams Belang could become the biggest party in Flanders, such discourse analysis is essential for understanding future Flemish politics and society (Arnoudt, 2023).

2. *What are the similarities and/or differences between the discourse employed by Vlaams Belang and the other political parties when justifying their respective position on period poverty?*

The increased popularity of Vlaams Belang could lead to other parties shifting their own programme to the right on the political spectrum (Erel, 2018; Yilmaz, 2012). Based on the literature review, this could entail biomedical and biopolitical arguments against additional period poverty interventions (Blázquez Rodríguez, 2021; Foucault, 1976; Repo, 2013; Senellart et al., 2008; van Eerdewijk 2001). Further, the current polycrisis has led to an overall increase of austerity policies and neoliberal crisis management across Europe (Cincu, 2017; Guerrina et al., 2022; MacRae et al., 2021). Both evolutions could prove detrimental for gender equality and women's rights in Flanders.

3. *Which other discourses are employed by Flemish political parties when justifying their respective positions on period poverty?*

Literature has shown that a common counter-reaction to the increase in austerity policies and the decrease in attention to gender equality on a governmental level, is pointing to the human rights violations these could pose. Regarding menstrual health, for instance, several physical, social and mental health risks are emphasized (Rossouw & Ross, 2021; Sommer, et al., 2015; Sommer et al., 2021; Weiss-Wolf, 2020). Thus, this last sub-question aims to analyse whether political proponents of additional governmental actions concerning period poverty employ such a human rights discourse.

To answer these questions, qualitative data collection and analysis methods are used. More specifically, the dissertation conducts a critical discourse analysis of elite interviews, parliamentary meetings and political election programmes. More information on the motivation behind these chosen methods is provided below.

To date, little research has been done on the political antecedents to and discourses about menstrual health. This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by complementing the frequently used bottom-up approach with studying up. Studying up was coined by Laura Nader 50 years ago to offer a different way of looking at anthropological fieldwork (Nader, 1972). Instead of only researching relatively disempowered communities, she states it is important to pay additional attention to the institutions and organizations high on the social power structure. In short, it allows one to ask “common sense questions in reverse” (Nader, 1972: 289). In the case of menstrual health, for instance, studying down could mean researching the demographic that has experienced period poverty: What characterizes this group; what are the social, physical and mental consequences of period poverty; what are their needs regarding

menstrual health, etc. However, researching the organizations and individuals responsible for national legislations and policies allows one to take a few steps back: What are the structural causes of the precarious situation of this community; what prevents the political level from actively changing this community's situation, etc.

Even though studying up is in line with the public anthropological view that researchers have a political responsibility to address society-wide issues, it does pose a challenge to the activist anthropological perspective on research (Robben & Sluka, 2007). How can researchers conduct fieldwork as 'actors' when they do not directly find themselves in the marginalized community they aim to show solidarity for, but are instead embedded in a formal political environment that does not allow as much open participation and active organisation (Smith, 2006)? Mason-Bish, experiencing similar difficulties when discussing disability policy as a non-disabled person with non-disabled policy makers, tackled this challenge by sharing the perspectives of the disempowered group without directly challenging the policy makers' viewpoints (Mason-Bish, 2018). This advice was followed during the elite interviews conducted for this dissertation.

Methodological challenges in interviewing elites, especially when conducted by less experienced researchers, arise throughout the various stages of research, from preparatory information collection to post-interview follow-up (Harvey, 2011; Liu, 2018, Mbohou & Tomkinson, 2022). First, thoroughly researching the interviewee's personal and professional background beforehand can help to build trust and increase one's own credibility (Odendahl & Shaw, 2001; Liu, 2018). Since building trust is done over time, it should be the interviewer's focus from the first contact to post-interview communication (Harvey, 2011). This includes transparency on one's own background, motive and research goal. Regarding the interview itself, subtle power manifestations from the elite interviewee might obstruct the interview process, such as letting the interviewer wait, or interrupting the interview for personal or professional matters (Odendahl & Shaw, 2001). Face to face interviews consequently offer an opportunity for participant observation and are therefore preferred (Liu, 2018). However, considering the possible time constraints of certain interviewees, video or phone meetings were proven to be a valid alternative, especially if otherwise the outcome would have been no interview at all (Harvey, 2011). To ensure the limited interview time is used as effectively as possible, the general interview questions and other relevant information were sent to the interviewee beforehand. As a way of following up after the interview, an appreciation email with the interview transcript was sent. This master's dissertation was also distributed to all research participants after submission.

4.2 Data Collection and Selection

Elite interviews have been proven valuable for studying different perspectives during political debates. As this dissertation aims to achieve exactly that with regards to period poverty, this qualitative research method was selected (Boucher, 2017). In order to limit subjective bias of the interviewer towards the interviewee's responses and increase the research credibility, the interview data were complemented with transcripts of parliamentary meetings on period poverty (Liu, 2018). In addition, the election programmes should prove useful to gain a wider understanding of the respective political standpoints on menstrual health and other sexual and reproductive rights.

Through purposeful sampling, several representatives of each political party were contacted in December 2022. The selection of representatives was based on their attendance of the parliamentary meetings that discussed menstrual health between 2020 and 2022. During January and February 2023, follow-up emails were sent to the representatives that had not yet replied and additional representatives, also present during the relevant committee meetings, were contacted. In total, nine interviews were conducted with relevant party members over the course of December 2022 to March 2023. The reader can find the general script of the interviews in appendix 1. To allow for comparison, interview questions were predetermined, however, freedom was given to the research subjects to elaborate and to the researcher to dig deeper into specific answers. Depending on the political party some questions were changed or skipped. The semi-structured interview format is to prevent tunnel vision from the researcher's side and to give interviewees opportunity to raise new ideas and topics (Liu, 2018). Eight out of nine interviews were with people representatives, one was with a party employee specialized in the topic of menstrual health. All interviewees were white, three were cis-gender men and six were cis-gender women. Whereas PvdA, Vooruit and Groen were represented by two interviewees each, Vlaams Belang and N-VA were represented by one each. CD&V, unfortunately, was not interviewed but did provide a written response to the interview questions. Although this made it impossible to ask follow-up questions, the party has been vocal about its standpoint on menstrual health throughout several parliamentary meetings. Additionally, since two of the four ministers addressed during these meetings belong to CD&V (consecutive ministers of Well-Being, Health, Family and Poverty Reduction), I was still able to retrieve sufficient information for an extensive data analysis.

All parliamentary meetings where menstrual health was discussed, were subsequent to the Caritas report of 2020. The results of this report led to the issue becoming increasingly part of the public and political

debate. The party election programmes all date from 2019 as this was the year the last election was held. All documentation was subjected to critical discourse analysis. More information about this analysis method will be provided further down in this dissertation.

4.3 Ethics

4.3.1 Positionality

According to Joye and Maesele (2022), confirmation bias is a common pitfall for researchers conducting critical discourse analysis. This means that having a preconceived idea of what one will find, might create the tendency to interpret the data in line with these preconceptions. De Lange et al. (2012) therefore stress the need for the researcher to critically self-reflect on one's own assumptions and to be aware of one's positionality both in society and with regards to the topic of study. I am a white, cis-gender, middle-class Belgian woman with left-wing political beliefs (Berger, 2015). My leftist political orientation has influenced the choice of research topic and theoretical framework. Additionally, although I have never experienced period poverty because of a lack of financial resources, I have experienced shame and anxiety for leakages when being in public. So whilst my privileged financial position hinders the complete understanding of period poverty, being a menstruator still makes it a personal topic.

Since the elite interviews were conducted as part of a master's dissertation, I am aware that my position as a student could have impacted the interviewees' perception of myself. They might have questioned my topical knowledge or credibility. In order to avoid such perceptions as much as possible, I prepared each interview by extensively researching the interviewee's professional background and their party's position taken in the parliamentary meetings. Additionally, the literature review was conducted before the interviews, providing me with the necessary background knowledge on menstrual health and period poverty.

My own political beliefs risked being incompatible with the beliefs of right-wing parties. Therefore, I have attempted to approach all meetings with an open-mind and to avoid preconceived assumptions to influence data collection and analysis. Conclusions driven from the interviews have been focused on what has been said rather than how or where, to avoid false generalisations. Further, I will be as open and elaborate as possible about the research process and provide theoretical and/or empirical evidence to support my findings. Finally, and in line with Foucault's understanding of 'reality', I aim to maintain a post-

structuralist thinking throughout the data analysis (Foucault, 1990). Instead of claiming to possess *the* truth, I acknowledge how no such thing exists and instead that a specific reality is created through the intersection of power and discourse. In the case of this dissertation, the research findings are purely based on my own interpretation of a selection of interviews, parliamentary meetings and election programmes.

4.3.2 Data Management

Regarding data storage, the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) mentions that “researchers have a special duty to consider controlling third party access to ethnographic materials” (EASA, 2018). Following university recommendations, data was saved on the password-protected personal OneDrive account rather than on an external hard drive or a USB to avoid theft or loss (Ghent University, n.d.). Additionally, written notes taken during the interviews were stored in a secure place at home. If, for any reason, it is necessary to share data with others than my supervisor, the data will be completely anonymous. The final data shared in this master’s dissertation does “not violate ethical principles of ethnographic research” (EASA, 2018).

As to comply with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), no information will be shared that could identify the interviewees besides their party (GDPR, n.d.). Participants have given their approval on this through written informed consent. Further, the parliamentary meeting transcripts and election programmes included in the data analysis are all publicly available on the website of the Flemish Parliament and on the websites of the respective political parties. No permission or special data management measures are therefore needed for its usage.

