

Women's health and safety



a UNISON guide for members

UNISON
the public service union

Introduction

UNISON recognises that everyone has an equal right to protection from harm at work, but that doesn't mean everyone should be treated as if they were exactly the same.

In UNISON women members make up 75% of members, women are at the heart of everything we do.

Across the UK approximately half of workers are women and UNISON knows that women often experience the working environment in a different way than their male colleagues do.

A lot of these differences are around women specific issues, things like reproductive health, the menopause, the effects of an ageing workforce and the fact that, on average women are smaller than men, may highlight gender differences at work. This booklet highlights some of the issues, looks at what women should expect from their employer and how UNISON can help members deal with these issues in a positive and supported way.

A gender-sensitive approach to health and safety at work

Recognising gender differences in the workforce is vital if we are to ensure that workplaces are safe and healthy for everyone. UNISON has always supported a “gender sensitive” approach to ensure that gender issues are an integral part of information gathering, standard setting, legislation, practical action to prevent and control risks, policy setting and involving women in decision-making bodies.

It's also important to acknowledge that some workers do not live in the gender they were labelled at birth. Some trans people transition to live permanently as women or men. Some have a gender identity that is not solely male or female. A gender-sensitive approach to health and safety at work takes their needs into account too.

Working differently

Jobs that women and men do, their working conditions and how society treats them is not always the same. These factors may affect the hazards women face at work and the approach that needs to be taken to assess and control them.

Factors to consider include:

- women and men have traditionally been concentrated in certain jobs and therefore may face hazards particular to those jobs
- women and men may be physically and biologically different in terms of their reproductive makeup
- women and men may have different responsibilities outside the workplace.

Working women are more likely to be exposed to hazards like issues around lifting or exposure to chemicals at work and at home because they have traditionally had greater domestic and caring responsibilities. Women are:

- more likely to be in low-paid, unsafe work and this may affect their working conditions and the hazards they are exposed to
- more likely to stay in the same job longer than men so may have a longer exposure to the hazards that are present
- more likely to work in jobs where trade union representation is weaker and there may be less worker consultation and participation which is an important factor in successful risk prevention.

Making risk assessment more gender sensitive

The law requires employers to assess the risk of work-related ill health arising from work activities. They must also ensure that these risks are removed or proper control measures are in place to avoid them where possible – and reduce them so far as reasonably practicable.

Employers should take an “all round” approach to risk prevention, recognising the gender differences that relate to work, including sexual harassment, discrimination, involvement in decision-making in the workplace and many women’s work/life balance issues.

Psychosocial hazards

Women are generally at higher risk of exposure to psychosocial hazards including bullying, discrimination, and sexual harassment, which all contribute to work-related stress. Some face additional risks if they are, for example, Black, disabled, younger, older, lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans, as well as being women.

Women often work in jobs that are isolated or have minimal team interaction, poorly paid and of low status. Evidence shows that these sorts of roles are more stressful than work that does not have these characteristics.

In addition, women are more likely to be at risk of violence because a higher percentage of them work in jobs where they provide face-to-face services to members of the public, clients, or service users.

Menstruation

For most women menstruation is a natural process that doesn't present difficulties. However, the menstrual cycle can be affected by many conditions that may cause discomfort or concerns. Menstrual problems that may affect them at work can include:

- Amenorrhea (absent menstrual periods)
- Menorrhagia (heavy menstrual periods)
- Dysmenorrhoea (painful menstrual periods)
- Premenstrual syndrome (various symptoms including tiredness, lethargy, bloating, cramps, fluctuations of mood and body temperature among others)
- Endometriosis, which affects two million women in the UK – a common condition where tissue that behaves like the womb lining is found outside the womb. Various symptoms include painful periods (dysmenorrhoea), excessive bleeding, diarrhoea, constipation, bloating and nausea, especially during menstrual periods.

New and expectant mothers

Every year around 350,000 women continue to work during their pregnancy and of those, over two-thirds return to work after giving birth.

