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### A Study on the Perception of Men and Women on Availing Menstrual Leave at Work Place

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#### KEYWORDS

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women

#### A B S T R A C T

Inspired by the two corporate companies embracing the period leave policy, Shiv Sena corporator Sheetal Mhatre has now demanded that women working in government, semi-government and private organisations be allowed to avail "menstrual leave" to help women in those problematic days and bring the taboo out in public domain. Menstruation is a woman's monthly bleeding. Menstrual pain and cramps are very common. More than half of all women employees face severe cramps and pain on the first day of their periods. The study aims to know about the perception of men and women about menstrual leave in work places and how the attitude of men and women differs. This revolves around the concept of first day of period leave. The concept of menstrual leave as a medico-legal aid is strong and sedative. The issue of menstrual pain inevitably affects each and every working woman. (Choudhary, 2017) Self-structured questionnaire was used among 30 respondents (men and women) from institutions in the organized sector in the Irinjalakuda municipality in Thrissur district, Kerala. Analytical descriptive research design is used in this study. The major findings in the study are: menstrual leave militates against the idea of equality in the work places, men and women are inherently different, menstrual leave will exclude women even more from work places. Women's natural cycles don't make them weak or less abled. Menstrual leave will reinforce menstruation taboo. However, the real progress of the human civilization can only occur when these differences are understood and honoured differently.

#### Introduction

Menstruation or periods is a normal vaginal bleeding that occurs as part of a women's monthly cycle. Every month your body prepares for pregnancy. If a pregnancy occurs the uterus or womb sheds its lining.

The menstrual blood is partly blood and partly tissue from inside the uterus. It passes out of body through the vagina. Menstrual cramps are pretty common. More than half of all women who get periods say they have cramps during the first days (Martin, 1987). Menstrual leave is a type of leave

where women may have the option to take paid or unpaid leave for her employment if she is menstruating and is unable to go to work because of this. The concept of menstrual leave can be seen from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. There are several countries that menstrual leave is already given. Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, South Korea, Italy are some of them.

The First Day Period Leave Policy in India recently brought to light when two Mumbai based companies granted leave on the first day of period leave to its 75 female employees, the company has also created a video highlighting the importance of doing so well. The company believes women who suffer from menstrual pain should inaptly permit to take off is right. The company also signed a petition that has been put up on which said that women should be given leave on the first day of period they calling it FOP leave policy that all companies across India should follow. The petition that put up on change.org is as follow:

Men and women are biologically different. However, all progress of the human civilization can only occur when we understand and honour these differences. Why should menstruation, for instance, an integral biological process that a woman goes through in her life time, be kept hidden? It's no secret that period cramps are the worst, but over the years women have had to show up at work and mask their pain with silly excuses. Recognizing this pain and the taboo around it, Culture Machine Media Pvt. Ltd has initiated a leave policy, called First Day of Period (FOP) Leave, as a part of which women can take a leave on the first day of their period, which is when the pain is usually the worst.

The female employees at Culture Machine's Blush, have the privilege, to apply for a

leave on the day when the discomfort is unmanageable, no questions asked. Now, they want the rest of the women in India to have the same right to choose.

They want other women too to be able to avail, if they require, an FOP Leave because there is no need to justify that horrendous period pain. Culture Machine is imploring women and men to sign this petitions so that it reaches the Ministry of Women and Child Development and also to the Ministry of Human Resource Development.

We want an FOP Leave to be made available for women all over India, in which ever sector it may be applicable to. This petition will be delivered to: Ministry of Woman and Child Development, Maneka Gandhi, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Prakash Javadekar

By this policy the women are empowered and have a favorable condition at work. But there is an alternative view for this, which is the arguments and disapproval raised against this policy. After all these years of struggle, women have been battling for their equality at work place and now they want some special grants. The idea of Menstrual Leave militates the idea of equality in work places. In the word of Devlina Mazumdar, HR head, Culture Machine told India Today, *"It's time we accept women are biologically differently built and there is no shame to admit that one is on their period. This policy will make the workplace women friendly and also it's optional"*. Dr Jyaanti Dutta, Clinical and Socio Analyst, says, *"Menstrual leave will take away from the efforts of women who are trying to establish a leave playing fields, moreover as periods are personal and private, women might not want go public. There is always the scope of taking sick leave if some women feel they need it"*

