



Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse

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Employment as a path to financial independence: why work matters to women experiencing domestic violence

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The Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse has recently completed a one year qualitative study on women's financial security, pre and post violent relationships. A key theme to emerge from the study is the role of paid work as a path away from violence and towards economic independence and self-sufficiency. Yet of the fifty-seven women who participated in the study, only twenty were employed when interviewed – a figure telling of the sizable barriers to abused women gaining and maintaining employment.

This paper will present women's perspectives on what has prevented or helped them to find or remain in paid work since leaving a violent relationship. The issues raised speak to broader concerns about the difficulties faced by women in the labour market, including poor access to child care, age- and disability-related discrimination, and the punitive impact of the welfare to work reforms.

The study ties in closely with a concurrent project undertaken by the Clearinghouse, in partnership with trade unions, to develop domestic violence workplace strategies. Together, the research findings and union partnership highlight the need for employers – along with education and training providers, recruitment services and government policy makers – to help build abused women's work capacity and opportunities.

This paper begins with an overview of the study and its key findings in relation to women's financial security, before discussing the specific issues that were identified around women's employment.

STUDY OVERVIEW

Having my own financial independence and complete decision making over what I do and what I spend and how I support my children is at the forefront of any decision I make. That's what financial security is to me.
[Service 8 Client 5]

Aims

The research was conducted in 2009, with aims to:

1. Investigate ways in which domestic violence undermines women's financial circumstances and, in turn, how poverty affects women's efforts to gain safety
2. Investigate strategies that support positive economic outcomes for women
3. Develop and promote the implementation of these strategies, to support women's financial security and pathways to safety.

Methods

A review of the literature was conducted to identify key areas of life where men's violence affects women's financial security. These areas concern: finances and money management; accommodation; legal issues (including financial settlements); health; transport; migration; employment; social security; and child support.

Clearinghouse researchers then worked with eight services to recruit female clients and workers to participate in interviews and focus groups. In total, fifty-seven women and fifty service workers participated in the study.

Participating services were located across Queensland, Victoria and South Australia, and included two regional services. There were four specialist domestic violence services, two legal services, a generalist family service, and a women's service. Additionally, one service targeted older adults and another targeted migrant women.

Themes

There were some distinct messages that came through the interviews and focus groups with women and workers, highlighting the interrelationship between domestic violence and women's economic hardship.

Key concerns

Broadly speaking, four key concerns were raised in the study, namely that:

1. Economic issues are a key factor in women's decisions to stay/leave violent relationships
2. Financial risk or poverty frequently results from domestic violence
3. There is a lack of perpetrator accountability for the economic impacts of abuse
4. Financial hardship impacts on women's recovery post separation.

These concerns recurred across the different areas of women's lives explored in the study and, in turn, shaped how women defined financial security.

Defining financial security

When asked what financial security would like to them, initially women in the study expressed entirely modest views focused on meeting their immediate needs: of paying the bills and putting food on the table. They wanted to have 'enough to get by' and 'to not have to worry'.

Questioning further, however, it became clear that financial security held much greater significance; it represented empowerment and a means for women to regain their sense of self

and agency, counteracting the disempowerment they experienced as a result of relationship abuse. Gaining financial security meant gaining control over their finances; being able to stop worrying about the future; being able to plan; and having choices. Overwhelmingly, women spoke of wanting to be independent of others.

Enhancing women's financial security

In moving forward, the study identified a range of principles that might guide efforts to enhance women's financial security:

1. Appreciate the financial impact of domestic violence on women's lives
2. Provide targeted short and longer term financial and material support
3. Build women's capacity to be economically independent
4. Create economic opportunities for women affected by domestic violence
5. Inform women's financial decisions and choices
6. Make abusive men accountable for women's economic outcomes.

More specifically, the study identified employment as key path away from violence and towards economic independence and self-sufficiency.

EMPLOYMENT AS A PATH TO FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

To go to work where my husband wasn't and he had no control over me at work – that was my place of freedom. [Service 3 Client 1]

Key data from the study

Of the fifty-seven women in the study, twenty (35%) were in paid work. Of these, thirteen women worked part-time and seven full-time. They were employed in casual, temporary and permanent jobs; most were working for employers but a few were self-employed.

Some women had worked during the relationship but were no longer doing so, while other women had been prevented from working by their partner during the relationship. A number of the unemployed women in the study were now looking for work.

For many women, employment was seen as providing essential (although sometimes inadequate) income – and also providing an escape from concerns related to the domestic violence, thus giving them a sense of normality, independence, agency and self-worth.

Barriers to women gaining or staying in employment

As with a number of Australian research studies, our research shows that domestic violence poses a direct challenge to women's employment in the form of men's abuse, pre and post separation. Women reported abuse in the form of sabotage of work efforts, stalking at the workplace or partners placing pressure on them to give up or not take up employment. Men's abuse also had implications for women's employment in terms of the impact of trauma on their capacity to work; and the competing demands on their time (e.g. where women were involved in legal disputes or had health problems to address).

Aside from men's actions there were numerous other barriers to women's employment, including:

- Lack of access to affordable child care
- Concerns about the impact of paid employment on Centrelink entitlements
- Lack of meaningful work opportunities, with low paid and casual work often all that was available to women
- Discrimination against older women, women with disabilities and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Transport difficulties.

Strategies to assist women gain or stay in employment

Women and workers discussed several strategies to enable women to (re)enter or remain in paid work, including strategies to:

- Prepare women for employment (e.g. volunteering, education and training)
- Find work (e.g. employment advocacy, recruitment services)
- Keep women employed (e.g. disclosure to supportive employers, flexible working conditions).

Recommendations

Women and workers also identified a number of steps that could be taken to improve women's employment prospects and capacity to stay in work. They called on employers to establish supportive workplace arrangements and to implement training around the impact of domestic violence in the workplace. At the same time, they recommended that governments:

- Provide more affordable childcare options
- Reassess the impact of paid work on social security entitlements and provide greater financial incentive to take up employment
- Provide greater support to women affected by domestic violence to access education and training.

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