



WHAT YOUR BUSINESS NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT DOMESTIC ABUSE

Think Business, Think Equality

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INTRODUCTION

This guidance is part of a suite of resources for small and medium businesses who want to understand and support employees experiencing domestic abuse. You can use this alongside our other *Think Business, Think Equality* resources on domestic abuse and gender equality at work to make a positive change in your business.

This resource provides information on what domestic abuse is and the different ways it can disrupt women's employment. It explains the impact of domestic abuse on the employee and the business, and what your role is as an employer, so you can better support an employee experiencing domestic abuse. We've used case studies based on real-life examples to highlight what domestic abuse looks like, and its impact on women's lives.

There are two further key areas that will help you to address and support employees experiencing domestic abuse. These are [What you need to know about domestic abuse](#) and [How to develop a domestic abuse policy](#). There's also a [best practice checklist](#) and a [glossary](#) that will support you to take action.

The resources are designed to be used together to enable you to deal with disclosures and support employees who are experiencing domestic abuse. The action you take in each area will reinforce action in the others.



KEY MESSAGES

These key messages give you an overview of what you need to know about domestic abuse and how it affects women at work.

1. Domestic abuse takes many forms – not just physical.

Coercive control, stalking, financial abuse, and emotional abuse can be just as damaging and are now recognised in law as criminal offences.

2. Domestic abuse is a workplace issue.

It affects women's health, safety, and ability to work, and it can have a wider impact on colleagues, morale, and business performance.

3. Domestic abuse follows women to work.

Perpetrators often target women by using work time, tools or spaces to monitor, harass or isolate them. This can include sabotaging transport or childcare with the aim of damaging their performance and undermining their economic independence.

4. The majority of victim-survivors are women.

Domestic abuse is rooted in gender inequality. Most perpetrators are men, and the abuse women face is often more severe and longer lasting.

5. Work may be a woman's only safe space.

For some women, the workplace is the only place they can access support or feel safe from the perpetrator's control or surveillance.



6. Domestic abuse impacts all women differently.

Disabled women, racially minoritised women, LGBTQ+ women, younger and older women may face additional risks or barriers to accessing support.

7. The effects go beyond the individual.

Domestic abuse can affect colleagues too, through added stress, safety concerns, and the emotional toll of witnessing or responding to abuse.

8. Trauma can affect how women engage in the workplace.

Experiences of trauma may impact a woman's ability to concentrate, communicate, or build relationships with colleagues. These effects may not always be visible but can influence how she participates at work, beyond just her attendance.

9. Many women don't disclose domestic abuse.

Stigma, shame, or believing it's not relevant to work can stop women from seeking support - so it's vital that employers are clear about the help available and ensure staff are trained to respond with empathy and understanding.

10. Employers have a role to play.

How you respond matters. Having clear policies, trained managers, and a culture of support can make your workplace a safer space for victim-survivors.



WHY THIS RESOURCE FOCUSES ON WOMEN

We recognise that both women and men experience domestic abuse and there are some similarities and differences in the effects in the workplace. However, the important difference between men and women who experience domestic abuse is the prevalence, severity, and impact of the abuse. Women experiencing domestic abuse are more likely to encounter repeated forms of abuse, for longer periods of time, and are more likely to be severely injured or killed than men who experience domestic abuse.

The focus of this guidance is women's experiences of domestic abuse, as the vast majority of victim-survivors are women, while the vast majority of perpetrators are men.

It's important to recognise and understand that domestic abuse is rooted in women's unequal status in society, and this makes domestic abuse a gendered problem.

This doesn't mean you will be treating staff differently because of their gender. When you take action to address domestic abuse and create a supportive workplace, you'll improve things for all your employees.

In this resource, the term **victim-survivor** is used to reflect that individuals experiencing domestic abuse can be both victim and survivor. Victims are often portrayed as helpless, powerless, or passive, in contrast to survivors who are active, heroic, and resourceful. However, the terms used separately don't capture the experience of violence against women or the external factors that affect women's ability to leave.



When we talk about a **perpetrator**, we are describing an individual who chooses to use abusive behaviours in order to assert power and control, usually to gain authority over their partner. It is someone who is currently committing, or has previously committed violence against women, which includes domestic abuse. You can find definitions of all key terms used in our [Glossary of Terms](#).



