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## Executive summary

- ▶ **The role and impact of masculinity on the safety and health of construction workers in Madagascar**

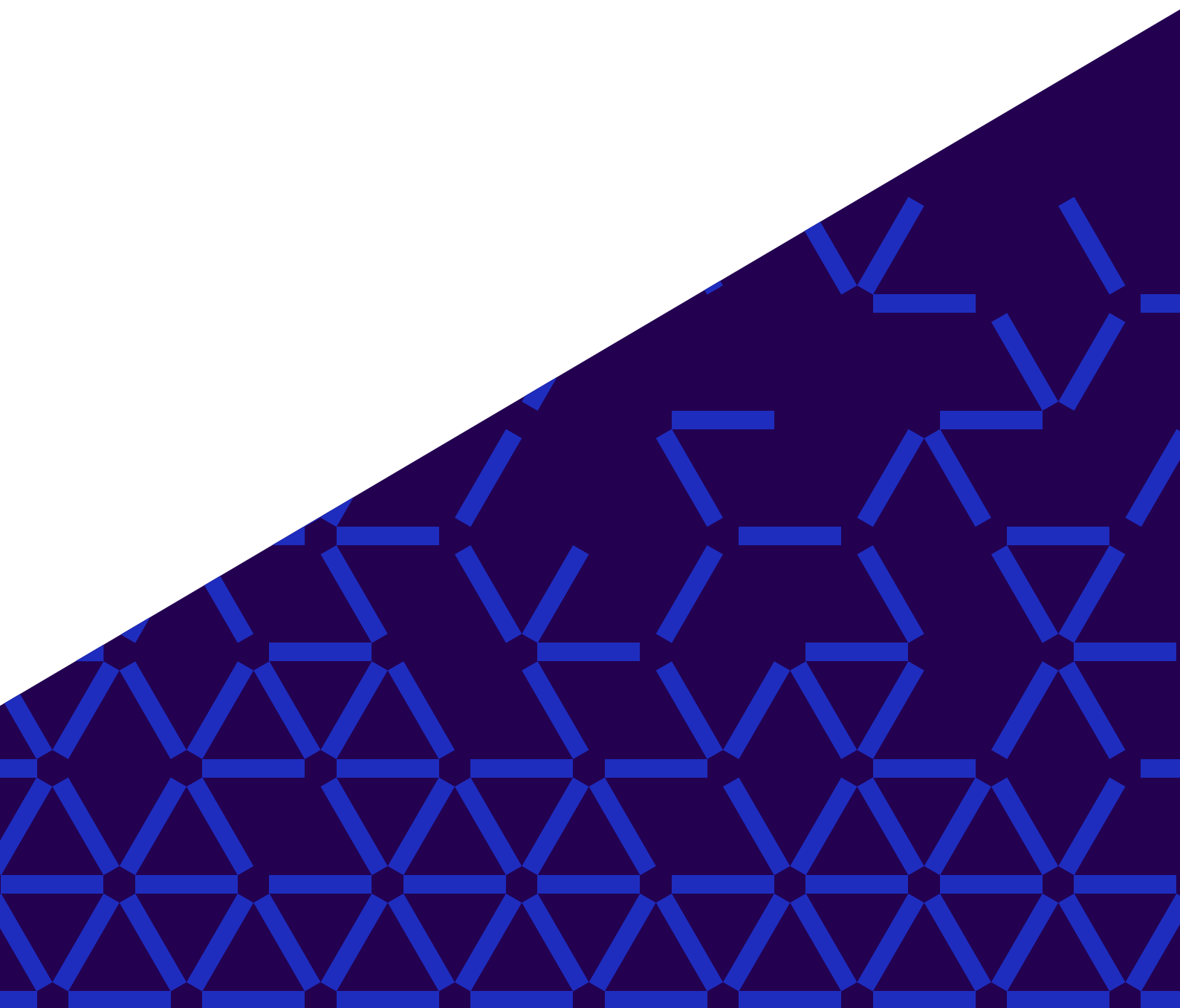
Survey report



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## Context

The Building and Public Works sector (French acronym “BTP”) was employing around 165,000 people in Madagascar in 2018, 86 per cent of them in the informal economy. The sector is male dominated, with women accounting for only 2 per cent of all workers in the sector. Construction workers are the socio-professional category most exposed to occupational risks, and the most prone to work-related accidents. According to data provided by the Caisse Nationale de Prévoyance Sociale (CNAPS) in 2020, around 12 per cent of accidents recorded in Madagascar occur in the building and public work sector.