4.4 Critical Discourse Analysis

Consistent to the theoretical emphasis of this dissertation, the data analysis method follows the Foucauldian connection between discourse and power. According to Foucault, discourses, characterized by their subjectivity, are institutionalized forms of knowledge that can construct unequal power relations and hegemonic understandings of the biological and social world that “systematically form the objects about which they speak” (Foucault, 1972: 49; Luke, 1997). Since knowledge production and distribution require power, political actors play an important role in discourse (re)production. Not only through their own party narratives, but also through institutions that are heavily impacted by the state, such as schools and universities (Moten & Harney, 2004). Dominant discourses and the unequal power relations they maintain can be so conventionalised in society, they are understood as truthful and objective (Farrelly,

2010; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). For this reason, it is important that political studies position discourse at the centre of their analysis.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is commonly used to examine existing inequalities and power imbalances present in various textual formats (Joye & Maesele, 2022). CDA perceives language as a representation of a certain discourse and acknowledges its relation with the broader historical, social, economic and political landscape. Thus, it takes a constructionist approach stating that language should never be seen as neutral but instead critically studied within its broader context including its underlying ideology and power structure (Joye & Maesele, 2022). Ideology can be defined as “some organized belief system or set of values that is disseminated or reinforced by communication” (McQuail, 2000 : 497, as cited in Joye & Maesele, 2022 : 10). Ideology is thus materialized through discourse (van Dijk, 1988). Power can be defined as having dominant and unequal access to social resources which allows one to dominate subordinate groups and construct a certain reality through discourse (Foucault, 1972; Joye & Maesele, 2022; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

CDA aims to “expose strategies that appear normal or neutral on the surface, but which may in fact be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends” (Machin & Mayr, 2012: 5). This is an important goal for the current dissertation, since menstrual health might seem less controversial than other gender equality-related topics and therefore party positions risk to be perceived as more neutral than they might be.

CDA assumes that politicians frame information within a larger meaning structure in order to impact their audience’s interpretation of said information (Lindekilde, 2014). They might choose to strategically include only certain fragments of a political topic in their communication towards their audience to support their own interests, ideology and goals (Ahrens et al., 2022; Lindekilde, 2014). Regarding menstrual health, for instance, this could mean focussing on the cost of free menstrual products as opposed to the health risks of not being able to afford said products. Their privileged access to information, knowledge and wealth provides them with the ability to dominate and control subordinate communities who lack these social resources (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

CDA can be approached in a variety of ways, however I have chosen the approach of Fairclough (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough, 2003). He emphasizes the so-called “order of discourse”, which refers to “the totality of discursive practices of an institution and relationship between them” (Fairclough, 1993:

138). Fairclough's model consists out of three dimensions: Text (e.g. vocabulary, grammar and composition), discursive practices (i.e. what are the structural and functional characteristics, such as genre and context, of text production and consumption) and the wider social practice (i.e. the broader economic, political and social context; do the texts and their discourses reinforce existing inequalities or vouch for social change?; Which ideologies are narrated through the texts?) (Joye & Maesele, 2022; Lindekilde, 2014). The first dimension, text, also includes non-written language such as clothing and body language. However, since this study only interviewed one or two representatives of each party, no party-wide conclusions can be made based on these characteristics. Regarding the second dimension, current data analysis includes three different genres: Election programmes directed towards a wider voting audience, interviews with a university student solely used for their dissertation, and parliamentary meetings during which parties debated about additional period poverty interventions. Analysis will demonstrate whether different arguments are used or information shared across these genres (Joye & Maesele, 2022). Regarding the third dimension, the broader characteristics of our current Western society, such as the polycrisis, neoliberalism, the gendered nature of institutions, the capitalist patriarchy and the far-right uprising could impact the discourses used by politicians. As previously mentioned, these characteristics are instrumentalized by the far-right, anti-gender movement for a backward reform of gender equality and women's rights (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Sauer, 2020). The critical discourse analysis will examine to what extent the parties critique or reinforce such existing inequalities.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Impact of Caritas Report

Menstrual health and period poverty only started to significantly become part of the public and political debate in Flanders after the study of Caritas was published in 2020. This could potentially explain why neither menstrual health nor period poverty were referred to in any of the election programmes of 2019.^{5,6} It was not considered to be a problem in a ‘developed’ country like Belgium. In fact, the general topic of sexual and reproductive rights was only mentioned in relation to international policy and development support, not in relation to the Flemish or Belgian population. This division between ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘developed’ countries suggests a linear and Eurocentric modernist understanding of the world in which the Global North is perceived to be more evolved than and therefore superior to the Global South (Mouzakitis, 2017).

Six out of the seven political parties mentioned in their election programme they aim to promote equal rights and opportunities for everyone regardless of, amongst others, gender.⁵ Vlaams Belang also vouched for equal opportunities, albeit only for ‘Flemish people’ (Vlaams Belang, 2019). This is important to remember throughout the discourse analysis because period poverty could have detrimental consequences for menstruators’ health, professional performance and school attendance (Caritas, 2020). In sum, bad menstrual health could jeopardize the strive towards equal opportunities.

After Caritas shared their results, numerous civil society initiatives were established across Flanders collecting and redistributing menstrual products to women in poverty (Caritas, 2022c). On the political level, it reinforced a binary between the majority parties (i.e. CD&V, Open VLD, N-VA) and Vlaams Belang on the one hand, and the remaining opposition parties (i.e. PvDA, Vooruit, Groen) on the other. The latter used the research findings and policy recommendations by Caritas to raise awareness about the issue in the Flemish Parliament. In total, the topic was touched upon in ten parliamentary meetings: Five meetings of the Committee for Well-being (CWHFP), four meetings of the Committee for Education (CE), and one meeting of the Committee for Equal Opportunities (CDGEOI).⁷ More specifically, eleven parliamentary

⁵ See Vlaams Belang, 2019; N-VA, 2019; Open VLD, 2019; CD&V, 2019; Groen, 2019; Vooruit, 2019; Vlaams Belang, 2019

⁶ For a more elaborate overview of the parties’ respective standpoints related to sexual and reproductive health and rights, see appendix 5

⁷ See Vlaams Parlement, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d; 2021e; 2022b; 2022c; 2022d; 2023b

questions were posed (one by PvdA, eight by Vooruit and two by Groen) and two proposals for resolution were submitted (one by PvdA and one by Vooruit and Groen) between October 2020 and May 2023.⁸ The two proposals suggested pilot projects offering free menstrual products in a selection of schools. Both were rejected by the CWHFP in the beginning of 2021. Below, an overview is provided of the results after analysing all textual fragments across the three dimensions as proposed by Fairclough (1993).

5.2 Discourse Comparison Far-Right, Anti-Gender Movement and Vlaams Belang

This section aims to provide an answer to the first sub-question: *“What are the similarities and/or differences between the far-right, anti-gender discourse and the discourse employed by Vlaams Belang, when justifying its position on period poverty?”*

Far-right politics and the European anti-gender movement politicizes the neoliberal critique on the welfare state, focusing on its economization and the importance of individual responsibility (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Sauer, 2020). Hence, even though the two discourses should not be equated, neoliberal arguments are an important part of the far-right, anti-gender discourse. Vlaams Belang stated that the issue of period poverty should not be tackled by the Flemish government but by local administrations and welfare organizations (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2022; Vlaams Parlement, 2021b; Vlaams Parlement, 2022c). According to the party, the government already provides sufficient funding to these institutions, which can be used in the fight against period poverty. One should not forget that the research by Caritas was done when most governmental funding and social welfare packages were already in place. Since then, the social allowance that is most often referred to by parties, ‘Groeipakket’, has had two one-time increases of 100 euro per child and a new category consisting of parents with a joint income between 34 526,91 euro and 40 281,40 euro has been created (Groeipakket, 2023a; Groeipakket, 2023b). However, an evaluation of the effectiveness of this allowance package showed an unequal distribution towards middle-income families (Stop Kinderarmoede, n.d.). Even though no research has been conducted to date to examine the impact of these increases on the prevalence of period poverty, one could assume that due to the unequal distribution, the fact that it is only for families with children, and the high amount of civil society initiatives fighting period poverty to date, its effect has been minor. In addition, the party argues for a structural approach to period poverty, but relying on local initiatives leads to rather scattered, unequal solutions.

⁸ For a visual overview of these parliamentary meetings, questions and proposals, see appendix 6

“These initiatives to fight period poverty are currently mainly on a local level. I think it is very good that it happens on that level: Locally, close to the people. Our party has mentioned it many times before: We do not agree with ‘everyone gets free products and [the Flemish government] just needs to solve everything’ [...] But these local administrations of course cannot do it by themselves, they need to get funding. This is already the case in Flanders, local municipalities are supported by the Flemish government” (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023)

Placing responsibility to fight period poverty at a local level exempts the government from any accountability and limits the control menstruators have over their own bodies (Erel, 2018; van Eerdewijk, 2001; Wood, 2020).

“Also citizens. The solidarity in people is big, I believe. And this is positive. I think we live in a society where now and in the future, we need to have more attention for one another [...] That we help each other. Because we cannot always point to the government, sometimes we ourselves need to start small. For the people who need these things at the moment, it means a lot.” (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023)

This quote is another example of placing responsibility on non-state actors. Instead of immediately looking at the government for support, citizens should look inwards and help each other.

Since the two proposals for resolution were about offering free menstrual products in schools, the responsibility of these institutions was a topic of debate between parties. The arguments given by Vlaams Belang are somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the party suggests that beside the local administrations, schools play an essential role in tackling the issue of period poverty because both stand close to ‘the people’ (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023; Vlaams Parlement, 2021b; Vlaams Parlement, 2022c). On the other hand, it has shared its concern that schools are currently overburdened and therefore should not be forced to take action (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a; Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023). According to Vlaams Belang, the main responsibility of schools is education. These are contradictory arguments in two ways. First, by not implementing period poverty interventions on a Flemish level, it forces schools to set up independent initiatives. Since schools are indeed overburdened, said ‘additional responsibilities’ will only increase their work- and financial load (Lauwerier, 2023). Second, in schools every student is supposed to be treated equally (Onderwijs Vlaanderen, n.d.). When menstruators do not attend school due to shame, fear of

leakages or lack of menstrual products, equality is no longer guaranteed (Caritas, 2020). One could assume that schools in financially precarious communities will need to allocate more resources than schools in more prosperous communities, potentially leading to further class-based inequality.

