

National Survey Results on the Impact of Domestic Violence on Work, Workers and Workplaces in Belgium

This survey was developed by researchers with the DV@WorkNet and the Belgian Institute for equality of women and men (IEWM). DV@WorkNet is an international network of researchers, domestic violence experts, social and labour organizations, and employers who conduct research and mobilize knowledge about the impact of domestic violence (DV) in the workplace. Gathering data on this important issue provides stronger evidence to help shape legislation and workplace policies that support violence prevention and safety in workplace.

The Institute is the Belgian equality body with regard to discrimination on the ground of sex or gender. Its missions are threefold: they assist victims of discrimination, they coordinate independent research and they provide recommendations to policy makers or other parties involved in the fight against discrimination. As gender based violence is a form of discrimination, the Institute has been a long-time participant in the fight against it. The Institute is the official coordinating body for the implementation and monitoring of the Istanbul Convention and the National Action Plan against gender-based violence.

SURVEY METHODS

Between May 2nd and June 9th, 2017, researchers at Western University and IEWM, in cooperation with its partners, conducted a national online survey on the impact of domestic violence on work, workers and in workplaces. The survey was available in Dutch, German, French and English, and was open to men and women aged 18 years and older, whether they had directly experienced domestic violence or not. An open sampling method was used, i.e. the survey was made public and accessible to everybody. The survey was spread online through the network of the partners, i.e. the Belgian Unions ACV-CSC, ABVV-FGTB, ACLVB-CGSLB, all the public administrations at a national and regional level and women's organisations.

The survey consisted of over 40 questions that focused on workers' experiences with domestic violence and the workplace, including questions regarding whether they were personally experiencing, or had ever experienced domestic violence, and if they were aware of co-workers who were experiencing or perpetrating domestic violence. Those with personal domestic violence experience were asked additional questions, such as how the violence affected their work and their co-workers, whether they discussed the violence with anyone at work, and what types of support they received. The survey was reviewed and approved by the Western University's Research Ethics Board. This report outlines the main findings from the survey.

SURVEY RESULTS

WHO PARTICIPATED?

A total of 1,989 people completed the survey. 69.3% of those who completed the survey were females and 30.5% were males, with the remaining identifying as 'other' (0.1%). The average age of respondents was 43 years old. Many respondents indicated being married (40.1%), followed by being in a relationship (20.8%), legally cohabitating (14.0%) and single (13.3%). Slightly under half (45.7%) of respondents indicated they did not have dependent children or any other dependents. 41.4% reported having dependents, either their own children, other children or other dependents.

The highest response rates came from East Flanders (18.9%), Flemish Brabant (13.3%), and Hainaut (11.7%), Brussels Capital Region (11.0%), and Antwerp (10.6%). Respondents from the remaining areas made up less than ten percent each.

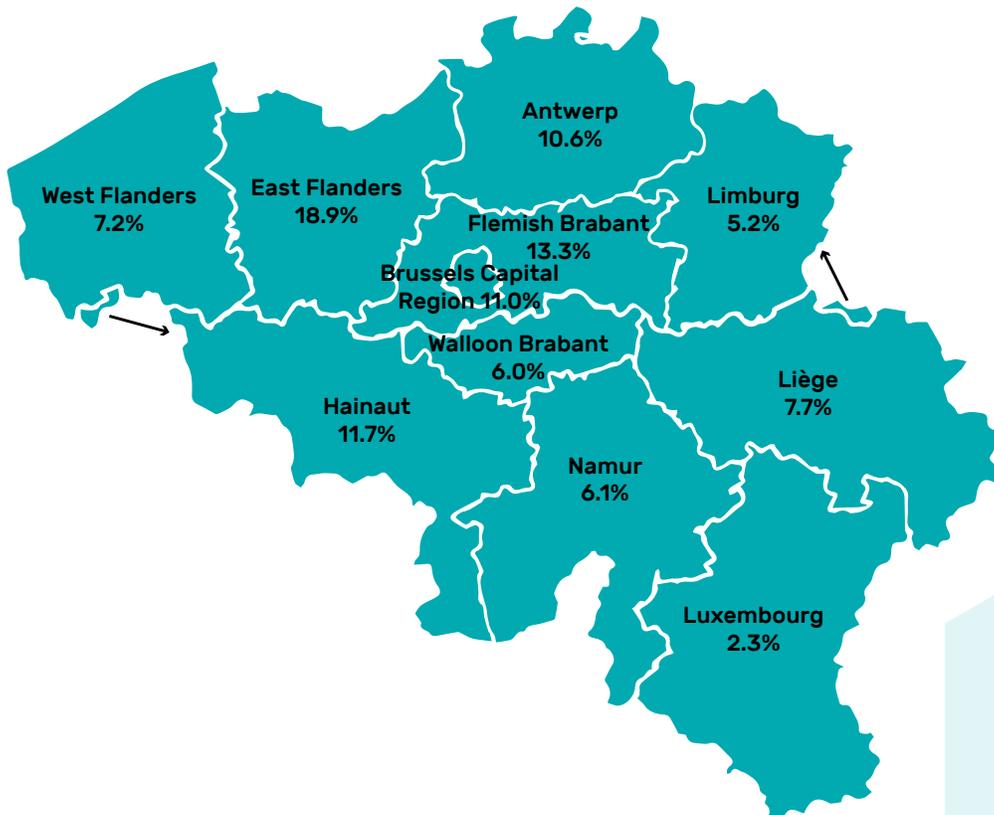


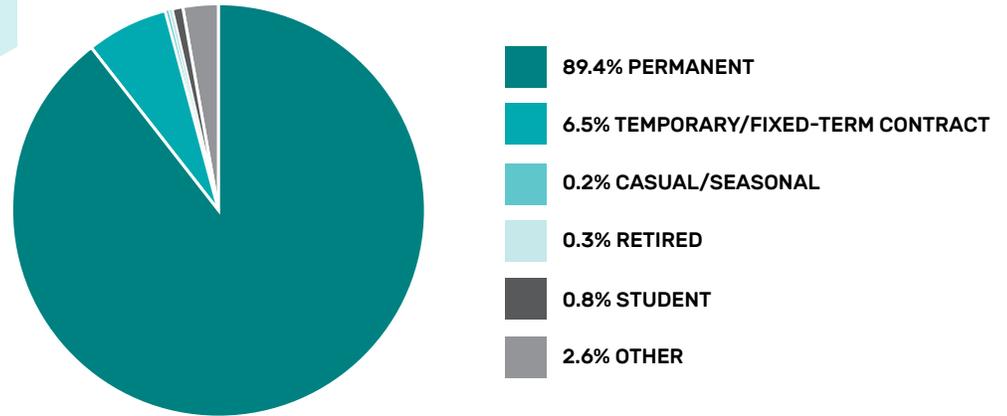
Table 1. Work Sectors

WORK SECTOR	%
Public Administration & Defence; Compulsory Social Security	44.2%
Administrative & Support Service Activities	19.5%
Human Health and Social Work Activities	14.7%
Other Service Activities	5.4%
Professional, Scientific & Technical Activities	3.5%
Information and Communication	3.0%
Financial and Insurance Activities	1.8%
Education	1.7%
Manufacturing	1.5%
Transportation and Storage	1.0%
Wholesale and Retail Trade	0.8%
Construction	0.7%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing & Animal Husbandry	0.6%
Accommodation & Food Service Activities	0.4%
Activities of Households as Employers	0.4%
Electricity and Gas, Steam and Air Conditioning Supply	0.3%
Activities of Extraterritorial Organizations & Bodies	0.3%
Water Supply & Remediation Activities	0.2%
Arts, Entertainment & Recreation	0.2%
Real Estate Activities	0.1%
Mining and Quarrying	0%

