

The Impact of Domestic Violence on the Workplace

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Abstract

This study explored the impact of domestic violence on absenteeism, worker productivity, and workplace responses to domestic violence, based on a survey of New Zealand employees. One thousand six hundred and thirty-eight (1638) completed questionnaires were returned, 249 from respondents who had direct experience of domestic violence. The majority of respondents were women. Domestic violence affected over a third of respondents' ability to get to work and their work performance. The opportunity to discuss the violence with someone at work resulted in positive outcomes. The study suggests that raising awareness of domestic violence as a workplace issue and developing appropriate legislation and workplace policies and practices would potentially benefit both workers and the employers.

Key words: Domestic Violence, Workplace

Introduction

Since the 1970s, the problem of intimate partner violence (IPV) has been framed as a criminal issue, a health issue, and a human rights issue (Campbell, 2002; Carlyle, Slater, & Chakroff 2008; United Nations Population Fund, 2014). More recently, there has been a growing focus on the impact of the experience of domestic violence on the workplace (e.g. Logan, Shannon, Cole, & Swanberg, 2007; McFerran, 2011a; Reaves & O'Leary-Kelly, 2007). Such interest is likely due to the influence of theories of "spillover," first described by Wilensky (1960), who proposed that positive or negative influences in one context (e.g. family life) may impact or "spillover" to other contexts (e.g. work). The concept had its origins in business and management studies and underpinned studies, such as those conducted by Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, and Wethington (1989), who investigated influences of family life on career aspirations and promotion, and reported a negative influence of home conflict on performance at work. Over the years, and particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, such research expanded to explore the relationships between job satisfaction and family life, and other life domains, such as social and health (e.g. Crohan, Antonucci, Adelman, & Coleman, 1989; Leiter & Durup, 1996; Loscocco & Spitze, 1990).

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Domestic violence is a serious and widespread issue. Globally, it is estimated that 30 per cent of women will experience physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner sometime in their life (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2013), which is comparable to the rates of IPV reported by New Zealand women (Fanslow & Robinson, 2004). While directly comparable figures for men are difficult to ascertain, recent figures from the USA suggest that around 14 per cent will experience serious physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner in their lifetime (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra, 2015). However, while there is emerging information on the prevalence of violence against men, to date, we are aware of no research that has explored the impact of this violence on men's ability to participate in employment.

Women who have experienced IPV frequently report that perpetrators of domestic violence engage in actions to sabotage their ability to go to work by a variety of means, including controlling finances so that they cannot meet the costs associated with work, including transportation; failing to meet childcare commitments; and physically threatening or restraining them (Brandwein & Filiano 2000; Swanberg, Logan, & Macke, 2005).

Harassment of victims while they are at work is not uncommon. Reports have been made of perpetrators repeatedly ringing or texting or physically stalking the victim, coming to the workplace and disrupting operations and, in some cases, violently attacking their victim and co-workers (LeBlanc & Barling 2005; Tiesman, Gurka, Konda, Coben, & Amandus, 2012; Tombs, 2007).

Studies have also shown that individuals who experience IPV have difficulty maintaining consistent employment as, frequently, they are forced to resign or their positions are terminated (Swanberg & Logan, 2005; Swanberg, Macke, & Logan 2006). In addition, their capacity to work is often compromised by a number of factors, including feeling distracted, tired and unwell; needing to take time off for medical or legal reasons; being late for work; and being too upset to work (Crowne et al., 2011; McFerran, 2011a; 2011b; Moe & Bell, 2004; Swanberg et al., 2006). In addition to jeopardising the person's employment, these factors have the potential to impact on the safety of themselves and those around them (Versola-Russo & Russo 2009). Further, many women who have left their abusive partner have reported that they were unable to look for work or accept a position because they were afraid their abuser would be able to find them and cause them harm (Logan et al., 2007).

