

Working Time Around the World: Main findings and policy implications

*Working Time Around the World*¹ reviews global working time issues including national laws and working time policies, trends in actual working hours, the specific experiences of different economic sectors and different types of workers, as well as the implications for working time policies. The primary focus of the report is on developing and transition countries.

Main findings

For the last five decades, there has been a global shift towards a 40-hours limit although substantial regional differences and uneven progress in reducing hours in the legal workweek are apparent. Evidence indicates that a “race to the bottom” in legal standards on working time is not visible, but the actual influence of these legal standards varies considerably and remains limited in many countries.

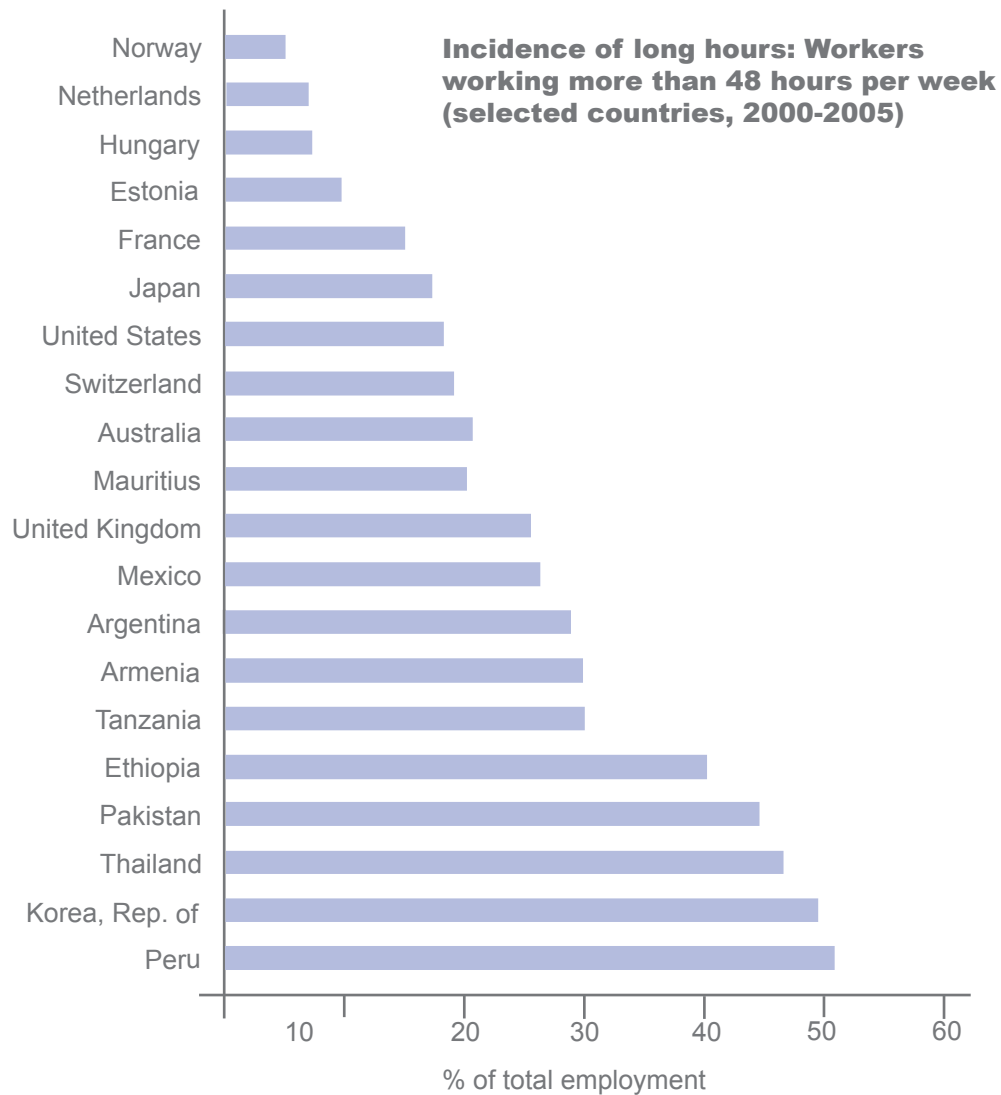
The weekly working hours that workers are actually working have been relatively stable for the last decade in the manufacturing sector in many countries; there is no sign that developing countries are “catching up” with industrialized ones; and the gaps between these countries remain substantial. Working hours tend to be more varied in the service sector, and they are particularly high in certain service industries, such as wholesale and retail trade; hotels and restaurants; and transport, storage and communications, all of which also commonly involve shift work and work at night or on weekends. However, these average figures mask the reality that the distribution of working hours is highly diverse: some individual workers are working very long hours, while others are working short hours, often due to underemployment. **In total, an estimated 22.0 per cent of the global workforce, or 614.2 million workers, are working more than 48 hours per week.**

