



DOMESTIC **Violence**

AND THE WORK PLACE

What is domestic violence?
Why is it a trade union issue?
What should a workplace policy cover?
Key negotiating points

A GUIDE FOR NEGOTIATORS

Foreword

Domestic violence is a serious crime with serious consequences. It is usually a hidden crime. People suffer silently – afraid for themselves and for their children. It is time to change that. We have moved from the days when no one wanted to intervene in a domestic situation. It is time to act to change attitudes to make sure that women are not subject to violence in their own homes or anywhere else.

The workplace can play a key role on raising awareness about domestic violence. We know for many women work is a place of safety where they may confide in others about their experiences and where they can access help.

Congress and its affiliates have been campaigning over the last few years to ensure that domestic violence is seen as an issue that unions can – and should – be doing something about. For women who are affected by violence at home, work too is likely to suffer unless they get the support they need. Yet, in many instances, unions are finding it difficult to persuade employers to put policies in place to help those suffering from domestic violence.

Congress urges employers to cooperate with unions in developing a common approach to domestic violence in the workplace. Working in partnership can change attitudes and help those who experience domestic violence to get the support they need.

It is intended that this Guide be used in a practical way to give information, ideas and contacts to union representatives in the workplace and to enable them to give consistent and effective assistance to those suffering domestic violence.

David Begg
General Secretary

Introduction

Domestic violence is not a new problem. Throughout history, and across divisions of class, race and culture, it has always been a feature of family life, and part of a wider problem of violence against women. What is new is that domestic violence is no longer acceptable.

Domestic violence is now a reality for a large number of women in Ireland. It is also a crime that can, and in some cases does, end in death. The seriousness of these consequences makes it an issue for all of us, especially in the workplace. It is quite possible that the woman you work alongside is being abused and that you remain unaware of it. Many people find the subject of domestic violence a difficult one to acknowledge or discuss because it is felt to be a taboo subject, confined to the home as a private family matter and not for the involvement of outsiders.

The more we learn about domestic violence the clearer it becomes that its impact on people's lives will affect their performance in the workplace. Trade unions and employers need to understand this and be ready to deal with such problems as they arise. Unions and their members can make an effective contribution to combating violence in the home by taking action in the workplace. These actions can include developing awareness amongst members, providing support systems within the workplace and liaising with agencies who help those experiencing such violence and who are campaigning for judicial reform.

While there is a growing recognition that domestic violence can be directed at men and people in same-sex relationships, such violence is still predominantly perpetrated by men against women. This Guide, therefore, while applicable to both sexes, deals with domestic violence from the perspective of women who experience domestic violence at the hands of men.

What is meant by domestic violence?

Domestic violence is the use or threat of physical, emotional or sexual abuse within all kinds of intimate relationships that cause harm or distress those experiencing such abuse.

In addition to actual or threatened physical or sexual assault, domestic violence includes non-physical intimidation such as persistent verbal abuse, emotional blackmail and enforced social or financial deprivation.

Domestic violence may occur in any type of close adult relationship: within marital or other partnerships, families or households. It happens in all societies irrespective of gender, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, cultural background, disability, marital status, age or sexual orientation.

But the figures show that it is predominantly violence by men against women – either their partners or former partners. Having abused once perpetrators usually persist: intensifying and escalating the violence and abuse. However, men may also be affected by domestic violence.

Domestic violence causes lasting damage to the sufferers' physical and mental health, affecting their ability to work and support themselves, to maintain their self-confidence and to move on and build new lives.



Exposing the myths

There are many popular myths and prejudices about domestic violence. These stereotypes are often at the root of the negative responses abused women receive when they seek help. Not only does this lead to wrong advice being given, but causes much unnecessary suffering. There are many ways in which the seriousness of both the extent and the severity of men's violence can be undermined – 'she asked for it' – 'she could always leave' – 'she must have provoked it' – to cite some of the many inaccurate but commonly held beliefs. No one 'deserves' to be beaten or emotionally tortured but women often blame themselves because they have been told consistently that the violence they experience is their fault. A violent man is responsible for his own actions and has a choice in how he behaves. Domestic violence is a crime and like any other crime it should not be tolerated.

The effects of domestic violence on women's lives

The effects of domestic violence can be far reaching. Assaults on women can cause severe and long-term physical damage ranging from bruising and scars to disability and death. They also have psychological repercussions, causing severe anxiety and depression. They include loss of self-esteem and loss of self-confidence, together with feelings of guilt and embarrassment.

Women feel afraid, ashamed and are often unable to confide in others or to seek help. They may still feel responsible for keeping the family together and for maintaining relationships. Family, friends and outside organisations may reinforce these feelings.

The woman may be too frightened of the abuser and his power, real or imagined, to leave. And if they do make the decision to leave, leaving a relationship is an extremely difficult and emotional experience for a woman. She may have to face the prospect of living in temporary accommodation, if it can be found, of surviving on benefits, and be in fear of having her children taken into care. It may mean moving from a familiar area, away from family and friends. She may be faced with and threatened by reprisals. Very few women find alternative safe accommodation quickly or cheaply and the standard of living of women tends to drop significantly following separation or divorce.

