
Speaking Notes

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Raising the Bar on Women's Health and Safety is a national campaign by our union. It had its official launch on October 13, 2020.

Why do we need this campaign?

Women face different health and safety risks, because of biology and social attitudes. But most workplaces, machines, personal protective equipment and safety programs have been designed to suit male workers. That means that women have often been left out. Even worse, their concerns are dismissed or ridiculed.

Women's health and safety was one of the issues discussed at USW's 2019 National Policy Conference. Let's watch a short video from that conference:

[Play video—3 ½ minutes]

The USW National Policy Conference unanimously passed a resolution calling for a national campaign. Raising the Bar on Women's Health and Safety is the result.

Here's what our director has to say in support of this campaign:

[Play video—1-2 minutes]

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All Steelworkers are being asked to:

- Increase our awareness of women's health and safety issues
- Treat women's health and safety issues as core USW health and safety issues
- Increase women's participation in health and safety activism, including on committees and in USW courses
- Increase respect and space for women's voices and ideas, in workplaces and in our union

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Specifically, we can:

- Read the new USW Action Guide for Raising the Bar on Women's Health and Safety
- Use the Raising the Bar Inspection Checklist to talk with women members, listen to their health and safety concerns, then take action to improve working conditions
- Sign up for updates of next steps in the campaign

All of these things are available on the campaign web site at usw.ca/raisethebar.

Who should be involved in this campaign? All Steelworkers. And we're especially calling on:

- Union representatives on joint health and safety committees
- Local women's committees
- Local health and safety representatives and activists
- Most important of all: women in our workplaces who can tell us their experience with hazards and health and safety challenges

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Women are not short men! In other words, women's health and safety is not only about getting us properly-fitting coveralls, gloves, and boots. It's more complex than that. The USW Action Guide for Raising the Bar on Women's Health and Safety describes 16 different issues.

Here's the full list. . .

Let's look at a few examples and why these issues affect women differently than men.

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Chemicals.

We know that chemical exposure can be hazardous to all workers. But most studies have been done on men, not men and women. And safety standards are based on that research. Chemicals can affect men and women differently because they have different reproductive systems. Women also breathe differently, have higher levels of body fat, and metabolize chemicals differently at different life stages.

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Toilets.

Are there enough toilets for women in the workplace? If toilets exist, can women get from their work station to the toilet and back in a reasonable amount of time? Can women use the toilets when they need to, without discipline or backlash?

In many workplaces, the answer to one or all of these questions is “no”. Where jobs are mainly filled by men, hygiene facilities for women are an after-thought.

The result? Discomfort from having to hold it. Embarrassment from having to pull down coveralls and use the great outdoors. Bladder and urinary tract infections from deliberately dehydrating yourself and from not being able to urinate when needed.

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Menopause.

First of all, one of the reasons why some women don't tell our union about their health and safety problems is fear of being ridiculed. Menopause is a natural life process. But, in our society, it's become something to make jokes about. Is it any surprise, then, that women might not come to our union for help accommodating the difficulties they're facing with work and menopause?

Every woman experiences menopause differently, and there are many possible symptoms, some of which are exacerbated by the workplace, such as:

- Hot flashes: Made worse by working in hot areas, in areas with poor ventilation, or in uniforms or protective gear that is too large or made from fabric that doesn't breathe.
- Anxiety attacks: Made worse if the employer (or co-workers) ridicule or criticize requests for accommodation or sick leave.
- A need to urinate more frequently, and heavy and irregular periods: Made worse if there are strict rules about breaks or if there isn't easy access to toilets.

And these are just a few examples.

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Sexual Harassment.

Does the workplace culture encourage or discourage jokes and comments of a sexual nature? If a customer or client or outside contractor sexually harasses a worker, whose side does the employer take? Are women workers expected to “take a joke” or “enjoy the compliment”, or do co-workers know how to treat one another with respect?

Harassment—sexual or in other forms—can poison a workplace and make it unhealthy and unsafe.

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In addition to the 16 specific health and safety issues, the USW Action Guide has a number of Action Tools, including:

- A Discussion Process to Talk with Women about Health and Safety
- A tool for Making a Committee Action Plan on Women's Health and Safety
- The Menopause Hazard Assessment Checklist
- A Hazards Checklist for Pregnant Workers
- Tips for doing body mapping to identify health and safety problems
- How to do an ergonomic assessment of a computer work station
- An Equality Audit for USW Collective Agreements

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As part of the campaign, local unions are encouraged to use the Raising the Bar Inspection Checklist to have a conversation with women in the workplace and identify hazards and concerns.

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You can find the Action Guide and the Inspection Checklist on the campaign web site at usw.ca/raisethebar.

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Some of you might wonder: Why haven't women spoken out before now? There could be a number of reasons, including:

- Women in male-dominated workplaces may be trying to fit in and don't want to draw attention to their differences.
- Maybe they've tried, and have been laughed at or ignored or accused of being "weak". So they've given up.
- Maybe they've got enough other responsibilities in their lives and aren't looking for another battle.

Whatever the reason, don't blame them. Encourage women to speak up now and work with them to get to the root of the problem.

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Remember: An injury to one is an injury to all—regardless of whether that "one" is a man or a woman. Let's do all we can to Raise the Bar!

Thank you!