



# What Are the Impacts of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace on the Mental Health and Productivity of Women Working in Male-Dominated Industries in Canada? What Strategies Should They Use to Cope with the Harmful Impacts of This Stressor on Their Mental Health?

**Dounia Bekkai**

Harvard University Extension School, Montreal, Canada

Email: [dounia.db84@gmail.com](mailto:dounia.db84@gmail.com)

**How to cite this paper:** Bekkai, D. (2024) What Are the Impacts of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace on the Mental Health and Productivity of Women Working in Male-Dominated Industries in Canada? What Strategies Should They Use to Cope with the Harmful Impacts of This Stressor on Their Mental Health? *Open Access Library Journal*, 11: e12297.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1112297>

**Received:** September 14, 2024

**Accepted:** October 15, 2024

**Published:** October 18, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

---

## Abstract

Sexual harassment in the workplace is still omnipresent in the workplace in Canada. It is even more ubiquitous in male-dominated industries, and women holding these “masculine” positions are the principal victims. Sexual harassment can take many forms, such as physical, verbal, or even virtual. Many Canadian women working in male-dominated industries are victims of this type of harassment in the workplace, which causes them intense stress and substantial emotional distress. Whether it’s in the Canadian Armed Forces, police, construction, farming, engineering, or firefighting, to name a few. Organizations should impose stricter policies, regulations, and sanctions against the harassers to ensure women’s safety, security, and productivity. Women should use strategies to cope with the consequences of sexual harassment on their mental health in their workplace. This research will investigate the impacts of sexual harassment in the workplace on the mental health and productivity of women working in male-dominated industries in Canada. It will also provide recommendations and strategies that women can use to cope with the harmful impacts of this stressor on their mental health.

---

---

## Subject Areas

Psychology, Sociology, Women's Health

## Keywords

Sexual Harassment, Sexual Assault, Workplace Harassment, Productivity, Gender Discrimination, Workplace Violence, Well-Being, Stress Management, Coping Strategies

---

## 1. Introduction

Since their integration into the employment market, Canadian women have successfully integrated industries that have always been considered exclusively “male-dominated”. They have been able to succeed in academic programs and professional careers that have always been exclusively “masculine”, such as engineering, architecture, military, law enforcement, firefighting, and construction, to name a few. Unfortunately, it has always opened the doors to gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace [1]. Sexual harassment in the workplace is an offense to women's safety, security, and productivity. It is a violation of their human rights and dignity. According to the United Nations Gender Equality, sexual harassment is defined as “any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favor, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behavior of a sexual nature” that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offense or humiliation to another [2]. Sexual harassment in the workplace results in harmful consequences on the mental health and productivity of women working in male-dominated industries. It is a huge stressor that causes intense emotional pain and mental strain, such as fear, anxiety, trauma, PTSD, stress, hypervigilance, and substantial emotional distress [3]. Therefore, women must use stress management strategies to cope with the harmful impacts of sexual harassment on their mental health and productivity. This research will primarily investigate the impacts of sexual harassment in the workplace on the mental health and productivity of women working in male-dominated industries in Canada. It will also provide recommendations and the strategies women should use to cope with the harmful impacts of this stressor on their mental health. This research will also provide definitions, explanations, statistics, and facts regarding sexual harassment experienced by women in male-dominated industries.

## 2. Definition of Sexual Harassment

According to the Canada Labour Code, sexual harassment is defined as:

“Any conduct, comment, gesture, or contact of a sexual nature that is likely to cause offense or humiliation to any employee; or that might, on reasonable grounds, be perceived by that employee as placing a condition of a sexual nature on employment or any opportunity for training or promotion” [4].

---

### 3. List of Mostly Male-Dominant Industries According to Statistics Canada

- Engineering and architecture.
- Automotive service technicians, truck and bus mechanics, and mechanical repairers.
- Construction trades helpers and laborers.
- Finance and accounting.
- Natural and applied sciences-related occupations.
- Trades transports equipment operators.
- Natural resources agriculture and related production occupation.
- Occupations in manufactory and utilities.
- Firefighting.
- Law enforcement such as the police and the military.
- Insurance and real estate.

