

# Menstrual Leave – the Next Work-Life Benefit

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## Abstract

‘Superwomen’ is the synonym we have for the woman of today. The role of working women has changed throughout the world due to economic conditions and social demands. This has surely resulted in a scenario wherein the working women have tremendous pressure to develop a career as robust as their male counterparts while sustaining active engagement in personal life as well. The ever increasing work pressure many a times always takes a toll over their mental and physical health.

The Gender Equal Employment Act was enacted in 2002 and the right to apply for menstrual leave was one of its provisions. It is very important to evaluate the need for this policy, the impact of menstrual leave and the relationship between women menstrual health and work. According to a focus group, most of the interviewees had experienced menstrual discomfort. Their reasons included congenital physical problems, pressure, nervousness, a bad life style, and drinking cold liquids. They did not understand the regulations about menstrual leave such as how to apply for it or how to use it. They seldom used menstrual leave for the following reasons: the regulation had no flexibility, unaware about anyone who had applied for it, there are many other leaves that might apply, nobody could take over their jobs, and the organization needed medical receipts if the workers wanted to apply for menstrual leave. The interviewees were also asked for their opinions about governmental policies regarding menstrual leave.

**Conclusions:** Further actions should be: 1. to build a supportive environment for menstrual care in the workplace, 2. to adjust management style in the workplace, 3. to make menstrual leave flexible, 4. to provide lectures to help female workers take care of themselves during their menstrual periods and to include these lectures in routine occupational health and safety courses, 5. to train nurses in the factories to care for menstrual discomfort, 6. to collecting data related to the relationship between menstrual health and employment (*A preliminary study on menstrual health and menstrual leave - [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285967524\\_A\\_preliminary\\_study\\_on\\_menstrual\\_health\\_and\\_menstrual\\_leave\\_in\\_the\\_workplace\\_in\\_Taiwan](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285967524_A_preliminary_study_on_menstrual_health_and_menstrual_leave_in_the_workplace_in_Taiwan)*).

Managing menstruation in the workplace is one of the overlooked issues which needs a lot of support and attention as this hinders the 100% outstanding contribution of women in the workplace. This paper intends to provide essential evidence to the policy makers, private sector and activists focused on advancement of girls’ women’s rights. Through this paper we the women of today wish to move ahead removing the stereotype thinking and the barriers due to which the women feel bonded like slaves.

**Keywords:** Menstruation, Women’s Health, Workplace, Work-Life Benefit

## 1. Introduction

Menstrual leave is a type of leave in which a woman is given an option to either take paid or unpaid leave from her organization if she is menstruating and is not in a

position to go to work because of this. Menstrual leave can be regarded as controversial because it can be seen as a criticism of women’s work efficiency or as sexism.

Since years women’s menstruation has been regarded as something very personal, not to be discussed in the

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society or even as a taboo for some people. Women have been doing all their daily chores and duties bearing this pain for a few days each month since time immemorial.

Women have been silent about this since years but now as women are taking charge. Now as they are climbing high ladders up their career it's high time that women's health be taken into consideration.

Research has shown that *one in 10 women's menstrual cramps are so severe*, it disrupts their daily lives. Or that there's a disease associated with menstruation called "endometriosis" where a tissue that normally lines the inside of the uterus grows outside of it. *Girl's* writer and actor Lena Dunham brought attention to endometriosis, which causes severe pelvic pains and even infertility, when she wrote about living and working with it in the essay, *The Sickest Girl*.

As more research and stories gain attention, it's clear that menstrual pain is a serious medical problem for many women. For some, it's a real struggle that causes chronic pain, yet still feels shameful to discuss openly in a work environment. Instead, most women suffering from severe cramps likely take a sick or vacation day or work from home, if their companies allow it (<https://www.fastcompany.com/3058847/could-menstrual-leave-be-the-next-work-life-benefit>).

## 2. Background Study on Menstrual Leave – The Next Work-Life Benefit

Women's menstrual cycles are one of the few topics that still make people uncomfortable, especially in the workplace. Perhaps this is a result of the antiquated sexist notion that women's emotions are tied to their period, or that women fear that they will be viewed as weak if they ask for time off, and often end up keeping what can be crippling monthly pain to themselves.

