

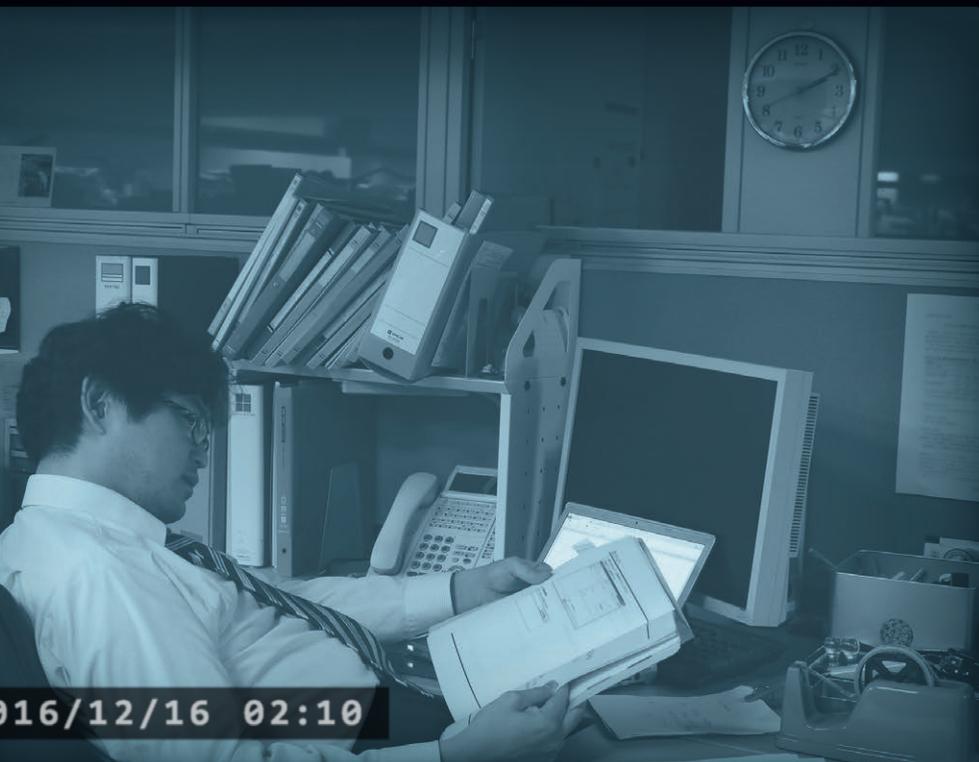
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THE

DARK SIDE OF GROW

In Asia's race for prosperity and profit, overtaxed workers are paying the price

KENTARO IWAMOTO and YU NAKAMURA Nikkei staff writers



ka·ro·shi /過勞死/ka'reuʃi/n.

ORIGIN: Japanese, from *ka* 'excess' + *ro* 'labor' + *shi* 'death': death due to overwork or exhaustion from one's work

TH

TOKYO/GUANGZHOU "Goodbye, my beloved and precious mom. Life, work and everything is painful."

After sending this message to her mother, Matsuri Takahashi, then an employee at Dentsu, Japan's largest advertising agency, threw herself from a company dormitory in Tokyo on Dec. 25, 2015. Her suicide was later officially recognized as a case of *karoshi* -- death from overwork. Japan's *karoshi* law covers both suicides and deaths from illness caused by overwork.

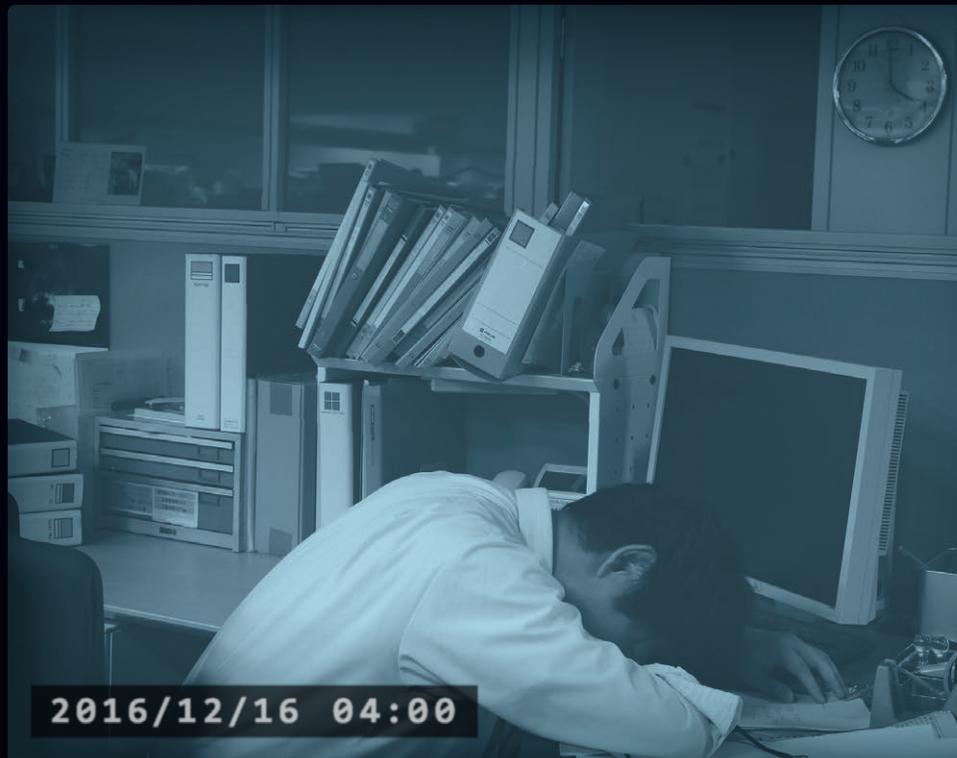
Even though Dentsu had a labor-management agreement capping overtime at 70 hours per month, the 24-year-old Takahashi was putting in more than additional 100 hours.

