



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Psychology

MENSTRUAL EXPERIENCES AT WORKPLACES AMONG FEMALE EMPLOYEES

KEY WORDS: Menstruation, workplace, menstrual hygiene management, menstrual attitudes, absenteeism, period policies, work performance, female employees

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this qualitative research study was to examine the many aspects of menstruation at work in India, including management of menstrual hygiene, attitudes towards periods, absenteeism, period policies, and job performance. Seven female workers, ages 21 to 30, participated in semi-structured interviews for the purpose of gathering data, which was then coded and thematically analysed. Menstrual hygiene management, menstrual attitudes at work, absenteeism, period policies, and job performance during menstruation were all found to have a substantial impact on female workers' performance at work. The findings have ramifications for organisations and governments looking to create menstrual health policies that support women's wellbeing and career progression and eventually help increase employment rates and the Indian economy.

INTRODUCTION

In 1992, the Bihar government, led by Lalu Prasad Yadav, introduced menstrual leave for working women, which was ground-breaking for the state. During that time, women were a minority in the workforce, and discussing periods was taboo.¹ Bihar remains the only state in India to provide two days of additional menstrual leave since 1992, as part of its Human Resources policies.²

The Menstruation Benefits Bill, 2017, introduced in the Indian Parliament, proposes two days of menstruation leave per month and improved rest areas at work, although it has not yet received recognition.² The bill, introduced by Shri Ninong, aimed to provide benefits to ease menstrual discomfort for female employees from eighth grade until menopause.³ It recommended granting 24 paid days off per year for women on their periods in any government-recognized workplace, equivalent to 2 days of menstrual leave per month.⁴

Women teachers in Uttar Pradesh launched a campaign in July 2021 to demand a specific number of days be provided as paid holidays to teachers during their periods as part of a recent effort to transform the workplace and make it gender inclusive. Alarming statistics about filthy school restrooms, girl dropout rates, and absenteeism were released as part of the Uttar Pradesh Mahila Shikshak Sangh campaign.²

Despite such efforts at the national level, taboos and attitudes surrounding menstruation continue to hinder organizations from ensuring proper menstrual facilities, promoting period positivity, and enhancing existing period-centric policies. However, there are companies in India, like Zomato, that have taken proactive steps to implement menstrual leave policies, even without strong legal protections in place. Zomato's decision to provide up to 10 days of "period leave" annually has sparked conversations about menstrual health and gender equality in the country.² This concept of allowing female employees to take time off during menstruation has also been embraced by various startups across India.

METHOD

Samples and Techniques:

The study included seven female menstruators aged 21 to 30 working in different sectors in India. Purposive sampling technique was used to select participants through Google Forms, followed by telephonic interviews. The researcher allowed participants to lead the conversation, ensuring a qualitative approach. Participants were informed about their rights and confidentiality, and interviews were recorded with their consent. Extensive notes were taken for efficient analysis.⁵

Data Analysis:

The Inductive Approach by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse the cases.⁶ Interviews were transcribed accurately, with most in English and three translated from Hindi to English using Otter.ai. After thorough editing and reading of the transcripts and notes, interviews were manually coded. Text passages were given temporary codes and categorized into wider categories to understand women's responses, handling, and impacts of menstruation and workplace policies. Codes were further categorized and sub-categorized into themes and subthemes.⁵

Inclusion Criteria:

The study was independent of the marital status or relationship status of the participants. No religious barrier was present. Participants of varied religious backgrounds, holding a varied of beliefs about menstruation were welcomed. There were no barriers in terms of years of work experience as well.

Exclusion Criteria:

Female employees who worked from home or in hybrid mode were excluded, since this study aimed more at exploring the structural and operational facilities, attitudes of the colleagues and supervisors as well as period policies in a workplace set-up at a more physical level.

Tool for Study:

The interview questions were prepared by the researcher in collaboration with her supervisor and reviewed by an expert in the field of menstrual health and hygiene. The expert holds a Master's degree in sustainable development practice from TERI SAS and has 3-4 years of experience working in the WASH sector with a focus on menstrual health and hygiene.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table – 1 Codes Derived From The Interviews

Participants	Type of Coding	Codes	
P1	Selective Coding	Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)	
	Axial Coding	Menstrual Facilities	Convenience
		Unavailability of Menstrual Materials	Clean and Dry washrooms
	Open Coding	Washrooms	Preference of Indian Toilets
		Handwashing Facilities	Disposal not needed

