Empowering employers to address domestic violence and its impact on the workplace

Capacitar os empregadores para lidar com a violência doméstica e o seu impacto no local de trabalho

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Abstract

Domestic violence affects all social and economic classes and age groups, but this type of public crime has traditionally not been linked to the workplace. This study sought to provide a new perspective on domestic violence by focusing on how it can be addressed in work contexts. Qualitative research was conducted based on a focus group to clarify what companies in Portugal's Algarve region know about this crime and its repercussions for the workplace. The results include recurring themes, such as domestic violence as a taboo subject, the difficulty of detecting this crime at work despite extant well-established indicators of this problem, its repercussions for teams, unawareness of specifically related labour laws and the need to train and inform workers. The findings also cover two emerging topics – corporate social responsibility and occupational health – as intervention areas. Given these results, an action plan was developed to be implemented in organisations in order to provide support to employees who are domestic violence victims.

Keywords: Domestic violence indicators, domestic violence legislation, domestic violence prevention, workplace impacts, empowering employers, action plan.

Resumo

A violência doméstica afeta todas as classes sociais e económicas e faixas etárias, mas este tipo de crime público não tem sido tradicionalmente associado ao local de trabalho. Este estudo procurou oferecer uma nova perspetiva sobre a violência doméstica, focando-se na forma como pode ser abordada em contextos de trabalho. Foi realizada uma investigação qualitativa com base num grupo de discussão focalizada para esclarecer o que as empresas da região algarvia de Portugal sabem sobre este crime e as suas repercussões para o local de trabalho. Os resultados incluem temas recorrentes, como a violência doméstica como tema tabu, a dificuldade em detetar este crime no trabalho apesar da existência de indicadores bem estabelecidos deste problema, as suas repercussões para as equipas, o desconhecimento de leis laborais específicas e a necessidade de formar e informar os trabalhadores. Os resultados abrangem ainda dois temas emergentes – responsabilidade social corporativa e saúde ocupacional – como áreas de intervenção. Tendo em conta os resultados, foi desenvolvido um plano de ação para ser implementado nas organizações, a fim de prestar apoio aos colaboradores vítimas de violência doméstica.

Palavras-chave: Indicadores de violência doméstica, legislação sobre violência doméstica, prevenção de violência doméstica, impactos no local de trabalho, capacitação de empregadores, plano de ação.

1. Introduction

Domestic violence is a reality affecting all social, economic and age strata (Direitos e Deveres de Cidadãos, 2020), and victims are protected by law in Portugal, including in the workplace. According to Versola-Russo and Russo (2009), domestic violence has negative repercussions at the organisational level, not only for the victims but also for their colleagues and for the reputation of these employees' organisations. Individuals' low productivity at work can be the result of domestic violence, which takes on greater significance due to its effect on organisations' general productivity, namely, decreasing services and products' quality and/or quantity. Thus, family members and friends closest to the victims and employers need a deeper understanding of this topic.

Seen primarily as a problem of individuals' private lives, scarce literature has addressed how companies can help combat the problem of domestic violence. To help overcome this gap, the present study focused on employers' perspectives on domestic violence. Empirical research was conducted using qualitative analysis of a focus group's data. This topic is underexplored and ethically complex in terms of contacting victims of this crime, so the group's members were recruited from different sectors' public and private organisations operating in the Algarve. The aim of the empirical study was to ascertain what they know about domestic violence – including its personal and professional consequences – and about the implicit legal implications for employers.

Finally, this study sought to generate greater curiosity about this topic, which could lead these organisations to make the fight against domestic violence in the workplace an integral part of their training programmes and to implement internal protocols to combat this crime. Although the responsibilities of companies in relation to domestic violence have recently been discussed by

some scholars (e.g. Karam et al., 2023), the aim of the current research was not to place the responsibility on employers for resolving domestic violence issues or to make them experts on this topic. It was rather to collect information on their perspectives on the issue and provide information to empower employers and allow organisations to be part of the process of screening for and forwarding identified victims to other sources of assistance.

Thus, the results were used to prepare a concise workplace action plan to combat domestic violence that strengthens employers' still obscured but increasingly clear role in combating this type of crime. The plan was divided into two distinct parts: abuse reported by the victim and abuse unreported by the victim. The next section presents a review of the literature that underpins the proposed approach, starting with the definition and synthesis of Portugal's existing legislation on domestic violence and its consequences for work contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Definition of domestic violence*

Domestic violence can also be referred to as 'violence in intimate relationships' or 'intimate partner violence' (Direção-Geral da Saúde [DGS] & Ação de Saúde sobre Género, Violência e Ciclo de Vida [ASGVCV], 2016; World Health Organisation, 2012). This crime can be defined as a complex pattern of behaviours of continuous violence, coercion and subjugation directed against people who live or do not live in the same dwelling or against former partners with whom the aggressor has had a marital and/or dating relationship. The prevalence is higher in women and children but affects people of all genders and ages in Portugal (Comissão para a Cidadania e a Igualdade de Género [CIG], 2024) and other countries (Duvvury et al., 2023; Hill, 2024).

