

YWCA Halifax

Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment in the Skilled Trades in Nova Scotia

Key Findings 2024 Stephanie Gill – YWCA Halifax

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We gratefully acknowledge that our work takes place in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People. We acknowledge and honour the Mi'kmaq People as the past, present, and future caretakers of this land.

The Report

This report highlights key findings from the YWCA Halifax’s evaluation and exploratory research into sexual and gender-based harassment in the skilled trades.

Between July 2023 and October 2023, the Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment (SGBH) in Skilled Trades project conducted a survey and follow-up interviews to learn about the prevalence of workplace sexual and gender-based harassment in the skilled trades sector in Nova Scotia, its impact on women and gender diverse people, and the underlying organizational cultures contributing to this issue.

Why This Matters

The public eye has turned to the skilled trades as a vital component in meeting the housing and infrastructure demands of a rapidly growing Canada and Nova Scotia. The existing labor shortage in the skilled trades and upcoming retirements, means that Nova Scotia needs to attract and retain thousands of new skilled trades professionals to meet the housing needs of Nova Scotians.

The skilled trades represent some of the highest paying jobs in Nova Scotia. In addition, they often provide good benefits and stability during economic fluctuations. Despite the stability and family-sustaining wages that the skilled trades offer, the percentage of women entering and remaining in the skilled trades has not increased. Only 7.8% of the skilled trades are made up of women and in some sectors the number is even smaller, such as construction where women represent only 4% of the workforce (*Mainland Nova Scotia Building Trades and Construction Trades Council, 2023*).

Workplaces that are dominated by men are more likely to have organizational cultures that are defined by an adherence to harmful and rigid gender norms, where being a “real man” is defined by physical strength, showing no weaknesses, and a rejection of femininity. Research has shown that sexual and gender-based harassment is more likely to occur in such environments (*Dresden et al., 2018; Foley et al., 2022; Gruber, 1998; Gruber & Bjorn, 1982; Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2014; Perry et al., 2021; Pew Research Center, 2018; Stockdale, 1999*).

Based on the YWCA Halifax’s work through our Shift Change and SGBH in Skilled Trades projects, we posit that women and gender diverse people are not staying in the skilled trades, due to a high prevalence of sexual and gender-based harassment in the sector and harmful workplace cultures that adhere to rigid gender norms.

Definitions

We affirm that trans women are women, and our use of the term “women” throughout this report is inclusive of trans women.

We use the term “gender diverse people” to refer to those whose gender identity exists outside of the male/female binary.

Sexual harassment refers to sexual comments or behaviours, requests for sexual favours, or other conduct of a sexual nature that are meant to make a person or group of people feel unwelcome, disrespected, and/or ridiculed.

Gender-based harassment refers to comments and/or behaviours that are based on traditional gender and/or sex stereotypes that are meant to make a person or group of people feel unwelcome, disrespected, and/or ridiculed.

Sexualized violence is a non-legal, umbrella term that includes all forms of violence, physical or psychological, that targets someone’s sex, sexual identity, gender identity, or expression.

What We Heard

We surveyed 101 women and gender diverse people in the skilled trades in Nova Scotia and conducted 8 follow-up interviews where they shared their experiences with us.

Women and gender diverse people reported a high prevalence of workplace sexual and gender-based harassment in the skilled trades sector. Over 90% of survey respondents reported experiencing at least one form of sexual and gender-based harassment while working in the skilled trades in Nova Scotia, with the majority (84%) of sexual and gender-based harassment occurring while women and gender diverse people were on a jobsite or at their workplace.

84% of sexual and gender-based harassment incidents occurred on jobsites.



“I’d be afraid, if I were a mother and had a child in this industry, and she was working with some of these crews, I would be worried.” – participant

Over 95% of those engaging in harassing behaviour were men. And over 65% of respondents said that their main harasser was someone in a position of power in their workplace.

“Being treated like a piece of meat even by supervisors and people in the training room, that train you to work there, and then on top of it, trying to prove that you’re just as good as everyone else all the time. But you’ll still never be treated equal because you’re a female in the trades. Those are my biggest issues.” – participant

Women and gender diverse people highlighted the persistent nature of sexual and gender-based harassment in the skilled trades with 82% of survey respondents reporting that they experienced sexual and gender-based harassment multiple times.

