

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON WORK

WHAT IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

Domestic violence refers to a series of behaviours, actions and attitudes of a (former) partner or family member that are intended to control and dominate the other person. This includes (possibly) repeated aggression, threats and coercion of a verbal, physical, sexual or economic nature, damaging the integrity of the other person. This also affects the victim's socio-professional integration.

In general, domestic violence is repetitive and escalates over time, making the situation increasingly dangerous for the victims.

It is appropriate to consider that not only women are victims of domestic violence. Men, LGBT people and transgender people can also be victims and affected.

CONSEQUENCES AND RISKS IN THE WORKPLACE

Victims of domestic violence report experiencing more physical stress symptoms (headaches, physical tension, fatigue...) But also psycho-emotional symptoms (depression, anxiety, distrust...).

Domestic violence is also an obstacle to social and professional integration as an employee.

possible consequences in the workplace are

- reduced concentration;
- reduced productivity;
- stress at work;
- more frequent tardiness;
- absenteeism;
- withdrawal from social contacts, influence on group cohesion;
- possible threat/sabotage in the workplace.

The victim's colleagues may suffer as the workload may increase (taking over tasks). Also the concern for the colleague and the possible threat on the work floor (threatening phone calls, emails, visits from the (ex) partner...) Can have an influence on the well-being of colleagues.

Domestic violence therefore also has an economic cost for the employer and an impact on the workplace in general.

WHAT DO WORKERS DO WHEN THEY BECOME VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

Research shows¹ :

- Not all victims are willing to confide in someone at work and for various reasons. Victims who do not inform anyone do so mainly out of fear of negative reactions, shame and the idea that partner violence is a private matter. An additional concern is the fear of retaliation by their partner and the fear of losing their job.
- Although victims may be aware of the support services offered by the government/company in cases of domestic violence, they may not make use of them because they are afraid of the consequences at home and in the workplace. Talking about the situation may make the person feel they are losing control of the situation.
- If a victim does take the step to speak up, it is because there is a need for a listening ear, advice, support, safety and/or physical protection.
- Depending on the victim and whether they are 'ready' to change the situation, different types of support may be required, both in form and intensity. However, getting support can have a positive influence on the mental and physical wellbeing of victims and on keeping their job.

WHAT CAN THE COMPANY DO?

Recognising the importance of the job

It is appropriate for the company to be aware of the importance of the job for the victim. Having a job can be positive for victims and have several meanings. On the one hand, it is a way to obtain necessary financial resources; on the other hand, it is a matter of personal development and independence. Victims indicate that work is a place where they feel safe, can catch their breath, have social contact with others and can maintain some self-esteem. Victims may see their work as a part of their lives over which they still have control, in contrast to their home situation.

Raising awareness

- Breaking the taboo. Spreading information on the subject and making it visible: talking about the problem clearly or making it visible can remove the taboo surrounding domestic violence, ease the guilt of the victims and make a discussion possible. Domestic violence can happen to anyone, regardless of gender, social environment or education. It affects well-being and relationships with others (including colleagues).

¹ National survey on the impact of partner violence on work, employees and workplaces in Belgium (2017): https://iqvm-iefh.belgium.be/sites/default/files/rapport_def_eng.pdf

- Thinking about/drawing up a procedure: what to do in case of doubt or detection of domestic violence in yourself or a colleague? Who do you talk to, who does what and when?

Support

- Appoint a confidant who is trained in partner violence and is a contact point at work. Confidentiality and self-determination of the victim remain essential.
- Referral to external support (Social Service POBOS).
- Advocate for protection at work and safety measures such as an adapted work schedule, a temporary transfer... Provide opportunities for social leave to file a complaint, go to a hospital or move as a result of domestic violence.

WHAT CAN POBOS DO?

The Social Service of POBOS can support employees confronted with domestic violence in various ways. The victim can tell his or her story confidentially and anonymously, and together we can then see what steps can be taken to improve the safety and well-being of the employee.

In addition to the psycho-emotional support, contact and referrals can be made to specialised services in line with the employee's needs (e.g. OCMW, refuge, legal service, social service police, etc.).

If necessary/desired, discussions with the employer/colleagues can be provided and advice can be given on how to deal with these often precarious situations.

Finally, an individual therapeutic route can always be arranged with one of the POBOS psychologists (broadening of perspective, motivation, processing, etc.).