She recorded painful days on Twitter: "Got very harsh words about a document I spent my day off working on. My heart

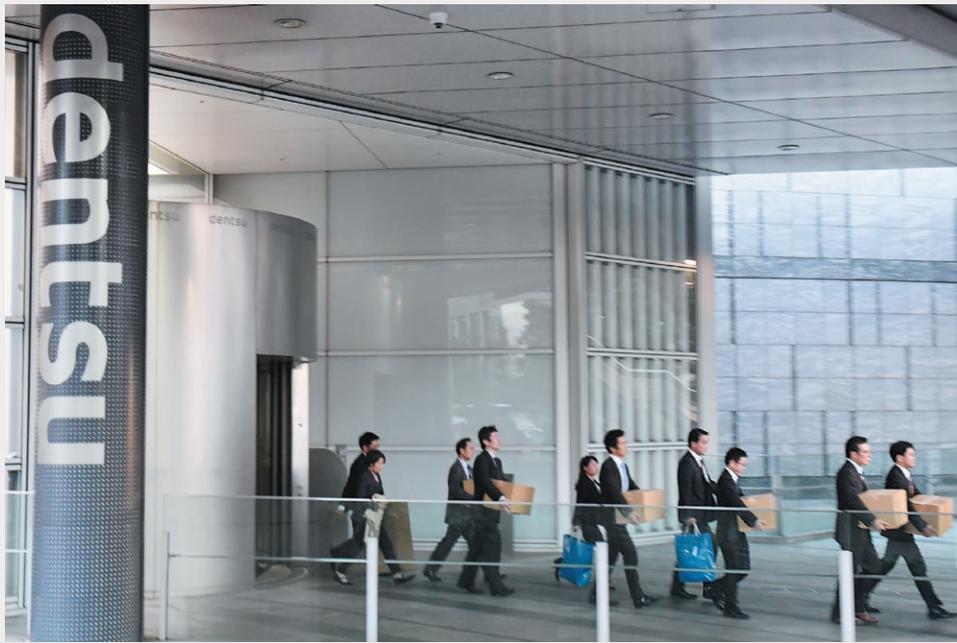
and body are totally destroyed," she said in one tweet.

Dentsu's working culture is notoriously demanding. "We are a client-first company," a Dentsu employee in his 50s told the *Nikkei Asian Review*. He and his colleagues, he said, are expected to do whatever it takes to satisfy their clients. "I spent most of my time in the office or at a TV station. I didn't have much time to go home," he said, recalling his first days at Dentsu in the 1980s.

This intense corporate culture has helped Dentsu forge its extremely close connections with advertisers, the media and even the government. The company offers some of the highest salaries in Japan and attracts graduates from top universities. With some 7,000 employees across its various businesses, Dentsu wields



Karoshi definition: Oxford Dictionary of English



LEFT: The Dentsu scandal continues to reverberate through corporate Japan.

RIGHT: An Alibaba employee takes a nap at company headquarters in Hangzhou.

Long working hours are not uncommon at the Chinese internet company.



massive influence in Japan.

But the advent of social media and internet ads has changed the advertising business drastically. The traditional marketing style -- a salesperson taking charge of specific corporate clients and securing ad space in newspapers and on TV for them -- is no longer the predominant one.

Unlike conventional advertisements, internet ads need to be tweaked and updated constantly in response to feedback. "Internet ads don't generate much profit, but they take a lot of effort and require different skills from those needed in conventional advertising," an employee at a major internet advertising agency said.

Takahashi belonged to Dentsu's internet ad department.

TV advertising, however, is still the company's bread and butter, accounting for 44% of unconsolidated sales in 2015. That is why "the logic for TV advertising is the prevailing logic at Dentsu," the employee in his 50s said. Managers who are not digitally savvy enough often give their subordinates unclear or inappropriate orders. For employees trying to meet their

boss's expectations, overwork is often the only option.

After Takahashi's mother made her daughter's suicide public in October, Dentsu banned employees from working in the office after 10 p.m. But changing the company's deeply ingrained culture will not happen overnight. "Even if we're told not to work overtime, it's hard for us not to do so, considering our relationship with clients," another Dentsu employee said.

Though Takahashi's suicide -- and her pained messages on Twitter -- helped shine new light on the problem, the issue of *karoshi* is not a new one in Japan.

According to Japan's labor ministry, there were 96 deaths from illnesses officially recognized as overwork-related in the year through March 2016. During the same 12 months, 93 suicides or attempted suicides were recognized as being caused by overwork. The phenomenon has become so well-known internationally that the word "*karoshi*" has even entered English dictionaries.

