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Domestic violence: a workplace safety, health and equality issue

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Key points

- Domestic violence is a foreseeable workplace risk, affecting survivors' safety, health, equality and labour market participation. It undermines women's economic independence and reinforces labour market inequality, trapping survivors in cycles of dependency and insecure work.
- In accordance with occupational safety and health regulations, employers are required to identify and mitigate these risks as part of workplace safety systems.
- While the work-related effects of domestic violence are recognised in the International Labour Organization's Violence and Harassment Convention No. 190, workplace obligations remain insufficiently explicit at the European Union level.
- Legislation and collective bargaining have a critical role in operationalising protection in areas such as paid domestic-violence leave, flexible working and job protection, risk assessment and safety planning, financial assistance and referral to survivor support services.

Reframing domestic violence as a workplace issue

Domestic violence increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the effects particularly evident in teleworking. Domestic violence has long been viewed as a private matter, beyond the boundaries of employment and workplace responsibility (ILO 2020). But this framing has obscured the profound ways in which domestic violence can affect workers, workplaces and labour markets. Domestic violence is indeed a critical occupational safety and health (OSH) and equality issue that requires structured responses from employers, trade unions and policymakers.

It is also important to take into account a gender and intersectional perspective because domestic violence ‘intersects with multiple forms of oppression, such as poverty, racism and social exclusion, creating layers of disadvantage for certain groups of women’ (EIGE 2025: 103). From an analytical standpoint, it may be helpful to define domestic violence as a distinct form of third-party violence and harassment at work when there are effects in the workplace. While employers are not responsible for the abuse itself, they have a duty to manage foreseeable risks when a perpetrator, acting as a ‘third party’, enters the worksite, stalks a survivor or compromises their safety and the safety of other workers.

This Policy Brief discusses how domestic violence can and should be addressed as a workplace issue, while recognising that its impacts permeate domestic, community and other spheres. Trade unions and employers play a pivotal role in supporting survivors and mitigating workplace effects through risk assessment, survivor-centred workplace policies and implementing domestic violence laws. Unions have been especially active across four main pillars: advocacy, awareness-raising, internal policy development and collective bargaining (Pillinger and Wintour 2024). By reframing domestic violence also as a workplace issue, unions and employers have been able to embed domestic violence measures in formal workplace policies and collective agreements, as part of a holistic approach. This shifts the burden of mitigation of workplace impacts from individual survivors to institutions, in this case, how employers can play a role in mitigating domestic violence in the context of work.

What is domestic violence, and why is it also a workplace issue?

Domestic violence cannot be reduced to a set of isolated incidents but rather forms a pattern of interlinked forms of power and control in current or former intimate-partner relationships. It can involve physical violence, psychological and emotional threats, sexual abuse, financial/economic abuse religious abuse, stalking, coercive control, humiliation, and intimidation and isolation, depriving a survivor of their voice and agency. European Union (EU) Directive 2024/1385 on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (henceforth the ‘Anti-VAW Directive’) defines domestic violence as: ‘all acts of physical,

sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim'. This definition is aligned with the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the 'Istanbul Convention'), but does not go as far as defining stalking or coercive control, particularly in a workplace context.

In the EU-27, 31.8% of women have experienced physical, sexual and/or psychological domestic violence in their lifetimes (FRA and EIGE 2026). Women in Hungary (54.6%), Finland (52.6%) and Slovakia (50.8%) reported the highest levels, while women in Bulgaria (20.5%), Portugal (22.5%) and Italy (25.9%) reported the lowest. Although women are disproportionately affected by domestic violence, men can also experience violence from intimate partners of all genders. For example, official data from Germany show that while women account for 71.1% of lifetime victims of domestic violence, men account for 28.9% (BKA 2023).

