EIS EQUALITY

The Educational Institute of Scotland

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Domestic Abuse

The Workplace Context And How Trade Unions Can Help

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INTRODUCTION

What is 'Violence Against Women'?

Gender based violence [1] against women crosses class, culture and colour:

- one in five women experience violence at some point in their lives
- around 75% of these women are targeted at work
- more than 20% of employed women take time off work because of violence against them
- around 2% lose their jobs as a direct result of the abuse

(Source: Zero Tolerance)

The Effects of Violence and Domestic Abuse Against Women

The effect of domestic abuse and violence on women can include serious injury as well as long-term psychological damage.

Signs of physical abuse will not always be evident; some victims are naturally defensive and will try to cover up any signs. Domestic violence can cause anxiety, depression, sleeplessness, low self-esteem and lack of confidence, plus feelings of embarrassment, shame and guilt. Victims may be unable to confide in others or seek help and may hide the violence, suffering in silence for many years.

Women may find it very difficult to keep working while coping with violence at home. Poor timekeeping or frequent sickness may be symptoms of domestic violence, particularly when the victim is trying to conceal the problem. Some women will not be allowed to socialise with colleagues outside work and may be forced to keep to a timetable around their hours of work.

Some women will be able to make the decision to leave or eject the abuser quickly. However, the process may be much longer for others. Major problems relating to finding new accommodation, new schools for children and operating on a reduced income may seem insurmountable.

Some groups of women face additional problems. Disabled women are particularly vulnerable if their partner is their carer. They may fear for their independence if their support in their own home disappears.

Lesbians experiencing domestic violence often receive little sympathy given society's prejudices.

BME women face a range of problems in addition to those already outlined; not least racism and stereotyping when looking for help. Some BME women may experience pressure from an extended family network not to leave an abusive partner to avoid bringing shame within the wider community.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES

What Can Trade Unions Do?

Domestic abuse is a complex issue, and for many people, is hard to understand. It is important for all trade unionists to find out about its impact and not to be judgmental or to think there are "quick fixes" to this problem or apportion blame. While the focus of this paper is the significant and serious impact on women, who are the majority of victims of violence and domestic abuse, it should be remembered that men too can be victims. The advice and actions recommended in this paper are not gender specific and should be used to support any EIS member who finds themself in these circumstances.

Some women, who are affected by domestic abuse, are disciplined or dismissed for behaviour or actions at work which are a consequence of the abuse which has happened outwith the working day.

Violent behaviour, verbal or physical, has an impact on the victim's work, confidence and competence.

Work may be the only resource a person has left, particularly if the abuser has succeeded in cutting off other sources of support. It may be the only means to retain some financial independence.

Possible signs of domestic violence:

- Changes in behaviour and work performance
- Preoccupation/lack of concentration
- Increased or unexplained absences
- Harassing phone calls to the workplace
- Bruises or injuries that are unexplained or come with explanations that just don't add up

Employees threatened by domestic violence or other kinds of violence may need:-

- time off to go to court
- time off to find a new place to live

- time off to recover from injuries
- a different private work station
- to have their phone calls screened
- additional security at work
- temporary adjustment to their responsibilities

Tackling violence against women is everybody's business. It is responsible trade unionism to ensure that we work to deliver effective policies that are known and acted on by everyone. There is a need to:

- campaign within our membership to end it
- challenge our own perceptions and behaviours
- support victims of violence
- work with employers and governments and the voluntary sector in their campaigns to end violence against women.

Workplace publicity about domestic violence – some suggestions:

- Be aware that a presentation about abuse can be difficult for those experiencing, or who have experienced, domestic abuse/violence
- Display brochures and posters in public places that explain the issue and send the message that there is no excuse for domestic violence (see Resources section)
- Make victim safety information available in private places such as staffrooms or in pay advice statements
- Include an article about domestic violence in an EIS newsletter or bulletin

What Can Schools Do?

