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# Working conditions in Korea: Survey highlights

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*The Korean service sector has grown since the first survey on working conditions was conducted in 2006. The characteristics of the labour market are similar to those of the EU labour market, although long working hours are still a major issue to be tackled, along with discrimination against women, older workers and temporary employees. The principal work-related risk factor is poor ergonomics, particularly in smaller businesses, which have poorer working environments than larger companies.*

## **Introduction**

The Korean Working Conditions Survey (KWCS) is based on the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), which has been conducted five times since 1991. The KWCS surveys Korean workers on their working conditions, to find out their exposure to risk factors and how these risk factors are affected by occupation, business or employment type.

Despite growing interest in working conditions, not enough knowledge exists to inform policy decisions on improvements. So far, interest in working conditions has focused mainly on the risks posed by equipment and chemicals. However, psychosocial work-related risk factors are now the focus of attention, especially in relation to the type of employment, the working conditions of specific vulnerable groups, and gender-related differences. Information on Korean workers' exposure to physical and chemical risk factors can be obtained from measurements in the working environment itself or from the national working environment survey, carried out every five years. However, there is no information on exposure to psychosocial risk factors, or any information on the working conditions of particular groups.

The first KWCS was carried out by the Korean Occupational Safety and Health Agency (KOSHA) in 2006, with the aim of drawing up an occupational safety and health policy to enhance working conditions. The second KWCS was carried out in 2010 to collect information on how working conditions had changed since the first survey and to inform any new policy.

## **Methodology**

The KWCS is modelled on the EWCS and has been carried out three times. The first survey was conducted in 2006 and the second in 2010. The third survey was conducted in 2011 with an extended sample size. The results here are from the second, 2010, survey.

In 2005 the EWCS questionnaire was translated into Korean and then modified to fit Korean culture and working conditions. In 2006, the first wave of the survey was conducted, with a total of 10,043 interviews. In 2010, with strong support from the Korean public and Ministry of Employment and Labour, the second wave was conducted. This included questions from the UK Labour Force Survey on industrial accidents and disease. For the second survey, a total of 10,019 workers were interviewed in their homes. The response rate was 32.1%. The third wave of the survey had an increased budget of KRW 2 billion (EUR 1,320,850 as at 29 February 2012), and 50,000 completed interviews are expected to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the results and to provide comprehensive statistical data.

### **Data collection**

Trained interviewers interviewed 10,000 employees in their homes in 16 cities and provinces between 20 June and 10 October 2010, a total of 15 weeks, excluding the long weekend of Chuseok (Korea's traditional Thanksgiving Day).

The population for the second KWCS is all those aged 15 and over in employment in Korea during the reference period. The criterion of employment is the same as that of the EWCS and the Labour Force Survey carried out by the National Statistical Office: anyone who performs any work for at least one hour for pay and profit during the reference week.

### Sampling and weighting

A representative sample of the economically active population over 15 years old (who were either employees or self-employed at the time of interview) were selected. Retired and unemployed persons, as well as housewives and students, were excluded.

The sample was drawn from the population and housing census. In the first stage, census districts were selected using probability proportional to size systematic sampling, based on the number of households in the census district. Subsequently, ten households were sampled randomly within each selected census district.

The final interviewees of the survey were selected by firstly ensuring that there was an eligible person in the selected household, and then, if there were more than one eligible person, selecting the one whose birthday was closest to the reference day.

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.

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire for the second KWCS was based on the fifth EWCS (carried out in 2010). However, the section on disaster and disease is based on the 2009 UK Labour Force Survey.

The main topics covered in the questionnaire are job context, working time, working intensity, physical risk factors, cognitive factors, psychosocial factors, health and well-being, skills, training and career prospects, work organisation, social relationships, job fulfilment, work–life balance and financial security, and violence, harassment and discrimination.

