



Resource Type: **Toolkit**
Primary Audience: **Unions,
Worker Centers**

Responding to Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

Trauma-Informed Strategies for the Labor Movement

Creating work environments that are safe and promote equity and greater pathways to economic security have always been at the core of the labor movement. The labor movement has harnessed worker power to secure fair wages, improve working conditions, and ensure fair treatment for workers, thereby improving the well-being of workers, including working women. In fact, women who are members of unions or work pursuant to a union contract experience a gender-based pay gap that is 50 percent smaller than that experienced by women working outside of a union agreement.ⁱ

While there have been important advances for women in the workplace driven by the labor movement, significant issues remain that threaten their ability to thrive on the job. Women experience disproportionately high rates of domestic violence as well as sexual harassment and violence on the job which can impact their work life, careers, and economic opportunity.

- One in four women and one in 10 men report having experienced severe sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime.ⁱⁱ
- Up to eight in 10 women experience sexual harassment on the job in their lifetime.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Women of color, individuals employed in low-wage industries, and those working in male-dominated industries are particularly vulnerable to experiencing violence and harassment.^{iv}

Such experiences not only impact worker safety, but can erode one's economic security due to lost wages, missed advancement opportunities, and job loss.^v

Gender-based violence and harassment, which includes domestic violence, sexual violence and harassment, and stalking, is about power and the abuse of power. Failing to proactively address these abuses of power exposes all workers to serious harm and increased risk of workplace violence. The labor movement, and unions specifically, are well positioned to be at the center of efforts to address workers' experiences with gender-based violence and harassment and ensure safe and equitable workplaces for all.

Survivors of gender-based violence and harassment are union members, worker center participants, organizers, and advocates. They can be powerful agents of change. Their leadership and knowledge are critical to building worker power and the labor movement. However, due to a lack of understanding of trauma within worker advocacy groups, the very organizations that can stand with survivors may unintentionally make them feel ostracized, unsafe, disrespected, or disbelieved. As a result, unions and worker centers may miss out on opportunities to build an active membership that can use their power and voice to inform and lead these advocacy efforts and more effectively improve working conditions for all. A failure to respond not only leaves survivors vulnerable, but can also put workplaces at risk of violence.

Individuals who experience gender-based violence and harassment will be referred to in this guide as “survivors” to focus on their power and agency rather than their victimization. “Survivor” is an imperfect term, however, because some people prefer to identify themselves as “victims” and others identify as both or neither of these terms.

