



Taking leave to bleed: Perceptions and attitudes toward menstrual leave policy

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ABSTRACT

Menstrual leave is offered in some countries and companies; however, there is a lack of research examining perceptions or effects of the policy. We examined the U.S. public's ($N = 600$) perceptions of a potential menstrual leave policy. Participants were asked open-ended questions about potential effects of menstrual leave in the U.S. Using thematic analysis, five themes emerged: (a) Supporting women and women in the workplace. (b) What do men get? (c) Concerns about the effects on the workplace. (d) Just deal with it [menstruation]. (e) This policy would make women look bad. These findings are important for policy makers to consider.

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Menstruation is a reproductive health function that around half of the population will experience over the course of their life. Researchers and health professionals have declared that menstruation is an important factor in discerning overall health, and that it should be considered the fifth vital sign (The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2015). Despite the normality of menstruation, there are some menstruators¹ who experience negative menstrual-related symptoms and/or illness, such as endometriosis. Along with these negative physical experiences, menstruators also face negative sociocultural effects, such as stigmatization, medicalization, and politicization of menstruation (e.g., Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). A workplace policy that has been proposed to address the biological and sociocultural effects of menstruation is referred to as menstrual leave. Menstrual leave allots menstruators time off if they are unable to attend work because of symptoms or illnesses that are associated with menstruation. This policy may be a potential solution to the negative experiences that menstruators have in the workplace; however, the policy may also have a variety of negative implications. There is

currently a deficit in research on the potential benefits, drawbacks, and other effects of menstrual leave policy on menstruators. Support surrounding this type of policy is mixed, with some believing that the policy will have a positive impact on menstruators, while others believe that this policy will have detrimental effects. In addition to studying the effects of menstrual leave in countries where it has been implemented, it is also important to explore potential implications in countries where menstrual leave has generated interest, but has not yet been implemented.

Menstrual leave

Menstrual leave is a workplace policy that provides menstruators with time off if they are experiencing menstrual-related symptoms or illness, and are therefore unable to attend work. Proponents argue that menstrual leave may contribute to menstrual health, and overall reproductive health, by providing time to rest and recover from menstrual-related illnesses and/or symptoms, or time to seek out professional health care. Menstrual leave may also be a potential solution to addressing reproductive/menstrual health needs without having to use sick time or vacation time. Menstrual leave has been (or still is) offered in Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Zambia. However, there is a deficit of public information on menstrual leave policies in these countries, and there is little research examining whether menstruators use the leave provided, sociocultural attitudes towards menstrual leave, and sociopolitical implications of the policy.

Japan began offering menstrual leave in 1947 with the intent of protecting women's potential capacity to bear children (Dan, 1986). Through in-depth interviews with Japanese female participants offered menstrual leave, Dan found that women who used the leave faced negative drawbacks, such as harassment. There is no known current research or public data about menstrual leave in Japan. Chang, Chen, Chang, and Hsu (2011) found that women in Taiwan rarely use menstrual leave due to a variety of reasons, such as the obstacle of having to obtain a doctor's note to acquire the leave.

Currently, menstrual leave is offered by professional workplaces such as Coexist (UK), Gozoop (India), and Victorian Women's Trust (Australia). These workplaces enacted menstrual leave with the purpose of recognizing menstruation as a biological function that, for some, may result in health-related issues. It was reported in 2017 that 7 of the 13 menstruating employees at Coexist used menstrual leave (Quarshie, 2017). Over 75% of female employees at Gozoop have used menstrual leave since the policy was first implemented in early Spring of 2017 (From email correspondence with B. Raja, employee at Gozoop, June 7, 2018).

The perceived need for menstrual leave

Menstruation is a natural and necessary biological function that contributes to reproduction. Bodily experiences of menstruation vary among menstruators, with some menstruators experiencing severe symptoms and other menstruators experiencing few to no symptoms. Symptoms of normal menstruation can include cramping, back pain, bloating headaches, fatigue, and changes in mood (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2017). Abnormal uterine bleeding (unpredictable, variable, and/or heavy bleeding) affects approximately 14% to 25% of women of reproductive age (Whitaker & Critchley, 2016). Illnesses related to the menstrual cycle include endometriosis, dysmenorrhea, fibroids, polycystic ovarian syndrome, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, and more. Further, for some menstruators, chronic illnesses (e.g., migraines, diabetes, irritable bowel syndrome) can be exacerbated by the menstrual cycle (Pinkerton, Guico-Pabia, & Taylor, 2010). These associated and exacerbated illnesses can impact menstruators' daily lives, and may warrant time off from work. For example, Moradi, Parker, Sneddon, Lopez, and Ellwood (2014) found that participants diagnosed with endometriosis commonly experienced severe pain both during and not during menstruation, and this significantly impacted participants' daily lives. Chen, Kwekkeboom, and Ward (2016) found that participants scored slightly above the mid-point on a scale that asked how much menstrual symptoms affected their daily lives. Finally, in a study spanning eight different counties, 35% of participants reported that their menstrual symptoms had a moderate to severe impact on their daily activities, including work (Dennerstein, Lehert, Bäckström, & Heinemann, 2010). The findings from these studies illustrate the potential need for menstrual leave or for some way in which menstruators can have a better experience in the workplace.