The inability to maintain regular employment can contribute to increased levels of poverty, stress, and ill health, which creates far reaching consequences for those experiencing IPV, their family, and wider society (Brush, 2000; 2004; Moe & Bell, 2004; Reeves & O'Leary-Kelly, 2007; Tolman & Rosen, 2001). For example, as a result of IPV, victims are more likely to have additional medical expenses; incur costs associated with relocation; need to replace destroyed property, and pay for legal advice or representation (Day, McKenna, & Bowlus., 2005), whilst perpetrators may take various steps to limit access to resources by using violence and harassing behaviour to either stop the woman from working or make working difficult (Adams, Tolman, Bybee, Sullivan, & Kennedy, 2012; Anderson et al., 2003). The instability created by the abuse often results in victims being unable to stay with a single employer for an extended period of time, contributing to loss of the opportunities that come with sustained employment such as promotion and other benefits (Moe & Bell, 2004).

Importantly, employment and the subsequent economic security that can arise from employment can help to create pathways out of the violence. We know that, when victims rely on the perpetrator for financial support, they are more likely to stay in the abusive situation (Tolman & Wang 2005) and that economic security provided by employment can result in a stronger sense of self and feelings of competence (Rothman, Hathaway, Stidsen, & de Vries 2007). Furthermore, Tolman and Wang (2005) reported that the workplace can also serve as a place of respite from perpetrators, providing important periods of time of physical safety where plans to leave abusive relationships could be made.

The impact of IPV on the workplace can also have significant consequences for the employer. Threats to safety and security may result in serious occupational, health, and safety consequences for both workers and workplaces. In addition to the potential loss in productivity noted above, IPV can result in substantial economic costs to the employer as a consequence of staff loss and the resultant recruitment costs (Reeves & O'Leary-Kelly, 2007).

Increased awareness of these consequences for individuals and employers has contributed to a growing recognition of the need to address the impact domestic violence has on the workplace. For example, in Australia, the Australian Domestic Violence Rights and Entitlements Project (McFerran, 2011a) has led to some of the world's most progressive domestic violence workplace policies. More recently, an international collaboration, led out of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence against Women and Children at the University of Western Ontario, has been established in order to mobilise knowledge about domestic violence and its impacts on workplaces and workers. At present, however, little is known about the New Zealand experience; therefore, the current study was designed to contribute to the international movement and, more specifically, to begin to understand the impact of domestic violence on the workplace in New Zealand.

Methods

The aim of the study was to understand the impact of domestic violence on the workplace in New Zealand. In particular, to understand how experiencing domestic violence impacts on an individual's ability to fulfil their duties as an employee and, in turn, how the workplace responds to domestic violence. To this end, the researchers worked in collaboration with the New Zealand Public Service Association (PSA) to undertake an online survey of a sample of PSA members. Approval to conduct the study was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (Ref # 9671).

Sample and Procedure

The PSA represents approximately 58,000 New Zealand workers and is New Zealand's largest union. Members are drawn from five employment sectors: community public services, district health boards, local government, public service, and the state sector and represent a wide range of occupations, including allied health and disability support workers and clerical and administration workers.

The sample size was determined by the PSA to ensure representation from sectors across the breadth of the membership without placing undue demands on members and employers by over surveying the membership. Thus, 10,000 randomly selected PSA members were invited to complete the survey. In total, 1,638 completed questionnaires were returned representing an overall response rate of 16 per cent. Of these, 249 (three per cent) were received from respondents who reported having personally experienced domestic violence while in paid employment.

