



Working conditions in a global perspective

Introduction

This report provides a comparative analysis of job quality covering approximately 1.2 billion of the world's workers in the EU28, China, the Republic of Korea, Turkey, the United States (US), Spanish-speaking Central America (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama), Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. It is the result of a pioneering project for the collection and analysis of data on working conditions around the world by the International Labour Office, the secretariat of the International Labour Organization (ILO), and Eurofound, both tripartite agencies that aim to improve working conditions and the well-being of workers.

Policy context

Job quality is increasingly recognised as a major policy concern. It is central to the ILO's Decent Work Agenda and to the European Union's Quality of Work policies. For workers, for the enterprises and organisations that employ them and for societies, there are benefits associated with high-quality jobs, and costs associated with poor-quality jobs.

The policy objectives of improved job quality, decent work and a high level of worker well-being can be supported by reliable data on working conditions. Working conditions surveys quantify the extent to which workers are exposed to certain risks at work, as well as the resources workers have to mitigate these risks. They permit analysis of different work situations, including analysis by occupation and sector, and allow researchers to examine the possible effects of changes in the world of work on job quality. They also allow monitoring of progress on working conditions. Comparable data are needed to support evidence-based policymaking on job quality.

Key findings

The report analyses seven dimensions of job quality: the physical environment, work intensity, working time quality, the social environment, skills and development, prospects, and earnings. While there are important differences across countries on these job quality dimensions, there are also important similarities.

- Exposure to physical risks is frequent. More than half of workers in many regions and countries covered are exposed to repetitive hand and arm movements, making it the most reported physical risk. One-fifth or more of workers are frequently exposed to high temperatures at work; a similar but lower proportion report exposure to low temperatures. Between one-fifth and one-third of workers, and up to 44% in Turkey, report loud noise.
- Intensive work, such as tight deadlines and high-speed work, are experienced by between one-third of workers in the EU, and half in the US, Turkey, El Salvador and Uruguay. Some 25–40% of workers have jobs with emotional demands.
- Differences in working time quality are stark: whereas 15% of workers in EU countries work more than 48 hours per week, in China and the Republic of Korea over 40% of workers do so, in Chile over 50% and in Turkey the figure is nearly 60%. Across the countries, at least 10% of workers work during their free time; long hours often come with intense work. While in most countries men report longer hours of paid work than women, when hours of unpaid work are included then, without exception across the world, women work longer hours than men. Over 70% of workers in the Republic of Korea report that it is very easy for them to arrange to take an hour or two off work to take care of personal or family matters; this is the case for 20–40% of workers in the US, Europe and Turkey.

- The majority of workers report a supportive social environment at work. Around 70% of workers across the countries surveyed give a positive assessment of their managers' performance in managing them, and report high levels of social support from colleagues, (though with some country exceptions). Up to 12%, however, are subject to verbal abuse, humiliating behaviour, bullying, unwanted sexual attention or sexual harassment.
- Regardless of the country, the least-educated get less access to opportunities to grow and develop their skills. The proportion of workers who report learning new things at work varies between 72% and 84% in the US, the EU and Uruguay, but the proportions are lower in China (55%), Turkey (57%) and the Republic of Korea (32%). The proportion of workers who report having some task autonomy is between 45% and 70%, while the proportion having influence on decisions important for their work ranges from 33% to 66%.
- Regarding prospects, job insecurity is of concern across many countries, with one out of six workers in the EU and one out of every ten workers in the US worried that they might lose their job in the next six months. On the positive side, 30–60% report that their job offers prospects for career advancement.
- Across the countries, women earn significantly less than men and are overrepresented at the lowest end of the earnings distribution. The level of earnings varies with employment status and occupation.
- The surveys consistently show differences between different groups of workers: in particular, between men and women, and between workers in different occupations. Differences in job quality between men and women result from multiple interactions between the welfare and family systems, labour market structures, gendered life courses and the division of paid and unpaid labour. Similarly, the data reveal systematic differences between occupations. Many workers in blue-collar occupations are exposed to physically demanding working conditions. Elementary workers and service and sales workers also report both physical and emotional demands.
- Gender differences are crucial to understanding the pattern of working conditions across the world.
- Job quality can be improved by reducing excessive demands on workers and limiting their exposure to risks – and also by increasing their access to work resources that help in achieving work goals or mitigate the effects of these demands. Each dimension of job quality can also be improved through workplace practices and policies.
- Workers and employers and their organisations each have a role to play in improving job quality; social dialogue is critical for devising policies in the workplace and beyond. Public authorities should regulate with the common goal of improving job quality in mind.
- In relation to surveying working conditions:
 - Data on job quality are vital to support improving job quality. These data permit issues of concern to be identified and provide evidence for policy action.
 - To support policymaking, countries across the world should develop working conditions surveys which include comparable data on job quality.
 - Analysis of working conditions surveys helps to identify how working conditions systematically affect some groups of workers more than others.

Policy pointers

- The existence of similar patterns across countries points to the need to look beyond specific national explanations and solutions when devising policy.
- The existence of differences can help shed light on possible national determinants of job quality and support mutual learning between countries.

Key messages

- Despite vast differences in economic structure, labour markets and development, 1.2 billion workers in 41 countries across the globe face common challenges and concerns
- Women continue to face the most significant challenges; they earn significantly less than men and work more hours than men overall.
- Wide-scale differences in job quality in all countries are evident, reflecting the different nature of work across sectors, occupations and workplaces.
- Job insecurity is widespread and at least 30% report being in a job without career prospects.
- Exposure to physical risks is still frequent across all countries, with repetitive hand and arm movements most reported.
- Working time differences are stark across the countries and regions covered with long working days common for over a third of workers.
- 70% of all workers report a largely supportive social environment at work and high levels of satisfaction with their immediate supervisors.

Further information

The report *Working conditions in a global perspective* is available at <http://eurofound.link/ef18066>

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