Menstrual stigma

Despite the potential benefits of menstrual leave, this policy exists (or could exist) in a cultural context that shames menstruation, and currently, little is known about the societal impact (or potential impact) of menstrual leave. Therefore, acceptance of the policy without consideration of the potential negative effects could be problematic.

Menstruation has sociocultural implications, including menstrual stigma, and the medicalization and politicization of menstruation. It is important to understand the complexity of menstrual stigma. Instead of viewing menstruation as another normal bodily function, menstruators and non-menstruators alike are socially conditioned to view menstruation as a source of uncleanness, shame, and taboo (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013).

Cultural stereotypes associated with menstruation depict menstruating women as ‘hormonal monsters’ who are irritable, moody, and less productive (Stein Deluca, 2017). Menstruators are also exposed to political messages that tell them that they are unfit for society when they are menstruating (i.e. Trump referring to Megyn Kelly when saying “blood coming out of her wherever” to discredit her; Yan, 2015).

Menstrual stigma has a multitude of consequences for menstruators. They are socially conditioned to hide all matters of menstruation, which may lead to self-objectification, participation in risky sexual behaviors, feelings of shame and disgust towards one’s body, and negative attitudes towards menstruation (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Roberts, Calogero, & Gervais, 2018; Roberts, Goldenberg, Power, & Pyszcynski, 2002). Additionally, some studies have shown that a menstruating woman is evaluated more negatively than a non-menstruating one (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, White, & Holmgren, 2003; Roberts et al., 2002). Forbes et al. (2003) found that their college participants evaluated a menstruating woman as more irritable, angry, and sad, and less sexually attractive than a woman not currently menstruating. Further, Roberts et al. (2002) found that when participants believed that a female confederate was menstruating (she dropped a tampon instead of a hairclip), they rated her as less likeable, and less competent than the female confederate who was thought not to be menstruating. Participants also sat further away from the confederate when she dropped a tampon instead of a hairclip.

Ambivalent sexism refers to the ideology that sexist attitudes can simultaneously be hostile and benevolent (Forbes et al., 2003; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Forbes et al. (2003) found that ambivalent sexist attitudes and beliefs can contribute to evaluating a menstruating woman more negatively than a non-menstruating women. They also found that hostile sexist attitudes predict both outward disgust towards menstruation and the belief that menstruators are irrational and moody. Individuals with higher levels of ambivalent sexism could experience those negative emotions toward menstruators who use menstrual leave, thus affecting the ways in which menstruators are evaluated.

The findings from the previous literature reveal cultural expectations for menstruators to conceal their menstrual status; a ‘rule’ that would be violated if a menstruator were openly taking a menstrual leave day. The research on menstrual stigma underscores how critical it is to examine the potential effects of menstrual leave. On the one hand, it is possible that menstrual leave policy could reduce stigma by opening up more discussion about menstruation in the workplace. On the other hand, the cultural context could prevent those positive outcomes from being realized. Those who have significant negative attitudes toward menstruation may be too

resistant to the idea of opening up that communication, resulting in negative evaluations of menstruators who disclose their menstrual status and use the leave. Negative attitudes toward menstruation could also lead to hostile attitudes toward the policy and those who use the policy.

The current study

Menstrual leave may have the potential to help menstruators take the time off of work that they need to resolve menstrual symptoms. At the same time, menstrual leave can have negative implications for menstruators due to menstrual stigma and the negative attitudes people have toward menstruation. Menstrual leave exists in a few countries, but there is no known empirical research documenting their effects. Currently, the U.S. does not have a national policy; however, there has been a surge in public interest in the topic (Dutt, 2017; George, 2018; O'Neill, 2016). The purpose of the current study was to understand people's beliefs about menstrual leave policy, and the effects this policy could have in the US.

