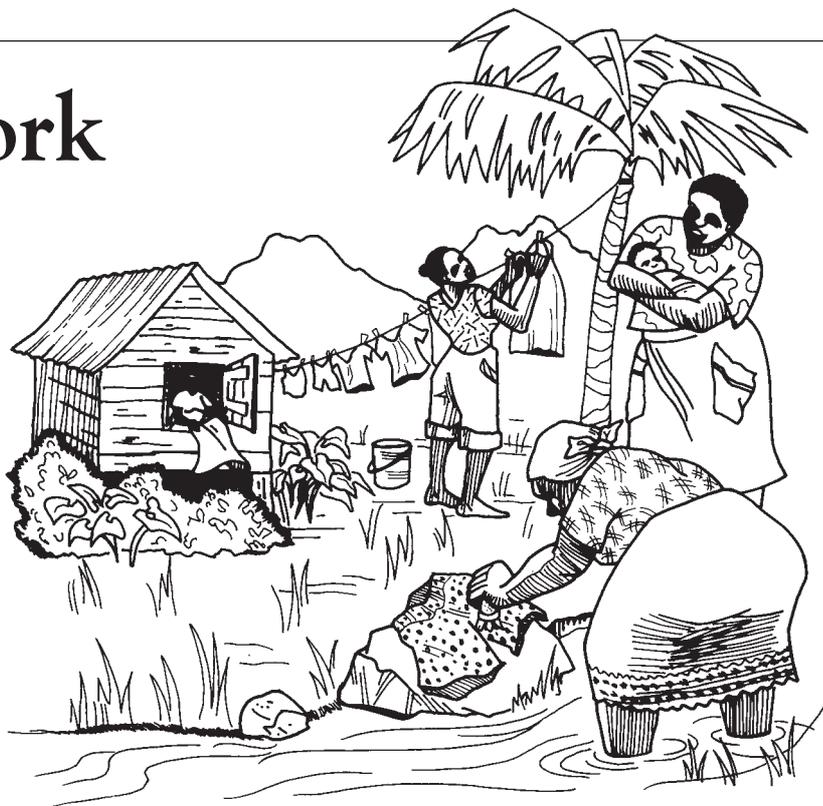


Chapter 26

In this chapter:

Cooking Fires and Smoke	394
Lifting and Carrying Heavy Loads	398
Work with Water	401
Work with Chemicals	402
Sitting or Standing for a Long Time	404
Repeating the Same Movement Over and Over	405
Crafts	406
Unsafe Working Conditions	406
Sexual Harassment	407
Migration	408
Workers in the Informal Sector	409
Working for Change	410

Work



Nearly every woman spends most of her life working. Women farm, prepare food, carry firewood and water, clean, and care for children and other family members. Many women also work to earn money to help support their families. Yet much of women's work goes without notice, because it is not considered as important as men's work.

The work women do, and the conditions in which they work, can create health problems—which often go without notice as well. This chapter describes some of these problems, their causes, and ways to treat them. But unless women's working conditions are changed, these problems cannot really be solved. Women must work together to make these changes happen.

► When a woman works to keep her family clean and fed, and to earn income to support her family, she is actually working two jobs.

One type of work that some women do—getting paid for sex—involves some specific and serious health risks, so we have devoted a whole chapter to it. “Sex Workers” starts on page 341.

Health workers, and others who care for sick people, are at risk for getting illnesses from the people they treat. Ways of preventing these problems are discussed on pages 295 and 525.

Cooking Fires and Smoke



caring for burns

► *Small children who spend much of their day playing near a smoking cookstove are at greater risk for colds, coughs, pneumonia, and lung infections.*

► *Women are at greater risk for these health problems than men, because women spend more time breathing smoky air.*

Most women spend many hours a day preparing food. This puts them at risk for health problems caused by cooking fires and smoke.

FIRES

Kerosene and other liquid and gas fuels can cause explosions, fires, and burns. To use these fuels more safely:

- do not let the fuel touch your skin or drip anywhere. If it does, wash it off right away.
- keep anything that can burn away from the stove. This will prevent fires from spreading and causing great damage. Store extra fuel in a safe place away from where you cook (and do not use matches or cigarettes nearby).
- put the stove where air can move freely around it.
- always be careful when lighting the stove.

SMOKE

Women who cook with fuels that produce a lot of smoke—such as wood, coal, animal dung, or crop remains—often have health problems. These fuels cause more problems when they are burned indoors where the smoke does not move out quickly. And if the fuel has *chemicals* in it—such as pesticides or fertilizers in the crop remains—the smoke is even more harmful.

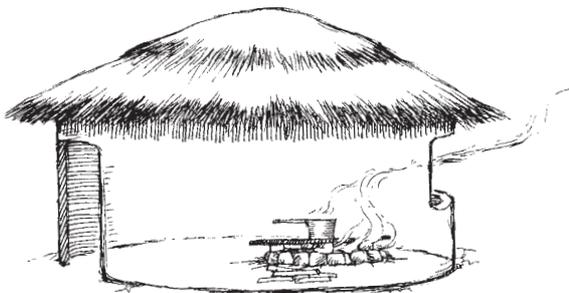
Breathing smoke from cooking fires can cause *chronic coughs*, colds, *pneumonia*, *bronchitis*, *lung infections*, and lung disease. Breathing coal smoke can also cause *cancer* in the lungs, mouth, and throat.

