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Domestic violence and multidimensional factors: investigating the impact of domestic violence on women's employment, health and housing.

Abstract

Domestic violence is recognised as a significant and complex issue for the Australian community. However, the impact of domestic violence on women's economic sustainability is not well understood. The multiple effects of domestic violence have serious consequences, causing unemployment, homelessness and long term health problems for many women and children. This paper will draw on research undertaken in South Australia which examines the complex interrelationships between domestic violence, and its impact on women's health, employment and housing. It will focus on the dilemmas for policy makers and service providers faced with the serious consequences for women's economic and social independence. It raises questions about workplace responsibilities and service approaches and offers strategies to improve the awareness of the whole community about this significant but previously 'hidden' issue.

Introduction

Domestic violence has significant social, health and economic costs (Access Economics, 2004; VicHealth, 2004). The multiple effects of gendered violence have serious consequences, causing unemployment, homelessness and long term health problems for many women and children. Women affected by and escaping domestic violence experience high levels of ill health (especially mental health), homelessness, poverty, unemployment, or tend to lose or have to leave their employment as a result of domestic violence (Chung et al, 2000; *The Road Home*, 2008; Franzway, Zufferey and Chung, 2009). This paper examines these intersections in relation to domestic violence in the workplace and argues that community awareness is important when examining the impact of domestic violence on women's health, employment and housing.

Definitions of domestic violence

Domestic violence includes any form of abuse, violence, coercion or control by a partner or ex-partner that serves to maintain power and control over that other person. Domestic violence can be actual or threatened physical, verbal, emotional, psychological, sexual, spiritual, financial or social abuse, or 'stalking'. We acknowledge that domestic or family violence is primarily committed by men and it occurs in the context of unequal power or privilege and gender inequalities in society (Bagshaw & Chung, 2000).

Statistics on domestic violence in Australia

Two national Australian surveys by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) have been important in quantifying violence against women in Australia: the Women's Safety Survey (WSS) in 1996 followed by the Personal Safety Survey (PSS) conducted in 2005. Violence was defined by the ABS as 'any incident involving the occurrence, attempt or threat of either physical or sexual assault, which would be deemed an offence under criminal law' (ABS, 1996: 2). The WSS included approximately 6300 female respondents while the PSS sampled approximately 11,800 females and 4500 males (ABS, 1996, 2006a). In 1996, 23 per cent of women reported experiencing violence in an intimate relationship (ABS, 1996). The PSS found that since the age of 15, 20 per cent of women had been physically assaulted by a male and 5 per cent by a female, while 28 per cent of males had experienced assault by another

male and 9 per cent by a female (ABS, 2006a). A recent report from the ABS (2007b: 2) on partner violence against women compiled demographics of women most likely to be affected by domestic violence and this included women with a history of child abuse, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, women with lower educational levels and employment and women aged 25–34.

However, these statistics are under-reported because both surveys found that women were less likely to report recent assaults to police if they were by a current partner or boyfriend, and 67 per cent of the physical assaults by males on females were committed by a partner, including a current or previous partner or boyfriend/date (ABS, 1996, 2006a). Furthermore, ABS statistics and current data collection in services, unions and by employers do not record the occurrence of domestic violence in the workplace.

Multiple effects and costs of domestic violence

The magnitude of violence against women at work and in the family has a cumulative impact on victims and communities across the world (Chappell & Di Martino 2006: 263). In 2002 in the United States fatal work injuries were higher for men (n=5,083) than women (n=441), but women experienced much higher rates of homicide in the workplace (31%, compared to 9% for men) and assaults and violent acts (34%, compared to 14% for men) (Chappell & Di Martino, 2006: 63). In the United States three people are murdered each day in the workplace, and 1 million workers (18,000 a week) are assaulted each year (Johnson & Gardner, 2000: 197).

In the United States the annual cost of lost productivity due to domestic violence is estimated at \$727.8 million, with over 7.9 million paid workdays lost each year (Centre of Disease Control and Prevention estimate, Family Violence Prevention Fund, nd). Tebo (2005) estimates that in the United States there is between \$3 billion and \$13 billion a year in lost productivity as a result of domestic violence, which includes the cost of hiring and training new workers. A survey of corporate security directors found that 94 per cent of the sample viewed domestic violence in the workplace as a high security concern (Centre of Disease Control and Prevention estimate, Family Violence Prevention Fund, nd). In the UK the estimated cost of domestic violence to businesses is over 2.7 billion pounds per year.¹ Domestic violence accounts for nearly one quarter of all violent crime and probably costs in excess of 5 billion pounds per year in the United Kingdom (Chappell & Di Martino, 2006: 135).

