

Policy on Gender Based Violence

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On any given night, over 3,000 Canadian women (and their 2,500 children) sleep in shelters to escape abuse. 400 others are turned away. Half of all girls and women in Canada experience physical or sexual abuse at some point in their lives. Yes, half. The number of missing and murdered Aboriginal girls and women in Canada continues to grow to the point where it can only be called an epidemic. Eleven percent of Canadian women report that they have been stalked to the point that they fear for their safety or the safety of someone close to them, such as their children (this is the equivalent of 1.4 million women). Each year, over 40,000 arrests result from domestic violence. Stories of gang rape of young women and of sex trade workers are common. Sixty-six percent of all female victims of sexual assault are under the age of twenty-four, and eleven percent are under the age of eleven. Sixty percent of women with a disability experience some form of violence during their lives. Women aged 15 to 24 are killed at nearly three times the rate of all female victims of domestic homicide.

In 1989 the Montreal Massacre brought the issue of gender-based violence to our collective consciousness, but the seemingly never-ending stories since then of women and girls being raped, beaten, cyber-bullied, stalked or abused risks dulling our outrage. But the evidence is clear: gender-based violence is not 'old news'.

These are our daughters, sisters, co-workers, mothers, aunts, grandmothers, friends, neighbours, union members. Violence against women cuts across all class, racial and religious lines. But while gender-based violence impacts all women, it is women who live in poverty, women of colour, Aboriginal women, sex trade workers, older women, women immigrants, women with disabilities, lesbian, bisexual and trans women who are at increased risk in our society as they have access to fewer resources and receive the least amount of social and financial support to escape violence when it occurs.

Let's be clear: most men don't beat, abuse, or stalk women. The vast majority of men are sickened by violence against women. But the steady stream of workplace and social media conversations that hint at, or blatantly assert that men have a right of access to women's bodies, or that women somehow deserve or desire to be raped/ beaten/ stalked/ harassed/ objectified, too often goes uninterrupted. And advertising and mainstream media continue to sell boys and men the idea that 'real men' solve problems through aggression. All of this contributes to a culture that connects masculinity with violence and makes violence against women more likely and more acceptable.

Many progressive men in our union have recognized that violence against women is a men's problem. It is men who will ultimately stop the cycle – by interrupting sexism when they see or hear it; by teaching their sons less about chivalry or machismo and more about women's equal value and the importance of relationship-building; by reminding other men 'don't be that guy' when they see or hear of the potential for stalking, abuse, degradation, or

date rape; by actively changing the culture in our workplaces; by supporting women leaders in our union who are calling for change.

Educating the criminal justice system and police on issues of violence against women has brought improvements, yet much remains to be done. Many of those convicted receive sentences that are so light they are a national disgrace and an affront to women and their loved ones. The criminal justice system owes women more. But a strict 'law and order' approach does not go to the root of the problem, does not address the position of women in our society, does not provide women with options and does not make violence against women a community responsibility.

Thirty years ago women broke the silence around 'wife abuse' and sexual violence. Through the organizing efforts of feminists, women's groups and unions across the country, we won shelter/rape crisis centre funding from provincial and federal governments. But the supports available have never been adequate – particularly for women in the north, far north, rural, and small communities. And in fact, ever since we established the need for funding, governments have been cutting back, effectively hampering our efforts to prevent violence from occurring in the first place. The federal government has further silenced women's groups by denying charitable status and funding to any organization who advocates for social or legislative change. Women are dying at the hands of men but they are also dying at the hands of governments that have systematically underfunded women's shelters, second-stage housing and emergency women's shelters, virtually eliminated affordable housing, drastically slashed social assistance and unemployment insurance, continued to reduce services for newcomers to Canada, denied meaningful Aboriginal self-governance and cut funding for native services and housing, continued to criminalize sex trade workers, eliminated the long gun registry and continuously failed to crack down on the illegal sale and trade in guns .

Our response as a union must be to step up our efforts to defeat governments that want to roll back the clock, and continue to raise our voices against gender-based violence.

Unifor supports the call for a National Action Plan to End Violence Against Women (including an inquiry into missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls). But we are not waiting for governments. Our union and the broader labour movement are taking action. We continue to negotiate Women's Advocates so that women in our workplaces know how to access community resources. We continue to expand our collective agreement language on violence, and we continue to lobby for legislative change. We collaborate with our community partners and the broader labour movement on projects and initiatives that aim to make the strongest possible case that violence against women is a national emergency rooted in social, economic, and political causes.

Our efforts to end violence against women are driven by a social justice agenda that addresses poverty, racism and discrimination. Women need the economic means to make choices – our priorities must include organizing in workplaces and sectors with a high density of women, reinvigorating the campaign for a higher minimum wage, demanding social assistance rates that lift women and children out of poverty, redoubling our campaign for affordable and accessible childcare, and recommitting to ongoing efforts to strengthen Canada's gun control laws.

The campaign to end violence against women is ongoing. It can be tiring, frustrating and demoralizing. It is a silent war in which the casualties keep mounting, and the government has become part of the problem. Unifor will continue to use our political leverage to challenge all levels of government in our ongoing efforts to eradicate

violence against women. And we must remain united in our determination to ensure our workplaces, our communities and our nation are safe for all women.

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