



# Women hurt at work

**ACTION**

Ever see a sign saying "Danger! Women at Work"? Ever wondered why not? Well, it is not because women do not do the 3D - dirty, difficult and dangerous - jobs. In fact, for many modern work hazards it is often women facing more of the risk.

If you, man or women, think about modern work hazards, stress and strains would top your list (*Hazards* 64). You'd be concerned about violence. You'd worry about lack of control. And in each case you could be looking at risk factors more likely to affect working women than men.

- TUC's 1999 report, *A woman's work is never safe*, based on official statistics, concludes:
- ◆ Women are more exposed to repetitive and monotonous work and to stressful conditions;
  - ◆ Young women are more likely than men to be physically assaulted at work; and
  - ◆ Women are more likely

than men to experience back strain, skin diseases, headaches and eyestrain.

The Health and Safety Executive's best available statistics, the 1995 Self-reported Work-related Illness (SWI) survey<sup>1</sup>, found that one in 10 25-34 year old women workers have been physically attacked by a member of the public at work. Attack rates are generally a third higher than for men.

HSE's SWI stats also showed that hazards traditionally associated with male, industrial work are also commonplace in the jobs women do. More than a quarter of women have to lift or move heavy loads at work. One in five are exposed to dust, fumes or other harmful substances. And the jobs with the highest rates of skin disease, for example hairdressing and repetitive assembly work, are jobs employing a predominantly female workforce.

## Separate workforces

Many factors have helped keep occupational health a "men only" issue, from bad science, to prejudice, to the jobs we do. The two most enduring myths are that men do all the risky work and that differences in gender and not jobs explain some of the trends.

Women certainly do different jobs. Professor Karen Messing of the University of Quebec, Montreal, speaking at the TUC's 1998 women, work and health conference, noted that "women occupy such totally different niches in the labour market that we can almost speak of separate workforces."

UK statistics show that in 1998 women made up nearly half of the workforce (44 per cent, or 11.7 million workers). The great majority (86 per cent) worked in the service industries - health, education, hotels and restaurants and the retail trade - compared to 59 per cent of men. Only one in seven women (13 per cent) work in construction and manufacturing, compared to 37 per cent of men.

According to an International Labour Office (ILO) report on gender and health and safety: "Segregation by occupation leads to exposure to particular occupational health and safety hazards. The type of health risks women face are associated with their specific working conditions."

## No record, no disease

Not that the true extent of women's ill-health is reflected in the statistics. According to Messing, in her devastating critique

*One-eyed science, occupational health and women workers*: "The types of health problems women have are not recognised or compensated, creating a vicious circle where women's occupational health problems are not taken seriously, therefore not recognised, therefore do not cost enough to matter."

Famously liberal Sweden is currently being dragged through the European Court by the white collar union TCO because of its "sexist" workers' compensation law. Sweden's industrial injuries compensation system "is gravely disadvantageous to women" it says, only approving half as many disease claims from women. Women get 30 per cent of the work injury payouts.

The flaws in the Swedish system identified by TCO - a bias against part-time workers, workers who leave the workforce to have children and workers developing conditions over time - apply equally to the UK system.

And there is no body of occupational health research to compensate for poor compensation statistics.

Professor Messing told the TUC symposium: "Little research leads to a blinkered view of women's health problems at work - they are put down to 'getting old' or the menopause, or hysteria. Women's problems are seen as unreal. So there is little incentive to do research - or to do any prevention."

## Just the job

If your job is packed full of risks, male or female, you will suffer as a result. Research published in August 1999 examined stress and gender in a group of British university workers<sup>2</sup>.

The authors concluded

that men and women react to workplace stress in the same way. Differences arise because they are exposed to different stress factors, not because they respond differently to the same stressors. "The results... are consistent with other studies that have suggested that working conditions are associated with health in similar ways for men and women."

According to ILO: "In general terms there is no great difference between men's and women's biological response to physical, biological or chemical hazards."

That's not to say that the way we define, assess and deal with risks is in anyway equitable - even "protective" efforts can add to the danger. The GMB union guide on women's work hazards cites an HSE report which found that "unavailability of, or improperly fitting, personal protective equipment has been shown to be a significant cause of some workplace injuries to women."

## Women's work

What is apparent is that women are presented with different hazards or the same hazards in different forms. Men might lift their heavy weights on construction sites, women in hospitals and care settings. Men in manufacturing might shift one heavy object a minute, while women will move dozens of smaller objects over a supermarket scanner in the same time period.

Certain types of especially punishing jobs are almost entirely the preserve of women.

According to Professor Messing, writing in *One-eyed science*: "In general women's jobs have more 'job strain' than men's, although, the concept applies to men's jobs as well."

"Some emotional aspects of

## The TUC gender agenda

In a major union initiative, the TUC is pressing for a "gender sensitive" approach to occupational health and safety. It helped convince the Health and Safety Commission to include social equality, including gender, in its current three-year corporate plan, and is continuing to press for better statistics, for HSE materials to reflect better the presence of women in the workforce and for more women on HSC committees.

- At workplace level TUC want safety reps to:
- ◆ Survey women in their workplace to identify their views on key safety problems;
  - ◆ Compare findings with the existing workplace health and safety statistics;
  - ◆ Review the company safety policy to ensure women's safety concerns are covered;
  - ◆ Check whether risks assessments cover the risks to women workers; and
  - ◆ Decide whether their workplace needs a special action plan on health and safety.

jobs are assigned almost exclusively to women. Perhaps because it applies to few men's jobs, the concept of emotional labour has only recently been developed to describe the requirements of some jobs in the service sector. "Emotional labour is "the management of feelings to produce a publicly observable facial or bodily display... sold for a wage."

