

How Employment Helps Female Victims of Intimate Partner Violence: A Qualitative Study

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This exploratory, qualitative study documents ways in which being employed is helpful to victims of intimate partner violence (IPV). The authors conducted in-depth interviews with 21 women employed by a large health care organization in a major U.S. city. Through content analysis, the authors identified six ways in which employment was helpful to participants: by (1) improving their finances, (2) promoting physical safety, (3) increasing self-esteem, (4) improving social connectedness, (5) providing mental respite, and (6) providing motivation or a “purpose in life.” Findings suggest that employment can play a critically important, positive role in the lives of IPV victims. The importance of flexible leave-time policies and employer assistance to IPV victims is discussed.

Keywords: intimate partner violence, employment, victims, occupational health

An average of 18,700 people annually are assaulted by intimate partners while on the job in the United States (Duhart, 2001). Even when partner violence occurs in nonworkplace settings, the consequences on work can be significant. For example, each time an employed woman is assaulted by her partner and survives the attack, she misses an average of 7 days of work and requires \$816 worth of medical and mental health care (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003). One study found that women who experience intimate partner violence (IPV) are absent from work almost twice as often as non-IPV victims (Hensing & Alexanderon, 2000).

It is not uncommon for IPV victims to be fired from their jobs by uninformed or unsympathetic employers. Research indicates that 21–60% of IPV victims lose their

jobs for reasons stemming from the abuse (McFarlane et al., 2000; Riger, Ahrens, & Blickenstaff, 2000; Shepard & Pence, 1988; Stanley, 1992; Wettersten et al., 2004; Zink & Sill, 2004). To recover from IPV assaults, victims often need to take time off from work to obtain medical attention, legal services, or counseling services or to relocate. As a result, advocates have campaigned for workplace policies that would afford victims the leave time that they require. In recent years, eight states, that is, California, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, New York, and North Carolina, have enacted laws that prohibit employers from discharging or disciplining employees who take time off of work for reasons related to domestic violence. Despite lobbying efforts for a national Victim’s Economic Security and Safety Act (VESSA), no federal legislation of this type has been passed (Legal Momentum, 2004). One reason for legislators’ reluctance to enact employment protections for IPV victims may be the lack of information about the benefits of work to victims’ safety and mental health.

Prior research has found that employment is positively associated with IPV victims leaving abusive relationships (Strube & Barbour, 1984; Wilson, Baglioni, & Downing, 1989) and increased self-esteem (Lynch & Graham-Bermann, 2004). Poverty and social isolation, which are associated with and in some cases result from IPV victimization (Browne, 1987; Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1997; Levendosky et al., 2004; Lloyd, 1997), can also be ameliorated by employment (Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1997; Goodwin & Kennedy, 2005; McCabe & Di Battista, 2004; Mccarten,

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2004; Mullins, Sheppard, & Andersson, 1991). For this reason, battered women's advocacy programs typically place special emphasis on assisting clients with job-seeking (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004). Thus, although it has been established that employment can play a positive role in the lives of some IPV victims, to our knowledge, *how* employment benefits IPV victims has not been studied previously.

According to Connell's social structural theory of gender and power, sexual inequities in the division of labor and power in society render individual women more vulnerable to adversity (including intimate partner abuse) (Connell, 1987). The theory holds that at the individual level, improved access to employment, money, and institutional and societal power will advance women's safety and health. Our investigation was informed by this theoretical perspective; we hypothesized that female victims of IPV would report that the financial and social benefits of employment improved possibilities for escape from abusive partnerships.

To investigate this issue, we designed a qualitative study to explore the perspectives of a sample of IPV victims on ways in which employment has helped them cope with and/or escape from partner violence. Specifically, we were interested in describing the benefits of work and the work environment. To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the benefits of employment to IPV victims in depth. Thus, our study addresses two gaps in the existing literature; first, it focuses on ways in which employment may be helpful to IPV victims rather than examining victims' productivity on the job, and second, unlike the majority of existing studies about IPV and employment, it utilizes a sample of employed women rather than clients of battered women's shelters or welfare programs. Battered women from shelters and welfare programs are not representative of working victims because they typically have experienced severe violence from which they needed to flee and/or are underemployed. In fact, many shelters prohibit clients from working. In contrast to most prior studies about IPV victimization and employment, our study takes the perspective of the victim and asks, "Is employment helpful and why?" rather than taking the perspective of the employer and asking, "How much does employing victims of IPV cost?"

