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SUMMARY OF IMPORTANT EDITORIALS

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- 1. The opportunity in Cameroon to rebalance the WTO**
(GS Paper III - Economy)
- 2. India's future demographic challenges**
(GS Paper I - Society)
- 3. Let's talk about menstrual leave, who bears the cost**
(GS Paper I - Society)

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1. THE OPPORTUNITY IN CAMEROON TO REBALANCE THE WTO

(GS Paper III - Economy)

This editorial ‘**The opportunity in Cameroon to rebalance the WTO**’ was published in **The Hindu** on 19th Mar 2026, highlights that **WTO must reform its rules, dispute system and development balance** to remain relevant in an increasingly power-driven global trade order.

Why WTO reform has become urgent

- Trade is now increasingly shaped by **geopolitics**, with tariffs and economic dependence used as strategic tools.
- The **WTO** faces its deepest crisis since **1995**, making **MC14** in Yaoundé a critical moment for institutional adaptation.
- The core issue is not whether reform is needed, but whether the WTO can adapt quickly enough to remain relevant in a more transactional trade order.
- The **Appellate Body** remains paralysed, weakening trust because rules matter only when enforceable.
- WTO negotiations have also lagged behind shifts such as rapid growth in **digital commerce** and changing cross-border economic activity.
- With **166 members** at different development levels, consensus-based decision-making has become slow and often unproductive.
- If enforceable multilateral rules weaken, trade becomes more unstable and smaller countries suffer most.

Institutional deadlock and emerging risks

- Rising geopolitical tensions and tariff use have distorted markets, though this should not be mistaken for WTO irrelevance.
- Most global trade still operates under **WTO rules**, so institutional weakening would have systemic consequences.
- The **Munich Security Report 2026** describes the drift toward “wrecking-ball politics”, where disruption and short-term deals replace gradual reform.
- In trade, this is visible in unilateral tariffs, economic coercion, and bilateral arrangements that bypass multilateral commitments.
- Continued drift could replace rules-based trade with ad hoc arrangements shaped more by power than shared principles.

Why old trade rules no longer fit

- The earlier balance of rights and obligations in the **WTO** no longer reflects present production and trade realities.
- Emerging economies now export more advanced and technology-intensive products.
- **Climate-related trade measures** are expanding and digital networks are reshaping global production.
- Rules designed for a late **20th century** trading system cannot adequately govern a **21st century** one.

What meaningful reform should address

- Reform must begin with restoring a credible **dispute settlement** system, since commitments lose value without enforceable adjudication.
- Members need a binding, trusted mechanism instead of overreliance on temporary alternatives lacking universal acceptance.
- Predictability must be balanced with **fairness**, especially in disputes over agricultural subsidies, market distortions, and unequal openness.
- Many developing countries argue that rules may be legally correct yet still produce developmentally unequal outcomes.
- Reform should improve responses to distortive practices and revisit **special and differential treatment** so it remains meaningful in current conditions.

Need for flexibility without fragmentation

- The WTO's structures were built for a smaller and less complex membership, contributing to present deadlock.
- Smaller-group initiatives on **e-commerce**, investment facilitation, and services can aid progress if they remain transparent, inclusive, and linked to the wider WTO framework.
- Flexibility should move the system forward, not divide it.
- If such initiatives stay open to all members and later feed into common rules, they can support reform rather than fragmentation.

Normative choice before MC14

- WTO reform is not only technical but also **normative**, because the alternative is a trade order favouring the powerful and exposing weaker countries.
- The WTO's core value lies in ensuring trade is governed by **rules rather than coercion**.

- In an era of strategic competition, rules do not weaken sovereignty; they protect countries from economic domination.
- The choice before MC14 is between serious reform that preserves the WTO's stabilising role and institutional drift toward fragmentation.
- Rebalancing the WTO is ultimately about preserving a workable framework for cooperation in an interdependent world.

BEYOND EDITORIAL

Way Forward for a Fair and Effective WTO Reform

- **Restore dispute settlement:** The **Appellate Body** must be revived, as it has remained non-functional since **December 2019**.
- **Rebalance development concerns:** Reform must address fairness in **agriculture**, including long-pending disputes over **public stockholding** for food security.
- **Update trade rules:** WTO disciplines must reflect **digital trade**, where members are already negotiating through the **JSI on E-commerce**.
- **Retain multilateral credibility:** Smaller countries still need WTO rules, as MC14 itself will bring together officials from **166 members**.
- **Use flexible formats carefully:** Plurilateral tracks on **e-commerce**, **investment facilitation** and **services domestic regulation** should stay open and WTO-linked.
- **Improve institutional efficiency:** Consensus-heavy processes need reform so a **166-member** body can respond faster to present trade realities.
- **Preserve rules over coercion:** WTO reform matters because the alternative is a trade order shaped by **unilateral tariffs** and power politics.