“But I am almost certain that, even though there are no dispensers at school offering menstrual pads, if young adults really are in need of menstrual products or if there is no money at home, they can go to the school’s administration and be helped. I am almost certain of this. It has been a long time since I have been to school, but I know that in my time when someone had an accident or you did not have anything with you, you could go to the administration. So I am almost certain that if young adults do not have products or they cannot afford it at home, and they go to the secretariat, student support or a trust person, it is taken into account. Schools really do their best” (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023)

Even though the interviewee expects most schools to already provide solutions, the frequent usage of words such as ‘almost certain’, ‘think’ and ‘could’ demonstrate certain doubt (Joye & Maesele, 2022).

“The resolution [submitted by Groen, Vooruit and PvdA on free menstrual products in all schools] has been rejected by the majority parties, by the government. Also by Open VLD and CD&V because they are of the opinion that you cannot obligate schools to do so. But then I do see that Aarschot, which has a Open VLD mayor who is also seated in the Flemish Parliament, started to offer it in schools themselves. This is again evidence that if resolutions are submitted by the opposition, [the government] often does not approve them but in reality then do implement it in their own municipalities afterwards” (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023)

The above quote was the interviewee’s reaction to the risk of creating location-based inequality when allocating responsibility to the local level. No specific answer was given to this risk but instead attention was redirected to the majority parties’ rejection of the proposals. Interestingly, “they are of the opinion that you cannot obligate schools” neglects the fact that Vlaams Belang has given the exact same argument to reject the offering of free menstrual products in schools. The quote emphasizes the decision-making power of the government, but also assumes them to be inconsistent and disingenuous. In other words, this narrative shows similarities to the far-right discourse against ‘corrupt neoliberal elites’ that fail to fairly represent the needs of ‘the people’ (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018).

Vlaams Belang does not see period poverty as a separate area of intervention, but instead as a symptom of poverty (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023; Vlaams Parlement, 2021a).

However, reducing it to a ‘mere’ issue of poverty fails to include other problems related to period poverty, such as the double taboo, shame and lack of knowledge (Caritas, 2020; Michel et al., 2022). Additionally, it neglects the gendered basis of the issue minimizing the individual experience and reinforcing the ‘culture of concealment’ (Blázquez Rodríguez, 2021; Foucault, 1976; Houppert, 1999; van Eerdewijk, 2001; Wood, 2020). Moreover, the report by Caritas showed that 12% of all menstruators have experienced the inability to pay for menstrual products, and 45% when only including menstruators living in poverty (Caritas, 2020). These findings clarify that it is not an issue of poverty and by solely focusing on menstruators living in financially precarious situations, the issue cannot be solved in its entirety.

Several party members have mentioned the financial benefits of ecological alternatives such as menstrual cups and washable underwear (Vlaams Parlement, 2021b; Vlaams Parlement, 2022c). However, research has shown that these alternatives are too expensive for lower-income families to afford (Divakar et al., 2020). Additionally, party members questioned whether free menstrual products in schools would not lead to their misuse (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a). To the response of opposition parties that the proposed pilot project is an effective way of examining such risk, no response was given.

Lastly, Vlaams Belang instrumentalized the issue of poverty to (re)produce a fear of the (ethnic) ‘other’ (Sauer, 2020).

“We first need to take care of our own people. The more [poverty] we import, the more difficult it is to fight poverty” (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023)

5.3 Discursive similarities with other political parties

This section aims to provide an answer to the second sub-question: *“What are the similarities and/or differences between the discourse employed by Vlaams Belang and the other political parties when justifying their respective position on period poverty?”*

5.3.1 N-VA

5.3.1.1 Similarities

Similar to Vlaams Belang, N-VA does not see decreasing period poverty in Flanders as a governmental responsibility. Instead, the local level, specifically local administrations and welfare organizations, are said

to be better equipped to identify and solve the issue (N-VA, interview, Brussels, January 24, 2023; Vlaams Parlement, 2021a; Vlaams Parlement 2021b; Vlaams Parlement, 2022c). According to the party, sufficient governmental funding is already provided to these organizations (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a). The aim to allocate more responsibilities concerning poverty reduction to local administrations, as stated in both the governmental agreement and the poverty reduction plan, might have impacted this decision (Vlaanderen, 2019; Vlaanderen, 2020).

“We are proponents of initiatives taken by local administrations in collaboration with schools, poverty-, wellbeing- and youth organisations. Some local administrations already do this, partially because of the recent media attention for the topic, and offer menstrual products in an accessible and discrete manner.” (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a)

Additionally, the minister of Education has referred to some policy recommendations made by Vrouwenraad (the Flemish non-profit organisation responsible for the M² projects following the federal funding round in 2020) in order to argue against period poverty being a responsibility of the Flemish government:

“Two of these [measures] could actually solve the entire problem in one go: Decreasing taxes to 0 percent and - actually it was and/or - reimbursement of menstrual products by health insurance” (Minister of Education, Vlaams Parlement, 2023b).

However, Vrouwenraad also recommended offering free menstrual products in schools, pharmacies and welfare organizations, and mentioned the inability of several schools to fund these solutions themselves (Vrouwenraad, 2020). Since both assume a Flemish governmental responsibility, the fact that the minister did not mention them suggests a strategic selection of information in line with own goals and interests (Ahrens et al., 2022; Lindekilde, 2014).

N-VA believes period poverty should not be approached in its singularity, but instead as part of the broader poverty issue, employing the same biomedical characteristics as Vlaams Belang (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a; Vlaams Parlement, 2021b; Vlaams Parlement, 2022d). Living in poverty is partially attributed to the fact that people wait too long to ask for help due to shame (N-VA, interview, Brussels, January 24, 2023). This reasoning shifts culpability away from a structural, political level and towards the individual. Such victim blaming ideology leads to a dehumanized perception of people living in poverty,

facilitating their portrayal as ‘the other’ and inhibiting people’s understanding of structural and political causes (Ghidina, 2019; Said, 1978).

“Of course I think it is unacceptable that a group of girls feels ashamed because of a lack of money and/or they feel the urge to stay at home and/or are afraid of accidents at school. But period poverty is not something that only exists inside the school walls. It is part of the broader poverty issue. [...] So is this again an issue that should be tackled by education?” (Minister of Education, Vlaams Parlement, 2021b)

“We give funding to schools for education, this is where funding should go to in the first place” (N-VA, interview, Brussels, January 24, 2023)

According to N-VA, it is not a school’s responsibility to tackle period poverty because they should focus on their main task: Education. Therefore, this is not an issue that should be discussed in the Committee for Education, but instead in the Committee for Well-Being (N-VA, interview, Brussels, January 24, 2023). Depicting period poverty as an issue of poverty thus shifts attention away from the domain the party is responsible for and towards one that is run by another party (CD&V; Ahrens et al., 2022; Lindekilde, 2014). However, the party employs a similar contradictory reasoning as Vlaams Belang because it uses the fact that several schools already provide solutions to period poverty as an argument against additional governmental interventions (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a).

“We believe the individual approach is much better [than offering products for free to everyone]. [...] More than half of children can bring menstrual products to school from home. It is only an issue for a small group of children.” (N-VA, interview, Brussels, January 24, 2023)

Referring to period poverty as only being “an issue for a small group of children” neglects the severe individual impact it could have. It reinforces a top-down perspective on the issue, rather than a bottom-up approach focused on individual rights and needs. In a similar vein, an N-VA representative stated: “I do want to inform you that it was an N-VA minister that reduced taxes on menstrual pads and tampons already in 2018” (Vlaams Parlement, 2020d). This statement minimizes the pressure of left-wing opposition parties exercised on the government to develop said legislation and shifts attention to actions already implemented before the issue was addressed by Caritas.

“Period poverty is a real problem that should be acknowledged and tackled. Menstrual products should be accessible commodities for all girls and women, regardless of their financial situation. However, I do not know whether the solutions proposed will help. Our party has some serious doubts. [...] The double taboo, concerning poverty and menstruation, means that discretion is essential here. [...] We believe it is important to focus on local administration in this case, because they will know exactly which problems are present in their municipality. They are able to offer menstrual products in an accessible and discrete manner.” (Vlaams Parlement, 2021b)

The above quote shows that, whilst the party is aware of the double taboo and shame surrounding period poverty, it simultaneously reinforces them by emphasizing the need to be discrete (Houppert, 1999).

N-VA does not agree with an overall free availability of menstrual products. Instead, it should be directed towards people living in poverty. The interviewee proposed, for instance, to let children living in poverty use tokens whilst others pay for their menstrual products in school (N-VA, interview, Brussels, January 24, 2023). One could wonder whether this would not just increase stigmatization. The double taboo already serves as a threshold to ask for menstrual products, using tokens would highlight one’s financial struggle even more (Caritas, 2020). Although this demonstrates that individual needs and experiences are insufficiently considered, the party did refer to the lack of attention the proposals for resolution have given to offering solutions during holiday periods (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a). Other alternatives, such as discounts in pharmacies or free menstrual products at food banks, were discussed during the interview. However, no alternatives (these or otherwise) were given during the parliamentary meetings.

5.3.1.2 Differences

The importance of being discrete, as referred to in one of the aforementioned quotes, was mentioned multiple times as a counter argument against free menstrual products in schools but also regarding menstrual education:

“I think [the topic of menstruation] should be included in sexual education at an earlier age [...] but I also think it is okay that it is discussed with a certain level of timidity since it is part of one’s private life” (N-VA, interview, Brussels, January 24, 2023)

The need for discretion reinforces the biomedical discourse that perceives menstruation as something to be ashamed of, to be silent about, to be handled privately (Blázquez Rodríguez, 2021; Houppert, 1999; van Eerdewijk, 2001; Wood, 2020). In addition, the party suggested that the existing taboo is usually

solved between friends, minimising the issue and assuming the solution is found in closed circles (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a).

Interestingly, N-VA was the only party that discussed the role of companies in providing affordable products (N-VA, interview, Brussels, January 24, 2023). No governmental restrictions were suggested, but rather the need for companies to offer a wide product range. This is in line with the neoliberal ideology encouraging a free market, austerity and a dependent consumer society (van Eerdewijk, 2001; Winkler, 2020; Wood, 2020).