Though the details may differ, other countries in Asia are also grappling with

the issue of overwork. According to the latest data from the International Labor Organization, 32% of workers in South Korea worked 49 hours or more per week. The ratio was 30% in Hong Kong, 25% in Singapore, and 21% in Japan. These numbers stand in stark contrast to the West: the U.S. figure was 16%, and France 10%.

SPREADING PROBLEM No ILO data was available for China, but overwork-related deaths have been reported there, too. One particularly tragic case came just 12 days before Takahashi killed herself.

On Dec. 13, 2015, Li Junming, an employee at top Chinese internet portal **Tencent Holdings**, died suddenly while taking a walk with his wife near their home. Li was a star employee, heading a development team in the company's game section even though he was still in his 30s.

Just a week before he died, he posted a heartwarming message online: "I will soon be a dad, and I hope our baby grows up healthy."

With a market capitalization 50 times



Reuters

bigger than it was 10 years ago, Tencent is known as the fastest-growing private company in China. The company, widely known for its massively popular WeChat app, boasts a market valuation of some \$230 billion, surpassing even that of Toyota Motor, the world's biggest automaker.

Li was a central figure in Tencent's rapid growth. Convinced that he died from overwork, colleagues close to him collected signatures to demand that Tencent improve working conditions. The company should "think much of employees' mental care and allow them to leave office for home at 8 p.m. starting next year (2016)," their petition said.

Overwork seems to have been a serious and widely shared concern, given how many employees rushed to sign the petition before it was presented to the company's top management.

Deaths from excessive work have also occurred at other well-known Chinese companies and with increasing frequency.

Chinese media reported that an employee at [Alibaba Group Holding](#) died suddenly in spring 2014, just before she was due

to give birth. The woman had recently become managing operator of the company's Tmall e-commerce site, six years after she joined Alibaba. People around her attributed her death to overwork.

The woman was reportedly so afraid of receiving a poor performance evaluation in the rapidly growing Tmall business that she skipped her required health checkup and continued to work at home even while on maternity leave.

The night before she died, she was up working until past midnight. At 4 a.m. the next morning, she suffered a seizure and was rushed to a hospital, but died of hemorrhaging outside the uterus.

Every year, some 600,000 people in China reportedly die from overwork, a statistic many experts attribute to the country's rapid economic expansion. Lu Shangbin, a professor at Wuhan University, says workers are under intense pressure from companies looking to maximize profits.

A 35-year-old car sales manager in Beijing experienced that pressure first hand. "Every morning began with a fear of

going to work," he said, recalling what his life was like last summer. "The day would end in a sleepless night and constant regret over transferring to sales department."

Months of heavy work, intense pressure and no help was enough to crush his ambition and his health. "Twenty days of no sleep and a few attempts at jumping from my 20th floor apartment convinced me to reach out to a doctor," he said.

In addition to company demands, however, professor Lu also points to another factor: workers' own desire to benefit from China's economic growth, which he says has been "too fast."

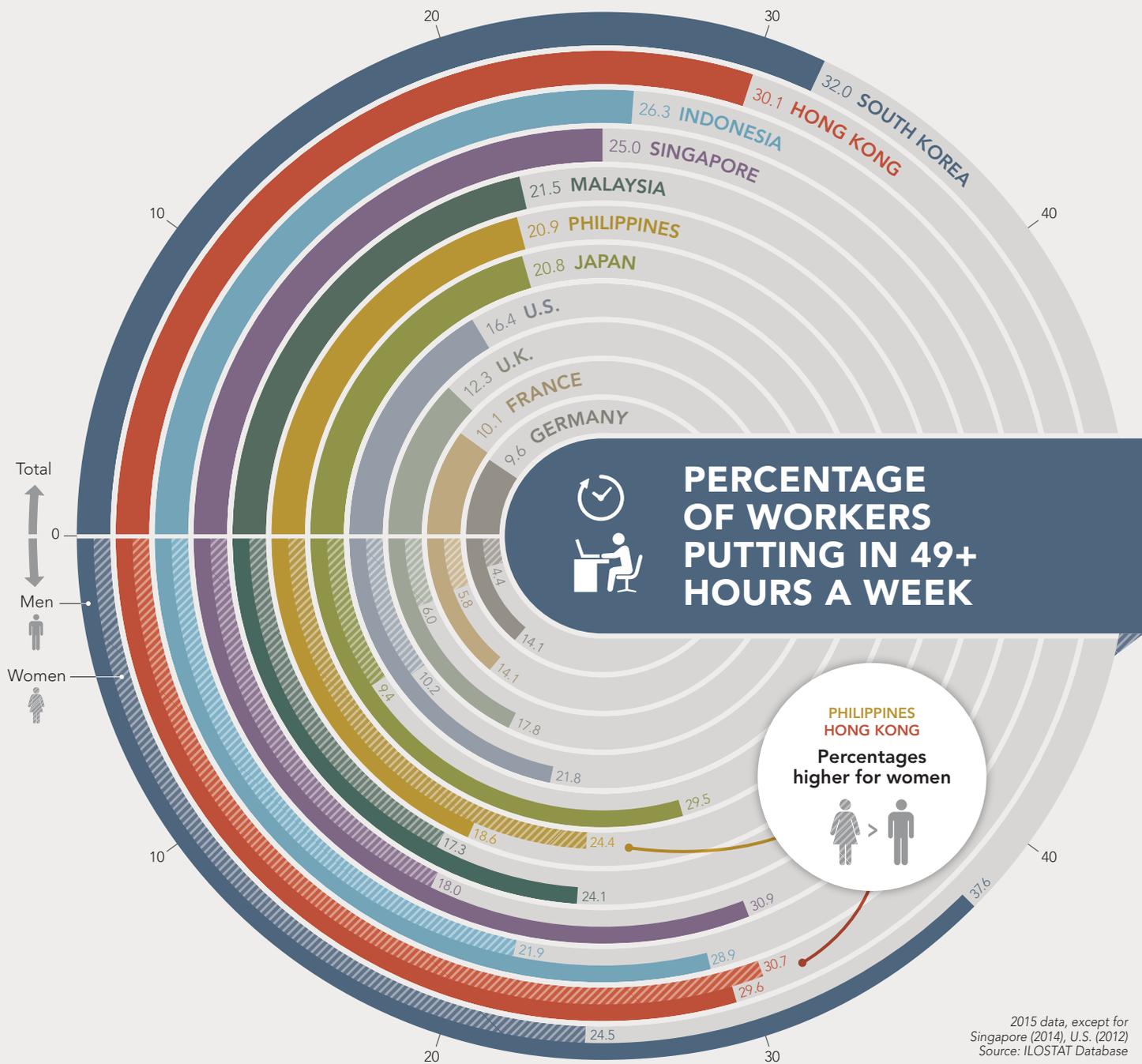
Lu described the situation as extremely dangerous, saying many people are sacrificing their health and happiness to get ahead in an increasingly competitive world.