### 4. Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Physical, Verbal and Virtual

Sexual harassment in the workplace can take many forms, such as physical, verbal, and even virtual. It is particularly omnipresent in male-dominated industries and the minority of women are the principal victims. Physical sexual harassment is any inappropriate, unwanted, and indecent physical gesture of a sexual nature [5]. It can be touching somebody's hair, hands, arms, shoulders, or any other body parts without consent in a very inappropriate "sexual" way [6]. It can be massaging, grabbing, or invading somebody's personal space without permission [6]. It can also be hugging or massaging someone without consent. It is any physical gesture of a sexual nature that is imposed without permission and consent [6]. However, sexual harassment in the workplace is not always only physical. It can also be verbal. Verbal sexual harassment is any inappropriate, unwelcomed, and indecent compliments, remarks, jokes, or advances of a sexual nature [6]. It is all verbal, and it can be, for example, a comment or a compliment regarding someone's private parts. It can be any unwanted inappropriate comment or compliment of a sexual nature [6]. It can be the spread of rumors of a sexual nature, accusations of a sexual nature, and gossiping about somebody's sexual activity and privacy [6]. Verbal sexual harassment can also be silent, such as making kiss sounds or any other non-verbal inappropriate sounds that have a sexual connotation [6]. As well there is another type of sexual harassment in the workplace, which is virtual sexual harassment. Virtual sexual harassment, also called "online" sexual harassment, is any inappropriate, indecent, vulgar comments, requests, or advances. It can also be the spread of rumors or accusations of a sexual nature with the use of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, TikTok, and Instagram, to name a few [7]. This type of harassment results in many harmful consequences on the mental health and productivity of the victims. It affects particularly the younger generation [7]. Virtual sexual harassment can be detrimental

to women working in male-dominated industries. It takes only a few seconds to spread a rumor of a sexual nature by clicking on one button on a social platform. It can harm women's reputation and image inside and outside the workplace, affecting their mental health, well-being, and productivity.

## **5. The Impacts of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace on the Mental Health of Women Working in Male-Dominated Industries**

Women victims of sexual harassment in the workplace are more prone to anxiety, PTSD, depression, and emotional exhaustion [8]. They can experience trauma, constant fear, psychosis, anxiety, burnout, stress, and emotional distress [9]. They can also experience huge hypervigilance and intense paranoia, which can destroy their productivity [9]. Women victims of sexual harassment in the workplace won't be able to remain productive in their workplace since they are facing intense stress and mental distress in the workplace. They won't be able to concentrate on their tasks since they are experiencing intense trauma. This type of harassment in the workplace negatively impacts their motivation, engagement, job satisfaction, and, of course, productivity. Women experience impaired concentration, intense anxiety, preoccupation, social isolation, low productivity, phobia of the opposite sex, and even suicidal thoughts [9]. Therefore, they must use stress management strategies to cope with this stressor and overcome this obstacle. The consequences of sexual harassment on their mental health can further impede their productivity [9]. It can even make them hesitant in their career motivation and advancement. It can dampen their motivation to strive for professional growth and hinder their career aspirations [9]. Women victims of sexual harassment in the workplace can lose their motivation, which can even destroy their productivity within their organization. Many women in Canada suffered after they experienced this type of harassment, according to Statistics Canada [10]. In addition, sexual harassment can lead to other counterproductive behaviors, such as tardiness, high levels of turnover, absenteeism, huge disengagement, lack of stability, and other counterproductive behaviors [9].

## **6. Research Method**

The method that will be used in this research to investigate the impacts of sexual harassment in the workplace on the productivity of women working in male-dominated industries in Canada is the online survey. Indeed, an online survey was built on the Qualtrics website and distributed to the respondents on Facebook. The respondents are women between the ages of 18 and 45 years old, residing in Canada and working in male-dominated industries, such as firefighting, construction, and trades. The online survey was posted on Facebook from July 2024 to September 2024. It was 100% anonymous and confidential. There are two principal categories in this survey. The first one is the demographic category, which consists of questions regarding age, gender, location, educational level, and marital status. The

second category is the measurement of the sexual harassment women have experienced in their workplace. The online survey consists of 25 questions. The Independent variable is sexual harassment in the workplace, and the dependent variable is the level of productivity of these women victims of sexual harassment in male-dominated industries.

## 7. Survey Results

The survey was built on the Qualtrics website and distributed on Facebook from July 2024 to September 2024. Fifty respondents responded to the study, this survey was 100% anonymous and confidential. 100% of the respondents identified themselves as women residing in Canada and working in male-dominated industries, such as firefighting, trades, and construction.

**Table 1** shows that at the moment of this survey, 50 % of the respondents were between 18 and 25 years old, 35% were between 25 and 35 years old, and 15% were between 35 and 45. Also, 55% of the women who responded to this survey were single, while 20% were in a relationship, 10% were married and 15% were divorced. Finally, 30 % of the respondents attended high school, 10% attended community colleges, 40% attended vocational colleges, and 20% attended university.

