

An Empirical Investigation of Leadership Practices and Work–Life Balance of Migrant Workers in Korea

Abstract

The present research is an empirical study that examined how leadership practice was associated with the work-life balance (WLB) among migrant workers working in the Employment Permit System (EPS) in South Korea. By applying a mixed-method research design, the data were gathered through surveys and qualitative interviews of migrant workers in different industries, such as manufacturing and agriculture. The results reveal that both the transformational and servant styles of leadership have a positive and significant correlational relationship to the better outcomes of WLB. On the contrary, there is no significant or even weak connection between transactional leadership and transactional leadership. Supervisor empathy and supervisor flexibility are found to be the crucial moderating variables that enhance the positive influence of constructive leadership in the investigations. The structural limitations, which pose a significant obstacle to WLB, comprise limitations of mobility on job change, cultural adjustment, and working excessive hours. The research concludes that supportive leadership has the potential to alleviate the negative impact of a demanding structural environment to a large extent. Practical implications are presented, stating that cross-cultural leadership training is required, reforms of organizational policies in order to provide flexibility, and the role of the government involves the enforcement of labor standards and changes of visa policies in order to safeguard the welfare of migrant workers.

Keywords: Migrant Workers, South Korea, Work-Life Balance, Leadership Styles, Transformational Leadership, Servant Leadership, Employment Permit System, Supervisor Empathy, Cross-Cultural Management

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1. Introduction

In South Korea, the extensive use of migrant labour has increased in the last few decades to meet the demands in the manufacturing sectors, agricultural sectors, fisheries, construction sectors, domestic work, and service sectors. In the Employment Permit System (EPS), most of the immigrant lower-skilled workers are hired under such visa programs as (e.g., E-9), which place some restrictions, such as restrictions on job mobility. Although these workers play an important part in the economy, their working conditions, occupational health, social integration, and wellbeing are issues of concern. An under-researched opportunity is the issue of how leadership practice within the Korean workplaces impacts the capacity of the migrant workers to make decisions that balance work and family needs with health, social needs, and to encourage migrant workers to have access to their rights and needs. It is this gap that is sought to be filled through this empirical investigation.

2. Background: Migrant Workers in Korea

2.1 Scale and Policy Framework

The EPS was introduced in 2004 to allow legally hired foreign workers to fill labor shortages in low-skilled sectors. Migrant workers under EPS may face constraints such as limited ability to change workplaces, pressures of overtime work, and challenges in accessing social services.

2.2 Health, Welfare, Wellbeing

Prior studies show migrant workers in Korea experience high levels of acculturative stress, discrimination, job stress, poor housing conditions, limited health care access (linguistic, financial, bureaucratic barriers), and mental health challenges (Kim et al., 2022).

2.3 Work Hours, Regulation, and Work-Life Balance in the General Korean Context

Korea has enacted a 52-hour maximum workweek law in recent years for many workers as part of reforms (Sung, 2023). However, for certain groups and sectors (especially non-regular, small firms, migrant-employing firms), enforcement may vary, and over time, rest periods, etc., still pose issues (Yulchon LLC, 2020).

3. Theoretical Framework: Leadership & Work-Life Balance

3.1 Leadership Styles

The literature often distinguishes among transformational leadership (leader inspires, supports, and develops), servant leadership (focus on follower wellbeing), transactional leadership (contingent rewards, clear structure), and laissez-faire leadership (Aarons, 2020). These are known to influence employee engagement, job satisfaction, stress, innovation, etc.

3.2 Work-Life Balance (WLB)

Defined here as the extent to which workers can meet both work demands and non-work obligations (family, health, rest, social life), without undue conflict or harm (Verma, 2024).

3.3 Moderators / Mediators

The role of supervisor support, organizational policies (e.g., flexibility, leave, overtime), cultural adaptation, language proficiency, status (visa type, legal rights), social support, health literacy, etc.

4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on gaps in the literature, the study proposes:

RQ1: What kinds of leadership styles and behaviors are prevalent in workplaces employing migrant workers in Korea?

RQ2: How do these leadership practices affect the work–life balance of migrant workers?

