

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS OF PART-TIME WORK

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INTRODUCTION

Part-time work has recorded rapid growth in the past 25 years in OECD countries (see Table 1). While this form of “non-traditional” or “atypical” work has been increasing among both men and women, the increase in the incidence of part-time work has been associated in particular with increases in the labour force participation of women: in most OECD countries, women account for close to 75 per cent of part-time workers. The increase in part-time work is also associated with the expansion of the service sector (see Bollé 1997).

Despite the growing importance of part-time employment in many countries, there is currently no uniform statistical definition for part-time work in use internationally. The diversity of definitions in use makes it difficult to determine whether differences between countries in published estimates of the incidence of part-time work are meaningful or not.

Recent work at the OECD suggests that there may exist rather serious comparability problems in current international statistics on part-time work.¹ For example,

- the application of a 30-hours threshold, which is the statistical threshold for the definition of part-time work in Canada, to Swedish employment data reduces the share of measured part-time employment in total employment in Sweden from 28 per cent to 17 per cent, or to approximately the same rate as in Canada;
- in Italy, where the measured incidence of part-time work is low, the number of persons working less than 30 hours and declaring themselves as full-time workers in the labour force survey is roughly equivalent to the number describing themselves as part-time. Applying a definition based on a 30-hours threshold would almost double the incidence of part-time work (from 5.9 to 11 per cent) in Italy, to only slightly less than the incidence for the United States (12.8) according to the same definition.

Differences in national definitions, thus, can have a considerable impact on the measured incidence of part-time work. At worst, observed inter-country differences, if accepted at face value, could lead to inappropriate policy measures or recommendations. This note first examines the current status with respect to international definitions of part-time work and provides an overview of definitions used in national

Table 1. **Indicence of part-time employment, national definitions, 1973-1996**

Percentages

	Part-time employment as a proportion of total employment					
	1973	1983	1990	1994	1995	1996
Australia	11.9	17.5 |	21.3	24.4	24.8	25.0
Austria	6.4	8.4	8.9	12.1	12.5	12.6
Belgium	3.8	8.1	10.9	12.8	13.6	14.0
Canada	9.7	16.8	17.0	18.8	18.6	18.9
Czech Republic	..	..	..	6.8	6.4	6.1
Denmark	..	23.8	23.3	21.2	21.6	21.5
Finland	..	7.7	7.2	8.6	8.2	11.6
France	5.9 |	9.6	11.9	14.9	15.6	16.0
Germany	10.1	12.6	15.2	15.8	16.3	16.5
Greece	..	6.5	4.1	4.8	4.8	5.3
Hungary	..	..	..	..	5.4	5.5
Iceland ¹	..	..	26.8	27.7	28.3	26.2
Ireland	..	6.7	8.1	11.3	12.1	11.6
Italy	6.4	4.6	4.9	6.2	6.4	6.6
Japan	13.9	16.2	19.2	21.4	20.1	21.8
Korea	..	..	..	..	..	..
Luxembourg	5.8	6.8	7.0	8.0	7.9	7.7
Mexico ¹	..	..	25.4	26.7	26.2	23.8
Netherlands	..	21.2 |	31.7	36.4	36.3	36.5
New Zealand	11.2	15.3 |	20.0	21.6	21.5	22.4
Norway	22.9	29.6	26.5	26.5	26.5	26.6
Poland ²	..	..	11.0	10.6	10.6	10.6
Portugal	..	..	5.9	8.0	7.5	8.7
Spain	..	..	4.9	6.9	7.5	7.7
Sweden	..	24.8 |	23.3	24.9	24.3	23.6
Switzerland ¹	..	..	25.3	27.4	27.3	27.4
Turkey	..	..	20.6	23.6	20.3	23.9
United Kingdom	..	19.0	21.7	23.8	24.1	24.6
United States	15.6	18.4	16.9 |	18.9	18.6	18.3
North America ³	15.1	18.2	16.9 |	20.3	20.0	19.4
European Union ³	..	12.4 |	13.6	15.5	15.9	16.4
Total OECD ³	..	15.5 |	16.3 |	18.7	18.3	18.6

| Vertical bars indicate breaks in series.

