

Research in Brief



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Mental Health Promotion Policies on Customer Service Workers in Korea and the Implications of International Organizations' Guidelines and Selected Countries' Policies¹⁾

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Customer service workers experience various mental health issues due to their emotional labor. Since 2018, a law known as the Customer Service Worker Protection Act has been in effect to safeguard these workers. However, policies that are in place for customer service workers, focused exclusively on post-facto interventions such as counseling, have done little to prompt efforts and participation from employers and, with the monitoring of compliance with the Customer Service Worker Protection Act lacking, have been rendered less than effective in promoting workers' mental health. The guidelines of international organizations emphasize the need for workers' mental health promotion, the importance of early intervention, and the role of employers in that effort. Advanced countries have in place a collaborative mechanism whereby, when it comes to policies on workplace mental health promotion, the government, labor unions, and employers work together in the whole process, from making to implementing them. They also mandate regular checkups on workers' stress levels. Therefore, Korea should consider implementing regular mental health checkups, providing workplace visiting health services, strengthening the monitoring of compliance with the Customer Service Worker Protection Law, encouraging tripartite engagement, and facilitating employer participation and efforts.

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1) This article is a recast of a part of *Mental Health Promotion Program for Emotional Labor Employees* (2022), coauthored by Sookyoung Kim et al.

1. The issue of mental health among customer service workers and the need for workplace mental health promotion

The need for health-promoting and preventive mental health interventions for workers

There is a growing social demand for workplace health promotion and the development of health-friendly workplace environments. Workplace health promotion interventions have been regarded as contributing not only to workers' health but also to their productivity.²⁾ As a result, the scope of these interventions has expanded from physical health to include mental health.³⁾ The significance of the Korean government's 2nd Basic Plan for Mental Health and Welfare, also known as "Comprehensive Measures for Mental Health for All Citizens," lies in its expansion of mental health policies to cover the entire population, not just those with mental health disorders or at high risk of mental health issues. Also, the plan emphasizes the importance of early intervention, shifting the time point of intervention from the previous "onset of a serious psychiatric condition" to "when mental health services are needed."

Emotional labor and mental health in customer care workers

Emotional labor as a concept was first put forth by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 1983, who defined it in her book, *The Managed Heart*, as work that requires "one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others—in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place."⁴⁾ In a more recent definition, emotional labor refers to "the effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions."⁵⁾

Throughout their daily work, customer service workers engage in emotional labor, which, as it involves conscious emotional control and emotional dissonance, may engender work stress, depression, burnout, and job dissatisfaction.⁶⁾ In a 2018 survey conducted of 1,000 customer care workers by the National Network for Economic Labor, 47.6 percent of the respondents were found to be at risk of emotional dissonance or emotional damage. In another survey, conducted in 2020 by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, as many as 80.3 percent of the 1,300 surveyed call center workers turned out to be at risk of depression.

2) Kuoppala, J., Lamminpää, A., & Husman, P. (2008). Work health promotion, job well-being, and sickness absences—a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of occupational and environmental medicine*, 1216–1227.

3) World Health Organization [WHO]. (2010). *Healthy workplaces: a model for action: for employers, workers, policy-makers and practitioners*. World Health Organization: Geneva, Switzerland.; European Network for Workplace Health Promotion [ENWHP]. (2009). *A guide to the business case for mental health*. https://www.enwhp.org/resources/toolip/doc/2018/04/23/mentalhealth_broschuere_businesscase.pdf.

4) Hochschild, A. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: US, University of California Press.

5) Morris, J. A., & Feldman, D. C. (1996). The dimensions, antecedents, and consequences of emotional labor. *Academy of Management Review*, 21, 986–1010.

6) Hochschild, A. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: US, University of California Press.; Pugliesi, K. (1999). The consequences of emotional labor: Effects on work stress, job satisfaction, and well-being. *Motivation and emotion*, 23, 125–154.; Pugliesi, K., & Shook, S. L. (1997). Gender, jobs, and emotional labor in a complex organization. In R. J. Erickson & B. Cuthbertson-Johnson(Eds.), *Social perspectives on emotion*(Vol. 4, pp. 283–316). New York: JAI.

