

# Workplace Discrimination: Impact on Health among Thai Migrant Workers in South Korea

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## Abstract

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*This article is intended to provide a perspective of workplace discrimination among migrant workers in South Korea in terms of an overall situation and impact on the workers' health, with a focus on Thai migrant workers. The study was conducted by content analysis based on previous studies and interviews to find out how Thai migrant workers experienced discrimination and how it impacted on their health, aiming to provide policy recommendations and future research implications. The results showed that most of Thai migrant workers in the Employment Permit System (EPS) who faced workplace discrimination in South Korea were either unskilled or semi-unskilled labour who worked the 3Ds jobs in the manufacturing sector, especially in agriculture industries and factories. These workers lacked both English and Korean language skill, which was the key factor that made them vulnerable to discrimination in the workplace. They had experienced some forms of workplace discrimination by employers or Korean colleagues, i.e. in the aspects of work and employment conditions, unsafe working environment, unclear employment contracts, and unfair wage payment, which were related to a healthcare access issue. Such experience affected both physical and mental health of the workers and subsequently led to health-risk behavior, e.g. alcohol drinking, smoking, and others that could bring about problems like fights, dipsomania, and alcoholism. For future research and policy recommendations, health promotion to improve health outcomes among migrant workers according to a community-based concept is a very interesting topic to consider.*

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**Keywords:** Workplace discrimination, Impact on health, Migrant workers

## 1. Introduction

Dynamic economic growth in Asia and the Pacific has spurred nearly 3 million Asian workers to seek employment abroad every year (ILO, 2007). Those migrant workers face various forms of discrimination in Europe and the Middle east and also increasingly within Asia itself. Some researches indicated widespread direct and indirect discrimination against migrant workers, when they first enter the labour market and while they are working. There is also multiple discrimination, in which workers are subject to segregation on more than one grounds, e.g. nationality, gender, age, religion, or length of stay. Other relevant forms of discrimination by colleagues and employers are racism and xenophobia (Galossi et al., 2010).

Like other countries, workplace discrimination is common in South Korea. A recent report showed that there are approximately 250,000 migrant workers under the Employment Permit System (EPS) in the country; many of the new arrivals are from Southeast Asian countries, mostly Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Those workers are allowed to work in industries where labour is tight, including agriculture, construction, and manufacturing (Jack Board, 2015). According to the Office of Labour Affairs, the Royal Thai Embassy in Seoul, Thai workers have started to work in South Korea since 1988; the trend of demand has been increasing particularly in the recent five years and South Korea has remained an attractive potential market for Thai workers. Statistics from the Thailand Overseas Employment Administration (TOEA, 2012) also suggested that South Korea is one of the top three countries Thai workers have chosen to work, while a satisfaction rating survey shows that Thai workers are also in great demand by Korean employers.

Currently in South Korea, approximately 24,000 Thai workers are legally under the Employment Permit System (EPS) and more than 10,000 Thai workers are subject to the labour law under the Internship Training System (ITS), in which they are trainees who receive lower income than the standard minimum wage. However, there are over ten thousand illegal Thai workers in the country as well; some of them are those who have run away from the contract and those who stay even after they are out of contract. Mostly, these migrant workers have experienced some forms of workplace discrimination, e.g. overtime working without pay, assault and abuse by employers, inadequate shelter and lack of proper toilets, and threats of deportation or repatriation. Such unfair treatment was rarely punished and continues to happen, leading to negative health outcomes as well as health inequalities among migrant workers, which are the problem we should concern. According to the report of the Ministry of Labour of Thailand (2014), workplace discrimination Thai migrant workers in South Korea had faced has led to various aspects of inequality, especially poor treatment by employers, e.g. improper working hours and working conditions. These factors not only impact on the health of migrant workers, causing stress and suffering, but also lead to problems concerning illegal workers who cannot tolerate such bad working conditions.

This paper, therefore, aimed to review the situations of workplace discrimination among migrant workers in South Korea, with a focus on Thai workers, by studying relevant secondary data, e.g. previous researches and interviews, to find out how those workers experienced discrimination and how it impacted on their health. Subsequently, suggestion of intervention and policy implementation, as well as recommendations for future research, was proposed to tackle health disparities that had resulted from workplace discrimination. This study is not only significant to workers' health but will also help to relieve illegal worker issues and retain labour stability for Korean employers.

