

# Addressing Domestic Violence in the Workplace: A Guide for Canadian HR Managers



## **Why This Matters**

Domestic violence is often framed as a private matter, confined to the home and beyond the reach of employers. Yet in reality, its consequences are deeply felt in Canadian workplaces. Workers experiencing domestic violence may struggle to arrive on time, concentrate on tasks, or manage absenteeism. Abusers sometimes extend their reach into the workplace, harassing employees with phone calls, text messages, or in some cases, physical presence. This creates not only personal suffering but also organizational risks – legal, operational, and reputational.

For Canadian HR managers, the challenge is particularly delicate. You must balance your legal duty to protect employees under occupational health and safety laws with your responsibility to respect their privacy. You must ensure that managers and supervisors respond to signs of domestic violence without overstepping or breaching confidentiality. And you must work to reduce stigma in order to create an environment where employees feel safe disclosing their experiences.

Complicating this further is the need to use language that is inclusive rather than gendered. While much of the research and advocacy in this field has focused on women as victims and men as perpetrators, domestic violence affects people of every gender identity, sexual orientation, and family structure. By adopting ungendered language, HR managers can ensure that no employee feels excluded or invisible when policies are discussed or supports are offered.

This article provides a comprehensive roadmap for addressing domestic violence in Canadian workplaces responsibly and compassionately. It explores the risks to employers who fail to act, outlines best practices for balancing privacy with support, offers strategies for reducing stigma, and demonstrates how inclusive language strengthens both compliance and workplace culture. Real-world Canadian cases are included to illustrate the stakes and highlight lessons learned.

## **Understanding Domestic Violence in a Work Context**

Domestic violence, also called intimate partner violence or family violence, involves

a pattern of abusive behavior – whether physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, or financial – within a personal relationship. In the workplace, it may appear in subtle ways, such as a once-reliable employee who begins missing deadlines or taking unexplained absences, or in alarming ways, such as threatening messages left at the reception desk or an abuser showing up in the parking lot.

Statistics Canada has reported that roughly one-third of Canadian adults will experience intimate partner violence at some point in their lives. While women continue to experience higher rates of severe violence, men, non-binary individuals, and LGBTQ2S+ people are also affected. A landmark survey led by Western University in 2014 revealed that more than 80 percent of workers who had experienced domestic violence said it negatively impacted their work, and nearly 40 percent said it directly affected their ability to get to work. For Indigenous employees and those living with disabilities, the prevalence is even higher.

Workplaces become a stage where personal violence collides with professional obligations. The signs are not always obvious, and HR professionals must be careful not to fall into the trap of assuming who might be a “typical” victim. An accountant with impeccable attendance who suddenly begins missing Fridays, a warehouse worker with unexplained injuries, or a senior manager frequently distracted by phone calls – all may be indicators. The workplace cannot resolve domestic violence, but it can either exacerbate the harm through silence and neglect or help mitigate it by offering support, safety, and dignity.

## **Risks to Employers When Domestic Violence Is Ignored**

For Canadian employers, ignoring the impact of domestic violence carries significant risks. At the most basic level, occupational health and safety legislation imposes a duty of care. Employers must take every reasonable precaution to protect employees from hazards in the workplace, and that includes the risk of domestic violence where it is reasonably foreseeable. Ontario’s Occupational Health and Safety Act goes further, explicitly requiring employers to take precautions if they know, or ought reasonably to know, that domestic violence could expose a worker to injury at work. Other provinces, including British Columbia, Alberta, and Manitoba, frame these obligations within their workplace violence and harassment regulations.

Failure to meet this duty can expose employers to regulatory penalties and civil liability. The 2005 murder of nurse Lori Dupont at Windsor’s Hôtel-Dieu Grace Hospital is one of the most tragic Canadian examples. Dupont was killed by her former partner, a physician at the hospital, after months of harassment and abuse. The case became a catalyst for legislative change, prompting Ontario to amend its OHS Act to include explicit provisions on domestic violence in the workplace. For HR managers, this case remains a sobering reminder that the consequences of inaction can be fatal and that the law recognizes domestic violence as a workplace hazard when there is a foreseeable risk.

Human rights legislation introduces additional obligations. Employees coping with trauma may require accommodation under the duty to accommodate disabilities, including mental health conditions arising from abuse. Others may need flexible scheduling to attend court proceedings, counselling, or medical appointments. Failing to accommodate can lead to human rights complaints, which in some provinces carry uncapped liability for damages.

