



Supporting women to find and keep jobs following domestic violence

Never Stand Still

Arts & Social Sciences

Social Policy Research Centre

Capacity-building messages for managers and staff in *jobactive* services

The issue:

Some women who experience domestic violence may need to find work or change jobs quickly, or may be required by Centrelink to find work upon separation from a violent partner.

Recognising the needs of women affected by violence can help to achieve and sustain employment outcomes.

The Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) may not comprehensively identify where violence is affecting, or is likely to affect, job search capacity. Clients may also disclose domestic violence to trusted employment consultants rather than through the JSCI.

What could employment services do?

Staff awareness: Provide training to staff about domestic violence and recognising the needs of specific clients, and referral processes.

Identify domestic violence as a potential barrier to employment: Create opportunities for clients to disclose domestic violence, for example asking clients whether they have any safety concerns and following up with referrals to Centrelink social workers.

Referrals: Develop comprehensive local information and organisational protocols for referrals. Where clients do disclose, employment consultants should, with clients' consent, support clients to disclose their circumstances to Centrelink social workers or local services.

Identify appropriate job placements: Women affected by violence may have particular safety and support needs which may affect job search and the type of jobs which are appropriate.

Collaboration: Local partnerships between domestic violence services and employment services to provide training and build capacity in employment services would help improve processes to support disclosure and response.

Build on elements of promising practice: Partnerships, personalised assistance, address structural barriers, emphasise client's strengths and capacities.

Understanding domestic violence

Domestic violence involves acts of violence that occur between people who have, or have had, an intimate relationship. It can involve physical, sexual, financial, emotional or psychological tactics, or other abusive behaviours aimed at exerting control. The number of women affected by domestic violence is difficult to identify precisely due to definitional issues and underreporting. However, national data has measured exposure to physical and sexual violence and indicates that “close to 2.2 million women have experienced at least one incident of violence by a male intimate partner: this is one in four women (25.1%)” (Cox, 2015: 79).

Some women who experience domestic violence may need to find work or change jobs quickly, or may be required by Centrelink to find work upon separation from a violent partner. Some women may be unable to return to previous employment because of safety concerns. Although *jobactive* contracts do not provide additional resources to assist clients affected by domestic violence, recognising the needs of women affected by violence can help to achieve and sustain employment outcomes.

Identifying domestic violence

Employment providers may become aware of a client affected by violence, where violence, or the process of leaving a violent relationship, is identified as a barrier to job search in the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI). The Australian Law Reform Commission recommended that the JSCI be changed to separately identify domestic and family violence in 2011, however, this has not yet occurred. As such, the JSCI may not comprehensively identify where violence is affecting, or is likely to affect job search capacity.

Clients may disclose domestic violence to trusted employment consultants rather than through the JSCI. Services could consider developing a simple script which consultants could use to ask clients if they had any safety concerns, and should ensure consultants are aware of the protocol of referring clients with safety concerns to a Centrelink social worker. Approaches to supporting victims of violence should be developed in consultation with domestic violence specialists and Centrelink. Options for clients to request a private appointment with a female employment consultant could also help.

Where clients do disclose, it may be appropriate for the employment service provider to support them by personally contacting a Centrelink social worker or local services on the client's behalf, with client's consent. Others may choose not to disclose. To support client decision making, employment consultants need to maintain understandings of the services and supports provided by Centrelink for victims of domestic violence. These include possible exemptions from job search during times of crisis, and exemptions from child support claims where these would risk aggravating violence.

Identifying appropriate job placements

Women affected by violence may have particular needs which may affect job search and the type of jobs which are appropriate. Domestic violence may have a negative impact on women's confidence and focus in jobseeking. It may also affect their ability to meet employment service appointments, for example where violence prevents women from attending, or where appointments are scheduled in conflict with court or other appointments.