Pregnant women who breathe cooking smoke can suffer from *dizziness*, weakness, *nausea*, and headaches. And because a woman's body is less able to fight infection when she is pregnant, she is even more likely to get the lung problems mentioned above. Smoke can also make her baby grow more slowly, weigh less at birth, or be born too early.

Preventing health problems from smoke

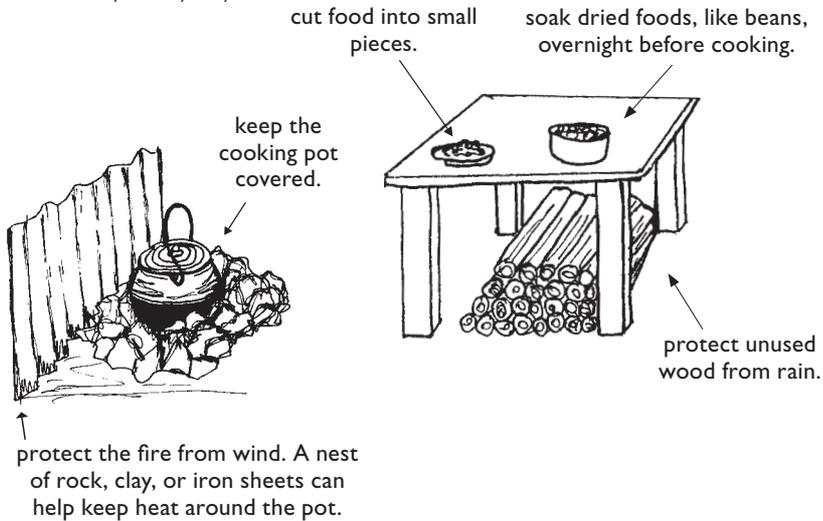
To reduce the amount of smoky air you breathe:

Cook where air can move freely. If you cannot cook outdoors, then make sure there are at least 2 openings for air in the room. This creates a draft, so the smoke will leave the room.



Cook in turns with other women. This way each woman will breathe less smoke.

Find ways to prepare food that require less cooking time (but still cook foods completely). This way you will breathe in less smoke, and you will also use less fuel. Food cooks more quickly and completely if you:



Use stoves that produce less smoke. This is the best way to prevent health problems caused by cooking smoke. Stoves that burn less fuel and produce very little smoke may be available in your area, but they can also be made easily with local materials. See the next page for instructions.

► *Smoke is a sign that fuel is being wasted, since it is caused by fuel that does not burn completely. Finding ways to cook with less smoke can save money as well.*

Stoves burn less fuel and produce less smoke when they have:

- protective lining (insulation) between the fire and the outside of the stove. Materials that trap a lot of air—like ash, pumice rock, dead coral, or aluminum foil—keep heat inside, instead of escaping out of the sides of the stove. This keeps the fuel burning hotly, which reduces smoke. Avoid using clay, heavy rock, sand, cement, and brick to prevent heat escaping from your stove because they do not trap enough air.
- chimneys inside the stove (see page 396) that help the air move around the fire. A longer chimney outside can also help cut down the smoke in the cooking area.
- ‘skirts’ (material around the cooking pot) to reflect the heat coming out of the chimney and direct it back to the pot. The pot then absorbs heat from all sides.
- a small burning chamber (see page 396) that allows you to burn one end of a piece of fuel in the chamber while the rest of the fuel stays outside. As the part inside burns, you can push the fuel further in.

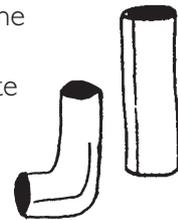
How to make a stove and cooker that reduce smoke

The rocket stove

This is one example of a stove that is easy to make. You may need to adapt it for the fuel you use and the materials available in your area.

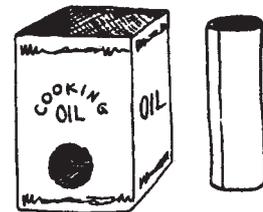
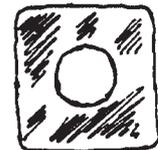
You will need:

- a large (5 gallon) can, such as a cooking oil can, soy sauce can, large paint can (well-cleaned), or a can that medical supplies were packed in. This will be the body of the stove. Cinderblocks or bricks may also be used, but a large can is better because it is thin and does not absorb as much heat.
- a 4-inch wide metal stove pipe with a 90-degree bend (elbow) in it. The pipe on one side of the elbow should be longer than the pipe on the other side. You will also need a straight stove pipe to attach to the short end of the elbow. These pipes will be used to create the burning chamber and chimney for your stove. (4 or 5 tin cans with their tops and bottoms cut out can be used instead of stove pipes.)
- insulation such as wood ash, pumice rock, vermiculite, dead coral, or aluminum foil.
- tin snips and a can opener for cutting the metal.
- extra metal for creating a 'skirt' around the pot.
- grating or thick fencing for the top of the stove, where the pot rests for cooking.