1. Data shown are for 1991.

2. Data shown are for 1992.

3. Averages are based on countries appearing in the table.

Notes, Sources and Definitions: See OECD (1997).

labour force surveys. The question of what is to be measured is then considered, along with the difficulty in making sense of current international statistics in the presence of the range of definitions in use, and the advantages of a definition

based on an hours threshold. The note presents some empirical results in support of the latter, which received the support of the OECD's Working Party on Employment and Unemployment Statistics at its 1996 meeting. A final section presents a summary and conclusions.

INTERNATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF PART-TIME WORK

Current comparability problems can be attributed to the fact that there is no international statistical definition of part-time work. However, there does exist what amounts to an international legal definition, given in Article 1 of the Part-Time Convention (ILO, 1992) adopted by the International Labour Conference in 1994.² According to this "legal" definition, the part-time nature of a job depends on the hours of full-time workers in similar occupations and even in the same establishment. This "legal" definition only provides a general framework. In countries, definitions of part-time jobs incorporated in legal statutes or collective agreements may or may not follow this framework.

Because of the variety in legal hours specified in national statutes or collective agreements, what is considered a part-time job in a statutory sense in one country may not be one in another country. Nonetheless, the statutory classification is not without interest because it may have rather specific consequences for the worker, in particular with respect to eligibility for certain work-related benefits or to requirements to make contributions to certain social insurance programmes. Still, is the statutory classification of a job what one should be attempting to capture in statistics of part-time work? Before addressing this question, let us examine what definitions are used nationally in statistics of part-time work. The following overview will concern data from labour force surveys, which are the principal source of international labour force statistics.

NATIONAL PRACTICES IN LABOUR FORCE SURVEYS WITH RESPECT TO THE CLASSIFICATION OF PART-TIME AND FULL-TIME JOBS

The statistical definitions applied in household employment surveys in OECD Member countries to distinguish between full- and part-time jobs are based on three approaches:

- The employee's own assessment of his/her job, which could reflect the legal nature of the work contract between the employer and the respondent, the designation of the job by the employer or the employee's perception of the intensity of his/her work.

- A threshold based on weekly hours usually (or actually) worked, with jobs having hours below the threshold being designated as part-time. The threshold generally does not take into account differences in normal hours of work in various sectors of activity and occupations, within the same sector of activity or by different workers within the same enterprise.
- A combination of the above two approaches.

In the European Union Labour Force Survey, data for 14 countries (the Netherlands being the exception) are provided in principle on the basis of the respondent's assessment of the nature of the job. With the exception of Austria and Finland, this is the definition used in national statistics as well. The national definition of part-time work in the Czech Republic, Poland and Switzerland is also based on the respondent's assessment of the job. However, Poland reclassifies part-time jobs for which the usual weekly hours exceed 40 hours as full-time jobs.

The definitions of part-time work based on a usual hours threshold take into account normal working hours and in principle overtime usually worked, whether it is paid or not. A national hours threshold is used to differentiate between part-time and full-time work in Australia (35 hours), Austria (35), Canada (30), Finland (30), Hungary (36), Iceland (35), Japan (35), the Netherlands (35), New Zealand (30), Norway (37), Turkey (36) and the United States (35). For certain countries additional criteria are applied in specific situations. In Norway the 37-hour threshold applies to usual hours worked in *all* jobs; however, persons who work 30 to 36 hours and consider themselves as full-timers are classified as such. Part-time work in Australia must involve less than 35 usual hours of work per week, but respondents who worked more than this during the survey reference week are reclassified as full-timers.

In practice, certain European Union countries, such as Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom combine the two approaches in classifying jobs as full-time or part-time. In the Spanish labour force survey, persons who say they work part-time but report usually working more than 35 hours are reclassified as full-time workers. Conversely, persons who say they work full-time and work less than 30 hours are reclassified as part-time. In Germany and the United Kingdom, a job is reclassified as full-time if the usual number of working hours reported exceeds, respectively, 36 and 40 hours a week. In their national data, Austria and the Netherlands apply a threshold of 35 usual weekly hours, Finland a threshold of 30 usual hours.

Greece and Italy in their labour force surveys attempt to apply criteria based on stipulations in collective agreements or on employer-specific situations. In Greece, an employed respondent is considered a part-time worker if she works fewer hours than stipulated in the collective agreement regarding her type of activity. In Italy, an employee is classified as a part-time worker if, in agreement with the employer, she works fewer hours than usually stipulated for the type of

job concerned. In practice, however, it is unlikely that these criteria are strictly applied by the survey interviewers. The responses thus may well reflect the respondent's assessment of the job, rather than the criteria specified here.

