

# Employment is Empowerment: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Women's Professional Growth

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Researchers in the domestic violence movement have long demonstrated that one out of four women are abused by intimate partners in the United States (Tiaden and Thoennes, 2000). In fact, homicide ranks among the leading causes of death for women (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2010) and is most frequently committed by intimate partners (Catalano et al., 2009). National and local policies, resources, and interventions are continuously developing, intended to reduce and prevent recurring domestic abuse to victims and to further expand options for those who choose to leave the abusive relationship.

Nationally, the Violence Against Women Act was introduced in 1994 to provide special rights to victims and children who have experienced domestic violence. Localized resources that are routinely accessed in communities across the country include safe shelters for battered women, social service programs to assist families of domestic violence, and hotlines and counseling agencies to support women who have been abused and connect them to resources (National Coalition to End Domestic Violence, 2016). However, domestic violence continues to occur at alarming rates (United States Department of Justice, 2006). Research finds that those who later become homicide victims often returned to their abusers due to issues surrounding economic dependency and difficulties in overcoming financial indigence (New York City Domestic Violence Fatality Review Committee, 2012).

This article addresses the concept of economic empowerment, its fundamental importance in a victim's journey to total liberation and safety from the abuser, and policies implemented to address intersections of domestic violence and employment. Attention is directed to how these issues impact women who have survived domestic violence.

Economic empowerment does not simply mean being employed; it requires financial competency and astuteness (Postmus et al., 2013), financial security and confidence (Kim and Gray, 2008), and job skills and potential (Lindhorst, Oxford, and Gillmore, 2007), all of which are jeopardized by an abuser's coercive strategies for maintaining power and control over a victim. Coercive control is a form of abuse that could potentially be overlooked by professionals because the behaviors associated with it are not overtly violent, compared to obvious types of abuse such as threats or physical violence. Coercive controlling behaviors—like restricting resources or transportation, or interfering with the pursuit of employment—can cripple the victim's

chances of ensuring a secure future post-separation (Stark, 2007). Consequently, those who are economically disempowered through coercive control are faced with financial, professional, and practical barriers. It is thus not uncommon for a victim to have little or no access to money, which complicates her ability to effectively or confidently manage personal finances post-separation. Further, the daily obligations required of the responsible and safe parent in the family could hinder her opportunities to work or prepare for employment post-separation. Consider cases of survivors who become displaced homemakers after leaving abusive relationships of many years—research finds that these women struggle to feel self-reliant, sometimes for years following separation (McDonald and Dickerson, 2013).



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Domestic violence-related stalking is strongly correlated with serious assaults including sexual and fatal violence, and should be considered indicative of a dangerous relationship even if the occurrence is isolated or seemingly trifling (Krebs, Breiding, and Browne, 2011). For those employed, the workplace can be a high-risk location for being stalked or harassed by domestic abusers (Versola-Russo and Russo, 2009). Women's work productivity can become impaired (Banyard, Potter, and Turner, 2011), threatening their job security. Some can become frequently late or absent from work as a result of abuse (Baum, Catalano, and

Rand, 2009), threatening their income. Consequentially, survivors struggle not only to achieve economic empowerment, but to maintain it as well.

To address these problems, guidelines on handling domestic violence-related workplace issues have been proposed, and employers are increasingly receiving education and training on domestic violence issues, prevention, and intervention. Laws, policies, and education on issues at the workplace are relatively new and involve forming policies on domestic violence, promoting employee awareness about abuse and the dynamics of abusive relationships, and developing guidelines for safety planning with victim-employees (Katula, 2012). Recommendations are offered at the state level. For example, New York State introduced the State of New York Model Domestic Violence and the Workplace Policy for Private Business, which defines domestic violence as a potential workplace issue and provides guidelines for private employers on how to handle employees' domestic violence situations (New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence [NYS/OPDV], 2009). The guidelines note the importance of maintaining confidentiality in disclosures, and encourage employers to undergo training by advocates from the NYS/OPDV. A 12-month review of their trainings on over 1,700 employees of state agencies found that 299 domestic violence issues were disclosed by employees within a year, and 301 referrals to service providers were given to

employees. The review noted that agencies were influenced to address some employees' Orders of Protection for the first time. In New Jersey, the New Jersey Security and Financial Empowerment Act was introduced in 2013 to allow a 20-day maximum leave of absence to employees experiencing domestic or sexual violence. The Act offers those fleeing abusive homes, for example, time to attend to extenuating circumstances while maintaining job security.

Other strategies to increase economic empowerment are designed to educate about issues pertaining to financial literacy and domestic violence. For example, The Allstate Foundation offers the *Moving Ahead Through Financial Management* curriculum to improve the financial literacies of survivors (Allstate Foundation, 2016). This curriculum explores financial safety planning, methods to repair an abuser's damage (i.e., ruined credit), and strategies for long-term financial planning. A longitudinal study evaluating the effectiveness of the curriculum demonstrated moderate to large effects compared to a control group over a 14-month period (Postmus, Hetling, and Hoge, 2014), and the curriculum itself is a cogent display of the intricate damages that domestic violence can inflict. One component of economic empowerment largely missing from the array of resources available to survivors, however, is emotional job-readiness training. Research shows that victimization contributes to problems such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder, as well as drug or alcohol problems (Golding, 1999), which can extend to the workplace. Programs that help survivors cope with anxiety symptoms at the workplace and overcome depression through employment are warranted and could contribute to survivors' economic empowerment. Pennsylvania Women Work is a statewide non-profit organization that seeks to economically empower displaced homemakers and women who are in career transitions or financial crises. The organization offers programs that provide job training to women and address the emotional challenges of entering the workforce. The organization's *New Choices* program, for example, offers job training in addition to group and individual counseling to women who feel anxious about joining the workforce, while the *3 Cups of Coffee* program assigns a peer mentor to meet with a participant at a shop or cafe periodically to explore her goals and career options in a relaxing environment.

As government, private, and non-profit agencies continue to push strong policies to empower survivors financially, mental health professionals are also in positions to help survivors take proactive steps to achieve their financial goals. Those working with survivors should consider employment an integral component of safety planning and goal setting. Employment can strengthen every level of the human hierarchy of needs, suggesting that job-readiness can serve all survivors well—despite circumstantial barriers that might leave one feeling disempowered. It is pertinent that professionals be aware of their clients' strengths, weaknesses, capabilities, and limitations when setting goals, and approach the topic of employment with sensitivity to those who might be hesitant to enter the workforce. It is important for professionals to become well equipped to assist survivors by familiarizing themselves with localized domestic violence resources and understanding how to safely link clients to these resources. It is further paramount to be mindful of the strength, resilience, and agency that is displayed in survivors of domestic violence; the notion being that, with professional support, these qualities can be brought to the

forefront and transferred into types of workplace qualities that only those who have overcome crises like domestic violence can demonstrate.

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