




Barriers to Employability and Employment

for Women Survivors of
Intimate Partner Violence





**As the first shelter for
abused women and children in
Canada, we are leaders
in the campaign for women's
empowerment, providing
innovative, specialized services
that help abused women and
their children transform their lives
and break the cycle of violence.**

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Executive Summary

Women who have left abusive relationships need more than a safe shelter to recover. While emergency shelters offer a short-term solution, women also need support on their journeys to healing and independence. When Interval House launched its Building Economic Self-Sufficiency program in 1998, it was the only employment program that addressed the unique barriers that abused women face when seeking employment.

This report sets down the barriers to employment and employability that abused women face as a result of the violence they've left behind. The report was completed with the input of community agencies in Toronto who serve domestic violence survivors, as well as past participants in the Building Economic Self-Sufficiency (BESS) Program.

Barriers to employment and employability

Every survivor of intimate partner violence experiences her barriers in her own individual way. While many barriers are common across this population, the impacts are unique to each woman, and can be exacerbated by her personal circumstances and external factors.

What's important to note is that the impact and experience of dealing with barriers is also an overarching, systemic barrier that survivors face. The impact or presence of one barrier can exacerbate the impacts of another barrier. Conversely, addressing one barrier can help alleviate the effects of others. Due to the nature of her experiences, it can be difficult for service providers to assist survivors in a tangible way.

Barriers to employment and employability include:

- Psycho-emotional issues related to abuse and trauma
- Lack of housing and potential homelessness
- Lack of formal education and work skills training
- Lack of work experience and workplace skills
- Lack of support and professional networks
- Lack of ability to use job search strategies
- Personal identification and documentation needs
- Lack of food and clothing
- Discrimination and stigma
- Employment that is typically accessible to survivors
- Financial insecurity and dependence on social assistance
- Lack of child care and child-related issues
- Susceptibility to health issues
- Lack of transportation
- Legal issues
- Immigration issues
- Lack of access to counselling for employment/employability

Introduction

Building Economic Self-Sufficiency (BESS) is an Interval House program that helps survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) find and maintain sustainable employment, and ultimately achieve economic independence.

In order to better understand the needs of its clients, Interval House undertook an assessment of the barriers that survivors of IPV face when seeking employment. The assessment collected information from representatives of social service organizations, as well as women with lived experience of intimate partner violence who participated in the BESS program.

This report documents Interval House's findings regarding the specific barriers to employability and employment that survivors of intimate partner violence face. The findings of this report can be used by service providers to inform the creation and implementation of employment and self-sufficiency programs that are designed specifically for survivors of abuse.



Methodology

Eleven (11) representatives from ten (10) organizations took part in this assessment. Their organizations serve survivors of domestic violence in several capacities. Accordingly, interviewees' opinions and insight were based on their own understanding and experience with clients.

In addition, Interval House employees participated in the assessment. Their insights were based on their work with survivors of intimate partner violence, as well as their experiences operating an employment-related program for these clients.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person with eight (8) past Interval House Building Economic Self-Sufficiency (BESS) clients to gain insight into their experiences as job seekers and survivors of intimate partner violence seeking employment. The interviews were loosely guided by a set list of questions. They were reassured that they could answer questions using their own discretion, therefore they were not obligated to respond, or to share details with which they were not comfortable.

Definitions

Economic Self Sufficiency

This term describes the circumstances in which a woman who has survived intimate partner violence works toward, in order to provide for herself and her family with minimal public / private financial and social assistance to meet needs that include housing or childcare assistance.

Employability

An inclusive term that means being physically, emotionally, intellectually, and psychologically able to work. It means having the skills and tools to get and maintain employment, it involves the person's personal and social environment as well as all the aspects of a woman's life which affect her work.¹

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence is one of the most common forms of violence against women and includes physical, psychological, sexual, financial abuse and controlling behaviours by an intimate partner. For the purpose of this report, domestic violence and intimate partner violence are used interchangeably.

1. "A Women's Resource Booklet: Overcoming the Impact of Abuse on Employability (2007)" as cited in "Report on the design of an approach to deliver transitional employment supports to women who experience violence," accessed March 2016, <http://www.thanl.org/media/pdf/reportwomenviolence.pdf>

Principles

Five core principles were identified through this research that should inform the knowledge and practice of program delivery and design for survivors of abuse. These principles must be understood in order for service providers to work with their clients effectively.

Women experience barriers in their own personal way

Survivors of abuse face a multitude of barriers. There are some barriers which are more commonly experienced across this population, but the impact of each barrier is unique to each survivor.