The use of a threshold based on actual weekly hours of work is exceptional and is applied strictly only in Mexico (35 hours). In general, an actual hours threshold would seem problematical because hours actually worked during the reference period of a survey may vary for reasons such as holidays, absences due to illness, family responsibilities, etc., which have little to do with the nature of the work schedule.

WHAT IS TO BE MEASURED?

The variety of definitions in use raises the question of what one should be measuring in statistics of part-time work. There is an obvious appeal in a statistical definition of part-time work that is based on the statutory classification. For policy-makers, it ensures, at least in principle, that the statistics of part-time work correspond to the population targeted by national laws, regulations and policies regarding this type of work. Moreover, to the extent that the legal status of workers affects their labour market behaviour, statistics based on the statutory classification may well reflect this, and the effect of changes in policies regarding part-time work can expect to be more easily monitored.

However, such apparent advantages may be difficult to realise in practice. It is not at all clear how the legal status of a job can be determined in the context of a questionnaire administered to respondents in a household survey, the normal source of data on part-time work. Countries which ask the respondent him/herself to classify the job in their labour force surveys might well be capturing the statutory status of the job, if the latter is a matter of common knowledge and there is an unambiguous correspondence between this status and the designation which the job receives in the work place. Whether this is actually the case in practice is impossible to verify. Some respondents, such as casual workers or persons on short, temporary contracts, may describe their jobs as part-time according to the designated monthly or annual hours of work for the job in question. Others may identify their jobs as part-time according to eligibility for social security coverage. Still others may simply consider their jobs as part-time if the perceived length of their work week is shorter relative to that of other workers in the same establishment, without reference to the statutory classification of the job.

Even if compelling arguments could be made for attempting to capture the statutory classification of a job as part-time or full-time in a national context, would the same arguments hold in an international comparative perspective, where there

is often a need to abstract from national particularities if valid comparative statements are to be made? Users and analysts need to have some assurance that observed differences between countries in the incidence of part-time work really reflect different labour market realities and are not an artifact of the different definitions in use.

It was noted above that a job that is statutorily part-time in one country may be full-time in another. The perception of respondents regarding what is a part-time job and what is a full-time job can be expected to vary accordingly. The same kind of variation in classification will, of course, occur when different hours thresholds are used by different countries in their labour force surveys. From an international comparative perspective, trying to make sense of part-time statistics in the presence of the variety of definitions in use is virtually an impossible task. If the analytical aim is to obtain a general and reasonably comparable measure of what are in some sense "shorter hour jobs" in countries, there is a strong argument to be made for applying a statistical definition based on an hours threshold. Such a definition is both simple to apply and easily interpretable, even if in practice jobs identified as full-time or part-time according to such a definition may not always correspond to how they are classified nationally by statute or in collective agreements. The OECD's Working Party on Employment and Unemployment Statistics, meeting in 1996, considered this approach appropriate for international comparative statistics and analyses.

The next section presents some empirical results using this definition.

COMPARISONS OF PART-TIME WORK ACCORDING TO DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS

Table 2 and Figure 1 presents statistics on the incidence of part-time work for a recent year (1995) according to national definitions, on the one hand, and usual hours thresholds (30 and 35 hours), on the other. A number of points are worth noting:

- In countries with a high incidence of part-time work according to national definitions, there are significant proportions of persons with part-time jobs of over 30 hours per week.
- In countries where part-time work (national definitions) is relatively uncommon, there exist significant proportions of persons with full-time jobs of less than 30 usual hours (and *a fortiori* less than 35 hours) per week. In general, the application of a 35-hour threshold increases significantly the incidence of part-time work in countries where it is uncommon according to the national definition.

