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Workers' Menstrual Experiences and Perceptions Towards Menstrual Leave in Indonesia

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Disclaimer:

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the International Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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List of Acronyms

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
HRD	Human Resource Development
Perrpu Ciptaker	Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang Cipta Kerja No 2. Tahun 2022
WFH	Work From Home
WFO	Work From Office

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Abstract

This study focuses on Indonesian workers' menstrual experiences at work and their perceptions, as well as attitudes toward menstrual leave. Menstruation, a crucial human reproductive function, is often ignored and even stigmatized, which makes the study necessary. What frequently happens is the neglect of the menstruators' rights, including their rights in the workplace. Workers' experiences are essential because only through their stories can we truly understand what they need when menstruating at work. Collecting workers' stories was carried out through qualitative interviews that prioritized the emic perspective. The primary conclusions of the study are workers' menstrual experience and their perceptions, as well as their attitudes, are highly influenced by the combination of menstrual stigma and gender dynamics in the organization.

Relevance to Development Studies

This research is relevant to development studies because workers' well-being, social justice, gender, and human rights are the main focus of development studies. This research provides an in-depth understanding of workers' menstrual experience and the extent to which menstrual leave policies can provide well-being and social justice also guarantee workers' human rights. By understanding the experiences and perceptions of workers, this research contributes to the discourse on how employment policies can be designed not only for productivity but also for the overall well-being of workers. Furthermore, this research also contributes to the field of gender and Critical Menstrual Studies (CMS) by addressing menstrual challenges and stigma in the workplace. Also, it contributes to the knowledge production of menstruation in the middle income and global south countries.

Keywords:

Worker; menstruation; menstrual experience; perceptions; menstrual leave; menstrual stigma; organization; workplaces

Chapter 1: An Introduction

1.1 Why Workers, Menstruation, and Menstrual Leave?

“With notable exceptions, across culture and historical eras, we socialize this biological process – including a serious inquiry into its form, function, and meaning – into hiding” (Bobel, 2020:1).

When I was 18, I discovered that Indonesia has menstrual leave—a policy allowing workers to abstain from work if they experience pain on the first or second day of menstruation. I thought it was very progressive. I innocently asked a cleaner at my university whether she had access to menstrual leave. The cleaner chuckled and replied that, first, she was unaware of such a policy. Second, she explained that as an outsourced worker, even annual or sick leave was barely within reach. When she felt ill, whether due to menstruation or not, she still forced herself to work. If she chose to stay home, she would forfeit her pay for that day—or, in the worst case, risk being dismissed. At that time, I assumed that this happened because of her status as an outsourced worker.

After graduating from college and entering the workforce, I soon found that awareness of menstrual leave—and access to it—was quite rare. Many employees out there share the same experience as that lady janitor; they are unaware that such a policy even exists, let alone feel empowered to use it. Many still force themselves to continue working, enduring the pain and discomfort of menstruation in silence. At my own workplace, I saw colleagues pushing through, unaware of policies that could make their situation and work environment more accommodating.

Ten years later, I realized that the policy I initially saw as progressive might actually work against workers’ interests. Levitt and Barnack-Tavlaris (2020) suggest that menstrual leave has the potential to reduce worker productivity, which could influence performance evaluations, recruitment processes, and even exacerbate gender-based wage gaps. This led me to wonder: If menstrual leave is not the answer, then what do workers truly need when menstruating at work? Do they share the same views on menstrual leave? Driven by these questions, I decided to research workers, menstruation, and menstrual leave. While menstruation may not be a problem for everyone, this is not everyone’s reality and it is a significant issue for many.

My father’s reaction when I shared my research focus on workers, menstruation, and menstrual leave also fueled my determination. He questioned the urgency of this topic, considering the last two topics unimportant. However, menstruation is a routine reality for millions of workers, with tangible effects on their lives. As the United Nations (2019) stated, “The stigma and shame generated by stereotypes around menstruation have severe impacts on all aspects of women’s and girls’¹ human rights, including their rights to equality, health, housing, water, sanitation, education, freedom of religion or belief, safe and healthy working conditions, and to participate in cultural and public life without discrimination.” This reality is often minimized and dismissed, even by people like my father. Of course, I do not blame my father alone, because the root of this issue is reflected in the quote at the beginning of this section: we tend to keep menstruation –into hiding.

¹ I realize that it is not only women and girls who menstruate. There are other genders that experience menstruation too. Therefore, beside this quotation, I use the word of workers or menstruators to refer those who menstruates..

My hope is that this research will bring menstruation to light as a visible and valid topic, spotlighting workers' menstrual experiences, the challenges they face, and their specific needs in the workplace. In this study, I conducted interviews with ten workers who I purposefully selected using a maximum variation sampling strategy. This strategy favors an 'information-rich' cases approach, so all participants were my friends who I recruited based on several criteria that I had determined. Although I knew all of the participants, some were not my close friends, and menstruation was a topic that I rarely discussed with them. I realize my close relationship with the participants can cause bias in data collection. However, in research on sensitive topics such as menstruation, the level of intimacy that I have with them helps me to reduce power imbalances between the researcher and participants. This matter encouraged participants to share more openly, resulting in data that is more authentic and representative.

I also recognize that the workers I interviewed do not represent all Indonesian workers; my study is limited to formal employees. Nevertheless, their voices and stories are valuable, and each individual's experience matters. "Their stories are a powerful reminder of the need for equitable and inclusive menstrual policies, and, above all, a framing of the menstruating body not as a site of humiliation and degradation, but rather as one deserving of care" (Roberts, 2020:178).

1.2 History of Menstrual Leave in Indonesia

Menstrual leave is a policy provided by the Indonesian government for workers who menstruate. First enacted in *Labour Law No. 12 Year 1948*, Article 13 stated that "female workers may not be required to work on the first and second days of menstruation." The inclusion of menstrual leave in Indonesian law is partly influenced by the heritage of Dutch colonial law, which in line with local values (Lahiri-Dutt and Robinson, 2008). During that period, European societies were facing the negative impacts of laissez-faire capitalism, such as long working hours and reduced family care, resulting in high infant mortality and low birth rates. In response, the Dutch government issued a maternalist protection clause that included provisions for maternity leave, breastfeeding rights, regulated working hours, specific gender-based work sectors, and menstrual leave. Indonesia adopted these colonial-era protections, which aligned with Indonesian women's activism at the time. This movement "acknowledges the specificity of human reproductive function, but sees this as a basis for special protection by the state, rather than a justification of inequity" (Lahiri-Dutt and Robinson, 2008:105).

The existence of gender-specific provisions in labor legislation, such as maternity leave and menstrual leave, became controversial as the labor market evolved. In the 1980s, there was an increasing number of women workers in the formal sector. At that moment, the new foreign investment regulations drove the growth in the manufacturing sector. Women began working in previously male-dominated fields, with around two-thirds of women employed in agriculture, and approximately 80 percent of light manufacturing workers being young women (Lahiri-Dutt and Robinson, 2008). This shift led to a divide between those who supported maternity protections and those who opposed them. Critics argued that these protections hindered career advancement, discouraged companies from hiring women, conflicted with women's emancipation, and reduced company productivity. In 1992, those opposed to these protections proposed revoking the maternity clause, but the proposal was unsuccessful.

In 1997, Indonesia's Ministry of Manpower announced a review of labor law, including the maternity protection clause, which again sparked public debate. Labor activists demanded that the protections be maintained and even extended to Indonesians working abroad, particularly in the Middle East and East Asia, where many serve as domestic workers. Conversely, middle-class workers voiced their urgency to remove the protection clause—especially menstrual leave—believing it to be discriminatory and a deterrent for companies considering female employees. Ultimately, this argument did not prevail, and the protection clause was retained.

Fifty-five years later, the menstrual leave policy was revised through *Employment Law No.13 Year 2003*. Under the 1948 law, two days of menstrual leave were automatically provided. In the 2003 law, menstrual leave became conditional, based on an agreement between workers and their employers. Article 81, paragraph (1) states that “female workers (laborers) who feel pain during their menstrual period and inform their employer are not obliged to work on the first and second day of menstruation.” Additionally, Article 81, paragraph (2) states, “The implementation of what is stipulated under subsection (1) shall be regulated in work agreements, company regulations, or collective labor agreements.”

In 2022, the Indonesian government introduced the Job Creation Law, known as *Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang Cipta Kerja No. 2 Year 2022 (Perppu Ciptaker)* which once again brought menstrual leave into the spotlight. The Job Creation Law only specifies workers' rights to 12 days of annual leave per year, with no explicit mention of maternity, childbirth, or menstrual leave. This omission led to protests and misunderstandings, as labor activists argued that it effectively eliminated menstrual and maternity leave for workers. The government, however, clarified that menstrual leave had not been removed and remained protected under Law No. 13 of 2003. Since it was unchanged, menstrual and maternity leave were not included in the Perppu Ciptaker (CNN Indonesia, 2023).

1.3 The Debate Around Menstrual Leave

The debate and controversy surrounding menstrual leave extend beyond Indonesia, occurring globally and within academic discourse. Research by Barnack-Tavlaris et al. (2019) involving 600 U.S. citizens showed that 23 percent of participants believed menstrual leave would have a positive impact on workers, while 49.3 percent thought it would have a negative impact, and 13.3 percent believed it would have both positive and negative effects. When asked if they would take menstrual leave if it were available, 47.2 percent responded "yes," 20.8 percent "maybe," and 32 percent "no." Additionally, 42 percent of respondents stated they would support menstrual leave, 16.3 percent would support it only under certain conditions, 34 percent were opposed, 3.8 percent responded "maybe," and another 3.8 percent were unsure or gave no answer.

