

Occupational health and safety for the informal worker: whose responsibility is it?

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During the 34th International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) 2024 triennial congress in Marrakech, Morocco, extensive attention was given to the plight of informal and migrant workers across the globe. What is the informal economy? Who is an informal worker? These were some of the questions raised. According to the International Monetary Fund (2021), the informal economy is a worldwide phenomenon that is growing at an unstoppable rate.¹ The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 2 billion people, or 60% of all employed people in the world, work in the informal economy, even if occasionally.² Therefore, understanding the scale, impact, and challenges that the informal economy presents is crucial for countries when developing relevant policies, specifically in relation to occupational injuries and diseases.

Factors such as artificial intelligence, changing demographics, and the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed the world of work.³ Technological advances, such as chatbots that have replaced customer-service workers, led to millions of job losses.³ This exacerbated inequality and increased job insecurity. However, digital platforms also created new and varied jobs, such as food deliveries and taxi services, work-from-home opportunities, and many others. All these changes imply that new occupational health and safety (OHS) hazards are emerging.

Chen (2012) states that the informal economy initially referred to independent contractors that worked for small, unregistered businesses.⁴ However, the informal economy now comprises a diverse range of businesses, jobs, industries, and workers that are not subject to government regulations and protection. According to Deléchat and Medina (2020), the informal economy has market value and contributes to the gross domestic product (GDP) of countries.⁵ In lieu of this, who then is an informal worker? The informal economy is often branded as 'illegal' or 'underground'. These terms are used to describe unethical and unlawful activities, which puts workers in the informal sector at risk of exploitation.

Informal workers, such as street vendors, are typically not under the auspices of government control or regulation. Their work practices are inherently unpredictable and unregistered. It is, therefore, challenging for them to embrace most regulations that are pertinent to the formal sector.⁶ Laws that deal with environmental health and safety, and preventive measures to reduce occupational dangers for

informal workers, are often disregarded. Even though international laws protect the OHS rights of informal workers, national laws commonly exempt informal workers from that protection.

Workers in the informal economy make money to provide for their families. However, they frequently operate in hazardous environments.⁷ For example, street vendors often struggle to get access to clean water, and waste pickers often handle hazardous materials without using appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). Under these conditions, OHS regulations, including those related to electrical and fire safety, and the use of PPE, are regularly ignored. Access to sanitation, ergonomic tools, and immunisations is essential to workers in informal employment, as the lack thereof leads to illnesses and injuries. However, these workers have poor control over their physical work environments, limited access to adequate training, and little control over their working hours. This predisposes them to injuries, psychological stress, and poor mental health outcomes as they often work in environments that are not governed by legislation.⁸ Bamu-Chipunza (2018), in a study in South Africa, found that some of the major health and safety challenges within the informal economy included ergonomics, psychological dangers, and general safety.⁹

According to a report published by Kamau et al. in 2019, vendors in Durban, South Africa, were spending approximately 12% of their daily earnings on water and toilet use.¹⁰ The absence of fundamental OHS regulations also indirectly affected workers' incomes. Vendors were forced to work long hours to make up for income lost while searching for adequate water and sanitation. Informal workers have limited access to healthcare services, as they cannot afford to wait in a primary healthcare facility during working hours.¹¹ Healthcare has become increasingly expensive. Workers, worldwide, fall into debt by having to pay for their treatment of diseases and injuries sustained in their working environments.

There is a global move towards evidence-based policies to improve the health and wellbeing of workers in the informal economy. The emphasis is on expanding access to primary and occupational healthcare. Health ministries of the World Health Organization (WHO), and national health systems, are responsible for providing health services to workers in the informal economy to prevent work-related injuries and diseases.¹¹ In South



Waste pickers often handle hazardous materials without using appropriate PPE Image: courtesy of www.weforum.org

Africa, the National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH) is undertaking research in the informal sector in workers such as waste pickers.

If the informal economy is indeed expanding and contributing to GDPs, it would serve countries well to calculate the financial burden of ignoring the impact of occupational injuries and diseases amongst these workers. It is reasonable to conclude that national OHS policies should also apply to workers in the informal sector, and that the governments should drive such policies.

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