RESPECT at work

RESEARCH REPORT

What Are Canadian Workplaces Doing to Keep Workers Safe from Harassment and Violence at Work?

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Western | Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children

Study Background

Despite legislation on harassment and violence at work and extensive research showing its pervasiveness and enormous impacts and costs for Canadian workplaces and their employees, we know very little about what workplaces have in place to prevent and effectively respond to this problem. To begin to fill this gap, data was collected using a national bilingual mixed-methods study with the goal of providing evidence to help the shaping of policies and other practices, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of where support is needed within workplaces. This report presents the findings from this study regarding anti-harassment and –violence workplace practices, specifically regarding policies, reporting procedures, and training. We recognize, however, that there are many other practices that the workplace can adopt to prevent and respond to harassment and violence. This project is a collaboration between Western University's Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, researchers from the University of Toronto, and the Canadian Labour Congress.

Study Methods

In April 2022, findings from the first national study on Harassment and Violence at Work in Canada were published.[1] This research consisted of a bilingual nation-wide online survey (active from October 2020 to April 2021) and semi-structured interviews. In total, 4,878 people participated in the survey and 34 interviews were conducted. The survey provided an important opportunity to gather data on the practices workplaces have in place to prevent and respond to harassment and violence. The interviews provided a deeper understanding of workers' experiences with these practices, how they are being used in workplaces, and their effectiveness.[2] Examples of practices include policies, reporting procedures, training programs, workplace risk assessment, investigations, and forms of mediation.
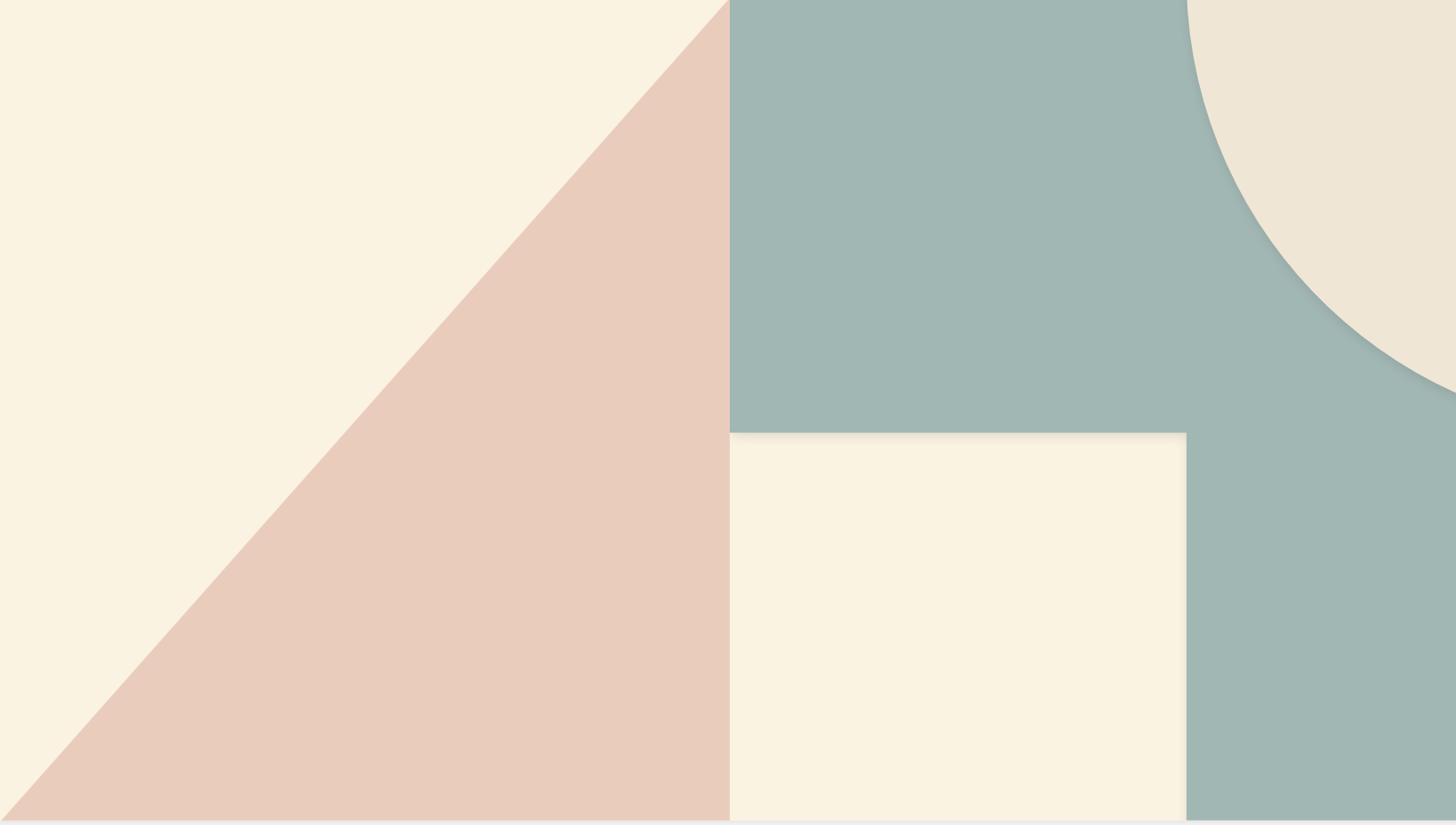
Study Findings
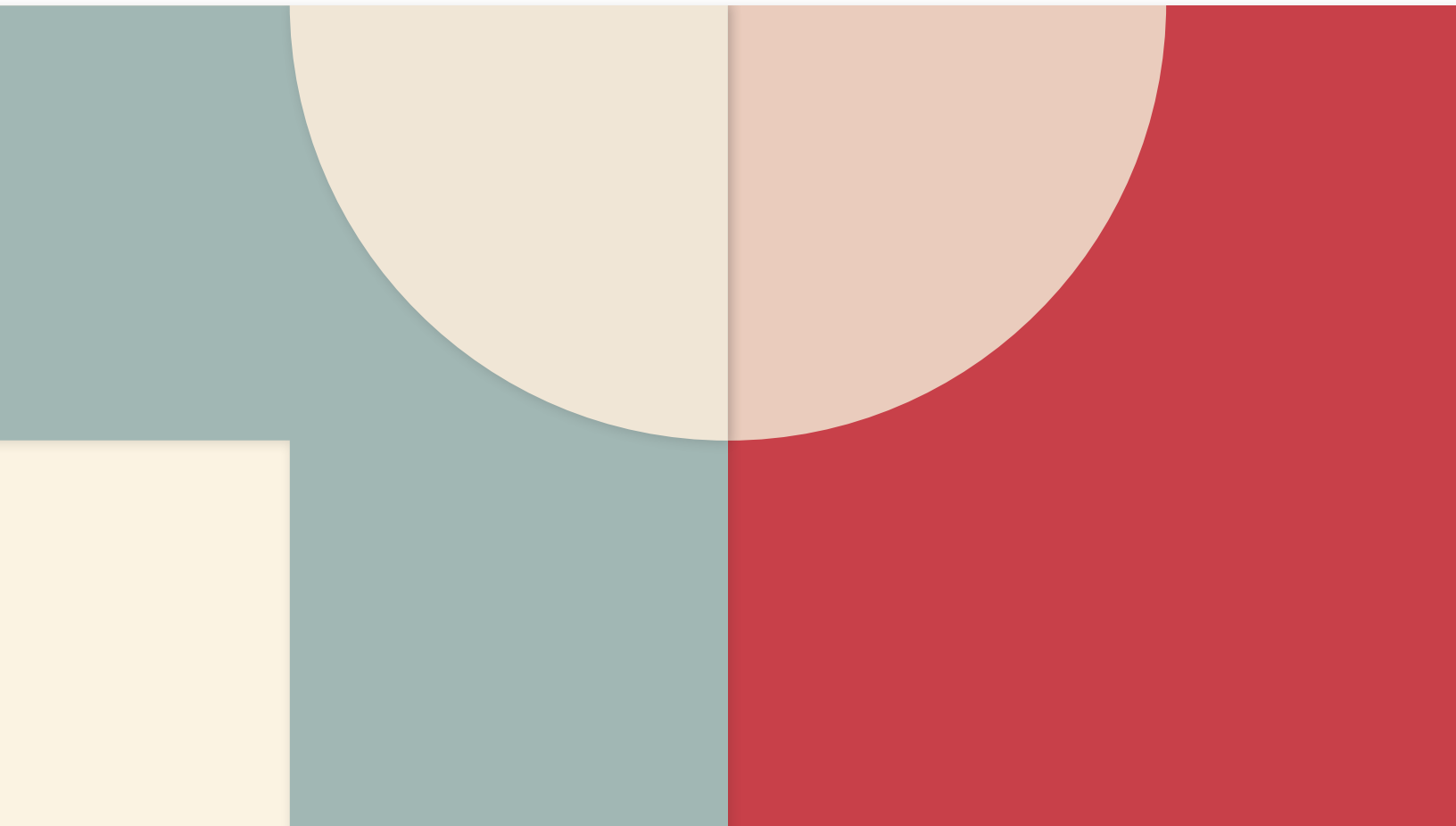
Harassment and Violence Prevention and Intervention Practices in Place in Canadian Workplaces

Legislation regarding harassment and violence at work exists in many Canadian provinces and territories and on the federal level. These legislative frameworks typically require workplaces to have policies and training in place to prevent and respond to reports of harassment and violence. Still, survey respondents indicated that many workplaces do not have key practices in place to protect workers and workplaces from harm (see Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage of workplaces that have key practices in place to prevent and respond to harassment and violence at work as reported by survey respondents.