Research by Bhattacharya et al. (2021) explored opinions on menstrual leave among employees in India, with samples from Agartala, Bhubaneswar, and Raiganj. This exploratory study employed descriptive and quantitative methods, revealing that 23.3 percent of female respondents felt that menstrual leave policies would be unfair to male employees, while only 4 percent of male respondents felt it would not be unfair to them.

Lahiri-Dutt and Robinson (2008) found that menstrual leave created new opportunities for women in traditionally male-dominated industries, such as mining. Their research focused on mine operators

in Sangatta, East Kalimantan, Indonesia. Before the enactment of Law No. 13 of 2003 on Employment, Indonesian law prohibited women from working in mines due to perceptions that mining was dangerous, physically demanding, and inappropriate for women. Research indicated that mine operators took menstrual leave because their work environment was not conducive to menstruating workers. The operators' duties included driving trucks and heavy machinery, often on sites with inadequate bathroom facilities, night shifts, and restrictive uniforms. Menstrual leave offered mine operators a respite, allowing them to take leave during menstruation. However, taking leave significantly reduced their earnings, as wages were tied to attendance and productivity. In this context, Lahiri-Dutt and Robinson (2008:118) argued that "gender-specific leave may lead to discrimination against women in the job market," but it can also help women overcome barriers to high-paying, male-dominated jobs.

Levitt and Barnack-Tavlaris (2020) described menstrual leave as "ambivalent sexism," meaning it can have both positive and negative impacts. They argued it can be beneficial for individuals who experience pain or suffer from conditions like dysmenorrhea, endometriosis, ovarian cysts, or mood disorders, allowing them time to address their health needs and even helping to destigmatize menstruation in the workplace. Conversely, menstrual leave may perpetuate sexist stereotypes, such as the notion that menstruating workers are less productive or weaker. Regularly taking menstrual leave could mean taking one to two days off per month, or 12-24 days per year, potentially widening income gaps and encouraging the medicalization of menstruation.

King (2020) argued that while menstrual leave has good intentions, but it provides an inadequate solution to workers' menstrual challenges. King disagrees with the rationale behind menstrual leave, which she sees as aimed at "protecting women's fertility," and believes that severe menstrual pain should indeed exempt individuals from working. She questions how staying at home and being sick because of menstruation is thought to be the solution and managing pain addresses the underlying menstrual health issues. She suggested, instead that menstrual leave may lead to unintended consequences, such as income loss, particularly in East Asia, where menstrual leave is often unpaid. According to King, a better approach would involve addressing menstrual health through medical care and stress mitigation. She argues that general sick leave policies, which are already available in many workplaces, should cover menstrual pain. As a gender-specific policy, menstrual leave may reinforce negative stigmas and inaccurate myths about menstruation, perpetuating workplace gender inequality and injustice at work.

Karin (2022) argued that "structural workplace changes are needed to acknowledge, anticipate, and accommodate menstruation, without harming equity or economic security for current and former menstruators." She suggested that most workplaces do not address the specific needs of individuals experiencing menstruation, perimenopause, or menopause. Employees often lack access to essential resources, such as paid breaks, affordable menstrual products, and private spaces to manage menstruation. Many still wear uncomfortable uniforms, lack bathroom access, or work in locations where facilities are distant. These issues may lead to decreased productivity, absenteeism, privacy violations, and health problems. Karin recommended government intervention and public policies to address menstrual inequities and promote workplace support for menstruation.

Research on the topic of menstruation itself remains limited in low and middle-income countries, including Indonesia, where menstruation is often considered taboo and rarely discussed, let alone

researched. Studies in these regions mostly focus on the challenges faced by menstruating girls or teachers in schools, rarely addressing workers' menstrual experiences (Sommer *et al.*, 2016). Calls for further research on the menstrual experiences of workers in the Global South have been made, emphasizing the need to bring greater visibility to this issue (Bobel, 2020).

1.4 Research Objective

Existing research on menstruation and menstrual leave primarily adopts a medical perspective and a positivist epistemology, rather than an emic, or insider perspective. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring workers' personal experiences with menstruation and their perceptions of menstrual leave policy in Indonesia. Workers' lived experiences are crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of menstrual leave policies, as they possess an epistemic privilege. Their firsthand accounts provide deeper, more accurate, and authentic insights compared to those of individuals who understand the topic only theoretically or indirectly.

This study focuses on formally employed menstruating workers, as menstrual leave policies are typically limited to the formal sector. By examining workers in a variety of jobs, the research captures a range of life experiences shaped by diverse work environments and cultural contexts. While all participants menstruate, factors such as background, type of work, workplace culture, and colleague dynamics create unique experiences and meanings. Understanding these experiences is essential because, through this, we can truly identify their needs as menstruating individuals in the workplace.

1.5 Research Question

Based on the discussion above, the main research question is:

What are workers' menstrual experiences and perceptions of menstrual leave in Indonesia?

To address this main question, the following sub-questions are considered:

1. How do different intersectional identities (such as class and gender) influence workers' menstrual experiences and perceptions of menstrual leave?
2. What are the perceived benefits and disadvantages of menstrual leave policies for menstruating workers?
3. How do workplace cultures and attitudes toward menstruation impact the implementation and reception of menstrual leave policies?
4. What strategies can be developed to make menstrual leave policies more inclusive and effective?

These sub-questions serve as a framework for exploring workers' perceptions of menstrual leave. During the research process, additional follow-up questions were asked to gather a more comprehensive understanding beyond the main and sub-questions.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This chapter explains the theoretical framework used to analyze workers' menstrual experiences and perceptions of menstrual leave. Two theoretical frameworks are applied: organizational theory and gender justice. The first theory aids in analyzing workers' menstrual experiences, while the second focuses on their perceptions of menstrual leave.

2.1 Organizational Theory

“Most of us spend most of our days work in organizations that are almost always dominated by men. The most powerful organizational positions are almost entirely occupied by men, with the exception of the occasional biological female who acts as a social man” (Sorenson, 1984).

Before examining workers' menstrual experiences and their perceptions of menstrual leave, it is essential to establish an understanding of how organizations, such as workplaces, operate and how they view or value women/menstruators. Joan Acker (2006) argues that all organizations have ‘inequality regimes’, meaning that practices, processes, and actions within organizations both result in and sustain inequality in the organization itself. Even in organizations with egalitarian goals, inequality regimes are perpetuated over time. The basis of inequality in organizations can arise from various factors, including class, gender, race, sexuality, religion, age, and disability. However, given the focus on menstruation, this study will concentrate on class and gender inequality.

Class is defined as “enduring and systematic differences in access to and control over resources for provisioning and survival” (Acker, 2006:444). In practice, class inequalities manifest in job roles and wages. Gender, on the other hand, refers to “socially constructed differences between men and women and the beliefs and identities that support difference and inequality” (Acker, 2006:444). Historically, there was a time when class has often been determined by gender. For instance, organizations traditionally designated managerial roles to men and lower-level ‘white collar’ roles to women. Today, gender and class are not perfectly aligned, as more women occupy managerial positions, although roles such as secretaries and clerks are still female-dominated. Acker argues that assumptions based on gender continue to form the class differences between men and women in distinct ways.

Acker identifies five ways organizations maintain inequalities. First, through general job requirements. Organizations often design the ‘ideal worker’ to recruit as a “white man who is totally dedicated to the work and has no responsibilities for children or family demands other than earning a living” (Acker, 2006:448). This ideal worker is often perceived as someone who can work without distraction, a privilege largely afforded to men in patriarchal societal structures. Acker (1990:139) states, “This worker is actually a man; men’s bodies, sexuality, and relationships to procreation and paid work are embedded in the image of the ideal worker.” Thus, general job requirements reinforce gender inequality within organizations through the unequal distribution of male and female workers.

Second, through job classification systems that often establish hierarchies. These systems outline job tasks and responsibilities and then rank them into specific wage categories. Acker’s study found that most women’s roles fell within clerical or secretarial positions, while men’s roles spanned various organizational levels. Women's roles tended to cluster in the fourth-lowest job category, with

correspondingly low wages. Third, through recruitment and hiring. As noted, organizations primarily seek the ‘ideal worker’, typically the unencumbered man. However, according to Acker, women can also be considered ideal workers if they are obedient, willing to take orders and accept low wages. This particularly affects women of color, immigrant women, and those in marginalized positions, who are sometimes even more desirable hires.

Fourth, through wage setting and supervision practices. Numerous wage-setting models are based on gendered assumptions, where men are perceived as more responsible and skilled and are thus paid higher wages. Fifth, through everyday informal interactions at work. Gendered assumptions shape daily interactions, with men often perceived as more powerful and thus more likely to demean or exclude women by ignoring them in meetings or dismissing their opinions. Female workers may also face expectations to act or appear sexually attractive in front of male colleagues.

The organizational theory outlined above illustrates how the inherent nature of organizations perpetuates inequality to create hierarchies and meet organizational goals. This framework helps illuminate how organizations view and assess women, or in this case, menstruators. They are not seen as ideal workers due to responsibilities outside of work and are often assumed to lack the same competencies as men. Even when employed, women are often placed in roles that emphasize ‘femininity’ and are considered ideal workers only when they are compliant, meet male expectations, and accept lower wages. Organizations are spaces where gender relations are actively enacted, and understanding these dynamics is crucial to understanding workers' menstrual experiences.