Gender and age appear to be important factors in determining working time. Despite women’s increased participation in paid labour, there is a clear “gender gap” in working hours worldwide: men tend to work long hours, while short hours primarily concern women workers. Women’s availability for paid work appears to be constrained by the time they devote to their household/domestic responsibilities. Age is a less powerful but nonetheless important factor in shaping working hours. Both younger and retirement-age workers appear to work slightly shorter hours than prime-age workers, often reflecting the insufficient employment opportunities for the former groups. Working hours were found substantially lower for the oldest age group (65 years or older).

Informal employment provides at least half of total employment in all regions of the developing world, with about three-fifths of it consisting of self-employment. While large proportions of the self-employed in industrialized countries work very long hours, the common pattern for the self-employed in developing countries is workers either working long hours or short hours (less than 35 hours per week). As noted, gender seems to be a key variable affecting the working hours of the self-employed in developing countries. While self-employed men are likely to work either very long or very short hours, the latter mostly due to underemployment, short hours are clearly the rule for self-employed women. It appears that these women are using self-employment to realize part-time or reduced hours, which they cannot obtain in the formal economy, in order to earn some money while handling their family responsibilities.

¹ Lee, S.; McCann, D.; Messenger, J.C. 2007. *Working Time Around the World: Trends in working hours, laws, and policies in a global comparative perspective* (London and Geneva, Routledge and ILO).

Attempts to reduce hours in these countries have been undermined for various reasons, including the workers' need to work long hours to ensure adequate earnings and the widespread use of overtime by employers to attempt to increase productivity rather than alternative approaches. While promotion of working time flexibility is often proposed as an alternative to long working hours (also to improve the quality of working life) in policy documents, these flexibility measures as well as part-time work are not much used in practice due to the fact that they reduce household income in the context of low hourly wages. Generally, working time laws and policies often have limited influence on actual working hours in developing economies, especially in terms of maximum weekly hours, overtime payments, exceptions and exemptions, and informal employment.



Source: Table 3.4, in *Working Time Around the World* (ILO and Routledge 2007), pp. 46-51.

Implications for policy in developing and transition countries

The framework for working time developed for industrialized countries (Messenger, ed, 2004) proposes that decent working time arrangements need to fulfill five interconnected criteria: they should preserve health and safety, be “family friendly”, promote gender equality, enhance productivity, and facilitate worker choice and influence over working hours. The *Working Time Around the World* report applies and adapts this framework to developing and transition countries, taking into account their different realities.

Healthy working time

Preserving workers' health and workplace safety is a basic goal of working time policies, especially those that aim at discouraging long hours. Laws and regulations that establish limits on working hours, such as the 48-hour limits in the Hours of Work Conventions, 1919 (No. 1) and 1930 (No. 30), and the 40-hour limit in the Forty-Hour Week Convention, 1935 (No. 47), are a necessary minimum condition for restraining excessively long hours of work. As legal limits alone are unlikely to be sufficient for achieving this objective, there also needs to be a credible enforcement mechanism, such as the labour inspectorate, as well as compliance with established "norms" among enterprises. The influence of wages on working hours plays a particularly strong role in undermining statutory hours limits, as long working hours and overtime work are often used to compensate workers for low wages in developing and transition economies. Attention to wage policies, and in particular to minimum wages, can thus make an important contribution towards breaking the vicious cycle of low pay and long hours.

