RESPECT at work

POLICY BRIEF | MAY 2026

Domestic Violence, the Workplace, and Leave Entitlements

Western Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children

Domestic Violence, the Workplace, and Leave Entitlements

Domestic violence (DV) includes physical, sexual, psychological, and/or financial abuse against a current or former dating, common-law, spousal, or other intimate partner. It is pervasive worldwide and most often committed by men against women. Globally, 26% of women who have ever been in an intimate relationship are estimated to have experienced physical and/or sexual DV since age 15, with even higher estimates when psychological and other forms of DV are included.[1,2] A review[3] of national surveys across the globe ([e.g., 4–8,9]) finds that 13% to 47% of employees have experienced DV, with Canadian employees falling roughly in the middle at 34%[7,8]. DV has been linked to many negative health outcomes including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidality, sexually transmitted infections, harmful alcohol use, poorer general mental and physical health, poorer health-related quality of life, and many others.[1,10,11]

The Workplace Impacts of DV

DV is not only a home or private issue; it often extends to the workplace in both occurrence and impact. Those who perpetrate DV often deliberately interfere with their partners' work lives by preventing them from getting to work on time or at all (e.g., injury or restraint, hiding car keys, refusing or interfering with childcare arrangements), harassing them at work (phone calls, text messages, showing up), or otherwise preventing them from completing work tasks (e.g., by interfering with sleep).[4–9,12–29] As a result, DV negatively impacts victims' work performance, employment, and career progression (e.g., feeling tired, distracted, unwell, or fearful; lateness and absenteeism; job loss by resignation or termination; missed opportunities and promotions).[4–9,12–14,17–23,25,26,28–37] For example, a 2014 national survey in Canada found that, of the 34% of employees who reported having ever experienced DV, over half reported that DV had occurred at or near their workplace, over a third that it impeded their ability to get to work, and over three quarters that it negatively impacted their work performance.[7,8] Employees who have ever experienced DV report more absent days and more workdays with lost productivity than those who have not experienced DV.[38] Women are more likely than men to report missed days of work due to DV.[28] Women who have experienced DV tend to have lower incomes and more unstable or disrupted employment histories compared to those who have not experienced DV.[39–42] Some women's employment is negatively impacted even after leaving an abusive partner because of ongoing trauma symptoms or employers being hesitant to hire them because of past disrupted job histories.[26] The health consequences of DV also appear to be exacerbated for those whose work is impeded by DV.[10] In worst case scenarios, DV at work may be lethal. In the U.S., women are more often killed at work by their partners than by co-workers or clients (women are killed at work at similar rates by partners and strangers).[43]

Negative workplace experiences are exacerbated for racialized women who have experienced DV, 53% of whom in a recent Canadian study reported that racism impacted their experiences as DV survivors in the workplace (e.g., fear that they would not be taken seriously if they reported DV to an employer) and 29% of whom reported that their partner used their race or immigration status to sabotage their efforts to find work (e.g., undermined their confidence or threatened to report them to immigration authorities).[31] Nearly half (49%) also reported that workplace discrimination impacted their trauma symptoms from DV.[31] Twenty-four percent of racialized DV survivors reported having lost a job because of DV[31], nearly three times the rate (8.5%) of DV survivors in the general Canadian workforce who reported having lost a job because of DV[7]. Additional research comparing work-related DV across racial and other demographic groups is still needed.

Research on DV perpetration as it relates to workplaces is limited in comparison to research on DV victimization. Nevertheless, some studies find that many who perpetrate DV also report absenteeism, demotion, and job loss resulting from their use of DV; that their job performance and accuracy is negatively impacted (e.g., irritability, difficulty concentrating, loss of interest, mental or physical health issues); that they have caused or almost caused workplace accidents or injuries because of their use of DV (e.g., being angry or preoccupied); and that they have used work time or resources to monitor, stalk, harass, threaten, or coerce their partner.[44–48]

DV in and around the workplace does not only impact those directly involved. Co-workers can also be impacted through stress and worry over the situation, increased workload, changed schedules, tension with co-workers, and, more rarely, direct harassment and injury.[4–9,12,13,19,29,38]

