



MENSTRUAL HEALTH IN THE DUTCH WORKPLACE

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INTRODUCTION

Share-Net Netherlands is a knowledge platform on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). Its members consist of policy makers, NGO practitioners, researchers, service providers, students and other SRHR professionals. Share-Net Netherlands hosts several Communities of Practice (CoPs), one of which includes the CoP on Menstrual Health. This CoP actively contributes to existing efforts to destigmatise menstruation, exploring barriers to appropriate menstrual health and networking experts in the field.

In 2022, based on the existing literature on the topic, the CoP on Menstrual Health conducted a survey among employees in Dutch workplaces. The purpose of the survey is to bring attention to different experiences of menstrual health in the workplace in the Netherlands and explore what a period-friendly workplace consists of. The results of this informal survey are intended to initiate further research on menstruation and the workplace in the Netherlands and beyond.

MENSTRUAL HEALTH

Menstrual Health is defined as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle”.¹ Improving menstrual health is not only a matter of supporting individuals, but of improving the quality of life of communities. Menstrual health is linked to fulfilling several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): when we take into account menstrual health needs, we are better equipped to improve health and sanitation (SDG 3 and 6), guarantee education (SDG 4), get closer to gender equality (SDG 5), and promote responsible consumption and production (SDG 12).

THIS REPORT

Based on the valuable efforts of various researchers in the MH field, the survey was developed to gain a better understanding of how the issue of menstrual health is perceived in Dutch workplaces. We found the aspects of workplace culture, general attitudes towards menstruation, stigmatisation of menstrual problems and (the lack of) employer interventions particularly relevant and focused on a small sample size to be able to extract as much qualitative data as possible.

The survey questions were designed based on a review of literature, policy briefs and other surveys on the topic of menstrual health in the workplace.

The survey collected data from respondents in their professional capacity by asking them about what facilities are available in their workplace, the general attitudes and workplace culture within their place of work, and what support and policies are available to employees, all in relation to menstrual health in the workplace. Given the taboo nature of the topic, we took care to design the survey in a way that protected the participants' privacy and gave them the option to skip questions if they felt they were irrelevant. This ensured that none of the participants were exposed to any physical or socio-economic risk.

Overall, the results are based on the responses of 150 participants, the majority of whom (> 60 %) were between 20 and 30 years old. 44 % of them reported to work in a female-dominated and 21 % in a male-dominated workplace. The survey was distributed through various social media platforms and within the internal network of the Community of Practice members. Since the aim was to highlight topics that are important to consider when addressing menstrual health at work, the survey was not spread equally across different workplaces and societal groups, and is therefore not representative in these aspects.

1 Hennegan, J., Winkler, I. T., Bobel, C., Keiser, D., Hampton, J., Larsson, G., Venkatraman, C., Plesons, M., & Mahon, T. (2021). Menstrual health: A definition for policy, practice, and research. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 29(1), 1911618.

KEY FINDINGS

General attitudes and work-place culture

Most respondents feel that it is possible to talk openly about menstrual health in their workplace. It is, however, not a topic of conversation that comes up often.

Menstruation-related symptoms, as well as the stigma surrounding menstruation, can manifest in general attitudes and culture in the workplace, directly and indirectly affecting menstruators' working lives.

To find out more about the impact of these factors on their work, respondents were asked if menstrual health was an issue that could be openly discussed in their workplace. The majority of them, 61%, think that it is.

Fig 1. Are you able to talk openly about menstrual health at your work?

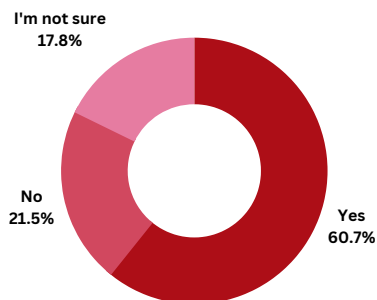
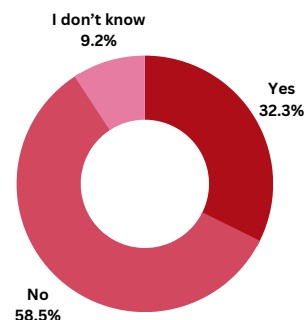


Fig 2. If yes, is this a regular topic that comes up amongst employees?

