

Unmasking the Shadows: Examining Workplace Violence in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Workplace violence has been an emerging issue in South Korea, garnering both social and scholarly interest over the past decades. Since the early 2000s, the country has witnessed thousands of cases of workplace violence in various sectors of work that range from big, high-profile cases to smaller-scale incidents. In fact, this issue already seems to be deeply ingrained in South Korean society as one in four workers reported having experienced workplace violence in the last year (Lee, 2023). Therefore, reflecting the rapidly growing recognition of and attention on workplace violence, this paper examines the historical background, causes, different types of violence in various sectors of work, consequences, and past attempted solutions of workplace violence. A lack of studies and resolutions was identified in the process of research. Therefore, active government intervention and social involvement in combating workplace violence as well as promoting a healthy workplace environment seems vital.

Introduction

In the realm of global economic powerhouses, South Korea stands tall as a nation of rapid growth and industrialization. However, behind its glitz and glamour lies a dark undercurrent that often goes unnoticed by many—workplace violence. As South Korea's prowess grew, so did the prevalence of this insidious phenomenon, silently plaguing the lives of working men and women across the nation. In fact, in December 2014, South Korea witnessed a shocking incident that first brought workplace violence into the global spotlight: the infamous “nut rage incident,” which involved an airline CEO hurling verbal abuse because she simply didn’t like the way the macadamia nuts were served to her in first class. This sparked widespread outrage and condemnation, becoming a symbolic representation of workplace violence; it also shed light on the power dynamics, hierarchal structures, and abusive behaviors that often occur in the Korean labor markets. However, despite this recognition, workplace violence continues to be a deeply ingrained issue in Korean society as one in four workers in South Korea is reported to have experienced workplace violence, and approximately 79.4 percent of the Korean population believes that it is a serious problem in our society (Lee, 2023). Despite this prevalence, the country has made a minimum effort to combat the issue. Therefore, this paper will analyze workplace violence in South Korea to examine how workplace violence is a pervasive problem in all fields of work and its eradication has significant challenges.

Background

Workplace violence is a rising issue that has garnered significant recognition in recent years. According to the South Korean Labor Standards Act (LSA), workplace violence is defined as “an act that causes physical or

mental suffering or worsens the working conditions and/or environment of another employee by taking advantage of the employer or employee's superior status or relationship within the workplace, beyond the appropriate scope of work" (Waters et al., 2023). In fact, because workplace violence has become so prevalent in South Korea, the public has even coined a new word for it: *Gapjil*. *Gapjil* is a portmanteau term, and is a combination of the word "gap," which means authority, and "jil," which means abuse. Simply put, it is a power abuse by people in positions of power toward those under their influence. Despite its simple meaning, workplace violence is not just an issue that revolves around an authoritative figure misusing their power. Rather, it is a complex and multifaceted problem that involves various dynamics, behaviors, individuals, and impacts.

There are four different types of workplace violence that occur commonly in South Korea: verbal abuse, physical aggression, exclusion and ostracism, and cyberbullying. Verbal abuse is a type of violence that involves an authoritative figure using derogatory terms, insults, shouting, and belittling towards an employer. Because it is subtle and manipulative, verbal abuse is one of the most common yet overlooked forms of workplace violence. Verbal aggression can also escalate to physical aggression, a type of violence that poses a direct threat to an individual's physical well-being. Exclusion and ostracism are also common phenomena in workplaces. However, due to the lack of physical evidence and an abundance of excuses, this behavior is difficult and stressful to address in workplaces. Lastly, with the rapid rise of technology and the usage of digital communication in workplaces, cyberbullying has become an emerging form of workplace violence.

Historical Context

Although the issue of workplace violence has been a long-lasting problem, it is often difficult to trace back its deepest root cause. However, many claim that the introduction to Confucianism and the influence of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, though the two events occurred centuries apart from each other, are the main factors that instigated South Korea's workplace violence. Confucianism, influenced by Chinese philosopher Kong Qiu, is one of the most influential and oldest Chinese beliefs. Since its development, Confucianism emphasized the "ethical guide to life and living with strong character" (National Geographic Society, 2023). It promotes five constant virtues: Ren (benevolence), Yi (righteousness and justice), Li (propriety and etiquette), Zhi (knowledge), and Xin (integrity). By the late 13th century, this belief spread beyond China, influencing and shaping the culture and values of neighboring nations like South Korea (Chen, n.d.). In fact, it quickly blended into the pre-existing Korean beliefs, gaining widespread popularity. Since then, Confucian ideas, specifically ideas regarding respect and "elders first," have become a core value of the country. Respect for seniority is commonly observed in society: people's behavior, title, and even eating habits vary depending on their positions. Additionally, from the very early stages of life, South Koreans are taught not to talk back, behave disrespectfully, or defy the requests of those in superior positions. Consequently, such extreme hierarchical and oppressive values like group harmony, loyalty to superiors, and obedience and conformity are commonly reflected in South Korean workplaces, contributing to the basis of workplace violence.

