



OURSELVES AT WORK

Creating positive menstrual culture in your workplace





VICTORIAN WOMEN'S TRUST

DUGDALE TRUST FOR WOMEN & GIRLS

First published in 2021 by the Victorian Women's Trust and its harm prevention entity, The Dugdale Trust for Women & Girls

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Launched on the 6th June 2013, The Dugdale Trust for Women & Girls (of which the Victorian Women's Trust Ltd is Trustee) is a national institution aiming to carry out strategic, harm-prevention initiatives that make real and lasting differences in the lives of women and girls.

In order to further its work on the menstrual taboo and its negative impacts, The Dugdale Trust is now working in tandem with Jane Bennett at The Chalice Foundation to extend community outreach and awareness around the development of positive menstrual culture across our society and globally.

About this work

The research and themes included here are drawn from the publication *About Bloody Time: The Menstrual Revolution We Have to Have* by Karen Pickering and Jane Bennett, which was published in 2019 by the Dugdale Trust for Women & Girls.

There is an important discussion to be had about women whose bodies cannot menstruate, about men who do menstruate, and about people who experience menstruation from the perspective of identifying as neither binary gender, and we hope a book like that comes into existence—written by trans and GNC authors—for the sake of people who need to read it, and for people like us, in the field, who would see it as necessary and significant.

This is not that book.



To read more and purchase the book visit:
<https://www.vwt.org.au/projects/about-bloody-time/>

Menstrual silence, shame, ignorance and awkwardness are not only counter to women's fundamental health and wellbeing, but also to the realisation of their full human rights – to be able to avail themselves of the opportunities and resources in life, to live without discrimination; and to be able to participate fully and freely as citizens and consumers in their communities, workplaces and society at large. ⁽¹⁾



JUST IMAGINE.



A girl is in the bathroom at home and she notices something different. She hasn't seen it before.

She calls out to her parents, urgently. They come to the door and ask if she's okay. "I am," she says wavering a little, "I think I've got my period." It's here.

She was prepared for this, and now, after much anticipation, it's really happening. There are happy tears, on both sides of the door.

A flurry of activity: grabbing supplies, hugs, lots of hugs, planning tonight's dinner, thinking about gifts, congratulations, reassurance, calling aunts, grandmas, cousins, who all want to celebrate. She knows what's happening to her is normal and natural, but it's also important and momentous. She is a little apprehensive about her life changing now, but she's also proud, excited and can't wait to tell her friends.

Her home is like many others, where well-informed parents teach their children openly and warmly about managing periods and self-care. School is also a safe and supportive place, free of judgment and stigma, where menstrual wellbeing is embedded in school policy and practice, and positive menstrual education and culture is for everyone.

She grows up to work in environments with modern attitudes towards women and others who menstruate, many with menstrual and menopausal policies in place to ensure that all workers are supported to be their most productive, creative and whole selves.

When she needs it the healthcare system provides holistic and effective treatment, underpinned by an understanding of menstrual wellbeing as a key factor in overall health and quality of life.

Advances in science, due to adequate and fair funding, have enabled the development of sophisticated knowledge about the menstrual cycle and related health.

She understands the lifestyle and environmental factors that help her to support her hormonal balance and if she experiences period pain or other cycle related distress she's respected when reporting symptoms, and diagnosis and cycle-sensitive therapeutic intervention is swift and clear. In this setting she understands that it's not menstruation or the menstrual cycle that is the problem but specific conditions that, when identified, can easily be treated.

While it feels a long way off for her she sees this dignity and care naturally extend to the people in her family and community who are peri-menopausal and menopausal—they do tell strange stories though about the olden days, when there was a menstrual taboo! ⁽²⁾

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SECTION ONE

Introduction

In 2019, we published our groundbreaking work *About Bloody Time: The Menstrual Revolution We Have to Have*, which highlighted the menstrual taboo that oppresses so many women and others who menstruate, affecting their sense of self, their confidence, awareness of their physical bodies and emotional realms, their sexual decision-making, and the management of their relationships at home and in workplaces.

Despite the best efforts of individuals (both private and professional), menarche, menstruation and menopause still tend to be difficult and traumatic for many girls and women and carry a great deal of negative association.

Not only do menstruators feel negatively about their menstrual cycle but they feel that others do too. Women and girls described an experience of menarche (first period) and menstruation as often shot through with a kind of collective anxiety.

The findings from our discussions in researching the book suggested that many women operate from a position of ignorance and disconnection from their bodies. Clearly, we have a massive problem with our collective menstrual culture, and how the majority of women experience their menstrual and menopausal lives.

Inevitably this impacts all arenas of life, including paid work. Our workplaces are sites of major anxiety and disconnection for women as they balance the demands of their jobs with their own needs and the needs of their body and themselves, around menstruation and menopause.

It shouldn't be this way. Menstruation and menopause are not illnesses. It is not about women being sick or having to take sick leave. It is about busting and dismantling the menstrual taboo at work, and developing instead a positive, menstrual culture across our workplaces.

In *About Bloody Time* we made a powerful argument and urgent call for a definition of menstrual health in positive terms, in contrast to the long festering and unexamined assumptions of malaise and vexation.

This call has been ably answered by the Terminology Action Group of the Global Menstrual Collective who declare: 'Menstrual health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle'.⁽³⁾

Developing a positive menstrual culture in workplaces is a logical step for promoting consistency, clarity and a safe, constructive working environment for employees and employers alike. As we researched and published *About Bloody Time*, we felt compelled to put our new learning and experience into our own organisational practice.

We began by developing a menstrual leave policy, making us one of the first organisations in Australia to do so. We published it as a template on our website. We put menstrual products in our bathroom and wondered why we hadn't been doing this all along. We talked about our research and actions to anyone who would listen. And many did, in huge numbers in fact, from around the country and the world.

As the weeks and months went on, we received inquiries about our work and we actively supported businesses and organisations considering menstrual and menopausal workplace policies. Happily, we have witnessed a substantial uptake of policies such as menstrual leave. It is clear that there is a hunger for improving workplaces, a desire to be rid of the negativity associated with the menstrual taboo and to put in place policies and actions to make life easier, more productive and healthier for many people.

The vision of menstrual wellbeing presented at the beginning of this document will require purposeful change, intelligent action, good will, some resources, money, bravery and, most important of all, collaborative effort.

This is why we have now taken the next step to put our experience into a practical guide to assist those seeking to create positive menstrual change in their workplace.

It will be worth the effort. What is certain is that employers who are proactive about the needs of their employees will ensure healthier, happier workplaces, as well as attract and retain valuable employees.

Developing a positive menstrual culture at work is one more piece of the equality jigsaw.

SECTION TWO

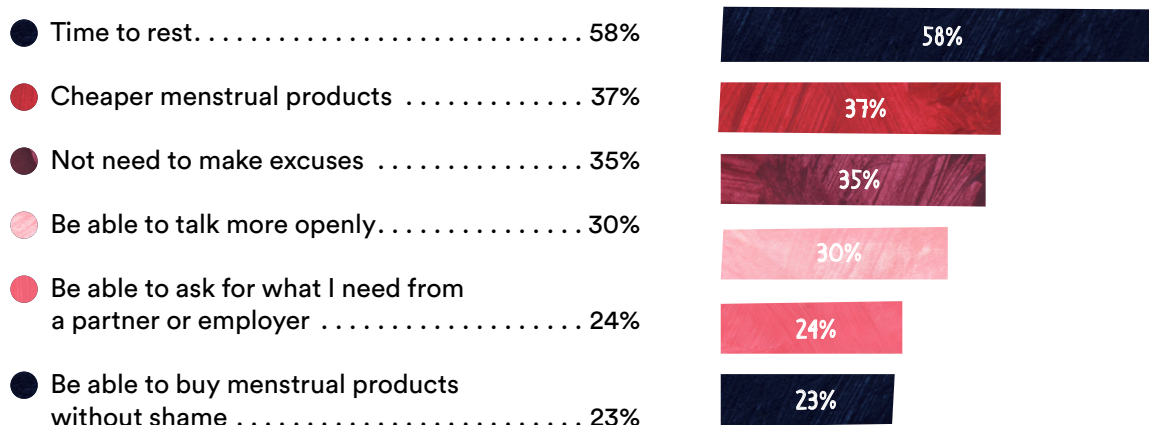
Key Survey Data to Help You on the Way

We surveyed 3,460 women and girls and had 22 discussion groups with all age groups and around Victoria. The results were significant and tremendously insightful.