The laws that are in place for the protection of the mental health of customer service workers have had little tangible effect in the workplace; private-sector sales representatives and call-center operators have remained particularly vulnerable

The verbal abuse, violence, sexual harassment, and poor working conditions that customer service workers experience as they go about their daily work have been consistently highlighted as social issues over the past 10 years. Since 2018, Article 41 of the Occupational Safety and Health Act (“Customer Service Worker Protection Act”) has been in effect, requiring employers to plan and put in place safeguards to protect their customer service employees from health damage resulting from verbal abuse, assault, and other harmful behaviors by customers. Among various occupational groups of customer service workers, those in particular need of mental health promotion interventions are private-sector sales clerks and call center workers, who, working as they do in direct and indirect interaction with customers, come to the fore of social attention whenever issues are raised of poor working conditions or abuse against workers by customers. These workers, who typically hold low-skill positions that can easily be filled by women or those with low educational attainment, may be especially vulnerable to mental health issues because, in many cases, they have to report to work even when they are sick or exhausted.⁷⁾

[Table 1] Customer service workers of different occupational types

	Jobs
Indirect interaction (non-face-to-face)	Call center operators, telemarketers, etc.
Face-to-face interaction	Supermarket and department store salespeople and cashiers, food service workers, airline flight attendants, etc.
Care services	Caregivers, nurses, preschool teachers, childcare workers, multicultural visitors, etc.
Public services/ complaint handling	Staff at ward offices and administrative welfare centers, employees of the Insurance Business Corporation, social workers, counselors at mental health and welfare centers, police, etc.

Source: Health Protection Guide for Emotional Labor Workers (2021). Ministry of Employment and Labor & Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency.

The need for an integrated and proactive mental health promotion plan that takes account of both mental health risk factors and protective factors

If the Customer Service Worker Protection Act alluded to above was enacted primarily to protect workers from such risks as verbal abuse and violence from customers, there is now a need for a comprehensive and preventive mental health promotion plan that takes account of both mental

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7) Charnim Park et al. (2012). A Study on Emotional Labor in the Service Industry: with Focus on Sales Workers and Call Center Operators. Korea Labor Institute

health risk factors and mental health protection factors. Thus, this examines the current state of mental health promotion policies for customer service workers in Korea and makes policy recommendations based on a review of pertinent international guidelines and relevant policies in a few other countries.

The mental health promotion guidelines that we examined for this study are those set up by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Labor Organization (ILO), the European Commission (EC), and the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion (ENWHP). For policies in other countries on worker mental health promotion, we looked at examples from the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Germany, Japan, and France.



2. Korea' policies on mental health promotion for customer care workers

The policy programs that are in place for the promotion of mental health in the workplace include counseling and other support services provided at workers' health centers, the monitoring of compliance with the Customer Service Worker Protection Act, and public campaigns on the protection of the mental health of customer service workers.

Workers' health centers are established to protect the health of workers at small-scale workplaces with fewer than 50 employees. There were 23 workers' health centers and 21 subcenters in 2022. The services they provide in the area of occupational mental health are mostly one-on-one personal work-stress screening and counseling, mind-body relaxation training, and individualized exercise prescription and exercise programs.

The Customer Service Worker Protection Act stipulates the employer's duty to protect the health of the employee. The monitoring of compliance with the law has been carried out and follow-up measures taken, in ways specified in the National Action Plan for Preventing Suicide and the Basic Plan for Mental Health and Welfare. The Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency has been running public campaigns via transit advertising, videos, and news cards, and in cooperation with some corporate-sector partners, to raise social awareness of the protection of customer service workers.

Some local governments, such as the City of Seoul and Gyeongnam Province, have established centers which, tasked with protecting the rights of workers in emotional labor jobs, provide education programs and psychological healing (counseling) services to their target groups in their designated areas. They also provide consulting services to workplaces, hold policy forums, and carry out publicity activities. Particularly important, the centers organize networks of labor, management, the government, consumer groups, and professional organizations and conduct with them regular discussions and activities to protect customer service workers.

