



## Women's occupational health and safety management: An issue for corporate social responsibility



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### ABSTRACT

This study measures the extent to which the gender perspective is taken into account in Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) management and proposes an innovative approach for managing it. This work is an exploratory study of the relations between women's OHS and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) through the examination of the main management practices that literature supports in a survey conducted at 117 companies in Spain with different levels of commitment to gender equality. Overall, the practices in question are found to be deployed to a moderate extent and their impact is limited. The most relevant initiatives are those related to the prevention, punishment and eradication of sexual harassment in the workplace and violence against women. Our findings indicate that compliance with the law and the importance of external recognition in CSR are main drivers in promoting the gender perspective in OHS. A coherent framework is suggested for addressing women's OHS management based on a voluntary, preventive, systematic approach that goes beyond sexual and reproductive issues, namely the CSR.

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### 1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was originally defined by the European Commission (EC) as “a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis” (EC, 2001, p. 8). In this sense, the Green Paper “Promoting a European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility” includes the health and safety area as part of its internal dimension (EC, 2001, p. 8). This definition was subsequently updated to “the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society” (EC, 2011a, p. 6).

Following the aforementioned Green paper, other authors have proposed the integration of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) practices into CSR (e.g. Montero et al., 2009; Cioca et al., 2014; Koskela, 2014; Granerud, 2011; Kawashita et al., 2005; Hoffmeister Arce et al., 2006; Bestratén and Pujol, 2004; Zwetsloot and Starren, 2004; Segal et al., 2003). Therefore, CSR

offers an opportunity to integrate OHS aspects into a broader framework addressing OHS questions beyond the compliance with the legislation (EU-OSHA, 2004) and creates a framework for sustainable work (Cioca et al., 2014). Accordingly, we consider CSR to be a suitable framework for strengthening OHS for numerous reasons: First of all, its strategic nature provides an opportunity to meet OHS requirements over and above legal obligations (Zwetsloot and Starren, 2004; Cioca et al., 2014). Secondly, the public expects companies to act in accordance with CSR principles and to protect the health and safety of their employees (Hart, 2010; Jain et al., 2011, 2012; Hoffmeister Arce et al., 2006). Thirdly, CSR can encourage the implementing of new initiatives to promote OHS and the consideration of the sensitivities of different stakeholder groups, thus making for wider recognition (Cioca et al., 2014; Jain et al., 2012; Montero et al., 2009; Sowden and Sinha, 2005; Zwetsloot and Starren, 2004). Fourthly, CSR enables higher goals for quality of working life to be attained, as it introduces actions to promote health and manage OHS more effectively (Hoffmeister Arce et al., 2006). Finally, using CSR initiatives as the basis for actions in the field of OHS can help reinforce those actions and ensure their continuity. It can also have repercussions in terms of image, attracting and holding on to talent, productivity and financial results at companies (Granerud, 2011; Cioca et al.,

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2014; EU-OSHA, 2012a; Montero et al., 2009; Zwetsloot and Starren, 2004).

On the other hand, women are an essential part of the workforce (EU-OSHA, 2013a). There are over half a billion female paid workers, and women make up 40% of the global workforce (World Bank, 2016). The International Labor Organization (ILO) has classified women workers as “vulnerable workers” with special Occupational Health and Safety needs (ILO, 2016). The main approach to women’s OHS is based on their biological, physical and psychological differences and on traditional postulates concerning human health and capabilities focused mainly on determining the causes of pathologies and on the cause and effect relationship between health and sickness (ILO, 2010). However apart from biological differences, which logically affect the health of women and men differently, OHS management needs to consider other factors and include a gender perspective to provide a broader view of the subject (Vogel, 2003; Messing, 2002, 2004; Botha and Cronjé, 2015; Zeytinoglu et al., 2005). Thus, inequalities in working conditions (horizontal and vertical segregation and the organization of work), part-time and temporary work by women, the fact that women bear most of the double burden of doing both paid work outside and unpaid work at home, harassment in the workplace and at home and gender-based domestic violence make it necessary to tackle issues of OHS using an integrated and a gender-related approach. Consequently, the factoring of gender into OHS management must not obviate the link between health and gender roles (ILO, 2010).

