

Women in the agrifood industry and musculoskeletal disorders

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As an ergonomist with 10 years' experience in a training and advisory structure alongside trade union teams in the agrifood sector, I have noted a particular interest on the part of employee representative bodies in the increase in musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and issues of occupational equality. However, these two sets of problems intersect only within the framework of collective bargaining processes or meetings of health and safety committees (Comités d'Hygiène Sécurité et des Conditions de Travail, CHSCT).

Employee representative bodies rarely frame demands or actions that link exposure to MSD factors with occupational diversity.

The leading occupational sector with regard to MSDs

In France, the agrifood sector is the leading sector of activity when it comes to reporting and recognising occupational diseases of the MSD (musculoskeletal disorders of the upper limbs) type (Table 57),¹ accounting for around 23 per cent of occupational diseases reported in 2014.

It is difficult to determine gender distribution in detail because the publically available national statistics are not broken down by gender. Statistical classification by branch of activity or national technical committees (Comités Techniques Nationaux, CTN) relevant to agrifood groups together services, retail and food. A gender-based statistical analysis of the rate of occupational diseases of the MSD (musculoskeletal disorders of the upper limbs) type (Table 57) would require a specific disaggregation, taking into account the fact that employees in the sector are covered by different social protection systems, namely, the general scheme managed by CARSATs² and the agricultural scheme managed by the Mutualités Sociales Agricoles (MSA). On the other hand, the wide range of activities (artisanal food production, meat processing industry, dairy industry), coupled with the wide disparities with regard to status (permanent contract or CDI, fixed-term contracts or CDD, seasonal, service provider), raises the question of heterogeneity of access to occupational health care, which is what enables the detection of musculoskeletal disorders

1. Tables of occupational illnesses (Tableaux des maladies professionnelles), available at: <http://www.inrs.fr/publications/bdd/mp.html>
2. The pension insurance and occupational health funds (Caisses d'assurance retraite et de la santé au travail, CARSAT) are French social security bodies focused on retirement, social assistance and the management/prevention of occupational hazards. CARSATs operate on a regional basis.

and their corresponding reporting and recognition as occupational disorders. Furthermore, for employees regularly monitored by occupational health care, there is another phenomenon that contributes to underreporting: the lack of 'undemanding or adapted' positions for workers of restricted capacities, in areas of high unemployment. This situation discourages people from reporting occupational illness from fear of being made redundant.

These things make it more complicated for employee representative bodies, especially health and safety committees (CHSCT), to deal with problems. In the course of our company inspections, however, a number of work situations raised questions about the link between gender and exposure to MSD.

Difficulties involved in incorporating working conditions in discussions of occupational gender equality

The concerns of employee representative bodies are often guided by their mandates: working conditions and occupational illnesses are rather the affair of the health and safety committees (CHSCT) and/or staff representatives, while issues of gender equality in the workplace are addressed rather by representatives of the works council or trade union representatives in the course of negotiations on corresponding agreements. Few staff representatives, however, tackle improving working conditions as a factor in occupational diversity, which would enable women to have access to all positions in a company. Historically, negotiations on sectoral and company agreements have favoured occupations that require strong technical skills (such as deboners), marked biomechanical physical effort (carrying heavy loads, forceful and broad gestures) and specific qualifications (management of production lines, certified maintenance or electrical work). These occupations have generally been pursued by men, thus benefitting from some form of recognition from firms. Women have rather gravitated towards occupations in which technical skills are less called for and whose evaluation is more complex. Having said that, it should be added that most negotiators and staff representatives are men, who are more likely to recognise occupations that they themselves have pursued and whose difficulties are evident to them. Occupations that tend to be pursued by women suffer from a lack of visibility, perhaps because there are fewer 'ambassadors' to plead their case. Making progress on gender issues thus requires raising questions about trade union, employer and employee representation with regard to the occupational diversity of risk exposure and occupational diseases, and evaluating the impact of such representation in negotiations on wage agreements, priorities in prevention activities and forward-planning as regards employment and skills.

