

# CAN WORK BE SAFE, WHEN HOME ISN'T?

Initial Findings of a Pan-Canadian Survey  
on Domestic Violence and the Workplace



**Western  
Education**

Centre for Research & Education on  
Violence Against Women & Children



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Congrès du travail du Canada



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# SURVEY BACKGROUND

## The Impact of Domestic Violence on Workers and Workplaces

*“My employer simply said to me, take whatever time you need and if you need any help with anything just let me know. I was very fortunate to have such an understanding and flexible employer.”*

*“People just knew, I was ashamed, they didn’t have much respect for me.”*

*“My coworkers were worried and disturbed by the physical and emotional evidence of the abuse.”*

Canadian employers lose \$77.9 million annually due to the direct and indirect impacts of domestic violence<sup>1</sup> (DV), and the costs, to individuals, families and society, go far beyond that. However, we know very little about the scope and impacts of this problem in Canada.

The evidence linking economic independence, being in paid employment and DV has been steadily developing, and we now know that: 1) women with a history of DV have a more disrupted work history, are consequently on lower personal incomes, have had to change jobs more often, and more often work in casual and part time roles than women without violence experiences<sup>2-5</sup>; and 2) being employed is a key pathway to leaving a violent relationship; the financial security that employment affords can allow women to escape the isolation of an abusive relationship, and maintain, as far as possible, their home and standard of living, both for themselves, and their children<sup>4-6</sup>.

Being a perpetrator of DV also significantly impacts a worker and their workplace. A recent study found that 53% of offenders felt their job performance was negatively impacted, 75% had a hard time concentrating on their work, and 19% reported causing or nearly causing workplace accidents due to their violent relationship<sup>7</sup>. Their behaviours lead to a loss of paid and unpaid work time, a decrease in productivity, and safety hazards for their co-workers.

Surveys to gather data about the prevalence and the impact of DV in the workplace are just starting to emerge. A ground-breaking survey by the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse (ADFVC) at the University of New South Wales was conducted through a partnership with organized labour and was completed by over 3,600 union members<sup>8</sup>. As a result of this project, over 1,600,000 Australian workers are now covered by domestic/family violence workplace benefits, including dedicated paid leave, protection from adverse action and flexible work arrangements.

To support advocacy and improve workplace DV policies in Canada, and contribute to the international knowledge base on this issue, Canadian data is urgently needed. Therefore, researchers at the University of Western Ontario, in partnership with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), conducted the first ever Canadian survey on DV in the workplace. Ultimately, stronger evidence will help to shape legislation, policies, and practices that promote violence prevention and safety in workplaces, that hold abusers accountable for their behaviour, and that lift the burden from victims so they need not deal with DV alone.

## Survey Methods

The online survey launched on December 6, 2013 and was open until June 6, 2014. Participants were recruited via the extensive networks of the CLC and its affiliates, and the survey was promoted through national media at its launch. The survey was offered in both French and English and was open to men and women aged 15 years and older, whether or not they had directly experienced DV.

The survey consisted of over 60 questions focused on people's experiences with DV and the workplace, including questions on if they were personally experiencing, or had ever experienced DV, and if they knew of anyone at their workplace who was experiencing or perpetrating DV. Those with personal DV experience were asked additional questions such as how the DV impacted their work and their coworkers, whether they discussed the violence with anyone at work, and what types of workplace supports they received. The survey was reviewed and approved by Western's Research Ethics Board.

