Working Time Around the World

John Maynard Keynes once made the bold prediction that the three-hour work day would prevail for his grandchildren’s generation. Seventy years later, the question of working time is as pertinent as it was at the inception of the 40-hour week. Not until now, however, has there been a global comparative analysis of working time laws, policies and actual working hours. Despite a century-long optimism about reduced working hours and some progress in legal measures limiting working hours, this book demonstrates that differences in actual working hours between industrialized and developing countries remain considerable – without any clear sign of hours being reduced. This study aims to offer some suggestions about how this gap can begin to be closed.

Lee, McCann and Messenger trace the theoretical background of the concept of working time before examining recent trends in working time laws in developing countries and countries in transition. The study then shifts its focus to developments in selected countries, considering both broad trends in working time at a national level and the structure and dynamics underlying these trends. The authors provide a remarkable set of policy suggestions that preserve health and safety, are ‘family-friendly’, promote gender equality, enhance productivity and facilitate workers’ choice and influence over their working hours.

This book will be of great interest to policy-makers engaged with working conditions or health and safety, labour market experts, trade union leaders and workers’ organizations, as well as academics and researchers in the fields of industrial relations, labour economics and labour law.

Sangheon Lee, Deirdre McCann and Jon C. Messenger are Research and Senior Officers for the Conditions of Work and Employment Programme at the International Labour Office in Geneva. Jon Messenger is the editor of and Sangheon Lee and Deirdre McCann are contributors to Working Time and Workers’ Preferences in Industrialized Countries, also published by Routledge.
### Routledge Studies in the Modern World Economy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Editor(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest Rates and Budget Deficits</td>
<td>Kanhaya L. Gupta and Bakhtiar Moazzami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Trade after the Uruguay Round</td>
<td>Harald Sander and András Inotai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Flow Analysis of Labour Markets</td>
<td>Ronald Schettkat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflation and Unemployment</td>
<td>Alvaro Cencini and Mauro Baranzini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macroeconomic Dimensions of Public Finance</td>
<td>Mario I. Blejer and Teresa M. Ter-Minassian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal Policy and Economic Reforms</td>
<td>Mario I. Blejer and Teresa M. Ter-Minassian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition Policy in the Global Economy</td>
<td>Leonard Waverman, William S. Comanor and Akira Goto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working in the Macro Economy</td>
<td>Martin F. J. Prachowny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Does Privatization Work?</td>
<td>Anthony Bennett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Economics and Politics of International Trade</td>
<td>Gary Cook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Legal and Moral Aspects of International Trade</td>
<td>Asif Qureshi, Hillel Steiner and Geraint Parry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital Markets and Corporate Governance in Japan, Germany and the United States</td>
<td>Organizational response to market inefficiencies Helmut M. Dietl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition and Trade Policies</td>
<td>Einar Hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>A. J. H. Latham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade, Theory and Econometrics</td>
<td>John S. Chipman, James C. Moore, Raymond Riezman and James R. Melvin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who Benefits from Privatisation?</td>
<td>Moazzem Hossain and Justin Malbon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towards a Fair Global Labour Market</td>
<td>Ozay Mehmet, Errol Mendes and Robert Sinding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Models of Futures Markets</td>
<td>Barry Goss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venture Capital Investment</td>
<td>Gavin C. Reid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macroeconomic Forecasting</td>
<td>Robert Evans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimedia and Regional Economic Restructuring</td>
<td>Hans-Joachim Braczyk, Gerhard Fuchs and Hans-Georg Wolf</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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*Sangheon Lee, Deirdre McCann and Jon C. Messenger*
Working Time Around the World
Trends in working hours, laws and policies in a global comparative perspective

Sangheon Lee, Deirdre McCann and Jon C. Messenger
## Contents

*List of figures*  
*List of tables*  
*List of boxes*  
*List of authors*  
*Foreword*  
*Acknowledgements*  

1 **Introduction**  
   1.1 Background and issues  
   1.2 Information sources  
   1.3 Structure of the book  

2 **Legal progress towards reducing working hours**  
   2.1 Introduction  
   2.2 Working hours limits: international standards  
   2.3 National working hours limits: 1967–2005  
      2.3.1 Limits on normal hours  
      2.3.2 Other limits  
   2.4 Conclusions  

