

SNAPSHOT OF

The GBV Workforce in Canada Through Research

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Ending
Sexual
Violence
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Contre
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sexuelle

Snapshot of the GBV Workforce in Canada Through Research

The gender-based violence (GBV) sector in Canada plays a vital role in supporting survivors, intervening with perpetrators, advocating for systemic change, and advancing public awareness, research and education. This work relies on a skilled and dedicated workforce. In 2022, the GBV sector in Canada included approximately 30,000 workers across more than 1400 organizations, including approximately 17,700 full-time and 12,200 part-time employees (Gender-Based Violence Database, 2018–2022 data). Despite its significance, the sector remains largely understudied, particularly regarding workforce conditions, economic contributions, and the challenges faced by frontline workers (Rossiter et al., 2020; Rossiter & Lanthier, 2024).

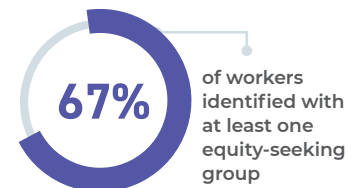
To better understand the Canadian GBV workforce, the Ending Sexual Violence Association of Canada (ESVA Canada)¹ conducted a questionnaire with responses from over 400 GBV workers. The findings from this study offered a snapshot of the sector's workforce, shedding some light on key trends and challenges (Fernandes & Lanthier, 2024). A brief overview of these findings is presented below.

Snapshot of Who Works in the GBV Workforce

The vast majority of GBV workers who participated in the ESVA Canada questionnaire identified as women (89.0%), 6.7% as gender non-binary, and 3.1% as men. These findings were in line with demographics collected in a 2021 National Survey on Training in the Gender Based Violence Sector in Canada (CREVAWC), as well as those from studies in the USA which indicate that the GBV workforce has traditionally been, and continues to be, woman-majority (Voth Schrag et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2020).

A large proportion of GBV workers (66.9%) in the ESVA Canada questionnaire identified with at least one equity-seeking group.

Though 29.9% of the sample indicated not belonging to any equity-seeking groups, 26.6% self-identified as 2SLGBTQIA+ and close to one quarter self-identified as BIPOC (22.2%) .



A significant minority of the GBV workers who responded to the questionnaire indicated identifying with more than one equity-seeking group. For example, of the 26.6% of respondents who self-identified as 2SLGBTQIA+, 8.9% identified with at least one other marginalized group, 3.6% identified with two others, and 1.9% identified with three or more.

Snapshot of the Work Undertaken by the GBV Workforce in Canada

GBV workers play an essential role in Canada, often stepping in to provide services where none exist and addressing persistent support gaps in their communities (Rossiter et al., 2020). A significant proportion of the work includes those who are on the 'frontlines'. More than half of those who responded to the ESVA Canada questionnaire (52.2%) reported that their roles involve frontline or direct service provision to survivors, their families, and in some cases, perpetrators.

Beyond frontline work, GBV workers were also engaged in the broader efforts that keep communities safe and organizations running. Among respondents, 21% reported work in management or supervisory roles, 15% in education, training, or prevention, 4% in administrative capacities and 2% in policy or research. Additionally, some respondents identified as board members, fundraisers, or custodial staff, further illustrating the wide-ranging nature of roles within the GBV sector.

¹ Formerly the Ending Violence Association of Canada (EVA Canada)

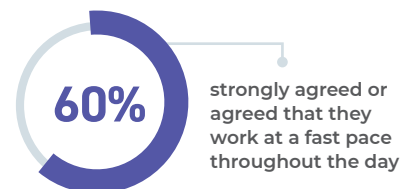
Snapshot of GBV Workforce Conditions in Canada

PACE OF WORK

GBV workers in Canada report operating in high-intensity environments, where the demands of crisis response, advocacy, and support services require them to work at a consistently fast pace.

When asked about their pace of work, 60% of GBV workers strongly agreed or agreed that they worked at a fast pace throughout the day (16.2% strongly disagreed or disagreed).

75.3% of workers who agreed that they worked at a fast pace were frontline workers or management.



A fast pace of work often means high workloads, limited breaks, and poor work-life balance, all of which are associated with burnout. Qualitative comments suggested the fast pace of work negatively impacted the mental health of some GBV workers. As one worker wrote in the comments: "It is of the utmost importance to ground myself every morning before the start of work. There are some days where it feels like I don't stop. I am constantly busy. I do not have any 'down time'. There is work for a full time and a half time person in this office, but it is only contracted for one full time position."

BURNOUT

Burnout was a significant concern among GBV workers in Canada, with many reporting emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue, and the impacts of vicarious trauma.

ESVA Canada's questionnaire results indicated that more than half of respondents (56.2%) strongly agreed or agreed that their work leaves them emotionally exhausted or worn out (26.7% strongly disagreed or disagreed).



ESVA Canada's questionnaire results indicated that more than half of respondents (56.2%) strongly agreed or agreed that their work leaves them emotionally exhausted or worn out (26.7% strongly disagreed or disagreed). Additionally, 39.0% of workers strongly agreed or agreed that exposure to others' trauma had a negative effect on their mental health, while 35.2% reported that their work drains so much of their energy it negatively impacts their personal life. These figures were notably higher for GBV workers identifying as persons with disabilities, with 50% agreeing that vicarious trauma negatively affected their mental health and 51.7% indicating that their work had a negative impact on their private life. This suggests that workers with disabilities may face additional barriers in managing the emotional toll of their work due to limited workplace accommodations, or systemic inequities in access to support resources (Berlingieri et al, 2023).