*For this survey, domestic violence was defined as any form of physical, sexual, emotional or psychological abuse, including financial control, stalking and harassment. It occurs between opposite- or same-sex intimate partners, who may or may not be married, common law, or living together. It can also continue to happen after a relationship has ended.*

*“The domestic violence caused unease between me and my co-workers because I had to miss work or sometimes cried. Also, some people felt helpless; they would have liked to intercede, but did not dare for fear of endangering me or themselves.”*

*“[The abuser] would phone my workplace to see what time I had left, and phoned when I arrived to make sure I was actually going to work.”*

# SURVEY RESULTS

## Who Took Part?

TABLE 1: Age

15 - 24	2.7%
25 - 34	17.5%
35 - 44	23.7%
44 - 54	31.8%
55 - 64	21.1%
65 - 74	2.5%
75+	.3%
No response	.5%

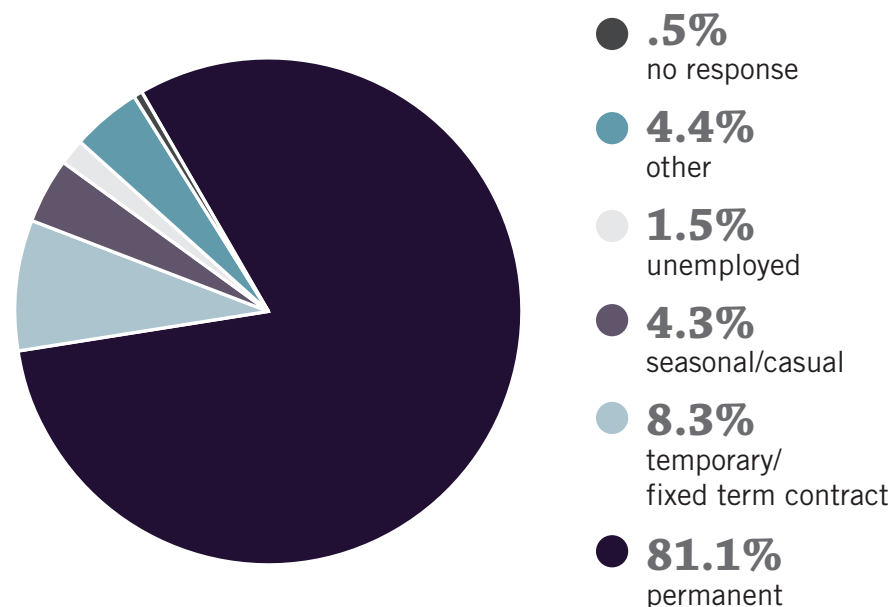
*“I could see how my situation could place others in danger and was lucky that none of the threats were brought forth or followed up.”*

*“Dealing with my ex-husband left me feeling anxious, tired due to lack of sleep. It affected the pleasure my work usually gives me.”*

A total of 8,429 people completed the survey, 95.5% of them in English and 4.5% in French. Overall, 87.7% of the sample reported being born in Canada, and 4.7% indicated they were Aboriginal. Most respondents were female (78.4%); the remaining identified as male (20.4%), transgender (0.2%), ‘Other’ (0.2%), or did not respond to this question (0.7%). Half the sample lived in Ontario (49.8%), 21.6% in BC, and the rest was distributed across the provinces and territories. Most people (94.1%) were between 25 and 64, with 2.7% between 15 and 24 years, and 2.8% 65 and over (Table 1). In terms of sexual orientation, 86.1% reported they were heterosexual (4.8% did not respond to the question about sexual orientation). A total of 18.7% of the sample reported one or more disability.

Reflecting the recruitment strategy, the vast majority (93.7%) of the sample was employed in permanent, temporary/contract or seasonal/casual work (Figure 1). The remaining were unemployed, indicated “other” (e.g., retired, on disability leave, or multiple types of employment) or did not respond to the question. Most respondents were unionized (81.4%), or had been in their last job, if currently not employed. Over half the sample reported working in the educational (28.2%) or health care and social assistance (23.8%) sectors. All other sectors (which were derived from the North American Industry Classification System<sup>9</sup>) were less than 9% each, and 8% indicated “other”.

