



Workplaces and Substance Use: Exploring Gender-Related Factors

Key Messages

- About one in six (17%) women reported using alcohol or other drugs within two hours before or during work, or being hungover, intoxicated or high while at work in the past year. In comparison, about one in four (23%) men reported similar behaviours.
- Among workers who reported using a substance at least once at work, about a third (35%) of women and half (56%) of men reported hiding their use. One in four (25%) women said they worried about losing their job or being suspended, compared with nearly half of men (48%).
- Women reported feeling pressure to use substances to fit in, be considered for promotions, or avoid speculation about their health or bodies. Among men, masculinity norms, such as “suffering in silence” or being seen as “weak” for seeking help, were also identified as risk factors.
- To reduce risks related to substance use in the workplace, employers and partners can provide regular education, address stigma, change workplace culture, update policies and offer appropriate supports and training.
- **The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) offers employers and partners resources, guidance, training and tailored services** to address substance use risks and protective factors in the workplace, including those related to gender.

Issue

Where we work, the type of work we do and workplace culture can all affect our well-being, including our use of alcohol or other drugs (substance use). Workplace risks and protective factors related to substance use and health¹ can affect workers in any industry. However, these risks and protective factors often differ across demographic groups, including gender (Frone, 2006; European Union Drugs Agency, 2022).

For women, harmful workplace experiences — including unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion, sexism and gender-based harassment — can affect well-being as much as other job related stressors, such as work overload, role conflict and physical risks (Sojo et al., 2016). Women in male-dominated industries may also face pressure to fit into a drinking

¹ Like mental health, substance use health exists along a spectrum, from no use and beneficial or lower-risk use to substance use disorder (CAPSA, n.d.).



culture, which can negatively affect their relationship with substance use (Roche et al., 2012).

For men, common masculine norms, such as not seeking help, being tough or pushing through pain, are linked to a higher risk of substance use and “suffering in silence” (Leadbeater et al., 2020; McIlwaine et al., 2025; Roche et al., 2012). Help-seeking behaviours, as well as access to and the impact of workplace social supports, also differ between women and men (Bartram et al., 2020; Bellman et al., 2003).

Understanding the context of substance use among workers and managers, including how gender shapes these experiences, is important for strengthening protective factors and supporting worker health and safety. This brief is part of a series on workplaces and substance use. It provides **context and data for employers and other partners**, such as unions, associations and health professionals, **on substance use and gender**.

The Study

We conducted a national study using a survey, focus groups and interviews with workers and managers from a range of industries. Of the 1,120 people surveyed, 514 identified as women and 595 as men. Fewer than five identified as Two-Spirit, six identified as nonbinary and fewer than five preferred not to say.

Participants were from five regions across Canada: the Atlantic provinces (7%), Quebec (30%), Ontario (34%), the Prairies (16%) and British Columbia (13%). Due to small sample sizes, British Columbia figures include Yukon and the Northwest Territories.

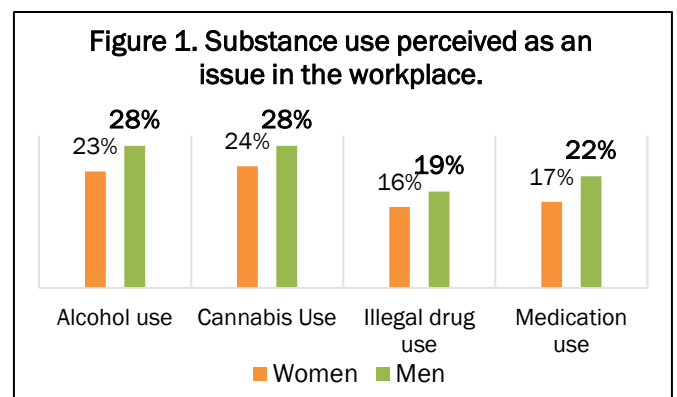
The sample included workers in both safety-sensitive² and non-safety-sensitive positions across a range of industries. Due to small sample sizes, the key findings below focus on the experiences of women and men.³

Key Findings

Extent of Substance Use Among Women and Men

Women were less likely than men to report substance use related to the workplace.

- About one in six (17%) women reported using alcohol or other drugs within two hours before or during work, or being hungover, intoxicated or high at work in the past year. In comparison, about one in four (23%) men reported similar behaviours.
- Fewer women perceived substance use as an issue in their workplace compared with men (Figure 1).



