

EQUALLY SAFE AT
WORK



Guidance on
violence against women,
work and COVID-19

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About the guidance

This guidance aims to support local government employers who have engaged with Equally Safe at Work. For early adopter councils, it should be used alongside the council's violence against women (VAW) policy that was developed as part of the pilot.

The guidance outlines the impact of COVID-19 on women's experiences of VAW; provides information on how to recognise signs of VAW; and sets out best practice for responding to and supporting employees disclosing or reporting VAW. There is a list of support services on page 23.

Equally Safe at Work

Equally Safe at Work is an innovative and world-leading accreditation programme that is being piloted in Scotland's local government. Equally Safe at Work supports councils to progress their work on gender equality at work and prevent VAW both in the workplace and in the wider community. An integral part of Equally Safe at Work is building capacity in line managers to understand the causes and effects of VAW, so that they are able to respond effectively to disclosures from staff. The COVID-19 crisis has necessitated a number of changes to workplaces, and as a result, victim-survivors may be facing different, and sometimes greater, barriers to accessing support.

COVID-19, women and work

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented challenge, which has the potential to significantly set back efforts to address women's labour market inequality, and to end VAW in Scotland. Women may be at increased risk of VAW due to the current self-isolation and social distancing measures. Their experiences may also be exacerbated by a lack of access to support networks or specialist services.

Significant changes to workplaces and working lives are creating further challenges for victim-survivors. Therefore, employers still have a key role in supporting women affected by VAW during the COVID-19 lockdown and recovery period. Employers and line managers may be the only consistent contact for victim-survivors during this time.

Violence against women and the workplace

VAW can affect women's ability to do their job effectively. This can be because of stress, trauma or physical injuries that can make it difficult to do their work as normal. Some women also leave their job as a result of the impact of VAW. VAW usually follows women to work and not only affects their wellbeing, but also the smooth running of an organisation by causing reduced productivity, increased absenteeism and higher employee turnover.

Women's labour market inequality means that, on average, women earn less than men. This reduces their financial independence, restricts their choices in employment and creates a conducive context for VAW. Financial dependence and poverty can make it harder for women experiencing violence or abuse to move on and maintain employment.

There have been significant changes to the workplace since the COVID-19 outbreak, including an increase in homeworking, employees working fewer hours, scaled back workforces and a reliance on digital platforms for communication. These changes are affecting the way women experience VAW and in some cases are leading to an increased risk of violence or abuse.

By understanding women's experiences of VAW and the way that COVID-19 affects men and women differently, you'll be better able to support your employees and ensure the council is not adversely affected. As a line manager, it's important to understand the different forms of VAW, their effect on victim-survivors and the workplace, and how COVID-19 has impacted this.

Domestic abuse

Periods of isolation and social distancing are likely to exacerbate women's experiences of domestic abuse, essentially trapping them in unsafe situations with limited access to support¹ and opportunities to leave. Coercive control is likely to intensify during lockdown, without regular interaction with other people, as perpetrators further restrict their partners' freedoms and threaten their safety. In addition, women will be more isolated from friends and family and may not be able to access vital support safely.

Coercive control

Coercive control is a pattern of behaviour that seeks to take away the victim-survivor's freedom, and strip away their sense of self. Within coercive control, violence is often used alongside a range of other tactics including isolation, degradation, and the micromanagement of everyday life. This may include monitoring movements, phone calls, dress, social activity and other relationships. The perpetrator creates a world in which the victim-survivor is constantly monitored, criticised and intimidated.

It's important to understand that domestic abuse is not increasing due to COVID-19 but rather that existing abusive relationships are intensified during this period. Domestic abuse is not a one-off incident. It's a pattern of controlling, coercive, threatening and/or violent behaviour that often includes physical, emotional, psychological and economic abuse.

Perpetrators may interfere with a woman's access to money and finances, as well as necessities such as food, clothing, transportation or accommodation.

¹ Engender (2020) Women and COVID-19

Economic abuse is used to reinforce the power perpetrators have by creating economic instability and further isolating victim-survivors from support. The impacts of domestic abuse on a woman's ability to do her job represents a significant loss of female talent to employers, with many organisations missing out on women's skills and experiences.

For women working from home, perpetrators may interfere with and/or prevent women from doing their job. They may insist that they are responsible for childcare or prevent them from accessing the equipment they need to work from home, such as a laptop or phone. As a result, victim-survivors may be unable to do their job, or aspects of their work, and in some cases, they may be pressured into leaving their job.

