Framing domestic violence: its impact on women’s employment.

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“I have never been able to go back to the level of work, study or financial security that I had before I met him. I never appreciated how serious domestic violence is. It has catastrophic effects on me and my children.” (Informant, 2008)

Introduction

Workplace violence and domestic violence are increasingly recognised, even at the global level, as not merely episodic, individual problems but as structural, strategic problems embedded in wider social, economic, organisational and cultural contexts with enormous social and economic costs to victims, families, employers and the community (Henderson 2000; Laing & Bobic 2002; Moe & Bell 2004). Preventing and responding to domestic violence in the workplace can involve a range of strategies and various parties, including staff and customers or clients who are victims (or perpetrators) of domestic violence, as well as employers, governments, unions and domestic violence services. However, as I argue in this paper, the understanding of domestic violence and intervention policies has been framed in terms of the family. The impact of domestic violence on women’s employment tends to be overlooked when attention is directed towards its impact on the family. Constructive changes to current domestic violence policies will depend on more than attempting to add the workplace onto the spectrum of complex issues around this problem. I propose that the ways that the family is conceptualised including its interconnections with women and their employment is critical. This paper draws on a research project being undertaken in South Australia on how relevant agencies and policies deal with domestic violence in the workplace.
**Research context**

As the term ‘domestic violence’ indicates, violence against women by intimate partners has been situated within the domestic, that is, the private sphere of the family. Nevertheless, intimate partner violence can take place in sites outside the family domain, including such public spaces as the workplace, while its effects on women experiencing the abuse can also have consequences for the woman herself as well as co-workers, employers and customers or clients (Murray & Powell 2008). Women’s employment is generally characterised by work in small firms and organizations, which have less ability and infrastructure to respond to domestic violence when it impacts on the workplace, compared to the public sector, for example. Women are even more vulnerable in family owned businesses and in rural areas where few services exist.

In the USA and the UK, a number of practice-based initiatives and policy commitments based on research into domestic violence and the workplace are evident. However, in Australia little research have been specifically undertaken about the impact of domestic violence on the workplace, and thus there is to date relatively little policy development. The federal government has funded research under its Partnerships Against Domestic Violence (PADV) program (Chung, Colley & Zannettino 2004) which argued for collaboration between domestic violence and employment and training services. An exploratory study of the intersections between domestic violence and employment interviewed agency workers from domestic violence and employment agencies in metropolitan Adelaide about service and interagency practices (Costello, Chung & Carson 2005). It found that domestic violence and employment services fail to adequately address the employment and vocational education needs of women experiencing domestic violence due to limited funding and resources, narrow program focuses and short intervention periods. McInnes (2001) had earlier found that mothers who had survived ex-partner
violence experienced increased barriers to paid work due to the compounding effects of poverty, social isolation, dislocation, the stress of managing continued threats and the impact of violence on their mental health and self esteem.

International research likewise finds that domestic violence is a barrier to accessing and sustaining work due to partners interfering and sabotaging employment through such tactics as stalking, abusive phone calls and harassment of colleagues, which result in job losses, less productivity, absenteeism and illness (Raphael 2001). Riger and Staggs compared the prediction of exchange theory, which assumes that increased resources would decrease abuse, with the backlash hypothesis, which assumes increased employment would threaten the partners’ power and increase intimate partner violence (Riger & Staggs 2004). They found that women already experiencing abuse, experience higher levels when they gain employment or welfare, which tends to confirms the backlash hypothesis.

What is most striking however, is that the general lack of public awareness about domestic violence, and the consequent lack of knowledge or ignorance about its causes, effects and viable remedies are particularly acute in the employment context. This ignorance extends from employers and managers to service agencies and workplace institutions. The stigma attached to domestic violence as a private matter of sexual politics exacerbates the dilemmas about what is to be done that are posed by the disruption caused by domestic violence in the workplace.

