

WORKING TIME AROUND THE WORLD

One in five workers worldwide are putting in “excessive” hours

New ILO study spotlights working time in over 50 countries

GENEVA (ILO News) – Nearly a century after adopting its first international standard on working time, a new study by the International Labour Office estimates that one in five workers around the world – or over 600 million persons – are still working more than 48 hours a week, often merely to make ends meet.

The new study, *Working Time Around the World: Trends in working hours, laws and policies in a global comparative perspective*^{1/} says an estimated 22 per cent of the global workforce, or 614.2 million workers, are working “excessively” long hours.

Shorter hours, the report says, can have positive consequences including benefits to workers’ health and family lives, reduced accidents at the workplace, as well as greater productivity and equality between the sexes. At the same time, the study says a considerable number of short-hours workers in developing and transition countries may be underemployed, and thus more likely to fall into poverty.

“The good news is that progress has been made in regulating normal working hours in developing and transition countries, but overall the findings of this study are definitely worrying, especially the prevalence of excessively long hours”, said Jon C. Messenger, Senior Research Officer for the ILO’s Conditions of Work and Employment Programme and a co-author of the study.

The study spotlights working time in over 50 countries, and for the first time explores the implications for working time policies in developing and transition countries. For the most part, it shows the distribution of working hours in developing and transition countries to be highly diverse, with some individuals working very long hours, and others working short hours.

In terms of those countries with the highest incidence of long working hours for 2004-05 (defined as more than 48 hours per week), Peru topped the list at 50.9 per cent of workers^{2/}, the Republic of Korea at 49.5 per cent, Thailand at 46.7 per cent^{3/}, and Pakistan at 44.4 per cent. In developed countries, where working hours are typically shorter, the United Kingdom stood at 25.7 per cent, Israel at 25.5 per cent, Australia at 20.4 per cent, Switzerland at 19.2 per cent, and the United States at 18.1 per cent.

Attempts to reduce hours in these countries have been unsuccessful for various reasons including the need of workers to work long hours simply to make ends meet and the widespread use of overtime by employers in an effort to increase their enterprises’ output under conditions of low productivity, the report says, noting that, generally speaking, laws and policies on working time have a limited influence on actual working hours in developing economies, especially in terms of maximum weekly hours, overtime payments and their effect on informal employment.

Another element of concern is what the report calls a clear “gender gap” in working time. The study says men tend to work longer average hours than women worldwide, with women working shorter hours in almost every country studied. Moreover, men are more likely to work longer hours than women, while women are far more likely to work shorter hours (less than 35 per week) than men. The report concludes that this is likely due to their bearing the primary responsibility for “unpaid” work in households and providing care for family members, not only children but also the elderly and individuals suffering from diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

Among married couples with children, the report says, men’s paid working hours tend to increase while women’s paid working hours decrease. For example, in Hungary the presence of children in the family resulted in men working 13 to 19 per cent longer than women, and this increased with more children in the family. In Malaysia, an estimated 23 per cent of women stopped paid work altogether because of childcare reasons.

“Tertiarization”— that is, the expanding service sector – and informal employment, two of the hallmarks of today’s global economy, are also major sources of longer working hours. Working hours in the services sector and its subsectors tend to be the most varied, and these hours are particularly long in industries such as wholesale and retail trade, hotels and restaurants, and transport, storage and communications, all of which also commonly involve shift work and “unsocial” hours. For instance, in Mexico, a higher proportion of workers spend more than 48 hours per week on the job in the wholesale and retail trade than any other industry. And the security industry, which has among the longest legal hours of any industry, working hours in countries such as Jamaica have been estimated at 72 hours per week.

The study says that in the informal economy, which provides at least half of total employment in all regions of the developing world, with about three-fifths of it self-employment, some 30 per cent or more of all self-employed men work more than 49 hours a week. Meanwhile, women in developing and transition economies are resorting to informal self-employment to realize reduced hours as means to reconcile their work and family responsibilities. With the exception of Thailand, at least one-quarter of all self-employed women is working less than 35 hours per week in the developing countries studied, the report says, and the figure is approximately one-half or more of all self-employed women in half of these countries.

In the manufacturing sector, the report says, average working hours in manufacturing across the world largely ranges between 35 to 45 hours per week, but are significantly longer in a number of developing countries, including Costa Rica, Peru, the Philippines, Thailand and Turkey. The study also shows both younger and retirement-age workers work slightly shorter hours than prime-age workers, often reflecting the insufficient employment opportunities for these two groups.

The study also provides a number of suggested policy points designed to advance decent work in the area of working time. Some of these policy suggestions include:

- reducing long working hours to lessen the risk of occupational injuries and illnesses, and their associated costs to workers, employers, and society as a whole;
- adopting family-friendly working time measures adapted to national circumstances, such as flexi-time, emergency family leave, and part-time work;
- promoting the development of high quality part-time work, shaped by local institutions and traditions and informed by the principles and measures found in the ILO's Part-Time Work Convention, 1994 (No. 175), which can help promote gender equality;
- adopting reasonable statutory hours limits that can contribute towards enhancing firms' productivity, and measures to assist enterprises to improve their productivity, in order to help break the "vicious cycle" of long working hours and low pay;
- considering measures that allow workers to devote more time to their families and to have more influence over their work schedules, in order to make formal economy jobs a possibility for more women.

[1] "Working Time Around the World: Trends in working hours, laws, and policies in a global comparative perspective" by Sangheon Lee, Deirdre McCann and Jon C. Messenger, 240 pp., ISBN 978-92-2-119311-1, ILO, Geneva. To order a copy of this study, visit: www.ilo.org/publns.

² The report also shows Indonesia with 51.2 per cent of workers working long hours, but due to data limitations, "long hours" was defined as more than 45 hours per week.

³ Most recent figure available for the report was 2000.