

## Menstrual Discrimination and its Impact on Decent Work

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### Menstrual Discrimination throughout a Lifetime

There is no doubt that half of this planet is occupied by menstruators (girls, women, transmen and queer). Menstruation is a biological process that exists to ensure the survival of our species. Since ancient times, menstruation has been considered a mysterious matter and has received low levels of public attention, even in the era of science and technology. Menstruation occurs in women born with ovaries and a uterus for the first time at an average age of 12 years old and occurs monthly until it ends at an average of 51 years old. When menstruation comes into the discussion, menopause must also have equal space – because menstruation and menopause are two sides of the same coin. The topic of menstruation is usually raised in the context of reproductive health or women’s health, childbirth, family planning, and contraception. Little mention is made of the long-standing, widespread discrimination against menstruators. This is a topic yet to be included in the curriculum of schools, colleges and universities including medical, nursing and public health courses in many countries including the UK (Kemp, 2021).

Historically, consideration of menstruation either as a dark magical power or a dirty or impure condition has been perpetrated throughout centuries. Menstruation is surrounded with various forms of myths and rumors that have been responsible for family and community practices that are mostly discriminatory against the menstruator. The Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation (GSCDM) defined menstrual discrimination as the *state of taboo*,

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*shyness (shame), stigma, restrictions, abuses, violence, deprivation from services and resources associated with menstruation throughout the life cycle of menstruators* (Paudel, 2020). In close alignment, irrespective of sex, class, caste, religion, region, education etc., menstrual discrimination has been practiced across the globe under different names, forms and severity. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the historic taboos created by ignorance still shroud in silence the abuses, restrictions or deprivations against menstruators that continue in many examples of menstrual discrimination (Paudel, 2020). For instance, in Canada, 63% of girls reportedly felt that they had to hide their menstrual products while buying them or using them in washrooms (Paudel, 2020). Likewise, 78 % of girls stop playing with other children after the onset of menstruation in the UK (Weaver, 2022).

The empirical evidence of discrimination against menstruators is found first at home, irrespective of global north and global south. More specifically, both menstruators and non-menstruators learn something about menstruation for the first time by hearing menstrual jokes, seeing menstrual products advertised and in displays in supermarkets, observing blood spots in bathroom waste receptacles, etc. When menstruators are first told that they are restricted from participating in some daily activities, they may be as young as 9 years old, when they are just starting to articulate their identities and plan their lives. Once girls start menstruating, they are made to believe that they are dirty, impure, powerless, inferior, and disadvantaged, and they cannot control what is happening to them. They are treated differently from non-menstruators (boys) who have already started to consider themselves as clean and pure compared to menstruators, powerful and advantaged in the family and in society. Menstruators see themselves as different and start to act differently towards themselves and others. This is the origin of menstrual discrimination and explains how menstruation detracts from a menstruators/girl's

power and self-esteem and how power and influence are transferred to the boys, which perpetuates the patriarchy. Neither menstruators nor non-menstruators question the reasons for this discrimination, which is justified as a reality of life. Girls remain silent and just follow the practices surrounding menstruation taught to them by their families and teachers. Boys separate themselves from the girls and start exerting their power and privileges. The menstruators have now experienced menstrual discrimination since childhood, and the family and community has socialized it in all aspects of the menstruator's life, including in the workplace.

By perpetuating the power of the patriarchy, the menstruators are considered inferior, weaker, and powerless at all times. This second class status continues throughout the lifetime of menstruators in all levels of society and is the underlying cause of many forms of discrimination including the following: selective abortion because of sex; exclusion of women from performing all rituals; physical separation; disinheritance by clans; inability to own property, etc. Similar types of discriminatory attitudes and practices are evident even upon the woman's death. For instance, in a few cultures in Nepal, wives do not have *Sora Saraddhe* (death rituals fall before Dashain) if they die before their husbands. Their names come after the death of their husband's name only.