The objective is to gain power over the victims, exercise coercive control over them, dominate and isolate them socially, deprive them of financial power, make them feel subordinate and incompetent and cause them to live in constant fear (CIG et al., 2016; DGS & ASGVCV, 2016; Guarda Nacional Republicana [GNR], n.d.; United Nations, n.d.).

Domestic violence can also comprise several practices separately or simultaneously, such as violence and sexual abuse; verbal, emotional and/or psychological violence; social violence; physical abuse; financial and/or economic violence; digital violence; and persecution (i.e. often recognised due to stalking) (Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima [APAV], n.d.; DGS & ASGVCV, 2016; GNR, n.d.; Gov.UK, 2020; UN, n.d.; Women's Aid, n.d.).

2.2 *Legislation in Portugal: labour laws*

Domestic violence harms people's daily lives in different dimensions, so victims' professional lives are normally negatively affected. As a result, domestic violence victims are protected by law, including their labour rights. This protection includes Law no. 112/2009, which outlines a legal regime focused on preventing domestic violence and protecting and assisting its victims. In this specific case, the injured parties' benefits are laid out in three articles (Diário da República Electrónico, n.d.), of which the first is Article 41. The victim can request a reduced and/or decreased workload when the employing organisation's size and nature permit this. This regulation is not mandatory, but employers are asked for their cooperation.

The second is Article 42, in which the injured party can request a temporary or permanent transfer to another establishment within the company. The transfer's approval is subject to filing a criminal complaint with the authorities and the victims' departure from their habitual residence at the time of the job transfer. If employers delay the transfer for reasons inherent to their organisation, the injured parties can immediately suspend their contract and resume activity when the transfer occurs. This clause can also be found in Article 195 of the Labour Code.

The last is Article 43, which stipulates that absences are justified when working becomes impossible due to domestic violence. More recently, Decree-Law No. 101/2020 was approved on 26 November 2020 as an addition to Law No. 112/2009, which proposes that the victim can apply for family restructuring leave for a maximum period of 10 days in a row. During this time, the injured party does not lose any employment rights, except for retribution, which is contingent upon the victims' filing of an official criminal complaint and moving out of their habitual residence. As previously seen, employment brings financial stability to the victims' lives. Hence, this restructuring leave would be more effective if it did not imply a loss of compensation. The introduction of paid domestic violence leave instead offers crucial support to victims, allowing them to seek help and safety without fearing financial repercussions. This provision also sends a strong message against domestic violence and aids in breaking the cycle of abuse while promoting a workplace culture centred on safety and well-being (Hill, 2024).

However, some questions have arisen regarding the injured parties' obligation to lodge a criminal complaint and leave their usual residence. Informing employers of the complaint provides the organisation with information on the 'existence of a criminal case during the investigation phase' (CIG et al., 2016), at the risk of the victims' exposure to discrimination and of no guarantee that employers will respect confidentiality. Thus, evidence presented of a legal status as a domestic violence victim, which presupposes a criminal complaint's existence, should be enough for the injured parties to invoke the above legal rights. In addition, domestic violence victims do not always live with their aggressor, so they may remain at their regular home address, which means legislation is needed

to discriminate between the multiple situations associated with domestic violence and prevent the injured parties' loss of decision-making power (CIG et al., 2016). Furthermore, Article 381(b) and Article 331(1)(d) of the Labour Code consider any dismissal to be unlawful and abusive if it is based on absences linked to domestic violence that takes place after the injured parties tell their employer about their legal status as a domestic violence victim (i.e. acquired when the criminal complaint is filed) (CIG et al., 2016).

Finally, a new situation gained greater prominence with the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic, namely, teleworking. Article 166(2) of the Labour Code states that domestic violence victims have the right to engage in teleworking provided that this practice is compatible with the job tasks required and again that the injured parties have lodged a criminal complaint with the authorities and left their usual residence (Rocha & Pimenta, 2020). Employers must be flexible enough so that domestic violence victims can engage in this practice because aggressors often seek out victims in their workplace (i.e. knowing that this is the only place where they have to be). In some cases, however, the injured parties remain at their habitual address due to the pressure put on them to stay in the aggressor's dwelling (CIG et al., 2016). Thus, a dichotomy can exist between having the right to do teleworking, which presupposes working at home, and proving a habitual residence has been left. Of course, victims can always sign into a shelter or reorganise their day-to-day activities in order to change residence (CIG et al., 2016).