**Research Project**

The available literature suggests that women with a history of domestic violence have a more disrupted work history and are consequently on lower personal incomes, change jobs more often and are employed at higher levels in casual and part time work (Pocock 2003). Women experiencing and escaping domestic violence are often the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in the labour market. Clearly, policy and legislative responses
to income support, domestic violence and employment by federal and state governments are
important factors that affect women’s ability to escape violence and to access and maintain
employment.

This observation raises questions about what are current policies and responses to
this issue which led to the development of a research project conducted by the author and
her collaborators, Donna Chung and Carole Zufferey. The project is funded under the South
Australian Government’s Women’s Safety Strategy. It is designed to investigate current
policies and practices of those agencies that have the brief to respond to domestic violence
in conjunction with those policies and practices of organisations that are relevant to
women’s employment including employer representatives, trade unions, employment
services and women’s services. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with thirty-
three informants from these agencies and organisations in metropolitan Adelaide and
regional South Australia. Particular attention was paid not only to policies and practices but
also to instances or opportunities for collaboration across the range of domestic violence and
employment services. A second stage of data collection following analysis of this material
was conducted through a state-wide confidential phone-in that sought the experiences and
reflections of women experiencing domestic violence and its impact on their employment or
study. Thirty-eight women respondents talked to the researchers about their experiences and
their suggestions to improve their access and retention of employment in the context of
domestic violence. A third stage of the project will test the recommendations relating to
policy and practice generated by the analysis of the data with focus groups of stakeholders
in agencies, organisations and relevant policy areas.

**Framing the family in domestic violence**

The family is central to domestic violence politics and policy, in part because it is a
key institution in feminist politics, which has played a significant part in bringing domestic
violence onto the public agenda. Feminist theorizing has conceptualised the family in terms of complex gender relationships of power. The family is thus an important site of sexual politics, a concept which I ground in Kate Millet’s notion of politics as ‘power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another’ that includes the sexes (as well as races, castes and classes) (Millet 1969: 23-24). Gender has become coded to refer almost exclusively to women, and has become a static descriptor drained of power. I want to stress that gender is an ever-present relation of power, best conceived as sexual politics that engages and challenges power as domination, resistance, alliances and pleasures.

Feminist campaigns undermined the sequestration of domestic violence behind the barriers of the private domain of the family. But the centrality of family also became problematic since this served to obscure the significance of employment in women’s lives. The overwhelming majority of women now enter the labour force and continue to participate if they marry and have children. While this is well-established, the significance of paid work in women’s lives is largely underestimated, as is the lengths to which women are prepared to go in order to remain in employment.

On numerous occasions when he was drunk and losing it, I would take my clothes and drive off in the car. I’d go and sleep in the car. In the morning I would have a shower at work. No-one at work knew. Work was what kept me going. I am a resourceful person (phone-in respondent).

Women’s attachment to family is seen as stronger than it is to their work. Underlying this assumption is the contemporary shape of sexual politics of the family where women undertake the bulk of the emotional and material care of other family members. Although the family has undergone considerable change a more egalitarian family is yet to be won, evidenced for example in the lack of significant change to gendered responsibility for
housework, or in the rates of female victims of domestic violence. Men’s resistance or more precisely, the resistance of heterosexual masculinity to curtailment of its dominance within the family is no less successful than the maintenance of masculine power in the public domain.

Feminist analysis of domestic violence in terms of the sexual politics of the family allowed the domestic violence policy and practices to be framed in family terms. Such framing drew on discourses, which value family life, motherhood and children’s safety, occupy a moral high ground and provide grounds for state interventions, mainly through social policy and minor legislative change, such as the establishment of certain forms of court orders. In the Australian context, alliances between bureaucrats/policy makers, researchers, wider women’s movement and agency workers and activists contributed to substantial reallocation of educational and welfare resources, training policies including the police and social workers, legal aid and resources, and research support.

The Howard government actively engaged in the sexual politics of domestic violence both in and beyond the family. It allowed domestic violence to remain invisible outside the family, except in the specific instance of violence in Aboriginal communities. Its opposition to welfare state and feminist policy frames encouraged a definitional shift from domestic violence to family violence, or rather as Howard said, ‘Australian families can live free of the fear of violence’ (Howard, cited in Phillips 2006).