## **Menstrual Taboo and Stigma**

Menstruation has been associated with many taboos, from ancient time onwards. It has kept women in the darkness of stigma all these years. Periods are considered a shameful period where women are considered impure and not productive. The myths surrounding menstruation and the enforcement of taboos make it an embarrassment for women among the general public. The world has thus silenced women's issues to the private sphere. Women all around the world are stigmatized and isolated for something in their body that is completely natural and physiological. Culture has long treated menstruation as threatening or dirty, and many have taken a closer look at the process by which a naturally-occurring bodily function in women which is as necessary and natural as sneezing became taboo. Like other rituals, and beliefs, menstruation taboo has a cultural foundation that can be traced genealogically, and historians and anthropologists have explored the progression that created the present taboo. As with any accepted social structure, the belief arose in the context and support of prevailing values. In this case, the taboo reflects cultural beliefs justifying the power differential between men and women. Charlotte Quinn, Administration education researcher says that *"having a normal menstrual cycle is just another vital sign like blood pressure or heart rate that ensures your body is working normally"*. So if a women's period is so natural and so vital then why it is always surrounded by heavy stigma. The stigma has been from thousands of years. Even from the ancient times. But that's the past and things must be changed by now. The same society that once made up the entire taboo are scared that the concept of menstrual leave will reinforce the taboos. But that was the old man who is stereotyped

and blind. Now we have a new society that is more developed and practical. The old beliefs can't stand between the new men and the society. Men and women are inherently different. For the time when a women is menstrually active a women bleed 3000 days and that can be almost 8 years of time. In these 3000 days of her life a women is different from others. She needs to take special care of herself on these days. And the society has to understand and accept these needs.

In America women are taxed 5% for sanitary products while men buy razors, he's tax nothing. Luxury is easier than priorities. In India and Nepal the stigma around menstruation is affecting a women's future sometime even her life. In most schools in India there is a lack of clean and safe toilet making it almost impossible to clean up and safely dispose of used menstrual products. In addition girls has insufficient access to sanitary products leading them to use leaves and even wraps which make them leak, and prone to infections. The real progress of human civilization can only occur when these differences are honored differently. Men and women are inherently different and that the society should understand them. Neither if it is not possible to make menstrual leave completely acceptable to the society this issue will be a way to bring more understanding and openness about the pain and challenges during this time. A period doesn't limit a woman. The only thing that could limit her would be her mentality. She is out there to conquer the world even on the day she bleeds. But sometimes she won't be able to be there. Then its ok to say that "I'm not ok" and each and every one in this society should be responsible to understand that. There shouldn't be any need to whisper. *"In a world, we can celebrate the only bleed that bleed without violence. In a world where*

*pad aren't wrapped and monologues aren't silenced, in a world where you and I can just be, as we are irrespective of our genitals and irrespective of our bodies. Then we must DOT DOT DOT that's the minimum amount of times we can encourage and empower a woman and make sure a period doesn't equal to a stop."* in the words of a student Aranya Johar. While it's great that we want equal opportunity for men and women, it is important to understand and embrace those men and women are inherently different and in doing this, we must make these differences work towards our collective advantage and not marginalize each other in any way. Some of these differences like menstruation are physiological in nature and are very real. This wasn't some theory that was concocted to get any leverage over the other gender. Let each woman decide their own threshold of tolerance and give them the option of taking the day off if needed. This form of empowerment that's rooted in empathy is what pushes us forward as a society. Being denied access to basic facilities when you're on your period is not your choice, strips you of your power and is a regressive norm. Being given the choice to take a day off if you need it is quite the opposite. It is empathetic, empowering and progressive.

