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Original Article

Long Working Hours in Korea: Based on the 2014 Korean Working Conditions Survey



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ABSTRACT

Background: Long working hours adversely affect worker safety and health. In 2004, Korea passed legislation that limited the work week to 40 hours, in an effort to improve quality-of-life and increase business competitiveness. This regulation was implemented in stages, first for large businesses and then for small businesses, from 2004 to 2011. We previously reported that average weekly working hours decreased from 2006 to 2010, based on the Korean Working Conditions Survey.

Methods: In the present study, we examine whether average weekly working hours continued to decrease in 2014 based on the 2014 Korean Working Conditions Survey.

Results: The results show that average weekly working hours among all groups of workers decreased in 2014 relative to previous years; however, self-employed individuals and employers (who are not covered by the new legislation) in the specific service sectors worked > 60 h/wk in 2014.

Conclusion: The Korean government should prohibit employees from working excessive hours and should also attempt to achieve social and public consensus regarding work time reduction to improve the safety, health, and quality-of-life of all citizens, including those who are employers and self-employed.

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1. Introduction

Employed individuals in Korea work more hours than those in other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries [1]. Long working hours can adversely affect worker safety and health [2–4]. We previously examined long working hours in Korea using results from the 2006 and 2010 Korean Working Conditions Survey. Over this 4-year period, there was a decline in the average number of hours worked per week, but the proportion of employed individuals who worked > 48 h/wk increased in each category studied (male, female, employees, self-employed individuals, and employers). Individuals who were self-employed or employers worked longer hours than employees, who are protected by the Labor Standards Act, and this was particularly notable in the Accommodations and food service sector [5].

In 2004, Korea passed legislation that established the work week as 40 hours, in an effort to improve quality-of-life and

increase business competitiveness. This requirement was introduced in stages. Companies with > 1000 employees, financial and insurance companies, and public corporations had to be compliant by June 30, 2004; companies with 300–999 employees by June 30, 2005; and companies with 100–299 employees, 50–99 employees, 20–49 employees, and < 20 employees by the end of June 2006, June 2007, June 2008, and June 2011, respectively [6].

We previously examined the period of 2006 and 2010, when there was enforcement of these regulations to workplaces with 300–999 employees and 20–49 employees, respectively. The present study compared working hours in 2014, when the regulations extended to all workplaces, with previous data from 2006 and 2010.

2. Materials and methods

We performed a secondary analysis of data from the fourth Korean Working Conditions Survey, conducted in 2014 by the Korea

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Occupational Safety and Health Agency [7]. The survey population was a representative sample of workers aged 15 years (legal minimum work age in Korea) or older. We included individuals who worked for pay or profit for at least 1 hour in the week preceding the interview. Thus, individuals who were retired, unemployed, homemakers, or students were excluded. An individual was classified as employed if they worked for pay. An individual was classified as employer if they worked for profit using paid employees. An individual was classified as self-employed if they worked for themselves without using paid employees.

The basic study design was a multistage random sampling in the enumeration districts used for the 2010 population and housing census. A total of 50,007 face-to-face interviews were conducted as planned (50,000 interviews). The total of 50,007 participants included 30,751 employees, 16,039 self-employed, and 3,217 employers. The survey data were weighted with reference to the economically active population, in that the sample distributions by region, locality, sex, age, economic activity, and occupation were identical to those of the overall economically active population at the time of the survey. The questionnaire collected information about 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, or harassment in the workplace. The methodology used and the questionnaire employed were almost identical to those of the European Working Conditions Survey [8].

3. Results

3.1. Changes in average weekly working hours from 2006 to 2014

Overall, Korean individuals who were employed worked an average of 46.3 h/wk in 2014 (Fig. 1). During 2014, employees worked an average of 43.4 h/wk, self-employed individuals worked an average of 51.0 h/wk, and employers worked an average of 55.1 h/wk. All three groups, both male and female, experienced a clear decline in average weekly working hours over the past 8 years.

