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Welfare, Poverty, and Abused Women:
New Research and its Implications

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by
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Welfare, Poverty, and Abused Women: New Research and its Implications

Accumulated research and experience have clearly shown that physical and psychological violence against women occurs in all social groups, as defined by age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or economic circumstances. However, the evidence is growing that poor women are more likely than others to experience physical violence by their partners, partly because they have fewer options, and that the combination of poverty and intimate violence raises particularly difficult issues for them (Davis, 1999; Greenfeld et al., 1998; Kaplan, 1997; Kurz, 1999; Ptacek, 1999; Raphael, 2000; Russo, Denious, Keita & Koss, 1997). Abused women's access to independent economic resources, including welfare, is central to their decision-making and safety planning (e.g. Brandwein, 1999a; Gondolf, with Fisher, 1988; Raphael, 1995); this means that women who experience both domestic violence and poverty are likely to have more, and more complex, needs than those who have more resources.

Because of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) welfare program, a growing body of research is exploring the connections between domestic violence against impoverished women and their experience with welfare. In the following pages, this paper summarizes this research, emphasizing the most comprehensive recent studies that have focused on TANF recipients. It expands on previous syntheses (Lyon, 1997; Raphael & Tolman, 1997; Tolman, 1999), and includes early investigations of child support issues and Family Violence Option (FVO) notification processes and outcomes. (Summary descriptions from other important studies are provided by topic in the appendices.) The overview concludes with implications of this research for ongoing implementation of the TANF program.

The diverse studies included here were originally conducted for varying reasons, although many were designed to monitor or evaluate aspects of states' experiences with TANF. They use different samples of women, and document violence and its impacts in different ways. The picture at this stage of knowledge remains complex: impoverished women have experienced disturbingly high rates of intimate violence as adults and in childhood; they have been affected by this violence in different ways and to varying degrees. The data also continue to demonstrate women's resiliency, tenacity, and strategic use of resources. These patterns have significant implications for women's use of welfare and their need for specific supports or temporary relief from TANF and program requirements.

How Prevalent is Domestic Violence Among Women Receiving TANF?

Nearly all of the studies that have investigated the issue have found that over half of the women receiving welfare said they had experienced physical abuse (defined as a continuum from slapping or hitting through more physically injurious acts) by an intimate male partner at some point during their adult lives; most of the women receiving welfare also reported physical and/or sexual abuse in childhood. In contrast, about 22% of women in the general population have reported experiencing domestic violence at some time in adulthood (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). When women receiving welfare have been asked about more recent abuse from their male partners, the rates have remained high. Although the specific behaviors and time frames differ across studies, the findings all show that poor women experience high rates of violence, especially those receiving welfare. Some of the most recent studies of TANF recipients (see Appendix 1 for results from other major studies) have found the following:

- ***Child Support and Domestic Violence***, a study of 1,082 applicants for public assistance in Colorado, found that 40% of the women reported current or past abuse by a male partner. Of the women who reported abuse, 74% said it was by a former partner only; 24% involved both current and former partners (Pearson, Thoennes, & Griswold, 1999).
- ***The Women's Employment Study***, an interview study of 753 randomly selected single female welfare recipients with children in an urban Michigan county, found that 62.8% reported moderate or severe physical abuse in their lifetime, and 23.2% reported such abuse in the past year (Tolman & Rosen, 1999).

- ***A Study of the Florida WAGES Population***, a sample of 740 randomly selected participants in the state's TANF program interviewed in 1998, found that 36% said they had been physically abused and 17% had been sexually abused by a partner in adulthood (Merrill, Ring-Kurtz, Olufokunbi, Aversa, & Sherker, 1999).
- ***Understanding Families with Multiple Barriers to Self-Sufficiency***, a multi-method study that included interviews with a stratified random sample of 325 welfare recipients in Utah, found that 79% reported that sometime during their adulthood a partner had pushed or grabbed them; 60% had been slapped or kicked. Twenty percent of recipients had been pushed or grabbed in the last 12 months, and 21% reported one of these acts of domestic violence by their current partner (Barusch, Taylor, & Derr, 1999).
- ***Job Readiness Program Participants***, an interview study of 122 welfare-to-work program enrollees in western Pennsylvania, found that 38% reported their current or most recent partner hit, kicked or threw something at them, and 27% were cut, bruised, choked, or more seriously injured (Brush, forthcoming).