Barriers are linked

The impact or presence of one barrier can exacerbate the negative effects of another barrier. Barriers have a complex, interlinked, and often cyclical relationship. Links between and amongst barriers can be direct or indirect, and they can coexist and be interdependent. Barriers can reinforce and perpetuate each other. Conversely, addressing one barrier and receiving supports to help reduce it can have mitigating effects on other barriers.



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Multi-dimensional, intersecting identities impact the experience of a barrier

As mentioned, each woman will experience and be affected by a barrier in her own, individual way. The barriers that each survivor experiences are determined by her personal circumstances and how she is affected by the wider context in which this occurs. Personal context can relate to:

- Age
- Intersecting identities regarding race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, culture, religion, disability, etc.
- Whether or not she has children and/or whether or not she is a single parent
- Education level
- Presence of health and mental health issues
- Economic status/income level
- Immigration status and nationality
- Geographic location (such as urban, rural, and remote communities)
- Situations like divorce, custody battles, legal issues, immigration issues
- Housing status (ex. being homeless, or under-housed)

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Systemic and structural barriers affect women directly and indirectly

External and environmental factors are beyond the woman's immediate control and affect her directly and indirectly. They include factors like:

- Discrimination (sexism, racism, ageism, classism, etc.)
- Socio-economic conditions and trends
- Political and governmental trends, legislation and policies
- Institutional policies
- Sudden and unforeseen disasters or crises

Due to the nature of systemic and structural barriers, it is more difficult for service providers to intervene and assist survivors in tangible means.

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Coping with barriers is an overarching, systemic barrier

Coping with or challenging barriers simultaneously and accessing supports can be overwhelming and highly stressful. The impact and experience of dealing with barriers is also an overarching, systemic barrier that survivors face.

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Barriers to Employment and Employability

Psycho-Emotional Issues Related to Abuse and Trauma

Many survivors suffer psychological and emotional effects directly stemming from their traumatic and abusive experiences.² These psycho-emotional issues include low confidence and self-esteem, low motivation, and high stress levels, as well as mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and general neurosis. Although some survivors may not have a formally diagnosed mental illness, a large number of them experience symptoms of mental health conditions, to varying degrees.

The additional pressure and stress of searching for a job can create or exacerbate these psycho-emotional problems.

Impacts of Psycho-Emotional Issues on Employability and Employment

Severe stress reactions

Severe stress reactions can result from living with abuse. These stress reactions might take the forms of avoidance behaviours, excessive sleeping, insomnia, and physical symptoms such as headaches and nausea.

The act of searching for a job is itself stressful, and can add to the stressors and reactions that women are already experiencing. These stress reactions can impact a survivor's frame of mind and the self-confidence required for employment. As a result, survivors may put up barriers or self-sabotage believing that there is no point in following through with employment goals.

Chaos and crisis as a way of life

For some women, chaos and crisis are normalized, and become a familiar place from which they feel comfortable operating. Therefore they may subconsciously seek out situations that bring about turmoil. In some cases, women recognize that they are often in crisis, but do not believe that they deserve better. When women normalize chaos and crisis, it results in an inability to focus on employment related goals; instead focusing on the current crisis.

2. "Design of a pilot program to deliver transitional employment supports to women who experience violence," accessed March 2016, <http://www.thanl.org/media/pdf/designoftransitional.pdf>

Sense of powerlessness

Women who survived abuse can experience feelings of powerlessness – an inability to change the future. This often stems from their lack of control or decision-making in their past relationship, and feelings of helplessness to change their situation.

Women who feel a sense of powerlessness may abandon their job search, even after minor setbacks. In addition, they may face indecision in developing their employment goals. This slows down their job search.

Unaware of resiliency

Often, women who leave abusive relationships are not aware of their own resiliency. Simply by leaving, a woman has displayed strength and courage that can be replicated in other aspects of their life. Programs to assist survivors need to help their clients understand their own resilience, and frame their program activities around this concept.

Impaired boundaries

Similar to conflict management skills, women in abusive relationships are frequently unable to practice healthy boundaries with their partners and in their lives. Good boundaries are important in the workplace, and are a key component of interpersonal relationships at work.

Low self-esteem

Women who experienced emotional and physical abuse often deal with issues related to low self-esteem. Abusers often tell their partners that they are worthless, and survivors can come to internalize that messaging, believing that they do not deserve happiness and success.

Women must be able to confidently market their skills when searching for employment, and must be able to use those skills with confidence in the workplace. Low self-esteem can impair this ability, and this becomes obvious to potential employers.