## 2. Workplace Discrimination

Workplace discrimination has been recognized as a big issue throughout the world and has triggered equal employment opportunities legislation since the 1960s (Daldy et al., 2013, p. 139). Generally, discrimination (Cambridge Dictionary, 2015) means to treat a person or a particular group of people differently, particularly in a worse way than you treat other people because of their gender, age, or disability. Banerjee (2008, p. 384, as cited in Daldy et al., 2013) defined perceived discrimination as a situation which an individual feels they were treated unfairly because of their membership of a particular social category. Migrants are one of the groups vulnerable to discrimination on a basis of cultural differences apart from age and gender factors, especially in the employment context. International evidence suggested the highest level of discrimination in employment settings, with as many as 40 percent of migrants experiencing some forms of discrimination at work (Daldy et al., 2013, p. 139). In addition, there is also multiple discrimination, in which workers are subject to segregation on more than one grounds, e.g. nationality, gender, age, religion, or length of stay (Galossi et al., 2010). Lang and Lehmann (2012, as cited in Daldy et al., 2013) also pointed that employers may discriminate against potential employees in many different ways and for many different reasons and negative consequences on the discriminated group include lower wages or higher unemployment rates.

Racial discrimination against migrants is another form of discrimination found in employment, which is often sensitive and more difficult to detect, even though it is strictly forbidden by a number of federal and state laws (FindLaw, 2013). Trenerry (2012, p.6, as cited in Daldy et al., 2013) presented a concept of systemic race-based discrimination at workplace, which arises from avoidable different and unfair treatment in recruitment, interview and selection, employment, job allocation, seniority, role ambiguity, performance evaluation, training, promotion, remuneration, dismissal, resignations, and retirement among staff of different racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. John Wrench (1997) defined racial discrimination in the workplace/employment according to a concept of racism and discrimination in Europe, where migrants or ethnic minorities are treated inferiorly in the labour market and workplace that the whites and the national majorities are dominating, even if they are comparably qualified in terms of education, work experience, or other relevant criteria. The criteria which mark a group for unjustified inequality in treatment may vary in different member states (Rex, 1992). The study showed that racial discrimination in Europe has happened repeatedly in the labour market of different EU countries and only anti-discrimination measures are not sufficient to cope with such a problem. There is probably a failure to appreciate how broader legal inequalities impinge on and interact with other forms of discrimination (John Wrench, 1997, p. 41).

In the United State, various types of discrimination persist despite legislations prohibiting such practice. This phenomenon also links to unfavorable health impact among migrants or ethnic minorities in the country.

A previous study examining racial/ethnic differences and mental health consequences of discrimination exposure showed a positive relation between workplace discrimination and depressive symptoms across racial and ethnic groups. According to the study, African American workers were more likely to report more frequency and multiple types of discrimination exposure than employees of other race/ethnicity. Thus, a way to improve psychosocial functioning among racial/ethnic minority employees at greatest risk of exposure is reducing workplace discrimination (Wizdom Powell Hammond et al., 2010). A recent evidence of workplace discrimination based on the General Social Survey, a national probability survey representative of the U.S. population (2008), showed that continuing high levels of workplace discrimination impacted on productivity and health of employees, resulting in higher levels of psychological distress and health-related problems, less job satisfaction, higher rates of absenteeism, and higher frequency of thinking about quitting job among employees who have dreaded or experienced workplace discrimination when compared with those who have not.

### **3. Workplace Discrimination among Migrant Workers in South Korea**

The Korean government has allowed local employers to import foreign workers (migrant workers) from developing countries in Asia as a result of a severe shortage of unskilled production workers after the economic boom in the 1980s. Most migrant workers employed by SMEs and farms can be divided into three groups: legitimate employees, industrial and technical trainees, and undocumented migrant workers. Some of these workers occupy many of the positions in the dirty, dangerous, and difficult/demanding industry, also known as “the 3Ds”, in the countryside (Steven Denney, 2015). In spite of steadily increasing public recognition and movement of concerned sectors in defense of migrant struggles and the Act Concerning the Employment Permit for Migrant Workers (the EPS Act) passed by the Korean National Assembly in August 2003 in an attempt to protect the rights of migrant workers and prohibit discrimination and human rights violation through legislation by providing a legal status for migrant workers (The EPS Act, 2003), those workers have still been faced with workplace discrimination and human right violation due to insufficient protection, and there are very limited possibilities to remedy such abuses (The Amnesty International Report, 2004). Migrant workers have also encountered hardships under the Employment Permit System (EPS). Many employers exploit workers through this system because those workers need to get permission from the employers before changing jobs, while some articles on racial discrimination faced by migrants showed that wage discrimination among migrant workers in South Korea is the highest in the OECD (Yonhap, 2015, as cited in Steven Denney, 2015).

