



Support in the workplace for victims of domestic abuse: Welsh Women's Aid Response

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These are the views of:	<i>Welsh Women's Aid (Third Sector) - the national charity in Wales working to end domestic abuse and all forms of violence against women.</i>

About Welsh Women's Aid

Welsh Women's Aid is the umbrella organisation in Wales that supports and provides national representation for independent third sector violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) specialist services in Wales (comprising our membership of specialist services and members of the regional VAWDASV Specialist Services Providers Forums). These services deliver life-saving and life-changing support and preventative work in response to violence against women, including domestic abuse and sexual violence, as part of a network of UK provision.

As an umbrella organisation, our primary purpose is to prevent domestic abuse, sexual violence and all forms of violence against women and ensure high quality services for survivors that are needs-led, gender responsive and holistic. We collaborate nationally to integrate and improve community responses and practice in Wales; we provide advice, consultancy, support and training to deliver policy and service improvements across government, public, private and third sector services and in communities, for the benefit of survivors.

We also deliver the Wales National Quality Service Standards (NQSS), a national accreditation framework for domestic abuse specialist services in Wales (supported by the Welsh Government) as part of a UK suite of integrated accreditation systems and frameworks. (More information on the NQSS can be found here: <http://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/our-members/standards/>)

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Introduction

Protecting the health and wellbeing of employees should be a priority in all workplaces. The consequences of not doing so are far reaching and will have a real and significant impact on both the employee and the organisation.

In England and Wales the social and economic cost of domestic abuse to year ending March 2017, was £66 billion¹. Some of this can be attributed to survivors juggling responsibilities of work whilst living in or trying to exit an abusive relationship, administrative difficulties from unplanned time off, lost wages and sick pay.

It is inevitable that the consequences of all forms of violence against women will flow into the work place. 75% of women who experience domestic abuse and violence are targeted at work – from harassing phone calls and abusive partners arriving at the office unannounced, to physical assaults. In the UK every year, 20% of employed women take time off work because of domestic abuse and 2% lose their jobs as a direct result of abuse. 53% of abused workers (male and female) miss at least 3 days from work per month.²

Domestic abuse is part of a continuum of violence, abuse and harassment women and girls experience throughout their lives, including within working environments. 52% of women had experienced sexual harassment at work including inappropriate comments, unwanted behavior or sexual advances³. Sexual harassment at work can take many forms, from suggestive remarks, jokes about a colleague's sex life, circulating pornography, to inappropriate touching, hugging or kissing, or demands for sexual favours. In the vast majority of cases (88%), the perpetrator of the sexual harassment was male, and nearly one in five (17%) women reported that it was their line manager, or someone with direct authority over them⁴.

For the survivor, all forms of violence and abuse will impact every area of their life. Employers have the opportunity to offer understanding, stability and in some cases a lifeline during a wholly difficult time. Employers have a responsibility to show zero tolerance to all forms of violence against women and ensure that they provide safe and supportive work places for all staff and clients.

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/772180/horr107.pdf

² https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/da_employers_pack.pdf

³ TUC and Everyday Sexism Report 2016

⁴ Ibid





Summary of recommendations

1. All organisations to have robust workplace policies covering the areas outlined below and take steps to ensure they provide a safe and supportive workplace both on site and remotely.
2. Provide paid leave for survivors of all forms of violence against women to access support and recover from abuse. This would include time off to access refuge and therapeutic support, attend court and manage child care arrangements.
3. Specialist training for all levels of the organisation from strategic leadership, management and human resources to awareness raising with all staff. Training should be informed or led by experts on violence against women, its causes and consequences.
4. Acknowledge all forms of violence against women, and the continuum of violence and abuse women experience in the workplace, in public and at home. This includes taking action to promote gender equality, show zero tolerance to all forms of violence against women by holding perpetrators to account and ensuring the work environment is supportive and safe for all staff and clients.
5. Ensure that the workplace response to survivors and perpetrators of abuse recognises and responds to intersectional experiences and actively takes action to dismantle the barriers to disclosure, support and justice.

