

# Long Working Hours in Korea

## —Results of The 2010 Working Conditions Survey—

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**Abstract:** Long working hours adversely affect workers' safety and health. In 2004, Korea passed legislation limiting the working week to 40 h, to improve quality-of-life and to increase business competitiveness. In the present study, we explored the characteristics of work in Korea and compared our data of the second Korean Working Conditions Survey (KWCS) with those of the first KWCS. We found that the average number of hours worked weekly has been reduced but the proportions of workers who work for more than 48 h per week has increased over the 4 yr between the two Korean surveys in all categories studied (male, female, employee, self-employed, and employer). We also found that self-employed and employers work much longer hours than do employees, who are protected by the Labor Standards Act. This was particularly true in the accommodation and food service sectors. In conclusion, Korean workers work longer than do workers of EU countries. The use of average figures masks differences in the numbers of working hours among those engaged in various types of employment, or in certain work sectors. Therefore, the Korean government should not simply monitor reductions in average weekly working hours, but should identify employees working for over 60 h weekly, and reduce their working time.

**Key words:** Working hours, Employee, Self-employed, Employer, Korea, Working conditions survey

## Introduction

The length of time spent at the workplace is a key feature of working conditions. The length, scheduling, and organization of work time are important determinants of work quality. Turning to working hours, it has been reported that long working hours adversely affect workers' safety and health<sup>1–3</sup>. In 2004, Korea passed legislation setting the working week at 40 h, to improve quality-of-life and to increase business competitiveness. However,

Korea still has long working hours compared to those of other OECD countries<sup>4</sup>. The legislation was introduced in stages; the Korean government requested companies with more than 1,000 employees, financial and insurance companies, and public corporations, to be compliant by June 30, 2004; companies with 300–999 employees had until June 30, 2005 to comply; and companies with 100–299, 50–99, 20–49, and under 20 employees were to be compliant by the end of June 2006, June 2007, June 2008, and June 2011, respectively<sup>5</sup>. In 2004, the International Labor Organization (ILO) found that 49.5% of employees in Korea worked for more than 48 h a week<sup>6</sup>. After legislation was passed establishing the working week as 40 h for companies with 300 employees or more, the first Korean

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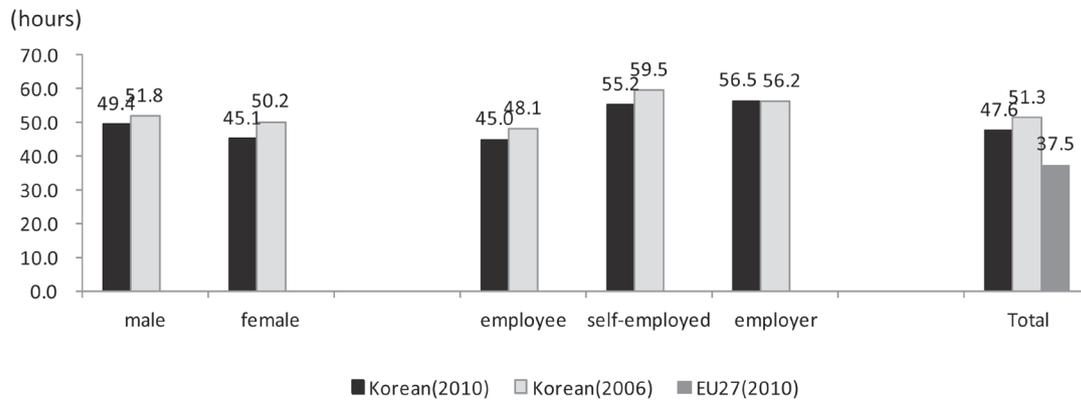


Fig. 1. Average weekly working hours.

Working Conditions Survey (KWCS)<sup>7</sup> was conducted. The second KWCS was performed 4 years later, when the legislation was applied to companies with 20 employees or more. In the present study, we analyzed working hours recorded in the second KWCS and evaluated changes, over the 4 years between the conduct of the first and second KWCS, in weekly working hours of employees, self-employed, and employers. We compared our data with the results of the first KWCS and those of the Fourth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS)<sup>8</sup>.