	Policy %	Clear no-retaliation policy %	Clear reporting procedure %	Reporting hotline %	Training for all employees (including senior management) %	Special training for those in Human Resources/ relevant department %	Don't know %
Workplace physical violence	71.4	19.3	34.6	11.5	46.5	15.9	12.2
Sexual harassment	67.0	17.5	30.2	9.9	40.3	14.3	12.5
Aggression/harassment related to prohibited grounds under human rights legislation (e.g., race, age, disability) (Not including sexual harassment)	66.7	17.6	29.8	9.6	41.7	14.5	13.2
Aggression/harassment that is not related to prohibited grounds under human rights legislation (e.g., race, age disability)	61.2	15.9	26.8	8.8	37.1	12.9	16.7
Domestic violence	38.2	10.9	16.6	6.7	22.9	9.6	36.2

Policies and Reporting Procedures

Less than three quarters (71.4%) of survey respondents indicated an awareness of their workplaces having a policy on physical violence. These figures decrease regarding other forms of harassment and violence at work: 67% for sexual harassment, 66.7% for harassment related to prohibited grounds under human rights legislation (e.g., race, age, disability) (not including sexual harassment), 61.2% for harassment not related to prohibited grounds under human rights legislation, and 38.2% for domestic violence. This progressive decrease points, in part, to a lack of understanding of the continuum of violence. This was confirmed by interview participants who spoke of experiences of multiple forms of harassment and violence and the lack of understanding regarding their connections by supervisors, managers, and investigators. The low percentage of workplaces with domestic violence policies also indicates a continued lack of awareness of domestic violence as a health and safety issue and a workplace issue.

The extremely low awareness among workers regarding clear reporting procedures and no-retaliation polices (see Table 1) raises questions regarding the content of harassment and violence policies in which these need to be included in detail. For example, survey respondents indicated that 67% of their workplaces have a policy on sexual harassment, but only 30.2% of workplaces have a clear reporting procedure and only 17.5% have a no-retaliation policy. These results could also point to a lack of communication of policies to workers through training and other avenues which was confirmed by interview participants. Survey respondents and interview participants indicated the lack of clear reporting procedures as presenting a significant barrier to reporting their experiences of sexual harassment and violence.[3]

Many interview participants expressed frustration regarding the ineffectiveness of policies in their workplaces. Some pointed to flaws in the ways the policies were designed, while others highlighted flaws in the ways the policies were followed, or not followed at all. Many of the workers interviewed indicated an awareness of the existence of harassment and violence

> *There's literally zero information…I didn't even know how to report, I didn't even know where to find the information on how to report. Like, I literally knew nothing. So again… information…I think it would be really helpful to orient people... just like a lot of misinformation, or just lack of information.*

(Provincial Government Worker A)

policies in their workplaces, but emphasized that they were not followed, were opaque and unclear, and/or were designed to manage risk to their organization rather than keeping workers safe. For example, vague definitions of harassment in policies influenced investigations and their outcomes. One participant was upset that her experiences of ongoing and escalating experiences of sexual harassment were repeatedly referred to as "inappropriate behaviour" in the investigator's report, which was heavily shaped by the policy in her workplace. Another worker, in a non-profit organization, shared that the frequent dismissal of harassment complaints filed by employees naming members of management as the harassers were made possible due the vague definitions of harassment in their policies.

Training

Less than half (46.5%) of survey respondents were aware that their workplaces conduct training for all employees (including senior management) on physical violence, and only 15.9% offer specialized training for those in Human Resources or relevant department. As with policies, these figures decrease significantly for other forms of harassment and violence (see Table 1). Figures are particularly low for workplaces conducting specialized training for those in Human Resources or relevant departments. Several participants spoke about being told by their managers that policies and training on harassment and violence was not applicable to them but were in place only for workers. Many interviewed workers pointed to the lack of knowledge, training, and support needed by supervisors and managers to recognize and meaningfully address harassment and violence at work. As a result, workers identified a need for independent organizations and/or workers to receive reports and provide impartial advice and/or support. The survey data reveals that very few workplaces have a reporting hotline to encourage reporting. Just over one in ten (12.5%) have a reporting hotline for physical violence. With other forms of harassment and violence, this number decreases with domestic violence having the lowest number of reporting hotlines available (6.7%) (see Table 1).

