

From stigma to statute: unpacking the concept of menstrual leave in the Indian socio-policy landscape

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ABSTRACT

The concept of menstrual leave has emerged as a pivotal intersection of gender equity, labour rights, and public health in India's evolving socio-policy landscape. Despite its growing visibility in corporate and legislative spaces, the idea remains conceptually fragmented and socio-culturally contested. This concept analysis, conducted using Walker and Avant's eight-step framework, critically deconstructs menstrual leave to identify its defining attributes, antecedents, consequences, and conceptual boundaries. Through a systematic review of scholarly articles, legal documents, corporate policies, and policy briefs sourced from PubMed, Scopus, and SSRN, the study elucidates menstrual leave as a rights-based, inclusive, and physiologically grounded policy construct. Key findings highlight menstrual leave's defining features—its explicit linkage to menstruation, symbolic recognition of bodily integrity, and its dual nature as both a welfare provision and an equity instrument. Antecedents such as menstrual stigma, workplace absenteeism, and feminist advocacy were found to shape its emergence, while consequences include enhanced wellbeing, gender-sensitive workplaces, and risks of stereotype reinforcement. The analysis further delineates surrogate terms like "period leave" and "menstrual rest," and constructs model and contrary cases to clarify conceptual limits. Ultimately, menstrual leave represents more than a health accommodation—it signifies a shift from silence to recognition, from stigma to statute. Anchored in sustainable development goals (SDG 3, 5, and 8), this paper advances the discourse on menstrual equity, inclusive labour policy, and gender-responsive governance in contemporary India.

Keywords: Menstrual leave, Gender equity, Labour policy, Menstrual health, Concept analysis, Workplace inclusion, SDG 5, India, Menstrual equity, Feminist policy

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of menstruation is a universal biological experience for many women and menstruating individuals, yet globally and particularly in India it remains enshrouded in stigma, silence and neglect. Menstruation is often treated as a taboo subject, with cultural and social norms framing it as impure, unclean or shameful. In India, traditional beliefs have excluded menstruating persons from certain social or ritual activities, restricted practices around hygiene and movement, and perpetuated secrecy regarding menstrual health and rights.¹ The effects of such stigma extend beyond the private sphere into public and professional realms, including school attendance, workplace participation, and even policy recognition.

In recent years, the concept of menstrual leave has emerged in global policy and workplace discourse: the idea that menstruating employees (and in some proposals, students) may be granted specific leave from work or study during the menstrual period owing to physical symptoms (such as pain, fatigue, bleeding) or as recognition of the gender-specific health burden.² In India, while some organisations and states have adopted menstrual-leave policies or proposals, there is no nationwide statutory entitlement yet.³ The concept thus lies at the intersection of health, gender equality, labour rights, and cultural transformation.

Menstruation is more than a biological event: it intersects with health (for example, dysmenorrhoea, heavy bleeding, endometriosis), workplace productivity, education, and social inclusion. In India, an estimated large proportion of menstruators face pain, discomfort, lack of menstrual hygiene resources, restricted mobility or absence from work or school.⁴ Given this backdrop, the idea of menstrual leave draws on labour policy, gender-sensitive workplace practice, and public health.

Globally, a handful of countries (such as Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Philippines and Spain) have introduced or experimented with paid or unpaid menstrual leave policies.⁵ In India, corporate entities such as some technology or services firms have introduced paid leave for menstruation.⁶ At the state level, the state of Bihar in 1992 introduced two days of paid leave per month for female employees (in limited sectors) and more recently the state of Kerala extended leave for female students in universities.⁷ Nevertheless, at the national level India currently lacks a legislative mandate for menstrual leave, though there is a private-member bill (The right of women to menstrual leave and free access to menstrual health products bill, 2022) proposing three days paid leave per month for women and trans women.⁸

The rationale for analysing the concept of menstrual leave lies in capturing its multifaceted dimensions: the health and wellbeing argument (that menstruators may need rest or flexibility for physiological reasons), the gender-equality argument (that workplace norms assume a male

default and ignore female health burdens), the labour economics argument (concerns about productivity, hiring bias, cost of leave), and the cultural-normative argument (that stigma and silence around menstruation limit discussion, disclosure, and policy responses).⁹ A concept-analysis approach allows for clarifying what menstrual leave “is” (conceptually), what it is not, what conditions enable it (antecedents), what features it typically has (attributes), what outcomes it generates (consequences), and how it relates to similar or adjacent concepts.

The objectives of this review article are to: Define and clarify the concept of menstrual leave in the Indian socio-policy context, identify and examine the antecedents and attributes of the concept (in India and globally), analyse the consequences (intended and unintended) of menstrual leave policies or their absence, situate menstrual leave within the Indian cultural context of menstrual stigma, labour law and gender policy and assess the potential of turning menstrual-leave discourse from corporate or voluntary practice to statute-level policy, including challenges, enablers and implications.

This article investigates menstrual leave primarily in the Indian context but draws on global experience where relevant. The concept is analysed at two levels: in the workplace (employment) and in education (students), as many Indian debates and bills include both. While various related dimensions (such as menstrual hygiene management, menstrual equity, menstrual poverty) are relevant, this review focuses strictly on the leave/leave-policy dimension rather than hygiene product access or sanitation facilities. The significance lies in filling a gap in the literature: while there is commentary on menstrual leave in India, there has been limited structured concept-analysis in the Indian socio-policy landscape. As India looks to advance gender-sensitive labour policy, understanding the concept of menstrual leave is timely.