China's labor laws stipulate that workers should work no more than eight hours a day and 44 hours a week. But the law has not kept up with the rapid expansion of the economy. Laws related to employment contracts and jobs are particularly prone to ambiguous interpretation. Some 3,000 labor disputes -- including demonstrations and strikes -- occur annually, and the trend shows few signs of abating.

MORE IS LESS Overwork is a pervasive problem across the region, but long hours are not making Asian countries more productive. According to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Japan and South Korea's gross domestic product per hour worked was \$40.10 and \$28.90, respectively, in 2012, far behind Norway, at \$86.60, the U.S. at \$64.10, and Germany's \$58.30.

Roland Berger, the founder of the German consulting firm that bears his name, says Japan's service-sector productivity is relatively weak compared to its manufacturing productivity. "Japan definitely should be much more ambitious in applying and introducing digital technologies into the white collar functions," he told the *Nikkei Asian Review* during a visit to Tokyo.

Jon Messenger, a senior specialist in



working conditions at the ILO, highlighted an important point: “In general, longer hours of work are associated with lower hourly labor productivity, while shorter hours of work are linked with higher productivity.”

Messenger pointed to the results of an empirical study covering 18 manufacturing industries in the U.S. The study found that a 10% increase in overtime resulted in a 2.4% decrease in productivity. A scholarly review of recent occupational safety

and health literature, he added, showed that “long working hours are linked with increased risks of accidents and illnesses, which increases costs to businesses and to the economy as a whole.”

Legal limits on overtime combined with “effective enforcement,” including a robust labor inspection body and financial penalties, are needed to reduce working hours, Messenger said. Adequate wages are also a must. “Otherwise, workers will need to work as much overtime as possible

just to make ends meet,” he said.

Some people put in long hours because they enjoy their work, while others are motivated by money or the chance to get ahead. But unfettered overtime is an unsustainable practice, both for employees and, in the long run, for the economy. **N**

Nikkei deputy editor Nobuyuki Okada in Tokyo and Nikkei staff writers Seiya Tsuji in Tokyo, Mariko Tai in Beijing, and Joyce Ho in Hong Kong contributed to this report.

JOYCE HO Nikkei staff writer

FEMALE FORCE

Hong Kong's women put in long hours, but it is foreign domestic helpers and low-skilled workers who carry the heaviest load

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HONG KONG It is no secret that Hong Kong's prosperity is powered by a workforce that puts in intense hours. "All workaholics should move to Hong Kong, where working hours average over 50 per week, with only 17 days of holiday annually," Swiss financial group UBS said in a 2015 report.

The report found that Hong Kong clocked the most working hours among the 71 cities it surveyed, averaging 2,606 per year. But there is another, more surprising statistic: The ratio of workers putting in grueling hours is higher among women than men in the city, something unseen among members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

According to the International Labor Organization, over 30% of Hong Kong's female workforce put in 49 hours or more per week last year, a threshold above which, the United Nations affiliate warns, "occupational health and safety, work-life balance, and individual performance" might suffer.

"I work over the weekend almost every week," Hin Han Shum, a Hong Kong-based lawyer at an international law firm, told the Nikkei Asian Review. Shum said she worked around 56 hours a week over the past month, which was "not bad" compared with the 90-hour weeks she was putting in earlier in the year. But her social life and health, she said, have both suffered.



Photos by Shinya Sawai

Klara Yau, who teaches English at a local high school, said she works roughly 50 hours a week, with weekends often eaten up by piles of papers to be marked and miscellaneous school duties, including promotional activities. "Some teachers probably slogged for 60 hours," Yau said.

