

Manal Azzi: It is important that OSH actors are properly trained on and address these new risks to workers

Interview to Alexandra Lefopoulou*

On the occasion of World Day for Safety and Health at Work 2021, on 28 April, Dr Manal Azzi, Senior Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Specialist at the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Coordinator of the World Day for Safety and Health talks to Alexandra Lefopoulou, journalist, for the magazine of Hellenic Institute for Occupational Health and Safety (ELINYAE) about the lessons learned and experiences from the world of work, especially about OSH, after Covid pandemic and the role about the role that the OSH systems could play at central level to emerging risks or new crises/threats.



- The COVID-19 pandemic has led governments, employers, workers and the general population to face unprecedented challenges in relation to the virus and the many effects it has had on the world of work. What's your opinion about the lessons learned and experiences from the world of work, especially about OSH?

Manal Azzi: The COVID-19 pandemic has exemplified the importance of strengthening occupational safety and health systems, so they are resilient and able to face both ongoing threats to worker safety, as well as crises which may occur without notice. Not only did workers face new challenges due to the risk of acquiring the virus, but mitigation measures in the world of work also presented new risks that need to be addressed by OSH actors.

- The pandemic has revealed the importance of coordination at national level against new threats. What's your opinion, about the role about the role that the OSH systems could play at central level to emerging risks or new crises/threats?

Manal Azzi: The crisis has also shown us the importance of integrating occupational safety and health as a key actor within the emergency response, as workers have found themselves at the frontlines of the pandemic, especially those working in healthcare and the emergency response.

- What can be the strategies to strengthen national occupational safety and health (OSH) systems to build resilience, in order to face crises now and in the future, drawing on lessons learned and experiences from the world of work.

Manal Azzi: In order to strengthen and build resilient OSH systems, action needs to be taken on all of the elements that comprise a comprehensive OSH system. This would include national OSH policy and regulatory frameworks, national OSH institutional frameworks, occupational health services, information, advisory services and training on OSH, data collection and research and strengthening OSH management systems at the enterprise level, including support mechanisms for OSH in MSMEs and the informal economy.

- Digital technologies became an essential tool in ensuring service continuity and adaptation, scaling up capacity in critical services, including through partnerships, as well as instituting crisis management plans. What can be the role of digital economy in safety risks in the post pandemic era?

Manal Azzi: During the pandemic, digital tools have changed both the way workers work within enterprises, and have also had impacts on OSH systems, such as labour inspection. For example, during the pandemic, labour inspectors in many countries conducted inspections virtually when possible. Enterprises who had workers teleworking also provided virtual risk assessment for ergonomic hazards, and other virtual trainings.

- Big data exchange for example is a very important feature with high importance in the recent pandemic crisis. What can it be implemented in a OSH strategy in the next years to come?

Manal Azzi: Data and research on OSH are essential for developing informed policies, laws and regulations, strategies and other measures. Especially in times of crisis, being able to exchange data quickly and as a situation evolves is crucial to taking appropriate measures to protect workers. In the case of COVID-19, data on COVID-19 cases in the workplace is useful to analyzing how the virus spreads and helps identify deficiencies in preventive and protective measures.

- The new way of working, shifts to new forms of working arrangements as the teleworking presented many opportunities for workers but also posed potential OSH risks. What can be the new skills and competences for OSH sector. Can we talk about a new need to re-skilling and re-qualification?

New forms of work that have become prominent during the pandemic, such as teleworking, have presented opportunities for workers while simultaneously exposing them to potential new risks. Workers engaged in teleworking may face social isolation, communication difficulties, psychosocial risks, ergonomic risks and impacts on work life balance. It is important that OSH actors are properly trained on and address these new risks to workers.

- Sustainability and safety risks. What should be the priorities for industry in the next years to come?

Manal Azzi: Many changes to the world of work, which were implemented quickly due to the nature of the crisis, have now become part of the new normal for many workers, for example, teleworking or use of PPE. It is important that research looks into the risks of these changes and that policies and guidelines for workers is created, as appropriate.

Manal Azzi is a Senior Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Specialist at the International Labour Organization (ILO) based in Geneva, Switzerland. In her 16 years with the ILO, she has had the opportunity to supervise interventions around the world. Dr. Azzi currently manages the branch's work on chemical safety and the environment and leads ILO's activities on health promotion in the workplace including improved wellbeing, nutrition and the prevention of stress, psychosocial risks, violence and substance abuse in the world of work.

Manal holds a Ph.D. in OSH (Faculty of Health & Medical Sciences-University of Surrey, UK), a masters in labour law, LLM (University of Leicester), a masters in nutrition, and BSc. in environmental and public health sciences (American University of Beirut), and a degree in biochemistry, human physiology and health education (University of Sydney).