5.3.2 Open VLD

5.3.2.1 Similarities

Open VLD follows the reasoning of Vlaams Belang and N-VA arguing period poverty should be tackled on a local level, while targeting people living in poverty (Open VLD, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 8, 2023; Vlaams Parlement, 2021a; Vlaams Parlement, 2021e). Thus, period poverty is merely seen as a symptom of poverty. The role of the Flemish government lies in encouraging the further development of such local initiatives (Open VLD, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 8, 2023). Interestingly, the party employs an opposite argumentation when it comes to school meals. Here, they argue for structural governmental support to make sure healthy meals are provided in each school in Flanders. The party has submitted a parliamentary note arguing that meals should be free for children living in poverty and offered in a non-stigmatizing way:

*“Education is **the** facilitator for upward social mobility. [...] However, poverty avoids education being the ‘machine of opportunities’ of our society. Only when one’s material living situation improves, can study results improve as well” (Vlaams Parlement, 2023c).*

In short, their argumentation for healthy school meals relates one specific issue of poverty to child inequality and therefore follows the same reasoning as the proposals submitted by the opposition parties on free menstrual products. No absolute explanation can be given for this inconsistency based on the data I possess. However, all opposition parties have mentioned that proposals submitted by the opposition are seldomly accepted by the majority parties (Groen, interview, February 2, 2023; PvdA, interview, February 7, 2023; Vlaams Belang, interview, January 12, 2023; Vooruit, interview, December 19, 2022). This is

important because it suggests that political positions are not necessarily driven by ideology alone but also by political strategies.

“I believe that if you do not bring menstrual products to school, there will always be someone you can ask. I think the biggest problem will be when you are confronted with not having any money or if your parents do not want to support you or you cannot discuss it with them [...] A child does not choose where it is born so the parents need to want to support [the child]. [...] Not every parent does [support their children] because otherwise we would not be confronted with these issues. [...] And opponents then say: But they receive child allowances. Yes, but it is not because you receive child allowance that your parents also use this for the right things.”

(Open VLD, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 8, 2023)

The interviewee assumes that the lack of financial support is not the problem, but rather the parents’ inability or unwillingness to allocate the resources accordingly. This reasoning reinforces the neoliberal idea that one is responsible for one’s own success or failure (Cincu, 2017; Guerrina et al., 2022; MacRae et al., 2021). Similar to N-VA’s narrative, it creates a dehumanizing image of people in poverty and diminishes the negative impact of state legislation or other third-party actors (Ghidina, 2019; Said, 1978). Instead the state is portrayed as taking the responsibility parents were not able to take towards their children. Even though this individual responsibility was mentioned by Vlaams Belang and N-VA as well, Open VLD was much more elaborate on the matter.

5.3.2.2 Differences

Whilst other parties demonstrated quite coherent standpoints on period poverty, one parliamentary member of Open VLD voiced their disagreement with the party’s position. As the mayor of a city that has introduced free menstrual products in all schools in the municipality, they stated that:

“Period poverty is not new, it has been part of public and political debate for some time and my city just did not wait for a solution. We did it ourselves, which I would strongly advise to others. If it were men who would menstruate, there would be dispensers with menstrual products available everywhere [...] Action should really be taken. I agree it is not solely education’s responsibility so just gather the three of you [minister of Education, minister of Well-Being and minister of Equal Opportunities] and establish a plan of approach on a Flemish level. It will make a difference. I am struggling with the fact that period poverty is pushed into the corner of poverty. As a woman, there is always a chance you wind up in a situation where you would have liked menstrual products to be available. It is a small effort with a big impact. In each toilet, toilet paper is offered right? I am getting annoyed because I know that actions will be taken in the future, it will just take a long time.” (Vlaams Parlement, 2022c)

This parliamentary member takes a position much more similar to that of the left-wing opposition than that of their own party. However, this is the only time they shared their opinion on the matter and, to my knowledge, they have not taken any further actions to promote a party proposal for resolution.

In contrast to Vlaams Belang and N-VA, Open VLD argues period poverty is a topic that should be discussed in the Committee for Education (in collaboration with the Committee for Well-Being and Committee for Equal Opportunities; Open VLD, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 8, 2023). Schools should not be reduced to mere knowledge institutions, but instead be perceived as important actors preparing children for their future role in a diverse society.

5.3.3 CD&V

5.3.3.1 Similarities

“Poverty is a complex issue that should be approached in a structural manner by different policy domains. Because [the resolution] concerns young girls at school it should be best treated by the Committee for Education. If girls do not go to school because they are menstruating and do not have menstrual products, we need to react. The social allowance [Groeipakket] that is offered is the right structural support. [...] Many schools have already developed good practices. They work in a discrete manner with trust persons that support the girls in a myriad of ways. [...] There should be a discussion with schools and welfare organizations in order to share best practices. [...] Menstrual products should be offered to families through the existing channels. Who needs it, should be informed of these channels. [...] It is important to treat this theme in a serene manner” (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a)

The above quote encapsulates various aspects of CD&V’s position on period poverty. First, the party is against the non-targeted provision of free menstrual products in schools (Vlaams Parlement, 2020c; Vlaams Parlement, 2021a; Vlaams Parlement, 2022c). It would be too expensive and one would be unable to distinguish girls who need it due to financial reasons. Second, CD&V reduces the issue to a symptom of poverty neglecting other aspects such as infrastructure or knowledge (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a; Vlaams Parlement, 2022c; Vlaams Parlement, 2022d). Third, it states that schools already provide solutions. However, the use of ‘many schools’ could suggest uncertainty about how widespread these solutions are currently implemented (Joye & Maesele, 2022). Fourth, the focus on serenity and discretion reinforces the ‘culture of concealment’ surrounding menstruation to date (Houppert, 1999). Finally, it proposes the Committee for Education as the proper place to discuss the topic. Since the minister of Well-Being is part

of CD&V, this leads to attention being shifted from their own domain to one for which another party is responsible (N-VA).

“I heard that Wallonia has invested 400 000 euros in additional regional pilot projects regarding period poverty. The Flemish government has invested 2,8 million euros in foodbanks, this includes hygienic products. 2,8 million euros is a bit more I think than 400 000 euros. Am I saying that period poverty does not exist? No, but I can sum up other elements that are also part of the wider poverty problem.” (Minister of Well-Being, Vlaams Parlement, 2022c)

Here, the minister attempts to minimize the governmental initiative against period poverty in Wallonia by comparing it to the Flemish government’s much larger budget allocated to significantly more than menstrual products (when Groen asked for more information on how much of this budget is allocated to menstrual products, no response was given). This approach was justified by arguing it gives people in poverty the freedom to choose which products they want (Vlaams Parlement, 2022c). Although these additional budgets and the increases in the ‘Groeipakket’ the past two years are positive evolutions, they do not change the perception of period poverty as a mere poverty problem nor of menstruation as shameful and taboo.

“The theme of menstrual products has received significant attention already, but we miss a clear reasoning behind the proposal to develop separate policies. When looking at cost of living, the reference budgets do not point to any inequality between men and women.” (CD&V, written communication, May 4, 2023).

Here, the party argues against separate menstrual health policies because of an alleged lack of gender inequality in cost of living. However, it fails to touch upon the fact that period poverty still exists (regardless of inequality in cost of living), that it actually reproduces gender inequality because of the detrimental impact on one’s social, physical and mental health, and that period poverty is more than a symptom of poverty (Caritas, 2020; Enright, 2019).

Finally, part of the statement of the ad-interim minister of Well-Being during the parliamentary meeting of October 18 2022 was the exact reproduction of the statement provided by his predecessor during the meeting of March 15 2022 (Vlaams Parlement, 2022b; Vlaams Parlement, 2022c). This demonstrates a coherent, albeit stagnant, party approach to menstrual health.

5.3.3.2 Differences

Compared to the other majority parties, CD&V less directly employs the neoliberal ideology of individual responsibility but instead highlights actions already undertaken to fight poverty and shifts responsibility to the Committee for Education (Azevedo et al., 2019; de Goede, 1996; Vlaams Parlement, 2020c; Vlaams Parlement, 2021a; Vlaams Parlement, 2022b; Vlaams Parlement, 2022c; Vlaams Parlement, 2022d).

Finally, the ad-interim minister of Well-Being declared a digital platform will be built in collaboration with Sensoa, a non-profit organization centred on sexual and reproductive health in Belgium, centralizing all information on the various initiatives concerning period poverty (Vlaams Parlement, 2022b). Meetings with Sensoa were said to start in the beginning of 2023, however, no updates have been given on the platform's status to date (Vlaams Parlement, 2023b). Vooruit has submitted a parliamentary question on this matter, unfortunately the minister's reply will only be published at the end of June 2023 (Vooruit, written communication, May 16, 2023).

The three remaining parties (PvDA, Vooruit and Groen) have submitted proposals suggesting free menstrual products in Flemish schools (Vlaams Parlement, 2020a; Vlaams Parlement, 2020b). In these proposals, and the following parliamentary debates, they employ a discourse radically different from the ones employed by the parties discussed so far. The next section elaborates on the discursive characteristics and counterarguments given by these opposition parties.

5.4 Additional discourses

This section aims to provide an answer to the last sub-question: *“Which other discourses are employed by Flemish political parties when justifying their respective positions on period poverty?”*

Existing literature has shown that a variety of scholars, activists and international institutions perceive good menstrual health as a fundamental human right (Bobel, 2010; Hennegan, 2017; Jieun, 2019; Consultation on draft long list of goal, target and indicator options for future global monitoring of water, sanitation and hygiene, 2012). Besides access to clean menstrual products, this discourse also includes being well educated on the topic of menstruation, full participation in work and social life without experiencing shame or taboo, and access to affordable healthcare (Human Rights Council, 2021; Sommer et al., 2021; Rossouw & Ross, 2021) It demands a holistic governmental approach that accounts for possible economic, social and political limitations to menstrual health and includes both preventive and

reactive measures (Yilmaz & Willis, 2020). Consequently, menstrual health (and period poverty) includes more than mere access to hygienic products. This broader focus concerning individual health and needs was not reproduced by any of the majority parties nor by Vlaams Belang. However, several elements of this human rights discourse are shared by Groen, Vooruit and PvdA.