When a woman is pregnant, has recently given birth or is breast feeding, their employer must assess any risks that they may face at work so that their health, and that of their baby, is not harmed.

New or expectant mothers must do the following to ensure that their employer looks after their health and safety:

- tell their employer in writing that they are pregnant or breast feeding, or that they have given birth in the last six months
- show the certificate of pregnancy from their doctor or midwife – if the employer asks in writing for proof that they are pregnant
- discuss any job-related concerns about their health or the health of their baby with their doctor or midwife. If the doctor or midwife advises them that there could be a risk, they should ask for a letter to show to their employer so that they can take this into account.

They will also need to consider their wider maternity/postnatal rights, such as paid time off for antenatal appointments and a private space to express milk should they need it, to ensure that their employer treats them fairly and with dignity.

Menopause

The menopause can lead to changes in a woman's health and may also lead to emotional changes. These can affect how a woman does her work and her relationship with her colleagues. Unfortunately, there is often very little understanding of the issues and very little support for women who are going through the menopause.

Employers have been slow to recognise that women of menopausal age may need special consideration. For too long, it has simply been seen as a private matter.

Every woman's experience of the menopause will be different but some of the most common symptoms that women may experience are:

- hot flushes
- sleep disturbance
- increased anxiety or depression
- urinary problems
- heavy periods and clots
- vaginal symptoms such as vaginal dryness, itching or discomfort.

If women are experiencing the menopause and finding it difficult to cope, they may need support from their line manager. As with any longstanding health-related condition, it is crucial to get this support and can make a major difference to how women and employers will deal with any issues arising from the menopause.

Employers should ensure that all line managers have been trained to be aware of how the menopause can affect work and what adjustments may be necessary to support women who are experiencing the menopause.

Manual handling, musculoskeletal issues and the use of work equipment

Manual handling causes over a third of all workplace injuries, including work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) such as upper and lower limb pain or disorders, and joint and repetitive strain injuries.

MSDs occur in relation to exposure to poor ergonomic conditions such as work requiring awkward postures, monotonous and repetitive tasks, inappropriate work methods or work organisation, and heavy lifting.

Women tend to report more upper limb pain, as opposed to men who report a higher incidence of heavy lifting injuries.

An additional risk factor for many women is the use of tools and equipment which are not always designed for a female work population, who are generally smaller in size and lighter in weight. This also applies to the design of personal protective equipment (PPE). PPE includes protective clothing such as overalls, gloves, safety footwear, safety helmets or high visibility clothing.

Ageing workforce

We all age and as we age our bodies change and the nature of these changes will be different for women and men. After the menopause, women may suffer a loss of bone density (osteoporosis), while men are less likely to be affected by this condition. With osteoporosis, bones become weaker and more likely to break so it is important that employers take account changes and differences in the way people age.

The work women do and the effects on their capabilities may change as they get older and continue to work.

Things to consider as we age are:

- sickness and absence from work
- stress
- accidents at work
- physical strength and stamina
- musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)
- your brain's ability to function easily
- sight and hearing changes and deterioration
- shift work and the effects on sleep, rest and physical/mental recovery.

What next?

If a UNISON member believes that an employer isn't taking her issues seriously or isn't doing enough to support her she should speak to her UNISON safety rep.

UNISON has produced further guidance for safety reps on how to approach managers to better support women at work.

Other resources

Health and safety knowledge pages
unison.org.uk/safety

Guides/booklets available from UNISON online catalogue
unison.org.uk/catalogue

Member booklets

Are you at risk? – booklet for members explaining risk assessment (stock number 2720)

Aches, Pains and Strains – booklet for members explaining musculoskeletal issues (stock number 3863)

Safety rep guides

Ageing Workforce
Stock number 3240

Menopause and Work
Stock number 3075

Gender, Safety and Health
Stock number 1982

Information on the UNISON website at unison.org.uk and search for women's health issues, and pregnancy at work.



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