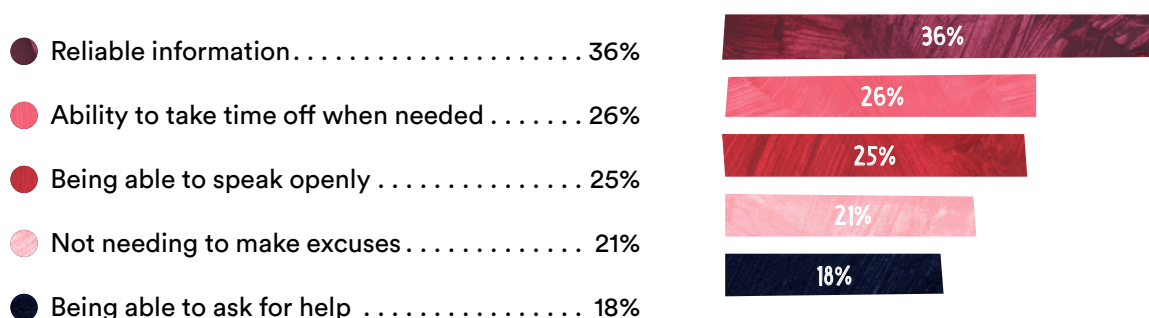


Two in particular go to the heart of the matter and are captured in these bar graphs:

What would make their period a better experience?



What would make the transition to menopause a better experience?



SECTION THREE

Dismantling the Menstrual Taboo: Workplace

One of the reasons taboos die so hard—in all types of civilisations—is that they are rigorously taught to youngsters, who dare not question them. To the uninitiated, they represent the status and privilege of adulthood. ⁽⁵⁾

We know some taboos exist for very good reasons. Many are upheld and observed because the benefits are so clear and obvious that the costs are easily outweighed. Others are perpetuated for the sake of tradition, remaining in place because they go largely unexamined.

All taboos have one thing in common: they rise and fall based on the number of people who consider them worth keeping. They are not natural or immutable laws. They are developed by societies and cultures in order to protect what is valued or sacred to the group.

But what about those taboos that are confounding, confusing or outdated?

Rational decision-making often employs the economic tool of cost-benefit analysis: a process of calculating and comparing different options available, in the interests of helping us to make the most sensible and efficient choices. When evidence suggests that costs outweigh benefits, we naturally seek to redress back to a state of balance or profit.

But in the case of the menstrual taboo, do the costs outweigh the benefits?

Let's put it to the test.

For those who like to maintain hierarchical relationships in the patriarchal mould, the menstrual taboo provides a type of 'proof' that women are weaker and less capable. Anyone who sees periods as a particularly unpleasant necessity are benefited, in that the taboo keeps outward signs of menstruation hidden to a large extent. In truth, it's difficult to view them as genuinely beneficial to anyone other than a very small group of people who may profit from the continuation of menstrual shame and stigma.

Arguments for better medical research, social justice, targeted education and specialist healthcare for menstruation and menopause, are much harder to make in the atmosphere of the taboo, which effectively silences those who seek it and diminishes awareness. This saves money in the short-term for governments, but the long-term costs will certainly mount.

On a more individual level, the general discomfort and ignorance about menstruation means that some women and girls can leverage this with teachers, partners, employers or family to avoid things they don't want to do without much resistance. And one real benefit of the taboo is the genuine camaraderie and support generated between women in the face of menstruation and menopause – where women and girls overcome shame and reach out for each other this mutual sharing can be especially joyful. These are some of the discernible benefits (such as they are) of the menstrual taboo in practice. It is a bleak view and one that is clearly reflected in our research and in the experience of so many women and girls.

Let's now examine the costs in maintaining the menstrual taboo.

According to Endometriosis Australia, endometriosis costs the economy more than \$7 billion a year. Women as individuals can spend in the region of \$20,000 over a lifetime on products to manage their periods.

There are also the opportunity costs for women who struggle with period pain and its effect on their career prospects. Having workplaces and economic models that punish women for having menstruating or menopausal bodies can result in derailment, deferment and lack of progression for women at crucial stages in their professional lives. There are aspects of women's lived experience that are simply too complex to express in dollar figures.

As in the way women's unpaid labour is ignored by the GDP, the costs of menstruation are often rendered invisible, which, unsurprisingly, makes hard econometric data difficult to source. Even if we had more hard statistics, they would scarcely convey the full extent of the problem we face.

Similarly, their social and emotional costs of the menstrual taboo cannot be reduced to numbers. It impacts girls and women in myriad ways and has serious consequences for their future health outcomes—physical, mental and sexual—and their lifelong relationship with their body. In the face of menstruation, some girls absent themselves from school altogether, while many others end their involvement in sport. The quality of their educational experience is affected because they carry anxiety and negativity around them throughout the school years, though perhaps especially in the years close to menarche when they are more vulnerable. The confidence of girls falls drastically after menarche,⁽⁶⁾ with girls twice as likely as boys to suffer depression during adolescence.

Girls who become sexually active without having a strong sense of themselves, their bodies, their cycle and their fertility are at higher risk of poor sexual decision-making, sexual dissatisfaction and even unwanted pregnancy. Conversely, for women trying to conceive, ignorance of reproductive health and processes can bring unnecessary difficulty. There is also a strong link between menstrual shame and traumatic birth outcomes and maternal distress.⁽⁷⁾

For menopausal and peri-menopausal women, a lack of preparation, awareness and options can lead to social isolation, and significant impacts on physical, mental and financial wellbeing. All these individual costs compound into far greater societal ones, placing very real burdens on families, communities, the healthcare system, and the economy.

From our perspective, the results are stark: the financial costs alone are immense. But what of the costs that can't be quantified – what does it cost for a woman to spend her whole life disconnected from her body, distrusting its functions? Nobody can put a figure on the anxiety that girls and women carry with them, month in month out, over the course of their lives. These realities can't be reduced to sums on balance sheets.

Yet this taboo surrounding menstruation and menopause is pervasive and costly, and we are all harmed by it.

The spectacular truth is that if we smashed the menstrual taboo, the benefits would be beyond measure. We could look forward to more equal and open relationships which could suffuse our society with a renewed respect for women, their innate power and the integrity of their bodies. We would expect more effective contributions to the economy, better productivity and increased growth in workplaces across the country. We would significantly reduce the burden on the healthcare system, by seizing the opportunity to better equip women for a lifetime of interacting with their bodies from a place of knowledge and acceptance. We could expect better outcomes for women's health generally, with positive impacts for public health, and especially in the fields of reproductive and sexual health.

It takes so much to keep upholding this archaic taboo: the waste, the harm, the compounded effects that reverberate throughout women's lives and place so much pressure on our families, our communities, not to mention our economic systems. But most important of all, when we know that a girl has more ambition, more confidence and more self-esteem before she starts menstruating than she does after, how can we go on like this?⁽⁸⁾

Making menstrual policy standard practice in all workplaces

I would love to speak about it without whispering. My employer is really good, but I would like other employees to be more open. I'm tired of the shameful silence and hiding my pads. ⁽⁹⁾

All workplaces operate within the parameters of legislation and compliance to national, state and local regulatory bodies. They also have their own suite of policies relating to the work environment, behaviour and standards. For example, a firm may have a social media policy, a policy around reporting accidents, and policies regarding dress standards or mobile phone use at work.