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

Indicators of abuse

Welsh Women’s Aid advise and support our organisational supporter members on ensuring they have robust workplace policies surrounding Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence.

As part of this we help employers identify indicators that may occur if someone is experiencing abuse, as confiding in a manager may not always be someone’s first course of action. These may include but are not limited to:

Work productivity	Psychological indicators	Physical indicators
Persistently late with no real explanation &/ or needing to leave work early	Changes in behaviour, may become quiet and withdrawn, avoid interaction or making acquaintances or friends at work, may always eat alone	Repeated injuries such as bruises that are explained away, explanations for injuries that are inconsistent with the injuries displayed
High absenteeism rate without explanation	Problems with concentration	Frequent and/or sudden or unexpected medical problems/sickness absences
Needing regular time off for appointments	May cry at work and/or appear to be very anxious	Sleeping/eating disorders

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<p>Changes in quality of work performance for unexplained reasons</p> <p>Interruptions at work e.g. repeated upsetting calls/texts/e-mails</p> <p>Increased hours being worked for no apparent reason</p>	<p>Could display fearful behaviour such as startled reactions</p> <p>Fear of partner/references to anger</p> <p>Is seldom or never able to attend social events with colleagues</p> <p>Expresses fears about leaving children at home alone with partner</p> <p>Secretive regarding home life</p> <p>Appears to be isolated from friends & family</p>	<p>Substance use/dependence</p> <p>Depression/suicide attempts</p> <p>Fatigue</p> <p>Change in the way the employee dresses e.g. excessive clothing in summer, unkempt or dishevelled appearance, change in the amount of make-up worn</p>
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These indicators of course, are assuming that employers and employees are interacting within a physical workspace. There is a high likelihood that due to the impacts of COVID-19 some workplaces will be operating on a 'working from home' basis for a continued period of time.

For some survivors, work is an important rest bite away from abuse which may be taking place in their home. If an employee is working from home, the abuser will have increased opportunity for control and concealing the abuse. We would advise that during this period of change, workplaces that have employees who work from home, reflect this in their Domestic Abuse Workplace policies.

Indicators of abuse when working from home could include but are not limited to:

- Repeated reluctance or refusal to join video meetings
- An instance on keeping the camera turned off during video meetings
- Rushed work or a decline in quality of work

In light of COVID 19 Welsh Women's Aid included advise to employers in our #StandwithSurvivors Bystander toolkit that can be found [here](#).

The abuser and the person being abused may be colleagues

It may be the case that the person being abused, and their abuser are colleagues and have the same employer or manager. In this instance employers should take appropriate action informed by the needs of the survivor, risk management, safety planning and safeguarding guidance.



In addition to considering disciplinary action against the employee who is perpetrating the abuse, action may be needed to be taken to ensure that the survivor and perpetrator do not come into contact in the workplace or through work activities.

Action may also need to be taken to minimise the potential for the perpetrator to use their position or work resources to find out details about the whereabouts of the survivor. This may include a change of duties for one or both employees or withdrawing the perpetrator's access to certain computer programs.

We advocate that acts of violence against women in all its forms be taken seriously by all workplaces, that the responsibility for such abuse lies with the perpetrator, that workplaces publicly challenge and make it clear that there are consequences for abusive behaviour.

No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

For someone with NRPF who has unsettled immigration status and is in an abusive relationship their employment could be their lifeline. Secure employment could be the difference between someone leaving an abusive relationship or staying in a dangerous situation. Employers should consider the practical arrangements highlighted in the next section which could allow someone to continue their duties at their place of work and safely exit an abusive situation.

We continue to call on the UK Government to abolish No Recourse to Public Funds and ratify the Istanbul Convention. Ensuring all survivors have access to safety and support.