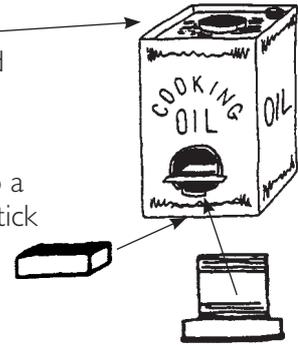
How to make the stove:

1. Use the can opener or tin snips to take the lid off the big can. Cut a 4-inch round hole in the middle of the lid for the chimney. Cut another 4-inch round hole in the lower front side of the can, about 1 inch up from the bottom of the can, for the burning chamber. The holes you cut should fit around your stove pipe or tin cans.
2. Place the stove pipe with the elbow inside the can so that one end sticks out of the front of the can. Make 2 parallel cuts $\frac{1}{2}$ inch apart at the long end of the pipe and bend the section back to create a lip. This way the pipe will not slip back into the can. The long section of this pipe will be the burning chamber (where the fuel burns). Attach a straight section of pipe to the short end of the elbow to make a chimney that ends 1 inch below the top of the can. Make a lip on this pipe, too, so the top of the pipe will not fall into the can.



Note: A chimney made from tin cans will only last 1 to 3 months, and then you will need to replace it. To prevent this, try making a fired clay chimney with a mixture of 3 parts sand and 2 parts clay. Put this clay around the chimney of tin cans. When the cans burn through, you will have a clay chimney supported by all the insulation (see the next page) packed around it.

3. Fill the body of the stove, around the chimney, with insulation such as wood ash.
4. Replace the can lid over the insulation and around the chimney.
5. Use a tin can to make a shelf inside the burning chamber. Remove the ends of the can and flatten it. Then cut it into a T shape that will fit inside the pipe. The top of the T will stick out and keep the shelf from slipping inside. Place a brick or rock under the outside part of the shelf to support the twigs while they are burning.

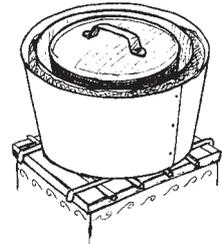


6. Use your grating or fencing for resting the pot on the top of the stove.

If you need to cook inside, place the stove near a wall with an opening in it. The smoke can climb along the wall and leave the building.



7. Make a skirt with extra metal. It should surround the pot, leaving a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch gap between the skirt and the pot at its base. For an even better skirt, make a double skirt and put insulation between the 2 sheets of metal.



The haybox cooker

To save even more fuel, use a haybox cooker to keep food warm or to simmer it after it has come to a boil on your stove. This cooker can cut fuel use by more than half when cooking beans, meat, rice, or grains. Rice and grains will use $\frac{1}{3}$ less water, because not as much water will evaporate.

Make a haybox by lining a cardboard box with 4 inches of hay (or use straw, sawdust, old clothing, feathers, chaff, cotton, wool, styrofoam, or corrugated cardboard). Leave space inside the box for your cooking pot and for more insulation on top of the pot. The lid of the box should fit tightly.

When using the haybox cooker, remember:

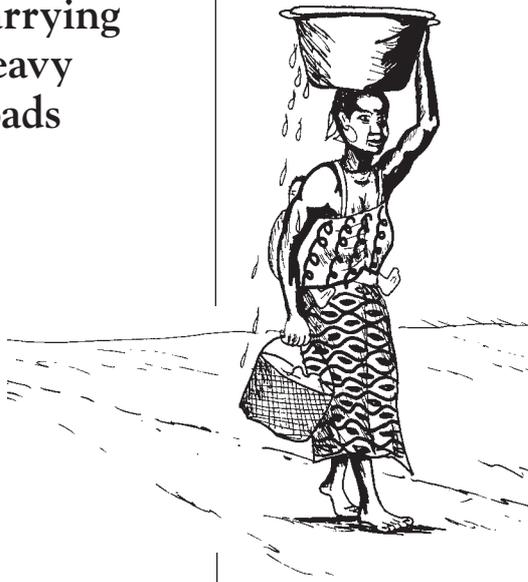
- food cooked in the haybox takes $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 times longer to cook than over a fire.
- beans and meat should be simmered on your stove for 15 to 30 minutes before going into the haybox. The foods may need to be reheated after 2 to 4 hours.
- keep the pot closed and **boil meat dishes again before eating**. This prevents *bacteria* from infecting your food.



Keep the hay cooker away from an open flame.

For more information on stove and oven designs, including easy-to-build solar stoves, contact Aprovecho Research Center. See page 561.

Lifting and Carrying Heavy Loads



HEALTH PROBLEMS

Women everywhere suffer from back and neck problems, usually from heavy lifting during their daily work. Carrying water, wood, and older children for long distances can cause serious strain.

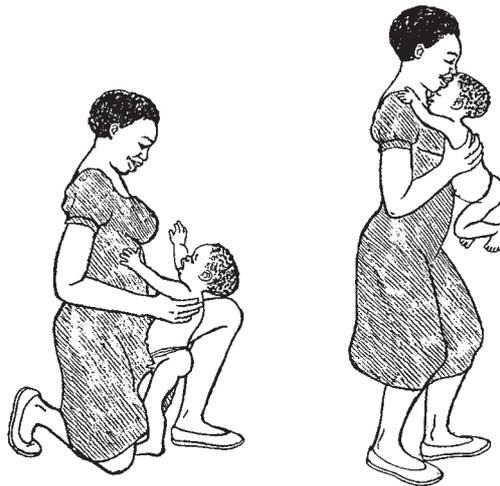
Young girls who carry many heavy loads—especially water—have problems with the back and spine (backbone). Their pelvic bones also develop poorly, which can lead to dangerous pregnancies later on.

