

Improving Women Survivors' ACCESS to Career Opportunities

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, the experiences and needs of women survivors of domestic violence have received increasing attention through research, media, and legislation. Although these efforts have helped inform the development of mental health and advocacy services for women, little attention has been given to the long-term impact of domestic violence on women's career and economic development. Domestic violence is devastating to women's career and economic growth.

- 75% of employed battered women are harassed in their work settings by their abusers, and 54% of these women lose their jobs as a result (Crowell & Burgess, 1996)
- 40% of battered women reported that domestic abuse caused them to be late for work more than 3 times in the last month, 34% reported missing whole days of work, 23% reported difficulties advancing in their careers, and 20% reported difficulties keeping their jobs (Retzlaff, 1999)
- Approximately 25-48% of all homeless women are homeless after fleeing from an abusive relationship (Crowell & Burgess, 1996)
- Domestic violence interferes with welfare recipients' efforts to hold jobs and become self-sufficient (American Psychological Association, 1998)
- Domestic violence costs U.S. employers approximately \$100 million/year in lost wages, sick leave, absenteeism, and non-productivity (Crowell & Burgess, 1996)

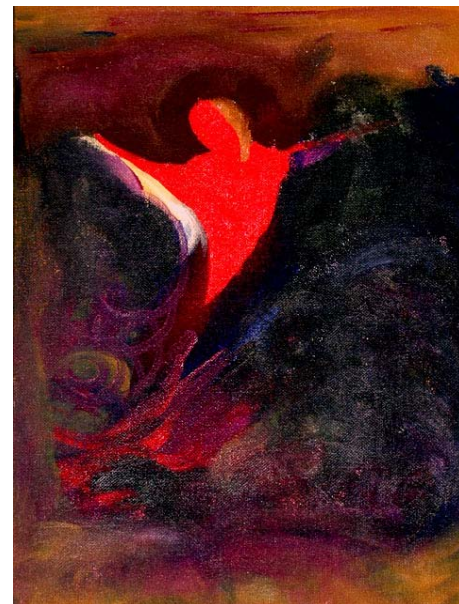
We wrote this report to describe the most recent research that we have conducted, and that of other researchers and community advocates, in the area of career counseling and intervention with women survivors of domestic violence. Our research findings are described in order to provide social service providers and women's advocates with information about addressing women survivors' short- and long-term economic, career, and educational needs. The research contained in this report was conducted in collaboration with domestic violence services agencies, advocates, community social service providers, postsecondary educators, and businesses in Oregon, California, Washington, and Utah. We are very grateful for the opportunity to work with and learn from our community. We are especially grateful to the women who participated in these research studies and courageously shared their experiences with us.

Supporting Women Survivors' Career Development

(from Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Chronister, Wettersten, & Brown, 2004)

Three personal feelings and beliefs are thought to be most important in advancing women's career development: *confidence*, *hopefulness*, and *personal goals*. By attending to these three feelings and beliefs when working with women survivors of domestic violence, social service providers and advocates help support women's economic and career development. Let us explain a little about each aspect.

Confidence. Confidence is a woman's belief in her ability to perform specific behaviors, such as filling out a job application, completing a job interview, or attending class. A woman's confidence influences the likelihood that she will try something new and persist in that activity despite barriers and difficulties that she might face. Confidence develops through experiences of (a) successfully completing tasks in the past, (b) having seen others succeed at their goals, (c) support and encouragement, and (d) physical health. Women's confidence is severely weakened because of abusers' systematic denigration, isolation, and physical, sexual and economic abuse. Social service providers and



advocates assist women in rebuilding their confidence by helping create situations in which women can succeed. Working with women survivors includes increasing their safety and providing for their financial needs, but also can include helping women identify their *past accomplishments* and *describing the skills* they used to achieve those accomplishments. Working with women survivors also may include facilitating their ability to make a list of short- and long-term personal and career *goals*. Such lists can help increase women's hopefulness and sense of direction when they leave shelter or advocacy center settings. For many women, identifying their skills and goals is extremely difficult. Consequently, it is important for domestic violence advocates to facilitate women's awareness about why they're having such a difficult time identifying their skills and interests (e.g., because they don't believe they are skilled due to their partner's verbal abuse) and providing women with resources that will allow them to learn more about different career and employment opportunities. Identifying sources of support and skills related to building support networks is critical to helping women achieve their goals and increasing their safety and economic stability. For example, in addition to making a list of goals, women also may want to list relationship qualities that help them determine if a relationship is supportive or not as well as identify specific people and agencies who will help them achieve their goals.