	Selective Coding	Menstrual Attitude at Workplace		
	Axial Coding	Discomfort of Men	Transition Period	Acceptance
	Open Coding	Unsure about the comfort level of males	Initial hesitancy towards discussion	Comfort among females in talking
		Concealment of menstrual materials		Shedding of menstrual shame
				Support and acceptance among females
	Selective Coding	Absenteeism		
	Axial Coding	Negative Menstrual Experience		
	Open Coding	Invalidation of Menstrual Experience		
		Lack of empathy from employer		
	Selective Coding	Period Policies		
	Axial Coding	Unsupportive Employers		
	Open Coding	Lack of female centric policies		
		Struggle for better policies		
	Selective Coding	Work Performance During Menstruation		
	Axial Coding	Self-Assurance	Unmet Needs	
	Open Coding	Unwavering efficiency at work	Desire for better accommodation	
		Sense of competency		
P2	Selective Coding	Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)		
	Axial Coding	Adequate Access to facilities		
	Open Coding	Convenient and Hygienic menstrual facilities		
		Easy availability of toiletries		
	Selective Coding	Menstrual Attitude at Workplace		
	Axial Coding	Lack of support from upper management	Adequate support from coworkers	
	Open Coding	Unhelpful supervisors	Supportive male colleagues	
			Helpful female colleagues	
	Selective Coding	Absenteeism		
	Axial Coding	Lack of empathy from management		
	Open coding	Women invalidating menstruation		
		Unrealistic expectations from management		
	Selective Coding	Period Policies		
	Axial Coding	Lack of female centric policies		
	Open coding	Desire for better policies		
		Negative menstrual experiences		

	Selective Coding	Work Performance During Menstruation		
	Axial Coding	Negative menstrual experience		
	Open coding	Reduced work performance		
		Increased stress level		
P3	Selective Coding	Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)		
	Axial Coding	Lack of accommodation at workplace	Management's Insistence on cleanliness	Fear Of being Burdenome
	Open Coding	Unavailability of menstrual materials	Availability of disposal facilities	Refusal to change pads without disposal facilities
			Employer attention to cleanliness	
	Selective Coding	Menstrual Attitude at Workplace		
	Axial Coding	Taboo Nature of menstruation	Support and acceptance among females	
	Open Coding	Lack of open discussions at work place	Helpful female supervisor	
		Refusal to talk openly with males	Willingness to help menstruating women	
		Concealment of menstrual products		
	Selective Coding	Absenteeism		
	Axial coding	Unwilling to take leaves		
	Open coding	Distraction from pain due to work		
	Selective Coding	Period policies		
	Axial Coding	Indifference towards period leaves	Supportive Supervisors	
	Open Coding	Lack of insight on period leaves	Extension of deadlines	
		Desire for a general leave	Mental health is prioritized	
	Selective Coding	Work Performance During Menstruation		
	Axial coding	Decreased work efficiency	Physical and emotional discomfort	
	Open Coding	Decline in work quality	Experience of menstrual cramps	
		Delay of task completion	Experience of mood swings	
		At a disadvantage compared to males		
P4	Selective Coding	Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)		
	Axial Coding	Inadequate facilities	Insistence on hygiene	

	Open Coding	Unavailability of menstrual materials	Fear of infections	
		Discomfort due to public disposal	Carries toiletries	
	Selective Coding	Menstrual Attitude at Workplace		
	Axial Coding	Sense of alienation	Support during menstruation	
	Open Coding	No open discussions	Helpful supervisors	
		Desire for female colleagues	Willingness to help menstruating women	
		Fragmentation of professional and personal		
	Selective Coding	Absenteeism		
	Axial coding	Fear of judgment		
	Open coding	Perception of making excuses		
		Perception getting special treatment		
		Unsupportive male colleagues		
	Selective Coding	Period Policies		
	Axial coding	Need for better period policies	Fear of negative consequences	
	Open coding	Need for reduced work hours	Jealousy of male colleagues	
		Inclusion of work from home		
	Selective Coding	Work Performance During Menstruation		
	Axial coding	Declined work performance		
	Open coding	Desire to take rest		
		Low energy and morale		
		Decreased work efficiency		
P5	Selective Coding	Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)		
	Axial coding	Mandated hygiene	Lack of facilities	
	Open coding	Cleaning of washroom every 2 hours	Desires convenience	
		Cleanliness prioritised	Unavailability of menstrual products	
	Selective Coding	Menstrual Attitude at Workplace		
	Axial coding	Desire to conceal menstruation	Comfort and support from females	
	Open coding	Lack of open discussions with males	Joint tracking of menstruation	
		Concealing of menstrual products		
		Shame surrounding menstruation		
	Selective Coding	Absenteeism		
	Axial coding	Lack of leave options		
	Open coding	Mandated six hours of work		
		No option of half day leave		
	Selective Coding	Period Policies		
	Axial coding	Need for better period policies		
	Open coding	Desire for paid leaves		
		Unsuccessful amendment of period policies		
	Selective Coding	Work Performance During Menstruation		
	Axial coding	Largely unaffected Competency	Negative menstrual experience	
	Open coding	Higher pain tolerance	Irritable mood	
		Ability to complete tasks	Requirement of extra help	
P6	Selective Coding	Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)		
	Axial coding	Lack of facilities		
	Open coding	Unavailability of period products		
		No assigned space to change pads		
		Retention of used pads		
	Selective Coding	Menstrual attitude at workplace		
	Axial coding	Comfort among women	Discomfort with men	
	Open coding	Supportive female supervisors	Teasing from male co workers	
		Open discussion among female co workers	Need to conceal period products	
	Selective Coding	Absenteeism		
	Axial coding	Negative menstrual experiences		
	Open coding	Invalidation of pain		
		Inability of men to empathise		
	Selective Coding	Period Policies		
	Axial coding	Desire for period leave		
	Open coding	Unfair expectations on menstruators		
		Difficulty getting leaves		
	Selective Coding	Work Performance During Menstruation		
	Axial coding	Declined work performance		
	Open coding	Requirement of extra help		
		Reduced problem-solving ability		
		Low mood and morale		
P7	Selective Coding	Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)		
	Axial coding	Inadequate facilities	Unhygienic washing facilities	
	Open coding	Difficulty acquiring period products	Unsanitary handwash	
		Inadequate disposal facilities	Inconsistent supply of water	