Carrying heavy loads can cause young women to suffer more *miscarriages*, and can make older women and those who have recently given birth more likely to have fallen womb (*prolapse*).

Prevention:

How to lift safely:

- Use leg muscles—not back muscles—when lifting. When you lift objects or children from the ground, kneel or squat to pick them up rather than bending over.



► It is easier to prevent back problems than to cure them. Whenever possible, let your legs do the work—not your back.

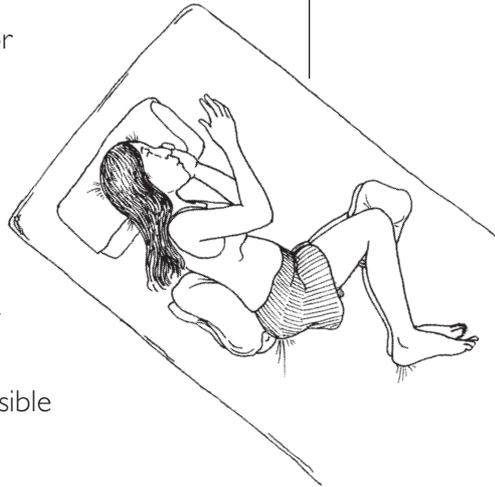
- Keep your back, shoulders, and neck as straight as possible.
- Do not lift or carry heavy objects during pregnancy or right after childbirth.
- Get someone to help you lift heavy objects. It may seem quicker to lift something by yourself. But later on you may lose time because of a back injury.

How to carry safely:

- Carry objects close to your body.
- If possible, carry objects on your back rather than on the side of your body. This way the muscles on one side of your back do not need to do all the work. Carrying loads on your side also makes your spine twist too much. This can cause back strain.
- If you must carry objects on one side, try to switch sides often. This way the muscles on both sides of your back are working the same amount, and your spine twists both ways. Or split the load and carry it on both sides.
- Try to avoid using head straps. They can strain your neck muscles.

**If you already have back problems:**

- Sleep on your back with a rolled cloth or pillow under your knees. Or sleep on your side with some rolled cloth behind your back and another between your knees to keep your body straight and support the spine.
- Do the exercises on the next page every day to strengthen the muscles in your back and lower belly. Stop if any of these exercises cause pain.
- Try to keep your back as straight as possible during the day. Do not slump forward.

**Bending**

Bending forward for long periods of time—which women often do when washing, farming, or with other chores—can cause back strain. If you must work this way, try to stretch often. If you start to feel pain in your back, it can help to try some different positions, like squatting or kneeling. Change positions often.



Do not bend over at the waist to reach things on the ground.

YES!

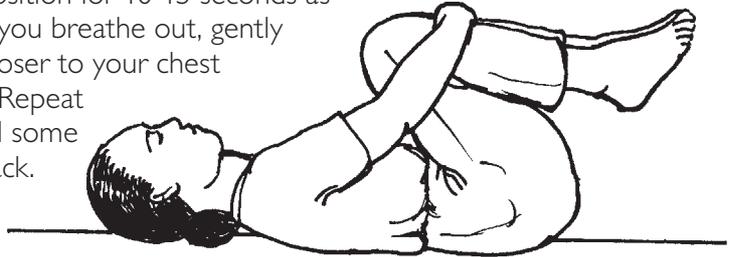
Instead, squat down by bending your knees and keeping your back straight.



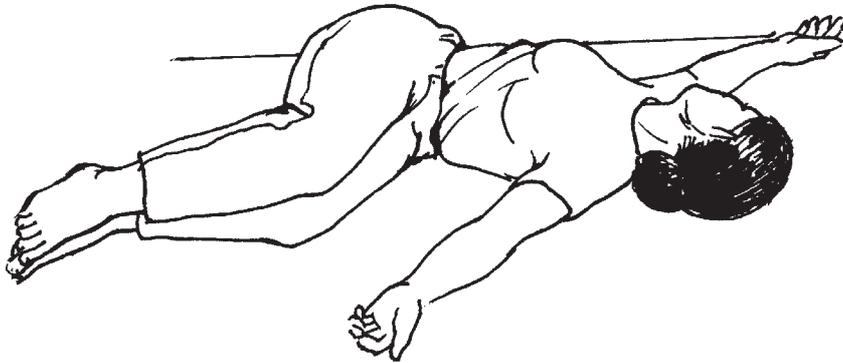
Exercises to relax and strengthen your back and belly muscles:

Try to do these exercises every day, in the order that they are listed:

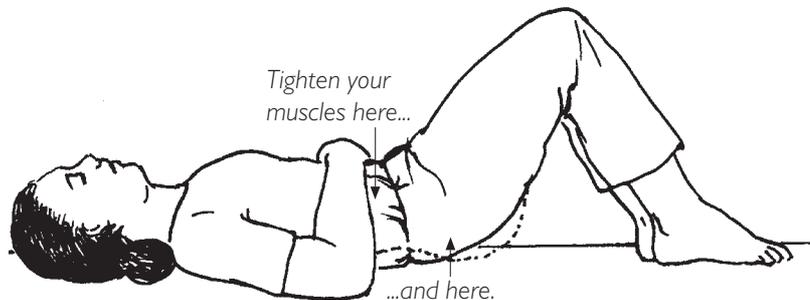
1. **Stretching your lower back.** Lie on your back and hug your knees. Hold this position for 10-15 seconds as you breathe deeply. As you breathe out, gently rock your knees even closer to your chest to increase the stretch. Repeat 2 times, or until you feel some release in your lower back.



