

Irish Congress of Trade Unions

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE WORKPLACE

Findings from a survey



STRONGER TOGETHER

CONGRESS

Northern Ireland Committee

Background to the Survey

Domestic violence may happen behind closed doors but it has far reaching consequences and is known to have an impact on the working lives of those living with an abusive partner. The scale of the problem is huge. In the UK, in any one year, more than 20 per cent of employed women take time off work because of domestic abuse and two per cent lose their jobs as a direct result of the abuse¹.

A Home Office report in 2009 found that 20 per cent of victims of domestic abuse had to take a month or more off work in the previous year due to the abuse. Other research has found that 56 per cent of abused women arrive late for work at least five times a month and 53 per cent miss at least three days of work a month.

Union reps are an important part of this picture. For those suffering abuse at home, the workplace can be a place of refuge and safety and a friendly union rep often is the first port of call when seeking help. Reps can support individual members in dealing with management and seeking time off work. Unions also have a role in bargaining for better workplace policies on domestic violence.

Unions in Australia have successfully campaigned on domestic violence as a workplace issue and have negotiated 20 days of paid leave in cases of domestic violence across the whole of the public sector. The ability to take time off work without facing disciplinary action or losing out on pay is crucial for survivors of domestic violence who are trying to flee an abusive relationship. Finding a new home, getting a place at a refuge, securing school places for kids, seeking legal advice, opening a new bank account and seeking medical help and counselling all take time. Good workplace policies on domestic violence often offer advances on pay to help survivors of domestic violence get through a period when they may have no access to cash or their own money is being withheld by an abusive partner.

The first step in convincing employers that there's a need for strong domestic violence policies is to

show them the extent of the problem and the impact that it has on working lives. To this end, in 2013 a survey was conducted to find out more about how domestic violence affects working lives and the role that employers, colleagues and union reps can play in supporting those experiencing domestic abuse. The survey was done by the TUC in co-operation with the ICTU, the STUC and the WTUC and so covered union members across the UK and Ireland.

This report concentrates on the responses we received from people living in Northern Ireland. A report analyzing the overall responses is available from the TUC www.tuc.org.uk

The survey was open to anyone who has either experienced domestic violence themselves or has a friend or colleague who has experienced domestic violence. The design of the survey was based closely on an Australian survey carried out as part of the Safe at Home, Safe at Work project² with Australian unions. The reason for mirroring the design of the Australian survey was to enable international comparisons.

The survey was launched on the UN Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (25 November) 2013 and closed on 1 February 2014. It was circulated electronically both to trade unions and their committees as well as to civil society organisations such as Womens Aid Federation NI.

All correspondence, blogs and other information about the survey emphasised that it was entirely anonymous. There were no questions which elicited information that could be used to identify the respondent or their employer.

“For those suffering abuse at home, the workplace can be a place of refuge and safety and a friendly union rep often is the first port of call when seeking help.”

The Findings

The survey was open to all. In Northern Ireland, the survey was completed by 1,734 people. 82% of respondents were women.

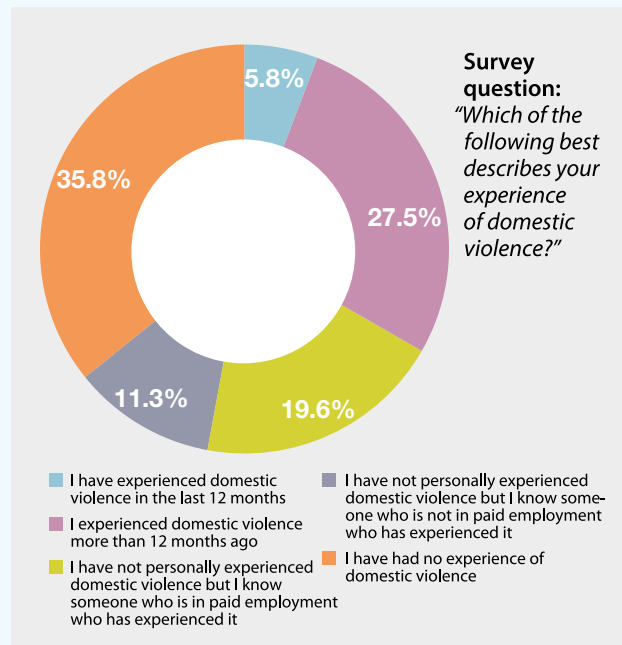
A third of respondents had experienced domestic violence themselves. Nearly twenty per cent knew someone in employment who had experienced domestic violence.