EMPLOYMENT

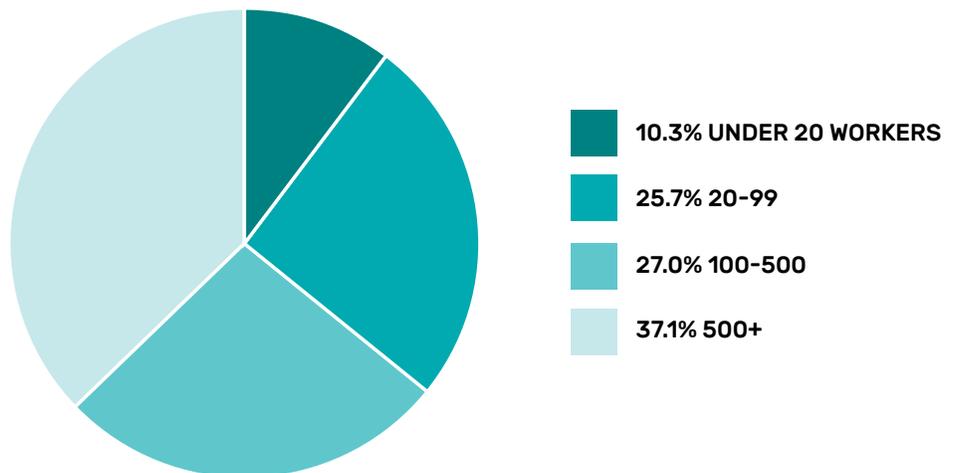
The majority (89.4%) of the sample was made up of permanent employees, including statutory public service employees (see Figure 1). The remaining respondents were temporary, casual/seasonal, retired, students, or indicated “other” (e.g., on-the-job trainees). Similarly, 77.8% reported they were working full time at the time of the survey.

Figure 1. Employment Category



Respondents worked in a variety of sectors. The three largest sectors represented were Public Administration & Defence and Compulsory Social Security (44.2%), Administrative & Support Service Activities (19.5%) and Human Health and Social Work Activities (14.7%). Table 1 provides an overview of the work sectors in which respondents were employed. The majority of respondents (83.8%) reported that they worked in the public sector with the remainder (16.2%) in the private sector. There was a range in the size of the workplaces that respondents were employed, with most workers employed in workplaces with more than 500 workers (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Workplace Size



EXPERIENCES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE (DV)

Approximately 28% of respondents reported having experienced domestic violence (DV) from an intimate partner in their lifetime; with 8.9% indicating they experienced DV within the last year of completing the survey and 19.1% indicating their experience with DV occurred more than a year before completing the survey.

10.5% of women and 5.2% of men reported experiencing domestic violence in that past 12 months. 23.1% of women and 9.7% of men reported experiencing domestic violence more than a year ago. In total 33.7 percent of women reported experiencing domestic violence in their lifetime and 14.9 percent of men reported experiencing domestic violence in their life time.

Figure 3. DV Prevalence and Gender

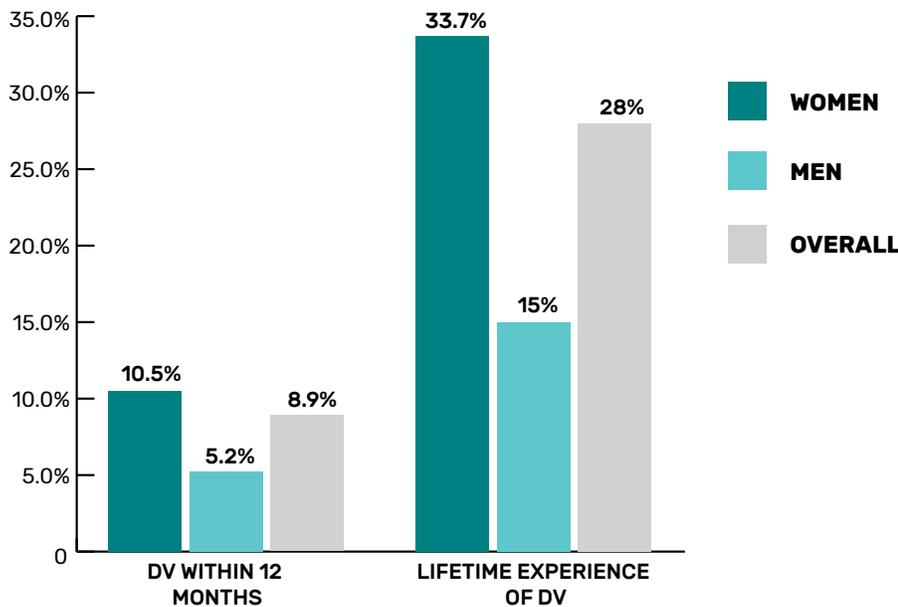
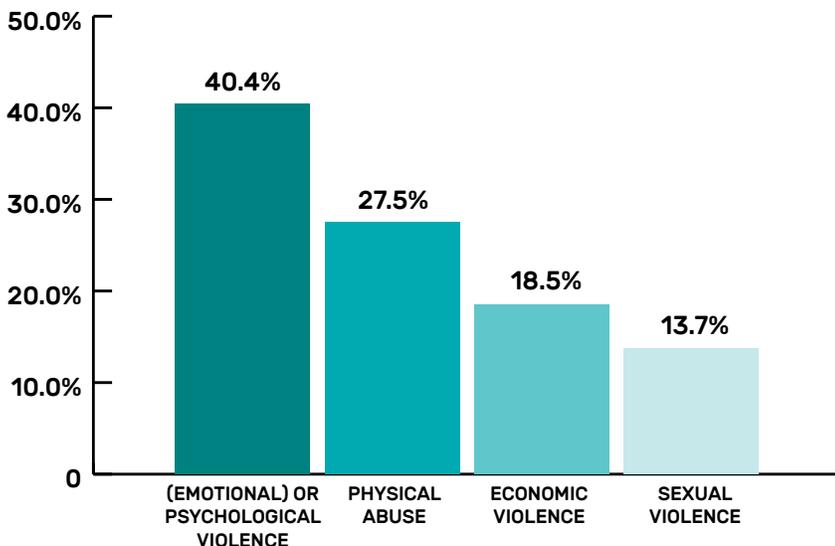


Figure 4. Type of Abuse Experiences



“You’re a victim twice over: victims of domestic violence are considered weak and unprofessional. The reasoning behind it is that it will have an effect on performance. Everything depends on the support provided by the employer; some employers acknowledge the problem, while other don’t consider it as (their) problem.”

