Introduction

In a world dominated by the free market system and an agenda to maximise company profits, workers are made to work extra long hours as to make full use of their productivity and get work done. With a highly competitive job market and an incentivised economy, job productivity has become more requisite than ever, with public/private institutions dependant on the maximised work output. This combined with a work culture that rewards a “burn-the-midnight-oil” or “work-until-you-drop” mentality, results in gruesome effects on physical and emotional health are evident, as the working class is being pushed to their limits.

Recently, case studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health showcased an evident decline in alertness and vigilance, as well as a deterioration in ethics and performance. They labelled the same to be “the worst environment of productivity.” In innately high pressure environments that require maximal worker performance all the time, negative health effects are more noticeable than less pressurized (though some are still present). Moreover, the inability to disconnect from long work hours impacts one’s well being, sense of happiness and general health. In the aforementioned study, impacts of over 40 hours a week showed musculoskeletal disorders in the long term, insomnia, weight gain, and increased stress. If such hours continue, these symptoms can even be stepping stones for diseases like high blood pressure, stroke and mental health disorders. In some cases, individuals forced to work excessively long hours have attempted suicide.

Despite evident issues with the health and wellbeing of the workplace and its impacts on the long term performance, many companies are yet oblivious to the need for change or a new system to mitigate the problems of long working hours. While it is true that cultural attitudes and socio-economic aspects influence the aggregate working hours in different states, the steady increase in the work days is
concerning. Long working hours have a clear detrimental impact on the mental and physical health of those who invest in them, which is agitating on a humanitarian level, and with respect to a company’s general strength and morale.

Countries and corporations have varying laws have varying laws on the maximum number of hours that workers can work for, however in many cases there is a lack of justice for workers that are forced to work for too long by employers who ignore labour laws.

Definition of Key Terms

**Overworking**

To exhaust (someone) with too much work; doing too much work; making an individual work for too long or an extended period of time.

**Working hours**

The amount of time someone spends at work during the day, usually regulated by laws of the country in order to avoid overworking. Excessively long working hours are working hours that exceed the working hour limits by a significant margin.

**Flexitime**

A working system wherein those occupied work set hours in a certain amount of time, but have some flexibility of when they start or finish work. In simpler terms, a time quota needs to be fulfilled by the working hours is up to the one concerned.

**Shift work**

A type of work wherein recurring periods of time are set in which different groups of employees do the same type of jobs in a relay method. This type of work is often associated with night shifts or rotating shifts.

**Downshift**

To work at a slower speed; ie. to eventually slow down.

**Clock In/Clock Out**

The record of time when individuals arrive at (clock in) and leave (clock out of) work. This changes depending on overtime or longer working hours.

**Timesheet**
A document where an employee notes the number of hours worked, a common office practice in most corporations.

Mental and physical health

Mental health refers to the psychological and emotional well-being of a person; physical health refers to the physical well-being of a person. Both are interlinked; the WHO defines health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’.

Background Information

Overworking and working excessively long hours has become an increasingly common global phenomenon, especially common in oriental countries such as Korea or Japan. Despite what is believed by many individuals entering the ultra-competitive job market, overworking has many more downsides than advantages. Not only does overwork decrease efficiency and overall productivity, it causes the rapid decline of an individual's general health. Despite the warnings of medical professionals, the negative effects of working excessively long hours remains a global dilemma to this day.

The relationship between productivity and overworking

Not only does overworking pose negative health effects on an individual, but it also decreases overall productivity. According to a study done by Stanford University, there is no difference, if not a decrease in productivity between an individual working 40 hours a week and 60. This is a result of the negative health effects that decrease human efficiency. Despite this overwhelming evidence, many company superiors still believe overworking is the best way to increase overall output.

The negative health effects of overworking

In today’s hyper-competitive employment market, employers make it clear that sometimes overworking is expected from individuals if needed. While staying well over company hours and overworking may be praised by a superior, it takes a serious toll on an individual’s overall health.

Working far beyond scheduled hours often means sitting in an office chair and staring at a screen for prolonged periods. These extended periods of sedentary behavior have many serious effects on an individual’s health. In a 2017 study by the Columbia University Medical center, scientists were alarmed by the fact that employees that were seated for 13 hours a day were twice as likely to die prematurely than employees who were sedentary for 11 hours a day. These findings were startling, and the report also mentioned that sitting for prolonged amounts of time has similar effects on the human body as excessive smoking.
These premature deaths caused by overworking have become so common in oriental countries that terms have been coined to describe these kinds of deaths. It is known in Korea as Gwarosa and in Japan as Karoshi, these terms literally mean for employees to work themselves to death. In a recent interview of a widowed South Korean named Park Hyun-Suk who lost her husband to Gwarosa, she described that he felt pressured to take on more work and by the time he came home from work he was so fatigued that he spent most of his time sleeping. Although an advanced autopsy was ordered, scientists could only link his sudden collapse to the negative health effects of overworking. This individual was just one of hundreds more who died in the flourishing economy of the Republic of Korea as a result of overworking. Among the more economically developed countries, it was identified that South Korea on average worked more hours in a week than any countries; Even 50% more than the famously industrious Germany. Evidently, overworking has taken a massive toll on the well-being of citizens. It was identified that Park’s husband was working well over 180 hours a week leading up to his death.