3.2. Changes in long working hours

In 2014, 47% of all Korean workers working for an average of > 48 h/wk, defined as *long working hours* by the International Labor Organization (Fig. 2). Overall, the percentage of employees worked an average of > 48 h/wk increased from 2006 to 2010, but

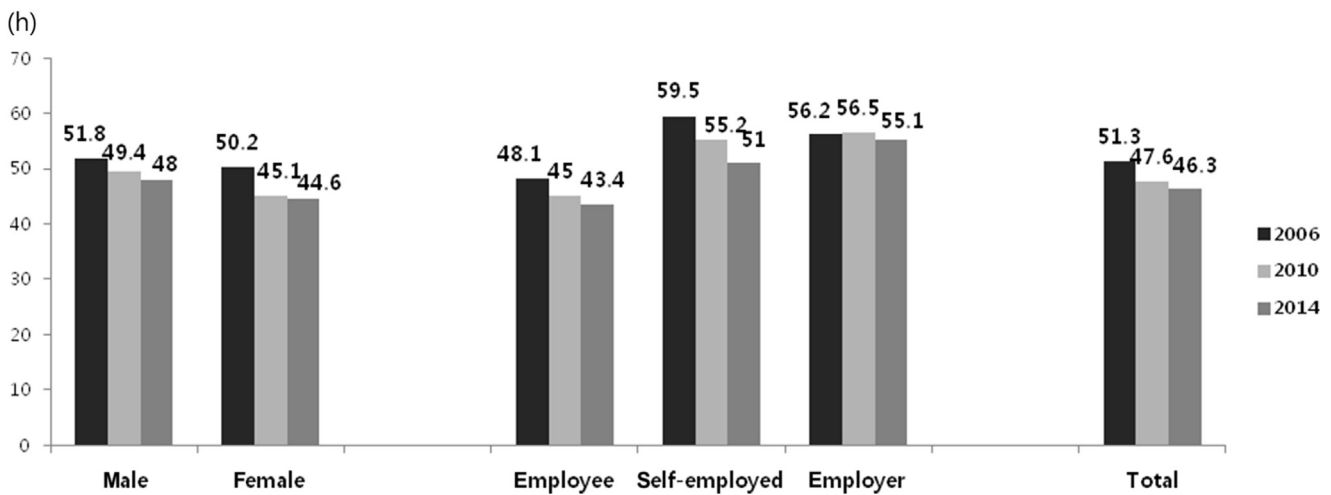


Fig. 1. Average weekly working hours from 2006 to 2014 according to sex, employment status, and overall.

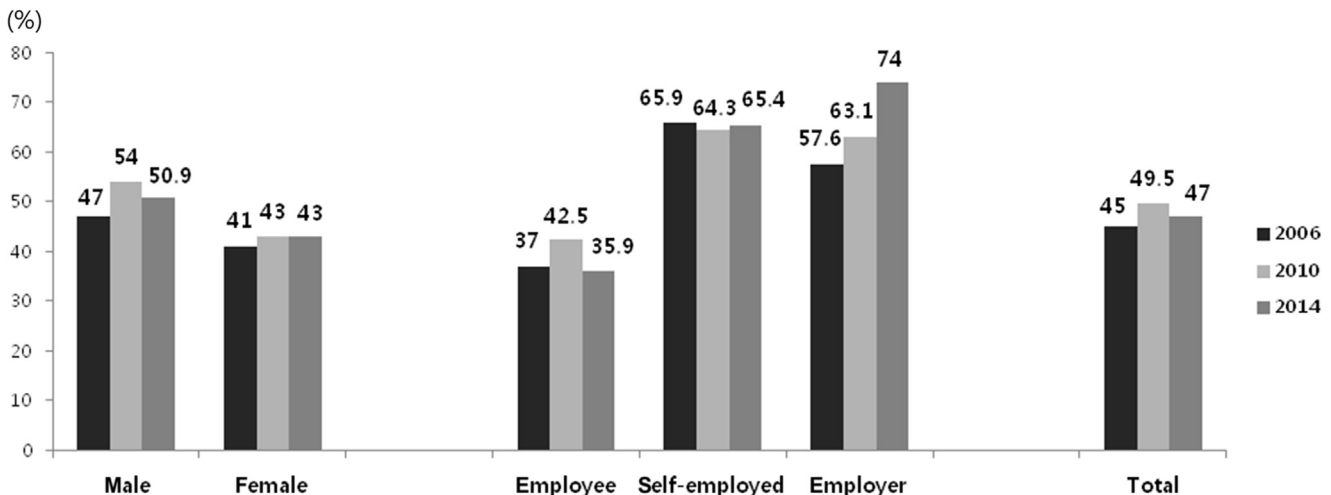


Fig. 2. Percentage of individuals who worked > 48 h/wk from 2006 to 2014 according to sex, employment status, and overall.

decreased in 2014. Self-employed individuals had little change over these years, but employers had a consistent increase from 2006 (57.6%) to 2014 (74%).

