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**Occupational health in a post-pandemic world of work. Introduction to this special issue**

Sicherheit und Gesundheit bei der Arbeit in der postpandemischen Arbeitswelt. Einführung in das Sonderheft.

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**Abstract:** Although occupational safety and health (OSH) is a core element of social policy, OSH had rarely been in the focus of social policy research in the years preceding the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, this special issue brings together state-of-the-art theoretical and empirical insights underlining the connection between OSH and social policy. It contains articles from different academic disciplines dealing with the following broad topics: actors and institutions involved in OSH, OSH policies and measures, and social inequalities related to OSH. The special issue makes three contributions. First, it puts a traditional and highly relevant but under-researched topic back in the focus of attention. Second, it revives the debate by providing interdisciplinary insights on a number of key topics of relevance. Third, these insights have strong implications for policymaking; they are thus of high practical relevance and could contribute to enhancing the protection of workers in the post-pandemic labour market.

**Keywords:** Occupational safety and health, post-pandemic labour market, risk inequalities, protection, regulatory system


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### 1 Introduction

Occupational safety and health (OSH) is a core element of social policy. OSH measures aim at ensuring good working conditions and sustainable work, especially by reducing the exposure to work-related hazards and by offering protection if such hazards cannot be eliminated. In addition to these primary preventive measures, there are also secondary (e.g. the provision of regular examinations or modified work tasks) and tertiary measures (e.g. vocational rehabilitation programmes). OSH is thus key to addressing the social needs of workers in the context of paid employment; moreover, it enables and ensures participation in the labour market and society (Böhle/Lessenich 2018).

Despite the obvious importance of OSH for social policy, in recent years there has hardly been any integrated debate. Although working conditions in general tend to receive attention in social policy-oriented research (e.g. Eurofound 2021), OSH structures, policies and measures are rarely considered explicitly. Social policy discourses have rather focused on labour market participation and activation as well as on a wide range of other topics related to the welfare state. OSH has rather been a topic in labour market research, work psychology, ergonomics as well as in interdisciplinary research on work and employment. However, even in these debates, OSH was not always a prominent topic in the years before the pandemic. We can only speculate about the reasons for this. On the one hand, other topics, particularly new technologies and the digitalisation of work, were the centre stage of attention, not leaving much space for a rather classical topic like health and safety at work. On the other hand, OSH standards in Europe – which are regulated as part of a comprehensive institutional system – have been high for a long time (more information is provided in the next section). Consequently, researchers may not
have seen the need and relevance of a broader debate on the subject. However, this assessment suddenly changed when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in Europe in 2020. It challenged the world of work as well as labour market and social policy actors in many ways, and it showcased a number of gaps in the existing OSH frameworks, leading to unequal protection for different groups of workers (e.g. Cai et al. 2021; Thomas et al. 2022; Tisch et al. 2023). Overall, the situation generated by the pandemic highlights the need to revive a broad and interdisciplinary debate on OSH in order to reinforce the overall protection of workers in Europe.

The protection of workers, however, is not only relevant in times of a pandemic. Healthy and safe workplaces are vital for the functioning of the economy, which means that reinforcing structures, policies and practices related to OSH is in the interest of workers, organisations and policymakers alike (Hämäläinen/Lindström 2006; Dörflinger/Wehrmann 2021). For example, structures and practices for prevention and protection may reduce the days lost per year due to absenteeism, and the costs generated by work-related illnesses and accidents. According to the International Social Security Association (2013), every euro invested in OSH pays back more than double for an organisation.

