Check out the check-in: Airport work hazards

Men have from three to ten times more compensated industrial accidents and injuries per worker than women. But this does not mean that women’s jobs are safer than men’s. The hazards in many jobs performed by women are hidden behind an illusion of “safe” and “clean” work.

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Airport check-in staff report high levels of workplace injury and a substantial fear of violence, according to the findings of new ILO-led research.¹

This report should ring alarm bells for management. For example, serious hazards are faced by airport check-in workers. Most of these workers are women, but the tasks and the equipment are rarely engineered with women in mind. Inexpensive redesign of these jobs can boost worker protection – and airport security.

It is the first-ever comparative study of the health effects on check-in workers working with different levels of airport mechanisation. The study has come up with the surprising conclusion that check-in workers may be as vulnerable to occupational injury as heavy manual labourers. Yet workers tend to remain unaware of the risks of their working environment and practices until they develop temporary or permanent disorders.

The study has revealed that check-in workers show widespread awareness, and fear, of the risks of violence from aggressive passengers, with 1 in 20 workers saying they have experienced some form of abuse (verbal or physical) from passengers. The widespread lack of training and inadequate protection at the check-in counter leaves workers relatively unprotected against assault.

These findings hold even more importance since the events of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington, DC. While civil society is experiencing heightened concern today
about the safety of air travel, check-in workers can be empowered and can become part the first line of defence to protect travellers, crew and aircraft against potentially dangerous passengers. Given management support and appropriate training, check-in workers make a logical and important link in the chain to ensure passenger and aircraft safety, yet to date employers have not put such systems into place.

Check-in workers are generally skilled at noticing passengers who appear agitated. Extending systems of protection in airports to include check-in workers in the hierarchy would be a proactive measure for air transport safety, and would serve to increase the level of professionalization, skills and development for these workers.

The ILO study reveals a mix of obvious as well as less apparent hazards of the job. Check-in workers risk musculoskeletal injury from frequent lifting and handling of baggage and prolonged standing while operating a computer. Other hazards include aggression from passengers, poorly designed workstations and uneven workload distribution. Workers have little or no control over the rhythm of work, the organization of their work, or the design of their workstations. Most check-in workstations lack adjustability, yet are intended to be shared by any number of workers, of any size.

In many airports, baggage check-in is performed manually, requiring check-in workers to lift and carry bags, often weighing up to 50 kilos per bag, throughout their entire work shift. Workstations where workers sit down throughout their entire work shift cause high rates of musculoskeletal disorders, even where baggage check-in is fully mechanized, in principle obviating the need for workers to lift and carry the bags.

A fully mechanized baggage system includes a conveyor belt which carries baggage from the check-in scale to another conveyor which carries baggage to the aircraft loading area. A semi-mechanized or manual system for baggage check-in requires check-in workers to lift every bag off the scale and carry them to the conveyor which takes bags to the aircraft loading area. A fully mechanized baggage handling system, at an adjustable workstation providing workers with the possibility to alternate between sitting and standing, is the preferred design. Additionally, a high check-in counter provides workers a degree of protection against aggressive passengers, compared to a low check-in counter.
The problems identified are not only confined to the check-in counter. Work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are the most common women’s occupational health problem and constitute the majority of cases of occupational disease today.

The two-country study examines check-in workers and injury/illness data at three airports representing typical workstation designs in many parts of the world. The airports studied were: in Switzerland, Geneva International (fully mechanized, where check-in workers sit throughout their entire work shift), and in Canada, London, Ontario (semi-mechanized) and Dorval International, Montreal (fully mechanized, where workers can work both sitting and standing). Entirely manual check-in stations were not covered in this study, though they continue to be widespread at small airports and in poorer countries, usually implying additional strains for workers.

Semi-mechanized baggage systems appear to place check-in workers at particular risk of musculoskeletal injury. Fully mechanized baggage handling systems tend to be more comfortable and free workers from excessive manual lifting. But they can still cause discomfort and subsequent injury due to frequent bending and other movements while staff are tagging baggage. Adjustable sit/stand workstations (such as at Dorval International) appear to increase comfort levels and to reduce the risk of injuries.

