




Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children
Safe, Respectful & Inclusive Workplaces Conference

From Harassment to Domestic Violence in the Workplace: What Have We Learned about Opportunities for Prevention?

Sandy Welsh
Department of Sociology
University of Toronto

May 29, 2009
London Convention Centre
London, Ontario




What is used, what seems to work and what do we really know?

Insights from academic research on
workplace violence, bullying, sexual
harassment and domestic violence



Harassment and Violence at Work

- Organizational issues, not interpersonal problems
- Hostile and demeaning behaviours
- Signal individual or group is not welcome and/or is competitive threat



Harassment and Violence are Organizational Issues

More likely to occur in certain contexts:

- Job insecurity
- Gender, racialized and other workforce power differences
- Lack of organizational competence and coherence

How Organizational Coherence Affects Violence

- Transparency: likelihood violent behaviour will be visible to all
- Accountability: likelihood behaviour of “bullies” or harassers will rebound badly on the abuser
- Capacity: organizational ability to motivate and control employees through visible rules and rewards

Hodson et. al. 2006. Chaos and the abuse of power: Workplace bullying in the organizational and interactional context. *Work and Occupations* 33(4):pp. 387-88.



How best to prevent harassment and violence? Most common options

- Policies and procedures
- Education
- Referral
- Responsive workplace culture



What seems to work for prevention: Some research evidence

- Supportive and Cooperative workplaces
 - Supportive organizational leadership and culture
 - Reducing gender, racialized and other inequalities across workgroups
 - Reduction of interpersonal competition and job insecurity (at minimum – recognize their effect)



What seems to work for prevention: Some research evidence

- *Proactive* policies and procedures
 - Concrete evidence of supportive organizational leadership and culture
 - Clear procedures encourage reporting

What sounds good, but may not be so hot

- Zero-tolerance policies
 - Sound great on paper
 - Less useful in practice,
 - Targets of violence and harassment view these as less effective than non-victims (Leck and Galperin 2006)
 - Modified zero tolerance policies – actual violence or threat of violence



Zero Tolerance: Potential to Squelch Early Incident Disclosure

Why targets of harassment and DV don't report or disclose to co-workers and supervisors

- Retaliation
- Fear of losing one's job
- The need for a reference
- Lack of information about their options
- The impression that their complaint is not "serious" enough to warrant an outside investigation
- Fear of not being believed
- Lack of family support for reporting

What sounds good, but doesn't always work as planned

○ Education and Training

- Weak evidence of long-term effect for sexual harassment training
 - Most useful for helping identify behaviours
 - Men X training effect, more willing to blame the victim and not report
- School bullying programs and “respect” programs
 - Most useful for helping identify behaviours
 - Encourage intervention on behalf of others

What might be useful but used less often?

- Train/educate workers to be “bully-proof”
 - Not ignore harassment and violence
 - Develop behavioural strategies to push back earlier
 - Supportive workplace culture and leadership necessary

What might be useful, but used less often?

- Bystander intervention
 - Harassment less likely in presence of “guardians”
 - Support co-worker
 - Intervene in harassment



What do we really know?

- Employers have a role and responsibility
- Leadership and organizational culture are key
- Policies are necessary but only the first step

Questions?

Sandy Welsh

Department of Sociology

University of Toronto

725 Spadina Avenue

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

M5S 2J4

welsh@chass.utoronto.ca

416-978-5290