

Preventing violence against women and girls in the workplace context





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This resource is part of Communicating Equality, a project focused on gender-transformative approaches to the primary prevention of violence against women and girls. When we analyzed the evidence on this topic, the workplace emerged as an important context for advancing violence prevention and gender equality in Canada. This resource provides a summary of promising gender-transformative initiatives for the primary prevention of violence against women and girls in workplace contexts in Canada and around the world.

Communicating Equality for Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a Canadian initiative to address the root causes of VAWG by focusing on primary prevention. Worldwide, one in three women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life [1]. In Canada, more than 50% of women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16 [2]. This project links expertise in media and communication, gender-transformative thinking and violence prevention to highlight and address the drivers of VAWG and translate them into effective Canada-specific messages and actions for public consumption.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Violence against women and girls	is defined as any act of gender-based violence that causes, or could cause, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of harm or coercion, in public or in private life. This definition encompasses all forms of violence that women and girls experience (including physical, sexual, emotional, cultural, spiritual, financial, and others) that are gender-based [3].
Primary prevention	means stopping violence against women and girls from occurring in the first place by addressing its underlying drivers. This includes changing the social conditions that give rise to this violence; reforming the institutions and systems that excuse, justify or even promote such violence; and shifting the power imbalances and social norms, structures and practices that drive and normalize it [3].
Gender-transformative approaches	move beyond simply being aware of gender inequality, or sensitive to gender differences, and instead deliberately challenge harmful gender roles, stereotypes, practices and norms, with the explicit aim of shifting the unequal distribution of power and resources between women and men [3]. Concerning violence, gender-transformative approaches focus on eliminating violence against women and girls and ending gender inequalities at the same time. In order to do this, a whole-of-society approach that engages all segments of society in the promotion of gender equality- including at the individual, household, community, institutional and policy/legal level- is necessary. Overall, employing gender-transformative approaches requires creativity, critical analysis, and novel ways of thinking [3-6].

THE WORKPLACE AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Canadian workplaces have an important role to play in the primary prevention of violence against women and girls, for three main reasons: Violence, sexual harassment, and discrimination against women occur in workplaces; violence that occurs at home or in the community can impact one's work; and workplace structures and cultures influence gender inequality.

Violence, sexual harassment, and discrimination against women occur in workplaces.

Despite [advancements in public policy](#) at federal and provincial levels to address workplace violence and harassment, research shows that women continue to experience gender-based discrimination and inappropriate sexualized behaviours that can make them feel undervalued, uncomfortable and unsafe while at work [7-9]. A survey conducted by Statistics Canada before the COVID-19 pandemic found that [7]:

- one-quarter (25%) of women said that they had been personally targeted with sexualized behaviours in their workplace in the preceding year, along with 17% of men.
- one in ten (10%) women experienced workplace discrimination based on their gender, along with a smaller proportion of men (4%).
- one in eight (13%) women stated that they had been sexually assaulted in a work-related context at one point during their working lives, about four times the proportion among men (3%).

Another Statistics Canada survey from 2018 found that 19% of women and 13% of men reported that they had experienced harassment in their workplace in the past year. Workplace harassment included verbal abuse, humiliation, threats to persons, physical violence, and unwanted sexual attention or sexual harassment. Workers who experienced harassment were more likely to be dissatisfied with their job, and experience higher levels of stress and poor health [8].

Violence that occurs at home or in the community can impact one's work.

Violence against women and girls that happens at home or in the community often spills into the workplace. In addition to violence and trauma affecting victims' and co-workers' performance at work, perpetrators often focus on the workplace as it is place of control for women outside of the relationship and a source of financial independence [10].

A recent pilot survey of a Canadian workplace found that intimate partner violence (experienced by one in three women or gender diverse respondents and one in five men) affected victims/survivors, their coworkers, and workplace productivity [11]. In 2009, a study of intimate partner violence costs to businesses in Canada reported an estimated loss of \$7.9 million [12].

