

Abstract

Background: The menstrual burden of women is a critical concern. Nevertheless, menstrual leave has been taken only by a small percentage of the female working population in Japan. We aim to describe the current menstrual burdens, including symptoms, perceptions, unmet needs, and economical burden, as well as barriers to taking menstrual leave among Japanese working women.

Methods: For this cross-sectional study, an online survey of Japanese working women aged 15-49 (from the first possible year of full-time employment in Japan to the general age for menopause) was conducted. We limited the target population to full-time female workers and excluded women who were on special leave. Using self-reported data, descriptive analyses were conducted to examine the physical, psychological, and economic burdens of menstruation and the possible barriers to taking menstrual leave.

Results: In total, 96 Japanese working women participated in our survey from 18 October to 5 December 2021. The mean age was 34.9 (standard deviation 7.3), and 80.0% of the participants had no history of childbirth. Approximately 80% of the participants experienced physical or mental distress during their menstrual period. In the modified Menstrual Distress Questionnaire (MDQ), more than half of the participants were affected by menstruation in one or more of the four symptoms (difficulty to express thoughts, lowered judgment, decreased work efficiency, and low confidence) during premenstrual and menstrual periods. Among the four symptoms, the impact was the greatest on decreased work efficiency. Those who felt uncomfortable to let their colleagues know that they had a menstrual period accounted for 50.0%. Merely 12.5% of the participants felt comfortable

enough to take menstrual leave when they read Article 68 of the Labour Standards Act. More than half of the participants (53.1%) perceived difficulty deciding whether to take menstrual leave, considering their condition. Similarly, 59.4% had pushed themselves to work even when their condition required taking leave from work. The most common desire concerning the economic burden was 1-2 days paid leave given every month, that cannot be carried over to the next month.

Conclusion: The present study explored menstrual distress, burdens, and the barriers to the use of menstrual leave among Japanese working women. The majority of Japanese working women who participated in this study had distress during their menstrual period, but more than half of them simultaneously pushed themselves to work even under difficult circumstances, because they felt some barrier to taking menstrual leave. The law on menstrual leave did not support them to feel comfortable to take the leave. Based on our findings, we recommend that social attitudes toward menstrual distress and burdens should be critically discussed. The work environment may well be advanced to have broader views of women's health in order to reduce the barriers to taking menstrual leave, and revision of Article 68 of the Labour Standards Act should be considered.

Keywords: Menstrual leave, burden, distress, Japanese working women, Article 68 of Labour Standards Act, modified MDQ.