There are many educational resources available for schools to choose from (see Resources section). However, the following key outcomes should be understood by young people when undertaking an education programme focussing on domestic abuse:

- To encourage healthy relationships amongst young people
- To promote self-respect, respect for others and for difference
- To challenge and eliminate tolerance of violence against women amongst young people
- To encourage a sense of social responsibility
- To promote positive skills for healthy relationships, based on equality and respect
- To support equal rights for young men and women, boys and girls

- To present alternatives to models of masculinity and femininity which encourage or condone coercion or abuse
- To promote understanding of power relationships that provide the context in which abuse and victimisation occur
- To promote the rights and responsibilities of children and young people as citizens
- To encourage confidence, self-respect and emotional literacy in children and young people in preparation for adulthood and parenthood
- To help children and young people know what help and support is available to them

For the older participants (in secondary schools and youth groups) there are additional outcomes:

- To provide accurate information about violence and abuse
- To try to challenge prevalent misinformation, stereotypes and attitudes that contribute to the acceptability of violence

WORKPLACE SUPPORT

Legislation

You are supported by legislation in the form of the Equality Act 2010. Part of the legislation, the Public Sector Equality Duty, requires all public bodies to promote equality of opportunity between women and men and to eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment in all its functions.

The responsibility lies with public sector employers to implement the Duty effectively and this must take account of all workplace gender issues including bullying, harassment and violence.

They must examine all aspects of work to ensure that serious action is taken to promote gender equality and to challenge discrimination. This will include

- appropriate risk assessments, including stress risk assessment
- appropriate equality impact assessments
- tackling harassment and bullying and violence against women workers where appropriate.

The five main areas of Health and Safety law relevant to violence at work are:

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974
The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992
The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR)
Safety Representative and Safety Committees Regulations 1977
Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996

In general, employers have a Duty of Care under this legislation that means that they should look after an employee's welfare at work and address issues that affect their health.

Practical Steps

Practical steps which can be taken by EIS representatives to support members suffering domestic abuse include:

- Be sympathetic and non-judgmental, have some understanding and awareness of the issue.
- Remember confidentiality is important. Information should not be given to a third party without the prior permission of the woman concerned.
- Recommend that physical violence is reported to the police - it may be or could become a life-threatening situation.
- Any decision to follow a grievance procedure must be made at the woman's own pace and when she feels confident to move forward. Try not to pressurise the member into taking action for which they are not prepared.

Practical steps which can be taken by EIS local associations and local authority employers to support members suffering domestic abuse include:

- Raise awareness of the fact that the EIS can give practical support.
- Provide information on external support available, e.g. Scottish Women's Aid (see Resources section), since members may not wish to seek assistance from within the workplace.
- Negotiate a harassment procedure in the workplace which includes action on when both parties work in the same school.
- Negotiate agreements which include paid special leave to enable the woman to resolve the crisis, relocate and recover.
- Negotiate a policy on domestic violence with management.

This negotiated agreement could include:

- Training
- Awareness raising
- Guarantees of confidentiality
- Time off arrangements for counselling, medical treatment or recuperation
- Financial assistance if possible
- Redeployment if possible
- Review of absence management policies

A consequence of this policy development may be the need to review existing health and safety procedures. For example, following a disclosure of domestic abuse, a risk assessment may need to be carried out for that member of staff leading to temporary or permanent changes to hours or duties. Similarly, procedures for the recording of violent incidents may need revision if both parties work in the same school.

All staff/members need to be made aware that the policy exists. It should be regularly monitored and reviewed and state who will do this.

Resources

Scottish Women's Aid: www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk
White Ribbon Scotland: www.whiteribbonscotland.org.uk
Zero Tolerance: www.zerotolerance.org.uk
Domestic Abuse Resources and Training for
Schools in Scotland: www.dartsscotland.org
SafeHub Scotland: www.safehubscotland.org

REFERENCES

1. The Scottish Government's definition of 'Violence Against Women', or 'Gender based violence' is:

> 'Gender based violence is a function of gender inequality, and an abuse of male power and privilege. It takes the form of actions that result in physical, sexual and psychological harm or suffering to women and children, or affront to their human dignity, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. It is men who predominantly carry out such violence, and women who are predominantly the victims of such violence. By referring to violence as 'gender based' this definition highlights the need to understand violence within the context of women's and girl's subordinate status in society. Such violence cannot be understood, therefore, in isolation from the norms, social structure and gender roles within the community, which greatly influence women's vulnerability to violence.'

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