

GENDERED VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

REPORT FROM SURVEY OF
WORKERS IN THE ACT 2020



UNIONSACT

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This report was overseen by the UnionsACT Women's Committee. The UnionsACT Women's Committee is a standing subcommittee of the UnionsACT Executive, created under the Rules of UnionsACT. The objectives of the committee short term are to empower women in the workplace and the community, encourage women to join their unions, and promote participation in We Are Union Women campaigns.

Long term we aim to build union pride and community activism, to empower women within their unions, and to advance campaigns that challenge structural inequality and discrimination against women.

This report has been produced with the support and sponsorship of the Independent Education Union, Australian Education Union and the National Tertiary Education Union.

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UnionsACT acknowledges that Canberra has been built on the land of the Ngunnawal. We pay our respect to their Elders and recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout 2020 and into 2021 the UnionsACT Women's Committee surveyed workers in the ACT asking about their experiences of gendered violence in the workplace. Over 1000 people responded to and asked questions ranging from the culture of their workplace to its Work Health and Safety policies and procedures. Respondents were mostly female (66.8%) and mostly over the age of 35 (69.9%). Industries with the highest number of responses were Health Care and Aged Care (22.2%), Government and Public Service (22.1%) and Education and Training (13.71%). Over half of those surveyed were full time workers and just under half are working in large workplaces with 100+ employees.

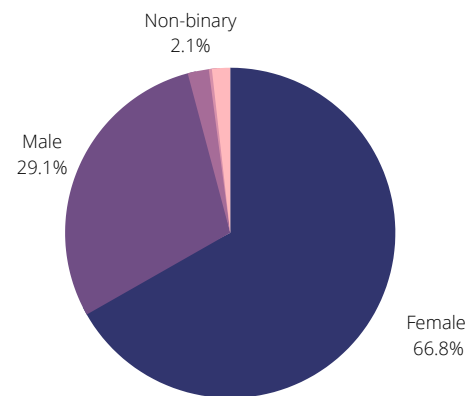
For the purpose of our survey and report gendered violence was defined as any behaviour, directed at or affecting any person, because of their gender or sexual orientation, that creates a risk to health and safety, creates economic harm or the expectation that one should tolerate violence or harm for reasons related to their gender.

Respondents conveyed the prevalence of workplace violence in the ACT. When respondents were asked if they had ever felt unsafe, uncomfortable or at risk in their current or previous workplaces, only 13.8% of women and gender diverse people said 'no' compared to 26.1% of male respondents. Workplace violence was not only evident in the psycho-social hazards, but also in physical hazards identified by respondents. 1 in 3 women and gender diverse respondents reported that they have been physically hurt by another person whilst at work. Fewer than 1 in 5 male respondents reported having experienced being physically hurt by another person at work.

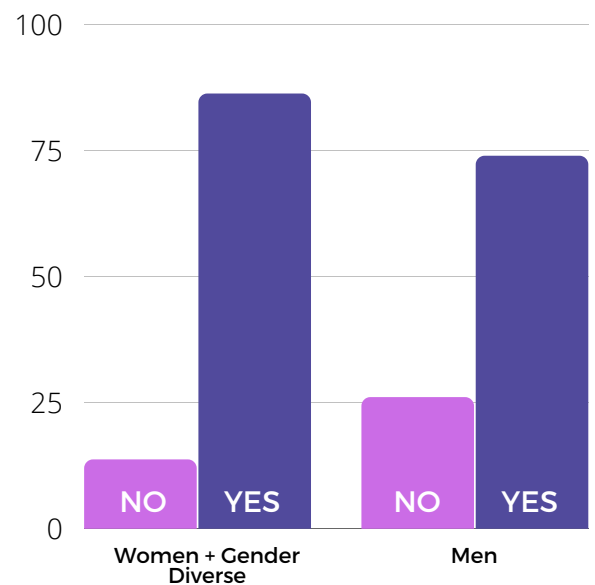
1000+

survey responses

Gender breakdown of survey participants



Have you ever felt unsafe, uncomfortable or at risk at work?