In Australia the total annual cost of domestic violence to the economy in 2002–03 was \$8.1 billion, the largest contributor being pain, suffering and premature mortality at \$3.5 billion per year (Access Economics, 2004; Carrington & Phillips, 2006). The direct costs to employers of domestic violence in staff absenteeism and replacement was estimated to be over \$30 million per annum, and the total cost to the corporate and business sector around \$1 billion per annum (Henderson, 2000; Carrington & Phillips, 2006).

VicHealth (2004) found that intimate violence was the leading contributor to death, disability and illness amongst Victorian women aged 15–44 years. Women and their accompanying children escaping domestic violence face deteriorating living standards, poverty, social disadvantage, homelessness, transience and dislocation for lengthy periods of time (Chung et al, 2000). Riger and Staggs (2004) researched the impact of intimate partner violence on labour force participation in a longitudinal study of 1311 Illinois women who had received

¹ Corporate Alliance Against Domestic Violence (UK) website: <http://www.corporateallianceuk.com/home.asp>

welfare. They found that, whilst 60 per cent of the women were working by the end of the three-year study, abused women worked slightly less, reported higher rates of poor health, depression, the need for mental health treatment and chronic health problems, compared to non-abused women (Riger & Staggs, 2004: 4–8).

Australian research has also identified the significant effects of domestic violence on health. Intimate partner violence has been found to be the leading cause of premature death and physical injury amongst women aged 15–44 years. Other health impacts of domestic violence include poor mental health and increases in the likelihood of behaviours and practices that are harmful to health (such as drug and alcohol abuse) (VicHealth, 2004: 10–21). Research has found that health mediates the relationship between abuse and economic outcomes over time (Riger & Staggs, 2004: 4–8; VicHealth, 2004), which impacts on women’s ability to access employment, resulting in dependency on income support.

Accessing employment is likely to be related to welfare to work requirements, however in one study three quarters of the employed battered women had been harassed by abusive partners in their workplace (either in person or on the telephone) (Johnson & Gardner, 2000). A study in Oklahoma indicated that 96 per cent of employed battered women develop other work-related problems such as their ability to perform and maintain a job as a result of this abuse (Johnson & Gardner, 2000: 200). A study conducted in New York and Minnesota revealed that up to 20 per cent of employed battered women eventually lose their jobs (Johnson & Gardner, 2000: 200).

Workplace responsibilities and service approaches

The issues of workplace violence and domestic violence have usually been dealt with in separate bodies of literature. The broad issue of workplace violence has been a major concern for communities and employers worldwide. Chappell and Di Martino (2006: 187) have identified three types of perpetrators of workplace violence:

1. Type 1 is the external intruder, which often appears to be a community ‘crime’ problem
2. Type 2 is violence related to dissatisfied customers and
3. Type 3 is employee-related violence.

All of these types are workplace health and safety problems covered by occupational health and safety legislation. Along with robberies and so forth, ‘domestic violence’ when it affects the workplace (including physical assaults and psychological harassment of employees) is one component of Type 1 workplace violence, and requires a clear policy response by employers. Addressing violence against women is a community responsibility but employers also have a legal responsibility to maintain a safe work environment for their employees. The findings of this study indicate the importance of expanding the response to workplace violence to incorporate and make visible domestic violence in the workplace.

Barriers and supports for women whose employment is affected by domestic violence

The specific issues for women in the workplace who have experiences of domestic violence were highlighted in a previous research project undertaken by the team and funded by the South Australian Government, titled *Sustainable Economic Futures* (Franzway, Zufferey and Chung, 2009). Women can be forced out of the labour market due to domestic violence,

resulting in increased welfare dependency (Moe & Bell, 2004). However, employment also remains an important pathway out of domestic violence, poverty and homelessness (Costello, Chung & Carson, 2005).

Key issues were that women’s work histories were often severely disrupted, employers were often unaware of situations, women’s circumstances such as location, ethnicity, caring responsibilities and education influenced their options, whether they could be safe at work (due to either perpetrator tactics or the type of employment) and if they felt mentally and physically able to work (Franzway, Zufferey & Chung, 2009). The following table outlines the barriers and supports experienced by women affected by domestic violence in the workplace:

Barriers	Supports
Community attitudes and beliefs related to gender roles and privacy of violence in the ‘home’	Supportive family members, friends, co-workers and employers
The impact of violence on women’s physical and emotional wellbeing	Good health care and support in identifying the effects of domestic violence
Lack of awareness of domestic violence by community members, employers and professionals	Supportive, accessible, culturally appropriate and safe services
Unsupportive workplace cultures and conditions	Access to appropriate and affordable child care.
Inappropriate and inaccessible service responses	Extended family members caring for children and financially supporting woman
The added burden of caring for children and generational/childhood abuse	Positive intervention by police that prevents further violence and protects victims
Relevant laws and policies not implemented adequately in relation to domestic violence at work	The supportive feminist and empowerment philosophy of services and employers
Stigma and shame increased by lack of public awareness	Changing attitudes recognising domestic violence as a public community and business issue