2. **The twist.** Lie on your back with your arms straight out from your sides. Bend your knees, and then move them slowly to one side. At the same time, turn your head to the opposite side, trying to keep your shoulders flat on the ground. Stay in this position as you breathe in and out a few more times. Then raise your knees to the center, and slowly bring them over to the other side. Turn your head the other way. Repeat this exercise 2 times on both sides, or until you feel some release in your lower back.



3. **The pelvic tilt.** Lie on your back with your knees bent. Flatten your lower back onto the floor. Slowly tighten your lower abdominal and buttock muscles and hold as you count to 3. Keep breathing as you hold. Then relax. As you do, your back will curve up the way it normally does. Repeat.



For more exercises to relax your back and neck, see page 404.

Women must often find and carry all the water for their families. Women also do most of the washing and cleaning, and are usually the ones who bathe children. All of these tasks are important for a woman's health and the health of her family. However, these same tasks can cause health problems.



Work with Water

Health problems from work with water:

- Women who spend long hours in contact with contaminated water are exposed to *parasites* and *germs* that live in and near water. These women are more likely to get infected with *bilharzia*, guinea worm, the germs that cause river blindness and *cholera*, and other parasitic diseases.
- Women who live downstream from a factory or large farms may be exposed to chemicals in the water. Chemicals can cause many health problems. For more information, see the next page.
- Water is one of the heaviest things women must carry, so collecting and carrying it can cause back and neck problems, as well as other health problems. See page 398.

► For information about how to treat these infections, see **Where There Is No Doctor**.

Prevention:

Clean water helps keep everyone healthy. All over the world, people are working together to improve health by organizing community water projects. But women are often left out of the meetings and decisions about these projects, such as where to put community taps, where to dig wells, and what kind of system to use.



Women should help take care of the system used for the water supply.

If your community does not have easy access to clean water, work with others to plan and organize a water project. If your community already has a water system, ask for women to be trained in how to fix and take care of the system used for the water supply.



► If you live downstream from a factory that dumps chemicals into the water, try to organize your community to work for better conditions. For an example of one community's experience, see page 127.

Work with Chemicals



► Avoid all unnecessary contact with chemicals.

Many women have contact with dangerous chemicals, often without knowing it. This is because many modern products used in daily life and at work contain hidden chemicals. Some of them can be very harmful, such as:

- pesticides, fertilizers, weed killers, and animal dips.
- paints, paint thinners, paint remover and solvents.
- fuels and pottery glazes with lead in them.
- cleaning products containing bleach and lye.
- hair dressing and beauty products.

HEALTH PROBLEMS

Some chemicals cause harm to your body right away, even if you do not feel sick. Others cause harm that shows up later on, even after you have stopped using the chemicals. Some damage lasts only a short time. Other damage is permanent.

Signs of health problems caused by chemicals:

Head: headaches, dizziness.

Eyes: irritation, redness, watering.

Nose and throat: soreness, burning, sneezing, coughing.

Teeth and gums: decaying teeth, blue gums—especially with lead poisoning.

Chest and lungs: wheezing, dry cough, shortness of breath, frequent colds. Chemicals can cause diseases of the lungs.

Liver: yellow skin and eyes, tea-colored urine, clay-colored stool, pain in the upper right side. These are signs of a serious liver disease (hepatitis).

Skin: pain, redness, irritation, cracking, itching. Chemicals can cause burns, allergies, ulcers, and cancer.

Urine system (bladder and kidneys): too little or no urine, change in urine color, or blood in the urine. Chemicals can cause kidney and bladder damage.

Other general warning signs:

- You feel nervous or irritable.
- Your body shakes, or your heart beats fast.
- You feel tired, drunk, or cannot think clearly.

IMPORTANT

Be especially careful about contact with chemicals if you are pregnant or breastfeeding. Chemicals can harm your baby.

If you cannot explain why any of these problems are happening to you, they may be caused by chemicals, especially if you are using solvents or cleaning fluids, pesticides, or materials containing lead.

Prevention:

To reduce the health risks from working with harmful chemicals, try to:

- avoid getting chemicals on your skin. When using chemicals at home, use rubber kitchen gloves (or plastic bags). When using chemicals at work, including farming, use thicker gloves and wear shoes. Otherwise, chemicals can get into your body.
- wash your hands after touching chemicals. If you have been using strong chemicals, like pesticides, change your clothes and wash yourself before eating or coming into the house. Use rubber gloves when you wash these clothes.
- avoid breathing in fumes (vapors) from chemicals. Work where fresh air flows freely. A cloth or paper mask will **not** protect you from breathing in chemical fumes.
- keep chemicals away from food. **Never use chemical storage containers for food or water**, even after they have been washed. A container that looks very clean can still have enough chemical to poison the food or water. Do not use sprays near food or on a windy day.