Regardless of their economic conditions, menstruators are considered inferior in all spheres of society. Menstruators experience segregation, exclusion, and inadequate or inferior school or working conditions, lower wages, lower pay and benefits. This amplifies the risks of exploitation, harassment and violence against women (ILO, Securing decent work for nursing personnel and domestic workers, 2022). It also makes it more likely girls will be forced to marry young.

Children are socialized to discriminate against menstruators since early childhood, starting at ages 6-9. Most non-menstruators and menstruators are initially equally disgusted, shocked, surprised, confused, scared, nervous, puzzled, and unhappy to learn of the monthly bleeding, particularly when the menstruators do not participate in cultural and religious activities. Children observe menstrual discrimination in the home. Young menstruators and non-menstruators are reminded of this at least every month when they see discrimination against mothers, aunts, sisters, etc., who respond with silence, although they may articulate justifications for the menstrual discrimination. Such early systemic socialization of menstrual discrimination further pressures the menstruator to accept her status as powerlessness, inferior and unequal, and to accept discrimination in silence. By the time the menstruators are older and entering the workforce, they have experienced years of discrimination in their daily lives and do not question or protest domination, bias or oppression against them. Boys may unquestioningly assume their roles as dominators, powerful and privileged members of the family, society, and in the workplace.

### **Dignified Menstruation in Schools**

The average menstrual bleeding lasts for five days. This means that a menstruator experiences discrimination 60 days in a year (5 days x 12 months) or over 8 years cumulatively over her lifetime. Due to false perceptions that menstrual blood is impure, dirty or state of weak menstruators are not allowed to do certain tasks in many cultures around the globe that applies around the clock for five days of average bleeding. Wherever they are, menstruators need special sanitation products (soap, pads, etc.) and facilities (toilet, water supply, waste disposal) in order to manage menstrual blood – which means hiding it. Few girls and women have premenstrual cramping or other symptoms, but others may need immediate access to a rest room, a hot water

bag, pain medication, or flexible working hours. Few of them may have serious complications which require a medical consultation and advanced diagnostics to determine their hormonal and physical status. In this regard, they may require special consideration and policies for care and treatment.

If a school serves as a dignified menstruation friendly school (See Figure 1), it welcomes all members of the school with a banner creating the space to initiate discussion around menstruation. A boy would understand the existence of menstruation and respect his girlfriend, including when she experiences menstruation, and a girl grows with the confidence and self-pride of being a girl who experiences menstruation. Both of them would influence their families and communities, and this would help dismantle discriminatory menstrual practices. A dignified menstruation friendly school also would allocate the necessary budget, implement appropriate codes of conduct, and have zero tolerance for any form of menstrual discrimination including sexual violence at school. Those who have the courage to speak about menstrual dignity will have the courage to speak against any forms of sexual violence and abuses in school. Such an environment allows girls to continue their schooling and decreases the incidence of forced, early or involuntary marriage.

Because the overlooked and ignored issue of menstrual discrimination has been centuries in the making, every political and social organization should initiate this dialogue by putting up a banner stating: "you are welcome to our dignified menstruation friendly institution." This banner will help not only to break the silence surrounding menstruation, but it will also dispel taboos and encourage the operationalization of policies to protect dignified menstruation.

If a school posts in its classroom and hallway walls messages about dignified menstruation (e.g., "menstrual blood is pure blood"), such measures could have immediate and widespread

impact. A girl in grade one will become educated in a positive way about her own dignified menstruation in the not-too-distant future. She will feel proud of herself for being born a girl. She can then explore the information provided and understand her special biological processes. On the day of her menstruation, she will not cry due to shame or fear. If she has premenstrual symptoms or illness, she will not feel guilt or confusion, but will confidently explore treatment available to her. Her choices and ability to make decisions will be easier regarding her own career goals, options for sex, marriage, childbirth, family planning and reproductive health. She can manage her own reproductive health concerns and be equipped to confront peri-menopausal and menopausal conditions when they arise.

In parallel, boys in grade one will grow up knowing that they are alive and thanks to menstrual blood and the birth cycle that keeps the human species moving forward. Such early learning would help immeasurably to underscore the importance and equality of all human beings and to introduce the accountability of all citizens for all types of discrimination and violence against menstruators.