2. India's future demographic challenges

(GS Paper I - Society)

This editorial 'India's future demographic challenges' was published in **The Hindu** on 19th Mar 2026, highlights that India's **demographic transition** is reducing youth pressure but creating major **challenges** in **schooling**, **jobs**, **ageing**, and **social protection**.

Demographic transition and emerging risks

- A report by the **International Institute of Migration and Development** and the **Population Foundation of India** projects India's population rising from **1,355.8 million** in 2021 to **1,590.1 million** in 2051.

- The average annual increase is only **0.5%**, indicating a prolonged phase of slower population expansion.
- The projections weaken older fears of **population explosion** and point to a shift beyond a youth-led, fast-expanding population.
- India is moving toward a more **urban**, steadily ageing, and balanced demographic structure.

Schooling pressures are changing

- The **0-4 years** population is projected to decline from **113.5 million** in **2021** to **8.6 million** by the middle of this century.
- With most regions nearing universal primary enrolment, demand for new schooling facilities may ease, especially in the **government sector**.
- Sustained fertility decline could increase “**uneconomic schools**” with low enrolment, raising risks of teacher job loss, a trend seen in **Kerala** for over three decades.
- **Unified District Information System for Education** data and **Ministry of Education** data show government schools fell from **11.07 lakh** in **2014-15** to **10.18 lakh** in **2023-24**, a drop of nearly **90,000**.
- Over the same period, private schools rose from **2.88 lakh** to **3.31 lakh**, an increase of **43,000**.
- Falling birth rates, smaller families, and greater capacity to pay for education have reduced enrolments in government schools and boosted demand for private schools.
- Parental preference for private schooling is also driven by social pressure and the perception that government schools lag in quality.

Demographic dividend has a limited window

- The demographic dividend depends mainly on the **working-age population** of **15-59 years**, whose higher share can accelerate economic growth.
- India’s workforce rises from **833.8 million (65.2%)** in **2021** to a projected peak of **1,009.0 million (65.5%)** in **2041**, before declining to **998.1 million (62.8%)** by **2051**.
- The demographic dividend window is expected to close after **2041**, making early utilisation critical.

- Even by **2051**, nearly **six in ten** Indians are expected to remain in the workforce, which is still encouraging.
- The editorial stresses urgency in leveraging this window before its growth contribution weakens.

Ageing will intensify fiscal and social stress

- India's **60+ population** stood at **130.5 million**, or **9.62%** of the population, in **2021**.
- By **2051**, this is projected to reach **325.3 million**, or **20.5%**, showing a sharp rise in ageing.
- The **median age** is projected to rise from **28 years** in **2021** to **40 years** by **2051**.
- A growing elderly population will increase pressure on **healthcare** and **social security**, straining public finances.
- Rapid ageing also requires redesign of financial and healthcare systems, especially **geriatric care**.

Policy signals and needed adaptation

- A declining child population could improve the **teacher-pupil ratio** and expand school infrastructure availability.
- Lower birth rates could reduce pressure on maternity care, enabling more rational resource use and better care quality.
- Despite fertility decline, continued investment is needed in **family planning**, prevention of unintended pregnancies, reduction of infertility, and protection of **women's reproductive rights**.
- India must overhaul **education** and **skill development** systems to prepare younger generations before the demographic leverage fades.
- Decline in the working-age share can be partly offset by greater female participation in formal work, creating a **gender dividend**.
- Expanding access to better-quality employment is necessary as the demographic structure changes.
- Rapid ageing could also generate a potential **silver economy**, opening scope for a second demographic dividend.

BEYOND EDITORIAL

Balancing Demographic Dividend and Ageing Pressures

- **Reorient school planning:** Falling child numbers require consolidation and quality upgrades, as **UDISE+ 2023-24** shows continued decline in government schools.
- **Use the dividend quickly:** India must expand jobs and skills before the workforce share peaks, as the editorial projects the **15-59** population peaking in **2041**.
- **Raise female participation:** A shrinking workforce can be partly offset by a gender dividend, with female **LFPR** already rising to **35.6%** in **2023-24 PLFS**.
- **Shift to learning quality:** Near-universal enrolment means policy must now prioritise outcomes over expansion, even as private schooling gains ground in **UDISE+** data.
- **Prepare for ageing:** Social security and pensions must expand as the elderly share rises, especially with schemes like **PM-SYM** offering old-age support to unorganised workers.
- **Build geriatric care:** Health systems must prepare for older populations through programmes like **NPHCE**, which provides dedicated elderly care in public facilities.
- **Promote a silver economy:** Ageing should also spur senior-care and assisted-living services, alongside the editorial's idea of a **second demographic dividend**.