The need for a revived debate on OSH is also underlined by a number of current developments in European labour markets. First, various economic sectors have begun to experience growing skills shortages. As labour has started to become a scarce resource, it becomes more urgent that losses generated by sickness and absenteeism be reduced to a minimum to keep the economy running. Second, demographic change, ageing societies and longer life expectancies have reinforced the debate about raising the retirement age in many European countries. If people have to spend more years of their life at work, work needs to be designed in a way that empowers people to do so (Burdorf et al. 2023). Third, other developments such as the use of new (digital) technologies, platform work or changing conditions in the context of climate change also have implications for OSH, underlining the need to re-engage with the topic (Reimann/Tisch 2021; Dörflinger 2023b). All these developments highlight the key role played by OSH structures, policies and practices. They should be designed in a way that offers protection to the workforce given the background of the changes currently occurring in European labour markets. Moreover, they should empower the workforce to remain healthy and safe throughout their entire, possibly prolonged, working lives.

This special issue contributes to reviving the debate on OSH by providing insights and reflections on structures, policies, practices and outcomes for workers. It clusters five articles related to three broad topics: (1) actors and institutions involved in OSH, (2) OSH policies and measures, and (3) inequalities related to OSH. In our view, the revived debate should underline the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, and the benefits of considering OSH as a key topic in social policy
research. Moreover, the debate should not only focus upon the (lessons learnt from the) pandemic; it should broadly look at the topic of OSH and provide answers to the general question how the protection of workers can be improved in the post-pandemic labour market. The contribution of this special issue is threefold. First, it puts a traditional and highly relevant but under-researched topic back into the focus of attention of social policy research. Second, using an interdisciplinary approach, it provides first-hand theoretical and empirical insights on a number of key topics of relevance to OSH. Third, the insights provided have strong implications for policy and are thus of high practical relevance.

The introduction to this special issue is structured as follows. We start by explaining the key pillars of the European OSH framework, and by shedding light on the role of OSH in core political discourses. We then illustrate the role of OSH during the pandemic, and the unequal effects produced for different groups of employees. Having elaborated on these contextual factors, we introduce the different articles of this special issues before concluding with a brief reflection on perspectives for future interdisciplinary research on OSH.

2 The regulation of OSH and its role in political discourses

The European Union considers health and safety at work to be an important part of its social policy (Hämäläinen/Lindström 2006). This is underlined by the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 and the Agreement on Social Policy of the same year. However, the general importance of health and safety at work was already underlined in earlier treaties. For example, it was mentioned back in 1951 in Article 2 of the European Coal and Steel Treaty, and in the Articles 30–39 of the Euratom Treaty of 1957. The Treaty of Rome signed in 1957 also extended the provisions regarding health and safety at work to a range of other industries (see Articles 117, 118).

From the 1960s onwards, a broad debate on the so-called ‘humanisation of work’ evolved in several European countries, in which OSH played a prominent role (see for example Isacson (2019) for Scandinavia or Marsh (1974) for the UK). This is because the adverse effects of Fordist mass production with its often highly Taylorist work organisation came to the fore in societal, political and academic debates (Engelen-Kefer 1976). In Germany, due to higher education levels resulting from the expansion of the education system, a growing number of skilled workers demanded different kinds of jobs than those widely available on the labour market (Fricke 2003). Therefore, the state invested more than one billion euros in several consecutive research programmes between 1974 and 2002, in which the social partners
also participated. While researchers provide mixed evaluations about the effects of the programme on the world of work, they can be considered a success when it comes to OSH. This is because binding minimum standards for health and safety at work were defined as a result of the research conducted. Moreover, different sources of pressure to which workers were exposed in the labour process could be eased, particularly related to physical factors (such as noise or heat), and aspects like monotony at work or a fast pace of work (Fricke 2003).