The financial burden domestic violence imposes on economies and employers is staggering, affecting national accounts and corporate bottom lines. In the EU, the annual cost of domestic violence against women is estimated to be €151 billion annually, with lost economic output associated with lost productivity, absenteeism and staff turnover representing 14% of that total (EIGE 2021). Data from a multi-company survey in six European countries found that 55% of survivors reported that domestic violence had led to lateness and absenteeism, but also presenteeism, resulting in high costs for employers (Pillinger et al. 2019).

Domestic violence, like other forms of gender-based violence and harassment, can be understood as an OSH issue, although this connection may not always be immediately obvious. The workplace impacts of domestic violence can result in psychosocial and physical risks, such as reduced productivity as a result of injury or trauma, difficulties in remaining in employment, and risks linked to stalking and harassment, such as abusive calls or emails, which in some cases may escalate to harassment, physical assault or even femicide at work. These dynamics highlight the close relationship between domestic violence and workplace well-being, with effects that can also extend beyond the survivor to colleagues and the wider working environment (Pillinger 2023a).

Under EU Framework Directive 89/391/EEC, employers are required to identify foreseeable risks and take appropriate control and prevention measures. Even under a narrow interpretation, domestic violence falls within OSH obligations where its effects materialise in the workplace or within the framework of telework, triggering duties to assess and manage those risks. This approach recognises domestic violence itself as a foreseeable risk that should be integrated into OSH management systems, work-related support and workplace policies (Pillinger 2023a). This does not imply that employers are responsible for preventing domestic violence. Rather, it acknowledges that they have a role in mitigating its work-related impacts within their sphere of influence. This can include gender-responsive risk assessments, recognising domestic violence as a psychosocial hazard and risk, and coordinated action

involving OSH committees, human resources (HR), security and unions. Examples of this are discussed below. Recognising domestic violence as an OSH issue allows workplaces to contribute to prevention and protection, not only as a site where risks may emerge but also as a critical point of support, helping to safeguard workers' health, well-being, safety and participation in employment.

Domestic violence, economic abuse and the gender pay gap

Access to an independent income is one of the strongest predictors of a survivor's ability to exit an abusive relationship. Nevertheless, coercive control often deliberately undermines such independence (Postmus et al. 2020). Economic abuse is a form of coercive control, affecting around one in three of all survivors of domestic violence, many of whom experience severe financial difficulty and economic dependency. Examples of economic abuse include partners preventing women from working and/or controlling their finances, experienced by 8.3% of women in the EU27 (FRA and EIGE 2026). From an intersectional perspective, United Kingdom (UK) research found that nearly four in ten younger women had experienced economic abuse in the past year; racialised and minoritised women were more than twice as likely as white women to experience economic abuse; while disabled women were nearly twice as likely as non-disabled women to experience economic abuse (Wilson-Garwood 2025).

Economic abuse takes various forms, including restriction of survivors' access to wages, savings and financial decision-making, as abusers seek to create cycles of economic dependency that make it significantly harder to leave abusive relationships. Tactics used by abusers to sabotage financial independence, work attendance and performance include withholding or stealing wages, blocking access to bank accounts, hiding transport passes or car keys, refusing to carry out childcare, destroying work uniforms or equipment and disrupting work travel. These tactics are compounded by structural gender inequalities, particularly because women are overrepresented in low-paid, precarious, part-time or informal employment (Postmus et al. 2020). As a result, survivors frequently experience disrupted employment histories, repeated job changes and insecurity at work, which reinforce and are reinforced by the gender pay gap. A 2021 survey of over 4,000 male and female employees across nine countries (Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, South Africa, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom) found that, of the one in three workers who had experienced domestic violence, 94% said that it had negatively affected their work performance and career progression (Vodafone Foundation 2021). Lower wages and insecure work increase economic dependency, while abuse itself may disrupt earnings, retirement savings, progression and long-term income security in work and in retirement.