### Main findings

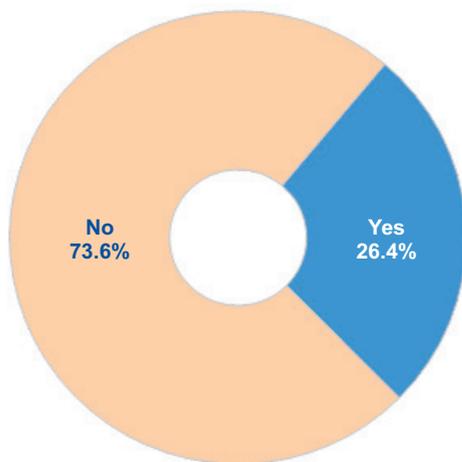
- The types of business and occupation, place of work, and employees' ages and education levels are similar to the EU average in 2005. However, there are differences in the working environment, including working hours, job demands and work autonomy.
- People work, on average, 47.6 hours per week. They work a 10-hour day, on average, 17.1 days per month, while 49.5% of employees work over six days per week.
- Compared to 2006, the 2010 survey shows a reduction in the number of people working in agriculture and manufacturing, with an increase in the number working in the service industry.
- The number of employees working five days per week has increased, while the number of people working non-standard hours (night shifts and weekends) is decreasing.
- The proportion of shift workers increased to 11% in 2010, which is 4 percentage points higher than in 2006. More men work shifts than women. The most common form of shift work is the regular two-shift system.
- Working hours, exposure to risk factors, job demands and work autonomy vary widely, depending on industry, occupation, employment type and age.
- There are clear differences between genders in the working environment. Job demands are higher for male employees than female employees. Men are more highly trained than women, are more likely to be in management or have supervisory roles, and earn substantially more.

- There is a greater exposure to ergonomic risk factors than physical risk factors. Provision of information to workers about these risks in the workplace has increased since 2006.
- Musculoskeletal problems related to work are common, with one in three of respondents complaining of upper-limb muscular pain related to work.
- The rate of absence from work due to health problems is 8.3%, with an average of 13.4 days absence (lower than in the EU, which has an average of 20.2 days or 13.5%). Although the rate of absence from work due to health problems is an important way of assessing the quality of the working environment, care should be taken interpreting this result as it is influenced by factors such as society, economy, culture and welfare.

## Training

The survey shows that a quarter (26.4%) of workers received training paid for by their employers in the previous 12 months in order to improve their knowledge and technical skills (Figure 1); 28.5% of male workers receive training, compared with 23.1% of female workers. Employees younger than 25 and older than 55 receive less training than employees in other age groups. There are also differences in the amount of training according to the size of the workplace. While 72.6% of employees in firms with 500 or more employees receive employer-paid training, the number drops to 13.6% of employees in firms with fewer than 10 employees.

Figure 1: *Workers receiving training paid for by their employers (%)*



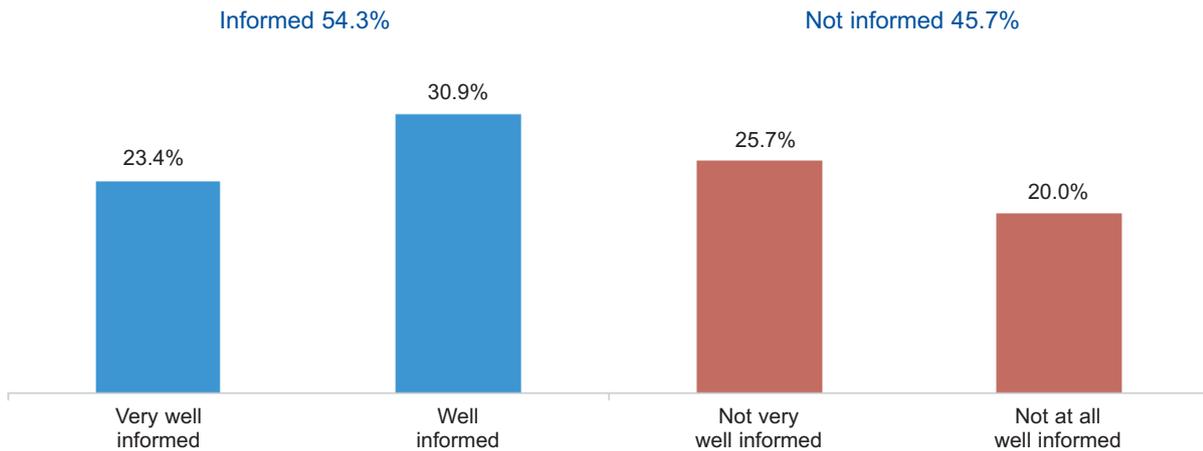
Some 38.4% of permanent employees receive employer-paid training, compared with 18.6% of fixed-term employees and 4.8% of temporary agency employees. The amount of this sort of training also differs according to occupation. The occupations with the highest amount of employer-paid training are military service (68.6%), clerical work (43.5%), higher administration (42.7%), and professional and technical occupations (42.5%). The occupations with the lowest level of employer-paid training are services (18.7%) and sales (16.6%).

