

Briefing 1: What can employers and companies do to address domestic violence during the Covid-19 crisis¹

This is the first of a series of short briefings intended for a diverse audience to rethink policy and practice during the Covid-19 crisis and beyond.² Our main focus is on **stakeholders from the world of work** (companies, employers, business associations, managers and team leaders, workers and trade unions). This and subsequent briefings will also be relevant for the policies and actions of international organisations, government agencies, NGOs and domestic violence support organisations. We have written this briefing out of a concern for the need for urgent policy and workplace responses in the light of the Covid-19 crisis. We also believe that the crisis has opened up a possibility to genuinely change the way we address domestic violence.

1. Introduction

This briefing aims to raise awareness and start a conversation about the heightened risks of domestic violence during the unprecedented Covid-19 public health crisis. Our focus is on the **implications of the shift to working remotely/teleworking from home**, rather than going into a physical workplace every day. This is now the reality for many workers. The issues we raise are also important for those workplaces and workers for whom working remotely is the norm, even without the pressures of a pandemic.

During the Covid-19 crisis it is critical that the home is a safe place for survivors of domestic violence and their children. Removing perpetrators from the home remains the most effective way to limit the disruption to survivors' lives, safety and security.

The stakes are high. How can employers continue to exercise their 'duty of care' for their employees as more and more people are working from home? What can be done to ensure the safety of workers affected by domestic violence who are away from the physical workplace?

These questions highlight the need for immediate and urgent responses to ensure the safety of domestic violence survivors in these unprecedented times. This crisis also brings into sharp focus the need for longer-term systems change. Doing more of the same is no longer sufficient.

2. Domestic violence as a workplace issue

Research shows that when workers are affected by domestic violence,³ it often affects their participation in work, their productivity and achievement of work tasks and targets, as well as their health. The many serious work-related impacts of domestic violence are already recognized in laws, government policies, company and corporate initiatives, and in workplace policies and collective agreements, across the world.

Domestic violence is recognized as form of workplace violence and harassment in the 2019 global treaty of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). **ILO Convention No. 190 on eliminating violence and**

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² Future briefings will include amongst other areas risk assessment and safety measures, managing employed perpetrators, ILO Convention No. 190, and issues to address in the longer term. **The briefings are available at:**

³ See for example a review of evidence in 'OneInThreeWomen Survey of six companies: How does domestic violence impact the workplace': https://www.fondationface.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/FACE_-_ProjetOneInThreeWomen.210x297_UK.pdf

harassment in the world of work (and accompanying ILO Recommendation No. 206) notes that workplace violence and harassment, including domestic violence, can take place in the private and public places where people work. It places responsibilities on ratifying governments, and in turn duties on employers, to mitigate the effects of domestic violence where it affects the world of work, for example, through risk assessments and workplace policies, information and support.

3. What can employers and companies do to support their employees during the Covid-19 crisis?

Unprecedented times require unprecedented responses.

Research tells us that during times of crisis, confinement at home, financial stress and economic and natural disasters trigger higher levels of domestic violence. Reports from media and advocates across the world are already making it clear that the risks of domestic violence are increasing as more people are working from home because of Covid-19.

The Covid-19 crisis offers many more opportunities for abusive partners to control and cause harm. Their actions can range from denying hand-wash or soap, to threatening to throw a survivor out onto the street, preventing a survivor from virtual contact with friends and family, and preventing them from fully engaging in work duties and responsibilities. This affects the stability and safety of their home life and that of their children, and it will disrupt survivors' work roles and their livelihoods. Fearing that their lives or safety and that of their children will be put at greater risk if they seek help, and under constant surveillance, some survivors may simply be unable to make a call for help to a manager or a domestic violence organisation. It is important to note that there may also be a heightened risk if a perpetrator suspects the survivor is disclosing to someone or seeking help.

Protecting workers from domestic violence is a core part of an **employers' safety and health responsibilities and the 'duty of care' for their employees**. But these are challenging times for employers, managers, team leaders and union representatives with staff now working from home and with contact maintained only through telephone or online conferencing.

This unprecedented crisis requires new thinking about policy and practice. It is also an opportunity to think beyond the immediate crisis so that social partners, including governments, employers, unions and service providers, are part of transformative change.

IMMEDIATE STEPS FOR EMPLOYERS

a) Communicate, stay in touch and build trust with employees during this difficult time

- Communicate information and resources to all employees about the heightened risk of domestic violence due to confinement.
- Give clear guidance of what workers can expect guaranteeing confidential, non-judgmental support, non-retaliation for disclosing domestic violence and job security.
- Publicise an up-to-date list of domestic violence support services that survivors can access for online and telephone support, counselling, legal assistance and where necessary as a last resort safe housing.
- Where existing workplace or company policies, procedures and collective agreements on domestic violence are in place, refocus these so that they are relevant to confinement in the lockdown.
- Ensure that managers and team leaders receive guidance on how to support survivors of domestic violence, for example, through online management meetings, training and webinars.
- Consider holding a dedicated online meeting or webinar on the issue, and invite other companies.

b) Find new ways to provide support to employees working from home, ‘think outside the box’

- Have regular contact with employees in online team meetings and one-to-one calls, checking in on team members and identifying any potential signs of domestic violence.
- Respond immediately to requests for support in a non-judgmental manner and aim to build trust.
- Allocate resources for security measures in the home, counselling, legal advice or financial assistance.
- Support employees to gain legal and police protection, including where necessary the exclusive use of the family home (e.g. provide your evidence of pre-existing domestic violence and its impacts at the workplace, phone records of abusive phone calls or other evidence).
- Large companies - or a network of companies and employers - could work together to introduce a domestic violence help-line for confidential advice and emergency assistance for their employees (through telephone, text or social media).

c) Adapt and/or introduce security plans to work/home settings

- Where workplace security plans are already in place, adapt these to the new home/work context.
- Introduce new security measures such as a code word or phrase that can trigger a management intervention to find a safe way to discuss strategies to ensure their safety or to trigger a line manager or team leader to call the police.
- Ensure that company-established website access has a password with extra security that cannot be accessed by a perpetrator.
- Work with police or domestic violence experts to carry out an immediate risk assessment and safety plan if an employee discloses.

IMMEDIATE STEPS FOR GOVERNMENTS

- Ensure that survivors and their families can remain in the safety of their own homes, along with survivors’ continued access to the courts as an ‘essential’ service and access to fast-track emergency protection orders.
- Ensure 24/7 access to helplines as an essential service and provide additional financial support for domestic violence specialist agencies to help them meet the increased demand in services.

WORKING TOGETHER...

- Provide financial or other in-kind support to specialist services such as online counselling, legal support and safe housing to help with the increased numbers reporting and seeking help.
- Support efforts to keep victims/survivors and their children in their own homes and don’t let the Covid-19 crisis be a reason for taking them out of their homes.
- Support new government/judicial responses to this effect, and recognize that coercive control without physical violence is also domestic violence.
- Establish joint protocols with domestic violence organisations to respond to domestic violence, for example, in drawing up safety plans.
- Cooperate and collaborate with other companies, business and employers’ organisations, workers and trade unions, NGOs, advocates and specialist domestic violence organisations to raise awareness and find new safe ways to help survivors.
- Engage in social dialogue between employers and workers to ensure that policies and collective bargaining agreements are in place to extend the ‘duty of care’ during the Covid-19 crisis.
- Lobby governments to ratify ILO Convention 190 and ensure that governments and employers take seriously their ‘duty of care’ for workers affected by domestic violence, whether they are public or private places of work.