Hopefulness. Hopefulness is a woman's belief that doing something, such as going to school, will lead to positive outcomes (e.g., employment, increased salary). For example, a woman might fill out a job application if she believes it will lead to an interview, but she may not even complete the application if she thinks that she will not be invited for an interview because she will have to explain her inconsistent job history or because she will be discriminated against because of her ethnicity or sexual orientation. A woman's hopefulness about her educational and career-related activities is influenced by her domestic violence experiences. That is, a woman's hopefulness that she can get a good job and keep it may be severely limited because her abusive partner sabotages her attempts to succeed (e.g., hides her car keys, makes her late for work, makes harassing phone and advocates help increase women's options by helping women understand career development. More specifically, social service providers and advocates help increase women's options by helping women understand their abusive partners have sabotaged how domestic violence has interfered with their career development. More specifically, as women become more aware of how much their abusive partners have sabotaged their attempts to work or go to school, they will be less likely to blame themselves for lost job opportunities and believe that they are stupid, incompetent, and not worthy of satisfying work.

Personal goals. Personal goals represent a woman's intention to act in order to achieve a particular end state, such as getting a job to support herself and her family. Women living in domestic violence situations may not have the safety, time, and financial resources to explore their career interests, identify their career goals, and take action toward achieving those goals. Often we find that women either do not know what they want to do or they have narrowed their work options prematurely based on the people they have come in contact and their limited experiences (e.g., women wanting to be a substance abuse counselor or nurse). Thus, it is important to consider the very real as well as the perceived barriers women face as they attempt to seek help, leave their abusers and/or start to identify their career-related interests and goals. Social service providers and advocates support women's career development by helping women learn more about themselves, gain new experiences and support to successfully achieve new experiences, and provide women with career information such that they can explore numerous possibilities and opportunities.

Empowerment of Women Survivors of Domestic Violence

(from Chronister & McWhirter, 2003)

Ellen Hawley McWhirter's (1994, 1997) counseling for empowerment model is an important model for helping social service providers, advocates, and researchers understand how they can facilitate women's empowerment. It is one of the foundations for our research. Counseling for the empowerment of women survivors includes service providers:

1. Facilitating women's critical awareness and thinking of the abusive and empowering power dynamics at work in their lives;
2. Facilitating women's recognition, development, and utilization of their skills and support networks; and
3. Facilitating women's ability to contribute to the empowerment of others in their communities.

Recommendations for empowering women survivors of domestic violence and developing programs and interventions that help increase women's *confidence*, *hopefulness*, and identification of *personal goals* are:

1. **Collaboration.** The relationship between a social service provider and woman is defined by counselor and woman working together to define women’s concerns and goals. In addition, the counselor works together with members of women’s communities (e.g., neighborhood, family, religious institutions, local community, women’s group, etc.) to build a strong support network for women, and use the support network that already exists. For example, it is not a goal for all women to immediately leave their abusive partners. Many women want to try to find help for their partners as well as plan for their safety.
2. **Context.** Social service providers increase their understanding of the woman survivor’s life situation, including her educational and career concerns, culture, family structure, religious or spiritual beliefs, economic situation, quality and depth of her support network, and characteristics of the surrounding community (e.g. law enforcement, political environment).
3. **Competence.** Social service providers recognize the skills, resources, and experiences that women possess and that may contribute to the achievement of their goals and development of new skills.
4. **Critical Consciousness.** Social service providers increase women’s critical consciousness, or a woman’s ability to understand herself within her relationships and communities and to see herself as a person who has the skills, ability and power to make certain life choices.
5. **Community.** Social service providers facilitate women’s connection to their communities by increasing their participation in supportive communities, whether these communities may be defined by neighborhood, support groups, friends, families, or religious/spiritual communities. Such communities may support and validate women’s experiences and provide important physical, emotional, and social support resources.

Not included in this list, but just as important, is **action** on the part of the social service provider or advocate. Women’s advocates have long recognized the importance of increasing their awareness and understanding of social, political, and economic barriers (e.g., legislation, law enforcement and judicial systems, court proceedings, etc.) that negatively impact women survivors’ mental health and economic development. This awareness and information helps social service providers and advocates better meet the needs of women survivors with whom they work. We assert that career counseling with women survivors of domestic violence must be practiced in the context of women’s communities, such that social service providers are aware of the public policies and legislative issues that impact women’s career and economic development and the possible provision of career and educational services. We also assert that social service providers who provide career counseling to women must be advocates and activists in women’s communities to increase and sustain women’s empowerment.



