

# LET'S TALK PERIOD

Committee for Managing Gender Issues



This is the first edition in a two-part series to understand community views regarding menstruation, particularly menstrual taboos and menstrual leave. A survey was rolled out by CMGI's research assistant, **Therese Abraham**, inviting participation from IIMA students, research staff and academic associates, to understand how the younger population of the IIMA community perceives menstruation. We saw participation from 90 community members<sup>1</sup> (equal representation from menstruators and non-menstruators) and present to you some of the findings from the survey.

## Menstrual taboos

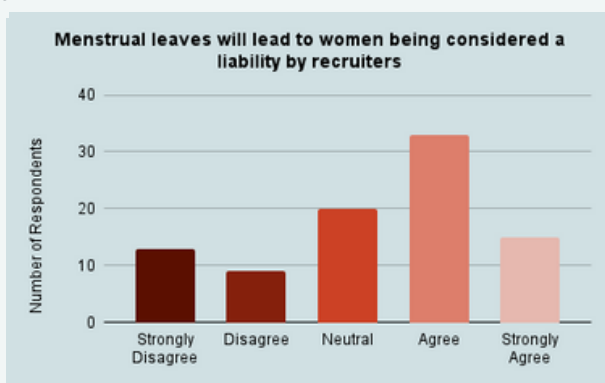
The survey indicated that 84 per cent of the respondents were familiar with myths and taboos, and 26.7 per cent said they were recipients of menstruation related orthodox practices. Common practices shared by the participants included:

- Restrictions from entering religious places and institutions
- Restriction on being part of religious rituals
- Ban from entering the kitchen or touching food for the fear that it may spoil
- Being made to sleep on the floor or in a different room

One of the participants shared how their mother, who initially did not subscribe to such notions, was forced to abide by it because of the pressure from her relatives. A few responses also remarked on the idea of 'impurity' attached with menstruating women, and how they would become 'untouchable' for others.

## Menstrual leave

The survey also attempted to gauge the community's perception towards menstrual leave. Recently, [Spain](#) became the first country to mandate paid menstrual leave. In India, some organizations have begun offering menstrual leaves to women, but they are not legally mandated to do so. State government of [Kerala](#) has announced that all female students in state Universities would be given two days of period leave. [Bihar](#) has had this policy for some years now.



There has been quite a lot of debate on social media and news in general, about the need for such leave as well as the idea that it may provide an 'unfair advantage' to menstruators. We found that 44.44 per cent of our respondents strongly disagreed and 31.11 per cent disagreed with the idea that menstrual leaves would mean unfair advantage for one sex. In our survey, out of 90 participants, 16.66 per cent strongly agreed and 36.66 per cent agreed that menstrual leave will lead to women being considered a liability during the hiring process. While these figures are encouraging, there is also a concern that menstrual leaves could be counterproductive and slow down the hiring of women. Previous calls for legislative backing have been met with resistance from many, including women who feel such a move would further hinder employment opportunities in an already adverse space.

Some of the pushback from women has also been attributed to their concern regarding not wanting to be perceived as 'weak' in front of their male counterparts, and not due to a fundamental issue with granting of such leaves. At the same time, proponents of menstrual leave argue that it is a right step in normalising menstruation and providing relief to many working women who experience discomfort. They contend that providing flexible working options during these days can improve outcomes for the employer.

# 'EK AUR FAVOUR?'

Nitin Pathak, Academic Associate at IIMA, pens down a few thoughts on menstrual leave and its implications.