For the purpose of this review, menstrual leave is defined as a form of leave (paid or unpaid) offered or proposed for individuals experiencing menstruation, especially where physical symptoms or menstrual health needs impede usual work or study performance.¹⁰ In the employment context, it refers to leave from work; in the education context, leave from school or university. The environments considered include both formal and informal sectors, though formal workplace policy is main locus of analysis.

It is important to clarify what menstrual leave is not. It is distinct from general sick leave (which is for any illness), maternity leave (which is for childbirth and postpartum period), and maternity benefit leave (which is legislated in India).¹¹ Menstrual leave is specifically tied to menstruation. The concept is also distinct from flexible work arrangements or work-from-home provisions, though these may overlap as alternative mechanisms.¹²

From a gender-equality lens, menstruation presents a gender-specific health event that may influence labour

force participation, educational attendance, and workplace equity.¹³ The conceptual foundation draws on feminist labour scholarship, gender and work theory (e.g., the male default in workplace norms), and health equity frameworks. The notion of menstrual leave steps into an “accommodation” paradigm—where workplace/education institutions adapt to the specific needs of a group—in order to promote substantive equality.¹⁴ From a policy-analysis perspective, menstrual leave can be viewed as an analogue to other gender-sensitive leave policies (e.g., paternity leave, caregiver leave) but raises unique issues of disclosure, stigma, and health normalisation.¹⁵

INDIAN SOCIO-CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: MENSTRUAL STIGMA

In India, menstrual stigma remains a pervasive barrier to open conversation, policy recognition and institutional accommodation. Myths and taboos around impurity, restriction of movement, exclusion from rituals or kitchens, use of cloth instead of sanitary products in many areas, inadequate sanitation or washing facilities, and lack of data on menstrual health all contribute to the invisibility of menstrual needs.¹⁶ The consequences include absenteeism from school or work, compromised menstrual hygiene management, mental and physical health burdens, and amplified gender inequality.¹⁷ In this context, the proposition of menstrual leave is not merely a labour policy but a cultural marker challenging the silence around menstruation.

INDIAN LEGISLATIVE AND CORPORATE CONTEXT

While the Indian central government has no specific statute providing menstrual leave, there have been proposals and corporate initiatives. States such as Bihar (since 1992) allowed two days of paid menstrual leave in certain cases.¹⁸ More recently, the draft menstrual hygiene policy 2023 and private member bills have sought to formalise menstrual leave at national level.¹⁹ On the corporate side, companies like Zomato, Byju's, Swiggy and Acer India have introduced paid menstrual leave or day-off policies for menstruating employees.²⁰ Yet these remain voluntary and not universally adopted. The lack of nationwide standard or statutory mandate means inconsistent coverage, potential discrimination and questions of implementation.

Given the growing discourse on menstrual leave, there is a need to systematically analyse what the concept entails, how it has been operationalised, the enabling and inhibiting factors in the Indian setting, and the implications of moving from stigma to statute. Concept-analysis offers a means to clarify the term, its uses, boundaries, underlying assumptions, and policy relevance. Such clarification can support policymakers, employers, researchers and advocacy groups in crafting more coherent and equitable menstrual-leave interventions.

LITERATURE SEARCH

In order to conduct a robust and transparent concept-analysis review of menstrual leave in the Indian socio-policy landscape, a structured methodological approach was applied. This section describes the overarching design, the search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, data extraction process, analytic framework for concept-analysis (antecedents, attributes, consequences, delimitations), and limitations.

Design

This review follows a qualitative concept-analysis design, drawing on published literature, policy documents, legal instruments, corporate practice reports and media commentary regarding menstrual leave in India and comparable international contexts. The purpose is not to perform a systematic meta-analysis of empirical studies but rather to clarify the concept of menstrual leave and situate it in Indian socio-policy terms. The concept-analysis employs the method articulated by Rodgers and Knafl and others: identification of uses of the concept, determination of defining attributes, antecedents and consequences, identification of surrogate terms, and description of model/example situations.²¹

Search strategy

A comprehensive search of academic databases (including SSRN, Google Scholar), official policy/bill databases, legal research portals, and reliable media/HR sources was undertaken. Key search terms used included: “menstrual leave India”, “paid menstrual leave workplace India”, “menstrual leave policy India”, “stigma menstruation India workplace”, “menstrual leave global trends”, “menstrual leave concept analysis”. The search covered publications up to 2024 (with some 2025 news for contextualisation), and included grey-literature where relevant (such as corporate policy announcements, state government notifications).

Inclusion criteria

Documents (academic articles, law review papers, policy briefs, corporate HR announcements) that explicitly address the concept of menstrual leave, either in India or in comparable international settings. Documents that discuss menstrual leave in the context of workplace or educational policy, including antecedents (menstrual health, stigma, gender equity) or consequences (labour participation, absenteeism, stigma mitigation). Policy instruments or bills in India that propose menstrual-leave provisions (e.g., The Right of Women to Menstrual Leave Bill, 2022). Media articles or commentaries that reflect workplace practice in India (corporate menstrual-leave policies). Peer-reviewed or reputable law-review sources discussing the constitutional, labour-law, or policy implications of menstrual leave.

Exclusion criteria

Documents exclusively focused on menstrual hygiene product access, sanitation infrastructure, or period poverty, without referring to leave or work/study accommodation. Empirical studies solely measuring menstrual health outcomes without linking to leave or policy. Non-English language sources unless they had English translation or summary. Publications that used the term “menstrual leave” only in passing without elaboration on concept, policy or workplace practice.

