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Economic and Psychological Factors Contributing to Diminished Worker Mental Health in Asia

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Overworked, Underpaid and Stigmatized: Economic and Psychological Factors Contributing to Diminished Worker Mental Health in Asia
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Executive Summary

Emerging and developing Asian economies reflects the region's rapid transformation from agricultural to manufacturing and services-based industries. The region's economic growth, however, may have come at cost of its workers' mental health. Workers in Asia spend, on average, more hours at work per week than workers outside of Asia, leading to reports of increased burnout and mental health issues. Broad, macro-level economic factors such as job insecurity, evolving labor markets and increasing use of technology in modern workplaces explain provide only a partial explanation for the rise of mental health concerns in the region. Psychological factors – particularly the work ethos and cultural acceptance of prolonged work hours may be inadvertently contributing to adverse mental health consequences among Asian workers. Any intervention aimed at addressing mental health concerns in Asian workplaces needs to account for the complex interplay between economic and psychological factors and work toward de-stigmatization of mental health concerns that remain prevalent in this region.

The Evolving Nature of Work in Asia

The nature of work today in emerging Asian countries is reflective of the region's transformation from manufacturing to services-focused economies. The Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA) projects that the services sector will grow at a rate of 6.8% per annum in Malaysia, contributing 56.5% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2020[1]. These macro-level economic changes have directly influenced the labor market. Human resource management consultancy firm Randstad terms the changing nature of job demands in the labor market as 'job polarization [2].' The company highlights that increasing use of technology for work will result in (i) a decline of jobs for middle-skilled workers and (ii) increasing industry needs for a digitally skilled workforce. The changing nature of work is also accompanied by changes to the personal meanings ascribed to work, forcing employees to be increasingly self-reliant in managing their careers. It is not (merely) enough to be diligent and directed in one's career pursuits. The knowledge economy and emphasis on soft skills mean that hopeful job applicants need to demonstrate agility, adaptability, and receptivity to new ideas[3]. Employees and hopeful applicants are expected to be proactive in career-planning and management, adopting new technologies and skills that allow them to stay competitive in today's job market[4].

Burnt Out from Rapid Change and Long Hours

These broad, labor market changes have led many employees finding work to be an inescapable part of their lives. Contrary to the optimistic predictions by economist John Meynard Keyes, that three-hour workdays will be standard for his grandchildren's generation, the average full-time worker in many countries today averages 33.85 to 40.55 hours a week[5]. A reduction in weekly working hours is unlikely to be observed in Asia anytime soon. A

survey of 38 countries by the International Labor Organization (ILO) showed that employees in Asian cities tend to work longer hours than those in non-Asian cities[6]. The report showed that workers in Hong Kong averaged 50.1 hours a week, those in Mumbai, India averaged 43.78 a week and those in Thailand working on average 42.1 hours a week. In 2016, the Department of Statistics Malaysia reported that 83.8% of Malaysian workers worked more than 40 hours a week and they attributed the increasing work hours due to shifts to knowledge-based work and globalization[7].

These changes and additional demands take a toll on employee mental health. Worker burnout is an immediate consequence of challenging, uncertain and demanding work. A popularly referenced poll conducted by AIA in 2019 showed more than half (51.5%) of Malaysians reported at least one form of work-related stress. Sampling 17,595 employees in the country, the AIA survey highlighted 16% of Malaysian workers are not engaged at work, 12% experienced high levels of depression and anxiety – and worryingly, as much as 45% of respondents state that their employers do not offer any mental health interventions[8].

High levels of work demand globally have also resulted in the World Health Organization (WHO) classifying burnout as an occupational phenomenon as part of the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). Burnout is defined as, "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: (i) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, (ii) increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job and (iii) reduced professional efficacy[9]." Burnout has severe consequences for physical and mental health, including an elevated risk of insomnia, depression, increased use of psychotropic and antidepressant medication, hospitalization for mental disorders and generally, poor psychological health[10].

Research conducted sampling Asian workers is clear on the effects of chronic stress and burnout on employee mental health. One study of nurses in Japan and China found emotional exhaustion (one facet of burnout) is positively associated with depression[11]. This study also found that disengaging from stressful work situations, also known as absence, is "a positive and restorative mechanism in response to stress...(and helps them) restore their mental health and maintain a satisfactory level of performance (p. 2746)."

