

# Creating Workplace Awareness of Domestic Violence

SINN FÉIN  
POLICY PAPER



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April 2019



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## Introduction

Domestic violence is a workplace issue. It can impact on an employee's performance at work resulting in lost hours and less productivity. Co-workers may be aware of a colleague's abuse but in the absence of a workplace policy are unsure on how best to support them. Managers need guidance on how to recognise the signs of domestic abuse and how to respond to a staff member's disclosure. Work can also provide a safe and supportive space for victims.

## Economic cost of domestic violence

While the emotional and psychological cost of domestic and gender based violence is devastating, there is also a significant economic cost to the public and private sector. The Council of Europe 2006 'Combating violence against women' study<sup>1</sup> considered various studies into the economic cost of domestic violence in a number of countries. The most comprehensive of these studies (Walby:2004) estimated that the combined health, mental health, social services, civil legal costs, criminal justice sector, employment, housing, human and emotion cost was €555 per head of population.

In 2017 the European Institute for Gender Equality estimated that intimate partner violence against women costs EU member states €109bn per year<sup>2</sup>. The three main types of costs identified were lost economic output, provision of services, including health, legal, social and specialised; and the personal physical and emotional impact on the victim.

In advance of Budget 2019 Safe Ireland called on the government to increase funding to prevent domestic violence and support victims. Research the organisation is currently conducting with National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway suggests the economic cost for domestic violence is higher than the Council of Europe's estimate of €2.4bn.

In addition to the health, social services, policing and criminal justice related costs the Council of Europe document notes that, 'employers and the business sector have to bear substantial losses caused by the psychological and ill-health consequences of violence against women, such as unpredictable absenteeism from work, reduced productivity, poor concentration and accidents.'

This is of course a cold analysis to refer to but it is useful to demonstrate the economic cost and human resources impact of this prevalent crime to the workplace and the wider organisation.

1 Council of Europe, Combating violence against women, Stocktaking study on the measures and actions taken in Council of Europe member states, 2006, <https://rm.coe.int/168059aa52>

2 European Institute for Gender Equality, Estimating the costs of gender-based violence in the European Union, 2017 <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/estimating-costs-in-european-union>

## Employer guidelines to support staff experiencing domestic violence

Cosc, an executive office of the Department of Justice and Equality, was established in 2007 to provide a co-ordinated whole of government response to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Publications produced by Cosc and other relevant research documents are available on its website<sup>3</sup>.

The HSE, Adapt Domestic Abuse Services and Clare Haven Services have developed an Employers' Guidelines on Domestic Abuse handbook available on the Cosc website<sup>4</sup>.

In November last year the Departments of Justice and Health in the north of Ireland produced substantive guidance<sup>5</sup> on developing a workplace policy on domestic and sexual violence and abuse.

Both documents outline the duty of care employers have to create a safe and supportive workplace for employees experiencing or at risk of domestic violence and the actions employers should take to achieve this.

Safe Ireland has also produced useful guidelines to assist employers to

- recognise possible signs of domestic abuse
- create workplace awareness of domestic abuse
- respond to disclosures of domestic abuse

These documents outline the straightforward policies and practices organisations of all sizes can introduce to appropriately support their staff experiencing domestic violence and direct them to the help they need.

<sup>3</sup> Cosc website, Publications <http://www.cosc.ie/en/COSC/Pages/WP08000130>

<sup>4</sup> Cosc website, Publications, Other Relevant, Publications, <http://www.cosc.ie/en/COSC/Employers%20Guidelines%20on%20Domestic%20Abuse.pdf/Files/Employers%20Guidelines%20on%20Domestic%20Abuse.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Department of Health website, <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/guidance-developed-employers-domestic-and-sexual-violence-and-abuse>

## Public sector workplaces must set the bar

With over half a million workers the public sector is the largest employer on the island of Ireland<sup>6</sup>. The public sector must always be the gold standard against which all employers judge themselves when managing the rights and entitlements' of their employees.

### *Role of the Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS)*

The Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS) provides an internal Employee Assistance Programme to civil service staff. It is centralised within the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform but operates as an interdepartmental shared service on a regionalised basis. Its remit is to provide assistance to employees to manage and resolve work-related and personal difficulties which, if left unattended may adversely affect attendance, work performance and quality of life<sup>7</sup>.

Service information provided on the CSEAS website includes a leaflet series, webcasts, featured articles and links to other service providers. Information provided on 'personal matters' include issues such as managing stress, suicide, addiction and mental health.

