

# How to improve the work environment for both women and men





# How can the work environment be improved for both women and men?

**Women and men have the same right to a good work environment, but more women than men are sick-listed from work, and more women are forced to end their working lives prematurely for health reasons. At the same time, more men are involved in serious accidents and fatal accidents at work.**

In this leaflet, we give some examples of how you, as an employer, can improve the quality of your work environment management by applying a gender perspective. We have also compiled a number of questions that can help you to identify possible risks and shortcomings in the work environment for your employees.

# What is working life like for women and men?

## **Women and men work on different things**

Women and men participate in the Swedish labour market to nearly the same extents, i.e. 85% and 89%, respectively, as of 2016 – much higher than the European labour-market participation rates of 65% for women and 77% for men. In Sweden, the proportion of people employed is highest for native-born men and lowest for foreign-born women.

The labour market is highly gender divided. Women work mostly in industries and occupations with many other women, men in industries and occupations with other men. Of all those employed, only 15% of women and 14% of men (as of 2016) work in occupations that have a balanced gender distribution, i.e., with 40–60% of each gender. Of the 30 major occupations, only three had a balanced gender distribution (as of 2016): cooks and cold buffet managers, upper secondary school teachers, and store sales managers and department managers.

## **More women become ill and more men are involved in accidents**

The Swedish Work Environment Authority's official statistics indicate that women become ill on the job more often, while men are more often involved in accidents resulting in absence from or death on the job. More women than men are also forced to end their working lives prematurely for health reasons.

The statistics also indicate that women, particularly younger women, are subjected to more sexual harassment at work than men are. Moreover, the proportion that reports having been subjected to sexual harassment from people other than their superiors or work colleagues has increased.

Even though absence due to illness is higher among women than men, it is much more difficult for women to get a workrelated illness approved and to receive an occupational injury pension.

### **Part-time and time-limited positions are more common among women**

Part-time positions are more common among women than men (27% for women versus 10% for men, as of 2017). Part-time work primarily affects one's income. Fewer hours worked mean lower income, in turn affecting compensation in connection with parental leave, unemployment, illness, and one's future pension. Part-time work can also lead to less favourable wage growth and career opportunities in the long term.

Part-time status may be involuntary. Significantly more women than men are underemployed, i.e., working fewer hours than desired.

Compared with men, women also have less secure ties to the labour market, being more likely to hold various types of time-limited positions than men are.

In Europe, women have a less secure connection to the labour market than men do, being more likely to have irregular forms of employment, such as indefinite, fixed-term, and other "non-contract" arrangements.

### **How work is organised affects who develops musculoskeletal disorders**

Musculoskeletal disorders are a common cause of reported work-related injuries for both women and men. The report "Physical work, gender and health in working life" (Swedish Work Environment Authority 2013:9) shows that the organisation of work at a workplace greatly influences the development of musculoskeletal problems.

Women and men often do different things at work, even if they have the same occupation. That is the most important explanation of why women experience more pain and more musculoskeletal disorders. Biological differences, on the other hand, play



only a small role. The report shows that men generally have greater variation in their work tasks, while women work more repetitively. Women pick things up with their hands and stretch themselves in uncomfortable working positions using repeated movements. Men do quick heavy lifting, operate machines, and use tools. Even when women and men carry out exactly the same work tasks, the physical load can differ because the equipment is often dimensioned for an average man.

**Some examples:**

- Women help people transfer themselves, while men lift things.
- Women are often tied to one place in their work, while men have work tasks that involve greater mobility.

**Tips:**

- Strive to reduce the number of monotonous and repetitive jobs.
- Where this is impossible, divide work tasks between individuals of both sexes so that all have variation.
- Design workstations so that they suit both women and men. Consider what determines who ends up doing what work tasks and what influences the organisation of work at your job.



## **Why should I, as an employer, apply a gender perspective?**

- Absence due to illness is lower in work with a balanced gender distribution.
- Notions of what is allowed and possible for women and men are limiting, not just for the individual's opportunities to develop, but also for companies, organisations, and society as a whole.