Data extraction

From each included source, following information extracted: author(s), year, country/context, type of document (academic, policy, media), key definitions of menstrual leave (if provided), attributes described (e.g., paid/unpaid, no. of days, eligibility criteria), antecedents mentioned (e.g., pain, stigma, absenteeism), consequences (positive/negative) discussed, barriers/enablers in implementation and relevance to Indian policy. Data extraction was conducted by lead author and cross-checked by a second reviewer to enhance reliability.

Analytical framework for concept-analysis

The following schema guided the concept-analysis:

Identify uses of the concept

How menstrual leave is described in literature and practice (e.g., as paid leave, sick leave, flexible work).

Determine defining attributes

The core characteristics that make something “menstrual leave” (e.g., tied to menstruation, specific leave entitlement, aimed at menstruators).

Identify antecedents

Conditions or events that must occur before menstrual leave arises (e.g., menstrual pain, workplace absence, stigma, gender-equity drive).

Identify consequences

Outcomes of implementing (or not implementing) menstrual leave (e.g., improved attendance, risk of discrimination, policy precedent).

Define surrogate and related terms

Example “period leave”, “menstrual break”, “flexible work for menstruation”, how they overlap or differ.

Construct model and contrary cases

Example of an entity offering menstrual leave vs. an entity refusing; or policy vs. company practice.

Delimit the concept

Clarify what menstrual leave is not, its boundaries relative to maternity/paternity leave, sick leave, flexible work, and how it differs across sectors.

Contextualisation in Indian socio-policy landscape

In this step, the concept’s relevance to India is mapped: cultural context of menstrual stigma, labour law and gender policy (e.g., constitution, fundamental rights, directive principles), corporate HR practices in India, and state-level policy developments.

The extracted data is synthesised to highlight how the concept functions in India, what obstacles exist, and how policy trajectories are evolving.

Quality appraisal

Although this is not a systematic review of intervention studies, the credibility of sources was appraised qualitatively (Table 1): peer-reviewed articles, SSRN-posted law-reviews, policy texts, and major media with verified reporting were given priority.

Sources with scant evidence or lacking transparency were flagged. Where data gaps or contradictions exist, these are noted.

Ethical considerations

As a review article based on published literature and publicly available documents, no primary data collection or human participants were involved; hence ethical approval is not required.

However, in discussing menstrual leave, sensitivity to gender, inclusion of trans and non-binary menstruators (where literature allows) and avoiding reinforcing stigma were important guiding principles.

Table 1: Quality assessment

Author(s)/source (Year)	Study/document type	Domain/focus area	Methodological clarity	Relevance to concept	Risk of bias/limitation	Overall quality rating
Van Eijk et al (2016) ¹	Systematic review	Menstrual hygiene and absenteeism	High	High	Low	High

Continued.

Author(s)/source (Year)	Study/document type	Domain/focus area	Methodological clarity	Relevance to concept	Risk of bias/limitation	Overall quality rating
Hennegan et al (2019)²	Qualitative meta synthesis	Global menstrual experiences	High	High	Low	High
Vashisht et al (2018)³	Cross-sectional survey	School absenteeism (India)	High	High	Moderate	High
Garg et al (2015)⁴	Narrative review	Myths and taboos (India)	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate
Hennegan et al (2020)⁵	Scale development	MPNS-36 validation	High	High	Low	High
Phillips-Howard et al (2015)⁶	Field study	School absenteeism (Kenya)	High	Moderate	Low	High
Bhaghamma Ramesh (2023)⁷	Law review	Legal basis of menstrual leave	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate
Palamattom (2023)⁸	Socio-legal paper	Policy analysis (India)	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate
UNICEF (2019)⁹	Global guidance	MHH policy framework	High	High	Low	High
WHO (2022)¹⁰	Global statement	Health rights and policy	High	High	Low	High
Hennegan et al (2022)¹¹	Cross-sectional validation	Adult workplace needs	High	High	Low	High
Mitra et al (2025)¹²	Scoping review	Menstrual and pelvic health mapping	High	High	Low	High
Government of India (2022)¹³	Legislative bill	Proposed statutory right	High	Very High	Low	High
Zomato (2020)¹⁴	Corporate policy	HR innovation-period leave	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate
Byju's (2021)¹⁵	Corporate announcement	Staff period leave	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate
Swiggy (2023)¹⁶	Corporate policy	Gig-worker leave	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate
India Forum (2023)²¹	Analytical commentary	Workplace menstrual policy	High	High	Low	High
WHO Europe (2024)²²	Report	School MHH programs	High	Moderate	Low	High
World Bank (2022)²³	Sector brief	MHH and economic impacts	High	High	Low	High
Hennegan et al (2021)²⁶	Policy definition paper	MHH framework for policy	High	High	Low	High
Borg et al (2023)²⁷	Workplace survey	Work factors and health	High	Moderate	Low	High
RSRR (2024)²⁸	Legal commentary	Indian law perspective	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate
Hennegan et al (2024)³⁰	Instrument validation	MPNS-R short form	High	High	Low	High

USES OF THE CONCEPT

Across the reviewed literature and socio-policy evidence, the concept of menstrual leave appears as both a policy innovation and a cultural instrument that simultaneously addresses physiological needs and symbolises gender justice. In practice, it functions as an entitlement for menstruating employees or students to take leave from work or study during their menstrual period without stigma or penalty.¹⁰⁻¹² In India, several private companies—including Zomato, Byju's, and Swiggy—have introduced such paid or partially paid menstrual-leave schemes, framing them within their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE and I) policies.¹⁰ These organisations publicly present menstrual leave as a progressive measure aligned with women's wellbeing and workplace inclusivity.

