



Gender issues in safety and health at work

Summary of an Agency report



There are substantial differences in the working lives of women and men and this affects their occupational safety and health (OSH). 'The Community strategy on health and safety at work' (1) has 'mainstreaming', or integrating, gender into occupational safety and health activities as an objective. To support this, the Agency has produced a report examining gender differences in workplace injury and illness, gaps in knowledge and the implications for improving risk prevention.

Key conclusions of the report

- Continuous efforts are needed to improve the working conditions of both women and men.
- Gender differences in employment conditions have a major impact on gender differences in work-related health outcomes. Research and interventions must take account of the real jobs that men and women do and differences in exposure and working conditions.
- We can improve research and monitoring by systematically including the gender dimension in data collection, adjusting for hours worked (as women generally work shorter hours than men) and basing exposure assessment on the real work carried out. Epidemiological methods should be assessed for any gender bias. Indicators in monitoring systems, such as national accident reporting and surveys, should effectively cover occupational risks to women.
- Work-related risks to women's safety and health have been underestimated and neglected compared to men's, both regarding research and prevention. This imbalance should be addressed in research, awareness raising and prevention activities.
- Taking a gender-neutral approach in policy and legislation has contributed to less attention and fewer resources being directed towards work-related risks to women and their prevention. European safety and health directives do not cover (predominantly female) domestic workers. Women working informally, for example wives or partners of men in family farming businesses, may not always be covered by legislation. Gender impact assessments should be carried out on existing and future OSH directives, standard setting and compensation arrangements.
- Based on current knowledge of prevention and mainstreaming gender into OSH, existing directives could be implemented in a more gender-sensitive way, despite the need for gender-impact assessments and attention to gaps in knowledge.
- Gender-sensitive interventions should take a participatory approach, involving the workers concerned and based on an examination of the real work situations.
- Improving women's occupational safety and health cannot be viewed separately from wider discrimination issues at work and in society. Employment equality actions should include OSH. Activities to mainstream occupational safety and health into other policy areas, such as public health or corporate social responsibility initiatives, should include a gender element.
- Women are under-represented in the decision-making concerning occupational health and safety at all levels. They should be more directly involved and women's views, experiences, knowledge and skills should be reflected in formulating and implementing OSH strategies.
- There are successful examples of including or targeting gender in research approaches, interventions, consultation and decision-making, tools and actions. Existing experiences and resources should be shared.
- While the general trends in women's working conditions and situation are similar across the Member States and candidate countries, there are also country differences within these general trends. Individual countries should examine their particular circumstances regarding gender and OSH, in order to plan appropriate actions.
- Taking a holistic approach to OSH, including the work-life interface, broader issues in work organisation and employment would improve occupational risk prevention, benefiting both women and men.
- Women are not a homogeneous group and not all women work in traditionally 'female' jobs. The same applies to men. A holistic approach needs to take account of diversity. Actions to improve work-life balance must take account of both women's and men's working schedules and be designed to be attractive to both.

Different work and home-life circumstances of women and men

Because of strong occupational gender segregation in the EU labour market, women and men are exposed to different workplace environments and different types of demands and strains even when they are employed by the same sector and ply the same trade. There is segregation between sectors and between jobs in the same sector, and even when employed to do the same job women and men often carry out different tasks. There is also strong vertical segregation within workplaces, with men more likely to be employed in more senior positions. Women predominate in part-time work, in which gender job segregation is even more pronounced.

Other gender differences in employment conditions also have an impact on occupational safety and health. More women are concentrated in low-paid, precarious work and this affects their working conditions and the risks they are exposed to. Women also tend to keep the same job longer than men so have a more prolonged exposure to the risks that are present. Worker consultation and participation is an important factor in successful risk prevention, but women often work in jobs where trade union representation is weaker, and they are less involved at all levels of decision-making.