2.3 *Domestic violence's impact on the workplace*

In recent decades, domestic violence has begun to be categorised as a public problem, and it is even considered a public crime in some countries, such as Portugal. Researchers emphasise that this violence is a reflection of the communities and societies in which it occurs, so it is also part of employers and workplaces (Duvvury et al., 2023; Murray & Powell, 2008). According to Swanberg et al. (2005, as cited in Murray & Powell, 2008), a reciprocal relationship exists between individuals' professional and family life, which can positively or negatively affect each other. Organisations can no longer ignore family issues and concerns as these problems are integral to employees' lives at various levels. Internal policies and procedures must focus on the family (e.g., providing daycare services in the workplace) as these structures are crucial to balancing workers' private and personal lives (de Jonge, 2018; Oliveira et al., 2013). Unfortunately, domestic violence is a part of many people's family life, so employers that fail to consider the family-workplace link promote systemic discrimination against individuals suffering from this abuse (de Jonge, 2018).

Showalter (2016) reports that employment provides victims with financial independence, which means aggressors often sabotage their jobs. Domestic violence thus becomes a determinant of injured parties' professional instability, more specifically, promoting absenteeism, lack of concentration and low productivity in the short term and, in the long term, an irregular professional experience track record, a precarious income and reduced current and potential income (Swanberg et al., 2007). Domestic violence is also associated with mental disorders such as depression, low self-esteem and post-traumatic stress disorder, which affect professional stability over time (Showalter, 2016). All these factors ensure that this kind of violence prevents many victims from attaining the financial security that would enable them to escape abuse (Vaughn, 2001). Overall, domestic violence has multiple impacts on the workplace (Workplace Strategies for Mental Health [WSMH], 2016), including reduced productivity and motivation levels, increased absenteeism and depressed morale and moods. Additional effects are higher health and liability insurance fees when employees are physically harmed on the job due to domestic violence and potential danger to other employees, colleagues and/or customers if the aggressors follow their victims to work. Impacts can also include high substitution rates, recruitment and training costs when victims are dismissed for low productivity or absenteeism, and disrupted relationships with colleagues. Lost time and low productivity are two of the most significant consequences of domestic violence that are the result of visits to health and legal services, real estate agents, social action and other community services (de Jonge, 2018; Duvvury et al., 2023).

According to Hearn et al. (2023), colleagues can play various roles in domestic violence situations, including as indirect victims/survivors, supporters, reporters, bystanders, or colluders with perpetrators. Domestic violence can involve multiple colleagues, contributing to power imbalances and affecting teamwork dynamics. Perpetrators may also manipulate colleagues, impacting their work capacity and triggering past traumas. Additionally, research on domestic violence in workplaces must consider intersectional gender dynamics and how factors such as age, class, ethnicity, and sexuality influence experiences and responses to domestic violence. Addressing these issues requires proactive organisational policies and training for supervisors and managers (Hearn et al., 2023).

If teleworking is involved, abusers can also enter the victims' virtual workplace while they are at home by sending aggressive e-mail and text messages (de Jonge, 2018). From this perspective, telework can serve as a gateway at home to the employing organisation (de Jonge, 2018), which confirms the interconnection between the workplace and family life – and domestic violence as part of the latter. As mentioned previously, the spectrum of domestic violence incidents includes verbal, emotional, psychological and social abuse, as well as disturbances in the workplace.

Showalter (2016) divides the latter disturbances into three distinct categories. The first is workplace harassment (e.g. multiple unwanted phone calls and/or text messages during the working day and aggressors' unexpected visits). The second is reduced working time (i.e. loss or reduction of paid working time and of the hours worked), which increases the victims' professional

instability. The last category is job loss, which is one of the most detrimental consequences as it prevents the injured parties from receiving a salary and achieving financial stability. Loss of employment can occur when victims have to leave their posts for security reasons because they have to take refuge, for example, in the aforementioned government shelters (GNR, n.d.). Unemployment can also be prolonged due to complications associated with finding a new job when domestic violence generates serious financial difficulties (Swanberg et al., 2007).

2.4 *Indicators of domestic violence's presence*

Many victims may fail to recognise that they are being subjected to domestic violence, or they are afraid and/or ashamed of the repercussions of admitting to being victims. They can worry about losing their jobs, consider the abuse to be a private, personal matter or even fear further abuse by aggressors if they discover that an employer has been informed of the violence (Swanberg et al., 2007). However, some indicators can facilitate the identification of domestic violence victims, of which a portion is listed in Table 1.

Table 1 - Indicators of the existence of domestic violence.