FIGURE 1: Employment Status

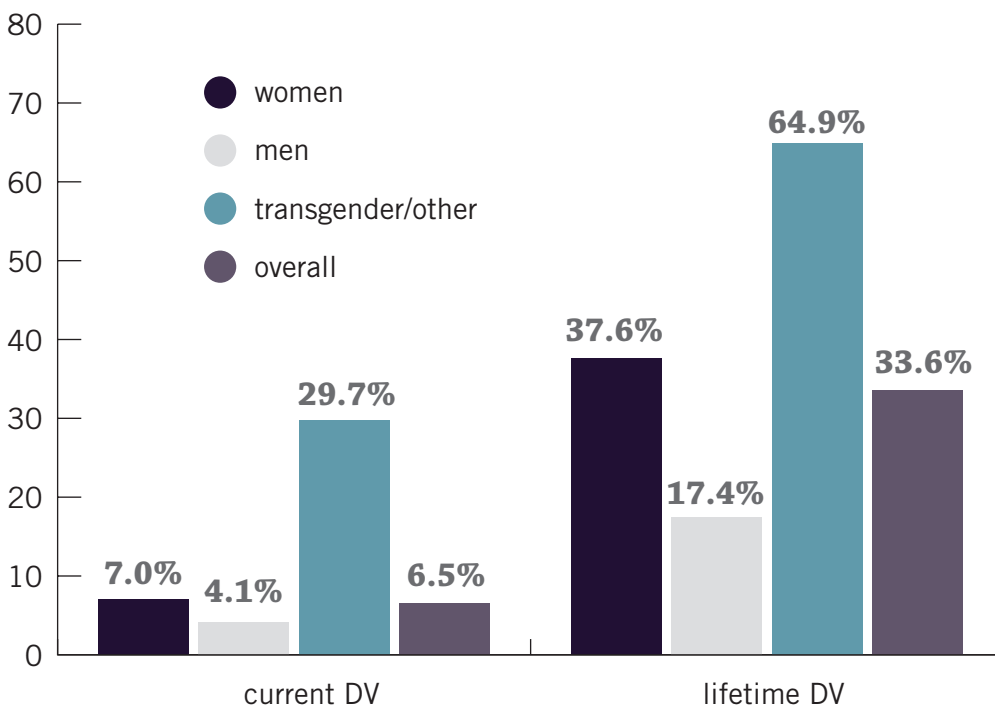


## Experiences of Domestic Violence

A third (33.6%) of respondents reported ever experiencing DV from an intimate partner, and there were differences by gender (Figure 2). Aboriginal respondents, respondents with disabilities, and those indicating a sexual orientation other than heterosexual (e.g., lesbian, gay or bisexual) were particularly likely to have reported experiencing DV in their lifetime. Prevalence rates were very consistent with previous national surveys<sup>10,11</sup>.

In terms of indirect DV experience, 35.4% of respondents reported having at least one co-worker who they believe is experiencing, or has previously experienced, DV and 11.8% reported having at least one co-worker who they believe is being abusive, or has previously been abusive, toward his/her partner.

