

Occupational health and safety for Sustainable Development of women

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ABSTRACT

In today's world, the concept of sustainability is attracting considerable attention as many governments have integrated it in their economic development strategies. Sustainable development relies on several principles for framing its actions, many of which can clearly be applied to occupational health and safety. These principles include the necessity for attention to be given to the health and quality of life of people, to the prevention of known risks and to the application of precaution when there is uncertainty with regard to the risks. It may thus be considered that occupational health and safety (OHS) and prevention of injuries and diseases are issues of concern with regard to sustainability.

Occupational health and safety is an area of concern for all those who work outside their homes. It is the right of every worker to be able to work in a healthy and safe place. There is little awareness about workplace hazards due to lack of access to information or even any kind of formal education. The impact of OSH hazard on women and children would be harder. In addition to paid work, women also do other demanding jobs like cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Due to uncomfortable positions at workplaces and that too for long hours, women develop musculoskeletal disorders. Pregnant women working with chemicals like solvents will be exposed to chemical poisoning and as result, their fetuses are also exposed to chemical poisoning.

A good indicator of economic and social inclusion for women is the availability and access to employment. Employment empowers women in many ways. However certain work environments make women workers more vulnerable to certain risks. Policies and programs in the workplace should be formulated and adopted for the promotion of the rights and welfare of women who are seen as crucial partners in attaining a nation's economic and sustainable development more so in the unorganized sectors which do not fall under the purview of legislations.

1. Introduction

In today's world, the concept of sustainability is attracting considerable attention as many governments have integrated it in their economic development strategies. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sustainable development is defined as a strategy to "meet the needs of the present world population without causing adverse effect on health and on the environment, and without depleting or endangering the global resource base, hence without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs". Sustainable development relies on several principles for framing its actions, many of which can clearly be applied to occupational health and safety. These principles include the necessity for attention to be given to the health and quality of life of people, to the prevention of known risks and to the application of precaution when there is uncertainty with regard to the risks. It may thus be considered that occupational health and safety (OHS) and prevention of injuries and diseases are issues of concern with regard to sustainability. Workplace is a critical site for efforts towards sustainable development. Occupational health is a basic element and constitutes a social and health dimension of the principal of sustainable development. OHS aims to ensure health ,safety ,working capacity and well-being of the working population. A healthy productive and well-motivated workforce is the key agent for overall social development.

Occupational health and safety is an area of concern for all those who work outside their homes. It is the right of every worker to be able to work in a healthy and safe place. India has a very poor health and safety record at workplace. Most workers in India work in the vast informal sectors. The variable and insecure nature of work means more and more workers are pushed into taking up hazardous and precarious employment both in the formal and informal sectors. For these workers, employment not only fails to bring about a successful escape from poverty, it may contribute to existing vulnerabilities. There is little awareness about workplace hazards due to lack of access to information or even any kind of formal education. Informal workers give low priority to OHS, as having work is more important than the quality of the job. Many workers argue that they may die of work, but if they do not work, their families would die of hunger. In any case family members of those active in the informal sector also get exposed to work related risks. Diagnosis of occupational diseases is difficult even in the formal sector, in the informal sector it is almost impossible. In addition to paid work, women also do other demanding jobs like cooking, cleaning, and childcare. The extended work puts tremendous pressure on women's bodies and minds. Due to uncomfortable positions at workplaces and that too for long hours, women develop musculoskeletal disorders. pregnant women working with chemicals like solvents will be exposed to chemical poisoning and as result, their fetuses are also exposed

to chemical poisoning. As a result their children's developing bodies are susceptible to harm. OHS issues among female workers are becoming alarming due to certain diseases and stress which can cause irreversible harm to new borns.



Occupational Health and safety- Refers to the potential risks to health and safety for those who work outside their homes .

Occupational Disease- Disease caused by a person's occupation.

Hazard – Something that can cause harm if not controlled.

WHO defines occupational health as the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social wellbeing of workers in all occupations by preventing departures from health , controlling risks and adaptation of work to people and people to their jobs.

2. Objectives of Occupational health and safety activities

- Promotion and maintenance of highest degree of physical, mental and social wellbeing of the workers in all occupations
- Preventing the adverse effects on health among the workers caused by their work environment and work conditions.
- The protection of workers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health.
- Placing and maintenance of workers in an occupational environment adapted to physical and mental needs.

Successful occupational health and safety practices requires the collaboration and participation of both the employer and employees in the health and safety programmes and involves consideration of issues relating to occupation, medicine, safety, Ergonomics, Psychology etc.