3 **Global trends in actual working hours**  
   3.1 Introduction  
   3.2 Historical developments: a century-long progress  
   3.3 Average weekly hours  
   3.4 Beyond average hours: patterns and variations in individual working hours  
   3.5 Excessive hours (I): non-observance  
      3.5.1 Defining excessive hours  
      3.5.2 Observance of statutory norms and ‘effective working-hour regulation index’  
   3.6 Excessive hours (II): working longer than 48 hours  
      3.6.1 Global estimates  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of figures</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of tables</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of boxes</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of authors</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and issues</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information sources</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure of the book</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal progress towards reducing working hours</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working hours limits: international standards</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National working hours limits: 1967–2005</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limits on normal hours</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other limits</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global trends in actual working hours</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical developments: a century-long progress</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average weekly hours</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond average hours: patterns and variations in individual working hours</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive hours (I): non-observance</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining excessive hours</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observance of statutory norms and ‘effective working-hour regulation index’</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive hours (II): working longer than 48 hours</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global estimates</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

3.7 Short hours and underemployment 55
  3.7.1 Short hours 55
  3.7.2 Time-related underemployment 58
3.8 Distribution of working hours: bifurcation and double challenges 60
3.9 Conclusions 62

4 Gender, age and working time 64
  4.1 Introduction 64
  4.2 Differences in male and female labour market participation 65
    4.2.1 Temporal constraints on availability 66
    4.2.2 Patterns of hours 67
  4.3 Work schedules and family responsibilities 69
  4.4 Working time flexibility 74
    4.4.1 Policies and programmes 74
    4.4.2 Workers' attitudes towards flexibility 75
  4.5 Working time and age: variable hours of work over the life course 78
    4.5.1 Patterns of hours over the life course 79
    4.5.2 Part-time work 81
  4.6 Conclusions 83

5 Tertiarization, informalization and working time 86
  5.1 Introduction 86
  5.2 The rise of the service sector across the world 87
  5.3 Working hours in the service sector 89
  5.4 Work schedules in the service sector 96
    5.4.1 Shift work 96
    5.4.2 Night work 98
    5.4.3 Weekend work 99
    5.4.4 Other flexible working time arrangements 100
  5.5 The ‘informalization’ of national economies 101
  5.6 Working time in the informal economy: self-employment as a proxy measure 103
    5.6.1 Industrialized countries 105
    5.6.2 Developing countries 113
    5.6.3 Transition countries 114
  5.7 Conclusions 118

6 Working time issues in developing countries 120
  6.1 Introduction 120
  6.2 Reducing working hours 121
    6.2.1 Time or money: working time and wages 121
    6.2.2 Working time, productivity and work organization 123
  6.3 Working time flexibility 124
6.3.1 Hours averaging 125
6.3.2 Flexibilization and weekly rest periods 127
6.3.3 Part-time work and other ‘non-standard’ working time arrangements 128
6.3.4 Worker-oriented flexibility 130
6.3.5 The extent of flexible working time arrangements 131
6.4 Work–family and gender equality 132
6.5 Policy and practice: enforcement, exclusion and the informal economy 134
6.6 Conclusions 137

7 Summary and implications for policy 138
7.1 Summary of main findings 138
7.2 Implications for policy in developing and transition countries 141
  7.2.1 Towards decent working time 141
  7.2.2 Healthy working time 143
  7.2.3 ‘Family-friendly’ working time 146
  7.2.4 Gender equality through working time 147
  7.2.5 Productive working time 149
  7.2.6 Choice and influence over working time 151
7.3 Concluding remarks 153

Notes 155
Bibliography 161
Statistical annex 168
Index 214
Figures

3.1 Historical trend in annual working hours in selected countries (1879–2000) 25
3.2 Weekly working hours versus incomes 33
3.3 Different types of working-hour distributions: illustrative examples 35
3.4 Observance rate and income by statutory working-hour standards 39
3.5 Effective working-hour regulation index (ERI) and national income 44
3.6 The ratification of Conventions Nos 1 and 30 and the share of workers who are working more than 48 hours per week 53
3.7 Incidence of short hours by national income 58
3.8 The distribution of working hours in the Republic of Korea (2004) 61
3.9 Working-hour bifurcation in selected countries: double challenges 62
4.1 Average weekly hours of work by age group (percentage, 2000) 80
4.2 Share of workers working short hours by age group (percentage, 2000) 82
5.1 Informal employment in non-agricultural employment by gender (1994–2000) 102
5.2 Wage employment and self-employment in non-agricultural informal employment by gender (1994–2000) 103
5.3 Usual versus actual working hours in the informal economy (the Republic of Moldova, 2003) 116
Tables

