

## WOMEN'S WORK ENVIRONMENT, RESEARCH, AWARENESS RAISING, TARGETED INSPECTIONS (SWEDEN)

**Type of initiative:** Research, awareness raising, targeted inspections

**Time frame:** 2011-present

### 1 Description of the initiative

#### 1.1 Introduction

In 2011, the Swedish Government gave an assignment to the Swedish Work Environment Authority (SWEA — *Arbetsmiljöverket*) on the topic of 'women's work environment' (government decision A2011/2209/ARM). The assignment encompassed a number of projects to build an evidence-based course for action. These projects involved knowledge generation and the dissemination of that knowledge to key players who have the power to change working conditions and the work environment. The assignment was for the period 2011-2014. In September 2014, SWEA received another assignment to take the lessons learned from the previous assignment and develop these further, in order to increase health and safety in mainly female dominated sectors (e.g. 'create and make accessible tools for risk assessment with a special focus on women's work environment'). This would not only benefit women but also men working in those sectors. In 2015, SWEA was given further funding to continue the work and to develop sustainable procedures for including the gender perspective in OSH management. Previously, the focus had been on the work environment in female-dominated activities but, in this new assignment, the scope was widened, responding to the question as to where, in which sectors, would the project be most effective in obtaining sustainable results.

#### 1.2 Aim of the initiative

The initiative had several mutually reinforcing aims, namely to increase knowledge and awareness about the status of women's occupational health, including their higher risk for developing MSDs, and to develop better methods of highlighting the risks of MSDs in SWEA's inspections. This increased knowledge and awareness is also expected to translate into greater gender sensitivity in workplaces and ultimately into an improved work environment for both men and women.

#### 1.3 Organisations involved

This initiative was run by the Swedish Work Environment Authority, SWEA (*Arbetsmiljöverket*). This authority, supervised by the Ministry of Employment, has a mandate to issue and enforce secondary regulations and to see that the Work Environment Act and SWEA's provisions are followed by companies and organisations. This is done largely by inspecting workplaces. The activities of this initiative were mainly carried out by SWEA staff. The two knowledge compilations were produced by researchers at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm and the Centre for Musculoskeletal Research, University of Gävle. In addition, two researchers were contracted to carry out an ongoing evaluation of the programme.

#### 1.4 What was done and how

The assignment was implemented through a programme comprising two projects, 'Ergonomics in women's work environment' (EKA) and 'sustainable work environment with women in focus' (HAK), and the activities

included research, awareness raising and dissemination activities, training of inspectors and targeted inspection campaigns.

The programme began in autumn 2011 with a survey on employers' knowledge, attitudes and behaviour regarding men's and women's different working conditions and prerequisites in working life. The aim of the survey was to obtain benchmark measurements for chosen target groups as a starting point for working towards change. The survey was conducted through telephone interviews and focus groups with employers within several different sectors. The questions were, on the one hand, about how employers see women's and men's different working environments and conditions and, on the other hand, about employers' awareness of MSDs in sectors where related problems are common. The survey revealed a low level of awareness about MSDs and gender issues and a low proportion of employers within all sectors treating men and women equally in the allocation of working tasks.

Two research reports (also referred to as knowledge compilations) on gender-specific issues related to the work environment, in particular risk factors for MSDs (including psychosocial factors), were prepared during the programme:

- 'Physical work, gender and health in working life', 2013;
- 'Under the magnifying glass — Gender perspective in work environment and work organisation', 2013.

A further research report, 'Women and men and their working conditions: The importance of organisational and psychosocial factors for work-related and health-related outcomes', was published in 2016.

The reports are available for free on SWEA's website. Questions on the reports are welcome, for which readers are directed to a customer service number.