**Preliminary findings**

Some key preliminary findings from the study sample reveal the following:

- Nearly 20 per cent of workers were absent from work with neck pain in the last year, and 44 per cent reported having to miss work due to back pain. Baggage tagging, either from a sitting or standing position, increases physical strain, but more injuries occur where there is no mechanized system for handling baggage, and where workers sit for a whole shift.

- Workers suffer less injury and discomfort in domestic than international terminals where baggage is often heavier and larger.
• Workers often lift loads exceeding the standard 30 kg limit.

• Bending low, reaching forward, lifting with one hand, and hauling bags to the conveyor belt put workers at increased risk of injury, yet no workers in the study had received training on manual lifting.

• Computer work at a non-adjustable workstation leads to strained, uncomfortable body posture whether sitting or standing.

• The risks of discomfort and injury remain largely unrecognized due to lack of training.

• Over 82 per cent of workers have experienced verbal abuse on the job, 17.4 per cent have experienced threats from passengers, and 4.5 per cent have been subject to physical assault from passengers. Nearly 45 per cent of workers perceive a substantial risk of violence in their work.

Women’s work: hidden hazards

In most countries of the world, women are concentrated in service jobs, in selected areas of manufacturing, and in agriculture. Within each of these areas of work there is a concentration of women in the jobs with the lowest pay and the least status.

Not until the 1970s was any systematic investigation begun into the health effects of women’s work. Even today, most research of this nature concentrates on major industries in industrialized countries, and thus mainly on traditional male jobs.

North American research and practice in occupational health have been conditioned by the workers’compensation system, where occupational health and safety commissions define priority groups for study based on the degree of compensation to those groups. Research tends to be concentrated on injuries and illnesses that cause a worker to lose work time and
which have a clearly defined cause. This practice means that the impact of waged work on millions of women in both the formal and informal sectors of the global economy continues to go unrecorded and unregulated, despite the fact that many jobs performed exclusively or predominantly by women have an important physical component which can produce pain and even disability.

Research, recognition and compensation are limited for women’s work because the jobs usually assigned to women often lack dramatic, easily identifiable dangers, making women and women’s jobs appear “safe”. Workers’ compensation statistics show that men have from three to ten times more compensated industrial accidents and injuries per worker than women and these statistics are often interpreted to mean that women’s jobs are safer than men’s while in reality, the hazards inherent in many jobs performed by women are hidden behind an illusion of “safe” and “clean” work.

Women’s biology differs from that of men - and women often perform different jobs under different conditions than men, coupled with a heavier burden of domestic tasks. All of these factors need to be taken into consideration when assessing the impact of waged work on women’s health.

The lack of research on women’s occupational health is also reflected in the methods used to determine appropriate standards for physical working conditions such as temperature, as well as maximum weights to be lifted. For workplace standards and the research on which such standards are based to be appropriate for women as well as men, they need to take into account the physiology, anatomy and anthropometry of women as well as the physical stressors women experience at work and those to which they return at home. Women’s waged work cannot be separated from the rest of their lives.

Fundamentally, this approach is indispensable because the average woman is a different size and shape from the average man, and standards based on men’s physiology and anthropometry will not be protective for most women.

In the case of airport check-in work, a job predominantly but not exclusively performed by women, adjustable workplace arrangements are called for to enable a good workstation fit for both male and female workers and to allow for the important differences in body size found
among workers in different countries, given that airports are found in every country of the world.

Many women work in poorly paid, low-status jobs with high performance demands and low potential for worker control over working conditions, pace of work and demands. These conditions have been well identified as causes of negative stress in studies of male workers. High-demand and low-control jobs have been shown to cause stress, resulting in negative health outcomes in workers.

Airport check-in work is characterized by high demand on workers, with little or no control by them, and includes repetitive work, particularly computer-based.