## Materials and Methods

We performed secondary analysis of data from the Second KWCS conducted in 2010 by the Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency<sup>9</sup>. The survey population was a representative sample of those aged 15 yr or over (in Korea, the legal minimum work age is 15 yr). Retired subjects, the unemployed, housewives, and students were excluded. The basic study design was multi-stage random sampling in the enumeration districts used for the 2005 population and housing census. Fieldwork was performed by the Hyundai Research Institute between June 20, 2010 and October 10, 2010. A total of 10,019 interviews were conducted. Survey data were weighted with reference to the economically active population. In other words, distributions by region, locality, gender, age, economic activity, and occupation were identical to those of the overall active population at the time of the survey. The questionnaire contained items exploring work time, physical risk factors at work, work organization, the impact of work on health, satisfaction with working conditions, and the presence of violence/ bullying/ harassment in the workplace. The methodology used and the questionnaire employed were

almost identical to those of the EWCS<sup>10</sup>. In the present study, we sought to provide an overview of working hours in Korea.

## Results

### Average weekly working hours

Korean workers work an average of 47.6 h per week. Self-employed workers and employers work an average of 55.2 and 56.5 h per week, respectively whereas the figure for employees is 45 h. A clear reduction in weekly working hours has occurred over the last 4 yr (Fig. 1).

The proportion of Korean workers who work for more than 5 d per week decreased over the past 4 yr. However, Korean workers still have a longer working week than did those of the EU27 survey<sup>8</sup>; approximately 50% of Korean workers worked for more than 5 d per week in 2010.

### Weekly working hours by employment status

The distribution of average weekly working hours according to employment status is shown in Fig.2. When weekly working hours (in working-hour bands recommended by ILO) were compared by employment type, 33.5% of employees had 40-h working weeks, forming the employee peak, whereas 48.9% of self-employed worked very long hours, thus 60+ h per week; this was also true of 40.9% of employers. However, 19.5% of employers worked 40 h per week.

### Weekly working hours by sector

Average weekly working hours were compared by sector. Those who were self-employed in the accommodation and food service, wholesale-retail trade, and membership organization, repair and other personal services sectors



Fig. 2. The distribution of weekly working hours by employment status.