UNSUNG HEROINES On average, men still work longer than women in Hong Kong, but their median hours have declined to 45 last year from 48 in 2001, while that of women stayed flat at 44, according to the government's 2015 census report. This was against the backdrop of a 31.5% rise in the size of the female working population, to 1.85 million, versus a 4.4% rise, to 1.93 million, in the male population over the same period.

The report attributed the rise in labor force participation among women to their "improvement in educational attainment, marriage postponement, and increased prevalence of spinsterhood." But the large number of foreign domestic helpers, totaling 340,380 as of 2015, mostly women from the Philippines and Indonesia, should not be ignored. They work long hours to shoulder local women's conventional obligations, such as taking care of children and elderly family members.

"Migrant domestic helpers need to work at least 16 to 20 hours a day, and [have] only one day [of] rest in seven

PHOTO: Union members gather signatures to have foreign domestic workers included in legislation covering working hours in Hong Kong on Nov. 27.

days," said Sringatin, chairperson of the Indonesian Migrant Workers' Union. She said the greatest plight for her community is the "live-in" condition, which is compulsory under Hong Kong law. "We cannot escape from the house," Sringatin said.

Feliza Guy Benitez, chairperson of the Filipino Migrant Workers' Union, wants the government to set a maximum 11-hour workday for domestic helpers, but she is concerned over her group's exclusion from talks over legislation to standardize working hours.

TWIN BURDENS Elizabeth Wong, a working mother with two children, says her career is "100% supported" by her two Filipino helpers. "I work an average 45 hours every week, but on Saturday I might attend seminars and professional enhancement activities to keep up with the latest development of our field," said Wong, a public sector employee.

But not all of Hong Kong's women are so fortunate. Sister Fong is a 68-year-old security guard at a private residential building. During a typical 12-hour shift, she told the Nikkei Asian Review that she



(Hours)

AVERAGE ANNUAL WORKING HOURS BY CITY

Hong Kong 2,606

Mumbai 2,277

Mexico City 2,261

New Delhi 2,214

Bangkok 2,191

Dubai 2,186

Nairobi 2,184

Taipei 2,141

Jakarta 2,102

Bogota 2,096

Cairo 2,082

Doha 2,082

Santiago de Chile 2,076

Tokyo 2,055

Shanghai 2,051

Istanbul 2,043

Tel Aviv 2,038

Chicago 2,030

Auckland 1,992

Toronto 1,985

Beijing 1,963

Lima 1,957

Manila 1,951

Kuala Lumpur 1,935

Seoul 1,934

Los Angeles 1,928

Zurich 1,912



Source: UBS

had been locked into the “double burden” of job and family responsibilities until just a few years ago, when her youngest daughter grew up.

“I could barely look after my youngest daughter. She went astray,” said Fong, who migrated from mainland China 21 years ago to join her husband. But shortly after they were reunited, he died of diabetes. “I used to be on an eight-hour shift, but the death of my husband made things hard,” she said.

“A lot of the Hong Kong women who work long hours are the unskilled workers,” Susanne Choi Yuk-ping, a professor in the sociology department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, said. The female population is “a polarized group,” said Choi. “We have highly educated women who have managed to enter high-pay sectors and become professionals or managers, but there are also a large number of women who are working part-time or unskilled workers.”

Over 66% of those engaged in low-skill occupations in Hong Kong, such as cleaning services, are women, according to the 2015 census.

Choi emphasized that a lot of women in Hong Kong are under economic pressure to work. “Their income is really crucial for the family. This includes middle-class women because of high housing prices and living costs,” she said, adding that the government should protect lower-skilled workers, as they tend to have little bargaining power.

LEGISLATION DEBATE Hong Kong has yet to report any deaths linked directly to overwork. But after 98 non-accident-related deaths during work were reported last year, the city’s Labor and Welfare Bureau is planning to launch a study on the subject, the bureau’s secretary, Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, told the Legislative Council on Nov. 30.

Meanwhile, the debate over legislation to regulate working hours is struggling to move forward. According to the latest report by the Standard Working Hours

Committee, a consultative body set up by Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying in 2013, labor organizations are pushing for a standard workweek of 44 hours, plus overtime compensation at 1.5 times the basic pay rate.

Employers’ associations, however, object to the introduction of a uniform workweek, arguing that employment contracts that clearly stipulate working conditions would be sufficient.

Six labor union representatives have boycotted the committee since April, saying contractual arrangements are a “toothless tiger.” “Workers who need the

CLIFF VENZON Nikkei staff writer

OVERTIME BRIGADE

Low pay is just one of the reasons Philippine women work so many hours

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job so badly might not always confront their bosses even if the latter breaches the contract," said Kwok Wai-Keung, Legislative Council member for the labor constituency, who characterized the employer group's contract proposal as a maneuver aimed at impeding the legislation of standard working hours.

"It's very difficult to get a consensus," Dr. Leong Che-hung, chairperson of the committee, said. While he believes both sides agree that workers should be "properly compensated" for overtime work and protected by legally binding contracts, the "one-size-fits-all" regime proposed by la-

bor unions would end up creating a lot of exemptions, potentially reducing the efficacy of the law.