The majority of those who had experienced domestic violence were women ($n = 215$, 86 per cent) and were over the age of 35 (93 per cent), with most being in the 45-54 age range. Most respondents were born in New Zealand (73 per cent) and identified as New Zealand European or other European (77 per cent), with Māori accounting for 14 per cent. Respondents most commonly worked in District Health Boards (DHB) (40 per cent) or the local government sector (27 per cent). When comparing the breakdown of the sample by sector to that of the entire PSA membership, the proportion of state sector employees was similar (Sample [11 per cent] vs PSA [14 per cent]). However, overall the study sample was under-represented with respect to public service employees (Sample [16 per cent] vs PSA [36 per cent]) and overrepresented with respect to local government employees (Sample [27 per cent] vs PSA [10 per cent]) and DHB (Sample [40 per cent] vs PSA [28 per cent]). With regard to the roles employees held, the majority were clerical or administrative workers (29 per cent), in professional roles (21 per cent), or were registered social, health or education professionals (22 per cent). Nearly all reported that they were in permanent full time employment (80 per cent) or permanent part time employment (16 per cent).

Survey Distribution

Prior to the distribution of the survey, the PSA sent out an email to employers and PSA union delegates, informing them that the survey would be distributed to randomly selected members. Subsequently, an email was sent via the PSA email system to the selected members inviting them to complete the anonymous survey. A URL, embedded in the email, took them to the survey site, which included an explanation of the questionnaire and set out their rights as study participants. A unique coded URL was attached to each emailed survey to ensure it was not possible to identify the source of the returned questionnaires, thus, maintaining anonymity.

The survey was open for a period of three weeks from 14 June 2013 until 5 July 2013. Two follow up reminder emails were sent to encourage participation, one at the end of the first week and one at the end of the second week. When the survey closed, the PSA forwarded the data in an Excel spreadsheet to the researchers for analysis. While the wider study involved the impact of violence from the perspective of those directly affected and that of co-workers, this paper only reports the findings associated with those who had direct experience of domestic violence ($n=249$).

Survey Instrument

The Australian Domestic Violence Workplace Rights and Entitlements Project survey (McFerran, 2011a) was used. Questions were organised under seven sections/categories: demographic profile, experience of domestic violence, impact of domestic violence on getting to work, impact of domestic violence in the workplace, support in the workplace, protection orders and family court, and employed friends/colleagues' experience of domestic violence. There were 38 questions in total, the majority of which also had sub-questions. For each question/sub-question, respondents were presented with a number of response options and asked to select those that applied to them. Respondents were not required to answer all questions in each section due to branching. The original questionnaire was modified for local use.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of analysis, the data were imported into SPSS V. 21.0 (IBM Corp, 2012). Descriptive statistics (percentages and frequencies) were generated. Where appropriate chi-square tests were also conducted to determine if there were differences in the experiences of domestic violence according to gender, age, sector of the PSA the respondent was employed in and their role.

Results

Respondents' experience of domestic violence

Chi-square analysis was undertaken to determine if experience of domestic violence while in paid employment differed as a function of gender, age, sector, role, or employment type. A significantly greater proportion of those experiencing domestic violence while in paid employment were female ($n = 215$, 86 per cent), (male, $n = 30$, 14 per cent), $\chi^2_{(df1)} = 24.28$, $p = .000$, and aged over 45, with most being in the 45-54 year age bracket: 18-44 ($n = 70$, 28 per cent); 45-54 ($n = 105$, 42 per cent); 55 and over ($n = 74$, 30 per cent), $\chi^2_{(df2)} = 12.83$, $p = .002$. Of those who provided information on when they had experienced domestic violence ($n = 234$), 79 per cent reported it had occurred more than 12 months ago.

Relationship to perpetrator

Respondents were asked about the perpetrator, their relationship, and their living arrangements. The majority of respondents identified the gender of their perpetrator as male ($n = 239$, 85 per cent). Most of the respondents (77 per cent) reported that they were not currently living with the abusive/violent person, while 8 per cent reported they were employed at the same place as the person perpetrating the violence.