2.2 Gender Justice: Redistribution and Recognition

To help me analyze workers’ perceptions of menstrual leave policy, I adopted Nancy Fraser's (2007) Gender Justice theory. Fraser’s two-dimensional approach to gender justice emphasizes the importance of redistribution and recognition in achieving gender equality. I use these two dimensions to determine whether workers view the menstrual leave policy as a form of redistribution, recognition, or both.

The two dimensions of gender justice—redistribution and recognition—address different aspects of gender inequality and need to be addressed and viewed bifocal. From one perspective, the inequality of distribution is closely related to class, while the inequality of recognition is more closely tied to status.

Theoretically, gender inequality from a distribution perspective relates to economic and social class issues. This occurs when gender becomes the basis for dividing labor into productive paid work and reproductive-domestic unpaid work. Another example is when gender dictates which work deserves higher or lower pay. Women tend to be directed towards “reproductive,” unpaid, or low-paid work, while men dominate high-income, productive work. This gender-based distribution results in inequality in income and economic opportunities between men and women.

In the context of menstrual leave, the policy can be seen as an attempt to redistribute time, income, and economic opportunities for workers experiencing menstrual pain. With this leave, workers can rest while maintaining the same economic opportunities as those who do not menstruate. However,

in some East Asian countries, menstrual leave is often unpaid, which reduces workers' salaries, and again creates another economic inequality.

From a recognition perspective, in contrast, gender emerges as a status differentiation rooted in society's status order. For example, women and 'feminine' traits are often regarded as having lower status than 'masculine' traits associated with men. Androcentrism, or the prioritization of masculine values, permeates various aspects of life—from culture, law, and government policy to the workplace and everyday interactions. Consequently, women often face injustices such as harassment, marginalization, and restricted civil rights due to a lack of recognition.

In terms of recognition, menstrual leave can be seen as an acknowledgment of the biological reality and identity of menstruators. This policy suggests that menstruation is not something to hide or regard as a weakness but is instead a natural part of life that deserves attention and recognition, even in the workplace. However, if poorly implemented, menstrual leave risks reinforcing negative stigma towards menstruation and menstruators, such as perceptions of being unclean or weak.

Law and public policy must address gender issues at multiple levels, including those of both distribution and recognition, if full gender justice is to be achieved (Colussi, Hill and Baird, 2023). For instance, in the context of menstrual leave, focusing solely on redistribution without recognition may result in the leave being deemed unimportant. Conversely, if the focus is only on recognition without redistribution, the economic impact may be ignored. Ultimately, redistribution and recognition are complementary dimensions that cannot be separated. In other words, gender justice requires fair treatment in the economic domain as well as equal recognition of social identity.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

This chapter outlines the research approach and methods, including the methodology, participant selection, data collection process, researcher positionality, limitations, and ethical considerations.

3.1 Qualitative Study Approach

This research adopts a qualitative study approach to gather insights into workers' menstrual experiences and perceptions of menstrual leave. Qualitative studies allow researchers to “identify issues from the perspective of the study participant and understand the meanings and interpretations they give to behaviors, events, or objects” (Hennink, M., Hutter, I. and Bailey, A and Almusharraf, 2020:11).

To capture the workers' stories, I conducted qualitative interviews guided by 18 open-ended questions as my interview guidelines. I did not rigidly follow a set sequence; instead, I adapted the questions to the flow of the conversation with each participant. My primary objective was to answer the central research question, which is “What are workers' menstrual experiences and perceptions of menstrual leave?”

An interpretive paradigm was also adopted, which “seeks to understand people's live experiences from the perspective of the people themselves.” (Hennink, M., Hutter, I., Bailey, A., and Almusharraf, 2020:14). This paradigm, also known as the emic or insider perspective, values people's narratives and stories gathered through interviews as legitimate and important sources of knowledge (Owen, 2020).

The interpretive paradigm acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and influenced by individual experiences. Individual experiences are shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. Consequently, there will be multiple perspectives on reality rather than a singular “truth,” as posited in positivism. This approach recognizes the subjectivity inherent in each person's experiences.

Workers' menstrual experiences and their perspectives are crucial because, according to feminist standpoint theory, they have an emic perspective and epistemic privilege. This means they hold unique experiences and insights as individuals who menstruate, which differ fundamentally from those who do not. The feminist standpoint highlights that each individual's lived experiences generate unique knowledge, with those who are marginalized or oppressed providing essential insights into social and power structures. Knowledge originating from marginalized groups often more accurately reflects social reality because they lack vested interests in maintaining the status quo. Life experiences from marginalized perspectives can thus challenge and broaden inclusive knowledge. As Harding (Harding, 1992:443) stated, “Women's lives (their diverse lives and experiences) can provide the starting point for asking new, critical questions—not only about those women's lives but also about men's lives and, most importantly, the causal relationship between them.”

3.2 Participants

I employed purposive sampling methods to select ten workers as my participants. As Patton (1990) noted, purposive sampling allows for in-depth research on a relatively small number of samples, even down to single cases ($n=1$) that are selected purposefully. The strength of purposive sampling lies in selecting ‘information-rich’ cases, which is particularly useful for in-depth studies. By ‘information-rich’, I refer to participants who offer valuable understanding or experience relevant to the research topic, which aligns with the study’s purpose. Using purposive sampling, I deliberately chose individuals who could provide meaningful insights to address my research question.

There are various strategies for purposefully choosing ‘information-rich’ cases. Among various strategies, I used a maximum variation sampling strategy. Patton (1990: 172) describes maximum variation as an approach that “aims to capture and describe the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of significant participants or program variation.” In other words, this sampling strategy helps capture a broad range of perspectives within a small group to identify common patterns across diverse experiences. Although the sample size is small, it is diverse in terms of characteristics, experiences, and viewpoints.

In maximum variation sampling, the potential for heterogeneity arises, as one person’s responses may differ significantly from another’s. However, this variability can enhance the strategy’s value; if consistent patterns or themes emerge, they become particularly insightful. These patterns help identify core experiences or key aspects shared by all participants, regardless of their differences. This suggests there is an experience or impact relevant to all.

To recruit participants, I began by identifying ten distinct job sectors to serve as the basis for purposeful selection. Other factors included job type, whether Working From the Office (WFO), Working From Home (WFH), or on-site, and job location. This was done to ensure each participant contributed a unique perspective on menstrual experiences in the workplace, or in other words, each participant had a different kind of ‘information-rich’.

Once the participant composition was determined, I proceeded with selection. The table below lists the participants selected and interviewed. They include two civil servants from different ministries, one mining surveyor, one manufacturing worker, one journalist, one accountant/finance officer, one teacher, one HR professional, one project officer, and one police officer. Nine of the participants are friends and acquaintances from various stages of my life, including junior high school, senior high school, college, and work. The remaining participant, a police officer, I asked my friend to introduce her to me.

Table 1 List of Participants

No	Name	Age	Gender	Profession	Works in	Job-Type
1	Rachma	27	F	Civil Servant at Coordinating Ministry of Economics	Jakarta	WFO
2	Uti	29	F	Civil Servant at Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection	Jakarta	WFO
3	Ida	26	F	Teacher	Jakarta	WFO
4	Dharma	28	F	Human Resource Development	Jakarta	WFO
5	Ita	28	F	Police officer	Jakarta	WFO
6	Sri	36	F	Finance	Jakarta	Hybrid
7	Nur	28	F	Aircraft engineer	Bandung	Hybrid
8	Mila	28	F	Project officer	Jakarta	Hybrid
9	Indri	28	F	Mine surveyor	Kalimantan	On site
10	Syifa	29	F	Journalist	Jakarta	On site

From the table above, it can be seen that the participants' ages range from 26 to 36 years old. Workers in this age group were purposefully chosen as they are typically in a productive phase and tend to be career-focused. I want to gain the experience and perception of those workers who focus on their careers.

Most of the participants are based in Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, with only two working outside Jakarta—one in Kalimantan and the other in Bandung. In terms of job type, four participants work exclusively from the office (Work From Office or WFO) for eight to nine hours daily. Additionally, three participants follow a hybrid model, allowing them to choose whether to Work From Home (WFH) or sometimes the office (WFO). The remaining three participants work directly in the field or on-site.

Some participants have held various roles in multiple workplaces. Changing jobs or even careers is common among workers in this age range, often for accelerated career growth or income improvement. However, the occupations listed in the table represent the participants' most recent positions.

3.3 Process of Obtaining Workers' Stories

The interview process for this research took place from July to August 2024. I conducted interviews with nine participants via Zoom and met with one participant in person. Each interview was scheduled according to the participants' availability, with some held in the morning, afternoon, evening, or night. Some participants requested interviews after work on weekdays, while others preferred weekends. On average, each interview lasted between one to one and a half hours.

All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, recorded, and later transcribed into English. Several participants described the experience as a comfortable conversation with an old friend, discussing

menstruation for the first time in this way. Some also mentioned that they only learned about the existence of menstrual leave when I invited them to participate in this interview.

