

Menstruation, menopause, motherhood: relentless challenges for working women

On 16 February 2023, the Spanish parliament passed the law on menstrual leave. Women experiencing debilitating period pain are now entitled to take up to three days' leave per month specifically for this condition. The first of its kind in Europe, this legislation has triggered a wide-ranging debate in national parliaments, local authorities and businesses alike. For their part, trade unions recognise this issue as a major challenge, calling for reflection and recommendations on health and safety at work. However, there remains significant resistance to this development, while the problems around motherhood are ever present and battle commences for recognition of the menopause's impact on working conditions.

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France provides the backdrop for this silent guerilla war. In around a dozen *départements*, the prefectures and local authorities find themselves in court over the issue of menstrual leave. Following central government advice, local state representatives litigate almost systematically in respect of any initiative creating that right within the regions, *départements* and major city or town authorities, citing 'the absence of a national legislative framework'. The courts very often rule in their favour, despite the protests of elected representatives. In the most recent example to date, on 24 June 2025, Strasbourg Administrative Court revoked the right of Strasbourg's city hall and *métropole* authorities to introduce a special leave of absence of 13 days per year for staff experiencing debilitating period pain, especially endometriosis sufferers. The two local authorities appealed against the decision, but the case law did not work in their favour, given that France actually has no enacted legislation on this matter.

And yet the arrangement does work! 'We currently have 120 women relying on the menstrual leave system that we set up back in 2023,' boasts Marie Condaminet, Head

of Prevention, Health and Social Action for Seine-Saint-Denis. This Ile-de-France *département* has managed to avoid the legal pitfalls by prioritising the preventive approach, namely making temporary adjustments to job roles, agreeing one-off teleworking arrangements or flexible working hours in consultation with the relevant occupational health department. This approach has resulted in a drop in the number of women taking sick leave together with an array of positive feedback. She recounts how 'One employee told us that these measures meant that she could finally settle in one job, instead of her having to give up a number of positions, as in the past, on account of her disabling periods.'

It is clear from these adjustments that the issue of menstrual leave involves so much more than a mere right: it deals directly with health and safety at work. Painful periods, heavy bleeding or problems linked to endometriosis (chronic inflammation of tissue outside the uterus) cause acute pain, severe fatigue, dizziness or discomfort, so many symptoms that can compromise the concentration, mobility or safety of a female employee at her place of work.

But there is no magic wand to remedy this problem: despite campaigns involving employees and managers alike to raise awareness of the problem, its acceptance 'is still a challenge', Marie Condaminet acknowledges. In the year following the entry into force of the legislation, in spring 2023, just over 1,400 a menstrual leave day were granted in Spain. Even assuming that some of this leave lasted several days, this figure would account for only a few hundred women employees across the entire country, a very low take-up rate demonstrating not so much a lack of need as a strong reluctance to rely on that right for fear either of colleagues' reactions or of being stigmatised at work.

'There's no surprise there,' comments Danielle Howe, researcher at the NICM Health Research Institute of Western Sydney University, Australia. To her mind, the low take-up by women who have access to menstrual leave highlights 'a reluctance to invoke their rights through fear of discrimination in their careers or of being treated as less competent'. A further issue, according to this university researcher, is that rather than looking at reproductive health matters as a logical

↓ **Pregnant and working: although maternity has the best legal safeguards of the three Ms (menstruation, maternity, menopause), its long-term impact on women's careers should not be underestimated.** Photo: © Belga



adjustment supporting the environment and quality of work, 'businesses are focusing on the single issue of leave without addressing the issues of flexibility, manager training or the developing work culture. Although recognition of these occupational health and safety challenges is improving as a result, the practices and policies per se are lagging behind.' This analysis is borne out by the example of Japan, the first country in the world to have adopted menstrual leave in 1947. According to a study based on figures compiled by Japan's Ministry of Health and referenced by researcher Yuri Horikawa, only 0.9% of women relied on their entitlement to menstrual or menopause leave between spring 2019 and spring 2020. Despite the almost non-existent take-up of this logical measure since its introduction, the law has still been opposed by businesses which have tried on numerous occasions to get rid of the menstrual leave entitlement, alleging in particular a breach of equality between men and women.