Today women are receiving higher education and are joining the workforce in greater numbers. Growing urbanization and industrialization as well as economic conditions have necessitated women to work. Women are engaged in different types of occupations. They so-called housewife is already doing a single shift. If the woman works outside home, she is

consistently working a double shift. On an average, women work longer than men.

According to International Lab our organization 2/3rd of the working hours around the world are worked by women because of the combinations of various roles in the workplace, in the family and in the society. Most often women's work remains invisible but it contributes a major portion to the world economy. In developing and overpopulated countries poor working women are at great disadvantage due to availability of excess labor. Introduction to newer technologies often adversely effects unskilled women workers who are the first to suffer loss of jobs.

Poor and unsafe working conditions affect workers health. Unhealthy or unsafe working conditions are not limited to factories alone. They can be found everywhere.

Work related health and safety problems can affect both employer and employee.

Employee

- Pain and suffering of the injury or illness
- Loss of income
- Loss of job
- Health care costs

Employer

- Payment for work not performed.
- Medical and compensation payments
- Repair and replacement of damaged equipment
- Temporary halt in production.
- Increase in training expenses and administrative costs.
- Injured worker may have to be replaced

3. Types of interactions at workplace which may be hazardous

- Physical, Chemical and Biological agents
- Machine and work Environment
- Interactions with other people

Physical Agents-

- Heat -Stroke, Exhaustion, Heat rash.
- Cold -Hypothermia
- Noise -deafness
- Vibration-Osteoarthritis

Chemical Agents-

- Fumes, particulates -Asbestos, silica,dust, fibrous materials
- Gases-Methane, Nitrogen,
- Dust -Hay or grain dust

Biological Agents-

- Bacteria, virus, Mosquitoes, Hep A, HepB, HIV aids

Machine and Work Environment

- Repetitive and Monotonous jobs with little control over workplace.
- Repetitive Strain injuries

- Ergonomic Issues Uncomfortable work heights, forced postures at work, Poor lighting and Ventilation, long working hours with little rest, badly designed tools, Shift system effecting the circadian rhythms and biological clock for women etc.

Interactions with people

Bullying, Sexual Harassment, Bossism, Physical and verbal abuse etc

Hazards at workplace are similar to men and women. But the following should be considered with respect to women workers.

- Women and men vary in physical, Physiological and Psychological make up and these factors determine how risks affect them at workplace.
- Women on an average have a smaller stature, less physical strength, vital capacity 11% less, Hemoglobin 20% less, skin area larger, more body fat content and lower heat and cold tolerance.
- Women's unique reproductive function exposes her unborn child to workplace hazards.
- Women also shoulder additional responsibilities of household tasks, care of children and social responsibilities
- Identifying issues with occupational health of women remains a challenge since much of women's work remains unrecognized, uncounted and unpaid.
- A woman worker is therefore more vulnerable to health risks at workplace.

4. Occupational Health and safety practices

- Nutrition (Counseling, subsidized food)
- Environmental sanitation -Water supply, Toilet, proper disposal of garbage, Lighting and Ventilation.
- Health checkups, Health Education and counseling.
- Providing and maintaining safe machine systems of work for employees.
- Control of Dust, fumes and gases through good design of Buildings.
- Safety and protective gears for workers exposed to hazards.
- Instructional training and supervision to employees
- Demonstration of safe working practices

- Maternity benefits, leave benefits, grievance cell, Compensation and Health Insurance, Creches for childcare.
- Regulation on working hours, helping women workers achieve work-life balance.
- Security for women working in night shifts.
- Awareness about the various hazards among the workers.
- **Exclusionary policies-** Not to employ pregnant and other women in jobs that may expose them to reproductive hazards.
- **Transfer policies for women-** Providing a different job in the same workplace where the pregnant women are safe from hazardous substances.
- Companies should attach same importance towards achieving high OHS performance as to other business objectives
- Ergonomic Interventions
- Health insurance and compensation
- Legislations and laws should be extended to small enterprises.

5. Conclusion

- A good indicator of economic and social inclusion for women is the availability and access to employment.
- Employment empowers women in many ways
- However certain work environments make women workers more vulnerable to certain risks.
- Policies and programs in the workplace should be formulated and adopted for the promotion of the rights and welfare of women who are seen as crucial partners in attaining a nation's economic development more so in the unorganized sectors which do not fall under the purview of legislations.
- An employment policy that ensures access to work for everyone and enables individuals to sustain themselves and their families by their own work will translate into socioeconomic development of communities and countries.
- OHS is a basic element and constitutes a social and health dimension of the principle of sustainable Development.
- The onus of OHS should lie on the employer who need to be sensitive to the issues of OHS.

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