Table 2. **Part-time employment: national definitions and methods based on usual weekly hours thresholds, 1995**As a percentage of total employment
Men and women aged 15 to 64

Country	National definitions ¹	Employment with usual weekly hours of less than 30 hours per week	Differences with the actual definitions	Employment with usual weekly hours of less than 35 hours per week	Differences with the actual definitions	Part-timers working more than 30 hours as a % of all workers	Full-timers working less than 35 hours as a % of all workers
	(1)	(2)	(3) = (1) - 2	(4)	(5) = (1) - 4	(6)	(7)
Netherlands	33.4	24.7	8.7	33.4	0.0	8.7	0.0
Iceland	30.5	22.3	8.2	28.9	1.6	8.6	0.9
Switzerland ²	28.5	22.7	5.9	26.7	1.8	6.5	1.2
Sweden ³	28.4	17.2	11.2	27.2	1.2	11.4	0.9
Norway	26.4	20.9	5.5	26.2	0.2	5.5	0.0
Australia ²	23.4	22.9	0.5	30.1	-6.7	3.4	6.7
United Kingdom	21.9	19.9	2.0	24.0	-2.1	2.7	2.8
Denmark	19.7	14.5	5.2	21.4	-1.7	5.6	2.1
Canada	18.2	18.2	0.0	24.1	-5.9	0.0	5.9
United States	17.1	12.8	4.4	17.1	0.0	4.4	0.0
France	15.7	14.1	1.6	19.0	-3.3	4.7	4.3
Germany	15.5	13.4	2.1	16.6	-1.1	2.4	1.1
Belgium	15.5	16.5	-1.0	20.4	-4.9	2.7	5.3
Austria	13.2	10.3	2.9	12.8	0.4	4.1	1.8
Ireland	12.2	15.3	-3.1	19.5	-7.3	1.3	8.0
Finland	9.1	7.4	1.7	13.1	-4.0	3.0	4.3
Poland	8.5	13.3	-4.8	17.0	-8.5	2.1	9.3
Luxembourg	7.5	11.2	-3.7	13.4	-5.9	1.3	6.3
Spain	6.5	6.2	0.3	9.3	-2.8	0.3	2.8
Italy	5.9	11.1	-5.2	13.9	-8.0	1.7	9.3
Czech Republic	5.5	4.7	0.8	6.3	-0.8	1.7	1.4
Hungary	5.4	2.6	2.8	4.3	0.0	1.7	0.0
Portugal	3.9	6.8	-2.9	9.1	-5.2	1.0	5.6
Greece	3.2	8.0	-4.8	11.5	-8.3	0.9	8.8

Countries are sorted by descending order of the incidence of part-time employment in total employment. Estimates in the table, in contrast to Table 1, are for the employed population 15 to 64 years of age.

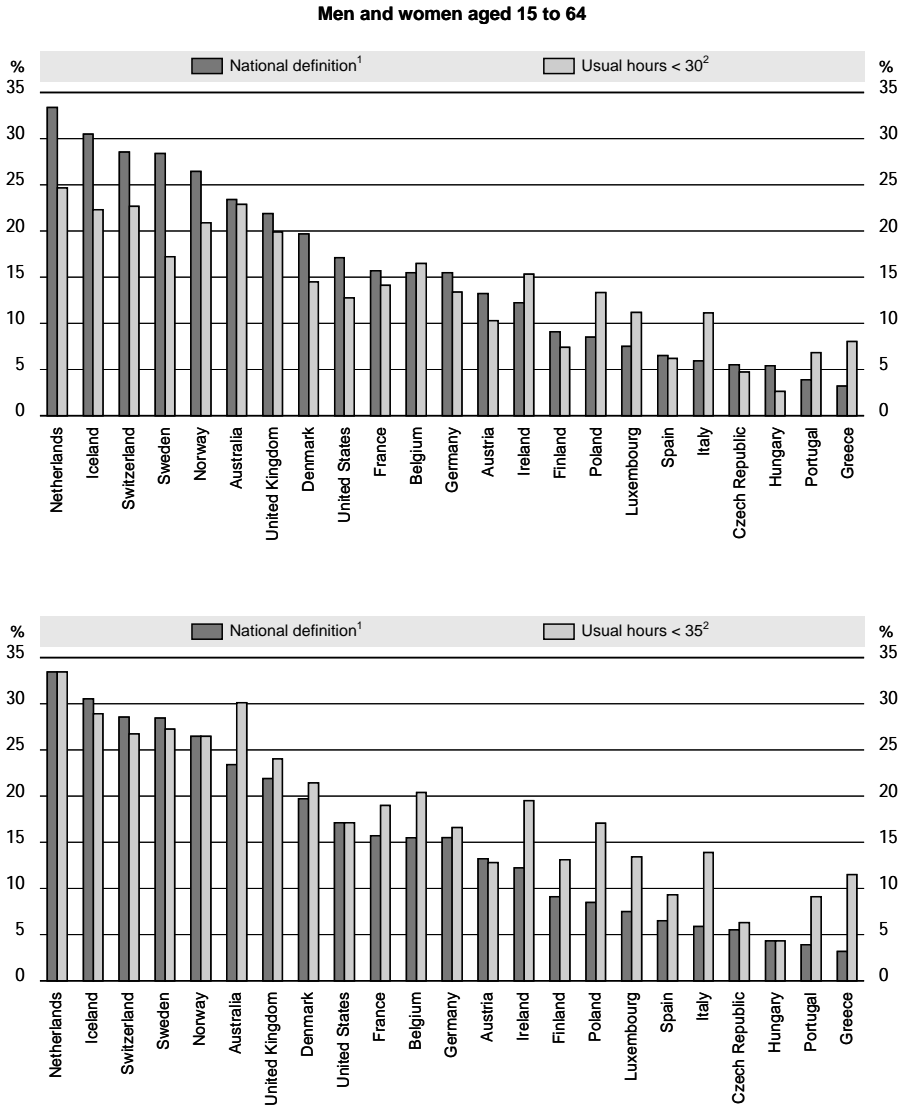
1. See the notes and sources found in OECD (1997).