At the governmental level, sub-national initiatives (for example, Bihar's 1992 special leave rule and Kerala's 2023 university-level student policy) demonstrate how menstrual leave is being used as a tool of gender-sensitive public administration.⁷⁻¹¹ Legislative initiatives, such as the "right of women to menstrual leave and free access to menstrual health products bill, 2022," propose formal statutory recognition of this entitlement across public and private sectors.⁸ Beyond institutions, feminist scholars and gender-rights advocates employ the concept rhetorically to challenge silence around menstruation, using it to catalyse public discussion and policy attention.^{2,3,9} At the same time, critics caution that its introduction may inadvertently reproduce gendered stereotypes or affect women's labour-market opportunities.^{4,13} The diverse uses of term across these spheres illustrate that menstrual leave operates as a multivalent concept—part practical welfare provision, part socio-political statement, and the part site of the contestation.

DEFINING ATTRIBUTES

The defining attributes distilled from literature, legislative drafts, and corporate documents collectively establish menstrual leave as a distinct policy construct with identifiable features. Primarily, it is explicitly linked to menstruation and therefore cannot be subsumed under general sick leave or maternity leave.^{8,11} It usually specifies a finite duration—most often one to three days per menstrual cycle—and may be annualised as 10-12 days of paid absence.⁶ The leave is conceptualised as paid or non-penalising, ensuring that menstruating individuals are not financially disadvantaged for utilising it.

Eligibility definitions consistently centre on menstruating persons, extending in more inclusive formulations to trans and non-binary individuals.¹⁹ The policy's sphere of operation is typically structured organisations such as offices, schools, and universities, where absence directly affects attendance and productivity metrics.¹¹ Equally important is its symbolic dimension: menstrual leave performs an act of institutional recognition that renders menstruation visible and legitimate within professional

spaces.²⁰ When all these attributes—biological linkage, duration, paid status, eligibility, institutional context, and symbolic recognition—are satisfied, the provision coheres into a distinct and recognisable conceptual category of menstrual leave.

ANTECEDENTS

The antecedents that give rise to menstrual leave can be grouped into biological, behavioural, socio-cultural, and institutional domains.

Biologically, significant share of menstruators experience symptoms—ranging from mild discomfort to severe dysmenorrhoea/menorrhagia—that impede work and academic performance.^{16,21} Behaviourally, these conditions manifest as absenteeism and presenteeism; numerous surveys report that menstruators miss school/work due to pain yet rarely disclose menstruation as cause.³

Socio-culturally, India's deeply embedded menstrual stigma perpetuates silence, exclusion, and shame, shaping how organisations and individuals address menstruation.¹⁷ Taboo of impurity and secrecy translates into inadequate infrastructural and institutional responses, making menstrual leave an overdue corrective measure. Institutionally, gender-neutral labour systems historically constructed the male body as the norm.^{13,14} This erasure of menstrual experience from policy frameworks has produced a structural inequity that menstrual leave now seeks to address.

Simultaneously, contemporary corporate governance trends that prioritise employee wellbeing and gender diversity (DE and I) serve as enabling antecedents, encouraging companies to pilot menstrual-friendly leave policies.¹⁵ In combination, these biological burdens, behavioural consequences, socio-cultural norms, and institutional gaps form the conditions that precipitate the conceptual and policy emergence of menstrual leave.

CONSEQUENCES

Intended outcomes

When effectively implemented, menstrual leave yields significant positive consequences across multiple domains. At an individual level, it validates menstruation as a legitimate health concern, enabling physical rest and psychological relief.^{10,20} Employees and students who can take leave without stigma experience enhanced wellbeing, reduced presenteeism, and greater satisfaction. At the organisational level, menstrual leave contributes to a positive climate of inclusivity, improving female retention rates and aligning institutional identity with global gender-equity standards.^{11,21}

Societally, its introduction fosters destigmatisation, normalising menstruation in public discourse and policy

frameworks.^{13,16} By situating menstruation within formal governance systems, menstrual leave helps shift the narrative from impurity to legitimacy, thereby promoting the menstrual health awareness and the collective sensitivity.

Unintended or adverse outcomes

Conversely, menstrual leave can generate unintended consequences if poorly designed or socially unsupported. Foremost among these is the potential for discriminatory hiring practices. Employers may perceive menstruating employees as costlier due to additional leave entitlements, prompting subtle biases in recruitment and promotion.^{4,9} A further risk is stereotype reinforcement—the perception that women require special protection because of inherent fragility, which could entrench rather than dismantle gender hierarchies.¹³

Administrative implementation also poses challenges: managers may demand proof of menstruation, violating privacy and undermining the policy's dignity intent.¹⁹ In cultures where menstruation remains taboo, many employees avoid availing the leave despite eligibility, nullifying its benefit.^{10,20} Finally, the exclusion of informal-sector workers—the majority of Indian women—from formal leave frameworks risks deepening socio-economic inequities.¹⁰

Together, these consequences reveal that menstrual leave functions as a double-edged policy: capable of promoting equality and wellbeing when embedded in supportive cultural and legal environments, but also capable of the

producing backlash and bias if introduced without complementary reforms.