Most studies of women’s OHS have concentrated on sectors where women predominate, and on psychosocial stressors. Few studies considering gender and sex-specific factors have been carried out (Botha and Cronjé, 2015; Avilés-Palacios et al., 2013; ILO, 2013; Messing et al., 2003; Campos-Serna et al., 2012; Zeytinoglu et al., 2005; Messing, 2002). Sex differences are based on biological factors (Regitz-Zagrosek, 2012) and occupational risk prevention covers pregnant women, breast-feeding period caring (Avilés-Palacios et al., 2013), anthropometric measurements (Messing et al., 2003), musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) and stress (Messing and Stellman, 2006). By contrast, gender is associated with behavior, lifestyle and life experience (Regitz-Zagrosek, 2012). According to Messing et al. (2003) responses to occupational exposures per gender should take into account gender differences in workplace climate (less autonomy and more control at work due to men’s position in the hierarchy, more exposure to sexual discrimination and harassment at work), gender differences in employment status (part-time work, horizontal and vertical segregation corresponding to workplace stressors), work-life interfaces (child care, elder care, domestic tasks) and non-work-related factors (domestic violence) that cause fatigue and stress. Therefore, improvements in women’s health and safety need to be built up within a coherent framework that covers in sex as well as gender issues (ILO, 2010).

Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, although OHS is therefore an important aspect of a company’s CSR work there is a lack of research connecting CSR, OHS and women. Initiatives for promoting OHS are often dominated by legal regulations, but a regulatory approach is effective when regulation meets high standards (such as those of the ILO & WHO) and includes a framework to effectively translate policy into practice (Jain et al., 2012). Likewise, “OHS standards have often used male models; for example toxicological data comes from males” (WHO, 2006, p. 6) and OHS policy and legislation involving sex differences include basically protection of pregnant women (Heide, 1999). Initiatives for promoting CSR are predominantly voluntary and private, so we propose that CSR could be the ideal approach for managing women’s OHS. Hence, this study is a first attempt to bridge this research gap encompassing CSR, OHS and women. In

this sense, this work can thus be considered an innovative study that explores the relations between CSR, OHS and women.

This paper sets out first to propose an approach based on a set of practices for managing CSR, OHS and women that goes beyond biological differences. Second, it examines the extent to which the gender perspective is factored into OHS management at a number of Spanish companies committed to gender equality (GE). Finally, it also measures outcomes and impacts. It offers not only a theoretical approach but also empirical data, so its main contribution is the embedding of women’s OHS issues in CSR.

The article is therefore structured as follows: First of all the OHS is linked with CSR. Secondly, women’s OHS is analyzed and the gender dimension is incorporated by considering practices for managing women’s specific needs within CSR. Section 5 then presents an empirical study of the incorporation of those practices and of the impacts generated at Spanish companies. Section 6 shows the results and Section 7 discusses them. Finally, a number of conclusions and implications for business management are pointed out.

## 2. Occupational health and safety and its link with corporate social responsibility

There is growing interest at institutions such as the Agency for Safety and Health at Work and the European Commission in promoting links between CSR and OHS. It should be also noted that academically there has been a slight increase in concern (Montero et al., 2009; Cioca et al., 2014; Koskela, 2014; Sajjad and Eweje, 2014; Granerud, 2011; Kawashita et al., 2005; Hoffmeister Arce et al., 2006; Bestratén and Pujol, 2004; Zwetsloot and Starren, 2004; Segal et al., 2003).

A summary of the relevant literature reveals that CSR offers a number of opportunities for strengthening OHS, mainly:

- To integrate OHS aspects into a broader framework addressing OHS issues beyond mere compliance with legislation (Granerud, 2011; Montero et al., 2009; EU-OSHA, 2004; Zwetsloot and Starren, 2004; EC, 2001).
- To create a framework for sustainable work (Cioca et al., 2014; Montero et al., 2009).
- To protect the health and safety of employees (Hart, 2010; Jain et al., 2011, 2012; Hoffmeister Arce et al., 2006; EU-OSHA, 2004; EC, 2001).
- To encourage the implementing of new initiatives to promote OHS (Cioca et al., 2014; Montero et al., 2009).
- To consider the sensitivities of different stakeholder groups, thus giving them wider recognition (Cioca et al., 2014; Montero et al., 2009; Sowden and Sinha, 2005; Zwetsloot and Starren, 2004; EC, 2001).
- To achieve goals of increasing the quality of working life and managing OHS more effectively (Montero et al., 2009; Hoffmeister Arce et al., 2006; Bestratén and Pujol, 2004).
- To increase the strategic importance of OHS (Cioca et al., 2014; EC, 2001).
- To achieve better integration of OHS in core business (Cioca et al., 2014; Granerud, 2011; Montero et al., 2009).

Furthermore, including OHS in CSR has a major impact and creates new advantages for OHS:

- It enhances corporate reputation, increases productivity and customer loyalty and raises the value of company shares (EU-OSHA, 2012a, 2004; Granerud, 2011; Cioca et al., 2014; Montero et al., 2009; Zwetsloot and Starren, 2004).
- It provides both financial and social returns such as reputation and legitimacy (EU-OSHA, 2012a; Montero et al., 2009).

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