
SAFE SPACES

*A study on paid family/
domestic violence leave
By Women's Agenda
and Good Shepherd
Australia New Zealand*



ABOUT WOMEN'S AGENDA

Women's Agenda is a daily news hub for professional women and female entrepreneurs, sharing the latest stories and trends on how we live and work.

We advocate for women's careers and aim to hold employers and governments to account when it comes to women's opportunities, safety and financial independence.

ABOUT GOOD SHEPHERD AUSTRALIA NEW ZEALAND

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand provides community-based programs and services that support women and children to build their safety and resilience, increase their access to education opportunities and improve their financial security.

The not-for-profit helps women at risk of, experiencing or recovering from family/domestic violence in a range of ways. It provides specialist family/domestic violence crisis, recovery and housing services and works closely with emergency and protection services. It also provides financial counselling, financial capability coaching and parenting programs.

Good Shepherd strives to make a lasting positive impact on the lives of women, girls and their families through research and advocacy that addresses social issues.

For free, confidential advice and support in relation to family/domestic violence, call 1800 RESPECT on 1800 737 732. If you, or someone you know, is in immediate danger, call 000.



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INTRODUCTION

Family/domestic violence can affect women whether they're working or not, and regardless of their education level, socio-economic or cultural background.

As well as the physical and psychological damage it causes, the financial impacts of family/domestic violence on the lives of women and children can be devastating, and continue long after they have escaped the violence.

It's estimated that 800,000 survivors of family/domestic violence are currently in paid employment.¹ Employers have a powerful opportunity to help reduce the risks for some women and provide an environment others may need to help them rebuild their lives. Not having a supportive workplace that allows time off work to attend court or appointments, make housing arrangements, recover from injury or stay safe can add to the emotional and financial stress of experiencing violence.

An increasing number of large employers are starting to acknowledge their role in mitigating family/domestic violence, with organisations as large as Telstra, major banks and the public sector in a number of states now offering paid family/domestic violence leave to employees.

Women's Agenda and Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand partnered together to explore how widespread such paid leave options currently are. We also looked at how comfortable people feel about asking employers for support to deal with family/domestic violence, and what type of information they think their workplace needs to better deal with the issue. The survey also explored the business and financial impacts of taking time off to deal with violence-related matters for female entrepreneurs and small business owners.

More than 550 women completed our online survey. Of these, 213 respondents chose to leave additional comments regarding the role of workplaces in supporting employees who experience family/domestic violence.

We were pleased to find that nearly half of those polled who are employed have access to at least one day of paid family/domestic violence leave. However, we were concerned by the large proportion of employed women who still do not have access to this leave. The vast majority of women feel paid family/domestic violence leave is important.

Three quarters of female business owners and entrepreneurs reported that they work from home more than 50% of the time. This may increase their risk of family/domestic violence, as it's likely that many women in this position do not have access to a separate "space" or environment that can provide some safety. Many business owners commented that taking time off from their business due to family/domestic violence would be detrimental to their income and in some cases cause devastating setbacks.

While this sample is by no means representative, we hope the results of this poll will lead to more conversations regarding paid family/domestic violence leave and a discussion that gives more consideration to self-employed women, as well as women who are in casual work.

1. www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/13_10_31_DV_as_a_workplace_issue_factsheet_FINAL6.pdf

JENNY'S STORY

A case study on how lack of support from workplaces can put women at more risk

Jenny's* story of partner violence demonstrates how the consequences of abuse stem far beyond the physical and emotional impacts. It also highlights the importance of having workplace policies that help to keep staff who are experiencing family/violence safe.

Jenny tried to not let the physical and emotional abuse she experienced at home affect her performance at work, but in the end she was forced to quit her job. Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand says Jenny's situation could have been improved if she'd had access to paid family/domestic violence leave. It could have helped her manage court dates, retain some financial freedom and ultimately keep her job.

When they were still together, Jenny's abusive husband Graham* would call her at work numerous times a day. She felt she had to answer, even during work meetings. She became increasingly anxious, and her work suffered as a result.

"I'd always been a high achiever at work," she said. "When my boss started making comments about my performance, I realised I couldn't go on the way I was."

Jenny's decision to leave Graham to go and stay at a friend's place saw her husband become even more abusive – showing up at her friend's house, yelling at her, harassing her at work, constantly calling the office and sending relentless emails and text messages.

"One day Graham turned up at the office and started screaming at me, accusing me of having an affair. It was mortifying. I pretended his anger was justified and took the blame, because somehow that seemed less humiliating than having an abusive husband."

She says her stress and anxiety heightened from there. "I was scared to go to work in case Graham was waiting for me, so I ended up taking all my annual leave to stay away. When that ran out, my anxiety doubled."

