

# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES

Established by UN Women and the  
UN Global Compact Office



COVID  
19

## THE COVID-19 SHADOW PANDEMIC

### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE WORLD OF WORK

A Call to action for the private sector



MAY 2020

## 1. INTRODUCTION



The unprecedented increase in domestic violence since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup> marks an urgent call for action for the private sector to leverage their existing resources and influence to keep women safe at home and safe at work. Employers have a 'duty of care' to their employees working remotely from home and are in a good position to support those who may be affected by domestic violence. Many employers recognize their role and have been doing their part prior to and during COVID-19, and the importance of creating a safe and supportive working environment for survivors of domestic violence. An important element of this, reflected in the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) framework, is the broader promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment in the world of work.

Across the world, one in three women experience physical or sexual violence during their lifetimes.<sup>2</sup> In Europe, as many as 43 per cent of women have experienced psychological abuse, and 22 per cent of women have experienced physical or sexual abuse, from intimate partner.<sup>3</sup> Domestic violence and abuse is often invisible, but may be experienced in the lives of your employees. If you wait for something to happen, you have waited too long. Being proactive and taking a role in prevention can make all the difference.

Domestic violence has significant costs for the economy and for employers.<sup>4</sup> The global cost of violence against women was \$1.5 trillion in 2016.<sup>5</sup> In the European Union (EU), the cost of domestic violence against women to the economy is estimated at €228 billion a year.<sup>6</sup>

Domestic violence can have devastating physical, economic and psychological consequences for survivors, while control and abuse can make it difficult to sustain meaningful employment. Domestic violence is a major barrier to women's participation in work, education and training, and for women to progress in their careers. Domestic violence survivors report that their abusive partners often disrupted their work, preventing them from seeking work, causing them to leave their job, or losing out on career and/or promotional opportunities because of the abuse.<sup>7</sup>

Domestic violence negatively affects the bottom line of companies,<sup>8</sup> with costs associated with higher rates of absenteeism, staff turnover and presenteeism/reduced productivity, and the potential for reputational damage. For example, company surveys carried out by Vodafone and the French-based 'OneInThreeWomen' corporate network show that up to one-half of employees who

had experienced domestic violence said that it affected their work because of lateness, absenteeism or productivity/performance.<sup>9</sup>

International norms and standards affirm that domestic violence is a fundamental issue of human rights.<sup>10</sup> The role of the private sector in preventing domestic violence is spelt out in the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).<sup>11</sup> ILO Convention No. 190 and accompanying Recommendation No. 206<sup>12</sup> on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work recognize the role of employers, amongst other stakeholders, to recognize, respond to and address the impacts of domestic violence in the world of work. The laws of some countries, such as Spain and New Zealand, provide protection of employment, workplace supports and paid leave exist for survivors of domestic violence.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE WORKPLACE



Domestic violence is about power and control, it deprives survivors of their agency and confidence, often making it difficult to report it. Being confined and isolated during a lockdown, along with added stresses, tension and financial insecurity, may exacerbate existing abuse and control or it may occur for the first time. Working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic has made reporting and seeking help even harder, particularly if a survivor is unable to leave the house to go to work or carry out other routine tasks. Simply making a call privately may be impossible. There are added risks of not being able to leave the home and having the protection of the workplace, where a survivor may have been able to talk to colleagues or a manager and access information, services and support confidentially during working hours.

Given what we know about the heightened risks of domestic violence and the increasing reported numbers of survivors seeking help during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that substantial numbers of women who are

working remotely are experiencing domestic violence. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic adds greater health and safety risks for an employee working from home during a lockdown.

These are relevant issues for the immediate future as lockdowns are lifted and in the longer-term where remote working is likely to be a more common feature of the future world of work.

Keeping women safely in their employment, including when working remotely, with the possibility of financial independence, is critical to enabling women to survive domestic violence. A starting point for many companies has been to draw up workplace policies with support and safety measures.

The below suggestions are drawn from existing company guidance and resources<sup>14</sup> on how to provide safe and confidential support to survivors of domestic violence during remote working.

