

Episode 10: Myth: Gender-based violence is a private issue

Overview: There's a perception that gender-based violence (GBV) only happens in the home, and that means it's a private matter, just for families or partners to deal with. This is a misconception that can keep survivors from reporting violence and finding support. Gender-based violence is a human rights violation that encompasses many types of actions including harassment, assault, manipulation, and abuse. It can happen anywhere, including in workplaces, schools, and public spaces, and has significant consequences for all of society. In this episode, we hear from experts from different organizations working against gender-based violence to understand why it is not a private issue but something that everyone should be working to address.

This episode is based on an event we held in December 2022 for the 16 Days of Action Against Gender-Based Violence. See a recap of the event here: <https://www.gendereconomy.org/we-can-break-free-what-it-takes-to-challenge-gender-based-violence/>

If you liked this episode, you may be interested in other GATE events. Check out our upcoming listing here: <https://www.gendereconomy.org/events/>

Featured Guests:

Pam Hrick, Executive Director and General Counsel, Women's Legal Education and Action Fund

Harmy Mendoza, Executive Director, Women Abuse Council of Toronto

Paulette Senior, CEO and President, Canadian Women's Foundation

Producers and Hosts: Carmina Ravanera and Dr. Sonia Kang

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Research Mentioned

1. Heidinger, L. (2021). Intimate partner violence: Experiences of First Nations, Métis and Inuit women in Canada, 2018. *Statistics Canada*. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00007-eng.htm>
2. MacDougall, A.M., Walia, H. and Wise, M. (2022). Colour of Violence: Race, Gender & Anti-Violence Services. *Battered Women's Support Services*. Retrieved from <https://www.bwss.org/colour-of-violence/report/>
3. Chellapermal, P. (2022). Intersections Between Employment and Safety Among Racialized Women. Retrieved from https://womanact.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/WomanACT_Intersections-between-employment-and-safety-among-racialized-women.pdf
4. Fact sheet: Intimate partner violence (2022). *Government of Canada*. Retrieved from <https://women-gender-equality.canada.ca/en/gender-based-violence/intimate-partner-violence.html>

Resources

[Find family violence resources and services in your area - Canada.ca](#)

[Gender Based Violence in Canada | Learn the Facts \(canadianwomen.org\)](#)

[Domestic Violence Resources | Canadian Association of Social Workers \(casw-acts.ca\)](#)

Transcript:

Paulette: It's having the insight, the vision, the education, the understanding, the culture to be able to accept that one, this can happen, but two, that you can do something about it. We're not helpless. And it's not private, it's public.

Sonia: That was Paulette Senior, talking about how we all have to work together to eliminate gender-based violence. Welcome to Busted, a podcast by the Institute for Gender and the Economy, otherwise known as GATE. We team up with leading experts to bust prominent myths about gender and the economy and give you the tools you need to bust each myth yourself. I'm Sonia Kang, Canada Research Chair in Identity, Diversity, and Inclusion at the University of Toronto, and my pronouns are she and her.

Carmina: And I'm Carmina Ravanera, Senior Research Associate at GATE, and my pronouns are she and her.

Sonia: We've got another special episode today. Back in December, GATE hosted an event called "We Can Break Free: What It Takes to Challenge Gender-Based Violence" as part of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. Our three guest speakers had some important myth busting insights about gender-based violence, and we're going to share some of those with our Busted listeners in this episode.

Carmina: This was such a great event, so I'm excited for our listeners to get to hear from our panelists!

Sonia: Just before we get into it, I want to caution our listeners that we'll be discussing the effects of violence and harassment in this episode. So please take care of yourselves. We've also put some resources in the show notes for anyone who might need support. Now, to start us off – what exactly is gender-based violence, or GBV?

Carmina: According to the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund, GBV refers to acts of violence committed against women, transgender and gender diverse people because of their gender, gender identity, gender expression, or perceived gender. It can take many different forms, including control, manipulation, stalking, assault, rape, name-calling, and harassment.

Sonia: Right. Awful. And we've been talking a lot about intersectionality this season, and I think it's really important for this topic too.