WHAT IS DOMESTIC ABUSE?

Domestic abuse is a pattern of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and/or violent behaviour, including sexual violence, by a partner or ex-partner¹. It affects women from all backgrounds irrespective of age, race, sexual orientation, education, culture, and socioeconomic demographic. It's an enduring social problem, with at least one in four women in Scotland experiencing domestic abuse in their lifetime.

Domestic abuse often doesn't end when a woman has left. Perpetrators may continue to abuse, harass and stalk victim-survivors once the relationship is over. Whilst it's recognised that men experience domestic abuse, it's most commonly experienced by women, with male partners or ex-partners perpetrating the abuse. Domestic abuse also happens in same-sex relationships.

The key difference between women's and men's experience of domestic abuse in opposite-sex relationships relates to the level of fear and threat they're subjected to². For example, in some cases, male victim-survivors report that during periods of violence or abuse they weren't afraid for their lives, and they would leave their house or go to their car to wait until things calmed down. However, for women, the level of fear and threat is much higher, with many victim-survivors fearing that at any moment they may be seriously injured or even killed.

¹ Scottish Women's Aid, *What is domestic abuse?*, available at www.womensaid.scot/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse

² Pain, R. (2012) *Everyday Terrorism: How fear works in domestic abuse*.



DOMESTIC ABUSE AND THE LAW

The Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 was introduced to make all forms of domestic abuse towards a partner or ex-partner, whether psychological or physical, a criminal offence. It defines domestic abuse as “a course of behaviour towards a partner or ex-partner intended to cause them physical or psychological harm, or where the perpetrator is reckless as to whether it causes harm.”

Previous to this Act, only physical abuse could be prosecuted as a criminal offence. However, many victim-survivors of domestic abuse may not experience physical abuse, but are subject to coercive control, and degrading treatment. The Act has now made this a criminal offence.

Coercive control is a pattern of behaviour that seeks to take away the victim-survivor's freedom, and strip away their sense of self. Within coercive control, violence is often used alongside a range of other tactics including isolation, degradation, and the micromanagement of everyday life. This may include monitoring movements, phone calls, dress, social activity and other relationships. The perpetrator creates a world in which the victim-survivor is constantly monitored, criticised and intimidated.



COERCIVE CONTROL: CASE STUDY

Zara has been with Adam for over two years. At the beginning of their relationship they were very social, and often spent time with friends, family and colleagues. However, over time, things started to change. Adam started to monitor her whereabouts. He would get upset if she didn't constantly check in with him throughout the day and would threaten to show up at her work if she didn't reply to his messages. He started to drive her to work and pick her up. He didn't like her going out with friends because he didn't want her to talk to other men.

He would make comments about her appearance and tell her that she should be grateful to have him because no one else would want her. He would comment on how much make up she wore and tell her that she should be embarrassed to go out in public looking like that. He became controlling over what she wore and wouldn't let her wear certain clothes because he didn't want other men looking at her. Sometimes he would ruin or destroy her clothes because he didn't like her wearing them.

Over time, Zara stopped seeing her friends and rarely saw her family. She stopped answering their phone calls and arranging to see them. She stopped speaking to her colleagues at work and going on work trips or nights out. She was afraid Adam would be angry if he found out she was talking to them because he said he didn't like them and said she shouldn't spend time with people like that. She felt anxious, depressed and constantly on edge. She felt like she was walking on eggshells and worried about upsetting Adam. She didn't want to tell her friends or family because she worried that they wouldn't believe her. She thought that since he wasn't physically violent then it must not be that bad.



HOW DOMESTIC ABUSE DISRUPTS WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

Historically, domestic abuse was considered by some to only affect women at home. However, it extends to all aspects of women's lives, and the workplace is no exception: the majority of women experiencing domestic abuse are also targeted at work.