Broken down by level of skill, 21.4% of skilled workers, 28.8% of semi-skilled workers, and 11.4% of unskilled workers receive employer-paid training.

## Health and safety advice

Only 54.3% of workers receive information about risks to health and safety in the workplace (Figure 2). This means that 45.7% are still not well informed, and immediate attention is needed to address this issue. Information is more commonly given to permanent employees (64.1%) than to fixed-term and temporary agency employees (52.4%).

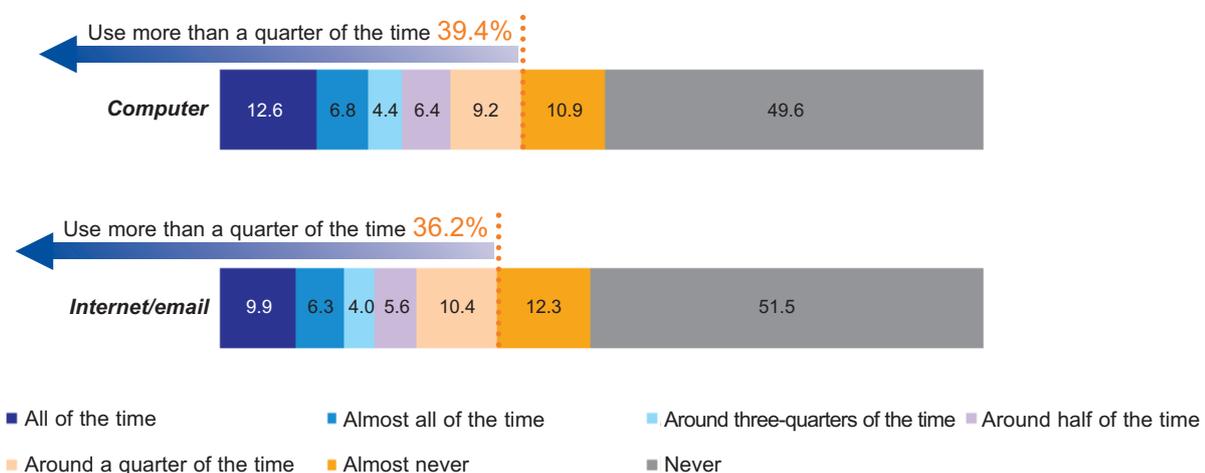
Figure 2: Workers informed about risks to health and safety (%)



## Use of information technology

In relation to use of technology, 39.4% of respondents say they use computers for more than a quarter of their working hours, with 36.2% using the internet or dealing with email for more than a quarter of their working hours, and 22.5% spending all their working time using a computer or using the internet and email (Figure 3). The rate of computer use is higher among male respondents (23.3%) than female respondents (20.9%). Sorted by occupation, the highest level of computer use is in professional and technical occupations (34.1%), higher administrator occupations (41.5%), and clerical occupations (56.7%). A lower use of computers is found in service (9.5%) and sales occupations (13.8%), and in skilled (11.9%) and unskilled occupations (2.1%).