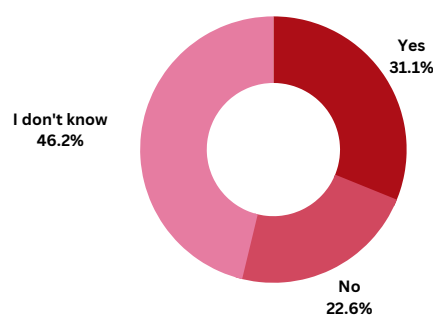


“Taking sick days for menstrual symptoms is encouraged (and common) and letting your colleagues know if you are suffering from any kind of menstruation symptoms is again common and encouraged. I feel very comfortable to share this with my colleagues if needed”

Interestingly, the majority of those who claim that menstrual health can be discussed openly in their workplace also state that this topic is not actually a regular topic of discussion. This suggests that participants are either employed in a workplace that is not as affected by the period stigma, or that they are not aware of the taboo surrounding the topic because it does not come up.

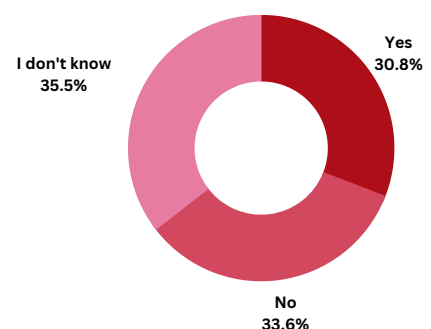
The impact of the taboo is also seen on other domains: almost half of the respondents do not know whether menstrual health issues qualify for sick leave. The stereotype that periods are often used as an excuse, which leads to secrecy and concealment, may be one reason for this.

Fig 3. Are menstruation-related symptoms and menstrual health issues accepted as valid reasons to take sick leave?



Menstruation seems to be accepted as a private matter, with one in three respondents being aware of employees hiding their period products at work.

Fig 4. Are you aware of employees hiding their period products at work?

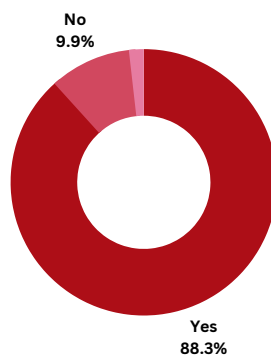


“ I know that no one takes their period products openly to the toilets, including myself. I usually put it in one of my pants' pockets. Speaking for myself, I do it to avoid awkward situations with male employees. ”

Facilities and accessibility

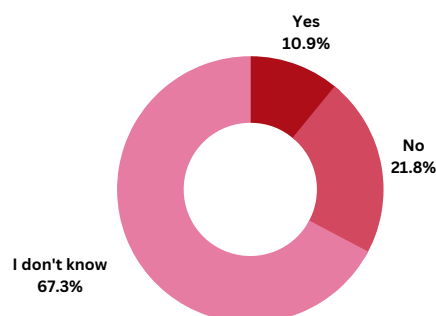
Having clean and adequate facilities and being able to access them freely in the workplace is important for a comfortable menstruating experience. With this in mind, respondents were asked about the facilities they are able to access in their workplaces. 88% of respondents reported that the toilet facilities in their workplaces were comfortable and clean.

Fig 5. Are the toilet facilities clean (cleaned regularly, you feel comfortable in the toilet room etc.)?



Although 88% responded that the toilet facilities in their workplace are comfortable and clean, it is interesting to see that this does not translate across to respondents considering that the toilets in their workplace are menstrual health friendly. 22% reported that they do not think the toilet facilities available to them at their workplace are menstrual health friendly.

Fig 6. Do you consider the toilet facilities menstrual health friendly?



“ ———

I am using a menstruation cup quite often, but I do not use it at work, because to use a cup, you need some space and a proper sink within the toilet. It's a pity that this is not possible everywhere.

