

Opportunities and Dilemmas for Community-University Partnerships in Korea: The Case of Health Promotion Among Precarious Workers

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Abstract

The willingness of university intellectuals to look beyond their campus borders has the potential to serve as the basis for universities to build transformative partnerships with other groups in Korean society. This potential has not always been realized, and this paper considers why that might be the case. Taking the important example of health promotion for Korea's most vulnerable workers, the paper considers the partnership work that has occurred in this area, how individual faculty have been involved, and why universities have not been active participants. The paper ends with a consideration of whether universities in countries where they are elite institutions, are situated to become more involved in community-university partnerships initiatives, or whether the direction in which these universities are moving, is likely to be away from rather than toward increased engagement.

What are the opportunities for community-university partnerships in South Korea (hereafter, Korea) and what dilemmas might such partnerships raise? Universities in Korea have long been cradles for critical intellectuals. This willingness of university intellectuals to look beyond their campus borders has the potential to serve as the basis for universities to build transformative partnerships with other groups in Korean society. In this paper, we consider how such partnerships are working by examining the challenges of building university-labor partnerships for the promotion of the health of precarious workers. In Korea, emerging conditions are now challenging traditional approaches to promoting workers' health and an alternative approach is urgently needed. This paper considers the case of the community-based workers' health movement by placing a particular focus on the role that labor-intellectual coalitions have had in it and describing the Korean contexts in which such an engagement approach has emerged. We will examine the opportunities and dilemmas for community-university partnerships and discuss future directions such partnerships might take.

The Korean Labor Context: Change and Opportunity

Korea is internationally recognized both for its labor activism and for its rapid economic development. Yet, over the last decade, under the influence of neo-liberal globalization, Korea's social fabric is increasingly frayed. Social inequality has been increasing, and the working class has seen what was already a very limited power further eroded. Not only has the clout of the overall labor movement been diminished, but the majority of vulnerable workers—those in Korea we call precarious workers—have remained largely untouched by even this limited labor movement led by large corporate unions. And traditional communities are also deteriorating, with rampant development projects overwhelming communities in the drive to construct high-rise luxury apartments. Universities, once a strong base for democratic movement, have not remained immune from these changes. Despite the reduced focus on workers' health and safety that have followed these changes, many workers continue to suffer from injuries and diseases resulting from their work. Traditional risk factors such as physical and chemical hazards have not disappeared while at the same time new risk factors such as job stress have emerged. In addition, chronic diseases have become increasingly prevalent among workers. Universities, once a strong base for democratic movement, have not remained immune from these changes.

The government's response to the problem of workers' health has been an institutional one. Rapid industrialization has been accompanied by increased suffering on the part of workers, and in response, the government has attempted to set up an occupational safety and health (hereafter, OSH) system including workers' compensation. Although the establishment of such systems was a positive step, it remains a limited one. Such institutions have focused almost exclusively on large manufacturing industries, and workers employed in small or medium sized corporations or service/sales sectors (that is to say, many workers in the Korean labor force) remain unprotected.

As in many other countries, the progress towards workers' right to health has had to be gained by endless struggles of workers themselves (Kim and Kim 2007). The high visibility of a workers' death has pointed to the urgent need for much more to be done. In the Korean history of workers' health movement, the death of a 15-year-old boy Mun in 1987 served as an important turning point. After working a mere month in a small workshop that produced thermometers, Mun died from mercury poisoning. Prior to Mun's death, occupational injuries, although widespread, had remained largely invisible. Mun's death was actively highlighted by concerned healthcare professionals and lawyers, and as a result, workers' health issues succeeded in garnering nationwide attention for the first time.

Other milestone in the struggle for workers' health have been important. Consider, for example, the fight to obtain workers' compensation for CS₂ poisoning. This battle was led by the Wonjin Rayon® union, which has built broad coalitions with civil societies. This successful struggle helped to make people in Korea aware of the centrality of union leadership in the workers' health movement, and many democratic unions,

which had been established along with the democratic movement in late 1980s, set workers' health as one of their major agenda.