Privacy laws create yet another layer of risk. Mishandling sensitive disclosures of abuse – whether by spreading information beyond those with a legitimate need to know, or by failing to secure records – can breach federal or provincial privacy

legislation such as PIPEDA. More importantly, breaches of confidentiality can place an employee in further danger and destroy trust in HR processes.

Finally, reputational risks cannot be overlooked. Media coverage of workplace incidents tied to domestic violence often prompts public scrutiny not only of the perpetrator but also of the employer's preparedness. A company perceived as indifferent or negligent may face customer backlash, union disputes, and difficulty recruiting or retaining talent.

## **Balancing Privacy and Support**

One of the greatest challenges for HR managers is striking the right balance between supporting employees and respecting their privacy. Employees experiencing domestic violence may fear stigma, retaliation, or simply the loss of control that comes with disclosure. For this reason, disclosure must always be voluntary. Employers should never pressure employees to share details, nor should they position themselves as investigators seeking to verify abuse.

Instead, HR's role is to ensure that employees know support is available. Communicating this effectively means creating multiple, safe channels for disclosure – whether through HR, a direct supervisor, an Employee Assistance Program, or even an anonymous hotline. Employees should also understand that they can request accommodations without having to provide excessive personal information.

When disclosures do occur, confidentiality protocols must be airtight. Only individuals with a clear need-to-know should receive information, and written records should be kept secure and separate from personnel files. Training for HR staff and managers should emphasize that even well-intentioned sharing of information can create risk. For example, a manager who casually mentions to a colleague that an employee is experiencing domestic violence may inadvertently expose that employee to gossip, stigma, or even danger if the information is relayed outside the workplace.

Providing support without overstepping requires a careful line. Employers are not counsellors or law enforcement, and their responsibility is not to verify abuse but to ensure safety and accommodations. Offering flexible scheduling, temporary job modifications, or assistance with safety planning – such as changing office locations or screening calls – are appropriate ways to help without becoming intrusive.

## **Reducing Stigma and Creating a Culture of Support**

Stigma remains one of the largest barriers preventing employees from seeking help. Many survivors fear being judged, disbelieved, or even penalized in their careers. Reducing stigma begins with breaking the silence. HR managers can incorporate domestic violence into broader workplace wellness and safety conversations, demonstrating that it is recognized as a legitimate workplace issue rather than a private failing.

Training plays a crucial role. Managers should learn to recognize possible warning signs – without stereotyping – and to respond in ways that are supportive rather than judgmental. A manager confronted with disclosure should focus on listening, affirming the employee's courage, and connecting them with available resources, rather than asking probing questions about the abuse itself. Similarly, employees across the organization should be made aware of available supports, whether through EAPs, leave policies, or community partnerships.

Part of reducing stigma also involves dispelling myths. The notion that domestic

violence is solely a private matter ignores the workplace risks and the employer's legal obligations. The belief that it only affects women excludes male and non-binary survivors. The assumption that abuse is always visible overlooks the many cases where emotional, psychological, or financial abuse leaves no outward marks. HR managers can help dismantle these myths through ongoing education, awareness campaigns, and policy language that reflects the full spectrum of experiences.

## **Inclusive and Ungendered Language: Why It Matters**

Language is powerful. When workplace policies refer exclusively to "female victims" and "male abusers," they risk alienating employees who do not fit those categories. Men who experience abuse may feel emasculated or disbelieved, while non-binary or LGBTQ2S+ employees may feel invisible. This not only discourages disclosure but may also expose employers to human rights risks, since policies that implicitly exclude groups can be seen as discriminatory.

Adopting inclusive, ungendered language is straightforward but transformative. Referring to "employees experiencing domestic violence" rather than "female victims" acknowledges that anyone can be affected. Using the term "abusive partner" rather than "husband" or "boyfriend" avoids gender assumptions. Policies should also clarify that supports are available regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, or family structure.

One Canadian employer that revised its policy in 2021 to adopt ungendered language reported an immediate increase in disclosures from male employees. While the numbers were small compared to overall staff, the change demonstrated that language alone can create an environment where employees feel safer coming forward.

## **Best Practices for Managing Domestic Violence at Work**

Every employer should have a written policy on domestic violence that integrates with workplace violence and harassment policies. This policy should define domestic violence clearly, set out the employer's commitment to confidentiality, and outline procedures for disclosure, accommodation, and safety planning. It should also list available resources, including provincial crisis lines, shelters, and EAP services.

Compliance with leave laws is another critical piece. Provinces such as Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan mandate job-protected leaves for employees experiencing domestic violence, including a number of paid days. HR managers must ensure policies meet or exceed these statutory requirements.