Nearly all respondents (99.4 per cent) said they thought that domestic violence can have an impact on the work lives of employees.

1 Domestic violence may prevent employees from getting to work

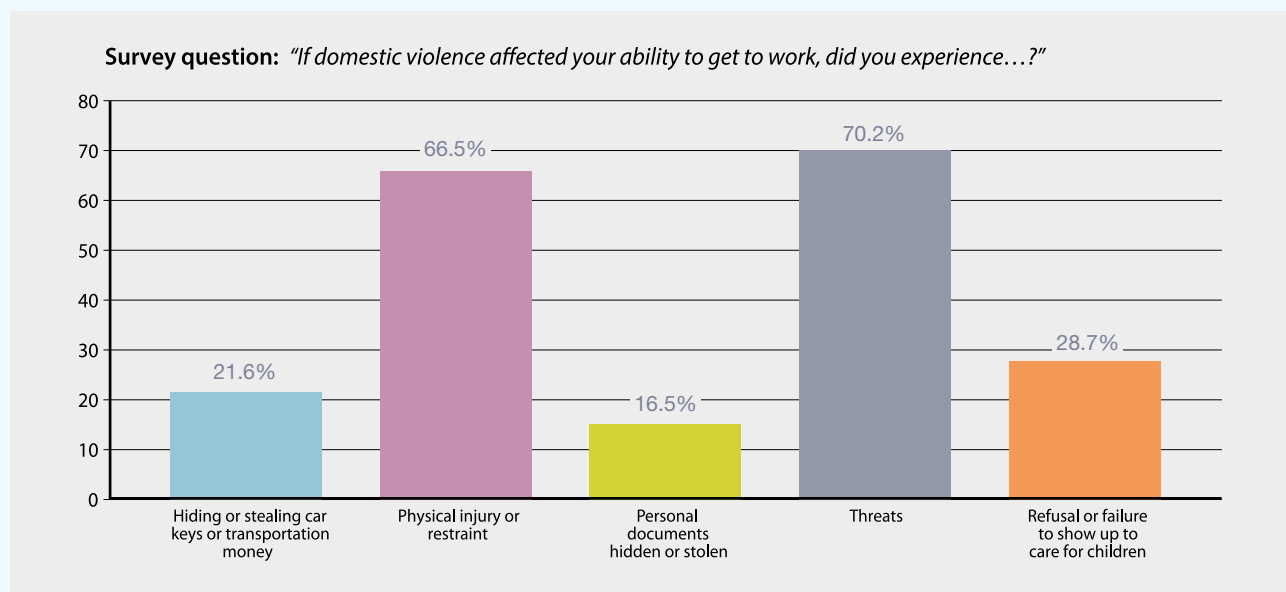
Of those who had experienced domestic violence, over forty per cent said it had affected their ability to get to work. As Figure 2 shows below, nearly two thirds of respondents who had experienced difficulty in getting to work reported that this was due to physical injury or restraint. For over two-thirds of respondents threats caused difficulty in getting to work. Nearly a quarter of those who had experienced difficulty in getting to work due to domestic violence said that this was due to car keys or money for public transport being hidden or

Figure 1: experience of Domestic violence



stolen by their abuser. Refusal or failure to look after children created problems getting to work for over a quarter of those who reported that the abuse had prevented them from getting to work.