Nowadays, there is comprehensive European regulation of OSH which has been in force since the late 1980s. The so-called ‘Framework Directive’ 89/391/EEC defines the main principles for healthy and safe workplaces throughout the EU, encouraging “improvements, especially in the working environment, to guarantee a better level of protection of the safety and health of workers”. Various other EU Directives complement the Framework Directive by regulating specific aspects related to OSH. So-called ‘risk assessments’ constitute the key tool to identifying potential work-related hazards, and to mitigating the identified risks. The contents of these EU Directives have to be transposed into national law by the Member States. While joint (minimum) standards are thus set, there are differences across countries, for example with regard to the control and sanctioning mechanisms regarding OSH policies. Furthermore, Principle 10 of the European Pillar of Social Rights (which came into force in 2017) states that “workers have the right to a high level of protection of their health and safety at work” and “to have their personal data protected in the employment context” (EC 2021). This underlines that healthy and safe working conditions are considered a social right for workers in Europe. Highlighting prevention and protection, this entire bundle of regulations defines employers’ obligation to ensure safe and healthy workplaces. As members of the Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work, trade unions and employer associations are involved in shaping EU OSH legislation, as this tripartite body includes both government representatives and the social partners. In recent years, the EU has announced its “Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021–2027”, which identifies challenges and objectives for the Member States along three lines, namely “anticipating and managing change in the world of work brought about by the green, digital and demographic transitions; prevention of workplace accidents and illnesses; preparedness for any potential future health crises” (European Commission 2021).

The importance of OSH is not only reflected in the comprehensive regulatory framework established by the European Union, but also beyond this region since a wide range of international organisations also highlight the topic’s importance. For example, the United Nation’s Sustainability Goals make two references to it – Goal no. 8 includes the notion of “decent work” while Goal no. 3 refers to “good health and well-being” (UN 2015). Moreover, the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) “Decent Work” agenda demands “security in the workplace and social protection for
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3 The Covid-19 pandemic and limits to protection

Despite the importance of OSH in regulation and policy discourses, the Covid-19 pandemic has indicated a number of problems, such as occupational stratification in rule enforcement as well as the provision of protection, and gaps in the assessment of work-related risks (e.g. Eurofound 2020; Dörflinger 2023a). While protection should in principle be equally available for all workers in accordance with the aforementioned regulatory framework, and independent of their employment status, occupation or the size of the organisation they work for, the pandemic underlined differences (e.g. Brown/Zinn 2021). These differences may have been exacerbated by a situation which was characterised by high levels of uncertainty. States wanted to keep their economies running and to ensure the availability of basic services to the population. Therefore, a range of infection protection measures were implemented to balance economic and infection risks, ranging from the use of protective gear to the lockdown of whole sectors. However, this caused varying levels of exposure to (infection, health and economic) risks for workers: many affected by lockdowns at least temporarily lost their jobs; others were encouraged to perform their work from home (some in isolation), and interactive service workers employed in key industries continued to work on the frontline with customers, patients or similar groups (Dörflinger 2023a). These unequal effects for different groups of workers have been referred to as “risk inequalities” (Brown/Zinn 2021: 274).

However, gaps in workers’ protection already existed before the outbreak of Covid-19. This is revealed by data from the latest Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) conducted by the European Agency for Safety and
Health at Work (EU-OSHA) in 2019. For example, risk assessments were not carried out equally across countries, economic sectors and workplaces (EU-OSHA 2019). Accordingly, they are more regularly conducted in countries with tough sanctioning mechanisms, in manufacturing and the public sector compared to private services, and in large organisations. This is likely to lead to varying levels of access to and protection for workers. Put differently, workers employed in particular countries, economic sectors, organisations or occupations are more or less likely to be able to access healthy and safe working conditions. In addition, ESENER underlines gaps in the assessment of mental hazards.

The fact that the pandemic was accompanied by increased exposure to various occupational hazards for many workers is well documented in the emerging literature. While the risk of infection has been a core concern, other health-related hazards as well as economic risks have also been investigated (e.g. Wehrmann 2023; Cai et al. 2021; Hadjisolomou et al. 2022; Vermeerbergen et al. 2021). Data collected by Eurofound for example underline service workers’ high exposure to risks as well as the fact that the mental well-being of workers has suffered during the pandemic (Eurofound 2020; 2022).