For employees going into a workplace, this may be their only safe space and their only way to access the support they need. Perpetrators may try to prevent women from going into work by refusing to provide childcare, tampering with their car, ruining or destroying their work clothes or withholding money for public transport.

In both scenarios, line managers and colleagues may be the only consistent contact that victim-survivors have. Perpetrators may restrict women from communicating with anyone other than for work. Therefore, it's important for line managers to know how to recognise signs an employee may be experiencing domestic abuse and how to respond to a disclosure.

Stalking

Stalking is a common tactic used by perpetrators of domestic abuse, but can also be perpetrated by colleagues, neighbours, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. It's a pattern of surveillance underpinned by the communication of that surveillance.

Stalking is very likely to intensify during COVID-19, as stalkers will be able to easily locate where victim-survivors are, which could be either at their home or at work, if they are not working from home. They may try to force contact with them through any means, including violating social distancing. They may also prevent them from going into work by tampering with their car.

If the victim-survivor is working from home, the perpetrator may consistently contact them throughout the day, either on the phone, email or online. They may also use workplace resources such as email and work mobiles to threaten, harass or abuse women.

Self-isolation and social distancing will make it more difficult for women to avoid their stalker which may result in increased feelings of isolation, anxiety, and fear, which in turn will make it more difficult for the victim-survivor to do their job effectively.

Sexual harassment

Despite many women not going into the workplace at the moment, they are still subject to sexual harassment at work. Sexual harassment doesn't just happen face to face, but also through email, text and online platforms. Emerging evidence has revealed that perpetrators are manipulating new communication channels to perpetrate sexual harassment against women. This itself creates increased challenges for victim-survivors to report, as they may feel it's not a priority or they won't receive support during this period.

For most workplaces with staff working from home, the ways in which line managers and colleagues communicate is through online platforms, such as Slack, Zoom, Skype for Business or Microsoft Teams. Through these platforms, colleagues can send direct and private messages, as well as post in larger team chats. This gives perpetrators new access to women that wasn't available before,

for example, the ability to see when colleagues are online, or ability to send private messages or pictures constantly throughout the day.

Perpetrators may use the ability to 'hide behind the screen' to threaten, intimidate or harass their colleagues. They may make sexual advances, inappropriate comments or jokes, or send unwanted pictures. This could include dressing inappropriately and/or being in an informal setting while on a video call, for example, on a bed.

Sexual harassment is under-reported because of fear of being blamed or not being believed, feeling embarrassed, and a lack of confidence in the complaints procedure. It's important for line managers to create a culture where victim-survivors feel comfortable and confident in the reporting process.

Rape and sexual assault

During COVID-19, employees who are victim-survivors of rape and sexual assault may find it difficult to carry out normal duties or participate socially or professionally. They may not have the same access to specialist support services and may be isolated from their personal support networks.

Evidence shows that increasing numbers of victim-survivors of rape and sexual assault are living with trauma. Trauma significantly affects victim-survivors' ability to cope or emotionally process what's happened. Trauma can cause depression, anxiety, panic attacks and stress. It also affects their relationships with other people, including colleagues, often leaving them feeling isolated or disconnected.

Self-isolating and social distancing may exacerbate women's experiences of trauma and lead to increased feelings of isolation, anxiety or depression. As well, the current crisis atmosphere may be triggering for victim-survivors. If a victim-

survivor is working in a scaled back team, or has been redeployed to a new role, they may find it difficult to work with different colleagues, especially if they're required to work alone with men.

So-called 'honour-based' violence

So-called 'honour-based' violence is a form of violence and abuse perpetrated to protect family and community honour. It stems from the belief that family and community honour is rooted in women's behaviour, appearance, and sexuality, and is to be guarded by men. It includes restricting women from doing certain things that are perceived as going against culture, family, community and religion, and can involve physically and/or sexually harming a woman, forcing marriage and isolating them from friends and family.

'Honour-based' violence has similar effects as domestic abuse on women's lives during COVID-19. In many cases, victim-survivors have multiple perpetrators which can include their partner and also family members. As a result of self-isolation, women may be locked in with their multiple perpetrators.

Women may be isolated from friends and family and have no contact with their support networks. They may face increased restrictions in movement and may not be able to leave their house or go to work. Perpetrators may prevent women from going into work or working from home by saying they are responsible for childcare. Victim-survivors may also not have access to equipment to work from home.

