

GENDER IN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

Introduction

In the lead up to International Workers' Memorial Day, the TUC released a new guide under the title of "Gender in Occupational Safety and Health."ⁱ

As the guide notes, "pressing for healthy, safe workplaces for everyone is part and parcel of the union representative's role... Being aware of the issues relating to gender in occupational health and safety ensures unions strive to ensure that workplaces are safer and healthier for everyone."

Workers' Memorial Day

International Workers' Memorial Day is the day when, across the world, we both remember those people killed, disabled and injured by their work whilst also re-affirming our commitment to take action to maintain and improve the health, safety and welfare of workers.

The theme for Workers' Memorial Day in 2017, held on Friday 28th April, was one of good health and safety for all workers whoever they are and so it is fitting that the TUC publish documents that seek to highlight

where this isn't the case – like around gender.

What is the scale of the problem?

On Workers' Memorial Day itself, to help reps use the gender guide, the TUC published a complimentary document under the title of "Personal protective equipment and women: Guidance for workplace representatives on ensuring it is a safe fit."ⁱⁱ Based on a survey in 2016, this document shows that:

- Despite a legal duty on bosses to provide the correct Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to their staff free of charge, only 3 in 10 women (29%) wear PPE specifically designed for women;
- More than half of women (57%) said that their PPE sometimes or significantly hampered their work – including 95% of women working in emergency services;
- More than 2 in 5 (41%) women said that the protective trousers that were given to them were inappropriate;
- More than 1 in 3 (35%) found their overalls unsuitable for carrying out their work duties.

Purpose of the Bulletin

This Bulletin will draw out some of the main points of both of the concise guides which reps are advised to consult and use as appropriate in their workplace.

How are the guides laid out?

Both of the TUC publications are designed to be user friendly with:

- helpful introductions to the related issues;
- major concerns highlighted with salient examples;
- references to general legal standards;
- questions about what unions can do and encouragement for rep top take action;
- the provision of (in the Gender Guide) a useful gender checklist.

Why are the guides important?

Fundamentally, where the differences between men and women are acknowledged when assessing risk and making decisions on suitable risk control solutions, there is a greater chance of ensuring that the health, safety and welfare of all workers is adequately protected.

What does this mean in practice?

In practice this means taking note of the different physical, physiological and psychological differences that can determine how risks affect men and women differently.

It also means recognising what can be obvious but often overlooked or simply not prioritised:

- Women are the ones who give birth and, in most cases, look after children or assume other family caring responsibilities;
- The employment experiences of men and women differ because they are often found in different occupations or are treated differently by employers;
- The nature of the work undertaken can cause harm in different ways. For instance, in heavy industry where men tend to be employed more there can be high levels of injury from one off events whilst in other occupations work related illness occurs from less visible, long term exposure to harm (typically in places where women are likely to find employment);
- Even in the same workplace, with the same job title and carrying out the same tasks, men and women can experience different demands, exposures and effects;
- Traditional bias also plays a part because the health and safety focus has been on risk prevention in visibly dangerous work largely carried out by men in sectors such as construction, mining and railways, where inadequate risk control can lead to fatalities, whilst the attention for women (particularly pregnant women) has been on prohibiting certain types of work and exposures, perhaps with an assumption that the kind of work that women do is safer.

As the Gender Guide notes: “Because of this, research and developments in health and safety regulation, policy and risk management have been primarily based on work traditionally done by men, while women’s occupational injuries and illnesses, such as work-related stress, musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) and dermatitis have been largely ignored, under-diagnosed, under-reported and under-compensated.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The effect of these factors is that occupational health and safety:

- often treats men and women as if they were the same,
- or makes gender-stereotypes, such as saying women do lighter work or that men are less likely to suffer from work-related stress.

Example of problems with PPE, tools and equipment

As an example, the TUC guides cite the problems with PPE (some of which were highlighted in the opening sections of this Bulletin^{iv}), tools and equipment, noting how most have been designed with the male body size and shape in mind. The result is that:

- most women – and many men – experience problems, for instance, in finding suitable and comfortable PPE because they do not conform to the standard male worker that the equipment is designed for;
- this leads to poorly fitting PPE giving lower physical protection, increased risk from tripping or the creation of a

general inability to see or grip properly.

Similarly, machinery, worktops and tools designed for men, or not set up properly for women to use, can increase female work accident rates or cause an increased risk of MSD’s from a poor working posture. For instance, the average woman has a hand length about 2cm shorter than a man’s, so tools such as pliers can have too thick a grip, inappropriate placement and loss of functionality.^v

Major issues

The Gender Guide goes on to look in more depth at specific issues in connection with:

- Musculoskeletal disorders;
- Pregnancy
- Stress
- Harassment and violence
- Uniforms, workwear and footwear
- Gender identity

TSSA reps are encouraged to look in more detail at the material in this section in case there are areas that could be applied to members in their workplaces.

Trade union campaigns

Examples are also given of trade union campaigns that sometimes resulted from a single health and safety rep raising an issue at a local level. Is there a significant issue felt by members in your workplace that TSSA could go onto adopt as a campaign?

Gender checklist on occupational safety and health

The TUC has developed a gender checklist which acts as a prompt so

that union representatives are able to pursue issues around gender in the workplace and at the same time bring together equalities work and health and safety work. In this way, reps can ensure that employers take action on the issues which will make a real difference to the health, safety and welfare of women and men.

There are other union techniques that have helped to address gender, such as:

- body-mapping
- surveys
- risk-mapping

TSSA's website has downloadable information about most of these techniques.^{vi}

The TUC's gender checklist is not meant to be a comprehensive list of specific areas but encourages reps to ensure that relevant issues in the workplace are identified and addressed in a gender sensitive way. The checklist can also prompt further questions, perhaps developed in conjunction with the affected members?

One thing the checklist is not is simply a tick box exercise; instead, reps, may be as part of a small group with other

reps, should be ensuring action is taken when either what is provided just isn't good enough (eg, the Safety Committee doesn't meet regularly, PPE ignores gender concerns, etc) or is non-existent.

Reps' Action

At various points in this Bulletin we have suggested actions that reps should take. If you are unsure where to begin, why not start by asking those you represent what the issues are for them, perhaps through a survey on a one to one basis? Above all, act on the material in the guides because in that way you are truly representing your members and encouraging others to join TSSA, a union that cares, the whole basis of our Time to Grow Strategy.^{vii}

Acknowledgements

This Bulletin has been compiled based on the TUC guides referred to in this Bulletin's text and available for download from the links below. The TUC documents also contain sources of further information.

ⁱ Available to download from: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/GenderHSChecklist.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Available to download from: www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/PPEandwomenguidance.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ See Page 4 of Gender Guide

^{iv} But also see Sections 2 and 3 of the Women's PPE Guide

^v See Page 5 of Gender Guide

^{vi} See: <https://www.tssa.org.uk/en/Your-union/health-and-safety/health-and-safety-reps-zone.cfm>

^{vii} Available at: <https://www.tssa.org.uk/en/campaigns/timetogrow/>