

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS



Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi-Disciplinary
Peer Reviewed

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MENSTRUAL LEAVE: A LEGAL, SOCIAL, AND WORKPLACE POLICY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Menstrual leave has emerged as a significant subject in labour law, gender justice, and workplace policy discourse. Although menstruation is a natural biological process, it often results in physical pain, fatigue, and psychological discomfort that adversely affect workplace performance and dignity. This research paper examines menstrual leave from legal, constitutional, medical, and human rights perspectives. It analyses international practices, the Indian legal framework, constitutional provisions, and arguments both in favour of and against menstrual leave. The paper argues that menstrual leave, when structured as a health-based and optional workplace accommodation, promotes substantive equality and workplace dignity rather than discrimination. The study concludes by recommending legislative recognition of menstrual leave as a progressive labour welfare measure in India.

Menstrual leave, a policy that allows employees to take paid or unpaid time off during menstruation, has garnered increasing attention worldwide. As workplace equality and health policies evolve, the implementation of menstrual leave is often considered a necessary step toward supporting gender inclusivity and reducing the stigma surrounding menstruation. This paper explores the concept of menstrual leave, examining its impact on workplace productivity, employee well-being, and broader societal implications. Drawing on case studies from countries with established menstrual leave policies, such as Japan, South Korea, and India, the paper investigates the legal, cultural, and economic factors influencing the adoption of such policies. Additionally, it critically examines the potential benefits, including improved employee retention and mental health, alongside the challenges, such as the risk of reinforcing gender stereotypes or exacerbating discrimination in the workplace. Through a comprehensive review of literature, surveys, and comparative analysis, this paper aims to provide a holistic view of menstrual leave's role in shaping workplace dynamics and promoting gender equity in modern employment environments.

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Keywords: Menstrual leave, Gender justice, Labour law, Workplace equality, Women's rights

I. Introduction

Menstruation is a natural biological process experienced by a significant portion of the global workforce, yet it remains largely stigmatized and insufficiently addressed within workplace policies. Many individuals experience menstrual symptoms such as severe pain, fatigue, migraines, and emotional distress, which can adversely affect their ability to work efficiently. Despite this, most labor frameworks continue to operate under gender-neutral policies that fail to account for menstruation-related health needs. In recent years, menstrual leave has emerged as a debated policy intervention aimed at promoting workplace inclusivity and employee well-being.

Menstrual leave refers to a formal policy allowing employees to take time off work during menstruation without facing penalties. The concept is not new; Japan introduced menstrual leave as early as 1947 under its Labor Standards Law, followed by other countries such as South Korea, Indonesia, and Taiwan.² More recently, nations like Spain have reignited global discussions by adopting progressive menstrual health legislation. These developments reflect a growing recognition of menstruation as both a health and labor rights issue rather than a private concern.

Menstruation is a natural biological process experienced by a substantial portion of India's female and menstruating workforce, yet it continues to be surrounded by social stigma, silence, and cultural taboos. Many individuals experience menstrual symptoms such as dysmenorrhea, fatigue, nausea, and emotional distress, which can significantly affect workplace performance and overall well-being. Despite these realities, Indian labour laws largely adopt a gender-neutral framework that fails to accommodate menstruation-related health concerns. In this context, menstrual leave has emerged as a contested yet increasingly discussed policy proposal within India's discourse on gender equality and labour rights.

Menstrual leave refers to a policy that allows employees to take leave during their menstrual cycle without professional or financial repercussions. In India, the concept is not entirely novel. The Government of Bihar introduced two days of menstrual leave per month for women

² Japan Labor Standards Law, 1947

employees as early as 1992.³ In recent years, private companies such as Zomato and Swiggy have implemented menstrual leave policies, reigniting public debate on the issue.⁴ Additionally, legislative attempts like the proposed Menstruation Benefit Bill, 2017 sought to mandate menstrual leave nationwide, though it has not yet been enacted.⁵

Supporters of menstrual leave argue that such policies recognize biological realities, promote workplace dignity, and align with constitutional principles of equality and health under Articles 14 and 21 of the Indian Constitution.⁶ Critics, however, warn that menstrual leave may reinforce gender stereotypes, discourage the hiring of women, or further marginalize menstruating employees in male-dominated workplaces.⁷ This polarized debate highlights the complexity of implementing gender-sensitive workplace reforms in India.