The role of the school is also important as it impacts teachers experiencing menstrual symptoms or symptoms of peri-menopause or menopause. Helen Clare, expert on Menopause in Education highlighted that the one in six teachers and 9 in 10 women experience moderate to severe peri-menopausal and menopausal symptoms that affect their jobs in UK on 11 April 2022 (GSCDM, 2022). Likewise, the UK Parliament published the report on Menopause and Work place on 28 July 2022 which highlighted the women who experienced (69%) anxiety or depression. And such condition affected at work by 92%, losing the ability to concentrate and confidence by 72 % and 67 respectively and increased the stress by 70%. Thus, the school is an appropriate place to have discussions about various aspects of dignified menstruation and

dignified menopause through classroom lessons on biology, extracurricular activities, budget discussions, planning activities and programs for students and parents. Students could better understand and provide help to teachers experiencing menstrual, pre-menopausal and menopausal symptoms at school. Likewise, these students would be prepared to show sensitivity to anyone in their homes who are experiencing these symptoms now and future.

Those who are born with a uterus and ovaries not only menstruate but also then go through peri-menopause and menopause. Many menstruators in peri-menopause experience mild to severe symptoms such as hot flashes, insomnia, joint pain, depression, heart problems, brain fog, anorexia, etc. that disrupt the woman's daily routine and impacts her ability to fulfill her responsibilities. These women are in need of special health care, treatment and symptom management. Employers rarely have policies and practices in place to provide needed care, treatment, and counseling.



## Dignified Menstruation Friendly Institutions

Menstrual Discrimination refers to taboo, stigma, shyness, restriction, abuses, violence associated with menstruation throughout the life cycle of menstruators. It also includes various aspects of the dignified menstruation such as social, cultural, political, economic, environmental, health, education, sanitation, human right, empowerment etc. For details: [www.dignifiedmenstruation.org](http://www.dignifiedmenstruation.org)

| Activities\Institutions  | Public         | Educational | Private        |
|--|----------------|-------------|----------------|
| Welcome banner – you are most welcome in dignified menstruation friendly institution.  | Needed         | Needed      | Needed         |
| The pictures about menstrual products with advantage and disadvantages, hang inside and outside of the institution.  | Better to have | Needed      | Better to have |
| The statements and posters about menstruation paste inside and outside of the institution.   | Better to have | Needed      | Better to have |
| Any staff or member of the institution can talk about menstruation and menstrual discrimination at any time.   | Needed         | Needed      | Needed         |
| Often organize programs that would address various forms of discrimination association with menstruation.  | Better to have | Needed      | Better to have |
| The responsive management committee/administrative system for eliminating the menstrual discrimination   | Needed         | Needed      | Needed         |
| The budget is allocated for promoting dignified menstruation   | Needed         | Needed      | Needed         |
| Well equip infrastructure (toilet, water, products, waste management) for all kinds of menstruator   | Needed         | Needed      | Needed         |
| Follow the three 'P' model to manage the menstrual products (P-Person- right to choice, Planet- no burden for planet, Pocket-availability, accessibility, affordability, no tax, locally produced) | Needed         | Needed      | Needed         |
| Have interaction programs with concerned stakeholders  | Needed         | Needed      | Needed         |
| Have special programs to those family who have practice of menstrual discrimination  | Better to have | Needed      | Better to have |
| Enquire or investigate if the performance of students or staffs of an institution.   | Needed         | Needed      | Needed         |
| Have a mechanism to response and manage the any emergency conditions occurred due to menstruation including menopause  | Needed         | Needed      | Needed         |
| Have an policy to address if menstruator experienced any health concern e.g. flexible working schedule   | Needed         | Needed      | Needed         |

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Figure 1

## **Dignified Menstruation in the Workplace-- Economic Consequences of Discrimination**

Menstrual discrimination is complex and multifaceted. In order to address complex menstrual discrimination, Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation (GSCDM) defined an innovative and holistic approach called 'dignified menstruation'-