One example would be women airline attendants,

"explicitly paid to manage their own and the passengers' emotions, to prevent fear and create customer loyalty."

Women's workplace health problems are frequently compounded by getting more of the same at home - the "double jeopardy" of domestic work, which can mean a second shift of lifting, responsibility and chemicals topping off those experienced all day at work.

## United, we're stunned

You might think that lifting, standing, breathing poor, pressurised air and exposure to cosmic radiation could be hazardous at work. You might believe doing this at several thousand feet above ground when pregnant could add to the risk. Not if you are United Airlines.

In its September 1999 opening day testimony to a London employment tribunal United Airlines claimed "that no risk has been found to exist".

The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), the union representing three British flight attendants suspended without pay because they were pregnant, said the tribunal "will determine whether an American company can thumb its nose at maternity laws in the UK."

Under the UK Management Regulations (reg.13a), a risk assessment must determine if a job presents a risk to a woman who is pregnant, has just given birth or who is breast feeding (*Hazards* 63). Under no circumstances can a company stop paying a worker who can no longer do her normal job because of pregnancy-related risks.

"It is ludicrous for United to claim that a flight attendant's job isn't risky," said Kevin Creighan, president of the AFA, which represents 900 UK workers. "Our job requires heavy lifting, bending, twisting and pushing." A 1996 tribunal had previously determined that United Airlines is subject to UK law.

### Sources and resources

1. *Self-reported working conditions in 1995: results from a household survey*, JR Jones, JT Hodgson and J Osman, HSE, 1998. HSE Books.
2. Emslie C and others. *Gender differences in minor morbidity among full time employees of a British university*, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, vol.53, pages 465-75, 1999.

### TUC materials

- Gender sensitive health and safety: Report of a TUC symposium on research into women's health and safety*, TUC, 1999. £25.00 (£5.00 trade unions).
- Restoring the balance: women's health and safety at work*, TUC guidance for safety reps, TUC, 1999.
- A woman's work is never safe*, TUC, 1999.
- Protecting the future - reproductive health and safety*, TUC, 1998.
- No more "men only" health and safety - what women want at work*, TUC survey of women safety reps, TUC, 1998.
- Details from TUC, Congress Centre, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS. Tel: 0207 636 4030. Fax: 0207 636 0632. TUC webpage: The TUC's safety website has a page on women's health and safety: <http://www/v128.dial.pipex.com/women.htm> or go in via the TUC website, <http://www.tuc.org.uk> (see page 7).

### Detailed sources

- One-eyed science: occupational health and women workers*, Karen Messing, Temple University Press, ISBN 1-56639-598-4, 1998. Very detailed, authoritative source showing how the hazards of women's work are frequently under-estimated or totally ignored and how compensation systems discriminate against women.
- Gender issues on occupational health and safety*, ILO. See the ILO website: <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/140femme/guides/occupati.htm>.
- Details: ILO Office of the Special Adviser on Women Workers' Questions (FEMMES). Tel: 00 41 22 799 6730. Fax: 00 41 22 799 6388. Email: [femmes@ilo.org](mailto:femmes@ilo.org)
- Integrating gender in ergonomic analysis: Strategies for transforming women's work*, TUTB, ISBN 2-930003-33-2, 1999.
- Women at work*. Themed issue of the *Asian-Pacific Newsletter on Occupational Health and Safety*, vol.6, no.2, August 1999. Detailed overview, giving a global perspective. Finnish Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Topeliuksenkatu 41 a A, FIN-00250, Helsinki, Finland. Electronic version: <http://www.occuphealth.fi/eng/info/asian/asindex.htm>

### General guides

- Women's health and safety*, UNISON women's health pack, 1999.
- Working well together - health and safety for women*, GMB, 1998.
- Women's health at work - an information pack for members*, MSF, 1996.
- Women's health and safety: a trade union guide*, Labour Research Department, May 1996.

### Specific topics

- Reproductive hazards** *Reproductive hazards at work* Hazards factsheet no.63, *Reproductive hazards at work: Women* is the most up-to-date guide, with detailed references. £1.50 to existing labour movement/union subscribers; £3.00 all other subscribers; and £6.00 non-subscribers. From *Hazards*. Short guide: *The effects of workplace hazards on female reproductive health*, NIOSH, February 1999. Ref: DHSS (NIOSH) Publication No.99-104. Free from NIOSH Publications Dissemination, 4676 Columbia Parkway, Cincinnati, OH 45226-1998, USA. Fax: 00 1 513 533 8573. Email: [pubstaf@cdc.gov](mailto:pubstaf@cdc.gov) web: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh>
- Sexual harassment** *Women Against Sexual Harassment (WaSH)*, 5th Floor, 4 Wild Court, London WC2B 4AU. Advice line: 0207 405 0429. WaSH also produces a series of excellent free leaflets on sexual harassment in the workplace.
- Office work** City Centre, Sophia House, 32-35 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8QX. Provides advice to office workers on health and safety, employment and equal rights issues. Produces newsletters and guides and has a telephone advice line: 0207 608 1338.
- Breast cancer** *Hazards factsheet no.62. Breast cancer and workplace exposures*. Comprehensive guide including detailed list of additional sources. From *Hazards*.
- Menopause** *Working through the menopause, information and resource pack for occupational health nurses*. RCN, 1999. Details from RCN, 20 Cavendish Square, London W1M 0AB.

### General

Women's Health. Resource and information centre providing guidance on all aspects of women's health (not a specialist occupational health agency). 52 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8RT. Health enquiry line: 0207 251 6580.