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**TOPIC**

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**Menstrual Leave and  
Gender Gap**

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## MENSTRUAL LEAVE AND GENDER GAP

### In Context

- The recent demand for the Paid leave for menstruation may create awareness on the subject but could end up widening the gender gap.

### What is Menstrual Leave?

- Menstrual leave or period leave refers to all policies that allow employees to take time off when they are experiencing menstrual pain or discomfort.
- In the Lok Sabha, at least three attempts were made in recent years to bring in private member Bills to propose menstrual leave.

### Menstrual Leave in the Light of Gender Gap

- **Gender Gap:** The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021 says that the gender global gap has widened (instead of shrinking).
  - ♦ In the current situation, it would take the world **135.6 years** to achieve gender equality.
- **Labour Force Participation:** Looking at it specifically at the workforce level, a woman earns **84 cents for every dollar that a man makes**.
  - ♦ The participation of women in the labour force is **significantly lower** than that of men, and even fewer women hold leadership positions.
- **Risk of Discrimination:** If one adds mandatory paid leave for periods to this, it would end up further dissuading companies from hiring women.
- **Social Stigma:** If the government ratifies 'special status' for menstruating women, it validates the social stigma around menstruation.
- **Period Shaming:** It would exacerbate period shaming in a country where large swathes of people (both men and women) consider menstruation to be 'impure'.
- **Lack of Access to Affordable Sanitary Products:** In India, accessing affordable and hygienic menstrual products poses a significant challenge. A considerable number of women, particularly those with low-income backgrounds, encounter difficulties in affording sanitary pads or tampons.
  - ♦ The latest **National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5** report underscores that approximately 50% of women aged 15 to 24 in India still resort to using cloth for menstrual protection.
- **Cultural and Religious Practices:** Specific cultural and religious beliefs and practices may hinder proper menstrual hygiene. For instance, in certain communities, menstruating women are viewed as impure, leading to restrictions on their involvement in religious activities or social gatherings.

### Case Study of Japan

- There are countries such as Japan that provide leave for painful menstruation- but it is mostly unpaid, and unused.
  - ♦ Data shows that a mere **0.9% of women** in the workforce avail menstrual leave days in Japan.
- **Reason:** Women claim that they are reluctant to avail this leave and **broadcast** that they are on their period, for the **fear of sexual harassment**.
  - ♦ This is the situation (today), even though this policy was introduced in Japan more than seven decades ago.
- **Gender Gap in Japan:** As per the World Economic Forum's ranking in 2019, Japan ranked 121 out of 153 in terms of gender equality. It has slipped to the **125th position in 2023**.
  - ♦ Women in Japan are less likely to be employed (even with the same credentials) than men, and are often paid less.

### Challenges in Implementation

- It is hard to say **when such leave would be taken rightfully**, and when they would be misused.
  - ♦ In 2020, 66 girl students in an institute in Bhuj in Kutch, Gujarat, were forced to strip to check who was menstruating.
- Further, who is to say which **enforcement methods** would be acceptable, when used by the employer.
- Critics suggest that introducing menstrual leave policies might create **operational challenges** for businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises.
- Women might prefer to keep their **health-related matters private**, and introducing a specific leave category for menstruation could infringe on **personal privacy**.

### Way Ahead

- Women are fighting hard for equity in their workplaces and leadership positions and **menstruation leave could be held against them** and reinforce their physical challenges.
- Recognising the **diverse nature** of menstrual experiences is essential.
- Tailoring support and being accommodative on a **case-by-case basis** promotes inclusivity, while also addressing the individual needs of those navigating their difficult periods.

### MAINS PRACTICE QUESTION

The matter of mandatory menstrual leave has sparked debates in several nations. How paid menstrual leave promotes gender equality and supports their well-being?

Source: TH