Looking at the gender dimension, this study analyzes the extent to which masculinity (in the sense of hegemonic masculinity, i.e. the most socially and symbolically valued way of being a man in a given time and place) impacts the safety and health of construction site workers, whether positively or negatively. Based on the results of the survey, targeted recommendations for improvement are proposed.

This work was carried out under the auspices of the ILO's flagship programme [Safety + Health for All](#) through its [Vision Zero Fund](#) (VZF) project to improve the safety and health of [construction workers in Madagascar](#).

## Methodological approach

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative survey was conducted in Madagascar from January to April 2023, using an innovative ILO methodology to analyze the role and impact of masculinity on the safety and health of workers in the construction sector, particularly on building sites.

The methods used for the field survey were observations and individual and group interviews, including photo-elicitation, which involves using photographs of work situations to stimulate culturally relevant reflections. In selecting the survey population for the interviews, the social markers relevant to the study were taken into account: gender, age, seniority at work, professional activity, employment status (manual labour, management), and geographical origin. The interviews and notes based on observations were then subjected to in-depth thematic analysis.

The choice of observation sites was determined by a number of criteria, including the nature of the worksite, its location, its size in terms of number of workers and the degree of formalization of the company. Four worksites of different sizes were observed: two managed by formal companies (one multinational and one national in the capital region) and two by informal companies (one in the capital region and one in the Manakara region).

After an in-depth analysis of the data collected, the results of the study were presented at a tripartite workshop held in Antananarivo in April 2024. Participants made recommendations and suggestions for follow-up activities to address the issues identified.

## Main results of the study

### Construction trades seen as male professions

The first key finding of the study is that the building trades are seen as essentially male professions, both literally and figuratively.

#### *The construction site: a male preserve*

There is a clear sexual division of labour, both functionally and physically, with the “worksite” (the outdoor space) reserved for men and the “office” (the indoor space) reserved for women.

The notion of “building site” covers the emblematic trades of the construction industry: bricklaying/masonry (including day labour), ironwork, carpentry, fitting, welding and so on. These are the trades that actually create a building and are a source of gratification and pride. For the workers interviewed, women have no place here.

To justify this view, the men did not express outright hostility, but numerous arguments were put forward. The first was paternalistic: women must be protected from hard, dirty or dangerous work and all its inherent risks. The second was physiological, based on women's supposed physical inability to perform what is seen as men's work: construction work is “a job for tough guys”, by which is meant “real” men. By extension, this also excludes men weakened by age. Respondents also invoked the effects on women's bodies of working on a construction site: the activities would “damage women's breasts” or “prevent them from fulfilling their marital duties due to tiredness”, for example, which is not acceptable from their point of view.

In the few rare cases where there was gender diversity on the site, men said that they “take it upon themselves” to spare women from work situations they feel are unsuitable for them, thereby drawing a new gender boundary in the social space of the worksite by assigning to women tasks that are intended “for them” by men.

Finally, site workers emphasized men's preference for risk to justify the exclusion of women from construction tasks. Construction work is presented as inherently risky, and a willingness to take risks is said to be an intrinsically masculine quality. A man who hesitates too much before committing himself to a risky activity could be questioned by his peers as to his “real” gender. Men are thus encouraged to just “go for it” to conform to group-work norms.

From this perspective, women's “vocation” is to work in offices and/or in peripheral maintenance or supply functions. However, the interviews revealed that female engineers escape this gender stereotype. Women in managerial functions seem more accepted than women working on construction sites.

#### *Gender diversity seen as a source of work disorganization*

Resistance to women working on construction sites is therefore very strong. The issue at stake here is the need for construction workers to preserve their collective hegemony by considering the presence of women solely through a gender – rather than a professional – lens.