“Supporting co-workers takes time and energy (encouraging them to contact a lawyer, reading and ‘translating’ legal documents, listening to stories), even if for sure it wasn’t excessive (a few hours over a period of six months).”

“Violence prompts a feeling of not being able to cope, a serious lack of self-esteem, which then has an effect on one’s professional capabilities.”

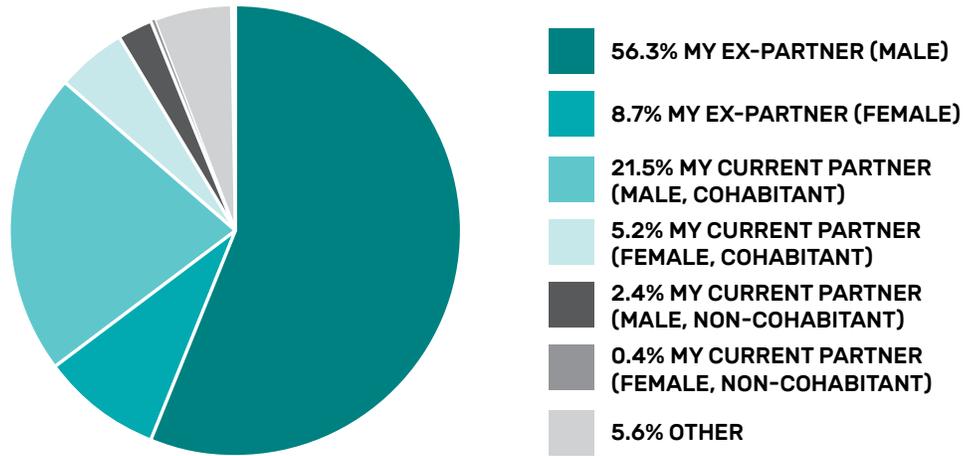
“At work people don’t immediately notice that you are the victim of domestic abuse, you keep up appearances. Only indirectly (not meeting a deadline, etc.) will someone notice that something is wrong.”

“Depression caused by the violence meant that I failed my exams for promotion and unfortunately no one took the situation into account.”

The most frequent form of abuse reported by all those who experienced domestic violence was emotional/psychological abuse (see Figure 4).

Over half (56.3%) of these respondents reported being abused by their male ex-partner followed by current male cohabitant partner (21.5%), female ex-partner (8.7%), current female cohabitant partner (5.2%), and ‘other’ (8.6%). See Figure 4.

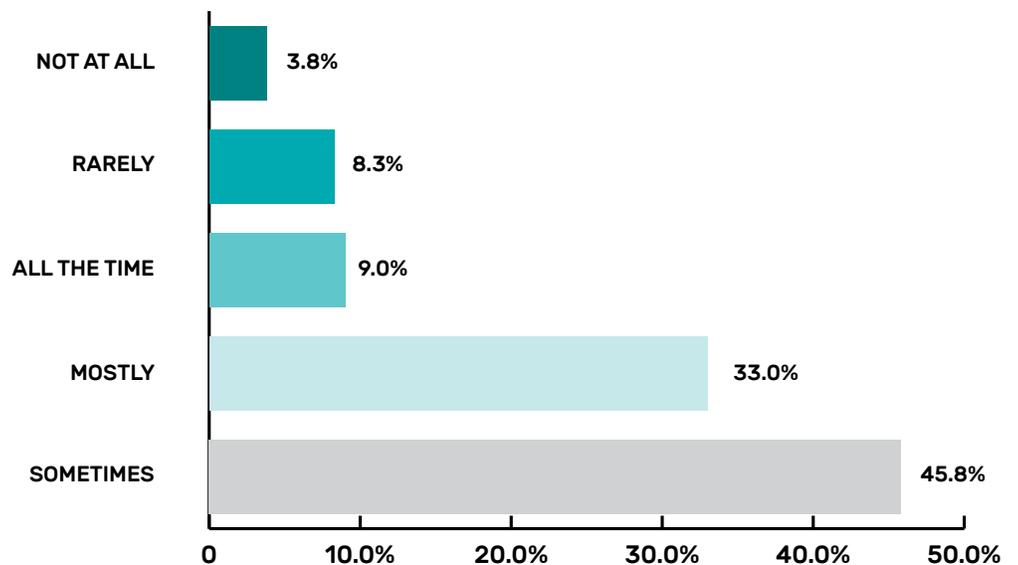
Figure 5. Perpetrators of DV



THE IMPACT OF DV ON THE WORKPLACE

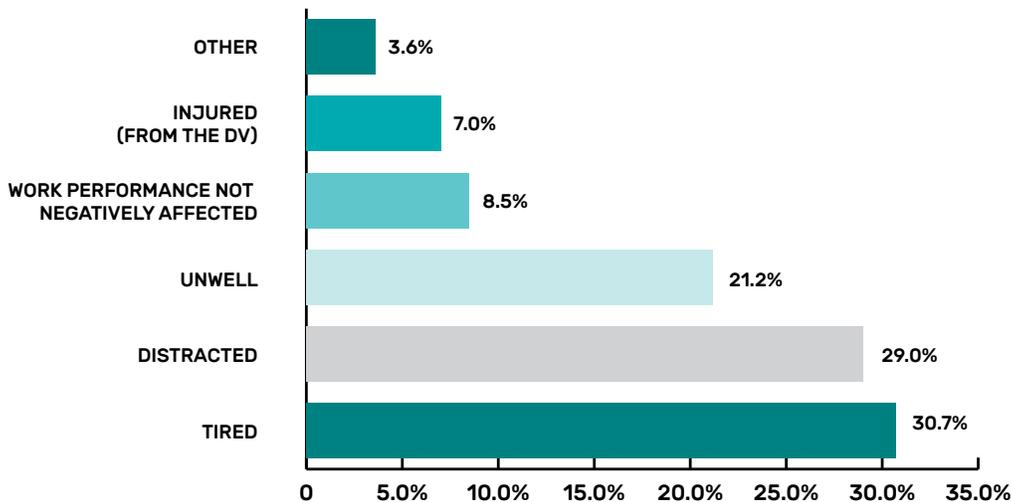
Of those who reported DV experience, 72.9% indicated it affected their ability to work. 42% of those who reported DV affected their work also reported that their work was affected ‘mostly’ or ‘all the time’. Almost half (45.8%) reported that DV affected their ability to work ‘sometimes’ (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. How frequently DV Impacted Ability to Work



