

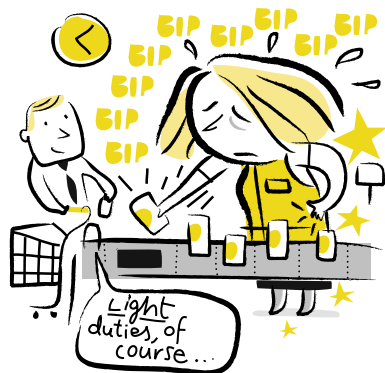
# Women's work



The human body is not made to lift all day, breathe fumes all day, stand, sit or get treated like crap all day. But work does that – and too many assumptions about the nature of “women’s work” combined with too little attention to the real risks mean the hazards of women’s jobs might be far less likely to get resolved.

**W**hat’s working life like for women? The jobs women are more likely to do, from nursing to cleaning, can have in spades all the characteristics of the most hazardous jobs including risks from chemicals, manual handling and fatigue, topped off with infection risks, violence and stress. Checkout workers lift about two tonnes of goods in an average four hour shift, one of the heaviest jobs around.

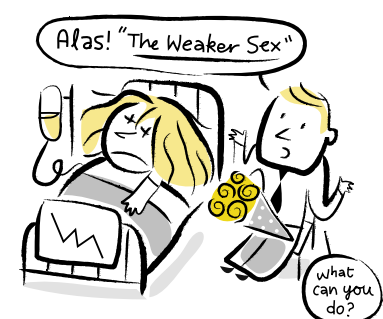
Workplace hazards to women need special attention, says the TUC. It is asking safety reps to make sure their workplaces have a “gender sensitive” approach to health and safety management. TUC’s Gender and Occupational Safety and Health (G&OSH) working party has produced



a checklist to help assess workplace health and safety policies and practices.

TUC says everyone has an equal right to protection from harm at work but adds that doesn’t mean treating everyone as if they were all the same.

“Recent research has shown that both sex (biological differences between women and men) and gender (socially determined differences) affect workers’ health and safety in many ways,” a G&OSH briefing says. “These differences are too often ignored or misunderstood, leading to failures in prevention.”



It adds that “gender stereotyping” – for example, ‘women’s work is light work’ or about the jobs women do – can also lead to false assumptions about who is or is not at risk in the workplace. Important opportunities for prevention can be missed as a result.

## What women think

The G&OSH checklist identifies policy gaps, highlights ways to improve investigation, risk assessment and training, improve data collection and it addresses overlooked areas like workplace risks to the reproductive health of women and men.

It also calls on unions to examine ways to increase women’s participation in workplace safety structures.

According to the G&OSH guide: “You may need to consult your members to find out more about their own experiences and any problems



they have encountered. You may also want to involve your equality rep or shop steward in discussions too.

“Once you have agreed your priorities, you will need to decide how you are going to raise these matters with your employer.”

Further information  
Hazards website  
www.hazards.org/women

TUC website  
The G&OSH gender checklist can be downloaded from the TUC website. www.tuc.org.uk/women

TUC work-life balance website  
www.tuc.org.uk/changingtimes

Share your experiences of good practice – email details to the TUC safety department: healthandsafety@tuc.org.uk

## Check it out!

### Workplace policy

- ◆ Does the employer’s health and safety policy or workplace agreement recognise that there are sex and gender differences in occupational safety and health (OSH)?
- ◆ Has gender sensitive health and safety been discussed with the union?
- ◆ Does the policy commit the employer to address the issue?
- ◆ Does the policy commit the employer to consult with all workers and their representatives – male and female, full-time and part-time, permanent and temporary – about OSH issues including risk assessments?

### Union policy

- ◆ Does your union policy recognise there are sex and gender differences in occupational safety and health?
- ◆ Have you discussed gender sensitive health and safety at your union meetings or at meetings of safety reps or equality reps?
- ◆ Has the union discussed gender sensitive health and safety with the employer?
- ◆ Does your union policy commit the union to consult all members – male and female, full-time and part-time, permanent and temporary – about OSH issues, including risk assessments?

### Management issues

- ◆ Are women as well as men involved in health and safety management in the workplace?
- ◆ Is there an appropriate gender balance on the health and safety committee or other consultative structures?
- ◆ Are all sections of the workforce represented?
- ◆ Are health and safety issues and priorities of concern to women regularly discussed at safety meetings – and are they taken seriously?
- ◆ Are the employer’s occupational health and safety staff aware of sex and gender differences affecting health and safety at work?
- ◆ Does the employer include gender awareness in health and safety and other training, such as induction of new workers?

### Safety and equality reps

- ◆ Do all sections of the workforce, including female dominated areas, have access to a union safety rep?
- ◆ Does this include part-time workers and temporary staff?
- ◆ Do safety reps consult with women members as well as men about their health and safety concerns?
- ◆ Are these concerns adequately reflected in the workplace health and safety agenda?
- ◆ Are there any women safety reps in the workplace?
- ◆ Do women safety reps attend safety and related consultative meetings?
- ◆ Does the union at all levels have a policy of encouraging more women members to become safety reps and equality reps?
- ◆ Do equality reps (if you have them) also discuss health and safety-related issues such as work-life balance, maternity protection, harassment or stress with the employer? If so, are these also discussed jointly with safety reps and union negotiators?
- ◆ Does your union include gender awareness in its safety rep training?
- ◆ Does your union offer health and safety courses for women reps?

### Risk assessment

- ◆ Are risk assessments carried out and acted on by the employer?
- ◆ Do risk assessments take account of sex and gender differences?

- ◆ Are women as well as men consulted about risk assessments?
- ◆ Are reproductive health risks to both men and women adequately assessed?
- ◆ Are risk assessments relating to expectant, new and nursing mothers (and the unborn or breastfeeding child) carried out properly and in good time?
- ◆ Do employers provide a private space for breast-feeding mothers to express milk, and a safe and hygienic place for the milk to be stored?
- ◆ Are work-related issues relating to fertility, prostate cancer, menstruation, menopause, breast cancer or hysterectomy adequately addressed?
- ◆ Are risks of violence – including concerns about working alone on site or late into the evening, and access to safe parking – or work-related stress to women and men adequately addressed?
- ◆ Are sex and gender differences taken into account in COSHH and manual handling risk assessments and in assessments of postural problems including prolonged standing or sitting?

### Sickness absence

- ◆ Does the employer have a sickness absence policy or workplace agreement?
- ◆ Does the policy and practice ensure that any work-related health problems are properly investigated, with a review of risk assessments where necessary?
- ◆ Are members and union safety reps involved in any investigations?
- ◆ Are members satisfied that the sickness absence management workplace agreement is fair and non-discriminatory?

### Monitoring procedures

- ◆ Are all accidents and incidents regularly reported and reviewed, including near misses and work-related health problems?
- ◆ Are all accident and ill-health statistics systematically reviewed at safety committee or other consultative meetings?
- ◆ Is sex-disaggregated data (showing men and women separately) on accidents and ill-health collected routinely?
- ◆ Do these data differentiate not only between women and men but also between different jobs and job levels and between different shift patterns?
- ◆ Are trends in the ill-health statistics analysed?
- ◆ Are all workers aware of the importance of reporting work-related ill-health and health problems made worse by work?
- ◆ Does the union carry out any confidential surveys of members’ health and safety concerns – and are all members consulted?
- ◆ Do union surveys allow the union to differentiate between men’s and women’s responses?
- ◆ Are the findings of any surveys reported and discussed with management, with feedback to all members?
- ◆ Are women’s and men’s health and safety concerns and priorities treated equally seriously by the union and by management in these discussions?
- ◆ Does the union’s bargaining agenda reflect members’ gender-specific concerns?
- ◆ Do the employer and trade union have the negotiating machinery in place to consult and negotiate on health and safety changes and gender equality?

### Missed anything?

- ◆ A bodymapping exercise, survey or more general inquiry by reps might identify unanticipated problems – lack of access to toilets, concerns about particular clients or lone working, for example.