5.4.1 Groen

Groen addresses various economic, political and social factors restricting women in Flanders to experience good menstrual health. First, it stresses the hegemonic neoliberal ideology that believes each individual to be responsible for one's own success or failure (Azevedo et al., 2019; de Goede, 1996; Groen, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 1, 2023). Consequently, people living in poverty are often blamed for their precarious financial situation rather than considering the impact of austerity policies and the "meritocracy on speed". The latter term refers to the tendency to assign one's financial success to their own actions rather than considering the socio-economic situation they were born in.

"Parents do not fail to buy menstrual products for their children because they are lazy, and if they are tired it is because they stayed up until 2 A.M. worrying about what to do tomorrow" (Groen, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 1, 2023)

"In school, every child is equal. I see you looking, but this is about real people, Minister. It is about real youth."
(Vlaams Parlement, 2023b)

Second, the party has mentioned several times that period poverty is more than just the inability to access menstrual products (Groen, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 1, 2023; Vlaams Parlement, 2020b). It also includes having sufficient knowledge about one's own biological processes and access to washing facilities, electricity, water and privacy. Third, the double stigma surrounding poverty and menstruation makes it difficult for third parties to identify period poverty, regardless of how 'close' they are to the people experiencing it (Vlaams Parlement, 2020b; Vlaams Parlement, 2021a). Finally, Groen believes period poverty should be seen as reflecting societal gender inequality because it poses physical (using unhygienic alternatives), psychological (shame and fear of leakages) and social (school absenteeism, isolation) health risks to women, and sees female bodies as pathologically deviant (Blázquez Rodríguez, 2021; van Eerdewijk 2001).

“Period poverty exceeds poverty. It is about the structural subordination of women in science, politics, healthcare and symptom reduction” (Groen, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 1, 2023).

“Menstruation is a normal bodily function and does not need to cause shame: students should be able to peacefully go to school, also during their menstruation” (Groen and Vooruit in proposal for resolution, Vlaams Parlement, 2020b)

Hence, two contradictory discourses are present in Groen’s arguments. Characteristics of the human rights discourse such as health risk identification and a broader perspective of gender inequality are employed to clarify their own position. In contrast, shedding light on the commonly used neoliberal ideology delegitimizes the arguments of the parties who rejected Groen’s proposal.

“Who opts to not offer menstrual products for free [in schools], makes an ideological choice” (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a)

The transcripts of several parliamentary meetings mention laughs or sighs expressed by other parties when discussing period poverty and menstruation (Vlaams Parlement, 2022c; Vlaams Parlement, 2023b). This could signify that the taboo around menstruation is also present within political parties and should therefore be taken into account when analysing their respective positions.

“More than 50 percent of those who attend school have a big problem related to material deprivation for four to six days each month. I see you are laughing, but you have never been in this situation” (Vlaams Parlement, 2022c)

Because people living in poverty often lose their dignity and freedom of choice, Groen agrees with the majority parties that a structural approach would be the best solution (Groen, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 1, 2023; Vlaams Parlement, 2021a). However, the party points to the majority parties’ contradictive argumentation because they refuse to implement a structural, Flemish solution and instead argue for scattered localised initiatives. The latter do not have the partner network nor the financial resources necessary for a large-scale intervention. Additionally, the ‘Groeipakket’, often referred to by the majority parties as the solution to period poverty, is unequally distributed (Stop Kinderarmoede, n.d.). Consistent with the human rights approach, Groen therefore sees reducing period poverty as a governmental responsibility (WHO Statement on menstrual health and rights, 2022).

“Research shows that child allowance is not fairly distributed across the population. So does [the government] want to free up fictitious money to fight period poverty and distribute it across families? Fine. But ensure that the social allowance is sufficient and divided effectively” (Groen, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 1, 2023)

The party argues that schools play an essential role in preventing period poverty because this is the only place (almost) every child goes to. A lack of governmental support shifts the financial burden to the individual schools. Further, it neglects the governmental responsibility to prevent child inequality (Groen, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 1, 2023; Vlaams Parlement, 2021a; Vlaams Parlement, 2021c)

“Not every school has the budget, resources or knowhow to tackle [period poverty]. A regional approach could unburden them, because now they take actions themselves” (Vlaams Parlement, 2023b)

Similarly, local administrations are overburdened “because they are asked to solve each poverty problem” (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a). Groen refutes CD&V’s argument that the additional economic support to food banks will provide a solution because it fails to consider individual thresholds such as long queues, experienced shame and the fact that hygienic products are not automatically included (Caritas, 2020; Vlaams Parlement, 2022c).

The proposal Groen and Vooruit submitted together referred to several international use cases, Flemish civil society initiatives and a statement by the Children’s Rights Commissioner that all support the idea of free menstrual products (Vlaams Parlement, 2020b). Including evidence of good practices and experts has the ability to increase one’s own credibility or authority on the topic (Joye & Maesele, 2022).

Finally, even though Groen is the ecological party in Flanders, they are against the push for sustainable products in order to fight period poverty (Groen, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 1, 2023). The party argues that poor people should not be the frontrunners when it comes to sustainability nor should their freedom of choice be decreased even more.

5.4.2 Vooruit

Because of the jointly submitted proposal by Groen and Vooruit in December 2020, many discursive characteristics of Groen’s position are similar to Vooruit’s. The main aspects discussed in this proposal were: Period poverty as more than a mere symptom of poverty; the psychological, physical and social

health risks related to period poverty; menstruation as a normal bodily function that should not induce shame; the need for a structural approach implemented by the Flemish government in order to prevent inequality; the invisible character of poverty; and the balance between sustainability and freedom of choice (Vlaams Parlement, 2020b). All of these characteristics have been elaborated on in the previous section.

The most significant difference between Groen and Vooruit is their respective emphasis on individual experiences of people living in poverty. For instance, Vooruit did not discuss the broader ‘blame the victim’ ideology present today that shifts culpability to the individual (Azevedo et al., 2019; de Goede, 1996). Additionally, whilst Groen wants to only target people living in poverty (except in a school environment), Vooruit also wants menstrual products to be provided in public bathrooms (Vooruit, written communication, May 16, 2023). The latter would be consistent with the recommendation stated in the 2019 Resolution of the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2019)

“Why are we here, in the Flemish Parliament? It is important that each Flemish person can be supported in their municipality in an equal manner. [...] What is this really about? Gender equality” (Vlaams Parlement, 2022c)

During several parliamentary meetings, Vooruit has argued that period poverty is a symptom of gender and child inequality rather than mere poverty (Vlaams Parlement, 2020c; Vlaams Parlement, 2021a; Vlaams Parlement, 2021c). Further, the party highlighted the important role the Committee for Education plays in preventing student absenteeism and in improving education on sexual and reproductive health.

“[Menstruation taboo] needs to be discussed in school. The educational sector has an important responsibility here, and now it depends too much still on the school you attend whether you will receive sexual education and know your own bodily processes. Because concerning menstruation, for instance, you only receive biological information but not what happens on an emotional or hormonal level.” (Vooruit, interview, Microsoft Teams, December 19, 2022)

Similar to Groen, Vooruit has mentioned that the (male) ministers expressed signs of awkwardness when confronted with the topic and other parties demonstrated signs of non-verbal resistance (Vooruit, interview, Microsoft Teams, December 19, 2022; Vooruit, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 26, 2023).

“If men could menstruate, these products would already be freely available. (Vlaams Belang party member sighs). Yes, you can sigh, I am not surprised by this behaviour from Vlaams Belang.” (Vlaams Parlement, 2023b)

Finally, Vooruit was the only party that touched upon the issue of period poverty experienced by homeless menstruators (Vlaams Parlement, 2022b; Vooruit, interview Microsoft Teams, January 26, 2023).

5.4.3 PvDA

PvDA suggests that the ‘blame the victim’ ideology is held by right-wing and neoliberal parties because it fits their aim of downsizing governmental responsibility and instead making the individual and/or parents responsible for one’s well-being, financial situation and care (Azevedo et al., 2019; de Goede, 1996; PvDA, interview, Brussels, February 7, 2023).

Like Groen and Vooruit, the party perceives the political approach to period poverty as a reflection of one’s general position on gender inequality:

“The answer to a simple question as offering menstrual products uncovers a lot about [a political party’s] vision on society, women and equality.” (PvDA, interview, Brussels, February 7, 2023)

“[Menstrual products] are an additional cost for women that they are forced to spend. The fact that women need to pay and men do not, is a case of inequality.” (PvDA, interview, Brussels, February 7, 2023)

Not only the lack of attention for menstrual health but also regarding other reproductive and sexual rights demonstrates a significant gender inequality in Flanders, according to PvDA. For instance, the gender orgasm gap and the fact that the clitoris has only been added in its entirety to school books since 2021, show a patriarchal oppression of knowledge related to women’s sexual experiences (Mayda, 2021; Enright, 2019; PvDA, interview, Brussels, February 7, 2023). The study conducted by Caritas (2020) shows a similar lack of knowledge about menstruation: One out of five menstruators did not know which products to use when they got their first period and more than 30% said not to have sufficient information about menstruation. The current Flemish educational plan for secondary schools merely includes the need to understand menstruation as a biological process (e.g. impact on reproduction, hormonal changes during menstruation, influence of birth control on the menstrual cycle) (GO!, n.d.; Sensoa, n.d.). Whether a broader interpretation is given to menstrual health education therefore depends on the school and/or teacher. The reduction of menstruation to a female biological process fails to lift the biomedical discourse

(Houppert, 1999; van Eerdwijk, 2001). Consequently, together with the government's inaction to expand menstrual education, it suggests that schools are important state institutions for the reproduction of its hegemonic ideologies (Moten & Harney, 2004).

"Knowledge is power. The shame and non-knowledge about menstruation is enormous. If you are in need of menstrual pads, you first hide it before going to the bathroom. This is hallucinating. It needs to be discussed. In addition, not having the right products is also an issue of poverty and shame. So it needs to be freely available."