SURROGATE AND RELATED TERMS

A spectrum of related terms populates the policy lexicon around menstrual accommodation. “Period leave” is the most frequently encountered synonym, employed in media and corporate communication as interchangeable with menstrual leave.²¹

The phrase “menstrual rest” carries a softer, care-based connotation, implying recuperation rather than legal entitlement. Likewise, “flexible work for menstruation” refers to modified schedules or remote work arrangements rather than absence per se, while use of generic “sick leave” to manage menstrual discomfort represents an adjacent but conceptually distinct strategy.¹⁹

The terminological variance reveals ideological nuances: “leave” signifies a rights-based, institutional guarantee, whereas “rest” or “flexibility” suggest managerial discretion or welfare paternalism. The lexical diversity underscores that menstrual leave belongs to a continuum of organisational responses to menstrual health needs, varying by how strongly each embeds rights versus discretion.

MODEL AND CONTRARY CASES

To concretise conceptual boundaries, model and contrary cases were extracted from real-world examples shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Types of case.

Type of case	Illustrative example	Key features	Conceptual status
Model case	Zomato (India)—offers up to 10 days paid “period leave” per year to female and trans employees.	Explicit menstruation linkage, fixed duration, paid, confidential self-declaration, gender-inclusive.	Fully satisfies all defining attributes of menstrual leave.
Partial case	Kerala university—menstrual leave for female students.	Limited to education sector; unpaid but formally recognised.	Meets most attributes; sector-specific adaptation.
Contrary case	Organisation allowing generic sick leave for menstrual discomfort without explicit policy.	Absence may occur, but menstruation not acknowledged in policy.	Fails definitional test—lack of explicit recognition.

These cases illustrate that explicit recognition and specificity are the decisive attributes: menstrual leave ceases to be conceptually valid when menstruation is unnamed or subsumed under general categories.

DELIMITATION WITHIN THE INDIAN SOCIO-POLICY LANDSCAPE

Within India's diverse socio-policy matrix, menstrual leave is both enabled and constrained by structural

realities. The cultural landscape, dominated by traditional taboos and regional variations, profoundly influences acceptability. In many communities, menstruation is still viewed as polluting, resulting in exclusion and silence that hinder policy uptake.¹⁶

Legislatively, India's labour laws historically recognise gender-specific needs only in relation to maternity; menstruation remains unaddressed in the maternity benefit (Amendment) act 2017 and allied statutes.¹⁸ Thus,

menstrual leave occupies a pioneering space as a potential new statutory category rather than an extension of existing provisions.

Institutionally, adoption is heavily sector-skewed: large formal-sector corporations and public universities have begun implementation, while small enterprises and informal-sector employers—who constitute the vast majority—lack both regulatory compulsion and financial capacity to offer such leave.¹⁰ Geographic variation is also pronounced; states like Kerala, Bihar and Odisha show openness, whereas others remain silent.¹¹

These delimiting factors suggest that menstrual leave, as presently conceptualised, disproportionately benefits urban, formal-sector employees and students, leaving a policy vacuum for informal-sector women. Bridging this divide requires adaptive mechanisms—such as social-insurance models, portable entitlements, or community-based leave funds—to extend protection equitably across India's labour landscape.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of menstrual leave as a concept within the Indian socio-policy landscape exposes the intricate interplay between biological experience, social norms, legal frameworks, and institutional adaptation. While the Results established the structure and substance of the concept, this discussion extends the interpretation to explore its theoretical significance, policy implications, and pathways toward equitable institutionalisation. The following sub-sections interpret each dimension of the results—uses, attributes, antecedents, consequences, terminological relations, model and contrary cases, and delimitation—to synthesise a dynamic understanding of how menstrual leave functions as both a practical entitlement and a socio-political statement.

The evolving uses of the concept: from corporate innovation to rights discourse

The widespread emergence of menstrual leave policies in India's corporate and sub-national spaces illustrates the evolving utility of the concept as a site of innovation and experimentation in gender policy.¹⁰⁻¹² Initially, the introduction of such policies by high-visibility companies like Zomato or Byju's served as symbolic gestures of inclusivity, branding these organisations as progressive employers attentive to gendered health needs. While voluntary corporate adoption reflects the influence of global DE and I frameworks, it also underscores the absence of statutory guidance at the national level.

This dual status—voluntary in the private sector and exploratory in certain states—has positioned menstrual leave as a laboratory for social change. By normalising discussions of menstruation in workplaces and universities, it begins to erode the taboo traditionally surrounding the topic.²⁹ Yet, these “uses” remain

fragmented and unregulated, resulting in inconsistent implementation and limited access. Legislative efforts such as the right of women to menstrual leave and free access to menstrual health products bill, 2022 mark an attempt to consolidate these uses into a coherent rights-based framework.⁸

Crucially, the expansion of the term's usage from welfare rhetoric to rights discourse mirrors India's broader transition toward gender-responsive governance. The movement from policy trial to potential statute signifies a societal willingness to reclassify menstruation—from a private discomfort to a public issue warranting legal recognition. This reclassification is not merely semantic but transformative, shifting the axis of debate from benevolence to justice.

Defining attributes and theoretical positioning

The defining attributes identified in the analysis—explicit linkage to menstruation, time-bound duration, paid status, inclusivity, institutional context, and symbolic recognition—together reveal menstrual leave as a hybrid construct situated at the intersection of health rights and labour rights.^{8,11,19}

The explicit linkage to menstruation differentiates it from general sick leave, marking a paradigm shift in the understanding of occupational health. Rather than pathologising menstruation, menstrual leave acknowledges it as a cyclical physiological process deserving legitimate institutional accommodation.¹⁶ The paid and protected nature of the leave embeds it within a rights-based paradigm, asserting that gender equality necessitates not identical treatment but equitable differentiation—recognition of distinct biological realities within shared economic spaces.¹³

The attribute of symbolic recognition extends beyond functionalism. It transforms menstruation into a policy category, enabling discourse and visibility.²⁰ The symbolic act of naming menstruation in official policy documents counters centuries of silence, a gesture that holds as much emancipatory potential as the leave itself.

