

# Is It a Bloody Good Idea? Talking About Menstrual and Menopause Leave in Australia

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The recent introduction of a paid menstrual and menopausal leave scheme in Australia by Future Super earlier this year – called the “[Bloody Good Policy](#)” – brought back to the fore some controversies that have tended to accompany any gender-equality related [policy changes](#).

What is menstrual leave, one might ask? Well, it is defined as “a workplace policy that provides menstruators with time off if they are experiencing menstrual-related symptoms or illness and are therefore unable to attend work” ([Barnack-Tavlarisa](#)).

Today, despite the three decades of extensive legislation in Australia to address gender equity and the disadvantaged position of women in the labour market, women are still underrepresented in leadership and management levels in Australian organisations and gender pay gap still favouring full-time working men over full-time working women in every industry and [occupational category in Australia](#). However, Australian workplaces have made some progression with regards to accepting diversity – from reducing the gender wage gap, to paid parental leave to workplace adjustments for those with disabilities; we have definitely moved beyond the dark ages of the White Australia Policy. Therefore, despite these advances, there is still much work to be done for us in creating a truly inclusive workplace<sup>[1]</sup>.

It is worth noting that Future Super is also not the first Australian workplace to adopt such a policy. That honour falls onto the Victorian Women’s Trust who deployed their policy in 2017 after a research around menstruation and menopause. The policy itself seem to be rather straightforward and intuitive, an additional defined paid leave period (12 days – pro rata and non-cumulative per annum) for women who are unable to carry out their duties due to symptoms associated with menstruation and menopause. However, since then, adoption in Australia has been scarce.

The media attention has also brought to light how backwards we are as a nation when it comes to adopting such policies. A quick look at our neighbours in Asia shows that countries like Japan instituted menstrual leave in their Labour Standards Law as far back as 1947, joining Taiwan, Indonesia, and South Korea as countries with legislation mandating and guaranteeing leave for women who are [menstruating](#). One might even be more surprised at the fact that this idea dated as far back as the 1920s in the Soviet Union, but the drivers of these policies were claimed to be largely driven by misinformation around the science of the human body rather than to advance [women's rights](#).

Yet, the debate rages on. Is this a good idea? After all, does this not potentially be a step backward for gender equality in the workplace – because it potentially becomes another reason for employees not to employ women? There are some who argue that providing menstrual and menopause leave provisions may actually worsen the stereotypes about women in the workplace – putting crosshairs on their emotional stability, reliability, and perhaps even additional expenses related to such leave provisions. So, rather than being seen as the ‘weaker’ sex, they advocate that women should rather bear the pain and take the work.

More disturbingly, as raised by Associate Professor Elizabeth Hill, some argue that the provision of such a leave “challenges the notion of the ‘ideal worker’ who is care-less and body-less”. However, navigating through the ‘new normal’ of COVID-19, it is that the ideal worker is an idea full of fallacy – and especially so for women in the workforce. It highlights to us the need to consider each and every single employee as unique human beings, and that when leaders view them as such – and value them; the benefits reaped can be exponential.

Well, we think that this is indeed a bloody good idea, and our question to Australian organisations and those around the world – is whether we can afford to NOT have it. We have highlighted three reasons as to why we can't.

Firstly, we know that for a fact, there are biological differences between males and females. The stigma around menstruating has been around since the dawn of time and is something that is still taboo in many places. The stigmatization of menstruation has some potentially serious outcomes, with research arguing that argue that the stigma of menstruation both reflects and contributes to women's lower social status and may also influence women's self-perception of their performance.

While some companies do allow women to take time off work under the auspices of personal or sick leave options, not only does this not address underlying cause of the stigma, but it also actually penalises women for being biologically born female. Introducing paid menstrual and menopausal leave will help us to normalise the processes associated with the female bodies; and after all – it is not like women enjoy or want to be in extreme pain every month; it is not a choice.

Second, there is the problem of presenteeism. [Presenteeism](#) is defined as the lost productivity caused by an employee being physically present at work but not fully functioning due to an illness, injury, or other conditions, or simply put, being there for the sake of it. A recent review indicates that presenteeism is one of the leading causes of lost productivity in the workplace. Given what we know on how menstrual and menopausal experiences can be debilitating on a regular basis for some women, not having a policy around this could hurt productivity even further. A recently published [Dutch study](#) found that presenteeism is a key factor in why menstrual symptoms account for an average of nine days lost productivity.

We know that promoting safe and healthy practices that allow people to get the support they need yields a more productive workforce. When workers know they won't be penalized for taking time off to address a health issue, it both enhances productivity and also reduces turnover, thus saving employers money.

Most organisations don't think twice about providing sick leave for their employees for a good reason. Some have even adopted and made reasonable adjustments for those who have physiological issues that may hinder their abilities to be fully productive at work – such as providing a sit stand desk or an ergonomic chair'; yet, we stop and hesitate to provide menstrual and menopause leave despite knowing that some of our employees may not be able to fully function on days when the pain gets debilitating, on a regular basis.

Lastly, [policy consistency](#). We know that policy consistency drives improved gender equity outcomes and that the introduction of policies and practices that support balancing work and family and address different aspects of respect, agency and safety at work and at home would lead to greater gender equality in our workplaces.

Yet, we can't really expect that we will make headways into closing the gap if we don't address the biggest elephant in the room. Men and women are physiologically different, and we need to embrace it. Men don't get the same amount of leave for the birth of their child(ren) as women, and we are okay with it. Just like paternal and maternal leave policies are not about women receiving preferential treatment, we can only promote equality by taking into account the diversity in our biological demands and differences.

Given that our commitment to diversity is celebrating that each and every one of us are unique human beings, it is about time that we stop throwing our arms up in the air each time a good policy is being raised. Future Super's decision to incorporate this policy is indeed a bloody good idea, and we believe that more organizations should adopt it.



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