82% of respondents reported experiencing sexual and gender-based harassment multiple times.



“It’s just constant.” – participant

Survey respondents brought attention to organizational cultures in the skilled trades that strongly adhere to harmful and rigid gender norms, where expressions of femininity are equated with weakness, leading to belittlement and derogatory comments about seeking help or showing sensitivity.

“I have seen people belittled for showing sensitivity or asking for help. Men will be called gay for having feelings, or belittling comments will be made about needing help with something.” – participant

Sexual and gender-based harassment are forms of sexualized violence, and like most forms of sexualized violence they are highly underreported. Survey respondents cited that reporting sexual and gender-based harassment in the skilled trades is hindered by fears of being labeled as “over-reacting” (52%), a “troublemaker” (50%), damaging one’s reputation or career (47%), or concerns about inaction (45%).

Barriers to reporting

52% “over-reacting”



50% “troublemaker”



47% damaging one’s reputation or career



45% concerns about inaction



“It’s hard to say anything because you don’t wanna be labeled as a tattletale. Word travels fast and it can affect your job.”
– participant

When women and gender diverse people working in the skilled trades do speak up about sexual and gender-based harassment, they are often treated like the problem or thought of as being “too sensitive.” And when survey respondents reported sexual and gender-based harassment to their managers, supervisors, and/or HR departments, only 50% of workplaces conducted a formal investigation.

“Some of the men get really angry or just really taken aback that they need to censor themselves in any way whatsoever and they feel that you know, they should be able to carry on as they have been before.”
– participant

Frustration from men and organizational cultures that adhere to harmful and rigid gender norms create an environment where women and gender diverse people feel silenced about their experiences of workplace sexual and gender-based harassment.

“I cried every day. I hated myself. I hated work. And no matter what I said, who I said it to, it didn’t matter how far up the chain I went... They didn’t care.” – participant

These working conditions limit the potential of women and gender diverse people in the skilled trades. Workplace sexual and gender-based harassment has caused many women and gender diverse people to reluctantly leave jobs and trades that they love and find joy in.

“I really love the work. I love working with my hands. The trade is everything that I wanted it to be except for the social dynamics and the psychological wear that it has on me ... and that is the number one reason that I would consider leaving the trade.” – participant

While individuals who engage in harassing behaviour must be held accountable for their actions, attempting to address sexual and gender-based harassment at the individual level without addressing organizational culture is ineffective and will not result in the elimination of workplace sexual and gender-based harassment (Brown, & Battle, 2020; Vijayasiri, 2008).

The bottom line? We have a major problem and until we address the prevalence of workplace sexual and gender-based harassment and the root causes of harm, the skilled trades sector will continue to see under-representation by women, gender diverse people, and equity deserving groups as well as high rates of turnover.

“The biggest reason I am leaving my trade, even after obtaining my red seal is the disgusting amount of sexual harassment and bullying from management.” – participant



**We can do better.
We need to do
better.**

Background

The YWCA Halifax's SGBH in Skilled Trades project emerged from the work of YWCA Halifax's Shift Change project. Shift Change learned from meetings with the Women in Skilled Trades Agency Network (WiSTAN) that agencies supporting women in trades are frequently contacted about workplace sexual and gender-based harassment. The SGBH in Skilled Trades project seeks to establish a foundational understanding of sexual and gender-based harassment in the skilled trades and emphasize the need for more work to be done to ensure that workplaces are safe for all employees.

The SGBH in Skilled Trades project remains committed to centering the voices women and gender diverse people living with disabilities, immigrant/refugee, Indigenous, Black, African Nova Scotian, and racialized women and gender diverse people and 2SLGBTQIA+ community members working in the skilled trades. To help center the voices of women and gender diverse people from these communities, the SGBH in Skilled Trades project is working with the

Ignite Group, a Halifax-based consulting firm, and building relationships with community organizations that support women and gender diverse people living with disabilities, immigrant/refugee, Indigenous, Black, African Nova Scotian, and racialized women and gender diverse people, and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. This collaborative effort aims to foster a holistic understanding of the unique barriers and successes experienced by these groups within the skilled trades.

