



Ontario's Task Force on Women and the Economy

July 30th 2021

We are writing to provide recommendations on how to ensure that gender-based violence is considered as the province rebuilds its economy post-COVID-19 because of the unique and disproportionate economic barriers faced by survivors.

The Woman Abuse Council of Toronto (WomanACT) is an organization that works to eradicate violence against women through research and policy, education and community mobilization. We have been doing this work in the community for 30 years. A key focus of our research and policy work is on the intersections between women's economic security and safety.

Gender-based violence and women's economic security

Women's economic security and safety are deeply connected. Women's economic insecurity can marginalize women, increasing their risk of victimization. It is also a barrier to their safety. We hear consistently that women's lack of access to income, savings, housing and employment is a key barrier to leaving violent situations.

Violence has long term economic impact on women. Women experiencing violence often experience harm financially including loss of control over finances and/or limited ability to access employment. The experience of violence has a significant impact on women's employment. Women with a history of domestic violence change jobs more often and are more likely to be in casual and part-time roles compared to women without experiences of violence. Studies have shown that an estimated 8% of survivors lose their employment because of the violence they are experiencing.ⁱ

Violence results in costs for survivors, including health costs, lost wages and relocation expenses. In addition, survivors can experience long-term economic consequences that make it difficult to rebuild their financial stability, including debt, poor credit, a diminished ability to work and ongoing legal costs. Financial hardship after leaving an abusive relationship is a near universal experience for survivors.



Domestic Violence in the Workplace

Background

In Canada, domestic violence costs employers \$78 million per year.ⁱⁱ Domestic violence can lead to declines in employees' concentration, attendance, and performance at work, while more than half of domestic violence cases carry over into or near the workplace.ⁱⁱⁱ This experience is not uncommon; in a recent survey of Canadian employers, over 70% reported needing to support an employee with a domestic violence situation.^{iv} Furthermore, women who experience domestic violence tend to have more disruptions to their employment and lower incomes.^v

Issue

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the need for workplace responses to domestic violence. Not only has domestic violence become more prevalent, it has become harder to detect and respond to. This can interfere with employment in multiple ways – it can be harder for employees to disclose violence to colleagues and access workplace supports; it can be more difficult for employers to recognize warning signs of domestic violence; and abuse may manifest or increase in the control and disruption of employment when working from home.^{vi}

Opportunity

Ontario's Task Force on Women and the Economy is uniquely positioned to address the role of domestic violence in women's economic recovery. The Task Force's work can support women experiencing violence as they face changing intersections between safety and workforce participation. The post COVID-19 economy will necessitate new supports and initiatives to prevent, identify, and address domestic violence in the workplace.

Recommendations

- Promote information about Ontario's domestic or sexual violence leave policy through a public awareness campaign and employer education.
- Provide training for employers to recognize and support employees who may be experiencing domestic violence, with special consideration for remote work.
- Strengthen enforcement of the Occupational Health and Safety Act to ensure that domestic violence is included in mandatory workplace violence policies and programs and that incidents of domestic violence are being appropriately prevented, investigated, and addressed.



Sexual harassment and violence in the workplace

Background

In Canada, one in four (28%) of workers have experienced sexual harassment at work or at a work function and one in seven (14%) of workers have been subjected to unwanted sexual contact at work.^{vii} While sexual harassment and violence is present in all workplaces, women are more likely to experience sexual harassment than men^{viii} and some women are disproportionately affected because of their employment status, the type of work they carry out or because of their working conditions.

Issue

A significant barrier to preventing violence and harassment against women is that there is little accountability, and many women feel unable to report or make a formal complaint. Research shows that this is a greater barrier in male-dominated sectors and environments. Reasons for not reporting harassment in the workplace include minimizing the issue, fear of the employer's response, embarrassment, uncertainty about whether it is or is not harassment and fear of the impact on employment and long-term career prospects.^{ix} Sexual harassment in the workplace can negatively impact productivity and motivation in the workplace, increase stress as well as increase the likelihood of employees leaving their jobs.^x

Opportunity

When developing a recovery strategy for the economy, Ontario's Task Force on Women and the Economy has the opportunity to reduce the barriers faced by women to re-enter the workforce, especially in fields in which women are underrepresented, including the skilled trades and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM).

Recommendations

- Encourage the federal government to ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 190, the first international treaty to recognize the right of everyone to a workplace free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence.
- Invest in services and supports for survivors of sexual harassment and violence, including, access to legal information and supports.
- Invest in education and bystander programs that shift the organizational culture within workplaces, especially in those fields in which women are underrepresented.



