CHAPTER 16

Occupational Health and Safety
for Women Workers: Some Teaching Models

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The passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970 guaranteed workers the right to a safe and healthful work place. The law made employers responsible for furnishing jobs and places of employment "free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm." The Occupational Safety and Health Administration within the U.S. Department of Labor was assigned the responsibility for enforcing this law, while many state governments enforce the health and safety laws within their own states. But workers still must know what their rights are and how to ensure that they are enforced. Basic to this is education and training on how the law works, how to use it, and what the hazards are in specific work places. The role of educating in this field usually falls to the unions and to labor education centers, although some employers do provide training in certain (primarily safety-related) areas.

As an increasingly large component of the work force, women need this type of training for a number of special reasons. First, jobs that traditionally employ large numbers of women have unexplored, unstudied hazards. Second, information on known hazards (for example, emissions from copying machines) often is not made available to them. Third, women are moving into non-traditional jobs where they may be exposed to a number of toxic materials. Fourth, certain chemicals women (and men) work with are now known to have detrimental effects on reproductive capacity. Finally, as more women become involved in their unions and take more active leadership roles, they should be provided with information on enforcing health and safety job regulations, since it is a growing concern of workers in all industries and occupations.
Occupational Health and Safety for Women Workers

This chapter discusses our experiences with four models for training women workers in occupational health and safety. It also supplies basic information on resources and groups involved in this area of training.

1. Short Presentations at Union Meetings or Conferences

Objectives: To increase women workers' awareness of the job hazards they face, and to begin to explore the tools available for correcting job hazards.

Training model: A half-hour presentation with a half hour for discussion and questions from the floor.

The two-and-a-half-day Trade Union Women's Summer School held at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1978, is a good example of this teaching model. This conference was co-sponsored by UCLA's Labor Center, the California Federation of Labor, and the Coalition of Labor Union Women. Health and safety was one of a number of topics covered at the conference, which was attended by about a hundred union women. In the hour on health and safety the speaker focused on stimulating the women's interest in surveying their own workplaces for possible hazards and in learning how to begin to combat those hazards (for example, forming union committees, filing OSHA complaints, and testifying at hearings). Instances of how women had used these tools were given as an incentive for the women in the audience to become more involved. Examples of serious job injuries such as amputations suffered by women in California during the previous year, as well as statistics on occupational illnesses among women, demonstrated the problem's seriousness.

To reinforce interest, the summer school coordinator incorporated health and safety issues into simulation exercises later in the conference. A class on organizing was given a role-play exercise that included information about skin disorders from exposure to a chemical used in a part of a plant that was the union's campaign target.

The same model can be used when speaking at union meetings, but here the speaker should become familiar with the particular needs of the union in order to discuss hazards specific to the members (for example, the hazards of video display terminals for clerical workers or newspaper employees). Highlight successful methods used by other unions that might be applicable, such as experiences in establishing health and safety committees. A brief (fifteen- to twenty-minute) movie or slide show can stimulate union interest at this kind of meeting.

In-depth discussions about using OSHA, or specifics of occupational diseases, are not recommended for these sessions, unless the group has had considerable prior experience in considering OSHA-related issues. The pur-
pose of the session is to stimulate interest. Developing expertise should follow in later sessions with the same workers or with union representatives.

2. At Residential Union Conferences or Schools

Objectives: To introduce women workers to the field of occupational health and safety, explain their rights under existing laws, and acquaint them with how to exercise these rights. To provide a general introduction to occupational disease. To teach recognition and evaluation of hazards in the work place and methods of control.

Training model: The optimum time frame is six to eight hours, for example, two to three hours a day in a three-day conference format. Additional time, however, would allow more active participation, learning how to fill out complaint forms, writing to elected officials, conducting a mock inspection. At the 1977, 1978, and 1979 Northeastern Regional Summer Schools for Union Women, students could elect a four-day workshop on health and safety. The following topics were covered:

A. Introduction to Law: Why the law was passed; who is covered; rights and responsibilities of employers and employees under the law; state programs; filing complaints; the inspection process; post-inspection follow-up; discrimination complaints. Resources for this session: How to Use OSHA: A Workers' Action Guide to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Cambridge, Mass.: Urban Planning Aid, 1975); The Shop Accident, a film from the Wisconsin School for Workers.