A study of several thousand Swedish women found that those women performing monotonous, rapid-pace work with little control over their work hours or conditions of employment suffered more from alcohol-related or gastro-intestinal illnesses or were hospitalized more often for heart attacks. Another study of women followed over a ten-year period in the USA found that women with “high strain” jobs had nearly three times more chance of developing coronary heart disease than workers in other jobs. And a 1993 OECD review of key studies on women’s work and health found that women are more exposed to monotonous, repetitive work than men, that women’s work content can often be characterized as high-demand, low-control, and that in typically male-dominated jobs the workplace is designed for male body size/shape and male norms, including most worktables and workstations where women work.

Particular to service sector jobs often performed by women, such as airport check-in work, are pressures to respond to the needs of passengers/clients/customers, a job stressor described as “emotional labour” in studies on airline flight attendants. Jobs which involve selling one’s emotional labour require workers to pretend to have positive feelings they may not really be experiencing and to deny their negative responses in order to make passengers feel they are being cared for. Although the emotional strain involved in work with the public has been little researched, in studies of flight attendants it has been shown to be an important cause of stress, exhaustion and “burn-out” from interacting with the public. In addition, these studies show that workers report “loss of self”, due to feelings and emotions becoming dulled in self-defence during difficult situations with passengers and customers.
Work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) have been well studied because they constitute the majority of cases of occupational disease; they are also the most common of women’s work-related health problems. Conclusions from the European Foundation’s 1996 Survey showed that, among workers in the European Union today, more women workers are employed in jobs with a risk of MSDs than males and the risk of MSDs exists in all industrial sectors. According to the United States Bureau for Labor Statistics, women make up 46 per cent of the workforce and 33 per cent of those injured at work, yet women account for 63 per cent of repetitive motion injuries that result in lost-work time (47,408 injuries out of 75,188). MSDs account for nearly half of all lost-worktime injuries and illnesses among women.

**Translating research into action**

Many of the problems identified in the study of check-in workers could be solved for relatively little cost, especially when set against the costs of high levels of injury. Yet the current trend in airports is for lower costs, recruitment of less experienced, younger workers, and the focussing of less attention on working conditions.

There are obvious ways to increase comfort for check-in workers. The biggest risk factors come with excessive workloads due to high volumes of passengers, constrained and awkward postures, and strains from lifting or repetitive hand movements. Managers need to ensure adequate staffing and breaks, and to provide adjustable keyboard trays, adjustable chairs and sufficient leg space. Workers should be able to alternate between sitting and standing during a work shift and they should, for example, be able to view a baggage scale display without twisting. It is suggested that the cost of retrofitting semi-mechanized or manual check-in systems may be less than the costs to employers, worker and insurance companies from MSDs, lost work time, disability and re-training.

The challenge of dealing with difficult and sometimes dangerous passengers presents a need for adequate training and for the design features of check-in workstations to protect workers from irate passengers. At the same time, campaigns against “air rage” (aggressive behaviour by passengers on aircraft, particularly towards cabin crew) should be extended in order to
protect check-in staff.

These issues will be reinforced in an international media campaign to be launched by the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), aimed at the empowerment of check-in workers, and the dissemination of the study results to bargaining agents of ITF affiliates worldwide.

Where occupational health and safety research is designed and carried out in conjunction with relevant trade unions, it is proven to lead to more sustainable actions in the workplace than research conducted in isolation from the workers concerned. The research team hopes that the findings of this study will provide trade unions with a practical evidence-based tool to develop concrete proposals for collective bargaining to address the problems we have raised.
Notes

1 The ILO Programme on Socio-Economic Security-led research has been conducted together with the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), with support from the Canadian Labour Congress, the Canadian Autoworkers’ Union, representing check-in workers in Canada, the PUSH and SSP/VPOD trade unions representing check-in workers at Geneva International Airport, and the ILO’s Bureau for Workers’ Activities and the Safe Work Programme. The findings and recommendations of this study will be disseminated shortly by the ITF to aviation unions worldwide. Interim findings were presented at the ITF Health and Safety Conference in Stockholm in May 2001.

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