A menstrual policy would take its place alongside these other measures for promoting consistency, clarity and a safe, constructive working environment for employees and employers alike. A good place to start is with the Menstrual Policy template developed by the Victorian Women's Trust (see Appendix One).

For decades, women have agitated for equal rights in workplaces, around issues such as pay equity, parental leave, the eradication of sexual harassment and representation on boards. These are all pressing concerns underpinning the advancement of women in workplaces that have been fashioned historically by men, without adapting or accommodating the needs of women, who have increasingly formed a significant part of the paid workforce. Introducing menstrual policies into workplaces is the next logical step in bringing about truly women-positive spaces in which every employee has the chance to reach their full productive potential.

As one study participant told us, 'My pain and nausea are really bad for at least the first day or two of every menstruation, but period pain is not taken seriously where I work and I'm expected to just deal with it. I can't pay for a doctor's appointment to get a certificate every time I go home early just because my ovaries hate me. It's really tough and comes around with alarming regularity.' ⁽¹⁰⁾

The simple and decent act of consulting with employees to form an official menstrual policy for a workplace is a decision that many employers can make executively, before seeing the obvious benefits. ⁽¹¹⁾

SECTION FOUR

People Leading the Way

When I worked in hospitality as a casual there was no way I could have taken time off for feeling crummy when I had my period. Even when I was exhausted from being up all night in pain I just had to suck it up and fight my need to sit or slow down. In my current workplace a menstrual policy was introduced a couple of years ago after conversations about periods generally and our own needs in particular. I'm so relieved that now I don't have to pretend I am fine when I'm not and I can be honest about what I am feeling. ⁽¹²⁾

With the increasing acknowledgment of the harmful impact of menstrual stigma and pain on the socio-economic wellbeing of employees, many organisations are starting to look at ways they can address these issues and promote inclusive workplaces.

We thought it worthwhile to sketch some case studies so that you can appreciate the diverse settings that have adopted menstrual policies, the approaches they have taken, and the early positive outcomes have emerged.

A Head Start: the Victorian Women's Trust Menstrual Policy

It makes sense to start with our own experience at the Victorian Women's Trust (VWT).

After several years of research and writing, it was a no-brainer for us: we really needed to craft a menstrual policy and not leave things to chance or good intention.

We introduced our menstrual policy in 2017. It was designed simply to provide opportunities for restful working circumstances and self-care for employees experiencing symptoms of menstruation and menopause.

Our policy consisted of three main practical options:

- The possibility of working from home; or
- The opportunity to stay in the workplace under circumstances encouraging the comfort of the employee, e.g. resting in a quiet area; or
- The ability to take a day's paid leave. In the case of paid leave, our employees could take up to 12 paid days per calendar year (pro-rata, non-cumulative) if they were unable to perform work duties because of menstruation and menopause, and their associated symptoms.

Our policy has delivered nothing but benefits. Across 5 years, 37 days of leave have been taken by staff, averaging 7.5 days per year across all staff members. The sky has not fallen in, as some critics were quick to suggest. Staff appreciate the fact that their employer has explicitly looked to this aspect of personal support in the workplace. They are more likely to enhance their own self-care and, in return, they're more committed to being part of a productive outfit. The office culture is open and positive, without stigma, awkwardness or embarrassment.

In the time since, we have made our [policy template](#) publicly available and free on our website to encourage organisations to consider a policy for their own workplaces.

As well as developing and implementing this policy, we have introduced other changes such as providing products in all (gender neutral) toilets, providing desk fans to employees experiencing temperature changes, a relaxed uniform policy, the ability to step in and out of meetings as needed. We have continued education around the menstrual taboo as a part of our VWT advocacy work, which has reinforced the implementation of the policy.

The Gaming Industry: Studio MayDay

During the game company's founding in 2018, Studio MayDay prioritised including a menstrual policy in their studio handbook to educate and shift culture in the male-dominated industry of game development.

After consultation with their community Studio MayDay chose to have menstrual leave sit under a broader 'healthcare leave' policy and also made their handbook public to inspire broader change within the industry and shift the bar on what is expected from equitable employers.

After 6 months of operation, the studio reported that the healthcare and menstrual leave policies have been used by staff, and the process has been quite simple. Someone will email in saying they need their healthcare day, and leave is assigned without questions.

This has gradually led to more open conversations, where people will simply report in to say that they're having bad cramping, or a bad menstrual day, and thus can't come in, with people in the team being generally supportive. It's certainly been a cultural shift from people originally emailing privately, but now somewhat more comfortable just posting into their internal 'away' channel.

Studio Mayday believe having an equal gender balance and policies with clear rationalisation has allowed them to largely avoid any issues in the office regarding healthcare leave. They moved to make period products available to staff onsite as part of their operating budget.

Feedback from staff has indicated that these policies have reduced a lot of anxiety, and having a stock of period products onsite has come in handy.

The first thing I did as a CEO: Australian Diver Accreditation Scheme

The Australian Diver Accreditation Scheme (ADAS) was developed by the Australian Government as a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to enhancing the occupational diving industry through training, assessment, accreditation and certification.

Early in 2021, we saw a tweet from Amanda Sordes, Executive Director, introducing their menstrual leave policy after making use of our template:



Amanda's motivation for introducing the policy was similar to that of Studio MayDay: to create awareness and promote change culture in a male-dominated industry. Amanda took the opportunity as soon as she saw the chance.

"I work in a very male-dominated industry (occupational diving) and I have become the first female CEO in this industry," Amanda said. "I want to make sure I carve policies that take women into account, and this is one of the many steps I have taken and will take to change the goal posts. My administration staff in the office is 100% female and had been managed by a man since day one, until now. I thought it was important to send a message that women's health issues are now to be addressed in an adult, mature way and that they are nothing to be ashamed [of]." ⁽¹³⁾

The policy is still very new so not many staff have used it yet. However, Amanda reported that staff have been talking about appreciating the move, and also being very grateful that menopause is not left out.

A Universal Policy: Health and Community Services Union (HACSU)

HACSU started the journey to their Reproductive Health and Wellbeing Policy when considering retention of women within the union and noticing that there were so few women in leadership roles, including union delegate roles. HACSU surveyed their members and many women responded that they would like to go into leadership roles but they were stifled by the current leave arrangements and that they were finding it hard to manage their reproductive health (including IVF) alongside their work.

It was decided to make the policy as universal as possible to avoid backlash and to set the bar low, at 5 days (they had recently introduced 20 days for domestic and family violence leave), but to keep persisting in thinking about increasing the days once the initial leave claim was approved.

They are pushing for more unions to adopt this or a similar policy, which is what often happens—one union will introduce a new policy and others will then jump on board.

Paul Healey, Assistant State Secretary of HACSU, has been a key instigator of the campaign for Reproductive Health and Wellbeing Leave. Paul worked in nursing for many years and was accustomed to having female colleagues. This sensitised him to women's experiences of reproductive health.

Paul has become a champion for women stepping into leadership roles and recognises that male leaders also need to actively promote reproductive health and wellbeing as a workplace issue. From his familiarity with women's workplace needs, Paul expressed feeling the 'rightness' and 'timeliness' of the Reproductive Health Leave policy when it was initially brought to him.

While at the time of publication (November 2021) the policy has received considerable support from Victorian politicians across party lines, it has not yet been made law and there are some issues about funding despite clear modelling of net benefit. Numerous changes have been made to the policy to make it more palatable, for instance pregnancy loss is in the agreement, but at this time menstruation and menopause have been removed. For the policy's champions this has been a long and frustrating process, but at the same time awareness has grown considerably through the back and forth of many conversations and negotiations.