Legal perspectives

ILO Violence and Harassment Convention No. 190

To date, ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment No. 190 (Convention No. 190), 2019, has been ratified by 55 countries (22 of which are in Europe, mainly from western Europe, including France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom). It recognises that violence occurring outside the workplace can also have direct impacts in the world of work. Convention No. 190 requires ratifying governments and employers to recognise the effects of domestic violence and, ‘as far as practicable, mitigate its impact in the world of work’. In addition, ILO Recommendation No. 206 provides practical guidance on work-related measures to mitigate the effects of domestic violence, including leave (though without specifying that this should be paid leave), flexible work arrangements, temporary protection from dismissal, risk assessment and referral systems.

Domestic violence was a central issue in the union-led global campaign – dating back to 2006 – to adopt Convention No. 190 and, since 2019, to ratify and implement it. The campaign, led by women trade unionists calling for a ‘feminist’ world of work, framed domestic violence as a structural gender-equality issue that causes physical, psychological and economic harm affecting the world of work. With a strong focus on social dialogue, the campaign helped to strengthen union strategies to address domestic violence as a workplace issue, using Convention No. 190 as both a normative framework and a blueprint for negotiations.

EU Anti-Violence against Women Directive

The EU Anti-Violence against Women (VAW) Directive was adopted on 14 May 2024 to establish a comprehensive framework for preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence across the EU. It aims to harmonise measures on prevention, protection, victim support, access to justice and cooperation among Member States. The Directive is a historic step in EU law to combat violence against women and domestic violence (Kasim 2025). However, it does not explicitly connect domestic violence to employment, OSH or workplace gender-based violence and harassment, leaving gaps that the social partners must address in practice. The Directive fails to mandate employer obligations regarding gender-based violence and harassment, in line with ILO Convention No. 190, and it does not explicitly incorporate social dialogue as a mechanism for implementation, potentially overlooking key workplace actors.

National laws

Despite the gap in EU law on domestic violence as a workplace issue, some European countries have adopted laws to protect survivors of domestic violence in the workplace (see Box below), with protections ranging from paid leave to workplace safety planning and job protection. In 2018, New Zealand set a precedent by becoming the first country to introduce ten days’ family violence

leave, which progressive legal frameworks in Australia, Canada and across Europe have since followed.

Laws on domestic violence in the world of work in Europe

Ireland: The Organisation of Working Time (Domestic Violence Leave) Act 2023 provides five days' paid leave for support, such as counselling, relocation and legal assistance, and protection from unfair dismissal for survivors.

Italy: The Jobs Act 2016 provides up to three months' paid leave, aligned with maternity leave principles. Workers may switch to part-time work or take leave flexibly. Implementation and detailed provisions are negotiated through collective agreements.

Northern Ireland: The Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Act 2022 grants ten days' paid leave annually to access legal advice, secure alternative accommodation, access health care or welfare support, or ensure family protection.

Spain: Organic Law 1/2004 provides paid leave, workplace adjustments, changes to hours, transfers and protection of employment. Collective agreements have extended rights to paid leave and financial support in mandatory company equality plans (Organic Law 3/2007, amended in 2021, for companies with over 50 employees).

UK: The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 extended domestic abuse protection orders to cover the workplace. Employer policies or collective agreements determine workplace leave provisions.

The role of collective bargaining

Collective bargaining is an effective way to establish survivor-centred support and safety in workplace policies. Recent national, sectoral and European social partner agreements represent progress towards integrating support for survivors of domestic violence in gender-responsive risk assessment and social dialogue frameworks. Table 1 provides examples of social partner measures in a range of sectors and countries. Some of the most progressive measures can be found in France, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, where there have been strong feminist union struggles to end gender-based violence and harassment.