- As part of the programme, SWEA carried out targeted inspection campaigns:
- *Ergonomics in women's work environment (EKA), 2012*. The first inspection activity within the EKA project was carried out in about 700 workplaces where manual handling or repetitive work occurred, mainly within the food industry, the manufacturing industry, the vehicle industry, the laundry industry, wholesale trade, the hotel cleaning industry and the care of green spaces. Approximately 70 % of the companies received administrative orders.
- *Ergonomics in women's work environment (EKA) 2013*. During the second inspection campaign within the EKA project, SWEA inspected workplaces within the healthcare and social care field, with a focus on the assessment of risks for MSDs during patient transfer. Of about 700 employers visited, over 75 % received administrative orders, most of them related to risk assessment procedures for patient transfer.
- *Sustainable work environment with women in focus (HAK), 2013*. In this round, SWEA inspected the work environment in 59 municipalities, with the work environment of male-dominated technical administration jobs was compared with that of female-dominated home care services. The result revealed that there were significant differences between female and male-coded activities within the same organisation. Home care services, where there are mostly women, had worse conditions and work environment than technical services, where most men work. Home care services had, among other things, more employees per manager, worse communication with decision-makers, more part-time employees, poorer cars, and fewer support functions. All municipalities received administrative orders for measures to fix work environment shortcomings, with significantly more orders in the home care services, both regarding staff and managers' work environment conditions.
- *Ergonomics in women's work environment (EKA), 2014*. Similar to previous inspections, the inspections aimed to increase employers' knowledge about the risks of MSDs and how these can be prevented. A broad range of sectors were covered by the inspections.
- *Sustainable ergonomic work environment with women in focus (HEKA), 2014*. This activity was a continuation of the HAK supervision that was done in 2013, but with a clearer focus on MSDs. The methods of risk assessment that were created earlier for the EKA inspections were used. Six municipalities were inspected.

In total, about 41,000 workplaces were inspected. Furthermore, training on the gender perspective in the assessment of risks of MSDs was organised for labour inspectors employed at SWEA.

In 2014, the Authority organised a series of conferences to support the dissemination of its research. The seminars targeted politically elected representatives, managers, safety representatives and work-environment and gender-equality strategists at the municipality level. The speakers included well-known researchers and the municipalities were also invited to share examples from their experience. The Authority also developed a set of communication materials, including brochures for employers and two short films that can be viewed on YouTube.

During the programme, over the course of 3 years, dialogue was started in connection with International Women's Day with a total of 2,600 different employers on the gender perspective in systematic work environment management and how the gender perspective can provide a more comprehensive picture of risks and shortcomings in the work environment for both women and men. These information campaigns generally received a positive reaction. The follow-up dialogues with inspectors showed that many employers appreciated the dialogue and that there is interest in discussing questions. For several employers, it was an eye-opener.

The Authority was granted SEK 20.5 million (EUR 2.26 million) for the first assignment for the 2011-2014 period and an additional SEK 240,000 (EUR 26,400) for the second assignment. The Authority reported having spent SEK 19.6 million (EUR 2.2 million) in the 2011-2014 period, of which SEK 9.9 million (EUR 1.1 million) was staff costs, SEK 6.3 million (EUR 693,000) was for premises and SEK 3.4 million (EUR 374,000) was other costs. The initiative involved a number of staff at the Authority, including inspectors. Other costs included the costs of following up on researchers and the cost of the seminars (approximately SEK 600,000 (EUR 66,000)). The cost of each research report (or knowledge compilation) was about SEK 1 million (EUR 110,000).

In the second assignment, the Authority developed information material, including an animated film and three lecture films that communicated the research findings developed over the 2011-2014 period.

For 2015 and 2016 another 30 million SEK were granted for the work to continue.

Since 2014 the SWEA has had a commission to mainstream the gender perspective in its own organisation. This resulted in employing a gender strategist in 2017 in order to support the management in strategically developing a gender perspective in all decision making. Gender mainstreaming has been a success factor for the sustainability of the learnings of the programme and the two follow-on projects.

The initiative has several innovative features. It focuses on gender differences and the specific risks faced by women at different levels in the workplace (e.g. occupational segregation, different tasks within the same occupation and different susceptibilities to the same exposure). Another innovative feature is the focus on generating evidence that can then inform further policy and action. The internal learning and competence development in SWEA has been remarkable, consisting of training for inspectors, reflection dialogues with inspectors after inspections, gender education for all staff at SWEA and mainstreaming the gender aspect in SWEA's regular activities and inspections. Another innovative aspect is the development of methods for inspection of men's and women's workload from an organisational perspective, with the comparative methodology being used in inspections to compare men's and women's work environments.

## 1.5 What was achieved

SWEA produced a number of reports — among others reports on inspection campaigns, the final report on the programme in 2014, and a white paper in 2017 — that presented the progress and the achievements of the programme.

The 2014 report provides information mainly on the utilisation of the evidence generated. For example, the 2014 report notes that the Authority's website on women's work environment received over 5,000 visitors during the period 2011-2014. In 2014, approximately 150 press releases were published. In September 2018, the short films had received a total of 760 views on YouTube. The Authority also attempted to gather a

benchmark measure of employers' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours towards women's work environment at the onset of the project in 2011.

