

Scottish Women's Convention response to:
The UK Government Call for Evidence:
Support in the Workplace for Victims of Domestic Abuse
September 2020

Premise:

The UK Government has launched a review that aims to ensure survivors of domestic abuse are given the support they deserve within the workplace, whether that is an outlet for reporting abuse, financial assistance or as a source of emotional support.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to women's equality.

The current pandemic has seen an exponential increase in matters concerning domestic abuse. The onset of rapid lockdown has left many women sequestered within unsafe home environments for much longer periods of time. The combination of home schooling, caring and other responsibilities as well as home working at a time of great national distress further exacerbated this issue for women and their families.

As justice is a devolved issue, the SWC has focused here solely on those matters reserved to the UK Government. It is, however, of the utmost importance that all policies and legislation account for domestic abuse to ensure that this recognises the inequality women face in this respect.

What practical circumstances arise in relation to domestic abuse and work?

At present, the majority of women within the workplace who experience domestic abuse must take a sizable number of days off under annual or sick leave. This can be for a variety of reasons including securing safe accommodation, attending doctor's appointments or court hearings.

In addition, women may feel unable to speak to employers regarding abuse suffered. This may be over fears of not being believed or because the appropriate support is simply not in place. Where such problems are not reported to management, this may see colleagues feeling they have nowhere to turn.

Other issues which may arise in relation to domestic abuse and work include:

- A perception that many employers would rather "*turn a blind eye*" either believing abuse is not really happening or believing they have no right to pry into their worker's private lives.
- Hesitance by women to inform employers due to a worry they are putting workplaces in an "*awkward*" situation.
- Being unable to take part in routine tasks or team sessions due to the degree of control being exerted on women.
- Challenges where the abuser may also be a member of the same workforce and thus exert a further degree of control through their constant physical presence to the victim.

What support can be offered in the workplace to victims of domestic abuse?

Workplaces must ensure high quality training for all management and representatives on issues related to domestic abuse and violence against women. It is crucial that all matters are conducted with the utmost sensitivity and ensure correct guidance regarding storage of information relating to someone's personal circumstances as a priority. It is wrong for a woman to have to justify a leave of absence due to domestic abuse and have to use their own annual leave entitlement as a result.

Given the widespread national cost of domestic abuse, it is conceivable that Government funding should be in place to offset additional training costs for businesses and organisations. Other support to be looked at includes:

- Allowance of additional holidays or respite for victims of domestic abuse. This should be a day one right for workers and be wide enough in scope that it allows leave to be taken for a number of different issues.
- Government-funded employee advice services for women to know their statutory rights within the workplace.
- Providing maintenance to medium and smaller organisations, particularly to cover the extra costs of training for domestic abuse-related matters.
- Ensuring that national policies and criteria cover both physical and non-physical points of domestic abuse to publicise the widespread form this violence can take.

- The recognition of particular vulnerabilities which may act as additional obstacles for women accessing support in and out with the workplace. Women whereupon English is not a first language, for instance, may face barriers and other sensitive cultural issues.

What does current best practice look like?

A number of local authorities across the UK have been at the forefront of implementing policies that recognise the acute challenge that domestic abuse plays. This is a powerful acknowledgement to employees of the implications that violence against women and inequality in general has on women in the workplace:

- The employer accredited Equally Safe at Work Scheme developed by Close the Gap to advance gender equality and prevent violence against women has developed further guidance in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.
- South Ayrshire Council, for instance, gives employees who have experienced domestic abuse up to ten days annual leave separate from holiday and sick pay entitlements which can be taken as a block or intermittently.
- A number of smaller organisations across the UK have also recognised domestic abuse when implementing flexible working models. This ensures women who have faced such challenges continue to be treated as part of the team and acknowledges what they have went through.
- Additionally, a number of trade union bodies have passed motions regarding domestic abuse leave which should be looked upon as thorough guidance for organisations to acknowledge domestic abuse as a workplace issue. Private as well as public bodies should be mindful of their obligations to both health and safety and a duty of care to employees. They must enact models such as those currently being implemented as a mode of best practice.

What is the potential to do more?

Initiatives set up by many organisations in acknowledgement of their role as a duty of care provider for women when it comes to domestic abuse should be applauded. A coordinated strategy at a national level, however, is needed to ensure this takes precedent and covers all women, regardless of where they work. Lack of a clear and coherent policy at this level risks many employers continuing to not understand domestic abuse as a workplace issue and feeling they are ill-equipped to deal with such situations. Organisations should be made aware of best practice in developing a domestic abuse policy with clear cut reference to legislation and guidance as well as signposting to violence against women organisations.

Further input should include:

- Ensuring employment law and statutory entitlements cover both workers and employees so that all women are offered the same protections.

- Setting a high standard for training and guidance that covers confidentiality and data handling of such matters for employees and employers.
- Ensuring other representatives, such as trade union equality representatives, are available to provide other outlets separate from management for women.
- Training and clear guidance that accounts for the wide-ranging nature of domestic abuse, including mental and financial control.
- A nationalised strategy that includes publicising other forms of working such as flexible working which may help alleviate some of these issues. This should include strengthening of statutory workplace policies such as the right to request flexible working.
- Ensuring social security provides a strong safety net for women including the reversal of the two-child tax credit limit and single household Universal Credit payments. This is imperative regardless of whether women stay with a controlling partner or not to provide some form of financial assistance where they are struggling.
- Consulting on other financial forms of redress for victims of domestic violence including monetary grants that may help women in such situations.

Conclusion

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the UK Government's call for evidence regarding domestic abuse within the workplace. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to the effect of this on equality at both a reserved and devolved level.

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