



Women and the ageing workforce: implications for occupational safety and health

This review considers a number of issues related to gender and age, particularly relevant to older women, in the context of occupational safety and health (OSH) and sustainable work. It was based on current literature and a workshop organised by EU-OSHA¹.

Why is gender relevant to the management of age-related OSH and sustainable work?

The workforce in the EU is ageing; therefore, age-related OSH strategies are crucial. However, men and women face different age-related challenges and are differently affected by issues in the workplace throughout working life. Therefore, in order to inform policy, debate and future research on sustainable work, it is important that we identify and understand these differences.

Age-related differences between men and women in the workplace

Ageing is associated with a number of changes in physical ability and health. Such changes can be influenced by sex-related (i.e. biological) and gender-related (i.e. socially constructed) factors.

Sex-specific differences between men and women in the workplace

The most obvious sex-specific age-related change is the menopause. However, many other age-related conditions that can influence working ability affect women more often than men, including osteoporosis, osteoarthritis and breast cancer. Such differences between men and women should be considered when developing strategies to promote OSH and sustainable working.

Gender-specific differences between men and women in the workplace

Vertical and horizontal gender segregation exist in the workforce and, therefore, women in general, and older women specifically, are exposed to different risks from their male counterparts throughout their working lives.

Vertical segregation results from a lack of promotion opportunities and career mobility, leading to a concentration of women at the lowest levels of the job hierarchy².

This can result in prolonged exposure to certain workplace hazards, such as repetitive work or work that requires awkward postures.

Horizontal segregation arises because women and men tend to work in different economic sectors. For example, older women in particular are over-represented in health and social work, education and other service sectors. It is important not to underestimate the physical and emotional demands of these jobs often carried out by women: manual handling, highly repetitive and paced work, shift work, the risk of violence and harassment, and stress are all issues that affect retention and the quality of working life in many areas in which women work.

Tackling the age-related differences between men and women in the workplace

Strategies for OSH and sustainable working should be both age and gender sensitive. Such strategies should address the sectors and jobs in which women predominate, such as health care, education, cleaning and retail, as well as male-dominated sectors, such as construction, and should also consider how age-associated declines in physical ability and health can be managed in a gender-sensitive way.

The menopause and workplace health promotion

Many health issues faced by women related to, for example, the menopause are taboos in society and, therefore, in the workplace. However, simple measures can be taken to address such issues: access to drinking water can be provided, layered clothing can be used for uniforms and flexible working to facilitate medical appointments can be arranged. More awareness raising and support measures are needed in the workplace, including advice on non-stigmatising measures, model policies and risk assessment checklists.

Gender-sensitive OSH strategies across the life course

A life long approach to sustainable work should encompass risk education and prevention for girls and boys in schools and ensure that OSH education addresses the risks associated with jobs in which women predominate. Furthermore, OSH should be highlighted as part of the vocational training for typical women's jobs.

Stress and musculoskeletal disorders

Many jobs often carried out by women are emotionally demanding or involve prolonged periods of sitting or standing. Therefore, stress and musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) can have a major impact on the sustainability of women's work. More attention needs to be given to these two issues, including a focus on risk prevention in jobs predominantly carried out by women. For example, in a kindergarten

¹ <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/seminars/workshop-gender-and-age-impact-working-life-etui-international>

² EU-OSHA — European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *New risks and trends in the safety and health of women at work*, 2013. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/new-risks-and-trends-in-the-safety-and-health-of-women-at-work/view>

in Denmark, a range of sustainable work adjustments were introduced to retain staff affected by repetitive movements and lifting.

Rehabilitation

If a woman's ill health is not recognised as being work related, this can be a barrier to accessing rehabilitation support. In addition, women with family care responsibilities are often unable to access rehabilitation services. Therefore, there needs to be a gender-specific focus on rehabilitation to ensure that programmes are accessible to women and are tailored to women's needs. An example of such gender-specific rehabilitation tailoring is given by the French work injury insurance organisation Anact. Anact promoted a guide for the rehabilitation of female workers after treatment for breast cancer³.

Family carers

More and more workers of both sexes have the responsibility of caring for sick, disabled or elderly relatives, although the highest proportion of this care is provided by women of 50 years and older. However, current strategies aimed at the reconciliation of work and carer responsibilities focus on young women with childcare needs. Therefore, appropriate reconciliation policies and practices must be developed to promote sustainable working. For example, flexible working schemes and part-time policies, as have already been implemented for young parents, should be considered, in order to prevent older carers from exiting the workforce. Furthermore, additional resources for the care of elderly and disabled people, and services to promote independent living as part of an integrated strategy, are essential.

Age and gender should be considered in risk assessment and strategy development

OSH strategies should promote diversity through risk prevention and by tackling risks at their source. Therefore, it is important to address age equality, gender equality and OSH in one policy and practice framework.

The close link between gender equality and sustainable work is demonstrated by the risk assessment and strategy development undertaken by a French printing company. The company's female employees suffered from exceptionally high rates of MSDs; therefore, the company analysed the length of time spent in different jobs by gender and revealed that men were more quickly promoted from roles that involved performing repetitive tasks for long periods than women. One of the outcomes of this assessment was a recommendation to promote the career path development and skill recognition of women within the company, in order to prevent them from becoming trapped long term in repetitive jobs.

In the UK, the National Health Service (NHS) adopted integrated strategy development through the Working Longer Group to address the impact of a longer working life on a workforce that is dominated by women and of which two-thirds of nurses are over the age of 40 years. This highlighted the importance of fully implementing sector guidelines on health and well-being at work in order to ensure that

the cumulative impact of a longer working life does not adversely affect an employee's health or ability to work effectively and safely.

Mainstreaming diversity in national OSH strategies

To systematically incorporate age and gender considerations into sustainable workplace strategies without causing discrimination, diversity should be mainstreamed into the strategies and activities of labour inspectorates. For example, the outputs of the Austrian labour inspectorate diversity strategy include a range of gender mainstreaming tools, training and diversity checklists for inspectors to use in companies and actions relevant to older workers and female-dominated sectors included in their campaigns⁴.

Key findings

It is important that we create sustainable working patterns for older workers, with a specific focus on older female workers, through measures that address workloads, work tasks, flexible working hours, the work-life balance, support in the workplace for specific gender-related health issues and workforce development. However, more research and practical tools are needed on the intersection between age and gender in relation to OSH and sustainable work. The key findings of this review are summarised below:

- sex- and gender-related differences in working conditions persist throughout the working life;
- the cumulative physical and emotional impacts of women's work should not be underestimated;
- support is needed for risk assessments that incorporate the complexities of age and gender;
- long periods in low-level jobs, without career promotion, can lead to long-term exposure to hazards;
- equal access to rehabilitation and vocational training must be addressed;
- simple non-stigmatising workplace measures can support women going through the menopause;
- workplace health promotion strategies need different approaches for male and female audiences;
- flexible work measures need to be relevant to carers of elderly dependants and to both men and women;
- labour inspectorates should have clear diversity strategies;
- older female workers should be viewed as a valuable asset and the double discrimination that older female workers may face should be addressed through awareness raising.

Further information

The report is available in English on the EU-OSHA website at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/safer-and-healthier-work-any-age-women-and-ageing-workforce/view>

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³ Anact — L'agence nationale pour l'amélioration des conditions de travail, *Travailler avec un cancer du sein*, 2008, Association CINERGIE, Paris.

⁴ EU-OSHA — European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Mainstreaming gender into occupational safety and health practice*, 2014. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/es/tools-and-publications/publications/reports/mainstreaming-gender-into-occupational-safety-and-health-practice>