Best and promising practices to end gender-based harassment and violence at work: A multi-pronged approach

About the project

Harassment and violence remain pervasive and destructive problems in contemporary workplaces around the world, including Canada, and across all occupations and sectors (Berlingieri et al., 2022; Pillinger, 2019). The consequences for workers, their families and communities; workplaces; and governments are profound and costly, ranging from severe physical and mental health consequences, lost earnings and destroyed career paths, to economic losses for workplaces. Notwithstanding the evidence of the prevalence, consequences and costs associated with harassment and violence at work, information surrounding best and promising practices is often vague and inaccessible. This project is primarily concerned with the identification, design, and use of organizational practices to prevent and respond to gender-based harassment and violence (GBHV) at work. Specifically, this project aims to gather what is known about best and promising practices from a critical and intersectional perspective. It gathers what is known from the research literature and other sources across the globe, with a particular focus on the Canadian context, and spans across sectors and industries. Ultimately, the findings will provide guidance and practical information to employers, unions and governments on how to effectively prevent and respond to GBHV and inequities at work.

Key findings

- GBHV is a complex issue that cannot be examined or prevented without addressing the social and structural processes that cause and maintain these forms of harassment and violence. This requires making violence visible and changing the ways in which its various forms have been institutionalized, and hence rendered invisible.
- To adequately understand and address GBHV at work, it is important to recognize that:
    - Understanding violence as a continuum of behaviours is key to prevention and timely, effective intervention. A continuum shows how forms of harassment and violence are interrelated and emphasizes their escalating nature, bringing attention to the necessity for early intervention. In the context of the workplace, a continuum facilitates the examination of forms of harassment and violence ranging from covert to direct, and non-physical (e.g., incivility) to extreme forms (e.g., physical assault, sexual assault, homicide). The continuum also recognizes the link between psychological and physical violence. For example, it illustrates how harassment can escalate to acts of physical violence (Berlingieri, 2015a&b).
    - Known factors related to specific occupations, work arrangements, job designs and workplace contexts place workers at greater risk of GBHV. Some jobs, mostly those performed by women, have been sexualized, feminized and racialized in ways that increase workers' risk of experiencing GBHV. For instance, female restaurant servers are often required to wear revealing clothing and are expected to tolerate inappropriate commentary from customers to subsidize their inadequate income with tips.
- Driven by legislative compliance and risk avoidance, workplaces have predominantly adopted a tick-box approach to anti-harassment and anti-violence practices, such as policies and training. Simply having these practices in place is insufficient. Attention must be given

to how they are developed, implemented and used daily within workplaces (Berlingieri, 2015a). A well-planned anti-harassment and anti-violence strategy views these practices as interrelated, ongoing, and mutually constitutive (Berlingieri, 2015a; Gherardi, 2012). That is, they shape and rest on one another. They are rich sources of information that can provide insights about effectiveness, and information about the unique context and risk factors for individual workplaces and specific sectors.

- Currently, accepted prevention and intervention practices lack gender-responsiveness. Further research is required to determine how this can be accomplished.
- The federal government continues to play a central role in researching and providing resources to workplaces, helping Canada to be a leader on the global stage in preventing and responding to GBHV.

Policy implications

- The next phase in preventing and responding to GBHV requires collective action and responsibility, a concept captured by the ILO C-190. The collective is now global. Since ratifying the convention, Canada joins other ratified countries, in committing accountability to the provisions of ILO C-190.
- Accepted practices need to be evaluated and findings should be used to strengthen legislation and regulations, policies and other practices to better protect all workers. The evaluation framework needs to both focus on individual organizations and extend across workplaces and industries. The framework should also deepen the understanding of the impacts and costs of GBHV at work and where improvements can be made.
- A lack of knowledge mobilization has impeded the adoption of GBHV prevention and intervention practices. It is difficult for workplaces to find high-quality, evidence-based information about practices to guide their work. No mechanisms exist to assess and make quality resources available broadly. Governments at all levels, working together, play an important role in rectifying this gap. For example, governments can bring together scholarly and community experts, and other stakeholders, to ensure that the development and implementation of best practices are evidence-based and reflect the lived experiences of victim-survivors.

Further information

- Barb MacQuarrie, OOnt, Community Director, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children, Western University: bmacquar@uwo.ca
- Dr. Adrianna Berlingieri, PhD, Academic Research Associate, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children, Western University: aberlin6@uwo.ca
- Dr. Alexa S. Clerke, PhD, Research & Knowledge Mobilization Specialist, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children, Western University: alexa.clerke@uwo.ca
- Loyce Mrewa, PhD Candidate, Research Assistant, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children, Western University: lmrewa@uwo.ca

Read the full report