————— ”

“ ———

Sometimes the toilet paper is not enough or the bins are not cleaned regularly. I would like to see some pads or tampons always available for everyone in case of an emergency.

————— ”

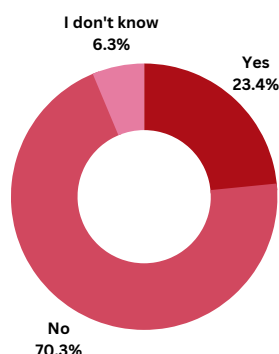
“ ———

There are bins, which is definitely most important. However, it is quite small, which is very uneasy with your bag and the movement restrictions. Furthermore, the toilet facilities do not include a machine in which one can buy tampons etc.

————— ”

There are many factors which respondents mentioned when considering whether the toilet facilities in their workplaces are menstrual health friendly or not and these included the presence of sanitary bins, enough toilet paper, the size and space of the toilet cubicles, whether sinks are present inside cubicles and whether there is access to period products in the toilet. The issues raised most frequently by respondents included not being able to use or wash their menstrual cups due to there not being a sink in the cubicle (this issue was mentioned by 32% of respondents) and the lack of access to period products (this issue was mentioned by 29% of respondents). When asked if respondents had consistent access to period products in their workplace, 24% answered that they did, while 70% answered that they did not.

Fig 7. Is there consistent access to period products at your place of work?



I would like to see some pads or tampons always available for everyone in case of an emergency.

I think it is a good idea to provide free period products for the employees, because some people can't afford it.

Many respondents shared that they would like to see period products freely available in the workplaces and shared that doing so would contribute to not only a better menstruating experience but would also help with fighting stigma.

Overall, the majority of respondents reported that the toilet facilities in the workplace were adequate for their menstrual health needs. However, the issues of not having a space to clean menstrual cups and a lack of freely available period products are issues felt by many respondents. Furthermore, while accessibility to menstrual health friend toilets are incredibly necessary, there are also other facilities that are important for overall menstrual well-being in the workplace. With this in mind, respondents were asked if there are secluded or quiet areas where they can go to rest if needed while at work. 31% shared that there were, while 59% shared that there was not.

Policies and support

A vast majority of the participants think that workplaces are in need of menstrual health policies - but only 3 % of them are aware of one in their place of work.

Menstrual health policies could promote inclusivity in the workplace for those who menstruate. Policies could include paid time off for menstrual-related illnesses (also known as menstrual leave), the provision of free menstrual products and pain relievers, more flexibility in work days or responsibilities, and more.

Fig 8. Are there policies in your workplace that allow for flexible working (ie. working from home) to accommodate menstruating employees?

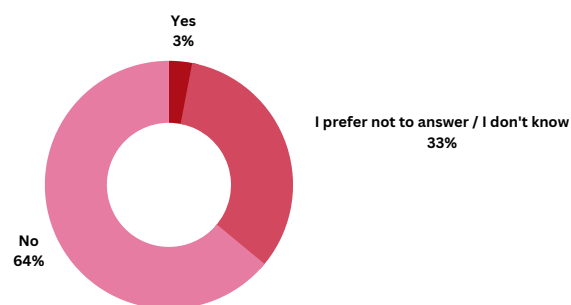
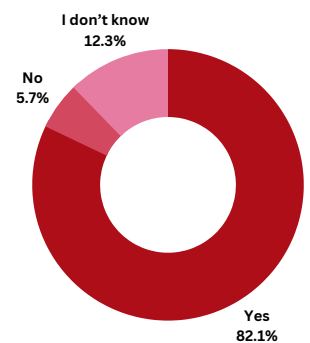


Fig 9. Do you think that workplaces need menstrual health policies?



An additional day/days off for menstruating people, i.e. a menstrual leave policy, is only in place at 3 % of the respondents' workplaces. 65% state that there isn't any and interestingly, about a third of the respondents does not know if there is.

This result stands in sharp contrast to the 82 % who think that workplaces are in need of menstrual health policies.

Yet there are many other ways in which the participants would wish their employer supported menstruators at work, for example to provide free period products, have more open conversations about menstrual health and have more flexibility in their working days.