Carmina: Definitely. The risk of GBV is elevated for people who are marginalized because of some aspect of their identity – for instance, if they have a disability, are LGBT, low-income, racialized, Indigenous, or immigrants. They also may have fewer opportunities to access resources. One example is that Statistics Canada reports that 61% of Indigenous women are likely to experience intimate partner violence in their lifetime, compared to 44% of non-Indigenous women. Paulette Senior, who we heard from at the top of this episode, is the CEO of the Canadian Women's Foundation. She spoke at our event about the importance of intersectionality in developing supports for survivors of GBV.

Paulette: Intersectionality is a critical component of how we do work. Let me sort of back up by saying that, it's always been the way that we should work, no matter what we're doing. But within the sector that we occupy, the space that we've been working with, where I've been working with for decades. You know, it's always been a call from racialized, indigenous, LGBTQ folks who, whose identity matters in multiple ways, that they are, have always been saying, what you're doing doesn't serve me well. And quite possibly a lot of the folks that we've been serving have fallen through the cracks, right? And that's for reasons...that's no different from any other sector, right. It could be colonialism, it could be racism, it could be all kinds of isms that get in the way of serving people well. And so being able to work through and view the people that you're working with through that intersectional lens, understanding the experiences through which they come to you for service, but also this...them standing at the intersection of the various identities, which could be race and gender and sexual identity. And ability or disability, all of that matters in serving people well. And so our sector for decades have missed the mark. We've heard that through a number of sources, most recently through the Battered Women Support Services, who just released a report called The Colour of Violence. And, and this particular kind of data gathering has been missing within the sector. Where you're looking at the experiences of racialized folks who say that they are not being served well and as a result of that they are not participating or are opting out of the services we're providing. It could be because they're afraid that the police will be called if they approach us and tell their story. It could be because no one in that service program or organization or someone that's gathering their information actually looks like them, sounds like them, right. So how are they able to understand that experience of...and be able to walk in their shoes. Or it could be that there is

discrimination. Systemic discrimination that exists. Although we come from a sector that has experienced exclusion based on gender, understand that the gender that people present with cannot be the only thing we look at. There has to be...we have to be looking at the whole person in terms of everything they come through our door with.

Sonia: Okay, so members of marginalized groups not only experience GBV uniquely, but they also face more barriers to accessing supports to cope with GBV, including straight up discrimination and lack of representation.

Carmina: Exactly. So that intersectional lens is super important whenever we're talking about GBV. Just something to always keep in mind.

Sonia: Now let's get into busting a major myth around GBV. There seems to be a pretty common perception that GBV is something that happens privately, in the home, and that means that it's a private problem for partners or families to deal with.

Carmina: This framing is not only harmful, but it's also inaccurate. The impact of GBV isn't contained within the home. It is a human rights violation, and it has consequences that reverberate throughout our societies. It damages well-being, health, equality, and prosperity. It also negatively impacts workplaces and the labour market. We heard a lot about this at our event from Harmy Mendoza, the executive director of the Women Abuse Council of Toronto. She told us about some of the Council's recent research on employment and safety among racialized women who have experienced GBV.

