



DOMESTIC ABUSE AND COVID-19

Think Business, Think Equality

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ABOUT THIS GUIDANCE

This guidance is for small and medium businesses who want to improve gender diversity in their workplace. It enables employers to support employees who are experiencing domestic abuse during COVID-19. It should be used alongside the Think Business, Think Equality online assessment tool and guidance on domestic abuse. The free online tool enables you to assess your current employment practice and provides tailored advice and guidance on how your business can benefit from gender diversity.

The guidance outlines the impact of COVID-19 on women's experiences of domestic abuse; provides information on how to recognise signs of domestic abuse; and sets out simple steps employers can take to respond to domestic abuse to ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff. There is a list of support services on page 18.

The Think Business, Think Equality online tool is available at:

www.thinkbusinessthinkequality.org.uk

COVID-19, WOMEN AND THE WORKPLACE

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented challenge, which has the potential to significantly set back efforts to progress gender equality and diversity in the workplace. In addition, women may be at increased risk of domestic abuse and their experience may be exacerbated by a lack of access to support networks or specialist services.

There have been significant changes to the way work is done since the COVID-19 outbreak, including an increase in employees working from home, employees working fewer hours or being furloughed, scaled back workforces and a reliance on digital platforms for communication. These changes are highly likely to create further challenges for victim-survivors. While the impact of COVID-19 has put significant pressure on businesses to manage the crisis, employers still have a key role to play in supporting women during this period.

By understanding women's experiences of domestic abuse and the way that COVID-19 affects men and women differently, you'll be better able to support your employees and ensure the business is not adversely affected. As an employer it's important to understand the effect of domestic abuse on victim-survivors and the workplace, and how COVID-19 has impacted this.

THE IMPACT OF DOMESTIC ABUSE ON THE WORKPLACE

The current self-isolation and social distancing measures will exacerbate women's experiences of domestic abuse as they become isolated in their home with their abuser for longer periods of time. There's a significant risk that under lockdown perpetrators will further restrict their partners' freedoms and threaten their safety. Coercive control by perpetrators is very likely to intensify without regular interaction with other people. In addition, women will be more isolated from friends and family and may have limited access to vital support.

Coercive control

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, their clothing, social activity and other relationships.

It's important to understand that domestic abuse is not increasing due to COVID-19 but rather that existing abusive relationships are intensified during this period. Domestic abuse is not a one-off incident. It's a pattern of controlling, coercive, threatening and/or violent behaviour that often includes physical, emotional, psychological and economic abuse.

Perpetrators may interfere with or restrict a woman's access to money and finances, as well as necessities such as food, clothing, transportation or accommodation. Economic abuse

can be used to reinforce the power perpetrators have by creating economic instability and further isolating victim-survivors from support. They may be preventing women from working from home and insist that they're responsible for childcare. They may also prevent them from accessing the equipment they need to work from home, such as a laptop or phone. As a result, victim-survivors may be unable to do their job, or aspects of their work, and in some cases, they may be pressured into leaving their job. The impacts of domestic abuse on a woman's ability to do her job represents a significant loss of female talent to employers, with many businesses missing out on women's valuable skills and experience.

Financial dependence and poverty are both primary risk factors that diminish women's and children's resilience when experiencing domestic abuse and can prevent women from leaving an abusive partner. Increasing rates of poverty as a result of job losses, low rates of sick pay and unpaid leave could increase women's economic dependence and vulnerability to domestic abuse.

Stalking is very likely to increase during this period as well. Stalking is a common tactic used by perpetrators of domestic abuse, but can also be perpetrated by colleagues, neighbours, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. It is a pattern of surveillance underpinned by the communication of that surveillance. As a result of self-isolation, stalkers will be able to easily locate victim-survivors, which could be at their home or at work. It will also make it more difficult for women to avoid their stalker. Stalkers may also violate social distancing precautions to cause fear or alarm and disrupt women's employment.

To find out more about the impact of domestic abuse on the workplace, visit the **DOMESTIC ABUSE** section at: www.thinkbusinessthinkequality.org.uk

YOUR ROLE AS AN EMPLOYER

Domestic abuse affects all aspects of a woman's life, including her experience at work. Domestic abuse often follows women to work and not only impacts on their wellbeing, but also the smooth running of the business by causing reduced productivity, increased absenteeism and higher employee turnover. It also affects women's ability to do their job effectively. This can be because of stress, trauma, or physical injuries that can make it difficult to do their work as normal. It therefore makes good business sense for you to support employees who are affected by domestic abuse.

Due to the current self-isolation and social distancing measures, more employees will be working from home, working fewer hours or will be furloughed. 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. Perpetrators may also interfere and prevent women from working from home.

For businesses where employees are still going into work, this may be the only safe space and way to access support for victim-survivors. In addition, perpetrators may try to prevent women from going into work by refusing to provide childcare, tampering with their car, ruining or destroying their work clothes or withholding money for public transport.