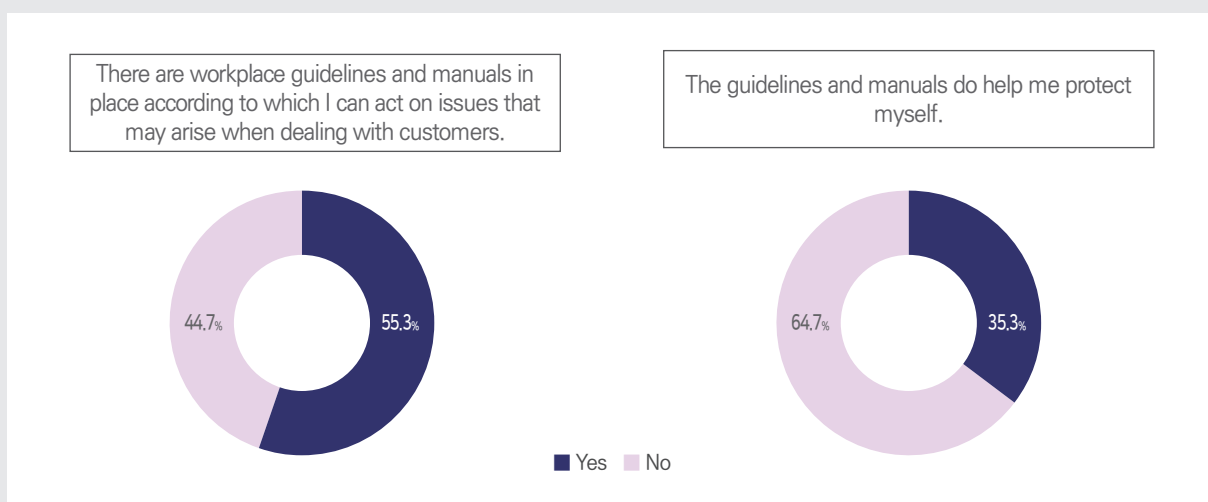
There are several policy issues concerning worker mental health promotion in Korea. First, the services provided for customer service workers are reactive in nature, consisting mostly of counseling catered to workers who are already facing problems, not preventive programs targeting all in the occupational group. Moreover, such organizations as workers' health centers typically require that workers apply themselves for the services they need.

Second, the role of worker's health centers in the area of mental health is rather limited in that the services they provide remain insufficient to meet the demand from workers with mental health issues. Moreover, their activities in improving the work environment mainly focus on addressing physical risk factors such as noise and hazardous chemicals, leaving the psychosocial risk factors of mental health largely unaddressed.

Third, only 1,000 to 2,000 workplaces are inspected annually for compliance with the Customer Service Worker Protection Law, and, at that, most of these inspections focus only on minor steps such as sending out employee health protection messages or posting notices. Furthermore, these inspections are predominantly reactive, not proactive, as they are conducted mostly following a serious incident. As a result, even though the Customer Service Worker Protection Law has been in effect for four years, its effect remains underfelt by workers on site.

Lastly, despite the fact that the role of employers is central to putting mental health safeguards in place for customer service employees, there has been little policy-level effort made to persuade employers and change their perspectives.

[Figure 1] Awareness of workplace safeguards for customer service workers



Note: Based on a survey of 980 customer service workers in the distribution industry

Source: Jongjin Kim et al. (2022). A Study of the Current State of Emotional Labor in the Distribution Industry.

3. International organizations' guidelines for mental health promotion at work and policies on worker mental health promotion in selected countries

The guidelines of international organizations such as WHO, OECD, ILO, EC, and ENWHO demonstrate that the industrial safety and health system, previously aimed at preventing occupational diseases and injuries, is now increasingly encompassing health promotion. Within the realm of mental health, the emphasis is moving from preventing mental conditions and disorders to mental wellbeing. Common themes emerging from these guidelines include: linking mental health interventions to existing occupational safety and health systems, including risk assessments; identifying problems and intervening early; considering mental health risks and protective factors simultaneously at multiple levels; linking mental health to other health issues, such as physical activity; building multi-sectoral collaboration mechanisms; involving workers; and persuading employers to take the lead.