With regards to workplace discrimination, any organization that denies opportunities to women because of their gender and inclusive policies like this is no better than the social institutions that say that women shouldn't be allowed into kitchens or temples when they're on their period. You're better off working for someone else. Sick leaves that are made available to most employees are minimal in number and are better suited for actual illnesses. Let's not ignore the workplace taboo of sick leaves either. Ask around about how bosses in India actually shame their employees for

feeling unwell or ask for proof of illness in order to grant this leave. We have a work culture that prides itself on not taking any sort of leave, a work culture where in most cases the only measure of hard work is the number of hours/days an employee puts in and rarely output, a work culture where you are made to feel guilty for asking for what you're actually entitled to. Now add the already existing taboo of menstruation to this mix and see how it doesn't work. A woman who sees this support will most likely give back so much more to her employer.

The average Indian male should never be the benchmark for any aspect of human existence. Societies evolve when we collectively strive to appease excellence, not average. Pain shouldn't be outweighed by other's ignorance. Let the fact that some men have no empathy be their shame and not women's burden to bear. Period leave is a progressive policy. More organizations should make this option available to women. Policies should be inclusive and must challenge existing norms and pander only to patriarchy. (Fernandes, 2017). Menstruation is a woman's monthly bleeding. When you menstruate, your body sheds the lining of the uterus. Menstrual blood flows from the uterus through the small opening in the cervix and passes out of the body through the vagina. Most menstrual periods last from 3 to 5 days. Out of 365 days in a year 60 days are different for a woman biologically compared to men. (Thomas, 2008). *"Agreed, with hard work and persistent effort it is indeed possible for women to do the same things and gender doesn't necessarily deter us from setting professional goals. But periods sometimes do"*. These are the words spoken by Indira Nooyi, Chief Executive Officer of Pepsico on how she has sustained managing home and work together in both hands.

In India the bloody debate started when the media based company Cultural Machine embraced as policy to grant one day menstrual leave a month to women working in the company. This got more publicized when the company posted a video showing about their First Day of Period (FOP) leave. Joins to this they lounged a petition calling on other companies across India to implement the same policy. Men and women see the world differently. When it comes to the concept of menstrual leave, something that favors a particular gender, it is not so sure that the other gender has to take it so easily. The mental image, the perception about this will be in a two different ways (Choudhary, 2017). *“As with other senses, such as hearing and olfactory system, there are marked sex differences in vision between men and women,”* researcher Israel Abramov, of the City University of New York (CUNY), said in a statement. Men and women are biological different and thus they are inherently different.

### **Materials and Methods**

The study was done on thirty men and women, with sixteen men, fourteen women and no transgenders. Self-structured questionnaire was used among 30 respondents (men and women) from institutions in the organized sector in the Irinjalakuda. Analytical descriptive research design and simple random sampling has been used in this study.

### **Significance of the study**

Communities comply by recognizing a taboo and obeying its avoidance rules to maintain order. Thus, taboos are created by “leaders of the society” and “controllers of opinion” to structure social relations and stabilize power structures. Thus taboos can influence the perception of people. Studies

show that the working capacity of women during the periods is comparatively low compared to the other day. This is not because they are weak; it is that they need to take care of themselves as priority in these days. The need of understanding about menstrual pain is not only about having consideration, it’s about being part of the system.

Equality is not that we have to practice; it is justice that we have to practice. We have to know understand and accept the differences. Equality at work means equal opportunity by equal physical and mental conditions of work which is what is proposed by the menstrual leave- FOP policy. On the other hand, there have been heated debates on whether availing menstrual leave puts a question mark on the ability of a woman keeping herself at par with her fellow male employee, whether it widens the gap between the genders.

### **Findings**

The study was done on thirty men and women working in organized sector in Irinjalakuda of Thrissur district. Most of the respondents in the study are in their thirties. Sixteen female respondents and 14 male respondents participated in the study, there were no respondents belonging to transgender community in the study. Almost eighty three percent respondents feel that menstrual leave does not widen the gap in gender, nevertheless, seventeen percent of men and women who think it is against the idea of gender equality. Most respondents in this study understand the differences inherently found in men and women, and they agree that difference is natural and should be honoured differently. Forty percent of respondents do think that menstrual cycles make their fellow female colleagues weak/ less abled.