Future reports should use an intersectional lens to discuss the complexity of sexual and gender-based harassment and the unique experiences and barriers faced by women and gender diverse people living with disabilities, immigrant/refugee, Indigenous, Black, African Nova Scotian, and racialized women and gender diverse people, and members of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities working in the skilled trades.



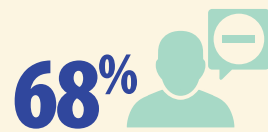
What is Happening?

91% of 101 survey respondents reported experiencing at least one form of sexual and/or gender-based harassment while working in the skilled trades.

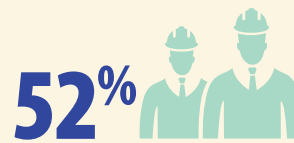
When asked about the specific behaviors women and gender diverse people experienced while working in the skilled trades, survey respondents reported:



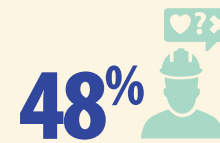
Comments or actions that were meant to insult them because of their gender or sex



Sexually suggestive comments or jokes



Inappropriate staring or leering



Unwanted questions about their private life or physical appearance



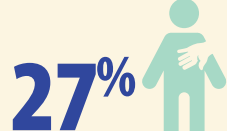
Unwelcome touching, hugging, cornering, or kissing



Being followed, watched, or someone hanging around nearby



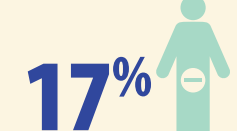
Repeated or inappropriate requests to go out on dates



Inappropriate physical contact



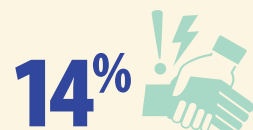
Seeing or being sent sexually explicit images and videos, cartoons, drawings, photographs, or jokes



Sexual gestures, indecent exposure, or inappropriate display of the body



Sexually explicit comments made in emails, text messages, or on social media



Requests or pressure for sex or other sexual acts



Indecent phone calls, including someone leaving a sexually explicit message on voicemail or an answering machine

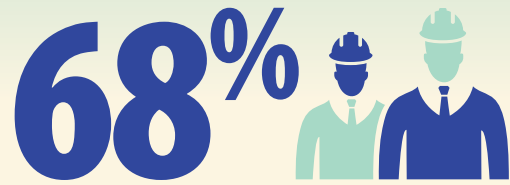


Inappropriate description, images, or video of you distributed on some form of social media without your consent



Actual or attempted rape or sexual assault

Who's Causing Harm?



of those engaging in harassing behaviours were either a direct manager or supervisor, another manager or supervisor, a co-worker who was more senior, a school instructor, contractor, or the CEO/ business owner.



of people engaging in harassing behaviours were men.



of people engaging in harassing behaviours were between 35-65 years old.



of survey respondents reported that their workplaces were male dominated at the time of their most recent experience of harassment.

Eighty-three survey respondents provided information about the gender gap in the skilled trades.

Eighty survey respondents provided information about who is engaging in harassing behaviour in their workplace.

How is it Being Handled?

Satisfaction level with how company handled report



Only 36% of respondents said that the harassment stopped after reporting it to their company.



of survey respondents made a formal report or complaint about their most recent experience of sexual and gender-based harassment.

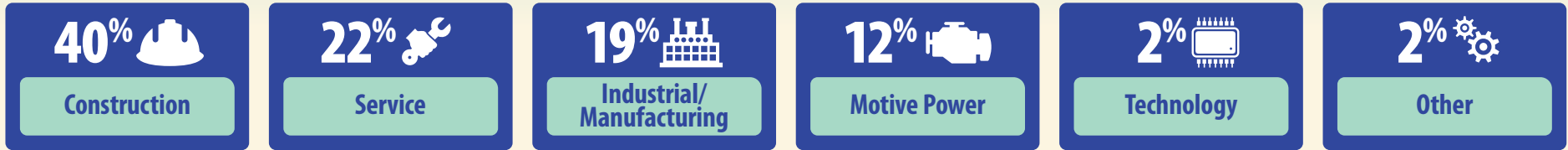


of women and gender diverse people who reported sexual and gender-based harassment said there was a formal workplace investigation after they reported.

