

A CALL TO ACTION: WOMEN'S HEALTH AT WORK AND VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

WHAT FORMS DOES VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE TAKE?

Violence in the workplace can take many forms: it can be physical, psychological or sexual...

- Physical violence is the most apparent form of violence. It includes acts ranging from hitting, kicking and spitting to serious assault and even murder. But while this form of violence has received a lot of attention, particularly in the United States, a far greater number of people generally report being exposed to psychological violence at work.¹ Psychological violence includes such acts as name-calling, intimidation, ostracism and harassment.
- Psychological harassment and bullying are two common forms of psychological violence. Psychological harassment involves repeated words, actions or gestures which can affect a person's dignity, physical or psychological integrity, or which may compromise one of that person's rights, entail unfavourable working conditions, or even result in a dismissal.² Examples of psychological harassment include constant criticism, exclusion, gossip and ridicule. One study of members of the CSQ (Centrale des syndicats du Québec) found that one out of three employees (35%) had been exposed to psychological harassment at work, either as victims or witnesses.³
- Bullying has been described by the International Labour Organization as vindictive, cruel, malicious or humiliating attempts to undermine an individual or group of employees.⁴ Examples of bullying behaviour include shouting at others to get things done, making life difficult for those who have the potential to do a better job and punishing those who are too competent by removing their responsibilities. Workplace bullying is quite common: in the Third European Survey on Working Conditions, almost one in ten workers (9%) reported being subject to intimidation and bullying.⁵
- Across the world, a significant proportion of workers also report being exposed to sexual harassment.⁶ In fact, various national surveys have found that anywhere between 40% and over 90% of the women questioned have suffered some form of sexual harassment in the course of their working lives.⁷ Sexual harassment includes sexual assault but it can also be much more subtle (like working in an environment where offensive material is displayed or where sexist jokes and comments are made). Accordingly, this form of violence also falls under the more general headings of physical and psychological violence.

VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE CAN BE PERPETRATED BY...

- An individual or a group of people (“mobbing” refers to a situation where a group is involved)⁸;
- Other employees, such as a supervisor or a colleague;
- The clientele, such as patients, inmates, students or their parents, users of public transportation, business customers, etc.
- Individuals with no direct relationship to the workplace, such as in the case of an armed robbery. This form of violence is more prevalent in high-risk environments like banks and gas stations.

WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE?

Violence may be motivated by any number of individual reasons, from feelings of personal inadequacy (often a factor in the case of bullying) to discriminatory attitudes relating to gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity. In other cases, psychological harassment may be used to intimidate “unwanted” workers in order to provoke their resignation. Workplace violence may also be unintentional, like when a patient with Alzheimer disease physically assaults a health care worker.

But individual behaviour is not the only cause of workplace violence: various work-related factors can act as instigators of violence or can be associated with incidents of violence. These include difficult working conditions (work overload, high work pace, etc.), various aspects of the work context (cutbacks, lack of employer support, etc.) and some elements related to the work organization (forms of management that encourage competition between employees, etc.). In today’s increasingly global and competitive marketplace, factors associated with violence in the workplace are becoming more and more common. Consider, for example, how the demands for increased productivity, the rise in precarious employment, the introduction of new and rapidly changing technology and the lack of proper training and supervision may be contributing to a climate of stress and violence in Canadian workplaces.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE...

ON THE VICTIM?

Violence in the workplace, whether physical, psychological or sexual, can have immediate and long-term consequences for the physical and/or emotional health of the victim. Victims may experience physical symptoms such as shaking, crying, nausea, fatigue, insomnia and loss of appetite; they may also feel fear, shame, guilt, anger, irritability, anxiety and frustration. Violence may also lead to tobacco, alcohol and drug abuse. In the long run, victims may lose self-confidence and feel depressed, even suicidal. Murder and suicide are among the worst consequences of physical, psychological and sexual violence in the workplace.

WHAT IS POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is another possible consequence of workplace violence. PTSD is an anxiety disorder that can develop following exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which serious harm occurred or was threatened. The individual who experiences PTSD may have flashbacks and nightmares and feel intense guilt or have outbursts of anger, although a range of other symptoms are also quite common. Symptoms usually begin within 3 months of an event and can last anywhere from one month to many years.⁹ It is important to note that post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as other serious psychiatric illnesses, does not only occur as a result of physical violence: The study of members of the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), for example, found that victims of psychological harassment experience increased rates of psychological distress, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁰

ON EMPLOYERS?

Violence at work does not only affect the victim; other employees too may be affected. Violence can disrupt interpersonal relationships and the overall working environment. As a result, employers undergo losses related to increased absenteeism and high turnover rates. They also bear the costs associated with the reduced productivity of employees and the deterioration of the work quality. Finally, employers assume the costs of workers' compensation claims. In fact, while the number of compensated occupational injuries has been going down over the past decade, the number of compensated claims related to violence has actually been going up.¹¹ The British Columbia Workers' Compensation Board, for example, reports that wage-loss claims by hospital workers from acts of violence have increased by 88% since 1985.¹²

ON SOCIETY?