3.3. Weekly working hours by employment status

We also compared weekly working hours during 2014, using working-hour bands recommended by the International Labor Organization for type of employment [9] (Fig. 3). A total of 38.8% of employees had 40-h work weeks, whereas 48.3% of employers and

42.1% of self-employed individuals worked very long hours (at least 60 h/wk).

3.4. Weekly working hours by employment sector

Average weekly working hours also varied according to employment sector (Fig. 4). Individuals who were employers in the sectors of Accommodation and food service and Art, sports, and recreation-related services worked an average of > 60 h/wk. Self-employed individuals in the Accommodation and food service

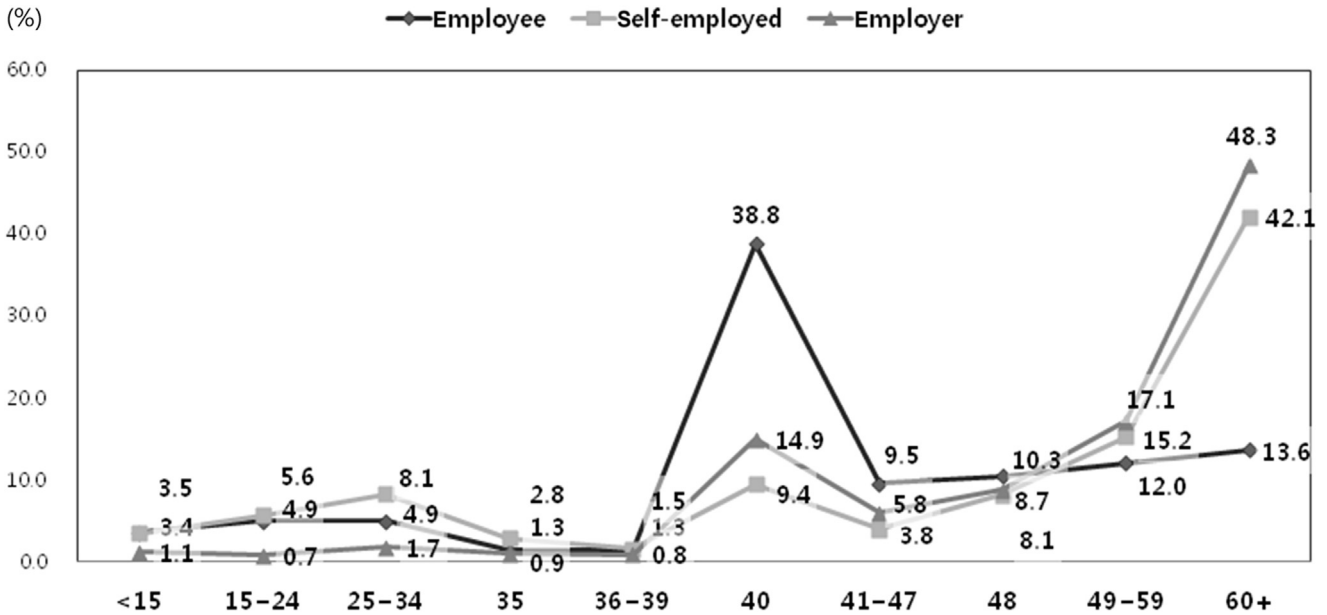


Fig. 3. Distribution of weekly working hours for employees, self-employed individuals, and employers during 2014.

