

How EHS management can help organisations elevate women's safety

Featured in:  **INSIGHTS**



Addressing EHS compliance for women in India requires a nuanced approach that recognises the unique challenges faced by female workers in different sectors.

When environmental activist Vandana Shiva said – “We are either going to have a future where women lead the way to make peace with the Earth or we are not going to have a human future at all” – she was making a statement about our survival itself. Men and women are the two sides of the same coin. The fact that they co-exist by default means they should co-habit in every sphere of existence for the world to achieve equilibrium. However, the numbers on workforce participation in India highlight an abysmal skew between men and women despite the fact that the female labour force is a crucial aspect of achieving balanced economic growth and social development.

A World Bank report highlighted that less than a quarter of Indian women are part of the labour force, and only a fifth are directly employed. This places India among the countries with the lowest rates of female labour force participation globally, with only some parts of the Arab world having even lower rates. Shockingly, the labour force participation of Indian women decreased from 36.7% in 2005 to a mere 26% in 2018, as reported by Deloitte. Additionally, a majority of the women are employed in unorganized sectors, which go unreported, and these women are deprived of the legal benefits that are guaranteed to women to ensure an equal working environment and conditions. It is, therefore, the need of the hour to step up to make every effort and put every system in place to give women their fair share when it comes to their right to work and earn their livelihood.



Manikandan SM, Chief Operations Officer

Identifying the loopholes

The challenges and barriers to female labour force participation are multifaceted and intricate. In this context, one of the significant disablers is the lack of appropriate Environment, Health, and Safety (EHS) compliance measures tailored specifically for women workers.

India's labour market is characterised by diverse sectors, both organised and unorganised, each presenting distinct risk profiles. Unskilled and semi-skilled women often find employment in high-risk industries such as construction and mining within the unorganised sector. These women face dangerous working conditions without proper safety measures, putting them at risk of accidents, health hazards, and, in some cases, even loss of life. Heavy engineering, mining, construction, and liquor industries, known for being male-dominated, often exhibit poor infrastructure and lack adequate physical safety measures. This situation is further compounded by safety concerns related to travel, site work, and late working hours. On the other hand, women working in organised sectors also face various forms of harassment, including mental and sexual harassment.

EHS, a multifaceted issue

EHS management, as an organised function, can be traced back to the 1980s when the chemical industry took this up as an organised approach to mitigate crises by implementing measures to protect the environment, maintain the health of the workforce, and ensure safety in workplaces. For the environment, it means organisations putting together systems to comply with environmental regulations to reduce the carbon footprint, ensure wastewater management, and protect biodiversity.

Safety measures include identifying workplace hazards and ensuring measures to reduce accidents and exposure to harmful situations and substances. Training is an important aspect of safety as it includes lessons in accident prevention and response, emergency preparedness, and the use of PPE. As for health, organisations focus on whole wellness modules for their workforce for their overall well-being and also provide medical assistance.

However, when it comes to EHS management for women employees, the approach needs to be pinpointed for greater impact. The Indian Constitution enshrines the principle of gender equality, ensuring equal protection and opportunities for all citizens, regardless of sex. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act 2013 was introduced to uphold this constitutional mandate and protect women from sexual harassment at work.

While the legislation is designed to provide a safe working environment for women and ensure compliance and disclosure, its implementation is still in its early stages, resulting in practical difficulties for employers seeking to comply.

Customised approach for impact

In order to bridge the gender gap in labour force participation and ensure the safety and well-being of women in the workplace, it is crucial to adopt a tailored approach to EHS compliance. Recognising that different industries and sectors present distinct risks, there is a need for customised EHS policies and programs that specifically address the concerns and challenges faced by women workers.

Organisations should prioritise the development and implementation of comprehensive EHS policies that account for the diverse needs and vulnerabilities of their employees. This involves providing appropriate safety training, ensuring access to safety equipment and resources, and creating a culture that promotes gender equality and zero tolerance for harassment. It also includes educating the women workforce of important health practices and ensuring that, while at the workplace, these working women abide by the highest standards of safety. This would ensure a more talent pool, which would be gender diverse, and ultimately benefit the employers in selecting the best available resource for their operations/work.

Workplaces need to ensure measures are put together to ensure women have access to healthcare and maternity support. In industries that enable hybrid work, women can be allowed the option of flexibility so that they can balance their home and work lives. In fact, this should become a universal norm, extended even to men. Every organisation must ensure a safe and fulfilling work environment for their employees, especially women, to make workplaces safe, comfortable, and convenient. There should be provisions for paternity leave along with maternity leave to ensure that both men and women are made responsible for bringing up the child, and socially, it should not be conceived to be a woman's responsibility for childcare. Providing transport facilities for women working night shifts is already placed in several industries, such as the media. Clean and well-equipped toilet facilities and nursery facilities, if possible, are some ways organisations can make a positive difference to their women employees.

Awareness is key

Furthermore, a collaboration between the government, employers, and civil society is vital to raise awareness about EHS compliance for women and facilitate its effective implementation. Employers must actively engage in creating a safe and inclusive work environment that encourages female labour force participation and supports career advancement opportunities.

Investing in women's safety and well-being in the workplace goes beyond just regulatory compliance; it is a strategic imperative for sustainable economic growth and social progress. A diverse and inclusive workforce that empowers women not only drives productivity but also enhances an organization's reputation and competitiveness.

In conclusion, addressing EHS compliance for women in India requires a nuanced approach that recognises the unique challenges faced by female workers in different sectors. With the advent of multi-national corporations in the Indian economy, patriarchal trends need to be changed and made inclusive for both men and women equally. A robust system that encourages the approach towards working women, incorporated by every employer, can bring about the much-required change. By promoting gender equality, providing a safe work environment, and developing tailored policies, India can foster greater female labour force participation and unlock the full potential of its economy. The journey towards gender-inclusive workplaces and robust EHS compliance must involve collective efforts from all stakeholders to create a safer and more equitable future for women in the workforce.