Impact of domestic violence on ability to work

The impact of the violence on respondents' ability to go to work is summarised in Table 1. Over a third of respondents reported that the abuse impacted on their ability to get to work. This was most commonly due to physical injury or restraint (62 per cent) or fear for their children's safety (41 per cent). More than half reported having to take time off work, most commonly for health or medical reasons and/or to attend counselling. Analysis showed that reasons for taking time off did not differ as a function of age ($\chi^2_{(df2)} = 5.773, p = 0.056$), sector ($\chi^2_{(df5)} = 3.208, p = 0.668$), role ($\chi^2_{(df1)} = 0.004, p = 0.095$), or employment type ($\chi^2_{(df2)} = 3.759, p = 0.153$).

Table 1. Impact of Domestic Violence on Ability to Work

Measure	<i>n</i>	%
Ability to get to work affected (<i>n</i> = 248)		
Yes	95	38.3
No	153	61.7
What affected ability to go to work (<i>n</i> = 95)		
Physical injury or restraint	59	62.1
Fear of leaving children alone with abusive/violent person	39	41.1
Hiding or stealing car keys or transportation money	25	26.3
Refusal or failure to show up to care for children	23	24.2
Verbally berated or threatened	19	20.0
Mentally/emotionally unable to cope with work	19	20.0
Personal documents hidden or stolen	14	14.7
The threat of deportation	1	1.1
Took time off work because of domestic violence (<i>n</i> = 245)		
Yes	131	53.5
No	114	46.5
Reason for time off (<i>n</i> = 131)		
Health/medical reasons	68	51.9
Attend counselling	64	48.9
Attend appointments (e.g. Police/lawyer)	41	31.3
Accommodation purposes (e.g. Had to move house)	36	27.5
Attend Court	29	22.1

Note: Percentages do not all equal 100 per cent due to multiple responses possible.

Impact of domestic violence in the workplace

Over half of the respondents (55 per cent) reported that they directly experienced domestic violence while at work. As can be seen in Table 2, 30 per cent reported being harassed via phone calls, email, or text messages, and 30 per cent reported being stalked in or around the workplace. When asked how the experience of domestic violence impacted on their work performance, the majority said that they were often late to work, while a smaller number

reported being distracted, tired or unwell while at work. Respondents also indicated that the domestic violence they experienced affected their relationships with co-workers, with 60 per cent, reporting that it resulted in tension and conflict.

Table 2. Impact of Domestic Violence in the Workplace

Measure	<i>n</i>	%
Experiences of domestic violence in the workplace (<i>n</i> = 139)		
Harassed through phone calls, emails, or text messages	41	29.5
Stalked outside/in/around the workplace	41	29.5
Abusive/violent person turned up at workplace and wanted to talk	25	18
Threatened you	16	11.5
Abusive/violent person disrupted the workplace	12	8.6
Threatened co-workers	2	1.4
How domestic violence impacted work performance (<i>n</i> = 224)		
Was late for work	189	84.4
Distracted/tired/unwell	35	15.6

Note: Percentages do not equal 100% to due to multiple responses possible.

Help seeking and workplace support

Respondents were asked a series of questions about what help they sought in the workplace and what support was offered. Slightly more than half (53 per cent) of respondents chose not to discuss their abuse with their co-workers. Disclosure rates did not differ as a function of gender, sector, role, or employment type. Only age showed a significant difference, with a greater proportion of older workers disclosing (45-54 years [22 per cent] and over 55 years [19 per cent]), than those in the 18-44 year group (12 per cent), $\chi^2_{(df2)} = 86.23, p = .013$.

Of those who disclosed, most were likely to speak about the violence with a co-worker (69 per cent) or supervisor/manager (54 per cent) than an HR person (7 per cent) or union delegate (4 per cent) (see Table 3). However, among those who did not discuss the abuse with co-workers, 24 per cent of respondents said their co-workers knew about the violence anyway. Privacy and shame were the most common reasons given for not discussing the abuse/violence at work. The outcomes of disclosing to someone in the workplace are shown in Table 3. Around two thirds reported positive outcomes as a result of disclosing; with almost 50 per cent of this group reporting that they were given paid time off. In all cases where a co-worker asked for time off to support their colleague, (*n* = 9), this was granted.