We surveyed a national sample of men and women and asked them open-ended questions about menstrual leave. We analyzed the data to identify what kinds of effects participants thought the policy would have, as well as what they thought about the policy. Understanding American beliefs about menstrual leave can help policymakers create a policy that will have the best possible outcomes.

Method

Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited online through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which is a website where individuals can sign up to complete tasks or take surveys for monetary incentives. Participants were told they would answer questions about workplace absenteeism, and the study took place completely online. Inclusion criteria included being 18 years of age or older, having a full or part-time job for an organization, living in the United States, and having internet access. Participants were awarded \$1.00 for completing the survey. The Institutional Review Board at the corresponding author's institution approved the study. All participants read an informed consent page and agreed to participate before moving forward to the survey.

Measures

Demographic and health-related questions

Participants were asked to indicate their age, gender, racial/ethnic background, level of education, current employment status, current household

income, religiosity, political affiliation, primary language, number of children, and health insurance status.

Menstrual leave questions

Participants were told the following about menstrual leave: “Menstrual leave is a type of leave/sick time where a person who menstruates may be given the option from their place of employment to take paid leave if they are menstruating and unable to attend work”. Next, they were asked the following open-ended questions: “How do you feel about menstrual leave? Do you think people should take time off for menstrual leave?”, and “What kinds of effects do you think menstrual leave would have in the United States?” Participants were asked to respond with one or more sentences. Menstruators were also asked to indicate whether or not they would use menstrual leave if it were available at their workplace.

Data analysis and interpretation

Data were analyzed and interpreted using thematic analysis, which is a commonly used method for “identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). Thematic analysis is a flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data, and we maintained rigor in the approach by following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The data analysis team consisted of 3 trained researchers who first read and re-read a subset of responses to familiarize themselves with the data. Next, all 3 team members re-read the first 150 responses in order to generate initial codes. The team met to discuss these codes and agreed upon definitions. Next, all 3 members coded those first 150 responses, then met to discuss. There was high agreement among the team and any discrepancies were discussed until consensus was achieved. Each team member then coded one-third of the remaining responses. The research team maintained a flexible and iterative coding process, which involved being open to additional codes as they were discovered. After independently coding the remaining responses, the team met to discuss the results. Finally, the codes were collated into themes, which are defined and described below. Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS version 23.

Results

Participant characteristics

Participants were 600 individuals living in the United States. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 65 ($M = 32.97$, $SD = 6.77$). Just over one-half (52.5%) of participants were men and 47.2% were women; one person

indicated non-binary, and another did not indicate their gender. The majority of the sample was White/Caucasian (75.7%) and employed full-time (80.8%). The full list of participant characteristics are presented in [Table 1](#). Only 14.2% of the sample ($n = 85$) had heard of menstrual leave policy before the study. Menstruators ($n = 231$) were asked if they would use a menstrual leave day if it was offered by their employer; 47.2% reported “yes”, 20.8% “maybe”, and 32% “no”.

Qualitative findings

The purpose of this study was to analyze participants’ perceptions and attitudes toward menstrual leave. The questions explored in this study were: How do you feel about a policy like this? Do you think people should take time off for menstrual leave? What kinds of effects do you think a policy like this would have in the United States? When asked if they would support a menstrual leave policy, 42% ($n = 252$) of participants said yes, 16.3% ($n = 98$) said they would support it only if certain conditions were met, 34% ($n = 204$) said no, 3.8% ($n = 23$) said maybe, and 3.8% ($n = 23$) were unsure or had no response. When asked what type of effects a menstrual leave policy might have in the United States, 23% ($n = 138$) of participants said there would be positive effects, 49.3% ($n = 296$) said negative effects, 13.3% ($n = 80$) said both positive and negative effects, 6.3% ($n = 38$) said there would be no effect, and 8% ($n = 48$) were unsure. The coding process concluded with the emergence of 19 codes, which were then collapsed into five main themes. The coders agreed upon these five themes, which were (a) *Supporting Women and Women in the Workplace*. (b) *Concerns About the Effects on the Workplace*. (c) *Just Deal with It [menstruation]*. (d) *Makes Women Look Bad*. (e) *What do Men Get?*. These themes and codes generated from the data are summarized in [Table 2](#). The themes represent broader ideas of the participants, while the codes are more specific. Exact quotes from the data are used to further illustrate the depth and complexity of these themes.