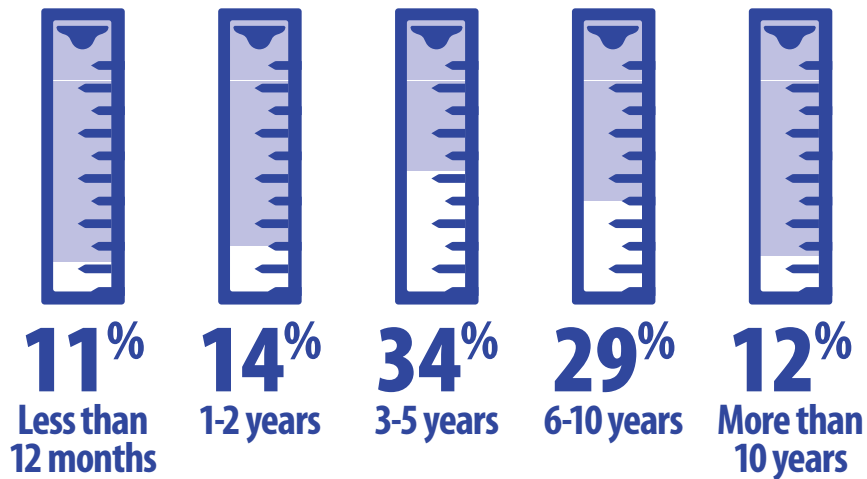
Eighty-two survey respondents provided details about their decision to report workplace sexual and gender-based harassment.

Demographics of Survey Respondents

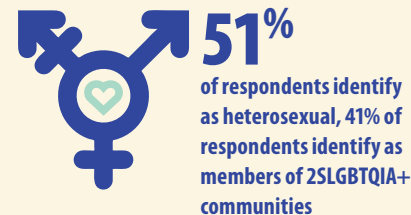
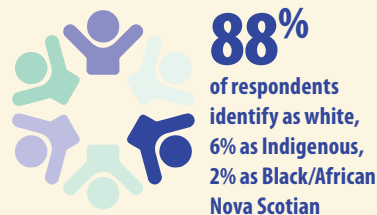
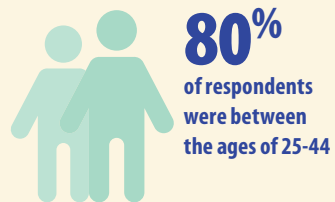
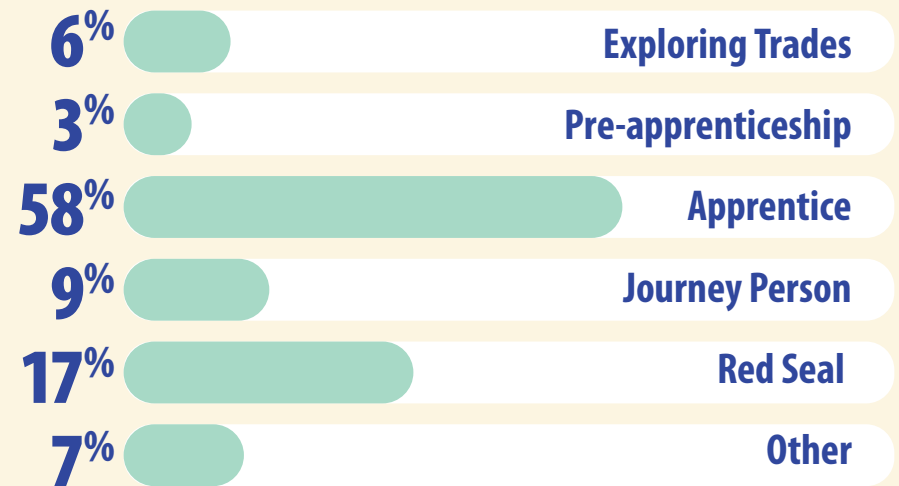
Industry



Length of Time in Skilled Trades



Stage of Trades Journey



Limitations and Future Considerations

There is limited research on sexual and gender-based harassment in the skilled trades in Nova Scotia. YWCA Halifax's exploratory research on this issue highlights the necessity for further research to gain a deeper understanding and generate comprehensive data.

The YWCA Halifax acknowledges that there is more work to be done to center the voices of women and gender diverse people living with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ community members, immigrant/refugee, Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, Black, and racialized women, and gender diverse people in this work.

