DOMESTIC VIOLENCE MAY START IN THE HOME, but seldom does it remain there. Just ask Melissa Corbeil, communications lead manager for an Ontario government department, and a survivor of spousal abuse. “I think it’s one of the biggest things that people assume: that when the abused partner is at work, they should be safe and that’s their time away from all that’s going on at home,” she tells Our Times. “That would be ideal. But it follows you there.”

Corbeil recounts her experiences in a video which can be found at domesticviolenceatwork.ca, an online resource centre created by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). Featured alongside the video are the findings from the first-ever survey done in Canada on the impact of domestic violence on workers and the workplace. The report, called “Can Work be Safe, When Home Isn’t,” a collaboration between the CLC and researchers at Western University, in Ontario, reveals some shocking statistics.

One-third of 8,429 survey respondents said they had experienced domestic violence at some point, and half of those who experienced it reported that the abuse followed them to their workplace — phone harassment and stalking were just two of the forms it took.

Corbeil can attest to this firsthand. She says that after the birth of their second child, when it was time for her to go back to work, her then husband “had said he was going to help take care of the kids, but that didn’t work out.” When she was finally able to find day care and go back to work, she explains, “the arrangement was he would take care of the kids two days a week and they’d be in day care three days a week. It would turn out he would have an excuse every day he was supposed to take care of the kids, as to why I needed to stay home. The days that I did go to work, he would call me upwards of 20 times a day. He would yell at me on the phone, even when I tried to get off the phone.”

Vicky Smallman, director of women’s and human rights for CLC, hears stories like Corbeil’s all too frequently. She says the survey research makes clear that violence “follows women to work. It has a significant impact on their performance, on workplace safety in general, and it can compromise their employment.” And when secrecy shrouds an employee’s personal ordeal, others may not know how to respond. “Employers may or may not know this is going on. They may only see the impact on, say, attendance or performance or attention, complaints about constant phone calls, and so on. They may not be recognizing the warning signs until it’s too late.”

The CLC’s report found that no vocation is immune to the threat posed by domestic violence. “It was a really big piece of research, probably the biggest survey on any sort of issue related to violence against women since 1993, when Statistics Canada did a survey,” notes the CLC director. “So we have very strong data. But the people who filled out our survey were largely people who had good jobs, good unionized full-time positions.”

Smallman speculates that while workers in precarious jobs most likely experience similar rates of domestic violence, they may experience higher rates of job loss due to it. Of survey respondents, “about eight per cent of those who experienced domestic violence reported that they had lost a job because of it. And these were secure, union-protected jobs, so imagine how that might have been different if that was somebody in precarious work. Let’s just say that sometimes it’s easier to get rid of somebody who’s
perceived to be the problem, so that ends up being the employee.” What’s not always recognized is that it’s the employer’s obligation to keep employees safe at work. “And that,” Smallman says, “does include safe from the impacts of domestic violence, in our opinion.”

When well-meaning co-workers spoke with her manager without asking her for information first, Melissa Corbeil found herself in a doubly difficult situation. “It came out as complaints to my manager,” she says. “Now, not only was I dealing with domestic violence, I was also dealing with being disciplined.” Colleagues were frustrated by the overwhelmed Corbeil. “I can understand, from their point of view — I had poor attendance, I was on the phone, I would go into the bathroom and lock myself in a stall and cry, just to try to get away from it all for a few minutes.”

Life did not improve after meeting with her manager, who did not know the true extent of Corbeil’s situation at home. Over the course of her six-year marriage the abuse escalated, and during that time Corbeil was the family breadwinner and terrified of losing her job. Corbeil’s husband worked the night shift. When he came home in the early morning hours, he would expect her to be awake. “I was sleeping an average of two hours a night, and I would have a hard time getting through the day on so little sleep. Eight years later, it’s hard to believe that was my life at one point,” she says.