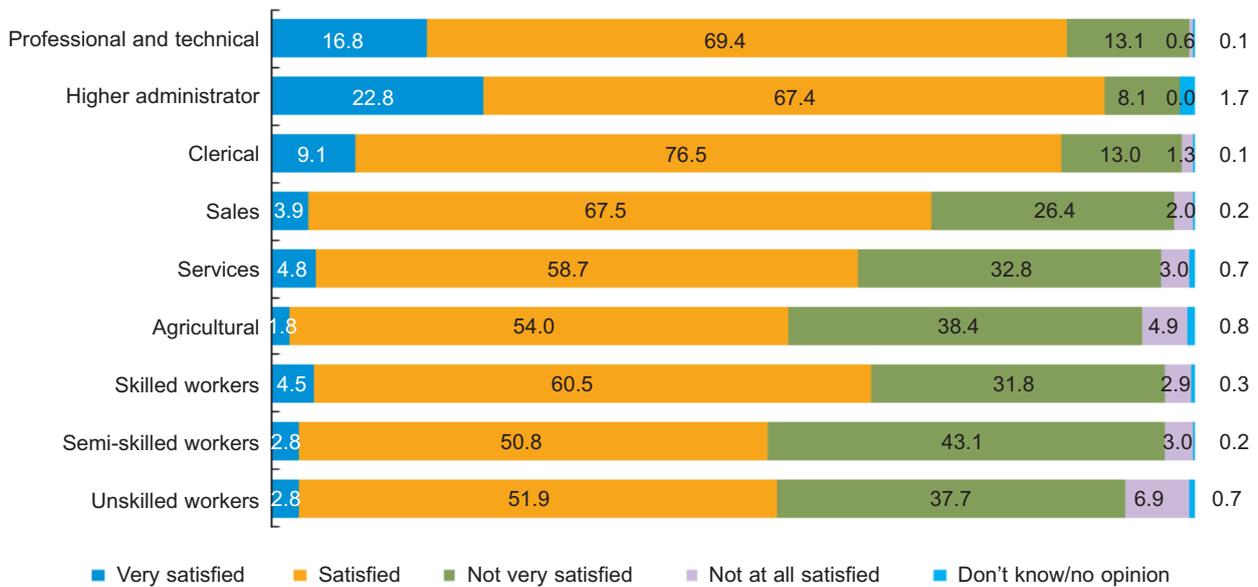
Figure 3: Workers using IT (%)



## Satisfaction with working conditions

Over two-thirds (69.1%) of respondents are satisfied with their working environment. However, there is a difference in satisfaction level depending on occupation (Figure 4): 90.2% of respondents in higher administrator occupations are satisfied or very satisfied with their working environments, compared to only 54.7% of people in unskilled occupations.

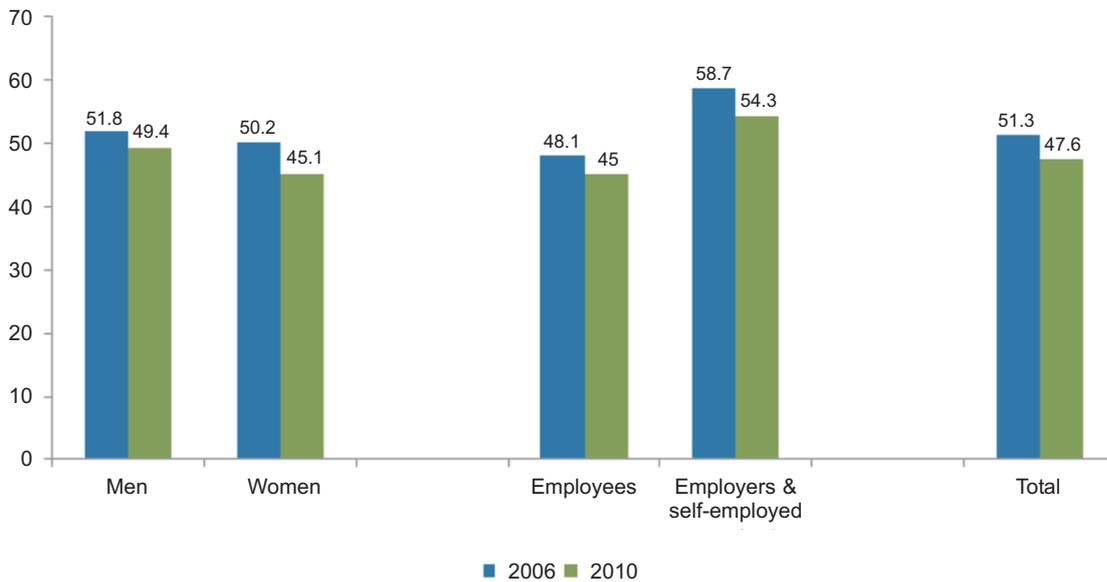
Figure 4: Satisfaction with working conditions by occupation and skill level (%)