In fact, the study revealed that gender diversity on a construction site was a source of tension. Testimonies indicated that men “sacrifice” themselves to perform certain tasks that are seen as arduous in place of women (welding in a cramped area, for example). In addition to denying professional equality, men also criticized the fact that women are spared the “dirty work”.

Sticking to a male “closed circle” on the worksite is also seen as a necessary condition for greater productivity, as it maintains their collective cohesion. For the workers interviewed, gender diversity would result in a loss of productive capacity and motivation, with the possibility that women would be seen as objects of sexual desire, and thus a source of disruption or even competition. Even formulated as a joke, this is still a strategy of resistance to gender diversity on a worksite, testifying to the significant barriers that women in construction need to overcome.

### ***Finding one's place as a woman in a male-dominated professional environment: a long-term challenge***

An interview with a young female welder illustrated how masculinity functions as a barrier defending professional territory.

Building trades are mainly learned on the job, and therefore require an experienced worker to pass on know-how to a new hire in practical situations. Given the prevailing male hegemony, a man with the necessary qualifications must be willing to pass on his experience to a woman. In this particular case, the man who was to become the young woman's trainer first sought to test her motivation by informing her that it was a very hard job, which he presented as not being compatible with having children. Attention was thus immediately drawn to her gender and a “natural” incompatibility with the profession was implied.

Subsequently, during training, her mentor preferred to teach her welding techniques which he himself considered more appropriate for a woman, rather than others. Therefore, if access to the profession is possible, it is not full access: women are limited to subordinate positions in the hierarchy of professional skills.

Once trained, the young welder was allowed no room for error. She had constantly to prove her skills by refusing any preferential treatment and demonstrating her physical endurance. Her desire for equal treatment within the work group meant that she also had to play down her gender identity and demand to be considered as “a man like them”. Her integration into the group was therefore relative, insofar as it involved a certain “guardianship”, having to place herself under the protection of a mentor or big brother (*zoky lahy*) to whom she was indebted. This paternalistic relationship combined the effects of both intergenerational and gender relations. She was thus placed in a position of double subordination, since she had to follow the instructions of both her official hierarchical superior and, implicitly, of her mentor.

As we learned from another young woman who worked as a bricklayer for two years, working as a woman in a predominantly male environment also means being exposed to harassment and sexist jokes, and even sexual violence. To prevent this from interfering with her work, the female welder was forced to adjust by, for example, ignoring the looks, attitudes and comments of her colleagues, and accepting the customs of the group, such as the consumption of alcohol, albeit without compromising herself. In all cases, it was up to her to adapt and make the necessary efforts not to stand out too much from the group and to ensure her professional integration, without denying her gender identity. These are many contradictory injunctions to manage alone.

## Production constraints and attitudes to risk

### *Business risks*

The workers observed during the survey are engaged in manual handling of heavy loads and are at risk of falls. They work in a noisy, dirty environment, often cluttered with hazardous materials and equipment. Working mainly out of doors, they are exposed to the elements (heat, rain, wind, cold). They may also work in confined, cramped, poorly ventilated spaces, most of the time in uncomfortable positions, or even off balance. They work at heights in situations that are not always safe (lack of scaffolding, guardrails, safety harnesses). Workers also handle toxic products without appropriate protection.

Working conditions on a construction site also depend on the coordination of the various trades and the many decisions regarding work organization, resulting in a high degree of unpredictability. Schedules vary according to production constraints, sometimes giving rise to *tâcheronnage* (jobbing or piecework), whereby working time depends on the number of tasks to be performed. This is known in Malagasy as *vita mody* (literally: you go home when the assigned tasks have been completed). The pace of work induced by this practice accentuates risk-taking and makes the work even more arduous. The deleterious effects of *vita mody* are greatly accentuated by collective emulation, since everyone strives to finish their working day at the same time.

In this context, how are occupational safety and health issues considered in the day-to-day activities of workers, and what resources are mobilized to deal with risks?