Theme 1 – supporting women and women in the workplace ($n = 298$)

Many participants (10.2%) explained that a menstrual leave policy would have positive effects on the workplace. There would be an increase in productivity and it would be more cost effective because people believed that a menstruator’s work would be hindered if they had to do it while suffering from symptoms of menstruation. If a menstruator is able to take the time off they need to recover and manage their symptoms, they can come back to work and be able to perform their job to the best of their abilities. This productivity would benefit the workplace overall because the quantity and

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample (N = 600).

Characteristic	<i>n</i> (%)	Mean (<i>SD</i>)
Gender		
Female	283 (47.2)	
Male	315 (52.5)	
Non-binary	1 (0.2)	
Race/Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	454 (75.7)	
Black or African American	48 (8)	
Asian	45 (7.5)	
Hispanic/Latina	32 (5.3)	
More than one race/ethnicity	13 (2.2)	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	6 (1)	
Other	2 (.3)	
Age		32.97 (6.77)
Highest level of education		
Less than high school	1 (.2)	
High school graduate or GED	42 (7)	
Associate's degree or post high school vocational	67 (11.2)	
Some college	139 (23.2)	
Bachelor's degree	266 (44.3)	
Master's degree	64 (10.7)	
Doctoral degree	11 (1.8)	
Professional degree	10 (1.7)	
Current employment status		
Employed full-time	485 (80.8)	
Employed part-time	84 (14.0)	
Unemployed	14 (2.3)	
Full-time student	11 (1.8)	
Retired / on medical disability	3 (.5)	
Current household income		
Less than \$20K	60 (10)	
\$20–30K	98 (16.3)	
\$31–40K	81 (13.5)	
\$41–60K	124 (20.7)	
\$61–80K	119 (19.8)	
\$81–100K	59 (9.8)	
Over \$100K	58 (9.7)	
How often do you attend religious services/activities?		
Daily	9 (1.5)	
A few times per week	28 (4.7)	
Once a week	78 (13)	
Only on religious holidays	60 (10)	
Rarely	175 (29.2)	
Never	249 (41.5)	
How would you describe your political views?		
Very conservative	14 (2.3)	
Conservative	111 (18.5)	
Moderate	153 (25.5)	
Liberal	185 (30.8)	
Very liberal	121 (20.2)	
No opinion	15 (2.5)	
Is English your primary language?		
Yes	591 (98.5)	
No	3 (.5)	
Do you have children?		
Yes	241 (40.2)	
No	355 (59.2)	
Do you currently have health insurance?		
Yes, private through employer	358 (59.7)	
Yes, public insurance	94 (15.7)	
Yes, purchased through insurance marketplace	59 (9.8)	
No	89 (14.8)	

Table 2. Themes and codes related to participants' attitudes and perceptions toward a menstrual leave policy.

Themes	Codes
Supporting Women and Women in the Workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pain and other symptoms of menstruation make the workplace menstrual leave necessary - General beliefs that the policy would be good for women and their well-being - Policy would have positive effects on the workplace - Policy could potentially protect jobs for women who miss work during menstruation
What do Men Get?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Policy would be unfair to men - Used hostility in expressing their opposition to the policy
Concerns About the Effects on the Workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Beliefs that the policy would lead to controversy - Policy could be abused by women - General beliefs that the policy would have negative effects on the workplace - Policy would be difficult to enforce - Safeguards would have to be established to prevent the policy from interfering with the workplace
Just Deal with It [Menstruation]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Policy is not necessary - Women should just use a sick day instead of having a separate policy - Policy should only be used by women who have severe pain or symptoms of menstruation
Makes Women Look Bad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lead to discrimination against women - Unfairly advantages men - Violates women's privacy - Labeling the policy as "menstrual leave" is problematic - Furthers the stigma of menstruation

quality of work would increase. One participant explained, "Yes I believe this is a good policy because women can suffer very bad symptoms from their period which would make them unable to perform their work duties properly. Work would improve since women wouldn't have to try and work while dealing with their period."

Other responses (18%) mentioned that this type of policy would benefit menstruators in the workplace in different ways. It would decrease challenges for menstruators because they would not have to come to work in severe pain or discomfort. It would also increase respect for menstruators because having a policy like this signifies that employers value menstruators they hire and that they, along with other employees, acknowledge that menstruation is a process that should not be downplayed or stigmatized. This would lead to more understanding of menstruators and their well-being, along with other health issues in general that a person could have. For example, one participant wrote, "I think it would be a positive effect with women. It is not a sickness that is fabricated, would make women feel more valued.", and another wrote, "It would greatly show that we respect our women and what they deal with each month."