'Family-friendly' working time

The reconciliation of work and family life needs to be a prominent concern of economic and social policies in countries at all levels of development. Preserving sufficient time to combine paid work with family and domestic obligations, such as childcare and elder care, should be an integral element of these policies. It is apparent that time for caring is becoming more significant, as increasing numbers of households become responsible for the care of the elderly and HIV/AIDS patients. The whole range of policy measures developed to aid work-family reconciliation is available to be drawn on and adapted to national circumstances, such as flexi-time, emergency family leave, and part-time work. At the same time, many less developed countries also need different measures from those in the industrialized world, such as measures ensuring accessible transport and water supplies, and investment in labour-saving domestic technologies. Moreover, working time policies and strategies aimed at formalizing the informal economy can be tied together, to the benefit of both, recognizing the aspect of informal work so favoured by women: the flexibility to combine paid labour with non-market work.

Gender equality through working time

In designing any work-family reconciliation measures, it is vital to analyze their impact on gender equality by taking into account women's disproportionate responsibility for caring and domestic obligations, while avoiding the assumption that these concerns only apply to women. In this regard, the promotion of part-time work as a work-family measure is an important issue. In the formal sector of developing economies, part-time work is still relatively rare, mostly due to low wage levels which make it infeasible. The experience of industrialized countries suggests that the provision of part-time employment alone is not sufficient and that there is a need for the availability of high-quality part-time positions across all jobs and occupations, and also for smooth transitions between shorter and longer hours. The measures used to attain these goals will be shaped by local institutions and traditions, but can be informed by the principles and measures found in the ILO's Part-Time Work Convention, 1994 (No. 175). Further gender equality initiatives in areas such as hiring, wages and benefits, and career development are also needed.



Productive working time

Statutory hours limits can help to reduce excessive hours (which tend to be unhealthy and unproductive), and thus contribute towards enhancing productivity. Reasonable hours limits help to maintain workers' health as well as their productive capacity. They also function as an incentive for firms to modernize their working time arrangements, and to invest in improving their technology and enhancing the skills of their workers. As the problems of long working hours and low wages are often linked, efforts to reduce working hours, if carried out without addressing low wages, can easily result in avoidance of the law and/or an increase in multiple job-holding among workers. It is therefore necessary to encourage and assist enterprises to improve their productivity, which should go hand-in-hand with reduced working hours and higher hourly wages. Measures to assist enterprises to improve their hourly productivity include providing workplace training to managers and workers on how to improve the planning and management of working time and workloads.

Choice and influence over working time

Reductions in working hours can play a role in advancing the influence workers have on their work schedules by allowing them a greater degree of choice over how they divide their time. Work-family measures also allow workers to devote more time to their families and make formal economy jobs a possibility for more women. Working time flexibility measures need to be tailored towards balancing flexibility with protection, through means like absolute maximums on the hours worked per week, advance notice periods and measures towards individual influence, such as the right to refuse to work on traditional rest days. Some individual choice measures are already in operation in developing economies, although they only appear in a few countries and firms. The vast majority of governments and enterprises could introduce simple individual choice techniques, such as rights to notice of when overtime will be required, choice regarding whether and when to work overtime hours ("voluntary overtime"), consultation on starting and finishing times, and even flexi-time schemes.

Conclusion

In crafting appropriate working time policies, the needs and circumstances of the country in which they will be implemented must be taken into account, including its level of development, industrial relations and legal systems, and cultural and social traditions. One common theme is the interaction of wages and working time, which is central to reducing working hours, and which must be addressed in tandem if policies towards decent working hours are to be effective. Also, it is clear that, rather than a deregulatory approach towards working hours, strong regulation that is widely enforced and observed is necessary as the basic framework within which working hours are arranged in transition and developing economies. Finally, there is a great need for social dialogue to permit workers' needs and preferences to be heard and acted on, to enhance firms' productivity, and to allow workers and employers to work together towards realizing high-skill/high-quality firms and economies.