We now turn to a first example of an enterprise whose work organisation is structured around a division of labour in terms of traditional gender stereotypes.

In a pork-processing firm (pâtés, roast meat, bacon and bacon rashers), the allocation of tasks between women and men is organised in terms of the most visible and quantifiable criterion of arduousness: load carrying. Thus men are oriented towards positions in which handling is most prominent: that is, lifting meat off hooks weighing around 3 or 4 kilos and/or manual loading of a meat slicer at a rate of one piece of meat every 5 seconds for 7 or 8 hours a day. A lifting aid is available for this position that reduces awkward postures for the back. Women are only assigned to jobs involving putting things into trays. This involves rearranging the thin slices that fall into the plastic trays to make sure that slices or cut-offs do not interfere with the sealing of the packaging and thereby fail to comply with quality requirements. They also have to ensure the visual appearance of the product: there are seven to ten slices in each packet and they have to be arranged so that it looks attractive to the customer. The slices have to be spread out slightly so that the customer can see how many there are and so that torn or extra pieces can be extracted. Management classifies this job as light work because no carrying of loads is involved. In the course of our observations we noted that removing the residual meat by hand requires a broad gesture and constant muscular tension, in addition to the mental load caused by the visual monitoring of the appearance and number of slices. This job, regarded as 'light', exposes the (female) operators to a range of MSD risk factors to the upper limbs, every bit as much as feeding the slicer, a job reserved for men. The conception of arduousness focused on load carrying steers women towards jobs that do not involve load carrying, but whose gestural strains are every bit as damaging to their health.

At the same time, the dextrousness that the women develop due to their diligence at the job only serves to nurture existing stereotypes concerning the natural facility women are supposed to possess for activities requiring speed and precision.

'Oh no, that's not a man's job!' Feminine and masculine work groups are constructed around stereotypes

The existing work organisation limits the possibilities for men to develop experience and gestures as regards jobs involving working with trays and prevents women from accumulating skills in feeding the slicers. And as a matter of fact, the firm is limited in its ability to consider new organisational models that would link risk prevention with professional development. We have often found that women themselves argue in favour of the current gender division of labour.

Moving on to another enterprise case study, in a production line for processing calves' heads, women alone are responsible for shearing, while men perform deboning operations. This factory's health indicators have been deteriorating year after year, with MSD-type occupational diseases of the upper limbs (epicondylitis) overrepresented among women.

Varying forms of organisation (shearing of a whole head or side by side) are to be found in this production line. After scalding by machine all the calves' heads are sheared with knives by expert (female) operators and then are transferred on a conveyor belt to the deboners, with no cooperation between the shearers and the deboners. It is each to their own task and, according to the (female) operators themselves, 'men aren't suited for this, this is precision work, men aren't meticulous enough'.

Attempts have been made by management to involve men in shearing to overcome problems of medical restrictions or absenteeism. But those who tried it were not fast enough, left hairs behind and slowed down the line. The female operators confidently dismissed all the arguments usually put forward by male management at the plant. By asking them about this in a joking kind of way – 'but men shave themselves at home every morning' – we were attacking what kept them in this job.

If the men cannot manage it, that means that only women can perform this activity. They take such pride in the fact that the enterprise itself has recognised how special this operation is, showing the women's unique skill. Diversity is thus not regarded as an asset, but as a hindrance to their own productivity and work quality. It was becoming something of a threat to the group and to the rapport we had built up with them to continue to ask them questions on this subject. For the representatives of the CHSCT it was tricky to call into question an organisational model with which they had come to identify.

