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# Domestic Violence in the Workplace

Amanda Fallin  
*University of Kentucky*

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I am a senior nursing student, and I have been a research intern with Dr. Debra Anderson for six semesters. Dr. Anderson's area of expertise is issues facing the homeless population. I have had the privilege of assisting her with her current project, which is an investigation of domestic violence in the workplace amongst homeless and battered women. I

have been involved with multiple aspects of the study, including conducting literature reviews, interviewing participants, conducting and transcribing interviews, and analyzing data. In February of 2007, I presented our results at the Southern Nursing Research Conference in Galveston, Texas. I also plan to participate in the Undergraduate Showcase in late April. I am continually thankful to Dr. Anderson for all the incredible learning opportunities.

#### Mentor:

**Debra Gay Anderson,  
Ph.D., A.P.R.N., B.C. Associate Professor,  
College of Nursing**



Our program of research focuses on vulnerable populations and violence. We have studied both homeless and non-homeless populations regarding their experiences of violence throughout their lifespan, from childhood through adulthood. The violence has included physical, emotional, and sexual abuse from parents, other adult relatives, intimate partners, strangers, co-workers and bosses. This particular study examined the experiences of workplace violence in the lives of homeless and battered women. Ms. Fallin has focused her efforts on the effects of domestic violence at the workplace and she reports that important work in this paper. She had her work accepted for presentation at the Southern Nursing Research Society's meeting in Galveston, Texas earlier this year and we will submit the project findings for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Amanda Fallin has worked with our team for three years and has been active in every part of the research process, from data collection to data analysis and dissemination of the findings. It has been my privilege to work with a student as talented and insightful as Ms. Fallin and I enthusiastically endorse her work for publication in *Kaleidoscope*. (Funding sources have included the National Institute of Nursing Research, National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, and the University of Kentucky).



#### Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pervasive problem that follows victims from the home into the workplace. Many women who experience violence in their homes are also harassed at work and are abused in the workplace. For the current study, thirty women who reported a history of workplace violence were recruited from a homeless women's shelter. Of the participants, thirteen experienced domestic violence in the workplace, and this paper focuses on the results obtained from those thirteen respondents. This paper also discusses the link between poverty and homelessness, intimate partner violence, and workplace violence.

#### Background

##### *Intimate Partner Violence and Workplace Violence*

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pervasive problem that follows victims from the home into the workplace. Many women who experience violence in their homes are also harassed at work and are abused in the workplace. According to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) (2001), 16% of workplace

homicides are perpetrated by an intimate partner. In 1994, Roper Starch interviewed 100 executives from Fortune 1,000 companies on behalf of Liz Claiborne, and respondents believed domestic violence affected profits more than AIDS, homelessness, and lack of health care (Liz Claiborne Inc., 1994). Intimate partner abuse adversely affects the victim's ability to perform in the workplace. Victims of IPV are more likely to suffer from absenteeism, tardiness, and distraction in the workplace than persons not affected by IPV (Reeves & O'Leary-Kelly, 2007).

The Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence conducted a survey from July to September 2005 of 1,200 currently employed men and women. Approximately twenty percent of the respondents to that survey indicated that they had suffered from IPV. Of the victims, sixty-four percent reported issues in the workplace resulting from the IPV. Fifty seven percent were distracted on the job, 40 percent experienced harassment at work, and 21 percent were terminated (CAEPV, 2006). Additionally, women who experience chronic abuse have more health problems, which adversely affects their ability to work (Staggs & Riger, 2005). IPV affects more than the individual involved; there is a cost to co-workers and to the workplace as a whole. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that, in 1995, victims of intimate partner physical abuse lost 7.2 days of work per incident. The estimated lost workplace productivity of victims of IPV was \$727.8 million in 1995 (CDC, 2006).

## Purpose

The purpose of the overall study, of which this paper is a subset, was to identify the types of violence and the risks of exposure to violence experienced by women who are homeless or living in domestic violence shelters. The focus of this paper is to (1) identify types of domestic abuse that homeless women are experiencing in the workplace and (2) identify factors contributing to incidences of domestic violence in the workplace.