2. Data are for 1996.

3. Data are for 1994.

Source: Data provided by Eurostat from the European labour force survey for the countries of the European Union and Iceland. For the other countries, data are provided by national authorities.

Figure 1. *Part-time employment according to alternative definitions, 1995*



Data are sorted by descending order of the incidence of part-time employment in total employment.

1. Part-time employment according to national definitions as a per cent of total employment.

2. Employment with less than 30 hours or 35 hours of work per week as a per cent of total employment.

Source: See Table 2.

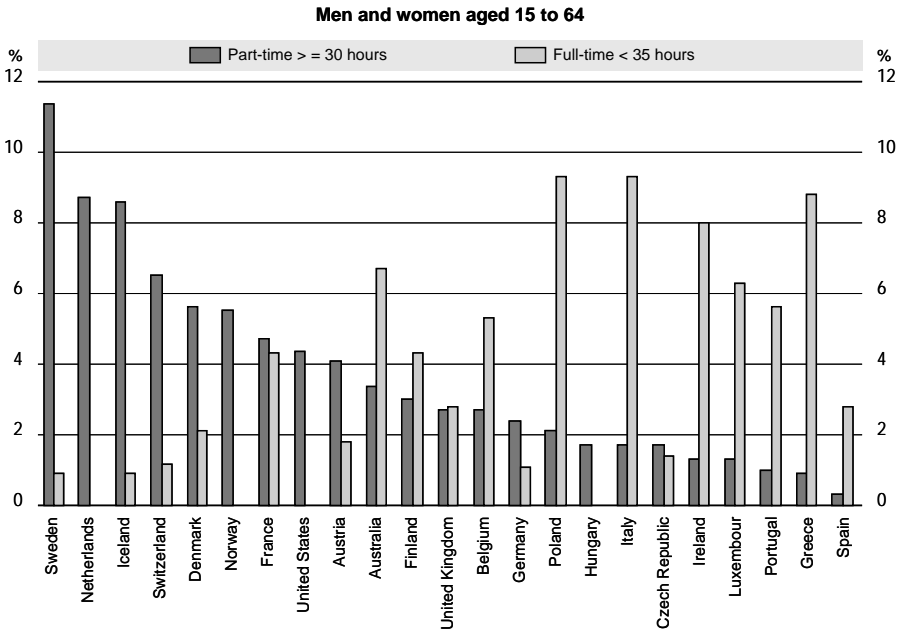
- In general, the greater the incidence of part-time work, the larger the difference between estimates based on a national definition and those based on an hours threshold. The correlation between these for a 30-hour threshold is 0.81 (see columns 1 and 3 of Table 2) and 0.55 (columns 1 and 5) when a 35-hour threshold is used.
- The variability among countries in the incidence of part-time work is smaller when an hours threshold is used, whether it be 30 hours (coefficient of variation 0.45) or 35 hours (coefficient of variation 0.41), compared with the use of national definitions (coefficient of variation 0.60). In other words, there is less variability among OECD countries in the incidence of short-hour jobs than is suggested by commonly-used statistics on part-time work.