B. Occupational Disease: How the body functions and defends itself against disease; how the body is broken down by work place hazards, with examples of common chemical and physical hazards. Resources for this session: slide show on noise developed by the Labor Occupational Health Program (University of California, Berkeley); various network TV shows (for example, 60 Minutes video on Kepone); “All in a Day's Work,” a slide show by Urban Planning Aid, Boston, or “Your Job or Your Life,” Institute for Labor Education and Research, New York.

C. Recognition and Control of Work Place Hazards: Common symptoms of occupational exposure to hazardous materials or agents; doing a work place survey; keeping a health and safety log; examples of controls for various work place hazards. Resources: occupational health survey form developed by the Labor Occupational Health Program; the list “Common Occupational Health Disease Symptoms,” available from Urban Planning Aid, Boston.

Developing an Effective OSHA Committee in the Local: We consider the optimum size for a group working intensively on this subject to be fifteen to eighteen students. While basic information can be presented in a large
Occupational Health and Safety for Women Workers

group, it limits individual involvement. Specific questions may be inhibited, and opportunities for in-depth discussions vanish. We suggest dividing large groups into sub-groups by occupational category. Clerical workers can then handle stress problems, for example, while industrial workers can learn more about controlling hazardous exposure to chemicals.

3. A One-Issue Conference for a Cross-Section of Working Women

Objectives: To acquaint working women with their rights under existing health and safety laws; how to use these rights; how to use collective bargaining to improve workplace conditions; how to form a health and safety committee.

Training model: Here the agenda from a 1978 "OSHA for Union Women" conference co-sponsored by the California State Labor Federation, AFL-CIO, and the Labor Occupational Health Program (University of California, Berkeley) is presented to indicate the basic information to include in a one-day, one-topic format.

8:30 Registration
9:30 Conference opening
9:45 Introduction to health and safety problems faced by women workers (with information on jobs commonly held, health hazards, stress)
10:15 Speak out: participants discuss health and safety complaints on their jobs and their efforts to correct them
10:45 Identifying workplace hazards: noise, stress, toxic chemicals, reproductive hazards
11:15 How to use OSHA effectively: employee rights and employer responsibilities
12:00 Luncheon; guest speaker
1:30 How to get results on health and safety problems: case examples
1:45 Health and safety as an organizing tool; using collective bargaining for health and safety; importance of health and safety committees
2:45 Workshops: what hazards are you facing and what are useful strategies for correcting them. Three concurrent workshops, with head of state OSHA program circulating throughout to answer questions or hear complaints:
1. Production workers—hazards of asbestos, carbon monoxide, noise, toxic chemicals
2. Clerical workers—hazards of stress, noise, falls, poor ventilation, poorly designed seating, use of video display terminals, copy machine chemicals
3. Service workers, public employees, and others—hazards of noise, lifting, slips and falls, stress, security problems, under-staffing, pesticides, and other toxic substances

4:00 General session and address; reports from workshops
4:45 Remarks
5:00 Adjournment

The “speak out” is one of the most important sessions in this kind of conference. It gives women a chance to articulate problems they are having and to define for themselves some of the hazards they face. Where possible, co-leaders for the workshops are a good idea and augment the information available to members of the group. In any event, provide guidelines for each group leader to ensure as similar a format for each workshop as possible. A good recorder in each group makes the report-back session at the end of the day more valuable.

A common problem at OSHA conferences where men who work in production jobs are present (as they were at the conference outlined here) is that they are forthright, even aggressive, about sharing their experiences with industrial accidents. The women, often less familiar with the issues, defer to the men, thus losing the opportunity to come forward with their concerns about job stress, reproductive hazards, and other issues that seem “tame” in comparison. Care must be taken to brief discussion leaders about giving equal time to the less experienced members of the group to voice their concerns.

