



Job security, social dialogue and subjective health of working people during the pandemic

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This column highlights the importance of job security and social dialogue in ensuring the subjective good health of working people by analysing work orientation data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP Research Group, 2017). First, I look at ILO reports on the pandemic’s overall effect on the world of work. Then I present my analysis of the ISSP data, showing the importance of job security and union affiliation—and indeed, of unions, as an element of social dialogue—in better subjective health of working people. Subjective health is a self-assessed health status that refers to both physical and mental health. Finally, I discuss policy.

The pandemic has massively reduced global employment in manufacturing and services. The ILO (2020a) reports that more than one in six young people are out of work owing to Covid-19, and approximately 25 million jobs could be lost worldwide to the pandemic. Data from China’s National Bureau of Statistics (2020) shows that the total value added to industrial enterprises in China declined by 13.5% in the first two months of 2020, when the country was most heavily affected by Covid-19.

Globally reduced demand and subsequent slowing of supply chains is also shrinking labour incomes, causing spikes in extreme and moderate poverty for those in work. Pandemics can disproportionately affect segments of populations such as older people and those with underlying health conditions; young people, via unemployment and underemployment; women, who are overrepresented in the service sector and

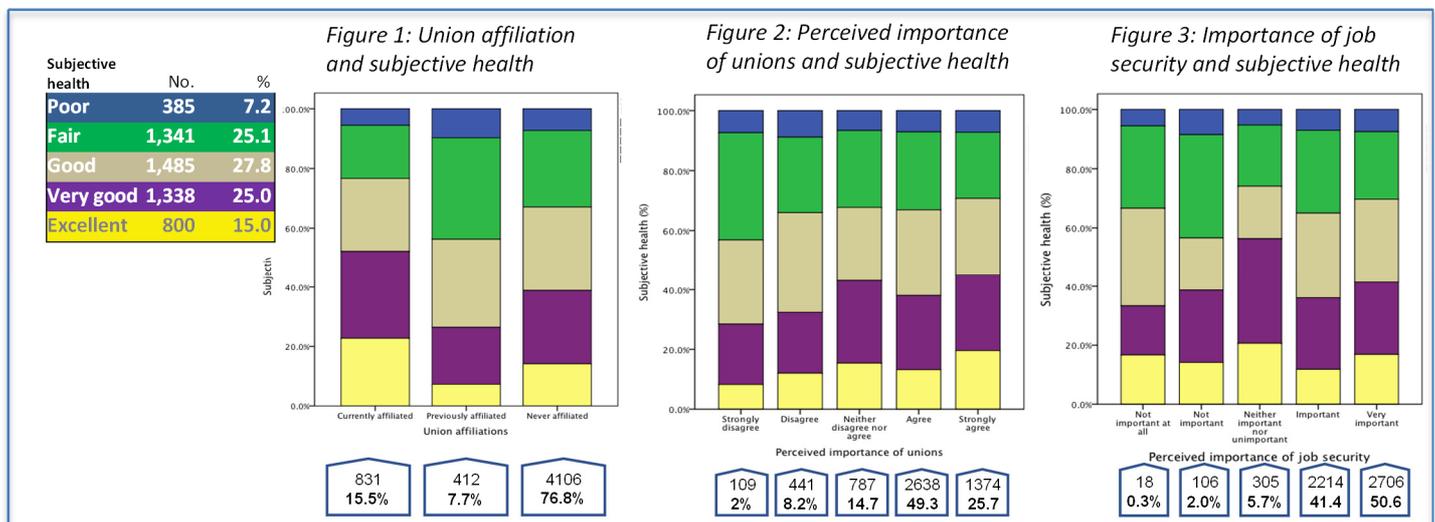
health care; unprotected self-employed workers and casual and gig workers who do not have job security or paid sick leave; and migrant workers (ILO, 2020b).

Job security, unions and subjective health

In a pandemic, the subjective health of working people takes on greater importance. This section explores the relationship between the subjective health of working people on one hand and the perceived importance of job security and union affiliation on the other, through descriptive and ordinal regression analysis. Of the 37 countries in the ISSP dataset (ISSP Research Group 2017), working respondents were selected from China, India, Israel, Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan.

Figure 1 shows the relative importance of union affiliation to the subjective health of working people. Respondents with union affiliations (15.5%) reported better subjective health. Even respondents who did not belong to a union but perceived unions as ‘very important’ scored better in subjective health assessments (Figure 2), as did respondents who perceived their jobs as secure (Figure 3).

An ordinal logistic regression ¹ for union affiliation, union importance, job security and subjective health shows, first, that there appears to be a relationship between union affiliation and subjective health for working people. People who are currently



¹ Ordinal regression predicts how likely it is for a respondent who chose a certain response to a survey question to also choose a certain response to a different question.

affiliated with a union score better in terms of subjective health than those who have never been affiliated with a union, for any level of subjective health. However, people who are no longer affiliated with a union score lower in subjective health than those who have never been affiliated. Both findings are statistically significant .

In the second instance, for the same regression model, there also appears to be a relationship between the perceived importance of unions and subjective health for working people. For any level of subjective health, people who chose 'strongly agree' for the statement 'Workers need trade unions to protect their interests' scored higher in subjective health than those who chose any other category. (All results except 'neither' are statistically significant.) For the third predictor variable, importance of job security, there is a positive relationship between valuing job security and subjective health. Although the statistical significances are mixed, the results show that the importance of job security interacts with subjective health ratings for working people.

Importance of job security and social dialogue

The ILO offers two immediate policy recommendations to tackle the effects of Covid-19 in the workplace: most urgently, workers, employers, and their families should be protected from the risk of the disease by large-scale public compliance with government orders to combat the virus. Second, income and employment-related support should be widespread. The ILO (2020b) urges building confidence, trust and social dialogue for effective policy measures.

Concerning the importance of unions, as an essential component of social dialogue, in protecting workers' interests, a vast majority (70%) of respondents across countries consider unions an important platform for securing workplace rights (Volk and Hadler, 2018). Among working populations, job security, followed by income security, is the most desired job characteristic; together, these foster the development of personal potential and are associated with mental and physical health (Volk and Hadler, 2018). My study also found that union affiliation and perceived importance of unions are highly positively associated with subjective health. Moreover, perceived importance of job security also correlates significantly with subjective health for working people.

Mental and physical subjective health may be critically weakened by a pandemic. Workers' rights, including paid sick leave, healthcare benefits, unemployment benefits, and safe working environments are fundamental elements of job security – a pillar of decent working conditions (ILO 2020b) – and directly connected to the general health status (both physical and mental) of the workers concerned. The ILO recommends combatting employment instability in the pandemic through improved occupational safety and health measures, initiated and made possible through social dialogue between workers,

employers, and union representatives; there must be no Covid-19-based discrimination in or exclusion from the workplace; and an enhanced health service should be accessible for all, including those who are uninsured. The most important issues related to job security—including paid sick leave, sickness benefits, and income security—should be protected for all workers (ILO, 2020b).

Trade unions, through active collective bargaining at the workplace, could reduce health disparities and create positive work conditions. A strong positive association between exercising social dialogue and equal opportunity policies is more likely to exist in unionised workplaces than non-unionised ones. Trade unions could play an essential role in ensuring workplace safety, wages, job security, and paid leave.

Depending on Covid-19's effect on economies, country-specific policy agendas could protect those who are self-employed, as well as waged workers and e-hailers. Because job security and trade unions significantly affect the subjective health of workers, a tripartite (or even a multi-stakeholder) approach to an action plan that includes the government, employers, and worker representatives may improve the situation.

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