But could paid leave for period pain catch on? British company Coexist made headlines when it introduced a period leave policy that would allow women to take time off that wouldn't count toward sick days. Bex Baxter, the director of Coexist, thought of the idea last year when she noticed a female employee who could barely stand from the severe pain she suffered. Baxter then reached out to Alexandra Pope, cofounder of the Red School—which aims at bringing "menstruality consciousness" to the

world—and the two organized a one-day seminar opened to the public called "Pioneering Period Policy: Valuing natural cycles in the workplace".

Although Coexist is reportedly the first company in England to implement a paid period leave, it isn't the first in the world. In February, China's eastern province Anhui became the third in the country to introduce a "period leave," joining Shanxi and Hebei provinces. Japan has had a policy in place since 1947, shortly after the Second World War when an influx of women joined the workforce. Other Asian countries, like South Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia also grant some form of menstrual leave. In 2013, Russian politician Mikhail Degtyaryov drafted a policy that would give female workers additional days off for severe pains.

In theory, while it's just plain humane to give women time off when they're dealing with excruciating pain that would prevent them from working, taking advantage of this policy would also mean revealing when you're on your period—which could be awkward with male bosses and colleagues (<https://www.fastcompany.com/3058847/could-menstrual-leave-be-the-next-work-life-benefit>).

## 3. Rationale and Importance of the Study

Along with gut-wrenching pain are those other not so fun symptoms - bloating, nausea and migraines. Mother Nature's way of saying congratulations you're not pregnant. Although I'm sure most of us would prefer to get a congratulatory e-card instead. About 80% of women will experience dysmenorrhea, the clinical term for menstrual cramps. And at least 50% of these women will seek some form of medical treatment. While exercise and anti-inflammatory medication can be used to ease the symptoms of dysmenorrhea, it doesn't always work. According to this study conducted in the UK, one in five women experience dysmenorrhea so severe, it interferes with their daily actions, while this Canadian study found that 51% of women reported that their activities were limited during menstruation as a result of dysmenorrhea, and 17% of them reported missing school or work. While we're waiting for scientists to come up with the ultimate quick fix to cure period pain (how amazing would that be?), a simple solution would be to allow women to take menstrual leave. The pain might still be there, but we'd all be able to suffer in comfort (<https://www.health24.com/>

News/heres-why-women-should-be-allowed-to-take-menstrual-leave-20170817).

There are various surveys and polls which keep happening and if we allow only the women to take part in it, I am sure the results fetched would come out to be a true. We do have certain polls happening on twitter in which the results show us that approximate 70% women feel that they do have a day in the month which really makes their work tough due to menstrual pain. The idea is not that women be given special concessions, but that women could be flexible, they still have a job to do and they organize their time accordingly.

## 4. Present Scenario and Informative Details about Women and the Problems they Face

### 4.1 Why we Need Period Leave?

As women continue to climb ranks and take on higher positions, women's health issues are getting more attention. Research has shown that one in 10 women's menstrual cramps are so severe, it disrupts their daily lives. Or that there's a disease associated with menstruation called "endometriosis" where a tissue that normally lines the inside of the uterus grows outside of it. *Girls'* writer and actor Lena Dunham brought attention to endometriosis, which causes severe pelvic pains and even infertility, when she wrote about living and working with it in the essay, *The Sickest Girl*.

As more research and stories gain attention, it's clear that menstrual pain is a serious medical problem for many women. For some, it's a real struggle that causes chronic pain, yet still feels shameful to discuss openly in a work environment. Instead, most women suffering from severe cramps likely take a sick or vacation day or work from home, if their companies allow it (<https://www.fastcompany.com/3058847/could-menstrual-leave-be-the-next-work-life-benefit>).

### 4.2 Downsides for Women Who Take Menstrual Leave

Whenever rights for any group of people are imbalanced, discrimination and stereotypes are high likelihoods. While countries in Asia have been first to implement

period leave, actually taking the leave is still not culturally accepted. For instance, in Indonesia where a monthly two-day menstruation leave is provided by law, companies need to perform physical examinations on female workers before they can take off. Hence, it's no surprise employees rarely use the provision, especially in male-dominated workplaces.

"We don't live in a world where culturally we've caught up with the fact that just because you might be going through PMS doesn't mean you're not capable of making good rational, logical decisions." That broadcasting your cycle so openly can lead to discrimination and stigma is one of the major reasons Naama Bloom, founder of HelloFlo, a tampon-subscription-service-turned-women's health-company, says she's "torn" for the women who take the leave.