## Working time

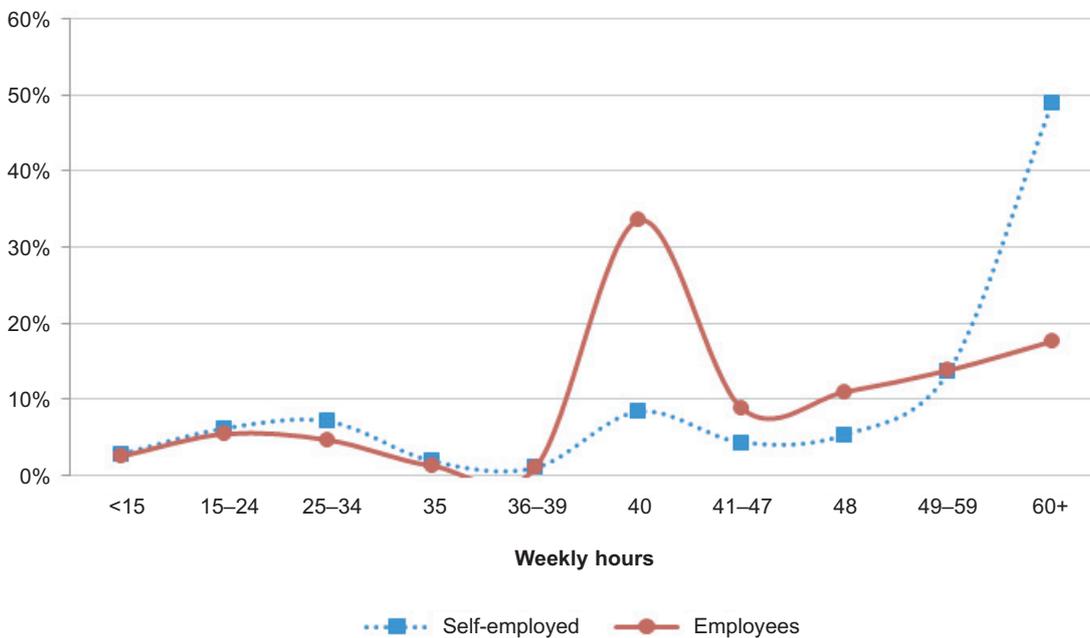
Koreans' interest in the quality of work and in work–life balance has increased since 2000. Their working hours have gradually reduced from 2004 when the 5-day and the 40-hour work week systems began to be promoted in phases, depending on the size of workplace (Figure 5). The first KWCS, in 2006, showed that respondents worked an average of 51.3 hours per week. The second survey shows a reduction to 47.6 hours. Waged workers have seen, on average, their weekly working hours drop from 48.1 to 45 hours. Female workers have shorter weekly working hours than men, because, as in the EU, more women take part-time jobs.

Figure 5: Average weekly working hours by gender and employment status



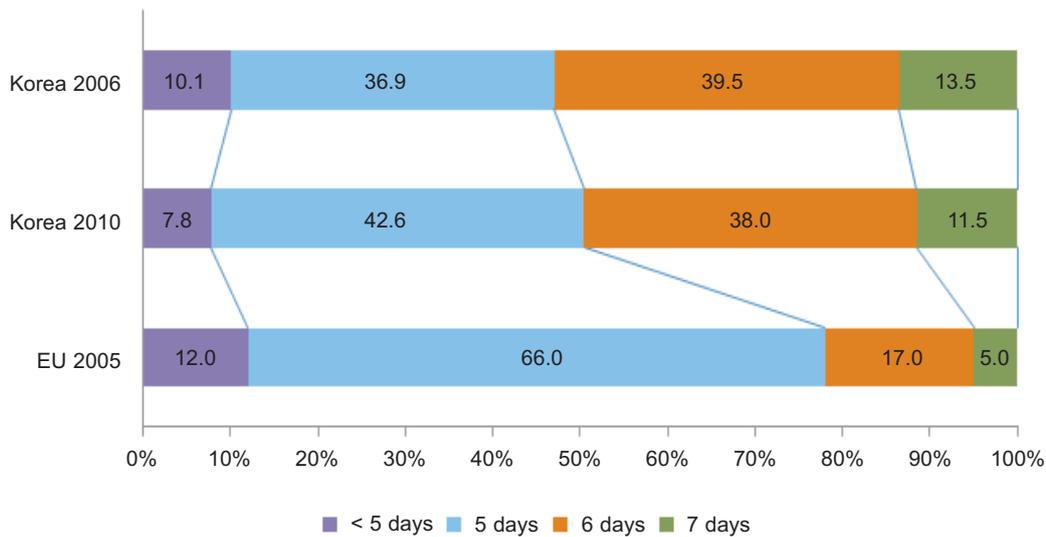
The distribution pattern of working hours of employees is very different from that of self-employed workers, with 48.9% of the latter reporting that they work 60 hours or more per week (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Distribution of working hours by employment status (%)