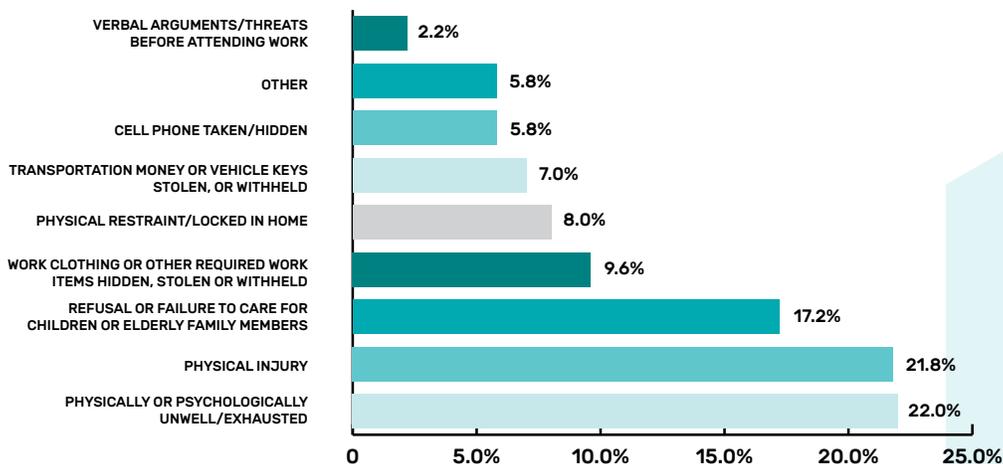
In regard to the type of impact DV had on work performance, almost one-third indicated that they were tired (30.7%), or distracted (29%) while working (see Figure 7). A further 21.2% indicated that they were unwell (mentally and/or physically) as a result of the DV and this impacted their work performance.

Figure 7. Ways that DV Affected Work Performance



40.8% of workers experiencing DV reported that DV made them miss work with an unplanned absence. The most common causes of missing work was due to being physically or psychologically exhausted or unwell (22.0%), physical injury (21.8%), perpetrator refusing or failing to provide care for children or elderly family members (17.2%), having their work clothing or required work documents hidden, stolen or withheld (9.6%), being physically restrained or locked in home (8.0%), transportation money or vehicle keys being stolen or withheld (7.0%), cell phone taken or hidden (5.8%) and having a verbal argument or threats right before leaving for work (2.2%). See Figure 8.

Figure 8. DV-Related Reasons for Unplanned Absence from Work



"It may seem strange, but some women immerse themselves in work to escape from their problems of domestic violence. One female co-worker admitted to me that "coming to work gives me a different perspective. It does me good."

"You feel belittled and you don't fancy coming to work because you have problems with bruises or visible blows. But on the other hand, going to work is a breath of oxygen – you are able to get out of your hell for a few hours."

"The situation with my ex-husband really affected my work (lack of motivation, poor concentration, etc.)"

"My ex-partner contacted some of my co-workers to denigrate me."

"He made threats to spread private information at work."

"I did not feel safe physically, I had to ask that the main door not be left wide open..."

"My ex came to my work when I was on leave."

"[I got] threats at work, the managers could not keep him under control and send him away. I could not work."

"I have not been on holiday, but on sick leave: burnout, depression: it affects work greatly."

"[The] impact on working life can sometimes be considerable, some people go as far as losing their job, which can have enormous consequences on family life, as well as making the victim even more fragile. It also reinforces the dependency (psychological as well as financial) that often exists between the couples in question."

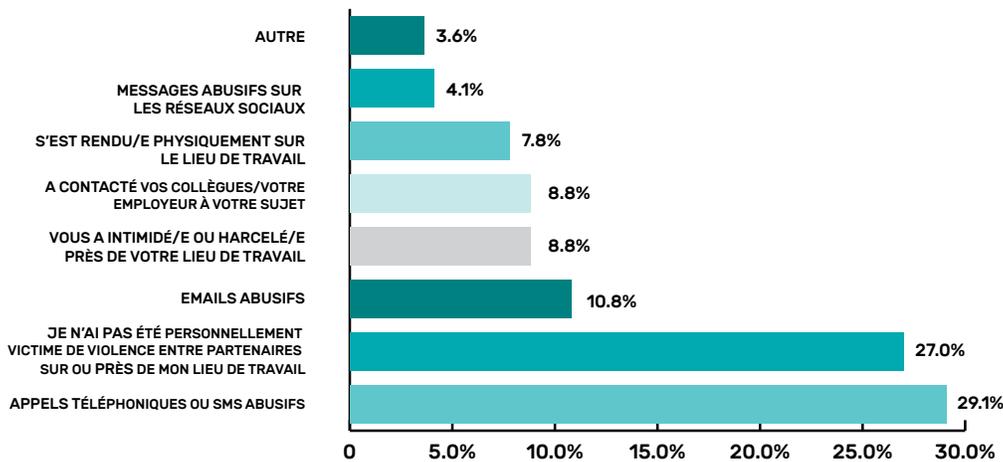
"After making superhuman efforts to dare talk about it, I was able to regain confidence. I knew that I had a point of contact, someone I could refer to in the matter."

"At my work I only talked about it with my co-workers, not with anyone else. It gave me a good feeling to have support."

"The prospect of being able to take a few days off and "catching my breath" so that I could take action if necessary was rather reassuring and I felt supported to some extent."

57.8% of victims reported that abusive acts occurred at or near the workplace. Of the abusive acts at the workplace, the most common was abusive phone calls or text messages (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. DV Tactics Experienced at the Workplace

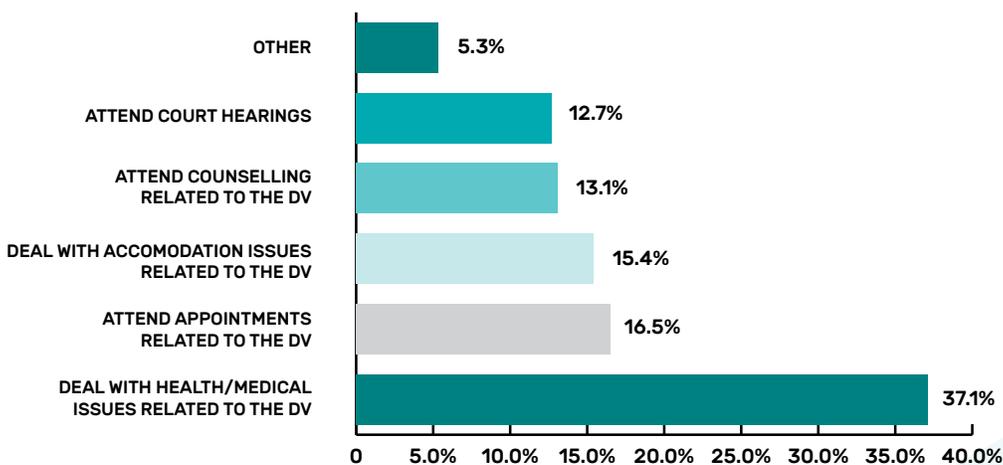


"[I was] emotionally too drained to go to work."

"I was manipulated and physically attacked, which led to me being burned out. The managers at work did their best, but they are not in possession of the right information."

Overall, 42.9% of DV victims indicated they had to take time off from work because of the DV. Almost 40% of those who took time off to deal with a DV-related issue, indicated that it was due to medical or health/mental health concerns related to the DV, including being too emotionally/physically exhausted (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Reasons for Taking Time off Work



"[My] clothes were torn (because they're too sexy), [my] telephone smashed on the floor (because the call came from a male co-worker), [I received] blows in the car going to work and more."