Recognising the signs

It's important that as a line manager, you're able to recognise the signs that someone may be experiencing a form of VAW and are comfortable initiating a conversation. It's also important you're confident in responding to disclosures and identifying the victim-survivor's support need. There may be added challenges particularly if a victim-survivor is unable to openly communicate from home.

In the current context, it may be more difficult to detect as communication may only be through video or phone calls.

Working from home

Signs an employee may be experiencing a form of VAW when working from home include:

- Changes in behaviour, such as acting in a way that is unusual or out of character for them.
- Withdrawing from previous sources of support, including team chats or catch-ups.
- Minimal participation or contribution in team meetings.
- Visible injuries or other signs of someone using physical violence and intimidation, such as broken objects or damage to the home.
- Suddenly not using the video function where previously they did, without an explanation or an explanation that doesn't quite fit.
- Nervousness or increased anxiety about their partner or family member coming into the room whilst you are speaking to them.

- Visibly uneasy or tense during team meetings, if on video.
- Unresponsive in online chats, or constantly offline.
- Reluctance to talk about their home situation or avoiding answering questions.
- Signs of tension such as audible conflict in the home.
- Reluctance to speak on the phone or on video, or their partner is always visible in the background.
- Lack of access to a computer or phone to be able to effectively work from home.
- A loss of confidence or self-esteem.
- Exhibiting fearful behaviour, such as being easily startled.

In the workplace

Signs that an employee is experiencing a form of VAW in the workplace include:

- Changes in their behaviour such as becoming quiet or avoiding speaking to colleagues.
- Avoiding lunch breaks or socialising.
- Avoiding male colleagues or acting visibly uncomfortable around male colleagues.
- Obsessing about time.
- Being secretive about their home life.

- Expressing a fear of their partner or leaving their children with their partner.
- Being persistently late without explanation or needing to leave work early.
- Receiving repeated upsetting calls, texts, or emails.
- Constantly checking their mobile phone.
- Being a victim of vandalism or threats.

Other signs

An increase in mental health problems may be affecting many employees at the moment because of COVID-19. However, for victim-survivors the following signs may be exacerbated by COVID-19 and may indicate an employee needs additional support:

- Increased stress, anxiety, depression or feeling overwhelmed.
- Reduced productivity or missing deadlines.
- Fatigue or exhaustion.
- Panic attacks.
- Increased sickness absence.

Starting a conversation

If you suspect an employee may be affected by VAW, it's good practice to initiate a conversation. This may be difficult if they're reluctant to share information. Some victim-survivors may not want to disclose their experience, and this should be respected. You can ask employees how they feel about the changes in their work environment. You may also want to ask about their support networks during this period and whether anything could be strengthened through additional support from work.

Questions you can ask to start the conversation

- I've noticed that you're not yourself lately, is everything okay?
- Is everything alright at home?
- Is everything alright at work?
- Is there any further support you think might help?
- Do you have friends and family to support you just know?

If a victim-survivor does disclose, it's important that you respond in a non-judgemental and sensitive way. Some women may disclose to you without wanting to make a formal report to the police. The way you respond can affect whether they will access support, formally report their experience, or come forward again in the future. It's therefore important that the victim-survivor feels believed and not to blame.

Simple steps you can take to respond effectively

- Listen to the staff member and take their disclosure seriously.
- Reassure them that their disclosure will be treated confidentially.
- Respect and accept their thoughts and ideas.
- Reassure them that their needs are a priority.
- Outline that there is support available for them.
- Organise a time to check-in in the future.

Best practice and support

It's good practice to raise awareness of the council's commitment to creating a culture of zero tolerance towards VAW. It's also important to raise awareness of your VAW policy to all staff and outline what behaviour is not acceptable, for example, sending inappropriate pictures online to colleagues. You should continue to challenge sexist workplace cultures that can still exist while employees are working from home.

Employees should be informed of what support mechanisms are available to them during this period. It's important to create an environment where employees know they will be supported if they disclose. You will most likely be in regular contact with employees either through team meetings or 1-2-1 supervision. This provides an opportunity to check in to ensure they're safe or to initiate a conversation. If a victim-survivor is unable to speak freely or share information, you could email your full team about your workplace policies and offer a list of support services they can access if they need to. Specialist support services such as Women's Aid, Rape Crisis and Scottish Women's Rights Centre are continuing to offer support for victim-survivors during the pandemic.