Despite these successes, the unionization rate in Korea remains low (at about 10 percent), and in particular, most workers employed in small-sized corporations are not protected by trade unions (Lee, Yoon, Kim, and Khang 2008). The unionization rate in small corporations with less than 30 employees is only 8.3 percent while that in corporations with more than 300 employees is 62.9 percent. This is noteworthy because workers employed in corporations with less than 50 employees amounts to 68.4 percent of total working population, and those in corporations with less than 5 employees account for a further 31 percent. The proportions are much higher in service/sales sectors (92.2 percent and 61.1 percent, respectively) (National Statistical Office 2005). Furthermore, growth of precarious workers driven by neo-liberal labor policy facilitates fragmentation among working class (Kim et al. 2006).

All of these conditions point to the fact that OSH institutions are failing to protect most Korean workers, and voluntary efforts based solely on corporation trade unions have remained limited as a way to meet worker needs. In this context, the importance of finding an alternative approach to workers' health promotion has emerged. In the next section, we describe the steps taken to address worker health issues by involving additional groups including university faculty. As we shall see, there have been opportunities but also limitations on the nature of that involvement. These limitations speak more generally to the kinds of challenges Korean universities as elite institutions face in becoming actively engaged in partnerships.

The Need for a New Approach in the Workers' Health Movement

In 2008, a unique organization, Seongsoo Workers' Health Center (hereafter, SWHC), was launched in the northeastern part of Seoul, where many small-scale factories are clustered and where various vulnerable workers including precarious and migrant workers live and work under crowded conditions. Like most initiatives, this one was not genuinely new; rather it was an outcome of a long series of prior efforts.

Several years ago, a group of health activists, including healthcare professionals working at universities, and local unions came together around the idea that, given the rapidly changing political economy of Korea, a new approach would be needed if workers' right to health was to be protected. They began to plan community-wide strategies that would move beyond individual workshops, and organized a community network called "Seongsoo-dong Family." This community network included various community actors such as: Solidarity for Workers' Health (hereafter SWH) whose members included healthcare professionals, lawyers, and labor activists; Seongsoo Clinic, a private clinic with a strong commitment to community mobilization; the Seoul headquarters of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions; and several local

unions representing native or migrant workers employed in the small-sized workshops of metal, print or shoe-making in those neighborhoods.

In 2003, this network started a community-wide campaign for improving working conditions under the slogan “We, workers change our workshops with our hands!” This campaign was accompanied by the training of workers, counseling programs for health and labor rights, and free health examinations. These efforts continued over two years, and in 2005 a task force was launched for the first community-wide survey that would be done by the workers themselves. The survey not only gathered extensive information on working conditions and welfare status among workers employed in small workshops, but also revealed, very vividly and in the words of the workers, the specific demands of workers and employers in those neighborhoods. The resulting report was presented in the National Parliament with much publicity. Unfortunately, visible changes in workers’ lives did not occur.

As a result, the network participants began to realize the need for a platform that would have a more stable and broad base and, the SWH came to propose a community-based workers’ health center. Health concerns had continued to be important among workers and this topic was seen as an effective way to intervene in working conditions, behaviors, and environmental factors. In addition, governmental agencies such as a public health center and the department of public health, various nongovernmental organizations, and local clinics could join with less burden of political consideration. Through many rounds of discussion and workshops, finally SWHC was launched with the goal of providing local workers with education/training and counseling program for various health problems including occupational exposures, general chronic conditions, and mental health, supporting employers of small-size corporations with technical assistance, training volunteers (such as healthcare professionals), and providing education material/programs for local physicians. Also, SWHC could serve as a venue for governmental public health agencies to meet local workers, and most of all, as a communal space for local workers and residents to mobilize themselves.

Where Is the University and Where Is the Community-University Partnership?