**Table 1.** Demographic Information: the profile of the respondents.

Variable	Option	Percentage
Gender	Female	100 %
	Male	0%
Age	18 - 25	50%
	25 - 35	35%
	35 - 45	15%
	45 - 55	15%
Marital status	Single	55%
	In a relationship	20%
	Engaged	0%
	Married	10%
	Divorced	15%
Education	Widow	0%
	High school	30%
	Community college	10%
	Vocational college	40%
	University	20%

## 8. Statistics on the Types of Sexual Harassment

According to **Table 2**, 55% of the respondents have been victims of physical sexual harassment in the workplace, while 45% of them have been victims of verbal sexual harassment. No respondent has ever been the victim of virtual sexual harassment in

the workplace.

**Table 2.** Types of harassment: Statistics.

Types of sexual harassment	Percentage of the victims
Physical	55%
Verbal	45%
Virtual	0%

## 9. Statistics of the Impacts of Sexual Harassment on Productivity

**Table 3.** The impacts of sexual harassment on the productivity of the respondents.

Types of sexual harassment	High productivity	Low productivity	No difference
Physical sexual harassment	0%	90%	10%
Verbal sexual harassment	0%	80%	20%
Virtual sexual harassment	0%	0%	0%

According to **Table 3**, sexual harassment in the workplace impacted the productivity of women working in male-dominated industries. This table shows that 90% of the women victims of physical sexual harassment in the workplace had low productivity, while 10% had no different feeling about their productivity. In addition, 80% of women victims of verbal sexual harassment had low productivity, while 20% had no impact. Finally, no woman who participated in this survey has ever been the victim of virtual sexual harassment in the workplace.

## 10. What Are the Proactive and Preventive Coping Strategies that Women Victims of Sexual Harassment in Male-Dominated Industries Can Use?

### 10.1. Individual Coping Strategy: Seeking Help from Psychologists

One of the preventive and proactive measures that will help women cope with the harmful impacts of sexual harassment in the workplace on their mental health is to seek help from health professionals, such as psychologists. Seeking help from psychologists is an effective preventive and proactive individual coping strategy that will protect and enhance women's mental health and well-being. Psychologists will help women overcome mental challenges caused by this type of harassment in the workplace. Women victims of this type of harassment in the workplace experience substantial stress and intense mental/emotional distress. They experience mental strain, emotional pain, anxiety, trauma, PTSD, and considerable mental/emotional exhaustion. Using preventive and proactive measures, such as seeking help from psychologists, is important when experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. These women must seek help from psychologists as early as possible before falling into depression and mental exhaustion. Seeking

help from psychologists will help them become resilient, resistant, and tenacious mentally to maximize their productivity. As well it will help them to prevent any possibility of getting a mental illness, PTSD, depression, or suicidal thoughts. Psychologists will help these women overcome their mental strains by providing them with a healthy and safe environment to foster their mental well-being and emotional healing. Many psychologists specialize in the treatment of women affected by trauma and PTSD in the workplace. They treat them with empathy, compassion, and confidentiality, helping them manage their stress and anxiety. In Canada, many women, particularly those who work in male-dominated industries, who are victims of sexual harassment in the workplace develop PTSD and an intense phobia of the opposite sex. Many of them have been able to overcome their PTSD and their phobia of the opposite sex after seeking help from psychologists. Psychologists offer personalized treatment plans to treat women affected by PTSD in the workplace. Moreover, not only do psychologists provide therapy with compassion and empathy, but they also provide psycho-education to help women victims of sexual harassment develop their emotional/mental resilience and tenacity. They also help them avoid any possibility of falling into depression. Organizations should promote mental health by hiring psychologists and creating a health care and well-being department for their employees. It is even more important for women working in male-dominated industries. Having access to help from psychologists will help women overcome the trauma caused by sexual harassment in the workplace. It will allow them to foster their well-being and maximize their productivity. Access to psychologists and other health professionals will benefit the employees' productivity and the organization's reputation and financial prosperity.

### **10.2. Organizational-Level Coping Strategy: Seeking Help from the Human Resources Department**

The second preventive and proactive measure that will help women cope with the harmful impacts of sexual harassment in the workplace on their mental health is to seek help from the human resources department. Indeed, human resources play a crucial role in contributing to the mental health and well-being of employees, particularly women victims of this type of harassment in male-dominated industries. Women victims of this type of harassment in their workplace must report their harassers and make a complaint to the human resources department. They must request human resources to open an immediate investigation and ensure that sanctions will be implemented against their harassers. Seeking help from human resources is an effective preventive and proactive measure for women to protect their mental well-being. It will help these women prevent any repetition of this misconduct. It will prevent any other misconduct that could harm the mental health of any other woman. Human resources must establish measures to prevent sexual harassment and its impacts on the mental health of women working in male-dominated industries. They must establish policies and regulations to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace. They must impose stronger punishments and sanctions

