

Menstruation and Corporate Blindness: Gendered Silences in Professional Life - Cases from Turkey and the World

Assoc.Prof. Yesim Sirakaya

St. Clements University UK Labor Economics and Industrial Relations Department Head of the Main Science

ABSTRACT: This study examines the reflections of the biological, psychological, and socio-cultural challenges faced by women employees during menstruation on their professional lives. It reveals how menstruation is overlooked in the workplace through the clash between women's biological realities and corporate structures shaped around male norms. The impact of societal taboos on workplace policies and practices is evaluated, and the hormonal and emotional changes experienced during menstruation are analyzed in terms of their effects on work performance. The study also explores the silent struggles of women employees, the practices of invisible labor, and institutional responses to demands for menstrual leave. It presents a comparative evaluation of menstrual leave policies in countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia, alongside menstruation-friendly practices in the European Union and Scandinavian countries. Finally, the study offers recommendations for developing institutional models that prioritize women's health, are supported by psychological support systems, and are grounded in gender equality. In this context, it emphasizes that biological differences should pave the way not for social exclusion, but for institutional inclusivity.

KEYWORDS: Menstrual period, women employees, professional life, menstrual leave, gender, invisible labor, corporate structures, psychological support, human resources policy, gender equality, international practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's biological reality-particularly the menstrual cycle-has historically been suppressed, ignored, or rendered unspeakable under a veil of privacy, both in social and institutional contexts. Yet menstruation is a fundamental bodily rhythm related to fertility, experienced actively by the vast majority of women throughout their working lives (Chrisler & Gorman, 2015). Despite this, the physical and emotional changes associated with menstruation are often labeled as "private matters" in the workplace, thus excluded from the public sphere and largely unreflected in organizational policies. Modern professional life is predominantly structured around norms centered on the male experience. These norms are shaped by standards such as uninterrupted physical presence, emotional stability, and consistent productivity. The physiological changes women experience during menstruation often do not conform to these expectations and are therefore perceived as "incompatibility" or "weakness" (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). As a result, the menstrual experience has frequently become an invisible burden for women employees-something to be concealed or silently endured. At the societal level, menstruation has long been stigmatized, associated with shame, and linked to notions of "cleanliness." These cultural codes have permeated institutional structures as well. Within workplaces, menstruation has either remained entirely unaddressed or has been acknowledged only to the extent of covert access to hygiene products (Bobel, 2019). This leads to the natural functioning of women's bodies receiving no recognition in the professional sphere, thereby deepening structural inequalities based on gender. Another consequence of this invisibility is the lack of articulated needs around menstruation and the absence of institutional support mechanisms. Even when experiencing pain, discomfort, or emotional fluctuations at work, women are often unable to express their needs and are instead pressured to conform silently under the expectation of appearing professional (Vostral, 2008). This study seeks to explore the invisibility of menstruation not merely as a cultural silence, but also as a form of structural and institutional negligence. The recognition of menstruation at both the individual and societal levels, the development of workplace policies around this experience, and the visibility of the female body in professional life must be regarded as essential steps toward achieving gender equality.

2. THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The menstrual cycle is not only a biological process but also a profound psychological experience. Cyclical hormonal changes in women's bodies affect not only physiological functioning but also cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. These changes become particularly evident in the workplace in areas such as attention, motivation, mood regulation, and stress management (Albert et al., 2015). Fluctuations in estrogen and progesterone levels throughout the menstrual cycle have a direct impact on emotional