Bharati S. Kumar, a history professor at Patna University, submitted a leave request to her Head of Department (HoD) in the early 1990s. It wasn't a typical leave request. Professor Kumar requested a two-day menstrual leave. Something so unusual that the HoD was taken aback before granting the request. This was one of the first applications submitted when the then-chief minister of Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav, was compelled by a women's delegation to grant menstrual leave to all female government employees formally. In an interview, Prof. Kumar recalls how her male colleagues smirked and sarcastically remarked, "*Ek Aur Favour Mil Gaya*" (Yet another favour). (Johri, 2020)

Thirty years later, nothing has changed. A decent period leave is still unavailable to most Indian women. Also, millions of working women are not being helped by a lack of legislation on this critical public health problem. Our economy's low female labour participation rate serves as an example. (Jayachandran, 2021)

In India, discussing matters related to menstruation has long been frowned upon and considered taboo. Regrettable practices followed across the nation even today are outdated beliefs and unscientific methods of treating period discomfort. Most individuals identifying as women experience discomfort for a few days each month. Health issues such as Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS), Polycystic Ovarian Disease (PCOD), Endometriosis, and Dysmenorrhea are becoming common now and see increased prevalence (Côté et al., 2002). A break from work might be helpful on those days. Also, the economic logic of a menstruation break benefits the employer. Once the pain has subsided and the women have returned to the office, the organisation gains from higher productivity.

Currently, in India, it is the sole discretion of the employer to offer menstrual leave- be it paid or not. The Indian Constitution lists "welfare of labour including conditions of work, provident funds, employers' liability, workmen's compensation, invalidity and old age pensions, and maternity benefits" under the concurrent list, indicating that both the Union Government and the State Governments have the authority to regulate menstrual leave issues. In 2017, the then Member of Parliament to Arunachal East, Ninong Ering, tabled a private member bill titled 'Menstruation Benefits Bill'. The bill, which failed to get the assent of the Parliament, promised four days of leave to all working women and expanded its scope to school girls of class eight onwards. In addition, it granted the "right to self-perception of her menstruation", making the legislation individual-centric and not 'employer-centric' (Ering, n.d.).

In a conservative society like ours, the operability of such a policy would have to be carefully designed. A period leave policy has a significant likelihood of stigmatising women even more and casting doubt on their ability to be 'efficient' workers. This perceived 'inability' to contribute to the workflow may deny women important leadership positions proving detrimental to career growth, especially in roles involving field engagements. The Maternity Benefit Act's implementation has taught us that there are still more problems to be solved, namely hiring bias. Owing to the clause of mandatory leave before and after childbirth, employers often consider hiring a woman a "risky" proposition. We know from anecdotal evidence that one question women are frequently asked in interviews is about their marital status. "Are you planning your family soon?" is nothing but an artful way for employers to know exactly if employing the applicant would be an extra hassle. Advertisements for sanitary napkins and menstrual health supplements portray a homogenous image of the 'suffering' woman. In reality, women's pain varies and is heterogeneous in nature. Not every woman suffers the same intensity of discomfort. If not addressed in the policy, there would be a high chance of furthering the stigma that the need for leave is artificially created to escape workload.

The ultimate objective of any such policy must be to inculcate all such nuances. As a society, it is critical to have this discussion right away. The leave should be flexible enough to be easily availed and must not have strings of patronage embedded into it so that it rescues itself from becoming *Ek Aur Favour*.

Johri, A. D. (2020, August 31). Indian Express. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/when-bihars-women-got-period-leave-6575393/>

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Ering, S. N. (n.d.). THE MENSTRUATION BENEFITS BILL, 2017. Retrieved February 1, 2023, from <http://164.100.47.4/billtexts/lbills/lbills/asintroduced/2651LS%20As%20In.pdf>

Jayachandran, S. (2021). Social Norms as a Barrier to Women's Employment in Developing Countries. *IMF Economic Review*, 69(3), 576-595. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41308-021-00140-w>



# "KOCHÉ PRAYAM AAYI"

**Priya Ashokan Renuka**, Academic Associate at IIMA, takes us through a few personal instances from her life. The piece makes us look at ingrained biases that we may harbour on any subject and teaches us that unlearning needs to be an integral part of all of our lives.