against the harassers. Moreover, human resources must also create stronger online and in-person training programs to sensitize employees about the harmful impacts of sexual harassment in the workplace on mental health. They must promote stronger preventive and proactive campaigns that advocate values based on respect, safety, security, and the importance of having a healthy work environment. Human resources leaders must work hard with the higher management of the organization to promote women's mental health in male-dominated industries. Indeed, they must organize preventive and proactive activities to promote women's mental health in the workplace. They must encourage open communication to allow women to report any misconduct within their organization. Human resources must also help these women by promoting the mental health and programs offered by the Employee Assistant Programs. They must emphasize the importance of the mental health of the minority of women working in male-dominated industries. Furthermore, human resources must accommodate women victims of sexual harassment in the workplace by sanctioning their harassers. They must also accommodate the victims by changing their workstations, making sure that they won't have any contact with their harassers to prevent any stress or sexual misconduct. They must offer flexible work schedules and decrease their workload to foster their well-being and productivity within their workplace.

### **10.3. Team-Level Coping Strategy: Seeking Help by Creating a Committee**

The third preventive and proactive measure that will help women cope with the harmful impacts of sexual harassment in the workplace on their mental health is to create a women's advocacy committee within a male-dominated industry. Creating a women's advocacy committee within a male-dominated industry is an effective proactive preventive measure. It will help women to gain emotional/mental support and a feeling of belonging to a community. A women's advocacy committee will be stronger and more effective in preventing the harmful impacts of sexual harassment on the mental health of women working in male-dominated industries. It will provide a safer and healthier work environment where women will gain emotional/mental support and feel belonging to the industry. This committee will also offer opportunities for open discussions and testimonials between women who might have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. It will provide great mental and emotional support to women victims of this misconduct. Therefore, it will foster their mental well-being and emotional healing. These women will have more power to report their harassers and gain emotional support from their peers. Thus, it will be a great source of support that will prevent women from falling into mental depression, loneliness, isolation, or emotional/mental exhaustion. Moreover, the collective women's advocacy committee will pressure organizations to establish stricter preventive and proactive policies against sexual harassment. It will pressure organizations to impose severe sanctions against the harassers. The women's advocacy committee can facilitate the creation of collective advocacy mentorship programs to foster women's mental well-being. The

group will create programs, group activities, events, workshops, and retreats that focus on women's empowerment, support, and mental well-being. The women's advocacy committee can also create partnerships with external organizations to benefit from counseling services and advice from legal experts. These experts will provide legal professional support to help these women victims of sexual harassment in their male-dominated industry.

#### **10.4. Organizational-Level Coping Strategy: Seeking Help from the Organizations**

Another preventive and proactive measure that will help women cope with the harmful impacts of sexual harassment in the workplace on their mental health is to seek help from the organization itself. Organizations play an important role in shaping a healthier and safer work environment for women who are victims of this misconduct in male-dominated industries. Organizations should foster women's mental well-being by promoting a workplace free from any sexual harassment or any other misconduct. They should lead by example and model respectful work environments for women working in male-dominated industries. They should implement mandatory training for all employees at any level of the hierarchy, whether vice presidents, directors, managers, supervisors, team leaders, or entry-level employees. Indeed, they should educate their workforce and organize workshops and campaigns to sensitize and remind the harmful consequences of this type of harassment in the workplace on the mental health of women working in male-dominated industries. They should also take proactive and preventive measures to ensure a healthy workplace and foster women's mental well-being in these male-dominated industries. In addition, employees should be accountable for any misconduct. Organizations should also ensure that policies, laws, and regulations, as well as the consequences, are shared among all employees to prevent any misconduct. If any woman is a victim of sexual harassment in the workplace, it should be reported, and sanctions must be taken. Appropriate disciplinary measures should be taken, and the victims should be protected from any retaliation. Organizations must offer a safer, healthier work environment to foster women's mental and emotional well-being. They should encourage a culture of open communication and team spirit, as well as cultures and values based on empathy, compassion, collaboration, respect, safety, security, and support for the well-being of women working in male-dominated industries. Women victims of sexual harassment should have the right to require management accommodation such as offering them days off, flexible schedules, reduction of hours, and mental support such as discussion with a health professional in the middle of the day to contribute to their well-being.

