

OUR WORK OUR LIVES CONFERENCE 2010 – PAPER OUTLINE

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

Presenter: Isobelle Barrett Meyering

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.

The paper will be divided into five key sections:

1. Women's definitions of financial security
2. Employment as an indicator of women's financial security
3. Barriers to women gaining or staying in employment
4. Strategies to assist women gain or stay in employment
5. Recommendations from the study.

Women's definitions of financial security

The presentation will begin by outlining the study's findings regarding women's definitions of financial security. Broadly speaking, women's views of what financial security meant for them centred on the notion of empowerment, understandably offering a way of counteracting the disempowerment women experienced as a result of relationship abuse. For them, 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.

Employment as an indicator of women's financial security

The presentation will go on to discuss how women's definitions of financial security specifically relate to the issue of employment. Twenty of the fifty seven women in the study were employed: thirteen 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

The presentation will outline key 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.

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
- Physical and mental health effects of the abuse
- Limited time available to work
- Limited work opportunities, especially for older women, women with disabilities and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Strategies to assist women gain or stay in employment

The presentation will outline key strategies that assisted women to gain or stay in employment. These included:

- Education or training
- Assistance from recruitment services
- Counselling or some other therapeutic support
- Volunteering
- Disclosures to supportive employers.

Recommendations from the study

The presentation will conclude with a discussion of the study recommendations. The key recommendation from women and workers was for the government to provide more affordable child care. The other recommendations relate to creating more supportive workplaces for women to disclose domestic violence and to be protected, through the introduction of:

- Non-discrimination policies for employees who disclose domestic violence
- Special leave to attend to issues concerning the violence
- Safety measures in the workplace.