

Chapitre 13

Violence in the workplace

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Résumé Summary

À partir de son expérience de travail, l'auteure explore la nature de la violence liée au travail. Elle identifie les groupes vulnérables et dénonce les diverses formes de violence dont les travailleurs peuvent être victimes, ainsi que les différences entre la violence de la part d'un collègue et celle qui est le fait d'un patient, d'un client ou d'un étranger. L'auteure discute des effets de la violence sur l'employé et sur l'organisme ainsi que de l'impact de cette forme de violence sur la vie familiale. Elle parle de la violence en tant que risque occupationnel, susceptible de causer des traumatismes, et de la réponse apportée par la Commission de la santé et de la sécurité au travail (CSST). Il est également question de responsabilité partagée tant dans la création du problème que dans son contrôle et des stratégies organisationnelles pour contrôler la violence. Plus spécifiquement, l'auteure préconise, tant pour les gestionnaires que pour les employés, un «seuil de tolérance zéro» de la violence en milieu de travail.

While the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (1994) reported that violent crime and murder rates fell for the third straight year in 1994, the public perception is that we live in an increasingly violent society. The reality is that despite the decreases, the 1994 crime rate was 8% higher than a decade ago. And more and more, high-profile crimes involving brutality or multiple deaths send shockwaves through our communities, making people feel vulnerable and unprotected.

The violence is not just committed in our homes and on our streets. Increasingly our workplaces are targets. In every occupational field, employees face the potential of exposure to a violent incident on the job. Although in general most employees enjoy high health and safety standards, violence has become a growing occupational health and safety hazard for many employees.

Workplace violence — a rising phenomenon

Violence on the job is not a new phenomenon. The problem of patient abuse toward health care staff was documented in the American literature in the 1970's and early 1980's (Madden et al., 1976; Whitman et al., 1976; Lion et al., 1981; Lanza 1983). Yet despite the growing problem of work-related violence, it has been largely ignored as a social issue. When the wide range and consequences of violent acts are understood, it becomes clear that there is serious cause for concern.

One does not need to look to the American experiences such as the Oklahoma City Federal Building or World Trade Centre bombings, the multiple shootings in a law office in San Francisco, or the massacre on the New York commuter train to point to an increasing problem of workplace violence. For years, Montreal has been plagued with holdups in banks and convenience stores. Quebec has also had its share of bombings and shootings, armed robberies and murders, hostage taking incidents, sexual assaults and cases of harassment and sexual harassment — all occurring at the workplace or as a consequence of work. Over the last several years, Montreal has also had its share of high-profile workplace crimes claiming many lives, specifically the murders at École Polytechnique and Concordia University.

While these latter incidents make the newspaper headlines and shock the community because of the brutality of the acts, most incidents of on-the-job violence are rarely talked about and seldom acknowledged. Violence and the fear of violence are affecting the Quebec economy, as well as the economy all across North America.

The costs associated with workplace violence are only now beginning to be documented. Direct consequences of workplace violence include decreased job performance, sick leave costs and disruption of business or service delivery. The United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, (Bachman, 1994) in a report analyzing data from the National Crime Victimization Survey for 1987-1992, estimated that each year nearly 1 million American people become victims of violent crime while working or on duty. As a result of workplace violence, an estimated half a million employees missed 1.8 million days of work each year, an average of 3.5 days per crime. The missed work days resulted in over \$55 million in lost wages annually, excluding days covered by sick and annual leave. Employees affected by a crime victimization lost an estimated 876,000 workdays annually, costing employees over \$16 million in wages, excluding days covered by sick and annual leave.

Workplace violence defined

It is only recently that attention has been given to workplace violence. Most of the focus of concern and intervention involves extreme forms of violence such as holdups, physical assaults, assaults with a weapon and murders. However, workplace violence takes on many different dimensions. It relates to a broad range of behaviours and actions that cause injury to the employee-victim and damage to the organization. Workplace violence consists of verbal, psychological, sexual and physical abuse.

To fully understand the magnitude of the problem of workplace violence, it should be thought of as a continuum of activity. On the one end of the spectrum are expressions or acts of decency, respect, tolerance and acceptance. These are expressed in the form of courteous behaviour and appreciation of others. In the middle of the spectrum are expressions of intolerance, disrespect, impropriety and rejection. These "softer forms" of violence are expressed in the form of verbal abuse, intimidation, harassment and sexual harassment, abuse of power, racism and malicious rumours. Further along the continuum towards the other end, are the physical or more extreme expressions of violence — vandalism and other property damage, sexual assault, physical attack and assault with a weapon, death threats, self-directed violence such as suicide, attempted murder and murder.