Methods

Between March 2001 and April 2002, we conducted semistructured interviews with 21 female employees of an urban hospital and health care organization that employs roughly 16,000 individuals. All

had sought out and received advocacy services from IPV specialists, not related to the authors, affiliated with their employer's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) between August 1999 and February 2001. Because it often takes time for victims of partner violence to gain trust in others, the specialists invited only those employees with whom they had had three or more contacts to participate in the study. The IPV specialists reviewed the EAP case records and determined that of 115 employees who had received IPV advocacy services from them, 51 (44%) met this eligibility criterion. The specialists contacted these individuals at work by phone and invited them to participate in the research study. Of those eligible, 21 employees (41%) completed an interview, 22 (43%) never replied to phone messages regarding the study, 6 (12%) declined participation, and 2 (4%) were unable to participate because of scheduling conflicts.

We chose an interview format as our method of data collection, rather than a survey, because this allowed us to collect richer, more detailed information using open-ended questions and interview probes. Interviews were conducted by two female social work graduate students interning with the IPV specialists in the organization's EAP office. The interns were trained to conduct the interviews by the second author. After providing written consent, each participant took part in a 1-hr confidential interview in a private room in the EAP office. Questions were asked verbatim in the order written. The interview schedule included 32 closed-ended and 35 open-ended questions. Responses were recorded by the interviewers on the interview schedule.

Interviews covered a wide range of topics including the effect of IPV on task performance and absenteeism, career advancement, whether participants had disclosed the fact that they were abused to their supervisors or coworkers, and whether participants felt that work helped them cope with abuse. This article focuses specifically on ways that work helped IPV victims cope with abuse and therefore utilized responses that fell into the final category of questions. Participants were asked a series of four closed-ended (yes/no) questions on the topic of the potential benefits of employment, such as "Does earning an income help you with your abusive situation?" Those who answered affirmatively were asked a subsequent open-ended question such as "How does earning an income help?" The remaining three questions about the potential benefits of employment were as follows: "Does work help you feel safer?" If yes, "How does work help you feel safer?" "Does work affect your self-esteem?" If yes, "How does work affect your

self-esteem?" "Does work help you in any other ways?" If yes, "In what other ways does work help you?" Information about participant demographics (e.g., level of education, race, part-time or full-time work status) was also collected through closed-ended questions.

Data Analysis

Data were entered into a database. Closed-ended questions were analyzed using Microsoft Access. Content analysis of responses to open-ended questions was conducted by the first and second authors. In addition to the three themes of financial independence, physical safety, and self-esteem that were discussed pursuant to interview questions on these topics, the participants raised themes of social connectedness, mental respite, and purpose. We coded responses into these six themes. Inter-coder reliability was calculated by using the number of sections of text that had a particular code as the denominator and the number of agreements as the numerator. Initial inter-coder reliability was high (89%). Differences in coding were then discussed, and consensus was reached between the coders.

Results

Sample Characteristics

All participants were female, and their ages ranged from 22 to 56 years ($M = 40$ years). The majority of participants were white, non-Hispanic ($n = 15$), had at least some college education ($n = 18$), and were separated or divorced from their abusive partner ($n = 16$). Seventeen respondents reported experiencing 5 or more years of IPV, and 10 reported having been abused by more than one intimate partner during their lifetimes. All participants reported that their abusive partners were male. All but one respondent had been physically assaulted by their current or most recent partner ($n = 20$). The respondent who had not experienced physical assault reported having been emotionally abused.

Nineteen respondents were full-time employees, and the majority ($n = 15$) had held more than one position within the organization during their tenures, which ranged from 1 to 25 years. On average, participants had worked for the organization for 9 years. Eleven of the participants were administrative support staff, six were direct patient care providers, two were research or technical staff, and two were managers.

The Positive Effects of Work

Through our analysis, we identified six ways in which employment was helpful to participants: (1) improving their finances, (2) promoting physical safety, (3) increasing self-esteem, (4) improving social connectedness, (5) providing mental respite, and (6) providing motivation or a "purpose in life." All respondents reported that employment was helpful to them in at least one of these six ways, with most reporting benefits in four or more areas (Table 1).

