

REDUCING PAIN: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON MENSTRUAL LEAVE

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Many barriers on the road to gender equality have been removed, but many roadblocks remain. Women have fought hard to get to the present when, thanks to higher education and work opportunities, they can dream of balancing work and home, though couple equity is still not a reality for many. The battle for rights related to reproductive health has been a hard-fought one but women have been successful at persuading governments to initiate policy changes to improve their health and well-being. In India, the [Maternity Benefit Act](#) that was enacted by Parliament in 1961 has been amended from time to time to give women better benefits; for instance, paid maternity leave has been [extended from the earlier 12 weeks to 26 weeks](#). It is in this context that the Supreme Court of India's directive to a petitioner to approach the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development to frame a policy on menstrual pain leave has to be seen. Pointing out that there are different "dimensions" to it, a three-judge Bench led by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud said the biological process must not become a "disincentive" for employers offering jobs to women. A petition had sought the Court's direction to States to frame [rules for granting menstrual pain leave](#) for students and working women, but there are apprehensions that these could entrench existing stigma and also result in furthering discrimination.

In India, Kerala and Bihar have menstrual pain leave; the food delivery app Zomato has also introduced it. Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Spain and Zambia have this policy included in labour laws. Many feminists have, however, decried the move, saying it will reinforce negative gender stereotypes. Also in India, there are other problems in need of addressing such as lack of sanitation facilities in school and at the workplace, especially in the informal sector. Between 2010 and 2020 the percentage of working women dropped from 26% to 19%, according to World Bank data. To encourage more women to join the workforce, it is imperative they have access to higher education and more opportunities. Sometimes, girls have to drop out from school simply because there are no toilets. In a world that should strive to become a better place for all, it is the responsibility of the wider society and governments to ensure that no section is left behind. Many countries are trying out four-day work days for a quality life, while others are offering paternity leave so that parenting can be, rightly, equally shared, and also to ensure employers do not see recruiting women as a disadvantage. All constraints on the road to gender equality and equity must be done away with.

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