Overall, there is a highly institutionalised system of OSH in Europe based on several EU Directives as well as the European Pillar of Social Rights. This is underlined by the policy positions and related discourses steered by major international and European organisations such as the United Nations, ILO or Eurofound. Yet, despite the general agreement on the importance of OSH, there are limits to the protection of (specific groups of) workers which were made visible during the Covid-19 pandemic. These underline the need for action, and for a wider debate on OSH in the post-pandemic labour market.

4 Overview of this special issue

This special issue is divided into three parts related to various topics in the context of OSH. The first part deals with actors and institutions involved in the comprehensive multi-level regulatory system. The second part focuses on specific OSH policies, and in particular on risk assessments. The third and final part sheds lights on several aspects of inequalities regarding OSH which may be accompanied by different needs and levels of protection.

The first two papers broadly deal with actors and institutions related to OSH. The article by Weber et al. focuses on the complex interlinkages between the different regulatory levels of the highly institutionalised European OSH system based on the literature on multi-level governance in employment relations. Using qualitative compara-
ative evidence collected in six European countries and two economic sectors, the paper sheds light on the role of the social partners in the field of OSH in the multi-level regulatory framework. It particularly investigates policy coordination between national social partners and the European level sectoral social dialogue. The analysis indicates that the degree of vertical coordination is still relatively limited despite the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic has promoted stronger coordination across levels. The authors conclude that the system of multi-level governance is still ‘in-the-making’.

The article by Valdivia et al. deals with institutional change in the context of OSH. It is based on the case of the German slaughterhouse industry; an industry that was already known for precarious working conditions before the outbreak of the pandemic. The paper uses a combination of a legal analysis of the legislative process and a political science analysis of the participation of civil society actors (particularly trade unions). By tracing key political and legal events, the article demonstrates how the worsening situation in the slaughterhouses was utilised by different actors to enforce the introduction of a comprehensive legal framework in 2020, i.e. the Federal Occupational Health and Safety Control Act. The article thus highlights that rapid institutional change on a national level was possible in the context of the pandemic, and shows the important interaction between civil society and democratic institutions as an enabler of such change.

The third paper is situated within the second theme; it deals with the risk assessment which is – in accordance with EU regulations – the key instrument for identifying and mitigating occupational hazards in workplaces. The article by Becke et al. is based on a mixed-methods research design combining survey research with qualitative case studies in two sectors in Germany. In a first step, changes in the mental health of employees during the pandemic were surveyed in order to assess the potential for introducing specific risk assessments for employees' mental health. In the second step, the results of the case study demonstrate that employees benefited from the implementation of risk assessments for mental health, for instance because of a reduction in work-related stress. In sum, the article underlines that risk assessments are an essential instrument for improving health and safety at work. Furthermore, the paper shows the importance of the workplace level; if a certain commitment towards OSH exists in ‘health-sensitive organisations’, both the organisation and its employees tend to benefit from this.

The last two papers in this special issue broadly deal with inequality in the context of OSH. The starting point of the article by Babst et al. is the fact that exposure to Covid-19 differed across groups of workers (e.g. frontline workers vs. office workers who were able to work from home). Those workers who were particularly exposed may need to rely on the solidarity of others and their compliance with containment measures in order to improve their own protection. Against this background, the paper looks at occupational recognition in times of the pandemic and at the question
whether such recognition can promote compliance with infection control measures. Using survey data, the paper indicates that the levels of recognition for certain occupations increased during the pandemic (particularly for care workers and those in essential services); however, the perceived levels are still rather low. The data show that occupational recognition has a positive impact on compliance with infection control measures, and that this relation is mediated by institutional trust. Hence, the paper indicates that social recognition can enhance solidaric behaviour which in turn contributed to a better protection of certain groups of workers during the pandemic.

Finally, the article by Kothe et al. looks at specific risk groups (disabled and other vulnerable employees) during the Covid-19 pandemic and at the role of employee representation bodies in this respect. Risk groups were exposed to particular hazards during the pandemic and are thus the paper’s focus of attention. Based on the results of an online survey among employee representatives in Germany, the authors provide a descriptive overview on the measures taken to protect risk groups at the organisational level. The results underline the role played by employee representative bodies – their involvement led to a positive impact on the scope and quality of protective measures, which again underlines the important role of actors and their interaction with the regulatory framework.