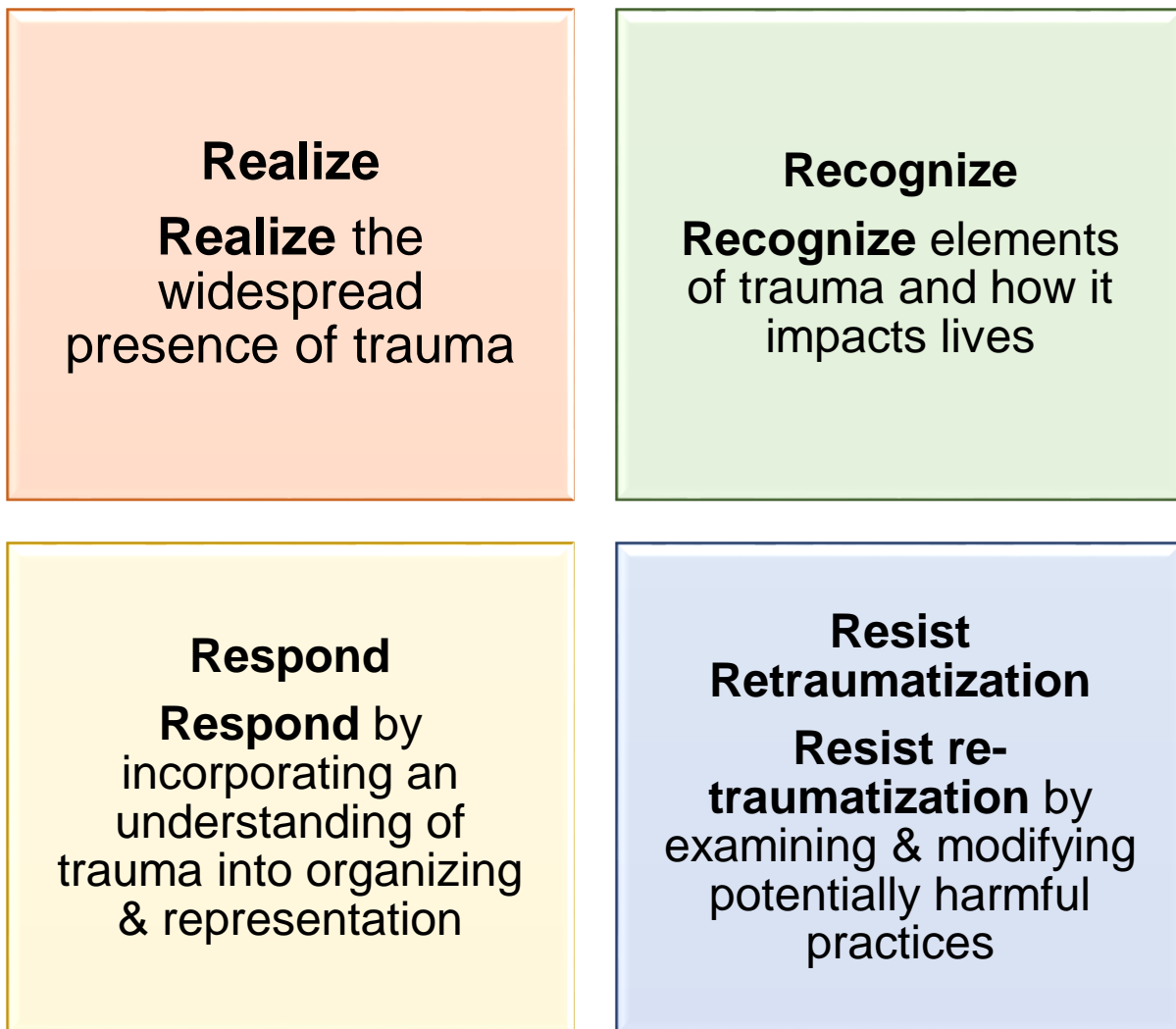
The values that lead workers to join the labor movement – solidarity, dignity, support, voice, respect, protection, rights, and power among other things – are the core values of a survivor-centered response to gender-based violence. By **realizing** that many union members and workers are survivors and have experienced trauma, **recognizing** the elements of trauma and how they impact workers and workplaces, **responding** in a survivor-centered and trauma-informed way, and **resisting** policies and practices that lead to **re-traumatization**, unions and worker centers can better support workers' needs, secure greater protections and economic benefits for members, develop survivor leadership, increase engagement in advocacy campaigns, and promote strategies for workplace change. By responding boldly and responsibly to gender-based violence and

harassment, unions and worker centers can help workers improve their own lives, careers, and lead efforts to transform their workplaces.

Building a Trauma-Responsive Labor Movement

Trauma-informed strategies help unions and worker centers respond more effectively to survivors' needs so that they can improve their work life, better participate in their organizations, and contribute to efforts to reform working conditions.

Four Rs of Trauma Informed Responses^{vi}



1. REALIZE what trauma is.

Trauma is defined as a response to an “event that combines fear, horror or terror with actual or perceived loss of control.”^{vii} Trauma is not simply something horrible that happens to a person. Instead, it is a distinct

chemical reaction in our brains that can impact how a person remembers a past event and responds to current experiences. Traumatic events can include near death experiences, the loss of a loved one, witnessing a violent act, and experiences of gender-based violence and harassment, including domestic violence, sexual violence and harassment, and stalking. However, what is traumatic to one person is not necessarily traumatic to another.^{viii} How one reacts to trauma is not a choice that individual makes; it is an unconscious survival response that occurs deep within our brains.

Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH) is a range of unacceptable behaviors and practices, or threats thereof, whether a single occurrence or repeated, that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm directed at persons because of their sex or gender identity, or affecting persons of a particular sex or gender disproportionately, and includes sexual harassment.

Anyone may be a target of gender-based violence and harassment and it may impact anyone in the workplace. It includes domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and stalking.

Trauma can impact how individuals see and relate to their surroundings^{ix} including workplaces, unions, and advocacy organizations. It can trigger long-lasting health conditions including anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, chronic pain, and gastrointestinal issues.