Jenny was not only anxious about her job, but her financial security. Graham had always insisted that she put all her earnings in their joint account. He gave her \$550 every fortnight to take care of household expenses and pay for her own needs, while he kept his own separate account.

"I guess I thought that was the way marriages worked," she says. "I trusted that Graham was making financial decisions for the benefit of both of us."

Faced with no financial stability, concerned she'd lose her job and scared her husband would carry out his threats to kill himself if she didn't return home, Jenny decided the best option was to return to Graham and try to repair the marriage.

“Things settled down for a while, and I started to relax again. I secured a major deal at work and my boss was pleased with me again. Everything was going well until I went out for a drink one night with a male colleague to celebrate a new account.” When she got home, Graham was waiting. He’d been watching her. “I ended up in hospital that night.”

Jenny was referred to a refuge run by Good Shepherd. She says she felt safe and understood there, being around women who empathised with her situation.

But going to work was a different story. She felt terrified. She wasn’t allowed to change her phone number and continued to receive threats from Graham. She also needed time off work to arrange an intervention order, but with no annual leave left, she had to take unpaid leave.

“I told my boss what was going on and asked if I could work from the refuge while I waited for the intervention order, but she said she needed me in the office.”

Jenny felt she had no choice but to quit her job to stay safe. She found herself unemployed, living in a refuge, with no purpose and no confidence.

Jenny says the Good Shepherd family/domestic violence counsellors helped her deal with her anxiety and depression, and offered support while she started to rebuild her life. She had to move away from her family and friends to escape Graham and it took her a year to find another job. But, for Jenny, the most important thing was finally feeling safe.

Not being able to access the equity in her home immediately – in order to avoid contact with Graham – Jenny was thankful to access financial coaching and support from Good Shepherd to build up some savings.

“Eventually I was able to buy furniture and a car,” she says. “It’s been three years since I left Graham, and I almost feel like the old me again.”

Paid family/domestic violence leave could have reduced some of the torment Jenny faced. As is the case for many women in her situation, if Jenny’s former employer had offered such leave, she may have retained her job. The leave would have allowed her to take time off work to stay safe and attend multiple appointments, while also providing a level of financial stability.

As such, Good Shepherd is advocating for more organisations to offer paid family/domestic violence leave in order to support more women to stay safe and to reduce the ripple effects of the violence they are experiencing, such as lost income and reduced financial security, which can impact their lives long after they leave the relationship.

*Names have been changed.

KEY STATISTICS

552 responses

44%

ARE EMPLOYED IN A LARGE ORGANISATION

9%

ARE SELF-EMPLOYED

36%

ARE EMPLOYED IN A SMALL OR MEDIUM SIZED ORGANISATION

36%

OF EMPLOYED RESPONDENTS HAVE **NO** ACCESS TO PAID FAMILY/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEAVE

17%

OF EMPLOYED RESPONDENTS ARE UNSURE IF THEY HAVE ACCESS TO PAID FAMILY/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEAVE, WHILE **21%** BELIEVE THEY HAVE ACCESS TO THIS LEAVE BUT ARE UNSURE HOW MANY DAYS ARE OFFERED

11%

OF EMPLOYED RESPONDENTS HAVE ACCESS TO MORE THAN 10 DAYS OF PAID FAMILY/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEAVE

49%

OF EMPLOYED RESPONDENTS SAID THEY WOULD FEEL COMFORTABLE APPLYING FOR FAMILY/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEAVE IF THEY NEEDED IT, **32%** SAID THEY WERE UNSURE

31%

OF EMPLOYED RESPONDENTS SAID THEY WERE IN A POSITION TO PERSONALLY APPROVE FAMILY/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEAVE FOR STAFF

25%

OF EMPLOYED WOMEN HAD NO ACCESS TO COUNSELLING SERVICES OR EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

67%

OF EMPLOYED RESPONDENTS SAID THEIR ORGANISATION NEEDS TO WORK ON HOW TO BETTER SUPPORT STAFF EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE

75%

OF SELF-EMPLOYED RESPONDENTS SAID THEY WORKED FROM HOME MORE THAN 50% OF THE TIME

84%

OF ALL RESPONDENTS BELIEVED PAID FAMILY/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEAVE WAS IMPORTANT IN MITIGATING FAMILY VIOLENCE IN AUSTRALIA

ACCESS TO PAID FAMILY/ DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEAVE FOR EMPLOYED WOMEN

More than a third (36%) of employed women who took part in this survey did not have access to paid family/domestic violence leave, while 17% were unsure if they could access such entitlements.