### *A conscious but sometimes constrained acceptance of risks, depending on the category of worker*

In many interviews, workers mentioned the dangerous and arduous nature of their jobs and the likely negative consequences for their health. However, for fear of losing their jobs, particularly in the absence of an employment contract, workers consciously accept risks. The injunction to meet deadlines was the main reason given for disregarding safety measures. Even in formal companies, productivity and deadlines take precedence over compliance with safety and health standards.

However, the threat of dismissal does not affect all workers in the same way. Skilled workers (bricklayers, ironworkers, carpenters, welders) are much sought after by employers, whereas labourers are easily substitutable. The latter, particularly in the informal sector, are therefore the most vulnerable when it comes to accepting imposed working conditions. To ensure their employability, some may even be encouraged to take more risks to be seen as “brave” and recognized as such by their peers.

Some categories of workers are also willing to accept unskilled jobs in the construction industry, whatever the conditions. This is particularly true of migrant workers from the interior of the country. For many of them, becoming a labourer on a building site means regular pay, which is seen as an improvement on their previous activities as fishermen or farmers.

### *Risk integration and trivialization*

The study revealed that workers are aware of the risks they face. As a result, there is no denial of risk as such, but rather consent to risk-taking, based on the internalization of social norms relating to masculinity, which make the risks tolerable.

Interviews with workers indicated that they implement a whole series of mechanisms, more or less consciously, to relativize and trivialize the danger involved, and to “give meaning to the physical and psychological damage, the pain, the risk-taking and the fear they engender”.

The first “technique” is to limit the time of exposure to danger and/or to the ethical dilemma arising from the impossibility of carrying out a task safely in the absence of protective measures. This involves “not thinking about it” and “pretending”, in other words “you know that the situation doesn’t comply”, “you don’t forget that you’re exposed to danger”, but “you can’t show it too much”. So, faced with contradictory injunctions, workers “take it upon themselves” to do their job in spite of everything. At the same time, they find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to complaining to their employer about working conditions, since they have pretended that the situation is acceptable to them.

On the other hand, the interviewees indicated that the mastery of professional gestures through practice and repetition (*fahazarana*) enables them to control the risks involved. In this respect, there is an important distinction between risk in general and risk to the individual. Risk-taking is relativized by workers’ conviction that they have sufficient professional expertise, together with a self-confidence constructed as an expression of masculinity, to be able to act without following the risk-control measures, if and when these are in place. By the same token, workplace accidents are attributed to carelessness or lack of professionalism. Inexperience is identified as the probable cause of accidents and injuries. Such incidents are sometimes even considered to be a formative – and therefore necessary – stage in their learning of the profession.

### ***Personal protective equipment: what for?***

In many informal enterprises, workers complained about the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) provided by the company. However, it was also noted that, when PPE was available, some workers were paradoxically reluctant to wear it, even on sites where it was compulsory. In some cases, PPE is used for purposes other than those intended. For example, hard hats are used as containers for fetching water to moisten concrete, or for carrying nails or mortar.

Workers explained their reluctance to wear PPE on the grounds of the discomfort it causes, particularly in hot weather (helmets, vests) or during certain handling operations (gloves). But above all, they pointed out that they are more efficient without their PPE, which is detrimental to productivity. Behind this reluctance to use PPE lies the idea that a good professional does not really need it, that a certain toughening of the body makes it optional. The idea of protecting one’s body then comes to undermine the image they have of a “good professional”.

There is also a clear difference between companies in the formal and informal sectors, with the latter not making safety equipment available to their employees. In the informal sector, PPE is implicitly regarded as an attribute of large companies importing international standards to Madagascar, and non-use of PPE is presented by contrast as part of the “Malagasy way”. The wearing of PPE thus appears less legitimate, justifying local “adjustments” and ascribing greater value to DIY know-how using the means at hand as opposed to taking proper precautions and adopting specialized expertise.