However, South Korea is not the only country that has experienced the effects of Gwarosa. In Japan, scientists have been studying the phenomenon since the early 1980s, alarmed by the fact that so many of their citizens fell dead on the job. It is the only country today that is actively acknowledging this form of death and is implementing legislation to try and eradicate the problem. Just last year, a postal worker in rural South Korea was forced to come to work despite being in a delivery accident the day before. The worker promptly killed himself, leaving behind a note describing the inhumane work conditions that he experienced. Evidently, the negative health effects of overworking seem to be affecting thousands of individuals globally, and it is a societal problem that must be acknowledged and further investigated.

Despite the many detrimental effects on the physical health of individuals, overworking seems to take a toll on an individual’s mental health as well. According to a study published in 2012, individuals who spend more than 11 hours of their day working doubled their risk of major depression than those who worked for about 8 hours. Excessive working leads to less sleep and relaxation, and it can take a toll on the close relationships of individuals, all factors that contribute to severe depression. Overworking also has been linked to cognitive impairment, resulting in decreased overall productivity. A particular example of these effects is in South Korea. South Korea is a society in which overworking is praised and is regarded as a norm. It was proven that in South Korea, the nation with the highest depression and suicide rates, overworking was one of the main causes of severe depressions. Apart from the many physical effects of overworking, many individuals suffer from the massive tolls on their mental health.

As the International Labor Organization (ILO) celebrated its centennial this year, the organization acknowledged the severity of the negative health effects associated with overworking. More and more countries are beginning to acknowledge the severity of this problem, and the time has come for the
international community to do so as well. The negative effects of overworking are real and must be acknowledged for action to be taken to solve the problem at hand.

**Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

**Mexico**

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the average Mexican spends 2255 hours working per year - the equivalent of 43 average working hours a week, making it the most “overworked country” in the world. The motivation for long work days in Mexico is evident, as fears of unemployment, job insecurity and negligent labour laws ensure that the 48-hour maximum regulation is rarely enforced. Mexico’s legislation in theory has comprehensive labor rights, including a clause mandating 6 vacation days for every 3 months of service. Due to its shambolic economy, cheap labor in Mexico draws companies to it, increasing the demand for minimum wage employees. Additionally, they have a right to join any union they wish, and child labor is illegal, but due to government indifference and pressure of massive corporations, none of these benefits come into play. The Mexican Association of Democratic Lawyers said, “Violation of workers' rights persists, but workers can't turn to the authorities because it is the authorities themselves who commit the violations.”

**South Korea**

According to OECD’s aforementioned study, South Korea ranked in third place for the longest working hours, which candidly have helped to boost economic growth. But there have been concerns about health problems like a low birth rate and increased heart problems. Due to the same, President Moon Jae-in has recently led a push to decrease the country’s extremely long work days and give workers the “right to rest”. With a surmounting societal change towards the working hours, Korea’s ruling and opposition lawmakers reached a temporary agreement back in 2017, to curb weekly hours at 52 (decreased from 68) and add a 50 percent extra pay for weekends. However, there has been some dissent, as certain lawmakers argued over the weekend wages, and others believe the change should be more gradual rather than immediate. As a result the overall litigation failed in a plenary session, and debate is still ongoing. Kim Tai-gi, a professor at Dankook University in Jukjeon, said that “Shorter working hours are necessary for the sake of happiness, but it needs to be discussed along with ways to improve labour productivity.”

**Japan**

Despite coining a term to describe an overworked death (“karoshi”), an average Japanese employed works around 1,700 hours per year which is surprisingly below the OECD average. While the country has a reputation for a workaholic culture, in recent years many companies have used...
unconventional and eccentric methods to ask their employees to “go home” and maintain a work life balance. For example; According to NBC News, three companies employed the use of a drone to play a “go home” tune to any employees lingering into night shifts. These cases show an increasing awareness regarding the dangers of a workaholic culture. Japan has had many cases, almost 191 deaths recognized caused by overwork in 2017, a range that brain and heart conditions, depression induced from anxiety about work and even suicide. However, almost 4.3 million Japanese works spent over 60 hours a week working, and many seem to touch almost 600 hours of overtime a year.

**Germany**

According to the OECD index, Germany has the lowest aggregate/average hours both yearly and weekly. Despite the same, Germany actually manages to have the highest productivity levels, as an average German worker is 27% more productive than their British counterparts. Businesses and shops are not allowed to stay open in their accordance, and there are strict laws in consideration of opening and closing hours. The German law “Ladenschlussgesetz” (Shop Closing Law) alongwith individual regulations controls opening hours. For example, the supermarkets close at 10.00 pm at the latest and open around 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. On the weekends, most commercial institutions are closed except for some like bakeries or petrol stations. The (“Arbeitszeitgesetz”) or the German Working Time Regulations regulates hours, and are based off of the regulation 93/104/EG. Additionally, a number of industries constitute collective agreements for working hours/holidays. A working week of 48 hours on average in 6 months cannot be exceeded.