Harmy: Gender-based violence often spills into the workplace. As a matter of fact, in the report we talk about...provides information about what survivors have to deal with when looking for employment while at work and the long-term effects of trauma. And so just to provide a bit of context, let me tell you that our report examines the intersections between employment trauma and with a particular focus on racialized women. Talking about what you just mentioned, intersections. We gather quantitative and qualitative data. So we did that through a total of 59 online surveys and 24 in-depth interviews which were completed early this year in January and February. And today I want to share with you what we heard and what we saw. In terms of how gender-based violence impacts women while looking for a job or employment, this is what we saw. 71% of them indicated that trauma had impacted them deeply in their ability to find employment. Why? They were too overwhelmed, stressed, feeling numbness, depression and anxiety. Almost half of those respondents, 47% to be exact, told us that they were prevented from looking for employment. And that means physically restrained. They were not allowed to leave their home. Why? Because they were told that that would take away their expected role in their home, like caregiving duties or responsibilities. 49%, almost half of the respondents, told us that their partner or ex partner had sabotaged their efforts to find work by using household work or child care responsibilities. And 29%, almost 30%, told us that their partner or ex partner used their immigration status, for example, to prevent them from finding work. They were threatened. To, for example, withdraw sponsorship applications. Now what about while at work, and too, going back to the question, while they are employed? Well, we heard that employment sabotage, it's a very, very common tactic that partners or ex partners use. And some other disruption tactics, for example, changing transportation arrangements or childcare duties or receiving harassing calls or texts while at work. And I want you to leave with this percent, this this information. This is actually very important. 80% of the respondents while at work reported that their productivity and effectiveness at work had been impacted by the abuse. So if you are an employer and you see that there is something happening with a staff. I want you to think about that number, 80% of them. 53% of them lost at least one job due to harassment and stalking in the workplace. Now there's one other statistic, number I'd like, I'd like to share. 15% reported their partner or ex partner had threatened to hurt their coworkers or cause damage to their employer. So that gives you a bit of an idea and how gender-based violence does spill into workplaces. Not only while at work, but while looking for employment.

Sonia: So all of those stats she talks about really show how GBV and the trauma that comes with it make it harder, if not impossible, for survivors to support themselves, which of course affects their well-being. And people who work with survivors can be directly or indirectly harmed by GBV as well. It's definitely not something that happens and stays in the home. It affects survivors' entire lives and the lives of those around them.

Carmina: And Harmy also talked about the long-term impacts of having to cope with GBV and its consequences. Supporting survivors isn't just about helping them get out of an abusive relationship. There's much more to it, because the trauma and other effects last much longer.

Harmy: The impacts are long-lasting. And not only because of the trauma survivors have to endure, but also because of so many other systemic barriers and challenges. And I'm going to name a few. And this list is not exhaustive because we know cases are very complex. But for example, financial hardship, it's nearly universal with survivors we heard from and we, we continue to talk to and consult. So income and housing insecurity. We know about the housing crisis in Toronto and how hard it is to find affordable housing. Dealing with issues of economic abuse. Like for example, coerced debt or bad credit, it's long-lasting consequences. Health costs, lost wages or reallocation costs are also key. And legal proceedings, anything. Family law, criminal law, child custody. We all know how long those systems are in terms of how long it'll take for a matter to be brought forward. And so they have to deal with that. And remember the report I mentioned initially, let me give you another number. I love numbers. I find that they illustrate. Let me tell you, 83% of the respondents told us that IPV impacted their career opportunities and progression. For example, gaps in employment is a barrier to secure future employment. So when you are hiring and you see there is a gap in employment, I want you to remember a little bit of these numbers. Because sometimes there is a reason for that and sometimes we're not thinking about that. I'm not saying that everybody who has that but gap in employment will be a survivor. But certainly these numbers tell us a lot about what's happening behind the scenes. And also it's important to, like I said, be educated. Know what's happening out there and what are survivors telling us in terms of their lived experience.

Carmina: We've put the link to this report in our show notes for anyone who wants to dig more into it. Basically, hearing all of this, and considering that 44% of women in Canada have self-reported experiencing intimate partner violence at some point in their lives, and that 59% of trans and gender diverse people have reported experiencing physical or sexual assault, it's clear that GBV is a pervasive and systemic problem that needs to be addressed at a societal level, not at the individual level. The health, social, and economic costs of GBV are enormous.

Sonia: Since this podcast is about gender and the economy, let's talk a bit more about GBV and organizations. What responsibilities do organizations and workplaces have when it comes to GBV? What should they do if someone is experiencing GBV outside of work, or even at work?

Carmina: Great question. Pam Hrick, Executive Director of the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund, or LEAF, talked to us about the legal obligations that organizations have when it comes to gender-based violence.