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stability. During the estrogen-dominant phase, cognitive performance and positive mood generally increase, whereas in the progesterone-dominant luteal phase, symptoms such as mood disturbances, restlessness, anxiety, and irritability become more common (Farage et al., 2009). These emotional fluctuations can indirectly affect women's workplace communication, decision-making, and coping skills. Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) refers to a set of physical and emotional symptoms that occur in the premenstrual phase and affect approximately 75% of women (Rapkin & Winer, 2009). PMS can negatively impact job performance through symptoms such as fatigue, difficulty concentrating, appetite changes, irritability, and depressive moods. In corporate environments dominated by high workloads, elevated expectations, and stress, PMS can intensify internal conflicts-especially when women strive to maintain a professional appearance. Menstruation can carry not only physical but also emotional burdens for women. Caught between societal roles, professional responsibilities, and personal needs, women may feel pressured to suppress their emotions, particularly in workplace settings. Such emotional suppression increases stress levels and, over time, may contribute to burnout (Romans et al., 2012). These internal conflicts necessitate not only the management of physiological symptoms but also the consideration of emotional resilience, self-care, and the need for psychological support. The lack of recognition of these psychological dimensions in the workplace leads many women to experience their menstrual cycle as a solitary, "hidden struggle." However, making the psychological impacts of menstruation visible through institutional policies and support systems would be a vital step toward enhancing both emotional well-being and productivity for women employees.

3. THE SILENT STRUGGLE OF WOMEN EMPLOYEES

For many women, menstruation is not merely a biological process but an invisible and unacknowledged struggle within the professional sphere. Despite experiencing pain, discomfort, emotional fluctuations, and low energy during this period, women are expected to fulfill their professional responsibilities without interruption. This dynamic reinforces the invisibility of their bodily struggles and further deepens the manifestations of gender-based inequalities in the workplace (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). Many women employees strive to appear "normal" at work despite physical discomfort during menstruation. This often involves personal coping strategies such as taking painkillers, making frequent restroom visits, controlling facial expressions, or silently enduring the pain (Baker, 2020). Making menstrual symptoms visible carries the risk of being labeled as weak, unprofessional, or "hysterical," leading many women to cultivate a silent form of endurance. This silence brings not only physical discomfort but also an emotional burden. The effort women exert during menstruation is described in the literature as a form of "invisible labor" (Daniels, 1987)-work that is socially expected within gender roles but unrecognized and uncompensated at the institutional level. Working through menstrual pain is a form of labor shaped by the necessity to remain productive despite bodily limitations. However, this labor is neither acknowledged by institutions nor often voiced by women themselves. The continued invisibility of this bodily labor contributes to the physical and psychological wear on women in the workplace. Although menstrual leave is implemented in some countries and organizations, it remains a contentious issue in Turkey. Requests for menstrual leave are frequently met with prejudices such as "seeking special treatment," "avoiding workload," or "being overly emotional" (Kumar & Srivastava, 2011). These biases make it difficult for women to articulate their bodily needs and push menstrual leave demands into the background on both individual and institutional levels. Yet recognizing this type of leave is a critical step toward enabling women to exist in the workplace with their bodily realities acknowledged. Women's experiences during menstruation are a clear indicator of the gender blindness prevalent in working life. Making these silent struggles visible is essential not only for women but for creating a more equitable, healthy, and inclusive work environment for all employees.

4. CORPORATE BLINDNESS: STRUCTURES THAT ERASE MENSTRUATION

For decades, corporate structures have been shaped by a male-centered conception of the workforce, systematically neglecting the visibility of women's bodies and their specific needs. This neglect is most clearly reflected in the silence surrounding menstruation. Most human resources (HR) policies operate based on standardized norms rather than acknowledging the physical and psychological diversity of employees-effectively excluding cyclical bodily experiences like menstruation (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). Menstruation remains an area that is not explicitly acknowledged in most workplaces and, as a result, is rarely reflected in institutional policies. HR policies regarding leave, absenteeism, and performance rarely account for menstruation-related needs. In Turkey, studies show that institutional guidelines either include vague references to "women's health" or omit menstruation altogether (Ersoy & Yüce, 2018). Beyond the lack of menstrual leave, the absence of menstruation-specific accommodations-such as flexible hours, remote work options, or health support-places a silent burden on women employees.

