

# Study: Harassment in Canadian workplaces, 2016

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Workplace harassment refers to objectionable or unwelcome conduct, comments, or actions by an individual at any event or location related to work that can reasonably be expected to offend, intimidate, humiliate or degrade.

In Canada, 19% of women and 13% of men aged 15 to 64 reported that they experienced at least one type of harassment in the workplace in the past 12 months.

These results are from a new study published in *Insights on Canadian Society*, titled "[Harassment in Canadian workplaces](#)," based on 2016 data from the General Social Survey (GSS) on Canadians at Work and Home.

In the GSS, workplace harassment refers to experiences of verbal abuse, humiliating behaviour, threats, physical violence, and unwanted sexual attention or sexual harassment reported by working-age Canadians. It is important to note that self-reported workplace harassment does not necessarily imply that an official complaint was made.

The study examines the prevalence, type, and sources of workplace harassment among Canadian workers. It also examines the association between workplace harassment and a number of well-being indicators.

## Verbal abuse the most common type of harassment in the workplace

In 2016, the most common type of workplace harassment reported by Canadian workers was verbal abuse, with 13% of women and 10% of men reporting having experienced verbal abuse in the previous 12 months.

The next most common type of harassment reported by Canadian workers was humiliating behaviour, which was reported by 6% of women and 5% of men. Men and women were equally likely to report having experienced threats in the workplace (3%).

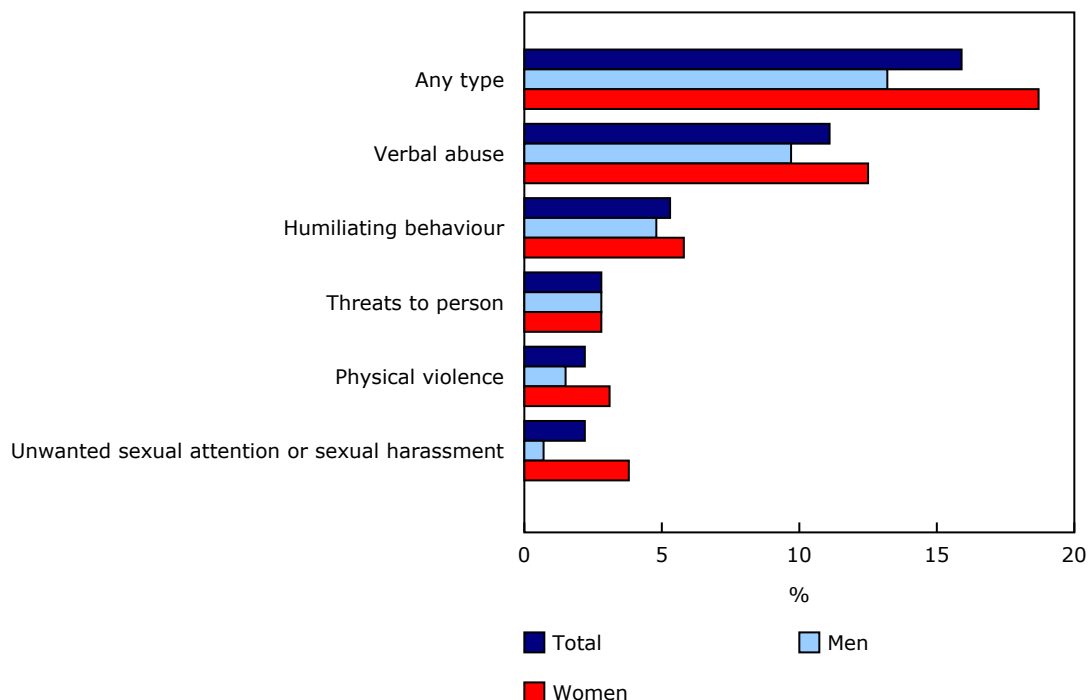
Other forms of harassment were less prevalent, and were experienced differently by men and women.

More particularly, about 4% of women and less than 1% of men reported having experienced sexual harassment or unwanted sexual attention in the workplace.

