

# Verbal abuse in the workplace: Are men or women most at risk?

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There is no significant difference in the prevalence of verbal abuse in the workplace between men and women, according to a systematic review of the literature conducted by researchers at the Institut universitaire de santé mentale de Montréal and the University of Montreal.

Verbal abuse is the most common form of [workplace violence](#). It can lead to many consequences, particularly at the psychological and organizational levels. Several studies underline the importance of taking into account sociodemographic variables such as victims' sex to better understand the phenomenon. However, the results are often contradictory and offer no conclusions as to the greater prevalence of verbal abuse in one gender or the other.

The objective of Stéphane Guay, lead author of the study, was to identify and summarize all previous research on verbal abuse in the workplace that took into account victims' sex in the analyses. After a rigorous selection process, 29 of the 90 identified studies were considered, most of which (24) were carried out in the health sector.

The results demonstrate that the majority of studies (15 of 29) reported no [significant difference](#) in the prevalence between men and women. This lack of difference can be explained by the fact the studies were conducted in the health sector. Men conform to a female-dominated environment by adopting certain behaviours that the literature considers stereotypically feminine. For example, they use more often

communication techniques and have a less aggressive approach to defusing violent situations compared to men in other sectors.

Among the studies that show significant differences, a majority conclude that men are more at risk (11 studies) than women (5 studies). One explanation is that "in a female-dominated workplace, men are expected to adopt a protective attitude towards women, which makes them more vulnerable," suggests Guay, director of the Trauma Studies Centre of the Institut universitaire en santé mentale de Montréal.

The other explanation is related to the fact that it is more socially acceptable to be aggressive vis-à-vis the "stronger sex," considered as able to defend itself, than towards women, considered to be more vulnerable. This is all the more true because the majority of perpetrators are male.

Finally, the third explanation stems from the fact that research shows that [men](#) tend to be more verbally aggressive when provoked, while women tend to negotiate more.

However, certain methodological limitations of these studies prevent definitive conclusions. Indeed, the sectoral categories are too broad, and studies that target some professions are still too few. Other factors are singled out by the researchers, including a lack of a clear definition of [verbal abuse](#), or the fact that social acceptance of violence against [women](#) depends on the cultural context.

Provided by University of Montreal

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