

Editorial



Special Series I: Working hours as a social determinant of workers' health

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OPEN ACCESS

Received: Jun 15, 2023

Revised: Jun 25, 2023

Accepted: Jun 26, 2023

Published online: Jul 6, 2023

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no
competing interests.

A fundamental component of decent work is adequate working time arrangements.¹ In Korea, the Labor Standards Act enacted in May 1953 included legal regulations for working hours for the first time. The act established an 8-hour day and a 48-hour week as the standard working hours, while also allowing workers to work for up to 60 hours per week. However, it is important to note that despite these regulations, low wages and long working hours have been prevalent for decades, including during the early days of Korean economic growth.² In 1988, the number of annual working hours reached 2,910 hours.³ Only after the statutory working hours of the Labor Standards Act were revised in 1989, which reduced working hours from 48 to 44 hours per week, did the number of working hours turn toward a decreasing trend.⁴ Since then, the government's efforts to shorten working hours have continued; the legal working hours were reduced to 40 hours per week in 2003, and were limited to a maximum number of working hours of 52 hours weekly in 2018. However, as of 2021, Korea's cumulative annual working hours are still long at 1,910 hours, remaining at the levels of Finland, Norway in the late 1960s, the United States, France in the early 1970s, and Japan in the early 1990s.⁵ These long working hours can be expected to negatively influence the health of Korean workers.

On 6 March 2023, the Yoon Suk Yeol government, which was established in 2022, announced a plan to reform the working-hour system.⁶ This announcement sparked a heated debate in Korean society about working hours. Among the various reform measures, the most controversial was the change in the basis period for calculating overtime work. To allow employers and employees to respond to corporate situations in a more flexible manner, the Yoon Suk Yeol government proposed removing regulations on the limits of weekly working hours and allowing overtime work to be managed on a monthly, quarterly, semiannual, and annual basis. According to this plan, the current maximum working hours of 52 hours per week would be relaxed, allowing up to 69 hours per week (11.5 hours per day for 6 days, e.g., working 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., one hour lunch, working 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., 30 minutes break, and working 6:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.). The Ministry of Employment and Labor stated that employers should reduce the total amount of overtime work if the basis period for calculating overtime work is expected to be prolonged. This measure aims to protect the health of workers. However, it is worth noting that this change may also introduce the risk of increased variability in working time arrangements, including overtime work, potentially leading to the deterioration of workers' health.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Jung-Choi K; Writing - original draft: Jung-Choi K; Writing - review & editing: Jung-Choi K, Jang TW, Kang MY, Kim J, Kim EA.

Accordingly, the *Annals of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AOEM)*, a representative academic journal in the field of occupational and environmental medicine, has published a special series on working hours to provide an academic basis for these social discussions. This series examines the current status of working hours from various perspectives and discusses any ensuing health problems both academically and objectively. The current status of working hours is a major social determinant that affects the health of Korean workers and is highlighted in the Special Series I of the *AOEM*.

The first article by the Korean Society of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (KSOEM) explains the contents of the Yoon Suk Yeol government's 'Working Hours System Reform Plan' and raises concerns about its impact on workers' health.⁷ The KSOEM is an academic society of Korean occupational and environmental medicine specialists that objectively summarizes the results of major research on the relationship between working hours and health and expresses the need for health in all policies. It would be a good article for readers who want to grasp an understanding of the overall outline. In addition, it is worth referring to the 'Position of the Korean Society of Occupational and Environmental Medicine on the Working Hours System Reform Plan' announced by the KSOEM on 22 March 2023.⁸

Kim and Min⁹ analyzed the current status of working hours in Korea using the Korean Working Conditions Survey and introduced the current status of holiday practices using the Workers' Vacation Survey and a research report from the Korea Institute of Health and Social Affairs. In 2020, approximately 6% of workers worked more than 52 hours and 11.6% of workers in small workplaces with less than 5 employees worked more than 52 hours. It was pointed out that the lack of legal regulations was considered one of the causes of this difference.

Jang¹⁰ introduced the Korean situation of the shift system, which is one of the working time arrangements. By analyzing data from the Korea National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey and the Korean Working Conditions Survey, it was reported that approximately 11 to 14% were shift workers, those on 24-hour shifts worked an average of about 58 hours weekly, and fixed night shift workers worked an average of about 50 hours weekly. In addition, policy directions were presented by comparing the night shift regulations in various countries.

A fourth study by Moon and Kim¹¹ presented the results of an expert opinion survey on the government's policy position on flexible working hours. According to a survey of 612 occupational safety and health, law, and sociology experts conducted in January and February 2023, the current government policy of flexible working hours was expected to have a negative impact on working hours and the health of workers. Policies that should take precedence over the flexible working hours policy were investigated, such as night shift regulations, wage guarantees to relieve overtime work, the establishment of working hours regulations for special employment, and the application of a 52-hour work week to all workplaces with less than five employees. Although it was not a direct survey evaluating the 'Working Hours System Reform Plan,' the latest views of labor and health experts on the government's policy on flexible working hours suggest the experts' concerns about the reform.

Lastly, Yang and colleagues¹² have addressed the problem of irregularity of working hours. The use of the Korean Working Conditions Survey revealed a significant increase in musculoskeletal pain among the respondents with irregular working hours. In particular, the combination of long working hours and irregular work significantly increased the risk of musculoskeletal pain, exceeding three times the risk compared to those with regular work

and a workweek of 31–40 hours. This study allows an assessment of the potential impact of the proposed 'Working Hours System Reform Plan,' allowing irregular working hours depending on the company's situation, and on the health of workers.

In summary, the content of the studies included in Special Series I indicates that South Korean society still engages in long working hours, with disparities in long working hours across different social strata. Additionally, some shift workers are exposed to excessively long working hours. Currently, high-priority policies include reducing the disparities in working hours, regulating night shift work, and ensuring wage protection to resolve overtime work issues. Flexible working hour policies could lead to irregular working hours for employees, which would have a negative impact on their health. Readers should explore the valuable research presented in AOEM's Special Series I, and it is hoped that this series will contribute to rational adjustments in policy directions, with a focus on human health.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary Data 1

Korean version paper

[Click here to view](#)

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