The OECD and EC guidelines, in particular, make much of the implementation of awareness-raising campaigns as a workable way to draw voluntary engagement from employers and the development of methods of evaluating the cost-effectiveness of mental health promotion interventions for workers (e.g., increased productivity due to improved job satisfaction) as a means of evidence for persuading employers.

The United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Germany provide examples of having developed and implemented policies via partnerships among public and private sector organizations. In the United Kingdom, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health and Social Care in a report they jointly issued have set out a plan for workers' mental health (Department for Work and Pensions and Department of Health and Social Care, 2017). Developed through collaboration with employers' organizations, government bodies, and other groups, the plan has put forth several "mental health core standards"—regular monitoring of workers' mental health status, raising awareness of mental health among workers and managers, encouraging physical activity among workers, providing a quality work environment, and so forth—and urged employers to implement them forthwith.

In Canada, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) has published the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, which recommends employers work to foster a healthy work environment. The standard includes measures such as psychosocial risk assessment, promoting a healthy workplace culture, and assessing leadership regarding mental health at work. MHCC has implemented the standard in practice by running projects in a total of 40 workplaces in the three years since 2014.⁸⁾ (OECD, 2021; MHCC, 2017)

Since 2012, Australia has maintained the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance, an association

8) Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]. (2021). Fitter Minds, Fitter Jobs: From Awareness to Change in Integrated Mental Health, Skills and Work Policies, Mental Health and Work. OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a0815d0f-en>; Mental Health Commission of Canada [MHCC]. (2017). Case Study Research Project Findings. Ottawa, ON: Mental Health Commission of Canada. https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/wp-content/uploads/drupal/2017-03/case_study_research_project_findings_2017_eng.pdf

of various organizations concerned with workplace mental health. The Alliance has spearheaded the development of a national plan for workplace mental health promotion and has advocated for the allocation of related budgets. The Alliance has launched a campaign called Heads Up to promote healthy work environments, with a particular emphasis on the role of leadership in the workplace in promoting workers' mental health. Also, the findings of a large-scale, long-term economic evaluation conducted by the Alliance of workplace mental health promotion activities have been utilized as a means of nudging employers toward joining the Alliance.⁹⁾

Germany's workplace mental health promotion plan (Arbeitsprogram Psyche) is built on the participation and partnership of the government, employers, health insurance funds, and professional associations. The main components of the plan include 1) providing information and raising awareness of mental health issues, 2) licensing and certifying relevant practitioners such as labor inspectors and health managers, 3) disseminating guidelines and best practices for implementing interventions at work, and 4) assessing psychosocial risk factors in more than 10,000 companies.¹⁰⁾

Japan implemented its Stress Check System in December 2015 following an amendment to the Occupational Safety and Health Act, pursuant to which all employers with 50 or more employees are required to have their workers' stress levels checked at least once a year and provide specialized services such as counseling and treatment to those among their workers who are determined by the test to be at high risk. Individual employees' stress levels are not disclosed without their consent. Depending on the group tests results, employers may be recommended to take follow-up measures, such as improving work conditions.¹¹⁾

France requires workplaces to have in place a Social and Economic Committee (Comité Social et Économique) with workers' representatives as members. Workers can present their demands to the employer through the committee, requesting improvements in safety, health, and working conditions, for example. Employers, on the other hand, are obligated to report to the committee about their plans and the progress they have made in response to workers' requests.¹²⁾

4. Policy recommendations for Korea

Provide mental health screening and linkage services

Workplace mental health (depression) screening, administered to workers only once every 10

9) The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance. (2019). *Who We Are*. <https://mentallyhealthyworkplacealliance.org.au/who-we-are/#our-members>

10) Monitor Deloitte. (2017). *Mental health and employers: The case for investment Supporting study for the independent Review*. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/public-sector/deloitte-uk-mental-health-employers-monitor-deloitte-oct-2017.pdf>

11) Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]. (2021). *Fitter Minds, Fitter Jobs: From Awareness to Change in Integrated Mental Health, Skills and Work Policies*, Mental Health and Work. OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a0815d0f-en>; Kawakami, N., & Tsutsumi, A. (2015). The Stress Check Program: a new national policy for monitoring and screening psychosocial stress in the workplace in Japan. *Journal of Occupational Health*, 15-0001.