**Timeline of Events**

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| 1864 | “First International” founded in London. While the attempt to establish this as an international labourers organisation failed in 1872, international cooperation to strengthen labour rights has begun to take shape, including tackling issues such as working hours.
The International Labour Organisation’s constitution is drafted and becomes part XIII of the Treaty of Versailles (with the ILO being under the League of Nations). |
NHK revealed one of their own employees, Miwa Sado (31 years old) died from heart failure after completing a staggering 159 hours of overtime in the prior month, with only two days off.

Matsuri Takahashi, a 24 year old working in Tokyo for the advertising company Denstu took her own life on Christmas in 2015. Investigators found that she showed symptoms of depression after completing 105 hours of overtime in a single month.

The China Labour Dynamics Survey published by Sun Yat Sen University in Guangzhou publishes a paper stating the average Chinese worker works 44.7 hours a week. More than 50% of respondents reported working over 50 hours a week; China’s labour law states that workers must not work more than 44 hours a week.

The EU’s biggest commercial union, IG Metal (the German metal workers) earned the right of a 28 hour working week. This deal was seen as a testament of growing influence of workers on their economic performance and development.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

The United Nations’ labour agency, the International Labour Organisation, has standards for working time in order for workers to achieve adequate rest time. Relevant ILO instruments include the Part-Time Work Convention in 1994 (number 175), the Night Work Convention in 1990 (number 171), the Reduction of Hours of Work Recommendation in 1962 (number 116), the Weekly Rest Conventions (for Industries in 1921, number 14; for Commerce and Offices in 1957, number 106). Various other ILO conventions and recommendations otherwise address working hour issues. International events include the various labour conventions drafted that regard workers’ well-being, with international focus days such as ‘Safe Days’ (ie Safe Day 2019).

Beyond attempts by the ILO, there has been little attention, if none at all, called to the negative health benefits caused by excessively long working hours in other United Nations organs.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

In 2003, WHO (the only UN organisation to have commented on this topic) published a document called Protecting Workers’ Health Series N’3, underlining Work Organisation and Stress. It outlined a number of systematic problems approaches for employers, managers and other authority figures such as
trade union representatives to combat unnecessary work stress. Primarily it defines work stress on individuals and organisations, and methods of taking care of troubled employees. It mentions poor work management, unmanageable demands, aversive tasks and badly designed shift systems as some of the key factors for rising anxiety and mental health problems. While the document is extremely indispensable in recognising the faults in commercial systems and the impact on work stress, it does not underline any solutions undertaken, or even doesn't stress on the decline of the health of employees. Therefore, the need for affirmative action is clearly lacking.

Possible Solutions

Producing remunerative and feasible solutions is important to ensure a certain quality of debate, yet should be practical to alleviate and prevent the negative health benefits of long working hours, creating a fair and just system to determine work days and mitigate shift work, and provide healthcare benefits to those suffering from these problems at present. Therefore, here are some general solutions, that could be made more comprehensive in terms of the resolution:

First off, in addition to simply acknowledging the existence of excruciating working hours and noting the debate of regulations in different states is not sufficient. Therefore, a mediated thinktank should be created, comprising of representatives from all member states. The purpose of the same would be to mitigate the effects of long working hours, by creating a system of healthcare benefits granted to those working overtime. These benefits would include mental health provisions like therapy, checkups with healthcare professionals, hospital insurances etc. Moreover, the funds for this think tank would originate from member states partaking, and a set quota of funds would be set aside for corporations registered with this thinktank. This thinktank in coalition with mentioned corporations could monitor the health of individuals working overtime and weekends, and necessarily make concrete changes to work schedules. To implement this system worldwide and different companies, branches of the thinktank could be established in main cities, or work in accordance with HR Management of the aforementioned.

Secondarily, a Committee could be sanctioned by the United Nations, that reviews and looks into the working hours at different public/private corporations, and provides a detailed review of considered changes to the working hours, shiftwork mandates etc. Additionally, this aforementioned Committee could release a Joint Statement and a Programmatic Review in regards to working conditions and negative health benefits overly, and pertaining to certain corporate giants, highlighting the negative effects of the same. One of its functions could include the execution of smaller institutions targeting alleviation of mental and physical health problems.
Organisations like the WHO could provide health and wellness programmes depending on areas of heightened workaholic culture, that could provide tools for individual employees to take care of their health in busy times and in longer hours. The same program could conduct seminars on time management, attention span, and discourage methods like multitasking. Additionally, such seminars could also include meditation classes, signs of differentiating between physical illnesses caused by work overload. These programs would be free to employees identified to be working at any kind of institution, with funds generated from local corporations and governments.

While the aforementioned are facile solutions towards reforming the situation and moving towards better working hours plus ratifying health of employees, there are a variety of other solutions that could be explored. The notable facets of a compliant solution are specificity, feasibility, and relevance. To convince all member states into accomplishing a solution, the addressed requirements of equal rights should be considered: How do long working hours affect basic humanitarian rights and why is it a problem? In the end, the solution (once sanctioned) rectifies the discussed matter through the repeal of specific regulations and addresses the prevention and alleviation negative health impacts of excruciating work output.

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