A Symposium on gender perspectives on musculoskeletal health at work – a Swedish initiative

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The objective of this symposium is to share knowledge and experiences on the working conditions and health of females from different perspectives of relevance to inequality, such as organisational structures, leadership, physical workloads and psychosocial factors. In doing so, we wish to promote collaboration between institutions and organisations engaged in improving working conditions in a gender context, thus supporting gender equality.

1. The assignment

The Swedish Work Environment Authority (SWEA) was commissioned by the Swedish government to develop and implement specific interventions during the period 2011-2014, for the purpose of preventing females from being excluded from working life because of restrictions in the work environment, with an emphasis on conditions related to musculoskeletal health and ergonomics.

As an answer to this government commission the Swedish Work Environment Authority initiated two projects. The projects aimed at increasing awareness and knowledge among employers, workers and other key stakeholders on:

- Differences in working conditions between females and males
- Prevention of musculoskeletal disorders and implementation of good ergonomics, emphasizing a gender perspective.

The projects were realized in close collaboration with researchers from Swedish universities.

2. Individual contributions

Five papers will be presented in order to share knowledge and experiences on women’s working conditions and health from different perspectives related to inequality such as organisational structures, leadership, physical workloads and psychosocial factors.

2.1 Physical Work, gender and health in working life

As an initiative within the governmental Commission, the Swedish Work Environment Authority requested a review of the scientific literature from researchers at the University of Gävle, devoted to possible explanations why females report work-related musculoskeletal disorders to a considerably larger extent than males in industrialized societies.

The review presents a model illustrating a cascade of factors that could contribute to the gender inequality in health, ranging from a segregated labour market to females being treated differently by health care providers and social insurance systems. The review then focus particularly on three steps in the model, i.e. whether females and males sharing the same job get different job tasks, whether females and males performing identical tasks experience different biomechanical exposures, and whether females and males having the same biomechanical exposure show different physiologic responses. The review concludes that the answer to all three questions is “yes”, but that gender differences in organisational and ergonomics factors (i.e. assignment of work tasks, design of work stations and tools) are likely to contribute much more in explaining health inequalities than differences in biology between females and males. The review also concludes that the scientific evidence on, in particular, organisational factors of current relevance is limited, since available studies are few and, to a large extent, old.
2.2 Working conditions in female and male dominated sectors in Swedish municipalities

In the project the Work Environment inspected the work environment and studied work relationships in general in 59 municipalities’ home care services and technical administrations during 2013. We wrote demands for corrective actions and we can state that the prevailing gender pattern in society and in working life, i.e. that the man is the norm and the that the women’s work is assigned a lower value is also found in the two activities we investigated. This gender pattern influences the preconditions for a good work environment for the managers and staff in the home care sector. That the Social Services Act in practice tends to be given precedence in relation to the Work Environment Act in the care of patients also tends to contribute. Both laws apply in parallel and neither of them has precedence over the other.

2.3 Initiatives for prevention specifically focusing women’s physical workloads

A national inspection activity where workplaces were inspected within the health care and social care sector, focusing risk assessment and management in patient handling. All, both women and men, must be able to carry out their work without jeopardizing their health and quality of life. Nobody should be injured when taking care of others. Injuries that develop gradually are difficult to discover in time. The focus in work environment management has traditionally been to prevent accidents. With this supervision, we wished to contribute by preventing musculoskeletal disorders. Employers were given tools to visualize today’s risks in order to prevent tomorrow’s injuries.

3.3 Women’s work environment, health and ergonomics: the impact of the project within the Swedish Work Environment Authority

The program aimed to increase awareness and knowledge of employers, workers and other stakeholders on women’s and men’s differing working conditions and on the question how to prevent musculoskeletal disorders and how to create good ergonomics. The projects consisted of three parts: knowledge acquisition and distribution, methodological and professional development and supervision. Results show that a gender segregated labour market entails differences in physical and psychological work load at the same time as women’s work is valued less than men’s work does. Both men and women gain of a gender perspective on work environment management. A sustainable work life demands organisational changes.

3.4 A gender perspective in occupational health projects – a success story?

The program has been evaluated continuously by researchers from Mid University. Results from research have been continuously discussed with project management. One of the conclusions from the research is that it is much needed to focus on the gender patterns impregnating the work of the inspections just as well as the work of the employers that are expected to improve their work environments. All in all, there is much to gain from integrating a gender perspective in the practical every day work of inspections in order to understand more about the ways in which gender norms impregnate work practices. This program also showed the importance to create arenas for continuously reflecting over what gender and gender equality means in particular contexts so that knowledge located close to the practical work with ergonomics and a broad range of work environment issues can be acknowledged. This knowledge can tell us about problems as well as possibilities that need to be taken care of all the way through to the government level.

References

Swedish Work Environment Authority, Inspections of female and male dominated municipal activities, home care services and technical administration, report 2014:03.