Safety planning is equally important. With the employee's consent, this may involve modifying work hours, relocating their workspace, providing secure parking, or alerting reception and security staff. In workplaces with a public presence – such as healthcare facilities, retail, or education – frontline staff may need specific protocols for handling potential intrusions by an abusive partner.

Collaboration with unions and joint health and safety committees can strengthen these efforts. In unionized settings, collective agreements may already contain provisions related to domestic violence leave or support. Joint committees can also play a role in reviewing and monitoring safety plans, ensuring that they remain practical and responsive.

## **Recent Canadian Cases and Lessons Learned**

Beyond the Lori Dupont case, other recent Canadian cases demonstrate the intersection

of domestic violence and the workplace.

In 2019, a Toronto-area employer faced scrutiny after an employee was stalked by her ex-partner at the workplace. While no physical harm occurred, the employee alleged that the employer failed to take reasonable steps to protect her after she disclosed her concerns. The case prompted an internal review of workplace violence policies and underscored that employers cannot dismiss threats as “personal issues” once they are made aware of them.

In British Columbia, a 2022 arbitration decision involved a unionized employee who requested flexible scheduling due to domestic violence-related court obligations. When the employer initially resisted, citing operational concerns, the arbitrator found that the duty to accommodate extended to these circumstances. The case emphasized that domestic violence can intersect with the duty to accommodate under human rights law, even when the abuse itself is not disclosed in detail.

Another illustrative example is Manitoba’s early implementation of paid domestic violence leave in 2016. Several employers who failed to update their policies were challenged by employees who were denied the paid leave to which they were legally entitled. These cases demonstrate that compliance is not optional and that failure to provide legislated supports can expose employers to liability and damage workplace trust.

## **Practical Steps for HR Managers**

For HR managers looking to act now, the first step is to audit existing policies. Many workplaces have violence and harassment policies that mention domestic violence only in passing, if at all. Updating these documents to include clear commitments, inclusive language, and specific procedures is essential.

Engaging leadership is also critical. Without senior management buy-in, policies may remain words on paper rather than living practices. Training programs, resource allocation, and cultural change all require leadership support.

Finally, HR managers should build external partnerships. Local shelters, legal clinics, and community organizations often provide workplace training or can serve as referral networks. By connecting employees with these resources, HR can extend support beyond what the organization itself can provide.

## **Conclusion: Creating Workplaces of Safety and Dignity**

Domestic violence is a complex, painful reality, but it is also a workplace issue. For Canadian HR managers, the responsibilities are multifaceted: to comply with the law, to protect safety, to respect privacy, to reduce stigma, and to ensure inclusivity through language and practice. While no workplace can eliminate domestic violence, workplaces can and must play a role in mitigating its impact and offering employees safety and dignity.

The lessons from recent Canadian cases are clear. When employers dismiss domestic violence as “not their business,” they expose themselves to legal liability and, more importantly, to preventable harm. When they step forward with thoughtful, inclusive, and supportive policies, they not only comply with the law but also build workplaces where employees feel seen and supported.

The call to HR managers is not to become counsellors or saviours but to become enablers of safety and dignity. By implementing inclusive policies, training managers, securing leadership support, and embedding respect in workplace culture,

you can transform your workplace from a site of potential risk to a source of support. The task is ongoing, but the reward is profound: healthier employees, reduced liability, stronger culture, and, ultimately, a safer society.

## **Model Workplace Domestic Violence Policy**

*(For Canadian Employers – Ungendered and Inclusive)*

### **1. Purpose**

This policy affirms our organization's commitment to providing a safe, respectful, and supportive workplace for all employees. Domestic violence is a serious social and workplace issue that can affect any employee, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, family status, or cultural background. When domestic violence enters the workplace, it can pose risks to safety, performance, and wellbeing.

This policy establishes procedures for supporting employees who are experiencing domestic violence while ensuring privacy, reducing stigma, and complying with Canadian occupational health and safety, employment standards, and human rights laws.

### **2. Scope**

This policy applies to:

- All employees at all levels of the organization, whether full-time, part-time, temporary, or contract.
- All workplaces, including physical offices, remote work locations, client sites, and virtual environments.
- Visitors, contractors, and others present in the workplace.

### **3. Definitions**

**Domestic Violence:** Any pattern of physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, or financial abuse occurring within a personal relationship, including current or former intimate partners, family members, or persons residing together.

**Employee Experiencing Domestic Violence:** An individual who is subjected to domestic violence, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, or family structure.

