

What does #MeToo mean for wellbeing in the workplace?

A white paper from The Consent Collective

Summer 2019

1. #MeToo is much bigger than just sexual harassment

Thanks to a series of high-profile cases, the subsequent and growing momentum of the #MeToo movement, a requirement from regulators that organisations take action, and a growing realisation that the next generation of talent in every sector is entering the workforce with changed expectations about how they should be treated in the workplace, employers are waking up to the scale and impact of sexual harassment and beginning to review (and hopefully improve) their policies and procedures. So far, so HR.

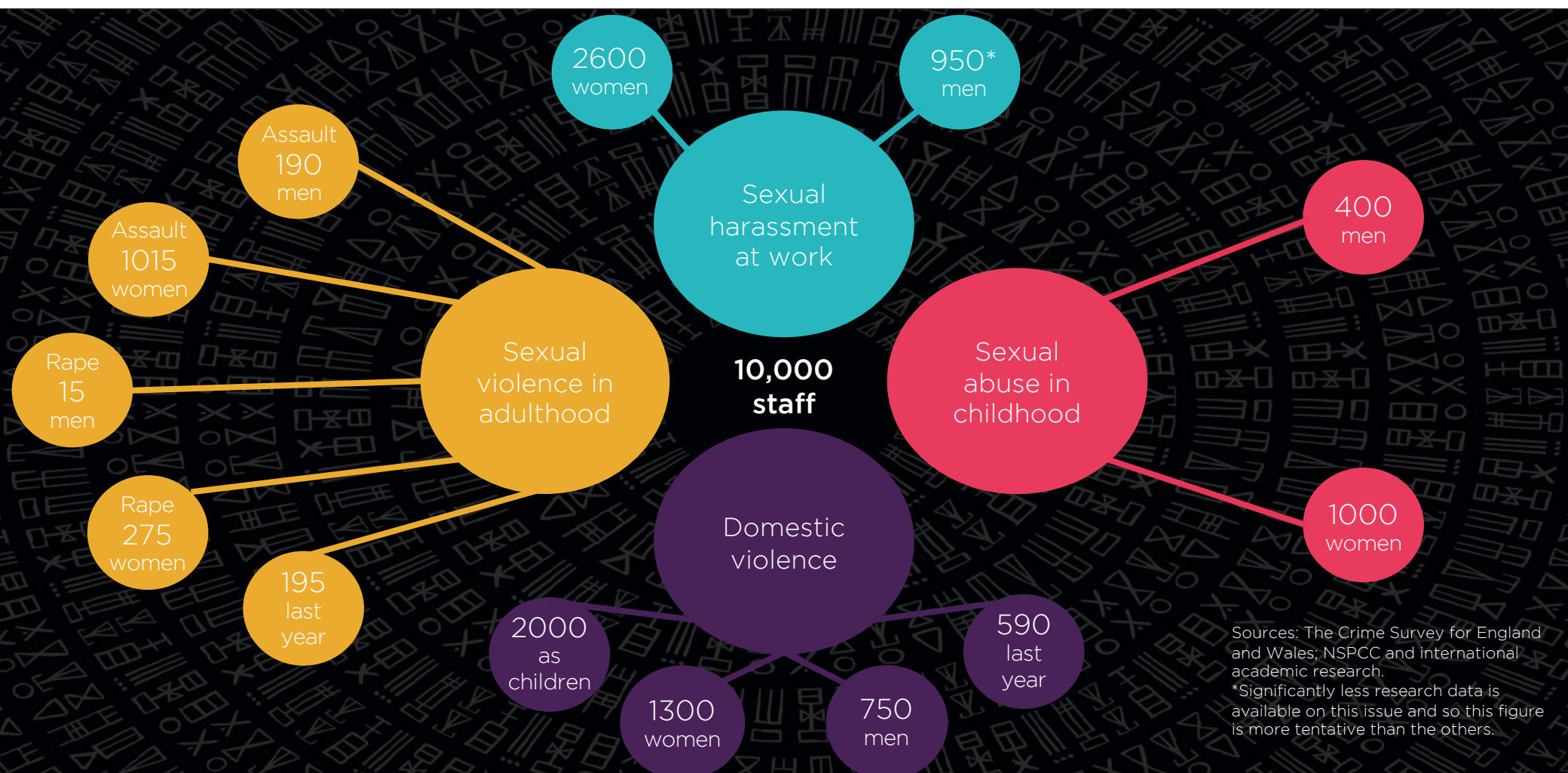
But #MeToo isn't just about sexual harassment and it isn't an issue that should only concern HR. These issues also have significant implications for wellbeing provision across organisations. Not only do employers have a duty of care to ensure anyone who experiences sexual harassment at work has access to excellent resources and support. Employers also need to recognise that #MeToo is a movement of people who have raised expectations about how they should be supported with their experiences of sexual violence and an increased willingness to ask for the help they need.