Of the 408 women who said they were in paid employment, nearly half (46%) reported having access to at least one day of family/domestic violence leave, while 11% said they had access to more than 10 days.

Worryingly, a significant number of respondents to this survey indicated they would experience privacy concerns if they needed to request such leave from their employer. While almost half of respondents (49%) said they would feel comfortable applying for paid family/domestic violence leave if they needed it, around one in five said they would not, with the remainder feeling “unsure” if they would feel comfortable or not.

My organisation offered 10 days’ family/domestic violence leave. I believe had I not had access to this I would still be in the relationship. The 10 days’ paid leave allowed me to take my children to my family who lived 2.5 hours away and make more solid plans of how to leave, and where the children and I would live, knowing that I had employment to go back to.”

A number of respondents, particularly in smaller organisations, expressed concern about voicing the real reasons for requiring such leave due to the stigma associated with family/domestic violence.

Several women commented on their own experiences of family/domestic violence. Some said their employer provided safety and security during difficult periods, and that they wouldn’t have been able to retain their income without a supportive employer. However, many women who said they had been affected by family/domestic violence reported they were not offered the support they needed from an employer, and in some cases found themselves out of work as a result.

There’s still work to do in terms of normalising the offering of paid family/domestic violence leave, but the results of this poll indicate many employers are making efforts to try to support employees who are experiencing, or may be at risk of, family/domestic violence.

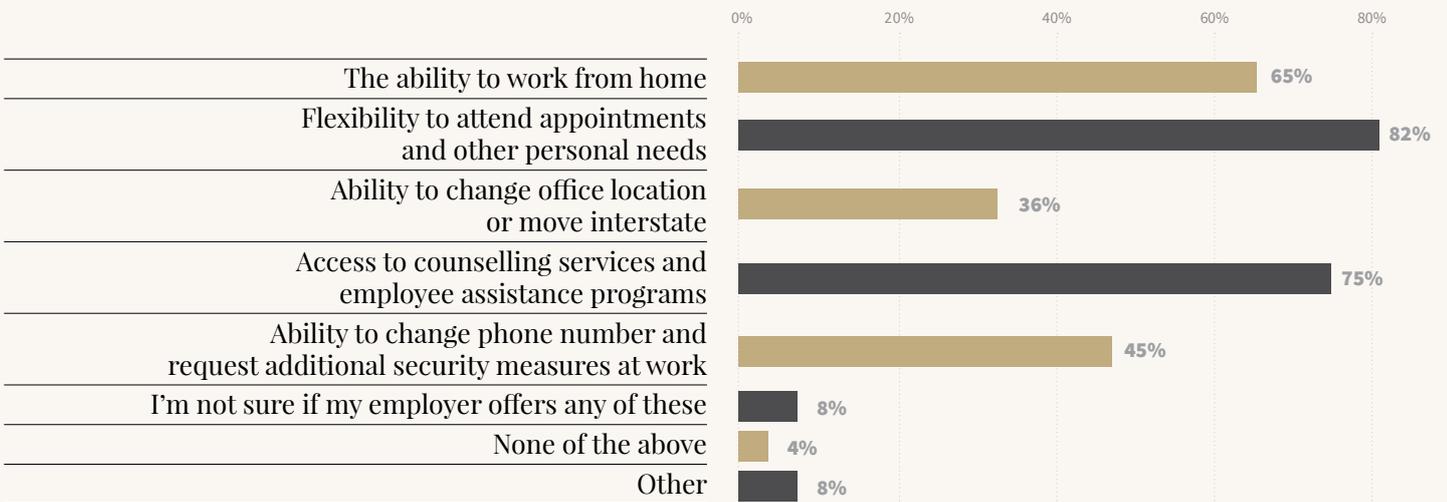
Four in five (82%) of employed respondents had the flexibility to attend appointments and other personal needs. However, it was concerning to find that one in five women did not have this flexibility.

It was likewise concerning that more than half (55%) of employed respondents said they did not have the ability to change phone numbers or request additional security measures at work, while a quarter of respondents did not have access to counselling services or employee assistance programs. In addition, only 36% said they were in a position to change office locations or to work interstate if they were in danger.

DOES YOUR EMPLOYER OFFER PAID FAMILY/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEAVE?



TO YOUR KNOWLEDGE, DOES YOUR EMPLOYER OFFER ANY OF THE FOLLOWING POLICIES THAT COULD SUPPORT SOMEONE DEALING WITH FAMILY/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?



THE RISKS FOR SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN

Women are increasingly starting new businesses, but this may be problematic for those experiencing family/domestic violence.

These women spend a great deal of time working at home, with three in four business owners (74%) saying they work from home more than 50% of the time.