1 in 3

women + gender diverse
have been physically hurt
by another person at work

"I have been grabbed, groped and flashed by male patients in the past. I was informed by management to just walk away and let another nurse handle it. I have never been encouraged to file a formal report and when I have I was told I was overreacting because the patient was intoxicated."

- Female Nurse

57%

identified existing hazards
in their workplace

Workplace injuries and ongoing hazards identified were related to the gender of the respondent. 57% of all respondents were able to identify existing hazards in their workplaces which could cause injury or illness 42.7% said that those hazards related to gendered violence. Additionally, 62.72% reported having been injured or hurt while at work and the majority agreed that the incident was related to their gender or gender presentation.

There are also a number of barriers to redress for workers who experience workplace violence identified through the survey responses. Key barriers include the existing workplace cultures that promote silence around incidents; a general disrespect of women and gender diverse workers; a lack of clear and adequate reporting processes for victims of workplace violence; and more generally, a lack of awareness around Work Health and Safety rights and entitlements among workers themselves.

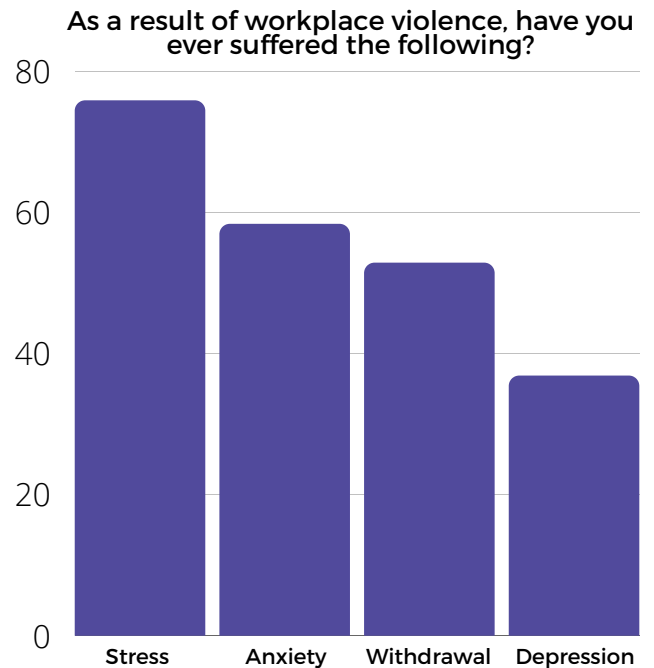
This report illustrates the prevalence of workplace violence in the ACT as well as its gendered nature. It seeks to highlight the pervasive elements of workplace culture that allow for gendered violence and the ways in which women and gender diverse people are prevented from asserting their rights and accessing help. The UnionsACT Women's Committee intends for this report to motivate Government, regulators and industry and to provide working people with safe and respectful workplace regardless of gender.

MENTAL HEALTH

The impact of gendered violence in the workplace was felt strongly by survey respondents. Many reporting adverse effects on their mental health. With the most common impact suffered was stress (75.8%) followed by anxiety (58.3%) then withdrawal and a loss of confidence (52.75%). Several other impacts were identified with 36.8% saying they had suffered depression and 4.5% reported that having made a suicide attempt due to gendered violence in the workplace. Almost half of the survey respondents stated that they had either thought about or had actually resigned from a job due to gendered violence.

Of those industries with a significant number of respondents there were a few with more alarming statistics. Respondents working in government or public service were more likely to have experienced sexist or gendered comments and jokes (82.22% compared to 77.5%). Education and training industry respondents were more likely to have been physically hurt by another person while at work (46.85% compared to 30.25%). Both of these industries also fared worse when it came to mental health.

Respondents from the education and training sector were more likely to experience mental health impacts as a direct result of gendered violence. While they reported higher levels of mental health impacts listed in the survey, there was an alarming discrepancy such as 90.2% reportedly experiencing stress and 42.4% reportedly experiencing depression. Respondents working in Government or the public service were also more likely than most to experience the common mental health impacts of workplace violence including stress (78.7%), anxiety (59.84%) and withdrawal (58.27%).



90.2%
education + training workers
experiencing stress

“In a former workplace I had to deal with lots of drunk men. Sexual harassment, aggression and stalking were all just unspoken parts of the job.”