Pam: So under Ontario law, under the Occupational Health and Safety Act there's actually an employer obligation to have policies and processes and trainings in place to deal with what is broadly called workplace violence. But that specifically includes domestic violence. So it would capture much about what Harmy was talking about. And it's incumbent on employers to be aware of those signs of intimate partner violence and domestic violence. Again, a lot of the things that Harmy was describing that the interviews and consultations found. Employers have an obligation to take all reasonable precautions to protect workers in the workplace from that type of violence. Not just if they know what's going on, but if they ought reasonably to know, to deploy a legal phrase, they should know what's going on. So that's why it's important for there to be really robust policies and practices in place for employers to make themselves aware of some of the issues that relate to domestic violence impacting the workplace and employees at work. If folks are showing up late, to use one example, not simply to attribute that to something they ought to be able to overcome and to hold that against them. It may be a point to inquire further about. And so those are important legal responsibilities that employers have. There's also in terms of legal requirements in Ontario, there is a right to access paid leave when encountering domestic violence, experiencing domestic violence or sexual violence. Up to five paid days of leave, an employer has an obligation to give for specific purposes for people who are experiencing DV or sexual violence. And there's more extended leave benefits under the Employment Standards Act as well. So it's incumbent upon employers to know about their obligations, to share that information with staff and to make it clear that it is a collective obligation, as well as to give colleagues the tools to identify when there may be an issue rising related to domestic violence, to be clear about how that will be dealt with.

Carmina: And beyond legal obligations, there are other things organizations can and should do to set up a culture that's ready support survivors of GBV. Harmy and Paulette talked about this issue – the role that organizations have to play in GBV prevention and about creating cultures of safety.

Harmy: Be trained. Ask for training. Set aside time for training. Be prepared. I think it's not – it's no longer about if it will happen, it's about when will this happen to me. Chances are you will likely deal with this situation, so prepare yourself for that. Make sure that you are aware of what you need to have in house as an employer, but also all of the other different support systems. That you should be aware.

Paulette: And I would add to that really creating a culture of safety. For folks to be able to say what's happening to them. So it's not just an HR matter that's shoved to HR. But that every person has responsibility and accountability around, you know, supervising folks need to be trained. And need to adopt a very different kind of approach that says this is a private affair. Right, so we know gender-based violence is prevalent in society and we know that it starts from that, the issues around harassment and sexual assault and abuse happens. It's rampant in society, so it's only natural that these issues would come up in the workplace. So being prepared and creating that culture of safety but also educate as Harmy said.

Carmina: Harmy also talked about three words for employers to remember when it comes to gender-based violence and intimate partner violence.

Harmy: And I'm going to leave you with three words. If I can ask you for anything, remember these three words. If you're an employer or a coworker. APR. A for accountability. P for prevention, and R for response systems. Accountability. It's all about assessment. I'm gonna ask you a question and I don't want you to answer to anybody, just to yourself. Assessment under accountability. As an employer or a colleague, how ready are you to respond to a disclosure of IPV? Don't answer to me, answer to yourself. Second item under accountability: communication. How well have you expressed your commitment to support victims of IPV? How well have you communicated that to your colleagues or to your employer? Employees, sorry. Don't answer. Just sit with it. Second letter, P. Remember, APR. P – prevention. This is all about policies and procedures. Do you have clear and comprehensive policies and procedures? Have you had your employees or as a coworker, have you been educated on your policies and procedures? And when was the last time your staff or you were trained on bystander intervention or how safely to challenge harmful behavior? Do you or your employees know the role of observers to create a sense of collective responsibility when witnessing harmful behaviors? And response systems, remember the R. This is all about reporting and responding to complaints. Every workplace is different, and with the pandemic we are now dealing with different workplaces. You know there are hybrid workplaces, there are only virtual workplaces, so your response systems have to respond to your reality and your workplace. Now, if I lived in a perfect world, and if I would ask for the perfect system, there's one key question I would ask in terms of our workplaces' response system. And that is that it should empower employees by providing informed support services. What do I need? You're gonna have to investigate a complaint or a disclosure. When you do that, or while you do that, please make sure you understand the general effects of trauma. Showing empathy over judgment. It's so important. Foster safety. Be responsive to cultural, historical, and gender inclusion.

Sonia: Accountability, prevention, and response systems – those are all useful tools for employers to remember and design for. But, as you said, this is a major societal problem, and GBV isn't going to be solved in the workplace alone. What other recommendations did our panelists have for eliminating GBV?