Fig.1 Most female respondents feel that menstrual leave will relieve their stress related to work

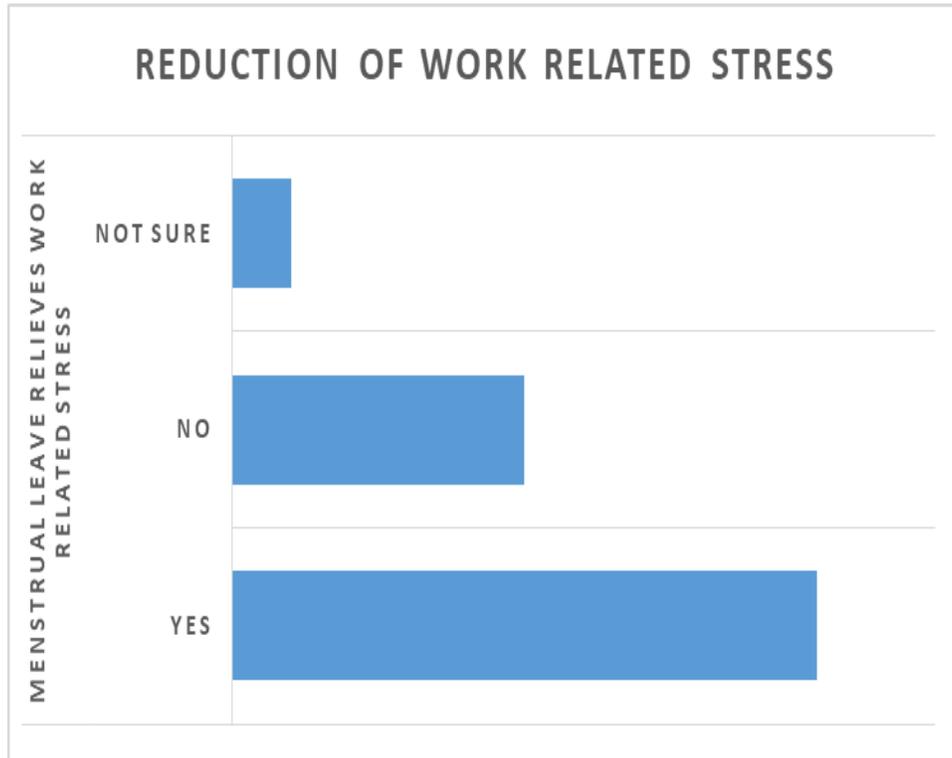


Fig.2 Forty percent of respondents do think that menstrual cycles make their fellow female colleagues weak/ less able. This could indicate a prejudiced mind towards women working on their menstruation days and also women in general in their period days