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For the results to be more transparent for employees... to be told just 'in our opinion, there's no harassment...' Okay, but why?

(Non-Profit Worker B)

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I think consistent training and awareness of harassment, discrimination, racism, and things of that nature, I think would be helpful because we, in ...the six years I've been there, we've not had a single training session on those kinds of issues. And I think it's set the tone for the culture in that way, because if you don't actually speak about it. ...that this type of behavior is not acceptable, people will figure out for themselves that it is."

(Education Worker B)

Interview participants spoke about policies and training available in their workplaces, but with no "pathways or support for implementing any of it" (Film Industry Worker B). Others spoke of training used as a response to reports of harassment with negative consequences for the workers filing the reports as co-workers learned of the reason for the training.

Interview participants expressed concerns regarding the content of the training they received in their workplaces. Examples include a narrow focus on physical violence, a focus on horizontal harassment and violence between co-workers and not by those in positions of authority, and simplistic demonstrations of "good" and "bad" behaviours and "what not to do" (Information & Technology Worker A). They want to see more "nuanced training" for all employees at all levels within the workplace that includes, for example, how and why various harassing behaviours cause harm, intersecting forms of harassment and violence (including forms of discrimination) along a continuum, psychological and emotional violence, harassment and violence that includes a hierarchical power dynamic, and concrete actions workers could take when experiencing harassment and violence. The latter was also indicated by participants as a key component of bystander training; that is, to be effective, bystanders need to learn the skills required to act and they need to be supported by their workplace to do so. Participants expressed a desire for their workplaces to have protocols for how such negative behaviours can be safely reported, investigated, and resolved and for these to be included in training programs. Interview participants also spoke of the importance that training be trauma informed, for those dealing with a worker who has experienced harassment and violence and for those receiving reports.

As these cases show, unplanned and poorly communicated training programs do not lead to meaningful changes within workplaces and can reinforce a workplace environment where harassment and violence are not taken seriously, and victims-survivors feel unsupported.

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So, they mandated training for the whole branch, and it was online. And I got to listen to everybody complain about it for the next six months, that they had to do the training and how dumb it was and this and that. And nobody really got the context because nobody said, hey, things have happened in our workplace.

(Provincial Government Worker B)

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... the scope was really very narrow, it was mostly like physical abuse, sexual abuse. But they were barely or not referring to psychological violence or emotional violence, those more subtle forms of violence. It was not clear what to do if you were the person affected by it.

(Military Services Worker A)

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...bystander intervention in the workplace as an action. And now we're really talking about a lot of allyship and how to step up. So, it's just really trying to activate that majority within most work sites that don't want these bad behaviors to continue, but... they don't know what to say or they don't have the power to say anything

(Trades Advocate B)

Conclusion

This study shows that much work is required within organizations to ensure their compliance with legislation and the effectiveness of the prevention and intervention practices they adopt. Resources and opportunities need to be provided to workplace leaders, human resources representatives, and other related stakeholders to learn about best and promising practices.

This study relies on survey respondents' awareness of prevention and intervention practices within their workplaces. Further research within organizations is needed to learn more about the practices workplaces have in place, the contents of these practices, how these practices are developed, implemented and used, how workers are informed, and the evaluation of their effectiveness. Knowing more about the challenges faced by workspaces in developing and implementing best practices is a required next step.

Acknowledgements

Suggested Citation

Berlingieri, A., Welsh, S., MacQuarrie, B., McFadyen, N.D., Bigras-Dutrisac, H. (2023). *What are Canadian workplaces doing to keep workers safe from harassment and violence at work?* London, ON: Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Western University.

References

1. See: Berlingieri, A., Welsh, S., MacQuarrie, B., McFadyen, N.D., Bigras-Dutrisac, H. with the Canadian Labour Congress. (2022). *Harassment and violence in Canadian workplaces: It's [not] part of the job*. London, ON: Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Western University. Available online at: https://www.learningtoendabuse.ca

2. For more information on this project, research methods, and to access resources and reports, visit https://www.learningtoendabuse.ca

3. Berlingieri, A., Welsh, S., MacQuarrie, B., McFadyen, N.D., Bigras-Dutrisac, H. with the Canadian Labour Congress. (2022). *Harassment and violence in Canadian workplaces: It's [not] part of the job.* London, ON: Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Western University. Available online at: https://www.learningtoendabuse.ca

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