Besides all this we were surprised to find that the gender division of labour in this workplace is part of the group organisation. If a job is 'reserved' for women they have no choice but to fall in with that and to make the best of it. This fundamental state of affairs can be so entrenched that it becomes ossifying for operators who would like to break free of it. It is a sort of denial of abilities, personal aspirations and individual competences for fear of destabilising the collective by switching activities to take up one that has traditionally belonged to the other gender. The desire to move on to take jobs that require technical skills (maintenance, supervising processing lines) is held back by the fear of 'rising above one's station'.

Such attitudes can hardly fail to recall broader questions of women's emancipation in civil society. Agrifood enterprises are historically embedded in geographical areas in which, sociologically, the distribution of tasks within the family tends to be gendered. The enterprises in the sector have remained to a considerable extent family-owned and based on a kind of paternalistic management, with internal organisation that often emerged from familial models of domestic task distribution. It is perfectly natural therefore that women are allocated jobs that come closest to their 'domestic' skills.

Work activities that emulate feminine domestic activities

The third case study is an enterprise in which lambs' intestines are a high value-added product. They are sold on in particular to make strings for high-end tennis rackets. The intestines are very fragile. They have to be disentangled and arranged on hooks to be cleaned. This operation is both repetitive and very tricky. It demands perfectly controlled gestures in terms of both the force used and the regularity of the gesture's amplitude. It is continuous, under time constraints and requires very high quality work.

As analysis of these three activities (putting in trays, shaving and sorting of intestines) within these three enterprises shows, there can be no doubt of women's exposure to various MSD factors, such as repetitiveness, gestural control, time pressure and a demand for high quality. As a consequence, the difficulty for employee representative bodies and OSH experts is to work out a model of occupational risk prevention that establishes diversity in work organisation without detracting from the existing modalities of recognition and structuring of the collective work effort, which are based on a claim to professional expertise linked to gender.

Technical improvements are essential if work organisation is to be harnessed to prevent MSD risks. Currently, such improvements are rather at the service of 'masculine' activities.

In agrifood the development of technical aids is focused on traditional handling aids, such as lifting tables or rising trays, to solve problems involved in preventing occupational hazards. The risks linked to carrying loads and handling particularly affect men, who are overrepresented in jobs involving feeding the slicers and handling.

Thus in the processing sector innovation is sluggish as regards production lines and specialised equipment. That could be explained by the falling number of suppliers in the French market, leading to quasi-monopolistic situations that constrain research and development with regard to improving working conditions. The particular features of the French market are also relevant: a renowned gastronomic heritage, a very broad range of basic materials (diversity of breeds) and standard French cuts that stand out as exceptions in the European and global markets.

Technological innovation in terms of improvements in working conditions thus remain focused on standard, transferable sets of problems, such as handling aids or lifting aids. Handling aids are not of much use in jobs that require speed and dexterity; they are 'too slow' or not sufficiently adaptable to cope with the variability of the products. Only the automation of some activities would be capable of reducing exposure to certain risk factors. On the other hand, automation has many downsides: it can eliminate jobs and skills and displace operators, pushing them into control functions and flow management. It requires serious investment and significant mounting surfaces, necessitating

design projects for new production sites whose surfaces are defined by their location. Automation therefore calls for rather standardised production and large volumes, processes similar to those in the car industry or chemicals. This effectively excludes a large number of small-scale production sites, very small enterprises or small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as activities involving extremely variable basic materials, which applies to most agrifood businesses.

The nature of the activities assigned to women, whose physical stresses are less visible and recognised, and which are less susceptible, technically and economically, to improvements from support aids, exposes them more to risks, including MSDs of the upper limbs.

That is why a gendered division of tasks can lead to unfairness in terms of exposure to occupational hazards.

The agrifood sector is structured in terms of organisational models derived from the distribution of domestic tasks. Stereotypes as regards occupational diversity are strongly embedded in them and technological advances are too limited to help to dismantle them. Female collective work efforts are heavily structured on the basis of this gendered division of labour and it is difficult for those organising work and for trade unions to tackle this issue because of the risk that they will destabilise the functioning of the enterprise.

References

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