(Source: Franzway, Zufferey & Chung, 2009:40)

Dilemmas of policy makers and service providers

The promotion of specific initiatives that focus on gender equality, such as equal opportunity issues, sexual harassment and work-life balance concerns is central to the prevention of DV. There is increased community awareness of what constitutes DV and increased levels of community unacceptability, particularly about the use of physical violence (Carlson 2005, VicHealth 2009, WHO 2005). This indicates the success of universal education strategies in raising awareness. However, there are still barriers to DV being acknowledged by those affected due to the private shame and stigma associated with being a victim or perpetrator. This is a major barrier to help seeking and stopping future violence.

One of the dilemmas in responding to DV is that resources have historically been directed towards crisis areas, which is understandable and ethical. However, whilst demand for such

services always outstrips supply, there is still an important need to put resources into prevention to try and reduce its incidence and severity (Campbell et al 2006). This highlights the need for employers, so they can know what options may be helpful in such situations (Kwesiga et al 2007, Murray et al 2007, Swanberg et al 2007). Murray & Powell (2008) discuss various initiatives by national and international employers, where DV in the workplace is being addressed with policy developments and training of staff about DV in the workplace.

There are major implications for employers in relation to productivity, retaining expertise and occupational health, safety and welfare. Workplaces are an important site both to support women to continue working and for future prevention and early intervention activities. Franzway, Zufferey and Chung's (2009) research indicated that the size of the workplace was important in relation to having relevant policies, employment conditions and the type of work undertaken. Employers were often keen to embrace opportunities for raising awareness and providing a supportive environment, which in some cases led to working partnerships with local women's health services to provide advice on policy, training and referrals. A positive response about Employee Assistance Programs also raised possibilities about workplaces as sites to refer male and female employees.

Strategies to improve the awareness of the whole community

An ongoing community education campaign about the impact of domestic violence in the workplace should be developed to help break down the stigma and shame that prevents the disclosure of domestic violence to employers, managers and co-workers. Education strategies should be tailored to specific communities such as rural, culturally and linguistically specific communities and Indigenous communities. As well, the 'champion' model could be helpful in the business context but case studies may be more helpful in women's services (Franzway, Zufferey & Chung, 2009).

A powerful collaborative community education strategy could be developed through cross sector collaboration by the domestic violence services, community legal services networks, women's health services, employment services, unions, employers, employer associations and the Working Women's Centres.

Community education strategies would need to be driven by particular principles premised on the benefits of increasing knowledge and awareness of the issues, including:

- The safety, health and wellbeing of women, children and young people subjected to violence must be the first priority in every response.
- Those who use violence against women must accept responsibility for their acts and acts of criminal violence against women must be treated as such.
- The promotion of gender and racial equity underpins all responses to violence against women.
- The prevention of violence against women requires strong government and community leadership and commitment. (Women's Safety Strategy, South Australian Government)

In addition:

- Women's choices and self-determination must be respected and acknowledged.
- Community attitudes and the stigma associated with domestic violence must be a target for change.

- Cultural and language barriers that impact on women's ability to identify and disclose domestic violence as well as to access and sustain employment when experiencing or escaping domestic violence should be acknowledged.

These strategies should hold perpetrators accountable for their actions, not to minimise men's violence and to promote the understanding that violence is not acceptable, is a criminal offence and is unsafe for women and children. For example, young people, particularly young men, should be educated at an early age about respectful relationships (Franzway, Zufferey & Chung, 2009).

Conclusion

Workplace violence and domestic violence are increasingly being recognised as not merely episodic, individual problems but structural, strategic problems embedded in wider social, economic, organisational and cultural factors, with enormous social and economic costs to victims, families, employers and the community (Chappell & Di Martino, 2006: 298).

Workplace and support services can, together, design strategies aimed at improving the awareness of the whole community about this significant but previously 'hidden' issue.

Workplace and domestic or family violence is not a private, personal issue but a major public, political and social problem that needs to move from 'an issue for discussion to an issue for action', and to be proactively addressed with a preventative, systemic and targeted approach (Chappell & Di Martino, 2006: 301).

More research is needed on how the intersecting and multidimensional influences on women's employment, health and housing impact on women's economic sustainability. Franzway, Zufferey, Chung & Moulding (2009) are further exploring these intersections to examine how the complex interrelationships between gendered violence, health, employment and housing and how these complex interrelationships impact on women's economic and social independence.

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