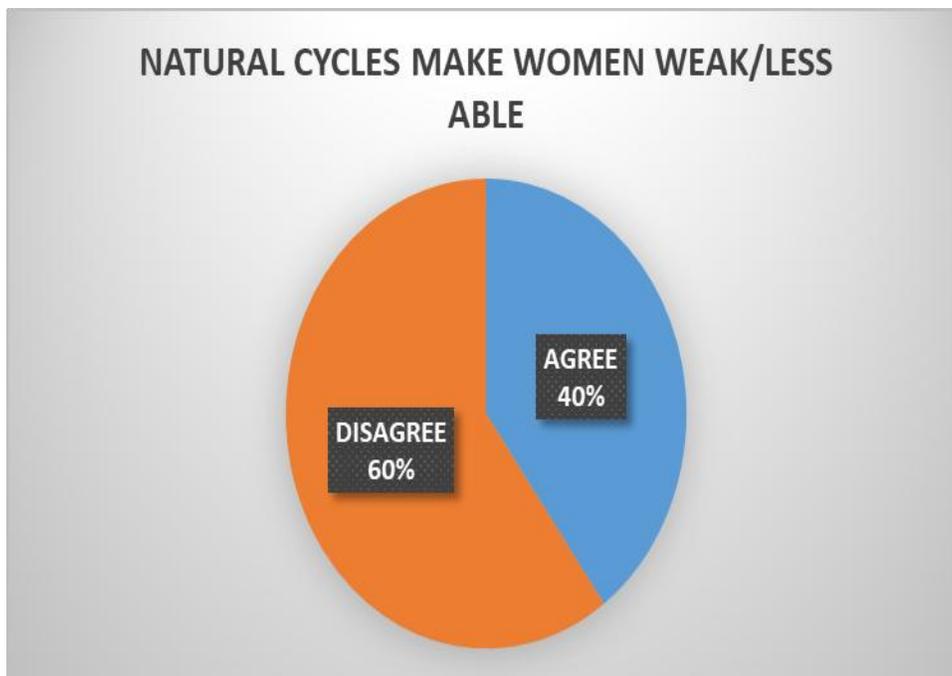


Fig.3 A fairly good number of respondents observe that women feel excluded from