

Discussion Paper

The impact of workplace violence on women's economic security and leadership opportunities

Violence against women remains a common social and economic problem. While there are many issues associated with such violence and there is an urgent and ongoing need to address the causes, this paper focusses mainly on the effect of violence in the workplace on women's economic security.

Workplace violence has serious implications for women's workforce participation, promotion and income. It influences attendance, performance and the willingness to apply for, and get, a promotion which all undermine the economic security of women. The psychological and sometimes physical injuries can also be critical in undermining a women's ability to maximise her potential in the workforce.

Other research, including from eS4W, shows that gaining and maintaining paid work is fundamental to women's financial well being. It protects against housing stress; it aids greater wellbeing throughout the life course including the creation of superannuation.ⁱ

Workplace violence has as its source, gender inequality in society.

Research cited by Workplace Equality and Respect shows that *"violence against women is much more likely to occur when power, opportunities and resources are not shared equally between men and women, and when women are not valued and respected as much as men."*ⁱⁱ

In society and the workplace in particular, the WER cites four key drivers of violence against women:

- Condoning violence against women;
- Men's control of decision making and limits to women's independence;
- Rigid gender roles and stereotypes about masculinity and femininity; and
- Men disrespecting women to bond with other men.

Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick said, "domestic violence is a workplace issue".

This pertinent but simple fact means that many of the issues associated with workplace violence need to be addressed by changes in attitudes in broader society. In simple terms, many men bring their prejudices and discriminations from home into work.

Eliminating violence against women in society will address the workplace violence issues.

United Nations Women noted *“Violence negatively affects women’s general well-being and prevents women from fully participating in society. It impacts their families, their community, and the country at large. It has tremendous costs, from greater strains on health care to legal expenses and losses in productivity.”* ⁱⁱⁱ

According to research by UNESCO, violence against women and girls threatens the rights to which they are all entitled to: the right to education, the right to work, the right to physical and mental well-being and the right to equality.

The UNESCO report cited work by the Spotlight Initiative is committed to shift people’s minds and attitudes by:

- drawing attention to gendered discrimination;
- working to change the social norms and practices;
- increasing public awareness;
- creating space for activists and survivors to share their stories; and
- educating communities about sexual and gender based violence.^{iv}

It is well established that a range of key indicators on the labour market show women experiencing a lower rate of workplace attainment than men and that this feeds directly into the gender pay and superannuation gaps. In particular, women have a lower workforce participation than men, work fewer paid hours, hold less senior and management positions than men, and retire (leave the paid workforce) earlier than men.

Each of these undermines the economic security of women; in total they feed into a significant erosion of the ability of all women to gain financial security.

Workplace changes

While societal issues are the key reason why there is workplace violence against women, workplaces can implement changes to tackle the problem. It requires the leadership group in each workplace to acknowledge the problem, which may not always be obvious.

Workplace Equality and Respect have outlined how change to be driven. It notes that *“Every workplace conversation, policy and action has the potential to either reinforce or challenge gender inequality and the kinds of attitudes and norms that drive violence. All workplaces can influence the structures, norms and practice that support ongoing gender inequality in Australia.”*

It further notes that *“workplaces can drive change by developing policies and practices that proactively support women and men to equally share care responsibilities and unpaid work, take up senior roles and be economically independent.”*

(Un) Paid Domestic Violence Leave

The shortage of paid domestic violence leave has created problems in the workplace for women who are obligated to go to work even in the most trying personal circumstances.

Recent reforms allow for employees to take five days of unpaid domestic leave. While this can be helpful for women as they deal with the myriad of issues associated with violence, the fact that it is unpaid erodes the financial position of women dependent on their weekly pay for basic living costs.

It is encouraging that some employers who recognise the importance of maintaining income have offered paid domestic violence leave.

Eliminating workplace violence of good for business and the economy

Gender equality is not only good for women's economic security but it is for economic growth. At a time when the economy is still subdued, policies aimed at boosting productivity and overall economic growth are desirable.

If reducing and then eliminating violence in the workplace boosts female participation, hours work and opportunities for promotion, it will also have a positive effect on the economy.

In a range of studies cited by the Workplace Agenda Agency, the financial benefits to the Australian economy from the rise in female employment has been huge. In particular, it noted that Goldman Sachs & JWere calculated that the rise in female employment since 1974 has boosted Australian economic activity by 22 per cent. In addition, projections by KPMG indicate that if the labour force participation gap between men and women was halved, Australia's annual GDP would increase by \$60 billion in 20 years. Australia's cumulative living standards would also rise by \$140 billion in this time.^v

Conclusion

Violence against women in the workplace remains a major problem that undermines the economic security of women. It is part of the overall problem of gender inequality that can be addressed via societal change.

Those changes in attitudes and actions have been well documented over a long period of time, and unfortunately progress in changing views has been slow.

In terms of workplace reforms, strong management where instances of discrimination and violence against women are dealt with are essential. Given women a means to express their experiences without fear of retribution must be common place. Recent high profile examples where this has not occurred has set the process back.

Sources

- i Economic Security4Women Discussion Paper – A pervasive Malice from Bedroom to Workroom - https://www.security4women.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/eS4W-Discussion-Paper_A-Pervasive-Malice-from-Bedroom-to-Workroom_eS4W-DV-and-Work-2016_20160701.pdf
- ii Workplace Equality and Respect - <https://workplace.ourwatch.org.au/why-do-this-work/understanding-violence-against-women/>
- iii UN Women “Ending violence against women” - <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women>
- iv UNESCO “Eliminating Violence Against Women” - <https://en.unesco.org/news/eliminating-violence-against-women>
- v Workplace Gender Equality Agency – “Workplace gender equality: the business case” - <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gender-equality-business-case>