This research paper aims to critically examine menstrual leave in the Indian context by analyzing legal frameworks, policy initiatives, and societal attitudes, while assessing whether such measures advance gender justice or risk unintended consequences. However, menstrual leave remains controversial. Proponents argue that it supports bodily autonomy, reduces workplace stress, and acknowledges gender-specific health realities. Critics, on the other hand, contend that such policies may reinforce gender stereotypes, increase discrimination in hiring practices, or marginalize menstruating employees by portraying them as less capable. This tension highlights the need for a balanced and evidence-based examination of menstrual leave policies.

This research paper seeks to explore menstrual leave as a workplace policy through legal, social, and health perspectives. By analyzing existing legislation, scholarly literature, and global case studies, the study aims to assess whether menstrual leave advances gender equality or inadvertently deepens workplace inequalities.

II. Research Methodology

This study adopts a doctrinal and empirical research methodology to examine the concept, legality, and implications of menstrual leave. The doctrinal method involves an in-depth

³ Government of Bihar, Service Code Amendment on Special Leave for Women, 1992

⁴ Zomato, "Introducing Period Leave for Women and Transgender Employees," Official Blog, 2020

⁵ The Menstruation Benefit Bill, 2017, introduced by Ninong Ering, Lok Sabha

⁶ Consumer Education and Research Centre v. Union of India, (1995) 3 SCC 42.

⁷ John, M. E., "Gender, Labour and Law in India," Economic and Political Weekly, 2018

analysis of constitutional provisions, labour laws, judicial pronouncements, international conventions, government policies, and reports relating to women's labour rights and workplace equality. Secondary sources such as books, research articles, journals, reports of international organizations, and online legal databases are extensively relied upon.

The study is analytical and descriptive in nature, aiming to critically assess whether menstrual leave promotes substantive equality or reinforces gender stereotypes. The research relies on qualitative analysis, and data interpretation is done through logical reasoning and comparative evaluation.

III. Hypotheses

1. The absence of a uniform legal framework on menstrual leave in India adversely affects workplace equality and women's health rights.
2. Menstrual leave, if implemented without adequate safeguards, may unintentionally reinforce gender stereotypes and workplace discrimination.

IV. Research Questions

1. What is the concept and significance of menstrual leave in the context of labour rights and gender justice?
2. Does the Indian legal framework adequately address menstrual health and workplace accommodation for menstruating employees?
3. How have courts, policymakers, and employers in India approached the issue of menstrual leave?
4. What are the comparative practices relating to menstrual leave in other countries, and what lessons can India draw from them?

V. Concept and Meaning of Menstrual Leave

Menstrual leave refers to a workplace policy or legal provision that allows menstruating employees to take paid or unpaid leave during their menstrual cycle when they experience physical pain, discomfort, or related health issues. The concept is rooted in the recognition that menstruation is a natural biological process which, for many individuals, is accompanied by symptoms such as severe abdominal pain, fatigue, nausea, migraines, and emotional distress. Menstrual leave aims to address these health realities within the framework of labour rights,

workplace dignity, and gender-sensitive employment practices.⁸

At its core, menstrual leave is premised on the idea of substantive equality, which goes beyond formal equality by acknowledging biological differences and providing reasonable accommodations to ensure equal participation in the workforce. Unlike sick leave, which treats menstruation as an illness, menstrual leave recognizes it as a distinct health-related condition requiring specific consideration. This distinction is significant, as treating menstruation merely as sickness may perpetuate stigma and discourage women and menstruating persons from openly addressing their health needs at the workplace.⁹