Finally, workers consider that their expertise deriving from habit (*fahazarana*) exempts them from wearing PPE. From this perspective, the wearing of PPE is reserved for workers with little confidence in their professional know-how, and for the few women working on construction sites. So, not wearing personal protection seems to be another distinctive masculine marker. In this case, the underlying idea is that only men are in a position to take risks, and therefore they dispense with PPE and other means of protection. Basically, when PPE is available, whether or not it is used will depend first and foremost on the group’s implicit work habits. If its use is not part of the accepted habits of the group, then there will be many forms of tacit resistance and an individual will be reluctant to deviate from the group norms and stand out from the others. So, here, the collective can clearly have a dissuasive effect.

## Relationships with the body and health

There are very few institutional arrangements for covering occupational illnesses and accidents and, where they do exist, they are seldom used by the few workers in the sector who are affiliated to the social protection system. This is due to the cost of access to care and, above all, the loss of income that stopping work inevitably entails. This being the case, how do construction workers express their relationship with their body and health in the context of their professional activity?

### *Enduring suffering as a professional ethic*

The workers' testimonies expressed a willingness to endure suffering, constitutive of a masculine culture at work, which manifests itself in several ways.

First, they tended to dismiss the long-term consequences of their working conditions on their health, especially as most employees are young, or even very young, and therefore still unaware of the problems likely to affect the body over time as a result of professional wear and tear. Youth thus allows for bearing the risks inherent in their work, especially when the negative consequences of working conditions on health are not immediately perceptible, as may be the case, for example, with exposure to chemicals. The idea of being "able to bear" (*mahazaka*) is based on the empirical observation that, for the time being, there are no visible effects of work-related ailments.

Most workers interviewed described frequent, almost daily pain, while minimizing its effects. Inherent in the work they do (carrying, lifting, spraying concrete, repeating the same movements), pain was considered inevitable and accepted with resignation by most of the respondents. In some cases, it was even completely denied or excluded from productive work, as if it were almost a duty not to express one's suffering during times of activity. Falls from heights were mentioned several times, and the surprising thing was the common refrain regarding the "harmless" nature of such accidents and the minimization of their consequences.

When the subject was not avoided or bypassed, it appeared that injuries and bodily pain were frequent. However, given their daily occurrence, these were accepted as an integral part of the job. Similarly, the arduous nature of the work was put into perspective by its inevitability. Workers have no choice but to put up with accidents as obligatory constraints.

Once again, the notion of habit (*fahazarana*) was regularly advanced as a way of coping with these constraints. This means repressing the expression of physical pain and exhibiting a professional ethos of endurance in the face of suffering.

This relationship with the body and suffering is also an aspect of horizontal social relations, whereby physical failings can be collectively punished by peers: workers "playfully" prevent each other from slackening off by kicking the first person who shows signs of letting up. This practice is a perfect illustration of the transmission and consolidation of moral values specific to the group (endurance, not complaining). It is all about not being identified by your peers as lazy (*tay kafe*). Building and consolidating this kind of endurance may not even require injunctions from supervisory staff.

### *Minimization of health problems*

Second, it is striking how continuity of activity takes precedence over caring for one's fellow workers, even in formal companies. Working near supervisory staff at all times, and in a very male-dominated environment, workers repress their emotions for fear of being seen as slackers and/or as "effeminate". This is a matter of conforming to the practices in force within the work group: renouncing sick leave avoids the accusation of being lazy, promotes an "ethic of hard work" and thus preserves one's masculine image as a "good professional". The absence of compensation in case of sick leave is also a strong incentive to continue working, so as not to lose income, even in formal companies where workers are affiliated to the social protection system.

When an injury is too obvious to ignore, and the equipment and first-aid kit that should be provided by the employer are not available, workers manage with what they have to hand. In the absence of footwear, cement bags are sometimes used to protect bruised feet, and the use of electrician's tape as plasters is commonplace. Remedies are sometimes worse than the injury, for instance using cigarette ash to heal a wound or using an oil-soaked cloth to "smoke" an injured foot and thus "prevent tetanus".

Workers may be aware of the risks associated with their activities, but they are often unaware of their causes and the consequences for health. This is particularly true of exposure to chemicals. Eating yoghurt and bananas, for example, is said to protect against toxic welding fumes; meat and fruit have a prophylactic effect against the harmful effects of cement; and alcohol cleanses the body of inhaled dust. The use of narcotics and alcohol has also been observed, both to boost productive performance and to overcome fear, including vertigo when working at height, which in fact increases the risk of falls and accidents.