- A better work environment can be created if the organisation's conscious and unconscious ideas and expectations of women and men are identified, and the organisation of work is instead more open to individual variations.
- A balanced distribution of women and men at the workplace is one way to prevent harassment.
- Workplaces that are educated in dealing with differences and diversity perform much better than do homogenous workplaces. Really innovative ideas are born through encounters characterised by differences. Creativity and efficacy increase with mixed work teams.
- Companies with a higher proportion of women in management achieve better results.
- Diversity benefits development. The EU's 2020 strategy states that 'discriminating measures during employment and at work reduce the accessible workforce and competence resources, and society as a whole is affected by slower economic growth'.
- An investigation conducted by the construction sector, "The Construction Barometer" (2013), found that competent personnel are lost due to a 'guys-only' attitude, and a mentally and socially onerous workplace culture. Women may leave the sector because they feel they are being stymied and not given the same career opportunities.

### **A segregated labour market reinforces traditional gender patterns**

The notion of differences between men and women has led to Sweden having one of the most gender-segregated labour markets in Europe. This is clear in the report "Under the magnifying glass - a gender perspective on work environment and labour organisation" (Swedish Work Environment Authority 2013:1).

For example, the notion that women are born with better caring abilities than men has contributed to our health care and social care sector being dominated by women.

The report makes it clear that in workplaces with men, the male perspective and way of working have become the norm. Women more often than men lack the ability to influence their work conditions. In addition, fewer women are found the higher up in an organisation one goes.

The report also shows that you, as an employer, can reduce the risk of discrimination, harassment, and conflict while increasing creativity and profitability through actively striving for a more gender-equal workplace.

**Tips:**

- Map where women and men are found in the organisation and consider how this organisational structure affects women's ability to influence decision-making.
- Identify different occupational groups' degrees of control and social support at work, and compare these between women and men within and between these groups.
- Map any pay differences. Are work tasks valued differently for women and men within the same occupational category?
- Do women and men have equal opportunities for competence development?
- Do women and men have the same opportunities to take parental leave?
- Do women and men experience stress to the same extent?





## **A report on men’s and women’s work environments**

The report “Women and men and their working conditions” (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2016:2) indicates that excessive demands and limited resources on the job generally correlate with lower job satisfaction, increased willingness to quit, and poorer mental and physical health. The report also shows that a greater proportion of women than men are working part time, doing shift work, and reporting heavier demands and fewer resources.

## How can I, as an employer, apply a gender perspective?

We have compiled a number of questions for you as an employer, from three perspectives: human, technological, and organisational. By going through these questions, you can identify and assess risks and shortcomings in the work environment related to the notion of gender. Hopefully, the answers to these questions can lead to ideas about how to address such risks and shortcomings.

### Human:

- Does our work environment management apply a gender equality perspective?
- Is there a notion that certain tasks or areas are more suited to women and men, respectively?
- Do women and men have the same opportunities to influence and participate in questions concerning the work environment?
- Are there pictures, texts, or objects at the workplace that could be considered degrading? Is there use of language or jargon that could be experienced as degrading?
- Is the workplace inclusive or exclusive? Do staff members feel included, irrespective of gender?
- Is the workplace characterised by mutual respect and tolerance?
- Is the attitude to parental leave the same for women as for men?
- Do women and men have the same opportunity for competence development?

### **Technology:**

- Are tools at the workplace adapted for both small and large hands and bodies?
- Are there protective clothes and work clothes that fit, irrespective of gender?
- Are there changing rooms for women and men, respectively?
- Are workplaces individually and ergonomically adapted?  
Are there differences between female- and male-dominated occupations when it comes to protective clothing, conditions, tools, etc.?
- Have any machines or tasks been 'gender stamped', that is, used or performed by only women or men?
- Official statistics indicate that women are sick-listed more than men are, and that more women than men are forced to end their working lives early because of ill health. Can this be linked to tools not being adapted for both women and men?

### **Organisation:**

- How many employees are there?
- How many are women? How many are men?
- What do the women and men do? Do women and men have the same positions?
- If women and men have the same positions, do they have the same work tasks?
- If women and men do different things, what are the work-related risks faced by the women and men like?
- Is a more equal distribution between the number of employed women and men being striven for?