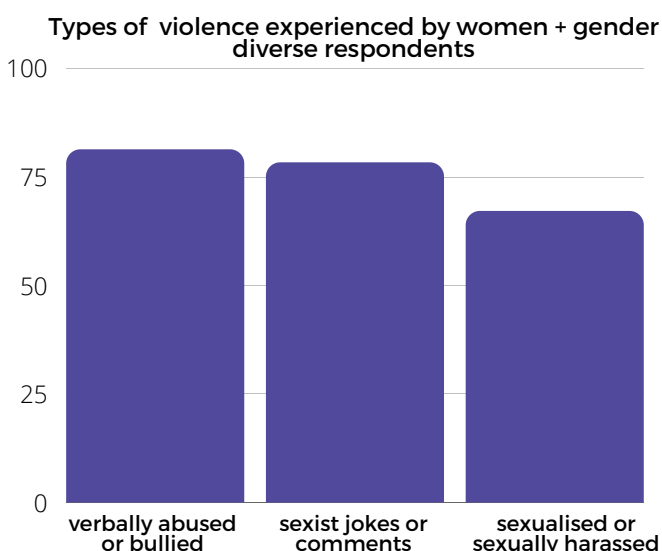
- Young Woman

WORKPLACE CULTURE

The pervasiveness of gendered violence in the workplace is aided by the sexist culture of many workplaces in the ACT. Survey respondents illustrated this culture. Only just over half of the respondents reported feeling respected at work and happy with their workplace culture. When asked 'have you ever felt unsafe, uncomfortable or at risk at your current or previous workplace?' only 17.52% of respondents said 'no'. Respondents were then asked who they would consider responsible for those feelings and the most common response was their boss or manager (42.2%).

Much of gendered violence perpetrated in the workplace is done through verbal abuse, harassment and bullying. 81.3% of women and gender diverse workers reported feeling verbally abused or bullied at work, 78.3% of respondents experienced sexist or gendered comments and jokes and 67.1% felt sexualised or had experienced sexual harassment.

Respondents also chose to detail experiences with workplace violence. These experiences speak to the culture of their workplaces and the subsequent violence that it allows.



42.2%
said their boss/manager made them feel uncomfortable, unsafe or at risk

SOME COMMENTS LEFT BY RESPONDENTS:

"Customer threatened to rape me because I forgot something from their fast food order"

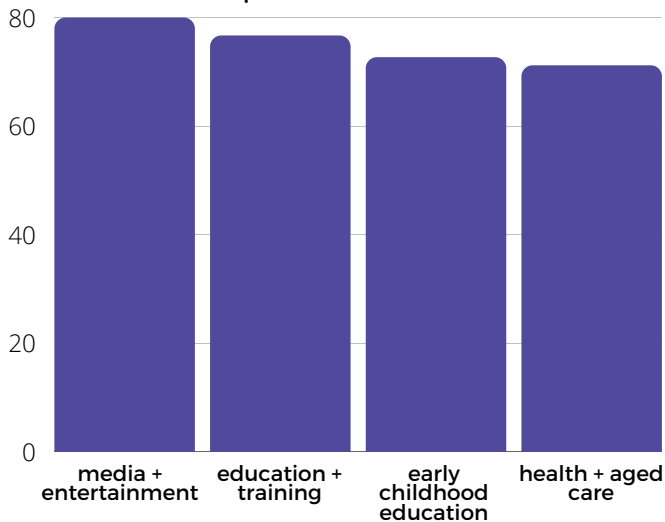
*"Punched, kicked, grabbed, called a 'f*ggot' 'c*nt' 'arsehole' threatened with serious violence... Workplaces say they don't tolerate it but never have I seen a patient or family member ejected from the hospital"*

"In my previous workplace my boss frequently put his hand on my thigh and would call me 'good girl'... I was too worried about losing my job to tell him directly to stop."