A number of business-owners commented on how taking family/domestic violence leave would affect their business. Of the 38 long-answer responses from this group, almost all said taking leave to deal with family/domestic violence would have some kind of impact on their work. Some said they would lose clients and income, and in some cases their entire business. Some noted that family stability is key to their success as a business owner.

For those who employ staff, some said they simply couldn't afford to pay a replacement if employees had to take paid family/domestic violence leave.

A number of business owners reported they had previously been affected by family/domestic violence, with a couple indicating that an abusive partner had prevented them from visiting interstate clients, and others noting they had lost their entire business during a period of violence and had to start again.

“My business would collapse because I couldn't afford to pay someone else to do my job and pay myself enough to look after the basic needs of myself and my three primary school aged children.”

MORE WORK TO DO

So what do our survey respondents think should be done to support employees who are experiencing family/ domestic violence in Australia?

PAID FAMILY/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEAVE

The vast majority of respondents (85%) think paid family/domestic violence leave is an important factor in supporting employees who are experiencing violence.

A number of women noted in the comments that they had personally taken leave due to family/domestic violence, with some indicating it contributed to them being able to seek safety and later rebuild their lives.

While many industries are beginning to offer paid family/ domestic violence leave, it is currently not available to all Australian employees. Making family/domestic leave compulsory in all workplaces will require changes to legislation. Good Shepherd is joining other community organisations to advocate for a minimum of 10 days' paid leave – in addition to personal leave – to be made mandatory.

SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYERS TO ADDRESS FAMILY/ DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The comments we received from respondents emphasised that paid family/domestic violence leave is not enough on its own. It's one thing for an employer to offer the leave, but there's also some responsibility on the approving manager to know how to handle requests for such leave and to provide other safety measures.

There is an opportunity for the community sector to work with businesses to better support employees and ensure family/domestic violence policies are developed and promoted appropriately so that staff feel comfortable in disclosing their situation and asking for help.

Employer support can make a huge difference. One survey respondent commented that work was a “safe haven”, while another commented on the safety she felt in being in a secure office where her former partner could not access her.

Other respondents outlined the negative impact that an unsupportive employer had on their situation and their efforts to rebuild their lives. Some said their issues were ignored, while others lost their job due to needing time out of the workforce. The word “stigma” was recurring, with a number of respondents noting the stigma associated with requesting family/domestic violence leave or being open about personal difficulties.

One woman reported the challenges she faced in securing references after losing her job when she took time off due to family/domestic violence. Another said it felt like a “minefield” trying to navigate appointments, running her home, speaking to police and treating physical injuries while trying to maintain a senior role.

Some respondents called for support for employers in learning to better spot signs of family/domestic violence, while others noted a need to educate superiors and managers on how to respond to such signs.

According to 67% of employed respondents, employers need to be better equipped with resources and information on family violence. More than half (53%) said their employer required more case studies and examples of what other businesses were doing well, 28% said more data and information on the prevalence of family/domestic violence would help, and 31% said access to external support services for employees would be beneficial.

Dealing with the perpetrators of violence who, like survivors, are also often employed, is another significant area that needs to be addressed.

Other significant factors that compound women's risk of financial insecurity, such as the gender pay gap, unsecure and casual work, as well as a lack of support for women returning to the workforce after having children, need to be addressed.

While many respondents noted the need for more workplaces to step up, they also said more support and acknowledgement of the issue was needed at the government level, as well as from other groups such as sporting bodies and community groups.

“Policies are in place at work but we are discouraged from using them – it’s frowned upon and not a good career move. Managers need to be trained to identify risk and show compassion.”

MORE RESEARCH TO BETTER SUPPORT WOMEN WHO CANNOT ACCESS EMPLOYEE LEAVE

The survey results have highlighted groups of women whose safety and financial risks are particularly high.

The increased safety risks and financial impacts for female business owners need to be further explored, with the majority reporting that they work from home more than 50% of the time. There is also an increased risk for women who do not work, perhaps due to their caregiving role or other reasons.

Numerous women who commented on the survey raised concerns about the lack of support for casual workers and noted that protections should be extended to these employees. Good Shepherd sees an opportunity to conduct research into how the casualisation of the workforce is putting women at increased risk of family/domestic violence and its impact on their finances.

We acknowledge that this survey sample is not representative, and that the survey touches on only some of the issues regarding the role of employers in mitigating family/domestic violence in Australia.

FOR FREE, CONFIDENTIAL ADVICE AND SUPPORT
IN RELATION TO FAMILY/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE,
CALL 1800 RESPECT ON 1800 737 732.

CALL 000 FOR EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE