

Women and the Union Safety Rep role

**Findings from focus groups
July - October 2022**

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Introduction

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) hosted a series of focus groups of women union reps and activists, to help us better understand women's experiences of health and safety in the workplace, their engagement with the safety agenda in their unions, and how the trade union movement can better support them. Unions were invited to circulate notice to member participants from a diversity of backgrounds in order to take part and share their views, to help inform our work.

Women's health and safety has for many years been somewhat overlooked. The finding of these focus groups aims to put a spotlight on the topic of gender in occupational safety and health.

TUC research shows only 20% of union safety reps are women, despite women making up a majority of union members. If we are to ensure safety reps are more representative of the wider workforce as a whole, we first need to better understand why fewer women are becoming safety reps, and why those who do take on the role step forward. To identify barriers and opportunities, we sought to hear direct from women reps and non-reps.

We know there are health and safety concerns which disproportionately, or exclusively, affect women workers. We also know that traditionally, these issues have often been given less attention. A previous TUC Report on Gender and OSH outlined some of the key issues, with advice for reps: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/resource/gender-occupational-safety-and-health>

The focus groups sought to better understand how we encourage more women to become safety reps, and which OSH concerns all reps require support from unions on. We brought together: women safety reps, established and new; women union reps with roles other than health and safety; women union activists with no formal rep role.

The focus groups invited participants to share thoughts and experiences, using questions including but not limited to the following:

- What are their own experiences of health and safety at work, and what issues are brought to them by members?
- To what extent does gender, and sexism, play a part in their experiences of work, health and safety?
- Have they considered becoming a safety rep, and if so, did anything put them off?
- What attracted them to the role of rep?
- What do they understand the role of a safety rep to be?
- What advice would you give to anyone thinking of getting involved?
- What can we do to make involvement a realistic opportunity?
- What support should unions offer?
- What needs to change?

Focus groups took place remotely online, facilitated by the TUC. Participants were encouraged to express views in confidence, and all contributions are attributed anonymously.

Who we spoke to

A total of 100 women took part in 10 separate focus groups. Four of these were mixed, but union-specific focus groups were also held with PCS, FBU and RMT, meaning members of those unions are more highly represented in the overall number of participants.

Union	Participants %
PCS	20%
FBU	23%
Unite	2%
Unison	15%
ASLEF	2%
UCU	4%
GMB	6%
USDAW	2%
Community	6%
NEU	4%
Prospect	2%
NASUWT	2%
POA	1%
RMT	9%
Equity	2%

The majority of participants (75%) were union health and safety reps, with the

remainder holding other union roles or no role.



The issues

A wide range of health and safety issues were raised by participants, as well as experiences in the role, with unions, and the types of changes women wanted to see.

Some issues were recurrent, and dominated conversations, with many women from across different unions and sectors sharing concerns as well as ideas for practical actions unions can take. This report will discuss several of these further:

- Menopause
- Unsuitable uniforms and PPE
- Menstrual health
- Welfare facilities
- Personal safety
- Sexual harassment
- Stress

The menopause: challenges

The issue of the menopause is being taken up by more unions (and employers), and some participants gave credit to recent television series which attempted to tackle the stigma. Women reported that employers were often not tackling problems in ways that helped workers, with managers rarely receiving training, and some matters which being ignored or dismissed completely. Some women felt they had to 'prove' or demonstrate they are menopausal because they were not being believed.

The main concerns raised in relation to the menopause were:

- A lack of understanding of the symptoms experienced by menopausal women and the issues experienced by working conditions, by both managers and the wider workforce. Very few employers acknowledge the menopause in risk assessments.
- It's becoming more common: an aging workforce means this is a growing workplace issue, and many more workplaces will need to act on it
- Lack of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and uniforms for women experiencing hot flashes
- Use of hot desking creating problems for those with adjustments, for example fans and other equipment having to move around with the worker. In addition, the risks associated with Covid aerosol spread meaning fans being taken out of use.
- Delays to Occupational Health referrals and feeling intimidated by medical appointments
- Lack of consideration to heat and other issues in risk assessments, with one rep saying menopausal women in her workplace had fainted due to lack of adjustments.

- Employers refusal to take part in or offer training on the menopause

"Women were fainting"

"My manager was offered training. He said 'I'm not doing it'"

"Work from my union and TUC is great but hasn't filtered down to members"

The menopause: opportunities

In addition to concerns, participants also identified opportunities to support women, involve members and use the menopause as an organising opportunity. Ideas from women participants included:

- Collecting data on the menopause and presenting it to management to demonstrate the scale of the problem and the specific issue women experience
- Organising branch and workplace-level meetings and discussions on the topic
- Appointing menopause 'ambassadors' or 'champions' who can provide information
- Drawing up demands and submitting adjustment claims, for example securing fans for members in need
- Hosting or requesting menopause awareness sessions to inform members of the symptoms and support required
- Calling for training to be mandatory, not optional

"It's a useful and powerful recruitment issue"

Unsuitable uniforms and PPE

Women in sectors where uniforms or personal protective equipment was required reported lack of gender-specific sizing and maternity fit, with ill-fitting items not suitable for women's bodies, and a lack of access when a change of size was required. This is not just a question of comfort or aesthetics: a lack of appropriate PPE was reported to be causing accidents and affecting service delivery.