Family and marital issues (domestic violence, separation, relationship and secondary family issues) are included in the 'What issues can I contact the CSEAS about' section of the service's introductory leaflet. This is the only reference to domestic violence in any of the CSEAS leaflet series. The website provides links to Women's Aid and Cosc in the family matters drop down menu in the Helpful Links section of the website.

The Managers Guide to Supporting Staff with Work or Life Challenges published by the CSEAS does not provide any guidance to Managers on how to create a safe and supportive workplace for employees experiencing or at risk of domestic violence, or how to respond to disclosures of domestic abuse. There is no reference to domestic violence within the document nor is there a reference to the Employers' Guidelines on Domestic Abuse handbook.

It is important that the CSEAS implement the handbook guidance that employers consider providing information and leaflets on domestic abuse to employees. We know one in five women will experience violence in their own home.

A 2014 study entitled 'Violence against women: An EU-wide survey' by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency found that forty one per cent of Irish women know someone in their circle of family or friends who have experienced intimate partner violence<sup>8</sup>.

6 Department of Public Expenditure & Reform Data Bank Q3 2018 Public Sector Numbers 328,920 / Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency Quarterly Employment Survey Q3 Public Sector Employment 2018 207,290

7 CSEAS website, About Us, <https://www.cseas.per.gov.ie/about-us/role-of-the-cseas/>

8 Women's Aid website, National and International Statistics, <https://www.womensaid.ie/about/policy/natintstats.html>

Despite its prevalence domestic violence continues to be underreported due to stigma, shame and fear. In some cases women may not realise the coercive relationship they are in is abusive. That is why the workplace is a critical component in the overall strategy to combat domestic violence. The civil and public sector needs to set the bar for all employers through its work in creating workplace awareness of domestic violence.

### *Paid leave*

There are a small number of governments that have taken a more ambitious approach to supporting employees who are victims of domestic abuse. Last July New Zealand's parliament passed legislation introducing paid leave for victims of domestic violence which will come into effect in April of this year in the public and private sectors. On the 1st of January 2019 the government of New South Wales introduced ten days paid domestic leave for all public sector employees. Paid leave is also provided for in legislation in Canada's Manitoba and Ontario provinces and in the Philippines since 2004.

Following the passing of New Zealand's legislation Juncal Plazaola-Castaño Policy Specialist with UN Women's Ending Violence against Women section stated that "Women who experience domestic violence have high rates of absenteeism at work and such a measure [paid leave for victims of domestic violence] can support them keep their employment. This policy can therefore contribute to more job security, economic opportunities and independence and greater chances for abused women to abandon an abusive relationship<sup>9</sup>."

Women's Aid believes that the introduction of paid domestic leave in Ireland would "send a powerful message to survivors that their employment will be secure and they will be financially supported if they flee the abuse<sup>10</sup>." Again the public sector has a duty to lead the way in ensuring employment acts as an avenue of support and escape for women, not a barrier.

9 Inter Press Service News Agency, Paid Leave In New Zealand For Victims of Domestic Violence Praised Globally, 5 August 2018, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2018/08/paid-leave-new-zealand-victims-domestic-violence-praised-globally/>

10 Women's Aid website, Women's Aid responds to New Zealand's landmark legislation granting victims of domestic abuse paid leave, 26 July 2018

## Sinn Féin's recommendations

- Cosc to develop and roll out an online Creating Workplace Awareness of Domestic Violence information campaign in consultation with private sector employers representative organisations
- CSEAS to incorporate in full the recommendations of the Employers' Guidelines on Domestic Abuse within all printed and online staff and management support materials
- A circular to be issued by government Ministers' to agencies under the aegis of her/his department to implement the recommendations of the Employers' Guidelines on Domestic Abuse
- The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to issue guidance to all non-commercial semi state agencies on the implementation of the recommendations of the Employers' Guidelines on Domestic Abuse
- Introduce ten days paid domestic violence leave annually for all public sector workers
- The Minister of Public Expenditure and Reform to convene an Expert Group to include women who have experienced domestic violence and abuse, domestic violence organisations and employer representative bodies to consider the introduction of statutory paid domestic violence leave reporting back to the Minister within three months



## JOIN THE CAMPAIGN

Help us build a better Ireland for a better future. If you believe in fairness, if you believe in a United Ireland, if you want to see change, **text** your **name and address** to **51444**, or go to our website: [www.sinnfein.ie](http://www.sinnfein.ie)



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