5 Conclusion

This special issue underlines the importance of reviving a broad and interdisciplinary debate in social policy research on occupational safety and health for the sake of enhancing the protection of workers. This need is not only underlined by the experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic but also by current developments in European labour markets, such as the twin digital and green transitions or demographic change and the related debates on retirement age. While such developments highlight that there are numerous OSH-related topics in need of further research, we would like to highlight three broad areas of concern.

First, more research is needed on the interactions between actors and institutions in the context of OSH. As explained earlier, the underlying regulatory system is complex and spans multiple levels – therefore, it is relevant to find out how different actors involved in OSH deal with these complexities, and how the complexities impact on the protection of workers. For instance, according to recent comparative research by Larsson et al. (2023), employee representatives in Germany report being overburdened by the fact that rules on OSH are proscribed in different types of regulations (e.g. codes, ordinances) and at the national as well as sub-national level. Additional research shedding light on aspects related to the interaction between
actors and institutions with a focus on specific levels, countries or economic sectors, or on a particular cluster of actors (such as the social partners) could certainly provide relevant insights into the debate. It could possibly also help to better understand uneven protection for different groups of workers as an outcome of the interaction between actors and institutions.

Second, so-called risk inequalities were already an important topic before the Covid-19 pandemic, but the outbreak of the illness made such inequalities between different groups of workers even more visible. While the protection of some groups of workers has been high for a long time (e.g. those employed in large manufacturing companies), others – for instance those working in small organisations, or in the private service sector – may only have limited access to OSH provisions (EU-OSHA 2019). Moreover, and due to occupational segregation, women in the labour market may be more exposed to certain risks compared to their male counterparts; the same applies to groups like migrants or disabled people. Therefore, it is important to better understand the determinants of limited access to OSH provisions as well as the specific consequences these entail for workers and their protection. The role of actors and institutions in this context should also be investigated because according to the regulatory system, all workers should in principle have equal access to OSH provisions. Risk inequalities are also a relevant topic in the context of current developments in European labour markets. For example, climate change is likely to impact on the conditions under which work is performed, possibly reinforcing existing or generating new hazards (Dörflinger 2023b).

Third, more research on the mental hazards to which (different groups of) employees are exposed in the context of their work, and on practices for assessing and mitigating them, is needed. There has been a long tradition of identifying, assessing and mitigating physical hazards in industrial work settings. This is different when it comes to mental or psychosocial risks. Such hazards are often found in service occupations (such as care, retail or hospitality work) which have been growing strongly in the past decades in the context of tertiarisation (Wehrmann 2023). Service workers may face a twofold challenge: on the one hand, a number of hazards (particularly the mental ones) to which they are exposed have hardly been systematically identified to date; on the other hand, data from ESENER underline that risk assessments in the service sector (particularly in private services) are generally less likely to be carried out regularly. As a consequence, service workers may face gaps in protection. Yet, efficient protection means that both physical and mental or psychosocial risks are assessed and mitigated. Additional research identifying such risks and best practices (regarding specific OSH policies and measures) related to mitigation strategies is essential to address gaps in protection. Such research should also look at occupational groups and sectors which have not traditionally been the focus of OSH-related research.
Regardless of whether future research on OSH focuses on the three areas of concern sketched in this conclusion or on related topics, we suggest relying on interdisciplinary approaches. Moreover, as the pace of change is high, perspectives reflecting the ongoing dynamics in European labour markets are desirable. Finally, context-sensitive comparative approaches including different countries, sectors or occupational groups, and research spanning multiple levels could be particularly useful. Such future research on occupational safety and health should contribute to achieving one core objective: to enhance the protection of workers in the post-pandemic labour market.

References