The white paper published in 2017 notes that organisational changes have been introduced in several municipalities (e.g. Sundsvall), empowering employees and allowing them to plan their work within home care services. Several municipalities have also responded positively to the inspections. They are making use of the lessons learned and promoting the sustainability of the initiative. Concrete examples of municipalities are not provided, but the report notes that changes were observed in the number of employees per manager and that some municipalities are reviewing the different working conditions of different groups of workers. One of the key achievements is an increased awareness about gender issues among labour inspectors.

The white paper points out that the project has generated valuable knowledge on the causes of increasing sick rates and what needs to be done. The results of the project have been disseminated at many levels and this had a major impact in the media and among the social partners. In the workplace, however, the new knowledge and inspections haven't been generally reflected in action so far.

## 1.6 Success factors and challenges

The 2014 report notes that a lack of awareness of the issues and traditions regarding the division of tasks between men and women was the greatest challenge faced. The initiative's success factors include using research evidence for the development of methods for inspections with a gender perspective, the training of inspectors, and the targeted inspections carried out in several rounds.

Generating extensive information materials in the form of reports and visual material and disseminating the information via a number of different dissemination channels (including conferences, the use of visual media such as YouTube, reaching out directly via avenues such as dialogues with employers and safety representatives) is another success factor of this initiative.

However, as the white paper concluded, greater changes are needed in the workplace in terms of governance, management, organisation and concluded allocation of resources in order to improve women's and men's working conditions and work environment. The prerequisites for change must be created at the organisational level, and in municipalities, the political level.

## 1.7 Transferability

Many elements of the initiative are highly transferable to other countries. The gender inequalities identified in Sweden are an issue in other countries too. The general approach of the programme on "Women's work environment" consisting in close collaboration with researchers and building upon evidence for new gender sensitive inspection methods and for training the inspectors is easily transferable to other contexts. The information materials developed and the use of a broad variety of dissemination channels are transferable too.

## 2 National background

Eurostat data from Labour Force Survey ad hoc modules show that, in the 5 years from 2007 to 2013, the percentage of workers in Sweden reporting some form of musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) decreased to some extent, from 58.7 % to 53.1 %. By contrast, in the whole of the EU, there was an increase from 54.2 % to 60.1 % over the same time period.

Provisions that transposed the European Union Framework Directive 89/391 came into force in Sweden in 1991. In 2001, the provisions were updated and renamed systematic work-environment management (SWEM).

The provisions of the Manual Handling Directive were transposed directly into national legislation in 2001 (Provisions of the Swedish National Board of Occupational Safety and Health (AFS 2000:1) on Manual Handling). The Provisions and general recommendations for the prevention of musculoskeletal disorders that entered in force on 1 December 2012, repealing AFS 2000:1 on Manual Handling, encompass all risks associated with MSDs, including all combinations of work movements, postures, positions and workloads and are more far-reaching than the EU Directive. The national legislation also covers some specific risks in

particular jobs, such as butchery undertakings, cash register operators in shops and some elements of hospital work relating to overcrowded conditions.

Swedish legislation on display screen equipment (DSE) is also wider reaching than the EU Directive, covering some types and applications of DSE not covered by the EU Directive, such as drivers' cabs or control cabs for vehicles or machinery, computer systems on board a means of transport and computer systems mainly intended for public use.

In addition, risk assessments have to be updated annually and eyesight testing is required for all those using DSE for more than an hour. The express purpose of such eye testing is prevention: by identifying those with deficiencies in their eyesight, measures can be put in place to enable them to perform DSE-related work without incurring additional risks.

Psychosocial risks are covered by provisions on the organisational and social work environment that came into force in 2016.

## References and resources

- (1) SWEA web page on gender equality. Available at: <https://www.av.se/en/work-environment-work-and-inspections/work-with-the-work-environment/gender-equality-in-the-work-environment/#5>
- (2) SWEA reports. Available at: <https://www.av.se/en/work-environment-work-and-inspections/publications/reports/>
- (3) SWEA, 2017. A white paper on women's work environment. Available at: <https://www.av.se/globalassets/filer/publikationer/rapporter/white-paper-on-womens-work-environment-2017-6.pdf>
- (4) WEA. Women's work environment 2011-2014. Available at: <https://www.av.se/globalassets/filer/publikationer/rapporter/womens-work-environment-2011-2014-knowledge-compilation-rap-2015-6-eng.pdf>

Note: The conversion from Swedish kronor (SEK) to euros was made using the average exchange rate in 2011 and 2014 of 1 SEK = 0.11 EUR (<http://www.x-rates.com>).

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