

Providing safe and healthy workplaces for both women and men

As women's participation in the labour force has increased, the gender-specific aspects of occupational accidents and diseases have been recognized. Agriculture, for example, remains a high-risk sector for both women and men, but many women working in agriculture end up doing the worst jobs, such as working with pesticides, chemical or biological agents without protection, or doing heavy cultivation or harvesting work without mechanical assistance.

Segregation by occupation leads to exposure to health risks and hazards peculiar to those occupations, which affects the over-represented sex more than the other. In industry, women factory workers in export-processing zones (where they are the majority) endure long hours at non-ergonomic work stations and often work with unprotected machinery. Industrial machinery is generally designed for men and is often awkward and tiring for women (and small men) to operate. In microelectronics, another industry where women predominate, they are exposed to chemicals which can have carcinogenic effects. On the other hand, work in sectors where men predominate, such as construction or the oil industry, generates its own set of hazards and health risks. Over the years, the focus of gender issues in OSH has shifted from the protection of women based on an assumed difference between all women and all men to the equalization of rights and protection for all workers, male and female, and the idea of making the workplace safe for each individual worker, whatever their sex or other personal attributes. Legislation oriented towards the protection of women as mothers and wives (which was assumed to be their primary function) was revealed to have potentially discriminatory effects on women's job opportunities. The focus is now on removing the risk from the workplace in the interests of protecting the health of all workers rather than excluding any social group from hazardous occupations. This new orientation has led to the revision or replacement of a number of OSH-related standards, for example those related to night work.

Work-related stress is increasingly being recognized as an OSH issue. Both men and women suffer from stress, but for different reasons, which may require different healthcare responses. Women's multiple roles at work and in the family means that they tend to suffer additionally from stress and fatigue. Following on from a reference in the Resolution on equal opportunities and treatment adopted by the International Labour Conference in 1985 to the need to protect men and women from risks inherent in their work, the Conclusions of the 2003 Conference made explicit the connection between safe work and decent work and raised "the need to take account of gender-specific factors in the context of OSH standards, other instruments, management systems and practice".

Find out more:

- [ILO – Programme on Safety and Health at Work and the Environment \(SafeWork\): Gender issues](#)
- [ILO – Conditions of Work and Employment Programme \(TRAVAIL\): Working conditions](#)
- [ILO – Programme on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work \(ILO/AIDS\): Gender Equality](#)
- [ILO – Sectoral Activities \(SECTOR\): Workplace violence in the health services](#)
- [ILO – Bureau for Workers' Activities \(ACTRAV\): Women's Occupational Safety and Health](#)
- ILO – Bureau for Employers' Activities (ACT/EMP)
- C102 Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952
- C118 Equality of Treatment (Social Security) Convention, 1962
- C149 Nursing Personnel Convention, 1977
- R157 Nursing Personnel Recommendation, 1977
- C155 Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981
- P155 Protocol of 2002 to the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981
- R164 Occupational Safety and Health Recommendation, 1981
- Resource Guide - Gender equality in the world of work
- Gender Equality and Decent Work - Selected ILO Conventions and Recommendations Promoting Gender Equality