

Violence and Harassment in the Workplace

Violence and Harassment in the Workplace - Intimate Partner and Family Violence

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What is workplace violence and harassment?

Most people think of violence and harassment as physical assault. However, workplace violence and harassment are a much broader problem. It is any act in which a person is abused, stalked, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in the course of their employment. Spreading rumours, swearing, verbal abuse, pranks, arguments, property damage, vandalism, sabotage, pushing, theft, physical assaults, inflicting psychological trauma, anger-related incidents, rape, arson, and murder are all examples of workplace violence. Workplace violence can occur online or outside of the office (such as at a work-related event).

NOTE: In this document, we use the term violence to also include bullying and harassment

Please refer to the following OSH Answers documents for information:

- [Bullying in the Workplace](#)
- [Internet Harassment or Cyberbullying](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace](#)

- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Legislation](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Dealing with Negative Interactions](#)
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What is intimate partner and family violence?

Intimate partner violence, also known as spousal or domestic violence, is a common form of gender-based violence. It refers to multiple forms of harm caused by a current or former intimate partner or spouse.

Intimate partner violence can occur regardless of the gender or sexual orientation of the partners and in many forms of relationships, including:

- within a marriage, common-law, or dating relationship
- at any time during a relationship, including after it has ended
- whether or not the partners live together or are sexually intimate with one another

Forms of harm or abuse may include physical, criminal, sexual violence, financial, spiritual, emotional, or psychological. Reproductive coercion, coercive control and technology-facilitated violence are also included. Coercive refers to using force or threats to alter behaviour.

Family violence is any form of abuse or neglect that a child or adult experiences from a family member, or from someone with whom they have an intimate relationship. It has also been described as the abuse of power within relationships of family, trust, or dependency that endangers another person.

Overall, intimate partner and family violence are a pattern of behaviour used by one person to gain power and control over another with whom they have or have had an intimate relationship. There are additional dimensions to harassment and violence in a family relationship that are unique, such as:

- using property, pets, or children to threaten and intimidate,
- not arriving for childcare,
- threatening deportation if the target was sponsored,
- withholding passports or personal documents,
- economic abuse such as withholding or stealing money, stopping a partner from reporting to work, and from getting or keeping a job, or

- sexual, spiritual, or emotional abuse or neglect.

Each situation is unique. The violence can be a single incident but is usually a pattern of behaviour over time. Be alert to changes in patterns of behaviour. Know that it is okay to have a private conversation where you name what you have noticed and ask if the individual is okay.

Who can experience intimate partner and family violence?

Anyone can be a target of violence, regardless of gender, age, race, culture, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or educational background. The abuser may be a current or former spouse or intimate partner, relative, or friend. Anyone can experience abuse or cause harm in their relationships.

There are many risk factors that can increase the chance of someone experiencing intimate partner violence including but not limited to:

- Having experienced previous victimization
 - Being a member of a marginalized community including Indigenous women and girls
 - Black and racialized women
 - Immigrant and refugee women
 - Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and additional sexually and gender diverse (2SLGBTQI+) people
 - People living with disabilities
 - Women living in northern, rural, and remote communities; and
 - Many more.
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Is this violence a workplace issue?

Yes. When intimate partner and family violence follows an individual to work, it becomes a workplace issue. An aggressor can present a risk to the affected individual or others in the workplace itself.

You may have heard people say “it is a personal matter”, “it’s none of my business” or “that’s between the couple”, for example. These attitudes further isolate people experiencing violence creating a barrier between the individual and those who may be in a position to provide valuable support and assistance. The workplace can play an important role in assisting people experiencing violence of any kind to get the necessary help.

What effect does intimate partner and family violence have on the workplace?

People experiencing violence often feel isolated. They may feel ashamed or have concerns that their situation will compromise their employment so they are afraid to say anything. Similarly, those who suspect violence may be affecting a worker are afraid to approach this subject or intervene for many reasons. This hesitation and further isolation increase the risk to those who experience violence. In addition, people experiencing violence often experience difficulty getting to work and state that their work performance is negatively affected. Other implications for the workplace include:

- reduced productivity and motivation
- absenteeism
- decreased worker morale
- potential harm to workers, co-workers, or clients
- increased replacement, recruitment, and training costs if targets of family violence are dismissed for poor performance or absenteeism
- strained co-worker relations

Examples of how violence may affect work include (this list is not complete):

- frequent and disruptive text messages, or phone calls from a family member or partner
- a family member or partner showing up at the individual's workplace and disrupting co-workers (e.g., asking many questions about the worker's daily habits)
- sudden avoidance of social situations or withdrawal from co-workers
- sudden changes of address or reluctance to reveal a current address
- being the victim of vandalism or threats
- the affected individual is being prevented from attending work (e.g., held from leaving the home, withholding car keys or bus pass)
- cameras are consistently turned off during virtual meetings
- children appearing on camera during meetings appear to be afraid or anxious
- partner is constantly hovering in the background of the meeting
- etc.