In this sense, menstrual leave represents both a material entitlement and a discursive intervention—a tool for confronting the deep sociocultural discomfort around menstruation.

From a theoretical standpoint, menstrual leave thus occupies a unique position within feminist labour scholarship. It embodies the principles of substantive equality—acknowledging difference without reinforcing inferiority—and connects to the capabilities approach, which seeks to expand individuals' real opportunities to achieve wellbeing in their specific contexts. This conceptual alignment strengthens the legitimacy of menstrual leave as a social-justice measure rather than a gendered concession.

Interpreting antecedents: the socio-biological foundations of policy

The antecedents of menstrual leave-biological discomfort, absenteeism, stigma, and organisational adaptation-collectively demonstrate that this concept arises from both empirical necessity and moral obligation.^{16,17}

Biologically, the high prevalence of dysmenorrhoea and menstrual-related fatigue among Indian menstruators justifies the need for structured rest.²¹ Behaviourally, recurrent absenteeism and productivity decline underscore the economic relevance of addressing menstrual health within workplaces.³ Yet, these functional reasons alone cannot explain the emergence of menstrual leave. The cultural antecedent-stigma and silence-is central. The invisibility of menstruation in organisational culture and policy has historically constrained women's participation, forcing them to manage pain privately or conceal absences.¹⁷

Menstrual leave as a concept therefore represents a reactive policy evolution against the long-term erasure of menstrual experience from public policy. It is a response not only to physiological conditions but also to social neglect.^{14,15} Institutional antecedents, such as corporate DE and I initiatives and growing feminist advocacy, further facilitate this evolution by creating receptive environments for reform.¹⁵

The antecedents together reflect that menstrual leave is not an isolated administrative innovation-it is the product of intertwined structural inequities and emerging social consciousness.

Consequences: balancing equity, efficiency, and cultural change

The dual nature of menstrual leave-progressive yet potentially contentious-makes its consequences particularly significant for policy design.

Positive transformations

At the micro level, menstrual leave contributes to personal wellbeing and employee satisfaction, directly improving health outcomes and workplace morale.^{10,20} When accompanied by the supportive culture as well as the privacy safeguards, such leave helps normalise menstruation, promoting psychological comfort as well as the inclusivity.

At the meso level (organisational), institutions that implement menstrual leave often report enhanced loyalty and lower attrition among female employees.¹¹

These effects align with global evidence linking inclusive policies to better productivity and talent retention. Furthermore, menstrual leave can serve as a cultural catalyst-inviting open dialogue and challenging internal

biases that have historically marginalised menstruating bodies.^{13,16}

At the macro level (societal and legislative), menstrual leave accelerates destigmatisation by institutionalising menstruation within public law. By doing so, it redefines menstruation as a subject of governance rather than gossip, health rather than shame.

This symbolic inclusion can ripple outward into education, health infrastructure, and gender sensitivity training.

Risks and unintended outcomes

Nevertheless, the unintended consequences identified cannot be ignored. Employers' fears of decreased efficiency or cost burdens may result in implicit hiring bias, disadvantaging women of reproductive age.^{4,9} Without explicit anti-discrimination clauses, menstrual leave could paradoxically weaken women's bargaining power in labour markets. The risk of reinforcing stereotypes-by implying incapacity during menstruation-also persists.¹³

Furthermore, implementation dilemmas arise concerning confidentiality and misuse. Over-regulation (e.g., proof of menstruation) may violate privacy, while under-regulation risks administrative abuse.¹⁹ A balanced design must protect both employee dignity and institutional functionality. The absence of supportive infrastructure-such as clean toilets, sanitary disposal, and access to menstrual products-can render leave symbolic rather than substantive.¹⁶

These tensions demonstrate that menstrual leave's success depends on embedding it within a larger ecosystem of menstrual equity, not treating it as a stand-alone entitlement. Its consequences thus illuminate the delicate equilibrium between health accommodation, workplace equality, and economic pragmatism.

Related terms and conceptual neighbourhoods

The existence of surrogate and related terms such as "period leave," "menstrual rest," and "flexible work during menstruation" reveals an ongoing linguistic negotiation over how society conceptualises menstrual accommodation.^{19,21} While these variants share the goal of easing menstruation-related difficulties, they differ ideologically. "Period leave" maintains a rights-oriented framing, while "menstrual rest" and "flexibility" imply a welfare or managerial-discretionary approach. The former is emancipatory; the latter, paternalistic.

In India's evolving context, the coexistence of these terms suggests both semantic fluidity and policy uncertainty. Policymakers and employers continue to test rhetorical boundaries-gauging which terminology garners acceptance without provoking backlash. The terminological ambiguity reflects a broader struggle

between conservative sensibilities and progressive inclusion: a balancing act between cultural comfort and gender justice.

Model and the contrary cases as mirrors of cultural readiness

Model and contrary cases identified in the analysis act as barometers of India's cultural and institutional readiness for menstrual leave. The model case of Zomato demonstrates how transparent, inclusive, and confidential menstrual leave policies can integrate seamlessly into corporate operations without productivity decline.¹⁰ By ensuring self-declaration and privacy, Zomato's approach illustrates that menstrual leave can be normalised rather than sensationalised.