Motherhood: recognised but not always properly accommodated

Loss of income and job insecurity: these are the two major obstacles which have long been identified in connection with working mothers. According to a study conducted in 2024 in 11 European countries by the NGO Make Mothers Matter, 27% of the 9,600 women interviewed felt that motherhood had impacted their careers in a negative way. Approximately half of them also bemoan the woefully low level of compensation they received during their maternity leave.

In the majority of European countries, motherhood is still addressed as an individual right rather than an occupational health matter. Few Nordic countries fully integrate this preventive dimension into their business policies, whilst the rest of the continent, including Western Europe, do not generally focus on prevention within their practices, whether in sectors dominated by women — healthcare, education, trade, personal services or cleaning — or office jobs such as marketing, information technology or administration. However, Council Directive 92/85/EEC requires employers to assess the occupational risks linked to pregnancy or to workers who have recently given birth and to make the appropriate adjustments to their positions.

Clearly, even when policies exist, their application is somewhat hit and miss: there could be a lack of training, with many managers remaining unaware of their obligations regarding maternal health at work. Staff returning to work after maternity or parental

leave may be regarded as having had 'career breaks' and thus may not receive support or enter into dialogue about the physical or psychological needs of young mothers.

'Nature abhors a vacuum,' Davina¹ explains, as if to excuse her employer's reaction when she went back to work after her pregnancy 17 years ago. However, her return to work was marked by anxiety, fearing that she was no longer on familiar ground and had lost her manager's confidence in her ability. Exhausted after the birth of her son, she had applied for parental leave following her maternity leave. At the time, her manager's reaction was nothing short of scathing. Although he understood her wish to make the most of her time with her children, he could not conceive the idea of her being 'tired'.

Working now as a manager in an international group, Davina feels that the situation has changed significantly. As evidence of this, she points to all the fathers in her team who have taken their paternity leave entitlement, not to mention the flexibility provided by teleworking. However, when she is questioned about menstrual leave and the menopause, she acknowledges that these issues remain taboo in her company and queries whether women want to talk about them.

Her questions resonate with the testimony of Isabelle, a journalist who compares her professional career, as a woman, to 'an obstacle course'. As far as she can see, businesses

still have difficulty in accepting motherhood and maternity arrangements, and so she feels it would be very complicated to go even further. 'And let's not forget either that menstrual leave is perhaps more easily implemented than any adjustments for the menopause,' she believes, 'because, with the menopause, you really are dealing with a "double whammy": not only are you a woman but, even worse, you are getting older, and that will be regarded as a loss of value to the company.'

Menopause: the great taboo

This pitfall is clearly identified by the trade unions. 'We are perpetually walking a tight-rope when it comes to women's rights in the work environment,' laments Martha Ochoa, officer responsible for youth matters at UNI Global Union, an international trade union federation. She is concerned that, 'If we push too hard on certain issues, such as the menopause issue, we risk triggering a debate on an alleged lack of productivity among women.' And the current political climate is especially pernicious on this matter. 'Across the globe, the far right is pushing an agenda that aims to exclude women from the world of work,' warns Veronica Fernandez Mendez, Head of Equal Opportunities at UNI Global Union, 'and its main angle of attack is precisely the issue of the specific rights of women.'

¹ Not her real name.

Motherhood, menstruation, menopause: an obstacle course navigated throughout a woman's working life.

However, the financial impact of disregarding these matters is enormous. One parliamentary report on the menopause, published in the spring in France, shows that 10% of women experiencing major menopause-related symptoms in the United Kingdom have resigned their positions, whilst 5% have done the same in Denmark, thus impacting company competitiveness due to the departure of highly experienced female employees. In Japan, one study estimated the cost of the absence of health policies for menopausal women at approximately 11.6 billion euros.