Special mention should be made of the session for clerical workers, which proved especially productive. White-collar workers from a variety of unions shared concerns about the same issue: fatigue from video display terminals. Because of this common interest, and because they felt that the state agency on occupational health tended to overlook this issue, they decided to form a coalition of members from a variety of unions to draft a new set of state standards on the use of this equipment. After the conference, they followed up this move, developing a survey questionnaire for union members in industries and companies where terminals are in use.

A valuable part of the conference was the resource packet prepared for all participants. This included background materials and newspaper and scientific articles in four areas: (1) Job hazards, stress, noise, varicose
Occupational Health and Safety for Women Workers

veins, video display terminals. (2) Reproductive hazards. (3) How to take action: using OSHA and your union procedures, a chart of the California OSHA program, sample workplace surveys and questionnaires, suggestions for keeping committee minutes, lists of useful books and publications. (4) Issues of the Labor Occupational Health Program newsletter on electronics, hospital workers, and drycleaning establishments.

This conference model was replicated in Honolulu, where the Labor Occupational Health Program was invited to come in as co-sponsor with the Hawaii State Federation of Labor, the University of Hawaii Labor Center, the Hawaii Commission on the Status of Women, the Hawaii State Department of Industrial Relations, and federal OSHA. Such joint sponsorship establishes valuable liaison among organizations with a common concern and commitment both to occupational health and safety and to women's involvement in it.

The Honolulu sessions drew some 170 participants. Most were not represented by labor unions or associations, but came in response to a newspaper advertisement. This recruiting technique worked well and demonstrated the widespread and growing concern about the subject.

Other public interest organizations have recently held similar day-long conferences for working women on health and safety issues. The Chicago and Philadelphia Committees on Occupational Safety and Health each conducted conferences that drew more than two hundred women. Co-sponsorship at these events involved area local unions, university groups, women's organizations, and the Coalition of Labor Union Women.

A word of caution to those who teach at women's conferences such as these: questions from the floor often pertain to issues involving understaffing and stress, while most experts in occupational health and safety are more comfortable suggesting solutions to problems involving toxic chemicals. We recommend that you pay special attention to determining ahead of time whether there have been workers' compensation claims for stress in your state, and whether federal or state OSHA programs have responded to complaints that involve stress or understaffing. OSHA generally will not act on stress complaints unless health effects are well documented. Therefore you might emphasize how to document hazards in this area, an increasingly important one for unions organizing in the white-collar field.

For the "action" sections of these one-day programs, we consistently try to use case examples of women filing OSHA complaints where positive changes have resulted, and of women's involvement on health and safety committees, to provide role models for participants.
4. Workshops or Classes on Specific Hazards

Objective: To provide in-depth training to union representatives with health and safety responsibilities for resolving OSHA complaints.

Training model: A two-day health and safety conference for the twenty health and safety committee members of a flight attendants' union.

Advance research is necessary into the particular hazards faced by the occupational group coming in for training. Here, for example, sessions centered around jet lag, middle ear problems, varicose veins, back problems, nutrition, flying's effects on pregnancy, and ozone. There are jurisdictional problems between the Federal Aviation Administration and OSHA that needed discussion at the conference and prior investigation by teachers. A pre-conference literature search was conducted, and a public health nutritionist was invited to teach a special session on diet.

These four models are examples of how information on one major subject, health and safety, can be integrated into labor education. Program designers and labor educators can adapt the models to fit their own situations. The integrative aspect is vital, for health and safety is increasingly an issue in collective bargaining. Working conditions are subject to union grievance procedures, and membership on health and safety committees is often an important first step for workers, especially women, to become more active in their labor unions or associations. We see programs on occupational health and safety as multi-purpose, a clear reason why they should receive more attention from educators.

Resources

Keeping current on changes in health and safety legislation and the latest research on workplace hazards is essential and difficult. Instructors of labor classes on health and safety should know the basics of the subject. Some materials that have been found especially useful have been referred to already. The following list provides a more complete review of resources that should prove helpful both to instructors and students of health and safety issues. Many are available at bookstores or through the publisher. For those published by unions or other groups such as the Labor Occupational Health Program, order directly from the organization. Asterisks indicate: * a good introduction to the field; ** a good information source on issues and hazards particularly relating to women; *** a good information source on a particular issue, for example, asbestos.

