

# Study: Gender-based violence: Unwanted sexual behaviours in Canada's territories, 2018

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In 2018, in the Canadian territories, nearly half of women (48%) and nearly one-third of men (32%) experienced unwanted or inappropriate sexual behaviour in a public space, in the workplace or online. Women were also more than three times more likely than men to report having experienced unwanted sexual behaviours in each of the three situations—namely, in a public space, in the workplace and online.

Gender-based violence—defined as violence that is committed against someone based on their gender identity, gender expression or perceived gender—encompasses a broad range of behaviours, from those that are not necessarily criminal (such as unwanted sexual attention while in public) to those that are classified as criminal acts (physical and sexual assault).

Unwanted sexual behaviours have been the subject of recent attention, mainly because of some high-profile events, but also as a result of pandemic-specific issues. In particular, concerns have been raised about the difficulty of accessing assistance resources and the increased vulnerability of some people who may be more isolated from their usual support networks. For example, in a recent study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of victim services who responded to the survey (76%) reported that difficulties accessing resources for clients impacted their ability to provide services.

The Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces gathered information on territory residents' experiences of unwanted sexual behaviours in the 12 months preceding the survey. Detailed results from the survey are released today in the *Juristat* article entitled "[Gender-based violence: Unwanted sexual behaviours in Canada's territories, 2018](#)." Although these data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic began, they enable a better understanding of Canadians' experiences of unwanted sexual behaviours.

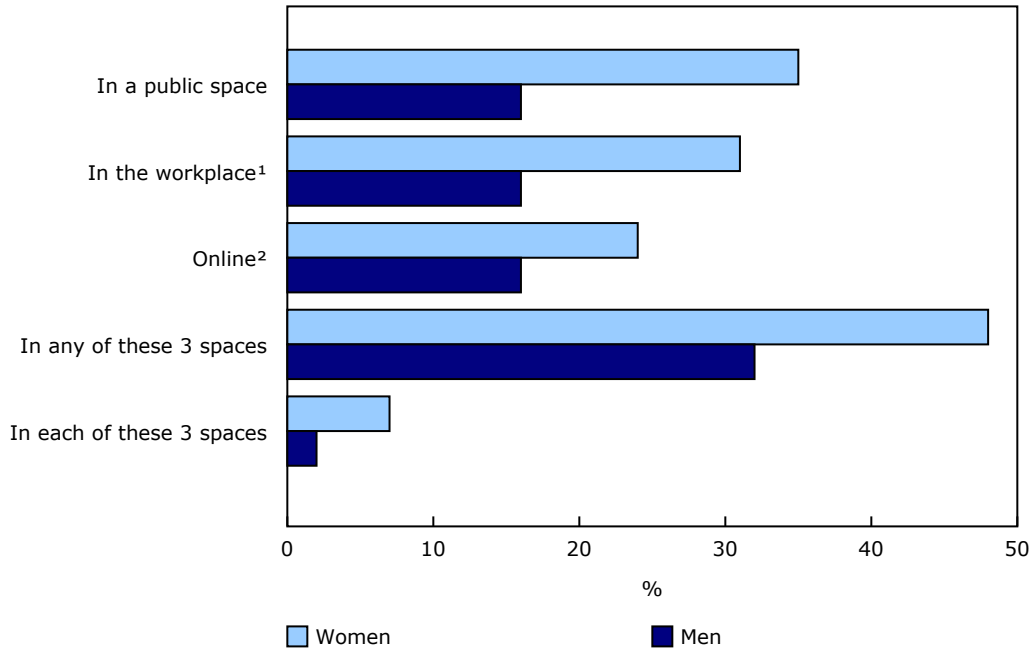
## Women in the territories are more likely than men to experience unwanted sexual behaviour

In the territories, both women and men were affected by unwanted or inappropriate sexual behaviours in public spaces, in the workplace or online. That said, the prevalence of these behaviours was higher among women (48%) than among men (32%) in 2018. Women were also more than three times more likely than men to report having been the target of unwanted behaviours in all three situations (7% of women, compared with 2% of men).



**Chart 1**

**Experiences of unwanted sexual behaviours in public spaces, in the workplace or online in the 12 months preceding the survey, by gender, territories, 2018**



1. Percent calculation excludes those who reported they did not work in the 12 months preceding the survey.  
 2. Percent calculation excludes those who reported they did not use the Internet in the 12 months preceding the survey.  
**Note(s):** All differences between women and men are statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .  
**Source(s):** Statistics Canada, Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces (5256).

People identifying with specific minority groups were more likely to report having experienced unwanted behaviours in all the three situations. Specifically, 24% of LGBTQ2+ women, 15% of single women, 14% of women with physical or mental disabilities, 13% of First Nations women, and 13% of women aged 15 to 24 experienced unwanted behaviours in all three situations.

**More than twice as many women than men in the territories experience unwanted sexual behaviour in a public space**

In the territories, more than twice as many women (35%) than men (16%) reported having experienced at least one undesired sexual behaviour in a public space, such as on the street, in a bar or restaurant, or while using public transportation. These proportions are similar to what had been reported by women (32%) and men (13%) living in the provinces.