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

Practical adjustments

There are several practical arrangements that employers can take to support survivors of domestic abuse and minimise harm. Depending on the role of the employee, and in discussion and agreement with them, special arrangements may be implemented. These can include but are not limited to:

- Change in work patterns or workload allowing for flexible arrangements
- Break from casework
- Paid leave
- Financial support
- Support around children and child care
- Links to employee assistance programmes and services offered by trade unions, such as legal advice
- Access to additional/timely external supervision or counselling support
- Information and contact details about to access specialist external support.



Paid leave

Leaving an abusive relationship, and recovering from all forms of violence against women, affects every area of survivor's lives. Following the New Zealand model⁵ we recommend that employers provide paid leave for survivors of all forms of violence against women to access support and recover from abuse. This would include time off to access refuge and therapeutic support, attend court and manage child care arrangements. Supporting employees this way can help survivors retain their jobs and facilitate recovery. The Future Generations Commissioner For Wales' Office⁶ and Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council⁷ are examples of employers in Wales who have already included paid leave for survivors of violence against women in their workplace policies.

The role of management

Managers will play an important role in the personal wellbeing of survivors. Empathy and understanding is vital to implementing effective solutions which work for everyone. For the survivor, there will be a multitude of concerns and if a manager is planning to approach the subject of abuse they must ensure they take the following measures:

- Being aware of the possibility that staff members could be affected by past and/or current abuse
- Recognising potential signs of abuse
- Create an environment where employees feel safe and able to discuss issues of abuse that are affecting them
- Initiating discussion if you have concerns about abuse in a sensitive and safe manner
- Take time to listen to the employee, believe them and make sure the discussion takes place in private
- Respect confidentiality
- Provide a sensitive, supportive response that takes account of any additional cultural & inequalities needs
- Considering what workplace support you could provide within the scope of current organisational policy and procedure
- Providing information about other sources of help including the [Live Fear Free Helpline](#) – the national helpline for Wales.
- Advise on the parameters of the manager's role and make clear what can and cannot be provided
- Keeping good records, documenting discussion and actions taken, ensuring that information is stored confidentially

⁵ <https://www.employment.govt.nz/leave-and-holidays/domestic-violence-leave/>

⁶ <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/news/future-generations-commissioner-for-wales-announces-paid-leave-for-staff-fleeing-domestic-abuse/>

⁷

<https://democracy.npt.gov.uk/documents/s56399/DOMESTIC%20ABUSE%20SPECIAL%20LEAVE%20REPORT%20APPENDIX%201.pdf>





- Monitor and review the situation regularly.

Psychologically informed approach to creating a safe and supportive environment

There are many different instances in which a survivor may disclose abuse. We advocate that all employers move towards a trauma/ psychologically informed approach to working⁸. This approach recognises that a person's trauma can affect their actions and behaviours and rather than penalising that person showing empathy and offering support and understanding.

For example, when Welsh Women's Aid support the development of Domestic Abuse Workplace Policies, we advocate that if an employee discloses violence or abuse during disciplinary procedures, this should be taken into account. If it is felt that the issue can be resolved by addressing the support or safety needs of the employee, the disciplinary process may be suspended.

Talking about the experience of violence and abuse, even if it happened a long time ago can be very difficult for the survivor. It may be the first time they have disclosed their experience to anyone. Talking about the experience of violence and abuse can bring on panic attacks and flashbacks. Employers must ensure they allow for the environment to be private and as safe and supportive as possible.

Welsh Women's Aid also advocate that workplaces have accessible information on specialist support services readily available in communal staff areas. Simple materials may alert or confirm that abuse is taking place, help others identify abuse, show that a discloser will be taken seriously, and signpost to support.

Linking with services

Creating an environment where survivors can manage their work whilst coping with abuse is paramount to safety and wellbeing. Specialist violence against women support is also often key to survivor's recovery, and employees should be made aware that the support exists.

We recommend that workplaces make themselves aware of the relevant services in their area, make this known to managers and keep relevant contact information in a place easily accessible to all.

What is possible with the existing framework?