In both scenarios, employers have an integral role to play during this period in supporting employees who are affected by domestic abuse. Line managers and colleagues may be the only consistent contact that victim-survivors have. Perpetrators may restrict women from communicating with anyone other than for work. It's therefore important for line managers to know how to recognise signs an employee may be affected by domestic abuse and how to respond to a disclosure.

It's good practice to have a domestic abuse policy, and to raise awareness of the policy to all staff. You should communicate what support mechanisms are available, and it will help to create an environment where employees know they'll be supported if they disclose.

If you don't have a domestic abuse policy, you can find guidance on how to develop a policy on the [Think Business, Think Equality](https://www.thinkbusinessstinkequality.org.uk) website, www.thinkbusinessstinkequality.org.uk

Line managers should ensure they're in regular contact with all team members, including those who are on sick leave or furlough leave. This may be a critical link for victim-survivors to access support or to disclose. It's good practice for line managers to organise regular staff meetings and also provide 1-2-1 supervision.

RECOGNISING THE SIGNS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

It's important that line managers are able to recognise the signs someone may be experiencing domestic abuse and are comfortable initiating a conversation about it. Line managers should feel confident in responding to disclosures and identifying any support needs. There may be added challenges during COVID-19 particularly if a victim-survivor is unable to openly communicate. In the current context, it may be more difficult to detect as communication may only be through video or phone calls.

Signs an employee may be experiencing domestic abuse when working from home

- Changes in behaviour, such as acting in a way that is unusual or out of character for them.
- Withdrawing from previous sources of support, including team chats or catch-ups.
- Visible injuries or other signs of someone using physical violence and intimidation, such as broken objects or damage to the home.
- Suddenly not using the video function where previously they did, without an explanation, or an explanation that doesn't quite fit.
- Nervousness or increased anxiety about their partner or family member coming into the room whilst you are speaking to them.
- Visibly uneasy or tense during team meetings, if on video.
- Unresponsive in online chats, or constantly offline.
- Reluctance to talk about their home situation or avoiding answering questions.
- Signs of tension such as audible conflict in the home.
- Reluctance to speak on the phone or on video, or partner always visible in the background.
- Lack of access to a computer or phone to be able to effectively work from home.

- A loss of confidence or self-esteem.
- Exhibiting fearful behaviour, such as being easily startled.

Signs that an employee is experiencing domestic abuse in the workplace

- Changes in their behaviour such as becoming quiet, avoiding speaking to colleagues.
- Avoiding lunch breaks or socialising.
- Obsessing about time.
- Being secretive about their home life.
- Expressing a fear of their partner or leaving their children with their partner.
- Being persistently late without explanation or needing to leave work early.
- Receiving repeated upsetting calls, texts, or emails.
- Constantly checking their mobile phone.
- Being a victim of vandalism or threats.

Mental health problems are affecting an increasing number of employees at the moment because of COVID-19. However, for victim-survivors the following signs may be exacerbated by COVID-19 and may indicate an employee needs additional support.

Additional signs that an employee is experiencing domestic abuse

- Increased stress, anxiety, depression or feeling overwhelmed.
- Reduced productivity or missing deadlines.
- Fatigue or exhaustion.
- Panic attacks.
- Increased sickness absence.

STARTING A CONVERSATION

If you suspect an employee may be experiencing domestic abuse, it's good practice to initiate a conversation. This may be difficult if they're reluctant to share information about their home life. In addition, some victim-survivors may not want to disclose their experience, and this should be respected. Line managers can ask employees how they feel about the changes in their work environment. You can also ask about their support networks during this period and whether anything could be strengthened through additional support from work.

Examples of questions you can ask include:

- I've noticed that you're not yourself lately, is everything okay?
- Is everything alright at home?
- Is there any further support you think might help?
- Do you have friends and family to support you just now?

If a victim-survivor does disclose, it's important that you respond in a non-judgemental and sensitive way. Some women may disclose to you without wanting to make a formal report to the police.

Simple steps to ensure you respond effectively include:

- Listen to the staff member and take their disclosure seriously.
- Reassure them that their disclosure will be treated confidentially.
- Respect and accept their thoughts and ideas.
- Reassure them that their needs are a priority.
- Outline that there is support available for them.
- Organise a time to check in in the future.

HOW TO SUPPORT STAFF

If a victim-survivor is unable to speak freely or share information, you could email your team about your workplace domestic abuse policy, if you have one, and offer a list of support services they can access. It's important to offer methods of communication that don't require video or audio so that victim-survivors can access support without the perpetrator knowing. This could include texting or platforms which have a chat function such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Slack or Skype for Business.

You could also agree a system of code words with the victim-survivors so that they can safely communicate without alerting the perpetrator.

There are a number of ways to support an employee who may be experiencing domestic abuse, and you should be guided by what they want. As well, their support needs may change over time and it's important to organise check-ins.

Examples of support options you can offer to victim-survivors

- Developing a safety plan with the victim-survivor to ensure they are safe at home and outline what to do if they're in danger. This could include what to do if they aren't able to check in, how to ensure their privacy, and code words to use to indicate what is happening.
- Agreeing that the employee can work flexibly, including changing or reducing hours, or starting or finishing early.
- If they're coming into work, creating a plan for arriving at and leaving the workplace. This could include changing start and finishing times and using different entrances and exits, if possible.