It's important to offer methods of communication that don't require video or audio so that victim-survivors can access support without the perpetrator knowing. This could include texting, or platforms which have chat function such as, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Slack or Skype for Business. You could also agree a system of code words with the victim-survivor so that they can safely communicate without alerting the perpetrator. There are a number of ways to support an employee depending on how they are affected. It's important that you offer different types of support and are guided by what they want. As well, their support needs may change over time and it's important to organise regular check-ins.

Examples of general support options you can offer to victim-survivors include:

- Offering practical support, such as a risk assessment and/or safety planning, special leave, employee assistance programme, or mental health support.
- Agreeing that the employee can work flexibly, including changing or reducing hours, or starting or finishing early.
- Organising regular check-ins.
- Signposting to specialist support services and helplines.

In cases of domestic abuse, stalking or so-called 'honour-based' violence:

- Developing a safety plan with the victim-survivor to ensure they are safe at home and outline what to do if they're in danger. This could include what to do if they aren't able to check-in, how to ensure their privacy, code words to use to indicate what's happened.
- If they're coming into work, creating a plan for arriving at and leaving the workplace. This could include changing start and finishing times and using different entrances and exits, if possible.
- Agreeing in advance who to contact if the victim-survivor doesn't appear at work, for example, a friend, their family, a neighbour or the police.

In cases of sexual harassment:

- Encouraging the employee to keep records of any incident either in the workplace or online, including saving messages and taking screenshots.
- Offering to use different methods of communication, such as only using email rather than video or online chat.
- Ensuring they are aware of your VAW policy and how to make a complaint. You may also want to outline how you can support them to make a complaint.

In cases of rape or sexual assault:

- Ensuring the staff member doesn't work alone or in an isolated area with male colleagues.
- Changing work patterns or workloads to manage mental health problems.

Managing a perpetrator

When the alleged perpetrator works in the same place as the victim-survivor, it's best practice to prioritise the needs of the victim-survivor and identify how best to support her through the process. It's important to support the victim-survivor once they have reported or disclosed to ensure they are not disadvantaged or unfairly treated. It also builds trust in the reporting process.

If the alleged perpetrator is an employee it's important to take the report or disclosure seriously. While the report is being investigated, you may want to speak to the perpetrator to address their inappropriate behaviour or exclude them from participating in video meetings or from using communication platforms. It is also important to remember that you have a duty of care to both the victim-survivor and alleged perpetrator. If you are unsure of process or procedure when managing a alleged perpetrator you should refer to the council's policy on VAW.

Best practice checklist

1. Raise awareness of your violence against women policy to all staff.
2. Ensure you remain in regular contact with all staff, even those on sickness leave, through catch-ups or 1-2-1s.
3. Familiarise yourself with the signs of violence against women during COVID-19.
4. Initiate a conversation if you suspect an employee may be experiencing violence against women.
5. Be supportive and non-judgemental if one of your team discloses.
6. Go at the employee's pace and if she's finding it difficult to speak or is becoming distressed, suggest taking a break.
7. Work with the employee to identify their support needs and the simple changes that can be made to support her.
8. Agree code words with victim-survivors so they are able to disclose and provide information on their situation.
9. Protect their confidentiality and communicate to them how you will do that.
10. Agree a safety plan in line with the staff member's needs.
11. Identify whether other workplace policies could be used to support them. This could include identifying whether staff would like to work flexibly, adjust work hours, workload and/or work location, wherever necessary and possible.
12. Organise regular meetings to check in and review their support needs.
13. Signpost staff to specialist support services, such as the local Women's Aid group or Rape Crisis centres.

Additional resources

There are a number of Equally Safe at Work resources you can refer to for more information about VAW and work, this includes:

- Guidance for line managers on VAW and work.
- Your council's policy on VAW.

You can also speak to the Equally Safe at Work lead in your council for more information.

A perpetrator may have increased access to the victim-survivor's computer or phone, and it may be helpful to share with them information on securely using their computer or phone:

- Rape Crisis Scotland and the Scottish Women's Rights Centre developed an app, [FollowItApp](#) to help victim-survivors of stalking to record evidence of the stalking.
- [Women's Aid](#) has information about covering your tracks online.
- [Technology Safety](#) has information on strategies to secure your phone or laptop.
- [Bright Sky app](#) can be used to securely keep a record of abusive behaviour and access information about local services in Scotland through a tool disguised as a weather app.

