



Gender-based violence and harassment in workplace health and safety plans

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Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH), including sexual harassment, is an anti-discrimination and an occupational safety and health issue. GBVH can have both short-term and long-term affects on workers' physical and psychological safety. Employers can effectively prevent and address GBVH in the world of work by integrating it into their occupational safety and health plans. Here are three things employers can do to develop an occupational safety plan to prevent GBVH:

1. Identify hazards and risks of GBVH in the world of work

An important first step for employers in the risk management process is identifying GBVH, including sexual harassment, as a reasonably foreseeable hazard in the workplace that could cause risks to health and safety. Subsequently, employers can identify the GBVH hazards and risks present in their workplace. Key steps include:

- Hosting focus groups with key stakeholders in the workplace to find out where there might be risks or risk factors for GBVH. These focus groups should include:
 - Health and safety representatives/committees.
 - Union representatives, if there is a union in the workplace.
 - Workers who are willing to voluntarily participate.
- Circulate anonymous worker surveys asking about their concerns about GBVH as a health and safety issue.
- Conduct a mapping exercise to identify where and when GBVH may occur (e.g., isolated places on the worksite), how it could occur (e.g., when working with customers or the public), the potential nature of the GBVH (verbal, physical, overt, subtle) and whose safety and health is likely to be affected (the target, coworkers).

2. Assess the risks for GBVH in the world of work and how to manage them

In deciding which measures should be taken to manage the health and safety risks that have been identified related to GBVH in the workplace, employers may take into account:

- The duration, frequency and severity of exposure to the workplace safety hazard (e.g., how often has a specific form of GBVH occurred where, and what specific risk has it led to?).
- Other psychosocial hazards that might increase the risk of harm, such as depression, anxiety or suicidality.
- Any information or support currently provided to workers. Conducting regular climate surveys, through which the employer collects information about the efficacy of interventions by asking if workers feel safer and making adjustments based on information gathered, is critical.

3. Control the risk by drafting a Workplace Health and Safety Plan to Prevent and Eliminate GBVH in the World of Work

Workplace health and safety plans contain the measures that an employer puts in place to address health and safety risks in the world of work. When implementing measures to control any risks of GBVH in the world of work, employers may consider:

- **Leadership and governance:** Leaders who show their commitment to tackling GBVH set the standard for what is acceptable in the workplace. Employers should consider providing ongoing training and support to leaders so that they are comfortable discussing GBVH and providing support to workers who may be experiencing it and others who are impacted.
- **Workplace culture:** A positive workplace culture helps establish what is considered acceptable behavior. Signs of a problematic culture include workers dismissing sexist jokes, ignoring harassment reports or tolerating inappropriate behavior. A diverse workforce and inclusive culture are key to preventing these harms.
- **Changing the design of tasks and systems:** It is important for employers to consider why a task is done a certain way and if it poses a risk of GBVH. If a risk is identified and assessed via the mapping exercise described above, employers can then look at ways to redesign the work to eliminate or minimize the risk as much as possible. For example, employers can reschedule tasks that require worker isolation to take place in the morning rather than at night or ensure that meetings with clients occur in public, accessible environments. Examples of shifting work structures to prevent GBVH by addressing a risk factor could include creating work teams with diverse representation based on age, race and/or gender-identity.
- **Physical environment, machinery and technology:** The design of the physical workplace environment, including the machinery and technology used, can increase the risk of GBVH. It can create conditions where harassment can occur more easily, be more severe or go largely unnoticed. Steps an employer can take in the physical environment of the worksite to address the risks for GBVH include:
 - Using clear or semi-opaque glass or screens to improve visibility in work areas
 - Restricting public access to areas where workers are alone or work at night
 - Ensuring worker facilities and amenities provide privacy and security, such as secure changing rooms
 - Designing the workplace to allow workers to move freely without physical contact.
 - Policies and processes: Written strategies, policies, processes, guidance and other organizational documents play an important role as a reference point to set expectations of organizational and personal behavior.

