

# Women's work

**Women's health and safety is neglected, says UNISON's Hope Daley – and something must be done about it.**

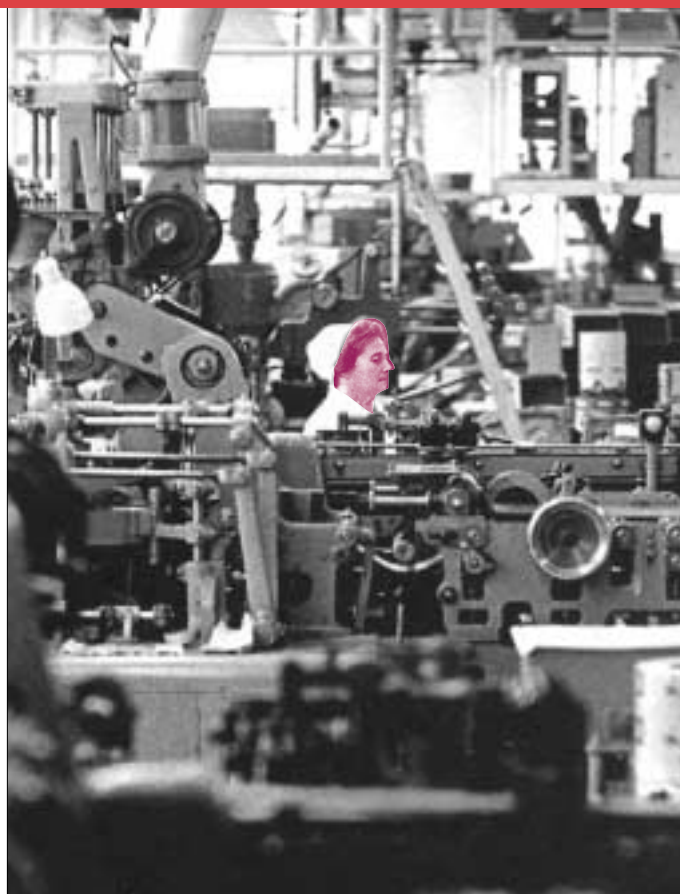
**A**lmost nothing is known about the effects of work on women's health and safety. Yet nearly half of the UK workforce is female, with a large number of these working part-time or doing several part-time jobs.

In many sectors, for example cleaning, women are frequently exposed to chemicals such as solvents. These substances may affect fertility and pregnancy, and can lead to miscarriages or premature births. They also increase the risk of other diseases, such as cancer, allergies and dermatitis.

And women such as home care workers, healthcare workers and catering staff are often required to undertake arduous, repetitive, monotonous work. Yet when employers carry out risk assessments for such work, gender is very rarely considered.

Where women suffer from gynaecological or reproductive problems and other possible work related concerns, a link is hardly ever made with their work. It is still the case today that women approaching their GP are rarely asked about their work or work patterns.

It is generally perceived that



the health and safety problems and needs of women workers are identical to those of men, and that women work in light, easy and risk free occupations. This is clearly not true.

Women are exposed to more repetitive and monotonous work and to stressful conditions; young women are more likely to be physically assaulted than men at work; and women are more likely than men to experience back strain, skin diseases, headaches and eyestrain caused by the job (see *Hazards 67*).

And while pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS) affects working women, best practice workplace agreements are extremely thin on the ground.

The Health and Safety Executive approach to health and safety at work is to apply the same standard for both women and men. Although there are a few exceptions, like manual handling, the unisex approach has been applied to most guidance on work methods as well as work

equipment, and has led to a number of health and safety problems for women at work.

Better information and far more research is needed into the effects of work on women's health and safety. And UNISON and the TUC are campaigning to make this happen.

We also need more women safety representatives. A recent TUC survey has shown that women are under-represented among safety representatives, and UNISON is this year launching a campaign aimed at recruiting more women safety representatives.

Single copies of UNISON's guide, *Women's health and safety at work*, are available free from UNISON's Health & Safety unit, 1 Mabledon Place, London WC1H 9AJ, e-mail [healthandsafety@unison.co.uk](mailto:healthandsafety@unison.co.uk), or call 020 7551 1446.

Women's pages on the TUC health and safety website: [www.tuc.org.uk/h\\_and\\_s/](http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/) The TUC guide *Keeping well at work* includes an excellent chapter on pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS). *Hazards Women hurt at work* factsheet, *Hazards 67*.

## Where's the women, HSE?

Unlike the UK HSE website, the US government's safety research agency has webpages devoted to women's health and safety.

It says: "As the only federal agency mandated to conduct research to prevent injuries and illnesses in the workplace, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has an expanding research program to address the occupational safety and health needs of working women."

NIOSH has also published information on "working women and stress" and "women in construction" (*Hazards 71*).

In January, the TUC called on HSE to make women's health at work a research priority (page 31). At TUC's urging, the Health and Safety Commission three years ago included "social equality," including gender, in its corporate plan (*Hazards 67*).

However, the "search signposts" on the HSE website currently have no entries under the headings "women" or "gender."

A search of the HSE website revealed that with the exception of reproductive health, there were no documents on the site exclusively dealing with "women" or "gender."

NIOSH women's health and safety webpages: [www.cdc.gov/niosh/womsoft.html](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/womsoft.html) *Women's health and safety issues at work* factsheet.

On the web: [www.cdc.gov/niosh/01-123.html](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/01-123.html) or send your request via email to [pubstaft@cdc.gov](mailto:pubstaft@cdc.gov) or via fax to 00 1 513 533 8573.