Perpetrators of domestic abuse often use a number of tactics to disrupt women's employment including:

- Using workplace resources such as phone and email to threaten, harass, or abuse them.
- Sending abusive and threatening phone calls, text messages or emails to their personal phone while at work.
- Preventing them from going to work by locking them in, or by hiding their keys or purse.
- Controlling their finances to prevent them from paying transport costs or tampering with their car to prevent them from going to work.
- Following them into their workplace or waiting outside for them.
- Isolating them from their colleagues by not allowing them to attend social events.
- Verbal harassment, assault or threats of assault when women leave to go to work.
- Destroying personal documents which may prevent them from applying for jobs.
- Preventing them from attending development or training courses.
- Sabotaging their work clothes.
- Offering to provide childcare but not turning up.
- Threatening to take the children if they go to work.



- For non-English speakers, preventing them from learning English which would enable them to work
- Discouraging them from applying for promotion or positions where they would become the primary earner in the household

Domestic abuse can create significant barriers that prevent women coming to work and sustaining employment. By understanding abuse and how it impacts staff, colleagues, and the wider workplace, you'll be better able to develop policies and practices that can best support staff and create a workplace culture where women feel safe to disclose their experiences and seek support.

DOMESTIC ABUSE AND WORK LOCATIONS

Since the pandemic there has been an increase in homeworking, and a greater reliance on digital platforms for communications. This creates significant challenges for victim-survivors as they may have used work as a safe space to access specialist support and support from colleagues. Due to the reliance on technologies when working from home, perpetrators have more access to victim-survivors, and are more able to monitor and control.

For businesses where employees physically attend their work premises this may be the only safe space for victim-survivors to access support. Employers therefore have an integral role to play in supporting employees who are affected by domestic abuse. Line managers and colleagues may be the only consistent contact that victim-survivors have. It's therefore important they know how to recognise signs that an employee may be affected by domestic abuse and how to respond to a disclosure.



STALKING, DOMESTIC ABUSE, AND THE WORKPLACE

Stalking is persistent and unwanted behaviour which causes or has the intention to cause fear or alarm. It's a form of surveillance underpinned by the communication of that surveillance.

Stalking is a common tactic used by perpetrators of domestic abuse, but can also be perpetrated by colleagues, neighbours, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. The emotional and psychological impact of stalking can result in increased fear, stress, and anxiety, and loss of safety or trust. Victim-survivors of stalking worry that it will impact their job because of unexplained or frequent absences to avoid their stalker.

Stalking can have a significant impact on the workplace because stalkers are able to pinpoint the location of their victim when they are at work. Because of this victim-survivors may turn up late or leave early. For example, some women may want to leave work before it's dark, so it's still light out when they get home which makes them feel safer.

Tactics used by stalkers to disrupt women's employment can include:

- Preventing them from attending work by tampering with their car;
- Using workplace resources such as phones and email to threaten, harass and abuse them;
- Watching or spying on them, or forcing contact with them through any means, including social media;



- Following victims to and from work;
- Sending unwanted gifts or flowers to their work; and
- Targeting their colleagues.

Many women who experience domestic abuse will also be stalked by the same partner or ex-partner. It's therefore good practice to include information about stalking in your domestic abuse policy.

DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

Women aren't a homogenous group and don't experience domestic abuse, or inequality, in the same way. Different groups of women may experience an increased risk of violence and abuse due to prejudice and structural barriers in society that cause inequality.

- Disabled women are twice as likely to experience domestic abuse and sexual violence as non-disabled women, particularly when the abuser is also their carer.
- Racially minoritised women face additional barriers to accessing appropriate support, and they may feel reluctant to seek support because of concerns about racism and, for some migrant women, potential language barriers.
- Older women are less likely to report their experiences of domestic abuse.
- The abuse older women face is often mistakenly labelled as 'elder abuse' rather than domestic abuse. This means they are less likely to access the specialised support they need.



- Lesbian and bisexual women can be vulnerable to perpetrators who threaten to out them to colleagues, their employer, or family members.
- Trans women are vulnerable to transphobic abuse, including emotional abuse, and can be reluctant to access support services or contact the police for fear they may be met with prejudice.
- Pregnancy can be a trigger for domestic abuse and existing abuse may get worse during pregnancy or after giving birth.



HOW DOMESTIC ABUSE AFFECTS WOMEN AND THEIR WORKPLACE

Domestic abuse doesn't stop when someone comes to work. It can have a serious impact on a staff member's health, safety and wellbeing, and may also affect their colleagues. As an employer, understanding how domestic abuse can affect someone's working life is key to being able to respond appropriately and provide meaningful support.

Creating a supportive workplace not only helps staff feel safe and valued, it can also mitigate the wider impact on teams and minimise disruption to the business, such as increased absence or staff turnover.

THE IMPACT ON A STAFF MEMBER

It's common for victim-survivors to be targeted in and around the workplace, which has a profound impact on women's capacity to work. It can have long-term consequences for women, causing damage to their physical health, mental health, and wellbeing. Women report experiencing trauma, stress, anxiety, and depression as a result of domestic abuse, and can struggle to find appropriate support in the workplace.

Women often need to take time off work to seek help from specialist support agencies, attend doctor's appointments, or move house. In some cases, they may even leave a job to avoid their perpetrator. Domestic abuse can also affect victim-survivors' capacity to work with men, particularly in situations where there's an existing gender or power imbalance in their workplace. It can also have an effect on women's ability to manage challenging situations, interact with others, or experience career advancement and development.



ECONOMIC ABUSE

Domestic abuse can cause financial instability or loss of employment because of unexplained lateness or absences. Women often need to take time off work to seek help from specialist support agencies, attend doctor's appointments, or move house. In some cases, they may even leave a job to avoid their perpetrator.

A perpetrator may interfere with a victim-survivor's employment as a means of economic abuse, which is a form of domestic abuse. For example, a perpetrator may prevent their partner from leaving the house, which means they may be late or even unable to get to work. This may mean lost income from missed shifts, or loss of employment due to unexplained absences.

A perpetrator may ban their partner from doing any training or development that might help their career as a means of control. By restricting a woman's ability to progress or improve her economic position, perpetrators make it more difficult for women to leave, and harm their long-term financial security and independence.

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON VICTIM-SURVIVORS

Trauma refers to when an individual has experienced an event or series of events that was physically or emotionally harmful, or life threatening. Trauma significantly affects the victim-survivor's ability to cope with or emotionally process what has happened. It can make it difficult



for people to speak about their experience or seek support. Research shows that trauma causes depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and stress. Trauma can also impact a victim-survivor's relationships with other people, including their colleagues, often leaving them feeling isolated, disconnected, and untrusting.

It's important to make the victim-survivor feel safe and supported, as well as signposting them to specialist support organisations such as the local Women's Aid and/or Rape Crisis centre. By understanding how trauma impacts victim-survivors and their experience at work, you'll be better able to support them.

Women in all job types are likely to prefer to avoid disclosure to their employers, but women in senior roles are particularly likely to seek to avoid 'victim' status. There is a perception that senior employees or peers (who are more likely to be male the higher up an organisation a woman rises) may wonder whether a woman experiencing domestic abuse is suitable for the job, for example if it's perceived that she "cannot even take care of her own family problems".

THE IMPACT ON COLLEAGUES

Domestic abuse also affects people who are in the victim-survivor's life on a regular basis. This can include work colleagues, for example:

- Having to fill in for absent colleagues, or colleagues who are under-performing;
- Decreased productivity or being distracted from their own work;



- Increased stress or anxiety from being followed to or from work by the perpetrator, or being subject to questioning about their colleague's contact details or locations;
- Increased worry over their own safety;
- Trying to protect their colleague from unwanted phone calls or visits;
- Feeling helpless and unsure about how to support a colleague;
- Experiencing a negative impact on their own mental and emotional health, especially if they're experiencing abuse themselves;
- Increased staff absence or turnover of key people; and
- Unknowingly assisting the perpetrator to locate their colleague or by covering up for the perpetrator at work.

THE IMPACT ON THE WORKPLACE

Domestic abuse is estimated to cost the UK economy over £66 billion per year, which includes an estimated £14 billion lost due to decreased productivity, administrative difficulties from unplanned time off, lost wages, and sick pay. Domestic abuse can have an adverse impact on staff morale, as well as on a business's image and reputation. It therefore makes good business sense for you to support employees affected by domestic abuse.