Chi-square analysis revealed no difference as a function of age ($\chi^2_{(df4)} = 2.201, p = 0.699$), employment sector ($\chi^2_{(df10)} = 5.635, p = 0.845$), role ($\chi^2_{(df2)} = 2.976, p = 0.226$), or type of employment ($\chi^2_{(df4)} = 2.701, p = 0.609$) on the outcome of discussing the violence with someone in the workplace.

Table 3. Help Seeking and Workplace Support

Measure	<i>n</i>	%
Reasons for not Discussing Abuse/Violence (<i>n</i> = 132)		
Privacy	49	48.0
Shame and privacy	25	24.5
Shame	20	19.6
Fear of dismissal	8	7.8
Possible of Person the Abuse was Discussed with (<i>n</i> = 95)		
Co-Worker	81	69.2
Supervisor/Manager	63	53.8
HR Officer	8	6.8
Union Delegate	5	4.3
Outcome of Discussing Abuse with the Workplace (<i>n</i> = 112)		
Positive things happened	73	65.2
Negative things happened	3	2.7
Nothing happened	36	32.1
Responses by the Workplace (<i>n</i> = 73)		
Time off (paid)	36	49.3
Time off (unpaid)	7	9.6
Alerted security staff	7	9.6
Changed/screened work numbers or emails	6	8.2
Alerted the police	5	6.8
Provided transport between work and home	4	5.5
Moved you to a safer place at work	3	4.1

Note: Percentages do not all equal 100% to due to multiple responses possible.

Summary

In summary, most respondents in this study were women over the age of 35, who had been abused by men and were in full-time employment at the time they experienced the domestic violence. Around 40 per cent reported that their ability to get to work was impacted by domestic violence, mainly due to physical injury or restraint and/or concerns for the safety of their children. Over half reported that they had to take time off to deal with issues related to domestic violence, with the most frequent reason being physical and mental health issues. Similarly, over half of the respondents who had experienced violence while at work with harassment, such as texts, phone calls, emails, and being stalked in and around the workplace, being reported as the most common forms of violence. Most respondents did not discuss the abuse they were experiencing with anyone in the workplace, with the majority stating that shame and privacy were the main reasons for not doing so. However, around two thirds of those who did disclose the domestic violence to those in the workplace reported positive outcomes.

Discussion

The results of this study adds to the growing body of knowledge about the ways in which domestic violence impacts the workplace, from the perspective of those who have directly experienced domestic violence. The majority of those who reported experiencing domestic violence while in the workforce were women. Most reported that the abuse was historical and that they were no longer living with the perpetrator. This may reflect the fact that victims are more likely to feel comfortable reflecting on their experience after they have had the opportunity to address issues related to their safety. That said, about a quarter of respondents with personal experience of domestic violence reported that they had experienced the violence in the preceding 12 months.

The findings confirm that experience of domestic violence has significant implications for the workplace. For example, over half of the respondents reported that the violence they experienced impacted on work attendance, that is, their ability to get to work on time, or at all. In addition, the findings showed the extent to which perpetrators are prepared to go to in order to prevent victims from going to work. Physical injury or restraint and psychological abuse were common reasons, as were concerns for the safety of children. Such findings are similar to those found internationally, such as Swanberg and Logan (2005), who reported that the majority of victims in their study were physically restrained or beaten to such a degree that they could not go to work. Further, Moe and Bell (2004) and Swanberg et al., (2006) reported that the safety of children, while in the care of the perpetrator, was a frequent concern for victims. This concern is not unfounded, as other studies have shown that children witnessing domestic violence experience trauma and are more likely to also be experiencing abuse (Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod 2010; Murphy, Paton, Gulliver, & Fanslow 2013). Therefore, it is understandable that respondents in this study would report concern for the safety of their children.