In this part, some cases of migrant workers who faced workplace discrimination and/or tribulations under the EPS according to the report of Amnesty International (2014) would be discussed and raised as an example. The first case was an Indonesian worker who was exploited by his employer; the employer told him that he had to choose between quitting the job and accepting the lower wage, while the employer would not sign necessary documents to allow him to find a new job legally. The second case was a Chinese worker who worked 13-hour night shifts in an embroidery factory; she was not allowed to change her job and threatened to get sacked by her employer. She decided to resign and went to the employment security center for help but her effort was in vain. Eventually, she committed suicide by throwing herself under a subway train. The third case was about Cambodian workers who were treated like slaves by employers in the agricultural industry; such assault and abuse cases continued to occur but were rarely punished. The fourth case was of Nigerian workers who were forced by the employer to become undocumented migrant workers without compensation. These workers had detected that their contracts allowed the employer to take some money off their wage for insurance, so they asked for a wage hike to make up for the part that was withheld for the insurance payment so that their net wage was not lower than the initial agreed amount. However, the employer interpreted their request as a collective action. And even after they consented to continue working for the company without the wage hike, the employer sacked them and subsequently lodged a report to the authority alleging that they abandoned their work without permission, leaving them no choice but to become undocumented workers. As a result, these workers became desperate because they lost their job and money and had to live in fear of getting arrested and deported at any moment.

The final case concerned eight Thai women who had worked at a factory of a digital company and suffered serious illness because of prolonged exposure to toxic chemicals (up to four years). Their job involved using a toxic chemical called n-hexane to clean plastic frames, but they were not provided with safety instructions or warned of the danger from working with the chemical in a closed area longer than 14 hours per day. They had reportedly worked 400 hours per month and an average of 160 hours of overtime.

They had not worn goggles, masks, or any other protective gear except for cotton gloves while working in the n-hexane room which also had poor ventilation after a redesign. Korean workers, on the other hand, would not do such a job. In October 2004, three workers fell ill and n-hexane poisoning was diagnosed as the cause of the disease. However, they decided to continue working from worry about expensive treatment cost and possible job loss in the long term. The company's president did not allow them to go to hospital, and when their condition worsened (there were unable to walk), they were forced to keep their treatment secret. The employer detained them at the dormitory for 40 days to prevent them from going out to meet others or getting treatment from fear of negative publicity. Five workers escaped to receive treatment at a local hospital with the help of friends and a missionary organization, while the other three workers were sent back to Thailand by the employer, where they did not get appropriate medical help. Later, they arrived back in Seoul for treatment at a state-funded hospital because the hexane poisoning required an intensive treatment of a year or more.

Nonetheless, the company continued not to tell workers about the danger of n-hexane despite warning from the industry security inspectors. Then in 2005, the company's president was arrested. This case is a clear example of multiple discrimination in the workplace, where a racial difference was combined with specific vulnerability, e.g. gender of workers; not only these migrant workers were not given adequate training or protection, but they were also assigned to more dangerous tasks than their Korean colleagues. In addition, women who were ill because of work seem to be more vulnerable to getting exploited by their employers, e.g. in forms of arbitrary detention, deprivation of rights and freedom, and denial of proper health care.

In summary, this literature review suggested numerous issues about workplace discrimination among migrant workers in South Korea, which are the following: 1) migrant workers are more likely to get their wage withheld and work excessively long hours for lower wage than Korean workers in similar jobs; 2) migrant workers encounter high levels of verbal and physical abuse at workplace and are denied the right to participate in legal trade unions; 3) many injured migrant workers have received inadequate treatment and paltry compensation for a serious industrial accident or an occupational illness; 4) pragmatically, migrant workers under the EPS have very limited scope for changing workplace, so they may terminate their status and become irregular workers if their employers do not follow the basic arrangements or their jobs and wages do not meet the agreements (e.g. more dangerous or more poorly paid than they had expected); 5) a number of migrant workers complain that they work in more dangerous conditions than their Korean colleagues, according to an interview of Amnesty International; and 6) a third of all migrant workers in South Korea are women, who are at risk of sexual harassment at workplace and also experience discrimination in terms of lower pay levels than the men migrants.