If a chemical gets in your eye, flush it immediately with water. Keep flushing for 15 minutes. Do not let the water get into the other eye. If your eye is burned, see a health worker.



Keep chemicals away from children. Always look for poison warnings, or this picture, on the label.

**Lead poisoning**

Lead is a poisonous part of some common materials—like pottery, paint, fuel, and batteries. Lead poisoning happens when people eat from pots with glazes containing lead or when they eat even a tiny amount of lead dust. It can also happen from breathing in lead dust or from breathing fumes from fuel containing lead.

Lead is especially harmful for babies and children. It can cause low birth weight, poor development, damage to the brain (which can be permanent), and death. So it is important to avoid working with lead during pregnancy.

If you work with lead, try to protect yourself and your family by:

- not getting powdered glaze on your hands or in your mouth.
- keeping children away from your work area.
- cleaning up with damp cloths rather than sweeping, so that less lead dust gets into the air.
- washing your hands well after working.
- eating foods that contain a lot of *calcium* and *iron* (see pages 167 and 168). These foods help keep lead from getting into your blood.

Sitting or Standing for a Long Time

If you must sit or stand for many hours at work, you may suffer health problems. Sometimes they only show up after months or years. Most of these problems can be prevented.

HEALTH PROBLEMS

Back and neck problems. These come from sitting a long time with your back bent or from standing in one place.

Varicose veins, swollen feet, and blood clots in the legs. When you sit or stand for a long time, it is hard for blood to flow easily through your legs, especially with your legs crossed.



Prevention:

- Take short, fast walks during your break. Also try to walk around the room or at least stretch every hour.
- If possible, wear socks or hose with support. They should go above the knee.
- Do each of the exercises described below whenever you feel stiffness or pain, or slump forward. Repeat them 2 or 3 times, taking slow, deep breaths.

<p>Head:</p>  <p>Roll it slowly in a full circle.</p>	<p>Shoulders:</p>  <p>Move them up and down, roll them forward and backward, and pull your shoulder blades together behind your back.</p>	<p>Waist and upper body:</p> <p>With your back straight, turn from the hip to face the side. You should feel relief in the upper and lower back.</p> 
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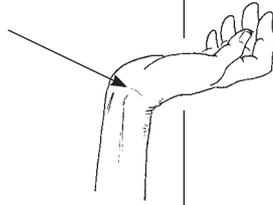
If you sit at work:

- Use a chair with a straight back—with your head, neck, and shoulders straight. If it feels better, put some rolled cloth or pillows behind you to support your lower back.
- If necessary, adjust the height of your chair or table to allow you to work in a better position. You can try sitting on a pillow, or putting a desk or table up on blocks.
- Do not cross your legs at the knees.
- Avoid wearing tight clothing.

Joints are places in the body where bones come together. At these joints tendons connect the bones to muscle. If you repeat the same movement over and over while working, the tendon can be damaged. Injuries to the wrists and elbows are common with farming and factory work. Injuries to the knees are common among domestic workers ('house-maid's knee'), miners, and other workers who kneel for a long time.

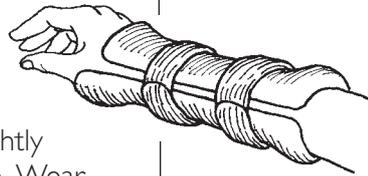
Signs:

- Pain and tingling in the part of your body that repeats the movement.
- For wrists, you will feel pain in your hand or here when your wrist is gently tapped.
- A grating feeling when you place your hand over the joint and move it.



Treatment:

- Rest the joint in a comfortable position as much as possible. If you must continue to use that joint as you work, wear a splint to keep it as still as possible. Try some of the ideas below in the prevention section.
- Make a soft splint by wrapping the joint with cloths so it does not move. Wrapping the cloth around a thin piece of wood first can help keep the joint straight. The cloths should be wrapped tightly enough to keep the joint from moving, but not so tightly that the blood flow is blocked or the area gets numb. Wear the splint while you work, and also while you rest or sleep.
- If the joint is painful or swollen, take aspirin or use one of the pain medicines that reduce inflammation. Hot, moist cloth compresses can also help decrease pain and swelling.
- If the joint does not get better after 6 months, get medical help. You may need to have medicine carefully injected into the joint, or you may need an operation.



medicines for pain

► If a joint is red or hot, it might be infected. See a health worker right away.

Prevention:

- If it is safe, switch hands or body positions as you work. Try to work in a way that bends the joint less and puts less pressure on it.
- Try to exercise the joint every hour, by moving it through all of the motions it can make. This will stretch and strengthen the tendons and muscles. If exercise causes pain, move the joint slowly and gently.