For some groups of women there are added problems. Women from other cultures, black and ethnic minority women, the Traveller community, have to face racism and additional stereotyping. A reluctance to feed racist stereotypes may be a barrier to seeking help. There may be additional pressure from an extended family network not to leave an abusive partner, especially if it would bring shame within the wider community.

Women with disabilities can be particularly vulnerable to abuse and violence. Women with disabilities may fear institutionalisation if they leave an abusive relationship where the abuser is also the main carer.

Lesbians who experience domestic violence have reported little sympathy from others. For lesbians with children there may be fear about the outcome of custody hearings, making it harder for them to seek help. A woman who experiences abuse at the hands of another woman may find it impossible to break the silence in a society that is not supportive of sexual relationships between women.



Why is domestic violence an issue for trade unions?

All violence against women, whether it happens at work, at home or in the community, is a legitimate concern for trade unionists. The effects of domestic violence can be far reaching. Home and work issues cannot always be separated and domestic violence can impact greatly on a woman's working life. Many abused women suffer physical injuries, sleep deprivation, low morale, poor self-esteem and heightened anxiety levels, all of which may contribute to lateness, absenteeism and poor work performance and therefore threatening job prospects and security. Domestic violence threatens the health and safety of sufferers. It threatens lives.

Many women experiencing domestic violence are targeted at work, from harassing phone calls, abusive partners arriving at or waiting outside the workplace, to physical assault. Sometimes the woman and the abuser work in the same place.

Domestic violence can force women to leave the area in which they live, perhaps making the workplace inaccessible. This can lead to loss of income and job security compounding the problems faced in leaving an abusive situation.

Why a workplace policy?

Trade unions have an important role to play in supporting women in the workplace who experience violence within the home. A safe and supportive work environment can be the key to helping women experiencing domestic violence to take positive action. One of the most useful ways to provide this is to develop with the employer a policy on domestic violence. A well-publicised workplace policy that allows employees suffering from domestic violence to explain what is happening to them would also be of benefit to the employer, assisting in personnel management and helping to ensure the health, safety and welfare of the workforce.

What could a workplace policy on domestic violence cover?

Below are some points that could be covered by a workplace policy:

- a policy statement that has clear aims and states the company's commitment to treat domestic violence seriously;
- a clear definition of domestic violence which recognises that, while it mainly affects women, men can also experience domestic violence;
- identification of the first point of contact for employees who need to discuss issues around domestic violence;
- a commitment to early intervention by identifying ways of creating a supportive environment and to creating confidential mechanisms for those experiencing domestic violence to seek help and information;
- a commitment to offering ongoing support to those experiencing domestic violence including time off, for example, for counselling, visits to a

- solicitor or support agencies, for re-housing or re-organising childcare;
- the possibility of relocation or redeployment where appropriate and supportive of the employee;
- a commitment to training and educating on domestic violence issues;
- provision of resources, posters and information on domestic violence available in the workplace;
- mechanisms for monitoring and reviewing the policy's effectiveness and for regularly updating information on help available and how to contact support services.

This list is not exhaustive.

Key Negotiating Points

In some employments unions may still have to convince employers that it is in the interest of both employers and unions to develop a workplace policy on domestic violence. Below are some key points that may help the negotiations.

Recruitment and retention

A workplace policy on domestic violence can be introduced as part of an equal opportunities policy that addresses the recruitment and retention of women employees. Such a policy could be a good investment for an employer seeking to retain skilled, trained and experienced staff.

Ensuring strong morale

A workplace policy on domestic violence can help create a positive working environment. If staff feel that they are supported then this can increase their morale, loyalty and commitment which in turn can have a positive impact on productivity.

Disciplinary action

The effects of domestic violence can impact on punctuality, attendance, health and safety, work performance and productivity. A clear policy on domestic violence that enables employees to confide in workplace reps at an early stage can prevent unnecessary disciplinary action against an employee.

Maintaining a positive reputation

Workplace policies that acknowledge the difficulties and complexities of people's lives outside of the workplace can help send a strong message both to employees, potential employees and the wider community that the employer is committed to supporting employees.





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Where to go for help

Below are details of some voluntary agencies and support services where women can seek help that will be additional to the help, support and counselling outlined in the workplace policy.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation
24 Hour Helpline 028 9033 1818

Rape Crisis Centre
028 9024 9696

Nexus
028 9032 6803

Victim Support
028 9024 4039

Disability Action
028 9029 7880

Lesbian Line
028 9023 8668

Men's Advisory Project
028 9024 1929

NI Council for Ethnic Minorities
028 9023 8645

The Samaritans
0845 790 9090

Citizens' Advice Bureaux
028 9023 1120

Republic of Ireland

Women's Aid
01 8684721
Freephone Helpline 1800 341900

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre
01 6614911
Helpline: 1800 77 88 88

Mna Feasa
Cork-based Domestic Violence Project
021 421 1757

Carí Foundation
Children at Risk in Ireland
1890 924 567

Childline
1800 666 666

Gay Switchboard
872 1055

Lesbian Line
872 0460

The Samaritans
1850 60 90 90

**Garda Domestic Violence and
Sexual Assault Investigation Unit**
01 475 5555