The impact of workplace violence is far reaching. The costs for society include health care and rehabilitation costs as well as unemployment and retraining costs. The time and money spent on investigations and legal actions, criminal and civil, are also among the consequences for taxpayers. These costs are quite significant: workplace stress and violence are said to account for between 0.5% and 3.5% of a country's GDP every year.¹³

WHY IS WORKPLACE VIOLENCE AN IMPORTANT PROBLEM FOR WOMEN?

We may be tempted to believe that violence is found primarily in jobs traditionally held by men, such as prison guards and police officers. Yet, violence is also found in many jobs traditionally held by women: health care workers, for example, have been shown to have a risk of violence that is similar to that faced by police officers.¹⁴ In fact, women are particularly at risk of workplace violence. One of the reasons for this is that women are predominantly employed in a number of high-risk sectors. These sectors have been identified by the International Labour Organization as those where the employees handle money or valuables (bank tellers, cashiers, etc.), where they provide care, advice or

education (nurses, social workers, teachers, etc.), where they work with mentally ill, drunk or potentially violent people (bar staff, mental health workers, etc.), where they work alone (taxi drivers, homecare workers, etc.), and where they carry out inspections or enforce rules (police officers, ticket inspectors, etc.). Other factors that put women at a special risk include their precarious situation in the job market (as low-paid, low status workers) and their status as the principal victims of sexual harassment.¹⁵

VIOLENCE IN WOMEN'S JOBS

Women are exposed to various forms of violence in their jobs as nurses, teachers and in the sales and service industry. In a survey of 720 registered nurses working in clinical patient settings in Saskatchewan,¹⁶ 82% said they had experienced verbal abuse while 54% reported physical abuse in the previous 12 months. In addition, 39% reported sexual harassment. The perpetrators were usually patients but also included physicians. The situation may even be worse for the health care / community care workers who work out of people's homes and find themselves largely isolated.¹⁷ Teachers too face violence in the course of their work. One study by the Manitoba Teachers' Society¹⁸ looked at violent incidents among teachers from kindergarten through grade 12 and found that 7% had been physically assaulted while almost 40% had been abused in some way in the previous 15 months. The same is true for women who work in the sales and service industry. Bank tellers, for example, are regularly exposed to verbal and physical attacks from customers. In addition, tellers face the threat of hold-ups, which they regard as their main work-related stressor. One study found that 78% of tellers had witnessed at least one hold-up, while 72% had themselves been held-up.¹⁹

HOW IS VIOLENCE DIFFERENT FOR WOMEN AND MEN WORKERS?

The nature of workplace violence is generally different for women and men. For example, an analysis of 152 appeals decisions for compensation claims linked to physical and psychological violence in Quebec²⁰ showed that women were more likely to be victimized by the clientele or their superior whereas men were more likely to be victimized by colleagues (even when they worked in jobs where they were exposed to the public). The study also showed that men were more likely to be physically assaulted whereas women were more likely to be subjected to psychological violence. Accordingly, men were more likely than women to suffer from a physical condition as a result of the violence (66% versus 35%). Women workers reported psychological problems in the vast majority of claims (91%), while men tended to report this less often (54%). Women also had longer absences from work as a result of the violence. Other studies have found similar results.²¹

The study points to the fact that violence in men and women's work is often perceived differently. For example, when a physical assault occurs (like when a prison guard is injured by an inmate) employers and decision-makers will rarely argue that the violence is a normal working condition. But when the assault is verbal (like when threats or sexist remarks are made) some employers and decision-makers will contend that this is just part of the job. Psychological injuries are also often treated skeptically, specifically with

regards to their existence, their seriousness and their relation to the violence. In this context, it may be more difficult for women to claim compensation since they are more often victims of psychological violence. It is important to note, however, that many workers choose not to report violent incidents in the first place.²² Women especially may choose not report because of their greater vulnerability in the job market and because of the fear that the violence would be interpreted as a lack of competence or professionalism on their part.²³

HOW CAN WE PREVENT VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE?

First, all forms of workplace violence should be taken seriously. Violence should never be considered part of the job, nor should it be tolerated. Violent behaviour on the part of a superior should not be seen as an expression of his or her authority, just like a dominant or arrogant attitude by a colleague should not be interpreted as a personality conflict or treated as a private affair between two colleagues. Let's take a closer look at some of the things that employers, unions, workers and governmental organizations can do to prevent and effectively deal with workplace violence.

WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO?