Many workplaces lack concrete support mechanisms related to women's health. Basic institutional provisions such as educational materials, counseling, psychological support, or access to hygiene products are often excluded from the organizational agenda, revealing a serious deficiency in workplace inclusivity and gender equality (Bobel, 2019). Institutions continue to position menstruation as part of "private life," thereby reinforcing an understanding that renders the female body invisible in professional contexts. Some progressive organizations around the world have begun integrating menstruation into their workplace policies. For example, certain UK-based NGOs and social enterprises offer menstrual leave, flexible working models, and access to health

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consultants (Coexist, 2016). While Japan legally recognizes menstrual leave, its actual implementation within institutions is still limited by prevailing social pressures (Seear & Han, 2020). In Turkey, examples of menstrual-friendly institutional policies remain extremely limited; existing corporate structures tend to remain silent or rely on ad hoc individual accommodations. This indicates that corporate blindness toward menstruation is not only a cultural but also a structural problem. The continued taboo around menstruation in corporate policies prevents women from fully participating in professional life. Recognizing the female body within the workplace and developing appropriate policies is not only essential for individual well-being but also enhances organizational efficiency and equity.

5. INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES AND A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Some countries around the world have developed pioneering policies that recognize women's needs during menstruation and aim to integrate this natural process into working life. These policies not only legitimize women's bodily demands but also contribute to raising institutional awareness regarding gender equality. However, the implementation of such measures is largely shaped by factors such as cultural norms, societal perceptions, and workplace ethics. Japan was one of the first countries to grant menstrual leave rights to women employees under the term *seirikyuka* in 1947. However, the actual use of this leave remains low, as many women fear that taking menstrual leave may conflict with workplace discipline, be perceived as unprofessional, or negatively affect promotion opportunities (Seear & Han, 2020). South Korea has a similar law, allowing women to take one day of menstrual leave per month. Yet, like in Japan, this right is often underutilized due to institutional resistance and social stigma (Lee, 2019). In Indonesia, menstrual leave has been legally recognized since 1948, but many companies are reluctant to honor it. Often, they impose documentation requirements that discourage women from exercising this right (Bennoune, 2022). These examples demonstrate that legal recognition of menstrual leave alone is not sufficient; the policy must also be supported by social norms and workplace culture in order to be effectively implemented. While menstrual leave is not widespread in most EU countries, menstrual-friendly workplace policies are increasingly gaining visibility. For example, Spain became the first EU country to legalize menstrual leave in 2023, granting women up to three days of paid leave (González, 2023). This policy represents a significant turning point in making menstruation more visible in both social and institutional contexts across Europe. The Nordic countries-particularly Sweden, Norway, and Finland-have adopted more inclusive approaches to menstruation. Rather than offering direct menstrual leave, they provide effective indirect support mechanisms such as flexible working hours, the option to work from home, psychological counseling, and access to hygiene products (Magnusdottir, 2021). Furthermore, in these countries, policies centered on gender equality and body positivity treat menstruation not as a private or taboo subject, but as a matter of public health and well-being. This comparative overview reveals that menstrual-friendly institutions require not only legal regulations but also a broader cultural transformation and administrative commitment. For Turkey, these international examples serve as valuable references for steps that can be taken at both the legal and institutional levels.

6. IS IT POSSIBLE TO HAVE PERIOD-FRIENDLY ORGANIZATIONS?

The menstrual process is a regular and natural part of women's life cycle. However, the work environment has often ignored this reality, treating the physical and emotional challenges women experience during menstruation as an individual issue. In contrast, modern human resource management, with a focus on diversity and inclusion, requires developing policies that consider the bodily differences of employees. Period-friendly organizations not only enhance the well-being of female employees but also contribute to creating a more productive, engaged, and sustainable work environment (Gedro et al., 2020). The first step is to break the institutional silence around menstruation. For this, it is essential for managers and human resources experts to undergo awareness training on menstruation and to create an open communication environment about the issue. Furthermore, the inclusion of flexibility, leave, and support policies related to menstruation in employee handbooks is a strong indicator that this process is officially recognized within the organization (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). The increased emotional burden and stress during menstruation can challenge psychological resilience. Organizations can provide holistic support by offering accessible psychological counseling services during this period, addressing not only physical but also emotional needs (Kamen et al., 2021). Additionally, creating safe spaces where menstrual symptoms can be openly discussed reduces emotional pressure and strengthens employee engagement. The menstrual process should be considered within a broader women's health perspective. Practical steps, such as providing free access to hygiene products, menstrual tracking, and health counseling services, help raise corporate sensitivity. Moreover, adjusting remote work, flexible working hours, and short-term leave specifically for menstruation makes the organizational structure more sensitive to biological diversity (Nash et al., 2020). Such practices not only support women's participation in the workforce but also help internalize gender equality at the institutional level. Period-friendly organizations are not only possible for the well-being of female employees but also for a more just, healthy, and sustainable working life. The policies and practices developed for this purpose will form the foundation of an inclusive work culture based on gender equality..