Herbert Smith Freehills: Let's yammer about #HotWomen

Law firm Herbert Smith Freehills has introduced initiatives around menopause that have been employee-led rather than introduced via a policy.

Madeleine Motion, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, said, 'For us, we've had a couple of ways that we've connected with our people on menopause, really employee-led initiatives.'

"The first is a really great Yammer group called 'The Hot Women group'. That's been an awesome space; a group of people experiencing menopause started, where they share tips and experiences ... I think it really shows the power of community and the power of being able to connect with other people going through the same experiences as you."

"We've also had a couple of events, talking about and raising awareness around the impacts of menopause and the impact that it has on people; we're trying to lift that taboo. Certainly I think there is a real taboo to talking about it at work and yet it affects a huge proportion of our population. [Menopause] impacts people's careers, people's wellbeing and it should be treated just like any other career and wellbeing issue." ⁽¹⁴⁾

Toula Turner (Executive Assistant to Danielle Kelly, Head of Diversity and Inclusion) shared via email in October 2021 that Herbert Smith Freehills has also recently introduced parenting platform '[Circle In](#)' for Asia, Australia and the UK. The platform includes a wealth of resources focused on supporting people and their teams with menopause, including awareness pieces and support guidance for both individuals and managers. It's a hub of resources that's always growing, and they're looking to start including some real-life stories on this topic soon too.

A Super Policy: Future Super

After conversations with the VWT, superannuation fund Future Super ⁽¹⁵⁾ introduced their Menstrual and Menopause Guidelines which feature a menstrual and menopause policy ‘for any person in our team who experiences periods or menopause. If someone can’t work comfortably from the office or at home due to the symptoms of periods and menopause, they will be able to take—separate from personal sick leave—up to 6 paid days of leave a year.’

These guidelines are designed to provide opportunities for restful working circumstances and self-care for employees experiencing symptoms of menstruation and menopause.

They are designed to be flexible depending on the employee’s needs, providing for the following options:

- The possibility of working from home;
- The opportunity to stay in the workplace under circumstances that encourage the comfort of the employee e.g. resting in a quiet area; or
- The possibility of taking paid leave.
- In the case of paid leave, employees are entitled to a maximum of up to 6 paid days per calendar year in the event of their inability to perform work duties because of symptoms associated with menstruation or menopause.
- A medical certificate is not required.

Future Super have made their policy open-source to encourage change within their industry. The organisation also set up a workplace group SuperGenders (formally SuperWomen) to provide a safe, supportive space for cis women, trans women, trans men, non-binary people, and those who are otherwise marginalised. SuperGenders aim to share experiences and ideas to improve Future Super, as well as support and celebrate gender diversity and inclusion both personally and professionally.

Public-facing Stigma Busting: CountdownNZ

In July 2020 Countdown supermarkets in New Zealand achieved what they think is a world-first by renaming feminine hygiene or intimate hygiene or sanitary items. These names suggest that women's bodies are dirty and don't speak to (for example) non-binary people so they've changed to using 'period products', 'genital wash' and 'continence products'—just calling them what they are, with no shame and no stigma.

As a public-facing business that serves 3 million New Zealanders a week, Countdown made the change after internal conversations that arose while the organisation was going through the process of reviewing their categories for online shopping.

Two staff members on the team ran a project to look specifically at the language they were using for period and continence care and how Countdown could support changing attitudes in this space. It was their work that led Countdown to make this decision and, with the support of the wider business, the supermarket rolled these changes out.

Countdown had already done some work in lowering the prices of their period products to address period poverty in 2018, providing a perfect foundation for a further conversation and further changes.

Kiri Hannifin, General Manager, Corporate Affairs, Quality, Safety and Sustainability at [Countdown Supermarkets](#) said, "More than anything, we want this change to help start an important conversation about the language we can and should be using to help reduce the stigma around what are natural parts of life."

"We're really proud to be leading the way," she continued, "but will be even prouder when other retailers make the change in their own operations too. I think if we use language that helps make people feel positively about things like periods and continence care then that's a win for all of us—especially our younger generations."

Keeping Good Company: Modibodi Menstrual, Menopause & Miscarriage Leave Policy

In May 2021 [Modibodi](#) launched a policy that entitles its employees to paid leave explicitly for menstruation, menopause and miscarriage, in addition to the company's existing sick leave entitlements.

Modibodi employees will accrue an additional 10 days paid personal leave per year for menstruation or menopause discomfort or in the event of a miscarriage. Or they can choose to work from home when they're feeling discomfort.

The paid leave days are not taken from 'sick leave' but are specifically designed to be used by staff suffering menstrual or menopause symptoms that interfere with their ability to work, or in the event of a miscarriage or pregnancy loss.

Kristy Chong, Founder and CEO, says she wanted staff to be able to speak honestly about their experience with menstruation, menopause and miscarriage and not feel ashamed about the fact it is physically or mentally challenging. This is all part of the organisation's commitment to normalise conversations about menstruation, menopause and miscarriage and to remove any stigma and shame associated with a normal, natural and common part of life.

We asked Kristy Chong about her experience implementing a Menstrual, Menopause & Miscarriage Leave Policy

What is your advice on implementing this type of policy?

I would suggest having an open discussion with your workforce to shape what your policy might look like and how it would work in reality. I think many companies fear this sort of policy could be abused by staff. But if you have the mindset that we do at Modibodi, that people want to be healthy and they want to do a good job at work, I absolutely believe you get more out of your staff by offering them the support instead of making them suffer in silence. By allowing people to speak up about their health concerns, we do a lot to improve the mental health outcomes of our staff in the long-term, so you get a more productive workforce.

What would you say to those who say this type of policy is regressive and promotes gender inequality?

We're aware of the fact there's some debate about whether menstruation, menopause or miscarriage leave promotes or undermines gender equality, or whether it's inclusive or regressive. However, in our business, we're constantly engaged in conversation with people about their experiences of menstruation, including those suffering debilitating conditions such as endometriosis, adenomyosis, dysmenorrhea, premenstrual dysphoric disorder and more, and we understand that for some people the symptoms they experience are significant and they shouldn't have to 'just put up with it' or 'just get on with it'.

I don't believe this policy plays into the stereotype of women needing extra TLC, time off or special treatment, nor should it impact a company's likelihood to hire or promote female staff. Painful periods are a medical condition experienced by some, but not all, people who menstruate, and the idea that companies might use this argument not to implement a policy that supports their staff seems regressive in itself.

I believe this policy will actually boost productivity, loyalty and openness in our workplace. We want to open up conversations about menstruation, menopause and miscarriage generally to help encourage widespread change in eliminating the stigma that's long been attached to these normal bodily functions.

SECTION FIVE

You Too Can Make Change Happen

Now having the option to work from home on my first day has made an amazing difference. I can make myself comfortable with a hot water bottle on my belly, I can avoid spending an hour and a half on my feet commuting and I can still get my work done. One of my colleagues said recently that she realised that, ‘understanding your cycle is a feminist act’ and I really think that’s true. Also, I think that the conversation has created a more compassionate atmosphere at work. We feel more able to look after ourselves and our wellbeing is respected both for its own sake and also for the overall productivity of our workplace. ⁽¹⁶⁾

Every one of us has power and agency. It’s just that we tend to associate these things with those further up a hierarchy, or see it only in others (especially when they are using it badly!).

We can exercise our power as individuals in our workplaces; we can join with others in our work as small groups of like-minded people; we can form part of a broader base across our workplace or beyond. We can join unions. Constructive conversations are the key. And there is some early work to do even before these start.

We have set out 6 steps to help you make changes at work.

1. EARLY WORK TO BE DONE

Read. Read. Read.

It pays to put some time and effort into educating yourself and others for the task at hand.