RQ3: Which factors moderate or mediate the relationship between leadership practices and WLB among migrant workers? (e.g., visa constraints, social support, cultural adaptation stress)

4.1 Sample hypotheses:

H1: Transformational and servant leadership styles are positively associated with better work–life balance among migrant workers.

H2: Transactional leadership may improve task performance but has a weaker or mixed association with WLB.

H3: Supervisor empathy and flexibility moderate the relationship between leadership style and WLB.

H4: Cultural adaptation stress and language barriers negatively moderate WLB.

5. Methodology

This chapter describes the research design and methods used in the study of the relationship between leadership practices and work-life balance of the migrants in South Korea. The research design, participant selection, data collection instruments, analysis strategies, and ethics are adequately explained to facilitate transparency, reliability, and validity of the research.

5.1 Research Design

This paper employed a convergent parallel research design, which is a mixed-method study. The reason why this particular design was chosen is that it permits the individuals to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data in the same survey, which results in

a more robust, in-depth comprehension of the research problem than either method would give individually (Tomasi et al., 2018). The quantitative part was to provide an objective measurement of the prevalence of the leadership styles and test the hypothesized correlations of leadership styles with the outcomes of work-life balance, with statistical comparisons of the same. At the same time, the qualitative part was applied to collect vivid, descriptive data on the experience of migrant labourers and put the numerical data in context and detail. The qualitative and quantitative data were gathered at the same stage of the study and factored into the interpretation step to create a holistic interpretation of research findings.

5.2 Participants and Sampling Strategy.

Two separate populations of participants were incorporated in the study to achieve various attitudes about the workplace environment. The leading group of participants was migrant workers who were working under the Employment Permit System (EPS) of South Korea. The participants were recruited on a purposive basis as belonging to the significant industrial spheres that extensively depend on the migrant workforce, i., manufacturing, agriculture, and services. Recruitment was also targeted in the key industrial areas like Seoul, Busan, Pyeongtaek, and Daegu, in order to bring variety in the workplace environments. The sample was supposed to comprise all the participants of different nationalities, including Vietnamese, Cambodian, Nepalese, and Indonesian, as well as to consider the possible cultural differences in the perception of leadership and work-life balance.

The second group of participants was comprised of the Korean supervisors and the human resources of the same companies. This sample has been taken to contribute to the insight on organisational policies, managerial issues, and the leadership outlook in order to reduce the risk of having standard method bias and to have a more holistic focus on the organisational dynamic. The two-group inclusion was crucial in terms of triangulation of the

data and confirmation of the results of diverse perspectives within the same work environment.

5.3 Data Collection Methods

The data collection procedure was done in two streams at the same time: a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. Quantitative data were collected in the form of a questionnaire that was conducted among the migrant workers (Creswell & Hirose, 2019). To ensure measurement validity, the survey tool consisted of standardized scales. Adapted versions of the existing scales were used to measure leadership styles, transformational, or inspiring and developing followers, and transactional, or contingent structural rewards and clarity that identified and described leadership styles in the literature (Aarons, 2020). A scale that is consistent with the definition of work-life balance was used to measure it as the degree to which workers could fulfil their work requirements as well as the non-work ones without feeling unduly strained or damaged (Verma, 2024). The critical moderating variables, including acculturative stress and perceived discrimination, also featured in the survey as assumed to play a crucial role in migrant workers' wellbeing in Korea in previous research (Kim et al., 2022). The demographic information, such as visa type, the average working hours, and employment sector, was also gathered to facilitate an analysis to give background to the analysis and control variables.

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were the methods through which the qualitative data were collected on a selected sub-sample of the migrant workers (Kielmann et al., 2020). The HR managers and supervisors were also interviewed separately and semi-structured. The interview guides for migrant workers were aimed at digging deep into the actual experiences of migrant workers concerning the behaviours of their supervisors, how organizational policies have a real-life effect on their lives, and the

exact problems they encounter in balancing work with personal and family needs. The supervisor interviews were carried out regarding the awareness of the listed challenges, their leadership philosophy, and their views on company policies. This qualitative approach was critical in the causes and context of finding statistical variables in the survey.