Women need support in understanding their right to live life the way that they choose. Service providers and personal networks need to support women's choices, even if they disagree. This support empowers women and helps her develop her confidence and self-esteem.

Lack of conflict management skills

Conflict management is an essential workplace skill that many abuse survivors are lacking. In most cases, women were unable to safely practice this skill while in the abusive relationship. As a result, women who have left abuse may avoid conflict at all costs, or may employ confrontation as their primary conflict management tool.

In order to thrive in the workplace, employees must be able to navigate workplace relationships and mitigate conflict. While they may be able to acquire employment, women who have left abuse may not be able to sustain employment if they do not have the required conflict management skills.

Perception that change is linear

Survivors and their networks often perceive change as linear with incremental progress and milestones. The expectation of linear development is a barrier to employability, as any “regression,” such as losing a job or returning to abuse, is seen as a failure. Women (and their support networks) must understand that change is a dynamic, cyclical process, and that “regression” is a part of development and can be a learning experience.

Conditions resulting from being in or leaving the abusive relationship

Intimate partner violence is about power and control. As a result, many survivors lived with conditions, such as isolation, that were imposed on them by their partners. After leaving the abuse, these conditions can continue to have an effect on a survivor's ability to secure employment.

Lack of housing and potential homelessness

Lack of housing is often the primary and most critical barrier that survivors face. In leaving their abusers, many women have also left their homes. Women may seek refuge in shelters, or with friends and family, yet these are temporary situations. Inevitably, some survivors may become homeless.

Currently in Toronto, the public housing supply does not meet the high demand, and women's incomes typically cannot support private market rents. Many survivors, especially those leaving shelters, may not have adequate funds to obtain housing and may also be limited to housing with substandard living conditions, either in private or public housing.

Related Impacts

- Leaving one's home means a lack of safety, security, and stability. Women who are not safely housed cannot begin to feel the security and stability needed to search for employment.
- Searching for housing can become a full time job, leaving no time or energy for the job search. Waiting to secure housing can be a very stressful experience for survivors of abuse. Obtaining housing becomes a priority, above other issues such as looking for work.
- Many survivors find themselves in a Catch-22 situation. Not having a permanent address may interfere with employer's willingness to hire them, while being unemployed and not having a regular income can make it more difficult to obtain housing.

Lack of formal education and skills training

Most jobs require a basic education level or certain specific “hard skills” which indicate specialized knowledge and proficiencies. These skills can include language proficiencies, technical skills, computer literacy, and other industry-specific skills. Although some of these skills can be self-taught, most often they are acquired through training and education programs.

Many survivors’ lack of education and training is a serious impediment to employability. Some have not received their high school diploma, or require post-secondary education or specific training in order to obtain a job in their field of interest.

Related Impacts

- Many survivors often want assistance with education more than, or before seeking employment, in order to upgrade their education or training levels to be eligible for certain jobs.
- The cost of education and training programs impedes many survivors from pursuing these programs, as does the often complicated application process. Even with grants and loans, some survivors may still be deterred from accessing post-secondary programs, due to the high debt they may incur.
- Survivors may not know the labour market requirements for education, training, and relevant hard skills, or, they may have changed over time. Some newcomers may need assistance with their education, training, and/or recertification, as the requirements in their home country may not be the same in the Canadian work force.

Lack of work experience and workplace skills

Isolation and control patterns in abusive relationships not only impact a woman’s psycho-emotional wellbeing; they impede her ability to get a job. In some situations, abusers may have prevented survivors from working. Some survivors have not worked for a period of time, while others may have never worked at all.

When women are not able to work and socialize, they do not gain valuable work experience, including hard and soft skills required by most employers. If they had those skills initially, they may have deteriorated over time.

Employers look for both work experience, and soft skills such as communication and interpersonal skills, and a general understanding of dominant workplace practices and etiquette. Some skills, like conflict resolution and assertiveness, may be lacking due to a survivor’s inability to practice it safely. Employers may also look for personal qualities and traits when hiring, such as being responsible, adaptable, professional, creative, detail-oriented and analytical.

Related Impacts

- While they may be ready and eager to work many survivors do not have enough work experience required by potential employers.
- Without soft skills, survivors are not employable in the general labour market, since job positions often require candidates to have these skills in order to effectively do the job.

Lack of networks

Women who survive domestic violence, especially newcomers, often do not have personal and professional networks. Isolation and control is common in abusive relationships, and this often results in women losing contact and connections with family and friends. Not being allowed to work, or leaving a job suddenly due to abuse, can negatively affect a woman's professional networks. In addition, women who leave their abusers and communities may lose access to networks and supports that were built during their relationship.