Previous researches also pointed out that not only in South Korea, Thai migrant workers have also faced similar forms of workplace/employment discrimination in other countries (e.g. Taiwan and the Middle East). In Taiwan, several forms of employment discrimination have become evident lately, starting from gender discrimination in the workplace to race-based employment discrimination. Ethnic discrimination at workplace is also a growing problem in Taiwan apart from racial discrimination, while recently emerging employment discrimination is age discrimination in employment (Cing-Kae Chiao, 2014). Similarly, there are records of combined discrimination among migrant workers in the Middle East countries. However, workplace discrimination Thai migrant workers have experienced in these countries is a bit different from South Korea because working in big companies with better support systems (e.g. interpreters and supervisors) helps migrant workers get through any problems about work or discrimination.

#### **4. Workplace Discrimination among Thai Migrant Workers in South Korea: Results of Review and Interview**

The study was conducted by content analysis based on previous studies and interviews reported by the Office of Labour Affairs in Seoul and other sources to find out how Thai migrant workers experienced workplace discrimination and how it impacted on their health. Those sources gave a picture of workplace discrimination among Thai migrant workers in South Korea, which had both direct and indirect impact on their health in various aspects. This part would present overall working situations of Thai migrant workers in South Korea, using documentary research and some further interviews.

##### **Study results based on interview documents relating to Thai migrant workers in South Korea**

Workplace discrimination among Thai migrants in South Korea is a key issue in the field of labour development. To clearly understand the issue, the study results would be presented by topics as follows.

1) There were inequalities of working hours, holidays, and earnings between Korean workers and Thai migrant workers at factories and these migrant workers were usually discriminated by the employers. Based on an interview, Thai migrant workers in a factory claimed that they had to work from 8.00 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. and were often ordered to work overtime until 10.00 p.m. without exception. Korean employers always ignored a request of the migrants to take a leave because of illness or any other reasons and the migrants tended to get into troubles if they failed to comply with the employers' orders, e.g. getting rebuked or facing a wage cut.

2) A weekly shift change, working amid noise pollution from running machinery, and lifting heavy objects of over 25 kilograms every day impacted on the health of the migrants. The heavy lifting could also lead to illness under the law. Such situations have been found in a variety of industries, e.g. a sock factory, a DVD packaging factory, a Kimchi factory, a guitar factory, a car parts factory, and furniture factory. Not only did those factories have long working hours, they were also full of heat and noise from machinery, dust, and chemical smells, lacked good ventilation, and had confined atmosphere and foul odors, which led to health problems of workers. Most of the workers in those factories confirmed that working abroad was tough, particularly in South Korea, given factors such as uncertain working time and unkind employers.

3) Migrant workers at factories in South Korea had to work hard and do everything in haste, such as finishing a meal within 20-30 minutes in the case of weaving and sock factories because they had to race against machines. However, according to the interviewees, Korean workers were not subject to such conditions because of their nationality; their working hours were certain and they could leave when the working hours ended without getting rebuked by the employers or foremen. That was an evidence of workplace discrimination against Thai migrant workers in South Korea.

4) Migrant workers were often exploited and threatened by Korean colleagues for they were considered as the blue collar which had lower status than Korean workers. In addition, the employers usually ordered (Thai) migrant workers to work overtime more than 30 minutes each day without pay. Thai migrant workers also had short vacation because their employers usually demanded that they work even when a national day was approaching and gave them only two or three days of leave despite long holidays. About the salary, although their contract promised a monthly wage, in practice the workers received earnings on a daily/hourly basis. Regarding overtime pay, migrant workers were often cheated about working hours, especially in the construction industry where those workers suffered discrimination on the working hour, overtime load, and wage rate. Many Thai migrants had to work from 7.30 a.m. to 9.00 p.m. in the summer and they could only complain to one another because they were not able to speak Korean and also did not have knowledge or connections to contact relevant and responsible organizations. There were some cases that the migrant workers consulted their interpreter about the problems, but he did not pay attention because he judged the migrants as people who only worked for money. Therefore, those migrant workers could not claim for anything other than what their employers had provided.