The study, however, also indicates that distancing oneself from work is done as a last resort among Asian workers. The findings hint on the underlying cultural norms regarding work in Asia, partly explaining why high amounts of working hours are regularly recorded among employees in this region. Distancing oneself from work is only done if necessary – unexcused absences from work incur a loss of face in Asian cultures. Evidence from psychological studies suggest that workplace mental health concerns in Asia are influenced by this culture of overwork; a complex interplay of key economic and psychological factors leads to lowered quality of mental health in this region.

Overwork: Economic and Psychological Factors

Job insecurity ranks as a persistent and pervasive economic factor leading to the culture of overwork in Asia. Feelings of job insecurity may cause workers to devote more time to work; the assumption being that frequent absence – a possible indication of a lack of commitment and productivity can lead to termination of employment. Employees are motivated to spend long hours in their workplace, making them appear more valuable to their organizations. Indeed, research has shown there to be a positive association between job insecurity and the number of hours worked[12]. A survey from the

Financial Times polling 5,000 respondents in 2017 showed that 22.8% of workers in the ASEAN region were concerned about job security, expressing concerns of their ability to hold on to their jobs. This represented a 2.5% increase from the previous two years[13]. The report also finds that job insecurity has increased despite GDP growth in this region and that Malaysian workers (74.5% of those sampled) were the least optimistic about their ability to find new jobs and attain higher pay. Terms such as the 996 work culture (working from 9am-9pm every day for 6 days) in Hong Kong and China, to karoshi (過労死; "death by overwork") in Japan are indications that the culture of overwork has become a workplace norm in Asia. The need to work increasingly long hours, to demonstrate loyalty and commitment to one's job may be symptomatic of feelings job insecurity – but Asian cultural ideals also shape worker's acceptance of a culture of overwork. A review of studies on work-life balance showed that many Asian workers – particularly from Confucian values and ideals, find it more acceptable to sacrifice family time for work[14]. In China, Japan and Singapore, the number of hours spent at work express recognition of the values of hard work, collective harmony, and loyalty. Asian workers also view the long hours at work as an act of providing for the long-term welfare of their family[14]. This acceptance of long work hours, however, blurs boundaries between work and family, contributing to poorer mental health outcomes and greater reports of work-family and work-life conflict among Asian workers[14].

A culture of overwork has been shown to have direct consequences for worker mental health. A meta-analysis sampling 53,405 workers globally showed that job insecurity is linked to depression, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion[15]. This analysis also showed that heightened levels of job insecurity are associated with lowered life satisfaction and diminished psychological well-being. The combination of overwork and low wages are

associated with increases in suicide – this realization prompting the Hong Kong government to raise the minimum wage from HK$34.50 to HK37.50 in 2011[16]. One other study showed that the inability to detach from work and feeling obliged to work as much as possible is also associated with poorer mental health outcomes. This study, comprising employees from Japan, also showed that detachment from work – the last resort among workers in many collectivist, face-saving cultures, can be beneficial for mental health and work engagement in the long-run[17]. A study of workers from the Asia-Pacific Region and Europe showed the importance of work-life balance for mental health. In this study, a better work-life balance protected against anxiety and depression. Conversely, it was found that work-family conflict and family-work conflict were predictive of anxiety and depression[18].

Building Healthier Work Environments in Asia

Any interventions directed towards enhancing mental health in Asian organizations need to account for the cultural expectations regarding work unique to this region. It is insufficient to focus simply on any one factor alone. The WHO and ILO highlight five categories of psychological experience that, if properly implemented, can improve mental health at work: (i) reasonable and manageable time structure, (ii) social contact, (iii) shared effort and sense of purpose, (iv) social identity and sense of belongingness to one's professional groups and (v) regular work activity[19]. Both organizations also highlight the important role of occupational health services for organizations, which can aid in (i) the identification of problems resulting from poor mental health and (ii) assisting employers in modifying the nature of their work and work environments. One such intervention involves the formation of a Stress Management Group (SMG) and Listening Group – an event where representatives from an organization would identify

stressors within the organization. The initiative, led by HR Directors, would then develop interventions and action plans toward addressing stressors in the workplace. Similar strategies can be encouraged by mental health advocates in Asia, which may more generally encourage a more open dialogue and recognition of mental health challenges between organizations and their staff. The collectivist cultural norms in Asia also suggests that structural changes and interventions that enhance a sense of social cohesion, provide for greater social contact and a strong sense of social identity are also protective factors against stress and burnout in Asian workers.