Framing it in these terms also led to the serious conflation of race with domestic violence, a complex issue for feminists, researchers and policy makers, that some argue has racialised domestic violence (Phillips 2006). Recognition of issues of violence in Aboriginal families and communities was delayed by white feminist reluctance to appear to prioritise sexism over racism or to perpetuate stereotypes of the predatory and violent Aboriginal male. Phillips argues that despite what are ongoing issues of racism inherent in Australian
society and culture, *policy responses* to the violence against Aboriginal women can still be attributed to second wave feminists placing domestic violence on the national policy agenda in the 1970s and 1980s. Chung’s analysis of Australian government funding shows the dominance of projects targeting families (mostly Indigenous) that also reflects the overall policy trend to see domestic violence or violence against women as ‘family violence’. However, it also reflects the singling out of ‘Aboriginal violence’ as a priority for the Howard government and, to some extent confirms the ‘Racialisation’ of family violence ‘as Aboriginal’. This culminated in the so-called intervention into NT aboriginal communities last year by the Federal government and its agencies, including the army, in the name of protection of children at risk of sexual abuse.

A second distinctive Indigenous issue in relation to domestic violence policy is in the terminology promoted by feminists. Some Aboriginal people have been generally unhappy with the term domestic violence, preferring ‘family violence’ while others suggest that the term ‘violence against women’ is more accurate (Larsen & Peterson 2001: 123). However, the idea that ‘family violence’ reflects the family oriented nature of Aboriginal culture has been strongly embraced by policy makers seeking to shift away from the language of feminism in domestic violence policy. When family violence is connected to attempts to value traditional Aboriginal law practices, the legal protection of Aboriginal women, particularly in remote Australia can be seriously undermined. Taylor et al. also see the term ‘family violence’ for Indigenous people as problematic as it promotes understandings distinct from the a understood term of domestic violence and can have implications for the appropriateness of services (Taylor et al. 2004: 73). We have found similar concerns among our informants:
With domestic violence… it is family violence, it is domestic violence and it is community violence… we are named as a domestic violence shelter but I think family violence is a little bit more glossy (Informant 8, Aboriginal Service).

I would use the term DV when talking about violence between partners. I think family violence - there seems to be people that are perpetrating violence on extended family and that happens and I think that is frustration around managing and depression, people are living under immense pressure nowadays. (Informant 15, Aboriginal Service)

The second speaker went on to say that she believed that the terms should be more comprehensive than domestic violence: ‘We should be thinking about it in broader terms because some of our young people are experiencing community and family violence. It is broader and can impact on work and ability to come to work.’ The point is relevant to many Indigenous communities that are confronted by internecine violence as well as that imposed by external disruptions.

**Conclusion**

I could only ever do relief work or casual work because I never knew when he would flare up and I couldn’t go to work with bruises and injuries. (Interviewee, 2008)

DV is about survival and you are never the person that you were before (Informant, Phone-in, 2008)

It is evident in our research at this stage that domestic violence has a long-term effect on women’s ability both to access and to sustain employment. Domestic violence impacts on women’s lives, the workplace and the community in substantial ways, by reducing the ability of women to access and maintain employment, increasing welfare dependency, increasing poverty in female-headed families and contributing to high risks of homelessness.
for women and children. Internationally, some innovative responses to domestic violence in the workplace have emerged, but few initiatives exist in Australia at national or state levels. My co-researchers and I propose that further work is needed to develop a systematic way to understand the invisibility or lack of knowing about the impact of domestic violence on women’s employment, and about appropriate policy responses by service agencies, employers and unions. This requires that the sexual politics of domestic violence, the family and employment be made visible and known through investigating the various ways of not knowing about domestic violence in the workplace and in the domestic violence agencies and employment services. It may then be possible to tackle this complex issue in ways that overcome the barriers to employment and to study women presently confront when they experience or escape domestic violence.
References


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