The bottom line, Leong said, is to make sure any new policy is effective without upsetting Hong Kong's economy. "Having standard working hours does not stop one from working longer, unless you set a maximum working hours," he said. "People will still work longer for more income." **N**

PHOTO: Late nights are the norm for many workers in Hong Kong's Central business district.



MANILA At a time when women around the world are working fewer and fewer hours, women in the Philippines continue to pile on the overtime.

A major culprit is the service sector, the country's growth engine. It employs over 90% of the women who are logging "excessive" hours -- 49 hours or more a week, according to 2014 data from the International Labor Organization, a U.N. agency. This includes jobs in retail, hospitality, domestic help and business process outsourcing.

A big part of the reason is structural. Some 70% of the country's retail sector is dominated by mom and pop shops, many of which stay open from morning to midnight and are managed by "mom."

Meanwhile, nearly 2 million women work as domestic helpers, and many of them live with their employers -- an arrangement that means they are often "expected to work round-the-clock," said Lourdes Macapanpan, a program director at the ILO in Manila.

PHOTO: Protesters demand justice for Erwiana Sulistyarningsih, an Indonesian domestic helper who accused her Hong Kong employer of physically abusing her, in Manila in February 2014.

Rose Cabacang, 27, just added her fourth job last month: online marketer for a wedding planner.

She already holds down a full-time position at a global knowledge process outsourcing company, where she works from 8 in the evening until 5 in the morning. She juggles the three part-time jobs during the day.

Cabacang and her husband both make more than Manila's minimum wage of 491 pesos (\$9.86) from their main jobs, more than enough to make ends meet. But she dreams of buying their own house and building up savings for her 2-year-old son.

The extra cash comes at a cost, however. Cabacang said she is lucky if she gets four hours of sleep a day, and she spends very little time with her son. "It breaks my heart when he asks me to play with him, but I just can't because I'm extremely tired," she said.

Because she and her husband are usually working, they hired a live-in helper. Karen, 18, works from 6 in the morning until 9 at night, taking breaks when her duties allow.

Cabacang and her maid are contributing to a trend in the Philippines in which 24.4% of working women are putting in 49 hours or more per week,

compared with the standard 40 hours.

The ILO's Macapanpan said the growing number of working mothers has driven demand for domestic workers, a job that does not require formal training or experience. A lack of money forced Karen, Cabacang's maid, to drop out of high school to find work.

Although her job puts food on the table, it is hardly stable. Karen is Cabacang's 10th maid in over two years, and many other households report similarly heavy turnover.

Evelyn Manangan, chief at the Philippines labor department's women workers development division said the domestic help industry in the Philippines is "peculiar" in that workers tend to have fixed salaries but are expected to always be on the job. In more-developed countries, helpers are typically paid by the hour. It does not help that under Philippine law, domestic helpers are guaranteed only eight hours of rest a day.

Macapanpan said the fact that so many women have lower-paying jobs pushes them to work more.

"There should be more government programs for vocational and technical training to give [women] access to higher-paying jobs," she said. **N**



KIM JAEWON Nikkei staff writer

WORK-LIFE IMBALANCE

South Korea's corporate culture of marathon workdays is taking a toll

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SEOUL Chung, 38, quit her job last year as a senior nurse at a Seoul hospital where she had worked for eight years. She now has a nursing job at a U.S. military hospital in Pyeongtaek, some 70km south of the capital. Though she makes only about two-thirds as much as she used to, Chung, who wished to be identified only by her last name, said she has no regrets.

"When I worked for the hospital in Seoul, I was given extra tasks after completing my eight-hour shift. I used to put in 12-hour days and had to come to the office on weekends to finish my work."

Chung said the extreme stress she felt made her quick to anger. When the stress finally became too much, she left. At her new job, she said, everybody leaves work as soon as their shift is over. "I'm happy that I don't have to bring my work home with me."

ALWAYS ON CALL Her story is all too common in South Korea. Take the Woori Bank director who's at his desk by 6 a.m.

and doesn't leave until 10 p.m., or the Samsung executive who brings his cell-phone with him to the shower so as not to miss a call from his boss.

According to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, South Koreans worked an average of 2,113 hours in 2015, the second highest among the 35 member countries. In Japan, by comparison, the average was a far smaller 1,719 hours, while the OECD average was 1,766 hours.

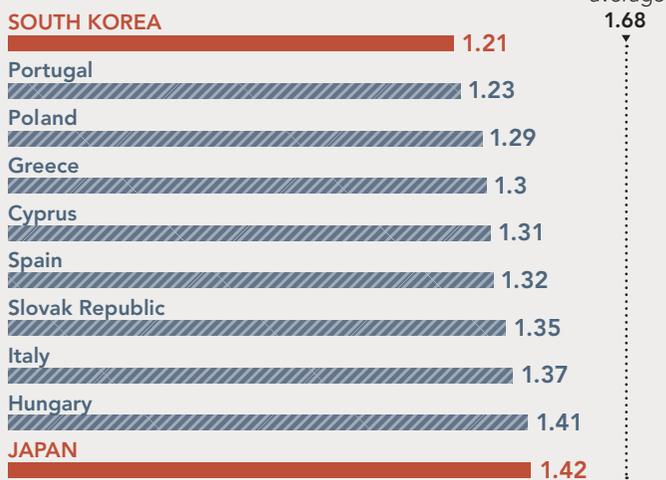
Why are South Koreans working so much longer than nearly everyone else?

