



# Menstrual Health: A Critical Concern for Women's Rights and Well-Being at National and International Levels

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## To Editor,

International Women's Day is indeed celebrated on March 8th every year. It is a global day dedicated to celebrating the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women. It also serves as a call to action for gender equality and women's rights. International Women's Day has been observed for over a century and is recognized and celebrated in many countries around the world. Menstrual Hygiene Day, on the other hand, is observed on May 28th each year. It is a day focused on raising awareness about menstrual hygiene and breaking the stigma surrounding menstruation. Menstrual Hygiene Day aims to promote access to safe and hygienic menstrual products and facilities for women and girls worldwide. It also advocates for proper education about menstruation to dispel myths and misconceptions. Both of these days have important objectives related to gender equality and women's well-being, but they address different aspects of women's lives and rights. Menstrual health is a critical concern for women both at the national and international levels (1).

While women have achieved success in various fields, menstruation-related issues, particularly the right to menstrual leave, remain a taboo subject in developing countries like India. However, it's essential to challenge this silence and stigma surrounding menstruation and advocate for women's right to health.

Menstrual health is an integral aspect of women's well-being and is protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Indian Constitution. Across the world, menstruation affects girls' education. Research by UNESCO reveals that in sub-Saharan Africa, one in ten girls misses school due to menstruation (2). In Ethiopia and Kenya, menstruation causes girls to miss one to four days of school per month, leading to a significant loss of learning days (3). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, 13% of girls aged 14 to 21 miss a whole day of school at least once every month due to their period (2).

The 2014 report by the NGO Dasra, titled "Spot On!";

revealed alarming statistics regarding menstrual hygiene management in India (4). It found that nearly 23 million girls drop out of school annually due to the lack of proper menstrual hygiene facilities, including access to sanitary napkins and essential awareness about menstruation. The report highlighted that a significant percentage of mothers considered menstruation as unclean, with 70% sharing this perception, and 71% of adolescent girls remained uninformed about menstruation until their first period. Additionally, a 2014 UNICEF report emphasized the lack of awareness about menstrual hygiene practices in various Indian states, with 79% of girls and women in Tamil Nadu, 66% in Uttar Pradesh, 56% in Rajasthan, and 51% in West Bengal being unaware of these essential practices. These findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive menstrual hygiene education and improved facilities to empower girls and women in India (4). Studies, such as one conducted at University College London, have shown that menstrual cramps can be as painful as a heart attack (5). This highlights the physical and emotional toll that menstruation can take on girls and women. Despite these concerns, the Menstruation Bill has faced multiple rejections in India. In February 2023, the Supreme Court refused to entertain a petition seeking menstrual leave, considering it a policy matter (6). This emphasizes the need to advocate for the establishment of a menstrual leave policy.

In many unorganized sectors in India, female laborers are often compelled to choose hysterectomy to avoid taking leave for pregnancy or menstruation (7). The practice of women opting for hysterectomy to avoid their monthly menstruation cycle is indeed a troubling phenomenon. Many women resort to this drastic measure because they perceive menstruation as problematic and a hindrance to their work, often in professions like cane cutting where taking leave during menstruation can be challenging. According to Achyut Borgaonkar from Tathapi, an organization that has researched this matter

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(8), the cane cutter community holds such views about menstruation, considering surgery as the only viable solution to eliminate it. However, this approach has severe consequences for women's health, including hormonal imbalances, mental health issues, weight gain, and more. The fact that even young girls as young as 25 years old have undergone this surgery highlights the urgent need for comprehensive menstrual health education, awareness, and improved working conditions for women in these communities to address the root causes of this concerning trend and protect women's well-being. This highlights the dire situation faced by women in these sectors. While there is no nationwide menstrual leave policy in India, some companies, including Zomato, Swiggy, and Byju, have already implemented such policies. Additionally, Bihar and Kerala have provided menstrual leave to female employees. Other countries, such as Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Zambia, have also recognized the importance of menstrual leave for women (9).

Concerns that menstrual leave will lead to a preference for male employees are unfounded. Men often take multiple breaks for smoking during work hours, amounting to substantial time spent away from their jobs. Women requesting two days of menstrual leave should not hinder a company's growth. Menstruation is not a disease, but it can cause severe health issues for some individuals (10). For those with polycystic ovarian disease (PCOD) and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) menstruation can be painful and in some cases they might have to go to emergency department for menstrual cramps (11). It is essential to provide menstrual hygiene to girls and female workers, particularly in the unorganized job sector, and both the government and employers need to take responsibility for this.

In conclusion, advocating for menstrual leave is vital to ensuring women's health and well-being. It is equally important to ensure strict adherence to any policies designed for the benefit of women. The responsibility falls on the government to ensure that women in the unorganized sector have access to basic facilities, as this is a sector where women's rights are often violated and overlooked. Overcoming the silence and stigma surrounding menstruation is crucial, and addressing these issues requires a collective effort and a deep understanding of the importance of menstrual leave for women's overall health and quality of life as its effects the right to life of the women.

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