3.4 Positionality and the Potential of Knowing Too Much

I am mindful of my ‘insider status’ with the participants and the potential of ‘knowing the participants too well’. Sometimes, I feel like an insider because I am also a menstruator and also a worker. But I am also aware of my position as an ‘outsider’. Although I am familiar with all of the participants, some are not close friends. Furthermore, menstruation is a topic I have rarely, if ever, discussed with them, making it a new area of exploration. All I can say is, that my close relationship with participants proved beneficial, creating a level of intimacy that helped reduce power imbalances between the researcher and participants.

In research on sensitive topics, such as menstruation, intimacy can provide an epistemic advantage. As a researcher, my closeness with participants enabled access to insights that might remain inaccessible to a researcher without emotional connections. Trust and familiarity encouraged participants to share more openly, resulting in data that is more authentic and representative. Additionally, my position as a woman, a menstruator, and a worker provided me with a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in these experiences.

3.5 Research Ethics

Research on menstrual experiences requires sensitivity to prevent any potential harm to participants, especially in determining which information may be shared. Therefore, at the beginning of each interview, I obtained consent and discussed confidentiality with each participant. This step was integral to the ethical conduct of this research. Pseudonyms were also used to protect participants’ confidentiality and anonymity throughout this study.

Chapter 4: Menstruation at Work

In this chapter, I invite you to step inside into the ten workers' everyday life experiences of menstruation at work. Through our conversation, they shared diverse accounts of their menstrual experiences, detailing about their feelings, the challenges that they faced, and how they coped with the problems. Some workers managed by taking menstrual leave, while others continued working, albeit with discomfort. We also discuss about their daily habits during menstruation.

To preserve the authenticity of their voices, I present the workers' experiences and stories in closed italicized quotations, with their pseudonyms and interview dates at the end. As for my own questions, I put them in bold italics. As you read this chapter, I hope you can relate to and connect with the workers, or even remember and reflecting similar experiences from yourself or maybe people you know.

4.1 We Are in Pain, Feeling Unproductive, and Being Emotional

The first worker I spoke with was Indri, a mine surveyor with almost six years of experience. Working in the mining sector—a field often considered male-dominated—had been her dream since high school. Indri has a history of endometriosis², adenomyosis³, and ovarian cysts. She explained that her pain had intensified since starting her career. During her period, she experiences severe abdominal pain that significantly restricts her work activities. *“When it hurts, I can’t sit at all. I can’t move. My cyst has spread to... what do you call it? Attached to the intestines. The cyst is in the back, near the anus. So, during my period, hormonal changes make the cyst react and cause my intestines to hurt.”* (Indri, interview, 23/07/2024).

Indri shared that her condition worsened after she attempted a fertility program to fulfill her desire to have a child. Hormones administered during the program triggered an imbalance that exacerbated her pain. *“My pain was triggered by hormonal imbalance. When (my body) was given various kinds of hormones and medicines, it became chaotic. That was one factor that made it worse because my hormones were disrupted.”* (Indri, interview, 23/07/2024). The program was ultimately unsuccessful, and the hormonal treatments caused Indri's cyst to enlarge, necessitating surgery to remove her left ovary, which reduced her chances of conceiving.

Following surgery, Indri's pain did not fully subside. Her cyst reappeared, this time on the right ovary, complicating her ability to perform her duties as a mine worker who spends considerable time in the field. Indri is required to work onsite, mapping coal locations for four to five hours daily. *“Why is it hard? One, I have to carry heavy equipment by myself. Two, it’s hot. Third, it’s for a long time—heavy, carrying such equipment, which is physically not made for women. Well, I suffer when I menstruate.”* (Indri, interview, 23/07/2024).

The second worker that I talked to, Syifa, also told me the same thing as Indri. Syifa, who works as a field journalist covering political and criminal issues in Jakarta, also told me about the pain she

² A condition resulting from the appearance of endometrial tissue outside the uterus and is a complex condition that can cause extreme suffering or pelvic pain.

³ A condition when the tissue that normally lines the uterus grows into the muscular wall of the uterus.

endures during menstruation. Syifa, who frequently covers the activities of the Indonesian president, works in an environment dominated by male journalists.

During her period, Syifa experiences intense body pain, especially in her back, which affects her focus and productivity. *“It really affects me. For example, I have two assignments, but I’m on the second day of my period, which is the most painful, and I experience heavy bleeding. On such days, I can only write three news articles when I would normally complete five or six. The pain is so intense that I can’t work as efficiently.”* (Syifa, interview, 28/07/24).

The rest of the workers I interviewed also described the pain they experienced during menstruation. Interestingly, all participants mentioned pain at the start of the interviews. My initial question was a general one: **“How is your experience of menstruating at work?”** Each participant immediately mentioned the pain they felt, whereas the menstrual experience can vary. It means that pain is top of mind for workers when recalling menstrual experiences. Table 2 below summarizes the types of pain experienced by workers during menstruation at work.

Table 2 Workers’ Menstrual Pain

No	Name	Age	Profession	Pain	Level of Pain
1	Rachma	27	Civil Servant	Hip and back pain	Mild
2	Uti	30	Civil Servant	Cramps and stomach pain	Mild
3	Ida	26	Teacher	Back pain	Mild
4	Dharma	28	HRD/Teacher	Stomach ache, stiffness	Mild
5	Ita	28	Police Officer	Stomach pain	Mild
6	Sri	36	Accountant/Auditor	Dizziness	Mild
7	Nur	28	Aircraft engineer	Stomach ache	Mild
8	Mila	28	Project Officer	Mood swings, stomach ache	Mild
9	Indri	27	Mine Surveyor	Stomach ache, headache	Severe
10	Syifa	29	Journalist	Stomach ache, back pain	Moderate

In addition to physical pain, managing emotions during menstruation presents further challenges for these workers. Ida, a high school teacher, described struggling to control her emotions, especially when students are disruptive as she begins her lessons. *“I feel irritated. Sometimes students just behave that way—some are noisy, some wander around. That’s the most challenging part.”* (Ida, interview, 12/08/24).

Although she tried to remain patient, there was one time she could no longer control her emotions. Ida was angry and received comments from her students. *“Students commented, saying, ‘Ma’am, are you angry because you’re on your period?’ I could only laugh. Controlling my emotions and mood is the hardest part.”* (Ida, interview, 12/08/24).

Ida’s experience highlights a form of gender micro-aggression—the cultural normalization of menstrual stigma through jokes. Such comments not only trivialize menstruation, but also suggesting that any display of anger is due to one’s period and implying that menstruating individuals should suppress their emotions.

Dharma, who has worked in human resources, as a personal secretary, and currently as a teacher, also expressed similar struggles. Across her four different workplaces, she noted that emotional stability during menstruation was often her most significant challenge. *“When I have my period, I feel this sharp pain in my abdomen, but it comes and goes. So, I can still work actively, but menstruation affects my emotions more than anything. I feel much more sensitive.”* (Dharma, interview, 16/08/24).

4.2 Limited Number of Bathrooms

For some people, menstruation makes them uncomfortable, and the condition will get worse when the workplace does not have basic facilities that support their comfort as menstruators. For example, Indri’s workplace site has a very limited number of bathrooms. Even if there were any bathrooms, the conditions were inadequate. It was a mixed toilet between men and women workers, and the lighting was minimal. She told me it makes her uncomfortable when she is on her period and needs to change her sanitary pads. *“The bathroom in my office just okay. However, the bathroom in the field, the conditions are not as good as in the office. You can still pee, but for a sick person like me, it’s definitely not proper”* (Indri, interview, 23/07/2024).

Besides the bathroom, Indri also mentions the uniform that she has to wear to work, which is close-fitted jeans that can amplify the discomfort during menstruation. Some workplaces do have rules about how to dress. Besides Indri’s office, other workplaces expect their women employees to wear constraining business attire such as fitted clothing or high heels. The reality is that cramps, abdominal pain, and menstrual bleeding are easier to manage when wearing comfortable clothing.

4.3 Taking Menstrual Leave

To alleviate the pain and discomfort of menstruating at work, some workers opt to take menstrual leave. Due to her history of severe menstrual pain, Indri consistently takes advantage of menstrual leave whenever her period begins. Her company, like Indonesian law, grants two days of paid leave to employees experiencing menstrual pain. However, despite having the option of two days, Indri always chooses to take only the first day off. This decision is influenced by her work schedule, which is four weeks on and two weeks off. She feels uncomfortable taking the full two days, explaining, *“On the first day, I stay in bed. But on the second day, I take medication. Technically, the government regulation allows me to rest on the second day too, but since I only work for four weeks, I feel like I should just manage with the medication. By the third or fourth day, the pain subsides and is at least more manageable than on the first or second day.”* (Indri, interview, 23/07/24).

Indri also expressed concern about being perceived as less productive due to taking menstrual leave. *“I worry that my supervisor will view me as unproductive,”* she admitted. (Indri, interview, 23/07/24). Fortunately, Indri has not faced any objections or obstacles from her male supervisors when requesting menstrual leave. In fact, due to her supervisors’ awareness of her condition and medical history, she is permitted to forgo providing a doctor’s note, which is typically required in her office as part of the administrative process for menstrual leave.

However, challenges arise when her first day of menstruation begins during work hours. Because the mining site is approximately 30 kilometers from the employee accommodations, she finds it difficult to leave immediately and rest at home. Furthermore, the shuttle car between the mining site

and the accommodations is only available during scheduled working hours, and no rooms or facilities are provided at the office for employees who need to rest due to illness.

