

MENSTRUAL LEAVE APPS AND WORKPLACE EQUITY AMONG KARACHI CORPORATE WOMEN

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Abstract:

Digital health tools have become major stakeholders in the last few years in defining policies at the workplace such as those handling menstrual health. The paper investigates the way menstrual leave apps shape the representations and actions of equal treatment in workplaces by women employed in Karachi corporate industry. Although there is the worldwide initiative to establish gender-inclusive policies, menstrual equity is understudied in urban professional communities in South Asia (Hennegan et al., 2021). The research will be based on the feminist technology studies and organizational justice theory, and will combine the mixed-methods research, surveying 2,000 women and interviewing 40 participants that will include financial, tech, and FMCG sectors. The quantitative evidence shows that app-mediated menstrual leave policies are positively correlated with perceived fair workplace, lower presenteeism, and better job satisfaction in and across women (Mahajan & Jha, 2020). In the male-dominated firms, conflict underlies the stories of tech inclusivity and stigma as shown in qualitative interviews. The authors come to the conclusion that despite the singular potential of the menstrual leave apps as a solution to fair workplaces, these types of applications may or may not be effective, depending on the attitudes of the management and organization cultures. Based on these findings, context-sensitive HR frameworks that combine digital tools and the overarching agendas of gender equity will be necessary (Rani & Nath, 2023).

Keywords: Menstrual Leave, Gender Equity in The Workplace, Women in Karachi, Corporate Human Resource Technology, Menstrual Stigma, Digital Health, Workplace Policy in Regards to Gender

Introduction

Menstrual health is a growing topic of concern identified as a valid and important part of workplace wellbeing, as well as connected to the areas of gender rights, corporate responsibility, and digital health technology (Hennegan et al., 2021; Sommer et al., 2019). Although menstruation has long been a taboo subject in the context of many cultures (but does not have to be, of course), more and more literature and activism are seeking to raise awareness regarding menstruation and bring it into the spotlight of open discussion and policy systems. On an international scale, the trend is tending towards recognizing menstruation as something more than a biological fact but as a determining factor in gender equality (at least, in working and institutional contexts) (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013).

The debate on the topic of menstruation in the working environment is not only new and unstable, but it is also not discussed openly in conservative, but highly digitized South Asian cities such as Karachi. The male-dominated culture and overall lack of reproductive health education and discourse have long prevented discussing the male menstrual experience at the workplace (Ali & Syed, 2017; Mahon et al., 2015). Though several international conventions such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against women) have been ratified by Pakistan, there is still no official law and

policy guidelines issued on menstrual leave or menstrual health management in employment. As such, considerations regarding accommodating menstrual needs became a matter of choice on the part of individual employers, which tends to be influenced more by biases at higher management levels than by concerns established in the structure (Khan et al., 2020).

Comparative Asia Present the evidence of the region of Asia relative to that of the menstrual leave. Such menstrual leave policies have been spotted as early as the 1940s and 1950s in countries such as Japan and South Korea with mixed success rates of implementation and utilization by the eligible employees (Mason et al., 2020). In Indonesia and Taiwan, there is a legal guarantee of menstrual leave that is commonly stigmatized or comes with unintentional professional consequences that result in women not even using menstrual leave (Bobel, 2019). These global stories educate us on the need not only to implement these policies of menstrual leaves but also to create inclusive organizational cultures that would make their usage a norm and not an exception.

Without any national policy on the subject in Pakistan, enterprises in the private sector; particularly the financial, technology, and media sectors in Karachi have started looking into potential digital solutions in the form of an alternative to accommodate the menstrual equity issue. Heightened access to FinTech (female technology) tools, especially mobile apps used in tracking menstrual cycles and managing health, has introduced new means of women taking command of their bodies and their work schedules (Wilde et al., 2020). Menstrual symptom, wellness-tracking, and period-tracking smartphone applications like Flo, Clue, Hera or Sahaara give users the ability to track a particular period, gain wellness knowledge, and, in some more advanced corporate environments, request menstrual leave through employee self-service systems (Evenson & Stein, 2022).

These technologies are a kind of digital discretion: in them, women could tend to their delicacy health needs without ever having to direct them to the workplace hierarchy of males. Putting such tools in the corporate structure of Pakistan does, however, come with a number of question marks. Are these applications toppling the traditional taboos or there is only cyberian silence in a new guise? Do they provide a more equalized state, or do they reproduce classed and gendered inequality especially in work, where the digital literacy or the skill in management is low, and others are male dominated (Ginsburg, 2020)?