“I probably wouldn’t have fallen so badly if they had some kind of awareness training. If you knew there was someone to talk to who wouldn’t judge you. Someone who could help you breathe for a minute and maybe give you some advice to help you manage”

Consent Collective research participant

2. Understanding the scale

A tempting response to sexual violence and domestic abuse is to assume they ‘do not happen in a community like this’. But the uncomfortable truth is these issues affect people of all ethnicities, religions, class, educational attainment, and abilities. There is no group of people that is immune from these forms of abuse and little reason to assume research data does not represent reliable estimates of the experiences of your UK employees. The figures below are estimates of how many people employed by an organisation of 10,000 people may have experienced different forms of sexual and domestic abuse.



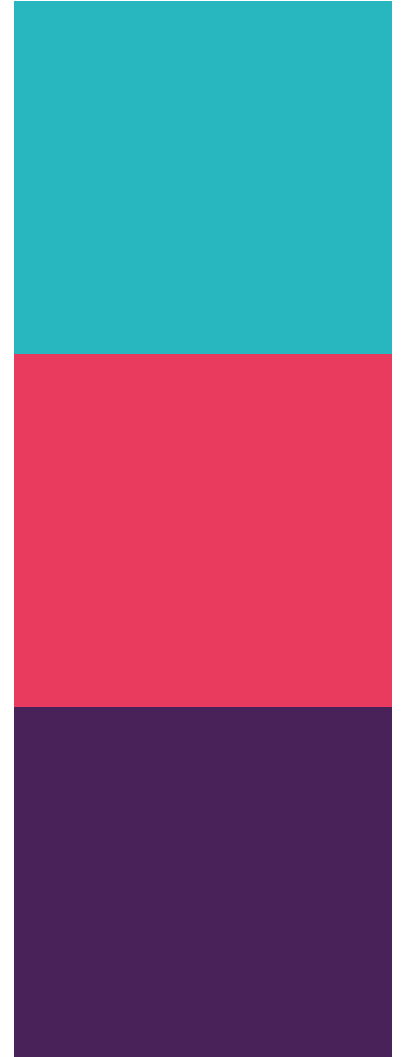
3. This IS about your organisation

Use our online calculator to estimate how many people in your organisation may have been affected by child sexual abuse, domestic abuse, or sexual harm inside or outside the workplace*

The world is opening its eyes to the scale of these issues and organisations are beginning to understand the impact on productivity and retention. With a generation of new graduates entering the workforce from campuses that are politicised on these issues we firmly believe that the employers who are ready to properly support people will be rewarded with the attraction and retention of talent as well as increased productivity and organisational loyalty.

But before we get to the future, what's happening now...

*www.consentcollective.com/workplace

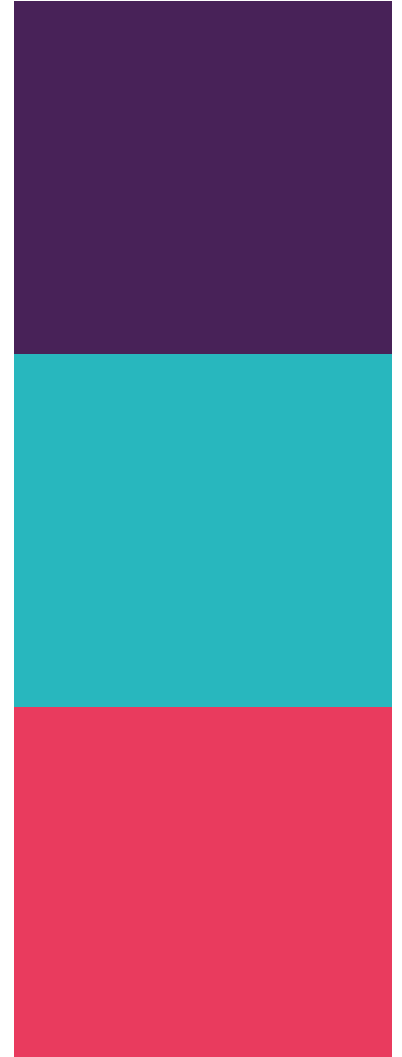


4. What is happening now?

At the start of any journey like this there is a need to take stock of the current situation before thinking about change. Just as the workplace would have been a very challenging environment for anyone who was gay or living with a mental health condition 15 years ago, when you take a snapshot of the challenges currently facing people living with the impact of sexual harm you discover a bleak image.