3. LET'S TALK ABOUT MENSTRUAL LEAVE, WHO BEARS THE COST

(GS Paper I - Society)

- This editorial 'Let's talk about menstrual leave, who bears the cost' was published in **The Indian Express** on 19th Mar 2026, highlights that while **menstrual leave** can support **dignity** and **labour participation**, its design, funding, and wider menstrual health infrastructure determine whether it **empowers** women or deepens **discrimination**.

Debate triggered by the Court's concern

- The **Supreme Court** refused to hear a **PIL** on a national policy for menstrual leave, warning that making it compulsory could damage women's careers.
- The concern was that employers may avoid responsibility for women employees if leave becomes a mandated condition.
- The editorial frames the issue as a tension between reducing structural barriers and risking fresh labour-market discrimination.

Risk of unintended labour-market effects

- Menstrual leave may legally permit rest during painful or debilitating periods and improve women's retention in work.
- Yet evidence cited by the editorial suggests employer-funded leave can also reinforce discrimination in hiring.
- A parallel is drawn with the **Maternity Benefit Act, 2017**, which introduced **six months** of employer-funded maternity leave.
- A **2025** study by **Purna Banerjee, Shreya Biswas, and Debojyoti Mazumdar** found that policy significantly reduced employment probability for women aged **20-29**, especially in high-skilled jobs with formal wages.

Why policy design matters

- The editorial argues that the formulation of any menstrual leave law is critical.
- **Spain**, the only Western economy cited with a national menstrual leave law, requires a doctor's certificate and funds the cost through publicly financed **social security**.
- Because the employer does not bear the cost directly, the chance of workplace discrimination is reduced.
- The key issue is therefore not only leave entitlement, but who finances it and under what conditions.

Need for evidence-based policymaking

- The editorial calls for more quantitative evidence on whether paid period leave reduces unemployment discrimination and what it does to women's labour productivity and retention.

- It suggests cross-State comparisons, including with **Karnataka** and **Odisha**, which already offer menstrual leave policy in some form, against States without such provisions.
- It also suggests firm-level comparison between companies that offer paid period leave and those that do not.
- Policy should be built on data-driven, evidence-based analysis rather than assumption.

From leave policy to menstrual health policy

- The editorial argues for a national **menstrual hygiene** policy covering all menstruating persons, not just rural schoolgirls.
- **Menstrual Health Management** initiatives should extend to working and non-working menstruating persons.
- Such a policy should go beyond subsidised sanitary pads.
- It should include incentives for **sanitary napkin** manufacturing, guidelines for napkin provision, and **MHM infrastructure** at workplaces.
- It also suggests additional medical leave for persons with severe period pain, possibly through protocols for pain management.

Infrastructure and workplace support

- Building on the **Swachh Bharat Mission**, the editorial proposes a **Swachh Bharat, Sashakt Nari Mission** to create or upgrade toilets for women and girls in public spaces and workplaces.
- It suggests using **CSR** funds to support municipal bodies, transport authorities, industrial areas, market associations, and other public spaces in expanding sanitation infrastructure.
- The focus is on maintenance and cleanliness of women's toilets across public spaces.
- Even without legal mandates, some companies are recognising that period leave or **work-from-home** options improve employee morale, loyalty, and labour productivity.
- Private firms can also provide flexible work arrangements or leave benefits at employee discretion.

BEYOND EDITORIAL

From Menstrual Leave to Menstrual Health Policy

- **Design leave carefully:** Menstrual leave should reduce distress without raising hiring bias, as the **Supreme Court** warned in **March 2026**.
- **Share costs fairly:** Public funding can reduce employer prejudice, as **Spain's 2023** law routes certified leave through **social security**.
- **Use evidence before scale-up:** Policy should draw on State comparisons, since **Odisha** already gives women staff **12 extra leave days** yearly.
- **Learn from subnational models:** Reform can also study **Karnataka's 2025** policy of one paid menstrual leave day a month.
- **Expand beyond leave:** Menstrual policy should cover all menstruating persons, as even the Union's policy focus has centred mainly on **schoolgirls**.
- **Build workplace infrastructure:** Safe toilets and disposal systems need priority, extending the logic of **Swachh Bharat** into workplaces and public spaces.
- **Promote flexible practices:** Firms can improve retention through **work-from-home** or discretionary support, which the **Supreme Court** itself preferred over compulsion.