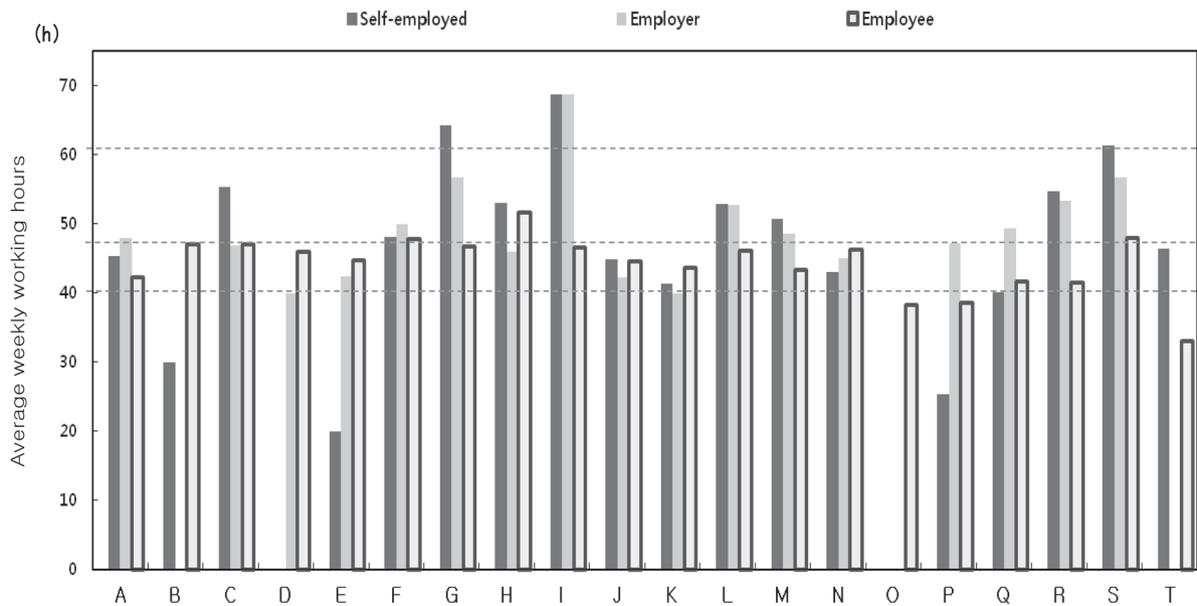


Fig. 3. Average weekly working hours by sector.

A. Agriculture, forestry, and fishing, B. Mining and quarrying, C. Manufacturing, D. Electricity, gas, and water supply, E. Waste management, materials recovery, F. Construction, G. Wholesale and retail trade, H. Transportation, I. Accommodation and food services, J. Information and communications, K. Financial and insurance activities, L. Real estate activities, renting, leasing, M. Professional, scientific, and technical activities, N. Business facilities management and business support services, O. Public administration and defence, social security, P. Education, Q. Health and social work activities, R. Arts, sports, and recreation-related services, S. Membership organization, repair, and personal services, T. Household employer activities.

worked, on average, more than 60 h a week, as was true of employers in the accommodation and food service sector. All employees worked, on average, less than 60 h a week (Fig. 3).

*Long working hours*

About 50% of all Korean workers work for over 48 h per week, defined as “long working hours”. Increases in the proportions of those working over 48 h per week over

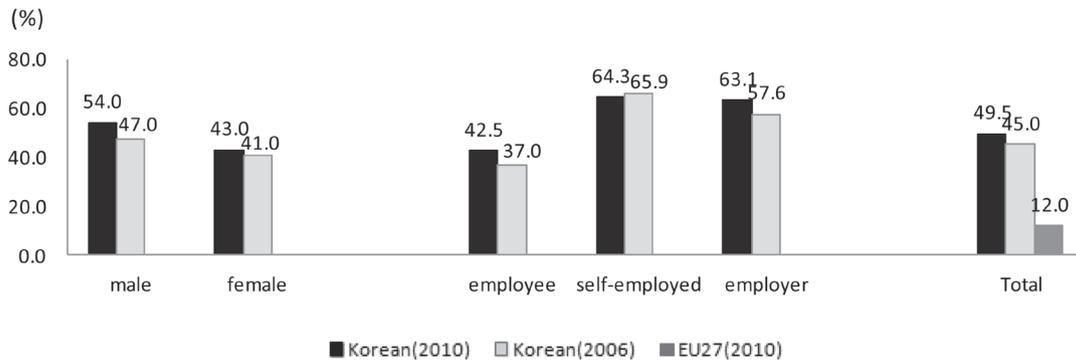


Fig. 4. The proportions of those working over 48 hours per week.

the last 4 yr were evident in all categories studied (male, female, employee, self-employed, and employer). The proportion of such workers recorded in the second KWCS was four-fold that recorded in EWCS 2010 (Fig. 4).

## Discussion

When it became clear that Koreans worked longer hours than did workers in other OECD countries, the Korean government implemented a policy aimed at reducing working hours. The 2010 survey results, compared to those of the 2006 survey, showed that average weekly working hours of employees, the self-employed, and employers, have been reduced.

As we stated in the background, in June 2004 it was legislated that a 40-h week should prevail in all workplaces, regardless of size, from July 2011 at the latest. Thus, a further reduction in weekly working hours may be expected. Even though the self-employed and employers are outside the reach of the Labor Standards Act, the hours worked by these groups fell, on average, by over 4 h a week from 2006 to 2010. Thus, the reduction in the legal work hours of employees has seemingly driven a reduction in the work time of the self-employed and employers. However, further study is necessary to determine if it is possible that the observed reduction in working hours is attributable to any factor other than the relevant legislation.