"[I was] unable to get to work, he 'confiscated the car.'"

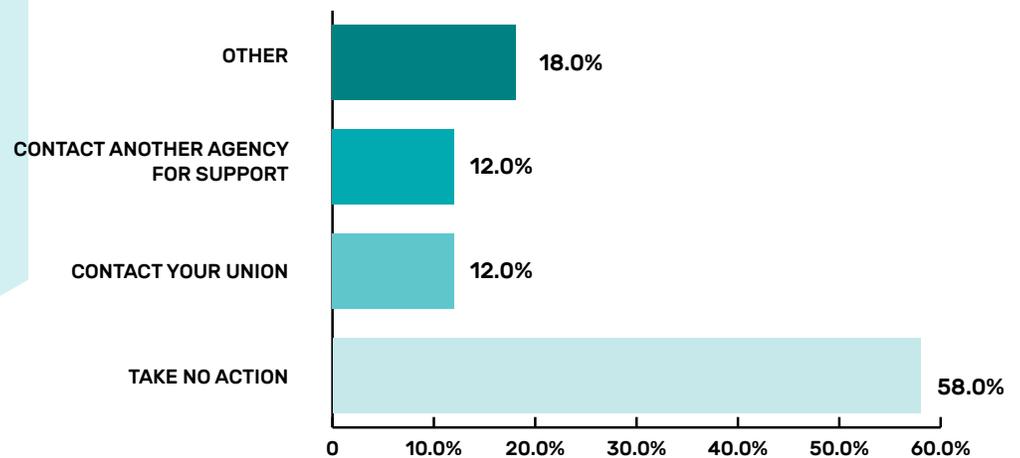
7.2% of respondents indicated that they had lost their job because of their experience of DV. 12.6% reported experiencing discrimination, negative, or adverse actions from their employer as a result of discussing their experience of DV. Of those who lost their job or felt discriminated against as a result of DV, 12% contacted their union, 12% contacted another agency for support, while the majority (58%) did not take any further action (see Figure 11).

"[I missed work because of] discussions, arguments in the morning before leaving."

"I was the person she took into her confidence and hence I also worried about it."

"It is unfortunate that the co-worker sometimes functions less well... This makes it difficult for co-workers (having to take over work when there's too much stress), but there is understanding for the situation."

Figure 11. Respondent Actions after Job Loss or Discrimination due to DV

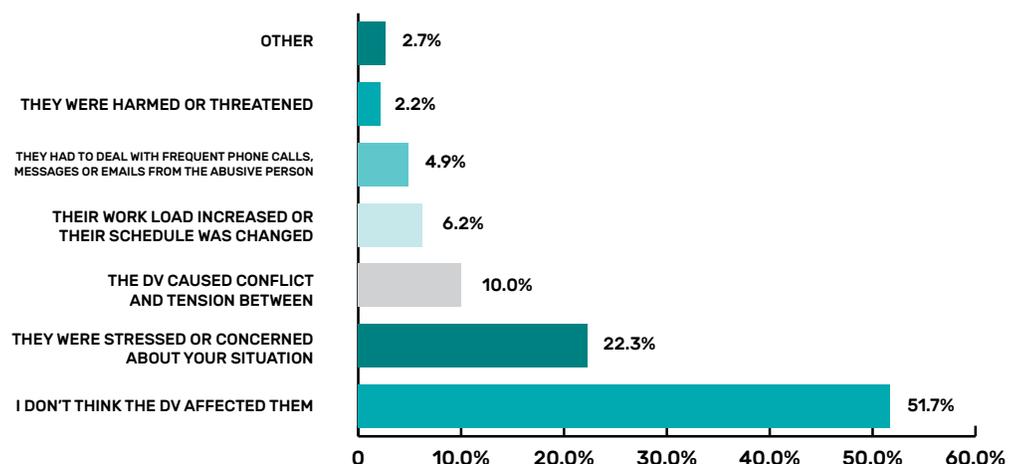


11.3% of workers experiencing abuse reported that they were working in the same workplace as their abuser. This close proximity can make victims even more vulnerable to abuse and it poses a challenge for employers to ensure safety of both the survivor and co-workers who may be affected by the abusive behaviours.

IMPACT OF DV ON CO-WORKERS

Respondents were asked if their experience of DV had an impact on their co-workers in any way. Many reported that they did not think their experience of DV affected their co-workers (51.7%). The most common impacts were being stressed or concerned about the victims' safety (22.3%). Respondents also indicated that the DV caused conflict and tension between them and their co-workers (10.0%) and that their co-workers work load increased or their schedule was changed (6.2%).

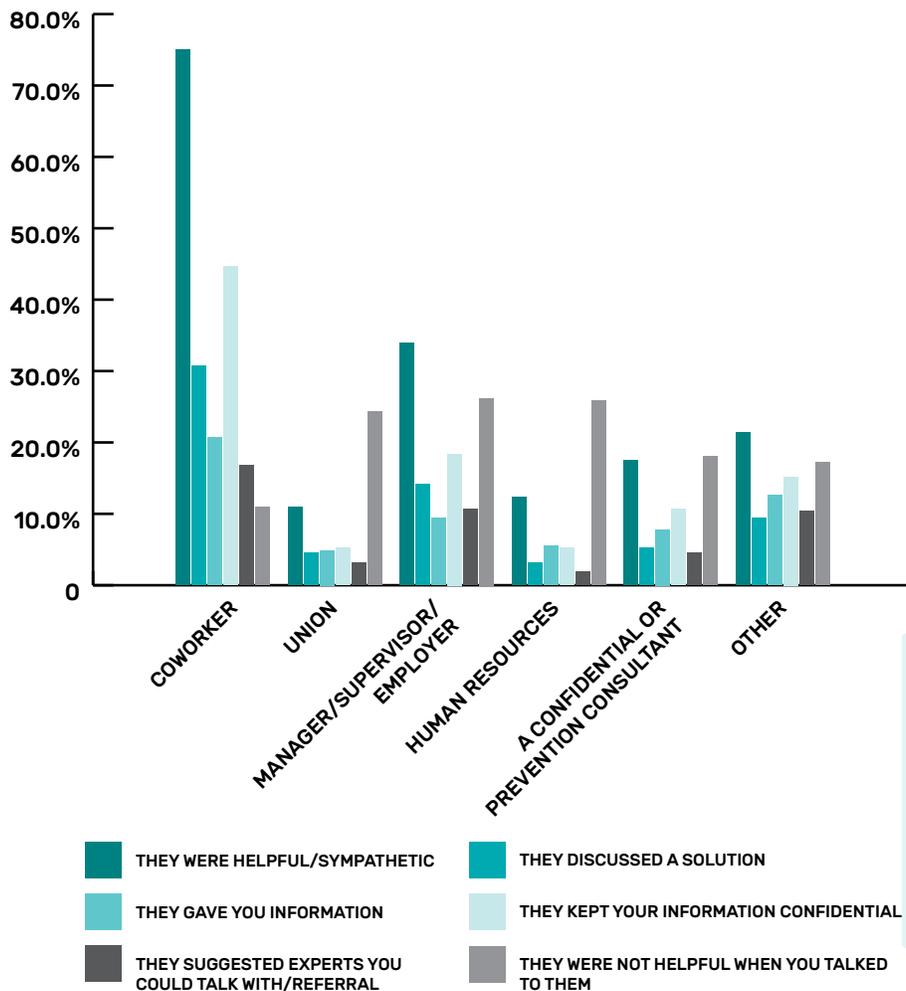
Figure 12. Types of Impact DV was Perceived to Have on Co-Workers