## Sample

A purposive sample of thirty women was recruited in the original study from two homeless women's shelters in a mid-sized city in Kentucky. Both shelters offer basic lodging, food, and healthcare services. One of the shelters also contains an intensive detoxification and substance abuse rehabilitation program. The women were given a modest payment of \$25 for their participation. For inclusion in the study, the women had to have experienced workplace violence, be over the age of 18, and be able to speak English. At the time of the abuse, the women were employed in various settings, including restaurants, retail stores, and offices. Thirteen of the 30 women (43 percent) interviewed reported

experiencing abuse perpetrated by a current or intimate partner. The results presented in this paper focus on the thirteen participants who experienced domestic violence at the workplace.

## Methods

Approval for the study was obtained from the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting it. Intensive interviewing was used to collect data for this qualitative study using the focused, semi-structured, interview guide shown here:

## Interview Guide

### Opening Question:

Please describe your most recent episode of workplace violence or harassment.

### Probes:

1. What time of day did the episode take place?
2. Were there any witnesses to the episode?
3. What was your relationship to the perpetrator (current or past intimate partner)?
4. Was alcohol or drug use involved in the episode?
5. Did you notify law enforcement, and if so, what was the outcome?
6. Was a weapon used during the episode?
7. Did you notify your employer, and if so, what was the outcome?
8. What preventative measures did you take?
9. Did you decide to leave the abuser (if the abuser was a current intimate partner)?
10. Are you still employed at the location where the abuse took place? If no, did the abuse influence your decision to leave?
11. Did anyone intervene during or after the episode?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Interviews were conducted face-to-face by two doctoral students and an undergraduate research assistant. Although the location was negotiable based upon participant preference, all the interviews occurred on-site at the shelter. The interviews were tape recorded, and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. At the conclusion of the interview, the participant was given a modest payment of \$25.

The original interview guide was developed based upon an extensive literature review and questions were added throughout the study as new topics emerged. Additionally, interviewers, at their discretion, explored unanticipated issues that arose. Each tape was transcribed after the interview, and a codebook was developed based upon the interviews and emerging themes. Atlas-ti software was used to manage the

qualitative data. The tapes and transcripts were kept in a locked filing cabinet, and access was restricted to the primary investigator and three research assistants.

It must be noted that the interview guide was revised as common themes unforeseen by the research team emerged in the first group of interviews. Furthermore, the results are based upon the participants' self-report of workplace violence, and cannot be verified. The study results are applicable to the participants, and cannot be generalized to another population.

## Results

Thirteen of the 30 women (43 percent) interviewed were abused by a current or past intimate partner. The abuse either occurred in the workplace, or directly impacted job stability or performance. Eight of the 13 women (61.5 percent) were abused by a current intimate partner, and five (38.5%) were abused by a past partner. Four incidents of abuse occurred during the day shift (between the hours of 7 am – 3 pm), four on the evening shift (3 pm – 11 pm), and two during the night shift (11 pm – 7 am). Four major categories of data emerged from these qualitative interviews: type of abuse, alcohol/drug and weapon use, employer support, and law enforcement support. The four categories are explained below.

### *Type of Abuse*

The women experienced different types of intimate partner violence at the workplace. The major type of abuse encountered by the women was physical assault. Ten women reported physical abuse, including biting, striking with an object, and hitting. The abuse had significant ramifications, including scars, hospitalization, and absence from work. One participant stated, "He pushed me, shoved me around, or grabbed me by the hair of the head."

Nine participants in this study experienced stalking/harassing communication at the workplace by their significant other. In the state of Kentucky, stalking is defined as "(engaging) in an intentional course of conduct directed at a specific person or persons which seriously alarms, annoys, intimidates, or harasses the person or persons which serves no legitimate purpose. The course of conduct shall be that which would cause a reasonable person to suffer mental distress." Additionally, Kentucky state law defines "harassing communication" as "(communicating) with a person, anonymously or otherwise...in a manner which causes annoyance and serves no purpose of legitimate communication." (National Center for Victims of Crime, n.d.). However, for the purpose of this study, "harassing communication" and "stalking" were classified together. A participant who experienced stalking/harassing communication stated, "He'd call every five minutes. You know, you can't be productive in a job when you

are getting threatening phone calls every five minutes, and I'm the one answering the phone and he's screaming and hollering at me over the phone, or he's showing up...you just, you can't work like that."

