

Foreword

Not all research projects, even those in occupational health, lead directly to concrete changes in working conditions. In fact, embarrassingly few do. And when women's occupational health is involved, research is rare and resulting change is even rarer. Why is it, then, that Dr. Rosskam's research, described in this book, has actually diminished the risk to check-in staff of suffering from musculoskeletal disorders? What is special about this research?

First, this is one of relatively few projects to focus on women workers. In 2000, Niedhammer et al. showed that only a minority of occupational health research projects involved women workers and even fewer analyzed the data on these women in any meaningful way [1]. In a recent update, we found that women's occupational health problems are still being neglected by researchers [2]. Those few studies that are done most often concern nurses and other health care workers. Much less is known about jobs like those at airport check-in, where employees deal directly with clients in other situations. Therefore, Rosskam's study is interesting to workers, unions, managers, scientists, and health professionals because it concerns people about whose jobs we know little, and rarely think about, even though we may see them very often.

Second, when the women report problems, Rosskam does not presume that they have the problems just because they are women. Instead, she looks for the source of the problems. It may seem normal for an occupational health researcher to think first about occupational causes for health problems, but in fact, research evoking vague biological or psychological causes for women's symptoms is all too common [2, 3]. Rosskam, however, takes care to uncover the factors in the women's working environment that are responsible for their health problems. Thus, she prepares the ground for prevention efforts.

Third, although the focus of this study is on musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), Rosskam does not confine herself to one single source of suffering in the check-in workers's jobs. Instead, she discusses sources of stress holistically. "Stress" in the workplace is a complex construct, and the word itself can be used to refer

both to a cause and its effect. Scientists are increasingly unpacking the concept of workplace stress, and they recognize that both women and men in the workplace suffer increasingly from health problems related to physical, emotional, and cognitive overload. They are also coming to realize that people are whole organisms, and their health is affected by all components of their surroundings, taken together [4, 5]. Musculoskeletal health is no exception, and Rosskam recognizes this in considering both physical and emotional stressors in this job. I am sure the check-in workers have recognized themselves in Rosskam's results, because the whole job and the whole person were considered. Why is this potentially important for promoting change? Because people are more likely to be mobilized for action by a study when they feel that the results are believable and valid.

Fourth, Rosskam also speaks directly to workers when she considers the strategies they use to keep from becoming ill from their work. She shows respect for them and involves them in the study. In her own words, she wants to identify "new ways of translating the concepts of worker empowerment into practice in today's work climate." She is interested in developing tools that will help workers to identify and resist excessive demands. This is an exciting new research subject that I hope she will pursue. The first results, reported here, show us some ways to combat workplace overload.

Fifth, Rosskam was able to obtain the collaboration of the unions in the workplaces that she studied. Unions have an interest in making change in the workplace, and that is their expertise as well. More and more often, unions and researchers in Europe and North America are coming to the realization that alliances between unions and researchers can help to identify occupational health risks that can be removed by changes in the workplace. The unions involved in Rosskam's study have been able to use the results to improve their members' jobs.

Sixth, Rosskam also collaborated with the employers, and her study speaks not only to workers, but also to managers, explaining to them the hidden costs of occupational health risks: in loss of worker competence, in sickness absence, and in worker dissatisfaction. Especially where service jobs are concerned, these costs are not obvious, since the worker is not manufacturing widgets whose rate of production can be monitored. Still, although an unhappy or ill service worker does not produce fewer widgets, she does become less able to meet the needs of her clients, especially when a reassuring smile is part of the clients' needs. Rosskam's study reminds managers of the important role of check-in workers in maintaining security and in calming the traveling public, and the need to care for the well-being of these employees.

Finally, unlike many other scientists, Rosskam does not mince words. A common conclusion even from researchers most devoted to improving workers' health is usually, "Further research is needed . . ." rather than "[Risk factor] should be removed immediately in order to alleviate the suffering. . . ." But

Roskam's devotion to worker well-being leads her to a refreshing frankness that no doubt helped stimulate workplace participants to transform her conclusions into action.

We can see that Roskam's book has led to change, but I am not sure that the jobs of check-in workers are even now entirely good for their health. More changes are surely needed, for the airport workers and for those in similar jobs. Most service workers still face long hours on their feet; unpleasant and even violent clients; poorly organized, repetitive work; and lack of respect from supervisors. Unfortunately, many occupational health scientists are still concentrating on the most visible, most dramatic workplace risks and neglecting the silent misery of many working women. I hope that this book will lead readers—scientists, managers, union activists, and workers—to take a new look at service workers and the challenges they face.

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