Barb MacQuarrie was a member of the research team that worked on the 2014 survey. MacQuarrie is Western University’s community director of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence against Women and Children. “I developed and had been delivering the ‘Make It Our Business’ workplace education program on domestic violence for a few years,” she says. “We had plenty of anecdotal evidence of domestic violence following workers to work and we even had some evidence from other countries, but we didn’t have any Canadian evidence. We thought it was important to gather that data in order to talk to Canadian unions and employers about the need to address this problem.” She became involved in the work after being in touch with Ludo McFerran, a trailblazer in the field. It was McFerran who, in 2011, coordinated the first national survey on the impact of domestic violence on workers and the workplace in Australia. With McFerran’s help, MacQuarrie reached out to the CLC and two other colleagues at Western and the survey quickly moved forward.

Sharing personal accounts of outspoken survivors, in addition to statistics, is the key to reaching a wider, non-academic audience. And speaking out, for Corbeil, is a dramatic change from when the Ontario Public Service Employees Union member was in the midst of trying to keep her painful situation under wraps. “Even if you have people who are close to you, you have this fierce need to protect your family and if anyone knows, you feel like you could lose your children, you could lose your whole family,” she explains. “You still remember the man that he was, that you thought he was. It’s a very tough time, because you feel that you have to be alone. You push people away.”

A dramatic turn of events convinced Corbeil that
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sharing her struggle was imperative. She remembers baking cookies for Christmas while her children were in the next room. When her youngest daughter fell and got up again, unhurt, “I guess my husband asked me if she was okay, but I couldn’t hear him.” He “came tearing up from the basement and knocked me down to the floor in the kitchen and hit me. At that moment, I knew I had to make a plan — I had to get out.”

She returned to work with bruises and a black eye, offering co-workers a vaguely plausible story about stepping on a snow shovel during an ice storm. “It’s amazing how easily we’ll accept explanations like that, and I find now, I’m almost too much the other way. I’m always nervous when I see someone with a black eye and they start to dismiss it, or they don’t even acknowledge that they have a black eye. All those feelings come up and you worry about that individual.”

In December 2006, Corbeil saw the first real opportunity to leave her abuser, but it proved too difficult logistically. “By the time February rolled around, it was actually on Valentine’s Day late at night, the kids were sleeping, and I was done. He had hurt me the most, I think, that night. I said I’m done’ in my head, because obviously you don’t ever reveal that — it’s the most dangerous time for a woman, when she’s leaving.”

But the following day, she was forced to change her plans. “He had gone to work, and I was going to call my Mom. I was going to drive to her and finally leave. But he called me halfway through the day, saying he was sick, and made me take him to the doctor.”

Corbeil says there was no going back after her husband physically attacked her in front of their young daughters a day later. “That was always my line: if he showed anything that would put the kids in danger, no ifs, ands or buts. He was choking me in front of the kids and this was a completely unprovoked attack. No argument beforehand. I was telling him everything was going to be okay. He wanted to quit his job — I said it was fine, we would make it work.” When he began screaming at one of their crying daughters, the mother of two says it looked like he was putting his hands on the child to choke her, too. “I was scared out of my mind, but I ran out, in the middle of February, in bare feet, shorts and a t-shirt, and just started screaming for help.” A neighbour, herself a domestic abuse survivor, let Corbeil in and immediately phoned the police.

Supportive family and friends are invaluable. So is structured programming to address domestic violence in the workplace. Beginning with building general awareness, the CLC is working to develop just that. Over the next year, they will introduce a series of two-day workshops for advanced shop stewards, health and safety representatives, and union reps, to help them better understand the issue. They’ll also focus on the union’s and stewards’ responsibilities, says Smallman, and “develop people’s skills in having these conversations. “We want to make sure that union reps have really good links to their local shelters and other service organizations, because those are the experts,” she notes. “We’re not looking for our people to become experts on domestic violence, but we want them to become experts on what’s available in the community.”

Experienced union educators are already conducting pilot groups, according to Smallman, but the material is difficult. “Even among the people that we train, among the people in our workshops, most likely there are going to be people who have experienced or maybe even perpetrated domestic violence, so how do you deal with that?”

Smallman is optimistic about a series of speaking engagements and other ongoing outreach. This past March, after approaching the government of Canada to co-host an event at the 60th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the CLC was able to bring the material there: “not only what’s happening in Canada but what’s been happening in Australia, where actually all of this started.”