Behaviours adopted by the aggressor	Behaviours adopted by the victim
− Interfering with victims' means of transport to work (e.g. hiding and/or stealing a personal vehicle or money for transport) − Destroying victims' clothing − Hiding and/or stealing victims' identification documents − Causing sleep deprivation or turning off victims' alarm − Threatening deportation if victims have a work visa − Failing to show up to take care of shared children when victims need to be at work − Physically immobilising victims and preventing them from going to the workplace − Cutting victims' hair − Making frequent phone calls or sending e-mails to victims at their workplace − Pursuing and/or watching victims − Appearing at victims' workplace and questioning colleagues about, for example, where the victims are, who they are with and when they will be back − Apologising for victims' failure to meet their obligations (e.g. victims are sick, travelling or at home taking care of their child) − Threatening victims' colleagues (e.g. 'If you don't tell me where they are, I will . . .') − Verbally and/or physically assaulting victims or their colleagues − Manifesting controlling or jealous behaviour − Destroying victims' property or workplace	− Attempting to cover and/or hide wounds and/or physical abuse marks on the body − Showing sadness, isolation, apathy, fear, low self-esteem and apprehension − Acting defensive − Exhibiting unusual tiredness and/or fatigue that may lead to victims' falling asleep more often than usual in the workplace − Suffering from anxiety disorders − Crying repeatedly − Having trouble concentrating − Performing poorly or making frequent mistakes − Apologising for aggressors' behaviour − Showing fear or nervousness in aggressors' presence or after receiving phone calls, text messages or e-mails from them − Exhibiting a lack of attention or even aggressiveness towards customers − Making frequent trips to the bathroom − Cancelling at the last minute repeatedly − Taking drugs or alcohol as a way to avoid confrontations − Often missing work or more than normal (i.e. absenteeism) − Arriving late to work

Source: Adapted from Castro-Gonzáles et al. (2016); Public Services Health & Safety Association (PSHSA) (2010); and Versola-Russo and Russo (2009).

2.5 *Circumvention of domestic violence's effect on workplaces*

Awareness of and education on this topic in the workplace needs to start with senior leaders, who should normally be well-prepared and positioned to develop an action plan for their company (Make It Our Business, 2016). Notably, most employers do not provide training focused on domestic violence to leaders and their colleagues, citing how supervisors have difficulty identifying this crime among their personnel (MacGregor et al., 2016). Thus, policies or plans must be created to raise awareness of domestic violence and its negative repercussions for workplaces (Weziak-Białowolska et al., 2020).

Despite domestic violence's significant impact on women's health and productivity, corporate responses to this issue have been largely overlooked in business ethics research. Branicki et al. (2023) conducted the first large-scale analysis of corporate domestic violence policies and practices, revealing trends and variations in responsiveness across companies: larger corporations, those with more women middle managers, greater resources, and formal consultation on gender issues, showed higher levels of domestic violence responsiveness. Surprisingly, no correlation was found between responsiveness and the overall proportion of women in the workforce or on boards. Hence, a human-centric, care-based approach offers significant potential for organisations to address domestic violence and promote socially responsible practices (Branicki et al., 2023).

An appropriate approach to violence in the workplace, especially domestic violence, is important not only for the safety of employees who are domestic violence victims but also for other people in their organisations (Katula, 2012). Various studies have found that on-the-job victim support systems enhance the injured parties' employability. Workers who receive no support from

their employers are more likely to be unemployed than victims who are supported at work (Swanberg et al., 2007). The fear of losing their job and being seen as a bad employee often prevents domestic violence victims from seeking legal help and medical services (Glass et al., 2016).

Research indicates the profound impact of domestic violence on victims and their workplaces. This underscores the importance of raising public awareness about domestic violence, with workplaces serving as a crucial platform for disseminating information. Providing domestic violence information in workplaces can enhance safety for victims who may not feel safe accessing resources from home (Giesbrecht, 2022). It is also essential for managers and coworkers to receive training on domestic violence dynamics and effective responses. However, many workplaces lack specific domestic violence policies, and even when they exist, employees may not be aware of them (Giesbrecht, 2022). Hence, there is a pressing need to implement supportive policies and promote awareness of these resources within workplaces.

However, workers may discover that revealing their domestic violence problem to their employer is not always the right choice, depending on the organisation's size and geographical location. A family business inserted in a small community will increase the probability that people know both the victim and aggressor, so victims should carefully evaluate the pros and cons of telling anyone within the employing organisation (Swanberg et al., 2007).

3. Methodology

3.1 *Approach*

Domestic violence is a sensitive, ethically complex topic, which meant that the methodology had to be able to deal with heterogeneity in this subject matter. A qualitative approach was adopted as this method facilitates explorations of phenomena involving human beings and their complicated social relationships in varied environments (Godoy, 1995). Domestic violence contexts comprise an intricate, inaccessible universe to study, so selecting a sample can become a complex, time-consuming process (Dias, 1998). The present investigation thus concentrated on a sample of organisations and their staff to guarantee easier access to relevant information and to approach the topic from a company point of view.

To ensure empirically robust research, the data were gathered from a focus group, namely, a session in which participants, moderators and observers could interact and the discussion centred around a specific, directed topic (Aschidamini & Saupe, 2005; Mazza et al., 2009). This group work facilitates the formation of new ideas (Ressel et al., 2008) and the expansion of knowledge about a particular project, programme or service. A focus group can also reveal still underexplored themes since this method tends to generate more critical comments (Backes et al., 2011), as was the case in the current study.