If you haven't already, pick up and read a copy of *About Bloody Time: The Menstrual Revolution We Have To Have*, and look at the resource list in the Appendix for further information and selected lines of investigation. Make sure you check out some other great work on changing menstrual culture that is being done by other organisations.

Circle In is one such organisation. Its mission is to create a better working world, and they are especially keen to help parents and caregivers. In 2021, Circle In undertook a survey of 700 respondents on menopause and the workplace. We were glad to partner with them on the [survey design and analysis](#).

Their workplace-specific findings not only affirm what we found in our own broader survey, but they present even more starkly the challenges for workplaces. Their key findings were:

- 83% of respondents said their work was negatively affected by menopause. Only 17% said it was business as usual.
- Over half (58%) of respondents who have experienced menopause said that managing work during their menopausal transition was 'challenging'.
- Almost half (48%) of all respondents struggled with their drop in confidence at work, and almost as many (46%) felt stressed by having to hide their experience. They said they felt disconnected or distracted from their workplace.
- Almost half (45%) of respondents said they considered retiring or taking a break from work when their menopausal symptoms were severe—but 72% of those did not go through with it, with many citing financial reasons.

The Circle In survey also found that:

- 76% of people who experienced menopause would have liked information, advice or access to a support network at work to aid them through this challenging period.
- Half of those who know someone going through menopause said their knowledge is low or non-existent.
- Only 3% of respondents felt that they had received 'excellent' support from their workplace during menopause.
- 60% said support was 'poor' or 'below average'.
- 70% who experienced menopause did not feel comfortable talking to their manager about their needs.
- However, 53% said that their manager's awareness would have been a great support to them during this time.

Find allies in your workplace and beyond.

If you're motivated to start a conversation at work, even informally over coffee, it will help you to think about how to approach management and manage pushback. Sharing experiences and ideas with co-workers will help you ground this initiative and plan doable steps. Circle In's advice, for example, is to hold an event to help normalise the conversation, ask some women to share their stories, and most of all find a senior leader to be a champion helping you drive awareness, policy and support services with key stakeholders. Check in with your union.

Talk to people in the relevant leadership positions.

Leadership by senior members of the organisation is the key to ensuring support, effective implementation and ongoing functioning of any workplace policy. Managers are twice as likely to be men than women so making sure that employees feel comfortable asking for what they need is important. Have discussions with members of the organisation's leadership and HR on the policy, focussing on what you are trying to achieve with it as well as potential sticking points.

2. WORKPLACE AUDIT

There is a neat little planning equation:

What is +/- what should be = needed action

In other words, it's always best, when planning for change, to start with a clear and strong understanding of the actual reality; from there you can assess what is 'good' or 'bad' about that reality and then tease out the actions that would lead to positive change.

With the menstrual wellbeing of your workers in mind, and to gain a clear line of sight on your existing workplace, start by undertaking the following workplace audit. For a robust assessment you may like to get a small group together, or for a quick appraisal you can check through the following lists in 5 minutes.

There are 5 main areas to consider:

1. The physical environment

- ☐ Are there options for adjusting office seating according to personal heating and cooling needs?
- ☐ Are all toilets fully accessible?
- ☐ Is there a dedicated place in toilet cubicles or bathrooms for menstrual products?
- ☐ Are there bins for disposable menstrual products in each toilet?
- ☐ Is there a toilet available with a basin for washing of rinsing reusable menstrual products (pads, underwear, cups)?
- ☐ Is petty cash available for staff to source and replace menstrual products as needed?
- ☐ Is there easy access to cold drinking water?
- ☐ Does the first-aid kit contain painkillers?
- ☐ Is there a place where a worker can be comfortable and rest? For instance, a couch or daybed with a blanket and cushion or pillow.

2. Workplace clothing provisions

- ☐ Are there alternative uniforms that employees experiencing menopause can wear? For instance, that are breathable and/or layered?
- ☐ Are dress codes flexible?

3. Workstation and workplace conditions

- ☐ Can employees change the location of their workstation to sit under a vent or by an open window?
- ☐ Are desk fans available for individual temperature management?
- ☐ Are blankets or hot water bottles or heat packs available to use at workstations?

4. Meeting protocols

- ☐ Are people able to stand up and move as needed, without feeling judged or being chastised?

5. Workplace culture

- ☐ Can workers step out for a quick stretch or breather?
- ☐ Are regular breaks accepted as a part of the workplace culture and routine?
- ☐ Is there respect for the need for more frequent and/or longer toilet breaks to manage menstruation?
- ☐ Is there respect for managing other personal needs due to menstruation or menopausal symptoms? For instance, working with a heat pack or desk fan or blanket.
- ☐ Is menstruation and menopause normalised rather than shrouded in secrecy?
- ☐ Do workers feel relaxed, comfortable and supported managing their menstrual/menopausal needs?

What other considerations have you identified?

3. ACTION PLAN

When you have completed the Workplace Audit, you can write an Action Plan.

Your plan should identify your *main goal*—such as to develop a positive menstrual culture within your organisation to enhance health and wellbeing, productivity and respectful relationships generally.

The plan can then list the sequence of tasks involved, such as:

- Secure in-principle agreement of management to commence the positive menstrual culture workplace journey.
- Design and carry out a short survey of your fellow employees.
- Design a menstrual and menopause policy, from initial design consultation, finalisation, adoption and promotion.
- Establish some workplace conversations that raise awareness and understanding of the issues. Consider inviting some guest speakers to address the topic, such as people who have introduced policies and related initiatives in their workplaces.
- Prepare some simple communications around the workplace, for example posters or key contacts.
- Secure agreement for office-based supplies of back-up menstrual products.
- Adjust other workplace policies e.g. bullying, sexual harassment, working from home, performance management, OHS policies and so on, to include provisions for menstruation and menopause.
- Make sure your workplace celebrates the various achievements contributing to positive menstrual culture across the workplace.

Your plan can sort out which tasks can be addressed immediately as distinct from those which will take longer, and whether there will be a cost. Your plan should also cover whether education is needed to support a change in workplace culture or to raise awareness of the issue, and whether the physical environment and facilities need to be adapted. It can also indicate who is happy to take responsibility for what jobs, and provide the timelines you set for task completion.

4. DESIGNING A MENSTRUAL/MENOPAUSE POLICY

It won't surprise you to know we suggest the best place to start the development of a menstrual and menopause policy is by downloading the template based on the one we introduced into our workplace in 2017.

You can learn more [here](#).

It can also be found in Appendix One of this document.

The most important aspect of this policy template is that it offers a three-tiered approach. The first tier is all about finding simple ways of making symptoms more tolerable while in the workplace; the second is about being able to work productively but choosing to do so at home; while the final option is about being able to take leave should the symptoms be too pressing to carry out any work.

As a way of assisting you to think about the different issues and questions which might occur to you and others, we thought it might be useful to reproduce the responses we gave in May 2020 when we were approached by an individual working at a worldwide corporate company with a set of initial questions on our policy.

Frequently Asked Questions

(a) Who is eligible to request menstrual days off and how do you verify the eligibility?

At the VWT any menstruator or individual experiencing menopausal symptoms is eligible for a menstrual day off. The policy is based on trust. There's no requirement to provide a medical certificate or undergo any examinations (as is required in some versions of the policy overseas) because we want the policy to empower individuals to be able to take care of themselves in their workplaces without placing them under undue scrutiny. In our workplace, staff can also take advantage of general sick leave allowances, or other flexible arrangements like working from home. This policy is no different from any other leave policy in that regard. Leave is taken in good faith.

The Health and Community Services Union here in our state, Victoria, is in the process of introducing Reproductive Health Care Leave which is inclusive of all genders.

Read more [here](#).

(b) How many days off a person might request? Is it a paid leave? Does it influence the attendance bonus if you have one?