The peaks for the self-employed and employers were at 60+ hours per week, whereas the employee peak occurred at 40 h per week (Fig. 2); this is because the Labor Standards Act is applicable solely to employees. Therefore, working hour regulations were partly effective compared to the 2004 survey of Korean working hours<sup>6)</sup> which revealed peaks at 49–59 and 60+ h; the smaller peak at 41–47 h band. However, the Labor Standards Act permit-

ted a maximum of 12 h overtime per week in the case of labor-management agreement. Payment to workers during overtime is 1.5 fold of regular working time. Korean employees may thus legally work for up to 52 h a week due to economic reasons<sup>5)</sup> although the preferred number of weekly working hours thus became 40.

The 2010 Working Conditions Survey revealed that average weekly working hours fell between 2006 and 2010, but the proportions of employees and self-employed working over 48 h per week increased by 5.5% and 3.9%, respectively, over the same interval. This may indicate that particular groups work very long hours although average working hours have decreased. Those who were self-employed in the accommodation and food service sectors; who worked in wholesale-related trade services; and who worked in the membership organization, repair, and other personal services sectors, worked for 60 h or more weekly. This tendency has become exacerbated over the 4 yr between the conduct of the two Korean surveys. This phenomenon is probably attributable to changes in industrial structure; from employees in enterprises to self-employed in service sector.

The significance of the earlier 48-h week, as set by the Hours of Work (Industry) Convention 1919 (ILO Convention No. 1), is that the legal standard was set close to the point beyond which regular work becomes unhealthy, identified in the literature as 50 h<sup>2)</sup>. However, worker health and safety were not the sole objectives of the 48-h week. Other goals are evident in the debates preceding the adoption of Convention No. 1. Although health and safety concerns were voiced, the dominant rationale was to ensure adequate non-work, or “leisure”, time<sup>6)</sup>.

During the depression of the 1930s, reductions in working hours were identified as potentially promoting employment, and an international instrument, the Forty-Hour

Week Convention, 1935 (No. 47) referred to the hardship caused by widespread unemployment and required that measures to reduce working hours to 40 h a week should be implemented. Again, the 40-h week was not introduced solely to stimulate employment, being rather recognized as contributing to a broader range of objectives, including, in recent years, the notion of “work-life balance”<sup>6)</sup>.

However, the evidence indicates that continuously working long weeks (50 h or more a week), or a combination of long work hours in both a workplace and at home, is associated with both objective and self-rated health problems, sickness, and fatigue, although working hours may not be an independent predictor of health<sup>3)</sup>. Some reports have shown that continuously working long hours may affect health by compromising sleep time.

We found that the self-employed and employers tended to work for much longer hours than did employees protected by the Labor Standards Act. This was particularly true of those working in certain service sectors. In other words, the average figures mask differences in the distribution of working hours across the nature or sector of employment.

It is not easy to know the extent to which long working hours are undertaken, especially from an international perspective. The key reason is that the concept of long working hours is relative one, depending on how many hours can be seen as long enough to cause concern. There appears to be three ways of examining long hours: hours exceeding the statutory normal hours; hours exceeding the maximum hours of work beyond which negative consequences on workers are known to be visible; and hours exceeding those which workers prefer to work<sup>6)</sup>.

Thus, any work time reduction policy of the Korean government, introduced either to increase employment or to protect worker health, should prohibit employees from working overtime hours that exceed a certain numerical limit. Further, the government needs to campaign to achieve social and public consensus favoring work time reduction. This will improve the safety, health, and quality-of-life of all citizens, including those who are self-employed.

## Conclusion

Korean workers tend to work longer than do those of EU countries. Average weekly working hours have been reduced in the last 4 yr but the proportion of workers working long hours (more than 48 h per week) has increased over the same interval. This means that particular groups of workers now work longer than was formerly the case. These are the self-employed; those providing accommodation and food services; those who work in the wholesale-retail trades; and those involved in membership organization, repair, and other personal service sectors to which the Labor Standards Act does not apply. Therefore, the Korean government should not simply monitor reductions in average weekly working hours, but should identify employees working for over 60 h weekly, and reduce their working time.

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