## Conclusions and recommendations

Analysis of all the material gathered reveals that prevailing masculine attitudes impact negatively on the safety and health of construction workers in Madagascar, and these attitudes are embedded in social relationships at work. In this sense, masculinity is a factor in people being employed in environments where masculine norms and values are mobilized in the service of productive commitment and endurance in the face of suffering, giving rise to multiple situations of risk-taking and exposure to danger.

This gender dimension therefore needs to be taken into account in the following interventions to improve the safety and health of workers in Madagascar's construction sector:

1

### Reinforcing a culture of prevention from an early age

- ▶ Integrate OSH into technical education and vocational training.
- ▶ Integrate prevention as a general subject, in the same way as civic education, starting in elementary school and progressively throughout the curriculum.

2

### Implementing regular training activities and awareness-raising campaigns focusing on culture change

- ▶ Ensure better appropriation of prevention instructions by repeating certain principles on a daily basis.
- ▶ In formal companies, where OSH concerns are the subject of internal policies, reiterate the priority given to OSH above all other considerations of productivity and/or work-schedule constraints.
- ▶ For employees who are reluctant to wear appropriate PPE when it is available, run awareness-raising campaigns based on heterogeneous focus groups (in terms of qualifications, seniority and age); use the photographic and videographic material produced to inform them of the consequences of not wearing PPE, for example in awareness-raising modules on the invisible harms of working environments, such as hearing problems or lung disorders linked to inhalation of cement dust or welding fumes; in general, promote safety and health at work.
- ▶ In awareness-raising modules, stress that taking care of one's health and physical integrity is in no way detrimental to one's "virile" (hegemonic male) identity and is even an essential dimension in continuing to ensure the sustainability of a family's means of subsistence; also train site supervisors to avoid any stigmatization in terms of questioning gender identity.
- ▶ Implement awareness-raising activities undertaken by adequately trained elders, who are the guarantors and validators of the group's norms and values, or any other person with a recognized position of social ascendancy.
- ▶ Use simple, concrete messages during awareness campaigns that directly address the concerns of site workers and speak to them (for example, what might be the concrete consequences of an accident on the life of a worker and his family).
- ▶ Do not impose methods or messages inspired by Western culture; rather, give priority to Malagasy norms and values, for example by using Malagasy adages or proverbs that advocate prevention.

**3****Strengthening OSH inspection systems**

- ▶ Continue the inspections carried out by the Labour Inspectorate on worksites.
- ▶ Promote a dialogue-based approach between the labour inspectorate and inspected companies.
- ▶ Initiate controls or support by other, less “formal” entities (e.g. workers’ representatives trained in OSH, who may have a different viewpoint).
- ▶ Strengthen the capacity of workers’ and employers’ organizations to promote OSH in the workplace.

**4****Encouraging greater integration of women in technical professions, particularly in vocational training schools**

- ▶ Promote the generally accepted qualities of women who find their place in the building trades.
- ▶ Use concrete examples of women already working in the field to show that it can be done.
- ▶ Put in place mechanisms to enable women to break the silence around harassment.
- ▶ Promote gender diversity in the workplace: making women’s presence on worksites accepted.

**5****Taking action in the informal sector**

- ▶ Promote the formalization of companies and affiliation to occupational medicine and the Caisse Nationale de Prévoyance Sociale (CNAPS).
- ▶ Increase inspection visits in the informal sector.
- ▶ Reinforce awareness-raising in the informal sector with appropriate messages.
- ▶ Gather more data on the circumstances of self-employed/informal workers, which could help indicate solutions (e.g. introducing a social protection scheme appropriate to their situation).

**6****Improving access to health services and care**

- ▶ Facilitate access to quality occupational health services with preventive functions (e.g. to monitor workers’ work-related health and support awareness-raising efforts).
- ▶ Offer systematic first-aid training.
- ▶ Enable workers to access appropriate care from qualified health personnel.





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