Being Judged by Friends

Indri admitted to facing negative sentiments from some colleagues when she was on menstrual leave. Surprisingly, these negative comments came from other female workers rather than her supervisors. *“The ones who are criticizing are my women colleagues, not my boss. My boss will definitely allow it. But I heard from a friend they called me ‘really weak’. I often hear it from people ‘It is really weak to take menstrual leave’. At one time someone said it directly in front of me. But I never took it to heart. My men colleagues never actually do, maybe because they just don’t understand what menstruation is like, they don’t feel it.”* (Indri, interview 23/07/24).

Once, Indri posted on social media about her medical history, she explained how her illness had caused her to undergo a cervical removal operation and was hospitalized when her menstrual pain became unbearable. She grew frustrated when one colleague misused menstrual leave to go on vacation, which she felt fueled misconceptions that menstrual leave was just an excuse for leisure rather than a genuine need.

Sick Letter and Supervisor Approval

Nur is another worker who has taken menstrual leave, though only twice in her five years of work, both times due to severe discomfort requiring bed rest. Like Indri, her workplace policy requires employees seeking menstrual leave to provide a sick letter from the doctor, which can be obtained from the on-site clinic. In addition to the letter, Nur also needs her supervisor’s approval. *“My supervisor happens to be a guy. But he is nice. So far, if I ask for permission, for example, ‘Sir, I’m not coming to the office and taking the menstrual leave’ just like that. Actually, according to the office rule I have to go to the doctor first for a sick letter.”* (Nur, interview 30/07/24).

Nur’s office also requires employees to inform colleagues of any leave, including menstrual leave, via a WhatsApp group. The goal is for all employees to know that the worker is on leave. When taking menstrual leave, Nur prefers to say she’s on sick leave rather than specifying menstrual leave. *“When it comes to menstrual leave, I don’t talk about menstrual leave in the big group. I’m just saying I am sick. Why? Because I don’t want to be taken lightly. I am afraid people will be like, ‘Ah, it’s just menstruation,’ and it means that I can still work. The reality, I can’t. I think menstruation hurts more. If you are really sick, you have to go to bed rest.”* (Nur, interview 30/07/24).

Nur admitted that she used to feel weak for needing menstrual leave, but her perspective has changed. *“Yes, I used to feel that way. But now that I’ve been exposed to a lot of information (about gender), actually, it’s okay. There’s no need to be ashamed of menstruation, there’s no need to feel weak.”* (Nur, interview 30/07/24).

Gender Sensitivity

Out of ten workers, only three, including Indri, Nur, and Mila, have access to menstrual leave. The rest of the workers did not have menstrual leave in their office. Those who have menstrual leave, each working in different types of companies. Indri works in an international mining services

company, Nur in a state-owned enterprise producing airplanes, and Mila in a start-up providing digital learning platforms.

Mila, who has not yet taken menstrual leave, mentioned that her workplace, particularly the CEO, demonstrates strong gender awareness. *“Firstly, my CEO, she is a girl, she is the initiator of this women’s innovation project. Well, she really has a perspective, so from the start, she has initiated what needs to be built to maintain the safety and comfort of every employee. She has this perspective on gender and feminism. So all kinds of harassment, sexual harassment, she is really strict and also my office.”* (Mila, interview, 16/08/24).

Indri noted that although her workplace is in a traditionally male-dominated field, her company offers menstrual leave to encourage and empower women in the mining industry. The policy was clearly communicated to all employees during onboarding, and supervisors who refuse menstrual leave requests may face disciplinary action, up to dismissal. *“My company is very supportive of the government regulations. Maybe because it is a multinational company, so, it has a high value on women’s empowerment. So for example, when I have a patriarchal boss who does not want to give me menstrual leave, it can affect him, because it is written in the company regulations. I happen to be in a company like that. So it really helps.”* (Indri, interview 23/07/24).

In contrast, many employees, including those in government agencies, still lack access to menstrual leave. One civil servant mentioned that menstrual leave in government agencies is currently still under discussion, which is paradoxical given that the policy has existed for 75 years. *“I was told that there is ‘Peraturan Pemerintah Nomor 11 Tahun 2017’ concerning the management of civil servants, including regulating paid leave. But after checking it, it turns out there is no menstrual leave. They said it will be revised so that menstrual leave will appear. However, the reason for menstrual leave does not refer to the 2003 law but to the maternal and child welfare law. So maybe later, there will be menstrual leave for police officers and civil servants.”* (Uti, interview 21/07/24).

Similarly, menstrual leave is rarely discussed in private companies. Dharma, who previously worked in HR in the private sector, noted that even in health-oriented companies like her office, menstrual leave remains uncommon. *“It is still very rarely discussed. Maybe in companies that have implemented it, more than half of their employees are women. Or maybe startups whose founders are women or work in the women’s sector.”* (Dharma, interview 16/08/24).

4.4 Negotiating for Menstrual Leave

Syifa, a journalist, secured menstrual leave after negotiating with her editor. Initially, Syifa admitted she was hesitant and didn’t feel brave enough to request leave for her menstruation-related discomfort. However, after six months on the job and realizing her condition during menstruation was affecting her ability to work, she decided to advocate for herself. *“I’m the type of person who asks. Because I always think, if we don’t say what we need and don’t ask for it, we won’t get it.”* (Syifa, interview, 28/07/24).

Syifa explained her situation to her editor and asked for a day off. Unlike Indri, Syifa’s workplace did not have a formal menstrual leave policy. Initially, her editor suggested she take a replacement day off, a common practice in journalism. Journalists often work weekends and national holidays, taking alternate days off later. For instance, if Syifa worked on Christmas, she could reschedule her day off

to another day. However, Syifa felt that menstrual-related leave shouldn't follow this mechanism, as the replacement day policy is meant to cover a journalist's right to rest on non-workdays, not to address health issues.

Syifa further explained to her editor the impact of her menstrual symptoms, particularly on the first and second days of her cycle. Having worked in two different online media organizations, she noted a difference in her ability to negotiate based on the gender of her editor. Her previous editor was a woman, with whom she felt more comfortable negotiating. Her current editor, however, is male, and most of her colleagues are also men. This often led Syifa to describe her leave simply as 'sick leave' to avoid further questions. *"It's not because I'm afraid of being seen as weak or what. It's just that I am too lazy to be asked and have follow-up questions (about menstruation). I just want to tell them that I am sick. When you are sick, people just don't ask anything."* (Syifa, interview, 28/07/24).

During her menstrual leave, Syifa occasionally received teasing from fellow journalists. *"They'd joke, 'It's nice being a woman—you get menstrual leave.' But it was mostly in good humor."* (Syifa, interview, 28/07/24).

Not all employees feel confident negotiating menstrual leave as Syifa did. Dharma, for example, hesitates to raise the topic since it wasn't included in her work contract. *"I hope I'd have the courage to ask, but I tend to be a yes-woman. Plus, it's quite rare to see menstrual leave explicitly mentioned in a work contract."* (Dharma, interview, 16/08/24).

4.5 Keep Working and Keep Moving

Unlike Indri, Syifa, and Nur, who chose to take menstrual leave, other workers decided to keep coming to work despite experiencing pain and other challenges.

Nothing We Can Do

For example, Uti, a civil servant at the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, described how her menstrual pain typically comes and goes. When it does come, she experiences stomach pain and dizziness, which makes it difficult to concentrate on her tasks. Nevertheless, she chooses to keep working. *"It's really like I... I feel too tired to work, to walk, and I can't focus because I'm feeling dizzy. I can only think about the pain. I try to focus, but I just can't seem to. I can't look at my screen or concentrate on my work—I just want to lay down at my desk."* (Uti, interview, 21/07/24).

When I asked her **'Why don't you just go home, or talk to your colleagues or your boss about your condition?'** She answered no. Uti said she rarely discusses her menstrual symptoms with them. Since the pain isn't constant, she feels there's no point in mentioning it. *"I don't tell them because nothing would change. It's usually too late in the day to leave anyway, so I just have to endure it for another two hours until it's time to go home."* (Uti, interview, 21/07/24).

Rachma, a civil servant at the Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs, also keeps working despite mild back pain. *"If I'm not feeling well, I just deal with it and keep working... (laughing)."* (Rachma, interview, 18/07/24).

Sri, another participant, also chooses to keep working during her period. With 14 years of work experience, Sri has worked in three different workplaces and held two different roles—auditor and

finance staff. As an auditor, her biggest challenge was working out of town while managing menstrual symptoms. *“When I was an auditor, it was painful and disruptive. Auditing is stressful, and sometimes we work outside the office. Whether it’s stock-taking or visiting clients, we work late, especially when we are out of town. It’s frustrating when you don’t know the facilities, like where the toilet is, or if the client’s site is a factory. The fieldwork can be really annoying when I’m on my period.”* (Sri, interview, 08/08/24).

In her current role as a finance staff member, Sri enjoys a more flexible work model with the option to work from home, which makes her menstrual experience more comfortable. She can set her own pace and take breaks as needed without reporting to her boss. Mila, who also works from home as a project manager for an education and technology startup, shares similar sentiments. Working from home during her period allows her to remain productive while working from bed and wearing comfortable clothes.

Feeling Responsible

Ita, a police officer, describes herself as someone who continues working as long as she’s able, despite experiencing severe menstrual pain. She even once forced herself to work while sick, ultimately fainting and being hospitalized for malaria. *“Yes, it hurts, but I can endure it and still work as usual. We’re expected to stay focused and perform at our best regardless of discomfort. That’s the challenge—you have to push through and stay focused. Responsibility comes first. As the chief of the criminal database in the criminal analysis section, my role is essential every day, so even if I’m in pain, I feel obligated to be there.”* (Ita, interview, 30/08/24).