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7. SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF MENSTRUATION AND VISIBILITY IN THE MEDIA

Menstruation has been coded in the cultural fabric of society as a private, shameful, and tabooed process; this perception has been similarly reproduced in the media. The way the media represents menstruation plays a significant role in shaping individuals' beliefs and emotions regarding this physiological process. However, this representation is often framed through normative, commercialized, and idealized body images, distancing the reality of menstruation (Chrisler, 2011). Television and social media advertisements for menstrual products frequently resort to depicting menstrual blood with a white, viscous liquid, visually censoring the reality of menstruation and presenting it as something that needs to be "cleaned." Showing women as "active, energetic, and happy" during this time creates a perception that makes menstruation invisible, turning it into an individual performance pressure (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020). This approach constructs a media language that obscures the naturalness of menstruation, disregarding its biological and emotional aspects. In recent years, social media platforms have started playing a significant role in removing the taboo surrounding menstruation. Feminist digital activism, in particular, has made discussions about menstruation more visible in the public sphere. Global campaigns such as #FreeThePeriod, #MenstruationMatters, and #PeriodPositive highlight the uncensored representation of menstrual blood and the fight against period poverty (Bobel, 2019). Sharing individual menstrual experiences also strengthens collective awareness and solidarity. However, the mere visibility of menstruation in the media is not sufficient to create social awareness. The quality and content of the representation are crucial in transforming the perception of menstruation. Otherwise, this visibility can be reduced to "marketing feminism" through commercialized body images or everyday consumer practices (Gill, 2007). Therefore, it is of great importance for media producers to be sensitive to real experiences, biological diversity, and cultural contexts when representing menstruation.

8. MEN'S PERCEPTION OF MENSTRUATION AND CORPORATE PARTICIPATION

Historically, menstruation has been positioned as an experience associated with the female body and kept at a distance from men. This social coding not only makes discussing menstruation something exclusive to women but also reinforces men's lack of knowledge and awareness about the process. However, a gender equality perspective requires a transformative process that includes not only women but also men. Men's perceptions and attitudes toward menstruation play a decisive role in shaping and implementing corporate policies (Hyde et al., 2019). When men see menstruation as a "special" or "private" matter, it limits the ability to discuss the menstrual experience in the public sphere, causing the physical and emotional effects women face to remain invisible within organizational structures. This situation can lead to male managers perceiving requests for menstrual leave or support policies as unnecessary or open to exploitation (Buckley & Gottlieb, 2021). Coding menstruation as solely a female issue poses a significant barrier to implementing equitable solutions at the corporate level. For gender equality policies to succeed at the institutional level, men must not be passive observers but active participants. This participation is crucial in deconstructing the taboo surrounding menstruation, establishing empathy-based communication, and recognizing menstrual processes as a health and well-being issue. For example, including male employees in menstruation awareness training can help address informational gaps and contribute to reconsidering gender roles (Jewitt & Ryley, 2014). The attitude of male managers toward menstruation directly affects both the corporate culture and how female employees express themselves. Recognizing the menstrual process is not just an individual sensitivity but also an administrative responsibility. Men supporting menstruation through direct policy implementation, rather than merely "trying to understand" it, is critical for establishing equitable organizational structures (Case & Meier, 2014).

