First Korean Working Conditions Survey: A Comparison between South Korea and EU Countries

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Abstract: This report aims to provide an overview of the intensity of work and work satisfaction in Korea by comparing the first Korean Working Conditions Survey with the results of the fourth European Working Conditions Survey in 2005. According to the comparison, Korean workers work longer hours than workers in the majority of EU countries. However, work intensity in the EU 27 was 1.5 times stronger than Korea. In Korea, the rate of violence, bullying and harassment in the workplace is much lower than the EU 27, but in terms of work satisfaction, EU workers responded more positively than Korean workers. The amount of leave in Korean workers was much lower than the EU counterparts, yet the average number of accident-related or other work-related leaves was greater in Korean workers than workers in the EU. The pattern of exposure to physical factors, namely the most frequent hazards, such as, repetitive movement and painful or tiring posture, is similar in Korean and EU workers. However, the proportion of each exposure is larger in Korean workers than EU workers. In Korea, the most frequently reported work-related symptoms are musculoskeletal disorders followed by stress and fatigue. These patterns are quite similar in Korea and EU countries.

Key words: Korean Working Conditions Survey, European Working Conditions Survey, Work intensity, Work satisfaction, Work-related symptoms, Work-related leave

Introduction

The workplace has changed dramatically due to the globalization of the economy, use of new information and communications technology, growing diversity in the workplace (e.g. increase in female, older, and higher educated workers) and an increased mental workload. Work itself and work environments play a significant determinant in the health of workers.

The European Foundation's *European Working Conditions Survey*, conducted every five years, has been providing a valuable insight into quality-of-work issues since 1990. The survey represents an effective means of tracking over time the impact of crucial issues and events: EU enlargement, the aging workforce and pressures associated with an ever-increasing pace of life, competitive-

ness, productivity, globalization and restructuring. The survey report contributes to be a source of reference for policymakers and as the basis for further research¹⁾. In 2005, the fourth European Working Conditions Survey was carried out simultaneously in 31 countries; the EU 25; the two acceding countries, Bulgaria and Romania; the two candidate countries, Croatia and Turkey; and Norway and Switzerland, which financed their participation in the survey. The number of interviews in EU 27 after quality control was 24,610¹⁾.

The Korean survey aims to provide an overview of the state of working conditions in Korea, as well as indicating the nature and contents of changes affecting the workforce and the quality of work. The specific objective of the survey is to develop social/occupational health indicators for the working environment.

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the first Korean Working Conditions Survey with the results of the fourth European Working Conditions Survey in 2005.

Subjects and Methods

KOSHA carried out its first Korean survey on working conditions in 2006²⁾. A representative sample of the economically active population aged 15 to 64 yr, i.e. persons who were either employees or self-employed at the time of the interview were selected. Retired and unemployed persons, as well as housewives and students were excluded. The basic sample design is a multi-stage random sampling. The Enumeration Districts in the 2005 Population and Housing Census was used for sampling. The fieldwork was carried out from the 26th of June, 2006 to the 26th of September by Gallop Korea. Out of a total of 46,498 visited households, 10,043 interviews were actually carried out. In general face-to face surveys involving random walk tend to face considerable (and increasing) difficulties in reaching the respondent (not only because of refusals and no response, but because of more mundane problems like difficulties in accessing the building, empty households, etc).

The survey weighting was carried out on the basis of the economically active population, which means that its distribution by region, locality, size, gender, age, economic activity and occupation is identical to that of the active population distribution. The questionnaire contains issues regarding working time, physical risk factors, work organization, impact of work on health, satisfaction with working conditions, and violence-bullying-harassment in the workplace, and so on.

The methodology and survey questionnaire of the first Korean Working Conditions Survey was almost the same as those of the European Working Conditions Survey.

Results and Discussion

The age and gender distribution of the subjects in Korea

The proportion of men is greater than that of women. The proportion of workers aged 30–49 yr is the highest, followed by the age range of 55 yr or more and 29 yr or below (Table 1).

Working time

Weekly working hours

Korean workers work an average of 51 h per week compared to the 38.6 h per week in the EU 27. Since 1991, there has been a clear and consistent trend in the EU towards a reduction in paid working hours, a trend which only slowed in 2005 due to the impact of the enlargement of the EU in 2004, where the new Member

Table 1. Gender and age distribution

		N	%
Gender	Male	5,812	57.9
	Female	4,231	42.1
Age	15–29	1,563	15.6
	30–49	6,033	60.1
	≥ 50	2,447	24.4

Fig. 1. Number of days worked per week (%).

States proved to have longer average working hours. Turkey had the longest working hours with 54.1 h per week.

Number of days worked per week

Fifty-three percent of Korean workers work more than 5 d per week compared to the 35% in the EU 27 (Fig. 1). Turkey has a longer working week than most other countries: almost 80% of Turkish workers work six or seven days. These figures probably reflect the differences in sectoral composition of Turkish economy compared to the rest of Europe, with a much higher proportion of workers in the agricultural sector where working hours are very long.

Long working hours

Forty-five percent of Korean workers work long working hours (more than 48 h per week) (Fig. 2) compared to the 15% in the EU 27. The country differences in Korea and EU follow the same trends as the figures for average working hours. The sectors most affected by long working hours are agriculture, hotels and restaurants and construction.

Shift work

Shift work has an important economic function in company operations and a large impact on individual working conditions.