The meaning of menstrual leave must also be understood in the broader context of women's reproductive and health rights. International human rights discourse increasingly recognizes menstrual health as an integral part of the right to health and the right to dignity. Organizations such as the International Labour Organization have emphasized the importance of safe, inclusive, and non-discriminatory workplaces, which implicitly includes accommodating gender-specific health needs. Menstrual leave, therefore, can be viewed as an extension of occupational health standards and workplace welfare measures.¹⁰

From a legal perspective, menstrual leave intersects with constitutional principles such as equality, non-discrimination, and the right to life and personal liberty. In the Indian context, these principles are enshrined under Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution of India. Proponents argue that denying menstrual leave may amount to indirect discrimination, as it disproportionately affects women and menstruating employees, particularly those engaged in physically demanding or inflexible work environments. Critics, however, caution that poorly designed menstrual leave policies may reinforce stereotypes that women are less capable workers, thereby affecting hiring decisions and career progression.¹¹

Conceptually, menstrual leave is not merely about granting time off; it represents a broader shift towards gender-responsive labour policies. It seeks to normalize conversations around menstruation, reduce workplace stigma, and create humane working conditions. The true meaning of menstrual leave lies in balancing health protection with equality—ensuring that

⁸ Margaret Grose, *Menstrual Leave and Workplace Health Policies*, 34 *J. Gender & L.* 112 (2020)

⁹ Shreya Atrey, *Substantive Equality and Gender-Sensitive Labour Law*, 15 *Indian J. Lab. L.* 45 (2019)

¹⁰ International Labour Organization, *Decent Work and Gender Equality* (ILO Report, 2018)

¹¹ Aparna Chandra, *Equality, Difference and the Indian Constitution*, 7 *NUJS L. Rev.* 189 (2014)

such policies empower employees without marginalizing them. When implemented with adequate safeguards, such as confidentiality, voluntariness, and integration with broader health policies, menstrual leave can function as a progressive tool for achieving workplace justice and inclusivity.¹²

VI. Medical and Psychological Perspective of Menstrual Leave

From a medical perspective, menstruation is a normal physiological process; however, for a significant proportion of menstruating individuals, it is accompanied by clinical symptoms that can impair daily functioning and work performance. Common medical conditions associated with menstruation include dysmenorrhea, menorrhagia, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD). Dysmenorrhea, characterized by severe pelvic pain and cramps, affects a large number of women of reproductive age and is a leading cause of absenteeism from work and educational institutions. Menorrhagia involves excessive menstrual bleeding, often resulting in fatigue, dizziness, and anemia, which further compromises physical capacity and concentration at the workplace.

Medical research acknowledges that the intensity of menstrual symptoms varies widely among individuals and cannot be generalized. Hormonal fluctuations involving estrogen and progesterone influence pain perception, mood regulation, and energy levels. In certain cases, menstrual pain is comparable to chronic pain conditions and may require medical intervention. Recognizing menstrual leave from a medical standpoint is therefore consistent with occupational health principles, as it allows individuals experiencing severe symptoms to rest and recover without risking productivity loss or long-term health complications. The World Health Organization has emphasized that menstrual health is an essential component of overall health and well-being, reinforcing the need for supportive workplace environments.

From a psychological perspective, menstruation is closely linked to emotional and cognitive changes due to hormonal variations. PMS and PMDD are associated with symptoms such as irritability, anxiety, depression, mood swings, reduced concentration, and sleep disturbances. These psychological effects can significantly affect decision-making, interpersonal communication, and stress tolerance at the workplace. Employees experiencing such symptoms may find it challenging to meet professional expectations, especially in high-pressure or rigid

¹² UN Women, Menstrual Health, Dignity and Human Rights (Policy Brief, 2021)

work settings.¹³

Psychological distress during menstruation is often exacerbated by social stigma and workplace silence surrounding menstrual health. Fear of judgment, ridicule, or negative professional consequences discourages individuals from disclosing discomfort or seeking accommodations. This suppression can intensify stress, lower morale, and contribute to burnout. Menstrual leave, when framed as a voluntary and confidential option, can alleviate psychological pressure by validating menstrual discomfort as a legitimate health concern rather than a personal weakness.

