

Domestic Violence & Abuse factsheet



2010

UNITE THE UNION

domestic violence

This factsheet considers the problem of domestic violence and how UNITE representatives in the workplace can help those who experience domestic violence. Information includes:

- effects of domestic violence
- negotiating a policy at work
- what to do if you or another member is experiencing domestic violence

domestic violence is a workplace issue

It causes distress to members and can affect their employment through lower productivity, absenteeism, and in some cases acts of violence being carried out in the workplace.

However the workplace is also one of many places in which women can access support and information. Indeed it may be the only place they feel safe.

Domestic violence policies form an essential part of a strategy to achieve equal opportunities in the workplace, and are a serious issue for UNITE members.

what is domestic violence?

Domestic violence can take the form of physical and sexual violence, psychological, financial and emotional abuse, threats and intimidation, harassment, isolation, belittling and constant unreasonable criticism.

People experience domestic violence regardless of their gender, class, age, race, disability, sexual orientation or trans identity. It is a pattern of behaviour used by one person to control or dominate another with whom they have, or have had, an intimate or family-type relationship. Evidence is clear that the majority of those who suffer domestic violence are women and majority of perpetrators are men, which it is important to recognise in developing policies and raising awareness.

Not all domestic violence takes place in the home, or during a current relationship. Often women are most vulnerable when they are leaving a relationship, or after it has ended.

Domestic violence also seriously impacts on children's safety and well-being and there is a significant correlation between domestic violence and child abuse.

how widespread is domestic violence?

It is very likely that in any workplace employees will be personally affected by domestic violence, either as a survivor or a perpetrator. A TUC survey of Trade Union women found that 54% either had experienced domestic violence themselves, or knew a colleague who had.

One in four women experience domestic violence over their lifetimes. It forms 25% of all reported violent assaults, and has the highest rate of repeat victimisation of any crime. Two women a week are killed by their current or former male partner in England and Wales.

what UNITE can do

Overall our aims are to:

- Negotiate a policy with the employer, whether as a stand alone policy or as part of other policies
- Ensure the workplace is a place of safety for those suffering domestic violence with measures in place for protection of eg new address
- Create an environment where individuals experiencing domestic violence feel confident that they will be believed, listened to, treated supportively and sympathetically, and not judged – whether or not they are ready to take a decision to leave
- Be able to advise members where they can get support, including from qualified counsellors, including if both partners work together
- Raise awareness in the workplace, and campaign nationally for improved policies to prioritise the safety and empowerment of those who suffer domestic violence, and take action to support women's and other refuges
- NEVER tell a member to take action s/he isn't happy with, but do always recommend that physical violence is reported to the police – it may be, or may quickly become, a life-threatening situation

effects of domestic violence on work

Members may face extreme difficulties in keeping the job going if they are affected by domestic violence or are trying to get out of the violent relationship.

Symptoms may include “poor” time-keeping and frequent sickness, poor concentration, low self confidence and self-esteem, anxiety, depression, insomnia, agoraphobia or post-traumatic stress disorder, where painful memories resurface and cause problems months or years later. Some survivors may turn to alcohol and drugs to help them deal with the situation. A woman may have to keep a rigid timetable about her hours of work and never socialise after work. It is important to note that not all women who are will show signs of experiencing domestic violence.

Signs of physical and especially other forms of abuse may be concealed for months, even years. Nearly a third of women experiencing domestic violence seek help only after 10 years of living with it, and over a third seek help after 2-10 years. Specific discrimination may also prevent men and LGBT people suffering domestic violence from being able to speak out.

Employers are becoming more aware of the cost of domestic violence to their business, e.g. reduced productivity and abuse-related costs (absence, turnover). It is estimated that the cost of responding to domestic violence across Greater London alone is £278 million a year.

If there are perpetrators of domestic violence in the workplace this may also affect the business costs, productivity and workplace safety.

“why doesn’t she leave him?”

Often women experience practical and psychological barriers to seeking help. Women find it difficult to tell anyone about the abuse they are living with because of the stigma involved. Black women may face additional problems, both from within and outside their community including racism from organisations. Shame and dishonour are powerful cultural notions, and Asian and other minority ethnic women may face social ostracism and rejection if they seek help. Lesbians and gay men can also experience domestic violence, and may experience prejudice from the police and within support services; and the situation of trans men and women needs particular recognition. Additional barriers are also faced by older women, disabled women, men, and those living in rural areas.

Many women fear not being believed and they fear losing their children (which is a common threat by perpetrators). Even when women do manage to leave their partners, contact arrangements for children do not always take account of one parent’s violence to the non-abusive parent and children.