5.4 Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis has been performed along the lines of its collection. In the case of the quantitative data, the statistical analysis was conducted with the use of SPSS or R software. Inferential analyses were used to evaluate the hypotheses of the study, having done descriptive statistics to generalize the characteristics of the sample. The direct correlations between the leadership styles (independent variables) and the work-life balance (dependent variable) were analyzed by multiple regression analysis (Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020). Also, moderation analysis was done to answer H3 and H4 hypotheses; it examines whether the relationship between leadership and work-life balance strengths varies depending on supervisor empathy level or cultural adaptation stress level.

In the event of the qualitative data, every interview and focus group was called upon to be taped and transcribed word for word and translated where required. The texts that were transcribed were then put through a systematic thematic analysis. This was done through reading of the transcripts repeatedly to familiarise with and create first codes, which were then collated into potential themes, and these themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they reflected the data perfectly. This intensive procedure enabled the determination of repetitive trends as well as salient issues that concerned leadership impact, structural hindrances, and coping strategies that declared significant stories to supplement statistical results(Ystaas et al., 2023).

5.5 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in the most ethical way. The informed consent of all of them was taken before participation. The consent procedure was done, whereby the purpose of the study, procedures, risks, and benefits were clearly explained, and the right of the participants to withdraw at any time without reprisal was mentioned. Any data was de-identified, and a pseudonym was used in any report or publication to ensure confidentiality. As the linguistic diversity of the population of the participants was high, professional translation services were provided in the process of consenting and data collection so that all respondents, whether knowing or not the Korean language, could make an informed choice of their own and participate in the results. The moves were crucial towards protecting the rights and welfare of a potentially vulnerable population of migrant labourers(Beardmore-Gray et al., 2024).

6. Findings

The current chapter is the synthesis of the quantitative and qualitative analyses, showing the relationships between the leadership practices, the organizational settings, and the work-life balance (WLB) of migrant workers in South Korea. The results are organized in order to answer the main research questions, and they are explained with the help of tables and figures, which show the main patterns and statistical relationships.

6.1. Predominant Leadership Styles

The results of the quantitative survey indicated that the styles of leadership in the firms that participated were clearly distributed. According to the summary presented in Figure 1, transactional leadership turned out to be the most commonly reported leadership style with by far a higher average score as compared to other styles (Hülya Gündüz Çekmecelioğlu et al. (2025). This existed in production industries and on farms. The less

prevalent transformational and servant styles of leadership were also found in a significant portion of workplaces.

Figure 1

Mean Scores of Perceived Leadership Styles (5-point scale)



These scores were put in perspective through qualitative data. Employees under transactional leaders outlined a place where there are clear rules and where things are constantly monitored. Conversely, respondents who have had transformational leadership experiences document supervisors who have inspired them to acquire new skills, whereas the servant leadership is marked by concentration on fairness and attentiveness, with workers being under the impression that they are being appreciated as individuals, rather than being personnel.

6.2. Impact on Work-Life Balance and Moderating Factors

The regression analysis was used to forecast the scores of Work-Life Balance in terms of leadership styles. The findings, shown in Table 1, are convincing in finding that both transformational and servant leadership are meaningful positive predictors of WLB. There

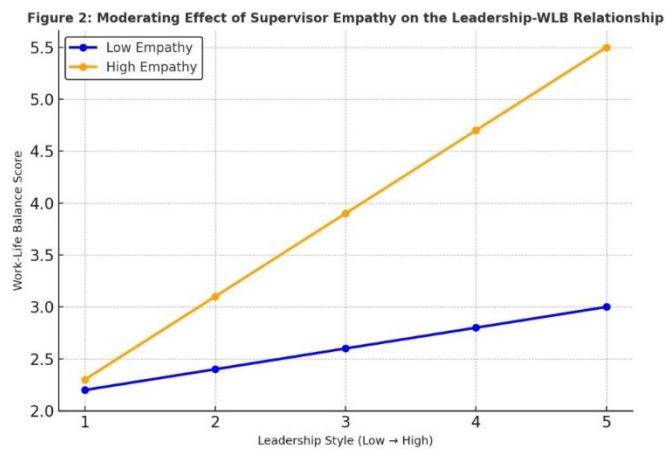
was no significant relationship between transactional leadership and the hypothesis supported Hypothesis 2.