Importantly, menstrual leave should not be perceived as a reflection of reduced competence or emotional instability. Instead, from a psychological health standpoint, it functions as a preventive mechanism that supports mental well-being and emotional regulation. Allowing short, flexible leave during severe menstrual phases can enhance long-term productivity, job satisfaction, and workplace engagement.

In essence, the medical and psychological perspectives collectively highlight that menstrual leave is not a privilege but a reasonable health accommodation. By acknowledging both physical pain and psychological distress associated with menstruation, menstrual leave policies contribute to holistic employee welfare. When integrated within broader occupational health and mental well-being frameworks, menstrual leave can foster inclusive, empathetic, and sustainable work environments without reinforcing negative gender stereotypes.¹⁴

VII. Menstrual Leave in India: Legal and Constitutional Perspective

The concept of menstrual leave in India must be examined through the lens of constitutional values, labour welfare principles, and gender justice. Although India does not currently have a uniform, central legislation mandating menstrual leave, the issue has gained legal and constitutional relevance due to its close connection with equality, dignity, health, and non-discrimination at the workplace. The absence of explicit statutory recognition does not render menstrual leave unconstitutional; rather, it invites interpretation within the broader framework of fundamental rights.

¹³ World Health Organization, *Menstrual Health and Well-being: A Matter of Human Rights* (WHO Report, 2022)

¹⁴ Claire Cain Miller, *The Medical and Psychological Impact of Menstruation on Work Performance*, 41 *Harv. J. L. & Gender* 87 (2018)

From a **constitutional perspective**, menstrual leave is closely linked to Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution of India. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal¹⁵ protection of laws, which has been judicially interpreted to include substantive equality rather than mere formal equality. Substantive equality allows differential treatment when such classification is based on intelligible differentia and has a rational nexus with the objective sought to be achieved. Menstrual leave, when viewed as a health-based accommodation addressing biological realities, can be justified as a measure to achieve real equality rather than discrimination.

Article 15(1) prohibits discrimination on the ground of sex, while Article 15(3) expressly empowers the State to make **special provisions for women**. Menstrual leave falls within the ambit of Article 15(3), as it seeks to protect women's health and working conditions without undermining equality. Indian constitutional jurisprudence has consistently upheld protective legislation for women—such as maternity benefits—as constitutionally valid. By analogy, menstrual leave can be constitutionally sustained as a welfare-oriented measure aimed at mitigating workplace disadvantage arising from biological factors.

Article 21, which guarantees the right to life and personal liberty, has been expansively interpreted by the Supreme Court to include the right to health, dignity, and humane working conditions. Compelling employees to work despite severe menstrual pain, fatigue, or psychological distress may amount to an infringement of dignity and bodily autonomy. From this standpoint, menstrual leave can be viewed as an extension of the right to health and occupational safety, especially in physically demanding or inflexible work environments.

From a **statutory perspective**, Indian labour laws such as the Factories Act, 1948 and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020 emphasize worker welfare, safety, and humane conditions of work. However, they remain gender-neutral and do not specifically address menstrual health. Some Indian states and private organizations have taken limited initiatives, but the lack of a comprehensive legal framework leads to inconsistency and uncertainty. Bills such as the proposed Menstruation Benefit Bill reflect growing legislative awareness, though they have not yet translated into enforceable law.¹⁶

¹⁵ Air India v. Nergesh Meerza, (1981) 4 SCC 335

¹⁶ Aparna Chandra & Mrinal Satish, Gender Equality and the Indian Constitution, 10 Nat'l L. Sch. India Rev. 45 (2018)

Judicial engagement with menstrual leave has been cautious. While courts have recognized menstrual health as part of dignity and privacy, they have also expressed concern that mandatory menstrual leave could reinforce stereotypes or adversely affect women's employment prospects. This judicial hesitation underscores the need for a **balanced, rights-based approach** that ensures voluntariness, confidentiality, and non-discrimination.