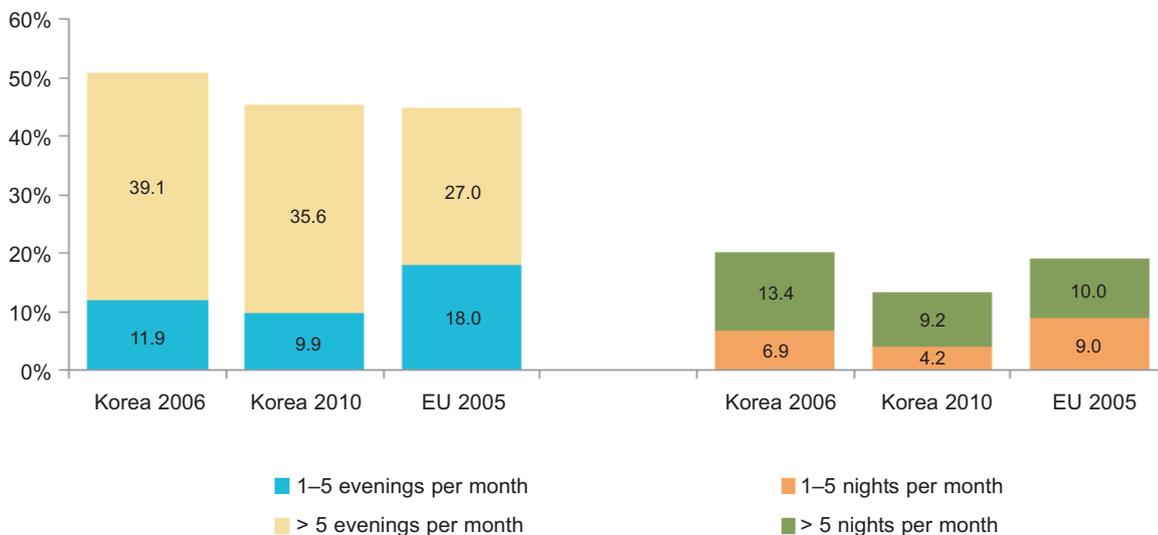
The proportion of Koreans workers who work more than five days per week has decreased over the last four years (Figure 7). However, Korean workers still have a longer working week than EU workers had in 2005, with 50% of Korean workers working more than five days per week.

Figure 7: Number of days worked per week in Korea (2006 & 2010) and the EU (2005) (%)