At present, employer policies and procedures on preventing workplace violence are quite limited, and so are the support systems available for the victims of violence. Yet, it is important to remember that employers are legally required to ensure the safety of the work environment and can be held responsible if they fail to protect workers against dangerous working conditions. Accordingly, employers should establish internal policies and procedures on workplace violence and designate individuals who victims can refer to. At the same time, they should ensure that all employees are educated on the issue of violence and are aware of the policies and procedures in place. Employers should also ensure that aspects of the work do not contribute to a climate of violence. In the event that violence occurs, employers should provide support to victims as well as to other employees who may be affected.

WHAT CAN UNIONS DO?

Unions should inform their members on issues of workplace violence and communicate a message of zero tolerance with regards to all forms of violence. They should ensure that prevention strategies work to eliminate, whenever possible, the risks of violence in specific workplaces. In this respect, unions can play an important role in making sure that aspects of the work that can contribute to a climate of violence – such as cuts, productivity constraints, lack of support, etc.- are minimized or eliminated. Unions can also negotiate clauses in collective agreements, including a clear policy on violence, an occupational health and safety committee to address issues of violence, education and training for employees, etc. Finally, unions should support the victims of violence as well as the other employees who may also be affected.

WHAT CAN WORKERS DO?

When a worker is victim of workplace violence, he or she should first look for support within the organization. This could be a union representative, someone in management or human resources, or even a colleague. If support is not available from within the organization, the worker should contact outside resources like community groups specialized in workers' compensation or sexual harassment issues. This will enable the worker to evaluate his or her options, which could include, for example, mediation by a third party for situations where the violence originates from within the organization. In some cases, occupational health and safety legislation can be used, including making requests for intervention by the inspectorate and invoking the right to refuse dangerous work. In fact, the right to refuse work has previously been used successfully in a case of psychological harassment.²⁴ In the majority of provinces, workers who were injured or became ill as a result of the violence can also file a claim for workers' compensation. It is therefore a good idea for workers to keep a log of events since this could be used in support of their case.

WHAT CAN GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS DO?

Violence in the workplace is an important problem that has still not been fully addressed as an occupational health and safety issue in Canada. Some provinces like British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and New Brunswick have adopted regulations to prevent workplace violence and to protect individuals who work alone.²⁵ According to the British Columbia regulation, for example, employers are required to take specific steps in order to assess, prevent and respond to workplace violence. Yet, many provinces still do not have specific regulations to prevent violence and to protect those who work alone.

The bureaucracy in place for establishing a compensation claim and/or pressing charges also presents a number of hurdles. While all provinces compensate for violent incidents that lead to disability, many provinces – including Ontario, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland – and the Northwest Territories have specifically excluded access to workers' compensation claims related to chronic stress. Accordingly, in these provinces, claims related to psychological harassment or to other forms of chronic stress are excluded from workers' compensation.

Governmental organizations should therefore develop legislative strategies to prevent workplace violence and take steps to reverse to exclusion of stress-related disability from compensation in many provinces. Governmental organizations can also contribute to prevention efforts by promoting research and dialogue on all forms of workplace violence. The Quebec Minister of Labour, for example, has set up a working group on psychological harassment. Prevention strategies should build on these ground-breaking efforts.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

In March 1998, a group of researchers, stakeholders and representatives of women workers gathered to take part in a symposium in Montreal on “Improving the Health of Women in the Work Force: A Meeting Of Representatives Of Women Workers and Researchers”. Participants adopted an action plan outlining a list of priorities for action and research in the area of women’s occupational health. The following recommendations came out of these proceedings.

The complete action plan is available at:

<http://www.unites.uqam.ca/cinbiose/ANGLAIS/PUB/PUB.ACTIONPLAN.HTML>

What everyone can do:

- Research and prevention strategies should be developed to document and counter the effects of sexual and psychological harassment, workplace aggression and violence, demanding (irregular, rigid or unpredictable) work schedules, and other factors which produce psychological stress. These approaches should be based on a systemic analysis of stress and violence, rather than a prescriptive set of rules and behaviors.

What the government can do:

- Legislative measures should be taken to prevent people from being required to work alone, or if this is unavoidable, to ensure the safety of those who work alone (such legislation already exists in some provinces).
- Regulations designed to prevent violence and sexual harassment should be adopted.

What employers can do:

- Incidents of violence against service workers, including caregivers, should not be viewed as a reflection on their professional competence. Systemic analysis should follow every incident. Incidents should be promptly identified and named, and procedures for post-traumatic counseling and prevention should be initiated.

What organizations responsible for workers’ compensation can do:

- Disability attributable to workplace stress, including chronic stress, should be compensable. Measures should be taken to reverse the exclusion of stress-related disability in many provinces.

¹ Hoel, H., K. Sparks, and C.L. Cooper. 2001. *The cost of violence / stress at work and the benefits of a violence / stress-free working environment*. Report commissioned by the International Labour Organization, conducted by the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology.

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- ¹¹ Hébert, Francois, Patrice Duguay, and Paul Massicotte. 2002. *Les actes violents en milieu de travail: des différences selon le sexe*. Paper read at 6th World Conference, Injury Prevention and Control, in Montreal.
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