Amongst these answers of menstrual leave having positive effects on the workplace, participants also explained in more detail the benefits it

would provide for menstruators. As some have already stated (20.7%), they felt that this policy would give menstruators time to rest and recover faster, and it would be especially advantageous for menstruators who have severe symptoms that make it hard to work. This includes difficult to manage premenstrual syndrome and certain conditions such as endometriosis. One participant wrote, “Yes for sure I’ve dealt with having to call off plenty of times due to menstrual symptoms, I am completely sick for at least 2 days...it would help the work force for women, females are sometimes forced to go to work with chronic menstrual symptoms.”

There was also the idea among these responses about menstruators not having to conceal menstruation and pretend that they are not experiencing painful or discomfoting symptoms during the work day. This in turn could help other employees be more understanding of menstruators. Also, a few participants stated (0.8%) that menstrual leave could potentially protect jobs for menstruators who must miss work by guaranteeing them days off to manage symptoms without penalization or jeopardizing their employment. For example, one participant wrote, “I think it would be fantastic. So tired of the stigma, but it really can be difficult, and women shouldn’t have to pretend like pain and discomfort isn’t happening during that time.” Another participant wrote, “I think this is a good policy; when someone is in pain and unable to work it is important that they need not worry about losing their job.”

Even though there was only one participant who discussed the transgender experience, we believed that it is important to include his response here due to the fact that he broached the struggle of having difficulty keeping jobs due to managing menstrual symptoms while identifying as a man. He wrote, “I think it’s about time—I’m a transgendered man and I have lost so many jobs because of missing time due to terrible trouble with this issue. I think it would help to prevent people who menstruate from unfairly losing their jobs or being in trouble.” Although responses in this theme mostly pertained to how menstrual leave would support women, this participant’s comment underscores the importance of thinking about menstruators who may not identify as women, but for whom menstrual leave could provide support.

Theme 2 – what do men get? (n = 245)

The main focus of this theme was on the issue of fairness regarding the implementation of a menstrual leave policy. The criticism that emerged numerous times throughout the comments (20.7%) was that this policy would be unfair to men because women would get extra leave days and men would not. This reproach either stemmed from personal belief or the

impression that other people would hold this belief if the policy were to be implemented. The idea of having a leave policy solely for menstruators would add to inequality in the workplace, rather than decrease it because men would not have a policy strictly for them. There were some that suggested that men do not get extra sick days for their ailments, so there should be no special treatment for women (menstruators). Menstrual leave was also viewed as more unfair if it included paid days of absence. For example, respondents wrote, “I don’t agree with this. It discriminates against men who have to work all the time,” and, “I think men would probably come up with a “condition” in which they would request off, such as men menstruation.” There was one participant who commented on how this type of policy goes against equality and gives women an advantage over men,

While I am a woman, support women, and want the best for women everywhere, and will fight to the teeth for women’s rights; I do feel that menstrual paid leave is going a bit overboard. Yes, use a sick day if you’re feeling this sick; but to get special treatment for our womanly issues is something that shouldn’t be given. We are wanting to be treated equal to men, not be given more rights than them.

In addition to the previously discussed perceptions, participants (13.8%) also voiced their concerns about how implementing a menstrual leave policy could lead to a significant amount of controversy. There were many participants who believed that if this policy were to be in effect in the United States, there would be outrage and protests from certain groups of people because it would not align with their own values or it would add to inequality. For example, one participant stated, “There would probably be an uproar, because we don’t seem to be a very progressive, forward-thinking nation right now. Another participant wrote, “I think there would be strong backlash from opposing sides.”

Many participants believed men would produce the most backlash in response to menstrual leave. Many firmly felt that men would protest against a menstrual leave policy because it would be unfair to them since they would not receive any extra leave days. This perceived unfairness would create a general tension between men and women and the resentment could potentially increase the amount of sexism in the workplace. One participant voiced concerns writing, “Men will probably be in conflict with the decision and feel that women get too many special privileges.” Another participant wrote, “I’m afraid it would cause workplaces to discriminate against women, and it would promote even more sexism in the workplace. I’m concerned men will roll their eyes, and that this sort of policy would reinforce negative stereotypes about women.”

