WOHRC FACT SHEET

WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH RESOURCE CENTER NEWS

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY Vol. 6 No. 6

Never Done—Hours of Work Around the World

"The ten-hour workday six days a week, with eight hours of sleep at night, left my father about four hours out of twenty-four to do what he, as a free person in a free country, wanted to do. We saw him guard and hoard those four hours, being careful to waste no hour. Had his workday been eight hours, he would have had twelve hours more in a week to do the things he wanted to do, things his personality craved. There was no yearly vacation. From 1876 to 1904, August Sandburg walked from his home to the same Q. blacksmith shop six days a week for a ten hour workday. On an eight-hour workday he would have had in those years many days amounting to two or three years of time for work of his own choice, for rest, for play and talk with his children and friends, for his accordion and his Bible. In those added two hours a day across those years his personality would have reached out and down and up, would have struck deeper roots in the good earth and sent higher branches toward the blue sky."

— Carl Sandburg[1]

Hours of work have been a major issue between employers and employees almost since the start of industrialization and the basic issues of women's rights on the job and society's perceptions of the role and limitations of women have been inextricably interwoven into the history of legislation and general practices governing the hours of work around the world. [2]

In the 1920's, for example, activist organizations, like the Women's Trade Union League and the Consumer League of New York, staunchly supported protective legislation for women, which included legal prescription of the maximum hours of work permitted. Other activist groups, like the Women's League for Equal Opportunity, however, opposed special rules for women, arguing that "restrictions on the conditions of labor should be based upon the nature of the industry, not on the sex of the workers. . . ."[3] They feared that shorter work-week legislation for women would "discriminate against women and handicap them in competing with men in earning their livelihood." [4]

Recognizing the special burdens of the multiple roles of women is not new as this 1936 Women's Bureau Bulletin illustrates. [8]

Some labor historians see the movement for protective legislation for women to have been a means of winning rights for men from "behind women's petticoats." As the historian Elizabeth Brandeis noted "In order to put an end to evening overtime work the men workers in the textile mills made a long and determined fight for a night work law for women which should prohibit their employment after 6:00 P.M. and thus force the closing of the mills at that hour." [4]

It was indeed for women that the first state laws prescribing the maximum hours of daily work were upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court. The historic 1908 decision *Muller vs Oregon* permitted Oregon to set a 10-hour day maximum for women only. Unfortunately, the Court's reasoning was based on their assumption that female physical structures and maternal functions "place her at a disadvantage" compared to men and that even if legally females were to be "upon an absolutely equal plane" with men, "it would still be true that she is so constituted that she will rest upon and look to him for protection; . . ." [5]

The imposition of protective rules and regulations governing hours of work, night work, weight lifting regulations spread, not only in the United States but around the world.[6] Some of the benefits were extended to men and establishing protections for women served as a driving wedge toward establishing these same rights—a minimum wage, an eight hour day, overtime pay, for all working people. However, in some cases, it was not for the protection of health, but for the explicit exclusion of women that protective legislation was passed. According to the Women's Bureau [7] the active lobbying by the craft unions involved in the skilled trades of grinding and polishing was instrumental in the passage of an 1899 New York State statute prohibiting women from using grinding and polishing machines.

Passage of the Civil Rights Act and creation of the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission in the United States led to the legal decisions striking down all state protective legislation as discriminatory and placing women on an equal footing to men in this regard. Protective legislation for women still exists in many other countries of the world, however.

History clearly shows that a major issue in industrial relations has been hours of work, but is there a relationship between the hours that you work and your health? Is leisure related to well-being? Does overwork injure you? How much is too much—and how little is too little?

The answers to these questions are relative. Almost everyone agrees on the extremes: both unemployment and excessive hours of work (well-above 40 hours, with no regular vacations or work breaks) will be detrimental to well-being. The International Labor Office, for example, has documented the correlation between the shorter work week with regular vacations to the increased standard of living in nations around the world. [9] Any occupational hazards present will have a greater effect as the exposure time increases. Excessive hours of stress on the body can worsen musculoskeletal injuries.

Several researchers have studied the profound adverse health effects of unemployment. [10] Unemployed workers have shortened life expectancies and an increase in virtually all chronic diseases. The accident rate of workers who learn they are soon to become unemployed rises dramatically.

The issues become less clear with less extreme cases and many other factors come into play. The nature of work, the extent of responsibility and autonomy, the sense of accomplishment one feels after completing a task, and, most important, the conditions of work, both physical and psychological, will all contribute to the drain and strain of the job.

Underload and Overload

Job underload and overload have been found by researchers to be serious stressors. Jobs which are either very boring or underutilize one skills, or else jobs, even if interesting, which place too many demands on a person—demands like continually meeting deadlines, or simply having too much work—will raise the stress level. Scientists have been able to document biochemical changes related to the stress response in people with such jobs. [11]

Getting away from it all—that is, work breaks and regular vacations are one way in which a person can recover from the stress of such work.