"I absolutely want people to be more comfortable and have the resources they need and the time they need", Bloom tells *Fast Company*, especially those that have debilitating pain. "I'm just worried we don't live in a world where culturally we've caught up with the fact that just because you might be going through PMS doesn't mean you're not capable of making good rational, logical decisions".

As an example, Bloom points to her former years working for American Express when the company decided to allow employees to work remotely. Shortly after, American Express abandoned that plan—because culturally they weren't ready yet 15 years ago—and the people who volunteered first were the ones who suffered professionally.

"That obviously wasn't about menstrual leave", says Bloom, "it's just about being the first people to take advantage of a corporate initiative - that's my concern" (<https://www.fastcompany.com/3058847/could-menstrual-leave-be-the-next-work-life-benefit>).

### 4.3 Could Period Leave Work?

Bloom says it's a possibility, but there needs to be a high level of training before companies can actually institute it, especially in educating managers and leaders that there's a difference between the physical pain that comes with menstruation and emotional instability. When the Red School's Pope led Coexist's seminar, the focus was on menstrual policy, not menstrual leave.

“It was about creating a more cycle-literate workplace, in general, and specifically for women to be more conscious around the menstrual cycle - actually for men to be conscious around it too,” says Pope. “The idea is not that women be given special concessions, but that women could be flexible - they still have a job to do and they organize their time accordingly.

Pope believes that real-life implementation of any kind of period policy needs to first emphasize education around the cycle overall. If men suffered from chronic period pains on a monthly basis, would we still be having this conversation?

“It should not be something that is imposed from above,” says Pope. “It should be something that a company comes at from a point of well-being. It will involve trust” (<https://www.fastcompany.com/3058847/could-menstrual-leave-be-the-next-work-life-benefit>).

#### 4.4 Period Leave’s Larger Implications in the Future?

Granting women time off every month for her period may seem too much of an alien idea now, but so was making a bigger deal about paternity leave in many areas and industries until enough dads spoke up. What if we were to think about period cramps like any other general health issue?

If we’re serious about tackling the gender wage gap and other gender disparities that have plagued women since they entered the workforce, we need to be serious about all sort of complex issues that have a hand in determining the gender roles we’ve tied women and men to. We also need to be serious in asking ourselves, if men suffered from chronic period pains on a monthly basis, would we still be having this conversation? (<https://www.fastcompany.com/3058847/could-menstrual-leave-be-the-next-work-life-benefit>)

## 5. Recent Step Taken by the Government

In perhaps the first of its kind, a Member of Parliament from Arunachal Pradesh on Tuesday has moved a private members’ Bill, the Menstruation Benefit Bill, 2017. The bill by Congress MP Ninong Ering has suggested that women who are working in private or public sectors get

two days of paid menstrual leave each month, Business Standard said. In Lok Sabha last week, Ering had asked a question on whether the government has any plan to propose menstrual leave at the workplace. In its reply, the Ministry of Women and Child Development said there was no such proposal and also the ministry did not have any plan for legislation on the issue. The ministry, however, listed a number of awareness efforts for adolescent girls.

In July last year, a Mumbai-based company Culture Machine took an initiative in this matter and started a ‘first day period leave policy’ for its female employees. Under this initiative, women could actually apply for leaves on ‘first day of the period.’ The company which runs a YouTube channel uploaded a video of the female staff being told of the policy and the way they reacted.

The company had also started an online petition, directed at the Ministry of Human Resource Development and Ministry of Women and Child Development, to apply this policy across the country.

Across the globe too, a number of countries have started the practice of giving paid menstruation leave to female staff members to make them feel more comfortable at the workplace. The countries that have introduced similar laws include Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. While Indonesia has granted the first and second day of menstruation as paid leaves under its Labor Act of 1948, Japan has offered this benefit for women since 1947. Last year in March, Italy was also considering whether to offer paid menstrual leave to its women workforce.

In a reply to Lok Sabha, Union Minister Santosh Kumar Gangwar had stated that the female workforce in India has registered the dip in the financial year 2015-16 (<https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/two-days-leave-during-periods-parliament-may-discuss-menstruation-benefit-bill-for-the-1st-time-know-what-it-is/999091/>).

## 6. Menstruation is no Joke

Women all across the globe go through the same kind of pain each month from bloating to cramps, headaches and excess bleeding. It should not be a surprise to us that women actually prefer sitting at home when they feel the uneasiness is increasing.