ACCESS: Advancing Career Counseling and Educational Support for Survivors of domestic violence. A career counseling program.

(from Chronister & McWhirter, 2004, under review; Chronister, Wettersten, & Brown, 2004)

ACCESS is a research-based, 5-week group career-counseling program created specifically for adult women survivors of domestic violence. This program was created by Dr. Krista M. Chronister at the University of Oregon. The purpose of ACCESS is to assist women survivors with:

- Expanding, exploring and identifying their career and educational interests;
- Increasing women’s awareness of their existing skills and accomplishments, and facilitating women’s development of new career and life skills;
- Increasing women’s knowledge of career opportunities, and how to pursue those opportunities;
- Connecting women with community professionals, resources and support networks; and
- Identifying and planning for short- and long-term future career and life goals.

Specific components and features of the ACCESS career counseling program

Five critical components leading to the most efficacious career intervention outcomes	Activities and features most consistent with critical consciousness	Activities and features of ACCESS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Written exercises 2. Individualized interpretation and feedback 3. World of work information 4. Attention to building support 5. Modeling 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dialogue 2. Group identification 3. Problem-posting 4. Identifying contradictions 5. Power analysis 6. Critical self-reflection 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clarification of individual and group values 2. Journaling assignments with focus on naming and describing career experiences and development in social context 3. SKILLS assessment 4. Self Directed Search 5. Relaxation exercises 6. Skill identification 7. Increasing awareness of support 8. Participants serve as models 9. Clarification of individual goals with group assistance 10. Identifying hopefulness and contradictions 11. Domestic violence information 12. Power analysis of domestic violence experiences and support networks

The effectiveness of ACCESS was examined with 67 women, living in the Pacific Northwest, who chose to participate in the ACCESS program. In comparison with women who did not complete the ACCESS program, research results showed that women who completed the ACCESS program:

- Had higher confidence in their ability to search for different jobs and career information after completing ACCESS;
- Increased their critical consciousness of the effects of domestic violence on their career experiences after completing ACCESS; and
- Made more progress toward achieving their personal and career goals two months after completing ACCESS.

Although there is still very little research that is being done on domestic violence survivors’ career and economic development, partly due to the difficulty of establishing trust, providing a safe setting, and achieving ongoing participation of women negotiating complex and dangerous life situations, this ACCESS research demonstrated the usefulness of addressing women’s career development in domestic violence social service settings. Moreover, the research on ACCESS demonstrated that a brief, 5 week intervention was enough to result in significant improvements in women’s confidence, critical awareness of the effects of domestic violence on their career and economic development, and progress toward their goals.

Reactions from women who participated in ACCESS

Some of the women who participated in ACCESS commented that the program made them realize that they were not only victimized by their abusive partners, but that they also had skills and power that helped them survive the abuse and could help them make changes in their lives. Almost all participants commented on the usefulness of the program information

and the powerful impact of the program session discussions and activities. Many women also stated that the ACCESS groups were the first counseling experience in which they thought about how domestic violence had impacted their work, education, and economic development.

Ethnic Differences in Career Supports and Barriers for Women Survivors

(from Chronister & McWhirter, 2004)

We conducted a research study examining ethnic differences in career development experiences salient for women survivors. We examined the relationships among women's intimate abuse history, perceived career barriers and supports, confidence in their abilities to work, and hopefulness about their careers. Thirty one women of color (ages ranged from 22-44) and 43 European American/Caucasian women (ages 20-52) living in domestic violence shelters in California, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho participated in this study. For this study, we defined women of color as those women who self-identify as members of American ethnic minority groups including, but not limited to, African/African American, Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latina/Chicana, and Native American/American Indian. We also included biracial and multiracial women in the ethnic minority women category. U.S. citizens and documented and undocumented immigrant women were included in this study, although we were unable to examine differences among these groups because of the small number of women who participated.

What we already knew about women survivors of color

Women survivors of color often face a "double jeopardy" because they may encounter barriers related to both gender and race/ethnicity (Kanuha, 1994). Women of color often are more isolated due to language barriers, distance from family members who live in other countries, and immigration status. Moreover, women of color may not seek support services as often as European American women survivors because of institutional racism, experiences of oppression, cultural beliefs, traditional gender role socialization, and racial loyalties (Greene & Jackson, 2000; Kanuha, 1994; Masaki & Wong, 1997). A lack of culturally appropriate services also contributes to perceptions of limited options for women survivors of color (Kanuha, 1994). Women of color who are in same-sex partnerships face additional barriers such as heterosexism, homophobia, and social service providers and advocates' lack of understanding of lesbian domestic violence (Kanuha, 1994; Lobel, 1986; Peterman & Dixon, 2003).