Employment and financial independence. All but one respondent ($n = 20$) reported that their jobs provided them with financial independence that made a significant difference in their ability to cope with abuse and to leave their abusers. The importance of income was threefold: (1) it provided participants with the economic means to support themselves and their children, (2) it provided participants with a sense of control over their own lives, and (3) it was psychologically reassuring to participants to prove to themselves that they were capable of providing for themselves and their children:

[Income] has made a huge difference. It gave me independence to have benefits, salary . . . and a sense of control that I could support myself and the kids because we had financial resources from my job. It gave me a sense of security and independence from my husband.

I knew I could leave and support myself because I had an income.

I had financial independence from him and that was crucial [in preparing to leave].

Because [of work] I can afford to live in a secure building with a concierge.

In one case, income from employment allowed a participant to hire a lawyer to obtain a divorce from her partner:

I had money to fall back on to support myself and the kids and I didn't need to depend on my husband. The money also helped pay for a lawyer.

Physical safety. Twelve respondents reported that their workplace provided them with physical safety, much of which was attributed to support from the workplace's police and security:

Work has been a safe haven for me. I felt coming to work was a security blanket.

Police and security have helped tremendously—they offered to take me to court, held a copy of my restraining order, took a picture of him so they could recognize him if he came on-site and escorted me to the [subway].

Table 1
Themes Reported By Participant

Participant No.	Theme 1: Financial independence	Theme 2: Physical safety	Theme 3: Self-esteem	Theme 4: Social connectedness	Theme 5: Mental respite	Theme 6: Purpose in life
1	✓	✓	✓	—	✓	✓
2	✓	✓	✓	✓	—	—
3	✓	—	✓	✓	✓	—
4	✓	—	✓	✓	—	✓
5	✓	—	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	✓	—	✓	✓	✓	—
7	✓	✓	✓	—	✓	—
8	✓	✓	✓	✓	—	—
9	✓	—	✓	—	✓	✓
10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	—
11	✓	—	✓	✓	✓	—
12	✓	—	✓	✓	✓	—
13	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	✓	✓	✓	✓	—	—
16	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	✓	✓	✓	✓	—	✓
18	✓	✓	✓	—	✓	✓
19	✓	—	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	✓	—	—	—	—	—
21	—	✓	—	✓	—	—

Police and security helped me by allowing me to park in the garage, giving me a pager and escorting me out different exits.

Security told me that they would protect me and gave me physical devices such as cell phones, beepers and pepper spray.

The importance of the workplace following through on safety precautions was demonstrated when one coworker of a victim violated the employer’s safety plan and the abuser was therefore able to locate his victim:

Even though the front information desk was told not to give the location of my office, they did so anyway and that was how [my abusive partner] found me after I moved offices.

Self-esteem. Nineteen participants reported that feeling proud of their accomplishments on the job was important to their overall well-being and health. Work helped bolster the self-esteem of participants by “reminding” them that they are skilled and successful individuals and by counteracting degrading comments made by the abuser. For example, three participants used the word “competent” to describe themselves in relation to work:

Work has helped me to feel good because it reminds me I am competent at something in my life. Work gave

me perspective on life and gave me a greater sense of purpose by helping others.

I can perform my job and I am competent and capable of doing my job. I set goals that are manifested immediately at work.

I think in general being in the work world has been beneficial in making me feel competent, responsible and has allowed me to be in a better place emotionally and physically.

Two participants specifically noted that they derived feelings of self-worth from work that countered undermining messages that they received about themselves from their abusers:

Work makes me feel like I do something—that I can do anything, and that I’m not stupid like he used to say.

The goals I have for myself have been met through work. The accomplishments at work were very contrary to the messages that my husband was giving me at home. It helped me to feel better about me.

Social connectedness. Sixteen participants mentioned that their connections with coworkers and other people in the workplace setting helped them feel less socially isolated. Some discussed the abuse with their coworkers and received direct support from them; others drew strength and insight from work relationships without revealing that they were

experiencing IPV. Coworkers appear to have served at least three important functions. First, they befriended and provided emotional support to participants:

I got stronger because of the friendships that I had with coworkers. They gave me nonjudgmental support. They reminded me who I was—very outgoing, happy, and a compassionate person.

