

August 29, 2024

Empowering women in the workplace: Health and Safety considerations



In today's rapidly evolving work environment, the value women bring to the workplace is recognised more than ever.

Women are essential to creating inclusive, balanced and dynamic teams, offering diverse perspectives and skills shaped by varied backgrounds and experiences. As Sheryl Sandberg aptly noted, *"In the future, there will be no female leaders. There will just be leaders"*.

However, despite these advancements, women continue to face distinct challenges in the workplace that demand focused attention. From ergonomic concerns and pregnancy-related health issues to the need for appropriately fitting personal protective equipment (PPE) and the ongoing battle against workplace harassment, these health and safety issues directly impact women's well-being and productivity.

This blog aims to investigate these challenges, offering practical strategies and insights to create a safer, more inclusive workplace.

Why should the safety and well-being of women in the workplace be ensured?

Ensuring the safety and well-being of women in the workplace is not only a legal and ethical responsibility but also a strategic advantage for organisations. When women feel safe and valued, they are more likely to be engaged, productive, and loyal to their employers or the organisations within which they operate.

Ultimately, supporting women in the workplace is not only about compliance but also about building a resilient, innovative and forward-thinking culture where all employees are valued.

Below are some of the Health and Safety challenges faced by women in the workplace.

Physical Health Issues

Women in the workplace encounter a range of physical health challenges that are often overlooked. *Ergonomic issues*, for instance, are a significant concern.

Workstations, tools and equipment tend to be designed with a one-size-fits-all approach, often catering for the average male physique. This can lead to discomfort, repetitive strain injuries, chronic fatigue, and long-term musculoskeletal problems for women. Adjusting workstations to fit the ergonomic needs of women can mitigate these risks, improving both comfort and productivity.

Pregnancy-related health poses another critical physical health challenge. Pregnant employees may face physical limitations and increased vulnerability to certain workplace hazards. Exposure to toxic substances, heavy lifting, prolonged standing, and high stress levels can adversely affect both the mother and the developing baby. Employers should consider implementing accommodations such as modified duties, more frequent breaks, and adjustments to work schedules to ensure a safer and more comfortable environment for pregnant employees.

Mental Health Issues

Mental health is equally important and often intertwined with physical health. Women in the workplace may experience unique stressors that contribute to anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Workplace harassment, including sexual harassment and gender discrimination, remains an issue that can severely impact a woman's mental well-being. Such experiences can lead to decreased job satisfaction, increased absenteeism, and even long-term psychological trauma.

Employers need to proactively address these issues by establishing and enforcing strict anti-harassment policies within the organisation. Providing training and awareness programmes on respectful workplace behaviour and creating safe channels for reporting harassment incidents are essential steps.

Furthermore, appointing mental health first-aiders or offering support services, such as counselling and stress management programmes, are ways in which organisations can help women address these challenges proactively.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

The design and availability of PPE pose another set of challenges for women. *Standard PPE* is often designed with men in mind, resulting in ill-fitting safety clothing and gear that fail to provide adequate protection for women.

Poorly fitting PPE can be uncomfortable, limit mobility, and reduce the effectiveness of the protection it is meant to offer. For example, oversized gloves can hinder a woman's ability to handle equipment safely, and improperly fitting respirators might not provide a secure seal, exposing the wearer to harmful substances.

Employers need to recognise these differences and provide PPE that fits properly and meets the specific needs of women. This includes offering a range of sizes and designs tailored to the female anatomy. Additionally, involving female employees in the selection and testing of PPE can ensure that the equipment is both effective and comfortable.

Women face different hazards and risks than men. For example, pregnant women in mines must go on maternity leave early due to health risks, and adjustments to equipment are necessary to accommodate physical differences. Addressing these unique risks through gender-sensitive risk assessments and professional risk management is crucial.

How can women overcome some of these workplace challenges?

Women in the workplace face numerous challenges, from gender bias to unequal pay and limited opportunities for promotion. However, resilience, persistence, perseverance and drive are key attributes that empower women to overcome these obstacles.

Imagine a seed buried in the soil, surrounded by darkness. The challenges it faces, such as droughts and floods, are similar to the societal and professional hurdles women encounter. Yet, these challenges soften the outer shell of the seed, allowing it to sprout roots and grow. Similarly, women draw strength from adversity, pushing through the soil to reach the light. This journey requires immense determination and the ability to withstand hardships, and ultimately leads to growth and success.

Women who embody these qualities not only survive but thrive, turning obstacles into opportunities and breaking barriers that once seemed insurmountable. Their journey, much like the seed's, is a testament to the power of resilience and the unwavering drive to succeed.

Why is it important to involve women in the decision-making process?

Involving women in decision-making processes within the workplace, especially in relation to health and safety issues, is essential. Their first-hand experience with discomfort in workspaces, ill-fitting PPE, and hostile working conditions provides an opportunity to address issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Women's natural empathy also allows them to understand and address the needs and concerns of colleagues and clients more effectively. Additionally, women often excel in record-keeping and administrative tasks, ensuring that operations run smoothly and efficiently. Their creativity and innovative solutions to complex problems, can bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Including women in workplace improvement discussions is crucial as they can authentically raise women-related concerns, and ensure that the workplace is safe, inclusive, and comfortable for all.

In conclusion

Familiarising yourself with various applicable legislation, regulations and by-laws will equip you as employer to understand the demands of the industry better. Key legislation to consider includes the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), *Construction Regulations* 2014, General Safety Regulations and General Administrative Regulations.

SERR Synergy assists business owners with a comprehensive OHS service to create, and continuously enhance, a health and safety culture and system in line with the business's internal policies and goals. We have a dedicated and qualified team that implements health and safety legislation, and assists with small- to large-scale OHS projects, concerns or aspects.

About the Author: Inge-Marie joined our team in August 2018 and currently holds the title 'OHS Team Lead'. She holds a B.Com in Business Management from UNISA and is currently studying towards her Honours degree. She has more than six years' experience in the construction and health and safety industry, specialising in roof work and working at heights. She is currently responsible for a team of professionals who work in various industries, including construction, manufacturing, chemicals and oil, restaurants and transportation. As a certified internal auditor for Integrated Management Systems, ISO 9001, ISO 45001 and ISO 14001, she conducts internal audits for clients and assists with the development and implementation of Integrated Management Systems (Safety, Health, Environment and Quality).

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