Table 1 Examples of social partner measures on domestic violence: the EU and beyond

Country	Sector	Measures
Austria	Transport, health care	The VIDA union collaborates with women's shelters and the White Ribbon campaign. A model company agreement supports collective bargaining on domestic violence.
France	Telecoms	The Orange 2022–2024 agreement on professional equality provides confidential social worker support, psychological, legal and emergency assistance, five days' paid leave and emergency housing.
	Transport	The 2021 equality agreement of SNCF, the French national rail company (2021) grants three days' paid leave for survivors to attend legal or support appointments, with access to company social and health services.
Ireland	Postal	The domestic violence agreement of An Post (the state-owned provider of postal services) covers changes in working hours, redeployment, financial assistance, ten weeks' paid leave, workplace security and record keeping on violence and harassment by perpetrators.
	Banking	The Danske Bank and Financial Services Union policy includes employers' duty of care, highlighting survivor's rights to receive appropriate support and assistance.
	Telecoms	The Irish telecommunications company EIR and Communication Workers Union policy includes ten days' paid leave to attend legal and other appointments, flexible working hours and work location, and a safe environment to talk about the issue.
Italy	Public sector	The national public sector agreement (2016–2018) established flexible leave, part-time options with right to return to full-time employment, and protections for victims, setting a model for other sectors.
	Telecoms	The Vodafone collective agreement (2020) provides 15 days' paid leave, reduced hours, remote work flexibility, counselling support, police reporting assistance and changes to work contact details for safety purposes.
Spain	Public administration	The national public administration agreement includes procedures to enable job relocation for survivors with strong privacy and data protection safeguards.
	Energy	The electric utility company Endesa's collective agreement includes financial assistance for employees experiencing domestic violence, covering up to 50% of rental and security-related costs where relocation is required.
Turkey	Multi-sector	The Confederation of Turkish Real Trade Unions' (HAK-İŞ) model agreement on violence and harassment includes domestic violence.
UK	Education	The teachers' union NASUWT provides guidance for workplace representatives on training, flexible working, paid leave, time off for counselling, safe spaces and designated support contacts.

Country	Sector	Measures
	Public sector	The public service union UNISON's model agreement and guidance includes clauses on training, named HR contacts, paid leave, pay advances, flexible working, redeployment/relocation, counselling access, and OSH integration.
	Public and private sectors	The union UNITE has guidance for union representatives on supporting survivors and negotiating workplace policies.
European level	Multi-sector	The European Multi-sectoral Social Partners Guidelines to prevent and tackle third-party violence and harassment related to work (updated, 2025) in five sectors recognises that violence occurring outside work, including domestic violence, can spill over to the workplace through stalking, harassment and digital abuse.
	Service sectors	In their EU cross-sectoral guidelines on violence and harassment at work, UNI-Europa (2023) include domestic violence risks at work and a call for social dialogue on domestic violence.
	Public sector: government	TUNED and EUPAE's (2022) agreement on digitalisation in central government administrations highlights the importance of addressing gender inequalities and domestic violence in telework contexts.

Source: author's elaboration.

The relevant national and sectoral collective agreements include various levels of workplace support (such as paid domestic-violence leave), temporary workplace adjustments (such as flexible working hours, changes to work tasks or work location), job protection, and financial assistance, including salary advances or interest-free loans. In contrast, European-level agreements largely establish the principle of social dialogue and support for national negotiations across different sectors.

One of the most positive approaches can be found in Spain, where a strong legal framework and the negotiation of gender equality plans have led to generous paid leave provisions, protection of employment, the right to work relocation, and financial assistance in sectors such as finance and insurance, energy, banking and the public sector. Provisions in Spanish agreements, such as financial assistance, have proved important in helping survivors manage economic abuse, the costs of relocation, legal proceedings or emergency support without falling into debt. Crucially, such provisions protect survivors' attachment to the labour market, with work becoming a safety bridge to autonomy rather than a site of further economic marginalisation and dependency. By embedding these protections within collective agreements, it is possible to ensure that domestic violence is addressed as a structural issue affecting income security, equality and well-being at work.

