Chapter 1
Introduction to Health Promotion for Working Women: A Methodology

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Introduction

The number of working women in the European Union (EU) and the United States has risen considerably in the course of the last few decades, constituting one of the major challenges facing labor forces in the Western world. Women currently comprise 42 percent of the employed population in the EU, and this figure is expected to rise in coming years.

The European labor market is characterized by strong gender segregation. As a consequence of horizontal segregation, men are mostly involved in manual and technical jobs (machine operation, construction, crafts engineering, etc.) and transportation jobs, while women are mostly occupied in sales and service jobs, including professions such as store assistants, nurses, secretaries, social workers, and so on. The EU labor force is also characterized by vertical segregation, with men holding the most senior managerial positions compared to women. Labor segregation means that men and women are exposed to different working conditions and face different occupational safety and health hazards.

Little has been done in terms of health promotion for working women. More specifically, prevention measures at the workplace have not addressed women as a separate group but have not taken into consideration factors such as gender segregation and the increased responsibilities of women at home. It is important for women to maintain a well-balanced life, both physically and mentally. Healthy female employees are important to the organization not only in terms of productivity, but most importantly for women’s immediate environment—the family—and society at large, in which women hold vital and multiple roles. This critical role of women as promoters of health for society has been overlooked. Women can play an important role as leaders in health promotion because of their traditional roles in the family and community.

This chapter will provide an overview of the definitions and concepts of workplace health promotion (WHP) with a particular emphasis on women, and discuss issues of WHP program planning and implementation.
Concepts and Definitions

Traditionally, the workplace was approached as a convenient setting for implementing health promotion programs. Currently, the approach to WHP is more comprehensive, and the workplace is seen as a setting where people bring along and act out their behaviors as well as a setting that alone influences employee health in the traditional sense of health and safety and in terms of how work is organized, exercised, and managed.

WHP according to the Centre of the Health Communication Unit at the University of Ontario is defined as: “an approach to protecting and enhancing the health of employees that relies and builds upon the efforts of employers to create a supportive management under and upon the efforts of employees to care for their own well-being” (The Health Communication Unit, 2004a). Comprehensive WHP is exercised on the following three levels, which constitute the main components of this practice:

I. Occupational Health and Safety Level This level refers to traditional occupational health and safety activities aimed at minimizing environmental and chemical hazards that threaten employee health, such as controlling exposure to toxic substances, removing dangerous equipment, and improving or alleviating health- and life-threatening working conditions.

Even though women’s health is affected differently by occupational hazards and working conditions, women are under-represented in occupational health and safety studies in favor of men. Professions that are traditionally mostly represented by women, like nursing, have been studied extensively, leaving a gap in the current knowledge of other women’s occupations such as hairdressers, domestic workers, and so on (Messing & Mergler, 2006).

II. Individual Health-Related Behaviors Employee health-related practices refer to behaviors that employees bring with them to the workplace that have the potential to influence their health and may create problems in productivity—although ill health is a combination of many different factors other than lifestyle. The workplace is indeed a convenient location for addressing health-related behaviors and for implementing health promotion programs.

Targeting health-endangering behaviors specifically for women in the workplace has an additional advantage because women are excellent carriers or multipliers of healthy behaviors for the family and society at large. The workplace has been used as a setting not only for the promotion of employee health, but also as a means to promote the health of employees’ families—especially their children (Eastman, Corona & Schuster, 2006).

III. Organizational Change Initiatives The working environment in which people spend a significant part of their adult lives affects employee health and well-being through the way the organization functions, which is often referred to as the “organizational culture.” Important issues which have an impact on the well-being of employees are management style, work organization, work overload, work control, and autonomy (Shain & Krames, 2004). The way work