work place if menstrual leave is permitted

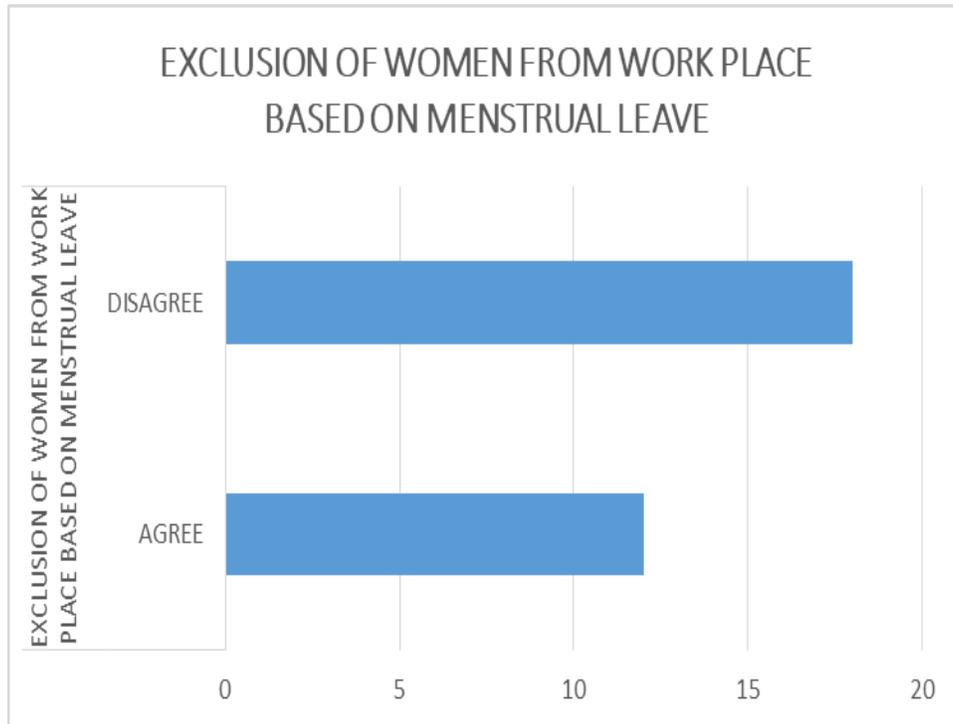
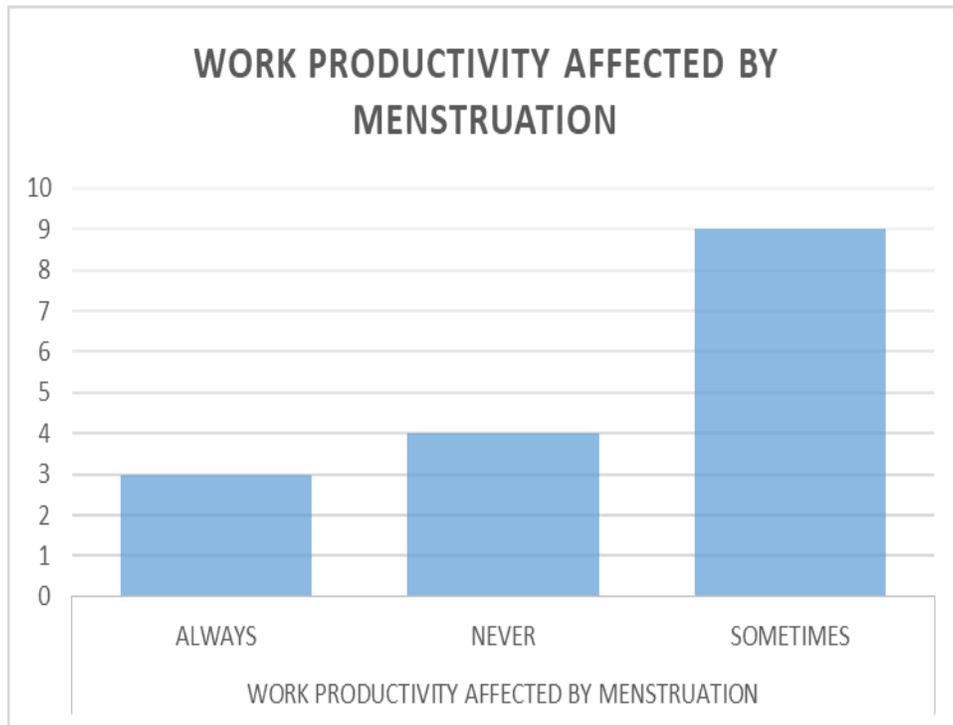