2.1 Weekly normal hours limits (1967) 13
2.2 Weekly normal hours limits (1984) 14
2.3 Weekly normal hours limits (1995) 15
2.4 Weekly normal hours limits (2005) 16
2.5 Minimum annual leave periods (2005) 19
3.1 Changes in working hours and paid leave (1956–2004) in selected countries 26
3.3 Statutory hours, observance and effective working-hour regulation index 40
3.4 Incidence of long working hours 46
3.5 The proportion of workers with shorter hours 56
3.6 Time-related underemployment (2001, percentage of total employment) 59
4.1 Changes in global labour market indicators by gender (1993–2003) 66
4.2 Proportion of workers working long hours, by gender (2004–5) 70
4.3 Proportion of workers working short hours, by gender (2004–5) 72
4.4 Working time and work–family balance in selected countries: coefficients matrix (2002) 76
5.1 Share of total employment in the service sector in selected countries 88
5.2 Average weekly working hours in manufacturing versus services in selected countries (2002) 90
5.3 Average weekly working hours in services (by subsector, 2002) 91
5.4 Proportion of workers working part-time hours in service subsectors (2000) 96
5.5a Distribution of working hours for the self-employed by gender (industrialized countries) 106
5.5b Distribution of working hours for the self-employed by gender (developing countries) 108
5.5c Distribution of working hours for the self-employed by gender (transition countries) 110
6.1 Working hours, earnings and benefits (Mexico, 2000) 122
2.1 The ILO Database of Working Time Laws 11
3.1 ILO data collection on the distribution of employed persons by their hours of work 36
3.2 Global estimates for workers working longer than 48 hours 54
4.1 Role reversal: longer hours of paid work for women in the Philippines 68
4.2 Plantation work and family responsibilities in Kenya 73
4.3 Long hours among retirement-age workers in Mexico 83
5.1 Excessive hours of work in the security industry: a global phenomenon 94
5.2 Extended opening hours in the retail trade: the case of Malaysia 97
5.3 The increasing fragmentation of working time: the case of split shifts in Peru 99
5.4 Very long hours and low pay: the case of domestic workers 115
5.5 Work schedules in the informal economy: everything depends on the volume of work 117
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Jon C. Messenger is a Senior Research Officer with the International Labour Office (ILO) Conditions of Work and Employment Programme, Geneva, with the lead responsibility for its sub-programme on working time and work organization. He specializes in policy-focused research on working time and work organization, with a special interest in issues relating to temporal and spatial flexibility, gender and the informal economy. His most recent publication is Decent Working Time: New trends, new issues (with Jean-Yves Boulin, Michel Lallement and François Michon (Geneva, ILO, 2006)). Prior to joining the ILO, he worked at the US Department of Labor in Washington, DC for 15 years, where he served as Team Leader for Research on employment and training.
Almost a century has passed since the adoption of the first international labour standard on working hours, which stipulates the principle of the eight-hour day and 48-hour week, and 70 years since the 40-hour week was adopted as the standard to which countries should aspire. Reading the documents that record the debates surrounding the adoption of these working time standards, one is struck by the optimism of the government, employer and worker participants regarding the possibility of shorter hours. One may recall that the great economist of the time, John Maynard Keynes, made a cheerful prediction during the economic depression that a three-hour workday would prevail for the generation of his grandchildren. One may wonder, then, how much progress has since been made and what can be done to make further progress towards making such predictions a reality.

This book, *Working Time Around the World*, takes up this historical perspective in the context of global economic integration and the Decent Work Agenda, and offers useful insights on these questions based on a number of unique information sources. As is well known, working time has been controversial and has accrued great social importance in many industrialized countries, but a systematic study that embraces both developing and industrialized countries has been surprisingly lacking. This is certainly unfortunate, given the widely shared belief that the disparity in working hours between these two groups of countries is considerable. The authors of the book, Sangheon Lee, Deirdre McCann and Jon Messenger, have made an important step forward in filling this knowledge gap, relying on the data they have collected for a number of years from legal texts, statistical surveys and national studies.

Their findings are mixed. They provide some good news concerning the progress made in the regulation of maximum working hours in developing and transition countries, although regional differences are substantial. Other findings are definitely worrying: despite progress in some measures, a substantial number of workers – estimated by the authors at about 22 per cent of the workers in the world – are still working more than 48 hours per week, while another significant proportion are basically underemployed, suffering from shorter hours. New policy challenges have emerged in many developing
and transition countries, as demographic factors such as the feminization and ageing of the workforce have impacted on working hours. In addition, this book shows that informalization and tertiarization (service sector expansion) have intensified, such that working time is becoming increasingly diversified among individual workers.