Carmina: They talked about how all parts of society have a role to play in making change for the better. Pam talks about investing in Canada's National Action Plan to end Gender-Based Violence, healthy sex education, and changing our justice systems to better serve survivors.

Pam: Just because we have a strong, robust definition of consent in the law in Canada does not mean that we have a legal system, a criminal system, that does a really good job of dealing with violations of consent, also known as sexual assault. And in my view, it's because it's not built to centre the needs and healing and accountability desires of survivors. It's a system that asks survivors to go and tell their story to strangers, report it to the police, to tell their story again and their experience again, to the Crown too. If it gets to this point, participate in a trial where they share this intimate violation in front of a courtroom,

again full of strangers, and they're subjected to cross examination by defence counsel who will often try to suggest they're misremembering, making it up. Did they do something to invite it? Were they wearing something in particular? Those are still things that come up in questioning and cross examination. So you can just sort of tell from that partial description of what survivors need to go through in the criminal system that it's not built for them. So this is one of the reasons why LEAF is really interested in doing work right now to explore alternatives to the criminal legal system to give further choices to survivors. They can deal with the assault they've experienced and centre their own healing and advance their own vision of accountability. And specifically, we're talking about restorative justice and transformative justice options, which are really grounded in community and in particular, Indigenous, Black, trans and queer communities have been doing this for decades. And we're really interested in understanding that better and promoting that as an alternative for survivors.

I think at the systemic level we need to collectively call for governments to properly, to endorse proper sex education for youth and healthy relationship education for youth. We need governments to fund prevention and education, which is a pillar of the blueprint from the National Action Plan to End Gender Based Violence and Violence Against Women, which is a civil society document. We need to see the money flow from the federal government and the commitment to the NAP. To be able to properly ensure that people are accessing that education at a young age and at a system level, really working to prevent gender-based violence and sexual violence from happening in the first place.

Carmina: And Paulette talked about the work being done by the Canadian Women's Foundation in schools and towards education.

Paulette: In fact, we fund a number of programs across the country that are community-based, where organizations are working with schools on a number of things. And so the, you know, I think one of the things that is egregious is the fact that gender-based violence is preventable. And we just have to be smart about when we start to teach, teach this, but also to invest in this. Because it's important. So we will fund organizations that do work with girls and young people, gender-diverse folks, to talk about what is a healthy relationship. What does it look like? Real exploring what are the signs of something that is healthy, but also know what are the signs of something that is not healthy? You know, being able to recognize control. And coerciveness. And know what that looks like, so that you know, before they go into higher education, especially on campuses, that they get that, they get that to their core. So they can bring that teaching as they bring other teachings that are mandatory in schools.

Sonia: It sounds like there's so much that needs to be done to address GBV, but it's great to hear from our panelists that there are some very actionable steps we can take to make change—and to learn about their organizations that are doing a lot of this work right now. So, to wrap things up, if someone says that gender-based violence needs to be addressed in private, what can we say to bust this myth?

Carmina: I think you can point to the simple fact that GBV affects every aspect of society, and therefore isn't a private issue at all. It damages people's health, well-being, and happiness, their relationships with their families and friends, their ability to work, and so much more. And it's very pervasive -- it's not just a few people here and there who experience it. So it's clear that GBV needs to be addressed societally as well, through investment in education, prevention, and solid support systems. And that means everyone can and should be involved in making change. On that note, I want to wrap things up with a word from Paulette about how we can move forward.

Paulette: So if folks know that there's a culture of support and love around them, then there's much that can be prevented. So I think education is important, but also having a non judgmental approach to responding is also really important.

Sonia: Thanks to Pam Hrick from the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund, Harmy Mendoza from Women Abuse Council of Toronto, and Paulette Senior from the Canadian Women's Foundation for contributing their insights to this episode. Busted is written and produced by Carmina Ravanera and me, Sonia Kang, and edited by Ian Gormely. Make sure to catch the next episode of Busted Season 2 next month!

Carmina: Until next time, happy mythbusting!