The safety and support of employees is should be a priority for every workplace and any potential risk to employees and colleagues must be taken seriously. Each person's needs are different, and any

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5adf97212487fdb305ae18c/t/5d55340a53bf06000176a908/1565865006251/PHW+%282016%29+ACE+Report+3%3B+Adverse+Childhood+Experiences+and+their+association+with+chronic+disease+and+health+service+use+in+the+Welsh+adult+population.pdf>

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measures developed in workplaces must only be used with the consent of the survivor. Steps taken could include but are not limited to:

- Flexible working hours
- Specific and planned code words
- Access to emergency telephone numbers
- A safety plan if the employee does not come to work
- Diverting phone calls
- Alerting reception and security staff
- Ensuring staff have arrangements for getting safely to and from work
- Relocation (temporary or permanent)
- Ensuring the employee does not work alone
- Agreeing with the employee what to tell colleagues and how they should respond if the abuser telephones or visits the workplace
- Keeping a record of any incidents of abuse in the workplace including telephone calls, emails or visits from the abuser

Data safety

Protecting the data of survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence or any other form of violence against women is paramount for the survivor's safety. Any personal data concerning the survivor should be kept strictly confidential with procedures in place that mean it cannot be accessed by the perpetrator. An increase in sensitive digital or physical files can create additional vulnerabilities for the people involved, and the confidentiality of survivor information is critical, as is transparency regarding the process for handling cases. Practical measures to ensure safe record keeping could include but are not limited to:

- Minimizing the amount of data being collected. The more that is collected, the more there is to protect.
- Limiting the number of people who have access to sensitive information.
- If there is any reason to share records with a third party, obtaining the survivor's signed permission and making the purpose for sharing clear.
- Keeping records away from the internet. Considering storing sensitive data on a computer that is not connected to the internet or networked with other computers. Using encryption that will protect it from unauthorised viewers if data must be shared.
- Changing passwords frequently.
- Ensuring protection of the virtual personality: Digital signatures, user names, passwords, PINs, etc., must not be used or changed by others without the consent of the owner.
- Testing security measures with an organisation or consultant who is well versed in digital security.





What is the potential to do more?

Training

At present Welsh Women's Aid advocate for more training on identifying abuse and knowing how to access support. Welsh Women's Aid and Women's Aid England Federation has been piloting Change that Lasts.⁹ One part of this is the Trusted Professionals training, a 1 day training course designed to upskill professionals who have contact with potential survivors and/or perpetrators of violence against women, domestic abuse and/or sexual violence to 'recognise the signs, respond to disclosures and refer to specialist support services. We believe all workplaces would benefit from this knowledge in creating environments where employees feel equipped, safe and supported.

In Wales this must be aligned to the National Training Framework that covers devolved public bodies to ensure that it reflects the context of prevention, protection and support in Wales. We recommend specialist training for all levels of the organisation from strategic leadership, management and human resources to awareness raising with all staff. Training should be informed or led by experts on violence against women, its causes and consequences.

Broadening beyond domestic abuse: Ending violence against women in all its forms

We welcome moves the UK Government has made in consideration to support for survivors of domestic abuse, including consulting on areas such as this and the development of the Domestic Abuse Bill. However, domestic abuse is one facet of the global epidemic of violence against women.¹⁰ Violence against women includes domestic abuse; rape and sexual violence; stalking; forced marriage; so-called honour based violence; female genital mutilation (FGM); trafficking and sexual exploitation including through the sex industry; and sexual harassment in work and public life.

Violence against women and girls is a cause and consequence of inequality between women and men, a violation of human rights, and a result of an abuse of power and control.¹¹ To truly end violence against women in all its forms policies and practice must recognise all the instances where violence occurs and aim to dismantle the systems which allow it to continue.

⁹ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/change-that-lasts/#:~:text=Trusted%20Professionals,refer%20to%20specialist%20support%20services.>

¹⁰ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

¹¹ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/information-and-support/what-is-violence-against-women-and-girls/>