[www.dignifiedmenstruation.org](http://www.dignifiedmenstruation.org) . It is *'a state free from all forms of menstrual discrimination (and it) includes taboo, shame (shyness), stigma, restrictions, abuses, violence and deprivation from services and resources associated with menstruation throughout the life cycle of menstruators'* (Paudel, 2020). GSCDM claimed that dignified menstruation is a tool or vehicle for advancing gender equality, improving sexual and reproductive health, and promoting human rights. Most importantly, dignified menstruation is important to prevent various forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), showing that menstrual discrimination is itself a form of SGBV. Menstrual discrimination works in a complex non-linear, or spiral manner, starting from a girl's childhood, winding through all aspects of family and community interactions. Applying a linear approach to the problem of menstrual discrimination is overly simplistic, and many scholars focus only on menstrual hygiene and health management. We describe menstrual discrimination through a multi-linear approach, following a spiral of examples to explain how menstruation introduces discrimination on all levels across a woman's lifetime. By this methodology, we conclude that dignified menstruation is both front and center and cross-cutting over various forms of social, economic and political discrimination.

GSCDM, proposes indicators for achieving dignified menstruation through friendly, approachable, responsive, unbiased institutions, as mentioned in Figure 1– from the workplace, home, school, restaurant, bank, public or private office – anywhere. By considering that more than half of the population of this planet are menstruators, it is evident that menstruators are

everywhere, in every workplace in formal and informal sectors, at all times. To ensure gender equality, inclusion, human rights, and self-determination for women, dignified menstruation must be promoted and protected by friendly institutions. Each institution should have a policy mandate that provides for open discussion about any issues regarding menstruation throughout a menstruators' life cycle, and educational activities to break the taboos, policies, and practices that contribute to menstrual discrimination.

Additionally, employers of all types could have policies and practices in place that automatically protect menstruators at all stages of menstruation. Hotels, banks and other public places could have posters in their reception areas promoting dignified menstruation and highlighting the availability of their facilities, which would amplify the message and its impact. In many cultures, women are encouraged to go banks, which gives them mobility, self-sufficiency and independence. If they have any concern related with menstruation, they would get support and care immediately. These are the simple examples of how the need to provide dignified menstruation is an unmet need that can be remedied to ensure decent workplace environments and increased productivity everywhere.

Menstruators experience discrimination in various ways as discussed above, which has not been fully examined or discussed among stakeholders, by activists, within academia, or by development workers. To understand the level of menstrual discrimination in the workplace, we seek a basic understanding of the complexity and multifaceted nature of menstrual discrimination regardless of the global north or south location of the menstruator.

There is a notable absence of systematic research regarding the relationship between menstrual discrimination and its impact in the workplace. The International Labour Organization (ILO) draws some links between women in the workplace and the reported 20 % worldwide

gender wage gap. Some countries impose maternal penalties (e.g., no pay for pre-birth doctor visits or maternity leave) and others openly claim that women are not competitive with men because they lack quality training or education. The same report also reveals that over 700 million (6 %) fewer women than men are employed (*ILO, A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality For a Better Future of Work for All*, 2019). However, the report does not cite menstrual discrimination as a direct cause of the gender wage gap and the inability of women to participate in the work force on an equal playing field. This suggests that the widespread, generational, systemic acceptance of menstrual discrimination and silence surrounding it carries forward the earliest notions that women are impure, inferior, weaker, less capable or less intelligent.

In the United States, male nurses secure higher salaries than equally trained and educated female nurses (wage gap \$5000/year) and there is only one male nurse out of 10 female nurses (*ILO, Securing decent work for nursing personnel and domestic workers*, 2022). Similarly, only 27.1 % women are managers and leaders in the workplace. Globally, 606 million or 21.7 % of working age women are engaged in unpaid work on a full-time basis, compared with only 41 million (1.5 %) of men. This imbalance points also to the systemic discrimination against menstruators, who are considered unfit for the workforce and capable only of low or unskilled jobs, usually in working conditions that are inferior to men's working conditions. They are not even worthy to be paid. They have no rights or benefits. More importantly, as discussed above, women workers also face more violence and harassment due to their lower status and menstruators, created and perpetuated since birth.