[Work] provided a community of friends which decreased my isolation.

I would see people and feel connected when I felt lonely.

I had people to go to lunch with and never had to go anywhere alone.

Second, some coworkers provided referral and resource information to participants who did not know where to get help. In one case, coworkers were viewed as potential sources of support should a crisis arise:

[Work] exposes you to more people and more friends so that if you needed an escape plan it could happen.

I got coworkers' perspective and viewpoints through my relationship at work. They provided tremendous support and pointed me to appropriate resources.

Third, coworkers provided models of "normal lives that don't involve abuse," prompting some participants to change their own perspectives on what was acceptable or tolerable in their relationships. In the words of one participant:

Work has given me strength to separate emotionally and know that I don't have to put up with abuse by getting other perspectives at work. It reminds me that people have normal lives that don't involve abuse.

Although the majority of respondents reported that they felt positively connected to coworkers, it was not necessarily easy for them to establish these ties. Three respondents noted that being abused made them feel less inclined to trust people generally and that it was particularly difficult for them to work closely with male colleagues. Another respondent mentioned that being abused meant she was normally isolated from people outside of her home and as a result her social skills deteriorated, making it difficult to relate to people at work. Twelve respondents reported that their partner was threatened by their close relationships with coworkers, and four of these reported that their partner was specifically concerned that they were having an affair with a male coworker. As a result, at least one respondent attempted to dissociate herself from all male colleagues:

I have cut off all my relationships with male coworkers because I was afraid [my partner] would threaten them or hurt me.

Mental respite. Fourteen participants mentioned that work was helpful to them because it provided a mental respite from their problems. Work prevented them from dwelling on their pain or distress. In particular, participants reported that it was helpful to feel busy and focused and that they were contributing to something meaningful through their work. Work was also described as an "emotionally safe place," where victims had the chance to collect themselves and "hear their own thoughts." For some, this meant periods of mental clarity and relief that enabled them to formulate a plan to leave their abusers.

[Work] has given me a chance to break away from the codependent cycle. Work is an emotionally safe place.

When I am not at work, I was with my husband. Work affords me an opportunity to get away and just be with myself.

He would control me mentally, so coming to work gave me space to hear my own thoughts.

Work has helped keep my mind busy and prevents me from mulling over the past.

Work took my mind off of all the horrible things going on at home.

I could redirect my energy from home problems and forget about them while at work. At times work has been like a vacation from home!

Coming to work every day helped me to tune out what was really going on at home. It gave me a break from my life and let the real me develop in a caring place.

Work provides a "purpose in life." Ten participants reported that having a job motivated them to get up in the morning and leave the house. Implicitly, participants suggested that were it not for their jobs, they might not have had the will to leave their homes and interact with other people. Notably, several participants used almost identical phrasing to describe the effect of work on their motivation:

It gave me motivation to get out of the house every day.

It gave me a reason to get up and go every day and gave me the confidence that I could make it on my own.

Work allowed me to get out and have a place where I could be me.

It makes me feel good to get up and go to work. I like where I work and the people I work with.

Discussion

The goal of this exploratory study was to document specific ways in which work was helpful to IPV victims. Our analysis suggests that employment can play a critically important, positive role in the lives of IPV victims, which is consistent with the tenets of the theory of gender and power (Connell, 1987); specifically, respondents reported that having steady employment and an income was a crucial factor in their ability to leave their partners. Moreover, respondents reported that being employed made them feel “competent,” reduced social isolation, provided them with a distraction from and alternate perspective on their abusive home lives, and gave them a sense of purpose in life.

It is noteworthy that participants in this study commented that their workplace provided them with “emotional safety” and a “place to hear their own thoughts,” despite the fact that all were employed by a large, urban, health care provider that can be described as busy and high pressure. That the medical work environment provided a contrast and relief to what participants were experiencing at home is both a testament to the extreme difficulty of their intimate relationships and to the positive feelings that they had about their work environment. The employer also made a strong statement about their commitment to their employees’ safety by creating safety plans for the IPV victims who wanted them.