In addition, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis contributed to the emergence of workplace violence. Initially started in Thailand in July 1997, this crisis spread across East Asia and wreaked economic havoc and destabilization. Many countries, including South Korea, experienced slowed, reversed capital inflows and growth. Many banks "came under significant pressure, investment rates plunged, and some Asian countries entered deep recessions" (Carson & Clark, 2013). Accordingly, at the end of 1997, many Korean businesses were forced to "carry out restructuring in a desperate effort to survive" (Park, 2013). The primary focus was to maximize the workers' productivity while reducing labor costs. Thus, workers made desperate efforts to secure their position in workplaces. In these situations, workers slandered and defamed each other; subtle bullying and tension were observed amongst all employees, regardless of their position.

Workplace Violence in the Service Industry

Since the nation's industrialization in the late 1900s, the service industry has demonstrated rapid growth, dominating the Korean economy. Despite the continuous growth, workplace violence is most noticeable and visible in the service industry, specifically among daeri drivers. Because *daeri* means substitute or proxy, daeri drivers, also known as *daeri unjeon*, are literally "replacement drivers." First emerged after the introduction of portable breathalyzers by the National Police Agency in 1981, daeri drivers targeted drunk businessmen who were incapable of driving; with a quick message or a call, a professional driver was provided to chauffeur customers to return home safely in their vehicles. Over the past decades, the daeri service has rapidly become one of the fastest-growing industries in Korea. It is estimated that in 2020, the daeri service industry was worth 2.7672 trillion won (\$2.5 billion) and that there are approximately 164,000 drivers in the market; the industry is also expected to surpass 3 trillion won this year (*대리운전자 실태: 한국플랫폼프리랜서노동공제회*, 2023). Now, this service has become ubiquitous in Korean society: people who, for various reasons, cannot drive call a daeri driver to drive their cars. The industry has been widely praised for eradicating drink-and-drive culture.

However, despite such positive effects, drivers regularly face workplace violence. In fact, according to a study conducted by researchers in the Korean Academy of Medical Sciences, daeri drivers universally experienced verbal bullying, and 42 percent had experienced physical violence over the past year. Specifically, all drivers reported instances of verbal bullying while driving and 34.1 percent of them said it had happened more than once in the past quarter of the year. In response to the violence, Han-KiSuk, general manager of Daeri Labor Union, asked, "Why should we be immersed in a sense of defeatism when we have to earn money and have a family to take care for?" (*[6411]의 목소리*] 나는 대리기사 노동자다, 2022).

Daeri drivers' frequent exposure to violence is because they are prone to various dangerous situations at work. Drivers experience interpersonal job demands and perform emotional labor. Additionally, they are confined to small spaces of cars with customers, who are drunk and violent at night. Daeri drivers are no different from other drivers, and their safety is directly related to traffic safety as well as to the safety of other citizens. Although customer interaction and service mindset are especially essential in this particular service-oriented profession, it is still important to show respect to the daeri drivers. Therefore, because there is a dearth of studies elucidating workplace violence among daeri services, the South Korean government must investigate further into this sector of work.

Workplace Violence in Manufacturing and Industrial Settings

In the context of big companies, the relationship between employer and employee is much more complex, often giving rise to various forms of workplace violence that extend beyond just verbal and physical harm. One common form is the *hwesik* culture. South Korea is well-known for "having a work-intensive corporate culture" (Kjølstad, 2021). Thus, *hwesik*, which literally means after-work dinners, emerged as a way for workers to get together, release stress, and foster camaraderie. All workers, regardless of their positions, enjoy food and drinks and end with a night at karaoke. *Hwesik* became a longstanding tradition in all workplaces.