The Costs of DV

DV also costs victims, employers, and societies through legal, medical, and social and psychological services costs; loss of personal productivity and income; damage to property; safety and security measure costs; employer costs related to absenteeism, staff turnover, and lost productivity; and more.[23,35,38,49–60] In a review of international data in 2013, Duvvury and colleagues found that the costs of DV were between 1.2% and 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) across countries.[50] In 2009, the economic impact of spousal violence in Canada was estimated to be $7.4 billion, including $78 million in losses to employers.[58] In the U.S. in 2014, the lifetime DV cost was estimated at $103,767 per female victim, $23,414 per male victim, with a population economic cost of nearly $3.6 trillion.[53] Such estimates likely underestimate the true cost of DV because they often do not capture long-term costs (e.g., due to disrupted education and employment trajectories) or macroeconomic costs.[61,62] In one Canadian workplace study, employees who had ever experienced DV lost an additional month's worth of workdays per year (due especially to absenteeism and lost productivity) compared to those who had not experienced DV, resulting in a productivity loss of 1.7% to 2.7% of that workplace's annual wage bill.[38] (similar results found in other countries: 54,55) Those who had ever perpetrated DV lost even more workdays.[38]

DV Leave Entitlements

There is growing recognition of the need for a whole-of-society response to DV and of the responsibility, reach, and economic benefit of workplaces responding to DV. Driven by this recognition and the activism of researchers, unions, and anti-DV advocates, many regions have implemented workplace DV protections, including (statutory) paid and/or unpaid DV leave entitlements[3,63,64] (other protections aim to reduce discrimination and raise safety and awareness)[65,66]. Victims "[should] not have to choose between their safety and their job."[67] Economic independence is also an important pathway to safety for many women and influences victims' decisions to remain with or leave an abusive partner.[16,32,68,69] Indeed, there is some evidence that employed women in some countries are less likely to experience DV[70,71] and more likely to leave an abusive partner[69] compared to unemployed women. Employment can also help mitigate the negative health consequences of DV.[10,39]

DV leave aims to assist victims, reduce the incidence of DV, and reduce the costs of DV (for example, by reducing workplace disruption, staff turnover, and productivity loss).[72] It is designed in particular to allow women and others experiencing DV to take needed time off work to deal with DV and its effects (e.g., find a safe place to live or access medical, legal, counselling, and other services)[73,74] while maintaining employment and the benefits that often come with it, including financial security, social connections, tangible supports, independence, mental respite and refuge from violence, and a positive sense of self and purpose.[5,14,75–77]

DV leave varies by region in terms of who has access (e.g., DV only or also broader experiences of family violence, DV victims only or also parents supporting dependents experiencing DV, women only or people of all genders, only those dealing with current DV or also those dealing with the ramifications of past DV); length of protected time off; and whether time off is paid, unpaid, or a combination.[3,78] There is often further variability in how workplaces implement DV leave even within the same region.[79,80] International research nevertheless finds broad support for DV leave. Most workers (and employers) support paid leave[81,82] and believe it and other workplace supports can reduce the workplace impact of DV[4,6,7,9,13].

Does DV Leave Assist Victims and Reduce DV?

Research evaluating the use and impact of DV leave is limited, but finds that paid leave in Australia has been used as intended—to make safety arrangements and access police, legal, medical, and other services—and helps victims maintain employment and income.[81,83] One study found that living in a U.S. state with a DV leave policy was not (alone) associated with working mothers' experiences of DV; however, living in a state with both a leave policy and a confidentiality policy in which employers are mandated to keep disclosures private was associated with lower levels of DV.[65] This study did not distinguish between states with varied leave time and paid versus unpaid leave; however, it highlights the importance of confidentiality, which may help mothers in particular feel safer making arrangements

and accessing services related to DV without fear of workplace retaliation or stigma.[65] Potential support for paid DV leave also comes from the finding that paid parental leave can reduce the incidence of DV.[84,85] Although insufficient for ensuring that victims' work engagement is unaffected by DV[17,86], employers have reported benefits to DV leave, including raising awareness about DV within the workplace, reducing stigma, providing a supportive environment, and enhancing the employer's status and reputation[79].

We also know that use of DV leave remains limited in many regions. For example, one U.S. study found that three years after the implementation of DV leave in Oregon, 74% of government employee participants did not know the leave existed and 65% of victims would have used it had they known.[20] Reported concerns with and barriers to access and use of DV leave internationally include: lack of awareness and education about leave among employers, managers, and workers; lack of pay during leave (where applicable); fear of job loss or repercussions; stigma, discrimination, privacy, and confidentiality concerns that prevent disclosures (especially if the perpetrator is a co-worker or in small or rural locations where the perpetrator may be known to the employer); and eligibility restrictions or employer requirements for intrusive or onerous evidence/documentation.[4,17,20,80–82,86,87] Where eligible, casual staff appear to have lower awareness and use of DV leave[17,81,86], in part because they fear consequences such as being given fewer shifts[87]. Additional research is needed on eligibility and use of DV leave for contractors, seasonal workers, gig workers, and victims working in family-owned businesses with their abusers.[78] Women and others belonging to marginalized groups may face additional barriers to accessing DV leave. For example, unequal access to workplace supports and barriers to disclosing DV at work such as lack of trust, lack of support, lack of awareness of resources, language barriers, and discrimination are exacerbated for racialized women.[30,31,88–90]

Employers and others responsible for implementing and managing DV leave have also reported barriers including inadequate training about policies, DV, and how to have conversations about DV with employees; inadequate communication strategies or difficulty communicating policies to staff; and insufficient government monitoring and regulation.[80,81]

Does DV Leave Reduce the Costs of DV?