(PvDA, interview, Brussels, February 7, 2023)

In contrast to Groen, PvDA demands free menstrual products for everyone, rather than only for the ones in need. The party argues that overall free availability is the only way to decrease shame surrounding both poverty and menstruation (PvDa, interview, Brussels, February 7, 2023). Currently, women are attempting to cope with this shame on an individual level even though it is a society-wide problem: "Why do we need to be secretive about a necessity that every woman needs on a monthly basis?" (Vlaams Parlement, 2021a). The party suggests that menstrual products should be widely available without any thresholds. In schools, for instance, it should be directly offered to menstruators without a middleman to avoid any further stigmatization (PvDA, interview, Brussels, February 7, 2023).

5.4.4 Discursive inconsistencies

Even though Groen perceives menstrual health as a human right and period poverty as the lack of products, knowledge and infrastructure, it strategically uses period poverty as a way to improve the governmental approach to poverty (Groen, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 1, 2023). The party believes this topic could speak to people's empathic ability and therefore alter the 'blame the victim' ideology currently held about people in poverty (Azevedo et al., 2019; de Goede, 1996). However, this strategic approach might reinforce the political debate to be reduced to one about poverty rather than stimulating a conversation around gender inequality. Similarly, all three parties have equated the need for menstrual products to the need for toilet paper in schools. Whilst this stresses the unequivocal need of such basic necessities, it also risks further reduction of the discussion about period poverty to one about poverty. In addition, Groen argues against an overall availability of free menstrual products because it could lead to unfair redistribution to the top (comparing free menstrual products to free electricity: "A person who wants to heat their pool does not need subsidies for electricity"; Groen, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 1, 2023). This is somewhat contradictory to the party's general position on period

poverty because having a financially stable living situation does not ensure having constant access to menstrual products nor to the budget needed to buy these products. It argues for overall free menstrual products in schools because of children equality but fails to do the same for equality on a societal level. Further, it does not address the capitalist dependency of menstruators on private companies to provide them with the necessary products (van Eerdewijk, 2001; Winkler, 2020; Wood, 2020). Even though this is not directly touched upon by any of the parties, PvdA's proposal for overall free availability, and Vooruit's suggestion of offering products in public spaces, would cater to it.

The three parties have communicated a positive and supporting position towards minority genders in their election programmes (Groen, 2019; PvdA, 2019; Vooruit, 2019). However, the critical discourse analysis identified some inconsistencies with regards to menstrual health. First, Vooruit has proposed offering free menstrual products in the bathrooms in schools (Vlaams Parlement, 2021e; Vooruit, interview, Microsoft Teams, December 19, 2022). If they follow a gender binary thinking, it will fail to include transmen and non-binary people (Bobel, 2010; Guilló-Arakistain, 2020; Wood 2020). In a similar vein, no politician (of any party) has used gender-neutral terms such as 'menstruators' to talk about the people experiencing period poverty, and gender inequality was generally understood as an issue of men versus women. Since all interviewees of these parties claimed to be feminists, this could be related to Repo's critique on the frequent use of gender by feminist organisations and its reinforcement of male/female binaries (Bogle, 2018; Repo, 2015)

Additionally, no notion has been made of how menstruators of colour are disproportionately located lower on the socio-economic ladder, failing to take an intersectional approach on the matter (Statistiek Vlaanderen, 2023). Lastly, both PvdA and Vooruit have mentioned the importance of offering discrete solutions to period poverty (Vlaams Parlement, 2020a; Vlaams Parlement, 2021b). This all could suggest that the hegemonic biomedical and non-intersectional discourse is still deeply ingrained in political thinking.

5.4.5 Civil society

During the interviews, all opposition parties suggested that proposals are frequently rejected by the majority parties solely because they are submitted by the opposition. As a counter-strategy, PvdA, Vooruit and Groen aim to build pressure on the government to include relevant topics to the political debate by

creating a significant public support base. Public awareness is increased through press communication and collaboration with civil society organizations.

“We notice that in the current democratic system, opposition parties do not achieve much by submitting parliamentary proposals on a weekly basis because they are rejected. That is not smart politics. If we really want to enforce certain measures, societal pressure on the political agenda is necessary.” (PvDA, interview, Brussels, February 7, 2023)

“Creating awareness is a responsibility of civil society. Politics’ responsibility is to channel all demands and put them on the political agenda.” (Vooruit, interview, Microsoft Teams, December 19, 2022)

“Civil society initiatives unfortunately do not find their way to politics often enough. Bigger organisations and unions are used to lobbying but smaller civil society organisations are not. It is important though that they as well are involved in politics in order to put certain societal topics on the societal and political agenda. They need political allies.” (Groen, phone interview, February 6, 2023)

In contrast, the remaining four parties have referred to civil society as an important actor to tackle period poverty in Flanders. This is in line with the neoliberal ideology that prioritizes private companies over the individual (Jessen, 2021). Consequently, civil society is perceived as complementary to the state and therefore the legitimate provider of welfare services.

5.5 Broader discursive characteristics

Even though this thesis focuses on the respective political positions regarding period poverty, the political debate on this topic touches upon the parties’ broader perspective on gender equality. Menstrual health might be considered to be a less controversial topic than other reproductive and sexual rights such as abortion or sexual orientation. This could be a potential reason for the topic being part of the political debate for three years without any intervention or change in party position. This section is therefore dedicated to providing an overview of the broader discourses employed by the opponents of free menstrual products in schools.

5.5.1 Vlaams Belang

“Of course we try to do politics between the people because if one does not come between the people, one cannot do politics. That way you can hear what people are thinking about, what they are frustrated about and what their biggest needs are.” (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023)

Throughout the interview, Vlaams Belang made several references to ‘the people’ (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023). This emphasis on wanting to represent ‘the people’ and thus reducing the region’s population to one entity, is characteristic of populist ideologies (Erel, 2018; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Such parties typically reinforce a polarizing narrative between an ingroup (the region’s population) and an outgroup (the government and/or minority groups such as migrants, LGBTQ+ communities or women). Multiple examples of this polarizing narrative were present in the interview and the party’s election programme:

“We first need to take care of our own people. The more [poverty] we import, the more difficult it is to fight poverty.” (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023)

“Even in Flanders Islam dominates the personal life and the morale of thousands of Muslims. This is more than problematic, also because the Islam is contradictory to our western achievements such as our civil freedoms and equality between man and woman.” (Election programme - Vlaams Belang, 2019: 31)

The final quote demonizes people practicing the Islamic religion by instrumentalizing the allegedly achieved gender equality in the West. Importantly, they do not mention ‘gender equality’, but equality between men and women which reproduces gender binarity based on biological determinism (Bobel, 2010; Guilló-Arakistain, 2020; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Wood, 2020). Interestingly, gender was solely mentioned once in the election programme of 2019 (see quote below; Vlaams Belang, 2019). However, over the past few years, the party has been extremely critical of the alleged ‘gender ideology’ and ‘woke madness’ in society (Vlaams Belang, 2021; Vlaams Belang, 2022a; Vlaams Belang, 2022b). It will be intriguing to see how often gender is touched upon in their 2024 election programme.

“An engineering degree is more valuable for our society than a degree in gender studies. Instead of using the amount of students and graduates as funding criteria for educational institutions, the quality and effectiveness should be decisive.” (Election programme - Vlaams Belang, 2019: 75).

This is consistent with literature on anti-gender campaigns in Europe in which gender studies and gender university departments are depicted as “a waste of public money” (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018: 10). Studies related to gender are supposedly non-scientific and ideological in nature opposed to the ‘objective’ sciences such as biology or engineering. However if sex was to be defined on a biological basis, it is not correct to say that man and woman are the only two options because 1,7% of people have intersex traits (Enright, 2019). Important to note is that this narrative was absent during both Vlaams Belang’s interview and parliamentary meetings. A possible explanation is that attention to menstrual health is not being perceived as being part of the so-called ‘gender ideology’ present in society. In addition, contextual differences in audience and intention might have also had an impact (Joye & Maesele, 2022). Whilst an election programme is aimed at gaining popularity across the population, the meetings and interview were respectively in a political and academic environment and about a topic not necessarily seen as the party’s priority.

Finally, children’s vulnerability was instrumentalized to argue for the importance of the nuclear family (Erel, 2018; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2014).

“Freelancers should also fall under the same parental leave regulation as employees because it is about the development of a child [...] The same goes for foster parents. These are people that accept children into their home because these children cannot find the necessary comfort in their own family.” (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023)

“It is important for our party that a family grows together which is only possible if everyone is involved... It is important that both parents are present. It is about the child’s needs.” (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 12, 2023)

Importantly, one could question whether the opposition parties have employed a similar strategy of instrumentalizing children’s vulnerability in order to achieve their goal.

5.5.2 N-VA

Following a biopolitical approach to gender and sexuality, the interviewee of N-VA held a gender binary and heteronormative perspective throughout the interview (Foucault, 1976; N-VA, interview, Brussels, January 24, 2023; Repo, 2013; Senellart et al., 2008). This perspective was being justified through

instrumentalizing children's vulnerability and pointing to the biological prevalence of heterosexuality in nature (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020; Erel, 2018; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2014; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Increasing awareness of these similarities to the far-right, anti-gender discourse is important because it highlights the impact N-VA, as Flanders' (and Belgium's) biggest party, can have on a backward reform of policies related to gender equality (Erel, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Kane, 2018; Möser et al., 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018).

"We believe that everyone has their right, has their place. What we do not want is that it becomes overcultivated. [...] What is most common is that a man and a woman find each other in their sexual attractiveness towards one another. That is until today the most common, what is most seen. Then you of course have homosexuals and all other sexualities. That is okay, that can exist and have its place. [...] We just don't think that it should be cultivated to the new normal. [...] I am afraid that if this is cultivated, especially children hitting puberty will start to doubt. Because I as an adult know what is possible and who I am but many children of a certain age do not, and these are the most vulnerable. [...] According to nature we should procreate and that is easiest when you are in a man/woman relationship. Is the other then abnormal? No, because also that is presented in nature. But nature also has its proportions and if you want to procreate, [heterosexuality] is the easiest way to do so. And this should be known, that it is the most common way to procreate and experience sexuality." (N-VA, interview, Brussels, January 24, 2023)

The focus on reproduction as a way of justifying heteronormativity is consistent with the biopolitical control of the entire population and its individual bodies (Foucault, 1976; Repo, 2013; Senellart et al., 2008).