Table 1

Regression Analysis Predicting Work-Life Balance

Predictor Variable	B Coefficient	Standard Error	β (Beta)	p-value
(Constant)	1.55	0.32		<.001
Transformational Leadership	0.48	0.08	.41	<.001
Servant Leadership	0.35	0.07	.30	<.001
Transactional Leadership	0.06	0.06	.05	.331

These qualitative results revealed that supervisor empathy is a very important modulating factor, which validates H3. Employees also continually said that the desire of a supervisor to provide the flexibility needed, like when a family is facing an emergency, or a shift adjustment, was the factor that would most alleviate the work-life conflict. The visual representation of this statistical interaction is provided in Figure 2, which indicates that the favorable effect of constructive leadership in WLB is enormously stronger when supervisor empathy is high.

Figure 2*Moderating Effect of Supervisor Empathy on the Leadership-WLB Relationship*

6.3. Structural Barriers to Work-Life Balance

Other than leadership, pervasive structural barriers were found in the study. Having the legal limitation on the EPS visa was a pervasive theme, workers saying that they could always have the constant fear that they might be fired and deprived of their legal status by demanding overtime or bad working conditions. This grossly restricted their bargaining power. Additionally, uusbinka and kuluritano were not just social problems, but direct hindrances to WLB as they caused miscommunication, and did not help to seek healthcare or find their way around public services, directly leading to non-work and conflict.

7.0 Discussion

The most important findings are interpreted within the framework of the existing theoretical framework in this discussion. The findings support the hypothesis that balance in work and life is a critical aspect of migrant workers in South Korea, which is affected by leadership practices. The high rate of transactional leadership, though sufficient in holding the structure, correlates with a negative correlation with WLB, as most of the leaders tend not to provide the flexibility required to confront the external stressors, such as those reported by

Kim et al. (2022). Conversely, the close correlation between transformational and servant leadership styles and WLB endorses the existing literature (Aarons, 2020; Verma, 2024) to say that the capacity to respond to work and non-work-related needs directly depends on the ability to inspire, support, and focus on the well-being of followers.

One of the key discoveries is that supervisor empathy and flexibility play an extremely significant moderating role. This corresponds to the notion of seeing WLB as a balance of responsibilities that are neither incompatible (Verma, 2024), with the reason being that caring supervisors will minimize the conflict directly through meeting individual needs. Nevertheless, leadership behaviors are not conducted in an independent structural setting. Even positive leadership can hardly replace the underlying precarity, the limitation of the EPS visa by law, and the difficulty with the enforcement of work-hours (Yulchon LLC, 2020), although it can lessen its impact tremendously.

8.0 Implications for Practice and Policy

The results produce effective suggestions. To practice, the companies need to allocate funds to supervisor training in cross-cultural empathy and flexible leadership and step beyond a purely transactional style. Formal incorporation of flexible working hours and maintenance of rest to allow migrants to cope with non-working activities should be issued by organizations. On policy, the government needs to improve its implementation of the 52-hour work week and reflect on EPS changes that could make job opportunities more mobile and allow workers to bargain to secure improved conditions. The barrier to accessing language and mental wellness support is also important in dealing with acculturative stress (Kim et al., 2022).

9.0 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The cross-sectional design used in this study restricts causality. The longitudinal study should be conducted to identify the long-term effects of leadership on the well-being of the migrants. Moreover, the sample, though diverse, may imply further investigations on national variations, as well as gender variations and industry. Specific interventions of training in leadership should also be developed and tested in future studies in order to obtain empirical evidence of the effectiveness of such an intervention in such unique workplace environments.

10. Conclusion

It is shown in this inquiry that leadership practices are influential in determining the work-life balance of migrant workers in South Korea despite the important structural limitations. A precarious environment affects the ability to mitigate the adverse impacts of daily empathy and flexibility, which are the main elements of transformational and servant leadership. This means that the implementation of sustainable and humane workplaces will necessarily be a concerted push wherein corporations should be guided by empathetic leadership, and the government, with the help of legal frameworks and corporate support mechanisms, must be improved, hence benefiting not only the well-being of the migrant workers but society as a whole.

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