The physical space where this type of group work takes place should be neutral and easily accessible (Aschidamini & Saupe, 2005). At the time that the research took place, physical distancing and hygiene and safety rules had been implemented due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, so the focus group met via Zoom's online platform (i.e. a video conferencing call).

According to Mazza et al. (2009), this type of meeting should not exceed two hours to avoid mental fatigue and exhaustion and to encourage a healthy exchange of ideas. The present focus group met on 15 June 2021, and the session lasted approximately one and a half hours, which was well within the one- to two-hour limit suggested by Aschidamini and Saupe (2005). Besides the participants, the group included a moderator and an observer (Mazza et al., 2009).

3.2 *Research objectives and issues*

This study sought to investigate what organisations in the Algarve region know about domestic violence and its consequences for the workplace. The focus panel exercise also focused on raising awareness of this issue and determining prevention strategies that the participating employers could apply in their organisations.

Research hypotheses were not created, but questions were formulated to encourage a deeper discussion throughout the group work session in order to generate new knowledge about domestic violence. The following open-ended questions were developed based on the extant literature and legal sources reviewed:

Q1: What is domestic violence and/or violence in intimate relationships, and in what different ways can it manifest itself?

Q2: What training or awareness-raising activities have you received and/or provided in your workplace focused on domestic violence?

Q3: Have you ever had contact with a colleague who was a domestic violence victim? If so, how did you learn about the situation? How were the victim's confidentiality and privacy guaranteed? In addition, what steps, if any, were taken by the employer after learning about the situation?

Q4: How are domestic violence victims protected by labour laws? If legislation considers this problem, in what ways are victims protected?

Q5: What loopholes, if any, exist in the laws that should be rethought with regard to domestic violence? How should these laws be restructured?

Q6: What indicators might help you identify whether an employee is being subjected to domestic violence?

Q7: In what ways, if any, does domestic violence affect victims' colleagues?

Q8: New technologies and telework can promote employees' isolation, especially for domestic violence victims. How can employers act after learning of a domestic violence situation, given this increasingly popular work model?

Q9: What action plan, if any, can help combat domestic violence and be implemented in organisations? How can this plan be structured to reflect the current labour market and your organisation's profile?

3.3 *Sample*

The focus group's size needed to be adapted to serve the research's purposes and objectives (Aschidamini & Saupe, 2005; Ressel et al., 2008). The present study's sample thus consisted of five professionals from five organisations drawing on the Algarve labour market. The participants came from both private and public entities, but all focus group members held positions involving human resource management, with at least one characteristic in common (Aschidamini & Saupe, 2005; Backes et al., 2011; Ressel et al., 2008):

Higher education: human resource management (Person A)

Hotel: general administration (Person B)

Environmental sector: human resource management (Person C)

Tourist transport: administration (Person D)

Family health unit: physician, family medicine assistant and Technical Council member (Person E)

The participants were recruited to represent different labour market sectors so that the data would reflect divergent professional realities. Measures were taken to maintain these professionals' privacy and hide their identity by avoiding any mention of the focus group members' family names or organisations. When quoted below, the participants are referred to by capital letters: Person A, B, C, D or E.

4. Results

4.1 *Analysis, interpretation and discussion of results*

The data analysis was conducted in two distinct phases (Aschidamini & Saupe, 2005; Ressel et al., 2008). The first was a general reading of the participants' statements (i.e. the transcription of the focus group meeting), while the second phase comprised creating an index of the data, which is discussed in detail in the following two subsections. This procedure highlighted how specific categories and/or themes emerged or were absent and any recurrent patterns (Aschidamini & Saupe, 2005; Ressel et al., 2008).

4.2 *Recurring topics*

The focus group data were thus processed to determine what themes arise recurrently throughout the participants' statements. The results include six themes presented in detail below.

4.2.1 *Taboo and banal theme*

Unfortunately, domestic violence is still often considered normal in Portugal, becoming an integral part of intimate relationships throughout the country because this behaviour is considered banal (Person E, personal communication). The participants repeatedly provided examples and personal testimonies of this trivialisation not based on their statements but on words overheard during their personal and professional journeys. The examples offered included the following: 'He hit me, but I deserved it' (Person E, personal communication) and 'I got bored with my husband; he even gave me a bump [on my head]' (Person C, personal communication). Domestic violence was also simultaneously treated as a taboo topic throughout the meeting (Person E and Person B, personal communication), which provides evidence of the need to promote the general public's greater sensitisation to this social scourge in order to eliminate the tendency to consider this abuse normal. Singulano and Teixeira (2020) observe that a social change is necessary, [namely,] an adjustment in the patriarchal structure that supports gender inequalities, which ultimately foster domestic and family violence.

4.2.2 *Workplace indicators of domestic violence's presence*

The participants (i.e., Persons A, B, C, D and E) were in agreement about which indicators of domestic violence are often encountered and easily identified in the workplace. Those mentioned included a significant decline in productivity, poor punctuality, loss of concentration, increased absenteeism, unstable moods, depression and distractions due to aggressors' repeated messages and phone calls during the victims' working day.