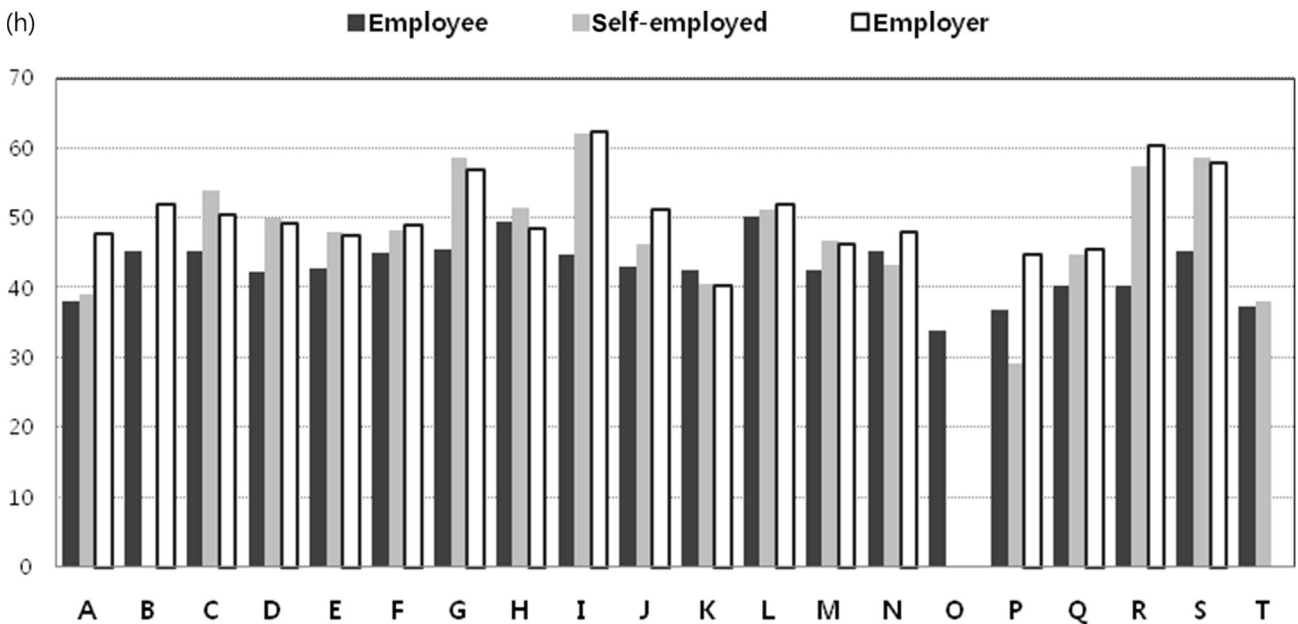


Fig. 4. Average weekly working hours in different employment sectors by employees (black bars), self-employed individuals (gray bars), and employers (open bars) during 2014. Employment sector: A, Agriculture, forestry, and fishing; B, Mining and quarrying; C, Manufacturing; D, Electricity, gas, and water 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 defense, 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.

sector also worked > 60 h/wk. Employees in each of the analyzed sectors worked an average of < 50 h/wk.

4. Discussion

When it became clear that Koreans worked longer hours than those in other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, the Korean government implemented a policy aimed to reduce working hours. Thus, in 2004, the Korean government legislated a 40-hour week for all workplaces, regardless of size, by July 2011 at the latest. Thus, our observation of a further reduction in weekly working hours in 2014 was expected. Moreover, we also observed that the percentage of employees working > 48 h/wk decreased from 37% in 2006 to 35.9% in 2014 (Fig. 2), and the percentage of employees working 40 h/wk (legal working time) increased from 33.5% in 2010 to 38.8% in 2014 [5]. Moreover, in 2014, employees in all sectors worked an average of ≤ 50 h/wk.

However, the proportion of employees working > 40 h/wk remained high in 2014 (45.4%). This may be because the Labor Standard Act permitted a maximum of 12 h of overtime work per week in cases of labor-management agreement.

Even though the self-employed are outside the reach of the Labor Standards Act, the hours worked by this group also fell from 2006 to 2014. Moreover, we found the average weekly working hours were > 60 for the self-employed individuals in only Accommodation and food service, whereas the average weekly working hours were > 60 for the self-employed in many more sectors in 2010. Thus, the reduction in legal working hours of employees has apparently driven a similar reduction in the working hours of the self-employed. Further study is necessary to determine if the observed reduction in working hours are attributable to factors other than the new legislation.

However, we found the average weekly working hours were > 60 for employers in two sectors such as Accommodation and food service and Arts sports, and recreation-related services in 2014, compared to only one sector in 2006. Furthermore, the percentage of employers who worked > 48 hours in these sectors have increased remarkably in 2014.

The self-employed and employers tended to work for much longer hours than employees, who are protected by the Labor

Standards Act. This was particularly true for certain service sectors, although average weekly working hours generally decreased for all workers over time.

Average values mask differences in the distribution of working hours for different types of employees and in different sectors of employment. For example, the self-employed and employers still tended to work > 60 hours in certain service sectors in 2014, although the average weekly working hours decreased when all Korean workers were analyzed together.

5. Conclusion

The Korean government should prohibit employees from working overtime hours that exceed certain limits. Further, the government needs to achieve social and public consensus regarding the need for work time reduction. This will improve the safety, health, and quality of life of all citizens, including those who are employers and self-employed.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

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