Five of the women were verbally abused using profanities and derogatory insults, such as those reported by this participant, "He would curse me...and 'you ain't good for nothing', and my self-esteem was this low. I could crawl under it." Some women experienced more than one type of workplace related abuse. "He's been to every job I've had since the day I met the man. So I can't really say that there's not one he hasn't been to, to threaten, shove, cuss." Another participant stated, "And he used to get really jealous when I wouldn't get off on time and he would come up and sit in the parking lot and wait for me to get out, come in and bug me, wanting me to come out and talk to him...I would go outside. Sometimes he would smack me, sometimes he would spit."

### *Weapon Use and Alcohol and Drug Involvement*

Four of the 13 women reported that their intimate partner used a weapon during the abuse, such as a knife or gun. According to one participant, "He had pulled a gun on me before and stopped me dead in my tracks, because I didn't want to get shot." A second woman stated, "He always carried the knife with him, but he didn't ever actually, he'd always just threaten, you know, he'd shoot me, or kill me, or cut me, it was always something." Yet another said, "He took a shot gun and blew out the antique mirror on my grandmother's dresser and burned my favorite teddy bear."

There was a high correlation between alcohol and drug use and workplace abuse. Nine women (69 percent) reported alcohol or drug use by the abuser. According to one participant, "he (was) out there drunk...lying on top of the car, hollering through the windows 'I'm going to kill you'." Another stated, "Sometimes, if he was drinking or something, he would get physical, and...smack me around a little bit." A third woman reported, "So he come in one night, drinking. He was a wino, I remember he always drank Thunderbird Wine. And he come in, I sat down on the couch, and he just all the sudden turned over and he had bit my nose. And it left teeth marks." Four of the women (31 percent) reported personal alcohol or drug abuse. "Well I'm an alcoholic, my drinking got worse after...it."

### *Employer Support*

In some instances, the abuser intended to sabotage the woman's employment or educational opportunities. "On purpose he would come approximately 10 til or 5 til 12, because the parents pick the children up at 12...and he wanted to make sure that, that he was causing problems and the parents might report something."

Another participant stated, “He never wanted me to work...he wouldn’t say, ‘You can’t work,’ but there was always manipulation, there was always verbal abuse about it.”

Employers were not always supportive of the abused women, even when the abuse occurred during working hours. For the purpose of this study, employer support was considered when the employer was aware of the abuse. Employers who were knowledgeable about the abuse were labeled either “supportive” or “non-supportive.” “Non-supportive” actions taken by employers could include ignoring the situation, threatening the victim with job loss, or terminating the victim. “Supportive” actions could range from verbal expressions of sympathy to taking action to protect the victim, such as contacting law enforcement. Five participants in the study stated that their employer was non-supportive, compared to only one who reported support from the boss.

Five women were terminated from their job as a direct result of the abuse. “It just got so bad, him screaming and yelling at the work, and the boss was just like, ‘I just can’t have it...see that he’s locked up and not coming here on the property...or you’ll just have to leave.’ And ended up I lost my job and it was a good job for a mortgage company.” One participant reported, “I started dating a gentleman and he would have people drive by to see if I was there. Then he begin coming in every day, he would ask my boss and call to see if I would be at work, my schedule would be, when my days off would be, and got to a point where they wanted to fire me over it.” According to another woman, “One of the other girls would answer the phone and he would think it was me and he would threaten, ‘I’ll get you when you walk out tonight. You can’t hide from me forever.’ You know, that went on for two weeks, my boss was getting really upset. And you know...and even after he knew I wasn’t coming to that door, he started coming to the back door and that eventually led to me getting dismissed from my job.”