5) There were a number of complaints from Thai migrant workers about discrimination at workplace, saying that hard work and other unfair conditions made them want to change the job and employer as well as influenced them to escape and become illegal workers. The interviewees also confirmed that the discrimination situations impacted on their health both mentally and physically, e.g. stress and tiredness from overtime working, work-related injuries/accidents/illness, and health-risk behavior, which varied a bit across gender.

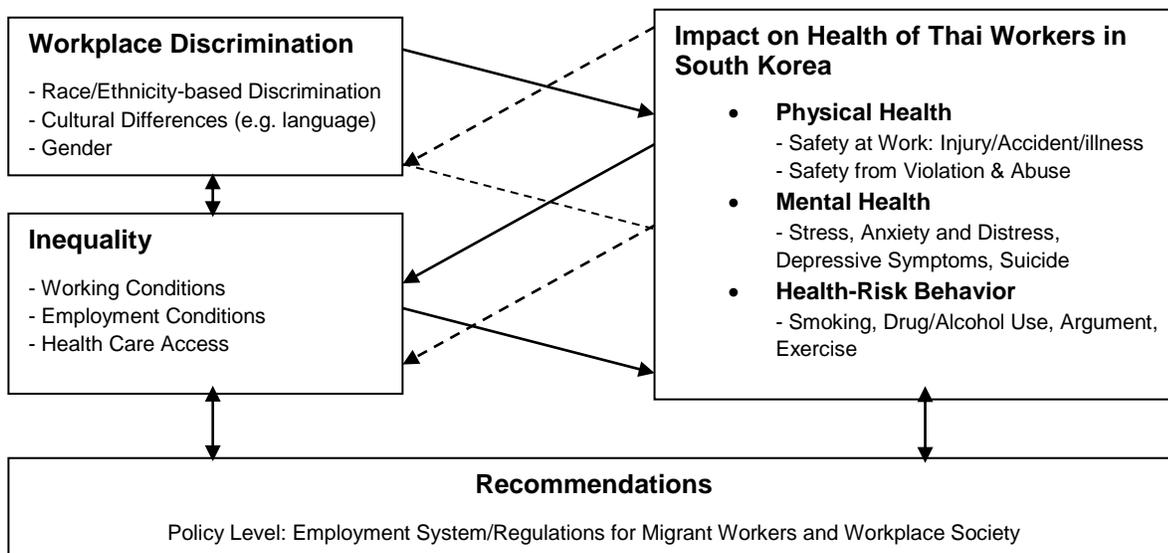
6) A Thai worker who worked as a telecommunication engineer at a big international company was also interviewed about discrimination situations as a comparison. He finished a Master's degree and had worked in South Korea for around two years, with approximately monthly salary of KRW5,000,000. According to the interviewee, although he also experienced a 'work hard' culture, he was never discriminated by the employer or colleagues. He could adjust to the way of life in the country and felt that it had not impacted on his health; he always went exercising and joined in health activities. Interestingly, workplace discrimination experienced by Thai migrant workers in a factory and professional workers in a big company was different, based on factors like job categories, educational levels, and business sizes, which also led to different health impact.

7) The Office of Labour Affair in Seoul (2012) reported discrimination situations and problems among Thai migrant workers in South Korea as follows.

- In terms of working conditions and individual factors, Thai migrant workers encountered more difficult tasks than expected, e.g. heavy lifting and outdoor working amid frigid weather. Those conditions led to fatigue and disappointment and provoked the need to change jobs among migrant workers; when unable to do so, they ended up escaping. Furthermore, a problem of communication between migrant workers and Korean employers was a major cause of workplace discrimination. Thai migrants had poor Korean language skill and could not communicate with their employers in practice even though they had passed a Korean language test and received a language training course for workers before arriving in South Korea. It was also difficult to expect the workers to learn and improve their Korean language skill on holidays because they had already been exhausted from hard work in the past week and most of them needed those days off for a break.