Our policy has 3 options:

(1) If someone is at the workplace but is feeling uncomfortable, that person can feel free to move to a more comfortable place in the office, such as to stretch out on a couch with a laptop and continue to work.

(2) If a person is feeling uncomfortable from a period and feels that they would be more productive by working from home, they can do so. In this case our remote office policy kicks in, meaning they can still do their paid work but from home.

(3) If the person feels uncomfortable to the extent that they are not able to do their paid work, they can take up to 12 days of paid menstrual leave over a year.

With these 3 options, employees are able to determine what suits their needs best. Taking menstrual days does not compromise other employee entitlements such as sick days, annual leave or time in lieu.

(c) Is there any procedure (for example, a medical one) to determine the legitimacy of leave requests? For example, 'the level of need/suffering during menstruation is x'.

There isn't any procedure to determine legitimacy of leave in our Menstrual and Menopause Wellbeing Policy. This has not happened to us, but if a staff member had a serious menstrual or menopause related condition (e.g. endometriosis, PCOS, PMDD) and a medical professional anticipated that they would regularly need time off each month when their symptoms were severe, special arrangements could be negotiated under the policy for that person to take a mixture of paid and unpaid days each month. And of course, such conditions also cross the line into illness so sick leave provisions could come into play.

(d) What is the rate of menstrual leave requests? Does it noticeably influence the daily work? Have you found any difference when compared to the absence rate before implementing the menstrual leave?

In the 5 years we've had the policy in operation at the VWT, we've had 37 days of menstrual leave across the office, an average of 7.5 days per year across all employees. The benefits are obvious, even if hard to quantify; the workplace culture is more open and supportive, free menstrual products are available in the toilets, and it's not uncommon for peers to talk openly about which menstrual cup they prefer. There is a strong sense from employees that the organisation is expressing genuine care for their wellbeing through this policy and it's apparent that this respect is returned.

By way of contrast, research published in 2018 surveying more than 32,000 menstruators on their absenteeism and productivity loss due to menstruation related symptoms found the following:

- 14% were absent from work during their menstrual period.
- Only 20% disclosed to their employer their absence was menstrual-related.
- Over 1,000 women were absent from work at every menstrual cycle.
- Over 80% (approximately 26,000 women) reported having decreased productivity for 23 days a year on average. ⁽¹⁷⁾

Absenteeism and productivity loss due to employees' menstrual cycles (we imagine menopause would be similar if not more disruptive) is starkly illustrated by this research and clearly highlights the issue which exists. A well-designed menstrual and menopausal policy can address this for the significant benefit to the business or organisation and employees.

(e) What benefits did you notice after implementing the policy? Were there any negative side effects?

This leave provision has made our staff appreciative of who we are, that the organisation cares about their wellbeing, and that we are providing a constructive and supportive workplace environment. This policy is in line with our intention to be a contemporary workplace that strives to encourage the best in staff. With the implementation of this policy our staff have felt more empowered, more in control and that their self-care needs are recognised and supported. Our experience of having a menstrual leave policy has been entirely positive. We invite all workplaces to give serious consideration to the needs of menstruating and menopausal employees.

5. ENGAGEMENT, TRAINING AND BUILDING A COMMUNITY

In their 2021 publication *Driving the Change*, Circle In suggests several steps to better equip managers and leaders ⁽¹⁸⁾:

- Develop a short manager conversation guide that outlines topics such as understanding menstruation and menopause, their impact on working life, how to provide the right support, guiding questions and key considerations;
- Implement manager training, ranging from simply raising awareness through to formal training;
- Invite managers to join employee groups, take part in forums, help create the awareness and understand how the right supports can make a positive difference;
- Help direct employees to support services if these already exist;
- Set up an online community for people to connect with one another (for example on Slack, Yammer, Teams or whatever platform you use). Make sure it is welcoming, safe and encourages authentic conversations around menstruation and menopause;
- Form a menstruation/menopause employee group to build an inclusive and supportive workplace.

6. REALIGNING ASSOCIATED WORKPLACE POLICIES

Once you feel you have a decent policy covering menstruation and menopause, including things such as absence and practical supports, you need to think about what other policies might need revising or to come into place. These might include your working from home policy, office protocols regarding toilet breaks, leaving the office for a short breather, office purchase of back-up menstrual products, bullying and harassment, and so on.

SECTION SIX

Breaking Down Resistance: FAQs

In our experience, when you seek to create social change, rest assured there will be backlash, pitfalls, curve balls and obstacles! The most important thing is to remain clear-sighted, determined and focused. Working with allies and as a group, and making sure you have serious fun together can take a lot of the sting out of tricky situations.

Here are some reflections from us at the VWT based on our own experience of introducing our menstrual policy and other workplace changes to produce a positive menstrual culture.

Forewarned is forearmed.

Dealing with backlash.

Menstrual leave can be controversial if men feel it's unfair or women who don't have any menstrual symptoms feel it's an unnecessary and undermining focus. In some places where menstrual leave is available, women do not take it because they feel it undermines their potential for consideration for managerial or higher-executive positions—they don't want to be seen as less reliable.

But for women who do have menstrual symptoms that impede their ability to work, is it fair for them to have to make excuses for a natural function? This is not about taking rights away from anyone but about allowing women to self-care when they need it without having to apologise or make excuses for their bodies.

After all, workplaces already make many provisions for the physical needs of employees. For instance, as far as possible work hours are scheduled during the day, time is allowed for meal breaks, toilet facilities are provided, and sufficient light, appropriate seating and work-conducive conditions are all considered necessary and sensible for the smooth functioning and productivity of a workplace. Adding similar consideration for the menstrual and menopausal needs of workers simply extends these sensible provisions to those who have a menstrual cycle, or are experiencing menopause.

Is an MMR policy a step back for feminism?

Some (including some feminists) have argued that menstrual leave is a step in the wrong direction and that it plays into ideas that women are less competent employees than men. This is an extension of the idea that if women want to succeed in the workplace they need to act like men. Instead menstrual leave should be understood as an issue of equity. It is part of a shift in society that is changing the workplace to accommodate women, not forcing women into a workplace structure designed for men.

Interestingly, several bodies of research have found that when sex-specific symptoms are removed (like breast tenderness) men have just as many symptoms as women month on month as those that are normally attributed to premenstrum and menstruation in women. These can include headaches, food cravings, energy fluctuations, mood swings and fluid retention. The difference is that in women these symptoms are more cyclically predictable while the studies showed individual differences, that is some men having significantly more symptoms than other men and some women having significantly more symptoms than other women. ⁽¹⁹⁾ ⁽²⁰⁾

So rather than assume workplace environments and conditions are gender neutral, we need to consider if they are equally suitable for people with and without a menstrual cycle, including those transitioning out of having a menstrual cycle.

Won't people take advantage of the policy?

Staff can also take advantage of general sick leave allowances and other flexible arrangements like working from home. This policy is no different from any other leave policy in that regard. Leave is taken in good faith. This needs to be weighed against the benefits. If a workplace has an issue already with staff abusing leave policies then perhaps there are different issues in the workplace that need to be considered and addressed.

Couldn't the MMR policy be covered by sick leave?

It is important for us to remember that menstruation is a regular, natural, biological process and is not a sickness. When we menstruate, our bodies are behaving exactly as they should. ⁽²¹⁾ Beyond reproduction there is growing evidence of the health benefits of a menstrual cycle, including for long-term bone and heart health. ⁽²²⁾

The menstrual cycle is a predictor and gauge of optimal physical health as it works in concert with multiple other systems in the body to keep us well. Of course, there are common conditions that lead to disorders of the menstrual cycle, like polycystic ovarian syndrome, fibroids, endometriosis, adenomyosis, primary dysmenorrhoea and menorrhagia. These conditions seriously impact the lives of 20–30% of women and other menstruators. And nearly all menstruators experience some unpleasant symptoms some of the time.