Although the employers were not supportive, some participants received support from their co-workers. Two of the women discussed a lack of support from co-workers, whereas four received help or support from co-workers. According to one participant who was supported, “I’ve had a couple of them walk with me to my car after that. You know, go out the back door with, make sure I got out.” However, another recalled, “I had told a couple coworkers that I worked with, beside everyday ... how abusive he was and how he was out of his head, those two were with me, when he pulled up and saw him cause they took off running...they was afraid he might have a gun.”

### ***Police Support***

The police were involved in the majority (8) of the incidents. For the purpose of this study, police support was considered when law enforcement was aware of the abuse. Police officers who were aware of the abuse were labeled either “supportive” or “non-supportive.” “Non-supportive” actions taken by the police could include ignoring the situation or punishing the victim. “Supportive” actions attempt to protect the victim, and could range from providing information regarding shelters to arresting the perpetrator. Six of the women reported that the police were supportive, two stated that the police were not supportive, and five did not specify. “He just had me petrified. But you know, I called the cops and everything, and told them what was going on, and they said, ‘Well, he actually has to come to your home. He actually has to knock on your door, then you can call us. Other than that there, there is nothing we can do. He actually hasn’t did anything to you yet.’”

### **Discussion**

#### ***The Link Between Homelessness, Intimate Partner Violence, and Job Instability***

The participants in this study were residing in homeless shelters at the time of interview. Homelessness and poverty may increase a woman’s risk of experiencing domestic violence (Boris et al., 2002; Wenzel et al., 2004). In a study of sixty homeless persons, aged 18-21, Boris and colleagues (2002) found that seventy-two percent had been in a physically violent relationship. On average, the participants had endured two abusive intimate partners, and one reported having experienced abuse in twenty previous relationships. Poverty adds to the risk of domestic violence among homeless women. Based on interviews with 408 women living in Section 8 housing and 402 residing in shelters, fifteen percent of the participants reported intimate partner violence in the last six months (Wenzel et al., 2004). Furthermore, in previous studies investigating homeless women, participants have indicated that they have experienced instances of workplace violence (Anderson & Rayens, 2004; Hatton, 2001).

For low income women, IPV is negatively associated with job stability (Riger et al., 2004; Oslon & Pavetti, 1996). Victims of IPV who are of low socioeconomic status are placed in a precarious financial situation. They almost invariably are dependent on each paycheck for basic needs, such as rent payments, childcare, and food. Compounding the problem, victims of IPV may be terminated as a direct result of the abuse. A participant who was terminated reported, “I was raising my boys on that income, so I didn’t only, you know, I didn’t only lose my job I lost support for my children, I had

to go on welfare, food stamps, you know, a lot of things happened, were the outcome of that.” If a woman dependent upon a low wage job is unexpectedly fired, she may find herself unable to keep up with financial obligations. The loss of a job can be the catalyst for a downhill spiral for these women.

### **Decision to Involve Law Enforcement**

Most of the women in the study who contacted the police received support, however, many never involved law enforcement. There are several factors involved in the decision to contact law enforcement. Negative encounters with the police, or hearing discouraging stories, can dissuade IPV victims from contacting law enforcement. Others may refrain out of fear that the abuse may escalate. A participant reported, “I’d called the police a lot and that’s what got him to start stalking me.” Another respondent stated, “He went to jail for 30 days at the (name of jail) and when he got out he was at home worse than ever. He was afraid to come to the workplace, but he would beat me when I got out.”

Still other women consider IPV to be a shameful or painful family secret, and are reluctant to disclose the situation. One woman stated, “I was pretty ashamed of it back then. I really couldn’t...I didn’t want people to know...I didn’t realize how much secrets I kept...I wasn’t able to be as honest as I should have been...cause I had a lot of shame and guilt.” The women may also experience low self-esteem as a result of the abuse (Wolf et al., 2003). A lack of self esteem can lead women to believe they have done something to deserve the abuse. “Little things that...triggered...I would maybe ask him for a couple of dollars to get a pack of cigarettes...he would like fly off the handle about a pack of cigarettes and...I’m like...maybe I did ask wrong. I was blaming me.”