Repeating the Same Movement Over and Over

Crafts

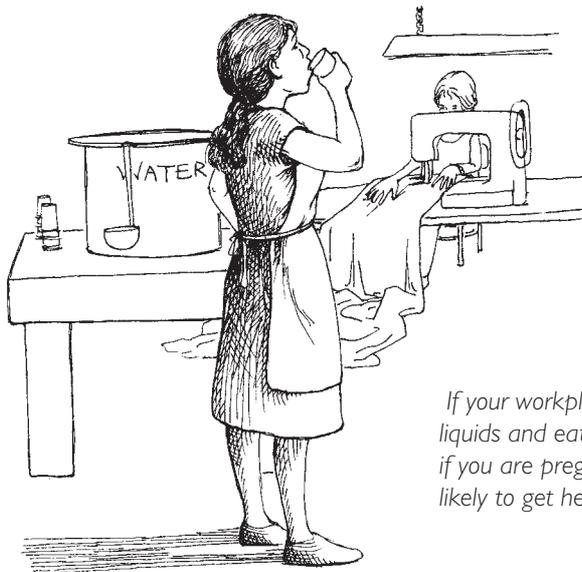
Many types of crafts are done in the home, where women work alone. This makes them less likely to know of common health problems caused by work and how to prevent them.

COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS FROM WORK WITH CRAFTS		
Craft or skill	Problem	What to do
Pottery making	Lung diseases similar to those miners get (fibrosis, silicosis)	Open windows and doors for better air flow. Blow air out with a fan if there is electricity. Wear a protective mask that keeps dust out.
Pottery painting	Lead poisoning	See 'Lead poisoning', page 403.
Sewing, embroidery, knitting, lace making, weaving	Eye strain, headaches, low back and neck pain, joint pain	If possible, increase the amount of light on your work and rest often. See 'Sitting or Standing for a Long Time' and 'Repeating the Same Movement'.
Work with wool and cotton	Asthma and lung problems from dust and fibers	Improve air flow (see above), and wear a mask that will not let fibers through.
Use of paints and dyes	See 'Work with Chemicals'	See the prevention information in 'Work with Chemicals', page 403.
Soap making	Skin irritation and burns	Use protective gloves and avoid contact with lye.

Unsafe Working Conditions

Many factories have unsafe working conditions, such as:

- closed and locked doors and windows, which make it impossible for workers to get out during emergencies, and which keep air from flowing freely.
- exposure to toxins, such as chemicals and radiation, without protective barriers or clothing.
- unsafe equipment.
- fire hazards, like loose electrical wires, or chemicals or vapors that burn easily.
- no safe water, toilets or latrines, or rest breaks.

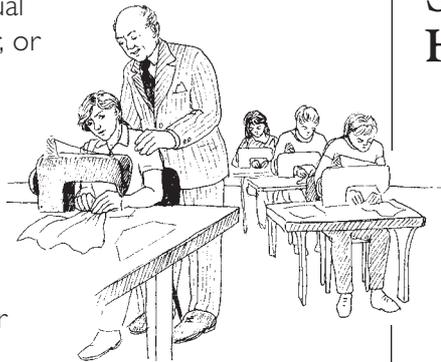


If your workplace is hot, drink plenty of liquids and eat salted foods—especially if you are pregnant. Women are more likely to get heat stroke than men.

Many of these conditions cannot be changed unless workers get together and demand change. But here are some things you can do yourself to prevent problems:

- When you begin a new task, get instructions from your boss or supervisor about how to safely use all equipment and chemicals. Always ask for advice from women with experience using the same equipment or the same chemicals.
- Whenever possible, wear protective clothing—like hats, masks, gloves, or earplugs for loud noises. When working with machines, avoid wearing loose clothing. Keep long hair tied up and covered.

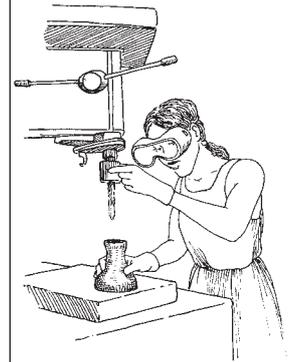
Sexual harassment is unwanted sexual attention from an employer, manager, or any man with power over a woman. This includes saying something sexual that makes a woman uncomfortable, touching her in a sexual way, or making her have sex. Every woman is in danger of sexual harassment. It does not matter if she works for her family in the country or in a factory in the city.



There are many reasons why it is hard for a woman to say 'no' to sexual harassment:

- She may be afraid she will lose her job, which she needs to support herself and her family.
- She may have been raised to obey and respect the wishes of older men and men in power.
- The man may be a relative, and she may be afraid if she says no or complains he will be made to look bad.

But no matter what situation a woman is in, sexual harassment is wrong. It is also against the law in many countries. If you have been sexually harassed, try to find someone to confide in and to give you support. You can also share your experience with other women. Although you may not be able to end the harassment, sharing your story with others can help them avoid being harassed.



Sexual Harassment



rape and sexual assault

What you can do to avoid and stop sexual harassment:

- Try to avoid the men who have harassed other women where you work.
- Do not go anywhere alone with male employers.
- Find out if there are laws to protect you from harassment.

Migration



Remember that everyone feels alone at first. This is natural.

Many women work away from their homes. Some women travel daily from home to work, while others have moved many miles to live near work. This is called 'migration'.

Most often women move from rural areas to cities where big factories offer jobs, or where they can get jobs as domestic workers. Some women choose to move, but others are forced to move because there is no food or work at home, or because factories offer more money. Often the money these women make is very important for supporting their families back home.

When women migrate, they may be alone for the first time. This can be very frightening because they are away from the family and friends who gave them support.

Here are a few things you can do to make yourself feel more comfortable in a new home:

- Make friends with other women at work. These women can become a new source of support.



Avoid dangerous situations like walking home alone at night.

