

# Bumps Along the Road

## Survivors of Domestic Violence Share their Workplace

by E. Joy Mighty and Lori E. Leach

*Les auteures rapportent les résultats d'une étude sur les relations entre la violence familiale et le milieu de travail*

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***"My ex-husband would call and call. And I was so scared that my supervisor, my director would hear me. And I know that I wouldn't have gotten support and ... that scared me too and I'd say 'Don't call me at work, I have to do my job.'"***

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*et suggèrent que l'impact des problèmes liés à la cette violence peut être étudié en milieu de travail.*

How do women handle or react to their experience of violence at home when they are in the workplace? Do they talk about it to their co-workers and employers? Do they hide it? Do they seek help from employee assistance programs? Do they stay home from work or do they stay at work longer? Do they work less or do they immerse themselves in their work more?

These are only a few of the questions that we asked ourselves as we tried to understand what it must be like for women who suffer abuse at home to face the world of work, where tradition often requires them to leave their personal problems at the door and get on with the business at hand. This article describes the experiences of women who participated in a series of focus groups which formed a part of a larger exploratory study of relationships between domestic violence and the workplace. Survivors' perceptions of their workplace experiences in light of their experience of violence at home was the focus of the study. We use the analogy of driving to emphasize the difficulties these women experience

in their everyday work life. What might be a casual Sunday drive for most people becomes a hazardous journey, full of unexpected twists and turns navigated without a road map.

Nine women participated in the survivors' focus group. At the time, only three of the nine survivors were employed; however, they were all employed during the time of their reported abuse.

They came from different social class backgrounds and had different career patterns. They all identified domestic violence as spousal in nature, that is, husband as abuser and wife as victim. The main areas in which survivors perceived their experiences at home as affecting the workplace were performance, absenteeism, promotion, interpersonal relations, and orientation to the workplace. It is clear that the road to productive, fulfilling, rewarding lives in the world of work can be treacherous for abused women who must overcome numerous roadblocks, detours, unforeseen potholes, and other bumps along the rocky road.

### **Performance: detours along the road**

With the exception of two women, all the survivors perceived that the experience of violence in the home had a negative impact on their productivity. They were unable to concentrate or were so preoccupied that, ultimately, their preoccupation adversely affected their productivity.

One survivor reported:

*Well ... when you're thinking about everything that's going on at home and all the bills you have to pay, by the time you're thinking*

*about what you're doing at work you're doing the totally wrong thing or you've done a slack job or whatever ... even though it only happened three or four times a day to let your mind wonder back home ... by the end of the day it's an hour you've wasted. (Survivors' Transcript, Sections 10 and 11)*

Most of the women reported that phone call interruptions from their abusive partners contributed greatly to a decrease in their productivity. One survivor recalled her experiences:

*And the phone calls! I mean my ex-husband would call and call. And I was so scared that my supervisor, my director would, you know, hear me. And I know that I wouldn't have gotten support and ... that scared me too and I'd say "Don't call me at work, I have to do my job." And he'd say "Well, I've got news for you too. Where am I going to get the money to play hockey?" You know. But you have this constant ...; it was hard. (Survivors' Transcript, Section 15).*

By contrast, two of the nine survivors in the group perceived their experience of violence at home as having a positive impact on their productivity. Both described trying to work at 110 per cent instead of at 100 per cent because of fear of losing their job and because they wanted to hide their problem.

*Well, like she said, I was giving 110 per cent because I know that if I didn't I was going to get in trouble at work too. (Survivors' Transcript, Section 29).*

*... I thought if I wasn't up to par they might ask me something. [I gave 110 per cent] to hide. (Survivors' Transcript, Section 25)*

# Experiences

## **Absenteeism: blind corners take us out of sight**

While managers and co-workers perceived absenteeism to be a negative workplace effect of domestic violence, the experience of the survivors did not validate this perception. Survivors were aware of others' perceptions of their contribution to absenteeism. They knew, for example, that others believed that survivors' absence from work caused the organization to incur expenses to replace them with casual fill-in staff. They knew too, that others believed that, because of the crisis in abused employees' home life, they could not be relied upon to be productive. In addition, they knew that others felt survivors were so often preoccupied with what was taking place at home, that they were effectively "absent."