The number of participants in this research who self-identified as gender diverse, African Nova Scotian, Black, Indigenous, and/or racialized is limited. Therefore, the data gathered does not offer a comprehensive understanding of the inequities faced by these communities within the skilled trades sector.

In addition, a significant finding highlighted in this report demands deeper investigation: 41% of participants identified as members of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. It is crucial to understand the experiences and perspectives of individuals from 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, employed in the skilled trades. Further exploration of 2SLGBTQIA+ community members experiences would provide

a more nuanced understanding and enable the sector to create more targeted approaches to address and prevent workplace sexual and gender-based harassment.

This report provides a broad outline of sexual and gender-based harassment within the skilled trades sector in Nova Scotia. It does not explore the complexity of sexualized and gender-based violence, including how gender intersects with factors such as race, age, ability, and sexual orientation, which significantly influence individuals' understanding and experiences of sexualized and gender-based violence (MacDougall et al., 2022).

“I felt like they didn’t really appreciate my skills as a welder, but they just wanted to show off that I was a female welder who was Indigenous.” – participant

“And I know I shouldn’t be ashamed to tell them that I am [Native] but some days just making it to work without that little extra bit of hatred from somebody is always nice.” – participant

It is well-documented that women and gender diverse people living with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ community members, immigrant/refugee, Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, Black, and

racialized women, and gender diverse people experience heightened levels of sexualized and gender-based violence and encounter systemic and structural barriers when seeking support and resources. To address the cumulative harm that these groups experience, future work must use a culturally relevant, intersectional gender-based analysis that examines the historical, structural, institutional, and cultural impacts of colonization, slavery, anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, transphobia, homophobia, intergenerational trauma, and other forms of oppression.

A diverse workforce is necessary to address the skilled trades labour shortage in Nova Scotia. To foster diversity, skilled trades workplaces must be free from all forms of harassment and ensure a safe environment for every employee. Commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion must be integrated into organizational culture and acknowledge the active and on-going learning that is necessary to continually evolve to meet the changing needs and challenges of a dynamic workforce.

“It can’t just be a few words on paper, it really needs to be action and implementation and understanding and unity.” – participant



Recommendations

Everyone within the skilled trades sector has a role to play in ending workplace sexual and gender-based harassment. The following recommendations from the YWCA Halifax encourage engagement and action from all stakeholders across different levels of the system, from government to individuals, to help ensure safe workplaces for every employee in Nova Scotia's skilled trades.



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COMMUNITY ACTION.

Recommendations for the Nova Scotia Government

Recommendation #1

Create an amendment to the Nova Scotia Occupational Health and Safety Act to include sexual harassment.

Key Details

- Definition of sexual harassment should be based on the Human Rights Act definition of sexual harassment:

“sexual harassment means

- i vexatious sexual conduct or a course of comment that is known or ought reasonably to be known as unwelcome,
 - ii a sexual solicitation or advance made to an individual by another individual where the other individual is in a position to confer a benefit on, or deny a benefit to, the individual to whom the solicitation or advance is made, where the individual who makes the solicitation or advance knows or ought reasonably to know that it is unwelcome, or
 - iii a reprisal or threat of reprisal against an individual for rejecting a sexual solicitation or advance.”
- Consult with community organizations and sexualized violence subject matter experts to ensure that the amendment aligns with best practice for responding to sexualized violence.
 - Government employees who enforce the OHS act should receive training in sexualized and gender-based violence, trauma-informed responses to disclosures, cultural humility, intersectionality, and vicarious trauma.

Recommendation #2

Create a sector specific third-party sexualized violence response team to ensure intersectional, trauma-informed, and timely response to issues of workplace sexual and gender-based harassment in the skilled trades.

Key Details

- Provide a timely and responsive avenue for employees to disclose or report sexual and gender-based harassment.
 - o Support employees through the compliant process towards resolution in their workplaces.
 - o Provide both an investigative and non-investigative resolution option for complainants.
 - o Provide confidentiality and protection from reprisal for complainants.
 - o Provide access to support and resources for complainants and respondents.
 - o Collect data and release annual reports on sexual and gender-based harassment in the sector.

Recommendation #3

Create incentives for training and work with employers and unions to build capacity. Continue to implement and fulfill best value and community benefit agreements.