↳ After being overlooked entirely for many decades, the issue of menstrual health is slowly making its way onto the European political agenda. In 2024, Saskia Bricmont and her colleagues within the Verts/ALE Group in the European Parliament presented a study on period poverty in the European Union and its consequences for women's health and lives. Now it is time for workplaces to tackle this issue. Photo: © Camille Goret

Marsinah, martyr and trailblazing champion of menstrual leave in Indonesia

‘The loss of productivity associated with these health issues far exceeds the modest costs involved in setting up targeted policies,’ comments Danielle Howe. But getting people to actually listen is another challenge altogether. Quite apart from the economic dimension, the menopause poses a real occupational health headache. Menopause symptoms – hot flushes, sleep problems, joint pain, anxiety, concentration problems or memory loss – can affect safety and performance in a number of occupations. Studies have shown that nurses, teachers and industry workers or women working flexible shifts are among the most exposed. In the case of care workers, sleep problems and tiredness can compromise the vigilance required during night shifts; in teaching, the stress, noise and heat of the classroom exacerbate hot flushes and concentration loss; in industrial settings, protective equipment, heat and the pace of work increase the discomfort experienced and the physical risks encountered. These cumulative conditions may lead to error, sick leave or early departure from the job, and yet these female staff have valuable experience.

As a young worker in a watch factory located on the eastern side of the island of Java, Marsinah led the industrial action of spring 1993, calling on the company she worked for to apply the local government increase in the minimum wage. Among the other demands made by her union was greater equality between men and women in the workplace, which included the introduction of menstrual leave. On 5 May 1993, she was abducted following her visit to Sidoarjo District Military Command headquarters. News of the discovery of her mutilated body some days later sent shockwaves rippling through the entire population. Although her murderers were never formally identified, the military junta in power at the time were suspected of instigating her execution. Ten years later, and in

the wake of the collapse of the Suharto dictatorship, Indonesia’s parliament adopted a reformed Labour Code, rolling out menstrual leave provision across the country. However, Article 81 of Act No. 13/2003 remains relatively unknown today and Indonesia’s female employees rarely have recourse to it. Marsinah, by contrast, has become a symbol of women’s rights in Indonesia: those attending union assemblies and rallies chant her name, and her story has inspired a whole host of books, songs, poems and films. On 1 May 2025, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto proposed bestowing national heroine status on Marsinah, but did not go so far as to reopen the investigation into her death, in spite of the regular demands of trade unions and local human rights associations.

‘Women are invisible when it comes to their health issues: such matters are completely overlooked by their employers, trade union organisations and occupational health services,’ acknowledges Stéphanie Rist. Before taking up her position as Minister for

address these subjects, we spark some interest’. But there is resistance too: in 2024, Frédéric Valletoux, her predecessor at the Ministry of Health, had opposed menstrual leave because of the risk of discrimination in the recruitment process for women.

At a time of severe budgetary restrictions, various French elected representatives point out that introducing a new right would also create an excessive financial burden. The deputies on the left of the political spectrum, who unsuccessfully proposed the introduction of menstrual leave on a nationwide scale in 2023, 2024 and then again in 2025, estimated the annual burden on the social security purse at 100 million euros. As Stéphanie Rist acknowledges, ‘Getting businesses on board with these measures is really complicated,’ given that they too would bear the cost burden. Danielle Howe is convinced, however, that the result would be well worth the effort, bearing in mind that ‘Overlooking reproductive health problems increases the risks of unemployment and financial insecurity, not to mention the worsening of gender inequalities. This is a challenge affecting the very structure of working life.’

That said, there is general consensus on a first step for tackling this challenge: raising awareness. ‘We are working to achieve this daily,’ explains Veronica Fernandez Mendez, but the campaign needs people to engage in discussion. ‘We often joke amongst ourselves,’ she smiles with Martha Ochoa at her side, ‘that, as soon as we bring up menstruation or the menopause, the men we are in conversation with seem to magically disappear.’ ●

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‘Recognising the specific needs of women in the workplace does not mean giving them preferential treatment: it is about guaranteeing a healthier work environment for all men and women,’ Veronica Fernandez Mendez points out. Nonetheless, she agrees that talk of the menopause or periods is still a sensitive subject, even in trade union circles, because work cultures are still predominantly maledriven. ‘That is why we are launching campaigns like *Stop the Stigma*, to make such matters healthrelated issues rather than a cause for embarrassment.’

Health in the autumn, this Renaissance deputy in the French National Assembly drew up a parliamentary report on the menopause, as mentioned above. In her conclusions, she expresses her support in particular for a systematic medical interview on the menopause for all female employees between the ages of 45 and 55. This member of parliament welcomes the mostly favourable feedback she has received in this regard, especially from within business circles. ‘As far as I can see, we are dealing with ignorance rather than resistance,’ she says, hopeful that, ‘when we