The parliament of Italy is mulling a bill that would help the women use their right as to take up to three days per month for those who experience particularly excruciating and debilitating periods. There has been a mixed reaction to this bill from celebratory to doubtful.

On one side where women feel relaxed and happy on the passing of such a bill, on the other hand it makes a handful of women apprehensive as well thinking about the negative consequences it might get. Some women believe that it can go against them where the female gender again would be targeted as the weaker section of the society and the people may avoid hiring them due to such fixed number of leaves, they might take.

## 7. Period Leave? Is it Necessary?

Yes, it is very necessary. Severe cramps Blood your own couch, A hot water bottle, Privacy. For women who spend a day or more doubled over in miserable pain, the need for period leave is serious.

The main idea about the period leave began in Japan in the late 1940's wherein the country created a labor law ensuring that the women who suffered heavily could take leave. Many other Chinese provinces have passed such a law as well.

Strong pain induces heightened fatigue, reduces memory and work competence. Many women have been making unnecessary excuses to come to the workplace or were utilizing their sick leaves for it. Which in turn not beneficial in the sense that if a woman uses her sick leaves for menstrual pain then she will not have any leaves left if she seriously falls ill. This law helped the women to take a leave if she required without bearing the loss of her sick leaves.

## 8. Menstrual Leave is a Part of the Leave Policy in Countries like Japan, Indonesia, Italy and South Korea, should India join this League?

Women are blessed by Mother Nature to give birth to a younger one, thus women should always be treated in the best possible manner she can ever imagine. We should

have a supporting environment and society where she should feel acceptable and wanted by all. Menstruation is a nature's call which a woman has to undergo with; we are being the society cannot do much but at least have the capability of changing the stereotype thinking and the bygone era thoughts which keep engulfing the women by barriers set up by the society itself.

A paid menstrual leave can for sure bring about a change in the thinking of the society as well as provide a friendly and accepted work environment for the women of today. Women of our society are regarded as only the givers. They give endless love, care and support many a times forgetting her own true self. It's high time that our Indian Society step forward in giving a helping hand to our women who actually lead our nation ahead. In India any kind of positive change attracts the negative apprehensions first.

Culture machine a media startup company headquartered in Mumbai have begun with a policy for women to give a leave on the first day of their period. This company comprising of 75 women employees understands the pain and discomfort the women go through. They cannot do much but thought of giving a friendly and conducive environment to their women employees. Women for sure hesitate to use up their regular leaves for menstrual pain and discomfort and have no option left but to go for work but even being physically present at their workplace they are actually not mentally present. Women are not at their productive best because of the discomfort they are going through. Also, its time that such a topic should be discussed in the society and no more regarded as a taboo or a talk behind the doors. It should become a part of our daily parlance.

As per Devleena Majumder, HR Head, Culture Machine. "There are 75 women working with Culture Machine currently, who constitute 35 percent of their team strength. The startup aspires to reach 50 percent when it comes to gender diversity." To my query on how the additional leave would impact productivity, Devleena says: "I feel that productivity is a state of mind. If our women take a small break and come back refreshed, I am sure it will increase the productivity in the long run".

As is usual when it comes to policies benefiting women, there is bound to be a few detractors, who will accuse such initiatives of going against the spirit of gender

equality espoused by feminism. Devleena says, “Men and women are not biologically equal which is why we already have benefits like maternity leave in place. Longer maternity leave allows the new mother to bond with her child and get back to work in a more settled frame of mind. Similarly, we hope this policy increases the feeling of well-being, our women staff enjoys” (<https://yourstory.com/2017/07/culture-machine-period-leave/>).

Since the time this company Culture Machine in India and one more company named Gozoop have introduced this policy there have been many likes and dislikes about this initiative. Such a policy in India is uncommon but the other countries of the world have already begun with this women friendly policy. As the debate goes on about the negative repercussions of this policy that it would impact the career growth, lead to stagnant women empowerment, prove that women are still the weaker section of the society and needs such special privileges and doubt on their capability and gender discrimination issues. Let me tell you all that this step would only bring about a positive change in the society where it would give a hand to the women population showing them the gesture of kindness, care and to show them that the society is sensitive and supportive towards them.

People who are not in favor of such policy whether males or females have no idea that some women in our society actually go through a lot of pain and trauma each month and that too silently. Silently because their request goes unheard, we live in a society where women do not open up and discuss such issue because they have a male boss or the colleagues take them for granted because the inability to perform at their best is then taken as the absence of professionalism and comparison between the performance of male colleagues with the females.