So far, little empirical studies have looked at the ways a menstrual leave app generates in Pakistani places of employment especially in the case of equity output and the perception of workers. The majority of the available literature is either on the menstrual hygiene programs conducted by schools (Sommer et al., 2019) or the applicability of the apps in the reproductive health context (Biviji et al., 2017). Due to this, it is of critical importance that the means of studying the impacts of such digital instruments on the practice of equity, inclusion and policy uptake in a real-world environment is considered.

This paper attempts to fill the gap by examining the use of menstrual leave apps in framing perceptions regarding workplace equity among the Karachi and Pakistani corporate women. Based on the literature on organizational justice (Greenberg, 1987) and feminist approach to technology (Wajcman, 2004), it will explore not only the ways an organization tries to assimilate menstruation technology, but also how personal experiences of women when facing menstruation in the workplace. By implementing a mixed-methods design using both survey data (n=2,000) and interviewing professionals (n=40) of a Pakistani urban corporate population, it comes out that this research is able to offer novel insights into the potential and perils of digital menstrual equity within the Pakistani urban corporate setting.

Literature Review

Menstruation with respect to work place dynamics and digital technology is a new and lesser studied area especially in the non-western world. Little is known about how such policies get filtered through technology in the day-to-day workplaces although this has been studied at an international level to understand the effects of the menstrual leave policies to absenteeism rates, stigma and organizational cultures (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Bobel, 2019). The studies that are related to the sphere of digital health have emphasized the importance of period tracking applications as ways to increase reproductive autonomy of women and allow users to track the symptoms, cycles and even gain health knowledge (Evenson & Stein, 2022). Nevertheless, such studies usually focus more on personal health impacts rather than focusing on institutional or employment-related impacts.

An increasing number of the digital platforms -on which personal tracking is not the only available feature- are now providing a combination of features, including connecting with workplace leave systems (Haque et al., 2022). Such applications enable women to list menstrual complaints and absenteeism, and avoid asking to take time off to supervisor's face to face, particularly in male-dominated or even conservative workplaces. Such digital discretion can lessen the embarrassment and make uptake of policies easier (Ginsburg, 2020). The recent empirical studies that examine the effects that these tools have in the workplace are, however, limited, especially in the context of South Asia.

Menstrual leave policies have been celebrated as a practice that benefits gender inclusivity on a global scale (Mason et al., 2020; Rani & Nath, 2023). However, researchers warn that biological determinism can also be strengthened as a result of those efforts or that women may be discriminated in the course of employment (Chrisler et al., 2016). When it comes to the empirical research on the adoption of menstrual apps in the professional context in Pakistan, there is a significant gap in knowledge, as such studies are at an extremely low level.

Significance

Gender, technology, and fairness in the workplace present an important and somewhat underrepresented topic in terms of gender and technology in Pakistan that this research will deal with. The discussion on menstrual health on the international stage is gaining traction, but the adaptation of the menstrual leave initiatives into the workplace environment (and more specifically on-line platforms) is not yet fully advanced in South Asia. The MT leave app can be applied in countries that still have stigma and insulence around menstruation: in the case of Pakistan, applying menstrual leave apps not only implements a technological change but also a possible cultural change in the workplace. The apps can be seen as the middlemen between individual experiences of the body and the demands of the career, granting women the autonomy and discretion to pursue health care requirements.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these tools is not limited to mere functions; it is based on the culture of organizations, the moods of the managers and the socio-religious norms in general. The empirical study of the menstrual leave applications within the Karachi corporate scene creates a basis out of which menstrual leave applications can challenge as well as strengthen current gender norms.

Research Objective

The main purpose of the study is to assess how menstrual leave applications due to its presence in the workplace affect the perception of equity at the work place among corporate women in Karachi. Under the condition when there are almost no official menstrual health policies and where the topic of menstruation is frequently not discussed because of the socio-religious sensitivity, mobile health (mHealth) apps provide

a new IT platform to respond to gendered demands of the workplace. The role of the present paper is to evaluate whether and how these applications change the balance of inclusion, comfort, and fairness in corporate spaces, especially in male-dominated sectors, like the financial market, tech business, and manufacturing industry.

Research Question

What impact do menstrual leave apps have on the perception of women in terms of equity and inclusion in the corporate world of Karachi?

Methodology

The project had a convergent mixed-methods design that was used to understand how menstrual leave apps influence perceptions of gender equity in the workplace among the Karachi corporate women. The combination of quantitative extent and qualitative depth indicated the integration of the mixed-methods approach, which is able to offer an extended perception of the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative data aided in the development of trends and correlations that were observed in a vast sample, whereas the qualitative interviewing reflected the intricate lived experience of people and socio-cultural formulation of these trends.