And here at home, the Saskatoon & District Labour Council and the United Way there are planning a joint event open to the public.

The CLC’s message is being heard. “Governments are starting to introduce legislation that is a direct
outcome of the work,” says Smallman. Earlier this year, “the Government of Manitoba had committee hearings on Bill 8, which changes the Employment Standards Act there to give five days of paid leave to people who are victims of domestic violence.” Bill 8, which has now become law, allows for a further five days of unpaid leave, and if someone experiencing domestic violence needs to search for a new home, 17 weeks of unpaid leave is also open to them.

Smallman feels this came to pass, in part, because “they had very powerful testimony in committee hearings. Barb Byers, our secretary-treasurer, went to testify and to support the legislation and she said that some of the interventions were just amazing.”

Michelle Gawronsky, president of the Manitoba Government and General Employees’ Union, for example, recounted her own mother’s experience of being terminated from work when she tried to take just a few days off to escape domestic violence and move her children to a safe environment.

The legislation, the first of its kind in Canada, “really sets a precedent for other governments.” Smallman adds that the CLC has invited the Trudeau government to participate in roundtable discussions about the latest statistics and the need for federal jurisdiction on the issue.

The CLC has also begun encouraging unions to negotiate paid leave as well as member education into their collective agreements, the Yukon Teachers’ Association being one union that has already done so. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), Australia’s equivalent of the CLC, helped make paid domestic violence leave a reality for over 1.6 million Australian workers by negotiating clauses into their collective agreements. The average leave taken is only about two days — just enough for essentials like court appearances and emergency child care. “Like here, it started with a survey and then they followed it up with this effort to negotiate,” explains Smallman. “But now they’re trying to get the government to extend the leave provisions to all workers. Whereas in Manitoba, they just decided to go right there, like ‘don’t wait around for collective bargaining. Let’s just make this an employment standard.’”

When Corbeil went public, the response was immediate. “People were shocked at work — only a couple of them had any idea,” she recalls. “Everything happened on a Friday night, so I had the weekend and I didn’t let go of my kids. On Monday, my mom said ‘I think you need to stay home’ and I said ‘No, I need to go to work. I have to go to work — I need a distraction because in this house, all I can picture is what happened.’

Corbeil arranged a meeting with her manager and all the clerks on her office floor. ‘I said ‘There’s the...
restraining order. This man cannot come in the building. If he comes to the building and asks for me, you need to call the police immediately. They were so supportive. They taped the picture of him on the inside of the reception desk so they could compare it to anyone who came to the front counter. He was still in jail at the time, but he was due to be released the next day.”

MacQuarrie sums up some of the reasons why speaking about domestic violence remains taboo in many workplaces. “We haven’t learned how to admit that sometimes individuals, most often, but not exclusively men, actually make a choice to use violence, coercion and threats to control their partners and ex-partners. We haven’t learned how to hold those who use violence and abuse accountable, and we haven’t learned how to effectively channel these people into supportive services where they can learn to change their behaviour.”

Conversations about women, work and wages can lift the lid off abuse. Still, as Corbeil points out, income is not the only determinant of whether a survivor leaves an intimate partner. The reasons for staying are manifold and complex. When women have financial security they may have more resources, but unionized, well-paid workers may stay with violent spouses, fearing harm to vulnerable family members or that their children will be caught in the court system. And it is often tremendously dangerous to leave. The majority of women who are murdered by abusive partners are murdered after they leave. Domestic violence is a crime that happens to workers from any occupation or tax bracket. “Women who just couldn’t fathom that happening to them didn’t have any respect for a woman who ‘allowed’ that to happen to her,” sighs Corbeil, recounting a small minority of unsupportive responses from co-workers. “There were the odd comments: ‘It could never happen to me.’ And you know what? Blindly, as a 16-year-old social activist, I said that myself.”

Most feedback Corbeil received was in solidarity, not judgement, however. “I was shocked the most by the number of beautiful, successful and strong women I worked with every day that came to me and said ‘I’ve been there. I went through that. I’m proud of you.’” She still hears such words today. But now Melissa Corbeil also speaks them.