Regardless of the nature of the incident, whether it takes on one of the softer forms of violence or one of the more extreme physical acts, or whether it is a one-time occurrence, a random happening or a repeated occurrence, the violence has a sole effect. The perpetrator uses power and coercion to subdue, control or injure the victim.

Vulnerable populations

Employees who handle money are among the most highly vulnerable populations. Cashiers in banks, supermarkets, convenience stores and other retail establishments, as well as taxi drivers, are at risk from holdups. Since holdups are so commonplace, we have become blasé to the danger and damage they cause. In every robbery, employees' lives are threatened either by a menacing note or by a display of a weapon. The effects of such a threatening gesture are often minimized by the media, the employer, the police and sometimes even the employees themselves. Minimizing the meaning or impact of the incident happens even when employees are attacked with knives, guns and sawed-off shotguns. Without physical injury, psychological injury can be easily overlooked and is often underrated. Holdups are so frequent, that it is easy to forget that innocent cashiers are sometimes shot and even murdered for a couple of cartoons of cigarettes, a few bottles of liquor and a small amount of money.

Employees in the financial and retail industries are not the only occupational group vulnerable to workplace violence. Employees who are in contact with the public are susceptible to some type of violent incident at work. This includes people working in all areas of the public sector as well as those in private business.

Violence is a problem for employees in the *Centres locaux de services communautaires* (CLSCs), hospitals and reception centres. Home care workers in CLSCs, attendants in nursing homes and nursing staff in chronic care institutions literally take a beating from confused or angry elderly people or from psychiatric patients, who do not want the service or who act out their frustration against their caregivers.

Violence in our primary and secondary schools has frequently made headlines all over the country in recent years. Students are at risk from extortion, harassment, gang fighting, physical assault, stabbings and shootings. Teachers sometimes have to deal with hostile students who take out their aggression, frustration and anger at them. Teachers complain to their unions and school administrators of being sworn at, physically attacked, sexually harassed, threatened and assaulted with a weapon by students. The police and media report that children as young as nine and ten attend school armed with brass knuckles, knives, and self-made weapons. Older students come with more sophisticated weapons, which they use to threaten and bully fellow students and even their teachers.

In the youth protection field, social workers face the wrath of angry parents when they remove a vulnerable child from the parent's

custody and place him in protective care. They deal with angry youth offenders, who threaten their lives because they are displeased with the practitioner's recommendations to the court. Yelling, intimidation, harassment (sexual or other), death threats, and physical assault are common reactions from desperate people who cannot cope, and who do not want to be reminded of their faults or mistakes, and their consequences. Social workers in the youth protection field are the targets of much of this type of abuse.

Like all other helping professionals, social workers are expected to take the abuse in their stride. Everyone seems to have accepted a common misperception about work-related violence: administrators and employees seem to believe violence comes with the territory and is part of the job.

In some industries the threat to employees is widespread. The airline industry is an example of how violence cuts across different occupational groups in a single industry. Flight attendants sometimes deal with intoxicated or irate passengers who can become abusive and sexually harassing. Ticket agents deal with verbal abuse and mistreatment from frustrated passengers every time a plane is grounded or a flight is delayed or cancelled. And flight crews have to work under the pressure of wondering whether perhaps one day they will be faced with a hostage-taking incident or terrorist attack.

Although men are vulnerable to abusive situations, violence and violent crimes, women are heavily concentrated in the banking and retail industries, and in teaching, social service and health care. All of these occupations are high risk for workplace violence.

The occupations and industries mentioned thus far are not the only ones susceptible to work-related violence. Workers in every occupation and at every level of job are vulnerable. Employees, supervisors, managers and senior level administrators are all at risk. No one is protected from abusive acts, because no one knows who will strike out at whom. Besides the worry about the possibility of a physical attack or a life-threatening incident, at some time or another during the course of their working lives, most people have to contend with one of the more insidious kinds of violence. This includes such things as harassment, screaming, abuse of power and derogatory comments. Very often abusive conduct or mistreatment is accepted as normal and as part of the work culture.