4.2.3 *Difficulty identifying domestic violence victims in the workplace*

In addition, the literature identifies various other indicators listed in Table 1. According to Katula (2006), employers and direct supervisors should also consider absenteeism and excessive delays – especially on Mondays – reduced productivity and frequent injuries, among other signs that often indicate domestic violence. Despite the above indicators, all the participants asserted that they have difficulty identifying domestic violence victims in their organisations.

4.2.4 *Team: domino effect*

The participants frequently used the word 'team', which shows work teams' importance in domestic violence situations. The domino effect was mentioned in this context (Person E, personal communication). That is, when one colleague is a domestic violence victim, this crime's negative repercussions begin to spread to other team members. Various participants (Person A, Person C and Person E, personal communication) added that, in close-knit teams, what affects one person will automatically have an impact on all the others. Regrettably, this team spirit can often result in feelings of helplessness and frustration because of ignorance about both how to deal with negative emotions and/or behaviours associated with domestic violence and how to help a colleague who is a victim (Person A, personal communication).

Practical and behavioural repercussions were also identified (Person A, personal communication). The former are mainly related to accidents at work, many of which are due to a lack of concentration when performing specific tasks as the victims are distracted by domestic violence. The behavioural repercussions are feelings of sadness, grief and demotivation that begin with the abused person but spread to other team members (Person A, personal communication).

4.2.5 *Specific labour legislation*

The focus group further discussed Portugal's labour laws supporting domestic violence victims, of which two aspects can be considered significant. The first is unfamiliarity with this legislation. Some participants did not know that labour laws protect this crime's victims. The second aspect focuses on gaps in the laws (Person A, personal communication), that is, on the constraints imposed on victims before legal measures can be applied. Filing a criminal complaint with the authorities can expose the injured parties to further harm by making them even more vulnerable. The group raised the question of whether companies should act preventively or only in accordance with legislation regarding officially existing situations (i.e. after abused employees have registered a criminal complaint and left their habitual residence).

4.2.6 *Training and information*

During the meeting, a consensus was reached that employers need to train and inform their personnel (e.g. Person D, personal communication). Workshops should be provided that focus on not only organisational violence but also domestic violence and the ways the latter can affect the workplace. Awareness-raising initiatives also need to be implemented so everyone in the organisation acquires sufficient knowledge about the problem. Employees, overall, must understand how this crime can affect victims' daily lives, as well as its effects on these individuals' colleagues and workplace.

Currently, little or no information and training is provided on domestic violence in the workplace (MacGregor et al., 2016). This crime is a highly complex social problem with repercussions for people's private and professional lives, so organisations must take the initiative to address this issue in the workplace. Few victims seek their employer's support, reinforcing the need for training sessions (Weziak-Białowolska et al., 2020) to foster more inclusive human resource management practices.

4.3 *Emerging topics*

The focus group also contributed two topics that only recently have been found in the relevant literature, which indicate gaps that need to be addressed in future research. The first is corporate social responsibility, and the second is occupational medicine.

4.3.1 *Corporate Social Responsibility*

The participants mentioned corporate social responsibility while exchanging ideas about organisations' power being linked to success based on employees' happiness (Person D, personal communication). This idea was reinforced by the following statement made during the meeting:

[C]ompanies that are already socially responsible . . . want to achieve a dominant position in the market [and] to have the best employees at their service[. L]egally, nowadays, it's important to be in compliance, but we [need to] go way beyond the legal issue, we [need to] go [straight] to the moral issue to know . . . how to get people on the side of companies because companies are really [just] that[:] . . . organisations of people. (Person D, personal communication)

Corporate social responsibility can thus be translated into actions that promote the social good, going beyond serving each company's interests and meeting legal requirements (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001, as cited in Duarte et al., 2019).

As previously mentioned, domestic violence can be a threat to victims' ability to keep their jobs (Showalter, 2016), often worsening their sometimes tenuous financial situation and increasing their risk of falling below the poverty line and into homelessness. This abuse may make them even more vulnerable to other types of workplace violence, such as unequal access to employment, exploitation, harassment and barriers to career growth (Duarte et al., 2019). Consumers increasingly base their purchasing decisions on the corporate social responsibility criterion (Instituto Ethos de Empresas e Responsabilidade Social, 2004), so companies that offer awareness-raising about and support programmes for domestic violence victims may be considered '"proximity actors" that can be mobilised to combat and react to the problem' (Duarte et al., 2019). These organisations' actions convey a culture of social responsibility that protects victims from illegal workplace conduct, thus becoming more appealing to consumers and business partners and contributing to a fairer, more sustainable society as outlined by the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 5 (UN, 2015).