What we learned from this study

In this study, European American and ethnic minority women survivors perceived similar levels of difficulty overcoming their future barriers, they anticipated needing similar levels of support in the future, and they had similar levels of self-esteem or hopefulness about their careers. However, the relationships among these factors were very different for women of color and European American women. The following is a breakdown of how European American women and women of color in this study differed in their experiences of abuse and perceptions of supports and barriers.

- *Experiences of abuse.* Women of color did not consider their experiences of abuse a significant past barrier, but European American women did. This finding is potentially explained by the fact that women of color may face more barriers (race, discrimination) not associated specifically with domestic violence. For women of color only, experiences of abuse were related to socioeconomic status (access to financial resources). That is, as ethnic minority women's economic resources increased, so did the amount of abuse they reported experiencing from their partner. This finding may be related to women of color in this study challenging traditional gender roles by obtaining employment, and even higher-paying employment than their partners, which may have threatened to increase their independence from their abusive partners, strengthen their support networks, and decrease their sense of isolation. As a result, abusive partners may have used more abuse to gain greater power and control over these women.
- *Perceived Supports.* For women of color only, the longer that they experienced domestic violence in their most recent relationship, the more future support they perceived needing to achieve their career goals. This was not true for European American women. One possible explanation for this finding is that women of color may perceive a greater loss of family and community support, as well as greater isolation, the longer they are involved in a violent relationship prior to leaving. Specifically, when women of color leave an abusive relationship they also may be leaving a more collective, larger community such as their ethnic community or neighborhood, religious/spiritual support systems, homeland, etc. It also may be that women of color perceive needing more future support because they are more likely than White women to seek help for their abusive partners and consider support options that do

not involve leaving their partners permanently (Perilla, 1999) – and there are very few comprehensive services that provide assistance for all family members.

- *Perceived Barriers.* Women of color in this study reported fewer income sources than European American women. This lack of financial resources may be particularly significant for undocumented immigrant women who cannot legally work in the United States. In addition to reporting fewer income sources than European American women, women survivors of color from lower socioeconomic backgrounds also anticipated more future barriers and difficulty overcoming these barriers. This finding supports the idea that women of color in this study may perceive more barriers outside of their experiences of domestic violence (e.g. oppression, discrimination) than do European American women. Moreover, as women of color anticipated more difficulty overcoming future barriers, their hopefulness about their future work and careers decreased. This was not true for European American women. One potential explanation for this finding is that barriers related to oppression and discrimination other than domestic violence (e.g., racism, xenophobia) may lower ethnic minority women's expectations for future career success regardless of what they try and do. That is, women of color may view the oppression of living in a domestic situation as something they can change or escape more so than the oppression associated with their race, ethnicity, and/or sexual orientation.

So what does this mean for working with women survivors of domestic violence?

Based on the results of this research study, the following are suggestions for supporting the career development of both European American women and ethnic minority women survivors:

- Programs, interventions, and services should include a focus on strengthening women's support network as well as decreasing the barriers that they will face. This includes social service providers utilizing the strengths and resources that already exist in women's communities.
- Supports such as financial resources, emotional support, and strong mental and physical health increase the likelihood that women will try new things and persist in their career pursuits.
- Greater support for women survivors of color is associated with increased hopefulness and positive beliefs about their career-related skills.
- Culturally sensitive programs and services that support women survivors of color and culturally sensitive training experiences for researchers and social service providers working with women survivors are critical.

It is important to remember that these findings are the result of one study conducted with a relatively small number of women living in the Pacific Northwest and West Coast. Although these results show that European American women and American ethnic minority and immigrant women of color may have different career experiences, more research is needed before interpreting and generalizing these results. In addition, it is especially important to collect more information from more women so that the unique career experiences of women from all different ethnic groups may be explored (e.g., Chinese American, Mexican-American, Cherokee, etc.).

Contact information

This research report was created by Krista M. Chronister, Ph.D. and Carrie M. Coplan, M.A., who are part of the Counseling Psychology program at the University of Oregon. If you are interested in reading more about the research studies summarized in this report, please see the references below.

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