Conversely, contrary cases organisations that allow menstrual-related absences under generic sick leave but refuse explicit policy recognition-reveal continuing discomfort with naming menstruation. This avoidance perpetuates silence, denying the symbolic and emancipatory potential inherent in explicit recognition. In this contrast lies a profound insight: menstrual leave is not only about time off but about visibility. The refusal to name menstruation sustains stigma; the act of naming dismantles it.

Synthesis: from stigma to statute

Integrating all dimensions, menstrual leave epitomises a transitional policy paradigm-one that seeks to translate the private biological rhythm of menstruation into public institutional responsibility.

The concept's evolution mirrors a larger social metamorphosis: from suppression to articulation, from silence to statute.

In its ideal form, menstrual leave operates as both instrument and emblem-a practical tool that supports health and productivity, and a symbolic commitment to gender equality.

Yet its implementation must be carefully calibrated to avoid reinforcing old hierarchies under new language.

Policymakers must anticipate resistance, address employer concerns, and safeguard against discrimination while upholding the central ethical principle: that equity sometimes requires differential treatment.

From a feminist policy perspective, menstrual leave stands as an invitation to rethink what equality means in workplaces historically designed around masculine norms.^{13,14}

It redefines equality not as identical conditions for all but as context-responsive fairness. From a governance viewpoint, it exemplifies the next frontier in gender-

mainstreaming-embedding bodily realities into legal structures without pathologising them.

Ultimately, the journey from stigma to statute depends on balancing three forces:

Cultural change

Normalising menstruation through education and dialogue.

Institutional adaptation

Integrating flexible, inclusive leave policies supported by infrastructure.

Legislative courage

Enacting rights that reflect lived realities rather than idealised neutrality.

If India succeeds in aligning these dimensions, menstrual leave could evolve from a contested innovation into a landmark precedent for gender-responsive policymaking-one that recognises the body not as a limitation but as a legitimate dimension of human experience in the world of work.

Limitations

While this concept analysis provides a comprehensive synthesis of menstrual leave within India's socio-policy landscape, certain limitations warrant consideration. The evidence base remains fragmented and largely conceptual, as most sources consist of legal reviews, policy briefs, and corporate reports rather than longitudinal or large-scale empirical studies, limiting the ability to quantify health, social, and economic outcomes. The exclusive reliance on English-language and publicly available literature may have excluded regional documents and grey data reflecting informal or community-level practices, particularly from rural populations where menstrual inequities are more acute. Methodologically, the application of Walker and Avant's eight-step model-though systematic-rests on interpretive analysis; alternative frameworks such as Rodgers' evolutionary model might have produced different theoretical nuances. Moreover, several data sources, including corporate and media documents, are not peer-reviewed, raising potential bias from reputational or political positioning. Finally, the findings are context-specific to India's socio-cultural and legal environment and may not be universally generalisable, though they offer valuable insight for comparative global policy discourse.

Future research should adopt participatory, intersectional, and empirically grounded approaches to capture lived experiences, assess long-term outcomes, and explore how class, caste, and occupational diversity shape the real-world implications of menstrual leave.

Table 3: Summary of included studies and conceptual findings.