DISCLOSURE OF DV IN THE WORKPLACE AND SUPPORT RECEIVED

Overall, around half (55.5%) of those experiencing DV reported they discussed it with someone at work. Following disclosure, some victims were provided help or sympathy (28.5%). Co-workers were the most frequent sources of helpfulness and sympathy (75.0%). Overall, some victims (10.2%) who discussed the DV with someone in the workplace were provided information. Of those that received information, it was most commonly given by their co-workers (20.7%). Fewer respondents indicated they discussed a solution (11.2%). The most common people in the workplace who discussed solutions with the victim were co-workers (30.7%) and managers/supervisors/employers (14.2%). Additionally, some victims reported that their information was kept confidential following a disclosure (16.6%), with co-workers (44.6%) and managers/supervisors/employers (18.4%) being the most common people to do so. A small number of victims were given referrals (7.9%), with co-workers (16.8%) being the most common referral source to these victims. Lastly, many victims (20.5%) felt that the persons they disclosed their experience of DV to was not helpful (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Experiences with Disclosing to Someone at the Workplace



"I had a lot of support at work and that helped me to leave my husband."

"I gave tips to a co-worker who was experiencing domestic violence, based on my own experience."

"They only saw my absences and mocked my suffering quite a lot."

"My direct boss did not react (apart from harassing me about my productivity), whereas other co-workers and union delegates supported me."

“It is very difficult to speak about it and generally you are judged because people do not understand that you let things happen and that you stay. You prefer to hide and are afraid of reprisals. And in the workplace you’re afraid that things don’t stay confidential.”

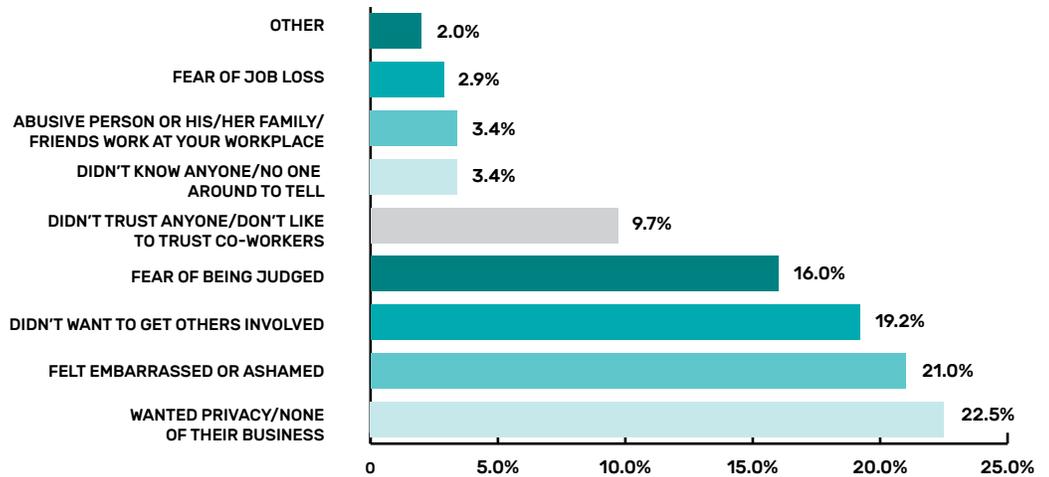
“One’s own perception and what you do with it are very personal. There is still a lot of taboo. You will not always be taken seriously in such a position as a man.”

“You have to face up to “your” shit alone. That’s it. The world of work is only interested in returns.”

Some respondents indicated difficulties developed from discussing their experience of DV at work. For instance, 12.6% reported experiencing discrimination, negative, or adverse actions from their employer as a result of discussing their experience of DV.

Respondents provided a number of reasons why they chose not to discuss DV with anyone at work (see Figure 14). The three most common reasons were the desire to maintain privacy, feeling embarrassed or ashamed, and not wanting to get others involved.

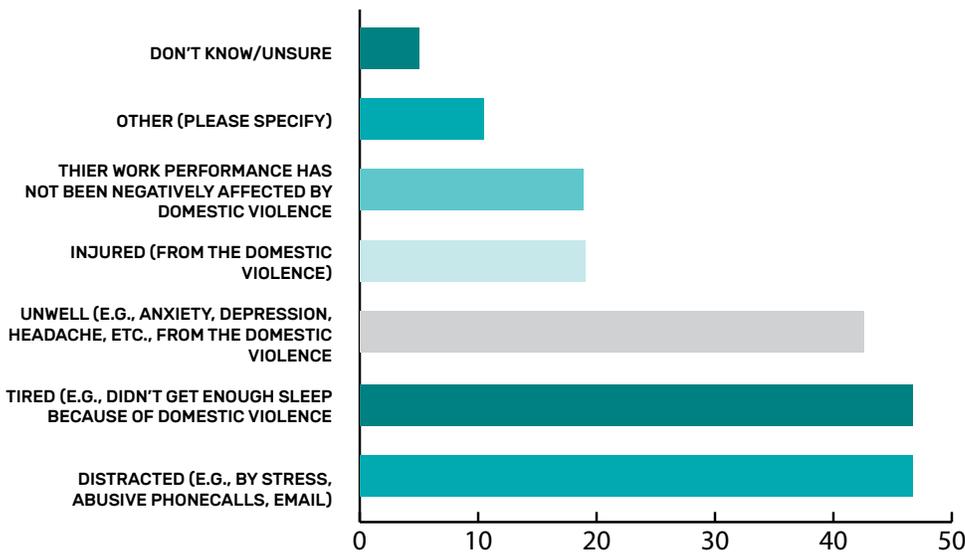
Figure 14. Reasons for Not Disclosing DV at the Workplace



RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTION OF DV IMPACT ON CO-WORKERS' WORK