YOUR ROLE AS AN EMPLOYER

Employers have a vital role to play in tackling domestic abuse. While the most important reason to take action is because it's the right thing to do, it also makes good business sense. Domestic abuse can have a profound impact on a staff member's wellbeing, safety and ability to do their job, and can also affect colleagues, team dynamics, and service delivery. By providing the right support at work, employers can make a real difference in someone's life while also helping to reduce absence, improve staff retention, and foster a safer, more inclusive workplace. Taking action on domestic abuse is part of building a fairer, more equal society - and every employer has a part to play.

There are a range of actions that you can take to support victim-survivors:

- You should have a domestic abuse policy and raise awareness of the policy to all staff.
- Ensuring that there are not repercussions from reporting is an important part of supporting employees through the reporting process.
- You should take steps to ensure that employees are safe, and they're not treated differently if they report.
- Keep records of any disclosure or report of violence against women. It's critical that the disclosure or report is clearly recorded and is kept confidential.
- Line managers should ensure they're in regular contact with all team members, including those who are on sick leave. This may be a critical link for victim-survivors to access support or to disclose.



Gender inequality is the root cause of domestic abuse. The way you deal with domestic abuse sends a strong signal to your employees, and your current and prospective clients, about how seriously you take it. By taking visible and proactive steps to tackle and prevent domestic abuse, it lets employees know that you have zero tolerance, and helps to create a safe and inclusive workplace culture. Delivering workplace equality will help tackle domestic abuse, and makes good business sense.

Your business can take action to prevent abuse at work. To find out how your business is doing right now, you can take our self-assessment test at www.thinkbusinessthinkequality.org.uk. You can also access our resources on creating your own domestic abuse policy and how to support staff affected by domestic abuse [here](#).



LIST OF SUPPORT SERVICES IN SCOTLAND

SCOTTISH WOMEN'S AID

Scotland's lead domestic abuse organisation working towards preventing domestic abuse and supporting victim-survivors.

www.womensaid.scot

Scottish Women's Aid local group directory:

www.womensaid.scot/find-nearest-wa-group

DOMESTIC ABUSE AND FORCED MARRIAGE HELPLINE

Support for anyone experiencing domestic abuse or forced marriage, as well as their family members, friends, colleagues and professionals who support them.

24hr service: 0800 027 1234

www.sdafmh.org.uk

RAPE CRISIS SCOTLAND

Scotland's national rape crisis organisation providing helpline and email support for anyone affected by sexual violence.

Helpline from 6pm-midnight:

08088 01 0302

www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk

Rape Crisis Scotland local service finder:

www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/find-a-service-near-you

SCOTTISH WOMEN'S RIGHTS CENTRE

Free legal information and advice for women experiencing gender based violence.

Freephone: 08088 010 789

www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk



SHAKTI WOMEN'S AID

Support and information for Black and minority ethnic women, children and young people experiencing or who have experienced domestic abuse.

0131 475 2399

www.shaktiedinburgh.co.uk

AMINA MUSLIM WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE

Culturally-sensitive signposting and support service for Muslim and ethnic minority women.

Helpline from Mon-Fri 10am-4pm:

0808 801 0301

www.mwrc.org.uk

HEMAT GRYFFE WOMEN'S AID

Support to Asian, Black and minority ethnic women, children and young people.

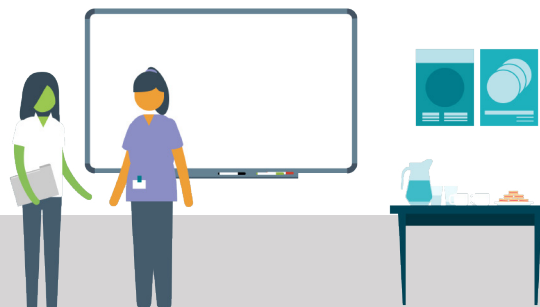
Helpline (24hrs): 0141 353 0859

www.hematgryffe.org.uk

LGBT HELPLINE SCOTLAND

Information and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Helpline: 0800 464 7000




Close the Gap works in Scotland on women's labour market participation. We work with policymakers, employers and unions to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's inequality at work.

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 Close the Gap



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