Author(s)	Domain/area	Research design/type	Method/approach	Population/context	Uses of the concept	Defining attributes	Antecedents	Consequences	Surrogate and related terms	Model/contrary cases	Delimitation	Results and conclusion
Van Eijk et al ¹	Public health (India)	Systematic review	Quantitative synthesis	Adolescent girls	Address menstrual hygiene and absenteeism	Physiological necessity for rest	Poor MHM, dysmenorrhoea	Reduced school attendance	Menstrual hygiene, period management	School health programmes	Adolescent focus	Menstrual issues justify structured leave frameworks
Hennegan et al ²	Global gender health	Qualitative meta-synthesis	Thematic synthesis	Women, LMICs	Normalise menstruation in institutions	Recognition and legitimacy	Stigma and silence	Destigmatisation, empowerment	Menstrual management, dignity leave	Model: rights framing	Cultural variance	Menstrual leave linked to equity and dignity
Vashisht et al ³	Education	Crosssectional survey	Quantitative	Schoolgirls, India	Highlight absenteeism	Attendance sensitivity	Pain and taboo	Learning loss	Period absenteeism	—	School context	Menstrual leave can prevent dropout
Garg et al ⁴	Sociology /public health	Narrative review	Literature synthesis	Indian women	Discuss cultural silence	Menstrual taboo visibility	Patriarchal norms	Behavioural restriction	“Period rest”	—	Cultural	Recognition needed for equity
Hennegan et al ⁵	Health measurement	Scale development	Validation (MPNS-36)	Adult women (Uganda)	Develop measurement tool	Behavioural, emotional attributes	MHM gaps	Health outcomes	Menstrual experience scale	Model tool	—	Measurement tools can inform leave design
Howard et al ⁶	Education/ Africa	Field study	Mixed	Kenyan students	School performance link	Symptom-based need	Pain, lack of facilities	Absenteeism	Menstrual hygiene	—	Developing nations	Policies must address productivity loss
Bhagamm ⁷	Legal / policy	Law review	Analytical	Indian legislation	Legislative justification	Gender equality	Feminist jurisprudence	Inclusion in labour law	Period leave, menstrual rights	Model: statutory bill	Legal context	Menstrual leave as emerging legal right
Palamattom ⁸	Socio-legal	Policy analysis	Qualitative	India	Legal debate	Gender-based leave	Workplace patriarchy	Policy shift	Work-life balance	Period leave	—	Formal sector
UNICEF ⁹	Global policy	Guidance report	Programmatic	Global (LMICs)	Policy framework	MHM integration	Global inequity	Improved outcomes	Hygiene management	—	Policy level	Inclusion of menstrual care in education
WHO ¹⁰	Global health	Official statement	Policy analysis	Global	Normative framing	Menstrual health as right	Taboo, exclusion	Gender empowerment	Menstrual health	—	Rights-based	Menstrual leave = human rights
Hennegan et al ¹¹	Workplace health	Cross-sectional	Validation	Adult women	Workplace experience	Discomfort, attendance	Symptoms, stigma	Reduced productivity	Period rest	Workplace pilot	Corporate	Justifies inclusion in HR policy
Mitra et al ¹²	Indian public health	Scoping review	Narrative synthesis	Indian women	Document health burden	Health-driven	Dysmenorrhoea	Policy need	Menstrual equity	—	National	Reinforces need for statutory approach
Govt of India ¹³	Legislation	Policy document	Bill analysis	Indian employees	Institutionalise leave	Statutory entitlement	Feminist advocacy	Labour inclusion	Menstrual leave	Model: Bill 276/2022	Formal sector	Proposes legal recognition of menstruation
Zomato ¹⁴	Corporate	HR policy	Practice-based	4,000+ employees	Implement paid leave	Paid, inclusive, self-declaration	Corporate equality norms	Improved morale	“Period leave”	Model: Zomato	Private firms	Benchmark for workplace reform
Byju's ¹⁵	Corporate	HR announcement	Practice	EdTech workforce	Employee welfare	Paid time off	Pain management	Enhanced wellbeing	Period leave	—	Private	Practical precedent
Swiggy ¹⁶	Corporate	Policy paper	Mixed HR approach	Gig economy	Employee comfort	Inclusivity	Workload pressure	Morale boost	Rest leave	—	Gig economy	Demonstrates corporate flexibility
India forum ²¹	Social policy	Commentary	Analytical	Workplaces	Workplace health	Visibility	DE and I	Inclusivity	Menstrual equity	Progressive firms	Corporate	Integration with health infrastructure
WHO Europe ²²	Global health	Report	Cross-regional	European schools	Educational inclusion	Access and rest	Health inequity	Improved attendance	MHM, rest day	—	Regional	Reinforces education-policy linkage
World Bank ²³	Economics / health	Sector brief	Policy synthesis	Global	Policy leverage	Productivity and welfare	Gender inequality	Economic impact	MHH	—	Global	Integrate menstruation into growth policy
Guardian ²⁵	Global / Spain	News report	Journalism	Spain	Evaluate outcomes	Practical and legal	Implementation gaps	Limited uptake	Menstrual leave	Contrary: low use	International	Highlights cultural hesitation
Hennegan et al ²⁶	Policy framework	Concept paper	Theoretical	Global	Define concept	Holistic inclusion	Policy invisibility	Standardisation	Menstrual health	—	Theoretical	Sets global definitional benchmark
Borg et al ²⁷	Occupational health	Workplace survey	Quantitative	Women-workers (Uganda)	Workplace burden	Functional impact	Lack of MHM	Reduced health, satisfaction	Workplace support	—	Developing context	Shows economic rationale
RSRR ²⁸	Law / policy	Legal commentary	Analytical	India	Policy debate	Equality and protection	Labour inequity	Risk of bias	Menstrual leave	—	Legal	Legal clarity required
Hennegan et al ²⁹	Health research	Validation study	Quantitative	Global	Standardise tools	Psychometric validity	Workplace context	Research efficiency	Menstrual wellbeing	—	Research	Provides validated measure for future studies

CONCLUSION

The concept analysis of menstrual leave within the Indian socio-policy landscape demonstrates how a private biological phenomenon can become a public matter of rights, equity, and governance. Evolving from corporate innovation to legislative proposal, menstrual leave reflects India's gradual transition from stigma to statute—from silence surrounding menstruation to institutional acknowledgment of its physical, social, and economic implications. The study reveals that menstrual leave is defined by clear attributes: an explicit link to menstruation, limited and often paid duration, inclusivity toward all menstruating persons, and its setting within formal organisations where participation and productivity intersect. Its antecedents lie in pervasive menstrual pain, absenteeism, entrenched stigma, and gender-blind labour structures that ignore women's embodied realities. When introduced thoughtfully, menstrual leave improves wellbeing, fosters inclusion, and normalises menstruation within professional and academic environments. Yet, if poorly implemented, it risks reinforcing stereotypes, perpetuating hiring bias, and excluding women in India's vast informal workforce. The analysis underscores that menstrual leave cannot operate in isolation. Its success depends on synergistic policies—including menstrual-health education, workplace sanitation, privacy safeguards, anti-discrimination laws, and flexible work options. Equally vital is cultural transformation: without dismantling the taboo surrounding menstruation, even statutory entitlements may remain under-used or misunderstood. Ultimately, menstrual leave symbolises more than a day off—it is a marker of social progress. It invites policymakers, employers, and educators to reconceptualise equality as fairness grounded in difference, not sameness. Integrating menstrual leave into India's labour and educational frameworks would affirm the legitimacy of women's and menstruators' experiences as part of the nation's productive life. Through careful design, inclusive coverage, and cultural sensitivity, India can transform menstrual leave from a debated benefit into a cornerstone of gender-responsive policy—signifying the country's movement toward a more humane and equitable future.

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