What, then, can be done? The authors offer an impressive set of policy suggestions for ILO constituents and other interested organizations, based on five inter-connected criteria for Decent Working Time, by advocating working time arrangements that: preserve health and safety; are ‘family-friendly’; promote gender equality; enhance productivity; and facilitate workers’ choice and influence over their working hours. In doing that, they have expressed strong reservations about the single-minded deregulatory approach towards working time often recommended by influential international financial organizations, as being potentially counter-productive and risking undesirable social outcomes.

While the policy elements and principles that the authors lay out in this book are certainly necessary for developing and implementing better and more balanced policies on working time, it is obvious that they do not attempt to provide a ‘ready-made’ policy prescription. They clearly recognize that in developing working time policies, great attention needs to be paid to the needs and circumstances of individual countries, such as their level of economic development, industrial relations and legal systems, and cultural and social traditions. As readers will find out, these policy elements require social dialogue for a successful result: no social dialogue, no gains.

In light of the policy challenges outlined in this book, it is clear that we need global research and global action. As a recent book on working time, La France et le temps de travail (Fridenson and Reynaud, eds, 2004), reminds us, the ILO has been the locus of working time debates since its inception, especially with regard to the relationship between working time, health and safety, and job creation. These debates have developed, however, to incorporate additional policy goals, most notably those of ensuring that working hours allow workers adequate time to devote to their families and other elements of their lives. The role of the ILO, however, appears to have lost its momentum over the last two decades, with the most intense debates being conducted at the European level. However, we believe that this book makes a case that the ILO should restore its traditional role in working time debates, and take coordinated action to ensure decent working time for workers around the world.

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Director
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A special word of thanks goes out to the national statistical agencies who kindly participated in the ILO special survey on working hours between 2004 and 2005. We were impressed by the high response rate and even more so by the high quality of the data, especially as, owing to the unique and demanding nature of this survey, in many cases these agencies had to prepare re-estimations from their raw data sets. We are also grateful to our colleagues in the ILO Bureau of Statistics, especially Bob Pember, who was extremely supportive throughout the entire survey process. We are also thankful for the considerable support from our colleagues in the ILO field offices in assisting us to initiate the country studies. Thanks also go to Andi Kabili and Sungmee Woo for their excellent work in data entry and preliminary analysis of the survey data.
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1 Introduction

The eight-hour day, implying the 48-hour week, was a key demand of the working class all over the world before the ILO was established... To the workers, the extension and generalized application of the eight-hour day represented a reform which no other could equal in value – a chance to share in the distribution of the new wealth created by modern industry and to receive that share in the form of spare time. More generally, the need to safeguard the health and well-being of workers was recognized; over-long hours had been shown to be harmful to economic efficiency as well as to material and moral welfare of the workers and to be incompatible with political democracy. Finally, there was a feeling in many quarters that international standards relating to hours of work might be a useful means of limiting the possibilities of unfair competition. In reflection of this trend of world opinion, the adoption of the eight-hour day and 48-hour week was a prime objective of the ILO.

(ILO 1958: 3)

1.1 Background and issues

The first ILO Convention, the Hours of Work (Industry) Convention, 1919 (No. 1), which established the principle of ‘8 hours a day and 48 hours a week’ for the manufacturing sector, is expected to celebrate its centennial anniversary at the end of the next decade. The main motivations underlying the adoption of this Convention are well captured in the quotation above, although it appears that a complex set of factors played out at that time so that, in retrospect, it is not entirely clear which of these are dominant. Following Convention No. 1, numerous working time Conventions were subsequently adopted: the Hours of Work (Commerce and Offices) Convention, 1930 (No. 30) extended the 48-hour working week to workers in commerce and offices in 1930, and the Forty-Hour Week Convention, 1935 (No. 47) established a new standard of the 40-hour working week in 1935 at a time when the world was devastated by economic crisis and war. The principle of a minimum of one-day weekly rest was introduced in the Weekly Rest (Industry) Convention, 1921 (No. 14) and the Weekly...
Working time around the world

Rest (Commerce and Offices) Convention, 1957 (No. 106). Conventions concerning night work and holidays with pay also followed.

How much progress, then, has been made in working time, especially in relation to the centennial wisdom of a 48-hour working week? In light of the economic growth that we have witnessed in many parts of the world in the twentieth century, one might assume that this wisdom has now become a well-rooted reality. In addition, it appears that statutory normal hours of work have been reduced gradually from 48 hours to 40 hours in a large number of countries (ILO 2005d; McCann 2005), which can be considered as a historical achievement in the last century. This is all good news for international working time standards.