FIGURE 2: DV Prevalence and Gender

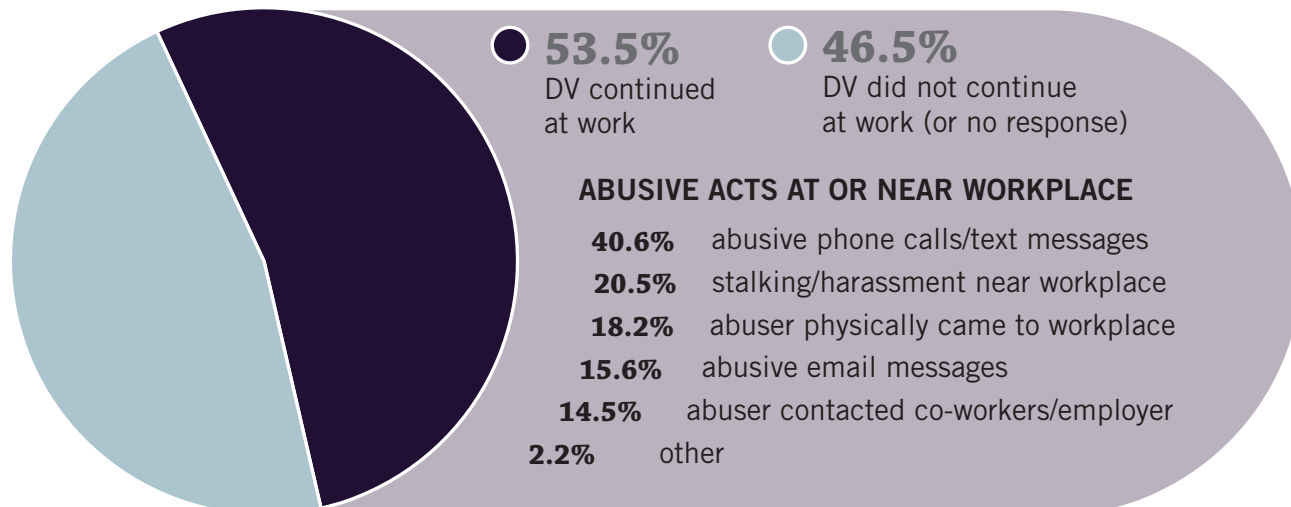


*“I would have to find a safe house because of violence at night. Then I would be without work clothing or school uniforms for the kids. My children and I would be too emotionally upset to go to work and school the next day.”*

*“I was in trouble for missing a lot of work and now I can’t miss work without a doctor’s note.”*

*“My ex-husband threatened to call my employer to tell them lies about me.”*

FIGURE 3: DV in the Workplace



*Among those exposed to DV...*

**38%**

*reported that DV affected their ability to get to work*

**8.5%**

*had lost a job due to DV*

*“He pretended to be security and dragged me out of work.”*

## The Impact of DV on Workers and Workplaces

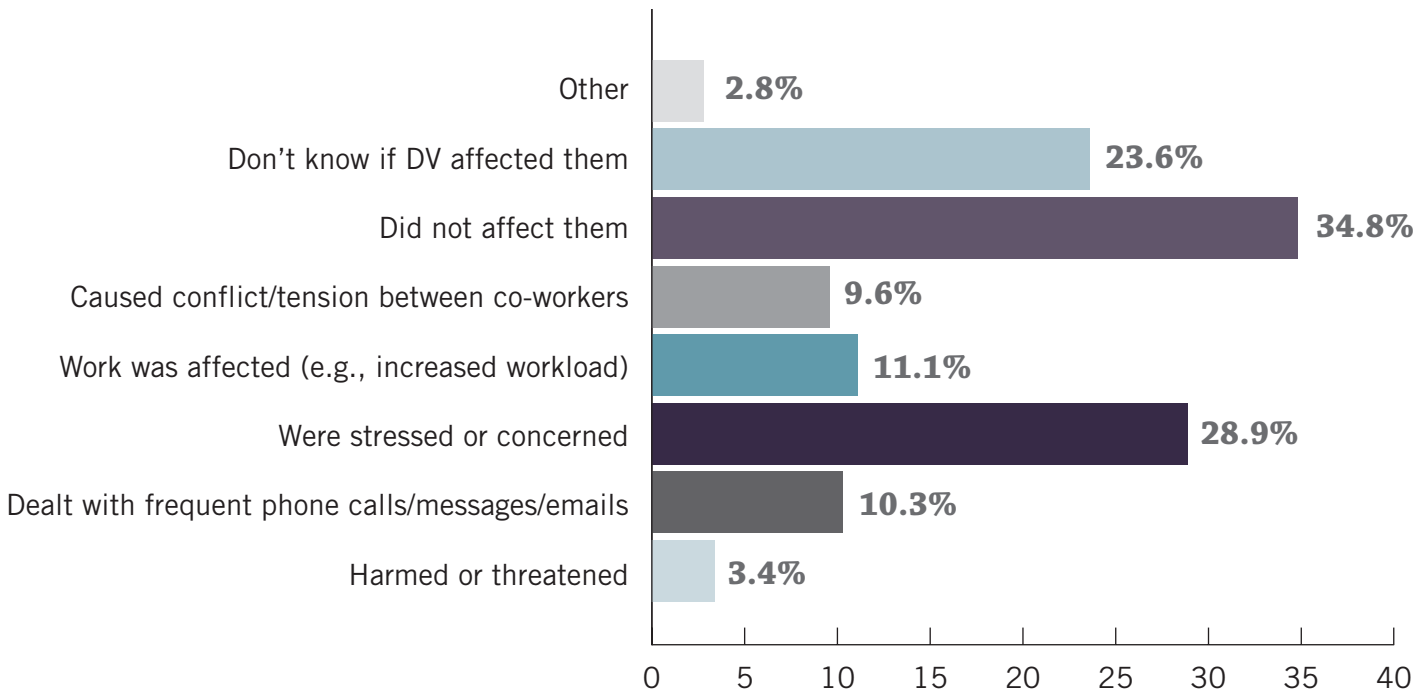
Of those who reported DV experience, 38% indicated it impacted their ability to get to work (including being late, missing work, or both). In total, 8.5% of DV victims indicated they had lost their job because of it.