Multiple Work Roles of Women

Women, on the average, work many more hours per week than their male counterparts. In most, if not all societies, women with paid employment, continue to bear the main responsibilities for childcare and housework as well, although males are sharing a greater burden in some countries. [12]

In 1977 the ILO reported that the typical employed women works an average of 75-80 hours per week all over the industrialized world, East and West. Employed married women appear to have a greater workload than employed married men. They report 17% less free time and less time for rest and recreation. On the average women have been found to spend at least 5 hours per week more time commuting, doing housework and other family tasks.

The Quality of the Environment Survey published in 1979 found that at least almost half the women surveyed spent an additional 3½ hours on housework on the days that they worked. This would make the average workday for employed married women 11½ hours, not counting commuting and work preparation time.

Paid Leisure and Vacations

International trends, particularly in the advanced industrialized world, are toward the shorter workweek with longer periods of paid vacation. Among Western nations, workers in the United States, on the average, appear to have the shortest vacation periods. In Sweden, France, and Denmark five weeks of vacation are mandated by law. In the Federal Republic of Germany there is a legislated three week minimum vacation time.

Is there scientific evidence that longer vacations can lead to better health? The answer is no.

In fact, there is really limited scientific evidence to support many of our modern concepts of the quality of life. People in the modern world have simply come to believe that human beings have some basic rights and needs—and the international trends toward shorter work weeks and improved conditions are apparent, even without an absolute medical data base upon which to proceed. □

INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES OF WORKING HOURS[9]

	Normal hours/ per week	Hours actually per week	Minimum weekly rest	Minimum annual leave
Australia	40	34.5 a	1½-2 days	3-4 (4 **) weeks
Belgium	40 (38**)	33.6 a	1 day (Sun)	4 weeks (2-3**)
Canada	40 (35-40**)	37.6 b	24 hours (2 days under fed	2 (3**) (weeks leg)
Denmark	40	33 a	1 day (some commerce 2)	30 days (l)
El Salvador	44	44.5 a	1 day Sun.	15 days
Finland	40 (35-40**)	40.4 a	24 hrs (2 days**)	4 (5**) weeks
France	39	39.7 a	1 day Sun. (2 cs)	30 days (l)
Germany (Federal Republic)	48 (40**)	40.7 b	24 hrs (shops 1½ days)	18 days (l) (4-5 wks**)
Mexico	48(40cs)	46 a	1 day Sun. (2 cs)	6 days (1-2 wks **)
Sweden	40	35.6 a	36 hrs (more by ** contract)	25 days (l) (5-7 wks **)
USSR	41	40.7 a	42 hrs	15 days
United States	40	34.8 b	2 days	1-2 wks **

** union collective agreements; a hours actually worked; b hours paid for; cs civil servants; l legislated national minimum

Notes and References

1.Sandburg, Carl, Always the Young Strangers, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1953, p. 97.

2. Much of the historical discussion is adapted from Stellman, Jeanne Mager, Women's Work Women's Health, Pantheon New York, 1977.

3. New York Reporter (White Plains) in U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau, Labor Legislation for Women, Women's Bureau Bulletin no 66, Washington DC 1929, p. 100.

4. Testimony of Mrs. Clarence M. Smith at hearing before the New York State Industrial Survey Commission, Nov 8, 1926, p. 935.

5.Muller v. Oregon, 208 U.S. 412 (1908).

6. An excellent source of information on international trends is the International Labour Office in publications such as International Labour Conventions and Recommendations 1919-1981, Geneva 1982.

7.U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau Women's Bureau Bulletin.

8. U.S. Dept. of Labor Women's Bureau, The Employed Woman Homemaker in the United States, Women's Bureau Bulletin no 148, Washington 1936.

9.Int'l Labour Office, General Survey on Working Time, Report III Part 4B, Geneva, ILO, 1984.

10.See for example Kasl, S, Cobb,S and Brooks,G, Changes in Serum Uric Acid and Cholesterol Levels in Men Undergoing Job Loss, JAMA 206, p 1500, 1968.

11.Frankenhaeuser, M and Gardell, B, Underload and overload in working life: outline of a multidisciplinary approach, J. Hum. Stress p. 35, Sept. 1976.

12. Bahr, SJ, Effects of power and division of labor in the family, in Hoffman and Hye eds., Working Mothers: an evaluative review of the consequences for wife, husband and child. Jossey Bass, San Francisco 1974.

13. Int'l Labour Office, Women workers and society: international perspectives, Geneva, ILO 1977.

Women's Occupational Health Resource Center
School of Public Health
Columbia University
600 W 168th St.
New York, New York 10032