



# **Close the Gap briefing for Scottish Government Debate: Making Scotland Equally Safe: Marking the Annual International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women**

**November 2020**

Close the Gap is Scotland's expert policy and advocacy organisation working on women's labour market participation. We have 19 years' experience of working with policymakers, employers and employees to influence and enable action to address the causes of women's inequality at work.

## **1. Introduction**

The 16 Days of Activism for the elimination of violence against women and girls highlights that violence against women (VAW) is an enduring social problem that undermines communities and workplaces. Close the Gap welcomes this debate marking the annual international day for the elimination of VAW.

This year's theme, 'fund, respond, prevent, collect' is focused on the impact of COVID-19 on VAW and gender inequality. This is a vitally important theme. COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on women's employment<sup>1</sup> and many women's experiences of VAW have intensified as a result of self-isolation and social distancing measures. Women's experiences have also been exacerbated by restricted access to support networks and specialist services, and significant changes to workplaces and working lives are creating further challenges for victim-survivors.

The theme also places a strong emphasis on prevention, and the importance of improving the collection of gender-sensitive sex-disaggregated data to deliver better services for victim-survivors. Improving the range of gender-disaggregated data used in policymaking has been a long-term ask of Close the Gap. COVID-19 has further illuminated the challenges in accessing good quality data on women's experiences of the labour market.

## **2. Equally Safe at Work**

Close the Gap has developed an innovative and world leading employer accreditation programme, [Equally Safe at Work](#). The programme is being piloted with seven local

---

<sup>1</sup> Close the Gap (2020) *Disproportionate Disruption*

councils comprising the Shetland Islands, Highland, Aberdeen City, Perth and Kinross, Midlothian, North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire. ESAW supports implementation of Equally Safe, Scotland's strategy for eradicating violence against women and girls, which crucially recognises that addressing women's labour inequality is a necessary step towards ending violence against women and girls.

The programme supports councils to improve their employment practice by addressing the barriers that women face at work, and highlights that employers have a key role to play in supporting victim-survivors and preventing VAW. Early adopter councils have delivered a range of work towards ensuring their employment practice is gender and VAW-sensitive. Examples include gathering baseline data on staff experiences of VAW; developing systems to gather intersectional data on staff disclosure; developing VAW policies; developing interventions to tackle occupational segregation; developing gender and VAW-sensitive flexible working policies; introducing special leave for victim-survivors of domestic abuse; and delivering awareness raising activities on VAW and work.

Equally Safe at Work has proven to be an important lever in enabling councils to take substantive action on gender equality, and provides councils with the opportunity to demonstrate leadership on gender equality and challenge VAW in their wider communities. The accreditation assessment process is currently underway, and Close the Gap are undertaking an evaluation of the programme.

### **3. Violence against women is a workplace issue**

VAW is a violation of women's human rights which is perpetrated at epidemic levels. It affects all aspects of women's lives, and the workplace is no exception. **1 in 4 women experience domestic abuse in their lifetime in Scotland and three quarters of women are targeted at work.** Perpetrators of domestic abuse often use workplace resources such as phones and emails to threaten, harass or abuse their current or former partner, acquaintance or strangers.<sup>2</sup> Perpetrator tactics such as sabotage, stalking and harassment at work affect women's performance at work, their levels of absenteeism and job retention.

The Equally Safe at Work survey of employees in early adopter councils found that **three-quarters (75%) of respondents had either experienced or witnessed sexual harassment in the last 12 months. Of those, the vast majority (70%) did not report it to their employer.** Experiences included unwelcome jokes of a sexual nature; feeling uncomfortable when alone with a male colleague; comments of a sexual nature about a woman's body or clothes; displays of pornographic photographs or drawings in the workplace; unwelcome verbal and physical advances; and unwanted touching.

---

<sup>2</sup> CIPD (2013) *Managing and supporting employees experiencing domestic abuse* available at [https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/managing-and-supporting-employees-experiencing-domestic-abuse\\_2013\\_tcm18-10528.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/managing-and-supporting-employees-experiencing-domestic-abuse_2013_tcm18-10528.pdf)

**Most women (80%) who experience sexual harassment in the workplace will never report it due to fear of being blamed, not being believed or losing their job.** Some women reported that they have not come forward because they feel VAW is so widespread and commonplace at work that there is no point in trying to challenge it.<sup>3</sup> While other women have expressed their frustration with inadequate reporting procedures.

Experiences of sexual assault or rape can significantly impact women's ability to keep their job, as a result of needing to take extended periods off because of emotional and physical impacts. Victim-survivors often experience trauma which can make it increasingly difficult to be in work situations which involve groups of men or being alone with men.

#### **4. The impact of COVID-19 on violence against women at work**

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 intensification of violence and 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 support and opportunities to leave. Coercive control is likely to intensify during periods of 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. With homeworking continuing to be prioritised, and with the recent introduction of tier 4 restrictions in 11 local authorities, many victim-survivors may still be facing significant barriers in accessing support. For some, work may be a critical safe space and a vital link for accessing support from colleagues or specialist services. This underscores the importance of the employer role in supporting victim-survivors at work.

Despite many women not going into the workplace during the crisis, they are still subject to sexual harassment at work. Sexual harassment does not 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. The use of online platforms, such as Slack or Microsoft Teams, also gives perpetrators new access to women that was not previously available. Barriers to victim-survivors reporting their experiences may be intensified during COVID-19, with victim-survivors feeling like it is not a priority, or they will not receive support during this period.

---

<sup>3</sup> Trade Union Congress (2016) *Still just a bit of banter? Sexual Harassment in the workplace in 2016* available at <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/SexualHarassmentreport2016.pdf>

For women working from home, perpetrators may interfere with women's work and prevent women from doing their job. This may involve insisting that women are responsible for childcare or preventing women from accessing the equipment they need to work from home, such as access to 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.

Evidence shows that increasing numbers of victim-survivors of rape and sexual assault are living with trauma. Self-isolating and social distancing may exacerbate women's experiences of trauma and lead to increased feelings of isolation, anxiety, or depression. The current crisis may also 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 are required to work alone with men.

[Close the Gap recently published guidance for employers on violence against women, work and COVID-19](#). This guidance highlights that the employer role in supporting women affected by VAW is particularly important during COVID-19. Employers and line managers may be the only consistent contact for victim-survivors during this time. The guidance highlights best practice for line managers in responding to VAW in the COVID-19 context, and ensuring that victim-survivors are supported to do their job effectively.

## **5. Conclusion**

VAW is a cause and consequence of gender inequality. In order to end VAW, it is therefore necessary to tackle gender inequality in all aspects of society, including women's labour market inequality. Action on women's labour market inequality has been made even more pivotal by the impact of COVID-19 on women's employment. Without addressing the key causes of women's labour market inequality, such as occupational segregation, toxic male-oriented workplace cultures, the undervaluation of women's work and the lack of quality part-time and flexible roles, progress cannot be made on preventing violence against women in or outwith the workplace.

This year's 16 days of activism campaign is an opportunity to raise awareness of the significant barriers that victim-survivors face, and highlight how that has been exacerbated by COVID-19. The campaign also presents an opportunity to encourage employers to adapt workplace practices to better support victim-survivors. Equally Safe at Work has proven to be an effective mechanism for engaging with employers to take substantive and meaningful action on gender equality and prevent VAW. The pilot contains important learning for employers across Scotland on how to prioritise action on these issues. Ensuring employers adopt policies to better support victim-survivors and prevent VAW in the workplace remains a critical aspect of eliminating VAW.