Over half (53.5%) of those reporting DV experiences indicated that at least one type of abusive act occurred at or near the workplace. Of these, the most common were abusive phone calls or text messages (40.6%) and stalking or harassment near the workplace (20.5%; Figure 3).

Those who reported experiencing DV were also asked how it affected their work performance. Overall, 81.9% reported that DV negatively affected their performance, most often due to being distracted, or feeling tired and/or unwell.

Those experiencing DV are not the only ones affected by it; many (37.1%) reported that their co-workers were affected too. Of those who reported at least one impact on co-workers, the most common response was that co-workers were stressed or concerned about the abusive situation (28.9%; Figure 4).

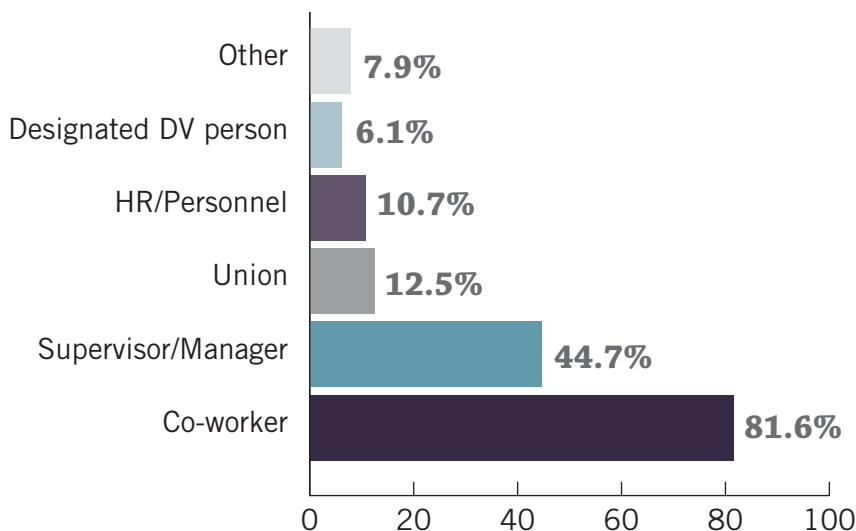
FIGURE 4: Impact of DV on Co-workers



## Disclosure of DV in the Workplace and Support Received

Overall, 43.2% of those experiencing DV reported they discussed it with someone at work. There are apparent differences according to gender, with men being particularly unlikely to discuss DV at work. Among those who did discuss it, nearly half did so with more than one person. The most common people disclosed to were co-workers (81.6%) and supervisors/managers (44.7%; Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: Disclosure of DV in the Workplace



