

SESSION I. WORK LIFE IN TRANSITION

1. Impact of a Changing U.S. Workforce on the Occupational Injury and Illness Experience

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Over the past quarter century, the civilian labor force has expanded considerably. The increase in the number of available workers can be attributable to two principal factors—rapid population growth and a sharp increase in participation in the labor force on the part of women. In the early 1970's, just over 4 out of 10 women in the civilian noninstitutional population were in the labor force. Of those employed, 38% were women. By 1997, nearly 6 out of every 10 women were in the civilian labor force. Women represented 46% of the employed; an increase of 20% in 25 years. This upward trend is expected to continue throughout the century. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that the number of women in the labor force will increase by 14%.

Not only is the women's proportion of the workforce increasing, but the number of hours they spend on the job and the number of days employed per year is increasing. From the early 1970's to the mid 1990's, the proportion of women working full time increased from just over 40% to about 55%. These changes in the workforce suggest that the potential for increased exposure to hazards in the workplace for United States women exists.

The number and rate of women suffering an occupational fatality has been far less than the number of men. The National Traumatic Occupational Fatality surveillance system reports that the fatality rate for males was 12 times higher than for females over the period 1980–1989. Although the rates and numbers have historically been lower, the proportion of fatalities attributable to women is increasing with time. In the 1992 Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, 7% of fatalities were suffered by women. By 1995, the percentage had increased to 8.6.

However, knowing the magnitude of the problem does not sufficiently explain the scenario. The conditions where female workers are injured, both fatal and non-fatal, are very different from male workers. For example, in a 1988 National Health Interview Survey, 675,000 workers self-reported experiencing carpal tunnel. Overall, the number of cases per 100 workers for women far surpassed the number for men; with some age groups more than double. The same results hold true in the BLS Annual Survey. Additionally, women are generally employed in relatively safe occupations such as white collar and service occupations.

As the labor force continues to change, it will become increasingly important to identify the characteristics associated with women in the workplace. This research examines workforce changes over time and the associated impact on occupational safety and health outcomes. The analysis is descriptive, reviews trends in employment and industry and projects trends into the 21st century. This information provides policy-makers additional data to make more effective decisions regarding the allocation of safety research and injury prevention resources.

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