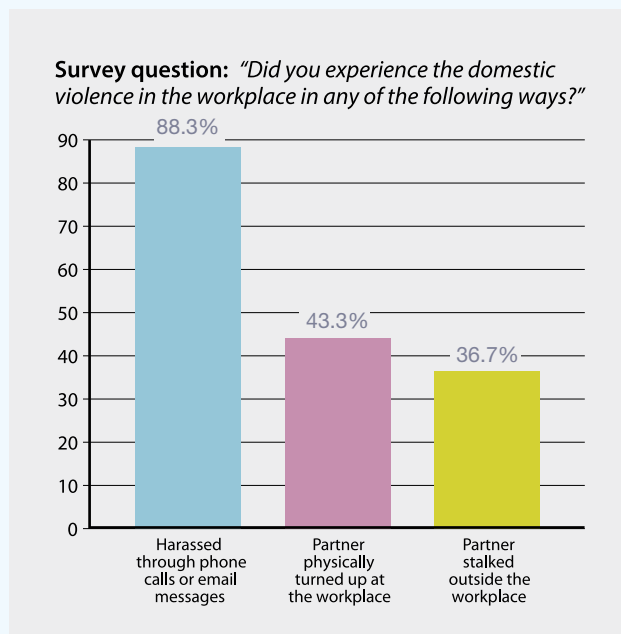
Figure 2: Ways in which domestic abuse may prevent an employee from getting to work



2 Domestic violence doesn't only take place Behind closed doors

Just over one in ten (10.4%) of those who experienced domestic violence reported that the violence continued in the workplace. Figure 3 below shows that in the majority of instances (88.3 %) this was through harassing or abusive emails or phone calls. For nearly half of those who reported that the abuse continued at work, the abuse took the form of their partner turning up at their workplace or stalking them outside their workplace. Nearly a quarter of respondents who had experienced domestic violence reported obtaining a control order with the workplace named as a place not to be approached by 6.5% of those respondents.

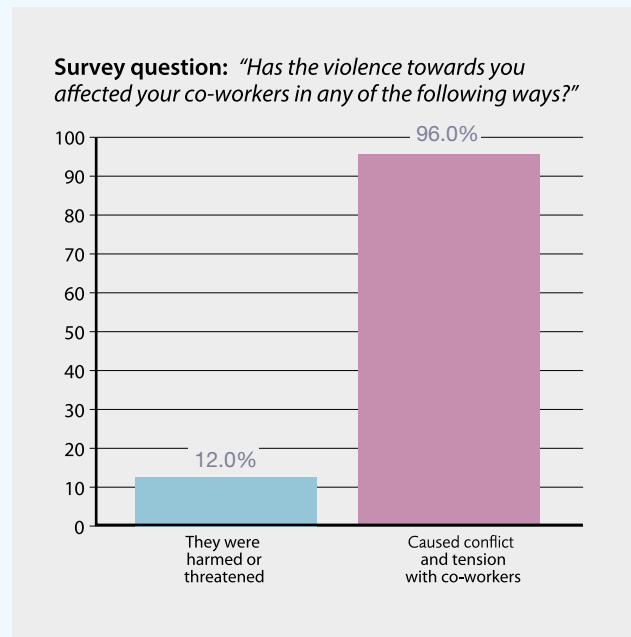
Figure 3: Ways in Which Domestic violence



This is a finding that should raise alarm bells for both employers and trade unions as it highlights the extent to which abusive and violent behaviour can spill over into the workplace.

High profile cases of domestic abuse victims murdered in their place of work show just how serious the consequences of domestic violence can be and that the violence can also take place on work premises. One such case is that of Clare Bernal who in 2005 was murdered by her ex-boyfriend (also an employee in the same workplace) while she was at work. Another is the 2014 case of Hollie Gazzard who was murdered by her abusive partner at her place of work in a hairdressers.