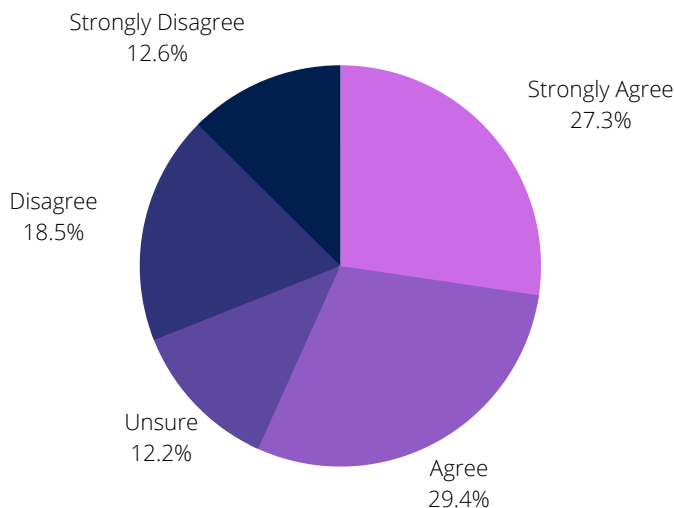
"Male students physically assault female teachers. It is not taken seriously as the male students are of primary school age."

"Being treated as a joke because I was female. Not being taught the trade and treated as a cleaner. Being tied up with electrical tape and thrown rocks at, being groped."

Feeling that the needs/rights of patients/customers etc are prioritised above workers



Violent, aggressive or bigoted behaviour in my workplace is called out.



Another key theme throughout the survey was that people felt that the needs and rights of their patients, customers, clients, students or others were prioritised over their own (58.6%). This was more often the case for women and gender diverse respondents, 64.8% of whom reported having their needs and rights de-prioritised compared to 43.9% of male respondents. This issue was of greatest concern for those in female dominated industries such as media, arts and entertainment (80%), education and training (76.72%), early childhood education (72.7%) and health and aged care (71.21%) highlighting the systemic nature of the issue.

Survey respondents also reported a culture of silence and acceptance around gendered violence. Only 64.5% of respondents said that their workplace took a zero-tolerance approach to sexism, homophobia and other norms that support gendered violence. When it comes to more directly harmful behaviours, only 55.5% agreed that violent, aggressive or bigoted behaviour was called out in their workplace.

MORE COMMENTS FROM RESPONDENTS:

"Usually people are disrespectful about working mothers, if they need flexibility with work. I worked in a construction area for a while and I felt like I was being treated like a child sometimes. This was the worst workplace for gendered and blatantly transphobic comments."

"I had clip boards thrown at me and been verbally and racially abused by clients. I've had vets throw surgical instruments and other equipment when they have lost their temper. I've had an employer say he wouldn't buy me a new uniform until I lost weight."

POLICIES AND REPORTING PROCEDURES

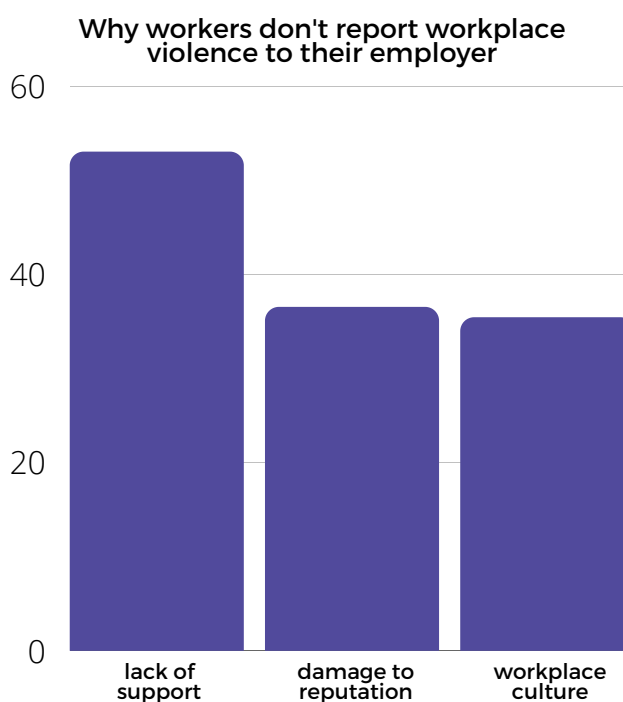
The prevalence and impact of gendered workplace violence in the workplace is compounded by poor workplace reporting processes and policies. Of those people surveyed, only 59.9% reported that their workplace has a policy and reporting system for Work Health and Safety incidents and that training had been offered. An additional 31.6% reported having a policy and reporting system in place but noted that training had not been provided in relation to policies and reporting systems for discrimination, harassment or workplace gendered violence only 55.6% said their workplace had included training. Again, an additional 29.7% reported that their workplace had a policy and reporting system but that they have not received training.