Violence from inside or outside the organization

Different people are perpetrators of workplace violence. The offender can be a stranger, as in the case of a hold-up in a convenience store. A

violent act can also be committed by a patient, client or customer. For example, health care workers and social workers, nurses and home care workers in CLSCs and the *Centres de protection de l'enfance et de la jeunesse* (CPEJs), are continually exposed to verbal and psychological abuse and physical attacks by their patients. Teachers at every level of our educational system, at the primary, secondary, CEGEP and university levels, have to contend with disruptive behaviour, threats and physical attacks by their students. And customer service representatives or people working in public relations must put up with threats and verbal abuse by irate customers.

If violence committed by strangers and clients or patients was not enough, employees are also vulnerable to violence from yet another source – the people they work with. Disgruntled employees or former co-workers and employers have been known to “get even” by shooting current or former co-workers and employers. The killing by Valery I. Fabrikant of four Concordia professors is an example. Another is the U. S. postal service, which has been particularly hit hard. From 1983-1989, 20 of the 35 work-related homicides of postal workers were committed by embittered co-workers or former co-workers.

While the extreme forms of physical violence are what catches media attention and arouses public emotions, the more subtle forms of violence are more frequent and of equal cause for concern. Verbal and psychological abuse in the form of screaming, derogatory comments, insults and swearing occur and are even part of the work culture in some organizations. Harassment of workers, sex and language discrimination, racism, abuse of power, sexual harassment and coercive behaviour comprise the non-physical forms of violence which more and more employees are bringing to the attention of their unions.

While all types of violent incidents at work are difficult to handle, managers seem to find it harder to address an abusive situation when the perpetrator is a client or patient or an employer, colleague or subordinate. More than stranger-related violence, over which there is limited control, violence committed by parties known to the victim are more difficult for everyone to deal with. An example of this difficulty is school violence. This troubling situation in more and more schools demonstrates how hard it is to turn schools into violence-free environments, and to develop proactive, coordinated approaches to deal with students who are violent towards their peers or their teachers.

For over ten years, the author has been conducting training workshops to assist helping professionals to better deal with client aggression. A consistent theme emerges, regardless of the occupational group involved. Employees feel responsible or guilty when a client or patient is

violent toward them. Somehow, some helping professionals believe that clients act out their anger toward them, because in some way they have failed to address their needs. The organization seems to support this view. Often the victimized employee feels blamed, isolated and unsupported by management and even by colleagues.

If dealing with clients is difficult, consider what happens when the perpetrator is a co-worker, employer or subordinate. Offensive behaviour is even less often addressed and the victim is even more marginalized, while the offender remains protected by the system. This is especially so when the perpetrator is in a position of authority with power over the victim. In the case where the offender is of great value to the organization, the victim's complaints are ignored. For it is often more expedient to ignore the powerless victim, than to challenge the conduct of a powerful or valued employee. Moreover, few managers or decision-makers want another human relations problem to deal with. Since most managers have little experience in dealing with abusive conduct, the offender's behaviour is often disregarded and the victim is placated, ignored or even punished for complaining.

Most employees expect to be treated with respect and dignity by the people they work with and work for. Instead, far too often they find themselves working in situations where they must be constantly on guard against abuse by the very people they are supposed to offer a service to, by those whom they are supposed to trust and collaborate with, or try to help.

On-the-job violence knows no favourites. Regardless of the job, position or title, increasingly employees seem to be susceptible to some form of violence at work or in the line of duty.

Violence has consequences

Regardless of who commits the violence or the form it takes, violence has one important consequence. The employee suffers injury and the organization is harmed.

Injuries to employees Even when there is no physical injury, violence causes psychological injury. Victims of work-related violence suffer the same reactions as victims of violence or crime in general. Many employees exposed to abusive or violent episodes suffer critical incident stress. A single incident like a hold-up or physical assault or sustained harassment can cause irreparable damage to the victimized employee. Anxiety, depression, fear, burnout and decreased ability to concentrate and perform the job are

common and normal reactions for employees exposed to traumatic events. Sometimes the stress reaction can be intense and long-lasting. Employees can suffer from post-traumatic stress reaction as a result of a life-threatening violent incident or from continuous abuse or harassment they face at work.

Rather than being unpleasant incidents, employees who are targets of violence or prolonged abusive conduct find their entire lives turned upside down. Reactions typically include sleep difficulties and nightmares, flashbacks, severe anxiety or panic attacks and increased use of alcohol, drugs, prescription medication (minor tranquilizers, sleeping pills) and smoking as a way of coping with the stress. Additional reactions include social withdrawal, reliving the event and concern for safety. Continued exposure to an abusive situation or repeated acts of violence increases employees' stress. The abuse causes a gradual erosion of their self-confidence and affects their ability to perform their jobs. Those who cannot recover from the incident go off on a sick leave, take a leave of absence, or quit their jobs.