- In terms of employment conditions under the Employment Permit System (EPS), there were some limitations that led to numerous issues among Thai migrant workers, e.g. the contract conditions and the conditions for job changes. Migrant workers in the EPS were generally hired by a small business with small capital, which could sometimes suffer unstable operation or even have to discontinue operation, leading to problems in paying wages and welfare benefit for workers. Therefore, the Ministry of Labour should negotiate with the Human Resource Development (HRD) entity to check and select employers before considering quota allocation. In addition, the unclear EPS contracts should be reviewed by related agencies, especially in regards to the business types of employers in South Korea. More than 50% of complaints from migrant workers indicated that the jobs they were ordered to do did not comply with what had been agreed in the contracts. For example, they were required to work overtime. The related agencies should clearly specify the types of business and job descriptions as well as create understanding about working conditions and limitations before delivering the workers. More importantly, since migrant workers had paid less for the process to work in South Korea as the EPS delivering fee was included in the public service, they lacked commitment to work. Those workers would get discouraged and quit jobs easily and usually request to change jobs or return to Thailand when faced with problems from employment/working conditions. Thus, before delivering the workers, training should be provided to make them understand about working conditions, e.g. difficulties in working, with emphasis that job changing is quite difficult under the contract because it depends on consent from an original employer.

- In terms of health impact, distress and anxiety caused by working and employment conditions as well as pressure from above had adversely affected both physical and mental health of Thai migrant workers (the details will be presented in the next part). As a consequence, the Office of Labour Affair in Seoul arranged a mobile unit to visit the migrant workers and provide appropriate recreation activities to them. To guide the discussion in the next part, a conceptual framework of this study was presented as follows.



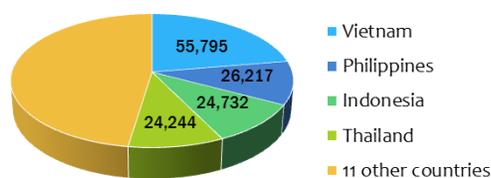
## 5. Discussions

Based on the study results and the conceptual framework, the discussions are divided into three parts to answer the main objectives of this study. The first part will generalize the characteristics of Thai migrant workers in South Korea who face workplace discrimination, including their backgrounds (e.g. domiciles and educational levels), job categories, and workplace discrimination experiences (i.e. the forms of workplace discrimination). Subsequently, the summary of ‘how they experience workplace discrimination and how it impacts on their health’ will be discussed align with the conceptual framework and relevant theories.

### 5.1 Who Faces Workplace Discrimination

The study results showed that migrant workers in South Korea mostly came from the countries in Southeast Asia and more than 50% of the total 250,000 migrant workers were in the EPS. Figure 2 illustrated the proportion of migrant workers from Southeast Asia in 2012. Most of the migrants came from Vietnam (55,795 people), followed by the Philippines (26,217 people), Indonesia (24,732 people), and Thailand (24,244 people), respectively.

The Proportion of Migrant Workers from Southeast Asia



[Source: Office of Labour Affairs in Seoul, 2012]

**Figure 2:** The Proportion of Migrant Workers from Southeast Asia

Generally, Thai migrant workers in South Korea who face workplace discrimination come mostly from the Northeast and North of Thailand, respectively. Most of them have low income and low socioeconomic status (SES) and have education below high school level. Also, there is high debt in their households. The decision of Thai migrant workers to work abroad is motivated by such individual factors and South Korea serves as a dream destination of those workers.

The literature reviews and interview indicated that ‘unskilled and semi-unskilled’ workers (the blue collar) are most prone to workplace discrimination in South Korea; they work the 3D jobs in the manufacturing sector, especially in agriculture industries and factories where several forms of discrimination happen. Moreover, these workers lack both English and Korean language skill, which is the key factor that makes them vulnerable to discrimination in the workplace.

### 5.2 How They Experience Discrimination

The results suggested that Thai migrant workers in South Korea face various forms of discrimination and there is also multiple discrimination, in which workers are subject to segregation on more than one grounds (Galossi et al., 2010), including 1) race and ethnic, for having different races or ethnics leads to discrimination from Korean employers and colleagues, 2) gender, for male and female migrant workers are treated differently by their employers, and 3) cultural differences, e.g. working culture, daily life, and especially language, which is an important tool for communicating and creating understanding. While the differences between Koreans and migrants have led to discrimination at workplace, Thai migrant workers also face the following inequalities as a result of workplace discrimination.

5.2.1 In terms of working conditions, Thai migrant workers have to work in unsafe and unfair working conditions, e.g. unhealthy working environment and long working hours, which is different from their Korean colleagues.