Lower-paying occupations with major power imbalances – which are predominantly performed by women of color and immigrant women – have an elevated risk of workplace sexual violence and harassment among women:^x 58% of hotel workers, 77% of casino workers, 60% of restaurant workers, and 80% of farmworkers have experienced sexual harassment or violence on the job.^{xi} In addition, transgender restaurant workers were three times as likely to say that they had been

harassed by managers about their gender or sexual orientation.^{xii} Industries that have high rates of gender segregation – in which women represent a small fraction of the workforce – also face high rates of workplace sexual violence and harassment. Eighty-eight percent of women in construction trades have reported experiencing sexual harassment and violence.^{xiii}

Trauma is not unique to survivors of gender-based violence and harassment. Marginalized communities, including people of color, LGBTQ people, immigrant and indigenous people, and individuals with disabilities

have been historically subjected to violent acts, oppression, and discrimination resulting in multigenerational trauma and exposure to multiple sources traumatic incidents throughout their lives. Discrimination and racism have been consistently shown to have increase traumatic stress responses among marginalized groups.^{xiv} Experiences of gender-based violence and harassment multiplies the impacts of trauma experienced by these communities. Addressing trauma will also help support justice and ensure equity for these marginalized communities.

2. RECOGNIZE elements of trauma.

In addition to the physical and psychological impacts, trauma can affect individuals in many ways. While some reactions may seem irrational, they are adaptive “coping strategies designed to survive adversity and overwhelming circumstances.”^{xv} There are 10 key elements of trauma and trauma response:

1. **Variations in response:** Individuals respond to the same events in different ways. There is no “right” way to behave after a traumatic event.
2. **Loss of control:** Trauma involves a loss or perceived loss of control.
3. **Scrambled chronology:** Memory of traumatic events is often non-linear and fragmented. Despite this, these memories are usually accurate.
4. **Challenges trusting or relating to others:** Trauma can make people feel unsafe in existing relationships and make it harder to form new ones.
5. **Isolation:** Trauma can make people feel alone and like no one will ever understand their experience.
6. **Timelines for processing traumatic events:** Some people begin consciously processing trauma immediately while some process months or years later, and others never consciously work through traumatic experiences.
7. **Multiple traumas:** Trauma related to gender-based violence and harassment may be compounded by other traumatic experiences as a result of an individual’s community, racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, or other identities.

8. **Re-traumatization:** Blaming survivors, denying choice in how to move forward after an incident, or failing to offer empathy and support can intensify traumatic responses.
9. **Resilience:** Survivors possess great strength and power that helps them to overcome traumatic experiences, however, many may not be aware of this resilience.
10. **Secondary trauma and resilience:** People working with survivors can experience secondary trauma due to exposure to suffering, but they can also become more resilient by witnessing others overcoming adversity.^{xvi}

These elements shape how those who experience trauma interact with others and how they respond to their surroundings. Recognizing these elements is critical to developing and implementing a trauma-informed response to ensure that survivors are able to not only remain safe, heal, have support, and maintain their jobs, but also to have voice and power in their union or worker center.

Two Stories of What Trauma Can Look Like

Gina is a rank and file leader who has been going door-to-door for a few weeks with a union organizer. After a few weeks she suddenly stopped participating in the campaign. When the lead organizer asked the organizer Gina had been partnered with about it, the organizer mentioned that Gina was really upset and visibly pale after visiting one particular house. The lead organizer approached Gina about what happened. Gina tried avoiding the question and just said that she was really uncomfortable continuing on the campaign. The lead organizer told Gina that to be a leader you sometimes have to push yourself out of your comfort zone. Gina stopped participating in campaign meetings, started having frequent absences citing illness, and eventually quit her job. The lead organizer later overhears a close coworker of Gina's sharing that Gina hadn't been the same since she went door knocking and ran into a classmate who had raped her five years ago.

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Donna has been training a new cocktail waitress, Lisa. During one of Lisa's shifts, a regular customer put his hand up her skirt and grabbed her backside. Lisa was angry and immediately asked Donna what they can do about his behavior. Donna responded saying, "What is the big

deal? He just squeezed your ass. It happens all the time. Besides, he'll probably give you a good tip." Lisa was upset but went back to work. A few weeks went by and squeezed your ass. It happens all the time. Besides, he'll probably give you a good tip." Lisa was upset but went back to work. A few weeks went by and one evening the same customer asked her out. Lisa said no. He turned red but didn't say anything. When Lisa finished her shift, he was waiting for her in the parking lot. He pushed her against her car and forcibly kissed her. Lisa was able to get away and ran back into the casino where she told the cocktail staff manager who helped her make a report to management. When Lisa shared her story, she didn't seem "upset" and confused some dates leading human resources to believe she was lying about the incident, even though Donna had confirmed the initial assault. Lisa felt helpless and frustrated and withdrew her complaint.

3. RESPOND by incorporating an understanding of trauma into organizing and representation.

Being trauma-informed is "less about 'what' you're doing and more about 'how' you're doing it."^{xvii} Organizations can become more trauma-informed by considering how a survivor might experience an organizing and representation campaign and adjusting approaches based on trauma and trauma response.