Fig 10. Does your workplace provide any training or learning materials about menstrual health?

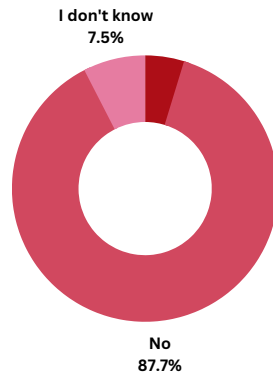
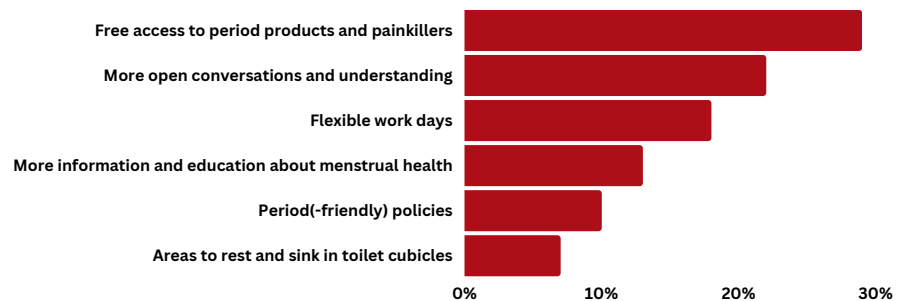


Fig 9. What would you like to see from your employer in relation to supporting menstruating employees?



When asked how they would like to see the stigma and shame around menstruation addressed in their workplace, the main suggestions were to have more open conversations about it, workshops or more education about the topic in general, addressing the misconceptions people can generally have, especially when it comes to period inclusivity, and to raise awareness through campaigns but also by providing menstrual products, as this would increase the visibility that periods are also a part of menstruating employees' working days.

Additional thoughts

The quotes below are answers from the open survey questions. These messages may assist in promoting better menstrual health at Dutch workplaces. A general message to organisations and managers is to create a safe environment in which menstrual health can be talked about. In many cases, employees themselves have constructive ideas for promoting menstrual health.

*I would like the topic to be out in the open. **Posters on the walls perhaps with a message like 'On your period? Take it easy.'** Also I would like this to be addressed in regulations around sick leave. So when people with periods sign a contract they get to hear **it's okay to take a day sick leave** on your period if necessary.*

It's a difficult dynamic I find, between some people who menstruate who think it is powerful to fully ignore their periods ("you can go skydiving in white pants on your period!"), which can be empowering for some, while it is also totally okay to admit that you feel crappy and in pain on your period and don't want to do anything.

***Free period products available in both men/women's bathrooms.** Or, just make the bathrooms gender neutral and then provide products.*

*Being explicit about options to **take time off or change their daily/ weekly schedule.***

“ —

Taking pain seriously, realising that this is different for everyone. From the colleagues I knew that they would say they are sick, never that this was because of their period.

— ”

“ —

*I find it hard to ask for a sick day off when I'm on my period, because I have to go talk to my men, boomer supervisors. They are nice people and I think they would be understanding, but just this process feels so uncomfortable to me. Also, I do not want to be seen as less worthy than my men colleagues because I always have to ask for a day off or so. **Maybe it's all in my head, but it is a factor that stops me from asking for the rest I deserve.***

— ”

“ —

*This survey really opened my eyes that as someone that works with mostly female employees, **there isn't much openness or awareness of menstruation.** I would like to see that change.*

— ”

“ —

***Periods should be celebrated!** We people with periods detox every month, break down and get rid of toxins, go through a cycle of death and re-birth. If this knowledge and the power in this is integrated in society and in the work environment, there are only benefits. For everyone. Yes, also for Peter.*

— ”

“ —

*“I’m glad this survey exists. I hope it helps push for some positive change. My periods are really debilitating and **I’m scared for my future** when I want to start my career at a big company and suddenly I lose it because they don’t have sick days for periods.”*

— ”

“ —

*How to keep **confidentiality during menstrual leave?** Sounds weird that the workplace will know employees menstrual cycle.*

— ”

“ —

Target people without a womb as well :) We need everyone for culture change.