Menstrual discrimination in the workplace is palpable but remains unspoken and hidden, perpetuating the taboo of the inferiority and impurity of menstruators. They without a voice are pressured to accept their lower status, accept jobs with low or no salaries, low grade or under-

appreciated work, reinforced by lack of facilities, lack of policies protecting equal pay for equal work, lack of opportunities to compete for promotions on merit or tenure, and lack of benefits. As a result, reports indicate that women were engaged in less dignified working conditions in 2018 than men (ILO, *A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality For a Better Future of Work for All*, 2019). The engagement of women in informal and unpaid employment was highest in countries where the menstrual discrimination was more severe and visible. For instance, in Sub Saharan Africa, Southern Asia and Latin America, where there are deeper traditions of silence and ignorance surrounding menstruation and discrimination is more evident, women were engaged in informal employment at 90 %, 89 % and 75 % respectively.

Globally, out of 249 million women, two-thirds are working as self-employed agricultural workers, agricultural daily wage workers, house maids, domestic care workers, washing and janitorial staff, street vendors, factory workers and assembly plants, labeling, warehouse packaging work, etc. (ILO, *Securing decent work for nursing personnel and domestic workers*, 2022). Due to the discriminatory perceptions and practices surrounding menstruation, women workers in some countries are overtly restricted or banned from certain jobs. For instance, in Niger, menstruators are not allowed to tend crops in the field because they are told they are impure and will spoil the crops (Personal Interview\_October 2021). Similarly in Nepal, menstruators are not allowed to work at sweet shops as waitresses or cleaners (Sancharika, 2022). Women who sell flowers, milk or milk products also cannot continue their work during menstruation in Nepal. In Sri Lanka, the owner of a garment industry instructed women not to come to work during menstruation, forcing them to use oral contraceptives in order to avoid menstrual days (DM Sri Lanka Chapter, 2020). In garment factories in Bangladesh 70% of the working women skip work during menstruation due to the stigma of being impure (Rafe, 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, among frontline healthcare workers, 70% were female. The relief policies, plans, protocols or relief packages did not consider the needs and priorities of frontline menstruators. In China, the deep level of silence and ignorance surrounding menstrual dignity was evident among (not so) humanitarian policymakers who compelled women to use oral contraceptive pills to stop their menstruation because no menstrual hygiene products were made available in relief packages or supplies of PPE (Personal Protection Equipment). These supplies were also missing products for women workers with menopausal symptoms, who were forced to disrupt their regular activities (Li, 2020).

In most countries, women workers who experience menstrual, peri-menopausal or menopausal symptoms cannot discuss their problem with supervisors or ask for flexible hours or leave if they need it. In most cases, they are forced to voluntarily stop working. In such working conditions, menstruators who are experiencing severe forms of menstrual symptoms could face various negative consequences, such as being fired for non-performance, receiving low evaluations, losing tenure, opportunities for promotion and benefits, etc. (Kemp, *Surgical menopause*, 2021).

For all menstruators, separate, private, and safe toilet facilities with running water, soap, availability of products for unexpected bleeding, and provision of waste disposal for used menstrual products etc. are basic requirements in the workplace. Such facilities and accommodations are not available for many women workers. For instance, out of 250 women tempo drivers in Nepal, 36 remained absent during menstruation due to the unavailability of toilet facilities (Thapaliya, 2014).

Discrimination associated with peri-menopausal and menopausal symptoms is still not a matter of concern for many stakeholders involved in economic development, academia or

activism. Indeed, due to lack of communication or open discussion about peri-menopausal and menopausal conditions, the issue is simply ignored. While medical professionals can take several months to diagnose symptoms related to menstruation and menopause, women can experience stress and depression that forces them to change their job (100 million women changed jobs/year in UK) or drop out of the workforce. Others with severe symptoms reportedly attempted suicide (Kemp, 2021).