*Among those exposed to DV...*

**81.9%**

*found that DV negatively affected their work performance*

*“I was tired and distracted yet work was a place where I felt safe.”*

*“[I] lied about injury and absence due to fear and not able to admit to abuse at that time.”*

*“The support from the few co-workers and the employer Psychologist was empowering. The gossip was malicious and not at all helpful.”*

*“...there’s no doubt it had impact, but I took pride in my ability to stay focussed and on task with a professional presentation. However, those were very difficult times.”*

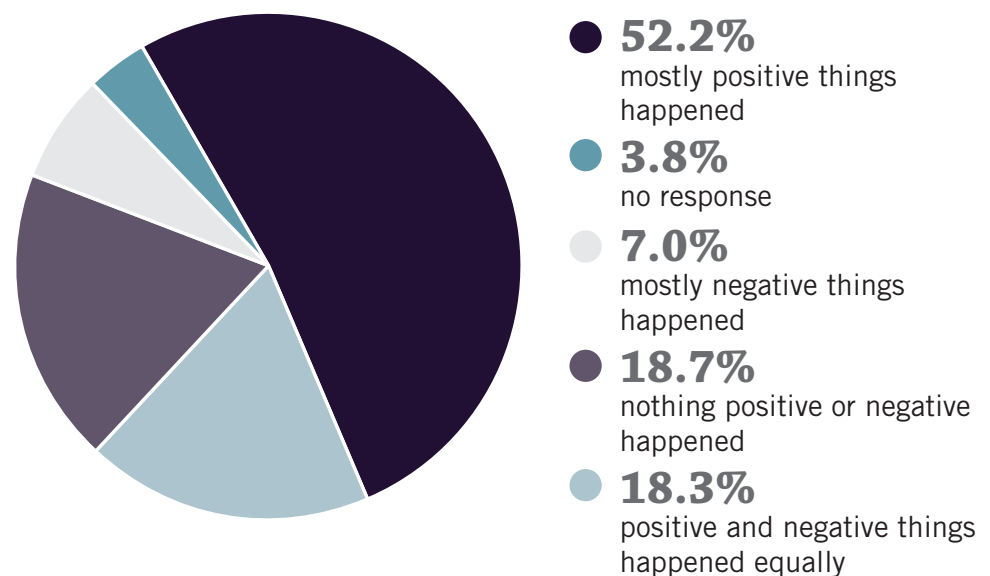
Generally people who discussed the DV at work found the individual(s) “helpful”, but the specific ways they were helpful varied. For example, co-workers most often “provide a listening ear”, and designated people to handle DV most often helped by developing a safety plan. Unions, supervisors/managers and HR most often provided paid time off.

When asked about the “sum total” of having discussed DV in the workplace (with anyone) just over half (52.2%) said “mostly positive things happened”, while only 7% said “mostly negative things happened”. Equal numbers (18.3% and 18.7%, respectively) said that positive and negative things either “happened equally”, or that “nothing positive or negative happened” at all (see Figure 6).

Among all respondents, 28% said they had received information about DV from their employer. Among unionized respondents, 27.2% received information about DV from their union.

Only 10.6% of all respondents think that employers are aware when DV is affecting their workers, but among those who said yes, 62.3% believe employers act in a positive way to help workers experiencing DV. Similarly, only 11.3% of all respondents think union officials are aware when DV is affecting members, and among them, 86.6% believe unions act in a positive way to help members.