Figure 4: eFFects oF Domestic violence on co-Workers



While such cases are rare, they should serve to remind employers of the seriousness of domestic violence and the importance of acting swiftly to ensure the safety of any employee who discloses that they are experiencing domestic violence.

These findings should also be of interest to employers and unions when considering workplace policies on use of IT equipment as perpetrators may well be using their work computer or phone to send abusive messages. Simple steps such as offering a new work email address or phone number could prove helpful. The role of security staff is also important in preventing abusive partners from entering the workplace or loitering outside.

As well as affecting the safety of the worker experiencing the abuse, domestic violence may also affect the safety of other employees. As illustrated in Figure 4, nearly a 100 % of respondents who had experienced domestic violence reported that the violence had caused conflict and tension with co-workers. 12 per cent of respondents reported that their co-workers were harmed or threatened.

Nearly 12% of respondents who had experienced domestic violence reported that their abuser was employed in the same workplace. Again, this is a significant issue for both employers and unions and may well be familiar to many union reps or HR professionals who have had to deal with cases where both perpetrator and victim are employed in the same workplace.

3 Domestic violence affects workers' attendance and performance

Perhaps unsurprisingly, more than 80 per cent of respondents who had experienced domestic violence reported that the violence had affected their work performance due to being distracted, tired or unwell (see Figure 5 below).

Living in a physically abusive relationship is traumatic and stressful and is likely to have a significant psychological impact on those experiencing the abuse. Such traumatic experiences are likely to negatively affect work performance.

It is estimated that domestic violence costs UK businesses in excess of £2.7bn each year due to decreased productivity, poor performance, absenteeism and employee turnover⁴.

Workplace training and policies should aim to raise awareness of the impact of domestic violence on work performance and to ensure that those experiencing domestic violence are treated sympathetically and sensitively by managers and HR officers. It is important that workers whose performance or attendance is suffering due to domestic violence are given the support they need and are not penalised or disciplined unfairly.

Figure 5: Effects Of Domestic Violence On Workplace Performance

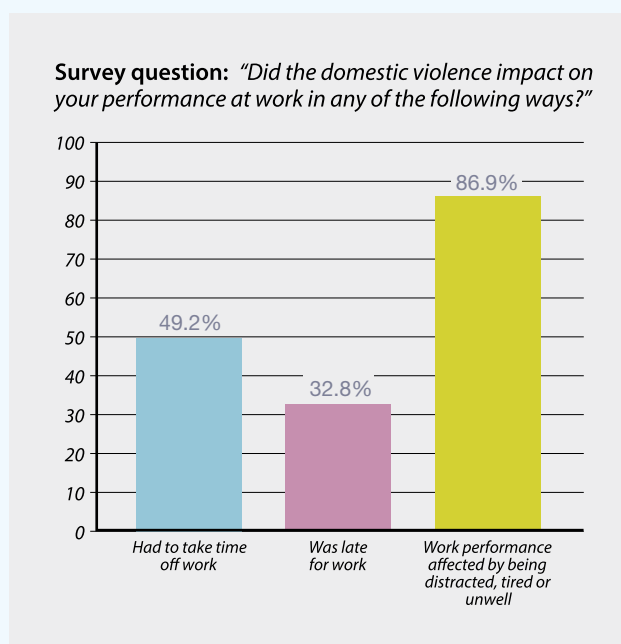
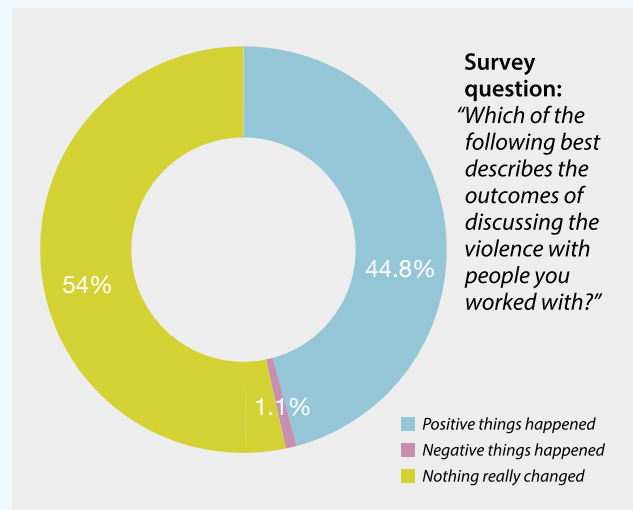