The study population was composed of working women aged between 22 and 45 of professional status working in mid-sized and large corporate companies in Karachi, financial industry, technology sector and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG). A purposive sampling method was taken to make sure that the participants were appropriately exposed to digital menstrual health devices or were employed in the organizations that implemented, piloted, or knew of menstrual leave app-based policy. LinkedIn, business HR websites, and professional women networks were used to receive 2,000 female respondents to engage them in an online survey. Also, 40 deep semi structured interviews were carried out in order to get qualitative data. They chose the interview participants who are diversified in terms of their job positions, seniority and the type of organizations to take into consideration the sectorial and class discrepancy in workplace cultures.

The quantitative research part was based on a well-designed questionnaire patterned after Mahajan and Jha (2020), stressing obscurations of organizational justice, leave availability, perceived stigma, and usability of app. The measurement of items was done based on five-point Likert scale and the instrument had undergone content validity pre-testing. The data were analyzed using SPSS Version 28, which is used to identify correlations between app usage and other variables like; perceived equity, job satisfaction and reduction in absenteeism. SPSS version 28 was used to plot descriptive and inferential statistical results like; regression and one way ANOVA.

Regarding the qualitative dimension, interview protocol was produced with the help of the thematic analysis framework provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). There were interviews coming to the experiences of women with menstrual leave apps, attitudes that the manager had, companies' reaction, and how they felt like using this digital tool they showed dignity and discretion. All interviews consisted of 45-60 minutes and took place face-to-face or via the live video conferencing services, depending on the preference of participants and the impact of the pandemic.

The qualitative data recorded were subsequently coded using the NVivo software in an inductive system of coding and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used; there were multiple coding's to determine pattern and contradiction among the stories. Among the themes that were plotted were; digital discretion,

managerial silence and classed access to leave, which became the key themes in the context of understanding the experiences of menstrual apps in various organizational sub cultures. Triangulation was used like any difference between the findings on these two sets of data was compared to increase reliability and to minimize the researcher bias.

The study has been ethically approved with the [Institutional Review Board of University Name] where the study was subjected to ethics of research on human subjects. All of the respondents were informed about their consent. Anonymity and confidentiality of data were strictly observed and the transcripts of interview were de-identified. It was explained to the participants that they had the right to pull out with no ramifications at any time. Study was also in alignment with digital data security conditions especially on sensitive health related disclosures.

Through this methodological framework, it was able to be rigorous and sensitive enough to study a culturally complicated and socially delicate issue in an environment of a fast-digitizing and patriarchal corporate culture such as in Karachi.

Results and Evaluation

This segment articulates the quantitative and qualitative results of the research and couples them to provide an ultimate examination of the impact of menstrual leave applications on the viewpoint of female workers in terms of equity at workplace in the corporate district of Karachi.

The study focused on corporate women surveyed to make a total of 2000, but 1784 out of them were considered valid responses. The survey assessed the attitude to organizational justice, attitude to managing of menstrual health and the ease of using of apps.

76 percent of app users stated that they became more comfortable controlling menstrual symptom at work, which means a significant decrease in the psychological load and stigma of menstruation in the working environment. These are consistent with the previous studies of Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) who found that performance and well-being can be as badly affected by the stigma concerning menstruation at work.

61 percent of the respondents felt that menstruation leave apps make their organizations more equitable. This affirms the claims of Mason et al. (2020) who conducted a study that revealed that structural support to menstrual health is an affirmative influence on women in terms of their view of fairness and inclusion. A multiple linear regression analysis revealed that there was a statistically significant positive relationship between app usage and organizational justice ($p < .01$), which was statistically significant and larger than any other relationships controlling age, sector, and job seniority ($p < .01$, with other effects of age, sector, and seniority being insignificant). These findings mirror those that are indicated in the theory of the Organizational Justice postulated by Greenberg (1987) according to which the perceptions relating to fairness in policies and practices particularly those concerning health accommodation have the potential of creating a more embracing environment at work.

Besides, ANOVA tests showed that there was a significant difference in perceived equity among the sectors. Technology companies showed that female employees had high scores on equity compared to those in FMCG and finance industries ($F(2,1781) = 4.61, p < .05$). Such a disparity shows that the acceptance and adoption of menstrual health technology may depend on the culture of organizations and their digital readiness (Wajcman, 2004).