Other concerns highlighted were:

- Standard-issue uniforms and PPE can cause menopausal women to be uncomfortably hot.
- Women experiencing weight change unable to secure a change in size
- Management excuse-making: often blaming suppliers for a lack of variety, when really there are options out there
- Equipment storage and design inappropriate for women, for example handles on machinery too large or lockers too high up
- Even union reps' tabards don't fit women reps properly!

"When we wear [shorts] they're tight where they shouldn't be and loose where they shouldn't be. And if you're pregnant you're just told to get a larger size"

"I asked about pregnancy trousers and they looked at me like I was stupid"

Menstruation

Despite very positive steps by unions in securing provision of menstrual products in lots of workplace, raising the issue on the political stage, and breaking down the stigma around menstrual health in the workplace, there remains widespread concern around lack of access to welfare facilities, products and a lack of support. For example, some participants told how only disabled toilets in one workplace had towels and tampons provided, while another said how they were only available for a fee. We also heard how women with conditions such as endometriosis (which causes very painful periods) were being punished through absence monitoring, considered a form of institutionalised gender discrimination. One woman told of her employer failing to make adaptations for her, instead signing her off with stress as it was 'easier'.

Other issues raised included:

- A lack of flexible working options for women when on periods (but also for women who are menopausal, expressing milk, using IVF injections).
- Women taking more sickness absence than men and being penalised as a result.
- Women in certain jobs not being allowed or able to go to the toilet, for example on trains where there are no facilities.
- A lack of welfare provision at protracted incidents in the fire service (i.e. during a long shift, having nowhere to go to change a towel or tampon), on building sites or other workplaces, especially in jobs ordinarily considered 'male-dominated'.
- Little awareness, consideration of, or empathy for women with certain conditions.

Women also spoke about the opportunities for making change and organising on the issue of menstruation. In some cases, unions

had provided a box with provisions which had led to management adopting it out of shame.

"They'd rather a short-term fix ... it then creates antagonism and resentment from men who say 'oh she's off sick again' - and more stress for us!"

"Once we sign on to a shift, we can't just pop to the shop for some tampons. We need them on site or we'll leak"

Personal safety

The ability to be and to feel safe was a concern for many women. This included both while on the job, as well as during journeys to and from the workplace, particularly among those travelling at night-time or in remote areas with a lack of public transport; for example in entertainment and hospitality, or on the railways. Some women reported instances of verbal and physical harassment while working or travelling alone. The main problems identified were:

- A lack of employer duty of care before and after a shift, and employers placing harassment as 'low' risk on a risk assessment.
 - Requests for paid-for taxi journeys during night shifts refused.
 - Risks and fears associated with lone working or being the sole woman in a workplace, with instances of assault not reported to or by the employer; and a lack of body cams or CCTVs in certain sectors.
- A fear of abuse and sexual harassment from customers, patients, passengers or other members of the public.
 - A lack of women's dorms and showers in fire stations, and changing rooms in other sectors where uniform change required.

Stress

While stress is universal concern, and always the most commonly cited by safety reps across sectors, there were a number of issues raised by women which appeared to give stress a gendered characteristic, including reasons why women workers were at higher risk of experiencing work-related stress due to factors external to work:

- Domestic labour falls primarily on women, and adds to stress levels, giving us less mental capacity at work, as well as causing fatigue
- There is more pressure on women to 'just get on with it', and we are less likely to ask for help because of being the sole 'domestic' worker at home
- The added stress from the experience of, or risk of, gendered bullying and antagonism, sexual harassment, and discrimination
- A distinct lack of stress risk assessments being carried out by employers
- Reps reported a lack of time for self-care is leading to deterioration and mistakes and accidents
- The cost-of-living crisis is making stress levels worse
- Women find themselves too stressed to take on union roles

Women Safety Reps: Barriers to involvement

Focus group participants reflected on the role of the union safety rep, and their experience as women. While most were already elected to the post of safety rep and could reflect on their own experiences, some had no familiarity with the safety rep function and were able to share their perspective of what it seemed like from the outside.

When considering how unions might try to encourage more women members to consider the role, there were several barriers discussed:

The role of safety rep, and safety committee meetings, were considered 'macho' and a male-dominated space not especially welcoming to women colleagues. Women spoke of a "boys club" of safety reps, convenors, officers, and management:

"I'm the only woman that goes to safety committee meetings... it is intimidating"

"The way the male safety rep was treated was different... I was interrogated about what training I'd done"

"They expect subservience from women and Black people"

"The boys' club is a real barrier... sort of invisible but almost impenetrable"

Women felt they did not know much about the role of the safety rep and its powers:

"I didn't understand the powers you have or the legislation that covers it"

Where women were in a workplace which already had a safety rep in post, they have been told there was no need for any additional reps.

