



Women four times more likely to experience sexual assault at work

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For women who work in education, the risks of workplace violence are especially high. New research shows rates of assaults have more than doubled between 2002 and 2015. (Shutterstock)

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Violence-related injuries at work are on the rise across Canada and this is especially the case for women, according to two recent studies we conducted at the not-for-profit Institute for Work and Health.

We found that women are four times more likely than men to experience sexual assault or unwanted touching on the job, no matter what occupation or industry they work in.

Author



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Women are also 13 per cent more likely than men to be physically assaulted at work — a difference largely explained by the sectors women tend to work in.

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Finally, we also found that differences between men and women in the risk of violence at work have changed over time.

Physical violence related to industry

In the first study, our team examined data from two cycles of Statistics Canada’s General Social Survey on Victimization (from 2009 and 2014).

A total sample of 27,500 working respondents were asked whether they had experienced assault at work in the previous 12 months. This included physical assault (“anything from being hit, slapped, grabbed or knocked down, to being shot or beaten”) and sexual assault (“forced sexual activity and unwanted sexual touching or grabbing”).

Out of every 1,000 female workers, 14 reported being assaulted in the past year. For every 1,000 male workers, eight reported being assaulted. The higher risk among women was largely due to sexual assault.

In terms of physical assault, the risk was 13 per cent higher for women than for men; 7.7 women per 1,000 women and 6.8 men per 1,000 men reported being physically assaulted in the previous year.

This difference in risks of physical violence at work faced by men and women can be mostly explained by differences in the types of work they do. That is, if men and women are doing the same shifts in the same job in most industries (not all), neither are more at risk than the other. The female security guard working nights in a building complex faces the same risk of physical assault as her male colleague doing that job the next night.

However, differences in the types of work men and women do are deeply entrenched in the Canadian labour market; many occupations and industries in Canada are still as segregated on the basis of sex and gender today as they were 20 years ago.

As a result, we still need to contend with gender imbalances in the risks of physical violence when thinking about workplace violence prevention.

Men are mostly the perpetrators

It’s a different story when it comes to sexual violence at work. Type of work does not explain the large differences between women and men: 6.7 women and 1.6 men per 1,000 workers reported being sexually assaulted at work in the previous year.

Women were four times more likely than men to experience sexual assault or unwanted touching on the

job, no matter their occupation or industry.

In the vast majority of cases, men (whether clients, customers, patients, strangers or work colleagues) are the perpetrators of workplace violence.

Among the overall rate of 11 assaults per 1,000 workers — both physical and sexual against both men and women — nine are committed by men and only two by women.

Given the propensity for men to be perpetrators, we must think about prevention programs that squarely address the conditions triggering workplace violence among some men.

More hospital emergency visits

In our second study, we again saw divergent trends between men and women. This study looked at workplace violence trends in Ontario using two population-based data sources: lost-time claims due to assault accepted by Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) between 2002 and 2015, and emergency room visits due to assaults at work across all Ontario hospitals from 2004 to 2014.

According to both sources, while overall rates of workplace violence remained stable among men, they increased among women by about 2.7 per cent a year.

Women educators are much more likely to need time off work because of physical assault on the job. (Shutterstock)

In the 10 to 13 years covered by this study, violence-related injury claims accepted by the WSIB ranged from 0.3 to 0.4 per 1,000 full-time workers for men, and rose from 0.4 to 0.6 per 1,000 for women.

Hospital emergency visits due to work-related violence held steady for men at 0.24-0.28 per 1,000, but rose from 0.2 to nearly 0.3 per 1,000 among women. (Keep in mind that these were injuries serious enough to warrant time off work and/or hospital visits. That's why the prevalence rates seen in these two sources were much smaller than what was reported in the StatsCan surveys.)

Sharp rise in violence for women in education

These two data sources also reveal a sharp rise in workplace violence among women who work in education. In this sector, rates of assaults more than doubled among women — from about 0.9 per 1,000 full-time workers in 2002 to 2.5 per 1,000 in 2015.

Indeed, women educators were four to six times more likely than their male counterparts to require time off work because of physical assault on the job.

In the health-care sector, the focus of much attention with respect to workplace violence, rates of workplace violence are plateauing for women (at about 1.0 per 1,000) and declining among men (from 2.7 per 1,000 in 2004 to 1.5 per 1,000 in recent years).

Whether this apparent turnaround is due to prevention efforts, we don't have enough data to say. But our findings suggest we should be paying as much attention to workplace violence in the education sector, especially among women.

We need cultures of reporting

Our studies help paint a clearer picture of workplace violence and how it differs for women and men. But they don't capture the full picture.

First, workplace violence is broader than just assaults, emergency department presentations and workers' compensation claims. It includes assaults, attempted assaults and also threats (both in person or not).

Second, according to studies in the health-care sector, only a fraction of workplace violence gets reported.

To truly address workplace violence and know if efforts are effective in reducing it, we need to first understand the scope of the problem.

That means creating cultures of reporting by building awareness of what types of violence should be reported, creating systems that make reporting easy and ensuring that reporting will result in appropriate responses.

 **Gender** **Occupational health and safety** **sexual assault**