Glossary

Coercive control

Coercive control is a pattern of behaviour that seeks to take away the victim-survivor's liberty or freedom, and strip away their sense of self. It's an act or a pattern of acts or behaviour that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim. It's used to maintain or regain control of a partner or ex-partner. Coercive control is recognised as a form of psychological abuse in the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018.

Domestic abuse

Domestic abuse can be perpetrated by partners or ex partners and can include physical abuse (assault and physical attack involving a range of behaviour), sexual abuse (acts which degrade and humiliate women and are perpetrated against their will, including rape) and mental and emotional abuse (such as threats, verbal abuse, racial abuse, withholding money and other types of controlling behaviour such as isolation from family or friends).

Equality

Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration - recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men.

Gender

Refers to roles, attitudes, values and behaviours that men and women are encouraged to adopt by society. These characteristics can vary depending on the society around us and can change over time. For example, historically, gender role stereotyping would suggest that women should look after children at home while men go to work in the formal labour market.

"Honour-based" violence

So-called "honour-based" violence is a form of violence and abuse that is committed to

protect family and community honour. It's the belief that family and community honour is rooted in women's behaviour, appearance, and sexuality, and is to be guarded by men.

Intersectionality

An intersectional approach recognises that that women are not a homogenous group, but their experiences will vary according to their multiple identities. For example, disabled and Black and minority ethnic women's experiences will be inflected by not only sexism but also ableism and racism.

Perpetrator

An individual who chooses to use abusive behaviours in order to assert power and control, usually to gain authority over their partner. Someone who is currently committing or has previously committed VAW.

Rape and sexual assault

Rape and sexual assault can be defined as any behaviour of a sexual nature which is unwanted and that takes place without consent or understanding. Rape is when a man penetrates another person against their will, either vaginally, anally or orally.

Sexual assault covers other sexual contact and behaviour that is unwanted, ranging from touching to any other activity if it's sexual.

Stalking

Stalking is persistent and unwanted behaviour which causes or has the intention to cause fear or alarm. It's a form of surveillance underpinned by the communication of that surveillance.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, which is intended to, or has the effect of, violating a person's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

Victim-survivor

The term victim-survivor is used to capture that individuals experiencing VAW can be both victim and survivor. Victims are often portrayed as helpless, powerless or passive in contrast to survivors who are active, heroic and resourceful. However, the terms used separately don't capture the experience of VAW or the external factors that affect women's ability to leave.

List of support services in Scotland

Scottish Women's Aid

Scotland's lead domestic abuse organisation working towards preventing domestic abuse and supporting victim-survivors.

www.womensaid.scot/

Scottish Women's Aid local group directory: www.womensaid.scot/find-nearest-wa-group/

Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline

Support for anyone experiencing domestic abuse or forced marriage, as well as their family members, friends, colleagues and professionals who support them.

24hr service: 0800 027 1234

www.sdafmh.org.uk/

Rape Crisis Scotland

Scotland's national rape crisis organisation providing helpline and email support for anyone affected by sexual violence.

Helpline from 6pm-midnight:

08088 01 0302

www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/

Rape Crisis Scotland local service finder:

www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/find-a-service-near-you/

Scottish Women's Rights Centre

Free legal information and advice for women experiencing gender-based violence.

Freephone: 08088 010 789

www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk/

The National Stalking Helpline

Support for victims of stalking.

Helpline: 0808 802 0300

Shakti Women's Aid

Support and information for Black and minority ethnic women, children and young people experiencing or who have experienced domestic abuse.

0131 475 2399

www.shaktiedinburgh.co.uk/

Amina Muslim Women's Resource Centre

Culturally-sensitive signposting and support service for Muslim and ethnic minority women.

Helpline from Mon-Fri 10am-4pm:

0808 801 0301

www.mwrc.org.uk/

Hemat Gryffe Women's Aid

Support to Asian, Black and minority ethnic women, children and young people.

Helpline (24hrs): 0141 353 0859

www.hematgryffe.org.uk/

LGBT Helpline Scotland

Information and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Helpline: 0300 123 2523

Close the Gap works in Scotland on women's labour market participation. We work with policymakers, employers and unions to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's inequality at work.

Close the Gap
166 Buchanan Street
Glasgow
G1 2LW
0141 572 4730

www.equallysafeatwork.scot

info@closethegap.org.uk
www.closethegap.org.uk

Twitter: @closethepaygap
Facebook: /closethepaygap

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