

TRANSFORMING PERSPECTIVES:

Paving the Path to Confront
Domestic Violence



Promising Practices in Tackling Domestic Violence Within the Public Administration

The **2023 events** in Bulgaria have shown the urgent need to confront the challenge of domestic and gender-based violence. This toxic social phenomenon is characterized by its multifaceted nature, deeply intertwined with established societal norms.

Collective attention and awareness are a must in order for a substantial social transformation to happen. Citizens must unite to dispel any apathy surrounding domestic violence, necessitating a paradigm shift that challenges patriarchal beliefs and paves the way for a safer, more supportive society. Only through such a collective acknowledgement can genuine and all-encompassing support for victims be effectively realized.

At the beginning of 2022, the **SHE project** was launched with a mission to reshape public attitudes towards gender-based and domestic violence. By leveraging the power of the workplace, the project seeks to create a transformative impact in the fight against domestic violence. While the project's methodology for achieving this objective may be considered not so conventional, its foundation actually rests on similar approaches from all around the world.

The public administration emerged as an appropriate target group for initiatives tackling domestic violence. As a significant employer and policy driver, the public administration possesses a unique ability to achieve positive change both within the organization and throughout the communities it serves.

At the core of the project lies a twofold aim: empowering HR specialists in Bulgaria within the public administration with the requisite knowledge and skills to identify, support, and refer domestic violence victims, while fostering a culture of comprehension within their respective departments.

Some countries are really committed to fighting domestic violence, especially when the government itself takes it seriously as an employer. It is important to see these countries as examples to follow. They can inspire and provide valuable ideas for Bulgarian authorities to take important steps in dealing with this pressing issue.

The concept of utilizing the public administration workplace as an influential platform to address this issue is not a novel one. The present publication aims to show this and inspire national authorities to move beyond mere partnership roles and to proactively contribute by taking effective political and legal decisions addressing the topic.

Different Approaches from Around the World

Two main strategies are evident when considering how authorities can effectively address the issue of domestic violence. Some countries have opted for a centralized approach, implementing a unified policy or laws nationwide, signifying domestic violence as a pressing national priority. In contrast, other countries have adopted localized strategies, targeting specific municipalities or regions to combat the issue. While a cumulative approach is also feasible, this distinction emphasizes the diverse paths countries can choose, each offering unique advantages and challenges. Presenting examples from both approaches is beneficial since it empowers local authorities to take effective action even when the state-level response may not be as active as needed, or vice versa.

By prioritising employee well-being and enacting comprehensive policies, Australia showcases how workplaces can become catalysts for change, fostering a safer and more supportive environment for civil servants.

An exemplary policy initiative comes from Australia, specifically in 2021 when the South Australian Government's Public Sector Commissioner showcased dedication to combat domestic and family violence through a comprehensive [Guideline of the Public Commissioner for Public Sector Employment](#). This document establishes minimum standards, fostering a safe and supportive work environment. The Guideline offers clear definitions, outlines employee entitlements, and provides explicit instructions on employers' responses to signs or evidence of domestic violence. What sets this initiative apart is its holistic approach, since it even includes guidelines on addressing cases where an employee is suspected or found to be perpetrating domestic violence.

Australia also demonstrates its dedication to supporting employees impacted by family and domestic violence through the provision of 10 days of paid leave annually, firmly established under the [National Employment Standards](#) – a policy document consisting of 11 minimum employment entitlements that have to be provided to all employees in Australia. Notably, this aligns Australia with other compassionate nations, including New Zealand, Canada, Philippines, Ireland, Italy, France, etc. where similar provision is included in the labour legislation. Such a legal recognition fosters a workplace culture that prioritizes the well-being and safety of employees facing these challenges.

Australia sets an example by adopting a centralized approach to combat domestic violence also through the [2022 Public Sector Interim Workplace Arrangements](#). They serve as a hallmark in this endeavour, addressing all public administration across the country. With a focus on re-establishing the public service as a model employer and an employer of choice, the document prioritizes [Family and domestic violence support](#) through a separate part dedicated to the topic. It offers comprehensive guidance to agencies on providing maximum support to victim-survivors and refers to helpful documents for employees dealing with domestic violence, covering crucial aspects of the process which they need to know. Additionally, the document outlines various laws enabling employers to assist employees, such as offering paid annual leave or home office opportunities. Notably, it further enhances its impact by providing a comprehensive template for agencies to develop or update their own policies on family and domestic violence.

Another country that has been making strides to safeguard public administration workers who encounter domestic violence is Canada. Notably, these measures have been particularly robust at both the provincial and city levels, showcasing Canada's commitment to ensuring the well-being of its public servants.

The Canadian [Occupational Health and Safety Act](#) requires City divisions and supervisors to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for worker protection if they become aware, or ought reasonably to be aware, of an employee in a domestic/intimate partner violence situation that may expose a worker to physical injury in the workplace. On this basis, for example, the City of Toronto issued a [Domestic/Intimate Partner Violence Policy](#), supported by [Guidelines](#) to assist the workplace parties in addressing domestic and intimate partner violence in City workplaces. These Guidelines extend their reach to managers, supervisors, co-workers, and to human resources department, which serves as a driving force in providing vital support to victims.

Another good example of Canada's commitment to addressing domestic violence at the workplace are the relevant resources produced by the [Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety](#), such as the [Domestic Violence in the Workplace online e-learning course](#) targeted at employers, employees, managers and supervisors from all type of institutions.