Menstruators who are working in undignified conditions can feel their physical, emotional and mental strength drained out of them every day. Their dignity and self-esteem are degraded in both a visible and invisible manner. They cannot express their pain, anger, or frustration with menstrual discrimination in any other way than being absent, changing jobs, or leaving the workforce. Unless there are policies in place to hear them and accommodate their needs, they have no voice.

The early adoption and normalization of menstrual discrimination reinforces its systemic impacts at the workplace. Menstruators who experience undignified treatment feel dominated, suppressed, inferior or deprived from the equal opportunities afforded to male workers. They experience various restrictions including deprivation from mobility, human interaction, normal work routines, and so forth, during menstruation. If they are compelled to leave the job market, they lose their careers and vocations and suffer the multiplier effect of losing an income that may support a family. This also impacts the micro and macro economy of the country. For example, the loss of an average of five productive workdays due to menstrual bleeding in a month by 70% of women workers in garment factory of Bangladesh (Rafe, 2019) creates loss economically for both the employer and employee, and is also a violation of human dignity, human rights and the right to employment.

Working women who consider taking herbal and allopathic medications including hormones (oral contraceptive pills) and other precautions to stop menstruation so that they can keep working, should be informed that these treatments alter their bodily functions significantly. These workers may be under additional emotional and mental pressure to hide the fact that they are undergoing such treatments. They are complicit in perpetuating the taboo rather than taking reasonable steps to change the systemic menstrual discrimination.

Undignified working conditions caused by the lack of appropriate policies and facilities regarding menstruation make it difficult or impossible for menstruators who experience pre-menstrual symptoms and severe symptoms or illness during menstruation to continue the work. Thus, they, too, face losing their jobs, changing jobs, risking change in income, seniority at work, and this degrades their quality of life and that of their dependents. Due to the lack of a friendly or supportive working environment, many menstruators also limit the amount of water that they drink during the day to limit their need for a rest break, which adds another layer of impact on their health and productivity. Likewise, poor and inadequate workplace infrastructure and hygienic conditions contribute to physical illness (e.g. infections) that affect their short and long-term productivity. There is a heightened chance for creating vulnerabilities for sexual harassment and violence against anyone protesting the problems.

Additionally, women who experience moderate to severe forms of peri-menopausal and menopausal symptoms are compelled to take sick days (paid leave), unpaid leave if permitted, or to change their jobs or quit their jobs. Such conditions impact their emotional and economical life significantly.

### **Policies to address the Menstrual Discrimination in the Workplace**

The global community has had more than a century of experience to improve working conditions for women since the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted guidelines after the first conference on women and work in 1919. Every day, steps are being taken to advance women in the workplace globally. The *decent workplace* is becoming a popular agenda item. Most members of the global community adopted the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 and is implementing measures to advance them. As the ILO defined it, "decent work" sums up the aspirations of people in their workplaces, including the creation of productive work, fair income, security, social protection, and social dialogue where all workers, regardless their identities, get equal opportunities and treatment (ILO, n.d.). SDG's 8-goal 2030 agenda, calls for 'decent work and economic growth.' This goal is embedded in the various targets of the SDGs. More importantly, decent work is acknowledged as a priority for the G20, G7, EU, African Union and other multilateral and regional bodies.

In order to address systemic discrimination against gender inequality in the workplace, the Gender and Social Inclusion policy (GESI) is the most common and popular policy to transfer commitments of many international human rights instruments into action. However, this policy does not mention that menstrual discrimination is one of the excluding factors in the public and private spheres of formal and informal workplaces, nor does it mention that menstrual discrimination is a major cause of discrimination against women across all segments of society.

Likewise, the Safeguarding or Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) policy was articulated in 2003, and the UN has provided guidance to gradually implement and apply it in development and other work. Nonetheless, this policy does not mention anywhere that menstrual discrimination is one of the causes of SEA in the workplace. At this stage, there are still no specific policies in practice to dismantle menstrual discrimination, which is learned and

socialized since early childhood--in the family, in schools, at work and throughout a menstruator's lifetime.