However, others may argue that the 48-hour working week and the 40-hour working week are no more than ‘paper tigers’, as they are stipulated in the law but their enforcement in practice is weak. A day cannot pass without hearing complaints about long working hours in developing countries such as China, but surprisingly also in some industrialized countries as well (Lee 2004). Concerns are often expressed in phrases such as ‘time squeeze’, ‘time poverty’ and ‘karoshi’ (death from overwork). Yet, how much do we know about long hours in these countries? To our surprise, despite such frequent coverage of long working hours in developing countries, the paucity of reliable data makes it difficult to know about the exact extent to which workers are working long hours, say more than 48 hours per week. In a sense, there is a mismatch between our concerns and our knowledge about working time in the developing world. Thus, a more systematic data collection and analysis is called for.

In fact, surveys have been undertaken to gauge the extent to which such principles have been adopted, and the results have been reported to the International Labour Conference. Yet, due to the nature of this exercise, the focus has been on national laws and practice, with little information on actual patterns of working hours. The most recent survey attempted to capture actual working time practice around the world, pointing out that ‘the overall picture is still far from clear, due to in part to the non-submission of reports and to the lack of comprehensive statistical data’ (ILO 2005d: 23).

More generally, it should also be noted that the existing body of literature on working time is heavily biased towards industrialized countries, particularly Europe (e.g. Bosch et al., eds, 1993; Golden and Figart, eds, 2000; O’Reilly et al., eds, 2000; Houseman and Nakamura, eds, 2001; Wong and Picot, eds, 2001; Messenger, ed., 2004; Boulin et al., eds, 2006). Therefore, our knowledge is very limited regarding developing and transition countries, with the likely exception of new EU Member States (see, for example, European Foundation 2006). ‘Global’ debates on working time, for instance concerning working time flexibility, often lack practical importance or relevance for developing countries, mainly due to the large gaps between developing and industrialized countries in terms of working
time developments. As traditional sources of working time flexibility (such as overtime) are readily available in these countries and informal employment is widespread, it is quite conceivable that incentives for new types of working time flexibility may not be very strong. Again, this question begs for a closer and more empirically based scrutiny.

At the same time, however, there is increasing concern about working time regulations and their negative impact on the labour market in developing countries. Indeed, there is a recent but nonetheless widely quoted view that developing countries tend to have more ‘rigid’ regulations on working hours and paid leave than many developed countries. For instance, the World Bank argued in a recent report that:

Regulation affecting working hours and paid leave can involve similar tradeoffs [between providing high levels of protection for workers enjoying regular employment and expanding protection and opportunities to a broader group of workers]. Many developing countries have adopted far-reaching regulations on these subjects – in some cases going beyond what is on the books in most developed countries. Even among countries at similar stages of development, the differences in regulations can be large, with significant effects on labor costs and on the ability of firms to accommodate fluctuations in demand.

(World Bank 2004: 145)

If this statement is accurate, then the logical future policy direction regarding working time should be deregulation and flexibilization. How convincing is this argument? First, questions can be raised about the method of determining the supposed ‘rigidity’ of working time regulations, which is basically incompatible with international working time standards (Lee and McCann 2007). Second, consideration should be given to the fact that little is known about enforcement gaps in developing countries and how they are related to economic and labour market performance. Without these, it is extremely difficult to evaluate the deregulation argument. Specifically, how large is the enforcement gap and how different is it across countries?

In addition, the overall working time picture can be rather complicated as we move down to individual workers working in different conditions. For instance, it is often reported in industrialized countries that long working hours are a male phenomenon while short hours are a female one. This gender-related variation can be further complicated in countries with significant informal employment where workers appear to be more diversified. Here again, we need data and analysis to examine the extent of working-hour diversification. Although work–family balance does not appear as a big social issue in developing countries, this does not mean that the difficulties of workers with family responsibilities are fewer. While in industrialized countries this issue tends to be increasingly handled through
flexible working time arrangements (e.g. part-time work, flexi-time), developing countries tend to rely more on gender-biased informal employment as a coping strategy or on extended family support. To the best of our knowledge, this diversification of working hours by gender and employment status (formal/informal) has never been considered in a global context.