Related impacts

- When personal networks are lost, survivors may not have a support system to provide assistance and emotional support during their job search and their employment.
- When professional networks are lost, women can no longer get formal and informal information about job and networking opportunities.

Lack of ability to use job search strategies

As some survivors may not have worked for some time, or ever, they may lack the ability to use job search strategies. They lack skills such as effectively searching for jobs, networking, understanding the application process, marketing oneself, and understanding labour market information. Some women also do not have an understanding of their strengths and aptitudes, and therefore do not know which roles might be the best fit.

Related Impacts

- Survivors may find it difficult to find employment without the skills needed to conduct a job search.
- Survivors cannot grow these job search skills without support from service providers, and without regular access to computers and internet connections, which they often do not have.
- Women who have worked intermittently, or who stopped working after a time often have challenges addressing the gaps on their resumes to potential employers. This may prevent their resumes from getting through the initial screening during the application process.

Identification and documentation needs

Documentation and identification are required to secure employment, financial supports, and other services. In many cases, survivors, especially immigrants or refugees, may have lost or left behind valuable identification and documentation when fleeing their abusive situation. Service providers attempt to avoid this challenge when helping survivors before they have left their abuser, by creating safety plans which include taking all important documents and identification with them.

Impacts

- Survivors may be unable to secure employment if they cannot verify their identities, provide social insurance numbers, work permits, and any other documentation required by employers.

Food and clothing

Food and clothing are basic necessities that survivors must obtain, long before searching for employment. Not having adequate food and appropriate clothing leads to many different poor health conditions, and in the most severe cases, death.

Impacts

- In emergency situations, survivors can find access to food through shelters, food banks, soup kitchens and donations. However, some may require culturally or religiously appropriate foods, or may have specific dietary needs.
- Survivors may have left their homes with few belongings, including clothing. In addition to work appropriate clothing, survivors need regular, seasonally appropriate clothing for their daily living. Thus, supports like clothing donations are necessary for basic functioning.
- In addition, many survivors lack work and interview appropriate clothing that can enhance their professional self-presentation skills. This can impede their ability to obtain employment.

Systemic Barriers

Systemic barriers are patterns of behaviour, policies, and practices that negatively affect marginalized groups. A woman's experience of IPV, in addition to her personal circumstances and intersecting identities, can contribute to her experience of these systemic barriers.

Discrimination and stigma

Some respondents described that women in general face barriers to employment (also known as a “glass ceiling”), which is further complicated for survivors of IPV. Discriminatory hiring practices, discrimination in the workplace, and stigmatized attitudes about domestic violence and homelessness all act as barriers to employment for many survivors.

Impacts

- A glass ceiling still exists due to gender discrimination, which can impede survivors' success and job promotion, and results in a lower wage earned in comparison to men in the same job position.
- The barriers that survivors of domestic abuse may face can be further compounded by their other intersecting identities; as racialized or ethnic women, as immigrants or newcomers, as LGBTQ women, as women with disabilities, and as non-English speakers.

Employment typically accessible to survivors

As mentioned, glass ceilings can prevent women from gaining more leadership, responsibility, and overall success in their careers. The majority of survivors who access services find employment in non-benefit, low-skilled jobs, in part-time, temporary positions, with low wages. The type of jobs that most of their clients can readily access is often limited, and places women in non-standard and precarious employment.

Impacts

- The situation of precarious employment can be a further barrier for survivors as people may not be interested or want to work in these situations. Women want success for themselves and to adequately take care of their families. The type of employment available and accessible to a large number of survivors makes it very difficult to do so, as most cannot earn a living wage, and may have to take on multiple part-time jobs in order to make ends meet.

Financial insecurity and dependence on social assistance

Women may flee their abusive situations with low funds and low access to funds. Many survivors require financial and social assistance to afford basic necessities and receive the supports they require.

Impacts

- This system is arranged so that increases in income levels result in reduced benefits and claw backs by government agencies. The advantages of the benefits received may outweigh the advantages of income that survivors could potentially earn.
- Women can become dependent on financial supports, and this assistance can become a disincentive to work. Some women may choose to rely on and become dependent on these supports, in fear that they will not be able to make ends meet with reduced assistance and low incomes.

Lack of childcare resources and child-related issues

Lack of childcare resources and all child-related needs is a serious challenge to employment for many survivors who are single, sole-support parents. Accessing childcare services, even with subsidies, is an unaffordable expense for many survivors. In addition, many child care services operate within stipulated times that may not be conducive to the mother's job search or work schedule.