Effects on the organization Workplace violence seriously affects work organizations. Workplaces which allow an abusive atmosphere to exist or do not take steps to control the situations where their workers are in jeopardy of attacks in the line of duty, suffer serious consequences. They face a morale problem, loss of employee commitment to the organization's goals, increased absenteeism, employee preoccupation with safety issues, increased accidents and errors and a deterioration in service delivery or job performance.

Employees, who feel the organization they work for does not care about them, have little energy to do their jobs. They are physically present but psychologically absent. They lack commitment to the organization and the quality of their work suffers.

Human resource problems and deteriorating job performance have tremendous repercussions for the organization. Employees directly implicated are not the only ones affected. Employees on the sidelines quickly learn that they work for an inconsiderate organization. They too lose their respect and commitment toward their employer.

Workplace violence and the family

Workplace violence and family violence can be interrelated. Employees do not leave their personal problems at home or their work problems at work.

On-the-job violence affects the quality of family life. An employee, traumatized by an incident of workplace violence, can upset the equilibrium

of the entire family. For example, imagine the impact on the family of a female cashier who becomes a victim of a robbery. Suffering from flashbacks, anxiety, depression and fear, it is understandable that this life-threatening experience would preoccupy her and make her less responsive to her family's needs. The author has observed from her many years counselling crime victims and their families, that when one member of the family is traumatized by an incident of violence at the workplace, the whole family can easily become traumatized.

As much as the family can become destabilized by an episode of violence occurring at work, the workplace can also suffer the consequences of family violence at home. Sometimes conjugal violence spills over into the workplace. There have been situations where an estranged spouse or partner has come to the workplace and sought out and murdered an ex-spouse. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (1994), 43 or nearly one-quarter of the 184 workplace homicides against women in the United States in 1994 were committed by a spouse or estranged spouse or boyfriend or ex-boyfriend who came to the workplace and hunted down a female partner.

Violence as a CSST issue

More and more unions are taking an active interest in the problem of workplace violence. As more employees break the silence and talk about the abusive behaviour and violent incidents they face at work, a clearer picture is emerging about the scope of this problem. Workplace harassment and on-duty violence have become a priority issue in union surveys, conferences and contract negotiations.

The author, who has been a consultant specializing in the management and prevention of workplace violence for over fifteen years, has found an increase in employee and management recognition of violence as a growing occupational hazard for employees over the past five years. More and more public sector employers are now training employees to better manage aggressive client or patient behaviour and to control other forms of violence at work.

Accident claims made to the *Commission de la santé et de la sécurité du travail* (CSST) related to violent incidents are increasing. While just several years ago, workplace violence was not even recognized as a category of work accident, statistics on fatal and non-fatal violent incidents are now becoming available, most particularly in the United States. A statistical overview of Violent Workplace Incidents in Quebec from 1989 to 1992 was presented by the *Institut de recherche en santé et en sécurité du*

travail, during a conference on Victimization in the Workplace organized by the *Association québécoise Plaidoyer-Victimes* in September 1993. In 1986 the proportion of CSST dossiers reported and categorized as "violent incidents" accounted for 5.3 per thousand of all claims compensated by CSST. By 1992 the figure had increased to 8.3 per thousand claims. Still these figures are probably the tip of the iceberg, for the CSST does not generally collect statistics on work-related accidents categorized as "violence".

Although recognition about workplace violence is slowly improving, most workers still remain silent about their victimization and are reluctant to file claims. Those who do fill out CSST claims often find it a frustrating experience. While on-the-job violence resulting in physical injury is more often accepted, employees filing claims for psychological distress with an absence of physical injury, particularly in cases of harassment or verbal or psychological abuse, have to prove the need for medical leave and the link between the violence and their psychological injury. This challenge to the employee's claim can lead to a secondary injury, causing an increase in the intensity of the employee's traumatic reaction and prolonging the absence from work.

Although incidents of work-related violence are still often met with reactions of disbelief or minimizing the meaning of the incident, more and more employees are breaking the silence and asserting their rights. As a result, injuries resulting from work-related violence in some occupations such as bank tellers and hospital employees, are becoming more accepted as work accidents. In some provinces, violence has legally become recognized as a work accident through recent occupational health and safety legislation.