A well-designed MMR policy acknowledges and respects this reality and enables workers to normalise and attend to their cyclic needs, helping to improve their overall menstrual experience and manage periods and premenstrum with greater ease.

This policy feels fraught, what's a safe way forward?

- Trial the policy as a low-stakes way to introduce the idea. If you have the capacity you can survey staff before the introduction of the policy, halfway through the trial period and then after full implementation of the policy.
- Keep the conversation going with staff. This might include a combination of formal and informal settings.
- Start with small steps to acclimatise staff more accustomed to the menstrual taboo. While the normalisation of periods clearly leads to a net benefit it can take some getting used to when silence and taboo have been the order of the day, and have prevented people from thinking or talking about menstruation and menopause. While the taboo creates an illusion of 'nothing to see here', many women then carry the burden of anxiety, shame and silence isolated and alone, often forced to make up excuses when they are unable to work due to menstrual or menopausal symptoms. This is disempowering for them and leads to a loss of capacity and engagement for workplaces.

Employees don't feel comfortable discussing menstruation and menopause, help!

In 2021, Circle In found that only 3% of respondents in their survey of 714 people felt that they had received 'excellent' support from their workplace during menopause. Sixty percent said support was 'poor' or 'below average'. Seventy percent of women who have experienced menopause said they would not feel comfortable talking to their manager about their challenges or needs.⁽²³⁾ Similarly, a recent study by the University of Nottingham found that while nearly half of women going through the menopause have difficulty coping with symptoms at work, two thirds did not think they would be able to disclose their menopausal status to their bosses, male or female.⁽²⁴⁾

Many respondents to the *About Bloody Time* project also expressed that they did not feel comfortable being honest with their bosses if they required a day off for their period and would often make up other excuses.⁽²⁵⁾

A MMR policy helps to remove this stigma and allow more honest discussions about wellbeing in the workplace. Here are some tips to support greater comfort:

If a workplace has a MMR policy among its suite of policies, whatever the wider culture or individual experience, this in itself helps to normalise menstruation and menopause and empowers individuals to ask for reasonable adjustments, rather than individuals having to deal with their menstrual and menopausal needs in secret or feeling they need to lie about it.

Create a light-bulb moment for management. Give space and time for management to understand the issue and ask questions to enable them to educate themselves and work out the best way to support their staff.

Some people may never be comfortable discussing menstruation and menopause and always consider them to be very 'private' topics, and that's OK. Nonetheless a workplace policy exists for all employees, setting out definitions, expectations, rights and workplace supports. In the realm of menstruation and menopause the existence of a policy is a powerful tool to help normalise these experiences and retrieve them from silence, shame and taboo, whether or not a particular employee ever wants to discuss it with their manager or use the policy's provisions. Through normalisation, as embodied by the policy, all employees will benefit from a more open and positive workplace culture.

My workplace said 'no' to introducing a policy, what do I do?

It can be disappointing and disheartening to receive a negative response when you have tried to initiate a positive change. However, there are informal ways that you can incrementally trigger change in your workplace, such as an online space for employees to discuss menstruation and menopause. Small steps can go a long way to preparing the workplace and management culture for more formal changes like a policy. Have a look at the Workplace Audit in Section Five of this guide as a place to start. Even a conversation with a colleague who you think might be a good sounding board is a great place to start.

SECTION SEVEN

Some Key Resources to Help You

Workplace policy template

VWT Menstrual and Menopause Workplace Wellbeing Policy Template

www.vwt.org.au/menstrual-policy-2/

Menstruation and menstrual wellbeing

Bennett, J. and Pickering, K. (2019) *About Bloody Time: The Menstrual Revolution We Have to Have*

Briden, L. (2015) *Period Repair Manual: Natural Treatment for Better Hormones and Better Periods*

Gabrielle, J. (2020) *Pain and Prejudice: A Call to Arms for Women and their Bodies*

Hendrickson-Jack, L. (2019) *The Fifth Vital Sign: Master Your Cycles and Optimize your Fertility*

Pope, A. and Hugo-Wurlitzer, S. (2017) *Wild Power: Discover the Magic of the Menstrual Cycle and Awaken the Feminine Path to Power*

Welch, C. (2011) *Balance Your Hormones, Balance Your Life: Achieving Optimal Health and Wellness Through Ayurveda, Chinese Medicine, and Western Science*

Perimenopause and menopause

Briden, L. (2021) *Hormonal Repair Manual: Every Woman's Guide to Healthy Hormones After 40*

Young, C. (2020) *Changing Woman: Understanding Perimenopause*

<https://www.charlotteyoung.com.au/>

Managing fertility and overcoming fertility problems

Bennett, J. and Pope, A (2008) *The Pill: Are You Sure It's for You?*

Naish, F. and Bennett, J. (2020) *The Complete Guide to Optimum Conception*

<http://www.fertility.com.au/>

Naish, F. and Bennett, J. (2004) *The Natural Fertility Management Contraception Kit*

<http://www.fertility.com.au/>

Naish, F. (2004) *Natural Fertility: The Complete Guide to Avoiding or Achieving Conception*

Workplace policy training and professional development

Menopause @ Work programs. In 2022 will include Menstruation @ Work programs

<https://www.thea.com.au/menopause/manager-training/>

The Chalice Foundation

<https://www.chalicefoundation.org/>

Websites

Menopause at Work

<https://www.menopauseatwork.org/>

Jean Hailes

<https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/>

Positive Midlife Workshop for Women

<https://www.midlifepleasureandpower.com/>

Endometriosis Australia

<https://www.endometriosisaustralia.org/>

Endoempowered

<https://endoempowered.com/>

Articles and reports

Baird, M., Hill, E. and Colussi, S. (2021) 'Mapping Menstrual Leave Legislation and Policy Historically and Globally: A Labor Entitlement to Reinforce, Remedy or Revolutionize Gender Equality at Work?' *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal*, 42(1) pp. 187–225.

Barnack-Tavlaris, J.L et. al., 'Taking Leave to Bleed: Perceptions and Attitudes toward Menstrual Leave Policy' (2019) 40(12) *Health Care for Women International*

Bobel, C. et al, *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstrual Studies* (2020) Palgrave Macmillan

Booth, K. *Why Menstrual Leave is a Hot Button Workplace Issue*

<https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2021/06/02/why-menstrual-leave-is-a-hot-button-workplace-issue.html>

ABS 2020, Gender Indicators, Australia

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/gender-indicators-australia/latest-release#:~:text=Employment%20and%20labour%20force%20participation,during%20the%20past%2010%20years>

Circle In, 'Driving the Change: menopause and the workplace' (April 2021)

<https://circlein.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Circle-In-Driving-the-change-Menopause-and-the-workplace.pdf>

Crawford, B.J. et al, 'The Ground on Which We All Stand: A Conversation about Menstrual Equity Law and Activism' (2019) 26(2) *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law*

Goldblatt, B. and Steele, L. 'Engaging with Law's Menstrual Moment', *Australian Feminist Law Journal* (forthcoming) Golding, G and Hvala, T, 'A bloody shame: Paid period leave should be law. Australia's workplace laws must better accommodate the reproductive body' (15 October, 2021) *The Monthly*

<https://www.themonthly.com.au/blog/gabrielle-golding-and-tom-hvala/2021/15/2021/1634251250/bloody-shame-paid-period-leave-should#mtr>

Golding, G and Hvala, T, 'Paid Period Leave for Australian Women: A Prerogative Not a Pain', (2021) 43(3) *Sydney Law Review* 349

APPENDIX ONE

The VWT Menstrual and Menopause Workplace Wellbeing Policy Template

Rationale

[Insert organisation name] has introduced a menstrual and menopause policy. Experiences of menstruation and menopause can be debilitating, yet we have been enculturated to mask their existence in the workplace, at schools and at home. This policy supports employees in their ability to adequately self-care during their period and menopause, while not being penalised by having to deplete their sick leave. Periods and menopause are not a sickness, although they may be accompanied by troubling symptoms. This policy also seeks to remove the stigma and taboo surrounding menstruation and menopause.

