



## Mains Practice Question

**Q.** Implementing paid menstrual leave policies worsens gender equality. Examine.(250 Words)

26 Feb, 2024 GS Paper 1 Geography

### Approach

- Start the answer with a discussion that sets a context for the question.
- Discuss the arguments supporting Paid Menstrual Leave.
- Discuss the negative impact of Paid Menstrual Leave on Gender Equality.
- Conclude suitably.

### Introduction

Paid menstrual leave policies may be intended to address menstrual health concerns and support women in the workforce. However, there are apprehensions that the implementation of such policies in India might worsen gender equality issues instead of improving them.

### Body

Some arguments supporting paid Menstrual Leave :

- **Lack of Access to Affordable Sanitary Products:** Access to affordable and hygienic menstrual products is a major challenge in India. Many women, especially those from low-income backgrounds, struggle to afford sanitary pads or tampons.
  - The most recent National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 report has highlighted how approximately 50% of women between the ages of 15 to 24 in India continue to rely on the use of cloth for menstrual protection.
- **Lack of awareness:** Lack of awareness about menstrual hygiene and related issues is a significant barrier in India. Many girls and women, particularly in rural areas, have limited knowledge about menstrual health, including proper hygiene practices, use of sanitary products, and management of menstrual discomfort.
- **Stigma and Shame:** Menstruation is still surrounded by social stigma and cultural taboos in many parts of India. Menstruating women often face discrimination, restrictions, and isolation, leading to feelings of shame and embarrassment.
  - The CRY report found that as much as 61.4% of girls have accepted that a sense of embarrassment existed in society with regard to periods.
- **Inadequate Sanitation Facilities:** Women in informal work (e.g., construction work, domestic work, etc.) often have no access to washrooms, clean water for bathing, and cost-effective hygiene products, and their safe disposal. Often, they also lack privacy to change their menstrual products.
- **Policy Measures:** The 2022 'Right of Women to Menstrual Leave and Free Access to Menstrual Health Products Bill' specified three days of paid leave for women and transwomen during their periods, and additional benefits for students, yet to become an Act.
  - Only two states, Kerala and Bihar, currently have menstrual leave policies for women.

The negative impact of Paid Menstrual Leave on Gender Equality :

- **Dissuades Companies From Hiring Women:** The participation of women in the labour force is significantly lower than that of men, and even fewer women hold leadership positions.
  - If mandatory paid leave for periods is added to this, it would end up further dissuading companies from hiring women.
- **Validates Social Stigma Around Menstruation:** If the government ratifies 'special status' for menstruating women, it may validate the social stigma around menstruation. It would exacerbate period shaming in a country where large swathes of people (both men and women) consider menstruation to be 'impure'.
- **Case of Japan Reinforcing the Exacerbation of Gender Equality:** There are countries such as Japan that provide leave for painful menstruation- but it is mostly unpaid, and unused.
  - Women claim that they are reluctant to avail of this leave and 'broadcast' that they are on their period, for fear of sexual harassment.
- **Concerns Surrounding Its Implementation:** If paid leave for menstruation were to be introduced, the challenge lies in its implementation. Determining legitimate use of such leave and preventing potential misuse would be complex.

Suggestions for Adopting Effective Menstrual Leave Policies :

- **Promote Menstrual Health Literacy:** The key part of improving menstrual health in the workplace would be to ensure that employers, employees (and their doctors), all have access to high-quality information about menstrual health.
- **Incorporating Adequate Rest Breaks:** For workers who menstruate, being able to take a break and access a toilet and clean water is especially important, but all workers would benefit from better working conditions.
- **Not Adopting Sex-Specific Policies:** Global evaluations of employment policies from the past several decades have consistently shown that gender or sex-specific policies (no matter how 'good' their intention) end up harming the very people they aim to help.
  - The trick is to identify the needs of 'women' (and ideally other marginalized groups) and to design policies for all employees that take them into proper consideration.
- **Ensuring Equal Wages and Job Opportunities:** Ensuring equal wages and job opportunities would go a lot further than menstrual leave in improving gender equality at work.

## Conclusion

When formulating menstrual leave policies, it's essential to acknowledge the varied experiences of menstruation and provide support accordingly, rather than simply labeling it as a biological disadvantage. Implementation of these policies should consider the risk of misuse and prioritize the respect for individual privacy and dignity.

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