Fig. 2. Long working hours (>48 h per week), by gender and employment status (%).

Fig. 3. Work satisfaction (%).

Approximately 10% of Korean employees are shift workers, whereas the EU 27 is comprised of 17.3% of shift workers. The most common type of shift work in Korea is 'rotating 2 shifts' (50.4%), followed by 'rotating 3 shifts' (33.7%), 'daily split shifts' (14.0%).

The differences between countries in the use of shifts are strongly influenced by the sectoral composition of the economy. In the EU 27, 29% of the workforce is employed in manufacturing compared to 21.1% in Korea.

Satisfaction with working conditions

Proportions of work satisfaction

Korean workers were less satisfied at their work than the EU average.

Sixty-seven percent of Korean workers responded as being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with working conditions in their job compared to the 82% in the EU 27 (Fig. 3). Of course these aggregate figures conceal large differences between countries. In general, national levels of satisfaction with working conditions appear to track closely standard measures of national wealth: countries with higher GDP per person report generally higher lev-

els of satisfaction.

Indicators of satisfaction with work

Estimation on satisfaction according to positive job elements was made. Results showed that Korean workers answered more negatively than the EU average on all 5 items including good friends at work, pay, feel at home, opportunity to learn, and job security except for career advancement. There was an especially big difference in terms of job security (Fig. 4).

Support

Korean workers were not as supported from colleagues, superiors/boss and external assistance as those in the EU. Twenty-nine percent of workers were supported from colleagues, 23% were supported from superiors/boss, and 17% were supported from external assistance (Fig. 5).

Violence, bullying and harassment in the workplace

Less than 1% of Korean workers say they have experienced physical violence from people within their workplace (0.3%) or outside the workplace (0.6%), bullying (0.7%) or harassment (0.6%) in the workplace compared to 25 EU countries showing violence from people within the workplace with 2%, violence from people outside the workplace with 4%, and bullying and harassment with 5%. It is hard to explain why there is such a big difference between Korea and EU solely based on the data of this survey.

Work organization

Intensity of work

'Intensity of work' indicates 'work demand'. 'Intensity of work' index was computed as the average of two indicators: 'working at very high speed' and 'working to tight deadlines'. The index assigns a value of 0 to 'never', 10 to 'almost never', 25 to 'a quarter of the time' 50 to 'around half of the time', 75 to 'around three quarters of the time' 90 to 'almost all of the time', and 100 to 'all of the time'. The work intensity index for Korean workers is 30% compared to 45% in the EU 27.

Autonomy at work

More than 60% of Korean workers are able to choose or change the order in which they perform tasks, their speed of work or their working methods. It is similar to the EU 27 with more than 60%.

Physical risk factors

The term 'physical risk factors' refers to physical risks in the broadest sense, encompassing exposure to physical or ergonomic risks (e.g. work involving painful or tiring positions), biological or chemical risks, as well as to

Fig. 4. Satisfaction with positive job elements (%).

Fig. 5. Social support at work (%).

ambient or environmental risk factors (e.g. noise, high/low temperatures). 'Radiation' indicates X-rays, radioactive radiation, welding light, and laser beams.

The two most common risks for men and women are repetitive hand/arm movements and working in painful or tiring positions: 71% make repetitive hand/arm movements a quarter of the time or more, while 61% work in painful or tiring positions compared to the EU 25 with 62% and 46%, respectively (Fig. 6). By sector, the most exposed groups in painful or tiring positions are skilled agricultural and fishery workers, services in restaurants, driving and transportation work. This pattern is similar to the EU countries.

Impact of work on health

Types of work-related health problems

The Korean survey revealed the most often reported work-related symptoms to be muscular pain (shoulder, neck, upper arms and lower extremities) (18.1%), followed by stress (17.9%), backache (16.8%), fatigue (16.7%) and headache (11.2%). The priority pattern in

Fig. 6. Exposure to physical risks (%).
(* proportions exposed a quarter or more of the time).

Table 2. Types of work-related health problems

Symptom	Korea 2006 (per 100 workers)	EU 27, 2005 (per 100 workers)
Muscular pain	18.1	22.8
Stress	17.9	22.3
Backache	16.8	24.7
Fatigue	16.7	22.6
Headache	11.2	15.5
Irritability	not surveyed	10.5
Injuries	7.0	9.7
Stomach ache	6.7	5.8
Sleeping problems	5.1	8.7
Eyesight problems	5.1	7.8
Skin problems	4.8	6.6
Anxiety	4.5	7.8
Depression	3.4	not surveyed
Hearing problems	2.7	7.2
Allergies	2.2	4.0
Respiratory problems	2.0	not surveyed
Heart disease	1.0	2.4
Other	0.4	1.6

Table 3. Health-related leave

	Average no. of days taken by workers who took at least one day of leave	Average no. of accident-related days taken by workers	Average no. of other work-related days taken by workers
Korea average	13.4	4.2	8.0
Men	15.4	6.4	7.7
Women	11.0	1.5	8.4
EU-27 average	20.2	0.4	1.8
Men	19.2	0.5	1.8
Women	21.3	0.4	1.7

Korea is similar to the EU (Table 2).

Health-related leave

Number of days of health-related leave in the previous 12-month period is as follows (Table 3). The average number of days taken by Korean workers who took at least one day of leave during the last 12 months is smaller than the EU, but the average number of accident-related or other work-related days taken by Korean workers during the last 12 months is bigger than the average of the EU.

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