Advocates and practitioners in this region face the additional challenges stigma and discrimination toward individuals with mental health challenges. The stigma is a persistent one in Asia; societal disapproval of seeking mental health treatment along with limited personal and financial resources on which to seek mental health support present themselves as additional challenges towards mental health advocacy in this region[20]. Compounding this problem are preexisting employment practices in Asia that require job applications to disclose their mental health status or use them as grounds for termination of employment. In January 2020, however, the Singaporean government, referring to an update of fair employment practices by the Tripartite Alliance for Fair & Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) recognized mental health discrimination in the hiring and retention of staff. Dismissing staff because of their mental health condition or requiring them to disclose their mental health condition (without good reason) can be viewed as discriminatory and unlawful, resulting in legal consequences for the employer[21]. Changes such as these are promising and represent essential steps towards the de-stigmatization and of mental health concerns for hiring, retention and development of talent in Asian organizations.

Improving Mental Health Support for Malaysian Workplaces

Strategies directed toward improving mental health in Malaysian organizations should considering both economic and cultural context contributing to diminished mental health among Malaysian workers. First, organizations need to realize that prolonged work hours and the resulting burnout may be symptomatic of inefficient work designs rather than worker incompetence. This is, crucially, exacerbated by cultural expectations that longer working hours are a sign of commitment or loyalty. Inefficient and ineffective work designs can result in role ambiguity, poor person-job fit, lack of autonomy and miscommunication – all of which take a toll on worker mental health[22]. A crucial first step is thus to identify and address structural issues known to be leading to stress and burnout. Use of the listening groups and SMGs can be effective in a collectivist culture like Malaysia. Feedback from these employee-led, organization-endorsed discussion groups can help organizations re-evaluate existing workflows, identify bottlenecks and where necessary, redesign the job process to value quality over quantity of working hours. Organizations can redesign work that values "making one's hours count" as opposed to "counting one's hours." Re-designing jobs for better mental health can serve as a protective factor against adverse workplace mental health issues and contribute to increased employee productivity.

Unless Malaysian organizations and their leaders recognize and actively working towards de-stigmatization of mental health issues at work, the stigma against work mental health issues in Malaysian organizations will persist. Organizations and their leaders can act as change agents towards the de-stigmatization of mental health concerns in the workplace.

Transparency in hiring, selection, and evaluation and retention policies – for instance, by adopting recommendations by the TAFEP, can be effective long-term strategies signaling the organization's recognition that mental health concerns permeate all levels of its human resource management functions. These structural changes can further be bolstered with employee education and further complement Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). To date, only a few companies in Malaysia offer mental health programs, leading to calls for EAPs to be integrated into the Malaysian Employment Act 1955[23]. Additional investment in, and recognition of the importance of EAPs may be one way to directly address mental health concerns among Malaysian organizations. EAPs may also serve to lower the psychological barriers that discourage Malaysian workers from seeking help when they are faced with mental health concerns.

Developing Asian regions, along with the ASEAN-5 countries (including Malaysia) report GDP growth rates of 5.1% and 5.3% over 10 years – higher than of G7 countries or those in the EU[24]. But perhaps the region's economic growth has come at a cost. Increasing job insecurity, changing labor markets, unhealthy obligations and expectations placed on work have normalized a culture of overwork. The persistence of mental health discrimination and stigmatization and in this region further increases the risk of mental health conditions among workers in Asia. Despite growing awareness of the importance of mental health issues in Malaysia, much remains to be done. The silence and reluctance towards open discussions of mental health in Malaysian workplaces give good reason to believe there are many more employees in the country with mental health challenges than is reported. When it comes to mental health concerns among Malaysian (and Asian workers in general), many are stressed, depressed and unexpressed. Most worryingly, such concerns remain unaddressed.

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