Between five and ten days of paid safe leave is emerging as a benchmark for collective agreements. However, significant implementation barriers remain. In Italy, which has the most generous paid leave provisions in Europe, requirements to provide 'official evidence', such as court orders or medical certificates, can deter survivors from accessing their rights. Trade unions argue that such conditions reinforce stigma, shame and victim-blaming, thereby undermining

the effectiveness of legal protections (Pillinger 2023b). Despite these limitations, the legal framework in Italy has enabled unions to negotiate elevated support for survivors in education, health, information and communication technologies (ICT), construction, banking/insurance and the automotive sectors. In Ireland, unions have negotiated workplace policies in the banking, postal and telecoms sectors, including ten days' paid safe leave (the law provides for five), and some innovative partnerships have been established with women's and men's domestic violence organisations for training and survivor support. Domestic violence has become an integral part of equality bargaining, for example, by establishing rights to paid leave in collective agreements on professional equality in France in banking, postal, retail, telecoms and the public sector. An important part of bargaining in this emerging area is the development of guidance, training and awareness raising carried out by women's sections of unions in many countries, most notably in France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Recommendations

Despite the limitations of the Anti-VAW Directive, noted above, it can be used as a lever to advance stronger workplace-specific laws and collective bargaining in the employment context. The absence of a workplace perspective in the Directive strengthens the case for a new EU Directive on all forms of violence and harassment in the world of work, aligned with ILO Convention No. 190. This would help to bridge the current gap in EU policy, and update and strengthen the provisions in the 2008 Framework Agreement on Harassment and Violence to address new world of work issues, such as domestic violence, third-party violence and harassment and digital abuse, which are not specifically addressed in current EU law.

Drawing on an analysis of agreements and guidance developed by unions, the following are practical recommendations for unions and employers concerning what may be included in collective agreements to mitigate the workplace impacts of domestic violence and support survivors:

- clear definitions of domestic violence (physical, sexual, psychological, financial abuse and coercive control) and its workplace impacts;
- strong commitments to confidentiality, non-discrimination and non-retaliation, supported by trauma-informed and gender-responsive approaches;
- defined managerial responsibilities, including a named HR contact and/or confidential advocate;
- training for managers, union and OSH representatives on recognising the signs of domestic violence, *responding* appropriately and *referring* to specialist support services;
- safety protocols covering all work contexts, including customer-facing, remote and hybrid roles;
- paid domestic violence leave, with reintegration support;
- temporary flexible working arrangements or shift changes to protect employee safety;

- workplace adjustments, reduced duties where needed, and relocation support for safety;
- financial assistance, including salary advances, loans and support accessing safe housing;
- inclusion of domestic violence in workplace risk assessments, with guidance for OSH committees;
- individualised risk and safety planning for and with survivors, and legal advice on protection or restraining orders covering the workplace;
- partnerships and referrals to domestic violence organisations for specialist support, safety planning and training.

Conclusions

Domestic violence has profound implications for the health and safety of survivors, their colleagues and the wider workplace environment. It is essential to tackle it in a work-related context in order to advance a feminist world of work that addresses structural gender inequalities and promotes a transformative approach to gender equality, intersectionality, and freedom from discrimination and violence. Evidence from workplace policies and collective agreements across different sectors demonstrates that collectively negotiated support, aligned with ILO Convention No. 190, can be preventive and life-saving.

This Policy Brief has highlighted how domestic violence is embedded within interconnected systems of inequality that span the workplace, households and wider society. Recognising domestic violence as a workplace issue requires a holistic approach to ensure that collective agreements and employer policies are coordinated with interventions in the domestic and social spheres. In this context, work-related mechanisms can play a critical role in creating safe, inclusive and equitable workplaces. Collective bargaining can ensure that survivors have access to paid leave, income protection and workplace adjustments designed to prevent job loss and support survivors' economic independence and safety. In addition to collective bargaining, unions can form alliances with feminist organisations to ensure that laws are aligned with ILO Convention No. 190 and implemented effectively to ensure effective protection for workers experiencing domestic violence.

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