

'Her husband beats her up all the time'

Women, work and domestic violence

Women's working lives are affected by their male partners abusing them at home. But as **Lisa Vetten** shows it affects women in different ways.

Domestic violence is usually seen as an issue for welfare and the criminal justice system. Yet the economics of domestic violence, which frequently trap women into remaining with their abusive partners, ensure that it is also an issue for workplaces. Indeed, widening women's access to income, assets and other resources is crucial to combating domestic violence. Not only does such access expand women's real choices, but it also goes some way to equalising the power imbalances between men and women which figure so prominently in abuse.

This article, which briefly reports on the findings of 32 interviews with women who have been (and in a few cases still are) in abusive relationships, highlights how domestic violence affected both women's capacity to work and their ability to obtain and hold down work. It concludes with the recommendations women made to employers about what could be done to better assist women in abusive relationships.

EMPLOYMENT, EARNINGS AND ABUSE

Only two of the men in this sample were unemployed during the course of the relationship. By contrast 16 of the women stated that they were not employed for

the duration of the relationship and were entirely dependent upon their partners and families. Twenty-two men held full-time positions while eight were employed on a part-time basis. In comparison, three women held full-time positions while 12 had an assortment of part-time and temporary jobs. One woman relied on a disability pension. Seventeen of the women knew what their partners earned while 15 were either unsure or did not know their partner's income. Nineteen of the women had no bank accounts.

More than half of the men (17) wanted their female partners to work. Of this group, five men were strongly of the opinion that women should work while they stayed at home. Commented one woman: "He once told me that he is never going to look for a job because he wants to be the wife and I should be the man and I should go to work and maintain the house... and he has experience; he could have long got a job. But instead he is sitting purposely because he wants to use me."

At least two of these men appeared to be substance abusers and thus unlikely to hold down a job.

Nine women had partners who did not want them to work. While the reasons for this varied, jealousy and possessiveness featured

prominently. These men feared that their partners would use the opportunity to meet other men at work and have affairs. Other reasons given by men for not wanting their female partners to work included wanting a traditional, stay-at-home wife; wanting to keep his female partner dependent on him; and claims that working wives made men feel inferior.

Nine women stated that their partner's behaviour directly affected their ability to work, as these quotes illustrate: "Being in a relationship that way, sometimes, deliberately he's feeling a bit jealous by making me late or maybe not to go to work"; "He did not want me to go to work. If I did he took all the money that I earned. Because I come from Pretoria and did not know Johannesburg, well, he was the one driving me around. Even going to job interviews he did not allow me to go with anyone. I would have to wait for him and only go when he was able to drive me there. When I phone for jobs and was asked to come for an interview, I could only come on the day that he was available. Every time when I got a job, he was the one who would transport me and had access to my workplace."

In total, seven (22%) of the women's partners prevented them

from going to work, seeking work or making any money. Ten of the men (31%) in the sample frequently took the women's earnings from them.

In addition, if women worked late some men would come to their workplaces to check on their whereabouts, or phone constantly to check up on them. This was less out of concern for the woman's well-being than suspicion that she might be seeing other men. Other men would arrive at women's workplaces and swear at them in front of others or start fights with the women's co-workers.

Male partners beating or bruising the women on the face also led to women's absenteeism. For one woman who held a front-of-house reception job, the scarring of her face resulted in her being moved to a position where she was less visible to the public. Generally, those women who sustained facial injuries as a result of the abuse felt that their credibility in the workplace suffered. The stress and anxiety resulting from the abuse also caused women's work to suffer.

While some women did not discuss the abuse with their co-workers, most did and met with a generally supportive response. However, one woman said: "I had to stay away from work because I could not work. I was not able to work and because of that I decided not to go back as the people treat you badly because they keep talking about you, saying that 'Her husband beats her up all the time,' such stuff that happens to women who are beaten every time."

Some women ultimately lost their jobs: "I couldn't take it anymore myself, going to work with those problems, being absent or being smacked around like that. I was what? I was put off."

The importance of having some

sort of livelihood which generates an income should not be overlooked. These women highlight the effect on the relationship of not having an independent source of income for themselves. "I lost my job and that is when all the verbal abuse started. Before I lost my job I had more say"; "What gives you the right to speak [in making decisions that affect the household] because you are not even working."; "When he has money [and she does not] that's when he gets rude and bullies, insult me and all that. He becomes very boastful and bossy when he's got money."

Thus, in some instances, having an independent source of income may protect women from abuse. However, this is not true of all abusive relationships. The interviews also highlighted that some men are threatened by women having their own source of income. "I think I'm behaving like a man as I am working."; "Just because I'm out of work so you think you're the head."

Clearly, the relationship between abuse and access to and distribution of household income is a complex one. In some instances, having an independent source of income may prevent women from being abused while in other situations it may not. For this group of women, having access to resources will be important in enabling them to leave their abusive partners.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EMPLOYERS

Domestic violence affects women, their ability to earn a livelihood and their workplaces in a number of ways. Some abusive partners may actively prevent women from seeking work in the first place and, once women are employed, may not only sabotage their efforts to hold down their jobs, but also pose a threat to women's co-workers.

Earning an income may protect some women from being abused, while in other instances, it is crucial in enabling women to leave violent relationships.

These were the recommendations women made on how workplaces could assist women in abusive relationships.

- Assist women to access training and learnerships to develop their skills and become more employable. Some discounted or free training could be provided to women via domestic violence organisations as part of companies' social responsibility.
- Develop relationships with domestic violence organisations. One woman suggested that companies offering learnerships should engage directly with organisations running shelters and reserve 1% of those learnerships for women in the shelter. Other suggestions included providing materials at cost to shelter residents (where applicable) and also allowing women to sell their produce to companies.
- Provide informed counselling and support to women in abusive relationships. This could consist of assisting women to lay charges against their partners, including providing them with the necessary time off work to go to the police stations and courts, as well as moving out of the home. Women also wanted employers to be better informed about domestic violence and to be able to refer them to counselling and shelter services.

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Lisa Vetten and Rezana Hoosain conducted the research on which this article is based. At the time both were employed by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.