Naturland
ACADEMY

Safe Work for Women

A Gender Perspective on Occupational Health and Safety in Agricultural Value Chains

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Briefing Paper

Naturland

Even though women constitute an essential part of the agricultural workforce worldwide, structural disadvantages between women and men remain. This affects not only differences in wages, but also social security and protection as well as overall distribution of tasks. Similar to many other sectors, women in agri-food systems are paid less compared to men (ca. 82% of men's wages), they are more often represented in exploitive labor arrangements and represent the majority of the workforce in off-farm processing work. Additionally, discrimination because of gender in the workplace may also occur in more subtle manners.

In this briefing paper, we will address frequently occurring issues in agricultural workspaces and map out easily accessible interventions and solutions.

1 Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) & Work Equipment

Problem: Worldwide, personal protective equipment (PPE) and other work equipment have been designed for male bodies from Europe or North America. Consequently, women in general and also men from other world regions often do not fit this standard worker model and have difficulties finding suitable PPE. This can lead to uncomfortable fits, poor working postures, and generally reduced protection. Some machinery might also be difficult to operate for women, due to their strength (on average lower than men's) or their (hand) sizes (usually smaller/shorter than men's).

Solutions:

- Provide PPE for diverse body types, e.g. gloves and footwear for smaller hands and feet, or suits taking into account female bodies.
- Machinery should be installed in a way that women and shorter or even taller persons can access and operate it without assuming an unhealthy body posture (e.g. height of machinery or table).

2 Working Time & Shifts

Problem: Night shift work is not only associated with high levels of stress and sleep deprivation, but also social consequences like isolation or the reconciling of work schedules and family responsibilities. For women, it can also lead to an increased risk of breast cancer[1] as well as of experiencing violence on their way to work during nighttime.

Solutions:

- Consider working time specific risks in your occupational health and safety policy and try to mitigate it.

- Grant flexible working times and communicate working time changes well in advance, particularly for workers with family responsibilities.
- If the workplace is located quite remote, make sure that women can get there safely, e.g. through increased police presence, sufficient street lightning, transport offered by the company.

3 Sanitation & Hygiene

Problem: Menstruation is a taboo in most places. If there are no adequate sanitary facilities, women might have to call in sick or avoid going to the toilet, which exacerbates physical and psychological discomfort and can cause infections.

Solutions:

- Showers, toilets, and changing rooms need to be separated by gender or – if not possible due to the small size of the company or other reasons – must at least be lockable.
- Always ensure access to toilets.
- Ensure toilets are hygienic and equipped with bins, running and clean water, and, ideally, free menstrual products are provided.



82%

of men's wages are earned by women in agri-food systems.

4 Maternity

Problem: Pregnant women and nursing mothers are particularly vulnerable to physiological risks of specific tasks. They might also lose their position or be transferred to lower-paid positions.

Solutions:

- Do not ask for pregnancy tests during hiring process nor dismiss women during pregnancy or maternity leave.
- Assign suitable tasks to pregnant women, e.g. no hazardous work or work that includes lifting heavy loads, extreme temperatures, or other tasks that could cause harm.
- Do not oblige pregnant or nursing women to night work.
- Enable the return to the same or similar position as before their maternity leave.
- Establish a nursing room or a calm place where women can breastfeed their babies or pump breast milk under adequate hygienic conditions and without disturbances.

5 Gender-Typical Tasks

Problem: Global data reflects, that women are predominantly engaged in food processing rather than food production. The related tasks lead to different risks: While men are more often exposed to more visible health risks due to heat, noise, vibration or heavy loads, women often carry out tasks that seem more secure but can cause long-term damage as well. Their tasks often require prolonged standing or include repetitive movements and awkward postures over a long period of time, e.g. in sorting, cleaning or cracking activities. This can lead to work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs), that are often not diagnosed or treated as work-related consequences.

Solutions:

- Consider "invisible" risks leading to WMSDs in your health and safety policy and health risk assessment.
- Identify and implement appropriate measures to decrease the risk of repetitive tasks, e.g. introduce regular "ergonomic breaks" where the body can change posture and release tension, provide adjustable workstations (e.g. height-adjustable) and PPE designed and provide for women.
- Raise awareness of these invisible risks among the workers.
- Regularly carry out ergonomic training for your workers, so they know how to fulfil work requirements and maximize the quality of work while reducing WMSDs.



