

WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY REVIEW MUST CONSIDER WOMEN'S NEEDS

A WOMAN'S VIEW Ginette Petitpas Taylor

Women are workers too – almost half of the New Brunswick workforce in fact - but you wouldn't know it from reading the discussion papers just released by New Brunswick's Independent Review Panel on the Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation System.

You won't find any mention of differences between women and men in coverage, claims and benefits, the appeals system or governance. None of the data is broken down by sex.

It is not a surprise - most of the slew of recent provincial government inquiries have proceeded as if gender didn't exist or matter - but it's a disappointment nonetheless. Evidently, no direction is being given by the government to examine gender breakdown, to give a thought to different realities of women and men – to consider diversity or equality.

One size definitely doesn't fit all in workplace health and safety. Women and men experience specific occupational health problems from exposure to different risk factors on the job, at home and because of their biological makeup.

Few New Brunswick women are found on a construction site or in a sawmill, the kinds of workplaces where accidents may produce loss of limbs or even death. Women more typically suffer from injuries that are not immediately visible while holding down jobs in child care centres, fish plants, banks and offices, call centres, bars and restaurants.

Women account for just 3% of workplace fatalities but 33% of time-loss injuries in Canada.

Women get the occupational diseases that go with doing rigid, repetitive movements over long periods, with a rapid work pace and inadequate recovery time between movements. That produces musculoskeletal system disorders such as carpal tunnel syndrome and bursitis. This is often made worse by the other conditions of women's work, stress and environmental issues such as unrealistic performance quotas, poor air quality and fluctuating temperatures.

Less than 3% of the claims currently accepted by the WHSCC are for occupational diseases.

Occupational injuries sustained by women are under-reported, because the effects take longer to become noticeable, in some cases only emerging after the worker has retired, so that the workplace link is more difficult to pinpoint.

Women's precarious footing in the labour force means that they often accept unfavourable working conditions. Women are more likely than men to be working for a small employer, to work part-time, to do home-based and contract work. They also earn less on average than men and are more likely to be lone parents, which further undercuts their ability to challenge dangerous or unhealthy working conditions. And that sometimes includes sexual harassment, bullying and physical violence.

And then women come home. Some studies show that while men's blood pressure declines when coming home, women's often rises, and women with three or more children have been found to be twice as likely to develop heart disease as women with fewer or no children.

Women's specific needs have not received the attention nor the protection they deserve in research, policy and program development in workers health and safety systems. When it comes to prevention and education efforts and compensation coverage, female workers are at the back of the bus.

The Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission in this province desperately needs to look at the differing needs of women and men workers.

The issue of workplace bullying is being included by some other jurisdictions in workplace health and safety legislation, and given the massive response to sessions on the subject held around the province this fall, New Brunswick has a problem. There is a pressing need to name the problem, prevent it and provide targets with recourses.

New Brunswick and Nova Scotia are the only provinces that exclude employers from compulsory workers' compensation coverage based on their size. New Brunswick employers with fewer than three employees and employers in the fishing industry with fewer than 25 employees are not required to have coverage.

Approximately 21,300 New Brunswick workers, or 6% of all employees, had no workers' compensation coverage in 2006. The breakdown by sex is not available, but many of the excluded are women who work in small enterprises, including non-profit organizations. Coverage should be compulsory for all employers.

Coverage for volunteers should also be expanded to include areas in which women are active. Currently only a few categories of volunteers are covered under the Act: firefighters, emergency services workers, persons assisting a peace officer, and a few others.

The high cost of coverage for non-profit organizations is another problem that was raised by a number of women's groups and many other community groups that met with the Premier's Community Non-Profit Task Force. Organizations such as transition houses are forced to pay steep rates because they are placed in a higher risk category. The problem is the way the WHSCC classifies agencies' risks.

Transition houses are likened to homes for physically handicapped or disabled individuals and are charged rates similar to drug addiction and alcohol treatment clinics and ambulance services. Yet the nature of work in such settings is clearly more dangerous than providing housing and counselling to women and children victims of abuse.

One New Brunswick transition house administrator reports having to pay \$2.28 per \$100 payroll in Worker's Compensation, resulting in a bill of over \$3,700 every year. The rate for such organizations in PEI is 29 cents per \$100.

Here's hoping the Panel will hear from people who value and depend on women, women's work. Starting next week, the Panel is taking its show on the road, with a series of public meetings. The last stop is in Moncton on November 22nd, 7 p.m. at the Future Inn. The Panel reports to the government in January 2008.

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