Are there laws about protecting workers from violence in the workplace?

All jurisdictions have [legislation that addresses violence](#) in the workplace.

Some jurisdictions expressly include domestic or family violence within occupational health and safety legislation, while others do not. For example, in Ontario, the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* includes a provision for “domestic violence” in section 32.0.4.

In Manitoba, the *Employment Standards Code* includes “Interpersonal Violence Leave”. This type of leave of absence provides those experiencing intimate partner and family (domestic) violence with paid and unpaid leave so they have the assurance of job protection while they seek safety. This action could include finding suitable housing, seeking care for physical or psychological injuries, accessing legal services including putting protective orders in place, etc.

However, it is the employer's general duty across all jurisdictions to ensure all workers have a safe and healthy workplace, including protecting all workers from all forms of violence.

What can the workplace do?

A supportive and accommodating workplace provides the individual with an opportunity to establish financial independence and provides the individual with access to the help they need in their unique situation.

While respecting confidentiality and privacy as part of their [workplace violence and harassment prevention policy](#), employers should also take responsibility to:

Identify Warning Signs: Because people who experience violence are more likely to report it to a co-worker than to others in the workplace, all workers should be educated and trained on recognizing the warning signs and risk factors, and on steps to take when reporting is appropriate.

Establish a support network: Various workplace parties can offer support and assistance to workers experiencing violence. Working together in a team that may include the supervisor, trusted co-worker, human resources, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider, and union representatives may be a helpful approach to providing a supportive network. The employer may also be able to help connect the individual to support services available in the local area.

Develop or support a safety plan: Workplaces can help by supporting or creating individualized personal and workplace safety plans to address the situation. Safety plans must be developed with the consent and at the direction of the person experiencing the violence. Update the plans as circumstances change. Share the plans with anyone who needs to know about the situation in order to ensure safety. Safety plans may include:

- Asking if the individual has already established protection or restraining orders. Help make sure all the conditions of that order are followed.

- Talking to the worker, work together to identify solutions. Follow up and check on their well-being.
- Asking for a recent photograph or description of the abuser. Alert others, such as security and reception, so they are aware of who to look for.
- When necessary, relocate the worker so that they cannot be seen through windows or from the outside.
- Removing the affected worker's contact information from publicly available company directories or websites.
- Changing the affected worker's workplace phone number, having another person screen their calls, or blocking the abuser's calls or emails.
- Pre-programming 911 on a phone or cell phone. Installing a panic button in the affected worker's work area or providing personal alarms.
- Providing a well-lit parking spot near the building, or escorting the affected individual to their car or to public transit.
- Offering flexible work scheduling if it can be a solution.
- Calling the police if the abuser exhibits criminal activity such as stalking or unauthorized electronic monitoring.
- If the affected person and abuser work at the same workplace, avoid scheduling both workers to work at the same time or location wherever possible.
- If the abuser works at the same workplace, use disciplinary procedures to hold the abuser accountable for unacceptable behaviour in the workplace.

[Adapted from: Making It Our Business (2014) from the Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women & Children]

Refer: Seek expert advice for safety planning from your local women's shelter, victim service organization, or the police. Threats of violence should be reported, and emergency procedures should be clearly communicated to all workers.

Where can I find more information on intimate partner or family violence in the workplace?

[The Victim Service Directory](#) from Justice Canada has been created to:

- help service providers, victims and individuals locate services for victims of crime across Canada
- allow victims to determine which services they may require
- to link organizations and victims, and

- to help all individuals access victim services.

Agency information for this Directory has been compiled through the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics Victim Services Survey and includes Agencies in all provinces and territories across the country. The list of agencies, however, is not exhaustive.

Other sources of information include:

- [Signal for Help](#) - Canadian Women's Foundation
- Addressing [Domestic Violence in the Workplace: A Handbook for Employers](#), WorkSafeBC
- [Make It Our Business](#), Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children (with the University of Western Ontario and the Canadian Labour Congress)
- [Stop Family Violence](#), Public Health Agency of Canada
- [Gender-Based Violence: It's not Just](#), Women and Gender Equality Canada
- [Addressing Domestic Violence in the Workplace](#), Public Services Health and Safety Association
- [Family Violence: It's Your Business \(A Workplace Toolkit\)](#), New Brunswick

(We have mentioned these organizations as a means of providing a potentially useful referral. You should contact the organization(s) directly for more information about their services. Please note that mention of these organizations does not represent a recommendation or endorsement by CCOHS of these organizations over others of which you may be aware.)

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