Respondents who were members of their Union were more likely to have policies and reporting systems in place with 62.1% saying they had a WHS policy which they have been trained in. 33.4% saying they had a policy but had not been trained. Likewise for discrimination, harassment and workplace violence policies, 57.2% of Union members reported having a policy that they had been trained in and another 32% had a policy but have not been trained.

For respondents who had experienced some form of gendered workplace violence, only half reported it to their employer. Respondents who did not report cited a number of reasons with the most common being that they didn't feel confident that their employer would support them (53%), followed by not wanting to be known as a complainer (36.5%), then workplace culture frowning upon reporting (35.4%).

59.9%
have a WHS policy and reporting system in which they have been trained

62.1%
of union members have a WHS policy and reporting system in which they have been trained



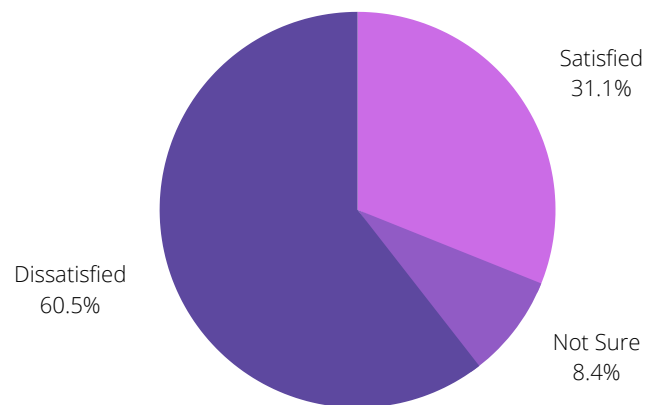
Overall, the survey shows that there are a number of social and cultural factors contributing to the under-reporting of gendered workplace violence. These factors are also clearly gendered with 46.3% of women and gender diverse respondents stating that they had been encouraged to just accept workplace violence as part of the job compared to 28% of male respondents.

It may also be the case that those experiencing workplace violence have not been properly educated about their rights. Only 47.7% of respondents reported that they understood their Work Health and Safety rights and knew how to uphold those rights.

Once these barriers to reporting have been overcome, there is the further issue of a lack of satisfactory outcomes from the process. Of those respondents who did report workplace violence to their employer, only 31.06% felt satisfied with their employer's response.

46.3%
female and gender diverse
respondents told to accept workplace
violence as part of the job

If you reported an incident, were you satisfied with your employer's response?



COMMENTS ON EMPLOYER RESPONSES TO INCIDENTS:

"Had a friend of my boss at the bar I used to work at pin me against a wall and try to coerce sex out of me. He then followed me home. This man had been fired from another venue for trying to blackmail a staff member into sex, which was common knowledge and a 'joke' to male staff members."

"I was offered 'resilience training' for reporting racist and homophobic comments and abusive remarks."

"I was physically thrown across a room by a colleague. When I reported it to my manager, I was told my colleague was 'innocent until proven guilty'. I received very little support from my Department during this process. I am still fearful of this colleague."

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.

ACT Government to consult with Unions in developing amendments to the Work Health and Safety Act to improve regulation around gendered violence and psychosocial hazards by including positive duty to prevent gendered violence in the workplace.

WorkSafe ACT to consult with Unions to develop a code of practice for gendered workplace violence including sexual harassment and other psychosocial hazards, that encourages workplaces to take a prevention focused approach in their work environment.