Key Details

- Provide training incentives for companies who send workers for psychological safety, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and sexualized violence training.
- Continue and expand work to create more best value and community benefit agreements. Ensure training of staff and reporting/evaluation is part of this work.
- Consult with sector associations to determine appropriate incentives.

Recommendations for Employers and Unions for Culture Change

Recommendation #4

Commit to continuous training in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and psychological safety, from floor to ceiling, with a focus on those in leadership roles to build organizational trust.

Key Details

- Continue to recruit and invest in support for underrepresented individuals to thrive. Retain and advance underrepresented groups by training existing employees.
- Invest in training and education that is designed and delivered by Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, 2SLGBTQIA+ community members, newcomers/immigrants, and people with disabilities to increase understanding in the workplace.
- Scale and grow the YWCA Halifax Shift Change project, a 6-week Gender Inclusive Leadership Training Course, that has proven results.
- NSCC instructors and all trainers providing training in the skilled trades receive training.

Recommendation #5

Invest in sexualized violence training for staff who respond to sexual and gender-based harassment incidents to enhance knowledge.

Key Details

- Work with experienced agencies or trainers to train staff on trauma-informed approaches, cultural humility, intersectionality, and vicarious trauma.
- Create a community of practice where staff can meet to connect about sexualized violence and receive support to address issues that arise.

Recommendation #6

Create stand-alone sexualized violence policies.

Key Details

- Work with sexualized violence subject matter experts to develop sexualized violence policies that reflect best practices.
- Union leadership to develop and mobilize sexualized violence policy that can be shared and implemented consistently for the diversity of trades classifications and their contractors.
- Ensure that policies can address situations of harassment by management, co-workers, union representatives, contractors, and customers.

Recommendation #7

Sector associations create a staffed, shared service to support small to medium sized businesses with responding to sexual and gender-based harassment.

Key Details

- Hire several full-time positions to help support businesses with the development of policies.
- Create a phone line or service that can provide support to businesses when responding to issues of sexual and gender-based harassment and other forms of discrimination.
- Continue to build relationships and collaborate with community agencies to support workers with intersectional identities to access community-based supports.

Recommendations for Individuals Working in the Skilled Trades

Recommendation #8

Practice active allyship and cultural humility.

Key Details

- Seek to understand and learn about different cultures through literature and participation in community driven events.
- Practice being an active bystander when you witness instances of sexual and gender-based harassment and other forms of discrimination.
- Commit to on-going learning and unlearning about your positional power.
- Have respectful conversations and build relationships with people who have different identities than your own.
- To help increase awareness and understanding of sexualized violence, complete Breaking the Silence training offered by the Nova Scotia Government.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendation #9

Future research is needed to further understand the issue of sexual and gender-based harassment in the skilled trades and to gather comprehensive data.

Key Details

- Investigate experiences and differences between unionized and non-unionized workplaces.
- Investigate experiences and differentiate between ICI, Residential, and Road Building in the construction sector.

- Investigate the unique complexities and challenges of employees and employers in small to medium size businesses.
- Investigate the unique complexities and challenges of employees and employers in rural Nova Scotia
- Understand the workplace policies that currently exist, how policies are communicated to staff and the current reporting processes that are used for sexual and gender-based harassment.
- Investigate experiences and differences between and within skilled trades sectors.

Recommendation #10

To address the cumulative harm that women and gender diverse people living with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ community members, immigrant/refugee, African Nova Scotian, Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, and gender diverse people experience, future work must use a culturally relevant, intersectional gender-based analysis that examines the historical, structural, institutional, and cultural impacts of colonization, slavery, anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, transphobia, homophobia, intergenerational trauma, and other forms of oppression.

Key Details

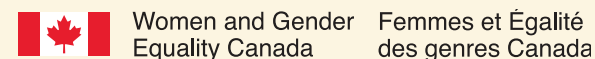
- Form a team of researchers with diverse backgrounds and expertise to bring forth multiple perspectives.
- Dedicate adequate time to create and sustain authentic relationships with relevant organizations and communities built on mutual respect and trust.
- Appropriately compensate and support first voice participants.
- Include the development of equitable and relevant survey questions that reflect the experiences and cultural standpoint of women and gender diverse people living with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ community members, immigrant/refugee, African Nova Scotian, Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, and gender diverse people.

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