Throughout her career, Ita has served in the public relations and international relations divisions and worked with the Central Java Regional Police, the National Police Headquarters, and on a peace mission in Africa. Although she faced no particular issues while working in Indonesia, her experience abroad in a war-torn environment posed challenges. She worked in a temporary office, dealt with unfamiliar sanitary products, and faced a work environment dominated by men.

Ida, a high school teacher, also continues teaching during menstruation, despite experiencing lower back pain. Her biggest challenge is standing while teaching. *“My pain isn’t in my stomach; it’s in my lower back. It’s really sore. Plus, my job requires me to stand a lot. But sitting too much also hurts, so it’s a dilemma.”* (Ida, interview, 12/08/24).

Ida chooses to keep working because missing a day means her students would fall behind, and she feels responsible for their progress. However, she finds her flexible working hours beneficial during menstruation. She only teaches 2–3 hours a day, allowing her to take breaks between classes. *“What I mean is that there’s a lot of free time. It’s like I don’t have to work full time, I can take a break for a while, go to the canteen for snacks, or walk a little bit in front of the school. What I mean is not too strict, like I have to be in the teacher’s room or class all the time.”* (Ida, interview 12/08/24).

4.6 Menstruation into Hiding

Menstrual habits are a final aspect of workers’ menstrual experiences. Nur, who works in a male-dominated environment, shared her story. She is an aircraft engineer at a state-owned enterprise in Bandung, West Java, and the only woman in her division. In this mostly male workplace, she sometimes feels the need to hide her sanitary pads. Every time she needs to change, she discreetly

conceals the pad in her clothes. *“I feel embarrassed, you know, to take a sanitary pad openly to the bathroom, so I put it in my pocket.”* (Nur, interview, 30/07/24). When I asked her **why she felt embarrassed**, Nur admitted she knew there was nothing inherently shameful about it, but it had become a habit. *“It’s something I’ve done since school, so now it’s just a habit I carry with me.”* (Nur, interview, 30/07/24).

In Indonesia, menstruation is considered a personal and somewhat embarrassing topic. This perception is driven by the negative stigma attached to menstruation. People often use euphemisms for menstruation and sanitary pads, such as ‘halangan’ (obstacle), ‘kedatangan tamu’ (having guests), ‘dapat’ (got it), or ‘datang bulan’ (monthly visit) for menstruation, and ‘roti jepang’ (Japanese bread) for sanitary pads.

Menstrual stigma is one of the oldest stigmas associated with the female body, and surprisingly, it still persists across many regions and religions today. Of all menstrual stigmas, menstrual blood faces the most negative perceptions. In Europe, menstruation was historically associated with magic and witchcraft, and menstrual blood has long been considered disgusting, dirty, and shameful (Delaney, Lupton and Toth, 1988). In Leviticus, there is a well-known passage highlighting this stigma: “...and if a woman has an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall put apart seven days: and whosoever touched her shall be unclean until the even” (Gousset, 2023).

Similar views are found in Indonesia, where menstrual blood is often seen as dirty, foul-smelling, impure, and mystical. In some religions, menstruating women are socially isolated and forbidden from entering sacred places. Most are also instructed to wash their disposable sanitary pads before discarding them—not only with water but with soap as well, before wrapping them in plastic. Some believe that not washing the pads can lead to health problems, while others think “if lizards smell menstrual blood, they will not get their period again” (Burnet Institute, Survey Meter, WaterAid, Aliansi Rem aja Independen, 2015).

The stigma extends to menstruating bodies as well. Those who menstruate are often unfairly labeled as flirty. Syifa shared that this negative view made her hide her period from her friends for a long time. *“People from Eastern Indonesia (Maluku) consider menstruation as a taboo. I remember when I was in first grade of junior high school, we talked like this ‘Whoever menstruates first, it means they are flirty to boy. In the end, we did not tell anyone that we were menstruating because we were afraid of being judged as flirty to the boys.’”* (Syifa, interview, 28/07/24).

Negative perceptions about menstruation are passed down from generation to generation, often through mothers and grandmothers. From a young age, children are educated about periods in private. I remember my mother explaining it to me in my room, just the two of us, with my father excluded from the conversation. This suggests that menstruation is something to hide, especially from men. My participants shared similar stories. They were taught to keep menstrual blood out of sight by using sanitary pads, wearing double layers of pants or tights, and avoiding white clothing during their period. We were taught that exposing our menstrual blood, even unintentionally, was shameful. We were also reminded to be careful because our reproductive systems were now active. In other words, the discourse around menstruation is infused with shame, secrecy, and silence.

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From the stories shared above, it can be observed that workers tend to have painful menstrual experiences that are poorly accommodated and often ignored by their workplaces, with an added layer of secrecy. These stories also highlight that not every workplace offers menstrual leave. So, the question arises: is menstrual leave truly what workers need during menstruation?

Chapter 5: Perceptions Towards Menstrual Leave

In this chapter, we explore workers' perceptions and attitudes toward menstrual leave. Most of the workers that I spoke to do not receive menstrual leave, even though it is legally mandated. To understand their views, I asked them several questions: first, whether they think menstrual leave is important or not; second, if menstrual leave were available, whether they would take it; and third, perhaps most importantly, what support they need when menstruating at work.

5.1 Menstrual Leave: Important or Not?

All participants agreed that menstrual leave is important. They recognized that every menstruator has different experiences; some experience severe symptoms, while others don't, and some have supportive environments, while others do not. They felt menstrual leave would provide the necessary comfort for menstruating workers. *"For me, I can endure menstrual pain, but others might not. They might need treatment or rest, and menstrual leave could help with that. It would improve our office performance compared to forcing ourselves to work through pain or mood swings, which could negatively affect our work quality."* (Ida, interview, 12/08/24).

Uti highlighted that menstrual leave is essential not only as a mandate from the law, but also in recognizing biological differences and accommodating menstruators' needs at work. *"Menstruation is a natural biological process, like childbirth or pregnancy.. In my opinion, this (menstrual leave) is very important to implement. Because not all women have normal and painless menstruation. Well, that means we have to accommodate those who really need it."* (Uti, interview 21/07/24).

For Indri, menstrual leave recognizes her as a menstruating woman while empowering her. *"It's empowering because not everyone has the same experience. When I was in pain, I could still function like a normal person. Even if I needed a day to rest, I could carry on after that."* (Indri, interview, 23/07/24).

5.2 It is Important... But....

Although every participant agreed that menstrual leave is important, they also expressed concerns. The first was the potential impact on workplace productivity. *"If, for example, every month all women employees take one day off, especially those in managerial roles, it would have a big impact on productivity."* (Dharma, interview, 16/08/24).

Second, there's a concern that reduced productivity could limit job opportunities for women. Some worry that employers might prefer to hire men rather than face the potential impact of menstrual leave on productivity. *"Like, for example, most companies give you two days off for the first day of menstruation, right? That definitely has an impact on our productivity, too, right? Well, I wonder if this makes my company, instead of hiring a girl who can leave 24 times a year, plus having annual leave, maternity leave, it just better to hire a guy."* (Rachma, interview 18/07/24).

Dharma shared an experience from her time in HR: *I also once got a hiring request like that. He did not want to have woman employees because he was afraid that they would get pregnant and they would take another three-month leave like that. So he very limited women employees on his team. Because he was afraid they would get married,*

take maternity leave, and give birth. There were so many requests like that. Moreover, if there is another leave like menstrual leave. So there were more and more reasons to limit women in the team.” (Dharma, interview 16/08/24).

Mila expressed concern that menstrual leave could reinforce negative stigmas, such as the perception that menstruating women are weaker. . “I don’t want my identity as a woman who can menstruate to hinder people’s perspective on my abilities. I didn’t want just because I was on my period and taking menstrual leave, I was seen as weaker and unable to do things. But at the same time, I also want to take menstrual leave because it is painful. I want to get an excuse where I can take menstrual leave so I can have a rest.” (Mila, interview, 16/08/24).

5.3 Would You Take Menstrual Leave?

When asked if they would take menstrual leave if it were provided by their workplaces, responses varied. Two workers said they would not take it, six workers said they would, and two workers said they would take it conditionally.

Table 3 Workers’ Perceptions and Attitudes towards Menstrual Leave

No	Name	Profession	Type of Job	Have Menstrual Leave	Menstrual Leave is Important	Will Take Menstrual Leave
1	Rachma	Civil Servant	WFO	No	Yes	No
2	Uti	Civil Servant	WFO	No	Yes	Yes
3	Ida	Teacher	WFO	No	Yes	No
4	Dharma	HRD/Teacher	WFO	No	Yes	Yes
5	Ita	Police Officer	WFO	No	Yes	Yes, with note
6	Sri	Accountant/Auditor	Hybrid	No	Yes	Yes, with note
7	Nur	Aircraft engineer	Hybrid	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	Mila	Project Officer	Hybrid	Yes	Yes	Yes
9	Indri	Mine Surveyor	On site	Yes	Yes	Yes
10	Syifa	Journalist	On site	No	Yes	Yes

Rachma and Ida said they wouldn’t take menstrual leave. Rachma feared it might affect her career progression: “I’m more concerned about being underestimated. I actually really don’t mind being told to take the leave, but At this point in my career, taking menstrual leave might interfere with my goals and my career.” (Rachma, interview, 18/07/24).