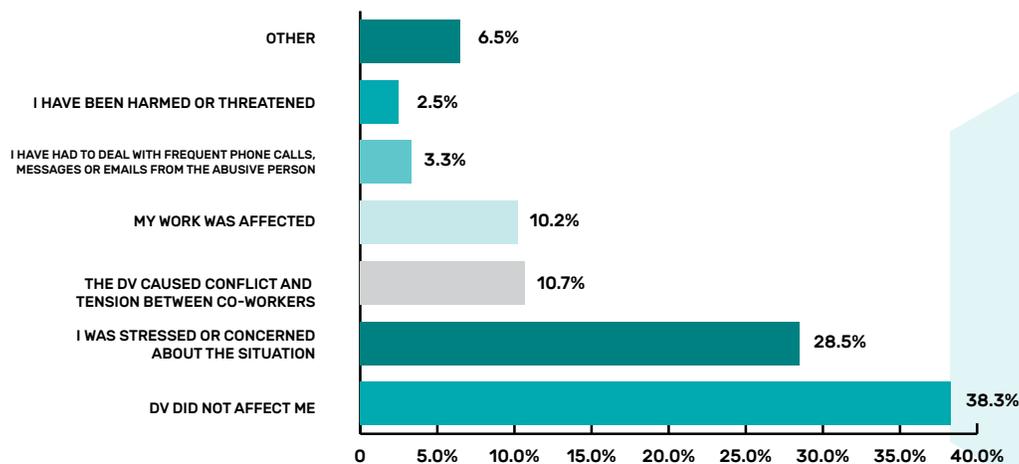
All respondents were asked whether they had ever had/witnessed a co-worker suffering from DV, and if so about their perception of the impact this had on their co-workers' work. Over a third (36.2%) indicated they believed their co-workers' work was impacted by DV. 16.9% of respondents said they did not believe their co-workers work was impacted by DV and 46.9% said they did not know if their co-workers' work was impacted. Of those who did believe their co-worker's work was affected just under half (46.7%) reported that it was due to their co-worker being distracted and/or tired (see Figure 15).

Figure 15. Perception of DV Impact on Co-Workers Work



While most respondents indicated that they were not affected by their co-workers' experience of DV (38.3%), there still remained a number of respondents who reported that they themselves had been impacted. For instance, 28.5% of respondents indicated that they were stressed or concerned about their co-workers experience of DV (see Figure 16).

Figure 16. Impact of Co-Workers' DV Experience on Respondents



"I wanted to see if I could help, but did not know what type of help I could provide."

"Everyone knew that my co-worker was still living with her violent partner, but as she never brought the subject up, everyone kept quiet. [She took] lots of sick leave and [we had] worries/questions during her absences."

"My co-workers were also threatened with death if I wasn't fired."

SOCIAL SERVICE AND LEGAL RESPONSE TO DV

Figure 17. Reporting to Formal Sources of Support

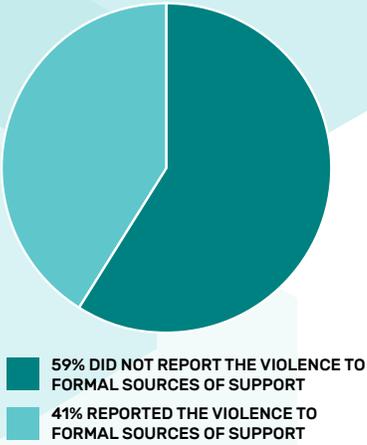
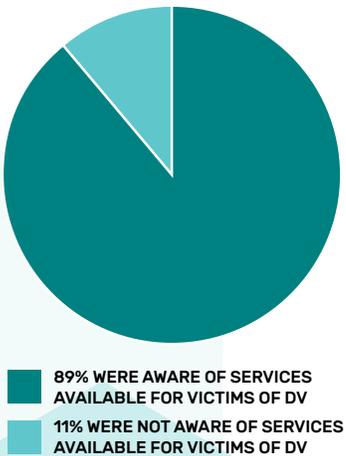
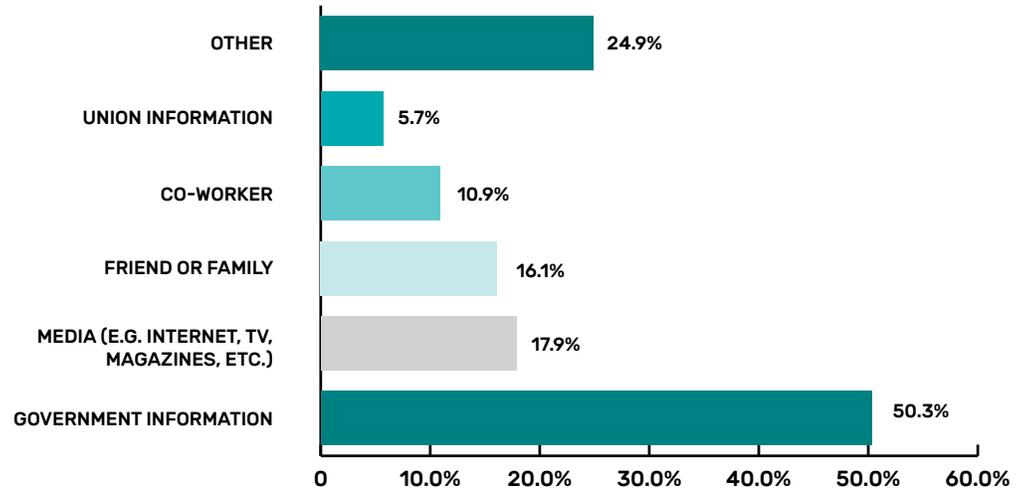


Figure 18. Awareness of Services to Support Victims of DV



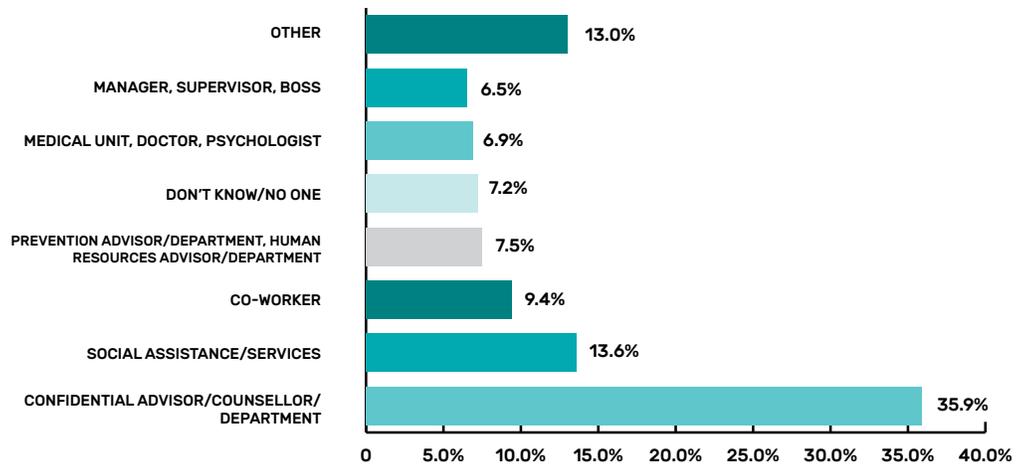
Of the respondents who experienced DV, 59% indicated they did not report the violence to formal sources of support (i.e., police, social worker, or medical units). There was an overall lack of disclosure to services despite the majority of respondents (89%) indicating they were aware of services available for victims of DV (i.e., shelters, legal assistance, counselling). Overall, half (50.3%) of respondents indicated that they had become aware of the service through 'Government Information' (see Figure 19).

Figure 19. Source of Awareness of Services



All participants were asked who they believed were the most suitable persons or services in the workplace to refer to in cases of DV. Through qualitative analysis, the largest percentage of respondents indicated that they believed a "confidential counsellor/advisor/department" was the most suitable person or service to respond (see figure 20).