Participants identified two primary factors which accounted for their absence. The first was the reality of being responsible for child care and the second was the need for time off during the transition period when leaving an abusive relationship. They saw their absence as being no more than the occasional sick days that other employees take. In addition, they did not appear to count taking a few hours as being absent, especially if the reason for being away was to handle child care problems.

## **Promotion: roadblocks and unsafe territory**

Survivors varied in their perceptions of promotion being denied them because of their experience of violence at home. One woman claimed her promotion was granted to someone else based on her performance appraisal which she felt was unfair due to her situation. "If it wasn't for what happened to me, I'd probably be an X officer or a Y officer" (Survivors' Transcript, Sect. 102).

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By contrast, another woman reported that she would have been unable to manage a promotion due to the additional stress it would have put on her. She did not have the strength and confidence to cope with the additional responsibilities that promotion inevitably brings. Confidence and self-esteem were reported as critical factors here. Another woman stated: "I didn't realize that I was smart enough to do somebody else's job. I didn't realize. So now I know I can do it, but before I didn't" (Survivors' Transcript, Section 108).

In general, however, the participants' experiences suggest that as long as the survivor is in the abusive situation there is likely to be some negative impact manifested in her performance which will prohibit her from receiving the promotion. In addition, stigmas or stereotypes may also be attached to the survivor so that even if she finally leaves the abusive situation, and is therefore no longer under the same stress, it may be difficult for her to be seen as equally productive and worthwhile by co-workers and managers alike.

a decrease in the survivors' participation, abused employees' anti-social or isolating moods and behaviours, including aggression, and the tendency for abused employees to become very dependent on other employees. Reduced team morale was perceived as becoming a serious problem when the experience of one abused employee filtered through the office and into customer service.

Lack of trust was identified as another important manifestation of the negative impact of domestic violence on interpersonal relationships, particularly on team morale. Lack of trust was primarily associated with their concern about confidentiality, their embarrassment, and fear of job loss. All the survivors also perceived that the decrease in morale was perpetuated by stigmas and stereotypes co-workers carry about abused women and domestic violence as a whole. Some survivors experienced these stereotypes from managers as well as from co-workers who often admitted to not understanding why women stay in abusive relationships.

*But see with me, I'm not violent*

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## **Interpersonal relationships: negotiating traffic circles**

All the survivors felt that interpersonal relationships were affected by their presence in the workplace. Participants perceived that domestic violence negatively affected the morale of the team. In particular, this negative impact was described in terms of

*but I wanted to shake her and say "Wake up," you know. And ah, there's so many things that happened with me. One co-worker looked at me with, it was like, "You probably deserved it." Another one looked at me as if to say I was a second class citizen because I was in a transition house, you know, and thank God two other*

*co-workers were there before me. So not only did I get it at home, I got it at work.* (Survivors' Transcript, Section 67)

Survivors' sullen or gloomy mood was also identified as a primary negative effect on the workplace. Some of the words that they used to describe this effect included "withdrawn," "isolated," "keep to myself," "shy," "aloof." Survivors explained that these

derstand why managers were ambivalent toward them. They felt that while managers often wanted to be supportive, they were also faced with the pressures of fulfilling their responsibilities toward other employees, as well as managing their time effectively.

Survivors spoke often of their disappointment in what they perceived to be a lack of team support in helping them to deal with their problems.

Even without disclosure, survivors felt that in their experience empathy could have been shown and, if their work was normally at an acceptable level, then offering them some compassion and validation as good employees would have greatly assisted in giving them a sense of belonging to a team. There were, however, two experiences of positive co-worker support. In one case, co-workers provided considerable support in assisting an abused employee to physically move her belongings and children out of the abusive home during business hours when her husband was at work.

The personal space needed between people in the work space was also identified as a factor which affected interpersonal relationships. Survivors identified their inability to cope with close quarters during working hours because of their need for actual space and for privacy so that if they were not working at full capacity, they could hide it from other co-workers.