In this paper we share some findings from our on-going research. Our participants highlight the gaps in provision, the lack of understanding and training on these issues, the fears employees can have about disclosing, and what can happen when people are supported by their employer.

Notes on our research: Qualitative research interviews have been conducted with 27 people to date. Participants are survivors of childhood sexual abuse, sexual violence in adulthood, domestic violence in childhood or adulthood, HR professionals, managers and wellbeing providers. The industries participants work in include audit services, charities, communications, education, financial services, healthcare, hospitality, human resources, local authorities, manufacturing, marketing, military, property management, retail, social care, social work, and software development.



“I think people would be shocked if I disclosed. There’s a stigma about the kind of person this happens to. But sometimes it’s the people you wouldn’t expect. People who look like they’re doing well. But you don’t know what they’ve lived with and are still living with. People need to realise that it could be anyone”

Consent Collective research participant

These issues are invisible

Participants who were survivors of abuse commented on the invisibility of the issues in their workplace. Being impacted by abuse was rarely mentioned as part of wellbeing, diversity, management training, or included in any workplace awareness campaigns. This invisibility made survivors of abuse feel that their organisation would be unsafe to disclose to.

“The very person who in theory would be the person I should disclose to was making victim-blaming comments in the staff room. I knew then that I was on my own and could never tell them”

“It’s so hypocritical. We’re a majority-women caring profession and yet I was never given any sign that it would be safe to talk about this. There’s no indication that people would know how to handle it”

Disclosure is only part of the story

Whilst some participants were open with their employer about their experiences the vast majority had not felt safe enough to disclose or had a strong desire to keep the matter private.

“Work is somewhere I go to get away from it. It’s an escape. I get to be professional me there. I don’t want that to change”

“Often you feel compelled to disclose when you’re at your most vulnerable because you’re in crisis. You’re less able to defend yourself from bad reactions when you’re in that situation”

“When you disclose to one manager it’s likely that you’ll need to disclose to future managers too. I wasn’t prepared to take the risk of someone in the future knowing this about me and not handling it well”

“No one should have to disclose in order to get the support they need”

Colleagues and culture

Many of the people we spoke to talked about the culture within their organisation and how the attitudes of their colleagues made life at work harder.

“When the footballers were on the telly talking about their abuse my colleagues called them weak and asked why they didn’t fight back. There were 11 of us in that meeting. I couldn’t have been the only person who was impacted by those comments”

“I shouldn’t have to wear armour to work. The staff room is my battleground. Someone should educate my colleagues so I don’t have to defend myself from their insensitivity”

“How can I have a sense of being in a team when I know I can’t talk about this?”

Managers and HR

The managers and HR professionals we spoke to had not received any training on handling these issues. Even in those cases where the incident may have been managed well there was a sense that managers had to improvise and were left unsure that they had done the right thing.

“My male manager didn’t know how to handle it. He avoided me completely which made me feel worse.”

“I don’t think many of us in work environments are geared up for that kind of thing. I’ve never thought about my team like that. We don’t have any procedures or policies in place”

“Looking back I think I did the right thing. But I had to make it up as I went along”

Wellbeing provision

As sexual and domestic violence are often invisible in employee wellbeing settings most people we spoke to did not feel confident that the assistance on offer would provide adequate support and were left to find alternatives.

“The Occupational Health team here were hugely supportive when I had a car accident but we never discussed my abuse. It wasn’t visible. It wasn’t talked about. It wasn’t clear they were set up for that”

“They will ask if you’re okay and they will say that you can speak to them if you have problems. But then the comments they make in the staff room and the complete lack of visibility on this issue made me feel like work would be a very unsafe space to disclose or get support”

Wellbeing provision

Of those who did seek support some people were left without any provision, some ended up on one-year waiting lists with specialist charities, some received good support but had to fight for it, some received support but felt it was inadequate, others felt harmed by the support they were offered.

“I was referred for counselling through my employer to (service run by a large national provider) but it wasn’t helpful”

“I used the service from work but even though domestic violence was flagged on my form they offered me relationship counselling with my abuser”

“It can’t be just any therapist. I’m still recovering from bad therapy. I needed long term specialist support from someone who knew how to work with men”

“I went to my GP for support and he made me tell him everything that had happened even though I didn’t want to. He thought things were best out in the open. This sent me spiralling downwards”

When people feel supported

Occasionally our research participants shared successful instances of feeling safe, believed and supported, proving that it is possible to successfully support individuals who are impacted by sexual or domestic abuse.