These results are cause for reflection. That part-time jobs of more than 30 usual hours should be common precisely in those countries where the incidence of part-time jobs is high and full-time jobs of less than 35 hours common in countries where part-time work is rare is a striking finding. It suggests that differences between countries in the incidence of part-time work may often bear, not on jobs which all would agree are part-time (for example, jobs of 20 usual hours per week), but on jobs that are on the boundary between full-time and part-time work. One could argue that in countries where part-time work according to national definitions is rare, the demand for short-hour jobs may be satisfied, at least in part by the presence of jobs classified as full-time but whose hours are relatively low (see Figure 2).

In addition, one cannot help noting the coincidence between the incidence of part-time work and the nature of the definition used to measure it. In general, countries where part-time work is common apply a threshold definition where the threshold is at least 35 usual hours per week (Switzerland is an exception). On the other hand, in countries where part-time work is rare, the definition is based on the respondent's perception (Hungary being the exception). Although this definitional difference cannot of itself explain the differences observed between countries, it remains true that the application of an hour's threshold does reduce significantly the variability among countries in the incidence of part-time work.

The reduction in variability, however, is not accompanied by significant changes in the relative standing of countries with respect to the incidence of part-time work (the rank correlations are over 0.90 for both hours thresholds). Countries where part-time work was more/less prevalent under national definitions generally preserve their respective statuses under an hours threshold (see Figure 1). Although this may not argue strongly in favour of a change from current practices, it is the case that under an hours threshold, statements concerning the relative frequency of part-time work among countries can be made with more confidence on the basis of such a definition than under the current situation. In future international analyses of part-time work, the OECD will be using a threshold value of

Figure 2. **Part-timers working 30 hours or more and full-timers working less than 35 hours, 1995**
As a percentage of total employment



Data are sorted by descending order of the share of part-time employment of more than 30 usual hours in total employment.

Source: See Table 2.

30 usual working hours per week as the defining criterion for part-time work. Although a 35-hour threshold is a more common one among its Member countries, past and projected reductions in working-time in some OECD countries (in particular France, Germany and Italy) make the adoption of this particular threshold somewhat problematical.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Current international statistics on part-time work are based largely on national definitions which vary considerably from country to country. Under these conditions,

discussions of part-time work are always subject to uncertainty as to whether observed differences among countries are real or represent a statistical artefact of the different definitions in use. The attempt to capture the statutory status of a job by asking respondents to classify their jobs may not always yield the expected result, since it is unclear what respondents refer to in replying to such questions posed in labour force surveys.

Empirical results show that variability across countries in the incidence of part-time work is reduced significantly by measuring part-time work on the basis of a uniform usual hours threshold. This suggests that some of the differences between countries concern jobs that are on the boundary between full-time and part-time work and whose ultimate classification may depend on fairly minor variations in defining criteria in countries.

In the absence of any formal international statistical definition of part-time work, this note suggests the use of a uniform threshold of 30 usual weekly hours, that is, a part-time job is one whose usual weekly hours are less than 30 hours per week. This approach received the approval of the OECD Working Party on Employment and Unemployment Statistics at its 1996 meeting. Although the 30-hours cut-off is fairly arbitrary, it does have the merit of being simple to implement and produces statistics that are relatively easy to interpret. Analysts in discussions of part-time work look for a measure that describes in some sense the relative frequency of jobs for which the working time represents less than a full work week. The proposed measure, although it may not always correspond to how jobs are regarded in national statutes or collective agreements, satisfies this requirement.

NOTES

1. A full account of this review can be found in van Bastelaer, Lemaitre and Marianna (1997).
2. The Convention Article states the following:
 - “The term ‘part-time worker’ means an employed person whose normal hours of work are less than those of comparable full-time workers;
 - The term ‘comparable full-time worker’ refers to a full-time worker who:
 - i) has the same type of employment relationship;
 - ii) is engaged in the same type or a similar type of work or occupation;
 - iii) is employed in the same establishment, or when there is no comparable full-time worker in the establishment, in the same enterprise or, when there is no comparable full-time worker in that enterprise, in the same branch of activity, as the part-time worker concerned.”

Normal hours of work here are defined as “the hours of work fixed by or in pursuance of laws or regulations, collective agreements or arbitral awards”. Where normal hours are not fixed in this way, they are considered to be “the hours in excess of which any time worked is remunerated at overtime rates or form an exception to the rules or custom of the establishment relating to the classes of workers concerned”.

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