Selective Coding	Menstrual attitude at workplace		
Axial coding	Negative menstrual experience		
Open coding	Invalidation of pain		
	Judgement from co workers		
	Societal pressure to conceal		
Open coding	Discouragement of open conversation		
	Absenteeism		
	Invalidation of pain by management		
Open coding	Provides reason as health issues		
	Concealment of menstruation		
Selective Coding	Period policies		
Axial coding	Lack of period policies	Understanding of period policies	
	Desires specified period leaves	Basic awareness of period policies	
Open coding	One day of paid period leave suggested		
	Work performance during menstruation		
Axial coding	Declined work performance	Unsupportive management	
	Quality of work affected by cramps	Lack of empathy shown by supervisor	
Open coding	Inability to complete portions	Pressure to continue working	
	Inability to concentrate		

Table 1 shows the codes derived from all the interviews. The total number of participants in the sample was seven.

Case 1: SC, 29, Developmental Practitioner. The participant, a Developmental Practitioner in an NGO, did not have menstrual facilities available. She preferred Indian toilets available at her workplace, which was convenient as she used cloth pads and menstrual cups that did not require disposal. Initially hesitant, she eventually was able to open to conversing about menstruation with males at her workplace, however was unsure if they were comfortable with the same.⁷ She feels supported and accepted among females. Absenteeism due to negative menstrual experiences and lack of empathy from her employer was a challenge. She believes there is a lack of female-centric policies and strives for better policies. Work performance during menstruation is not a challenge for her and she believes that having periods is not disadvantageous for her efficiency and competency. While one day working from home policy at her workplace helps to some extent, she desires better accommodations and period policies (“two days’ work from home”) pertaining to her work.

Case 2: JS, 26, Product Support Analyst. The participant has easy access to menstrual materials provided by the workplace. Washroom and disposal facilities are convenient and well-maintained. However, the workplace’s attitude towards menstruation has led to negative experiences. Upper management lacks support, and supervisors are unhelpful during menstruation. A female supervisor dismissed the participant’s need for leave during menstrual cramps, invalidating her pain. Coworkers, both male and female, are supportive. The participant desires better policies, including period leaves, but management has not implemented them.

Menstruation affects her work performance negatively, causing decreased efficiency and increased stress levels.

Case 3: AP, 22, Designer. The participant, working in an MNC in Delhi, lacks access to menstrual products at her workplace. However, she has clean washrooms and proper disposal facilities. If proper disposal facilities were not available, she refused to change pads altogether. She avoids speaking to men (except close acquaintances) about menstrual issues and conceals menstrual products when carrying them. She feels comfortable discussing and assisting other females with their menstrual needs. She acknowledges the stereotypical mindset that hinders open conversation about menstruation. She prefers not to take leaves during menstruation, considering work a distraction from menstrual cramps. She doesn’t specifically desire period leaves but desires leave in general. Her supervisors are supportive and prioritize the mental health of female employees. She experiences decreased work efficiency and performance due to physical and emotional discomfort.

Case 4: R, 21, Civil Engineer (Trainee). The participant is a civil engineer from Bangalore. According to her, the menstrual hygiene facilities were inadequate at her workplace, and she was adamant on having cleanliness because she was afraid that illnesses would spread owing to a lack of menstrual materials. There was apprehension when trying to dispose of the used pads because they were outside the toilet, and there were no amenities available, making it difficult during menstruation. When it came to menstrual attitudes at work, she felt alienated since she was the only woman in her section and, however her supervisors were supportive in terms of menstrual attitudes at work. When it was about absenteeism, there was a fear of being judged, as well as a worry of being judged by other coworkers, who believe she would be given preferential treatment during her menses. The period policies were out of date, and there was no way to get leave when menstruating because it was never mentioned in policies. When it pertains to work performance, since it was an onsite job, she had to be always present, which resulted in a reduction in work performance with low energy and decreased work efficiency.

