

Inequalities in the world of work exacerbate the spread of Covid-19



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A growing number of studies on the spread and impact of the Covid-19 virus on the world of work reveal, yet again, that occupational safety and health policies need to widen their scope beyond the physical setting of work in order to be effective. Workers face increased exposure to the disease not only at work but also because of the type of work they perform and the conditions under which they are employed. Undoubtedly, physical working conditions and the availability of 'physical' safety measures are key factors in determining and shaping safe workplaces. However, entrenched inequalities in employment conditions and complex sociological factors also determine who faces a greater risk of infection and who can access or even afford healthcare and safety measures (Van Bavel et al. 2020; Khalatbari-Soltani et al. 2020).

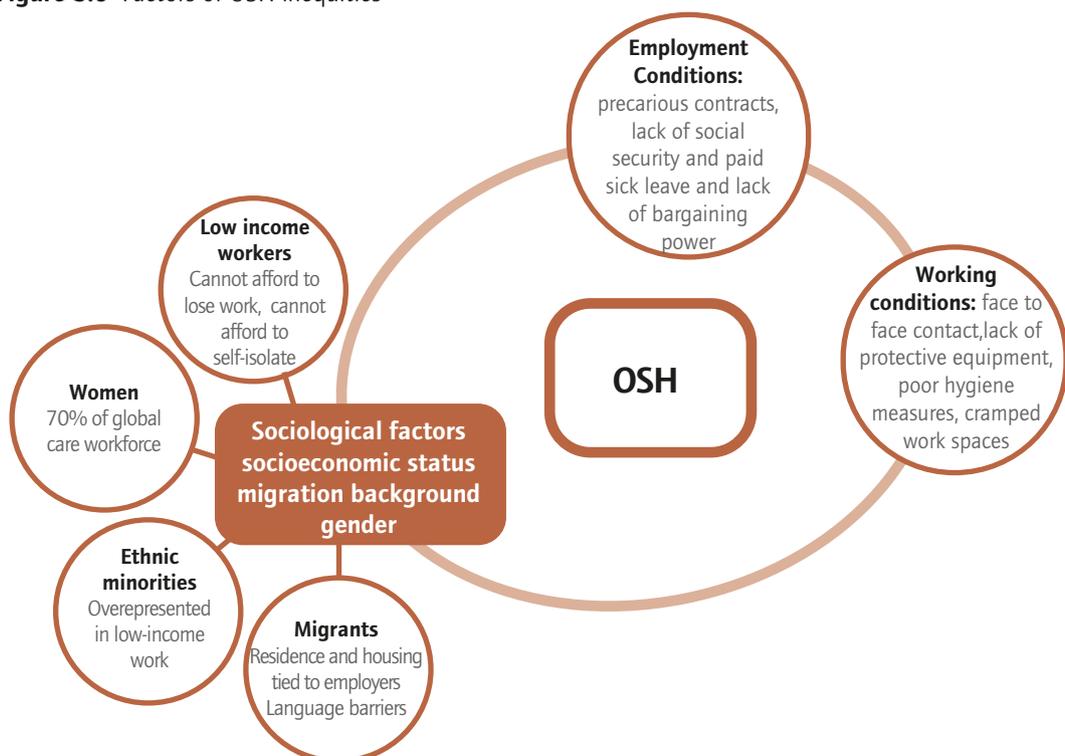
Studies indicate that low-income workers are bearing the brunt of the pandemic, with low-skill and low-income levels linked with higher Covid-19 positivity rates (Flores and Padilla 2020) and higher mortality rates (Wise 2020; Windsor-Shellard and Kaur 2020). This is not a coincidence. There is a clear pattern to this 'coronavirus class divide' (Williams 2020). One critical factor is that occupations that require the physical presence of workers and in-person interaction with other people are often low-income

jobs (Lu 2020). A number of these occupations were declared 'essential' during the pandemic, and workers employed in these sectors were asked to be physically present at work.

Apart from the 'physical characteristics of their work', low-wage workers find themselves in a particularly vulnerable situation for a complex variety of reasons. First of all, many of them cannot afford to stay at home when they are sick. Regardless of the physical settings and safety measures, such workers are unlikely to report their employers or call in sick as they fear losing their jobs and income (Foley and Piper, 2020; Haley et al. 2020). They are often employed on precarious contracts, or on an hourly/daily basis. Irregular employment conditions, insecure, temporary or zero-hour contracts, subcontracting, and even undocumented or illegal work offer little job security (Council and Khlat 2020).

Secondly, low-wage and precarious workers often lack adequate social protection. According to an analysis of policies in over 190 countries, 27% of countries do not guarantee paid sick leave (Heyman et al. 2020). Workers without paid sick leave are 1.5 times more likely to go to work even when sick (Smith and Kim. 2010). 'When workers lack paid sick leave, they often need to make untenable choices between going to work sick and being able to afford the basic

Figure 5.6 Factors of OSH inequities



Source: own compilation.

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necessities' (ibid 2020: 925). Making matters worse, several sectors even offered extra pay or bonuses to workers who continued to show up to work during the pandemic (Dyal et al. 2020).

A precarious/low socioeconomic position and lack of job protection make workers more vulnerable (Council and Khat 2020) as they find it difficult to demand better working conditions. This lack of bargaining power is closely related to persistent inequalities in contractual conditions, working conditions and job security (Quinlan et al. 2001). Representation by unions has also proven to be critical for maximising health and safety precautions during the Covid-19 pandemic. A study among nursing homes in the US found that unionised homes had a 30% relative decrease in Covid-19 mortality rates and greater access to protective equipment (Dean et al. 2020). Similar findings were reported in other sectors.

There is also a distinct intersectional dimension to the impact of Covid-19. Occupations linked with higher rates of exposure and fatalities are also those with a higher representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, women and/or migrants (Windsor-Shellard and Butt 2020; Foley and Piper 2020; Neef 2020; Hattenstone 2020) An estimated 13% of workers in the EU are immigrants (Fasani and

Mazza 2020). Approximately one million seasonal workers are hired in the EU every year, especially in the agri-food sector. There are also large numbers of irregular workers in agriculture, food processing and construction, as well as in hotels, cleaning, domestic services and restaurants. These workers, often hired through agencies, find themselves in 'grey zones' between formal and informal work arrangements (Munck et al. 2012). Undocumented workers in these sectors are even more vulnerable. Such workers do not have the 'privilege' of working from home (Yancy 2020).

Migrant labourers brought in to work on farms or factories are often housed by employers and there are few guidelines or little enforcement regarding housing standards. Even during the pandemic, workers were forced to live in crowded conditions (such as communal camps or repurposed shipping containers) without proper sanitation measures (Neef 2020). These workers are also dependent on employers for their legal residence rights and face the threat of detention or deportation if they report them. Finally, lack of information in multiple languages is another key factor, preventing them from learning about their rights and safety measures (Liem et al. 2020).