In conclusion, from a legal and constitutional perspective, menstrual leave in India is **not contrary to equality**, but rather aligned with substantive equality, dignity, and the right to health. The Constitution provides sufficient normative space for recognizing menstrual leave as a legitimate workplace accommodation. What is required is a carefully designed legal framework that harmonizes constitutional protections with labour market realities, ensuring that menstrual leave empowers rather than marginalizes women in the workforce.

VIII. Problems Associated with Menstrual Leave

- **Risk of Workplace Discrimination**
Mandatory menstrual leave policies may unintentionally lead to discrimination against women during recruitment, promotion, or performance evaluation. Employers may perceive women as less productive or more costly employees, which can negatively affect their career advancement and job security.
- **Reinforcement of Gender Stereotypes**
Menstrual leave can reinforce traditional stereotypes that women are physically weak or emotionally unstable during menstruation. Such perceptions undermine the objective of gender equality and may stigmatize menstruation rather than normalize it as a health issue.
- **Absence of Uniform Legal Framework**
India lacks a comprehensive and uniform law governing menstrual leave. The absence of statutory clarity results in inconsistent implementation across states and organizations, creating uncertainty for both employers and employees.
- **Privacy and Dignity Concerns**
Requiring employees to disclose menstrual status to avail leave can infringe upon privacy and dignity. In workplaces lacking sensitivity or confidentiality mechanisms, this disclosure may cause embarrassment, harassment, or misuse of personal health information.

- Potential Misuse and Administrative Challenges

Employers often express concerns regarding the misuse of menstrual leave due to the difficulty of verification. This may lead to administrative complications, mistrust between employers and employees, and resistance to adopting menstrual leave policies altogether.

IX. Suggestions for Effective Implementation

- Adopt a Voluntary and Gender-Neutral Framework

Menstrual leave should be voluntary and framed as a health-based accommodation rather than a compulsory entitlement. A gender-neutral approach that includes all menstruating persons can reduce stigma and prevent discriminatory assumptions during recruitment or promotion.

- Ensure Confidentiality and Privacy Protection

Clear guidelines must be established to protect the privacy and dignity of employees availing menstrual leave. Employers should prohibit intrusive inquiries or medical certification and adopt confidential reporting mechanisms to prevent embarrassment or harassment.

- Integrate Menstrual Leave with Existing Health Policies

Instead of treating menstrual leave as an isolated benefit, it should be integrated with existing sick leave, wellness leave, or flexible work arrangements. This approach reduces administrative burden and promotes a holistic occupational health framework.

- Provide Workplace Sensitization and Awareness Programs

Regular awareness and sensitization programs should be conducted to educate employers and employees about menstrual health. Such initiatives can help dismantle myths, reduce stigma, and foster an inclusive and empathetic workplace culture.

- Legislative Clarity with Anti-Discrimination Safeguards

Any future legislation on menstrual leave should clearly prohibit discrimination in hiring, wages, promotions, and termination based on the use of menstrual leave. Strong enforcement mechanisms and grievance redressal systems are essential to ensure that the policy empowers rather than marginalizes workers.

X. Conclusion

The debate on menstrual leave in India highlights the complex intersection of health, dignity, equality, and labour rights. Menstruation, though a natural biological process, often involves physical pain and psychological distress that can substantially affect workplace performance and well-being. Menstrual leave, when viewed as a health-based accommodation rather than a concession, aligns with constitutional values of dignity, equality, and the right to life.

From a legal perspective, the Indian constitutional framework provides sufficient normative support for recognizing menstrual leave through Articles 14, 15(3), and 21 of the Constitution. However, the absence of a clear statutory framework has resulted in inconsistent practices and policy hesitation. Concerns relating to stigma, discrimination, and misuse cannot be disregarded, but they should not justify the complete rejection of menstrual leave. Instead, these challenges underscore the need for a carefully balanced and rights-oriented approach.

A voluntary, confidential, and non-discriminatory menstrual leave policy, integrated with broader workplace health and welfare measures, can promote inclusivity without reinforcing gender stereotypes. Ultimately, menstrual leave should be conceptualized not as a privilege granted to women, but as a reasonable accommodation that advances workplace justice, employee well-being, and substantive equality in India's evolving labour landscape.

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