5.2.2 In terms of employment conditions, Thai migrant workers face a problem of unclear conditions of the EPS contract. In fact, the jobs they are ordered to do are different from what have been agreed in the contracts. The workers are forced to work for long hours and overtime (mostly without pay). Moreover, they are usually paid less than agreed. Employers often violate the contracts in regards to wage payment, which directly affect employment status of migrant workers. In contrast, these similar situations will not happen to Korean workers.

5.2.3 In terms of healthcare access, the case study of eight Thai women who worked at a factory of a digital company and suffered serious illness because of prolonged exposure to toxic chemicals was an evidence that Thai migrant workers are denied the rights and access to appropriate healthcare when they become ill from unsafe working conditions and they could be detained by employers when the condition of their illness worsens.

This multiple discrimination and other relevant forms of workplace discrimination from Korean colleagues and employers certainly impact on the health of Thai migrant workers, both physically and mentally. They are also both upstream and downstream approaches that link to health outcomes (positive or negative outcomes and illness/disease) of migrant workers. The next part will discuss how workplace discrimination impacts on health of Thai migrant workers.

### **5.3 How Workplace Discrimination Impacts on Their Health**

An overview of health impact from workplace discrimination faced by Thai migrants was conducted by content analysis, based on data from the literature reviews and interview; the results are as follows.

5.3.1 Most of Thai migrant workers in South Korea, both legal and irregular workers, work in small factories or SME businesses that do not have interpreters or foremen to help them in liaising with the employers. The situation is different in Taiwan or the Middle East where migrant workers work in big companies with a full system support. Therefore, Thai migrant workers in South Korea are suffered from stress as a result of working conditions and employment discrimination by the employers and Korean colleagues, which also lead to the use of alcohol and drugs to relieve stress.

5.3.2 Lacking Korean language skill is one of the reasons that cause Thai migrant workers to face discrimination from Korean employers. These workers are not able to communicate to their employers when they have problems in daily life or health as a result of working or employment conditions. This is also a key issue that relates to their rights to appropriate healthcare. In addition, the instructions on working practices and machinery operations are only available in Korean language and failing to understand and comply with such instructions can lead to serious consequences about their safety and health, especially for migrant workers who work the 3D jobs.

5.3.3 Thai migrant workers have a hard time adjusting to the Korean society. They are usually isolated from native people because of the language barrier, cultural differences, working class status (most Thai migrant workers in South Korea work the 3D jobs, which are usually looked down by the employers and Korean colleagues), employment status, and age (some of Thai migrant workers used to work in another country for a long time before coming to South Korea, so they are older than migrant workers from other countries, especially Vietnam, as Vietnamese migrants are mostly young. Higher age is also another factor that affects the workers' ability to adjust to the new environment.

5.3.4 Controversies frequently occur between employers and migrant workers and among workers themselves. Migrant workers are usually stressful because of workplace discrimination and mostly turn to smoking and alcohol drinking to relieve such stress and tiredness, which can lead to arguments and fights. This is health-risk behavior of Thai migrant workers that should not be overlooked.

5.3.5 There were many cases of accidents and injuries that are a consequence of workplace discrimination, especially the unsafe working environment and conditions mentioned above. Assault and abuse by employers are another issue to be concerned, for it can result from discrimination in the workplace, particularly on a basis of gender as female migrant workers are mostly the victims of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and emotional abuse.

In conclusion, the study results confirm that workplace discrimination leads to inequalities, which impact on the health of migrant workers in South Korea, including Thai migrants. How workplace discrimination impacts on their health can be divided into three main aspects as follows.

**1) Physical health** - The results showed that Thai migrant workers suffer accidents and illness that are caused by unsafe working conditions and unclear employment conditions as a result of discrimination from Korean employers. 'Safety at work' is a keynote that should be addressed because it directly affects physical health of those migrant workers.

**2) Mental health** - Most of Thai migrant workers suffer stress and anxiety that are caused by discrimination. They feel alienated by the society and also isolate themselves from native people. This variation of emotional states and feelings brings about symptoms like insomnia, migraine, stress disorder, depression, and other mental disorders. Anyway, there is not a report of a suicide case among Thai migrant workers in South Korea.

**3) Health-risk behavior** - Thai migrant workers are forced to work for long hours and overtime. Facing such workplace/employment discrimination can lead to health-risk behavior; the migrant workers do not have time to relax and exercise and sometimes adopt a habit of smoking and drinking as a way to relief stress, which may lead to problems like fights, dipsomania, and alcoholism.