- Find a safe place to live. Many companies run their own hostels. Some are safe, but many are not. Sometimes they are places where women live in poor conditions and pay too much money for rent. The company may also take advantage of these women because they do not have control over where they live.

Sometimes the only way to get safe housing is to find it yourself. Here is an example of a woman's group that organized for safe housing:

Women who work making clothes in factories in Dhaka, Bangladesh, became tired of their poor, unhealthy living conditions, where they were often sexually harassed and *abused*. With help from a woman with management experience, they set up 2 hostels. Now the workers pay part of their wages to the hostel. In return, the staff, who are all women, provide food, cooking utensils, blankets, clothing, and other help. The workers are safe and close to work, and are able to save more of their wages.

—Bangladesh

Many women earn money working at tasks—like selling in the marketplace, making home crafts, and domestic work—that are not considered formal jobs. These jobs have very few protections, so women who do them are at risk for being exploited and abused.

Domestic workers

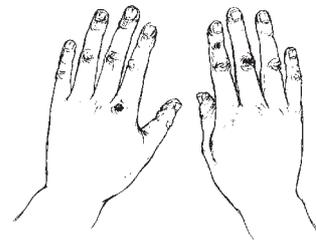
A domestic worker faces many of the same health problems already described in this chapter. Because she works in someone else’s home, she has few rights and little protection. She faces:

- *exhaustion* and poor *nutrition* from long hours and poor pay. Even though she may cook for her employer, she is often given little to eat.
- constant fear of losing her job and of being mistrusted by her employer. She may lose her job if she becomes pregnant. These fears, and the separation from her family, can cause mental health problems.
- sexual harassment, especially if she lives in her employer’s house. Because he has power over her job, she may be forced to have sex.
- painful bone, joint and muscle problems from working on her knees for long periods (‘house-maid’s knee’).

Workers in the Informal Sector

Washer-woman’s hands

When a woman uses a lot of cleaning chemicals without using gloves, her skin may become red, cracked, and painful, and develop open sores. The nails often get thick and damaged, and separate from the skin underneath.



What to do:

- If possible, use rubber or plastic gloves to protect your hands.
- Keep your hands as dry as you can. Use lotion or the thick juice from an aloe plant after you finish working. If your nails begin to look thick or damaged, try painting them right away with gentian violet.
- Try keeping a bowl of cool black tea or vinegar water (one capful of vinegar in one quart of water) next to the sink. Each time you use soapy water, soak your hands in the tea or vinegar for one minute.
- Use the juices of fresh plants that are known in your area for helping skin problems like rashes, burns, or itching. Gather and wash fresh plants, and grind them into a watery paste. Put your hands in this mixture as often as you can.



Working for Change

In South Africa, domestic workers have a Domestic Workers' Union to help them demand laws to protect themselves. They began by knocking on doors, and by educating people through pamphlets and radio announcements. Now they are a national union. They work with domestic workers' unions in other countries to help workers get fair working hours, fair pay, social security benefits, and other basic protections.

Unions like the South African Domestic Workers' Union are a very good way to organize and protect workers' rights. But it is often difficult to start a local union because there are no larger unions for support or because the company does not allow them. In this case there are other ways women can work together to help themselves.

When women start to work together for better conditions, they sometimes fear that they may lose their jobs or that they will be treated badly if their employers find out. In these cases it is important that women trust those they are organizing with. If it is not possible to talk at work, it may be best to meet in secret in private homes or in the community.

To begin organizing your workplace:

- **Talk** with the women you work with to identify common problems and possible ways to solve them.
- **Meet together** regularly as a group to build trust and help support one another. Be sure to include women who are new at work and make them feel welcome. Remember, there is strength in numbers.



Once you are organized as a group or a workers' association, you may feel strong enough to join a union or start your own. The company may be less likely to challenge you if you are already organized.

WHAT YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN DO

When your group has identified common problems and possible solutions, decide which problems can be changed and what you need to do to make change happen. Even if the company is not willing to change anything, you can do a lot for yourselves.

Teach each other about safety.

Women who have been doing the job for a long time will have learned the safest way to do things. Ask them to share ideas about how to make the job easier and safer.

Help new women. New women may be afraid to join your group, especially if the employers do not support you. But it is still important to share your knowledge about safety, because the safer every woman is, the safer you are.

Support each other. Many women experience conflict at home when they start working, because their role in the family changes. Share advice on solving family problems, and on balancing housework and child care with paid work. Some women even help take care of each other's children. They may organize a child care center, where one woman is paid to care for young children so that others can work. Or the women may take turns minding the children.

You might also try meeting together with men to discuss women's workload. For example:



helping relationships



In workshops at the Center for Health Education, Training, and Nutrition Awareness (CHETNA) in India, men and women are asked to list their daily tasks. Many are surprised to learn that a woman's work day starts before a man's does and ends long after his, and that she rarely gets a chance to rest. This helped men to see how work is distributed unfairly between men and women. Then they were able to talk about dividing work fairly, based on the needs of the family and not only by gender roles.

If you can, negotiate with your employer for better working conditions, such as:

- higher wages.
- maternity leave (time off when a woman has a baby, with the right to return to the same job).
- bathroom breaks.
- child care at work.
- a private place to remove breast milk by hand (for mothers with babies).



when the mother works outside the home