A study conducted in Toronto found that intimate partner violence affected women's short- and long-term stability and progression at work. This study also reported that women who experienced intimate partner violence were often met with judgment, intolerance and stigmatization in the workplace [10].

Workplace structures and culture influence gender inequality.

Research shows that gender inequality is at the root of violence against women and girls across all areas of society [3]. Workplace policies and practices can perpetuate gender inequality by limiting women's opportunities, advancements and pay. Workplaces also perpetuate inequality when they normalize male control and dominance and privilege masculine character traits in certain sectors, industries and leadership positions [7, 13].

According to Employment and Social Development Canada, in 2017, women in Canada earned 88.6 cents for every dollar earned men [14]. A 2019 study by McKinsey Global Institute reported that significant gender inequities still remained in Canada, with women representing:

- 35% of managerial positions
- 23% of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) workers
- 20% of small business owners
- 29% of elected officials
- 64% of unpaid caregivers in the home
- 80% of single parents [15].

These results were largely similar across Canadian provinces and cities, pointing to common priority areas for action for governments and organizations.

Evidence suggests that there are many actions workplaces can take to stop violence against women before it starts, promote respectful and safe relationships in the workplace and surrounding community, and address the gender inequities that underpin violence against women and girls.

Unfortunately, most workplace violence prevention policies and programs do not take into consideration the higher rates of violence that women and gender diverse individuals experience, or the need for advancing gender equality as important for violence prevention. Policies and programs often ignore gender identity, race, ability, age, immigration status and other factors that influence victimization. Understanding the mediating effect of gender and these other factors is crucial to address and prevent violence more effectively. It is therefore imperative that workplace violence prevention is gender-transformative. This means changing the gendered norms, practices and structures that drive violence against women [3, 5]. Some examples are offered for gender-transformative actions and programs that Canadian workplaces can consider for adaptation or adoption in order to prevent violence against women and girls and advance gender equality.

GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE INITIATIVES FOR THE PRIMARY PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE WORKPLACE

Five actions that workplaces can take to contribute to the primary prevention of violence against women and girls and gender equality through a gender-transformative lens [13, 16]:

1. Reform policies, systems and practices that implicitly or explicitly condone violence against women or reduce perpetrators' accountability for their violence.
2. Build organizational and institutional cultures that promote and demonstrate the importance of equality, respect, safety, and fairness in professional contexts, and building people's confidence to act as prosocial bystanders.
3. Challenge attitudes and norms that normalize male control and dominance and privilege masculine character traits in various sectors, industries, and leadership positions.
4. Support men and boys in developing healthy masculinities and positive, supportive male peer relationships by countering constructions of masculinity as dominant, aggressive, controlling, or hypersexual that are especially prevalent in particular professions and roles.
5. Promote structural changes that equalize access to resources and power and normalize gender equality in the workplace and in public and private life.

Actions 1 & 2: Reform policies, systems and practices that condone violence against women and build organizational cultures that promote gender equality and respect towards women and girls

The condoning of violence against women and girls is a key driver [3]. In workplaces, this may look like excusing or minimizing interpersonal violence and sexual harassment or justifying why violence occurred [16]. In Canada, there is federal and provincial legislation that outlines the responsibilities of employers in the prevention of workplace harassment and violence. About 90% of workers in Canada are covered under provincial or territorial labour laws (human rights and/or occupational safety laws). Federal legislation (Canada Labour Code and the Canadian Human Rights Act) applies to federally regulated industries such as banking, telecommunications, radio and television broadcasting, railways, and federal Crown corporations [17]. In response to these legal requirements, many workplaces have developed policies, systems and processes to prevent violence and harassment. However, it is crucial to ensure that gendered realities and inequities are understood, reflected and effectively addressed through these organizational policies, systems and practices. Here are some examples of programs and projects that offer gender-transformative approaches to promoting gender equality in the workplace and combatting organizational cultures that condone violence against women and girls:

[Addressing Domestic Violence in the Workplace Through Collaboration \(DVatWork\)](#) is a project of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and their Children in partnership with the Canadian Labour Congress and Federally Regulated Employers - Transportation and Communications (FETCO). DVatWork provides employers with tools for preliminary risk screening, policy building, and organizational readiness assessment as well as training on domestic violence for both employers and workers. Their free Foundational e-learning course includes evidence on the ways domestic violence affects the workplace and the importance of understanding gender issues to prevent and address domestic violence. It helps learners recognize, respond and refer to appropriate resources as a key component of professional development for all members of any workplace.

Ending Violence Association of British Columbia (EVA-BC) has a range of [resources and training](#) that support policy and cultural change in organizations to move toward violence-free workplaces. For example, [Sexual Harassment Advice, Response, and Prevention for Workplaces \(SHARP Workplaces\)](#), developed in partnership with Community Legal Assistance Society, provides information, resources and training to workers and employers on the rights and responsibilities related to sexual harassment in the workplace as well as best practices in prevention and response.

Organizational and cultural change requires many different strategies and initiatives. A popular type of workplace-based programming for the prevention of violence against women focuses on building bystanders' confidence to act pro-socially to effectively intervene and challenge disrespect, abuse and discrimination. EVA-BC's award-winning [Be More Than a Bystander](#) program, in partnership with the BC Lions Football Club, equips leaders and employers with the knowledge to recognize the range of behaviours that contribute to a negative workplace culture where sexual harassment and abuse against women can occur, and the skills to appropriately intervene and address these issues. The program has been adapted for industries that primarily employ men, such as [resource extraction](#).

Be More Than a Bystander is an adaptation of Mentors In Violence Prevention program (currently [MVP Strategies](#)), one of the best evaluated bystander intervention programs [19]. MVP Strategies is designed for all employees, but the training is especially renowned for its success in conducting participatory workshops in which men are fully engaged, and from which they emerge with new ideas about how they can play a constructive role in improving workplace culture.

In Australia, Women's Health Victoria developed [Take a Stand](#), one of the first workplace-based bystander intervention programs for the prevention of violence against women in that country [13]. This award-winning program provides participants with the knowledge and practical tools to become active in promoting respectful relationships between men and women. This includes challenging sexist jokes and comments, the condoning of violence against women, and discrimination based on gender. Take a Stand delivers [suite of training](#) focused on preventing and responding to violence in the workplace.

Actions 3 & 4: Challenge masculine organizational cultures and support men and boys in developing healthy masculinities and positive male-peer relationships.

Creating a workplace environment where all can thrive includes challenging masculine organizational cultures and rigid and harmful masculinities and gender norms [13, 20]. Here are some examples of programs and projects that challenge masculine organizational cultures and support healthy masculinities in the workplace:

[Mining for a Safer Masculinity](#) was a project developed by Factive Consulting in Australia to address at-risk gendered behaviours on mine sites. This project found that men often displayed stereotypical views about low capabilities of women and high capabilities of men and used derogatory language, aggression, bullying and intimidation for indicating or correcting perceived femininity in other men. Men also often pushed themselves beyond their bodily limits, or into dangerous situations to prove their abilities and strength, increasing harm, stress, and overall risk. Mining for a Safer Masculinity encouraged mining companies to investigate how gender impacted the behaviours of people working in dangerous environments when sociocultural meanings of what it meant to be a man often encouraged—and sometimes dictated—risk-taking, aggression, toughness, and disrespect towards women [20].

In Canada, projects such as [Equity Leaders](#) by Next Gen Men invite leaders from male-dominated fields to build more inclusive, safe and equitable workplaces. Their Gender Norms training module invites participants to “reflect critically on individual and societal ideas of masculinity and what it means to ‘be a man’ and assess how these ideas contribute to or impede diversity, inclusion, and equity in the workplace” [21]. Other training topics include power and privilege, allyship, masculinities and feminism at work, caregiving, and respectful workplaces.