Fig.4 Most female respondents feel that they are affected by the discomfort of menstruation during their working hours



**Fig.5** Almost eighty three percent respondents feel that menstrual leave does not bring a gap in gender, there is a seventeen percent of men and women who think it is against the idea of gender equality



**Fig.6** A significant percentage of respondents think that menstrual leave is going to reinforce menstruation taboo and widen the gap instead of bridging it



Fig.7 The tendency to take leave based on bodily conditions in work place is higher and is irrespective of gender, all genders feel that there are higher chances of taking leave if fallen sick

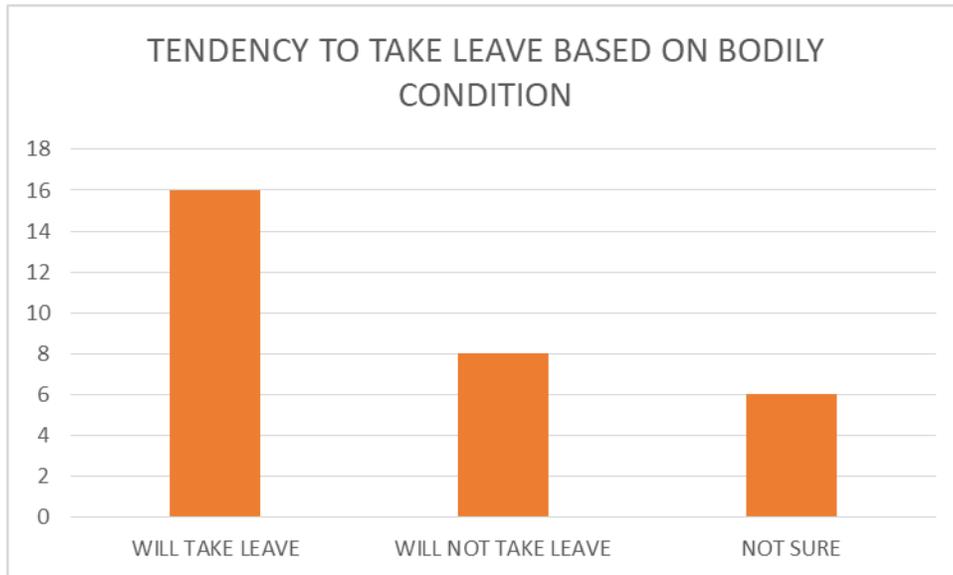
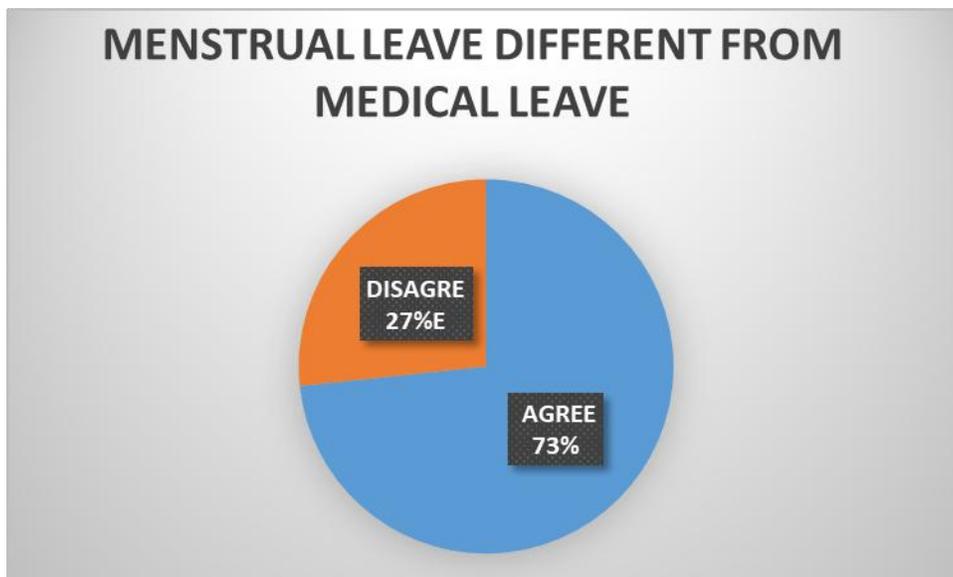


Fig.8 It is observed that most of the respondents suggest, menstrual leave cannot be mixed with medical leave



This could indicate a prejudiced mind towards women working on their menstruation days and also women in general in their period days. A significant percentage of respondents think that menstrual leave is going to reinforce menstruation taboo and widen the gap

instead of bridging it. Most of the respondents prefer working in work places where women are considered, this shows an empathetic attitude towards the fellow female employees. It is observed that most of the respondents suggest, menstrual leave cannot be mixed with medical leave. Almost

all female respondents feel that menstrual leave will relieve their stress related to work. Most respondents feel that they are almost always affected by the discomfort of menstruation during their working hours. A fairly good number of respondents observe that women feel excluded from work place if menstrual leave is sanctioned

### **Suggestions and Conclusion**

Equality in work place has been a major problem since decades. The gap between gender equality was well shown in the case of remuneration in the work place. Women were less paid compared to men in work places. It took years and years of hard work to change that. Apart from that, women have family friendly policies such as parental leave, maternity leave where men don't have any of these concertinos. Above all, a 12 days additional leave will be not be agreeable for the society. This can cause problem to the economic productivity of the working institution. At the same time, work place gender equality is achieved only when employees are able to access and enjoy the same rewards, resources and opportunities regardless of gender, and that's where the importance of menstrual leave can be seen. Menstrual leave will not dent the idea of gender equality as long as it will not be a burden for the company as well as the other colleagues. It's highly important that the pros and cons of the FOP-policy (menstrual

leave) are weighed against the views and opinions of women employees of any company/ institution since they are the primary beneficiaries of the policy. Although women admit that the practical difficulties they have to face during their menstruation days, they also feel they are stigmatized when it comes to addressing it in open. Menstrual leave will be a reality only when all genders openly embrace the benefits and think of each other, especially women in this regard from an empathetic perspective which is highly valued but rarely found in this age.

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