9. EDUCATION AND AWARENESS: TRANSFORMATIONAL TRAINING MODELS IN ORGANIZATIONS

The exclusion of menstruation in organizational structures is not only linked to a lack of policies but also to a lack of knowledge and awareness. Therefore, training programs for recognizing menstruation and fostering an inclusive and transformative workplace culture are crucial. Education not only challenges the societal taboos surrounding menstruation but also encourages all employees to develop empathy toward biological differences (UNESCO, 2019). Menstrual awareness training should be aimed not only at women but at all employees. These trainings should cover the physiology of the menstrual cycle, the psychological effects of premenstrual syndrome, the impact on work performance, and the social taboos surrounding menstruation. The use of inclusive language in the training ensures that participants see the process not just as a "women's issue" but as a shared workplace issue (Sumpter & Torondel, 2013). In the context of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, menstrual education should serve not only as information transfer but also to encourage individuals to question their biases and engage in critical thinking. Participatory methods, such as workshops where direct menstrual experiences are shared, case studies, and empathy-building exercises, help internalize organizational awareness (Cranton, 2016). The continuity of internal training and its integration with corporate values ensures that menstruation moves beyond being a temporary "awareness week" topic and becomes a tool for permanent cultural transformation. Special sessions for human resources, managers, and employees in leadership positions enhance conscious participation in the policy development process. This way, menstruation is treated not as an individual issue but as a corporate responsibility (Mahon et al., 2015).

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10. CASE STUDIES FROM TURKEY

In Turkey, the approach to menstruation in the workplace is characterized largely by silence and institutional ambiguity. While there are no clear regulations regarding menstrual leave in legislation, the issue has begun to surface in certain sectors, especially in sensitive private initiatives. However, the general trend continues to be the invisibility of menstruation, with the raising of requests for menstrual leave or support potentially leading to negative labeling of female employees (Gülseren & Aslan, 2022). In recent years, especially some start-up companies with a social initiative nature and organizations close to women's associations have started to discuss menstrual leave policies. For example, in 2022, Viva Agency, a digital media agency based in Istanbul, publicly announced that it would grant female employees one day of menstrual leave per month. Similarly, some women's cooperatives have shown sensitivity to their employees' needs during menstruation by providing flexible working hours. Although these practices are still not widespread, they have encouraged public discussion and received positive responses on social media. However, the reflection of such examples in large corporate structures has been limited. Some labor unions and civil society organizations advocating for women's labor rights are trying to include menstrual leave as part of the collective rights struggle. The Women's Labor and Employment Initiative (KEİG) and KESK Women's Assembly have emphasized that menstrual leave should be legally guaranteed, criticizing the neglect of the physical and psychological effects women experience during this period (KESK, 2021). However, these demands have not yet turned into concrete regulations in decision-making bodies. The lack of legal infrastructure and the resistant societal mindset slow down this process. Some universities and municipalities in Turkey have started developing social support models to address the economic difficulties related to access to menstrual products. For instance, in 2023, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality launched a pilot program to provide free sanitary pads to young women. These types of initiatives are important steps in bringing period poverty to the social policy agenda and preparing the ground for broader corporate sensitivity (İBB, 2023).

11. CONCLUSION

The menstrual period is a continuous biological reality in women's lives; however, gender norms, cultural taboos, and institutional structures have persistently made this process invisible. This invisibility causes women to be unable to express the physical and emotional challenges they face due to menstruation in the workplace, forcing them to silently endure these challenges and postpone their rights-based demands. This study has examined the psychological, social, and institutional dimensions of menstruation; it has discussed how the experiences of female employees during their menstrual periods are suppressed and ignored within existing organizational structures. The exclusion of menstruation from corporate policies should not only be viewed as a health issue or an individual matter; it must also be regarded as a reflection of gender-based structural inequalities. The experiences of female employees during this period must be rethought within the context of gender equality. International examples show that period-friendly practices are not only a social responsibility but also necessary for creating more inclusive, efficient, and sustainable work environments. Legal regulations, human resources policies, and managerial approaches must recognize this process and create safe and supportive environments where women can exist with their bodies. Ultimately, breaking the silence is the responsibility of the entire working world, not just women. Institutional structures that recognize women's biological realities, integrate them into work models, and are based on inclusivity and equality will be among the most powerful steps for social transformation. The more visible the menstrual process is, the more valuable women's labor will become, and we will move one step closer to gender justice.

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