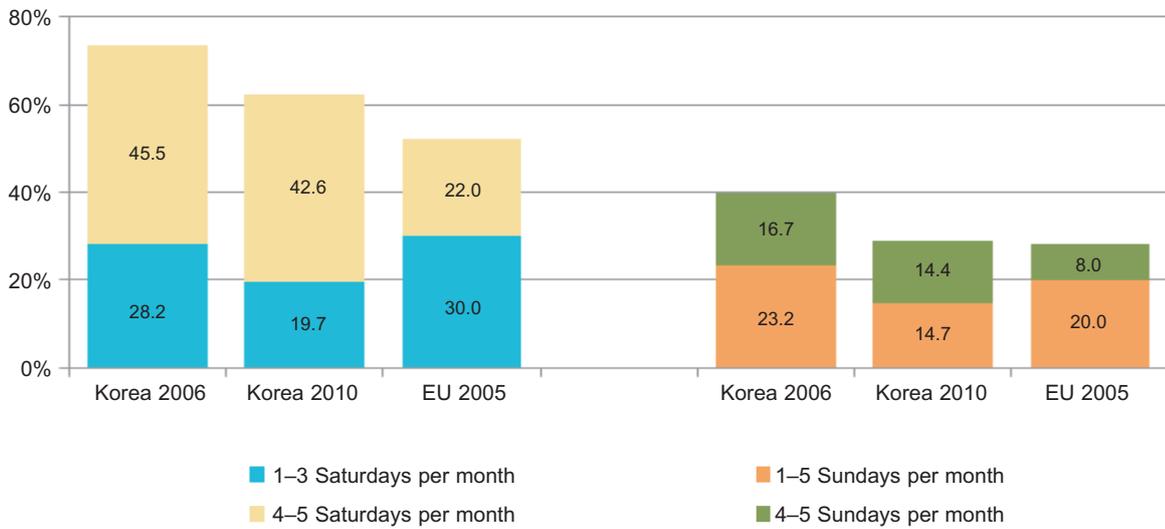
Half of workers do not work ‘normal’ working hours, working instead at evenings, nights and weekends. However, compared with the first survey, the second survey indicates that this kind of irregular working schedule is decreasing (Figure 8). This is caused by positive changes in working hours, such as the promotion of the five-day working week. More men than women work in the evening or at night, showing a decreasing trend with increasing age. More self-employed people than employees work irregular hours. There are also differences according to occupation, with more people in clerical occupations working irregular hours than those in manufacturing occupations, and more working these hours in service occupations than in sales.

Figure 8: Evening and night work in Korea (2006 & 2010) and the EU (2005) (%)



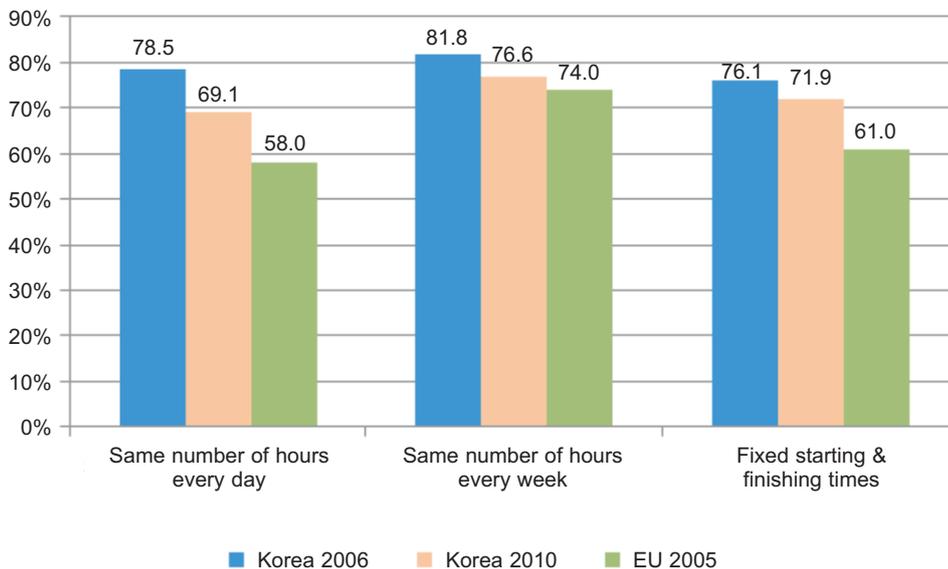
Weekend work is more prevalent in Korea than in the EU; 62% work on a Saturday at least once a month, and 29% work on a Sunday at least once a month. There has been a clear reduction in weekend working over the last four years (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Weekend work in Korea (2006 & 2010) and the EU (2005) (%)