Melissa Keith is a freelance journalist and former radio broadcaster living in Lower Sackville, Nova Scotia.

MORE GOOD WORK

“I’M A NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR UFCW CANADA,” says Emmanuelle Lopez-Bastos by way of introduction. “My role is to look at social justice issues through the equity and anti-oppression lens, and look at the diversity of our membership and the needs of our workforce within the communities they live in.” Domestic violence in the workplace is a topic that she situates within a social justice framework, observing that while most examples involve male partners or ex-partners abusing women, gender identity (cis/trans) and sexual orientation also need to be part of the discussion. Indeed, the CLC survey found that trans respondents experienced particularly high rates of domestic violence. How race, religion and class intersect with domestic violence also needs to be taken into account when considering the troubling topic. “It’s about taking a wider-lens approach to the issues of violence within our community because we are not black and white,” she argues. “We are not binary, and we do not all come from the same place.”

“They did the CLC survey on domestic violence in the workplace and we did our own survey on it,” says Lopez-Bastos. “Because of our membership being from so many different sectors, it’s a very different experience from, say, public sector workers.” Since UFCW Canada represents workers in sectors such as retail, industrial and health care, adds Lopez-Bastos, “the scope of representation and needs changes dramatically” in relation to this occupational diversity. Of those who completed UFCW Canada’s 2014 survey, 59 per cent were female.

While most domestic violence is committed by men against women, Emmanuelle Lopez-Bastos says, gender identity and sexual orientation need to be part of the discussion.

“When they were asked about their experience of domestic violence, 18 per cent responded that they were currently experiencing it,” says Lopez-Bastos, out of which — over 70 per cent — said it came from a relationship with a current partner. Those who did experience domestic violence said it affected their work performance, whether it was being late for work, or missing work. About half of these respondents said they were able to talk to a co-worker about it and seek resources, such as an Employee Assistance Program (confidential counselling services for workers dealing with life issues affecting their work). continued >
Despite a smaller sample size and a demographically different membership, UFCW Canada’s survey responses were “highly consistent with those responses cited in the CLC’s survey on domestic violence,” reports Lopez-Bastos. The survey findings also revealed that, in the absence of a national intervention strategy, employers and local unions are more likely to use ad hoc approaches in dealing with domestic violence, when they are aware of it. She gives two examples taken from her union’s survey: “Where one employer might have designated a special code in the event that an abuser came into that workplace, another employer might have set up a safe area and focused on that if the individual experiencing domestic violence was on the premises and felt endangered.”

Lopez-Bastos regards the CLC’s research as valuable across sectors and across the country. “It’s groundbreaking, in terms of resources and being part of that now and actually implementing it, talking about it within our local unions, and seeing how that plays out throughout Canada.”

The fight for fair wages is instrumental in combating domestic violence, notes the UFCW Canada national representative. “We have put forward a very strong position on closing the gender wage gap in Ontario, as a key step in ensuring that women have those resources to establish financial independence, access to equal wages for equal work, and through employment in unionized workplaces,” she says. “Even if people don’t automatically see that link between women and their social determinants of health and the social determinants of income, the fact remains there is this great gap that impairs women’s earning potential in most non-unionized job environments. That gap feeds a whole host of other situations, like a woman’s ability to create a tangible action plan to flee from violence.” Because women are often primary care providers to different generations — children, the elderly, relatives with a disability — improvements to job security, benefits, wages and scheduling all contribute to greater flexibility in protecting themselves and vulnerable dependents from danger at home.

Lopez-Bastos found the survey work hard: “These issues hit home. It’s very, very uncomfortable.” Not nearly as uncomfortable, she adds, as living with limited resources to escape from an abusive partner. “It increases that vulnerability. You need so much courage to feel supported in our Canada because there are women who are turned away from shelters every night, because there’s not enough space. So with this blueprint and the Canadian network of women’s and shelter services, the point is to tell the government, ‘You can’t do it alone. You have to encompass the work that we do on the ground,’ in order to create those meaningful changes to address violence against women on different fronts.” — MK