Supporting survivors as they enter or re-enter the workforce

Background

Survivors of intimate partner violence face barriers to enter and retain employment because of the physical and psychological impact of abuse, disruption to their jobs by threats, stalking or other forms of co-coercive control tactics by their abuser, and continued disruption through homelessness, or ongoing court proceedings.^{xi} Racialized women face a ‘double penalty’ in employment practices with less wages, and less opportunities for meaningful advancement than their counterparts.^{xii} Older women face unique barriers due to ageism but also from experiencing gaps in their careers due to the abusive relationship.^{xiii}

Issue

A lack of trauma-informed employment services can act as a further barrier, with the impact of trauma continuing to affect women’s decision making, soft skills and employment experiences.^{xiv} The focus on achieving the shortest route to work within employment and social assistance programs can mean that survivors accept precarious work, instead of focusing on obtaining decent and meaningful work that is considerate of their trauma.

Opportunity

There is an opportunity to create back to work employment pathways that are intersectional and reflect survivors’ realities of homelessness, or large gaps or breaks in their employment or education history. For example, returnship programs which work as internship opportunities, have already been shown to be successful for women re-entering the workforce after a hiatus.^{xv} In recognizing that survivors need ongoing support due to the impact of gender based violence, building capacity in employment and career services to offer trauma-informed and intersectional support will help survivors seek meaningful employment and help retain their employment.

Recommendations

- Invest in the development and implementation of trauma informed and culturally competent programs that support survivors to enter or re-enter the workforce.
- Ensure that employment and career services are providing long-term intersectional and trauma-informed services for survivors of gender based violence, with an emphasis on meaningful employment for women.
- Support employment and career services to develop partnerships with employers from multiple industries to build capacity for employers to retain employees who have experienced gender based violence.



We thank you for the opportunity to submit recommendations for rebuilding a post-COVID-19 economy that centers around women. We need to continue to establish social conditions and policies that promote women's economic security and safety.

As an agency that works in the anti-violence against women sector, we have a deep understanding of the lived experiences of survivors across Ontario. In our work, we witness the challenges that are faced by survivors and what we have shared in this submission are the experiences and concerns that women share with us every day. A co-creation approach that engages people with lived experience is critical in system reform. We welcome the opportunity to partner with Ontario's Task Force on Women and the Economy to conduct consultation and engagement with survivors and the anti-violence against women sector.

Sincerely,

Harmy Mendoza
Executive Director
Woman Abuse Council of Toronto (WomanACT)



ⁱ Wathen, C.N., MacGregor, J.C.D., and MacQuarrie, B.J. (2014) Can Work be Safe, When Home Isn't? Initial Findings of a Pan-Canadian Survey on Domestic Violence and the Workplace.

<https://www.uwo.ca/projects/heritage/heritage3/img/survey-report.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ DV@WorkNet. (2018). *The impact of domestic violence on workers and workplaces*. London, ON.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Wathen et al. (2014)

^{vi} Pillinger, J. (2020). *The COVID-19 Shadow Pandemic – Domestic Violence in the World of Work: A Call to Action for the Private Sector*. New York, NY: UN Women.

^{vii} Angus Reid Institute (2014) Three-in-ten Canadians say they've been sexually harassed at work, but very few have reported this to their employers <http://angusreid.org/sexual-harassment/>

^{viii} Statistics Canada (2018) Harassment in Canadian Workplaces Accessed from:

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2018001/article/54982-eng.htm>

^{ix} Angus Reid Institute, 2014

^x Statistics Canada, 2018

^{xi} Interval House (2016) 'Barriers to Employability and Employment for Women Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence'. Interval House. Toronto. <http://www.intervalhouse.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Barriers-Report.pdf>

^{xii} Ng, E.S., Gagnon, S. (2020) 'Employment Gaps and Underemployment for Racialized Groups for Immigrants in Canada: Current Findings and Future Directions'. Future Skills Centre. [EmploymentGaps-Immigrants-PPF-JAN2020-EN.pdf](#)

^{xiii} Lantrip, K.R., Luginbuhl, P.J., Chronister, K.M. et al. (2015) 'Broken Dreams: Impact of Partner Violence on the Career Development Process for Professional Women'. *J Fam Viol* 30, 591–605.

^{xiv} Tarshis, S., Alaggia, R., and Logie, C. H. (2021). Intersectional and Trauma-Informed Approaches to Employment Services: Insights From Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Service Providers. *Violence Against Women*.

^{xv} Wingard, Jason. 'Are Returnships The Key To Relaunching Your Career? (forbes.com)'. February 13, 2019