These studies demonstrate that women receiving TANF/welfare have experienced high rates of violence by a male partner as adults; rates for the past year, when obtained, range from just under 9% to over 23%. Notably, studies conducted over the past ten years have consistently shown that the domestic violence rates for women receiving TANF/welfare are significantly higher than for other low-income women from the same neighborhoods. Women who have experienced difficulties with welfare program compliance also report higher rates of domestic violence.

What Health Effects of Domestic Violence Are Found Among Women Who Receive Welfare?

Overall, research has found that poor women experience more physical and mental health problems of most kinds than women in general (see Tolman & Rosen, 1999). Some of the recent research on women on welfare has investigated recipients' physical and mental health, and looked particularly at ways their health may be affected by their experience of domestic violence. It is not surprising that those who have experienced domestic violence have generally higher rates of physical and mental health difficulties. However, the data also show that the impact of domestic violence on physical and mental health can diminish over time after the abuse ends. It is crucial, then, that support services should be available to all women, but problems should not be assumed.

Impacts on Physical Health. In the studies that have examined the question, many welfare recipients have reported physical health problems at higher rates than the general population. A study of recipients in Massachusetts (Allard, Albelda, Colten, & Cosenza, 1997), for example, found that 31.7% of abused women and 21.4% of non-abused women reported a current "serious physical, mental, or emotional problem." The Michigan study (Tolman & Rosen, 1999) found that women who had been abused in the past year were nearly twice as likely to report a "physical limitation" or rate their health as "poor" as those who said they had never been abused (17.9% compared to 9.5%).

Impacts on Mental Health. The impact of domestic violence on welfare recipients' mental health has been measured in highly diverse ways. In general, the studies have found that abused women on welfare have higher rates of depression and PTSD than do women who report no abuse. Further, women who report recent abuse have higher rates of depression than those whose abuse occurred in the more distant past. A study of women in a poor Chicago neighborhood, for example, found that current depression was reported by 42.3% of the women who had experienced severe aggression in the past 12 months, compared to 37.3% of those who had experienced severe aggression at some time in their lives, and 24.8% of the entire sample of abused and non-abused women (Lloyd, 1996).

Similarly, the Michigan study (Tolman & Rosen, 1999) found dramatic differences among women who had experienced severe abuse in the past 12 months, in the more distant past, and never. Of those who had been

recently abused, 61.6% had at least one of the mental health issues investigated, compared to 44.1% of those with past abuse, and 22.8% of those with no reported abuse. Similar significant differences associated with abuse and its recency were found for women's ratings of depression, PTSD, and need for treatment. In the Utah study of welfare recipients, 42.3% of the *entire* sample were scored as depressed, and 15.1% were scored as suffering from PTSD (Barusch et al, 1999). Although the figures were not provided separately for the abused women in this study, one would predict that they, too, would have dramatically high rates of clinical depression.

Drug or Alcohol Abuse. Drug and alcohol issues have also been measured in many ways, when they have been included in these studies. Current drug and alcohol “problems,” for example, were reported by 18.7% of the currently abused women, compared to 10.1% of the entire sample, in a study of AFDC recipients in Passaic County (Curcio, 1997). Rates of drug and alcohol “dependence” were obtained in the Michigan study (Tolman & Rosen, 1999). The Michigan researchers found that the welfare recipients in general were *less* likely to be dependent on alcohol, but *more* likely to be drug dependent than women in general who were surveyed in a national study. However, women who had experienced severe physical violence in the past 12 months were significantly more likely to be alcohol dependent (8%) than were those whose abuse occurred in the past (2.6%), and those who had never experienced severe physical violence (1.1%). The same patterns of declining rates were also found for drug dependence.

As dramatic as these elevated rates of emotional distress and drug and alcohol problems are for women whose abuse is recent, the substantially lower rates among women whose abuse is not recent suggest that these effects often diminish – for a variety of reasons, including interventions. More evidence of resilience was found in the Massachusetts study, where women whose abuse occurred more than 12 months previously had significantly higher scores of self esteem and “mastery,” as well as lower rates of depression and anxiety, than the more recently abused women (Allard et al., 1997). While it is important to note that the scores for abused women did not reach those of the never-abused group, the evidence of recovery shows resilience among many women, and demonstrates the importance of not making assumptions about the emotional well-being of women who have experienced abuse. Again, however, it also indicates the importance of services and supports for women who disclose abuse.

What Is the Connection Between Domestic Violence and Women's Experience of Work and Training?

The most recent studies have significantly added to earlier investigations of the ways abusive partners can affect women's experience of work, education, and/or training programs. They show a complicated relationship between women's experience of abuse and their involvement in welfare and work. Making assumptions about women's participation based primarily on historical, or even current, physical abuse alone is clearly unwarranted. The type of abuse women experience (physical, sexual, or both), for example, has been found to make a difference.