There were several hostile comments that fell under this theme (6.3%). Most hostile remarks were about how this policy would be unfair to men

and that it favors women too much. One participant stated, “I think this is absolutely ridiculous and caters way too much to females for little to no reason. I think it would lead to a lot of pandering and equality isn’t a thing anymore.” There was another participant who made it seem like men are tougher than women by writing, “I think no, while it sucks men show up to work a lot of times even if they are sick, in pain, half bleeding.” Even though the respondents had mostly negative comments that were encompassed in this theme, they speculated some very important complications of implementing a menstrual leave policy.

Theme 3 – Concerns about the effects on the workplace (n = 202)

Another common theme in the responses was being concerned about the effects or negative outcomes of introducing the policy (33.7%). One of the most common responses was that menstruators would likely abuse the policy. Many participants inferred that menstruators would utilize the menstrual leave just to skip work when they were not truly menstruating. Approximately 15% of participants reported on the potential for menstruators to abuse the menstrual leave policy. One participant responded, “Women could lie and say they needed ‘menstrual leave’ when they’re not even on their periods. This policy would be very abused and hard to enforce.” There were 9 participants (1.5%) who reported that it would be difficult to enforce the policy along with those negative effects. One wrote, “It seems a bit easy to abuse and the policy would probably require some proof that the woman is actually menstruating, and menstruating is affecting the quality of work.” Requiring proof may cause discomfort for some employees and it would be difficult to prove whether menstrual symptoms really did affect the quality of work.

Many participants also reported on the general belief that the policy would have negative effects on the workplace. A participant responded that more people would use it as “an excuse to call off work” and other employees “would suffer due to being shorthanded.” Another participant responded that the policy would just lead to “more people taking sick days, ie. America yet more unproductive.” There were 82 participants (13.7%) who reported on those potential negative effects on the workplace.

The participants who thought menstruation should not interfere with the workplace wrote responses such as, “Most women will take advantage of it to get off work and companies will have to cover their spots to get work done.” There were 19 (3.2%) participants who believed safeguards would have to be put in place to prevent the policy from interfering with the workplace. Some participants believed that a menstruator’s absence might put a “burden” on other employees. It would “harm businesses by severely limiting the amount of personnel available, at times” and “businesses would

be less productive and have to change the way they do certain things,” according to another participant.

Theme 4 – Just deal with it [menstruation] (n = 209)

Responses also included the common theme that menstruators should just ‘suck it up’ and ‘deal with it’ when it comes to menstrual pain and symptoms. Sixty-six responses (11%) were coded for suggesting menstrual leave policies are unnecessary because menstruation is not that bad and most menstruators do not need it. One participant reported, “I think this is a silly policy. It might also be insulting to women. Women can work when on their period. This is dumb.” Many female participants were offended that this policy exists. They responded with statements like, “Menstruation is, unfortunately, part of life for women and something that just has to be dealt with” or “Our menstrual cycle is a natural thing that we should get used to.” Another participant wrote, “Women have been menstruating since the beginning of time and it has never been an issue until recently. This is not a good reason to miss work.” Some others had more hostile responses like, “suck it up. My back sometimes hurts and I still go in [to work].”

There were 75 participants (12.5%) who believed that employees should just use a regular sick day if they have severe symptoms, rather than creating a separate policy. One participant wrote, “I think you should be treated as any other sick day, and not as something special.” Many participants were bothered by the idea of menstrual leave and menstruators having the possibility of taking more days off. Another participant wrote, “Regular illness policies should cover this in most cases.”

Sixty-eight (11.3%) participants believe that if a menstrual policy did exist, it should only be used for menstruators who have severe pain or other symptoms like heavy bleeding. One participant responded, “If menstruation is physically affecting the quality of work, then this policy seems ok to implement.” Another participant wrote, “[Introducing the policy] depends on the severity of the period.”

Theme 5 – This policy would make women look bad (n = 96)

The final theme concluded from the codes was that participants believe offering and utilizing menstrual leave will make women look bad (16.2%). The responses included in this theme mentioned the following: the further stigma of menstruation (1%), the violation of privacy (2.2%), problematic labeling (1.2%), unfair advantage for men (2.8%), or potential for discrimination (9%). Many participants expressed that they do not support the leave policy because they would not want people to know when they are

on their period for fear of being associated with a natural process that is often stigmatized. For example, one participant wrote,

Women would have everyone know when they are on their period. It would stigmatize women. I think this would have a negative effect.