Figure 1 **In an atmosphere of trust and encouragment, women can use their voices to address issues that are relevant to them.**

NATURLAND STANDARDS

Gender Equality and Protection of Female Workers in the Naturland Social Responsibility Standard

- **Equal treatment:** No systematic discrimination of workers based gender (among others) in terms of remuneration (wages, social benefits, other benefits) and career opportunities (training, promotion).
- **Respectful collaboration:** No cases of verbal abuse, sexual harassment, or physical violence between workers or between workers and others in the company (e.g. as disciplinary practice).
- **Vulnerable Workers:** Pregnant women and nursing mothers must be excluded from potentially harmful work.
- **Sanitary facilities:** Sufficient sanitary facilities separated by gender are required.
- **Accommodation:** If accommodation for workers is provided, it must be equipped with lockable showers and/or separate showers for men/women.
- **Protection of female workers:** Female workers must be adequately protected, e.g. concerning wage deduction in case of pregnancy, sexual harassment, verbal/ non-verbal assaults, separate toilets and dressing rooms, no compulsory HIV and pregnancy tests, fair hiring practices, etc.

6 Invisible Challenges of Women

Problem: Women are less often in leading positions or positions where they can express their needs and/or steer a company. This results in invisibility, lack of awareness, or even ignorance of women's security and health problems.

Solutions:

- Identify a person (preferably a woman) that is trusted by the female workers, to whom they can talk to about challenges they are facing, and who can advise them on procedures to address their challenges (e.g. grievance mechanisms).
- Form a gender committee specifically designed to scan the company for gender-related health and safety issues.
- Encourage women to participate and use their voices: This will only be successful when there is an atmosphere of trust and if no one is fearing dismissals or discrimination for speaking up.
- Train and encourage women to know and learn about their rights.

7 Gender-Sensitive Grievance Mechanisms

Problem: With inequalities both in society as a whole as well as within companies itself, there are rarely safe ways to report discrimination as a woman without having to expect negative consequences. This is why discrimination is often not reported and structures remain the same.

Solutions:

- Implement an effective grievance mechanism that not only supports gender equality within a company but also helps to uncover other forms of discrimination or rights violations.
- Provide multiple access points to the mechanism, including formal and informal methods with local languages. Publish all relevant information using channels targeted towards women and girls specifically.
- Ensure transparency: All workers should understand what to expect when filing a complaint, from start to finish of the process.
- Train officers responsible for handling complaints and grievances specifically on gender.
- Ensure the process does not end with compensation. Reflect on whether the outcome is useful for the individual and be open to continuous learning on structural issues within the company. [2]

8 Policies & Trainings

Finally, in order for all these solutions to be effective, they should be written down, implemented and of course all employees must know about their employer's efforts. It is crucial to develop clear workplace policies based on a thorough assessment of the actual, current situation within the company. However, not all discrimination is easy to identify; it often happens in subtle or even unconscious ways. Missing blind spots can be prevented by seeing the development of policies as a collaborative action, e.g. involving the gender committee.

Policies and procedures should prevent and address discrimination. This may include policies on parental leave, a youth policy and/or a more general gender policy. In the next step, trainings for workers on their rights and opportunities implemented through those policies should be developed and conducted. While women are the primary target group, trainings and capacity building should still be offered to workers of all genders, especially in mid- and senior level management, to raise awareness. Ultimately, policies and training may bring everything together, but a policy is only as valuable to the extent to which it is actually lived out in company culture.

↪ **Changing your workplace to be more gender-sensitive requires a lot of expertise and does not happen overnight. However, please feel encouraged to start with small steps, lead with a bottom up approach, aiming to support women and girls and make them feel safe in their workplace.**

BEST PRACTICE

LIMBUA's Gender Committee

LIMBUA is a Naturland member from Kenya producing avocado, mango and macadamia products. At LIMBUA, gender equality concerns two closely connected areas: the working conditions of permanent, temporary and seasonal employees, and their cooperation with women farmers and farming communities. Their Gender and Youth Strategy aims to reduce barriers, provide equal access to employment and development opportunities, and strengthen women's participation in decision-making.

Part of their strategy is the democratically elected gender committee that promotes equal opportunities, addresses discrimination, and raises awareness of employees' rights and gender-related topics. It also supports the grievance committee in addressing gender-related concerns. Its responsibilities also include gender-related training and an annual gender risk assessment. Case reports are forwarded to the Assess and Address Committee, which evaluates the reports, implements necessary measures or mitigations, and ensures that the committees operate in compliance with Kenyan law and company policies.

The Gender and Youth Strategy also includes women farmers in its support measures. These include trainings on diverse topics and support with kitchen gardens and, for eligible women farmers and female-headed households, biogas installations.



Figure 2 **LIMBUA's gender committee meets quarterly and is democratically elected.**

Sources

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Citation

[1] Hansen, Pedersen (2024): Night shift work and breast cancer risk – 2023 update of epidemiologic evidence.

[2] The UN has further outlined *guiding principles* for the effectiveness of grievance mechanisms.

Picture Credit

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