Meanwhile, for Ida, she felt her physical condition didn’t necessitate menstrual leave: “If I look at my condition, which, even though I’m menstruating, I can still do my work, I don’t think I would take menstrual leave. Because if I don’t teach for a day, the student will miss out on their lessons, and catching up with them will be a bit of a hassle. So, it’s better if I can still hold on, I will teach. But if the pain is unbearable, it is better if I take menstrual leave.” (Ida, interview 12/08/24).

Those who said they would take menstrual leave included Dharma, Nur, Mila, Indri, Syifa, and Uti. Indri, Syifa, and Nur routinely take menstrual leave due to physical symptoms, while Dharma and Uti would use it for comfort and rest. *“I will take it if I really need it because it is really uncomfortable, right? Yeah, I will take a break too. I mean, resting is not just for the body, but sometimes it is also for my mind.”* (Uti, interview 21/07/24).

Sri and Ita said they would take menstrual leave if they had no urgent responsibilities. *“I will go back to my responsibilities. For example, if it’s not that important for me to be at the office, or if there is someone else who can handle office stuff, I will take it. If I feel like I have a responsibility that requires me to be there, I will not take it”* (Ita, interview 30/08/24).

Sri echoed this view, emphasizing that workplaces should prioritize performance metrics over attendance to avoid burdening any particular gender. She said worker performance should be based on deliverables, communication, problem-solving, and initiative—not just presence. *“For the company I work for now, for example, let’s just use their key indicator performance, it’s clear what the indicators are. It is measured by what you deliver. So instead of presence, what was seen was your work results, how do you communicate with people, how do you provide solutions, how do you give initiative?”* (Sri, interview, 08/08/24).

5.4 What Do You Need When Menstruating at Work?

Almost all workers expressed the need for their workplace to provide sanitary pads, clean bathrooms, a designated resting room for menstruation, and supportive supervisors who can readily approve menstrual leave when needed.

Sanitary Pads

All the workers I spoke to use disposable menstrual pads. Generally, they carry pads in their bags, but an issue arises when they forget to restock, and their menstruation begins unexpectedly. Most workplaces do not provide menstrual pads in bathrooms, leaving this entirely up to the workers. Among the ten workers, only Rachma reported that her workplace had previously supplied pads in the bathroom. However, this provision was short-lived, and the stock was not replenished after it ran out. *“At that time, they were provided in the office bathroom, but for some reason, the program was not sustainable. It went on for a few months, and then no one stocked it anymore; I don’t know why.”* (Rachma, interview 18/07/24).

To manage such situations, Rachma often asks colleagues or the office assistant to purchase pads. However, she feels uncomfortable and embarrassed, especially when discreetly carrying pads to the bathroom. *“Not everyone is ready for menstruation and then brings sanitary napkins, or for example I already bought them but because I kept changing I ran out of them. Sometimes, I am also confused about buying sanitary napkins in the middle of work, and when I ask for help to buy it, I feel uneasy because it’s a private thing.”* (Rachma, interview 18/07/24).

Decent Bathrooms

In addition to sanitary pads, workers emphasized the importance of decent bathroom facilities. Indri described the poor condition of the bathroom at her mining site, underscoring the need for a clean,

well-lit bathroom with running water. A safe and hygienic bathroom is essential for menstruators to clean themselves and change their pads. Given that this process may take longer, increasing the number of available toilets could prevent long queues.

Bathroom safety is also crucial. Ita shared her experience of being placed in a workplace with unsecure bathroom facilities, where men and women shared basic, labelled stalls without proper locks. One day, while she was using the bathroom, a janitor accidentally entered. *“At that time, the cleaning staff and the officer who distributed the toilet paper were guys. So it’s like guys coming in and out. That wasn’t a good time. I closed the door, but even though it was completely closed, it could be locked. Then, there were officers who were distributing toilet paper. I heard someone had come in. I did not know he was a guy. Then he knocked, but I didn’t have time to answer he opened that door. Can you imagine it? I am very shocked and surprised.”* (Ita, interview 30/08/24).

Menstrual Room for Resting

Some workers have homes that are far away and require a long time from their office. For example, Indri and Nur. Indri works at a mining site where the distance between the office and her house is more than 30 km, as does Nur. When menstruating and deciding to take menstrual leave they have difficulty going home immediately. Both said it would be better if there was a special room to rest during menstruation. *“We don’t have a room to rest when we we’re sick. There are chairs, but the chairs aren’t ergonomic for resting. If we want to work half day, it’s hard to find a ride because it’s really far, more than 30 km”* (Indri, interview 23/07/24).

Supportive Supervisor

Workers also expressed the importance of having a supportive supervisor who is understanding of their needs and open to discussions about menstrual health. Such a supervisor would more readily approve work-from-home days when necessary. *“For me, a boss who easily grants permission and supports the needs of their employees is essential.”* (Uti, interview 21/07/24).

Overall, workers’ needs include accessible sanitary pads, clean bathrooms with water and proper hygiene facilities, a designated room for menstrual rest, and a supportive work environment free from stigma. Providing these needs in the workplace will affect workers’ health as well as economic development (Sommer *et al.*, 2016). The lack of such provisions can lead to anxiety, stress, reduced focus and productivity, decreased income for menstruators, and even health issues such as urinary tract infections.

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This chapter shows that workers generally have positive views on menstrual leave. They recognize that this policy can support their rights as menstruators and allow them the necessary time to rest, and imagine how it can alleviate the discomfort they face in the workplace. However, they also have concerns and questions about whether this policy can be accepted so it might not reinforce negative stereotypes about menstruation. Together, we can see how workers’ perceptions reveal a gap between the policy and the practice, as well as a deep need for empathy and understanding for them.

Workers' perceptions of menstrual leave remain ambivalent, and the reasons behind these views will be explored further in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Menstrual Stigma and Organizations Norms

The previous two chapters explored workers' menstrual experiences and their perceptions of menstrual leave. In this chapter, I try to analyze these experiences and perceptions through the lens of organizational theory and a gender justice perspective.

6.1 Workers' Experience, Menstrual Stigma, and Organization Norms

I argue that workers' menstrual experiences are shaped by a combination of menstrual stigma and organizational norms. Menstrual stigma that discredits menstruation and those who menstruate, as I have explained in Chapter 4, and organizational norms that place women in the second place to men cause workers to have painful menstrual experiences yang full of secrecy, and are poorly accommodated and often ignored by their workplaces.

Menstrual stigma creates the belief that menstruation should be entirely dealt with in private, and it is every menstruators responsibility to deal with menstruation without any complaint. Menstruators are expected to follow 'menstrual etiquette', an unwritten code dictating that they should manage menstruation without complaint and treat it as a personal matter (Owen, 2020:16). This is what makes workers deterred from discussing menstrual pain with their colleagues or supervisors. For example, when Uti felt it would be pointless to talk to her supervisor about her menstrual pain. She beliefs that it was her own responsibility. Previous research by O'Flynn (O'Flynn, 2006:953) found a similar finding, that "a woman will not explain absence from work or difficulties in carrying out duties by explaining that she is menstruating."

Another effect of menstrual stigma on the experiences of the workers I interviewed was they had to hide any display of menstrual blood that has long been considered disgusting, dirty, and shameful (Delaney, Lupton and Toth, 1988). Any related items, including menstrual pads, must be hidden. This is reflected in Nur's stories when she hides her sanitary napkins inside her shirt pocket, also Rachma's experience when she feels uncomfortable asking others to buy sanitary napkins for her.

The silencing of menstruation implies to something shameful or private, but in this case, both are possible. The construction of menstruation as a problem that should not be discussed in public makes it normatively not considered as an issue to be addressed in the workplace. This is what makes the workplace ignore the reality of workers' painful and stigmatized menstruation, and indeed based on the stories of the workers, this is what they have experienced so far.

Most of the workplaces of the workers I spoke to did not have menstrual leave; some even do not provide basic facilities such as clean bathrooms. The stigma that menstruation is shameful and solely a personal responsibility allows society to overlook menstruators' needs, with workplaces adopting this bias by failing to meet these needs (Young, 2005). Gender-biased workplaces often feel no obligation to accommodate menstruators, with organizational policies typically reflecting traditional gender roles rather than addressing menstruators' specific needs.

However, the silencing of menstruation should be seen as more than just a personal issue because it serves the agenda of masculine hegemony, which is the essential value of the organization (Owen, 2020). By viewing menstruation as something to be hidden, this belief helps in maintaining masculine

powers and makes menstruators feel the need to conform to the standards created by the gendered-organization. The stigma associated with menstruators leaks into the organizational space and is perpetuated inside the workplace setting.

Workers' roles are further constrained by the concept of the "ideal worker." According to organizational theory, ideal workers are those who can work without distractions—a definition that excludes menstruators. Chapter 4 highlighted how workers experience pain, lower productivity, and emotional fluctuations during menstruation, all of which can be seen as work disruptions. This ideal worker concept also pressures employees to continue working despite menstrual pain and can discourage them from taking menstrual leave. Workers fear not meeting this standard, as Rachma expressed concern that taking leave might affect her career. Similarly, Indri felt uncomfortable taking two consecutive days of leave, worried it would label her as unproductive. The combined impact of menstrual stigma and the ideal worker standard also led Nur and Syifa to avoid announcing menstrual leave, opting to call it sick leave instead, to avoid judgment or invasive questions.

