



## Evidence submission

Department for Business, Energy & Industrial  
Strategy

# SUPPORT IN THE WORKPLACE FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

Response by the Latin American Women's Rights Service  
(LAWRS)

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### About the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS)

LAWRS is a by-and-for, feminist and human rights organisation focused on addressing the practical and strategic needs of Latin American migrant women displaced by poverty and violence. LAWRS' mission is to provide Latin American migrant women with tools to assert our rights and pursue personal empowerment and social change. We directly support more than 5,000 women annually through culturally and linguistically specialist advice, information, counselling and psychotherapy, advocacy, development programmes, and workshops.

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# Introduction

## Latin American women at work

LAWRS' service users are Latin American migrant women, working mainly in cleaning, hospitality and domestic work, experiencing violence against women and girls, exploitation and trafficking, enduring difficult living and working conditions in low-paid jobs and facing barriers to social protection.

Immigration status plays a major role in the way Latin American migrant women inhabit the work environment. As employers are asked to act as immigration officers and perform checks of their employee's right to work, migrant women experience a general lack of trust and fear. This fact plays an important role in preventing victims from disclosing domestic abuse at the workplace. Thus, immigration is not only a tool for coercive control for perpetrators of domestic abuse, but also for employers, who often threaten and exploit workers because they know that their immigration status will keep them from seeking support. This is especially concerning as many women become undocumented as a part of the domestic abuse they experience, as our evidence-based work shows. Mothers who fear being separated from their children due to their immigration status will be especially vulnerable to perpetrators both at work and in the home.

Repealing the illegal working offence, ensuring employers are not required to check the immigration status of their employees and ending data-sharing arrangements between employers, statutory services and the Home Office for immigration enforcement, will be key to build back trust between migrant women and employers in a way that allows them to disclose issues as sensitive as domestic abuse in this setting.<sup>1</sup>

## Inquiry questions

What practical circumstances arise in relation to domestic abuse and work?

Latin American women tend to be employed mainly in sectors like cleaning, hospitality and domestic work, which are characterised by low-pay, lack of regulation and precarious conditions. It is not uncommon for them to be victims of exploitation in the workplace, and experience

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please see our report "[The Right to be Believed: Migrant women facing Violence Against Women and Girls \(VAWG\) in the 'hostile immigration environment' in London](#)".

employment rights violations such as underpayment of the minimum wage, lack of contract or payslips, unlawful deduction of wages, among many others.<sup>2</sup>

A lack of knowledge of English often contributes to a general lack of understanding of the system and of their rights at work, a fact that unscrupulous employers are aware of and take advantage of. The isolation that this kind of employment can lead to due to anti-social and/or long hours, can also make it difficult for them to know who to contact in order to receive help and advice. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for women working in cleaning to not know exactly what company they are employed by, and having no contact other than the phone number of their direct line manager.

Women who are experiencing domestic abuse might face different issues at work depending on their personal circumstances. For many, work is a safe space away from their perpetrator and they will be keen to continue working normally as far as it is possible. Nevertheless, as part of the economic abuse they may be facing, many victims would be prevented or limited by perpetrators to do so. For instance, by limiting their working hours.

As a result of the domestic abuse, migrant women will find that their work and performance is affected due to the trauma they are going through, which can often lead to loss of memory, difficulty concentrating, and missing deadlines, among other issues. In most cases, a woman experiencing domestic abuse will need flexibility in terms of attendance. This is particularly true at the stage of leaving the home that they share with the perpetrator and moving to a refuge or temporary accommodation, as their life and routine is disrupted – especially if they have children to look after. For women who are not allowed to take sick days at work without losing their pay or arranging for a replacement themselves, this flexibility is often not an option.

### **Case study**

Milena is a survivor of domestic abuse. She works as a cleaner at a hospital with a zero hour contract, and is not eligible for Universal Credit. After she left her perpetrator, she was offered temporary accommodation, but the only possibility to pick up the keys was during her working hours. She did not feel her employer would understand, so she left her work during working hours. Her employer had been promising her a regular contract for a long time, which never came to fruition, and instead she was offered the hours that no other cleaner would take, with no flexibility.