- Official statistics indicate that women are sick-listed more often than men are and that more women than men are forced to end their working lives early due to ill health. How is my workplace in this regard? What could the possible differences be due to? Could they be because women and men do different things?
- What prerequisites do men and women have at the workplace to enable them to work on the same things?
- Do all employees have the opportunity to influence their own work conditions? Which employees experience high work pace, machine- or client-governed work speed, lack of development, or being physically bound to the workplace?
- How do different operational decisions affect women's and men's exposures to various risks and ill health?
- Do women's and men's opinions and viewpoints regarding problems and improvements in the work environment receive the same attention?
- If musculoskeletal disorders arise, could work rotation be a way to reduce and prevent injuries?
- Have any employees chosen to reduce their working hours to part time due to shortcomings in the physical or psychosocial work environment? Are there any differences between men and women in this regard?
- How is the distribution of men and women in work groups, project groups, and development groups?

## What has happened from a historical perspective?

What we take for granted today has not always been so; for example, much has changed on the labour market. Here are some historical milestones that have influenced women's and men's working lives in Sweden.

- 1859** Women have the right to hold certain teaching positions.
- 1925** Women have, with certain exceptions, the same right as men to hold state positions.
- 1939** Ban on dismissing working women on account of pregnancy, childbirth, or marriage.
- 1947** Right to equal pay for the same work introduced for state employees.
- 1958** Women have the right to become priests.
- 1960** The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise and the National Labour Organisation decide, within a five year period, to abolish differential pay for women and men (men had received higher pay because they were considered the breadwinners).
- 1971** Separate taxation replaces joint taxation.
- 1974** Parental insurance is introduced, giving parents the right to share their parental leave at the birth of a child.
- 1980** The law against gender discrimination in working life is introduced.
- 1983** All work is open to women, even within the military.
- 2009** The Discrimination Act comes into force.
- 2010** A change in the Act on Total Military Conscription makes compulsory national service gender neutral.
- 2013** Eighteen agencies specially tasked with striving to promote greater gender equality (so called gender mainstreaming); 59 agencies tasked with doing so in 2017.
- 2016** The number of non-transferable days for the parental allowance is increased from 60 to 90.

## **Progress has been made, but traditional gender patterns persist in working life**

Since the 1970s, Sweden has promoted gender equality policy intended to give women and men the same opportunities, rights, and obligations in all areas of life. Women and men should have the same power to shape society and their own lives.

The most recent inquiry into gender equality policy (SOU 2015:86) describes developments on the labour market, among other matters. Despite women's participation in the labour market, there are differences in earnings and part-time work, gender segregation in education and the labour market, as well as an uneven take-up of parental insurance benefits. This inequality has consequences for both the labour supply and the work environment.

## **Find out more about gender equality in the work environment at [av.se](http://av.se)**

A good work environment is a gender equality issue. The Swedish Work Environment Authority's government remit for 2011–2016 to observe and investigate women's work environments revealed that the Swedish work environment remains unequal. However, systematic gender-conscious efforts to improve the work environment can make conditions better for both women and men. We have brought together videos, query tools, and knowledge compilations on the Work Environment Authority website for you as an employer to use in this effort.

See the page "Gender equality in the work environment" at [www.av.se](http://www.av.se).



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**Sources:**

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”Mål och myndighet. En effektiv styrning av jämställdhetspolitiken”, [Objectives and agency: the effective guidance of gender equality policy], Swedish Government Report 2015:86.

”På tal om kvinnor och män – lathund om jämställdhet 2018”, [Regarding men and women – a gender equality reference guide], Statistics Sweden.

The Swedish Work Environment Authority’s occupational injury statistics.

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The Swedish Work Environment Authority

112 79 Stockholm

Telephone: +46(0)10-730 90 00

E-mail: [arbetsmiljoverket@av.se](mailto:arbetsmiljoverket@av.se)

Order number ADI 690

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Our vision: Everyone wants to, and can,  
create a good work environment



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