- Agreeing in advance who to contact if the victim-survivor doesn't appear for work, for example, a friend, their family, a neighbour or the police.
- Signposting to specialist support services, such as the Scotland's national Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline, or the local Women's Aid group who are still providing support during this time.
- Referring to your employee assistance programme, if you have one.

BEST PRACTICE FOR SUPPORTING VICTIM-SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

Raise awareness of your domestic abuse policy to all staff.	
Ensure you remain in regular contact with all staff, including those on sickness leave or on furlough leave, through catch-ups or 1-2-1s.	
Provide line managers and staff with information on the signs of domestic abuse during COVID-19.	
Initiate a conversation if you suspect an employee may be experiencing domestic abuse.	
Be supportive and non-judgemental if one of your team discloses.	
Go at the employee's pace and if she's finding it difficult to speak or is becoming distressed, suggest taking a break.	
Work with the employee to identify their support needs and the simple changes that can be made to support her.	
Organise code words so victim-survivors are able to disclose or provide information on their situation.	
Protect their confidentiality and communicate to them how you will do that.	
Agree a safety plan in line with the staff member's needs.	
Identify whether other workplace policies could be used to support a staff member experiencing domestic abuse. This could include identifying whether staff would like to work flexibly, adjust work hours, workload and/or work location, wherever necessary and possible.	
Organise regular meetings to check in and review their support needs.	
Signpost staff to specialist support services that work on domestic abuse, such as the local Women's Aid group.	

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There are a number of resources available on the [Think Business, Think Equality](#) website to support your practice on increasing gender diversity and supporting victim-survivors of domestic abuse. In addition, the website includes:

- [The free self-assessment tool](#) on domestic abuse which enables you to review your practice and receive a tailored guidance.
- [Best practice guidance on domestic abuse.](#)
- [Frequently asked questions on domestic abuse and work.](#)
- [Case studies on women's experience of domestic abuse.](#)

There are additional resources available at [Scottish Women's Rights Centre](#):

- [Reporting domestic abuse to the Police: Your rights.](#)
- [Reporting stalking to the Police: Your rights.](#)

[Scottish Women's Aid](#) has a number of videos highlight the impact of coercive control:

- [Hidden in plain sight](#)

Perpetrators may have increased access to a victim-survivor's computer or phone, it may be helpful to share with them information on securely using their computer or phone:

- [Women's Aid](#) has information about covering your tracks online.
- [Technology Safety](#) has information on strategies to secure your phone or laptop.
- [Bright Sky app](#) can be used to securely keep a record of abusive behaviour and access information about local services in Scotland through a tool disguised as a weather app.

GLOSSARY

Coercive control

Coercive control is a pattern of behaviour that seeks to take away the victim-survivor's liberty or freedom, and strip away their sense of self. It's an act or a pattern of acts or behaviour that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim. It's used to maintain or regain control of a partner or ex-partner. Coercive control is recognised as a form of psychological abuse in the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018.

Domestic abuse

Domestic abuse can be perpetrated by partners or ex partners and can include physical abuse (assault and physical attack involving a range of behaviour), sexual abuse (acts which degrade and humiliate women and are perpetrated against their will, including rape) and mental and emotional abuse (such as threats, verbal abuse, racial abuse, withholding money and other types of controlling behaviour such as isolation from family or friends).

Emotional and psychological abuse

Emotional and psychological abuse is a form of abuse, characterised by a person subjecting or exposing another person to behavior that may result in psychological trauma, including anxiety, chronic depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder. It aims to diminish a victim-survivor's sense of identity, dignity, self-worth, and independence. Perpetrators use tactics such as threats, verbal abuse, intimidation, bullying, abuse in the workplace, constant criticism and isolating someone from family and friends in order to exert control.

Equality

Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration - recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men.

Financial Abuse

Financial abuse involves a perpetrator using or misusing money which limits and controls their partner's current and future actions and their freedom of choice. Perpetrators use financial abuse to stop victim-survivors from getting a job, from having money for transport to/from work, or not allowing them to buy necessities related to work or personal use. It can also include generating debt in the name of the victim-survivor.

Gender

Refers to roles, attitudes, values and behaviours that men and women are encouraged to adopt by society. These characteristics can vary depending on the society around us and can change over time. For example, historically, gender role stereotyping would suggest that women should look after children at home while men go to work in the formal labour market.

Intersectionality

An intersectional approach recognises that that women are not a homogenous group, but their experiences will vary according to their multiple identities. For example,

disabled and Black and minority ethnic women's experiences will be inflected by not only sexism but also ableism and racism.

Perpetrator

An individual who chooses to use abusive behaviours in order to assert power and control, usually to gain authority over their partner. Someone who is currently committing or has previously committed VAW.

Stalking

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.

Victim-survivor

The term victim-survivor is used to capture that individuals experiencing VAW 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 VAW or the external factors that affect women's ability to leave.

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: 0300 123 2523

Close the Gap works in Scotland on women's labour market participation. We work with policymakers, employers and employees 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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