Policy

This policy is designed to provide opportunities for restful working circumstances and self-care for employees experiencing symptoms of menstruation and menopause.

The policy is designed to be flexible depending on the employee's needs, providing for the following options:

- The possibility of working from home*;
- The opportunity to stay in the workplace under circumstances which encourage the comfort of the employee, e.g. resting in a quiet area; or
- The possibility of taking a day's paid leave.

In the case of paid leave, employees are entitled to a maximum of 12 paid days per calendar year (pro-rata, non-cumulative) in the event of inability to perform work duties because of menstruation and menopause, and their associated symptoms.

A medical certificate is not required.

*This provision should be incorporated into your organisation's working from home policy.

Access a downloadable copy of this template [here](#).

APPENDIX TWO

The Global Menstrual Leave Policy Landscape ⁽²⁶⁾

Sydney Colussi, Elizabeth Hill and Marian Baird, University of Sydney

The current ‘menstrual moment’: accommodating periods at work.

The contemporary world of work is having a ‘menstrual moment’ as employers, unions and workers increasingly turn their attention to the complex relationship between menstrual health and paid work.

With increasing acknowledgment of the harmful impact of menstrual stigma and pain on the socioeconomic wellbeing of workers, some governments and private organisations are looking to address these issues and promote inclusive workplaces. One workplace measure is ‘menstrual leave’ – a labour policy designed to ~~to~~⁽²⁷⁾ accommodate the menstruating body at work. While 5 years ago menstrual leave could accurately be described as a rare or unusual policy with a historical legacy rather than a contemporary relevance, this is no longer the case. Menstrual leave is now established or emerging in over 17 countries and dozens of private companies, with a presence across Asia, Europe, Africa, South America and Australia.

The historical development of menstrual policies.

The design, rationale and impact of menstrual leave is embedded in national, organisational and historical context. As a policy, it is shown to have been adapted for local labour market conditions, cultural norms surrounding menstruation and gender, and the specific needs of workers in developed and developing countries. For example, the first recorded menstrual policy in the Soviet Union in the 1920s was designed to protect women from industrial labour conditions and preserve their ‘reproductive and maternal functions’. ⁽²⁸⁾ In many countries, menstrual leave is still problematically entangled with a pro-natalist agenda, the preservation of traditional gender roles and the gendered division of labour. But it has also progressed to serve numerous functions in the 21st century workplace. In Indonesia, for example, menstrual leave has been instrumental in addressing inadequate sanitation facilities for female workers in the mining sector. ⁽²⁹⁾ In contrast, several private companies in India’s tech and media industry have introduced menstrual leave as a means of addressing menstrual stigma in the workplace and normalising biological differences between workers. ⁽³⁰⁾ Some organisations, including Channel 4 in the United Kingdom and Future Super in Australia, are choosing to implement menopause policies in order to create safe and ‘empowering’ work environments during this life transition. ⁽³¹⁾

A ‘controversial’ but potentially valuable policy.

Highly diverse and context-driven, menstrual leave is anything but a homogenous policy area and yet it is almost universally contested—indeed, few labour policies generate as much controversy. Menstrual leave has been both vigorously disparaged and defended in the global media and is particularly controversial among feminists, who are divided over its capacity to reinforce or remedy gender (in)equality at work. Critics have called menstrual leave ‘paternalistic’ and ‘silly’ because it purportedly reduces women to their biological attributes and reinforces gender bias in the workplace, particularly the harmful idea that women are either rational or menstrual.⁽³²⁾ In sharp contrast, supporters argue menstrual leave is a ‘woke’ initiative that accommodates and normalises workers’ bodies, thereby challenging the outdated notion of a male ‘ideal’ worker with no reproductive body or care obligations.⁽³³⁾

As a policy that exists at the contested intersection of reproductive health, labour rights, gender and class, the debate over menstrual leave is unlikely to abate anytime soon. Even if it is impossible to resolve this debate in the short-term, it is still important to make sense of menstrual leave and its role in the contemporary labour market. As an old idea enjoying renewed interest, what exactly is the driving force behind menstrual leave?

What is driving the interest in menstrual policies?

There is growing discontent with how employers respond to or, more frequently, ignore, menstruation, menopause and the reproductive body at work. Indeed, the recent push for menstrual leave parallels a broader global movement for ‘menstrual equity’ in which menstruators are reclaiming menstrual embodiment and challenging the stigma attached to a natural and unavoidable biological process.⁽³⁴⁾ Young people, in particular, appear to be more receptive to the idea of substantive rather than formal equality, with the implication that differential treatment may be needed to address relative disadvantage in the workplace.⁽³⁵⁾ This focus on substantive equality reflects a wider concern with labour policies that promote diversity and inclusion at work, particularly for menstruating workers who experience disadvantage at the intersections of race, age, class, ability and gender identity. This means moving beyond a binary understanding of menstruation, in which females are gendered as menstruators and males as non-menstruators. To accommodate the menstrual experiences of all workers, including those across the sex and gender spectrums, menstrual policies must avoid constructions of a ‘universalised’ menstruating woman who is young, white, able and middle-class.⁽³⁶⁾

A ‘new wave’ of workplace menstrual policies.

This shift in discourse provides important context for more recent iterations of menstrual leave, such as the Victorian Women’s Trust (VWT) Menstrual and Menopause Wellbeing Policy, which is offered to gender diverse and mature workers.⁽³⁷⁾ The strategic design and implementation of menstrual leave shows this policy area can result in multiple and often conflicting ends, from the reinforcement of traditional gender roles to the recognition of biological difference in paid work. The design and purpose of menstrual leave will shape its ability to support gender equality at work.⁽³⁸⁾ While some menstrual policies are designed to reinforce women’s unpaid care roles as wives and mothers, other policies are used to normalise and de-stigmatise menstruation and menopause at work.

Menstrual leave has been described as a ‘double-edged sword’ that may spark controversy while also driving valuable conversations about menstrual health and stigma at work.⁽³⁹⁾ This is a complex policy space, with potentially high stakes and no easy answers. However, those who have dismissed menstrual leave may have done so too soon. The current trajectory of global labour rights discourse suggests a growing, not declining, acceptance of the menstruating and menopausal body at work.

As this eBook demonstrates, it is possible to develop a menstrual policy that addresses the menstrual taboo in the workplace and supports workers as wholly embodied individuals. Engaging with this rapidly evolving policy space may be a critical first step toward more gender diverse and age-inclusive work.

The VWT menstrual leave policy sends a clear, strong message that menstruation and menopause are normal. It is appreciative that the associated symptoms can be difficult, and that self-care at these times, as needed, is supported and valued. More widely applied, I’m confident that such policies will lead to happier and at least equally productive-workplaces.

Progressive workplaces that are prepared to embrace and practice diversity policy need to take the menstrual policy step. Menstrual policies matter. By accepting the realities of your employees’ health and wellbeing you can choose to respond positively and enjoy the untold benefits at your workplace.

Jane Bennett, founder of the Chalice Foundation

Endnotes

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Appendix Two: The Global Menstrual Leave Policy Landscape

26. This is a complex but rapidly evolving policy space and the authors hope their article contributes to the new and exciting conversations now being had about gender equality and the body at work. This overview of the global menstrual leave policy landscape is based on this journal article: Baird, M., Hill, E. and Colussi, S. (2021) 'Mapping Menstrual Leave Legislation and Policy Historically and Globally: A Labor Entitlement to Reinforce, Remedy or Revolutionize Gender Equality at Work?' *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal*, 42(1) pp. 187–225.
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