Confidentiality issues may also arise at work in the context of domestic abuse. The prevalent stigma and disbelief that victims face may lead many to not wish other people, be it colleagues, line managers or employers, to know what they are experiencing or have experienced. Breach of confidentiality could also increase the risk for victims, as disclosure could be a sign that the

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, please see our report "[The Unheard Workforce: Experiences of Latin American migrant women in cleaning, hospitality and domestic work](#)".

perpetrator is losing control over their victim, leading to a dangerous situation. The Latin American community being relatively small, it is not uncommon for a woman to work closely with someone who is also acquainted with her perpetrator. When this someone is a line manager, supervisor, or employer, this can create a conflict of interest which can potentially be problematic and lead the victim to make every effort to avoid disclosure for fear of confidentiality not being respected.

A fear of being classified as “trouble-makers” can also influence migrant women’s decision to disclose domestic abuse at work. This is particularly true for women who are undocumented, who wish to remain as invisible as possible to avoid both losing their job and being detained and deported.

## What support can be offered in the workplace to victims of domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is, in many cases, just part of the systemic abuse that migrant women can experience at the same time. For some, the relationship with their employer, line manager, supervisor, or colleagues, is also one characterised by abuse. Although there are many steps an employer can take to support victims of domestic abuse, it is key to consider that many employers are not well-intentioned, so the first step to support workers experiencing domestic abuse should be to ensure that the abuse is not replicated at work, by increasing regulation in sectors such as cleaning, hospitality and domestic, separate from immigration control.

There is no “one-size fits all” approach that can be taken to support victims of domestic abuse, as this would overlook the specific and complex needs of those facing multiple and overlapping barriers, such as migrant women. However, steps that can be taken to improve the support available at work for women experiencing domestic abuse include:

- 1) Creating a domestic abuse policy and procedure which will provide employers and line managers with the knowledge of how to best respond if the situation arises.
- 2) Providing training on domestic abuse awareness delivered by specialist ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised women’s organisations, so that responses can be culturally sensitive and trauma-informed.
- 3) Offering flexibility in terms of attendance, as there will be stages of the process in which a woman might need to be absent from work or rearrange working hours/days.
- 4) Following a strict confidentiality policy, as women often wish to avoid the stigma associated with domestic abuse, and they could be put in danger if it becomes known that they have disclosed they are victims of domestic abuse.

- 5) Providing a culturally sensitive approach, as domestic abuse can be experienced differently according to one's specific circumstances and context. It is key to understand that migration and culture play a big role in how a woman experiences, escapes and survives domestic abuse.
- 6) Providing safe spaces and allowing women to contact the police or supporting organisations during working hours, as this is often the only time they are away from the perpetrators in which they can find a confidential space.
- 7) Circulating information about domestic abuse in the appropriate languages, as well as information of specialist 'by and for' Black and minoritised supporting organisations.
- 8) Providing employees the full information of the company they are working for, and contacts of management other than their direct line manager or supervisor.

## What is the potential to do more?

Women experiencing domestic abuse need special support from the government to resolve childcare necessities. As many are isolated from their connections at the moment of leaving their perpetrator, they might no longer be able to receive help from a neighbour, friend or acquaintance. Having to look after a child/children can often prevent them from being able to go to work. Flexibility from employers is key during this time, but support from the government for childcare could result in a longer term solution.

Furthermore, in order for migrant women to feel it is safe to disclose domestic abuse at work, it is imperative that they are seen and supported as victims first and foremost and not as possible immigration offenders. Their safety should be prioritised over any form of immigration control. In addition, victims must work in a supportive environment where their rights are respected, where they do not earn salaries below the minimum wage, where they are able to take time off sick when needed, where they are protected against bullying, harassment and violence. For many Latin American women, this is not the case. Their workplace is a space of further abuse, be it at a cleaning company which offers outsourced services, or in a private household as a domestic worker.

Until these sectors are more regulated, and that regulation is separate from immigration control, this will not change, and migrant women will remain the most vulnerable group in the British workforce, susceptible to exploitation, trafficking, and modern slavery. The government has the potential to improve conditions for all workers by repealing the illegal working offence, ensuring employers are not required to check the immigration status of their employees and ending data-sharing arrangements between employers, statutory services and the Home Office for immigration purposes.