“My manager supported me throughout with regular quality supervision. He believed me and did not question too deeply what I had experienced. He was interested and willing to learn about my knowledge of sexual violence and the effects it has”

“I had one excellent manager. She was ahead of her time. We talked about self care and a wrap around care programme. She suggested that I take at least two weeks off and she came and met with me every week”

“I did disclose to one colleague and that person proved to be a lifeline when I was having problems. Just a quick chat with her could set me up so I could handle my day”

Work as a source of support

Some participants also talked about their strong desire to remain at work, their desire to not be seen as ‘too broken’ and the positive role that their work environment played as they came to terms with what had happened to them.

“Work was the only thing keeping me going for a time. I really liked my job. It gave me a lot of meaning. I needed that and I enjoyed it”

“Don’t panic and think ‘Oh my god that person is damaged and can’t do their job properly’ Just try to understand and work with me so that I can do my best work. That’s what we both want”

“My experience has made me value my work so much. Now it’s way more than just a salary. I feel supported here. I can’t imagine wanting to leave”

The positives

Experiencing any form of abuse can be life-changing, but not all change is negative. Some participants talked about the positive elements they could see from their recovery and how it changed the way they acted in the workplace.

“I’m also a manager and I’ve managed other survivors. We became a little group and would support each other. I was able to signpost them and offer support because I’d been through it myself”

“I’ve had so much therapy I’m much more self-aware than I was before. I feel better able to handle relationships, to know boundaries and how to handle other people.”

“If someone’s not performing, and that’s out of character, I wonder what’s happening in their life. I think I’m a more sensitive manager because of my experience. I don’t automatically assume that someone is being lazy.”

How's your organisation doing?

Here are a few quick ways you find out how well your organisation is doing when it comes to supporting people on these issues:

- Has your organisation ever had a company-wide wellbeing campaign on the impacts of sexual harassment, domestic abuse, or sexual trauma?
 - Does your organisation only offer advice and support to customers/clients around these issues and fail to support staff?
 - If your organisation has an EAP what wellbeing resources does it return when you search for 'sexual harassment', 'rape' or 'domestic abuse'?
 - Is your wellbeing provision able to provide longer term emotional support or is it limited to a few weeks of telephone counselling (which is insufficient and can be harmful for these issues)?
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Do things need to improve?

If you're responsible for wellbeing provision at your organisation get in touch with us to find out how you can begin to improve the way you support your staff who are living with the impact of sexual harassment, childhood trauma, and domestic abuse.

If you're not responsible for wellbeing provision please raise awareness of these issues by

- Sending this document to your managers/wellbeing providers
- Highlighting any gaps in provision that you can see
- Use our online calculator to highlight the potential scale of the issue at your organisation (www.consentcollective.com/workplace)
- Talk to your union, networks and colleagues about these issues and ask for their support in raising awareness

This is what we do

The Consent Collective is a unique not-for-profit helping organisations and communities respond to sexual harassment, sexual violence and domestic abuse.

Our experts have been active in this field for years. We have a track record of working across the criminal justice, health and education sectors.

Our combination of expert knowledge, sector relationships and creative talent means we can deliver powerful work in an informed and sensitive way.

We're leaders in our field. Let us help you lead the way on these issues in yours.



Dr Nina Burrowes - Founder

Conversations about consent and sexual harassment need a safe pair of hands. Our founder Dr Nina Burrowes, is a psychologist and national expert helping people understand the psychology of sexual harassment, sexual violence and domestic abuse.

A regular educator of police officers, prosecutors, barristers, judges, therapists, healthcare professionals and university staff Dr Burrowes is the author of two books on sexual abuse.

Dr Burrowes has talked about consent, relationships and sexual violence in parliaments, theatres, universities, music festivals, and on all forms of media nationally and internationally. An activist at heart, Nina set up The Consent Collective to ensure organisations can achieve long-lasting change.

Nina is available as a keynote speaker at your event, helping you to put sexual harassment on the agenda in a way that is safe and informative.



Cynthia Ellis - Co-Founder

Cynthia has over a decade's experience in the insurance, health and wellbeing sector. Her expertise and knowledge across the wider corporate market combined with her work with The Consent Collective places her in a unique position to support clients who wish to address sexual violence, sexual harassment and domestic violence through the various channels available to them.

Cynthia has supported clients in building and implementing strategies and programmes, incorporating multiple providers and is now able to apply these skills to help The Consent Collective and their clients collaborate.

Cynthia leads on all of our University and Workplace projects.



If you want your organisation to better support people living with the impact of sexual harassment, child sexual abuse or domestic abuse then get in touch

cynthia@consentcollective.com

www.consentcollective.com