

Brief Report

**Study on immigrant workers in South Korea:
their mental health, social support,
and quality of life**

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INTRODUCTION Starting from the 1980s when its industrial structure started to change, Korea saw the size of its workforce decrease and started hiring immigrant workers. Most of the foreign workers were Chinese – including Korean-Chinese and those living near the border between China and Korea – and others from Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Their numbers have increased ever since and now reach almost 600,000. These immigrants work in factories and construction sites across the country.

Most foreign workers in Korea work for small businesses and thus play an important role in solving Korea's problem of having a small workforce. However, Korea is now faced with a different problem caused by the lack of legal and institutional protections for foreign workers living in Korea. This led to the exploitation of immigrant workers, violation of their human rights, discrimination, and prejudice.

In both 2008 and 2009, delayed payment of wages was the biggest reason immigrant workers sought counseling at the Korea Support Center for Foreign Workers (2010). Also, the number of industrial accidents, an indicator of poor working conditions, drastically increased from 15,896 in 2008 to 29,193 in 2009. In particular, the number of fraud and assault cases nearly doubled, from 852 cases in 2008 to 1,482 in 2009. This illustrates how the number of fraud and assault cases has been increasing as the working environment of foreign workers changed.

A review of the literature revealed that, in general, workers who leave their home country to work in a foreign one with a different culture suffer from mental problems such as severe depression and anxiety (Griffin & Soskolne, 2003; Hovey & Magana, 2002). Because of the cultural differences and the lack of social support, they experience high levels of stress, face language barriers, and have traumas or suffer from stress disorders due to the physical and psychological abuse they get in their workplace (Vega *et al.*, 1987).

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) usually occurs after a person experiences a traumatic moment that most people do not experience in their lifetime, but recent cases show that physical or verbal

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abuse that causes strong fear, powerlessness, and panic can cause PTSD even though the trauma may not seem so severe on the outside (Kinzie & Goetz, 1996).

Recovery from mental health problems caused by extreme stress or trauma depends on how well-organized the social support system is (Weeraporn, 2004). Previous research by Korean scholars on foreign workers in Korea found that social support had a particularly positive effect on reducing depression and anxiety and on psychological stability and adaptability (Lee, 2004). Furthermore, Lee (1997) reported that the poorer the work environment and the more inadequate social support, the higher stress levels foreign workers experience. A study by Lee and colleagues (2004) reported that one group of illegal immigrants (ethnic Koreans from China) showed relatively serious symptoms of somatization disorder, anxiety, and phobic anxiety, all of which are associated with stressful experiences such as delayed payment of wages, physical abuse, and industrial accidents, and saw their quality of life go down.

THIS STUDY is the first systematic study in Korea to examine the relationships between mental health problems (including depression, anxiety, and PTSD), social support systems, and quality of life of foreign laborers in Korea.

Analysis was conducted on the physical or mental health issues experienced by 190 foreign workers residing in the metropolitan areas, Seoul city and Gyeonggi province. In addition, they completed the Korean versions of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R), Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), WHO Quality of Life Scale-brief (WHOQOL-BREF), and Social Support Scale.

RESULTS After statistical analysis, the major findings were as follows. 61 subjects (26.0%), the highest number, reported that verbal abuse was the biggest reason that caused physical or mental difficulties while living in Korea, followed by serious accidents or injuries, 18 subjects (7.7%), fraud, 17 subjects (7.2%), physical abuse, 15 subjects (6.4%), and sexual assault, 3 subjects (1.3%). Overall, 79 workers had experienced physical violence (33.7%).

Subjects' mean score on the BDI was 16.68. Because BDI scores between 16 and 23 indicate severe depression, many foreign workers who have taken the test apparently suffer from severe depression.

The mean IES-R score was 29.86, while the IES-R cut-off score for PTSD was 25. The IES-R results also indicated 125 subjects (65.8%) met the criteria for PTSD, 22 subjects (11.6%) met those for a tendency toward PTSD, and 43 subjects (22.6%) were shown to have no PTSD.

The subjects' levels of depression showed a strong correlation with the severity of their PTSD and anxiety. Moreover, the level of depression negatively correlated with quality of life. Those who had experienced violence had higher anxiety levels, in both state and trait categories. Those who experienced less violence were those who benefitted more from social support.

The findings in relation to relationships showed that people who had received fair treatment without discrimination received a greater degree of social support, suggesting that those who experienced no violence benefitted more from such support. Additionally, the more respect they received from other people, the higher the quality of life they enjoyed.

SUGGESTIONS Based on the results of this study, the suggestions are as follows:

First, Korea should create treatment and educational programs and build a specialized mental health delivery system to improve the mental health of foreigners in Korea.

Second, mental health specialists who understand these foreigners' cultures and languages should receive training to help foreigners.

Third, as part of an effort to improve foreign workers' mental health, Korea should create a more inclusive social support system that offers greater practical and emotional support.

Fourth, Koreans need to receive education to increase the awareness of migrant workers' human rights issues and issues related to multi-cultural societies.

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