In addition, you may want more specific information on particular substances, and how to keep exposures within safe or acceptable limits. Two very good industrial hygiene resources are:


Finally, you might find the following publications useful for keeping track of what’s going on in the field, what standards are being set, and what other worker groups are doing in the area of health and safety. Several, for example *Survival Kit* and *Occupational Health and Safety Newsletter*, offer good fact sheets on particular hazards.

*Cacosh Health and Safety News.* Published monthly by the Chicago Area Committee on Occupational Safety and Health, Room 508, 542 S. Dearborn Street, Chicago, Ill. 60605.

*IUD Facts and Analysis.* Published monthly by the Industrial Union Dept., AFL-
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CIO, 815 16th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

Lifelines Health and Safety News. Published monthly by the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, 1636 Champa Street, Denver, Colo. 80202.

LSHI Guides. Published periodically by the Labor Safety and Health Institute, 377 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y., 10016.

Monitor. Published bi-monthly by the Labor Occupational Health Program, 2521 Channing Way, Berkeley, Cal. 94720.


Safer Times. Published monthly by the Philadelphia Area Project on Occupational Safety and Health, 1321 Arch Street, Room 607, Philadelphia, Pa. 19107.

Survival Kit. Published bi-monthly by the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health, Box 17236, Back Bay Station, Boston, Mass. 02116.

Women’s Occupational Health Resource Center Fact Sheet. Published monthly by the center, School of Public Health, Columbia University, 60 Haven Ave. B-1, New York, N.Y. 10032.

SLIDE SHOWS

“All in a Day’s Work.” An introductory slide show on occupational health produced by Urban Planning Aid and sold through Mass COSH (address above, under Survival Kit).

“Are You Dying for a Job?” 30-minute slide show that introduces occupational health hazards and methods of prevention. Available from Western Institute for Occupational/Environmental Sciences, 3009 Hillegass Ave., Berkeley, Cal. 94705.


“Your Job or Your Life.” 25-minute slide show that examines problems facing working people, especially health and safety. Available from Institute for Labor Education and Research, 853 Broadway, Rm. 2007, New York, N.Y. 10003.

FILMS

The Shop Accident. How to use OSHA and follow through on an OSHA safety inspection, for rent or sale from the University of Wisconsin School for Workers.

Song of the Canary. Directed by Josh Hanig and Dave Davis, distributed through New Day Films, 660 York Street, San Francisco, Cal., this is primarily about DBCP and brown lung.

Occupational Health and Safety for Women Workers

Working Steel. A film about foundry workers, produced by the Labor Occupational Health Program under the direction of Ken Light; available for sale or rent from LOHP.

Several television stations have carried excellent documentaries on occupational health, although these are often available through the station on a purchase basis only. We recommend Kepone, a CBS documentary shown several years ago on 60 Minutes; in only twenty minutes it surveys occupational health issues more effectively than any other short film we have viewed.

Organizations

A number of groups around the country are active in health and safety issues. Several labor education centers within universities have set up occupational health programs, and new centers started programs in fall 1978, following funding from the U.S. Department of Labor. The New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, conducts a college credit program at night for in-depth training of union leaders and representatives on issues of health and safety. Contact: Frank Goldsmith, Cornell University, 3 East 43 Street, New York, N.Y. 10017.

Numerous labor organizations have developed or are launching education programs for their members on health and safety. In addition, one group in New York City, the Women's Occupational Health Resource Center, is a research arm and clearinghouse for information on women's occupational health concerns. Contact: Dr. Jeanne Stellman, School of Public Health, Columbia University, 60 Haven Ave. B-1, New York, N.Y. 10032.

The Labor Occupational Health Program (University of California, Berkeley, 2521 Channing Way, Berkeley, Cal. 94720) provides technical expertise on health hazards faced by workers, conducts educational training sessions, and produces written and media materials designed to reach women workers.