ECONOMIC INSECURITY

Systemic underfunding and chronic resource shortages have resulted in heightened employment precarity and economic insecurity in the Canadian GBV sector (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2022). A significant minority of GBV workers who responded to ESVA Canada's questionnaire indicated experiencing work precarity. A quarter of workers in the sample (24.7%) strongly agreed or agreed that they were worried about becoming unemployed; for BIPOC workers the proportion who were worried about becoming unemployed was higher at 37.4%.

Despite the specialized skills and high occupational health and safety risks associated with GBV work, compensation remains inadequate (Fernandes & Lanthier, 2024). Economic insecurity was a significant concern for GBV workers in Canada. Less than half (41.4%) of GBV workers strongly agreed or agreed that they were fairly compensated for their work, while 37.2% strongly disagreed or disagreed. However, these figures varied across provinces and territories. In Alberta, 56.3% of respondents felt fairly compensated for their work (with 25.1% disagreeing), whereas in Ontario, only 16.7% agreed, and 64.8% disagreed. When Alberta was excluded, just 33.3% of GBV workers across the remaining provinces and territories felt fairly compensated for their work, while 43.6% did not.

GBV workers are low income relative to other sectors (Rossiter et al., 2020). Many GBV workers struggle to make ends meet despite their education, experience, and the demanding nature of their roles. As one GBV worker pointed out: "We need better pay for the work we do in this field, I need another job to be able to make monthly costs." However, even within this

Additional barriers emerged as being particularly significant for lowest income or singlehousehold income household workers, older workers, and workers with disabilities:

- > **Lowest income or single income household workers.** Women make up the majority (60%) of the lowest-income workers in Canada (Dionne-Simard & Miller, 2019), a reality that is particularly pronounced in the GBV sector, where chronic underfunding, low wages, and precarious employment conditions further exacerbate financial instability. One individual described the impact of being a GBV worker in a single income household: “The salary is a huge issue. I live alone and compared to my co-workers in dual-income households, I exist in a low-income bracket despite my education, qualifications, or what I endure daily at my job. I don’t need extra support from the government or my employers, I need to be able to pay my bills.”
- > **Older workers.** While older workers may hold senior roles or supervisory roles within the GBV sector, be part-time workers who are slowing down in their careers as they age, or work to stay connected to community, many also report that financial barriers keep them from leaving their jobs, even when the physical and emotional demands become overwhelming. One worker shared that: “Age is a major factor, people want to find a way to quit your job,” highlighting the difficult reality faced by many older women. Despite wanting to leave, financial insecurity can force them to continue working, as poverty is significant concern (e.g., no pension). Older women, particularly those who are racialized, are at heightened risk of economic hardship, leaving them with little choice but to stay in the workforce out of necessity (Leclerc, 2024; Mendoza, 2021).
- > **Workers with disabilities.** While a majority (62%) of Canadians with disabilities participate in the workforce, many face significant barriers to economic security (ESDC, 2024). They are more likely to hold lower-paying jobs with less stability and fewer benefits, highlighting the systemic inequities that impact their employment opportunities and financial well-being (ESDC, 2024; Fancey et al., 2021). This is likely even more pronounced in the GBV sector where these conditions are exacerbated. Essential accommodations are reported to sometimes be inaccessible to workers with disabilities due to financial constraints rooted in the funding structures of GBV organizations (Berlingieri et al., 2023). One GBV worker described their experience with needing access to a leave for a mental health disability: “Earlier this year I considered a medical stress leave, but most non-profits are unable to provide short-term leave due to high premiums for extended benefits. This left me in a position where I had to choose to continue working while I was suffering or put myself in debt through accessing medical EI. Ultimately, I was unable to take a leave.”

STRONG WORKFORCE COMMITMENT

Despite the many challenges of working in the Canadian GBV sector, qualitative comments suggested that workers find fulfillment in their roles, and many are driven by a sense of purpose and the belief that they are making a tangible difference. Many workers describe their jobs as meaningful and rewarding, finding motivation in the progress survivors make and the broader advocacy efforts they contribute to. However, GBV workers point out that systemic change is needed including better funding, fair wages, and policies that prioritize both survivor support and worker well-being. Despite these obstacles the workforce remains deeply invested in both the present and future of gender-based violence services.

Conclusion

The GBV workforce in Canada plays a critical role in providing support, advocacy, and intervention for survivors and perpetrators, yet significant gaps in research and policy continue to overlook the conditions of its workers, particularly those facing heightened economic insecurity.

While the sector operates on a large scale, with approximately 30,000 workers, across more than 1400 organizations, persistent underfunding and precarious employment structures undermine job stability, wages, and access to benefits.

The findings highlight that lowest-income or single household income workers, older workers and workers with disabilities are disparately impacted by economic insecurity. These challenges not only compromise worker well-being but also threaten the sustainability and effectiveness of GBV services. Despite these hardships, the GBV workforce in Canada shows deep commitment to its mission, as workers demonstrate dedication to supporting survivors, advocating for systemic change, and fostering safer communities. However, the sustainability of the sector cannot rely solely on the passion and commitment of its workforce. Meaningful investment is needed to improve working conditions, ensure fair compensation, and provide adequate workplace supports. Addressing these issues is essential not only for the well-being of workers but also for maintaining the effectiveness and longevity of GBV services across Canada.

It is crucial to prioritize workforce sustainability alongside survivor support. Without targeted action to address economic insecurity, the sector risks losing experienced and skilled workers thereby jeopardizing the essential services it provides. Strengthening the GBV workforce is not just an investment in workers; it is an investment in the safety and well-being of communities across Canada.

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