Saskatchewan was the first Canadian province, and claims to be the first government in North America, to have adopted legislation in 1993, against harassment on the job. The legislation defines harassment as any objectionable conduct, comment or display by a person that is directed at a worker, is made on the basis of race, creed, religion, colour, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability, physical size or weight, age, nationality, ancestry or place of origin; and constitutes a threat to the health or safety of the worker. The legislation obliges every employer to "ensure insofar as is 'reasonably practicable', that the employer's workers are not exposed to harassment at the place of employment"; and obliges every worker at work to "refrain from causing or participating in the harassment of another worker" (*The Occupational Health and Safety Act*, Saskatchewan Labour, 1993).

As a result of this legislation, claims for compensation resulting in psychological injury of workers in Saskatchewan are more readily

accepted. The governments of British Columbia and Ontario have been developing similar anti-harassment type legislation through their Labour Departments. Thus far, Quebec has no such legislation in place, although it is likely that it too will one day follow the lead of other provinces in this area. Moreover in 1995, statistics on violence as a work accident were still not being systemically categorized and collected by the CSST.

With the problem of workplace violence increasing for so many different occupational groups, it is fair to say that workplace violence is becoming increasingly identified as a leading occupational hazard. Union surveys, employee accounts of incidents and preliminary research studies are supporting employee claims about violence as a problem in many industries. Among hazards to employees, violence is one of the foremost occupational health and safety challenges of the nineties.

Whose responsibility?

Everyone shares responsibility in creating and maintaining the problem of work-related violence. For one thing, some employees have a high tolerance for abusive and hurtful comments, gestures and actions. Screaming, yelling, harassment and derogatory comments may even be a part of the cultural norm in many work relationships.

The acceptance by management, unions and employees themselves of abusive client behaviour, adds to the problem. Offensive clients or customers who are not stopped from taking out their frustration and anger on employees, are given tacit permission to continue the abuse. The client receives the message that it is all right to behave this way and the employee receives a message that abuse is part of the job.

This message is false. Violence is not part of anyone's job except for law enforcement, corrections and the military, which have been mandated to control violence in our society. Some other workers, particularly those in the helping professions, are expected to handle violent client or patient behaviour, even when they have neither the skills nor the back-up support to deal with it.

The first responsibility for workplace violence rests with management. It is they who set the standards for behaviour in a workplace. It is they who set the rules about conduct. It is therefore up to them to act as role models on how people should conduct themselves at work.

It is also management's responsibility to protect the people who work for them. They must take the initiative and issue a statement that

clearly says, "Violence and abusive or harassing behaviour of any kind will not be tolerated at our workplace". They also must do more to protect their employees from hold-ups and other forms of externally-generated violence and crime and from internally-generated abuse.

If they can do little to protect their workers from random acts of violence committed by strangers, they can do other things. They can educate their workforce on what to do when they are exposed to a violent incident, understand what their employees may experience in such an incident and support and help them recover from it. Many employers now provide trauma counselling for employees through an Employee Assistance Program. This should be made available to all employees who are victims of a violent work incident. Management can also help by training employees to better manage clients, patients or customers who are aggressive and out-of-control.

Although management bears a lot of responsibility for the tolerance and laissez-faire attitude about this problem, this is not management's problem alone. Employees themselves have contributed to the problem by their own attitudes and actions. Violence has been allowed to become a way of life in society. There is a great deal of tolerance for violence. Many people are abusive toward others, in their personal, social and work relationships. Too frequently anger may lead to verbal abuse or worse.

Employees, who do not like what an employer does, will sometimes find ways to sabotage or undermine management's authority. Colleagues who are not liked may be insulted, silenced or criticized. With people being more self-centred and more preoccupied with making money and with their own career advancement, they are less inclined to think about their social responsibilities or their colleagues. Conflicts among colleagues may increase with work pressures and job insecurity. More and more, employees are allowed to take out their frustrations on colleagues, employer or subordinates.

Often abusive behaviour is tolerated at work. It is hard to tell a superior or co-worker, "You have no right to treat me this way. Please stop". It is hard to set limits or confront patients, clients or customers who are abusive. Yet as long as people remain silent about unacceptable behaviour, the abuser receives the message that it is all right to continue the abusive treatment or behaviour. This only increases the frequency and severity of the attacks.

