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Unit Title	Communicating Economics						

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Menstrual Leave – How It Can Improve Economies and Women’s Stature

The unlikely solution to the prevailing prejudice surrounding menstruation that improves productivity and work environment for all.

A woman’s suffering should not be taboo. Menstrual pain affects everyone in the workplace. From women working while suffering, to men working with suffering women. This fault in productivity can be solved with a well-regulated menstrual leave, helping all parties involved.

In 2021, the UK’s Standard Chartered Bank published a study showing that one-in-four women say their menstrual symptoms and lack of their recognition made them more likely to quit. A study published by the British Medical Journal showed 14% of women already take time off school/work during their periods and that menstrual pain accounts for 9 days of lost productivity per woman per year. Menstrual leave solely allowing women who suffer incapacitating menstrual pain to take 1 day off monthly minimises this, benefiting women and the business through increased production and improved work relations. Figure 1 illustrates how pain affects absenteeism, favouring the implementation of this policy:

Chloe Caldwell, author of a menstrual memoir, worked and normalised her pain during her 20s but only after “fainting a few times” in 2017 was she diagnosed with Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (a severe condition with taxing side-effects) and got access to medical help. Caldwell’s example illustrates the lack of awareness in menstrual-related conditions, emphasising the need for policies like this.

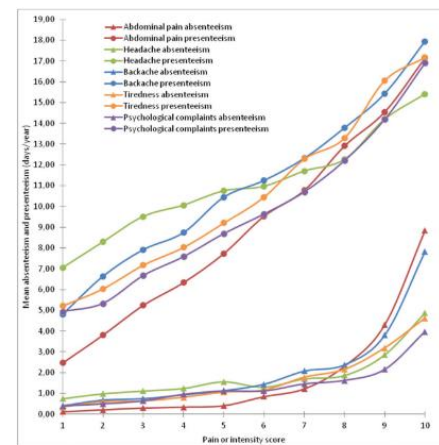


Figure 1 The relationship between pain and intensity scores, related to absenteeism and presenteeism, in lost days per year.

Menstrual leave was first introduced in the USSR in the 1920s and instated in Japan in 1947. While initially successful, the leave was unpaid and the workforce, unsupportive, so women gradually opted out. South Korea was the first to implement paid leave, in 1953. This proved successful with prevailing high adherence, but pressure from the demanding work culture and stigma associated with menstruation has seen the policy becoming slowly dismissed by women. The most recent proposals for menstrual leave were also misguided. Portugal's 2021 suggestion was failed by Parliament since the suggested 3-day leave for all women could be abused by those who do not need it, hindering the work force. This year, Spain tackled the issue with a leave of however many days a woman requires, but since it relies on social security to pay instead of employers, it is unlikely to be successful.

Many critics, while highlighting that the policy has been unsuccessful in Europe, argued that this policy’s acceptance would perpetuate the stereotype that women are less capable than men, that the policy could be abused by those who don’t need it and that it reinforces the gender pay gap. While valid arguments, a more robust scheme than Portugal’s, entailing only women with medical conditions to be eligible will discourage stereotypes and prevent said abuse since those who don’t

meet the criteria cannot take leave. This policy, much like maternity leave (now recognised as an obvious right), has been suggested to increase gender inequality, which is not the case as Marian Baird, a professor at the University of Sydney, assured that women in these environments tend to be better workers and their time off does not hinder their career prospects.

Advantages to menstrual leave include the promotion of women's rights and economic output. Bringing period pains into political agendas destigmatises and normalises conversations about menstruation, raising awareness and allowing women to negotiate their needs unjudgementally. Baird believes this also increases commitment and loyalty from employees – by-products of feeling valued. Understandably, a firm which employs this scheme will be perceived as considerate of its employees and will attract and retain better, smarter talent from both genders.

Combining factors from the supporters and critics, a menstrual leave policy that only allows women who have medical diagnoses, to take 1 day off per month is optimal for working women, men, and the economy. If this leave is implemented, women will feel valued in the workplace, reciprocating that with higher dedication and the work-environment will improve with less employees working under pain (individual firm effect). Additionally, the days that eligible women are working will be more productive due to being well-rested, offsetting the productivity lost on their day off. This will result in the average lost productivity dropping as those without painful conditions are the remaining contributors, effectively raising the entire workforce's productivity (nationwide effect).

Within this debate, three factors reign: productivity, well-being, and inequality. With this regulation of menstrual leave, the economy benefits, employees feel respected, and inequality is not an issue since the people who need help are being accommodated for. This regulation does not increase the gender pay gap as not all women would meet the criteria, removing the possibility of women facing discrimination within the recruitment process. A well-regulated menstrual leave like this is a must-add policy in the modern world for its contributions to firms and the working population.

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