Figure 20. Identified Persons and Services most Suitable for DV Cases in the Workplaces



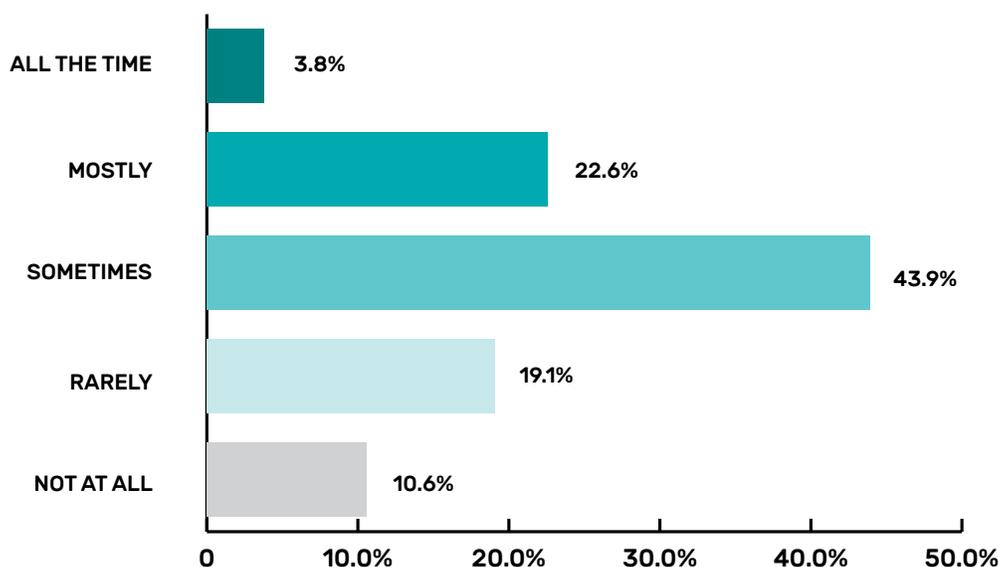
BELIEFS ABOUT DV IN THE WORKPLACE

63.9% of respondents believed that workplace support for DV (i.e., paid leave, education and training, and safety policies, etc.) could reduce the impact of DV on the work-lives of workers. The majority of respondents (88.2%) did not believe that employers were aware when DV was affecting one of their workers. Furthermore, majority of workers (62.8%) were not aware of how employers responded when workers reported DV, and 21.7% believed that employers did not respond positively.

In terms of union responses to DV, over half (55%) indicated that they did not know if union officials were informed when DV was affecting their members (34.5% indicated they 'did not know'). A further 43.9% indicated that they believed that union officials 'sometimes' act in a positive way to help members when union officials became aware of the experience of DV (see Figure 21).

Nevertheless, The vast majority of workers recognized that DV has a significant impact on victims, perpetrators, their co-workers, and the workplace as a whole. In fact, 98.3% of respondents indicated that DV affects the work-lives of workers exposed to violence in some way.

Figure 21. Extent of Union Taking Positive Action



“You ALWAYS bring problems from home with you to work in one way or another.”

“Training about domestic violence and how to react to it and prevent it not only addresses the impacts of domestic violence at work, but also strengthens the victim in dealing with it. It is a form of prevention and empowerment.”

“Employers understand, but what is most important for them is productivity, efficiency, not private life at work.”

“At the time, the only help I received was from my employer.”

“The minimum the direct boss or manager can do is to be kind if the employee speaks out, provide information about where support is available and encourage the person to seek help.”

“Whereas the working environment is an important place for the victim and better knowledge of the network would make it possible to help people overcome it more, in particular by directing them to the appropriate services, as well as the possibility that could be offered to people to take leave without any problems so that they could go to the police, hospital or to a refuge in the event of a crisis, for example.”

“People need to be more aware, everyone. Provide information, talk about it more, debate the subject, for example by implementing information sessions, short films and giving the public the right to talk about it between themselves and/or with professionals.”

“Awareness of domestic violence within the organisation or with union representatives can help lower the barriers for victims to access help. It is important that they have somewhere to take their story at work.”

“Without an effective policy (e.g. a collective labour agreement or in-house prevention policy or one that is focused on the welfare of workers, it risks being ignored or – worse – being penalized.”

“Awareness campaigns in general are effective but it would be good to do one in the workplace, to point out where to go and for these people to be trained in this issue (how to broach the subject, etc.) because it’s complicated to talk about it. Having experienced it, it’s not talked about, it’s denied/minimised or else the victim confides in a few people once she has left.”

It is important to be attentive to women (and men) who suffer violence from their spouse. We mustn’t dismiss someone who has suffered this type of violence, because often (in my experience) the only way to get out of it, is to maintain one’s financial independence and to escape from this hell.

“I think it is important to make it okay to discuss the topic. The importance of removing the taboo must come first. As a victim of domestic violence you are in a situation you can’t easily get out of, you have a feeling of shame, etc. The more it can be discussed, the greater the chance of coming out of it, I think.”

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Almost one-third (28%) of respondents reported personal experience with domestic violence at some point in their lives, which is similar to other surveys conducted to study the impact of DV at the workplace.

Of those who reported DV experience, 72.9% indicated it affected their ability to work, and a further 42% indicated that DV affected their workplace 'most' of the time or 'all the' time. Similarly, almost two-thirds of the respondents reported that DV impacted their work performance frequently due to being distracted or tired. They reported that DV continued at the workplace in some way, the most frequent being through abusive phone calls or texts, or the abuser physically coming to the workplace. Around 41% indicated that DV made them miss work, mostly due to being physically and/or emotionally unwell or exhausted, and physical injury. Some respondents experienced discrimination (12.6%) after discussing the DV at work, and sadly, some reported they lost their jobs (7.2%) as a result of the DV.

Over half of those who had experienced DV discussed the violence with somebody at work, overwhelmingly with co-workers. Far less respondents were disclosing to unions, managers, supervisors or human resources. In terms of reporting to and accessing formal sources of support, almost two-thirds of all victims did not receive assistance, despite the majority of respondents (89%) being aware of the services available for victims of DV.

Almost two-thirds of respondents believed that workplace support for DV (i.e., paid leave, education and training, and safety policies, etc.) could reduce the impact of DV on the work-lives of workers. However, and unfortunately, the majority (88%) did not believe that employers were aware when DV was affecting their workers, and 22% believed that employers did not respond positively to employed victims of DV. Around one-third of the respondents also indicated they believed that union officials rarely or not at all responded in a positive way to help members when union officials became aware of the experience of DV.

"I try not to think about it and thanks to the union and especially the women's committee in which I have invested I am slowly able to come to terms with it and rebuild."

"Union representatives have the necessary training to offer victims first-line help. A brochure or manual for union reps would be a good tool."

Please cite this document as:

Saxton M.D., Olszowy, L., & MacQuarrie, B.J. (2017). National Survey Results on the Impact of Domestic Violence on Work, Workers and Workplaces in Belgium: Joint UWO and IEWM Report. London, ON: Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children.