#### **10.5. Stress Management Strategies**

There is another individual preventive and proactive measure that can help women cope with the harmful impacts of sexual harassment in the workplace on

their mental health, which is the use of stress management strategies. Women victims of this misconduct in their male-dominated industries can use stress management techniques to protect their mental health and well-being. They can use relaxation techniques, breathing techniques, and yoga techniques to prevent any mental strain or depression. These techniques can help women prevent any mental crisis or emotional/mental exhaustion. They consist of practicing yoga, meditation, deep breathing, stretching, and progressive muscle relaxation. In addition, women victims of this type of harassment in the workplace must practice positive mental exercise techniques to cope with the negative thoughts caused by sexual harassment in the workplace. For example, they must challenge their negative or irrational thoughts and practice positive self-talk. They must challenge and break their dark thoughts, such as suicidal thoughts caused by sexual harassment in the workplace. They must also build their mental strength and resilience; they must work on their self-esteem, tenacity, and self-actualization. In addition, women victims of this misconduct in the workplace must practice physical activity and adopt a healthy lifestyle. They must limit caffeine consumption, alcohol consumption, and nicotine intake. This strategy is a great preventive and proactive measure that will prevent any harm to their overall health. Moreover, social support is also an important preventive and proactive measure that will help women protect their mental health when experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. Women should never isolate themselves when experiencing an intense stressor in the workplace, such as sexual harassment. They must talk to friends, family members, neighbors, acquaintances, or coworkers. They must also join a support group or community and engage in community volunteering so they won't feel isolated. Furthermore, engaging in creative and artistic activities is also a great preventive and proactive measure that will help women protect their mental health while experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. Expressing negative thoughts, dark thoughts, and suicidal thoughts and transforming them into art is a great therapy that will transform trauma into a productive project. Indeed, drawing, painting, singing, or writing are great activities to prevent any mental harm when experiencing a stressor such as sexual harassment in the workplace.

## 11. Conclusion

Finally, it is easy to realize that in Canada, even to this day, women are still victims of sexual harassment in the workplace, particularly in male-dominated industries. According to the statistics of the survey of this research, it seems that most of the time, women are victims of physical sexual harassment more than any other type of sexual harassment in the workplace. Unfortunately, it is easy to realize that it leads to many harmful mental health problems that could be detrimental to their careers and productivity. There are many coping measures that women can use to cope with the impacts of this type of this type harassment on their mental. Women must use effective measures to protect their mental health, foster their well-being, and enhance their productivity. Moreover, the Canadian government should

pressure organizations to establish stronger policies and training to prevent any type of harassment. It should also impose harsher consequences on the harassers to protect women's safety, dignity, and productivity. Organizations should also improve their anti-sexual harassment policies to protect their reputation nationally and internationally. They should find solutions to prevent sexual harassment to contribute to the well-being of their employees, protect their relationships with their stakeholders, and contribute to their good reputation and financial prosperity.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## References

- [1] Canadian Labour Relations (2024) Sexual Harassment in the Workplace. <https://www.CanadianLabourRelations.com>
- [2] United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and The Empowerment of Women (2008) Prohibition of Discrimination, and Harassment, Including Sexual Harassment, and Abuse of Authority. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/unccoordination/antiharassment>
- [3] Mayor, L. (2017) Female Firefighters Face Bullying and Sexual Harassment, Fifth Estate Finds. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/female-firefighters-bullying-sexual-harassment-fifth-estate-1.3305509>
- [4] Human Resources and Skill Development Canada (2010) Information on Labour Standards: 12 Sexual Harassments. [https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/employment-social-development/migration/documents/assets/portfolio/docs/en/reports/labour\\_standards/sexual\\_harassment/harassment.pdf](https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/employment-social-development/migration/documents/assets/portfolio/docs/en/reports/labour_standards/sexual_harassment/harassment.pdf)
- [5] Ontario Human Rights Commission (2024) Sexual Harassment in Employment. <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/sexual-harassment-employment-fact-sheet>
- [6] D'Amore Law (2020) What Are the Different Types of Sexual Harassment? <https://www.damorelaw.com/what-are-the-different-types-of-sexual-harassment>
- [7] Montpetit, K. (2024) Ontario's Bill 190: What It Could Mean for Investigating Workplace Virtual Sexual Harassment. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13163>
- [8] Hoffman, S. (2023) The Impact of Sexual Harassment on Women's Health and Well-being: A Case for Studying the Casino Gaming Industry. *Sociology Compass*, **18**, e13163. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13163>
- [9] Quick, J.C. and McFadyen, M.A. (2017) Sexual Harassment: Have We Made Any Progress? *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, **22**, 286-298. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000054>
- [10] Statistics Canada (2024) Gender Results Framework: A New Data Table on the Workplace. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240212/dq240212a-eng.htm>