Unwanted sexual attention (e.g., whistles, calls, stares, gestures or suggestive body language) was the most frequently reported sexual behaviour in public spaces in 2018, with 27% of women having been targeted, compared with 7% of men. Unwanted touching (such as physical contact or getting too close in a sexual way) was also relatively common, with 22% of women and 10% of men having reported being the target of it.

Women who experienced unwanted sexual behaviours in a public space were most often targeted by someone they did not know or knew only by sight (70%). The same was true for just under half of men (46%). For both women and men who experienced this type of behaviour, the perpetrator was usually a man.

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## **One-quarter of women in the territories have experienced unwanted sexual behaviours on several occasions**

Women living in the territories were also more likely than men to report having experienced unwanted sexual behaviours in a public space on several occasions. One-quarter of women and 1 in 10 men experienced this type of behaviour more than twice in 2018.

Compared with people who experienced one or two unwanted sexual behaviours in a public space, people who experienced them multiple times were more likely to report emotional or psychological impacts, or changes in their habits or behaviours. Although no direct causal link can be established, they were also more likely to rate their mental health as poor or fair, to have low satisfaction with their lives, and to have seriously considered suicide.

## **Unwanted sexual behaviours in public spaces are more common in the territorial capitals than in smaller communities**

People living in the territorial capitals were more likely than their counterparts living outside them to report having experienced unwanted sexual behaviour in a public space in 2018. While 35% of women in the territories as a whole were targets of unwanted sexual behaviour in a public space, that proportion rose to 46% in Yellowknife, 44% in Iqaluit and 42% in Whitehorse. It is likely that some conditions in urban settings, such as higher population density, a higher degree of anonymity and the greater number of public spaces, might facilitate some types of unwanted sexual behaviours.

Among the territories, Yukon residents were the most likely to have been the target of unwanted sexual behaviours. In that territory, just over 4 in 10 women (41%) and nearly 1 in 5 men (19%) were the targets of such behaviours. In the Northwest Territories, 38% of women and 18% of men said they had experienced unwanted sexual behaviours in a public space, whereas in Nunavut, 25% of women and 11% of men reported having experienced them. These differences are partly explained by the proportion of each territory's population living in the capital, which is highest in Yukon and lowest in Nunavut.

## **First Nations and Métis women are just about as likely as non-Indigenous women in the territories to experience unwanted sexual behaviours in a public space**

In the territories as a whole, non-Indigenous women (41%), First Nations women (39%) and Métis women (41%) were just about as likely to report having experienced unwanted sexual behaviours in a public space in 2018. In contrast, just under 3 in 10 Inuit women (29%) reported having been the target of such behaviours. Among men, however, no statistically significant difference was seen between Indigenous and non-Indigenous men.

Unwanted sexual behaviours in a public space are more common in urban areas and are most often committed by strangers. However, a large proportion of Inuit women (83%) live outside the capitals, mainly in Nunavut's small communities where most of the residents are likely to know each other, which could partially explain the relatively low proportion of Inuit women who reported having experienced unwanted sexual behaviour.

Some studies have also suggested a normalization of violence among some Inuit women. Police-reported data in 2018 and data from the 2014 General Social Survey on Canadians' Safety indicated high rates of sexual assault in Nunavut. This is in addition to the intergenerational violence and trauma resulting from colonization and experiences at Indigenous residential schools. Thus, given more serious assaults, it is possible some individuals may not perceive the violent nature of some of the less serious unwanted sexual behaviours.

## **Nearly one-third of women in the territories experience unwanted sexual behaviours in the workplace**

Women living in the territories are also more likely than men to report having been the target of unwanted sexual behaviours in the workplace, which include such things as inappropriate sexual jokes, touching, sexual attention, or comments or insults because of gender or sexual orientation. In the territories, nearly one in three women (31%)

who held a job in 2018 were the targets of such behaviour, compared with just under one in six men (16%). In the provinces, 29% of women and 17% of men had reported being targets of unwanted sexual behaviours in the workplace.

The difference was more pronounced in workplaces where the majority of employees are men. In those settings, 37% of women and 15% of men reported having been the targets of unwanted sexual behaviours.

The most common unwanted sexual behaviour in the workplace was inappropriate sexual jokes, which were experienced by 20% of women and 9% of men living in the territories. However, the greatest difference between men and women was seen with unwanted sexual attention. About 1 in 6 women (17%) reported having been subjected to such behaviour, compared with 1 in 50 men (2%).