Menstruation has been historically stigmatized; therefore, many menstruators feel they must keep their menstrual cycle a secret and would not want people in the workplace knowing that they are menstruating for fear of judgment. Another participant addressed stigma by writing, “It would be uncomfortable for women to ask for it.” Societal norms prevent menstruators from speaking openly about menstruation, so they would likely be uncomfortable disclosing their menstrual status to someone in the workplace. One participant believes that, “classifying these days as “menstrual” days would be a violation of an employee’s privacy” which is why they support just adding extra sick days. This response exemplifies the influence of the societal concealment taboos.

The responses included in this theme also revealed beliefs that menstruators would look bad when they are missing more days of work due to menstruation. If employers took note of this, they might hire fewer menstruators because they are seen as more expensive. This has an unfair advantage for men who will be seen as more productive because they do not need those extra days off and more men will be hired over menstruators. Participants reported that it makes “women look weak and like [they] are seeking special favors.” The policy would “continue to perpetuate that women [have] more needs” and “require” more accommodations. This discriminatory treatment when hiring new professionals can have a negative impact on menstruators who are trying to get ahead in the workforce. One participant responded that, “men would be much more offended and would purposely not hire women because a missed day is given every month.” Another said that it would “make it less likely for businesses to hire women.”

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the attitudes Americans have toward menstrual leave, which are important for employers and policy makers to take into consideration, and have implications for existing menstrual leave policies that are being implemented around the world. Since menstrual leave has not yet been implemented in the U.S., but has become part of public conversation, it is important to study current American attitudes, which can affect whether or not people support the leave, make use of it, and/or support those who choose to make use of it. In the current study, fewer than half (45%) of participants reported that they would

support menstrual leave if it were implemented in the U.S., and an additional 16.3% reported that they would support menstrual leave if it met certain conditions. Some of the conditions participants provided were if the leave was unpaid, menstruators' symptoms required medical intervention, and if it would not affect the productivity of the workplace. A little more than two-thirds of participants reported a firm "no" when asked about their support for the policy. These findings suggest that Americans are divided on the issue of menstrual leave, which warrants further study.

The two most common themes that emerged from the open-ended responses about the potential effects of menstrual leave in the U.S. were the potential for menstrual leave to support menstruators in the workplace, and in contrast, criticism of the policy including concerns about its fairness for men. Many participants acknowledged the benefits the policy would provide for menstruators, particularly those that suffer from significant symptoms that affect their daily lives (Chen et al., 2016; Dennerstein et al., 2010; Moradi et al., 2014). Menstruators would have better overall well-being and may even be more productive at work if they were allowed time to rest and recover on days when their symptoms were difficult to manage.

Despite the many positive responses to the policy, many participants were concerned about the unfairness of menstrual leave. Some expressed their own personal beliefs about it not being fair to men, while others expressed the concern that the public would consider the policy unfair and thus respond negatively to the policy. Many participants expressed that men will deserve more time off if menstruators are offered menstrual leave. The hostile responses such as, the policy is "absolutely ridiculous and caters too much to females for little to no reason," exemplify extreme negative attitudes against menstrual leave. Perceived unfairness could exacerbate the gender divide and result in backlash against menstruators. This finding is important given that previous researchers have found that participants who perceived parental leave as unfair, evaluated an individual who used parental leave more negatively than participants who did not perceive parental leave as unfair (Grover, 1991). Several comments revealed hostile sexist beliefs, which have been associated with negative attitudes toward menstruation, and have negative consequences for how menstruators are evaluated (Forbes et al., 2003). Future research should investigate the extent to which people evaluate menstruators more negatively when they use menstrual leave, and whether hostile sexist beliefs moderates that relation.

If a policy that could potentially help menstruators' health and well-being results in discrimination in the workplace and negative evaluations instead, then the policy will not have the intended benefits. One way to ameliorate this concern could be to provide more education about menstruation and menstruation-related illnesses, in order to provide justification for the

policy. However, it is important to provide this education in a way that does not reinforce the medicalization of menstruation. Such education should highlight the normalcy and function of the menstrual cycle, while providing information about the percentage of menstruators who experience menstrual-related disorders (instead of implying that menstruation in itself is a disorder), and how those experiences can affect daily life.

Two other common themes were concerns about negative effects on the workplace and beliefs that menstrual leave was not necessary – that women should just deal with it. A major concern about negative effects was that menstruators would abuse the policy and falsely claim that they were menstruating, in order to get time off work. Concerns about menstruators taking advantage of the policy reflects some of the hostile sexist attitudes previously discussed. Future researchers could provide participants with authentic personal vignettes on reasons menstruators have taken leave in the past, and subsequently evaluate participants' support of menstrual leave. Perhaps participants will be more supportive of the policy if they are presented with circumstances in which menstruators are not abusing the policy.