Figure 6: Outcomes Of Discussing Domestic Violence With Co-Workers



"One of the striking findings from the survey was how rarely those experiencing domestic violence disclosed to anyone at work."

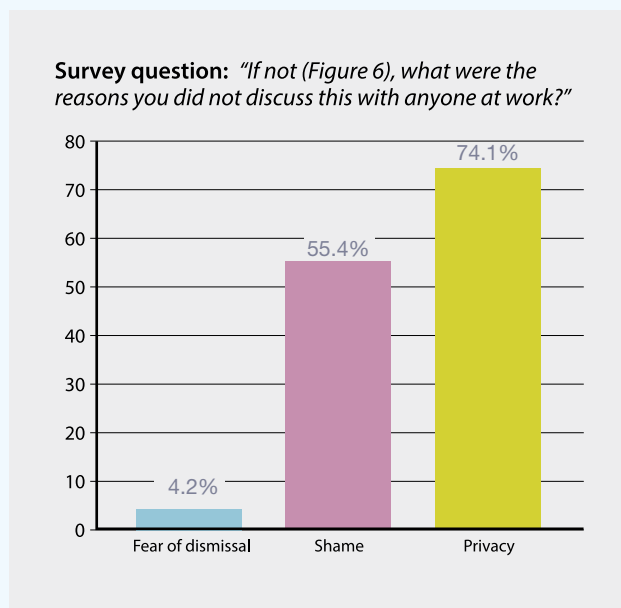
4 We need to talk about domestic violence

One of the striking findings from the survey was how rarely those experiencing domestic violence disclosed to anyone at work. While this is not surprising in itself, given the stigma attached to domestic violence and the shame often experienced by those who experience it, it is surprising and worrying how few people felt that disclosing had led to anything positive happening (see Figure 6).

Figure 7 (overleaf) shows that fewer than one in three (28.2 per cent) of those experiencing domestic violence discussed the violence with anyone at work. The main reasons for not disclosing were "shame" and "privacy".

Nearly the same proportion (24 per cent) of those who did not discuss the violence they were experiencing believed that people were aware of the violence anyway even though they hadn't been told and they never mentioned it.