Dainn Wie, an associate professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo, offered three reasons.

The first, she said, is that workers do not have a voice. "Companies usually have too much power," Wie said. "Contract workers can't demand anything of their employers."

Another reason is a wage structure that makes workers vulnerable to long hours. Pay is so low, said Wie, "the only way they

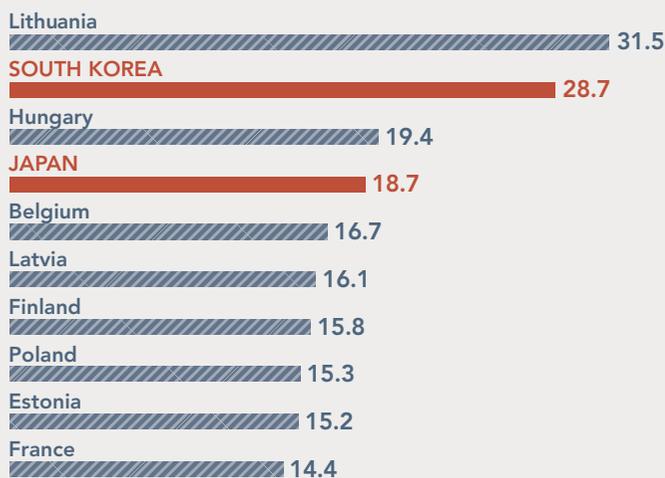
WORLD'S LOWEST FERTILITY RATES



Data as of 2014

Source: OECD

SUICIDE RATES BY COUNTRY (per 100,000 people)



Data for 2013

Source: OECD

PHOTO: A rush-hour scrum forms near the exit of a Seoul subway station in November.

can earn more is by doing overtime. Many of them are contract workers."

According to the Ministry of Employment and Labor, the average contract employee worked 9.6 hours of overtime per month in 2015, compared with 7.6 hours for salaried workers.

The third reason, according to Wie, is an office culture where senior employees see marathon workdays as a given. In such an environment, junior colleagues feel pressure to stay in the office longer.

Chung, the nurse, sees cultural differences at play. "In the Korean hospital, I worked like a machine," she said. "But in the U.S. hospital, I can change my hours or shifts by talking with my colleagues. I think that's because of a difference in the cultures, not something specific to the workplace."

Lee Jung-min, an economics professor at Seoul National University, said the longer-is-better approach to work is no longer sustainable. The government and businesses need to promote more open and

innovative work environments, Lee said.

"We should change our old habit of overtime," the professor said. "It is time to let young employees express their creativity in open and free workplaces."

Scholars say long working hours translate into higher incidences of accidents and injuries in the workplace. They also have broader negative implications for society at large.

South Korea's fertility rate was 1.2 births per woman in 2014, the lowest in the OECD, whose members averaged 1.7, and slightly below Japan's 1.4.

Long hours in the office mean people have less time to have children. "Women put in slightly fewer hours than men at the workplace, but if you add housework, they work far more hours than men. They have no time to have children," Wie said.

Low fertility rates may be troubling, but there is a far bleaker problem: suicide. South Korea had the highest suicide rate in the OECD in 2013, at 28.7 per 100,000 people. Japan was third, at 18.7, while the U.S. was the 12th, at 13.1.

Although no direct correlation has been proved between longer work hours and higher suicide rates, surveys clearly show that overtime work negatively impacts people's life satisfaction levels.

Lee, the economics professor, said poor communication within South Korean companies is partly to blame for the long hours. "Many employees spend time just waiting for their bosses to sign something for them," Lee said. "If they can cut out such steps, or speed up the process, I'm sure they would be able to go home earlier."

SHORT AND SWEET There are signs of change, however. For example, Bori Publishing, a children's book publisher in Paju, north of Seoul, adopted six-hour workdays in 2012 so employees could have more free time.

"Six-hour days are great. I have more 'me' time, and it's easier to visit government offices and clinics when I need to," said Kim Nuri, an editor who has been at Bori since 2010. "It also means we can avoid rush hour and spend more time with our children. Some employees are learning foreign languages after work."

The company freed up the time by cutting out its afternoon tea break and unnecessary meetings. Bori officials say both management and employees are happy with the system. **N**

Nikkei staff writer Kentaro Iwamoto in Tokyo contributed to this report.

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SIMON ROUGHNEEN Asia regional correspondent
CLOCKING OUT*There are no easy solutions,
but Asia must tackle
its epidemic of overwork*

JAKARTA Asia's economic rise has come with some downsides: income inequality in countries such as Indonesia and Thailand, environmental degradation in Vietnam and China, uncontrolled urban sprawl and clogged traffic in Manila and Mumbai.

For millions of employees, from those in low-paying factory jobs to high-pressure corporate positions, long working hours are another pitfall. Japan and South Korea are Asia's longest-established high-income economies and both figure at the wrong end of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's index of working hours.

South Koreans worked 2,113 hours on average during 2015, the second highest in the OECD. Japan's figure of 1,719 hours was much closer to the OECD average of 1,766, but the world's third-biggest economy nonetheless retains its image as having a culture of work first, personal life second. That image was reinforced by a recent government survey showing that many Japanese workers are putting in more overtime than their OECD counterparts.