**FIGURE 6: Outcomes of Discussing DV in the Workplace**

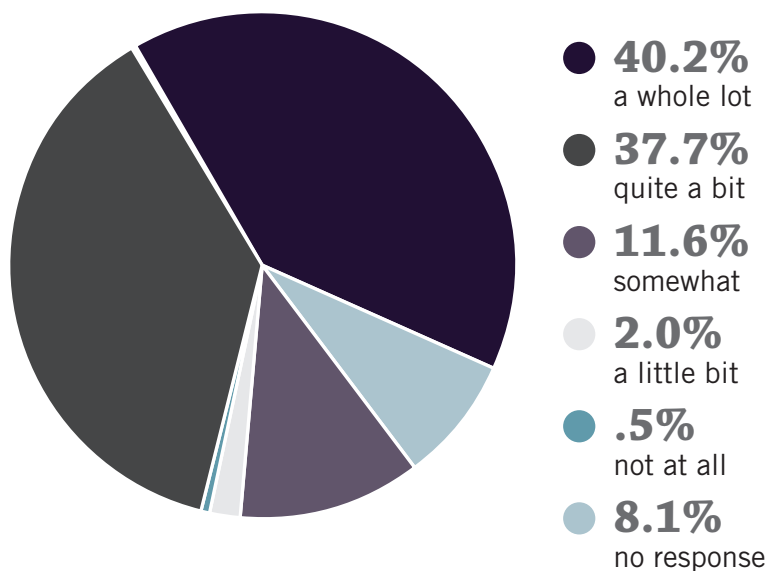




## Beliefs About DV in the Workplace

Most people understand that DV has a significant impact on victims, perpetrators and their co-workers, and on the workplace as a whole. In fact three-quarters of all respondents think workplace supports such as paid leave and safety policies for DV can reduce the impact of DV on the work lives of workers. Among all respondents, 91.5% think that DV impacts the work lives of workers exposed to DV at least 'a little bit', with the majority believing it impacts 'a whole lot' (40.2%; Figure 7).

FIGURE 7: Perceived Impact of DV in the Workplace



*Among all respondents...*

**91.5%**  
*think that DV impacts the work lives of workers*

*“There are some co-workers who will listen; however most don’t really want to get involved. The only concern my boss had was how soon was I going to return to work.”*

**CANADIAN SPOTLIGHT** Ontario was the first province to amend its Occupational Health and Safety legislation. Domestic violence is interpreted in a manner consistent with the workplace violence definition when it may occur in the workplace ([http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws\\_statutes\\_90o01\\_e.htm#BK50](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90o01_e.htm#BK50)). Manitoba proposed an amendment to its workplace safety legislation to include domestic violence and stalking/harassment ([web2.gov.mb.ca/bills/39-4/b219e.php](http://web2.gov.mb.ca/bills/39-4/b219e.php)). To support this, the Manitoba government provides to workplaces a toolkit on DV ([www.gov.mb.ca/fs/fvpp/toolkit.html](http://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/fvpp/toolkit.html)).

*“...confiding in co-workers helped alleviate the stress of being attacked going to the car, the unending phone calls over and over and over and the extreme fatigue both physically and mentally.”*

*“Constant phone calls prevented me from doing my job properly, as it tied up the phone required for business.”*

## SUMMARY

- Consistent with national population-based surveys, over a third of respondents reported personal experience with DV at some point in their life. This was higher for women, gender diverse and Aboriginal people, those with disabilities and those reporting a sexual orientation other than heterosexual.
- Among those who had experienced DV, over a third reported that the violence affected their ability to get to work.
- Over half of those who had experienced DV reported that it continued at the workplace in some way, for example, harassing phone calls from the abuser, and stalking.
- Of those who had experienced DV, the vast majority reported that it affected their work performance in some way, for example, due to being distracted, tired, or unwell.
- Over a third of those who had experienced DV discussed the violence with somebody at work. The most common people to whom DV was disclosed were co-workers and supervisors/managers.
- The vast majority of respondents, whether or not they had personally experienced DV, believed that it impacts the work lives of those experiencing abuse ‘quite a bit’ or ‘a whole lot’. And yet, most respondents also thought that employers and union officials are not aware when DV is affecting workers.
- Most respondents believed that workplace supports such as paid leave and safety policies for DV can reduce the impact of DV on the work lives of workers.