Here we examine in detail the role of universities and community-university partnerships in the process described above. At the outset of this paper, we noted that intellectuals have played a leading role in the democratic movement in Korean modern history. Under the military dictatorship, basic labor rights were severely restricted ostensibly to ensure economic development and national security, and in this climate intellectuals such as professors and writers were the only actors who were able to raise their voices and resist this oppression. Many college students, who were a relatively privileged group at that time, developed their roles within this progressive movement. During the 1980s, many student activists infiltrated the factories and worked to educate and organize workers. They also led evening classes in poor neighborhoods to

enlighten and mobilize residents across the country. In this context, action-oriented participatory research to report the lives of the poor and to improve community environment could be tried (Cho and Cho 1992). Meanwhile, many intellectuals, who had participated in the student movement in the 1980s and 1990s, actively organized or participated in various organizations in order to continue their activity after leaving universities. SWH was an important example of such efforts.

Despite this strong tradition of social engagement of intellectuals, universities as *institutions* failed to make any meaningful contribution to the progressive movement or to community development. Only in few cases, did universities provide shelters for professors or student activists who had been oppressed by the government. Instead, universities continued to remain so-called ivory towers, and in some cases, even became political oppressors themselves.

Why might this be the case? As it turns out, most Korean universities are privately owned with strong patriarchal rules and professors are considered to be a highly privileged class. Neo-liberal reforms of universities since the late 1990s, instead of encouraging engagement and partnership have actively discouraged such efforts. The performance of professors is now evaluated solely on the basis of the number of papers published and the amount of research funds generated. Disciplines seen as irrelevant to direct economic outputs (i.e., the humanities or social sciences) are increasingly disregarded (Kyunghyang Daily 2008). Although governmental support for academic research has expanded, such support has largely been for applied research from which immediate economic gain can be expected to result (Bak 2006). The academic interest of researchers, financial support by the government, and normative value for community-university partnership of universities are largely invisible.

Prospects for Change

Despite all this, opportunities remain. As social inequalities worsen, calls are increasing for universities to contribute to tackling this issue. When the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare invited applications to develop health promotion strategies for vulnerable populations a few years ago, a group of researchers including the authors proposed a plan founded on community participation. We, the faculty of medical schools and long-time members of the SWH, believed that Seongsoo-dong might well be an ideal setting for a successful demonstration project and that the efforts for workers' health movement could be facilitated through technical and financial support from such a research project. The proposal succeeded in obtaining a three-year grant, and the project is now in its third-year term. The interim evaluation of the project shows that, as predicted, the technical/financial support was helpful in expanding the local network and in realizing the workers' health center. In addition, the project is leading to the development of a more realistic program by using the several years' experience of the network.

Yet, challenges remain. The funding agency insists that immediate measurable changes be seen in health outcomes or behaviors. Yet such changes are not easily achieved

within the scope of a few short years. Also, the funder remains concerned that the programs are led by non-governmental organizations rather than by government agencies, in spite of the importance of the voluntary movement of community. Such disagreement might well have negative effects on the appraisal of the project results. In addition, though all co-investigators are university faculties, the university-wide support or official partnership between university and community does not exist. This contrasts with the case of the work in the United States such as in the University of California Berkeley's Labor Occupational Health Program, in which the university represented itself as a strong platform to link researchers and community workers (Lee and Krause 2002).

Conclusion

For promoting workers' health in Korea, an alternative approach is needed urgently and must be found. In particular, to protect health of workers employed in small-sized corporations or have disadvantages such as those experienced by precarious or vulnerable workers, community-based strategies with strong coalitions are essential. Here, universities, as valuable community resources, have the opportunity to play an important role, but in Korea they are not likely to do now.

In the near term, it may be more realistic to organize and activate networks of individual researchers with voluntary commitment to community, and to facilitate exemplary cases of community-researcher partnerships. Such networks could serve as training schools where the next generation of action-oriented researchers could train themselves, and at least, could remind the universities of their responsibility in communities.

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