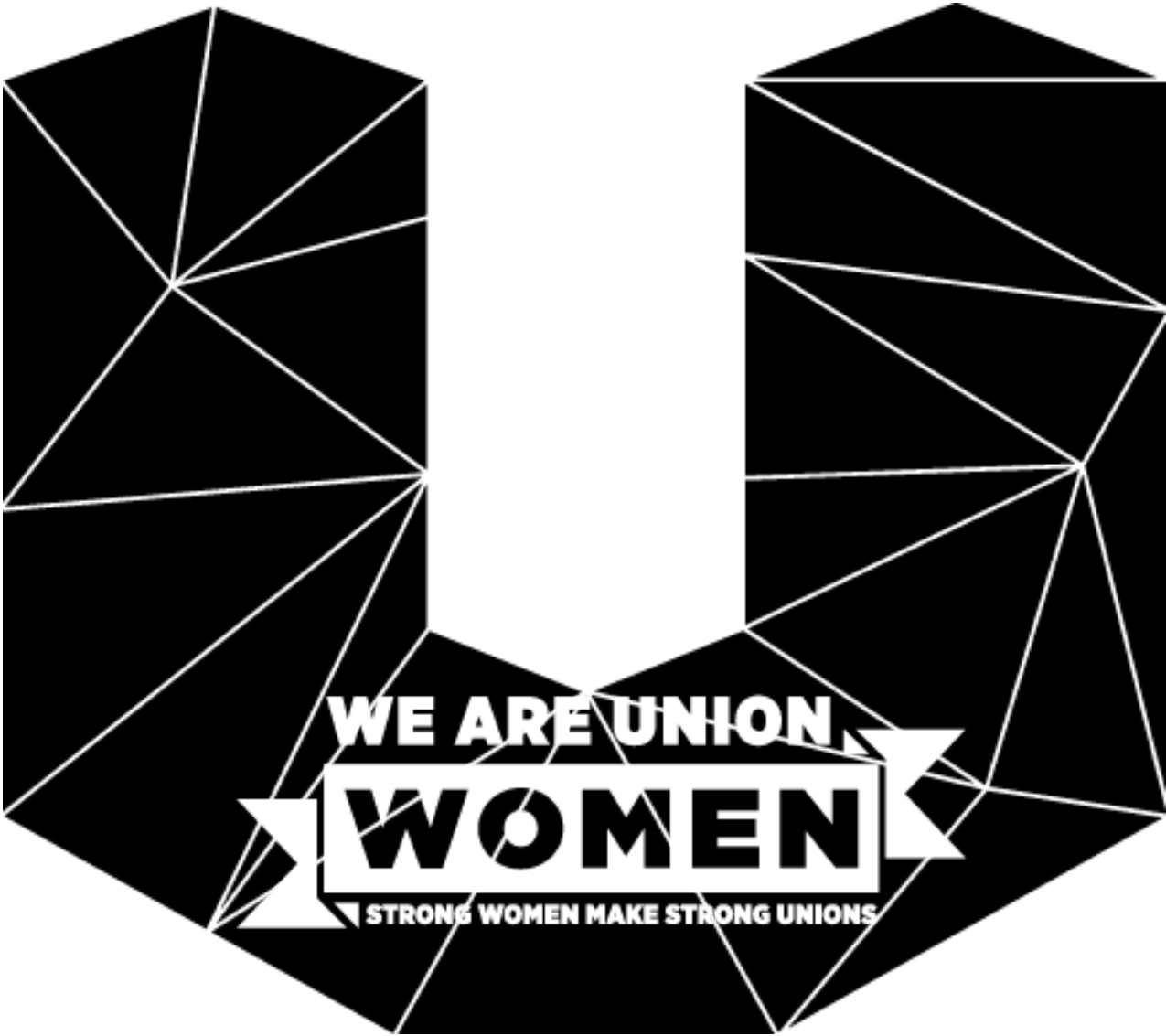
ACT Government to provide funding for WorkSafe ACT to produce a Guidance Note and to run a campaign about gendered violence at work. This would educate workers on their rights and employers on their obligations as well as to improve access to support and reporting systems.

2.

The ACT Government to continue to incorporate workplace gendered violence as a key area for action and investment under any territory framework to address violence against women or to improve work health and safety outcomes.

3.

ACT Government to fund workplace rights training including information on workplace gendered violence in the secondary school curriculum.



WE ARE UNION

WOMEN

STRONG WOMEN MAKE STRONG UNIONS