The civil society sector can also play a crucial role in employee education and empowerment. Such collaboration is not only justifiable but recommended.

When it comes to combatting domestic violence in the workplace, expectedly, the civil society sector in the USA refuses to take a backseat, as exemplified in comprehensive resource library National Resource Center [Workplaces Respond to Domestic and Sexual Violence](#). The Center is a result of public-private partnership led by Futures Without Violence, and funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women. The Center is strategically designed to enlighten and unite all the key players - from survivors to employers, co-workers and even lawyers. It supplies everyone involved with the most effective tools and knowledge. Its website provides access to an extensive array of invaluable resources, including eye-opening factsheets, guides, practical workplace tools like model policies, empowering webinars, and transformative training materials. Other USA-based CSOs that are contributing are for example: [Project Sanctuary](#), [Fight Against Domestic Violence](#), [Workplace Fairness and the Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#).

Even in the absence of receptiveness from decision-makers to prioritize this issue, employers are advised to recognize that the resources offered by the civil society sector within their country are always available. Thus, fostering a partnership between the civil society sector and public administration, similar to the one in the SHE project, is strongly recommended.

A good example for the abovementioned local approach is the New York City administration and its comprehensive [NYC Domestic and Gender-Based Violence Workplace Policy \(2022\)](#). The policy has two purposes as it follows: to “standardize survivor-centered and trauma-informed responses for employees experiencing domestic and gender-based violence in the workplace or in their personal lives” and to “provide employees with a liaison at every agency who can provide confidential support and direct connection to the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence and the City's resources for survivors”. The Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence develops policies and programs, provides training and prevention education, conducts research and evaluations, performs community outreach, and operates the New York City Family Justice Centers. The NYC Family Justice Centers are located multidisciplinary service centers providing vital social services, civil legal, and criminal justice assistance for survivors of domestic

and gender-based violence and their children—all under one roof. New York City sets a powerful example and enhances awareness, potentially reducing domestic violence within its ranks by holding each local authority accountable for implementing the Policy. However, as it becomes evident, there are specialised departments within the local authorities that makes it possible for policies like the abovementioned one to be efficiently implemented.

Some EU members also showcase good examples of addressing domestic violence within the public administration. For example, France demonstrates a strong dedication through the Directorate-General for Administration and the Civil Service.

In collaboration with social partners, in 2017 they issued a comprehensive Guide [Preventing and Dealing with Situations of Violence and Harassment in the Civil Service](#). This Guide serves as a resource, aiming to inform and assist employers, human resources departments, and other prevention actors in supporting employees who endure violence not only within the workplace.

An exemplary implementation of the Guide's principles can be seen in the Gers department, an administrative region in France. Since 2012, this department has established a highly effective and all-encompassing violence and harassment prevention system, overseen by the occupational health and social action service within the human resources department. The system features a multidisciplinary team comprising a staff social worker, occupational psychologist, prevention doctor, safety engineer, legal expert, and department head. This collaborative approach ensures tailored measures are taken for each unique situation, utilizing diverse operating procedures including helplines and individual interviews.

To address domestic violence specifically, the departmental system works closely with judicial authorities, victim support services, women's and family information and law centres, and the department's social services. In cases where the perpetrator is present at the employee's workplace, close coordination occurs between the employee, department head, and staff social service to aid the employee in filing a complaint, seeking protection, and implementing appropriate organizational measures. France also highlights the potential role that trade unions can play in the battle against domestic violence.

While not every country's citizens may consider trade unions as effective protectors of one's rights, it is essential not to underestimate the potential impact of these organizations.

The European Trade Union Confederation for example is a strong actor in contributing to the elimination of domestic violence in the workplace. In this respect, a very comprehensive project supported by the Union is [Safe at Home, Safe at Work](#) and is a meaningful reminder that trade unions can bring real added value. The project draws attention to 11 European countries (including Bulgaria). The [final publication](#) of the project showcases trade union strategies to prevent, manage and eliminate workplace harassment and violence against women. One of the most beneficial parts of the report is dedicated on how trade unions can be even more effective and it suggests recommendations like: lobbying for a legal framework, that guarantees the rights of all women, addressing violence and harassment as a form of gender discrimination, promoting of collective bargaining as an effective way to reduce violence, engagement in strategic litigation, training and awareness raising for union representatives, managers and supervisors, etc.

Bulgaria's example

Even though the SHE initiative is not government-led, it also shows a promising path forward. The initiative's [results](#) can serve to pave this path, guiding citizens and civil servants towards greater engagement with the topic.

Recommendations:

Based on the outlined promising practices, some recommendations for stakeholders who are eager to address this issue proactively can be offered:

- **Fostering engagement with both local and state-level decision makers since both can be influential.**
- **Establishing a policy and legal framework that address gender-based discrimination within workplace environments since it stays in the core of domestic violence.**
- **Enhancing labour legislation to formally recognize and address the issue of domestic violence, especially through paid annual leave for victims.**
- **Encouraging directors and decision makers to actively create internal policies, make official statements, and take a leadership role in addressing the topic.**
- **Fostering close coordination between civil servants and state authorities engaged with domestic violence, facilitating effective support and coordination mechanisms.**
- **Strengthening the role of national trade unions to advocate for the prioritization of domestic violence concerns within workplace contexts.**
- **Collaborating with CSOs and utilizing their public resources addressing the topic.**



Illustrations: Freepick.com

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Co-funded by
the European Union

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