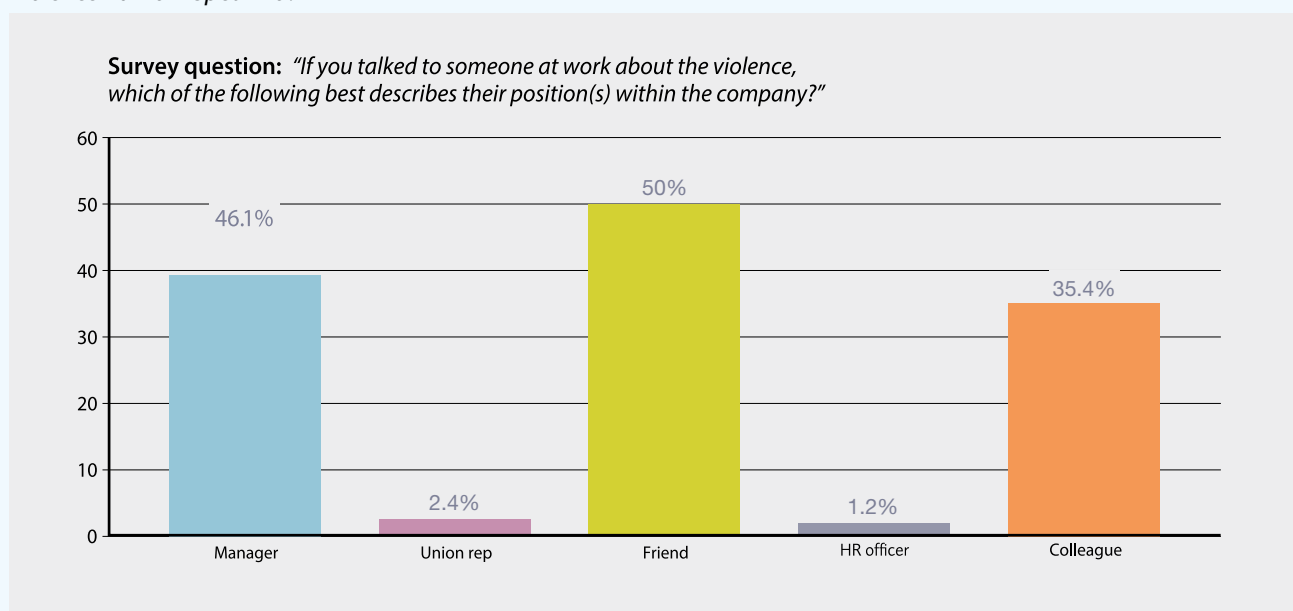
Figure 7: Reasons For Not Discussing Domestic Violence With Co-Workers



Those experiencing domestic violence were most likely to disclose to a friend (Figure 8). Less than 40% disclosed to a manager, this may well have been through necessity (for example, explaining persistent absence or visible injuries) rather than choice. Less than 3% disclosed to a union rep.

The survey included an open ended comments section which revealed vastly differing experiences of disclosing to colleagues. Some praised the support they had received from managers and/or union reps. Others reported that

Figure 8: Who Do Employees Experiencing Domestic Violence At Work Speak To?



the union rep had taken the side of the perpetrator who was employed in the same place and the victim had eventually had to leave their job. These findings highlight the importance of both unions and employers ensuring that their reps and staff receive training on domestic violence and that employees and members are made aware of the support they can expect to receive in the workplace and of relevant workplace policies.