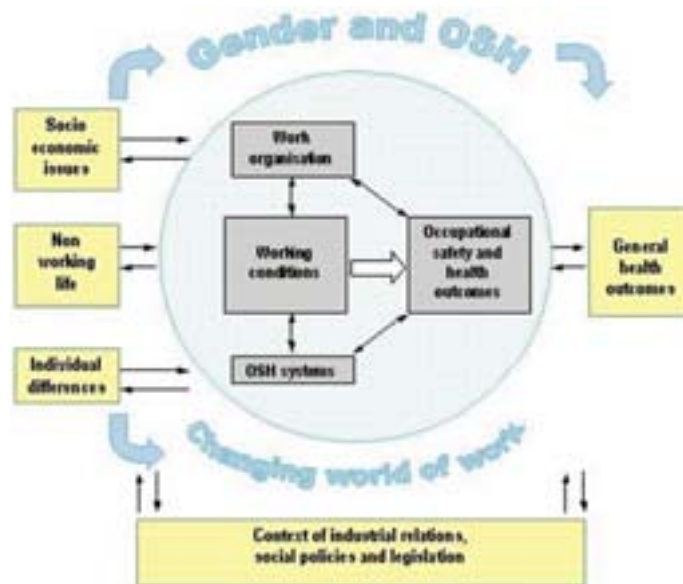
Gender inequality both inside and outside the workplace also affects women's occupational safety and health and there are important links between wider discrimination issues and health. Women still carry out the majority of unpaid housework and caring for children and relatives, even when working full-time. This adds considerably to their daily work time and puts extra pressure on them, especially where there is incompatibility between work arrangements and home life.

(1) 'Adapting to change in work and society: A new Community strategy on health and safety at work, 2002-06'. Communication from the European Commission, COM(2002) 118 final

Some examples of gender differences in risks and health outcomes

| Hazard/health outcome | 'More exposed/ greater incidence' | Comments |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| Accidents | Men | Men have a higher rate, even after adjustments are made for fewer hours worked by women |
| Upper limb disorders | Women | High incidences are found in some highly repetitive work carried out by women such as 'light' assembly-line work and data-entry work, where they have little control over the way they work |
| Heavy lifting | Men | But, for example, women in cleaning and catering and care work suffer injuries from heavy lifting and carrying |
| Stress | Women | Both report high rates, but stressors particular to 'women's' work include sexual harassment, discrimination, low status jobs with little control, emotionally demanding work and double burden of paid work and unpaid work in the home |
| Violence from the public | Women | Women workers have more contact with members of the public |
| Noise/hearing loss | Men | Women in textile and food production can be highly exposed, for example |
| Occupational cancer | Men | Women have higher rates in certain manufacturing industries, for example |
| Asthma and allergies | Women | For example, from cleaning agents, sterilising agents and dust in protective latex gloves used in healthcare and dusts in textile and clothing manufacture |
| Skin diseases | Women | For example, due to working with wet hands in jobs such as catering, or from skin contact with cleaning agents or hairdressing chemicals |
| Infectious diseases | Women | For example, in healthcare or work with children |
| Inappropriate work and protective equipment | Women | Many work clothes and equipment have been designed for the 'average man', causing problems for many women and 'non-average' men |
| Reproductive health | Both | Neglected areas include fertility, menstrual disorders, menopause and male reproductive health |
| Inappropriate work hours | Both | Men are more likely to work very long paid hours, women do more unpaid work in the home. Both want a better work-life balance. |

Model showing where gender differences can occur that affect occupational safety and health



Recognising and taking account of gender differences

Prevention of ill health and promotion of well-being at work are important for the quality of work of both women and men. The design of work, its organisation and equipment are often based on the model of the 'average' man, although the principle of matching work to workers is enshrined in EU legislation. Making jobs easier for women will make them easier for men too. The report covers taking a 'gender-sensitive' approach to research and interventions, and a 'gender-sensitive' risk assessment approach is summarised in a separate factsheet. Additional information is available in a special section of the Agency's website (see further information).

Further information

The Agency's report *Gender issues in safety and health at work — A review* provides more information about risks to women workers and their prevention, and how to take a 'gender-sensitive' approach. This report is available at:

<http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/reports/209/en/index.htm>

Factsheet 43 on how to include gender in risk prevention is available at: <http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/factsheets/>

The Agency's website has a section devoted to providing links to further information related to women and occupational safety and health at: <http://gender.osha.eu.int>