The survivors perceived fear or concern for their safety as a primary impact of domestic violence on the

workplace. Fear was defined as an unease about the possibility of physical harm by the abusive partner. They also perceived a decrease in the safety level at work on three dimensions. The first was the safety of clients with whom they dealt. The second dimension of safety was discussed in terms of the operation of dangerous, heavy machinery. Both of these aspects of safety were seen as outcomes of survivors' inability to concentrate and their inattention to their job. The third safety dimension was the fear of the abuser. They described being constantly fearful that they would lose their job, that the abuser would come to the workplace, that they would return home to find that he had harmed the children, that someone at work would discover what was happening to them at home or that they would be judged for their change in behaviour or job performance.

#### **Orientation to the workplace: driving a familiar road**

All survivors viewed their job as a very important source of stability in their life, albeit some were aware that they could not handle the workload because of the stress of their abuse at home. Even though they were fearful of job loss, the complexity of what was happening in their lives made them lose not interest in the job itself, but a desire to learn anything new since the job was often too much for them to handle.

Although the workplace often became a refuge from their abuse at home, most survivors were ambivalent about the safety of this refuge in terms of their experiences of stigmas, judgement, abusive phone calls, pressure from management, and the constant fear that they would not be able to maintain their positions.

#### **Disclosure: hidden corners are dangerous**

Survivors discussed the difficulty of disclosure. How, for example, does one disclose the fact of her abuse without having it affect her job secu-



Sonja Andic, "La Estrella/El Diablo," collage, 24.5 x 20 cm, 1997

behaviours were caused by exhaustion, fear of losing their job, the need to hide the problem, and shame. Many survivors also felt embarrassment, frustration, and unhappiness.

Many survivors became very insecure, dependent, and "needy." They perceived that the mood of managers and co-workers was also affected. They described co-workers as complaining, cold and distant, as well as, at times, very friendly and understanding. Survivors claimed to un-

rity? The difficulty was compounded by lack of trust in management, co-workers, and the organization as well as survivors' perception of the lack of confidentiality among employees. Other questions associated with the difficulty of disclosure were: "Where does one disclose?" and "What does one disclose?"

Participants perceived that the problems arising from the impact of domestic violence on the workplace were aggravated by some of the employee attitudes encountered. Survivors described their experiences with having to deal with the stigma of being abused and being stereotyped or judged by their managers and co-workers.

*I wasn't sure whether to tell them or not. I mean, sometimes I would call in to say that I can't come in today and even though my supervisor wouldn't ask me anything, I could tell that he knew why I couldn't come in. I could just hear the disgust in his voice as if he was saying, "woman, why don't you solve your marriage problems?" The worst thing was going to work the next day. I used to feel as if everybody knew and everybody was pointing a finger at me, blaming me for everything, like not doing my share of the work. I would feel so awful and miserable for the rest of the day. (Survivor's Transcript, Section 65)*

### **Survivors' needs: making the journey better**

Survivors identified several problems associated with their need for such things as time off, child care, structure in their schedule, and "time-out" or rest periods. They felt that many co-workers and managers perceived that these needs were unreasonable and should not be satisfied by the workplace when there was a job to be done.

Time off refers to the need for paid time away from work to arrange for child care, moving, appointments, and other personal matters necessitated by the crisis of domestic vio-

lence, especially during the transition period when the abused is attempting to leave the abusive situation. It was a primary, recurring issue for survivors, many of whom had experienced an unfulfilled need for at least a day or two to move out of their home and into a shelter or an apartment. With the exception of one experience where the supportive behaviour of the manager and co-workers was described as an exception to the norm, the survivors were forced to use vacation time during their time of crisis. They were angry and frustrated about the experience of using their valuable vacation time to deal with domestic violence when, according to one survivor, "... you're going to need a vacation even more because you're so wiped out!" (Survivors' Transcript, Section 185).