Recently, globally, several organizations started to provide menstrual hygiene products to women, enact laws for tax waivers on these products and allocate separate toilets for girls/women from boys/men. Such laws or provisions are welcome, but they do not address the multifaceted nature of menstrual discrimination in the workplace. For instance, if there is taboo around menstruation, women are emotionally pressured to hide their menstruation, even in the toilet by wrapping the used hygienic pad under layers of plastic or other material. Nepal promulgated the menstrual law in 2017, declaring that any form of menstrual discrimination is punishable, but it has not defined what constitutes menstrual discrimination in the workplace, and the law is not enforced. While Nepal has adopted the SEA Act (2015), it has not identified instances where SEA occurred due to the practice of menstrual discrimination. The two policies are stand-alone and continue to exclude consideration of the complex nature of menstrual discrimination as a form of violence and a violation of a woman's human rights.

By acknowledging the moderate and severe menstrual symptoms and illness that some women experience, some countries and organizations around the world have started to institute menstrual leave. For example, in Japan in 1947; Russia in 1920, Spain in 2022, and others (King, 2022). Unfortunately, such provision have not played an effective role in creating *decent work* nor have they been effective in changing the culture of menstrual discrimination. Additionally, no menstrual leave law addresses discrimination related with peri-menopause and menopause.

The conversation around peri-menopause and menopause is still new worldwide, even in the global north. There are no specific policies at the international level to address the various forms of discriminations, treatment and management associated with peri-menopause and menopause.

## **International Human Rights Documents and Workplace Menstrual Discrimination**

International Human Rights Instruments that could be used to address menstrual discrimination in the workplace are discussed below. These include documents identified as targets of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) C 190 recommendations to avoid "violence and harassment."

'Leave No One Behind' is the slogan of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Out of 17 UN goals, SDG 8 is for 'Decent Work and Economic Growth'. Within this goal, the targets 8.1, 8.3, 8.5, 8.6, 8.7, 8.8 and 8.9 are relevant to addressing the needs of menstruators in the workplace. However, none of these targets specifically address menstrual discrimination or articulate ways to dismantle it.

Target no 8.1 calls for increasing per capita income for sustainable economic growth. The entrepreneurial small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are included under this target and are where most menstruators are engaged in the workforce. However, in the absence of an enabling environment that fosters dignity for menstruators (dignified menstruation), this target could not possibly be met.

Target 8.5 calls for full employment and decent work with equal pay. Due to the systemic impact of menstrual discrimination, only 45 % of women were in the workforce in 2018, compared with 75 % of men. Similarly, full employment and decent work for all is not possible without having a non-discriminatory environment for menstruators.

Target 8.6 calls for the promotion of youth employment, education and training. This target will not be possible to meet without having the non-discriminatory conditions provided to menstruators by the employer and educational and training institutions. This target was set for

2020. Clearly, given the current status of youth unemployment, failure to meet this target could be due to undignified working opportunities for menstruators.

Target 8.7 calls for taking immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking. Though there is no specific research yet done, forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking are directly associated with the systemic impact of menstrual discrimination. In many parts of the world, fathers seek to marry their daughters off before the onset of menstruation, creating a culture of child brides that can be equated to forced labour and modern slavery, with the blessing of the family.

Target 8.3 calls for decent informal job creation, entrepreneurship focusing on non-agricultural sectors including unregistered small scale private enterprises, self-employed street vendors, taxi drivers, home base workers, and others. In the absence of calling for or providing the dignity and health of girls and women during menstruation, this goal is not possible to achieve.

Target 8.8 calls for protecting labour rights and promoting safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers and intermittent employment. It is also impossible to achieve this goal without the dignified working conditions for menstruators.

Target 8.9 calls for promoting beneficial and sustainable tourism. This goal is also challenged where it is reported that women working in the tourism sector have faced various forms of discrimination during menstruation (e.g., in Nepal).