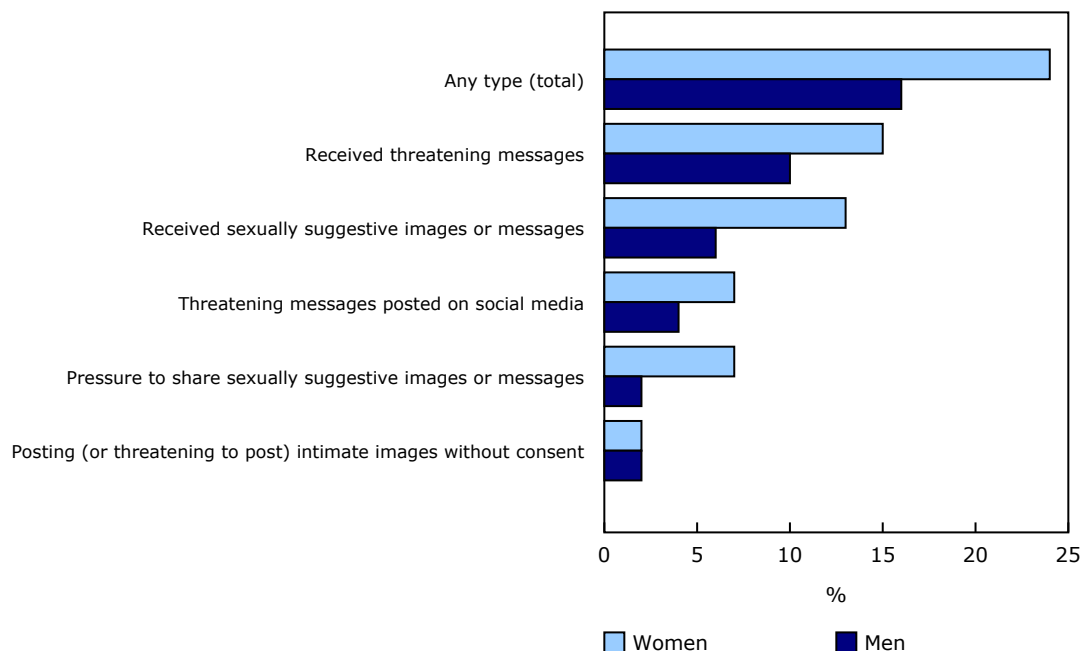
Unlike unwanted behaviours in public spaces or online, which young women were more likely to have been the targets of, the proportion of women who had experienced unwanted sexual behaviours in the workplace was similar among all age categories from age 15 to 54.

### **Almost one-quarter of women in the territories are targets of unwanted behaviours online**

In the territories, nearly one-quarter of women (24%) and almost one in six men (16%) who had used the Internet in the 12 months before the survey reported having been the target of unwanted behaviours online. In the provinces, 18% of women and 14% of men reported having been the target of unwanted behaviours online.

The most common behaviours were receiving threatening or aggressive emails or messages directly targeting them, as well as receiving unwanted sexually suggestive or explicit images or messages. This behaviour also had the largest difference between women (13%) and men (6%). In contrast, relatively few people (2%) reported that someone had posted or threatened to post intimate or sexually explicit images without their consent.

**Chart 2**  
**Experiences of unwanted behaviour online in the 12 months preceding the survey, by type of behaviour and gender, territories, 2018**



**Note(s):** Excludes respondents who reported that they did not use the Internet in the 12 months preceding the survey. All differences between women and men are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), except for the category "Posting (or threatening to post) intimate images without consent."

**Source(s):** Statistics Canada, Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces (5256).

As with unwanted sexual behaviours in a public space, the perpetrators of unwanted behaviours online were most often men acting alone. However, while most unwanted sexual behaviours in a public space were attributable to strangers, unwanted behaviours online were more likely to have been perpetrated by someone known to the victim.

Even when they do not happen in the "physical" world, and even though not all of them meet the threshold of criminal behaviour, unwanted online behaviours can still negatively affect the people subjected to it. The vast majority of people who had experienced unwanted behaviours online said they experienced emotional or psychological impacts. Many Internet users reported taking steps to protect themselves from online harassment. Overall, 32% of women and 22% of men reported having taken steps to protect themselves from online harassment in the 12 months prior to the survey.

### Note to readers

Data collection and increasing knowledge about gender-based violence is a central component of *It's Time: Canada's Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence*. This Juristat article is based on results from the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces (SSPPS), conducted in the territories in 2018. The SSPPS collects information on experiences and characteristics of violent victimization, as well as the continuum of other unwanted sexual experiences while in public, online or at work. The SSPPS was also conducted in the provinces, and those results were published in late 2019 in the Juristat article "[Gender-based violence and unwanted sexual behaviour in Canada, 2018: Initial findings from the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces](#)."

Future reports will be able to combine results from the provinces and the territories to report on Canada-level findings.

The SSPPS also included questions on experiences of sexual and physical assault, as well as questions on perceptions and attitudes towards gender equality and gender-based violence. An analysis of those aspects will be published at a later date.

The development and collection of the SSPPS and the analysis of its results was funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada.

The analysis was conducted according to gender, based on the question which allowed respondents to specify if they were male, female, or gender diverse. A dedicated analysis of transgender, gender diverse, and sexual minority populations is planned for a forthcoming article.

Since the survey asked broadly about all experiences of violence, and not only those which were perceived to be gender-based, key gender differences in the prevalence, nature, and impact of unwanted behaviours and violent victimization were explored in order to examine gender-based violence in Canada.

### Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5256](#).

The article "[Gender-based violence: Unwanted sexual behaviours in Canada's territories, 2018](#)" is now available as part of the publication *Juristat* ([85-002-X](#)).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; [STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca](mailto:STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca)) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; [STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca](mailto:STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca)).