Employees' work is more easily disrupted during confinement: it is easier for an abuser to control all aspects of a survivor's movements, including their work, for example, by destroying work resources, or control access to a telephone or computer for online meetings.

Tactics of control by an abuser include frequent interruptions of work, refusal to carry out child care, surveillance and physical violence, or preventing an employee from completing work tasks.

It is harder to make a call to a friend or work colleague, or to contact a help line or to talk to a manager about accessing workplace supports.

Health and safety is affected if a survivor is denied safety measures such as access to soap or hand sanitizers, or if she is prevented from shopping to the supermarket or pharmacy where it might be possible to alert someone for help (for example, as exists in France, Spain and the UK).

It is harder for managers to recognize the signs of domestic violence, particularly as appearing stressed or not responding to calls may be related to childcare or other problems during the lockdown.



## COMMUNICATE

- Communicate regularly with all employees and team members, stay in touch and build trust.
- Encourage survivors to seek help, stressing that this will be without recrimination from their manager or the company.
- Keep contact up through regular company-wide and one-to-one communications, and find safe ways for a survivor to contact a manager or domestic violence support service.
- Give reassurance and support a survivor in her own safety planning.

## SPOT THE SIGNS

- Be attentive to potential signs of domestic violence, for example, if someone is being distant, withdrawn and does not fully participating in calls or online meetings; if they are tired, worried, distracted or anxious; or if they are called away or interrupted by a partner when on the phone or in an online meeting.

## ADAPT WORKPLACE SUPPORTS TO THE NEW REALITY

- Adapt existing workplace support and safety measures that may already be provided for a survivor to remote working. For example, introduce a safety code or hand signal as a way to trigger emergency help.
- Offer workplace supports such as paid leave if the survivor is finding it difficult to complete work tasks or if she needs to access essential services.
- Divert telephone calls or emails if there is abuse by phone, text or email from a current or ex-partner, and find safe and confidential ways to communicate with the manager and team members.
- Ensure that work equipment, such as a phone or computer, are provided to a survivor, along with emergency financial assistance, if she is forced to leave home in an emergency.
- If the abuse is perpetrated by an ex-partner living separately, offer advice about a protection/restraining order and about contacting the police if the order has been breached.

## PROVIDE INFORMATION AND REFERRALS TO SPECIALIST SERVICES

- Provide up-to-date information about and referrals to online, telephone or other support from specialist domestic violence organizations.
- Ensure that survivors have access to emergency contact numbers and that they are safely stored on a mobile phone.

### 3. HOW ARE COMPANIES RESPONDING DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS



Some companies have been proactive in reacting to the heightened risk of domestic violence, aware that during confinement tensions may increase and abusers will have a greater chance of exercising control and causing physical, sexual or psychological harm. Challenges arise because communications with employees can only take place via online meetings or via the telephone.

Some companies give support to help managers to recognize the problem and make it possible for colleagues to speak about problems they may be facing at home, including how they can respond in effective and non-judgmental ways, and how they can address risks, find safe ways to communicate and give support to a colleague. Additional support is provided through up-to-date information about domestic violence or other specialist services that are designated as ‘essential services’, giving survivors access to information, safety planning and support, counselling, legal support or long-term safe housing.

Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEPs) signatory **Vodafone** has adapted its Global Policy and Toolkit on domestic violence and abuse to the new reality for employees working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>15</sup> The key priority is to ensure that employees can work safely from home. Based on the **recognize, respond and refer model** the Global Policy and updated guidance provide a comprehensive range of workplace supports, including 10 days paid safe leave and security measures that are adapted to remote working from home. This is supported by two podcasts for managers which aim to raise awareness about the heightened risks of domestic violence during confinement and beyond. Vodafone Foundation has also developed the Bright Sky app and other help-line resources to give support and information to survivors of domestic violence and abuse in many of its markets across the world.<sup>16</sup>

Unilever, another active WEPs signatory, has built a comprehensive **global framework to preventing and responding to intimate partner violence and sexual harassment**<sup>17</sup> taking place on and off its tea estates in Africa and South Asia. Developed in collaboration with UN Women and in consultation with the government, producers from different commodity sectors and women’s rights groups, the interventions focus on the safety,

health and wellbeing of women workers, children living on the estate, and smallholder farmers.