Child-related needs may also be a barrier to employment for some survivors. This includes dealing with any health issues children have, attending doctor's visits, affording children's medication, accessing counselling services for children, getting children involved in extra-curricular activities, dealing with child custody and visitation issues, and of course basic necessities such as providing food, shelter, and clothing for children.

Related impacts

- Lack of childcare can result in restricted job search and/or employment hours, absenteeism at the work place, and tardiness or needing to leave early or have flexible hours.
- Mothers often prioritize their children's needs ahead of their own, and they try to deal with their children's issues before focusing on their own goals, such as employment.

Susceptibility to health issues

Any mental or physical injury, illness or impairment can act as a barrier to employment for survivors seeking work. These may be mental or physical health issues directly related to experiencing abuse, pre-existing medical conditions, physical or mental disabilities, and all other diagnosed diseases or illnesses.

Related Impacts

- Dealing with health issues may make it difficult for survivors to look for work, and may even impede their job performance when they do attain work.
- Health issues can limit the type of jobs and tasks that survivors can do. Depending on the individual's health problem, she may have to frequently be absent from work to attend appointments for treatment. Thus, survivors may require jobs with flexible work schedules and tasks in order to adequately take care of their health problems.
- Survivors require many different types of supports to help them deal with health barriers including access to health professionals, specialists and clinics, and medication. As mentioned, many survivors have difficulty accessing jobs that provide health benefits to cover more complete health insurance and medication costs, and can therefore not afford these substantial health costs.

Lack of transportation

Transportation is another systemic barrier to employment for many survivors of domestic violence. Some may have to deal with long commutes and distances to travel between home and work. Many cannot afford the additional expense of owning or leasing a vehicle. Many survivors rely on public transit, which presents its own issues in the City of Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area.

Related impacts

- Survivors may have to take several modes of transportation to arrive at their destinations, if they are coming from a more remote location in the city. Transportation can restrict the geographical boundaries in which it is feasible for women to work, which further circumscribes employment opportunities available and accessible to them.

Legal issues

Survivors may deal with legal issues such as obtaining a divorce, child custody battles, and pressing charges against her abuser. The legal services they require are both time and cost consuming. Many may not be able to afford adequate legal representation.

Related Impacts

- Coping with legal issues can impede survivors from actively searching for work, and may prove difficult to handle while working. Survivors may require support to overcome this barrier including access to affordable legal services and court accompaniment.



Immigration issues

Newcomers face immigration related issues before they can be employed, which includes achieving legal working status. Some may resort to working “under the table” to get funds, in jobs with little to no regulation. They may often be in disadvantaged positions with employers who can control their work hours and pay, as they are working illegally.

Related Impacts

- Survivors who are newcomers, especially immigrants and refugees, need assistance in navigating the immigration process, and may require additional supports including receiving letters of recommendation for their applications, and accompaniment to hearings.

Lack of access to counselling for employment/employability

Many survivors may need specialized counselling or psychotherapy to help them cope with, and treat, complex issues and/or mental health issues, stemming from their experience of abuse and trauma. Specialized counselling and psychotherapy services can provide clients with long-or longer term counselling rather than general or brief counselling.

Currently there is a shortage in this kind of counselling, or there are barriers to women’s participating (such as fee for service models, or waiting lists).

Related Impacts

- Without access to specialized counselling, survivors will not learn effective coping strategies, receive assistance with setting and achieving goals, or receive help to overcome barriers and challenges, and generally with re-building their self-esteem, confidence, and motivation.

Political and economic climate

In the recent past, the Canadian economy has been in recession. There has been high unemployment, and a large number of people are competing for decreased numbers of jobs. Service providers are seeing the effects of a competitive job market on their clients, and are trying to provide clients with the appropriate supports and services needed.

Related Impacts

- Due to the decrease in jobs available, the type of work that survivors are competing for is most often temporary, part-time, low skilled, without benefits, and offers low wages.
- Service delivery is affected by these conditions, as they can limit how programs assist clients – from the types of jobs and placements they help clients get, to the training programs available to refer them to.

Conclusion

Securing employment is an important step in a survivor's journey to healing and independence. However, for women who survived intimate partner violence, there are a multitude of barriers that can prevent her from being employable and finding gainful employment.

When service providers are supporting these women, it is important to remember that the act of coping with barriers is a barrier in and of itself. By recognizing this principle, service providers can begin to effectively assist women in recovering from trauma and violence.

In this context, designing employment programs for survivors of abuse must take into account the barriers that women face, and aim to reduce them as best as possible. Program design must also ensure a holistic, wrap-around approach, to enable women to access what they need at the different times in their healing, recovery, and search for employment.



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