

But what made RSI a legitimate occupational health issue was the courage of the women who, in the face of cynicism and attacks on their integrity and dignity, just hung in there.

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In Asia today, women more increasingly than men are being employed in the export industries. If you look at economic data, more and more women are economic heads of households. This is why women have to hold on to their health—for the sake of their own health and the viability of the family. If they are injured or disabled by work, it can throw a family that is just surviving into the hole called poverty.

Women's experience of work and the occupational risks they confront, on the whole, are different to men's—not because they are women but because of the gender segregation of labor. Women are more at risk of soft tissue injuries because they do a lot of the repetitive assembly line work. They get a lot of cancer because the industries they work in, such as the dry cleaning and electronics industry, routinely use carcinogens. In the majority world, the regulation of workplace cancer causing agents is much more lax.

At the risk of making broad generalisations, men tend to have a lot more lacerations, amputations and transportation injuries. Women tend to have more chronic, long term, disabling illnesses.

MAKING IT SIMPLE

One of the important things for those who teach occupational health to women workers is to make it easy. Not that women can't deal with complexity, but because they have so many other things to do and their available hours are limited.

One of the beauties of what happened in the province of Leyte in the Philippines was that it was so easy. Imelda Marcos had a new copper smelter built as her gift to the people of the province. Copper smelting draws a lot of power and this one was linked to a local geothermal plant. When the power supply could not keep up with the smelter's demands, it shut down. When it did, for some strange reason, the pollution control mechanics, would open and heaps of sulphuric acid would pour into the bay—so much that the pH (a measure of acidity) of the seawater was 2.3—that's as acidic as vinegar.

The sulphuric dioxide emissions caused a lot of chest disease in the nearby community and amongst the workers. The smelter had passed the environmental impact assessment and the community felt that they could not do anything without complex

Working for Life

Melody Kemp's *Working for Life* is a basic text for women workers, labor activists and trade union workers. It is meant to serve as a source book for women workers, just like occupational health workers have their 10-centimeter textbook of chemicals as a back-up.

The book originally started as a handbook for labor inspectors, a simple handbook that could be stuck into back pockets. Melody was chief advisor on a project that was to improve the conditions of working women in Indonesia. After visiting about 125 factories, it became very clear to her that the labor inspectors had no idea of the way in which women were differently affected by occupational hazards.

Melody was staring out the window one night when she realized that the people who really needed these information were the women themselves. Most of them are not members of unions and there is hardly any workers' education programs for shop floor workers.

Materials coming from the trade unions in the industrialized world assume that readers are technically educated and understand the language of legislation. But women in the developing world do not have formal education. Where would women get information?

Wanting to use her experience as a woman in occupational health, and being a former trade union member, Melody wanted to speak with women workers to encourage them to know and become familiar with the language and "alchemy" of occupational health. She firmly believes that information is power and that with information, women workers can feel the courage of the informed.

Working for Life is simple without oversimplifying things and without being patronizing. It actually speaks with women because they are the ones who get totally left out.

"*Working for Life* is not the only book in the world on occupational health but it maybe is the only one that is for women directly. It is a practical handbook, a how-to-do guide, a bit like *Where There is no Doctor* for workers," declares Melody. "I hope women will be able to pick it up and use it."