5.5.3 Open VLD and CD&V

Open VLD and CD&V have argued for including sexual and gender diversity in education, for the annihilation of traditional gender roles in society and for broader equality between men and women (CD&V, 2019; Open VLD, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 8, 2023; Open VLD, 2019). However, their rejection of the proposals by Groen, Vooruit and PvdA restrict the achievement of gender equality in Flanders. This difference between discourse and practice proves the importance of studying a single gender equality topic rather than gender equality in general (Berqvist et al., 2018). Only by increasing awareness of such underlying and indirect resistance to gender equality is it possible to identify the lack of responsibility taken by the government to achieve full gender equality. It also opens up the discussion regarding a possible shift to the right present in Flemish politics (Erel, 2018; Yilmaz, 2012).

5.6 Intertextuality

No significant differences were found regarding Fairclough's second dimension between the interviews and the parliamentary meetings on the topic of period poverty (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough, 2003). Thus, the context of both formats did not seem to impact the argumentative content of the parties. With the exception of the aforementioned Open VLD member, this demonstrates intertextual consistency throughout the parties' positions (van Dijk, 2009; Fairclough, 1995). An interesting observation was that the interviewees of the opposition parties critiqued governmental actions significantly more than vice versa. All shared their discontent about proposals being rejected because they were submitted by the opposition (Groen, interview, Microsoft Teams, February 2, 2023; PvDA, interview, Brussels, February 7, 2023; Vlaams Belang, interview, Vlaams Belang, January 12, 2023; Vooruit, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 26, 2023). Additionally, the interviewees of Groen, Vooruit and PvDA related the rejection of their proposals on period poverty to the government's patriarchal and neoliberal ideologies. Such structural critique was less prevalent during the parliamentary meetings, potentially due to the majority parties then being at the receiving end of it.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Discussion

6.1.1 Strengths and Limitations

This study was conducted for a master's dissertation during a time range of eight months, limiting the possibility of in-depth research. First, only one or two party members were interviewed per political party, so generalizations of specific language characteristics should be approached with caution. For instance, the interviewed representative of Vlaams Belang made significant connections to their personal life and included many emotive adjectives in their answers (Vlaams Belang, interview, Microsoft Teams, January 16, 2023). However, it is impossible to say whether that is part of the party's political strategy or to be attributed to the individual's personality. Further, increasing the number of interviewees would have allowed us to gain a better understanding of personal opinions in addition to the party standpoints. One of the members of Open VLD, for instance, clearly communicated a different position than their party's on the idea of offering free menstrual products in schools (Vlaams Parlement, 2022d). Second, the participants were only interviewed once which might have limited knowledge collection and the researcher's ability to build trust (Harvey, 2011; Liu, 2018). Third, since significantly more political initiatives around period poverty have been taken on a federal and Walloon level compared to the Flemish level, it would be interesting to compare the discourses and party constellations of each region. Fourth, not only politicians impact policy-making, but also non-state actors such as media and civil society organisations (van Dijk, 1997). It would have been valuable to study both actors in order to get a better idea of the relations between politics, media and civil society. Finally, since this thesis is based on qualitative research, it is difficult to draw any decisive conclusions (Haesebrouck, 2022).

I believe that this study was able to avoid several pitfalls that are common when conducting critical discourse analysis. First, scholars state CDA research frequently lacks a longitudinal approach (Joye & Maesele, 2022). By including the election programmes of 2019 and committee meeting transcripts of 2020-2023, the results provide a comprehensive view of the parties' position during the entire current legislature. I do acknowledge that including previous legislatures might have added value, however that is beyond the scope of this thesis. Second, a risk for researchers conducting CDA is to blindly stare at the textual nuances rather than integrating its findings into the broader societal context. Throughout my research, I have tried to remain aware of the underlying power relations, the connection of menstrual

health positions to the wider political discourses and the impact this could have on the evolution of Flemish politics.

6.1.2 Future recommendations

Since this is the first study to examine political discourses on period poverty, it would be valuable to reproduce it on an international level. Many other European countries have been confronted with a rise of far-right and anti-gender parties so it would be interesting to research how such ideology translates to the topic of menstrual health and whether non-far-right parties employ a similar discourse (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Verloo, 2018). In addition, due to the time and resource limitations of a master's thesis, this research was conducted on a Flemish level. However, some policy domains related to menstrual health are federal responsibilities. Future research could identify existing similarities and differences between the discourses employed on the Flemish, Walloon, Brussels and national political level. Additionally, it would be interesting to examine the discursive characteristics in Flemish politics with regards to other topics related to gender equality, both experienced mainly by low-income communities and by people higher up on the socio-economic ladder. The hegemonic neoliberal ideology characterized by victim-blaming might impact politicians' sense of urgency and empathy for topics specific to people living in poverty (Azevedo et al., 2019). Furthermore, the data collected was limited to interviews, meeting transcripts and election programmes. However, social media has increasingly become an important political arena (Heinemann & Stern, 2022). Political parties in Belgium, for instance, spent collectively around five million euros on social media advertising in 2022 (België kampioen in politieke advertenties op sociale media, 2023). N-VA and Vlaams Belang, were even in the European top three. Social media has proven to be an important platform for diverse political parties, especially for the far-right and other anti-gender actors (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020; Heinemann & Stern, 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2016). As this arena is mainly dominated by men, it facilitates oppressive language towards gender, sexuality and reproduction (Heinemann & Stern, 2022). It would therefore prove useful for future research to study which discourses are used by individual politicians and their parties on social media in order to attract voters.

6.2 Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to identify the discourses employed by the Flemish political parties when justifying their respective standpoints on period poverty interventions. Even though each party's position had some unique elements (e.g. Vlaams Belang employing a polarizing narrative of one 'homogenous

Flemish people' against the ethnic 'other'), a division could be made between the four most right-wing parties and the three most left-wing parties. The former argued against additional governmental interventions and instead for a local approach focused on poverty reduction. It suggests that the Flemish government does not see tackling period poverty as a priority nor as its responsibility. Whilst this is directly in line with the neoliberal ideology of individual responsibility and austerity, it also indirectly reinforces the far-right, anti-gender political agenda. By reducing period poverty to a symptom of poverty, it neglects the underlying gender inequality, shame and taboo. It is consistent with the biopolitical discourse that justifies the political control of biologically female bodies and therefore minimizes the individual control over one's own body and life (Foucault, 1976; Repo, 2013, Senellart et al., 2008). The biomedical discourse perceiving biologically female bodies as pathological and abnormal was reproduced by N-VA and CD&V's focus on the need for discretion (Blázquez Rodríguez, 2021; van Eerdewijk 2001; Wood, 2020). The wider discursive characteristics of Vlaams Belang and N-VA clearly reinforced the biopolitical approach of gender and sexuality (Foucault, 1976; Repo, 2013; Senellart et al., 2008). These findings point to the importance of not automatically equating anti-gender politics with far-right parties. Instead, at least in Flanders, biopolitical, biomedical and neoliberal characteristics of this discourse were found in each of these parties' standpoints. Of course, it is important to note that European state structures are inherently patriarchal and act with a bias towards heterosexual men's interest (Connell, 1990). Therefore, it serves as an optimal breeding ground for these gender discriminatory and essentialist political narratives and actions. The three most left-wing parties, on the other hand, employed a human rights discourse when arguing for governmental interventions to tackle period poverty. They focused on the individual mental, social and physical health risks of bad menstrual health, the underlying gender inequality it reflects and the fact that period poverty also includes a lack of education and infrastructure. The most significant difference between them concerned who should receive free menstrual products. Should it be focused on people living in poverty (Groen), also offered in public spaces (Vooruit), or made available to everyone (PvDA)? Even though these parties oppose gender binary thinking, they too fell for its hegemonic dominance by using 'women' and 'girls' instead of 'menstruators' and by perceiving gender inequality as inequality between men and women (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018).

Hopefully, this dissertation could increase awareness concerning how the far-right, anti-gender political agenda is not only achieved through direct backward reforms of gender equality and women's rights. Instead, a lack of governmental interventions on seemingly less related topics such as menstrual health could play into their overall aim to reduce gender equality in society. Flanders can only become a region

of full gender equality if its government is willing to be critical of its own narratives and annihilate any existing social, economic and political barriers.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 : Interview questions

Original Dutch version

1. Wat zijn de huidige politieke/ beleidsprioriteiten van uw politieke partij? Hoe wordt dit beslist?
2. Welke standpunten en doelstellingen heeft uw partij om menstruatiearmoede tegen te gaan in Vlaanderen? Welke maatregelen zijn hieromtrent reeds genomen (of nog gepland)? Indien uw partij hier geen plannen voor heeft, waarom niet?
3. Welke standpunten en doelstellingen heeft uw partij omtrent het verbeteren van seksuele en reproductieve rechten in Vlaanderen? Welke maatregelen zijn hieromtrent reeds genomen (of nog gepland)? Indien uw partij hier geen plannen voor heeft, waarom niet?
4. Indien een focus op menstruatiearmoede en/of seksuele en reproductieve rechten in lijn ligt met de politieke agenda van uw partij:
 - a. Wat voorkomt uw partij om (verdere) actie te ondernemen rond deze topics?
 - b. Wat zijn de strategieën die door uw politieke partij worden gehanteerd om deze topics bespreekbaar te maken op Vlaams niveau?
5. Worden menstruele gezondheid, en de bredere seksuele en reproductieve rechten, als voldoende relevant gezien op Vlaams niveau volgens U? Waarom wel/niet?
6. Welk politiek orgaan moet volgens U verantwoordelijk zijn voor het verbeteren van seksuele en reproductieve rechten, inclusief het recht op menstruele gezondheid?
7. Organisaties zoals Sensoa, Bruzelle, She-Decides en Vrouwenraad hebben reeds initiatief ondernomen rond deze topics. Zijn er eventuele samenwerkingen gepland met dergelijke organisaties vanuit uw partij? Waarom wel/niet?
8. Hoe belangrijk acht U dergelijke burgerlijke initiatieven voor het aanpakken van topics zoals menstruatiearmoede?