**Abusive Person:** The individual who perpetrates domestic violence.

### **4. Employer Commitments**

Our organization will:

- Take every reasonable precaution to protect employees from workplace risks related to domestic violence, as required under applicable occupational health and safety laws.
- Provide confidential and supportive responses to employees who disclose domestic violence.
- Respect employee privacy and share information only on a strict need-to-know basis.
- Comply with all provincial and federal legislation providing for domestic violence leave.
- Provide education and training to managers, supervisors, and employees on recognizing, responding to, and supporting colleagues affected by domestic

violence.

## **5. Confidentiality and Privacy**

- Disclosures of domestic violence will be treated with the highest level of confidentiality.
- Information will only be shared with individuals who have a direct role in ensuring the employee's safety or implementing workplace accommodations.
- Records relating to domestic violence will be kept separate from personnel files and securely stored.
- Any breach of confidentiality may result in disciplinary action.

## **6. Procedures**

### **7. a) Disclosure**

- Employees may disclose domestic violence concerns to HR, their direct manager, or through other designated safe channels (e.g., EAP, union representative).
- Disclosure is voluntary. No employee will be pressured to share details beyond what is necessary to arrange support and workplace safety measures.

### **1. b) Safety Planning**

With the consent of the employee, the employer may develop a workplace safety plan, which may include:

- Adjusting work location, hours, or duties.
- Screening phone calls or emails.
- Providing secure parking, building escorts, or additional security measures.
- Notifying reception or security staff with clear instructions on handling unwanted visitors.

### **1. c) Workplace Accommodations**

Employees experiencing domestic violence may be entitled to:

- Flexible scheduling to attend medical, legal, or counselling appointments.
- Modified job duties or remote work arrangements where feasible.
- Job-protected leave in accordance with provincial employment standards.

### **1. d) Domestic Violence Leave**

Employees are entitled to leave under applicable provincial law, which may include:

- Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan: Paid and unpaid leave (number of days varies).
  - Alberta, British Columbia, Quebec, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland & Labrador, PEI, Federal: Unpaid or partially paid leave provisions.
- The organization will provide leave in accordance with or exceeding legislative requirements.

### **1. e) Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**

Employees and their families have access to the EAP for confidential counselling, referrals, and support. Information about accessing the EAP will be posted and regularly communicated.

## **7. Roles and Responsibilities**

### **Employees**

- Notify HR or their manager if they require accommodations, leave, or safety

planning.

- Participate in safety planning to the extent they are comfortable.

### **Managers and Supervisors**

- Respond sensitively and confidentially to disclosures.
- Refer employees to HR, EAP, or external supports as appropriate.
- Support the implementation of accommodations and safety measures.

### **Human Resources**

Maintain confidentiality and secure records.

Develop and oversee safety plans and accommodations.

Ensure compliance with provincial legislation.

Provide training and awareness to staff and management.

### **Joint Health and Safety Committee / Union (if applicable)**

- Collaborate in reviewing and supporting workplace violence and domestic violence prevention measures.

## **8. Training and Awareness**

The organization will provide regular training on domestic violence in the workplace, including:

- Recognizing signs of domestic violence without stereotyping.
- Understanding confidentiality obligations.
- Responding to disclosures in a supportive, non-judgmental manner.
- Awareness of leave entitlements and accommodations.

## **9. External Resources**

Employees will be provided with information on local domestic violence supports, including crisis lines, shelters, legal aid, and counselling services. National and provincial resources include:

- **Canada's Family Violence Info Line:** 1-800-267-1291.
- **ShelterSafe.ca** – a directory of shelters across Canada.
- Provincial crisis lines (e.g., Assaulted Women's Helpline in Ontario; VictimLinkBC; Nova Scotia Transition House Association).

## **10. Policy Review**

This policy will be reviewed at least every two years, or sooner if legislation or organizational needs change. Employees will be informed of updates, and all managers and supervisors will be trained on any revisions.

## **11. Non-Retaliation**

Employees who disclose domestic violence, request accommodations, or access leave will not face retaliation, discrimination, or adverse treatment. Any retaliation will be treated as a serious breach of this policy and may result in disciplinary action.

## **12. Enforcement**

Violations of this policy, including breaches of confidentiality or failure to follow



safety procedures, will be subject to corrective and disciplinary measures, up to and including termination of employment, in accordance with collective agreements and employment laws.

## **Closing Statement**

Our organization recognizes that domestic violence affects people of all genders and backgrounds. By committing to privacy, safety, inclusivity, and support, we aim to create a workplace where employees feel secure, respected, and empowered to seek help without stigma.