Case 5: SP, 26, Physiotherapist. The participant is a physiotherapist working in a clinical setup. Although she works in a hospital and changes the pads there, there are not enough facilities for menstrual hygiene management. However, the restrooms are generally clean because they are scrubbed every two hours. Since the hospital is so large and has so many patients, changing is less convenient and time-consuming, and the lack of menstrual products in the restrooms poses a barrier. When it comes to menstrual attitudes at work, there is a desire to hide menstruation, and she does find comfort in her fellow co-workers in this regard. Additionally, there is this shame that surrounds menstruation that does not give much space to openly talk about the menses. Since she deals with inpatients and outpatients, there is very little to no option in taking leave or day off during menses, especially due to a tight work schedule that requires her to work for 8 hours a day. There has been a need and desire for the implementation of better period policies. The work performance during menses does take a toll on her as the productivity decreases and assistance from her colleagues is needed. Her mood also gets affected thereby consequently experiencing negative menstrual experiences. However, the participant also reported having a high pain tolerance which does not really affect her competency and efficiency at her workplace.

Case 6: SP, 30, Physiotherapist. The participant, a physiotherapist in a hospital, had negative menstrual experiences at her workplace. There was a lack of facilities, including unavailability of products and no designated space for changing pads or disposing off used ones. Menstrual

products were not provided by the workplace. There were instances when she had to keep her used pad with her until the end of the day to avoid discomfort being the only female in one of her workplaces (a private clinic). She felt comfortable discussing periods with female co-workers and her female supervisor, but experienced discomfort and teasing from male co-workers. Absenteeism due to negative menstrual experiences was invalidated by co-workers, particularly male colleagues who lacked empathy. The participant desired period leaves and faced challenges in obtaining leaves as a healthcare professional. Work performance declined during menstruation, requiring assistance, and emotions like low mood and decreased morale were hindrances.

Case 7: AC, 22, Teacher. The participant is a private school teacher. Although menstrual materials are easily available for the participant at her workplace, the procurement is inconvenient as she must approach the receptionist every time, she needs a pad. While she is satisfied with the washroom and the level of hygiene maintained in the workplace, she wishes for better disposal facilities for soiled pads. The participant is in a transition period in her life where her beliefs and opinions regarding menstruation are slowly becoming more progressive. While she is in a period where she is shedding her menstrual shame, there are still factors that hold her back. She is unsure of the comfort levels of men regarding menstruation. Although she has found support, comfort, and acceptance among women, she finds it uncomfortable to talk to men about menstruation. She feels the need to conceal menstrual products as well. At the workplace, she has experienced many negative menstrual experiences ranging from a lack of empathic employers to invalidation of menstrual experiences such as pain and discomfort. The participant also indicated a desire for female-centric policies in the workplace that would allow provisions like period leaves. While she experiences a steady sense of competency at the workplace and believes that her work efficiency remains unaffected when she is menstruating, she did reveal that she wishes for better accommodation at the workplace and has unmet needs.

CONCLUSIONS

Issues related to menstruation in workplaces include the desire for period leaves and lack of female-centric policies. Menstruation is often taboo, with societal pressure to conceal it.⁸ Some women expressed their fear of jealousy from male colleagues, furthering the taboo. Procuring period products can be difficult, but disposal is generally easier. Discussing periods with men is uncomfortable for many women.⁹ Female supervisors and colleagues are usually supportive, but there are exceptions. Work performance may slightly decline during menstruation due to physical and emotional symptoms. Unfair work expectations disregard the discomfort women experience. Overall, women commonly face negative experiences with menstrual hygiene, attitudes, absenteeism, period policies, and work performance at workplaces, although experiences vary.

Limitations

The small sample size limited generalizability to a larger group of working women in India. Purposive sampling restricted the representation of perspectives, especially from female menstruators working from home or in hybrid mode. Telephonic interviews may have limited the interpretation of non-verbal cues and body language, potentially leading to misinterpretations. Technical glitches, such as connectivity issues, were encountered during the interviews. Additionally, the challenge of finding participants willing to share their insights and experiences was present due to their full-time work commitments.

Future Scope

Future studies can explore how menstruation management

impacts women's lives, including their families and social networks, considering relationship and marital statuses. Additionally, studying the effects of menstrual policies and facilities on organizational productivity and efficiency would be valuable. Understanding the challenges surrounding procurement of menstrual products in workplaces and including menstruators from diverse genders can also be important areas of research. To enhance generalizability, larger sample sizes and diverse sampling strategies should be utilized.

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