Few studies have examined the costs associated with the provision of paid DV leave, but tend to conclude that the benefits to employers (reduced turnover and absenteeism, increased productivity) outweigh or significantly offset the costs.[91–93] One recent study in Australia, for example, estimated that the total annual cost to employers of providing a 10-day DV leave entitlement is between $13.1 million and $34.3 million, largely offset by the estimated cost of DV-related absenteeism ($14.3 million) and other benefits.[91] One study in New Zealand conservatively estimated an average savings of $3,371 per year in production-related costs alone for every woman whose experience of DV is prevented through workplace protections (flexible work arrangements, leave, DV policies, and training).[94] Financial costs are a concern for some employers but are seen as more significant by employers who have not yet provided leave, suggesting anticipated costs may be higher than actual costs.[81]

Small and micro-businesses nevertheless feel the costs of providing paid leave more than large businesses.[81] Some recommend a need for government support for employers with limited financial means to provide DV leave.[3,95]

DV Leave Best Practices

A number of best practices for DV leave have emerged based partly on the experiences of victims. Researchers and advocates generally support a minimum of ten paid days plus weeks of additional unpaid leave; flexibility in when the days can be used (e.g., over a longer period of time); broad inclusion of different forms of DV; minimal regulation on the activities leave can be used for (e.g., recovery activities, not just crisis response); minimal or no evidence requirements and low-barrier or third-party verification (survivors report being more likely to access leave if they can use a letter from a counsellor, physician, lawyer, or support worker rather than police report[96]); inclusion of individuals supporting dependents or family members experiencing DV; standalone DV leave separate from other forms of personal leave; full job protection; no (strict) qualifying periods or restrictions on occupation type (some regions currently exclude some farm and domestic workers or casual employees, for example); and no revenue or size exemptions for small businesses.[17,67,81–83,86,95,97–104] Questions remain about whether or not eligibility should be expanded to include those experiencing sexual violence perpetrated outside intimate/familial relationships and whether or not perpetrators should be entitled to paid DV leave to seek support.[83] Some recommend no exclusions for employees charged with an offence or who committed violence because victims are sometimes falsely accused or charged for actions taken in self-defense.[101]

DV leave entitlements are important but insufficient without broader workplace supports and cultural change. Based partly on the experiences of victims, advocates also note that (trauma- and violence-informed) management training be required to ensure safe disclosures and proper handling of leave requests and confidentiality (including meeting the needs of diverse groups). Indeed, one study found that supervisor training on DV and DV leave increased the likelihood that supervisors provided DV leave information to employees and improved workplace climate towards DV.[105] Advocates further note that (ongoing) training, education, and communication be provided to workers to increase awareness of leave availability, increase recognition and response to DV, and help change workplace culture and stigma surrounding DV; that comprehensive (standalone) DV workplace policies (or broader legislation) and practices be put in place to build awareness of DV and create safe working environments (e.g., flexible working arrangements, confidentiality procedures, workplace safety planning and security procedures, workplace-based supports, referral processes, consequences for those who use work time and resources to perpetrate violence); and that more general diversity, equity, and inclusion workplace policies and practices be put in place.[17–20,23,26,31,67,72,80,83,86,87,98–101,106–110] Research supports a number of these practices. It finds, for example, that raising awareness and providing education about DV leave can reduce workplace stigma and discrimination of victims.[81] It finds that women are more likely to maintain employment when they receive workplace support such as schedule

flexibility, screened abuser phone calls, and security planning.[111] Having a supervisor that is understanding and helpful when family or personal matters arise and/or interfere with work can also help reduce absenteeism that results from an abusive partner's interference in a victim's work.[33]

Conclusion

There is growing consensus that DV leave should be "paid, flexible and easily accessible where necessary, while containing sufficient safeguards to maintain the confidentiality of personal information and the integrity of the leave system."[112] Nevertheless, additional research is still needed to better understand the use and impact of DV leave, including comparisons of paid and unpaid leave, and impacts across communities and demographics. DV leave and other workplace responses are also but one piece of a whole-of-society response. Access to safe and affordable housing, childcare, and social assistance is also sorely needed.[15,31,101]

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