This book is aimed at investigating working time around the world by addressing these and other issues. The available sources of information on working time in developing and transition countries, such as legal texts, statistical data and case studies, are examined to give a contemporary picture of working time in these countries in an accurate and balanced way. While we cannot claim that we have been able to provide satisfactory answers to all of these issues, we do believe that this report offers useful information and analysis, offering valuable insights regarding the issues at hand and some important policy implications.

1.2 Information sources

Given the paucity of information and data, which has made it difficult to carry out a global review of working time, it is worthwhile mentioning the information sources used in this book. Major information sources are of three types.

First, the ILO’s Database of Working Time Laws allows us to undertake a comprehensive analysis of working time regulations around the world. This database provides searchable information on the laws of more than 100 countries, covering a broad range of subjects such as weekly and daily hours limits, rest periods, holidays, and flexible working time arrangements (see Box 2.1 in Chapter 2).

Second, in order to fill our knowledge gap concerning developing countries, a series of 15 country studies has been carried out based on a standard research framework. The selection of countries for such studies was based on geographical and strategic importance: whether working time issues have been debated as a social concern; or if changes in working time policy (including legal changes) have been recently introduced. In some cases where working time data are scant (e.g. China), new data collection through small-scale surveys was undertaken. A list of these country study reports is provided in the Bibliography.

Finally, to complement the existing ILO data on average weekly working hours, data on the distribution of weekly working hours (the number of workers in specified categories defined according to the number of weekly working hours) were collected from national statistics. An ILO questionnaire, which provides a standard tabular format for reporting, was sent to national statistical agencies, and a total of 60 countries kindly participated in the survey. The data that we received were carefully entered in a single
standardized database, which will be made publicly available (see Box 3.1 in Chapter 3 and also the Statistical annex).

We believe that this study benefits greatly from these information sources, which are probably more comprehensive and more reliable than those previously available, although we also note that more should be done to capture working time developments in developing countries (see Chapter 7).

1.3 Structure of the book

The remainder of this report is structured as follows: Chapter 2 will focus on international trends towards reducing working hours. It will review the development of legal hours limits in the international standards and national laws over the latter part of the twentieth century to the present, incorporating an examination of the policy objectives underlying these initiatives. The chapter will identify an overall global trend towards shorter hours (i.e. the 40-hour working week), with considerable regional variations.

Following an overview of regulatory frameworks, Chapter 3 turns to the actual working hours that workers are working, reviewing both recent trends in average working hours and the distribution of working hours. The extent of long working hours, defined as more than 48 hours per week, is examined and a global estimate is provided. The gap between law and reality is measured based on the concepts of ‘observance’ and ‘effective regulation’. The chapter also includes a discussion of the incidence of short hours among workers.

Chapter 4 introduces an important thematic issue, ‘gender, age and working time’, reflecting the diversification of the global workforce along the lines of gender and age. In this chapter we investigate gender gaps in working hours and working time arrangements and their implications. In addition, we discuss the question of how working time flexibility is related to workers’ feelings about over-work and address the work–family balance, based on the available evidence. Similar questions will be asked about age and its implications.

In Chapter 5 we turn to the issues of ‘tertiarization’ (the expanding service sector) and informalization, which have gained increasing importance in recent years in both industrialized and developing countries. Given the widespread assumption that these changes have led to the diversification of working time, this chapter examines actual working hours in the service sector and its component subsectors in these countries. It also analyses newly available information on working time in the informal economy from the ILO questionnaire in order to study how patterns of working hours in the informal economy vary within a country and across countries. The primary focus of these latter discussions will be the self-employed,
who account for the largest share of informal employment and for whom data are most readily available.4

In order to present a more vivid picture of trends in working time, in Chapter 6 we illustrate dominant trends in working time policies with a rich set of country examples. On initiatives to reduce working hours, we explore two of the primary factors that influence the impact of these policies, the relationship between working hours and wages, and the recourse to overtime as a way of increasing productivity. Focusing on developing and transition countries, we show that working time ‘flexibility’, although often mentioned in policy documents, is not widespread in practice in these countries. In particular, limited attention has so far been paid to ‘employee-oriented’ forms of flexibility, including those that benefit workers with family responsibilities. Finally, we return to the questions raised in Chapter 2 about the often limited influence of working time policies on workplace practice, and outline a number of the factors that contribute towards this divergence.

Chapter 7 concludes, summarizing the main findings of the previous chapters, and based on these, outlining policy suggestions for consideration by governments and the social partners. The recommendations are made within the ‘decent working time’ framework developed in Working Time and Workers’ Preferences in Industrialized Countries (Messenger, ed., 2004), a previous study of working time in industrialized countries.
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