Child care was a primary problem identified by survivors. Most survivors described situations where fear for their children negatively impacted their ability to participate fully in their work or increased the need for time off to attend to their children's needs. Eventually, for two of the survivors it came down to a choice between the job and child care. As one survivor explained in frustration:

*It would be, well I worked from 8:00 o'clock in the morning until 4:30 or 5:00 o'clock at night ... and I don't know how many times I would call him and my older daughter would answer the phone and I'd ask "Where's Daddy?" and she was just young at the time and she'd say he was sleeping and this was about 2:00 [p.m.] and she'd say "We're watching TV" or whatever, and then I would have to say, "You go wake your father up." And she'd try to wake him up and I'd always end up leaving work and going across, making myself look really bad at work you know, and either getting him up out of bed or taking the kids to my mom. You know, and I mean I shouldn't; my mother raised her family and my kids have a mother and a father. I didn't feel like my mother*

*should have to raise my kids too. So I just left the job. I just left it.... I could be on welfare and make sure my kids are looked after, or work and have something happen to them; those were my two choices. (Survivors' Transcript, Sect. 57)*

Although survivors wanted the flexibility to take time off to attend to personal matters that arose from being abused, paradoxically, they also expressed the need for structure in their work schedule that would allow them to have predictable hours. One survivor reported becoming very anxious as the end of the day approached because of fear that she would not get her work done on time to leave at 5:00 in order to get home when she was expected by her abusive husband.

It was unanimously agreed by survivors that exhaustion played a major role in their ability to be effective and was itself a primary problem:

*Like you were so exhausted by the time you went to bed, completely drained and I mean for those of us, most of us have kids; by the time we do the dishes and try to spend at least an hour with the kids, I mean you were just completely wiped out. (Survivors' Transcript, Section 3)*

Having identified the problems associated with dealing with domestic violence issues in the workplace, the participants offered solutions that they perceived would reduce the impact of these problems. These included assistance to employees, increased education and sensitivity training, and the establishment of appropriate policies and procedures for dealing with domestic violence as an organizational issue.

### **EAP assistance: a traffic director is a great help**

Survivors identified the need to increase and improve EAP (Employee Assistance Programs) to make them more specialized and more effective for handling abuse issues. This sug-

gestion, according to the participants, would entail extending the available hours for EAP beyond Monday to Friday, since domestic violence does not only occur during the traditional work week.

All survivors were aware of EAP programs within their organizations. However only one chose to use the available program. The other survivors did not choose EAP because of the perceived lack of confidentiality in the process.

*I think one of the problems people are running into ... [is] confidentiality. I worked in ... an area, see I had people around me that knew. And EAP was like that ... fear of them keeping it to themselves ... fear of keeping things confidential. I think they should ... check the references before you go there, or even outsourcing, outside of the company, government, or whatever it is. (Survivors' Transcript, Section 168)*

#### Education, training, and policies: coping with unsafe road conditions

All participants unanimously agreed that there was a need for education and training to increase awareness and sensitize all employees to the workplace issues arising from domestic violence. They felt that managers in particular needed to be trained to cope with abused employees and the impact of domestic violence on the workplace.

All participants also agreed that just as there are policies about sick leave and bereavement, or funeral leave, so, too, there should exist a special leave for employees who are experiencing domestic violence. Other suggestions included:

- a new time off policy specifically for the transition period when the survivor is leaving her home and the abusive relationship;

- a policy which allows time off for counselling (outside the or-

ganization) and for appointments to make medical, legal, and child care arrangements;

- the inclusion of information about abuse in the organization's hiring kit or as part of an introductory kit about the organization.

#### Conclusion

Organizations can assist in ensuring that the journey for their employees is a safe one. Failure to do so results in negative consequences for both the employee and the organization as a whole. Organizations have a social responsibility to contribute to the elimination of a societal problem that threatens to erode the quality of life of their employees before, during, and after the work day.

In their focus group, managers recognized the need for organizations to place more emphasis on managing people not resources. Specifically, this included redefining the role of a successful manager and treatment of individual employees as valuable human beings. One manager explained:

*Have we looked at the employees lately? Have we got 18 people out on stress leave that work for this individual? At \$100,000 we have to start considering how well that person has been a manager of people not of things. No one would think of throwing away 100 barrels of oil but we seem to ignore it when we have four people out on long-term disability in the same department. Coincidence? (Managers' Transcript, Sect. 180)*

Domestic violence is not just an issue for women. It is a widespread and critical social problem that is not only the prerogative of the police or social services agencies to solve. If you were to lose control of your vehicle and go off the road, would you rely solely on the police to help, or would you hope that the driver of the car following would stop to give you a hand?

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