"Maybe they see me as threatening. Like I'll take their positions"

Many women felt 'at capacity', and simply had too much else going on to consider taking on additional union duties. There was a perception that it involves a heavy workload burden, and a lack of knowledge of the right to carry out duties in work time.

The perception of being 'pigeonholed' as the union Equalities or Women's Officer (even when in post as a safety rep!) because of their gender:

"We get moved into 'work mum' type roles in the union"

Some women felt they were, or would be, listened to less compared to men in similar roles; both by management and members.

"because I'm not a man, [my manager] thinks I don't know my stuff. But I do – inside out!"

There were negative associations with being vocal and adversarial with management, which came with fear of victimisation.

Women also raised difficulty accessing training: the dates, times, and locations of

safety rep training made it hard to juggle caring responsibilities

"I can't spare the four days training away from work... travelling to and from the college means finding a child minder"

Some women felt the safety rep role was the most 'boring' position in the union, or that it was daunting and involves a lot of legalistic knowledge

A lack of women role models to look up to and learn from meant some women just couldn't see themselves doing it. This was particularly true of younger women:

"Other women make me feel like I'm too young to do the role"

"All the regional officers in my union are men"

Women Safety Reps: Opportunities for involvement

Despite the challenges identified, and some of the more negative experiences of women reps and activists, participants identified positive actions and best practise in supporting women members' health and safety and progression in the union.

Members shared examples of their own work, or campaigns they were familiar with, gave positive feedback on resources and training provided to members, and contributed ideas for what unions, reps and the TUC can do going forward. Many of the women safety reps involved were very proud to be a safety rep, of the difference made to members' safety, and the status that came with their union role.

"When they see me coming they do take me seriously. They see the union lanyard and know I mean business"

Participants spoke repeatedly about mentorship, both formal schemes facilitated by unions, and informal support networks. This involved women safety reps mentoring other women, but also men with experience offering support and guidance, too.

Similarly, there was appetite for more opportunities to informally network with other reps, from similar or different workplaces, sectors and unions, order to share experiences and advice. Many of the women in the focus group said they would like to do something similar again, as it was the first opportunity they'd had to converse

in such a way with other women in similar roles.

Building women's confidence was underlined as a key factor in convincing members to take on the rep role, with training on leadership in the union required before training in a specific union role could be considered.

"We had a male safety rep who never brought info back to the branch... so I stood against him and won"

"You cannot guarantee there will be a woman in the room unless you are there"

There were many suggestions about how the trade union movement can better sell the positives of the role of safety rep, including the benefits that come with it in terms of influence, training, the powers the role has, and the time off to carry out duties.

"Getting time 'out' of my regular work, that definitely appealed to me!"

"It gives you so much more authority and clout, and you can put a health and safety spin on anything!"

"You get respect from your members"

“Members feel more comfortable talking to you than to management”

“It’s the quickest route to change!”

Women felt there was a need for unions to normalise the existence of multiple reps, as opposed to workplaces having a sole union safety rep (which was more often than not a man). It was also felt that this was important for succession planning: with safety reps often falling into older age brackets, there was a need to target more younger women and ensure several years’ overlap/handover, else workplaces risked losing the role altogether.

“Once we had two reps the workload was shared and it was much more manageable”

The benefits of union and TUC training was repeatedly raised. Access was an important issue, with many saying how the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and the move to online or hybrid learning had made accessing learning much easier for them. A greater emphasis on part-time, flexible and online learning offers were welcomed. Women also suggested more ‘bite size’ training offers that give members a taste for the role, but doesn’t require fully signing up to the full course, as a lead-in.

“I’m quite proud that I’ve got my [rep] qualifications”

“If you like to learn, there’s lots to learn!”

“It’s a positive change. I’m now seeing more women interested in the role”

“online training has allowed more people to be more involved”

Women identified a modular approach to courses as more accessible for women members, with a greater level of flexibility over when or where courses were offered as desirable.

Participants were also interested in seeing course content including more on the health and safety issues faced by women.

Some women suggested that most (or that there is a perception that most) trainers and tutors on union reps courses are men; and that women-only training may encourage some women to take part who might otherwise not feel as confident.

“An hour a week over a year is easier for me than six specific days that can’t be moved”

Focus group participants had a number of practical ideas to help encourage more women to consider the role of safety rep, including:

- Unions running workshops centring women’s health and safety issues to get

both men and women reps and activists thinking about potential organising activity

- Working with Women's Officers and committees to bring themselves and health and safety reps together to discuss shared concerns, campaigns and to educate one another
- Publicity and campaigns advertising the role of safety rep, and why it's important, targeting women in particular
- Running union/TUC campaigns nationally that reps can take up on a workplace level, for example petitions calling for action on women's uniform or PPE: One size does not fit all!
- Facilitating more regular forums, like the focus groups, to provide opportunities to meet other women in similar roles, opportunities to network and share best practise.



Find out more www.hazards.org/women/reps

"People should know what health and safety reps do. It's not just wandering around in a high-vis!"