12) Worker-participation.eu. (2018). *National Industrial Relations. France. Health and Safety*. <https://www.worker-participation.eu/National-Industrial-Relations/Countries/France/Health-and-Safety>.

years as part of the national health checkup program, should be conducted more frequently and on a wider range of items, including, in addition to depression, anxiety, job stress, and emotional labor levels (National Health Insurance Service, 2022). Customer service workers identified through screening as being at high risk for mental health concerns should be provided with counseling and treatment services through workers' health centers, emotional labor worker's rights protection centers, mental health welfare centers, counseling organizations, and medical institutions.

Support customer service workers through local organizations such as worker's health centers

While large-scale employers can afford to have in-house health care managers and have them implement health care education and other related programs in their own workplaces, customer service workers, affiliated as they are in most cases to small employers and subcontractors, need counseling and education programs provided by local organizations such as workers' health centers and emotional labor worker's rights protection centers. Specifically, education and assistance programs should be offered to those workers, without them having to initiate the application process themselves, by way of outreach to their workplaces. Also, consulting and technical assistance should be provided to employers so that they can foster healthy work environments and implement appropriate measures. This should be preceded by additional funding, staffing and empowering relevant local organizations.

[Table 2] Education and other programs that can be made available for customer service workers

- Raising awareness about mental health (ways to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health issues and avoid stigmatization)
- Training on strengthening job skills, such as customer service skills
- Training on strengthening mental health protective factors (promoting positive emotions, building resilience, maintaining equilibrium in a stressful situation, breathing techniques, etc.)
- Physical activity programs (stretching, gymnastics, meditation, etc.)
- Individual capacity building programs and career development seminars

Strengthen monitoring of compliance with the Customer Service Worker Protection Act and conduct risk assessments for psychosocial factors

More workplaces should be subject to monitoring for compliance with the Customer Service Worker Protection Act through all-across or random inspections. These inspections should go beyond merely determining whether and how many safeguards workplaces have in place for their customer service employees and include both quantitative and qualitative assessments of psychosocial factors. Policymakers may consider enhancing follow-up measures, such as incentives or fines, that are contingent on the inspection results.

Promote locality-oriented activities and multi-organizational efforts to promote and protect workers' mental health

Budgets should be allocated to local authorities based on the distribution of customer service workers in each local community. It is also important to empower organizations in charge, such as emotional labor worker's rights protection centers and regional labor centers, to lead in organizing and activating networks that align with local characteristics. These organizations should also be provided with additional budget and staffing to effectively engage establishments in the networks and facilitate active network activities. Developing new performance indicators, including those measuring the diversity of participating establishments and the awareness of worker mental health issues among the network members, will help ensure the sustainability and expansion of such networks. To encourage diverse local organizations concerned with worker mental health to participate and collaborate in the network, tailored incentives and outreach strategies should be implemented to meet the specific needs of workers' associations, employers' organizations, and public sector agencies.

[Table 3] Things that employers can do at workplace to protect the mental health of their customer service workers

- Fostering social support (putting in place grievance redress mechanisms, establishing communication channels, forming and facilitating support groups such as clubs, etc.)
- Improving the physical and cultural aspects of the work environment
- Allowing flexibility in work tasks, work hours, and work locations, to the extent possible
- Implementing a leave program to allow employees to take time off work to receive mental health promotion education, counseling, etc.

Engage employers and motivate their efforts

Best practices can be derived from and used to convince employers that their efforts to protect their employees' mental health can increase productivity. Such awareness-promotion activities should target both prime contractors and subcontractors, as a significant portion of customer service workers are employed by the latter. These activities require the development of methods to assess the economic effect of worker mental health promotion and investments in data collection and analysis. There is also a need to expand the awarding of good practices for large employers. For smaller employers, an incentive program should be implemented to offer tangible financial rewards based on the extent of their efforts in protecting their employees' mental health.