Our findings suggest that for many victims of IPV, the financial, social, and emotional benefits of employment may be critical to immediate and long-term safety. Specifically, victims’ capacity to leave their abuser may be directly linked to their employment income. Moreover, the workplace may provide victims with periods of physical safety and a number of emotional bolsters (such as increased self-esteem, social support, mental respite from emotional abuse, and a feeling of purpose in life) that increase their capacity to formulate and carry out plans for leaving their abusive relationships.

These findings have several implications for practice and research. Prior research has established that victims of IPV are more likely to quit or be fired from their jobs than other employees as a result of experiencing abuse (Zink & Sill, 2004). The higher than average turnover rate among IPV victims has costs for both employers and victims. Employers may be able to reduce job turnover and protect victims by providing them with continuing employment, flexible leave time, secure work and parking areas, and EAP equipped to handle partner violence-related crises.

Employers are urged to review IPV “best practices guidelines” that provide advice on implementing these types of strategies, such as those available from the Family Violence Prevention Fund or the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence (Randel & Wells, 2003).

Further, training sessions and other interventions that make workplaces more hospitable to victims should be developed and evaluated in a variety of settings. For example, supervisors should be provided with information about how to respond to employees who are victims, employees should be provided with information about the availability of assistance from their employers, and security staff should be provided with specific training about partner violence.

These findings also have implications for battered women’s shelters in the United States, some of which require victims to quit or temporarily leave their jobs in an effort to prevent abusers from finding shelters by stalking victims when they leave work. Although this precaution may be reasonable, shelters should be aware that requiring IPV victims to leave their jobs even temporarily may affect their clients’ self-esteem, social connectedness, and feelings of purpose in life. Shelters are encouraged to prioritize employment advocacy, to train staff to help victims find alternate work that is personally meaningful to them if they are required to leave their current jobs, and to create safety plans with victims and their employers that would enable their clients to continue working or return to their jobs as soon as possible.

This study has at least four limitations. First, because of the complexity of recruiting IPV victims into a workplace-based research study, our sample size was small ($N = 21$) and results may not be generalizable. The women who participated in this study may not be representative of all victims of partner violence who were employed at the health care organization. Prior research suggests that IPV victims who disclose their abusive experiences to their employers may suffer more severe abuse than employees who do not disclose; therefore, our sample may be skewed toward those experiencing more extreme levels of partner violence (Hall, 2003). On the other hand, our sample did resemble a large, national sample of IPV victims in at least one way: the majority of participants in our sample ($n = 16$) reported that they had been in their abusive partnerships for 5 or more years, which is consistent with the average number of years of abuse reported by IPV victims on the National Violence Against Women Survey (4.5 years) (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Furthermore, par-

ticipants in this study reported that they had worked for the organization for an average of 9 years, which is comparable to the job tenure for all employees at the organization (7 years). A second limitation is that because participants were recruited from one organization, it is possible that victims of IPV employed elsewhere would have reported different feelings about work and coping with abuse. Because the employer has an EAP and creates safety plans for IPV victims, this organization may be atypical. Additional, larger-scale studies that draw participants from a wider variety of workplaces are needed. Third, because of confidentiality concerns, interview responses were recorded by hand rather than audiotaped. It is therefore possible that some quotations were not recorded verbatim. Fourth, the participants in this study had three or more contacts with the organization EAP before they were invited to enroll. This restriction may have introduced bias into the study because the subset of IPV victims who visited the EAP multiple times may not have been representative of IPV victims in the organization. Future studies should consider using less strict eligibility criteria to minimize this potential source of bias.

Although our study was not designed to be conclusive about the connections between IPV victimization and employment, to our knowledge it is the first study to investigate how employment is helpful to IPV victims from victims' perspectives. Prior research has focused on how IPV interferes with victims' ability to work and work productively rather than how employment may benefit them. Our study draws upon first-hand accounts from employed IPV victims that highlight six ways in which employment was beneficial to them as they struggled with the effects of partner violence and abuse. Future research in this area should ascertain whether these six benefits of employment (including financial stability, physical safety, improved self-esteem, opportunities for social connectedness, mental respite, and feeling one has a purpose in life) are relevant to IPV victims employed by other types of organizations. In addition, research that explores the efficacy of employer responses to IPV—including workplace policies, safety improvements, and training—will offer much-needed guidance about ways in which organizations can successfully prevent IPV and protect victim employees.

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