Facets 6.7

Difficult and dangerous -

because women do not

Ever see a sign saying Working well together - health and safety for women,

occupational health agency). 52 Featherstone Street, London

Women's Health. Resource and information centre providing General

Details from RCN, 20 Cavendish Square, London W1M 0AB.

Menopause list of additional sources. From Hazards.

workplace exposures.

line: 0207 608 1338.

health and safety, employment and equal rights issues.

excellent free leaflets on sexual harassment in the workplace.

line: 0207 405 0429. WaSH also produces a series of

Dissemination, 4676 Columbia Parkway, Cincinnati, OH

Conductive health,

and restaurants and the service industries -

ty (86 per cent) worked in

workers). The great majori-

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Famously liberal Sweden

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occupational health

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to workplace stress in the

One-eyed science, occupational health and women workers: “The types of health hazards they have not been recognised or compensated, creating a vicious circle of women’s occupational health problems are not taken seriously, therefore not recognised, do not cost enough to matter.”

Famously liberal Sweden is currently being dragged through the Court by the white collar union TCO because of its “best” worker’s compensation law. Swedes’ industri-

injuries compensation system is gravely disadvantageous to women: “It says, only approximating half as many disease claims from women. Women get 30 per cent of the work injury payouts.

the Swedish system identified by TCO: - a bias against part-time workers, workers who leave the workforce to have children and workers working during conditions over time - equally apply to the UK system.

And there is no body of occupational health research to compensate for poor compensation statistics. Professor Messing told the TUC’s symposium: “Little research leads to a blinkered view of women’s health problems at work - they are put down to ‘getting old’ in the menopause, or hysteria. Women’s problems are seen as unimportant. Some is little incentive to do research - or to do any pioneering work where the sex is 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

that women and men 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 the outcomes of different 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 contains a 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 construc-

tion sites, women in hospi-
tals 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 physically demanding tasks are consistently shown to be a persistent source of injury.

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 jobs are assigned exclusively to women. Perhaps because it applies to free men’s jobs, the con-

cept of emotional labour has only recently been developed to describe the requirements of same jobs in the service sector.”

Emotional labour is “the management of feelings to produce a publicly observed image. Emotions in the workplace 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 women’s domestic work, which can mean a second shift of lifting, responsibility and chemicals helping all those experienced all day at work.

Women’s workplace health problems may well suffer as a result. 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 workplace and for more women on TUC 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 women workers; and

Decide whether their workplace needs a special action plan on health and safety.

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United, we’re stronger

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 Health and Safety Regulations (1974) 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 illness.

“It is ludicrous for United to claim that a flight attendants job isn’t risky,” said Kevin Coghlan, 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.