In a separate study, South Korea had the second-highest rate of suicide among OECD members, at 28.7 cases per 100,000 people, in 2013. Japan was fourth, at 18.7.

THE ULTIMATE PRICE There is, it seems, a link between hard work and untimely death in Asia. Perhaps the most luridly tragic side effect of Asia's push for growth is *karoshi*, a Japanese term describing death from overwork, often by suicides but also linked to exhaustion and stress.

Japan saw compensation claims for *karoshi* and illnesses related to overwork rise to a record high of 2,310 cases in 2015.

A government white paper published this October warned that almost a quarter of the workforce could be vulnerable to *karoshi*, with the benchmark set at employees who work more than 80 hours of overtime each month.

The suicide of Matsuri Takahashi, an employee of advertising agency Dentsu, in December 2015 seems to have sparked a more determined push for reform. The 24-year-old jumped to her death from a company dormitory after putting in more than 100 hours of overtime the previous month.

On Nov. 7, Tokyo Labor Bureau officials raided Dentsu offices on suspicion of violating labor laws. The following day, Yasuhisa Shiozaki, minister of health, labor and welfare, said the ministry "will thoroughly investigate, eyeing the possibility of sending the case to prosecutors."

A forum on tackling long working hours was held in Tokyo on Nov. 25, with speakers ranging from a doctor to a journalist and a human resources chief. Participants agreed that Japan needs a cap on working hours and rules on rest intervals -- neither of which exist in practice.

But despite the hardship caused by long working hours, and studies showing that excessive overtime is actually counterproductive, will corporate Japan relent? Dentsu "has played down the authorities' directive to correct its long overtime hours," one senior labor ministry official said, adding that labor officials had contacted the company numerous times since 2010 over working hours.

With economies booming across Asia, concerns are growing about how growth-hungry countries with less-



developed laws and regulations can avoid their own crises.

For some, it may be too late. China already has its own term for *karoshi* -- *guolaosi* -- and state media in 2014 suggested that some 1,600 people a day succumb to overwork. Evidence suggests that the nation's growing legions of cubicle office workers are more likely to make up the grim statistics than their lower-paid, unionized factory counterparts.

In less-developed Asian economies, cities such as Jakarta and Manila can see eight-hour work days turn into 12- or 13-hour marathons when the draining morning and evening commutes through heavy traffic are factored in.

HARD PROBLEM There are no easy solutions to Asia's epidemic of overwork. The region could look to Europe, where strong trade unions, generous social welfare provisions and far-reaching labor laws mean workers are rarely overburdened. Germany passed legislation establishing a 40-hour workweek half a century ago, and a 2014 Eurobarometer survey suggested that 80% of Europeans are happy with their working hours.

But surveys indicate that Germans



Shinya Sawai

GLOBAL HAPPINESS RANKING

for 2013-2015

1	Denmark	7.526
2	Switzerland	7.509
3	Iceland	7.501
4	Norway	7.498
5	Finland	7.413
6	Canada	7.404
7	Netherlands	7.339
8	New Zealand	7.334
9	Australia	7.313
10	Sweden	7.291
11	Israel	7.267
12	Austria	7.119
13	U.S.	7.104
14	Costa Rica	7.087
15	Puerto Rico	7.039
16	Germany	6.994
17	Brazil	6.952
18	Belgium	6.929
19	Ireland	6.907
20	Luxembourg	6.871
21	Mexico	6.778
22	SINGAPORE	6.739
23	U.K.	6.725
24	Chile	6.705
25	Panama	6.701
26	Argentina	6.650
27	Czech Republic	6.596
28	UAE	6.573
29	Uruguay	6.545
30	Malta	6.488
...		
33	THAILAND	6.474
...		
35	TAIWAN	6.379
...		
47	MALAYSIA	6.005
...		
53	JAPAN	5.921

want to work closer to 30 hours a week, while France’s left-right political divide has deepened in recent years in part due to clashes over the country’s extremely generous worker benefits, such as long holidays, which critics say undermine business competitiveness. Protecting employee rights and improving working conditions while maintaining economic growth is a tricky balance for any government to achieve.

An alternative solution could come from the private sector, namely the much-touted “gig economy” of short-term contracts and so-called digital nomads.

This way of working is on the rise in the West, and is also coming to Asia. Ride-hailing companies like Grab and Didi provide for drivers, who operate as independent contractors rather than employees, as they would if they worked for a conventional taxi company.

But while this type of employment usually means working remotely, with greater personal freedom, the lack of income security and the unpredictable nature of what is essentially freelance work could prompt another kind of despair.

A more immediate solution may be found in the order and efficiency of

PHOTO: A high-pressure corporate culture means many employees in Asia are on call around the clock.

Singapore. Despite their long hours, workers there seem to be much happier with their lot than their counterparts elsewhere.

A survey by recruitment agency Morgan McKinley found that while more than 70% of workers in Singapore put in overtime, more than 80% of them described this time as more productive than their regular hours. In Japan, only 26% felt the same way, according to the survey.

Moreover, nearly half of the Singaporean respondents said their employers offered the option of working from home, while two-thirds said they have some freedom in setting their start and finish times. This sense of control may go a long way in explaining why workers can put in long hours without too much of a frown. **N**

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