Initiatives focused on transforming gender norms in and through the workplace in order to prevent violence against women and girls are not uncommon. In 2010, China Family Planning Association and the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) partnered to develop and evaluate an educational program for violence and HIV prevention with young men in factories and schools. The participatory sessions aimed to transform inequitable gender norms into more equitable views and practices, and discussed topics such as men and women's sexuality, violence against women, reproductive health and HIV prevention, and gender roles in daily life and work. This program adapted the popular work of Instituto Promundo's [Program H](#) and EngenderHealth's [Men as Partners](#) to a workplace context in China [22]. These programs

encourage reflection on rigid norms associated with masculinity and promote the transformation of gendered attitudes that produce inequities. Program H has been extensively evaluated and adapted to many countries and contexts throughout the world [22-24].

Allyship programs are also promising approaches for engaging men in a workplace context. In 2011, North Dakota State University created the [FORWARD advocates program](#) for and with male faculty whose role was to contribute to the advancement of gender equity and gender justice within the context of the university, particularly as it pertained to recruiting, retaining, supporting and advancing women faculty. This process included male advocates in discussions and encouraged use of materials about subjects such as male privilege, unconscious bias, and bias in the faculty search process. They also received extensive anti-oppression training that covered issues such as anti-racism, LGBT allyship and hegemonic masculinity [25].

Action 5: Promote structural changes that equalize access to resources and power and normalize gender equality in public and private life.

Workplace gender equality initiatives are one of the most common and recognizable forms of primary prevention approaches in Canada and abroad. Overall, workplaces can equalize access to resources and power between men and women by increasing women's leadership and representation at all levels of the workplace and strengthening women's economic security, participation and decision-making. They can also promote and normalize gender equality in public and private life by increasing women's workforce participation, addressing the gender pay gap and promoting more equitable, accessible and affordable parental leave and childcare arrangements for both women and men [13, 16]. Here are some examples of gender-transformative initiatives focused on increasing gender equality in the workplace:

The symposium Women and the Workplace held at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management in 2019 brought together 240 Canadian leaders and champions of workplace gender equality and diversity. Presenters and participants came from the public and private sector, unions, academia, industry and human resource associations, and civil society organizations. The [final report](#) provides strategies and resources for employers to use to advance equality in the workplace in hiring, retention and career advancement.

Among international examples, the national primary prevention organization Our Watch, in Australia has developed [Workplace Equality and Respect](#) tools and resources to support organizations in implementing actions and assessing workplace initiatives before and during the process. The resources feature good practice examples from workplaces across Australia, such as organizational action plans, and an equitable flexible work policy. There are also templates, videos and guides to help workplaces tailor the process to the context [13].

CONCLUSION

Canadian workplaces can play an important role in creating a society where all women are safe, equal and valued. The gender-transformative actions and program examples described here can guide organizations in their journey to centre gender equality and respect in their workplace. These initiatives demonstrate the importance of: promoting cultural shifts such as challenging masculine organizational cultures and rigid and harmful masculine gender norms; providing training on activating bystanders, sexual harassment, and partner violence for employers and workers; and addressing inequities and power discrepancies between men and women in the workplace.

Ideally, these actions should be integrated into a comprehensive approach that includes change and engagement at all levels – from leaders and workers, to customers, clients and the surrounding community. It is important that prevention and gender equity work becomes core business – not only a special project – for the long-lasting socioeconomic and cultural change that will help stop violence against women and girls before it starts.

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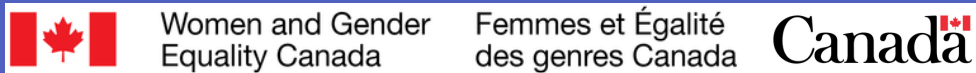


Communicating Equality

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