There are six key ways to provide a supportive response:

1. Promote the physical and psychological safety of survivors by validating their experience and supporting them in a non-judgmental way.
2. Be transparent about what you can and can't do to help, describe processes to eliminate uncertainty, and be consistent in your responses to build trust.
3. Provide opportunities for peer support from those with similar-lived experiences.
4. Work with survivors to identify and address what they need to feel safe and supported. Recognize that survivors are the experts on their own experiences and what they need to thrive.
5. Empower survivors with a meaningful voice and choice in decision-making in organizing practices and grievance processes.

6. Acknowledge that individuals may have experienced additional trauma as a result of discrimination and oppression due to one's race/ethnicity, gender, religion or other identity and how this exacerbates the impacts of gender-based violence and harassment.

Example of Trauma Informed Organizing Practices

A survivor leader expresses interest in being a spokesperson on a campaign to address sexual harassment. Worker center staff speak with her about what being a campaign spokesperson will involve. They explain the types of statements they will need to take and evidence that they will need to identify. They affirm that she will have final approval over any campaign materials released with her story and also explain that once her story is in the public domain, the organization will not be able to control what others write and discuss. Staff explain that, even though she will be sharing her experiences as part of a campaign, she can decide how and when to tell other worker center participants about her experiences.

4. RESIST RE-TRAUMATIZATION by examining and modifying potential harmful practices.

Although unions and worker centers usually have positive intentions when they respond to gender-based violence and harassment, they can unintentionally re-traumatize survivors. Labor movement organizations can and should take deliberate steps to avoid doing so.

Typical workplace advocacy strategies can result in re-traumatization. Although workers may usually experience positive transformation when organizers push them to retell their stories of workplace mistreatment to many audiences as part of organizing drives, this practice can potentially harm survivors. "Pushing," in particular can mimic coercive behaviors that abusive individuals use to harass and coerce survivors. In addition, unions investigating grievances or worker centers interviewing members may cast doubt on whether survivors are being truthful about their experiences if workers do not have what are perceived to be "normal" distraught emotional reactions and a clear timeline of memories of the violence or harassment.

Not being believed, a lack of support, or being pushed to act by their union or worker center can intensify a survivor's experience of trauma, impact

their participation in activities, reduce their power at the workplace, and may ultimately result in survivors leaving their jobs altogether.

Trauma-Informed Labor Movements

When unions and worker centers take proactive steps to support survivors of gender-based violence and harassment by focusing on the four “R”s: **realizing** that many union members and workers are survivors who have experienced trauma, **recognizing** the elements of trauma and how they impact workers and workplaces, **responding** in a survivor-centered and trauma-informed way, and **resisting** policies and practices that lead to **re-traumatization** by examining and modifying potentially harmful practices, workers are able to lead successful movements to end violence and harassment in the workplace and secure greater pathways to job stability and growth.

Trauma-informed labor movements uphold and embody union values of solidarity, support, voice, respect, dignity, protection, rights, and power. Such movements have proven to effectively advance economic justice for survivors and all workers. When all workers have power and voice, everyone is able to be safe and thrive at work.

Transforming Workplaces: What Can Happen When Survivors Lead

SEIU-United Service Workers West and Maintenance Cooperation Trust Fund affiliated janitor-advocates (*promotoras*) successfully campaigned for the Property Service Workers Protection Act in 2016. The California state law establishes new standards for janitorial sexual harassment training and enforcement. Anti-violence and worker safety advocates formed the **Ya Basta! Coalition** to develop a comprehensive survivor-led approach to developing and delivering peer led trainings to improving worker safety and build survivor leadership.

UNITE HERE! Local 1’s **Hands Off, Pants On** campaign led the Chicago City Council to pass a 2017 ordinance that mandates panic buttons, requires stronger sexual harassment policies, and prohibits retaliation in the city’s hotel industry.



The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) successfully organized survivors to combat violence and harassment in the fields. The resulting **Fair Food Program (FFP)**, is an agreement between and among tomato growers in Florida, participating buyers, and the CIW designed to provide workers with better wages and working conditions. Terms of the agreement includes:

- Compliance with the Code of Conduct, including zero tolerance for forced labor and sexual assault;
- Worker-to-worker trainings to ensure workers understand their rights and responsibilities;
- An independent worker-led auditing mechanism to ensure compliance;
- A complaint resolution mechanism (including a 24-hour hotline); and,
- Health and safety committees on every farm to give workers a voice.

Workplaces Respond provides technical assistance to workplace stakeholders seeking to better prevent and respond to gender-based violence and harassment impacting the workplace. Scan this QR code to access the technical assistance request portal.



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