With regard to whether menstrual leave was necessary, participants responded that women have been menstruating since the beginning of time, and so it does not make sense as to why a policy would be needed now. These findings suggest that the public would benefit from more knowledge about the effects of severe menstrual symptoms on daily life (Chen et al., 2016; Dennerstein et al., 2010). Informing the public of the research demonstrating the pressure women feel to conceal menstruation and its symptoms in order to avoid negative evaluations from others may also be helpful (Kowalski & Chapple, 2000).

The final theme included concerns that a menstrual leave policy could have other backlash including further the stigma of menstruation, violation of privacy, and the potential for discrimination, as well as making men appear as more favorable and accomplished employees. Momigliano (2017) also expressed concerns about menstrual leave increasing employers' inclination to hire more men, unfairly advantaging them, while reinforcing the idea that women are more emotional and do not function as well while menstruating. Given that discrimination is a possible consequence, countries with menstrual leave should monitor hiring practices to ensure employers are not hiring fewer menstruators because they are considered an economic burden (Pattani, 2017). It is interesting, yet concerning, that many participants in this U.S. study anticipate that menstrual leave would result in backlash. Some of the current menstrual leave policies exist in more conservative countries; it is possible that the backlash would be greater in countries that are less egalitarian or that have more significant

inequalities between men and women. Therefore, the effects of menstrual leave on menstruators warrants further study.

Although providing the option of menstrual leave has the potential to open up more conversation about menstruation, it should be kept in mind that many menstruators consider their menstruation to be an intimate and private matter, and do not want to disclose their status, especially to men (Brantelid, Nilvér, & Alehagen, 2014). The potential for stigma reduction may not be realized if menstrual leave is not thoughtfully implemented, or if the public has these preexisting negative attitudes toward the policy that we uncovered in our study. Further, the policy in a sense suggests menstruators cannot (or should not) work while menstruating. While this may be true for some menstruators, it is certainly not true for all. Longitudinal studies that measure stigma before and after the implementation of menstrual leave can help answer this question. In addition, the fact that negative attitudes exist pre-implementation, suggests that policy makers should also address some of these attitudes in the introduction of the policy.

The current study has several strengths including a large national U.S. sample and the anonymity of the study provided an opportunity for participants to give candid and open-ended responses. It is the first known empirical study of U.S. attitudes toward menstrual leave. The study also introduced a concept that many participants had not previously heard of, which means that many participants contemplated menstrual leave for the first time. This has the potential to lead to more openness and dismantle the menstrual taboos of concealment. Another strength of this study is the inter-rater reliability. Three collaborative researchers discussed each code and theme thoroughly until mutual agreement was achieved. The strengths of this study are valuable and contribute to literature that has the potential to help menstruators in the workplace.

Despite the strengths, this study is not without limitations. Although there was some diversity in the sample, future researchers should increase efforts to obtain more responses from individuals from racial/ethnic minority groups. The findings are also limited to the U.S., but may be generalizable to other Western cultures. Although there is value in obtaining open-ended responses, there is also the potential to obtain ambiguous responses, which can hinder the accuracy of coding. We did not have the ability to follow-up with participants to further explain any ambiguous or short responses.

This qualitative analysis provided rich data for attitudes toward menstrual leave. The five themes encompassed all of the responses in a summative way. Although the responses were varied, many participants had hope for the implementation of this policy and how it would improve the working environment for women. If properly implemented, considering the

attitudes expressed through this study, menstrual leave policies have the potential to help individuals who suffer from severe menstrual symptoms or disorders.

Encouraging discussion about menstrual leave and menstruation in general is a significant first step in addressing menstrual stigma, which is pervasive across the globe. Countries and companies that have menstrual leave policies should examine whether their policies either improve or exacerbate menstrual stigma. In looking toward the future, even if menstrual leave is not implemented in every country or company, there should be more efforts to create better and more beneficial sick leave policies in general. If these policies were improved upon, it would solve many of the dilemmas that could arise from the implementation of menstrual leave, such as the inequality, backlash, or violation of privacy. The workplace would then become an environment that is more sympathetic and respectful of employees' needs and health problems, which should be an objective of any type of leave policy, whether it be sick leave or menstrual leave.

Note

1. We intentionally chose to use the term 'menstruator' in order to be inclusive and to recognize that not all people who menstruate are women, and that not all women menstruate.

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