

TOOL 4.6

Gender Smart Safety

- » **GOAL:** Provides an overview of gender smart safety and a case study
- » **TARGET UNITS:** Occupational Health and Safety, Human Resources, Medical and Legal

What is Gender Smart Safety: Gender smart safety is a way of assessing and responding to occupational health and safety risks with a gender lens.

Business Rationale: Gender Smart Safety in a workplace helps ensure all work tasks are safer for all employees. It helps employers identify specific hazards faced by employees of all genders who are carrying out specific work tasks.

Recognizing gender differences in the workforce is essential to ensure the safety and health of all genders. These differences should be considered when developing policies for addressing occupational health and safety (OHS) hazards in the workplace, including gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH).^{64,65} For instance, in the past the effects of occupational safety and health hazards on women were misjudged, because the standards and exposure limits to hazardous substances were created based on male populations and laboratory tests.⁶⁶ Other examples include the physical demands of heavy work, the ergonomic design of workplaces, and the impact of the length of the working day on those with caring responsibilities.^{67,68,69} Today, there is growing recognition of sex and gender differences in terms of occupational health and safety hazards in the workplace, including GBVH.

Gender Smart Safety challenges cultural norms in respect to how different genders should approach work tasks and focuses on actual exposure to hazards and perceptions of risk as experienced by all genders. Companies have a unique opportunity to integrate universal design features in the workplace by building physical, learning, and work environments that are usable by a wide range of people, regardless of gender, age, size, or disability status. For example, universal design features at work could include automated doors, sloped entrances, broad passages, larger fonts for signs, and mitigating GBVH risk through, for instance, better lighting and security. While universal design promotes access for individuals with disabilities, it also benefits others in the workplace.

⁶⁴ European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, [Summary Annual Report 2014](#).

⁶⁵ ILO, [Safety and health at work](#).

⁶⁶ F. Valentina, [Women workers and gender issues on occupational safety and health](#), 2010.

⁶⁷ V. Forestieri, Information note on Women Workers and Gender Issues on Occupational Safety and Health. Geneva: ILO, SafeWork, 2000.

⁶⁸ C. Peters and P. Demers, [Gender Differences in Occupational Exposure Assessment for a National Surveillance Project](#). *Epidemiology*, 2019.

⁶⁹ E. Sorrentino, V. Rosa, D. Montwrosso, and A.M. Giammariolos, [Gender issues on occupational safety and health](#). *Annali dell'Istituto superiore di sanita*, 2016.

The result of a focus on Gender Smart Safety is that employers can increase the number of employees who can carry out specific work tasks safely. They benefit from improved performance and productivity because they have a physically and emotionally safer workforce, which can enhance staff retention and a company's reputation.

BOX 4G | Improving Jobs for Women in Papua New Guinea

The Gender Smart Safety Program helps companies identify risks and improve safety for women workers in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The program was developed by the Business Coalition for Women, with the support of IFC. Three companies with operations in PNG—Oil Search, St Barbara (mining), and New Britain Palm Oil—participated in the initiative. The main GBVH issues related to women's safety in the workplace included the threat of violence, including sexual harassment; workplace bullying in the form of gossiping causing emotional harm and distracting women from focusing safely on their tasks; and travel to and from work when waiting for or travelling on company transport.

Actions taken to address GBVH risks included introducing fixed nightshift signs enabling female housekeepers identify when rooms were occupied by men; providing the option to employees to wear trousers instead of skirts at work; adding trained gender-smart contact officers to provide advice and a secure point of contact to report harassment; encouraging discussion around harmful gossip as an interruption to teamwork and productivity; and dedicated seats for females or families in company transportation to and from work. One company's response to its gender-smart safety audit meant that the percentage of women who felt happy about their safety at work rose by 18 percent. For further support on gender smart safety, contact IFC's [Gender and Economic Inclusion Group](#).