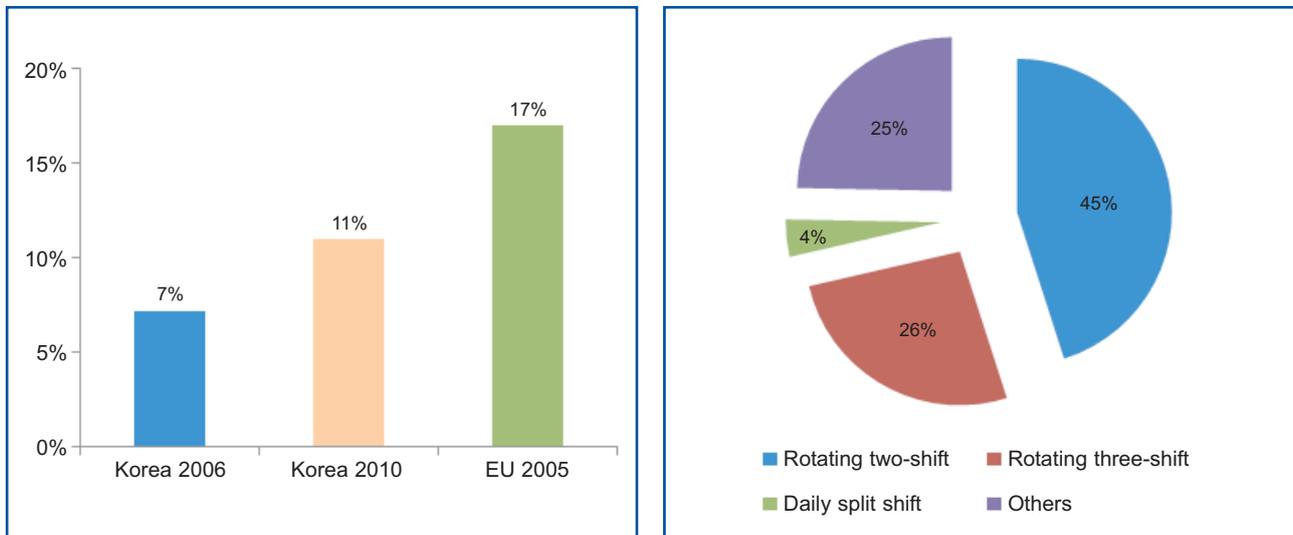
Looking at regularity of working hours, 69.1% of all workers (employees and self-employed) work the same number of hours every day, 76.6% work the same number of days every week, and 71.9% have fixed starting and finishing times. The proportion of Koreans with regular work schedules has, however, decreased over the last four years (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Regularity of working time in Korea (2006 & 2010) and the EU (2005) (%)



In 2010, the proportion of workers on shift work was 11%, an increase of 4 percentage points on 2006 (Figure 11). Two regular shifts is the most common type of shift work (48%). More men than women do shift work. Shift work is more common in sales (9.9%), manufacturing (12.4%) and services (13.6%) than in clerical occupations (3.1%).

Figure 11: Shift work – prevalence by survey; distribution by type of shiftwork, 2010



## Commentary

This detailed survey on working conditions had several purposes. The first was to ascertain what health and safety risks were posed to workers, and to identify the most hazardous occupations so that they can be targeted by policy. Secondly, KOSHA not only wanted to find out about actual working conditions but also about what had changed, and again to use this information to establish a health and safety policy tailored to current working conditions. Lastly, KOSHA wanted to find the correlation between the labour market and health risk factors, so that it could formulate an effective policy to reduce risk at work. The survey therefore analysed the respondents' working structure, working hours, job training, health and well-being, and job satisfaction and whether they had equal opportunities. The survey also compared working conditions between Korea and Europe.

## Annex

### Quality control of the survey

Quality control for the survey interviews was done in three stages:

1. internal examination by a local supervisor;
2. internal inspection by the specialised editor at KOSHA's headquarters;
3. random phone verification of 30% of interviews.

The random verification confirmed address, gender, date of birth, occupation, and exposure to health risk factors in the respondent's present occupation. Information was also gathered on the method of filling out the survey, duration of the survey, and satisfaction with the interviewer. Any questionnaires which raised problems as a result of the verification were returned to the local supervisor to be checked and confirmed.

The number of questionnaires collected was 10,132, with 113 discarded due to quality control. This meant 10,019 questionnaires were included in the final data, which exceeded the target sample size of 10,000 interviews.

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