**CANADIAN SPOTLIGHT** The Yukon Teachers’ Association has negotiated special leave that can be used when workers need time off due to DV ([www.yta.yk.ca](http://www.yta.yk.ca)).

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) has a network of social stewards who are provided training to develop listening skills, learn about available resources, and assist in prevention of a range of difficulties, including family-related problems. The program is particularly effective in Quebec ([http://www.cupw.ca/index.cfm/ci\\_id/6075/la\\_id/1.htm](http://www.cupw.ca/index.cfm/ci_id/6075/la_id/1.htm)).

# WHERE FROM HERE?

This research has identified the scope and impact of domestic violence on workers and workplaces, but is only a first step. Immediate next steps include encouraging use of these results by governments, unions and employers to establish proactive practices to address the impact of DV at work, such as:

- following the lead of Ontario and Manitoba in amending Occupational Health & Safety legislation to place positive obligations on employers to protect workers from DV
- including DV-related amendments in federal and provincial Employment Standards that give the right to request flexible working arrangements and entitlement to paid DV leave
- prohibiting discrimination against those who experience DV by including it as a protected ground in Human Rights legislation
- negotiating specific supports into collective agreements, including (as in Australia and Yukon) paid domestic violence leave
- developing innovative programs like Unifor's Women's Advocate Program and CUPW's Network of Social Stewards, especially the Quebec approach
- building on successful employer-led initiatives to enable employers to protect and support their workers
- educating managers, supervisors and workers about DV in the workplace, and providing specific protocols and tools to protect and support victims and intervene with perpetrators (e.g., [www.makeitourbusiness.com](http://www.makeitourbusiness.com))

Ongoing analysis of the survey data will help us answer questions like:

- Are some groups more or less impacted by DV? How does this affect their work?
- How are co-workers affected, and what DV warning signs should they be aware of?
- What can help improve support for workers experiencing DV?

A planned parallel survey of offenders will help us understand how interventions in the workplace can reduce their use of violence and its impact on productivity and safety. At an international level, we are comparing the Canadian data to other national surveys and linking this work via the new DV@Work Network, an international collaboration led by our Canadian research team.

Improving the workplace response to DV will require a multi-pronged approach by legislators, employers, unions and advocates to protect and support victims, and assist perpetrators in changing their behaviour. Ultimately, preventing violence and its consequences is a collective social challenge; one place that positive change can happen – for victims, offenders and employers – is the workplace. These survey results will help us take steps in the right direction.

## CANADIAN SPOTLIGHT

Unifor has negotiated over 300 Women's Advocate positions in workplaces across the country, including 40 hours of basic training which is often paid for by the employer.

In a number of collective agreements, Unifor has also successfully negotiated language that waives the usual two week (unpaid) waiting period for Sickness and Accident benefits for women entering a shelter.

*"I ended up taking a lot of time off and for the most part no one really understood exactly why I was gone for so long."*

*“Sleep deprivation affected [my] ability to focus at work or get there on time.”*

*“I was extremely nervous about sharing my situation... understanding that it may have a negative impact on how my supervisor viewed me and my work. However, that was unfounded and so far they have been very helpful and understanding and have also respected my privacy and been careful not to intrude.”*



CIHR IRSC  
Canadian Institutes of Health Research  
Institut de recherche en santé du Canada

## Acknowledgements

This research has been a collaborative effort between the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children (MacQuarrie), Western's Faculty of Information and Media Studies (Wathen, MacGregor) and the Canadian Labour Congress. We would like to acknowledge the contributions that the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the CLC made to the translation of the survey, the responses, and this report, respectively, as well as the CIHR-funded PreVAiL Research Network for significant in-kind contributions and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding to support data analysis.

## How To Cite This Document

Wathen, C. N., MacGregor, J. C. D., MacQuarrie, B. J. with the Canadian Labour Congress. (2014). *Can Work be Safe, When Home Isn't? Initial Findings of a Pan-Canadian Survey on Domestic Violence and the Workplace*. London, ON: Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children.

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