Translated English version

1. What are the current political/ policy priorities of your party? How is this decided upon?
2. Which standpoints and goals does your party have to combat period poverty in Flanders? Which related actions have already been taken (or are planned)? If your party does not have any plans, why not?
3. Which standpoints and goals does your party have to improve SRHR in Flanders? Which related actions have already been taken (or are planned)? If your party does not have any plans, why not?
4. If a focus on period poverty and/ or SRHR is in line with the political agenda of your party:
 - a. What prevents your party from undertaking (further) action concerning these topics?
 - b. What are the strategies of your political party to make these topics discussible on a Flemish level?
5. Is menstrual health, and SRHR, seen as sufficiently relevant on a Flemish level according to you? Why/why not?
6. Which political level should be responsible for the improvement of SRHR, including menstrual health, according to you?
7. Organizations such as Sensoa, Bruzelle, She-Decides and Vrouwenraad have already taken several initiatives concerning these topics. Are there collaborations planned (or already done) between our party and such organizations ? Why/ why not?
8. How important are these civil society initiatives to combat period poverty according to you?

Appendix 2: Advertisements of menstrual products throughout the years



Advertisement for Modess menstrual pads from 1946, published in *The Australian Women's Mirror* (Connory, 2021). Focus of the advertisement is on secrecy, in line with the 'culture of concealment' (Houppert, 1999)

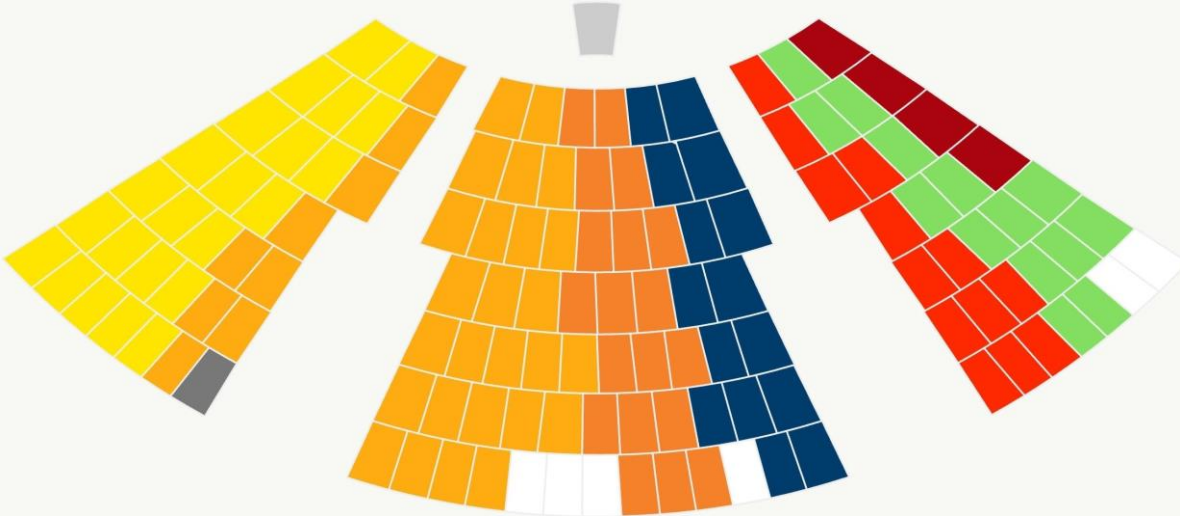


Advertisement Stayfree menstrual pads from 1981 (Bajaj, 2019). Focus of the advertisement is on menstrual odor, in line with the biomedical discourse that views biologically female processes as pathologically deviant (Blázquez Rodríguez, 2021; van Eerdewijk 2001). Menstruation is perceived as something dirty and shameful (Koskenniemi, 2021; Wood, 2020).



Snapshot of Always commercial for their Ultra product line in 2015 (Always UK, 2015). Blue liquid is supposed to depict menstrual blood, suggesting menstrual blood is something that should remain hidden. The rest of the commercial shows four young women in short dresses after a night of partying, all happy and beautiful. It neglects hormonal changes and pain that occurs during menstruation and suggests women should not feel differently than any other week of the month if they have the right (discrete) product.

Appendix 3: Seat distribution of Flemish Parliament



Left to right: Vlaams Belang, N-VA, CD&V, Open VLD, Vooruit, Groen, PvDA (Vlaams Parlement, n.d.)

Appendix 4 : Demographic distribution of Committees

Committee for Well-Being, Health, Family and Poverty Reduction (CWHFP)

Members:

- Gender: 10 men (including president) - 21 women
- Ethnicity: 100% white

Responsible ministers throughout this legislature: Wouter Beke (CD&V - white man), Benjamin Dalle (CD&V - white man), Hilde Crevits (CD&V - white woman)

Committee for Domestic Governance, Equal Opportunities & Integration (CDGEOI)

Members

- Gender: 17 men (including president) - 14 women
- Ethnicity: 1 Moroccan Belgian - 1 Turkish Belgian - 29 white

Responsible minister: Bart Somers (Open VLD - white man)

Committee for Education (CE)

Members

- Gender: 16 men - 14 women (including president)
- Ethnicity: 1 Moroccan Belgian - 1 Turkish Belgian - 29 white

Responsible minister: Ben Weyts (N-VA - white man)

Appendix 5 : Overview Focus SRHR (in Flanders) in Election Programmes

Vlaams Belang

- More severe punishment for perpetrators of sexual violence (including chemical castration and lifelong supervision of justice)
- Anti-harassment alarms for women and the elderly
- Improving families' purchasing power and their financial resources in order to increase the average birth ratio
- Better work-life balance through increased parental leave and childcare

No notion of 'reproductive rights', 'sexual rights', menstruation, menstrual pads, tampons, pregnancy, abortion, contraception or women's rights

N-VA

- Fight against sexual and gender-based violence (including Female Genital Mutilation and forced marriages)
- Equality and individual freedom of religion, sex and sexual orientation, etc
- "People with an intersex condition and their environment have the right to get support." (p. 50)
- Everyone should accept homo- and transsexuality

No notion of women's rights, SRHR on Flemish level, menstruation, menstrual pads, tampons, abortion, contraception, pregnancy (except by including pregnancy leave in retirement)

Open VLD

- Better balance of care work between mother and father
- Reducing risks of postnatal depression
- Increasing the time period for legal abortion, currently 12 weeks.
- Pregnancy leave included in retirement
- Tackling sexual harassment in cultural sector
- Legislation around surrogacy
- Sexual education focussed on gender identity, sexual experience, sexual identity
- Fight against Female Genital Mutilation, sexual and gender-based violence, oppression and forced marriage
- Increasing women's rights and tackling sexual violence in 'developing' countries
- Promotion of sexual and reproductive rights through the international She Decides campaign, focused on emancipation

No notion of menstruation, contraception, menstrual pads, tampons

CD&V

- Better balance of household tasks between men and women
- Refund of contraception for women in poverty
- Careful abortion procedure with professional support for women

- Legislation regarding the ability to give birth discreetly (to avoid abortion or abandonment)
- Against commercial surrogate motherhood
- Education characterized by gender neutrality and equality
- Fighting Female Genital Mutilation, sexual and gender-based violence, polygamy and forced marriages
- No room for sexual harassment or discrimination in sportclubs

No notion of menstruation, menstrual pads, tampons

Groen

- Healthy living environment for all, adapted to vulnerable groups such as pregnant women
- Balance in household tasks for men and women
- Tackling sexual harassment in sports, culture, media, healthcare, education and entrepreneurship
- Against commercial surrogate motherhood
- Increase time period for legal abortion up to 16 weeks and decrease mandatory reflection time from 6 days to 48 hours
- Refugee seeking procedure focused on vulnerable groups such as pregnant women and single mothers

No notions of menstruation, tampons, menstrual pads, contraception

Vooruit

- Fight against sexual violence (specific focus on sports, media and cultural sectors)
- Balance in household tasks for men and women
- Better registration of sexual harassment through the Institution of Equality between Men and Women
- No pregnancy discrimination
- Sexual education focussed on gender identity, sexual experience, sexual identity

No notion of menstruation, menstrual pads, tampons, abortion, contraception

PvDA

- “We want a society where the archaic mentality of patriarchal dominance disappears and where there is no place for sexism or violence against women. We want a society where women’s rights, for instance the decision to become a mother or not, is not continuously questioned but instead are indefinitely attained.” (p. 183)
- “We demand equal pay for equal work and denounce current sexist oppression.” (p. 183)
- Equality between men and women includes equal engagement in housework and childcare
- Prevent gender-based violence and sexual harassment
- Increase time for legal abortion to 18-20 weeks and decrease mandatory reflection time from 6 days to 48 hours
- Expand free contraception, for instance free birth control for women older than 21 years old

- “We invest in an inclusive form of sexual education in schools, including diversity in gender and sexual identity. It is not limited to contraception and reproduction but also touches upon sexual experience. [It should be given by experts of the field]. In the end, we want to create an open climate ... where questions of students can be handled without taboo.” (p. 195)

No notion of menstruation, menstrual products, period poverty or others in the election programme

Appendix 6 : Overview Relevant Parliamentary Meetings

DATE	TYPE	POLITICAL PARTY	COMMITTEE
20/10/20	Parliamentary Question	Vooruit	Well-Being
25/11/20	Parliamentary Question	PvDA	Well-Being
27/11/20	Proposal for Resolution	PvDA	/
2/12/20	Proposal for Resolution	Vooruit & Groen	/
15/1/21	Reaction to Proposals	/	Well-Being
28/1/21	Parliamentary Question	Vooruit	Education
15/3/21	Parliamentary Question	Vooruit	Education
16/6/21	Parliamentary Question	Vooruit	Education
29/6/21	Parliamentary Question	Vooruit	Equal Opportunities
15/3/22	Parliamentary Question	Vooruit & Groen	Well-Being
31/3/22	Parliamentary Question	Vooruit	Education
18/10/22	Parliamentary Question	Vooruit	Poverty Reduction
4/5/22	Parliamentary Question	Vooruit & Groen	Education