I was in Grade 10 when I got my periods. In a Malayalee Hindu household, when a girl gets her period for the first time, it calls for celebration. I remember Amma calling her sisters and informing them, "*Koche prayam aayi*" (the girl has come of age—an indication of attaining womanhood). Relatives and family friends visited me armed with gifts and money. I never thought getting one's period meant so much to people.

However, there is a saying in Hindi— "*Chaar din ki chandini phir andheri raat*" (good times don't last forever). Soon after the celebration, I witnessed a switch in my parent's behaviour towards me. I was given a separate mattress, clothes, and room to use whenever I was on my period. As a child, I never got an appropriate answer as to why I was treated so. There were times when I never wanted to follow what they asked me. For instance, I was asked to wash my hair on all days for the duration of my periods. Back then, I had long curly hair and found this daily activity a bother as tying up wet hair was a whole other fight. The number of tiffs I have had with my parents for not doing these things would mentally drain me. I clearly remember one of our summer holidays in Kerala where I was supposed to visit a temple with my parents. Lo and behold, I got my periods that day and try as I might to hide it, Amma found out. I was sent to my cousin's place because according to my parents and other family members, I was "impure" to be in the house when they were planning to visit the temple. As always, I rebelled and questioned them but never got an appropriate response from them.



Time passed by and I got into college. Living in a hostel was an exciting prospect for me as I would be interacting with people from different geographical areas, cultures, and traditions— all of us living under the same roof. I was surprised with myself when I voluntarily did all those things (taking a head bath, having separate bedsheets) that my parents asked me to do and looked down on girls who would visit religious institutions even during their periods. It was a culture shock for me. Even though I constantly questioned my parents' ideology, I never realised that the same thing I was averse to had somehow become a part of me. It took quite some time to unlearn what Amma had taught and ingrained in me.

Over the years I have made sure to visit my parents only when I am not menstruating. On the off chance it doesn't happen that way, I try to keep it under wraps and not show any discomfort on my face. Once, I remember screaming at my brother who came to wake me up in the morning— "Don't touch me, Amma will yell at you". To date, I can't comprehend why I reacted the way I did. I never wanted my baby brother to normalize the taboo associated with menstruation and this was the time when the movie *Padman* became a huge hit. Hari, my brother, kept asking me what does it mean. Initially I was reluctant to talk about it. However, one fine day I finally decided to talk to him and took him out for a walk. I explained to him how the menstrual cycle works and the science behind it. He did take some time to understand things and I am glad we had that conversation.

Recently my roommates and I went on a girls' trip. One of my friends got her periods while we were sleeping and we woke up to a stained bedsheets. I was sleeping right beside her. She got quite uncomfortable. We helped her clean the bedsheets and dry them out. Looking back at the instance, I really liked how we got together and ensured everything was all right. It reflects as personal growth for me.

It has been ten years since I left home for higher studies and much unlearning has happened in these years. When I switched from sanitary napkins to a menstrual cup, I didn't dare to tell my mother. I managed to have the conversation with her after two years of using it. I understand it might not be a big deal but somewhere down the line, I wanted her to know that things are changing and that we needed to be adaptive. I was quite overwhelmed when I heard my mother insist that one of her colleagues use a menstrual cup.

This piece intends not to complain about what my parents taught or asked me to do but to reflect on the aspect that even when I was too rebellious to follow it, I never knew that it became a part of me. And it's the same for Amma as well. Unless we question what has been passed down to us, we might become carriers of irrational thoughts to the next generation.

The monthly newsletter from the [Committee for Managing Gender Issues \(CMGI\)](#), is an attempt to initiate conversations on discrimination, gender bias, sexual harassment, and related issues. We would love to have the community participate. Please reach out to [Therese Abraham at theresea@iima.ac.in](mailto:Therese Abraham at theresea@iima.ac.in) for submissions, queries, and/or feedback.

If you feel you have been subjected to sexual harassment or if you would like to make any suggestions regarding curbing sexual harassment or gender bias on campus, please reach out to us at:  
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Phone: 97129 15533  
Please note that any communication with the CMGI is strictly confidential.