- **Reporting avenues and responses:** GBVH, including sexual harassment, is often underreported. It's important that clear, confidential and safe reporting pathways are available to workers, including alternative options for those who do not wish to report to their manager. Responses to GBVH should take a human-centered and trauma-informed approach, meaning the safety and preferences of the people impacted are considered. Responses to incidences of GBVH should always feed into the workplace safety and health risk management processes so the risk is better managed in the future.
- **Measurement and reporting:** To understand the risk of GBVH in a workplace and progress made to prevent it, employers should measure and report on their progress. Regular staff engagement and measurement against key performance indicators or targets can help monitor the risk of GBVH in your workplace and track improvement efforts over time.

All of these measures are adaptable, depending on the work setting. They require proactive identification and tailoring to ensure they meet the specific risks within a specific workplace.

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Everyone deserves to stay safe and healthy at work – but over the past several years, news stories have made clear that gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work remains a widespread problem. This spring, the Department of Labor hosted a four-part webinar series examining gender-based violence and harassment as a workplace health and safety issue.

Each webinar focused on a different industry where workers face disproportionately high rates of gender-based violence and harassment. Workers, advocates and speakers from the Women’s Bureau, Occupational Safety and Health Administration and U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission discussed the unique risk factors in each industry that make workers susceptible to gender-based violence and harassment, the impact on workers and strategies to mitigate risks. Below are five key takeaways from the series.

- ***Certain factors can increase the risk of gender-based violence and harassment***

Speakers explained how certain factors such as working in isolation, in customer-facing jobs or in male-dominated jobs increase the risk for experiencing gender-based violence and harassment at work. For example, home healthcare workers often work alone in their patients’ homes, which leaves them more vulnerable to abuse from patients.

- ***Unsafe work environments due to gender-based violence and harassment affect worker recruitment and retention***

Gender-based violence and harassment negatively affect recruitment and retention of workers, especially women, because the cost of working in an unsafe environment is too high. Several workers stated that they either quit their jobs or nearly quit because of the violence or harassment they experienced at work. Being forced to leave a job to

escape violence or harassment, or being wrongfully fired due to employer retaliation, also impacts workers' ability to maintain consistent employment and wages.

- ***Gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work negatively impacts mental health***

The webinars demonstrated that experiencing gender-based violence and harassment at work has a negative impact on worker mental health, in addition to physical health. The stress and fear of being harassed, assaulted, revictimized or retaliated against can lead to many negative health impacts such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. This is true not only for survivors of violence or harassment, but also for workers who are at risk or who witness it.

- ***Worker-led solutions to prevent and address gender-based violence and harassment can make workplaces safer***

Solutions to gender-based violence and harassment at work must draw on the knowledge of workers who have experienced it. These workers know what will work in their specific job contexts and what will not. The webinar series highlighted several types of worker-led initiatives that are helping to address and prevent gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work, including:

- **Worker-centered surveys**, like those conducted by UNITE HERE Local 1, Restaurant Opportunities Centers United and National Nurses United. These collect worker input to properly identify, address and prevent workplace health and safety issues.
- **Trainings that center worker experiences**, like those run by the BASTA Coalition of Washington, which provide farmworkers with training on addressing sexual violence, and SafeBars, which provide restaurant and bar employees with bystander intervention training. These can improve safety with their clear worker-centered prevention and response strategies.
- **Worker-driven policies**, like those modeled in the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' Fair Food Program. These can provide an important framework for how to address and prevent gender-based violence and harassment based on workers' lived experiences.
- ***Employers and unions are critical to ending gender-based violence and harassment at work***

Everyone has a role to play in making workplaces safer and more respectful. Employers in particular are integral to ending gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work as they have direct control over creating a positive and accountable workplace culture and listening to worker voices. Unions are also critical because they can – and often do – advocate for and secure stronger protections from gender-based violence and harassment through tools like collective bargaining agreements.

Further reading: [5 Ways Construction Employers Can Create Safer Workplaces for Women](#)

Further reading: [How we're implementing the National Plan to End Gender-Based Violence](#)

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