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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

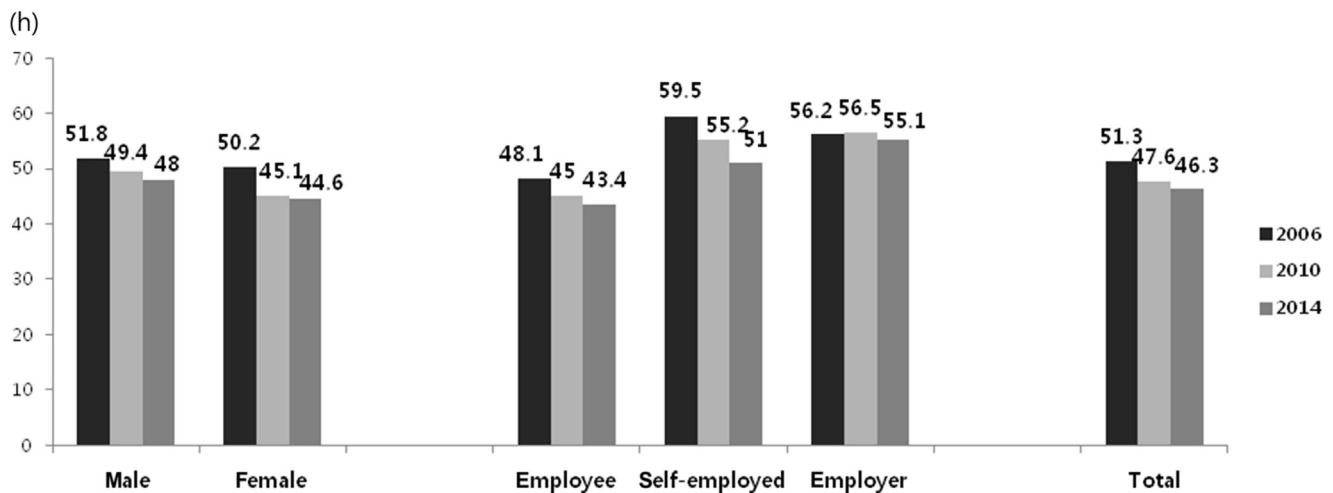


Fig. 1. Average weekly working hours from 2006 to 2014 according to sex, employment status, and overall.

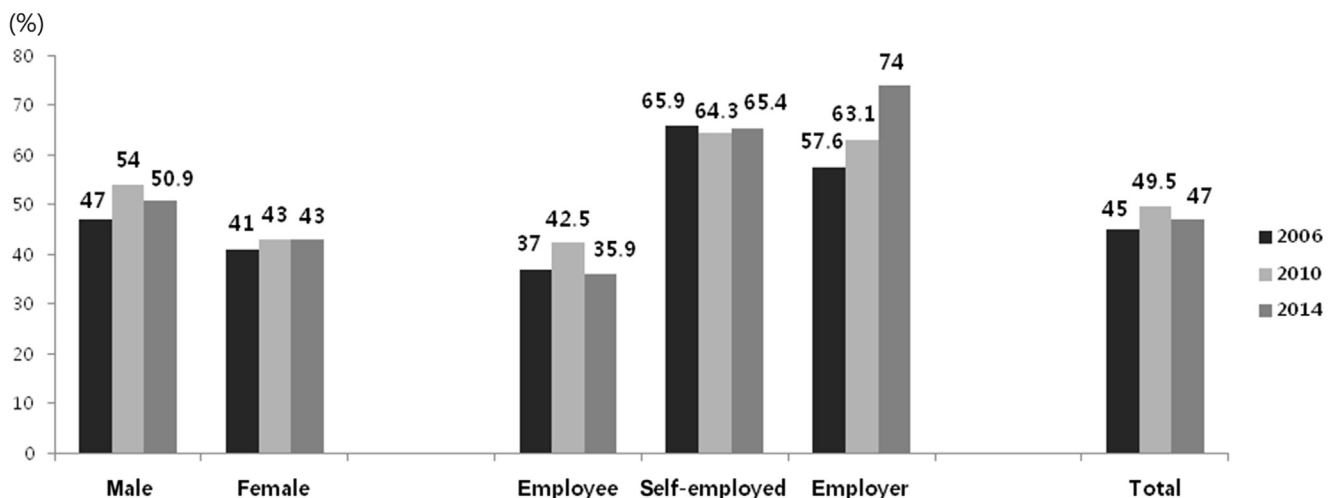


Fig. 2. Percentage of individuals who worked > 48 h/wk from 2006 to 2014 according to sex, employment status, and overall.

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