

**FEDERAL STRATEGY ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE  
BRIEFING NOTES FOR STATUS OF WOMEN CANADA AND THE DEPARTMENT OF  
JUSTICE CANADA**

**ISSUE: Anti-Violence Worker Safety and Well-Being**

Every province and territory has legislation obligating employers to ensure worker safety, but the work-related threats to the well-being of anti-violence workers are often overlooked. For example, the very nature of their work puts anti-violence workers at heightened risk of workplace violence – police consider responding to domestic violence calls one of the most dangerous situations they face on the job.

**KEY POINTS**

- Workplace violence can range from harassment, threats and intimidation to physical or sexual assault. In the context of anti-violence programs, workplace violence may be committed by clients, clients' abusive partners, ex-partners, family members or gang members, someone who comes into the workplace to commit violence, or co-workers or supervisors (workplace harassment or bullying).
- Some of the most dangerous times for women dealing with gender-based violence are when they reach out for help or attempt to leave a violent relationship. The abuser can become more violent at these times as he sees his power and control over the victim being threatened, and his violence may extend to those who are supporting the woman, including support workers. Anti-violence workers meet their clients in both their offices and in public places such as courthouses, and occasionally in their homes, heightening the risk.
- An abuser may believe that his partner would never have left him if not for the anti-violence worker, and may direct his anger and violence at the worker, attempting to draw the worker into the power and control that he has over his ex-partner. In some situations the abuser's family members, friends and gang members may target the worker as well or on behalf of an abuser.
- Working in an arena where you're dealing with people whose lives have been threatened puts workers at heightened risk, but employers are not always alert to these risks, and should be taking extra security measures. Even those employers that are alert to these issues are often stymied by financial constraints that do not allow for needed protective measures such as panic buttons, de-escalation training and bullet-proof glass.
- In addition, anti-violence workers face risks not just to their physical health, but also to their emotional and psychological well-being. This is an entire workforce that thinks about, talks about, and responds to nothing else all day long but rape, assault, abuse, threats, and other forms of gender-based violence.

- These workers support survivors of heinous violence and cruelty – some of whom are in genuine fear for their lives, some whom don't survive. These workers often carry the immense weight of responsibility for helping women safety plan to protect themselves and their children sometime without the support of the systems around them. Legislators and employers need to be cognizant of the toll this takes on this workforce's emotional and psychological health, and of how widespread vicarious traumatization is in those supporting survivors of gender-based violence.
- Vicarious traumatization refers to an inevitable outcome associated with exposure to traumatic events and information, which affects the beliefs, values, perceptions and worldview of individuals who work with trauma survivors. Unaddressed, this often manifests not only in psychological symptoms, but in physical and chronic illness. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to get worker's compensation programs to cover this type of work-related illness.
- As with any type of violence, workplace violence can have serious and lasting physical and psychological consequences, not only for the person directly experiencing it, but co-workers and the agencies in general as well.
- If a worker faces threats or violence from her client's partner or family, the worker may be unable to continue working with the client. This can lead to increased danger for the client, as this is another way the abuser is isolating her from support.
- Generally speaking, anti-violence workers are working very hard under very stressful conditions for very low wages. Many have no pensions. Funding is not statutory and therefore precarious under most provincial/territorial governments. There has not been a concerted effort to ensure that people doing this extremely difficult and important work have liveable wages, adequate benefits, and the security of pensions.
- For more information on the issues faced by anti-violence workers, see *Assessing the Complexities and Implications of Anti-Violence Service Delivery in the province of British Columbia* at [http://endingviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Complexities-of-AV-service-delivery-FREDA\\_lowres.pdf](http://endingviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Complexities-of-AV-service-delivery-FREDA_lowres.pdf).

## **SUGGESTED ACTIONS**

- While delivery of services are a provincial responsibility, the federal government should take responsibility to ensure that there are grants and supports in place for agencies to ensure they have policies to facilitate anti-violence worker safety and to support their workers.
- The federal government should support development of concrete, detailed written policy about workplace-related violence and anti-violence workers, such as policies for meeting with clients outside the office and working with high-risk clients, and should mandate that all employers implement that policy.
- When developing a response to workplace violence, the federal government should determine the most serious gaps in employees' knowledge that need to be addressed, and ensure delivery of the relevant training. This could include risk identification and management, non-violent communication, and de-escalation strategies trainings.

- We urge the federal government to create an initiative to offer funding for capital expenditures to create a safer work environment including security provisions such as security doors, buzzer entry systems panic buttons and bulletproof glass available to child protection workers, Corrections staff and police dealing with the same offenders that anti-violence worker's clients are victimized by.
- Workplace policies should also include provisions to respond to and support traumatized workers in incidents of workplace violence and/or incidents like the domestic homicide of a client, such as critical incident debriefing, counselling and supervision. Policies should also extend to vicarious traumatization.
- Self-care is an essential part of building up workers' resilience, enabling them to maintain a balanced perspective of their work and their clients, and improving the ability to recover from stressful incidents and the cumulative affects of hearing about the horrors being perpetrated upon women and children every day. All agencies providing anti-violence programs should be mandated to provide structural support for self-care plans, and to encourage their workers to engage in self-care and access professional support when needed to help them cope with ongoing vicarious traumatization.
- Designated transfer payments should be used to ensure that wages, benefits, and pensions are on par with the value and importance of this work. In most provinces and territories, the lack of attention to wages and pensions of this essential workforce is seriously problematic, especially when compared with the wages, benefits, and pensions for RCMP, and other first responders who work with survivors of gender-based violence.

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