4.3.2 *Occupational medicine*

Another theme that arose during the focus group session was occupational medicine's important role in screening for domestic violence victims and in fighting against this crime (Person C and Person E, personal communication). This medical speciality is legislated by Law No. 102/2009, Article 108(1), which reads as follows. 'The employer must promote the use of appropriate health examinations to confirm and evaluate workers' physical and mental fitness to practise their profession, as well as the profession's repercussions and conditions that affect the workers' health (Diário da República Eletrónico, n.d.).'

In general, occupational medicine maintains a holistic perspective on individuals, which a focus group member corroborated:

It is important [not only] to conduct good screenings in occupational medicine . . . whether . . . [of] tension . . . [or] glycemia but also to see employees as a whole person . . . on a physical level – whether everything is fine or not – [and] psychologically as well. (Person E, personal communication)

Companies must also ensure their employees work in a safe environment to harness all their potential. However, these individuals must prove that their physical and mental skills are adequate (Person E, personal communication), so effective coordination between employers and occupational medicine services is imperative. Occupational health professionals cannot and must not assume responsibility for resolving domestic violence situations in their entirety and alleviating this crime's repercussions for the workplace because domestic violence is not only a health problem but also a legal issue. However, domestic violence victims' crisis affects their coworkers' well-being and safety in the workplace. An effort should be made to carry out medical evaluations at both the physical and psychological levels to identify possible domestic violence situations in advance and to provide proper support to victims.

5. Discussion

Given this topic's sensitivity, organisations must recognise this crime's impact on victims' performance and that of other employees. Employers must prioritise knowing how to identify the signs of domestic violence and respond to them (Castro-Gonzáles et al., 2016; Karam et al., 2023; PSHSA, 2010; Versola-Russo & Russo, 2009). As domestic violence is a public crime, organisations should take the necessary steps to become part of the solution to this problem. Providing workplace assistance to domestic violence victims will make them feel heard and safe while promoting their well-being and commitment to their employer (de Jonge, 2018).

Previous studies have also found that many domestic violence victims depend financially on the aggressor or their shared finances (Showalter, 2016). Recognising this vulnerability, aggressors tend to sabotage the injured parties' professional lives. The aggressors cause varied disturbances in their victims' workplace, which traditionally appear in three formats: harassment on the job, reduction of working hours and job loss. These disruptions may eventually result in unemployment for the victims, thereby making them even more vulnerable by taking them to the brink of poverty and adding to their risk of becoming homeless.

The present research examined the laws protecting domestic violence victims at work in Portugal. However, most rights enshrined in legislation require the injured parties to file a criminal complaint with the authorities and to leave their home. These conditions are questionable on a moral and social level, especially since they ignore the multiple situations in which domestic violence occurs that do not always require victims to move out of their habitual residence.

The focus group was recruited from professionals working for five Algarve organisations to assess employers, supervisors and colleagues' difficulty in identifying domestic violence victims in the workplace. The group session highlighted how little organisations know about Portugal's labour laws on domestic violence and identified two topics scarcely covered by the existing literature: corporate social responsibility and occupational medicine.

The action plan proposed below thus can – and should – become an integral part of companies' social responsibility policies or occupational health plans. This plan comprises a general proposal, so it must be adapted to fit each company's reality and industry, providing guidelines for Portuguese organisations' strategies. In addition, more studies are needed to assess accurately the prevalence of domestic violence in Portugal to develop more appropriate programmes that support victims and prevent this crime from affecting workplaces while taking into account this country's specific needs.

5.1 *Theoretical Implications*

The impacts of domestic violence in the workplace are still an under-research area. The topic is still seen as belonging to the private sphere of employees' lives, and despite being a public crime, most people and organisations are yet reluctant to interfere when in the presence or suspicion of violence. The same applies to research into companies' role in tackling this social problem. This study broadened the current literature on the subject by addressing how Portuguese companies look at this issue and their knowledge and attitudes regarding the subject. In addition to confirming previous results reported in the literature, i.e., that the problem is still taboo and challenging for companies to identify, the study identified two emergent topics. These relate to the actions that companies can take in combating domestic violence. According to the participants, organisations can approach this topic from the perspective of their corporate social responsibility policies or address it within the scope of their occupational health programs. These can, therefore, be two valid strategies to include the issue of domestic violence on the agendas of organisations.

5.2 *Practical Implications: the Action Plan*

This study makes it clear that organisations can play an important role in combating domestic violence by supporting workers who are victims of this type of crime. To empower employers, we have developed a comprehensive action plan designed to be implemented across organisations. These guidelines should be combined with programmes that necessarily include organisation-wide training (Weziak-Białowolska et al., 2020) and response teams to address domestic violence in the workplace (e.g. task forces that involve leaders, human resources personnel, security teams, unions and victim-support associations). Other measures include developing internal protocols and policies, training sessions on domestic violence, and awareness-raising initiatives to ensure the action plan does not fall by the wayside (Widiss, 2018). The proposed plan needs to be implemented continually over time, become an integral part of welfare-at-work programmes and remain easily accessible to all employees (Glass et al., 2016).