Fourty semi-structured interviews were carried out in a variety of the sectors: technology, finance and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG). Main themes that came out of thematic analysis based on the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were:

Emancipation, and self-love

The aspect of menstrual leave apps was appreciated by numerous participants due to the lack of attention that it brought. With the help of apps, they could take leaves or specify the symptoms without having to face the confrontation and explanation, especially to male bosses. As one of the participants said:

Prior to the app, I used to cough up a lie in the form of a feigned fever, or migraine. What is even better is that now I can just record a day without being ashamed.”

This resembles what Ginsburg (2020) refers to as digital tools providing users with socio-technical mediation, with the assistance of which it is possible to negotiate stigmatized health experiences in a nobler fashion.

Menstrual leave apps could be only effective, particularly when it was supported by attitudes of direct supervisors and particularly male managers. A few respondents reported that confusion, uneasiness, or passive resistance of managers was felt, even though the company had policies on a company wide basis.

For example:

Even after the introduction of the app, my manager continued to ask me to explain the reason of my absence. Such a discovery echoes the findings considered in an earlier study carried out by Ali and Syed (2017), who highlighted that formal policy change is not enough in those cultures where patriarchal stereotypes precondition how managers should act.

There was a sharp contrast between high level and junior workers. Leading women tended to behave with greater confidence when using the app and were more confident in having rights to take menstrual leaves. Juniors, on the other hand, feared that they would be judged or punished because they are using the feature. When you are a senior talent, then it is viewed to be self-care. you are thinking that if you are junior, you are lazy.”

It corresponds to the theory of intersectionality proposed by Crenshaw (1989), according to which the way gender manifestations are treated in the workplace is moderated by the factor of class and status in the professional hierarchy.

Cultural Tensions

Most of the women seemed to like the convenience of the apps but a few of them reported conflict between digital modernity and traditional culture. Others claimed not to be comfortable with an app that followed menstruation, especially in the corporations of conservative culture or where monitoring of employees with the computing activity was highly imperative. The fact that menstrual technology is not just a technological problem but a culture detail is pointed out here (Wajcman, 2004)

An integrated approach to quantitative and qualitative research produces a complex image of the impact of menstrual leave applications on the sense of workplace equality within the corporate life of Karachi.

On the one hand, the positive relationship between the use of applications and the perception of the justice of the organization contributes to the contention that digitization tools may be one of the effective levers in

fostering inclusion. Nevertheless, the situation-specific effectiveness of such tools differs considerably depending on organizational culture, the nature of managerial attitudes, and the hierarchy of the use.

Second, although the apps imply technological discretion, their functionality is subject to human decoding as well as enforcement in institutions. Fortunately, health-supportive policies are capable of being developed, but as Chrisler et al. (2016) warn, they may be compromised by the informal cultures in workplaces that still stigmatize menstruation.

Third, class, gender, and seniority in firms are key equity issues that arise in the interrelation between them. According to Rani and Nath (2023), the workplace policies should be made not only towards women who are average but in consideration of diversity and hierarchy within.

Last but not least, the research adds to Feminist Technology Studies by demonstrating that the apps such as Flo or Clue, or the region-specific app such as Hera are not neutral tools. They are completely immersed in local and gendered norms of reception and design and their ramifications. This is highlighted in the Karachi case study where the digital health solutions can be recommended to the section-context-specific indicating that there is a need to pay attention to practical and symbolic dimensions of equity (Evenson & Stein, 2022).

Discussion

Employment of menstrual leave apps in Karachi working offices portrays a new but non-uniform change in the global labor market regarding issues of gender, health, and technology. The results of the study point to the potential and the boundaries of the digital interventions in transforming workplace equity.

The mobile app is a discrete way to address issues of menstrual discomfort in an environment where the aspect of menstruation remains rather quiet despite a rapidly increasing population. In any case, discretion is not sufficient to ensure equity. According to Syed et al. (2021), Pakistani corporate culture, with its strong rooted patriarchal values, does not favour any kind of arrangements with the view to accommodating health-related issues, in general, and gender-related, in particular, which are rather perceived as being dictated by a given productivity factor, rather than some compassion. This tension was captured in our interviews: most of the women were happy that the app offered employees a dignified way to make such disclosures without having to verbally announce that they needed a leave, but some of them observed that the cultural and organizational reaction to taking a leave, even in unprecedented times such as those created by the COVID-19 pandemic, was uneven.

The researchers found that the subjective organizational justice was highly improved among app users thus collecting evidence on the theory suggested by Greenberg (1987) that organizational justice matters a lot in relation to staff contentment concerning the procedures used in the workplace. This justice was not a one-dimensional one however. Experiences were smoother when the respondents were women in more senior positions or departments with HR managers sensitive to the issue of gender. In contrast, junior members or employees who contact male bosses usually wrote of some minor tactics of dissuasion or uneasiness in demanding their app-affordable privileges. Such is the gap that reflects the intersectional criticism of feminist work policy that argues various forces of class, status, and sex interact to create the consequences of policy (Crenshaw 1989).

The implementation of such a technology also is symbolically valuable: it demonstrates a corporate readiness to recognize the issue of menstrual health as something grooved into the workplace agenda. Such

symbolic treatment may however go wrong without the official HR assistance however. The common theme that participants identified with the app was that though it was there, there was very little communication about the app even within the organization. There is also a risk of ensuring that it is performative rather than life-changing through this institutional silence (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). The tool has to be integrated in more comprehensive policies, which affirm the importance of menstrual health within the occupational well-being spectrum, in order to act as an equity enhancer.

A variety of policy implications are associated with this last outcome: Next, companies shall devise inclusive leave policies supporting the development of menstrual accommodations. Such formalization must be facilitated by the use of digital platforms that are characterized by discretion and tracking and accountability and transparency. Second, trainings on menstrual health that involve workplace trainings, particularly men supervisors, are necessary to reduce stigma and normalize the discussion on menstruation. Studies carried out on organizational behavior show that the attitude of managers plays a central role in the adoption of progressive HR policies (Bendoly et al., 2010). Third, tech startup companies in the area will be encouraged to design menstrual applications that are culturally sensitive and that take into consideration local dialects, religious factors and varied female experiences. Such apps as Hera and Sahaara have an initial success in this area, but their penetration is still restricted without business collaboration and favorable policies (Haque et al., 2022).

The research has several limitations in spite of its contribution. It fails to incorporate the rural and peri-urban job sectors where the menstrual stigma may be at its severe form and where the accessibility of digital resources is more difficult. Besides, the information was self-reported, which means that there is a risk of bias, especially social desirability bias since the topic is considered to be rather sensitive. Finally, the project excluded transgender and non-binary people who menstruate and whose experience with equity in the workplace and health-related accommodations were both under-researched and an important part of gender justice at work.

The study, however, makes contributions to the expanding number of studies that indicates that technological mediation once mutually reinforced by institutions can promote the creation of more diverse and inclusive workplaces. It goes beyond the scope of menstrual equity as a policy idea to action, demonstrating that the ability of apps as features of convenience extends to them as agents of cultural change. The success they have will be based on whether they are held as individual interventions or whether they are built into larger gender-inclusive labor reforms.

Conclusion

To conclude, the research project has identified menstrual leave smartphone apps as an encouraging but incomplete solution when it comes to addressing gender inequality within the Pakistani corporate industry. Digital platforms provide individuals with more control and autonomy over menstrual health issues in the workplace, which, according to international tendencies in the sphere of digital health and reproductive rights, leads to the innovation (Evenson & Stein, 2022). Such apps can also help to diminish the stigma as well as improve the sense of justice within an organization due to the simplification of leave application and a desire to consider menstruation a natural phenomenon (Greenberg, 1987). Nevertheless, the results equally give realization of the fact that technology is not everything. Unless it is accompanied by similar changes in company culture, managerial therapy, and gender-friendly processes, menstrual apps will be just lip service and not an agent of change (Wajcman, 2004; Bobel, 2019).

Notably, the issue of equal support turned out to be unequal as well, with support being stronger in gender-

diverse departments and higher-level, undeveloped in perspective of boys with male connotations and in lower-level environments. This confirms intersectional feminist criticisms that digital equity needs to consider such differences as class, the hierarchy, and socio-cultural power relations (Crenshaw, 1989; Ali & Syed, 2017). Therefore, achieving the menstrual health technologies does not rely on the design of the apps only but also on integrating the technology into the HR framework and diversified training.

More studies is required in urber sn Karachi, in the future, studies should be allocated at workplaces in Lahore, Islamabad, and other second-tier cities where there may be differences between digital literacy and gender norms. Furthermore, analysis should be extended to the experiences of transgender and non-binary menstruators who are still not part of mainstream health discussion in workplaces (Chrisler et al., 2016). It would also be possible to use longitudinal research designs to follow the duration of perceptions of equity (and whether they decrease as novelty wears off). Together, we can conclude that menstrual leave apps are a step in the right direction, but they cannot be a single intervention to promote inclusion at workplaces in Pakistan unless they are just one of many steps to incorporate the principles of gender equity into the DNA of companies in the country.

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