It may take longer to find appropriate employment for clients with high safety needs, or with employment histories which have been limited or disrupted due to violence. Clients affected by violence are more likely to sustain employment outcomes where their safety needs are met. In some cases, where women are at risk of being contacted by perpetrators, adjustments to the physical work environment to ensure safety should be considered. Women may benefit from working in organisations which offer industrial protections for domestic violence, such as paid leave to attend court.

Building capacity through collaboration

Domestic violence and employment service systems usually operate independently from each other, and while collaboration and referrals do occur, employment providers may not have local service lists to assist in referring women affected by violence. Local partnerships between domestic violence services and employment services to provide training and build capacity in employment services would help improve supports for disclosure and response.

Promising practice

Some community agencies have developed innovative practices and programs to promote skills, employability and work readiness for women affected by violence. However, these tend to operate on a smaller scale than provision of services under jobactive. Programs which have been run by WIRE and McAuley in Victoria provide models which could inform larger scale initiatives. Key elements include:

- Partnerships between skilled employment specialists and other specialised community service providers, including in areas of housing and legal assistance.
- Provision of assistance in a safe environment, with small caseloads to ensure personalised assistance.
- Emphasis on overcoming structural barriers that shape women's access to quality employment opportunities and career pathways, and building on women's capacities and strengths rather than focussing on individual deficits.

Examples of promising practice are provided below.

Case Study One: McAuley Community Services for women

McAuley Community Services for Women in Melbourne provides a range of accommodation and supports for women and children escaping family violence, or experiencing homelessness. For around four years, it operated an innovative employment service for women who had lost jobs because of family violence or who were trying to obtain jobs to help to leave violent relationships. Many were still living in their own homes although usually tenuously. The majority were experiencing family violence, homelessness or risk of homelessness and mental health issues. An innovative co-case management approach was used, whereby McAuley workers with skills in employment services and case management co-supported women alongside other community service organisations specializing in areas such as housing and legal assistance. McAuley workers supported and assisted women to search for and find jobs, including developing resumes, identifying transferable skills, coaching and mentoring for interviews, and outfitting through Fitted for Work. The workers were mobile and met women in public spaces rather than in women's homes. When women were offered a job, McAuley staff would provide coaching and mentoring. If invited into the workplace, they could undertake risk assessments of the workplace in order to keep work safe. Caseloads were small by employment service standards.

The McAuley employment program provided tailored responses to women seeking employment following violence. McAuley staff found women were highly motivated to find work. The program served a wider range of women than those using jobactive services, and claimed to achieve high success, although outcomes could take a long time to achieve. While the service was supported through a series of short term grants, it ceased operations due to lack of funding. No area or level of government accepts responsibility for ongoing funding of this innovative program model.

Case Study Two: Women's Information and Referral Exchange (WIRE Women's Information)

The Women's Information and Referral Exchange (WIRE) (Melbourne) provides information, support and referral to women, including on domestic violence and financial security. As well as information and referral, WIRE runs employment workshops, job coaching sessions, and offers WiFi, computers and computer tuition. Employment workshops and job coaching focus on obtaining employment, including information and support around employability and applications and interview techniques. Sessions are conducted with a gendered lens, looking at barriers faced by women, talking about confidence, and adopting a more personal approach than other employment workshops outside of a women specific organisation. In partnership with a registered training organisation, WIRE also offers a work readiness course for women with multi barriers to employment. Facilitators raise issues of domestic violence rather than waiting for women to disclose, and acknowledges that women may also be affected by other forms of sexism and gender discrimination. Content covers the additional barriers to workforce participation women face, and how these can be overcome. Women attending WIRE programs obtain confidence and connection from the safe environment, and recognise that structural gender issues are not individuals' fault. There are frank discussions regarding how the impact of sexism and men's violence against women has affected them and about women's strength and resilience. Women utilising WIRE's employment resources can also access one- on- one support without an appointment, even if they are still dealing with the effects of violence years after it occurred.

For more information:

Cox, P. (2015) *Violence Against Women: Additional analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey ANROWS*, Sydney

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