Fewer than half of the respondents reported that they had talked to anyone at work about the violence. This is not surprising, in that the literature indicates that victims of domestic violence often face repercussions, such as job loss or having their hours of work reduced. However, when employers are known to offer assistance, employees are more likely to disclose abuse, utilise services, and report more favourable outcomes (Swanberg et al., 2006). Given this, a finding of particular concern in this study is that, in approximately one quarter of cases where the violence was discussed with a supervisor/manager or someone from HR, and in almost a third of discussions with co-workers, there was no outcome and, in a small number of cases, there was a negative outcome. It is possible that one of the reasons why respondents in the present study did not report more offers of assistance is because managers and co-workers genuinely did not know what, if anything, they could do. There is also the possibility that managers and colleagues feel that asking a co-worker about potential domestic violence would be seen as intrusive, and that by not calling attention to signs of abuse they were respecting the victim's privacy. This finding lends support to previous research that points to the fact that managers (and co-workers) need training on how to recognise and respond to the signs of abuse (Murray & Powell, 2008).

Given the number of respondents who identified issues related to children as a reason for work disruptions, it could be beneficial for workplaces to consider the role childcare plays in a victim's ability to work and, if possible, to consider providing entitlements that might lessen the difficulty in finding appropriate childcare. While childcare issues are commonly cited in the international literature as being a concern for working women experiencing domestic violence (Moe & Bell, 2004; Swanberg et al., 2006), there were no examples found in the literature of workplaces taking steps to specifically address this concern.

Another concerning, although not surprising, finding was that around half of the respondents reported that their ability to go to work was compromised by physical or emotional health issues. The health ramifications of domestic violence have been well described (Campbell, 2002; Campbell et al., 2002; Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKeown, 2000; Guruge, 2012) and have been shown to have direct, immediate, and long term impacts on victims' ability to work (Swanberg et al., 2005; Swanberg et al., 2006).

Strengths and Limitations

The fact that men had an opportunity to participate in the survey is a strength of this study. While males only accounted for 14 per cent of the sample, this aligns with Breiding et al.'s (2015) assertion that 14 per cent of males will experience serious physical IPV in their lifetime. However, the small number of men who participated in the present study precluded separate analysis of the data according to the sex of the respondent.

There are several further limitations which should be kept in mind when considering the findings from this study. First, the overall sample is relatively small. It is not known how many potential participants did not complete the survey because they had recently resigned, were between jobs, or were currently not in a position to take on employment as a result of an abusive situation. Secondly, the sample does not reflect the full ethnic diversity of New Zealand, being comprised mainly of New Zealand European or Other Europeans, and Maori. This might be because ethnic minority groups are underrepresented in the PSA membership. Thirdly, women under the age of 35 were underrepresented. This could be due to the lower work participation of women with younger age. Statistics New Zealand (2016) has indicated that, in the fourth quarter 2015, the labour force participation rate of women in younger age groups (20-24, 25-29, and 30-34) was about 73 per cent, whereas that of women in older age groups (35-39, 40-49, and 50-54) was about 82 per cent. The other alternative reason for this underrepresentation may be that domestic violence is preventing younger women from returning to work. According to the Annual Report of National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges (2015), 54 per cent of women using refuge services between July 2014 and June 2015 were aged under 35, compared with 41 per cent of women who were 36 years old and above. However, further research to explore this underrepresentation issue would be worthwhile. Representativeness of the sample is an issue that should be addressed in future research.

Conclusion

This study has produced important insights into the impact of domestic violence on the workforce and, while similar studies have been conducted overseas, this is the first study to address this issue in New Zealand. The findings also lend support to spillover theory in that they clearly show that the effects of domestic violence are not confined to the home but have significant impact in the workplace. Finally, in light of the findings, and given that current annual cost of domestic violence to New Zealand employers has been estimated to be at least \$368 million (Kahui, Ku, & Sniveley, 2014), it is imperative that domestic violence is recognised as an issue to be addressed in the workplace and that policies which support victims, perpetrators and co-workers are implemented.

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