

## Trying to Work It Out: Women's Experiences in Small Workplaces\*

There are many gaps in knowledge of women's health and experiences in the workplace. Most occupational health studies have focused on large, male-dominated workplaces such as construction and mining. However, the Atlantic region, encouraged by provincial and local governments, has seen a dramatic growth in the small business sector. Despite the fact that women are represented in large numbers in small workplaces, little is known about their work and health. This project tried to shed some light on the experiences of women who work or have worked in small workplaces in Newfoundland.

The purpose of the study was to:

- examine women's experiences in small workplaces,
- explore some of the difficulties associated with work in small workplaces, and
- discuss how work in small workplaces affects health and well-being.

### Methodology

Sixty women living in St. John's, Clarenville, Gander, Corner Brook, and Stephenville, who work or have worked in small workplaces in Newfoundland, participated in focus groups and interviews.

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### Findings

#### ❖ Physical work environment

When women described their workplaces, they frequently conveyed that their work environment was uncomfortable and unsafe. Often equipment needed to do one's job was broken, missing, or not well maintained. Some of the things that may be taken for granted in large workplaces such as air conditioning, a clean working space, or ergonomic equipment, are often not part of the working lives of small workplace employees. One possible reason for these working conditions is that smaller business may be less financially stable and may operate closer to the bottom line. Also, manuals for small business owners often do not emphasize occupational health. Since many employees tend to be reluctant to complain, employers may not realize that there is a serious problem.

#### ❖ The organization of small workplaces

Work schedules tend to be irregular, employees generally do not feel secure in their jobs, and employees often do not have a great deal of agency when it comes to deciding when they work, for how long, and what kinds of work they do.

Gender roles also appear to influence the structure of women's work in small workplaces. Women reported doing a great deal of unpaid work both at home and in the community. Sometimes they took on extra work such as cleaning or washing. Women working in bars and restaurants are also sometimes required to use their sexuality as part of their job.

A major health issue for many women is balancing home and family responsibilities. Many women indicated they suffered serious stress as a result of irregular shifts, being on call, and having to work long hours to make ends meet. Although some employers were flexible and understanding, many did not take family responsibilities into consideration. Hardships such as having no health insurance, benefits, a pension plan, or paid vacation leave meant that women did not have security and piece of mind.

### ❖ **Socio-economic factors**

Many women made clear links between the socio-economic environment in their communities and the quality of the work they did. Simply put, a lack of high quality employment in a community forced women to work in jobs that were not good for their health and well-being. When the number of people looking for work greatly outnumbered jobs available, employees would accept a poor physical environment, long shifts, and other factors that negatively affected their lives. Employers on the other hand were presumably secure in the knowledge that if they got “trouble” from employees, they could be easily replaced.

## **Recommendations**

### ❖ **Attention to the “small workplace”**

The provincial and federal government and agencies dealing with new businesses in all sectors must pay attention to workplace safety. More attention needs to be paid to small workplaces that are often considered benign. Definitions of “workplace” need to be re-examined. Small workplaces, non-profit organizations, and private homes need to be examined as workplace sites. Departments and divisions dealing with occupational health and safety

and labour standards must ensure that employees and employers are following laws and regulations. This kind of monitoring can be achieved in part through regular, unannounced workplace inspections.

### ❖ **Communication**

There needs to be greater formal communication and sharing of information between departments/divisions dealing with public health, workplace health and safety, and worker rights.

### ❖ **Information**

All employees and employers should be provided with information about their rights and responsibilities, such as the Labour Standards Act.

### ❖ **Support**

Support needs to be provided to both employers and employees. Support systems need to be put into place to help employers understand and follow labour standards and occupational health and safety regulations. Employees need help and support, especially when working in unsafe, unfair working conditions. Unions or an Ombudsman can be a source of support for workers

### ❖ **Labour/occupational health and safety standards**

Labour/occupational health and safety standards should include mandatory family-friendly policies for workplaces and safety-related policies for workers confronted with physical threats from clients in the workplace. Seats and rubber mats should be mandatory for workers whose job involves standing in one spot for long periods of time.

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