#### **5.4 Limitations of the Study**

This is a qualitative study that focused on specific cases to find out how workplace discrimination impacted on the health of Thai migrant workers in South Korea. The study results were interpreted by content analysis based on relevant researches and interview reports, in which bias and emotion from the interviewees is hard to avoid and should be aware of. Importantly, all the results only refer to Thai migrants and cannot be generalized for migrant workers from other countries. Finally, there are no further quantitative data to enhance reliability of the results.

### **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

#### **6.1 Conclusion**

Workplace discrimination among migrant workers is widespread across the world as a big issue that relates to inequalities and life quality of migrant workers, especially in terms of health impact. Based on the study results, workplace discrimination had various impact on the health of migrant workers both directly (physical and mental health) and indirectly (health-risk behavior). Among Thai migrant workers in South Korea, most of them experienced some forms of workplace discrimination, including multiple discrimination, in which workers were subject to segregation on more than one grounds, e.g. race, gender, and culture.

Generally, Thai migrant workers who faced workplace discrimination in South Korea were either unskilled or semi-unskilled labour who worked the 3Ds jobs in the manufacturing sector, especially in agriculture industries and factories, and lacked both English and Korean language skill. Regarding their backgrounds, these workers had low socioeconomic status (SES), low income, and low educational level (below high school level) and there was also high debt in their households.

Thai migrant workers experienced workplace discrimination in South Korea in the aspects of work and employment conditions, unsafe working environment, unclear employment contracts, and unfair wage payment, which were related to a healthcare access issue. Such experience impacted on their health, both physically and mentally, and led to health-risk behavior, e.g. alcohol drinking, smoking, and lack of exercises.

There were three major causes of workplace discrimination that impacted on the health of Thai migrant workers in South Korea. The first one was a problem of the EPS as migrant workers still had to work under unsafe and dangerous conditions in practice despite the policy of health and safety at work provided in the contract. Some rules of the contract also aggravated the situation; for example, migrant (unskilled) workers would be able to change job only with consent from an original employer. The second one was about health and safety at work. Many Thai migrant workers had to work in unsafe environment for long hours, e.g. with chemicals or machineries. Importantly, they received only slight training and most of job orientation, working practices, and instruction manuals were only available in Korean language. Failing to understand and comply with such instructions could lead to serious consequences about their safety and health. In the case of female migrant workers, they were at risk of sexual harassment and assault at work and also lacked mandatory health insurance. The final cause was unfair wage pay. Some of the Thai migrant workers received less than the national minimum wage and their wage was sometimes withheld for a long period. The group that was most vulnerable to discrimination on unfair wage pay was female migrants.

## 6.2 Policy Recommendations

First, the policies regarding the Employment Permit System (EPS) should be amended to ensure the rights of migrants and practically protect migrant workers from further risk of discrimination, especially in the workplace. At the same time, the provisions of the International Migrant Workers Convention should be applied fairly without discrimination on race, gender, or any other grounds.

Second, the compliance with international standards in regards to detention and deportation of migrant workers should be ensured, including the protocol for treating female workers. A policy of safety at work should also be emphasized to ensure that the workplace and working conditions are safe for the health of migrant workers. The Korean government should play a part in issuing laws to regulate the employers.

Third, employers and related agencies should provide translated versions of instruction manuals and other important documents about health and safety standards so that migrant workers can read and understand, or at least provide interpreters for training migrant workers about health and safety standards. Fourth, the rights of migrant workers to participate in the labour union should be considered in the government policy.

In the community level, social capital and supports, proper places of living and neighborhood, and networks are factors that could promote positive health outcomes of migrant workers. Related agencies and policies should also pay attention to this aspect by creating programs or activities that would build appropriate environment and conditions for a healthy community, which could help migrant workers as well.

## 6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, the impact of workplace discrimination on health (i.e. health outcomes) should be measured by a mixed model that is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Additional studies and searches for empirical data, including longitudinal studies, should be conducted to prove the level of relations and the linkage between workplace discrimination and health outcomes of migrant workers, because most of the previous studies just focused on predicaments and related regulations and there has rarely been evidence about the linkage between workplace discrimination and health outcomes. In addition, investigation of key factors to reduce workplace discrimination and health inequalities among migrant workers and health promotion according to a community-based concept are very interesting topics for future research.

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