

## Editorial

# Psychosocial work environment in Asian countries

Almost a decade ago, in July 2013, Miwa Sado, a reporter for one broadcasting station in Japan, died of a heart attack<sup>1)</sup>. Reports revealed that she had worked more than 159 h that month and had taken only two days off. Similarly, this year in Jakarta, a tragic incident involving a young courier rider sparked widespread discussion on social media. The rider collapsed at the front gate of a customer and tragically lost his life instantly.

The state of working conditions in Asia is concerning, and there are many examples to illustrate this. Reports from international organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), indicate that almost two million employees die every year from work-related illnesses. Shockingly, 65% of these cases occur in Asia. Although the negative effects of poor working conditions are well-known, there are still limited improvements being made. Even in major cities like Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Tokyo, employees may appear to be living prosperous and urban lifestyles, but the reality is different. For instance, WHO and ILO's joint report shows that many Asians work more than 40 h per week<sup>2, 3)</sup>. Unfortunately, despite their hard work, many of these employees face issues such as being underpaid, unrecognized, and having limited job control. Such situations expose them to psychosocial risks that can adversely affect their psychological well-being and overall health.

While certain affluent Asian countries have different labour force characteristics, a significant portion of the workforce is engaged in the informal sector in several other countries, including Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Regrettably, casual workers are often deprived of the benefits provided by national labour laws and social protection measures. Most are left to fend for themselves and their families without employment protection. Due to the lack of regulations to safeguard employee rights, these workers suffer from sub-standard working conditions and low wages and are exposed to poor physical work environments. ILO estimated that approximately two billion workers were engaged in the informal sector globally in 2019, with nearly 1.3 billion residing in Asia-Pacific<sup>3)</sup>. This precarious situation places them at a heightened risk of experiencing physical and psychological injuries.

However, despite the increasing recognition of the impact of psychosocial factors on employee well-being and safety in the workplace, the concept of psychosocial risk factors is still relatively new, and much still needs to be explored in this area. The focus on workplace safety has predominantly centered on physical hazards and accidents<sup>4–6)</sup>, with limited attention given to the psychosocial aspects of work. While job stress has been extensively discussed in the literature<sup>7, 8)</sup>, the specific concept of psychosocial safety climate (PSC)<sup>9, 10)</sup> emerged only a decade ago. Although there have been intensive studies on PSC, it has gained a different popularity than research utilizing a safety climate approach<sup>11, 12)</sup>. The potential of PSC as a framework for understanding and addressing psychosocial risks is promising and requires further attention and investigation to ensure the psychological well-being of employees<sup>13)</sup>.

Inadequate attention has been given to psychosocial risk factors at work in Asia. Both academic reporting and policymakers are guilty of neglecting this issue. This can be attributed to the lack of strong policies and regulations that effectively address these matters, resulting in inadequate monitoring and enforcement of psychosocial risk management. Consequently, employees are exposed to adverse psychological outcomes. Furthermore, the lack of union power means employees do not have enough avenues to address and mitigate these risks, contributing to a culture where such issues are not adequately addressed and may go unnoticed. In some Asian cultures, there may be a norm of silence or reluctance to openly discuss work-related issues, leading to a lack of knowledge about available protections and resources for addressing such risks, and perpetuating a culture of silence.

Indeed, poverty is a significant factor that cannot be overlooked in the Asian context when considering employees' choices and decision-making regarding their working conditions. It is alarming to note that around 300 million regional workers continue to live in poverty, often alongside their families<sup>3)</sup>. This dire situation further exacerbates workers' challenges, making it difficult to assert their rights and demand better working conditions. The high cost of living and the dearth of employment options create a situation where employees may feel compelled

to endure unfavourable working conditions rather than risk unemployment or financial instability. The limited availability of employment options can further restrict employees' choices. They may feel compelled to accept whatever employment is available, even if it means accepting poor working conditions. The rising cost of living and a lack of viable alternatives can leave employees with little leverage to demand improvements in psychosocial risk management or seek alternative employment options that prioritise their well-being.

A decade ago, Kortum *et al.*<sup>14)</sup> found that workplace concerns related to psychosocial risks, such as job stress and mental health issues, were relatively less prominent than those concerning physical injuries in many developing countries. Although commonly recognised and extensively studied in Western literature, job stress may not be given the same importance by many employers in Asian contexts. Instead of identifying the broader organisational and environmental aspects that contribute to these risks, employees are often blamed or stigmatised if they experience difficulties coping with work-related stress.

While European countries often have strict regulations in place to protect employees' well-being and to promote safer working conditions, it is true that concerns and complaints about working conditions still exist. Even in countries with comparatively shorter working hours, such as Australia and Canada<sup>3, 15)</sup>, individuals may voice dissatisfaction with their work environments. Just imagine what would happen in a few Asian countries where the working conditions are far worse.

The research tradition regarding psychosocial issues in Asian contexts appears to lag behind its Western counterpart. Specifically, except for countries like Japan or China, most prominent scholars investigating psychosocial risks are based in Western countries, such as the USA, Canada, and Europe. While Australia and New Zealand are geographically closer to Asia, they are also considered Western rather than Eastern. Furthermore, although a few studies on psychosocial issues have been conducted, their methodological rigour remains questionable and needs investigation. Many studies still need to rely on cross-sectional or individual surveys, which limit our ability to draw definitive conclusions about the realities of working conditions. Additionally, these studies are often not published in reputable journals, limiting their accessibility to a wide range of knowledgeable readers worldwide.

Apart from the challenges mentioned earlier, it is important to address the issue of conceptual clarification. The way certain psychosocial risk factors at work are

interpreted and perceived can differ across cultural contexts. For example, while job control is commonly viewed as necessary in Western literature<sup>14, 16)</sup>, Erez<sup>17)</sup> argued that job control might not be seen as equally important in India. Similarly, Burke and El-Kot<sup>18)</sup> found a positive relationship between work hours and work engagement in Egypt, which is uncommon in most Western studies. Other studies revealed that higher psychological demands enhanced work engagement among Japanese employees<sup>19)</sup>. This raises the question of whether Asian researchers should develop their own definitions or construct clarifications to resolve the issues related to psychosocial risk factors. Developing region-specific definitions and construct clarifications can help capture the unique aspects of psychosocial risks in Asian contexts, considering cultural, social, and organisational factors that may influence the perception and experience of these risks.

In conclusion, all these scenarios raise a few critical questions. Are policies sufficiently addressing psychosocial risk issues in Asia? How can the quality of research be enhanced to provide accurate empirical findings on the current working conditions in Asia? Perhaps, now is an opportune time for policymakers and researchers to collaborate closely and find optimal solutions for addressing workplace challenges in Asia.

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