Biologically men and women are made different. Even each female is not the same. There are many women who have an easy period time and work at their best always but we also have a certain number of women who actually go through a lot of pain and uneasiness performing their best at work or even commuting to their workplace. So instead of finding about the loopholes in every kind of new initiative and trying to continue with our stereotype thinking we need to bring about a change.

In our country, women’s participation in labor force is either stagnating or dropping - the National Sample Survey (NSS) data shows labor force participation rates of

women aged 25-54 in India have stagnated at about 26-28 per cent in urban areas, and fallen substantially from 57 per cent to 44 per cent in rural areas. At the same time, in terms of economic participation and opportunity of women, India ranks at 136 of 144 countries in the latest WEF Global Gender Gap Report, coming in at 135th for labor force participation and 137 for estimated earned income. The focus, therefore, should be on making women an integral part of India’s economic goals.

Regarding the second argument around women’s basic health and hygiene, the latest census data shows that at least 636 million Indians lack toilets, a crisis that contributes to loss of economic output and violence against women. The shame associated with women’s periods has a huge impact not only their health but also education, shows a report in India Spend. It states: “Only in seven of India’s 36 States/ Union territories did 90% or more women in the 15-24 age group use hygienic protection during menstruation, according to the latest national health data”.

The demand for our rights is a just and a must cause, however, let’s choose inclusion rather than exclusion as a principle for policy making (<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/menstrual-leave-will-exclude-women-even-more-from-workplaces/>).

## 9. Why Work-Life Balance is ‘Impossible’?

Though it sounds little negative and talking about the new generation women who have proved that nothing is impossible for them and are striving hard to climb up the ladder with their aspirations and achievements. But to be practical at some point or the other it becomes impossible to maintain that proper work-life balance.

Pain killers, hot water bags, hot beverages all go in vain and nothing seems to work at all after a certain time period for some. It’s a natural process that we all women got through but it hardly feels natural. Working, commuting long distances to reach the workplace, meeting the targets, holding meetings does become hard during this time. This is not the only thing that women have to cater to, right after office they have another priority waiting for them and that is taking care of their loved ones and their home. Setting a balanced chord between the two seems difficult, yet women have been ignoring their health and

doing every bit of their responsibility silently. Ultimately some percentage of women in our country exhausts their sick leaves for this purpose.

Just to strike a balance between workplace and home many women try and take the help of painkillers to ease their pain but the consumption of such painkillers is also not good for the health. Women take help of their friends to hide and try to soothe themselves to ease the pain, and the moment the boss is there they alerted and brought back to their work seats. But this will not result into 100% productivity as well. There is so much stress engulfing women to strike a balance between work and home that it does affect their overall wellbeing.

Women of today have a job, a baby and a household to manage, beside the three four days of pain every month. This is not an issue of discussion rather an issue for consideration. If men had to face such a difficulty each month this law would have been introduced much sooner than today. During a menstrual cycle most of the women are not able to work flexibly and efficiently and results in a discouraging work-life balance. According to a report by NHS it says that 14% of the women are unable to go to work due to the period pain. One in 10 women was bedridden and approx. 40% women said that the pain prevented them in concentrating at work. Way back home after work also becomes torturous and exerting for some.

## 10. Conclusion and Recommendation

### 10.1 Menstrual Leave- The Next Work-Life Benefit

It will definitely prove to be a step ahead by leaving behind all the stereotype thinking and barriers due to which the women feel like bonded slaves. We know that the women of today are trying to prove themselves in each sector and profession and shining like a bright star. Such a move by the women should be made smooth and women friendly and should not seem like a struggle by her as already there are so many challenges where she has to show her worth.

Not every woman goes through severe pain, not every woman has the facility of extended help in family and not every woman can afford the facilities of hiring helpers

for their day to day chores at home. We need to think at large and for the entire women population who can strike a perfect chord between work and their home to get a perfect work-life balance for themselves. Every women does not go through a severe pain, there are many who may even not feel anything but there are some whose life becomes unmanageable during such days. This initiative should bring about a helping hand towards such women who actually need a day off to rest at home and come back the next day with a fresh mind to contribute to the productivity of the organization.

There would be positive changes in the overall health of the women as well. It will make the life of a woman easy and happy and will show its benefits even towards the society as a whole because a happy employee is an asset to any organization.

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