The absencing policy shows that the workplace indirectly has the same vision and mission as menstrual stigma. The workplace normatively requires hiding everything about menstruation, expecting menstruators to be present for work while menstruating even if they are exhausted and in pain, and acting as though as if they are not experiencing a menstrual cycle at all. Afterward, menstruators are judged on their personality and professionalism if they fail in this regard. Those unable to hide their period risk being labeled as weak or incompetent. In fact, sometimes menstrual pain causes menstruators to be less productive at work, as Syifa said. Negative judgments about this are certainly unfair.

The systemic stigmatization of menstruation has been a complex issue within organizations for a long time. This negative stigma is not limited to menstruation alone but to women's reproductive function in general, but menstruation signifies broader prejudices about women's embodiment. An experiment by Robert et al (2002) found that a woman was perceived as less competent and likable after she accidentally dropped an unwashed tampon compared to when she dropped a hair clip. Grandey, Gabriel and King (2020) stated that the "natural experiences" of menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause all career-limiting. This shows that the norms of work life seem to conflict with reproductive function in general.

However, menstruators have the right to enter the workforce and earn a living, as well as they have the same right as men to have ambitions in the professional world of work. The natural biological function of humans should not be considered as an obstacle or problem, let alone used as a criterion for assessing someone's performance in the workplace. Menstruation, just like eating or sleeping, is a natural human needs that cannot be avoided, stopped, or requested by menstruators. Therefore, it should not be considered as something that must be hidden, or even ignored.

6.2 Workers Perceptions and Gender Justice

Workers' perceptions of menstrual leave also influenced by both menstrual stigma and organizational culture. Through a gender justice framework, workers have a positive perception of this leave, viewing it as a form of time redistribution and as a necessary allowance for rest for those experiencing menstrual-related discomfort. This policy is also seen as a way to acknowledge menstruation as a

natural biological function. However, workers express concerns that the policy may portray them as unproductive and reinforce the stereotype that menstruators are weak, potentially leading to inequalities in both distribution and recognition. This worry stems from the prevailing masculinity and the concept of 'ideal worker' of an organization.

Workers' ambivalent views on menstrual leave, perceiving it as both beneficial and detrimental, highlight the inseparable nature of the two dimensional conception of gender justice. In Indonesia, menstrual leave may support the dual aspect of time redistribution and recognition of menstruation as a biological function of menstruators, but it fails to recognize the negative stigma associated with menstruation and the rigid demands of organizations. Thus, without careful implementation, the policy risks creating a backlash against menstruators. Consequently, their concerns in such a stigmatized and demanding workplace environment are valid.

Given workers' overall positive view toward menstrual leave, it remains a necessary provision. Workers who claim they would not take menstrual leave may not genuinely feel they do not need it; rather, they may be deterred by menstrual stigma and organizational pressures. Of the workers who avoid taking the leave do so out of being labeled as unproductive or jeopardizing their careers, as conveyed by Rachma. These unproductive words are closely linked to organizational norms, which have been unconsciously embedded in workers' beliefs and become part of their daily lives.

The phrase "the personal is political" aptly captures the stories shared by the workers. Their menstrual experiences as menstruators in a patriarchal society are profoundly shaped by social stigma and political structures that have historically marginalized them. Therefore, public policies should aim to alleviate these challenges.

Acker (2006) outlines several approaches to counter inequality within organizations, which could inform efforts to make menstrual leave policies in Indonesia more inclusive and effective. Acker suggests that inequality can be addressed through legislative support, social movements, and internal organizational change. Legislative support might include affirmative action, such as government funds for organizations implementing menstrual leave, and financial penalties for employers who fail to comply. This would encourage more workplaces to adopt the policy.

Furthermore, social movements, particularly those led by civil rights and women's groups, are critical to dispel menstrual stigma and raise awareness about menstrual rights. Furthermore, a profound transformation of workplace opportunities, institutions, and systems is required to dismantle the historical male-centered paradigm. Achieving full equality in employment demands that labor norms and institutions shift away from a male-breadwinner or female-homemaker model and the notion of an 'ideal worker' with no reproductive health or caregiving responsibilities.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This research began with a desire to explore workers' menstrual experiences and their perceptions of menstrual leave. As an exploratory study, I gathered numerous stories, experiences, opinions, perceptions, and insights into the needs of workers during menstruation at work—beyond just menstrual leave. Here, I aim to amplify their voices as menstruators, workers, and humans.

First, workers experience real menstrual issues and needs in the workplace. Each worker I interviewed had unique problems and needs related to menstruation. It can be said that menstrual pain is a central concern for workers' menstrual experiences. The severity of menstrual pain varies among workers, and many are expected and believe they had to hide their condition. Moreover, not all workplaces provide menstrual leave, and basic facilities such as proper bathrooms or attention to workers' menstrual needs are often lacking, making it harder for workers to feel comfortable and safe.

Second, regarding their perception of menstrual leave, all workers agreed that it is important for workplaces to offer it. Workers see menstrual leave as a crucial measure to ensure comfort for those who experience pain during menstruation and to recognize their rights as menstruators. However, workers also worry that policies like menstrual leave could negatively impact the productivity of certain genders, specifically women, fearing that it may influence women's recruitment and wages.

Third, I conclude that workers' menstrual experiences and their perceptions of menstrual leave are shaped by both negative menstrual stigma and the organizational environment. In this context, negative stigma, coupled with organizational practices that place women as secondary to men, leads to painful, hidden menstrual experiences. Amid these conditions, workers must still meet the expectations of the 'ideal worker', which is someone who can work without distraction, a privilege largely afforded to men in patriarchal structures.

Fourth, the concerns workers have, such as the fear of being considered unproductive when taking menstrual leave, highlight that the global work and organization system has been designed to meet men's needs. When menstruators cannot comply with these expectations due to specific needs, they are deemed unproductive. In this case, gender-based policies like menstrual leave, which aim to promote gender justice, cannot be fully realized in gendered-based organizations. In addition to achieving gender justice, the global recognition of menstrual stigma and this gendered organization is urgently needed.

Fifth, the absence and marginalization of menstruation—particularly in public spaces like workplaces—means that society and organizations bear No. social or economic responsibility for the well-being of menstruators, even when they are at work, a context in which health and safety are otherwise considered employer obligations. Despite the systemic production of menstrual stigma and related restrictions, organizations are not expected to take on any responsibility for the care of menstruating workers. This reinforces the message that menstruators are unwelcome in the workplace, which is perceived as a male, non-menstruating space. This issue needs to be addressed because menstruators must enter the workforce to earn a living. They have the same rights to professional fulfillment as non-menstruators, and the economy requires menstruators to work outside the home.

The workplace actually is a reflection of the wider world. Based on the workers' experiences, it is clear that menstruation remains a neglected reproductive function, both by the state and workplaces. While Indonesia has menstrual leave, the policy places the burden entirely on workers. Its nature, which focuses on negotiations between workers and employers, makes it difficult for workers to fully benefit. This highlights the liberal nature of Indonesian employment law, which minimizes the state's role and shifts the burden onto workers. The current law changes affirmative protections for workers taking menstrual leave, making it more liberal and forcing workers to negotiate directly with more powerful employers. This shifts the burden onto female workers, leaving them to navigate their needs alone. Beyond menstrual leave, other measures, such as the provision of sanitary napkins, decent toilets, and designated rest areas, can also support workers during menstruation.

Finally, the reproductive function of menstruators is crucial to the continuation of human life. It is important to note that all the workers I interviewed for this paper were formal office workers with clear contracts in large offices. However, most menstruators in Indonesia work in the informal sector, where they often lack clear contracts and where the state does not guarantee menstrual leave. Informal workers, such as domestic workers, sometimes work for 24 hours without sufficient rest, access to health checks, or employers who attend to their menstrual needs. Given these conditions, I encourage further research focused on workers in the informal employment sector.

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Appendix

Topic and Theme

Topic/Theme	Description
Participant's self profile	Gender, age Profession, educational background, household location
Menstrual experience at work	Menstruating at work Challenges and difficulties Workplace menstrual policy
Menstrual leave at work	Participant knowledge about the leave Experience in accessing menstrual leave
Perception and attitudes towards menstrual leave	Opinion, attitude Obstacles/stigma Policy evaluation - what menstruator actually need?

Summary Question Guide

Participant's self-profile	Can you tell me about your age, education, and profession? And gender identity?
Menstrual experience at work	How is your menstrual experience at work?
	Do you have bad experience at work because of periods?
	What challenges do you experience when menstruating at work?
	Does menstruation have impact on your work performance?
Menstrual leave at work	Do you know that Indonesia has a menstrual leave policy?
	Does your office have menstrual leave?
	Have you ever taken menstrual leave?
	How was your experience in accessing menstrual leave?
	How do people around you/your boss response when you take menstrual leave?
	(If the respondent do not know about menstrual leave) would you like to take menstrual leave?
Perception and attitudes towards menstrual leave	What do you think about menstrual leave? Is it necessary?
	What do you think about worker who take menstrual leave?
	Would menstrual leave be a solution to menstrual problem that faced by workers?
	What do you really need when you are menstruating at work?
	What kind of menstrual policy or absence of a policy would you prefer? Why?
What is the experience of others who you are familiar with at work or home who have accessed the menstrual leave? What have you learned from their experience?	