As well, about 3% of women reported having experienced physical violence in the workplace over the past 12 months, compared with about 1% of men.



**Chart 1**  
**Proportion of workers who reported having experienced workplace harassment in the past 12 months, by sex and type of harassment, Canada, 2016**



Source(s): General Social Survey (Canadians at Work and Home), 2016.

### Women are more likely than men to report that they have been harassed by a client or a customer

The GSS also enquired about the person responsible for harassment among those who reported being harassed in the previous 12 months. Respondents could report more than one type of harasser.

Women were more likely than men to report that they had been harassed by a client or a customer. Among people who said they were harassed in the past year at work, 53% of women said a client or customer was responsible, compared with 42% of men.

Among men who reported having experienced workplace harassment, the next most common source of harassment was their supervisor or manager (39%). Among women, it was colleagues and peers (34%).

### Workplace harassment is more common in health-related occupations

One reason why women report different harassment experiences than men is because they work in different occupations than men.

Specifically, women are more likely to work in health occupations, which involve a high degree of interaction with the public, which sometimes can lead to harassment situations.

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Overall, workers in health occupations (which includes nurses and doctors) had a 23% probability of reporting that they had been harassed in the workplace, even after controlling for other factors. This likelihood was greater for women (27%) than for men (21%).

By contrast, workers in natural and applied sciences (which includes occupations such as engineers and computer and information system professionals) had a 9% probability of reporting having experienced workplace harassment.

In addition to occupation, it is important to note that other factors—such as the presence of a mobility limitation, sexual orientation, Aboriginal status, union status, income and education—can also affect the probability of being harassed in the workplace.

## **Workplace harassment is associated with lower levels of personal and workplace well-being**

Workplace harassment has a relationship with indicators of workplace well-being, such as job dissatisfaction, level of motivation to perform at one's best, and sense of belonging to one's current organization.

For example, the proportion of women who said that they were dissatisfied with their current job was more than three times higher for those who experienced workplace harassment in the past year (14%) compared with those who did not (less than 4%). Similar results were found for men.

In addition, harassment by a supervisor or manager was associated with more negative effects on indicators of workplace well-being than harassment by someone else.

More than one-fifth of women and men who had been harassed by a supervisor or manager reported that they were dissatisfied with their job, compared with less than 5% of women and men who did not report that they had been harassed at work.

There is also a significant relationship between workplace harassment and personal indicators of well-being, such as self-rated physical and mental health, and self-reported stress.

The most significant association was with mental health: 18% of men and 16% of women who reported experiencing workplace harassment in the past year reported that they had poor mental health, compared with 6% of men and 8% of women who had not been harassed.

For the most part, the relationship between harassment and lower levels of personal and workplace well-being remained even after accounting for other factors.

### **Note to readers**

*Data in this study are from the 2016 General Social Survey (GSS) on Canadians at Work and Home. The target population for the survey was non-institutionalized people aged 15 and older, living in the provinces. This article focuses on people aged 15 to 64 who worked for pay during the past 12 months, yielding a sample of about 9,000.*

*In the GSS, respondents were asked whether and how frequently, they experienced five types of workplace harassment in the past year: (1) verbal abuse; (2) humiliating behaviour; (3) threats; (4) physical violence; and (5) unwanted sexual attention or sexual harassment. For example, the question on sexual harassment in the workplace read as follows: "In the past 12 months, have you been subjected to unwanted sexual attention or sexual harassment while at work?" Readers should note that the definition of sexual harassment includes those who reported sexual harassment, as well as those who reported unwanted sexual attention.*

*In the study, the probability to report experiencing workplace harassment is examined with logistic regressions models. Factors included in the model include (a) sociodemographic factors, including gender, age, highest level of education, ethnicity, immigration status, sexual orientation, province of residence, personal income, marital status, presence of young children in the home, and physical mobility limitation; and (b) workplace characteristics, including workplace size (number of workers), terms of employment (which takes regular work hours into account), union status, and occupational group.*

**Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5221](#).**

The article "[Harassment in Canadian workplaces](#)" is now available in *Insights on Canadian Society* ([75-006-X](#)).

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