As perpetrators vary greatly, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to managing and assessing their risk. A dynamic approach is essential, involving case-by-case judgment, structured guidance, and supervision. This includes recognising warning signs, understanding perpetrator behaviour patterns, conducting evidence-based risk assessments, and considering victims' assessments (Tsantefski et al., 2023).

The plan presented in Table 2 proposes a series of actions that employers, supervisors and colleagues can take when they encounter coworkers who are domestic violence victims. The measures are divided into two distinct situations: domestic violence not reported by victims and domestic violence reported by victims. If both the victim and aggressor work in the same organisation, the action plan should also include the following steps (WSMH, 2016):

- Ensure that the victim and aggressor do not have the same work schedule and/or that they have different workspaces.

- Initiate disciplinary proceedings if the aggressor engages in abusive behaviour in the workplace.

Both actions must be taken by supervisors and/or the employer.

6. Conclusions

Despite this study's relevant results, some limitations should be acknowledged when they are interpreted. This research was based on only one focus group, so the findings may not represent the full extent of Algarve organisations' knowledge about domestic violence. Future studies should thus expand the number of representatives consulted. In addition, the research focused on the Algarve region to ensure the participants were easy to contact, but further investigations could benefit from involving organisations from other areas of Portugal or other countries.

Given the study's focus on the Portuguese national context, the contents here expressed should be adapted to the realities of other countries, including in terms of the relevant legislation, entities that provide support to the victims of domestic violence, and emergency contacts, amongst others. Although these contents may vary, the relevance of developing more research on domestic violence, its antecedents, and consequents (including in the work setting), as well as the importance of fighting this social problem, remains.

The action plan proposed (please see Table 2) can be a valuable tool to empower employers to take a more active role in the fight against domestic violence. As mentioned earlier, the goal is not to place the responsibility on employers for resolving domestic violence issues but to recognise their essential role in this process of societal change towards a safer, healthier, and fairer world for all.

Table 1. Action plan.

Situation not reported by the victim	Situation reported by the victim
Actions for colleagues	
− Spend lunchtime or breaks with the victim and offer to talk and listen to him or her. − Offer to meet the victim outside the workplace if they are uncomfortable talking about the topic in the workplace. − Report concerns to the victim's direct superior in cases of firm, sustained suspicions.	− Develop a familiarity with the aggressor's physical appearance and voice if they appear in the workplace, which will help if the security team or police need to be involved in cases of immediate danger. − Offer to monitor phone calls from the aggressor. − Provide a list of institutions from which the victim can seek assistance.
Actions for direct supervisors	
− Discourage rumours within and between teams and promote all employees' privacy, especially that of the victim. − Reinforce awareness of the consequences of inappropriate violations of confidentiality and confidentiality. − Gather up-to-date information on legal and therapy resources to provide guidance and psychological help to the victim when necessary. − Review the company's victim support programme with all employees.	− Offer to listen to the victim if he or she decides to report the domestic violence. − Be accessible to the victim and emphasise that his or her job in the organisation is safe. − Help the victim create a defence and personal security plan. − Relocate the victim's workspace within the company's premises so that he or she cannot be seen from outside through any windows and so that the aggressor does not know where to find the victim. − Provide training to security teams if the aggressor appears on the premises. − Provide the aggressor's photograph to the security and reception team. − After discussing the problem with the victim and seeking his or her approval, ask the administrative staff to monitor the victim's phone calls. − Change the victim's phone extension and remove contact details from the company's website. − Suggest medical treatment, a follow-up visit, and/or specialised support from the Associacão Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (APAV) or IIC (i.e., provide their contact information).
Actions for employer	
− Develop and offer a company programme on domestic violence that supports all employees and their families. − Create a workplace violence prevention programme that incorporates domestic violence in conjunction with health entities or associations such as the APAV and CIG − Implement a policy of non-discrimination, non-retaliation and confidentiality for any employee who reports being a domestic violence victim. − Provide training to raise domestic violence awareness and summarise organisation and support processes. − Strengthen confidentiality and privacy policies across the organisation.	− Offer to listen to the victim if he or she decides to report the domestic violence. − Provide time and workload flexibility to the victim without compensation. − Allow the victim to justify any absences needed to deal with his or her family situation. − Conduct a threat assessment with experts' help (e.g. police, external specialists and victim support associations). − Develop a specific company security programme for each type of violence in conjunction with health entities or organisations, such as the APAV and CIG. − Provide an escort service to the victim upon arrival and departure from the organisation's premises in coordination with, for example, the security team. − Supply the victim with a company mobile phone with a direct connection to the police (i.e. via 112 [national emergency number]). − Protect the company's facilities and car park. − Install panic buttons in the office and/or on the floor where the victim works.

Sources: Adapted from PSHSA (2010), Widiss (2018) and WSMH (2016)

Credit author statement

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