Since many people are ashamed or embarrassed about being victim to abuse, they conceal the incident. They may feel incompetent, worry about other people's reactions and become paralyzed by their own fears. Employee-victims need to realize that violence is not their fault. Breaking

the silence and taking action are the best ways to stop abuse. Telling a colleague, an employer or a human resource professional about what happened, filing a grievance with the union and mobilizing colleagues who may also be exposed to workplace violence will shatter the myth that it is an isolated problem. Taking control of the situation will lead people out of their complacency and empower them to do something to stop abusive conduct.

Joining with others who have experienced incidents of workplace violence brings support, encouragement and comfort to victims. Collaboration is also an effective way to ensure change, and to push employers to provide better protection and help to deal with these incidents.

Ultimately, if enough people stop accepting violence as part of their jobs, employees will push for change. This will make the ideal of a zero tolerance for violence in our workplaces more of a reality.

Strategies to deal with workplace violence

There are many actions organizations can take to stop the cycle of violence and reduce the dangers to employees, especially those in high risk occupations. The least organizations should do is the following:

- Become aware of the potential for violence in the organization, the types of abusive behaviour or violence employees are at risk from, and the impact that these may have on employee health, service delivery and job performance.
- Adopt a policy of zero-tolerance for violence or an anti-harassment policy. Ensure the policy is well publicized and prominently displayed so that employees, clients and patients become aware of the consequences of abusive conduct.
- Develop a Behaviour Risk Management strategy to assess and control high risk employees and clients.
- Provide a confidential Employee Assistance Program to help employees deal with frustration and difficulties from personal and work problems that can lead them to become abusive toward others.
- Provide training to help employees deal with aggressive and difficult patients, clients or customers. Train employees in anger management, conflict resolution and negotiation skills, so that the parties involved in disputes come out as winners.

- Have a mediation service to settle disputes.
- Provide support and trauma counselling for employee-victims of abuse and other violent incidents.
- Train supervisors and managers to deal with perpetrators of violence in order to decrease the possibility of an escalation of incidents and to stop the abuse. Train them to be supportive and helpful to employee-victims in order to decrease the impact of traumatic incidents on employees' personal and professional lives, and to reduce the disruption to the organization's operations following an incident.
- Eliminate the systems' problems that increase frustration and anger and leave people feeling dehumanized and alienated.

Zero-tolerance for violence

While not all forms of work-related violence can be easily eliminated, particularly when physical assault and other acts of crime are committed by strangers, much of the abusive conduct internal to the organization can be controlled. Abusive behaviour often exists in the workplace because it is condoned by employees and clients.

Creating a "zero-tolerance for violence" workplace requires a major shift in employee and management attitude and action. Instead of accepting that violence and abusive treatment is part of a job, employees must say "NO" to abusive conduct. Employees must learn to handle their aggression, anger and frustration constructively. New ways must be found to resolve conflicts involving co-workers, employers, and clients so that all parties feel like winners in a dispute, instead of one party winning and the other losing.

A collaborative effort by management and labour is needed to create a workplace environment that is based on the principles of respect, dignity and cooperation. Controlling workplace violence means uniting, firmly saying "NO" to violence and collaborating to create a more humane workplace environment.

Although work-related violence is not a new phenomenon, it is only recently emerging as an occupational health and safety issue. How sad it is that employees in every conceivable occupational setting have to put up with verbal, psychological and sexual abuse, physical violence and acts of crime on the job. Although employees may receive the message that

violence is "part of the job", no one should have to put up with some of the "softer forms" of violence that seem so familiar in our workplaces. Sexism, racism, verbal abuse, harassment and abuse of power have no more place in the workplace than do sexual assault, armed robbery or murder.

Abusive conduct on the part of strangers, clients or patients, or people in trusted positions, like co-workers, employers or subordinates has no place in the workplace. Such behaviour is damaging to the victim and the organization.

Unless people take steps to change those attitudes which tolerate abusive conduct, it is likely that the violence will escalate. The violence in schools directed at students and teachers, toward bus drivers and taxi drivers, toward social workers in CPEJs, home care workers, nurses, and customs agents at border crossings is evidence of a wide-spread and growing social problem.

Complacency, tolerance for abuse and denial have allowed the problem to escalate. It is only by careful planning and collaborative action that the violence, which has devastating effects on our workplaces and is injuring so many of our workers, can be controlled. This is a problem for every employee to be concerned about, because no one knows who will be the next victim of a gratuitous act of violence at work.

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