However, recently, such culture has been condemned for becoming a form of workplace violence. For decades, *hwesiks*—from deciding the menu, venue, and seating arrangements—were predominantly determined by employers or those in superior positions. Additionally, because many seek *hwesik* as an opportunity to strengthen teamwork, promote open communication, and foster work-life balance, employers often encourage drinking. It was common for leaders to show their amount of love and affection towards subordinates by offering alcohol. Therefore, although sometimes forceful and unwanted, this was generally perceived as normal. In fact, this culture is still considered ordinary in many workplaces.

According to a survey by a civic organization named “Workplace Bullying 119,” 62.5 participants claimed that their employers exploited the workplace hierarchy to enforce after-work gatherings (Kim, 2023). Workers also displayed frustration and discomfort when experiencing forced or unwanted consumption of alcohol. However, because Korea’s combined Millennial and Z generations have increasing awareness of workers’ rights, many show discontent in attending hwesiks. Instead of conforming to authority and showing respect, the Millennials and Generation Z emphasize freedom, fairness, and transparency.

Consequences of Workplace Violence

Workplace violence became a prevalent element in life, both directly and indirectly impacting people’s lives. One notable consequence is the psychological harm to workers. A study by Randy A. Sansone verified the presence of increased stress levels in the aftermath of workplace violence; it states that workplace violence can result in several different emotional and psychological impacts: increased mental distress, sleep disturbances, insomnia, depression, anxiety, adjustment disorders, and even work-related suicide. Workplace violence and the following consequences are more commonly observed among males than female workers and older ones than younger ones. Those who work longer, at night, and irregularly were also prone to such conditions. In addition to psychological harm, workplace violence can also have physical consequences like neck pain, musculoskeletal complaints, fibromyalgia, and cardiovascular symptoms.

Past Solutions and Effectiveness

Workplace violence, or Gapjil, is an ongoing, evolving problem in South Korea. However, despite its prevalence and rising concerns, limited work and progress have been made to address this issue. For example, in 2018, the South Korean government amended the Occupational Safety and Health Act of Korea (OSHA) to prevent violence and its negative outcomes against service workers. The revised legislation mandates employers of the service sector to promote and protect employees’ emotional and physical health by providing customer response preparation, mental counseling, and extended break times. It also requires employers to take sufficient measures and review existing policies to minimize health hazards. Additionally, though vague, the law prohibits poor treatment of workers.

Failure to address such measures may lead to an administrative fine of up to 10,000,000 won per occurrence. Although many changes have been made in hopes of enhancing the working conditions of service laborers, the media consistently reports extreme cases of workplace violence in the service industry. Some laborers even claim that businesses have not fully implemented the legislation. Additionally, recently, Korea’s Office for Government Policy Coordination, the Ministry of Employment and Labor, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the National Police Agency, and the Anti-Corruption & Civil Rights Commission established a joint committee and announced the Anti-Bullying Action Plan.

To combat violence and harassment in workplaces, the plan presents “six stages to manage the risk of workplace bullying and harassment, and to properly deal with such incidents in the workplace” (*Government Announces “Anti-Bullying Action Plan” to Address Workplace Harassment - Kim & Chang, 2018*). The six stages are: 1) reporting, 2) investigation, 3) disciplinary action against the harasser, 4) support for the victim 5) employer liability, and 6) prevention. This plan was praised for providing an opportunity for employers and firms to provide support and prepare for the occurrence of workplace violence incidents. However, due to vague and lenient guidelines, progress is almost invisible. The Ministry of Employment and Labor, in fact, claimed that they reviewed the plan’s effectiveness and provided several improvements, including the expansion of the act, establishment of bullying reporting counters, and review of measures.

Conclusion

In 21st-century workplaces, workplace violence is everywhere. From large corporations like Samsung and Hyundai to small businesses, restaurants, and taxis, workplace violence can be seen in a wide spectrum of industries and organizations. It also continues to make headlines about reports of workplace violence involving famous sports stars, celebrities, and even prominent CEOs. Despite such severity, little effort is made to address this with the public. Therefore, the South Korean government, NGOs, as well as individuals must take immediate action. For instance, the government and NGOs can create a joint program to raise awareness about workplace violence in workplaces; by holding regular workshops, seminars, and community events, both employers and employees will learn the significance of this issue. Individuals can also contribute to creating a positive working culture by showing a little more respect and empathy to each other. They can make small changes by simply showing gratitude and saying “Thank you” to daeri drivers; respecting work-life balance; and using softer tones when communicating with colleagues. Although they seem trivial and awkward, these small steps will eventually lead to significant progresses. Consequently, by fostering a culture of healthy, respectful, and inclusive workplaces, South Korea can take significant strides toward growth.

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