

Gender Equality, Work and Health: A Review of the Evidence



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Gender Equality, Work and Health: A Review of the Evidence

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The planning of this publication began at a WHO Symposium entitled “Gender and Work-related Health Issues: Moving the Agenda Forward”, which Dr Östlin coordinated for WHO at the Women Work and Health Conference, held June 2-5, 2002, in Stockholm, Sweden. The contributions to the Symposium provided valuable input to this overview paper, and they covered: ‘Gender and health-related work concerns in agriculture’ by Dr Sophia Kisting, Occupational and Environmental Health Research and Education Unit, University of Capetown, South Africa; ‘Global gender issues in health and industrial work’ by Elisabeth Lagerlöf, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Dublin, Ireland, and ‘Women sex workers’ lives and prescriptions for their health’ by Meena Shivdas, Gender and development specialist in Singapore. These papers were edited by Drs Östlin and Messing and can be found on the website of GWH on <http://www.who.int/gender/publications>.

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We hope that this collective work of women in the field of gender, work and health can make a contribution to all working women in the world.

Preface

Work – formal and informal, paid and unpaid – plays an important part in determining women’s and men’s relative wealth, power and prestige. This generates gender inequalities in the distribution of resources, benefits and responsibilities. The workplace can be a setting where gender inequalities are both manifested and sustained, with consequent impacts on health.

Work affects women’s and men’s bodies and minds in many ways. Workers can gain great satisfaction from their jobs, but they can also be exposed to hazards that can affect their health. Toxic chemicals may lead to cancer, reproductive problems, and even to death. Repetitive movements and heavy loads can damage bones, joints, muscles and nerves. Working in overly hot or cold temperatures can affect the cardiovascular and reproductive systems, causing pain and illness. Working under pressure with little power to change the work environment can cause psychological and physical distress.

All over the world, women and men suffer discomfort, disease, injuries and death from their work. In general, the problems associated with men’s work are better known, since men do visibly heavy and dangerous work such as mining, cutting trees, fishing and building. More recently, a number of risks have been identified in women’s work, and this publication presents some of these.

Increasingly, key studies have been undertaken examining the effects of the working environment on health, but this research has not yet touched on many of the extremely harsh conditions in which the majority of the world's women work, and the consequent harm to their health and that of their families.

Women will be more and more involved in the global workforce, in both formal and informal work

To bring more attention to gendered aspects of women's working conditions and health, the Department of Gender, Women and Health (GWH) organized, together with the Occupational and Environmental Health Programme (OEH) within the Department of Public Health and Environment (PHE), a WHO Symposium, entitled "Gender and Work-related Health Issues: Moving the Agenda Forward" at the Women, Work and Health Conference, held June 2-5, 2002, in Stockholm, Sweden. The purpose of the symposium was to discuss gender and women's health issues related to industrial work, agricultural work and sex work and to summarize key gender issues in work and health. The presentations at the symposium provided valuable input for this global overview paper.

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