These problems, together with the imposed social isolation within abusive relationships, low self-esteem, financial concerns, and fear of future violence, mean that women may feel that they have no option but to continue the relationship, particularly if there are children or other adults dependent on them.

a negotiated policy

- A strict confidentiality clause for members who seek help at work; in particular personal details of members (addresses, telephone numbers, work locations, shift times) must be kept strictly confidential
- Allow the employee to decide the course of action taken throughout
- Recognition of the effects of domestic violence on work and agreement that members will be believed, and treated sympathetically and flexibly. In particular, a commitment that time-keeping problems and increased sickness, caused by domestic violence, will not affect a member’s work record
- A commitment to grant, or at least consider sympathetically, time off for members experiencing domestic violence, for example to enable them to sort out the practical and legal problems
- extended leave if the member needs to go to a refuge or move away
- paid leave to attend appointments e.g. for legal, housing, medical or childcare issues, or for professional counselling – the employer should also cover the cost where there is a legal route to do so
- Redeployment to a different workplace, or a non-frontline job, if possible and if the member wishes

- Other security measures eg changing entry codes, should be implemented if employees are being harassed by abusers. Employers should provide a secure workplace and ensure reception and other relevant staff have appropriate domestic violence training
- Rights to flexible working may give a woman more control over her situation. Not requiring women to work overtime without sufficient notice - abusive partners are often very controlling of their partners' time
- If the couple work together, there should be prompt use of the harassment procedure if abuse takes place at work
- Named staff (managers, personnel and/or shop stewards/workplace reps) to provide listening and guidance (though not formal counselling) for employees on welfare or domestic issues. These staff should have some training in domestic violence and dealing with personal issues
- Information on domestic violence services, the workplace policy, the role of the named contacts, and protocols for identifying and responding to domestic violence (victims and perpetrators) to be given to all staff as part of induction, health & safety, and management training
- Promote a 'zero tolerance' culture. 'Jokes' about domestic violence should not be acceptable in the workplace
- Salary advances to be available in extreme situations where it is identified that this may help a woman flee a violent situation

what to do if you are experiencing domestic violence

Remember you are not alone and you are not to blame, whatever your abuser has told you. You do not have to put up with your partner's behaviour. You can take responsibility for your own safety, but you cannot stop the abuser's behaviour. It is important to talk to someone – see list of contacts at the end of this leaflet.

Make a crisis plan. Pack a bag of essential possessions and keep it safe in case you need to leave in a hurry. Include money, keys, important telephone numbers and addresses, medication, and important documents like birth certificates, passports, bankbook, driving licence etc. Make sure you have access to a mobile, public phone, or neighbour's phone.

You may decide to stay, or to leave home and stay with friends or family or in a refuge. If you want to stay in the family home and use legal action to get your partner to leave, you should go to a solicitor or contact Rights of Women (see below) to discuss the options open to you. Community Legal Services funding may be available for women on low incomes.

further information

In an emergency call the police dial 999 or your local police station

Women's Aid is a national charity working to end domestic violence against women and children. They provide support and information and each National Helpline offers support and refer women to a network of over 500 refuges and support services, including specialist support (in some parts of the country) for ethnic minority and disabled women and lesbians.

Women's Aid national domestic violence helpline

08457 023468 (24 hr)
www.womensaid.org.uk

Produces the UK-wide directory of all domestic violence refuges and helpline services. Briefings, information and help leaflets for women in 11 languages including legal rights leaflets, available from the website. Help information is also available in a range of formats including ethnic minority languages, Braille, large print leaflets and on audio tape.

Scottish Women's Aid

0800 027 1234

Women's Aid, Republic of Ireland

1800 341 900

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

0800 917 1414(24 hr)

Welsh Women's Aid

0808 8010 800

Refuge

24-hr domestic violence helpline

0808 2000 247

Mens Advice Line

0808 801 0327

Men who need protection or access to safe housing should contact their local police or local council housing department for help.

Rape Crisis Federation (England & Wales)

0808 802 9999

They can refer you to a local rape counselling service.

Support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people:

Broken Rainbow Helpline

0300 999 LGBT (5428)

Unite 24-hour legal helpline service

0800 709007

For initial advice on non-employment legal matters including divorce, child support and property.

Rights of Women

Speak to a trained woman solicitor or barrister (free service)

020 7251 8887

Victim Support

0845 3030900

Southall Black Sisters Helpline

0208 571 0800

Dawes Project

0161 839 3236

Supports women experiencing problems at work because of domestic abuse

UNITE REGIONAL WOMEN'S ORGANISERS

North West

Helen Osgood 0161 848 0909

North East/ Yorkshire & Humberside

Sue Pollard 0113 236 4830

West Midlands

Natalia Stepnowska 0121 553 6051

East Midlands

Maureen Scott-Douglas 01332 548 400

South West

Karen Cole 0117 923 0555

South East

Mary Sayer 0845 605 2193

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