² Safety-sensitive positions involve work where impairment could pose a risk to the worker, co-workers, the public or the environment (e.g., heavy equipment operators, medical practitioners).

³ Gender identities and roles were self-identified by participants during the study.



Risks and Protective Factors

Different workplace risks and protective factors can influence substance use among women and men. Understanding and addressing these factors can benefit both workers and workplaces. The following are some of the most common risks and protective factors identified by women and men across industries:

- **Workplace culture:** About one in 10 (15%) women said alcohol use was acceptable in their workplace culture, compared with one in five (21%) men. Similarly, about one in 10 (10%) women and one in five (17%) men said cannabis use was acceptable.
- **Stigma:** Among workers who reported using a substance at least once at work, about a third (35%) of women and half (56%) of men reported hiding their use. One in four (25%) women said they worried about losing their job or being suspended, compared with nearly half of men (48%).

“I know a person who is asking about alcohol [policies]. She doesn’t touch that, but everybody thinks that she’s an alcoholic. I worry if I go and report my problems, I would be seen [differently]. There is no encouragement to speak up about these things.”

–Worker (woman)

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- **Masculinity norms:** Several focus group participants described expectations for men to have “tough skin,” to “buck up and deal with it” and not talk about their issues. One man noted this contributed to “suffering in silence.” Another explained that mental health or substance use health issues were seen as a “weakness.” Among men who reported using a substance before or during work at least once, about half (47%) said they worried about what other employees or managers would think of them.

“In my workplace, there’s a macho culture that’s baked in. People don’t usually admit they’re getting help for an issue. Because guys typically ... we don’t talk about our stuff.”

–Worker (man)

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- **Pressure to use among women:** Some focus group participants discussed women feeling pressure to drink alcohol at work events or lunches to avoid being seen as “prudish,” being passed over for promotions, or facing uncomfortable questions or assumptions about their bodies and health.

“It was sort of prudish to not have a beer at lunch or three. It was like if you didn’t go drinking at the bar and get drunk enough, you weren’t going to get promoted.”

–Worker (woman)



“There is the stigma of, well, why don't you drink, and even if my answer's as boring as I've never liked the taste, I'm a young woman in a profession. Is she not drinking because she's pregnant? There's all sorts of reasons why my not drinking makes people more uncomfortable than if I was to drink.”

–Worker (woman)

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- **Gender differences in risk:** Workplace risk factors can affect people in different ways. For example, some women reported feeling unsafe socializing with leadership or men colleagues when alcohol or other substances were involved. At the same time, they felt that not participating could lead to being excluded from promotions or other workplace opportunities. For men, these same settings created a different type of risk; substance use was often seen as a way to connect with leadership and build relationships with colleagues and managers.

Policies and Training

- **Policies:** Among managers, half (53%) of women felt their organization's policies or procedures were discriminatory or stigmatizing toward people who may have alcohol or drug issues, compared with a third (34%) of men. Among workers, one in five (19%) women felt their workplace policies were discriminatory or stigmatizing, compared with two in five men (44%).
- **Training:** Fewer women managers (about two in five or 42%) than men managers (nearly three in five or 57%), said they felt adequately trained to intervene when they thought an employee might be impaired at work.

Implications and Recommendations

Women and men face different workplace risks related to substance use. **There are also opportunities to strengthen protective factors and reduce these risks.** Addressing stigma, workplace culture, gender-related factors and unclear policies (see [CCSA study](#)) can improve worker well-being, safety and productivity.

Recommendations include:

- Conduct a needs assessment on substance use in your workplace.
- Provide education and training for workers and managers using evidence-based information on substance use and gender differences.
- Develop clear, equitable and comprehensive policies and best practices tailored to your organization.
- Establish trusted individuals for disclosure or offer peer support options that are inclusive and feel safe for people of all genders.
- Provide alternatives to substances when celebrating, socializing or managing health and well-being.
- Offer accessible, confidential and diverse supports.



To support your organization, CCSA offers resources, guidance, training and tailored services to address substance use risks and protective factors in the workplace. For more information about the study, workplace resources, or on substance use, contact us at workplace@ccsa.ca.

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About CCSA

CCSA was created by Parliament to provide national leadership to address substance use in Canada. A trusted counsel, we provide national guidance to decision makers by harnessing the power of research, curating knowledge and bringing together diverse perspectives.

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