**Georgian WEPs signatory companies**, such as the television channel Mtavari, an audit company and a microfinance institution, are raising awareness about available support services, and providing free training and other assistance to survivors or domestic violence.

In North America, the mining company **Rio Tinto**<sup>18</sup> has issued safety guidance for employees working at home during the lockdown. Based on its existing Family and Domestic Violence Guidance, it encourages employees to speak to a manager, HR representative or colleague. Support is available through a dedicated email that is monitored by the health and safety team and which can trigger two levels of support via safe words that enable a manager to ‘check in with me’ or ‘to be referred to professional help’. An employee who needs the safety of the workplace as respite from abuse or to discuss workplace supports with a manager can be designated as an ‘essential office worker’ and attend a safe office location (if applicable) operated in accordance with COVID-19 safety protocols, and/or offered emergency accommodation in accordance with Rio Tinto’s policy.

Some companies have created networks and campaigns using social media and other tech supports to raise awareness about domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic and to provide much-needed resources.

One way to do this has been to initiate awareness raising campaigns about domestic violence and how to access specialist services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Long-time signatory of the WEPs, **Kering**, operating in France, Italy, UK and USA, has an awareness campaign entitled **#YouAreNotAlone**. This give information and tailored online resources for women survivors of domestic violence and signposts them to specialist organizations that can provide support during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>19</sup> It has also responded to the expressed needs of its partners by distributing emergency funds to organizations that support victims of domestic violence.



Collaboration and networking between companies can bring critical resources and expertise to bear, adding leverage, avoiding duplication and ensuring that resources reach support organizations. ‘**OneInThreeWomen**’, a European network of companies committed to combating violence against women based in France,<sup>20</sup> has launched an information and awareness-raising campaign to raise funds for the domestic violence organization *Fédération Nationale Solidarité Femmes* to ensure sufficient resources at the local level to support survivors during and after the lifting of the lockdown. Avon,<sup>21</sup> along with Natura & Co sister brands, participates in a campaign **#IsolatedNotAlone**, and is a further example of companies collaborating to support domestic violence survivors during COVID-19, with funding for front-line services and signposting survivors to support services in partnership with national and international organizations.

A further example of business collaboration is **Business Fights Poverty**, a European-based network of multinational companies, which has developed a range of business actions to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of these is an Action Toolkit<sup>22</sup> to addresses the challenges of domestic violence and online bullying and harassment. It gives practical suggestions for companies and encourages them to harness their core business strategies including marketing, innovation and philanthropy to respond to the increased levels of domestic violence. Supported by Avon in this initiative, a series of online discussions and private webinars have been held with companies in a variety of sectors across the world.

These networks and campaigns can be of crucial importance in raising awareness amongst companies, particularly those that are at an early stage in developing policies and responses to ensure the safety of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

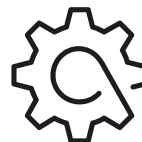
## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES



High-level corporate leadership



Employee well-being and safety



Supplier diversity & marketing practices



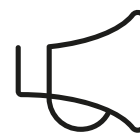
Workplace HR



Measurement and reporting



Education and training for women



Community engagement

# AN EXAMPLE OF A GOOD PRACTICE WORKPLACE POLICY ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The policy is evidence-based and comprehensive, survivor/victim centred and includes:

- Prevention activities aim to promote a workplace culture of trust that makes it possible for survivors and colleagues to speak about domestic violence.
- Domestic violence workplace risk assessment and safety planning, as an integral part of occupational safety and health.
- Workplace supports, such as paid leave (10 days is currently the norm) to seek protection, attend court or police appointments, attend counselling or other specialized services, flexible working, reorganization of work tasks and work location, amongst others.
- Safety planning and implementation of security measures in the world of work, including when working from home.
- Financial support/advanced payment of salaries or loans if there has been financial abuse.
- Training and awareness raising to create a culture of confidentiality and trust.
- A network of trained workplace advocates/champions who provide confidential advice and information for survivors.
- Regular training for managers in providing non-judgmental listening, workplace supports and referrals.

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