Low income women have special factors to take into consideration. In some instances, women may refrain from involving law enforcement out of a sense of economic dependence. Women also may not contact the police out of fear of discrimination against persons of lower socioeconomic status or race (Wolf et al., 2003). On the other hand, factors that may increase the likelihood of police involvement include having children, being subjected to severe violence, and suffering an injury (Bonomi et al., 2006). One woman reported an instance of abuse that left physical evidence, and she stated, “So I secretly went out the door and had to maybe call the police. And they come, and they see the mark and they took him to jail.”

### **Recommendations for Employers**

An overwhelming majority of employers are aware of the devastating impact intimate partner violence can

have on a victim’s ability to perform in the workplace. Sixty-six percent of corporate leaders participating in the Liz Claiborne study believed that “a company’s financial performance will benefit from addressing the issue of domestic violence among its employees.” (Liz Claiborne, 1994, pg. 3). Eighty percent responded that IPV pervades every aspect of a victim’s life. However, although employers are aware of the relevance of IPV to the workplace, they still believe the problem is of a personal nature and the primary responsibility lies within the family (Liz Claiborne, 1994). One participant in the current study revealed, “So then I started dating this guy...and he would try to fight me on the job and then (employer’s name) would just stand there and look. He wouldn’t help...it was just like he would hear him arguing at me and he wouldn’t come to help...kind of like you just see something on the streets and you just shy away.” Another respondent stated, “They was just letting it go on. They just hushed, swept it under the rug...if somebody fought on the job.”

Findings of our study confirm that victims of IPV experience an overwhelming lack of assistance from their employers. This is unfortunate, because employers are in a prime position to support victims of IPV. Persons in positions of power should take steps to create a supportive working atmosphere. In order to adequately support victims of IPV, management must take an active role.

The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has recently published several recommendations for creating safe and supportive workplaces. First, employers must be dedicated to eliminating violence in their workplaces. If possible, management should provide multi-disciplinary assistance, including relevant medical, psychological, and legal services. Second, a specific workplace violence policy should be developed and implemented (NIOSH, 2006).

Unfortunately, not all workplaces in the United States adhere to these guidelines. In a recent survey of work sites, 70 percent of work sites did not have formal training regarding workplace violence. Of the workplaces with a policy, only 44 percent addressed domestic violence (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). Finally, employers should invest in the health and safety of their employees (NIOSH, 2006). Currently, 73 million employees work at a site without any security staff, and 69 percent of workplaces do not control public access (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005).

A participant in our study stated, in reference to her employer, “When the guy was there sitting he should have called the police and had the police come pick him

up...that would have been trespassing, he didn't have no business there, he was stalking me...the boss I worked for, he should have done a whole lot more...to keep him off of the property." Companies should also restrict information about employees. Any phone or email requests for information about specific employees should not be answered. "And he went to a temp service and asked for me, and they didn't know he was violent...he was there waiting when I got...off." Support from the employer can make an impact on the trajectory of the abuse. Employer assistance is critical for the safety of abused women in the workplace.

## Recommendations

The current study was a pilot study; therefore, it should be replicated on a larger scale. Perhaps another study could span multiple cities or encompass a larger sample size. Additionally, subsequent studies should investigate a link between domestic violence in the workplace and eventual homelessness. Alternatively, future research on the effect of domestic violence in the workplace could be geared toward women working in high risk areas or low-income jobs, including retail jobs, offices, or restaurants. Research results should be presented to employers to increase awareness of the problem of workplace violence.

## Conclusion

Domestic violence extends from home into the workplace. Homeless or impoverished women may be at increased risk to experience intimate partner abuse, and this abuse leads to decreased job stability. Professionals who routinely work with homeless women or victims of domestic abuse must include interventions to promote job retention for these women. Also, future studies are needed to develop and evaluate various policy changes to decrease the risk of domestic violence transcending into the workplace.

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