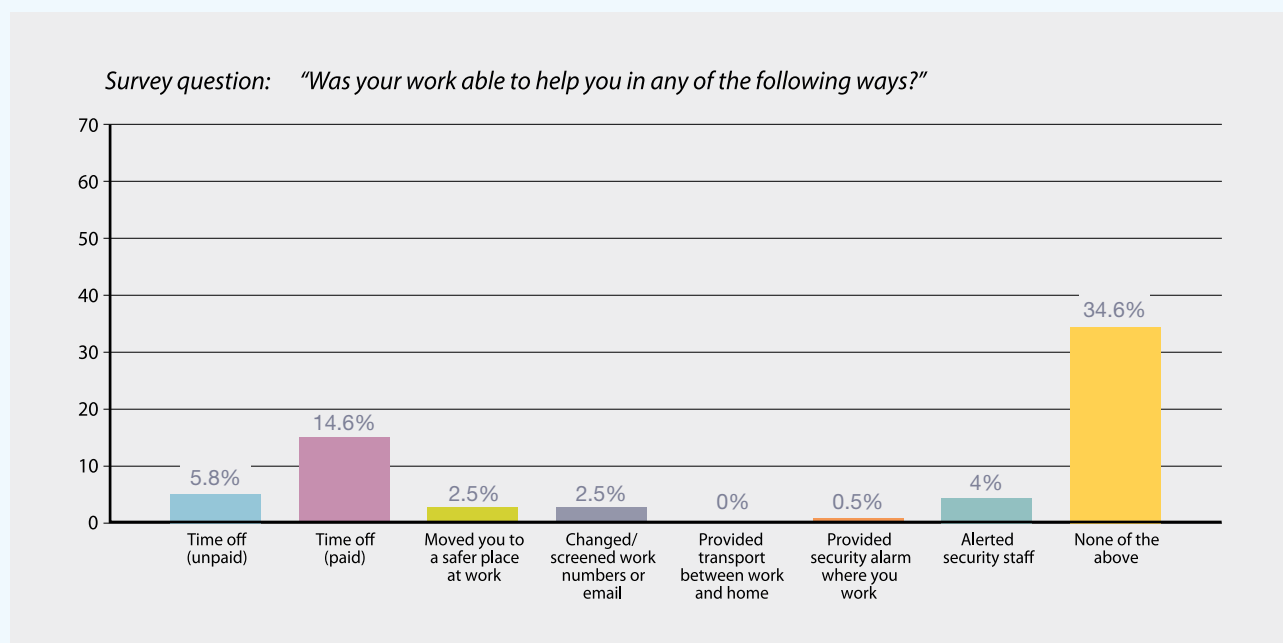
5 Losing a job, losing a way out

Several respondents to the open ended question in the survey reported that they had lost their job as a result of the domestic violence. In cases where a manager is unaware of or unsympathetic to the reasons for persistent lateness, unexplained absences, or poor performance, the employee can find themselves being disciplined or even dismissed. Losing a job and an independent source of income is a disastrous outcome for anyone experiencing domestic violence.

There is a documented correlation between socio-economic status, income and domestic violence. In an analysis of the British Crime Survey in 2004, Professor Sylvia Walby and Jonathon Allen commented that:

"Vulnerability to some forms of inter-personal violence is associated with lack of access to economic resources. There are many ways in which lack of access to financial resources might increase vulnerability to becoming a victim, or indeed, perpetrator of violence. This may be

Figure 9: Types Of Support Or Assistance Offered By Employers



associated with lack of access to resources to set up a new independent household or to pay for independent transport home such as a taxi. [...] It is also possible that the causal link may flow in the opposite direction, that domestic violence leads to poverty either as a result of disrupted employment or as a result of fleeing the violence and setting up a new household as a lone parent who no longer benefits from a partner's income."⁵

Supporting employees who are experiencing domestic violence is crucial. Without a job and a source of income, those experiencing the abuse are less likely to find a way of escaping the abusive relationship. The emotional support of colleagues or of a union rep could also provide an important life line to an employee trapped in an abusive relationship. Without the link to the workplace and colleagues, those suffering abuse are more isolated and therefore more vulnerable.

6 There is more that employers can do to support employees experiencing domestic violence

The survey asked about different types of help offered by employers to those who discussed the domestic violence with their employers.

It is a cause for concern that one third of respondents said that none of the forms of help listed in the question were offered to them (Figure 9). While it is encouraging that 15% were given paid time off work, it is worrying that very few were offered any other means of assistance such as changing or screening work phone numbers or emails, providing a security alarm, or alerting security staff to potential threats.

Nearly 80 per cent of respondents said they thought that workplace entitlements such as paid leave and safety policies could reduce the impact of domestic violence in the workplace.

notes

- 1 Walby, S & Allen, J *Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate*, March 2004
- 2 www.dvandwork.unsw.edu.au/
- 3 <http://strongerunions.org/2013/11/25/domestic-violence-is-a-union-issue/>
- 4 Walby, S. *The Cost of Domestic Violence*, Women and Equality Unit, 2004
- 5 Walby, S & Allen, J *ibid*

Further Information

For more information and help on the issues covered in this briefing contact:

24 Hour Domestic and Sexual Violence
Helpline

0808 802 1414

Open to all women and men affected by domestic and sexual violence.

www.womensaidni.org

www.ictuni.org



Northern Ireland Committee
Irish Congress of Trades Unions
4-6 Donegall Street Place
Belfast
BT1 2FN
Northern Ireland
Tel: 028 9024 7940
Fax: 028 9024 6898
Email: info@ictuni.org
www.ictuni.org