— ”

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the survey is to bring attention to different experiences of menstrual health in the workplace in the Netherlands and explore what a period-friendly workplace consists of. Based on a review of literature, policy briefs and other surveys on the topic of menstrual health in the workplace, three main themes were inquired after in the survey: stigmatisation, facilities and policy.

Stigmatisation

Even though the majority of respondents from our survey claim that menstrual health can be discussed openly in their workplace, it is not a regular topic of discussion.

Menstruation is seen as a private matter, and some respondents mentioned that it would be a violation of privacy if their employer would know their menstrual cycle. Future research should explore stigmatisation of menstruation further, and examine what can be done to eliminate the taboo at work when present.



In practice, one could think of ways to support employees in assisting to maintain a balance, where they are as open as necessary and as private as wanted. Employers on the other hand could provide safe places where employees can share their feelings and thoughts.

Facilities

Although most of the respondents from our survey reported that toilet facilities were comfortable and clean, improvements can be made on making these facilities menstrual health friendly. As the survey did not focus on specific workplaces in the Netherlands, no general conclusions can be drawn on the state of facilities available for those who menstruate. It is however evident that the topic of facilities requires more attention.

- Tangible menstruation-friendly adaptations, such as providing period products for free, can be a first starting point for many workplaces to kickstart the conversation on menstrual health. This also includes support for employees to help articulate their needs towards a person in charge.

Policy

Menstrual health can be included in work policies in many ways, including allowing more flexibility and providing free menstrual products. Four out of five respondents from our survey indicated that their workplace needs a menstrual health policy. There is however no one-way-fits-all, and different workplaces will have other needs regarding a menstrual health policy.

- It is important to create a policy that works for everyone, and employees should have the opportunity to articulate their needs. Plus, employees need to be informed whether menstrual health issues qualify for sick leave.

Ensuring an optimal state of menstrual health is not only a personal but a social responsibility that demands attention from employers everywhere. We hope the results of this informal survey initiate further research on menstruation and the workplace in the Netherlands and beyond. This should also include research on the circumstances in different types of workplaces, circumstances for employees that experience menopausal symptoms and attitudes from employees and employers who do not menstruate.

GLOSSARY:

AS DEFINED IN "THE GLOSSARY FOR THE GLOBAL MENSTRUAL HEALTH MOVEMENT"

Menstrual cycle: A complex reproductive process in the female body that begins at puberty with menarche or the first period. It usually begins around the ages of 10 to 16, and ends at menopause (average age is 51), when menstrual periods stop permanently. The menstrual cycle has four phases: menstruation, the follicular phase, ovulation and the luteal phase. Menstruation marks the beginning of the menstrual cycle.

Menstrual health: A state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle.

Menstrual leave: A form of leave which grants an employee the option to take paid or unpaid time-off from their employment and/or work flexibly which does not count towards sickness absence, for menstruation or menopause related symptoms

Menstruator: An inclusive term to describe all people who experience menstruation. This is a gender neutral term used to refer to all people who may experience menstruation as a biological function. This inclusive term is used to denote that not all people who experience menstruation identify as women (ie. trans men, nonbinary or intersex individuals), and that not all women menstruate (ie. post menopausal women, or women who have undergone hysterectomy).

Period/menstrual stigma: A mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person related to their menstruation or menstrual experience. This includes the social stain and loss of status, due to menstruation. Through the process of being stigmatised, menstruators often become socially stained or discredited because they hold a characteristic that is classified as unacceptable or undesirable.

Period/menstrual product: A physical internal or external product used to absorb or collect menstrual blood and effluent.

Menstruation: The regular discharge of menstrual blood and mucosal tissue from the inner lining of the uterus through the vagina. It signals the beginning of a person's menstrual cycle. Normal menstrual bleeding lasts from 2-7 days per menstrual cycle. Menstruation stops during pregnancy, early breastfeeding and other times due to hormonal changes, extreme stress, or underlying medical issues.

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