ILO C 190 defines workplace 'violence and harassment' to include 'a range of unacceptable behaviors and practices, or threats (single or repeated) that aim at result in or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm' (International Labour Organization, 2019).

By considering its physical, emotional, psychological, sexual and economic harm, menstrual discrimination itself represents an example of violence and harassment but is also the cause of the violence and harassment. Throughout the ILO articles, there is no mention of the need for and importance of dignified menstruation at formal and informal workplaces. Article 3, (b) includes reference to ‘...uses sanitary, washing and changing facilities’ which may address some issues of menstrual discrimination (International Labour Organization, 2019). However, no ILO article refers directly to women workers’ needs for menstrual dignity, which continues the unspoken taboo against menstruators.

## **Discussion**

‘Decent Work at Workplace’ are buzz words in the field of labour rights. *Decent work* is defined as a human right and integral to achieving justice, which is comprised of four elements: the right to full employment; the right to work for a living wage; social protection; and social dialogue (Siwa, et al., 2022). For decent work, there are toolkits, guidelines, policies, etc., including those issued by the ILO (Tool Kit for Mainstreaming Employment & Decent Work, 2007). This toolkit discusses the employer’s obligation to ensure protection from risks, freedom from violence and harassment, and to provide health care and fair working conditions, including maternity services and pensions. It does not mention the discrimination and violence associated with menstruation and its impacts throughout the life cycle of menstruators in the workforce.

Likewise, the ILO standard and rights guaranteed in the workplace for non-discrimination and gender mainstreaming do not acknowledge the fact that dignified menstruation is an integral element for gender mainstreaming and providing a decent work environment. There are different trade unions and alliances that address the dignity of women in a workplace - e.g., trade unions celebrate ‘International Labor day’ under the theme of ‘dignified work for women’. However,

these celebrations simply focus on the inclusion of women from various socioeconomic strata in the workplace and do not raise the need for dignified menstruation in order to provide a dignified workplace for menstruators.

By reviewing all of the major human rights instruments directly related to decent work (ILO C 190) and other international human rights agreements (International Human Right Declaration 1948, CEDAW 1979, CRC 1989, SDG 2015), it is unfortunately clear that silence remains regarding menstrual discrimination in both the formal and informal workplaces.

Most stakeholders consider the topic of decent work for women a feminist issue. They focus their attention on women's reproductive and maternal health needs and ensuring the provision of health benefits. They do not, however, address the complexity of menstrual discrimination that holds women back from the start in society and in the workplace. Menstrual discrimination is an overriding issue of equality and human rights. In conclusion, there are gaps in policy and there is a failure to acknowledge the gravity of menstrual discrimination. This policy failure results in indecent working conditions and limits opportunities for menstruators. The aim of this chapter is to abolish this menstrual discrimination in policy and in practice and endorse these measures:

1. For addressing the systemic impact of menstrual discrimination, dignified menstruation should be an integral part of a decent work environment. The UN and other developmental partners need to expand the definition and scope of "decent work" to include the needs and priorities of menstruators.
2. Stakeholders need to acknowledge that menstrual discrimination is a direct cause of the effects of the gender-based violence, discrimination and inequality at formal and informal workplaces.

3. Workplace policies and practices should be in place for responding to create dignified or address the needs and priorities of menstruators. Workplaces should, at the least, discuss about menstrual issues, brochures available, arrange talks on dignified menstruation, provide privacy for toileting and waste disposal), supplies for hygiene (running water, soap, and menstrual products), flexibility with scheduling and leave, and options for job shifting or job sharing. Education regarding menstruation, menstrual discrimination/dignified menstruation, pain management and the counseling on advantages and disadvantages of hormone therapy are additional services that could be provided at the workplace.
4. These same policies and practices should be expanded to accommodate women's ongoing needs throughout their menstruating life cycle and demonstrate to women undergoing peri-menopause and menopause that their contribution to the workforce and the wellbeing of the society is valued and respected.

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