Several studies have found that, in general, women who have experienced even recent domestic violence are interested in working and are as likely to be employed as those who have not. However, some women have partners who actively interfere with their efforts to work or attend school or training; such women have more difficulty sustaining their participation. Similarly, women whose partners threaten to kill them, or threaten their children, are more likely than others who report current abuse to have reduced work involvement.

Partner Interference. The evidence of abusive partner interference with women's efforts to obtain education, training, or employment, and to sustain these efforts over time, has grown and become more specific, and the rates of active sabotage found in some studies have been disturbingly high. Raphael (1999b), drawing from interviews across the country, listed work sabotage strategies she had found, and reported that fights before key events, such as tests or job interviews, were the most common. More specifically (see Appendix 2 for data from other studies on this issue), studies show the following:

- ***Job Readiness Program Participants:*** 46% of the women in the program reported their partners were jealous about the possibility of their meeting someone new at work, 21% were threatened or harassed while they were at work, and 32% were told that they would never be able to succeed at work or school. In addition, 12% were told that “working women are bad mothers,” and 8% had partners who said, “You may

work only if you keep up with the housework.” Women whose partners expressed these latter views were significantly more likely than others (5 times and 3 times more likely, respectively) to drop out of the program. Similarly, women who sought a protective order (PO) dropped out of the program at six times the rate of others who did not seek a PO – 31% compared to 5% (Brush, forthcoming).

- **The Michigan study:** 22.9% of all the women recipients said their partners had harassed them at work, training, or school, or interfered with their efforts to go; 7.3% reported this had happened in the past year. In addition, 23.3% reported they had had to stay home because of something their partner had done; 5.6% said this had happened in the past year. Most dramatically, 48.2% of the women who had experienced recent severe physical violence reported direct interference in the past year, compared to 6.3% of past victims (Tolman & Rosen, 1999).
- **The Wisconsin study:** This study of women who experienced current or past abuse found that 43.2% reported they don't feel safe from their abusive partner at work, 29.8% reported they have been fired or lost a job because of domestic violence, and 34.7% said their education and training efforts have been hampered by the abuse. More specifically, 84.5% said their abusive partner had kept them from sleeping, 57.8% said his threats had made them afraid to go to work or school, 47.1% said he had refused to provide promised child care at the last minute, 41.5% said he had called them repeatedly at work, 34% had been refused promised transportation at the last minute, and 33.9% had been beaten so badly that they could not work (Moore & Selkove, 1999).

Work Experience. The studies show that most women on welfare, whether they have been abused or not, want to work and have work experience. At least three-fifths of the women report having worked in the past, including 98.9% in the Utah study (Barusch et al., 1999). Over 70% of the recipients in the Massachusetts study had held full-time jobs. Further, 73.5% of the women with abuse histories had been employed full-time, compared to 64.5% of the women who had never been abused. (Allard et al., 1997). In addition, 89% of the mothers in this study (both abused and never-abused) reported that they would rather go to school or work than stay home full-time. The abused and never-abused groups of women were also equivalently likely to have had schooling or training for particular work and to be currently enrolled in a program.

Some studies have reported that the *patterns and timing* of work and welfare receipt differ for women who have been abused, however. For example, an early study of poor women in Worcester (Salomon, Bassuk, & Brooks, 1996) found that women who had been abused were significantly more likely than those who had never been abused to remain on AFDC for a combined total of five years or longer. It also found that housed women who experienced physical violence by a partner were significantly more likely than others to “cycle” (experience more than one episode of welfare support). This finding may support perceptions that women use welfare strategically in response to their partners' violence;¹ it may also reflect the impact of their partners' interference or direct abuse.

Clearly, the relationships among welfare, work, and domestic violence are complex. The Chicago study provided some of the earliest evidence of this complexity. The women who had experienced abuse were similar to those who had not in current employment, job status, days absent from work, and number of weeks unemployed in the past year. However, they were more likely to have been unemployed when they wanted to be working, to have lower personal income, and to have received AFDC, food stamps, and Medicaid in the past year. In addition, the women whose partners had threatened them with physical harm or had used a weapon against them were employed in significantly lower status jobs than others. Further, while some of the women who had experienced abuse decreased their employment efforts due to their partner's interference, others *increased* their labor force participation, and still others did not change (Lloyd, 1997).

The evidence is clear that most women who experience abuse continue their efforts to work. In his analysis of Washington data on women who were receiving AFDC or were at risk for such support, for example, Smith (2000) found that the women who experienced both physical and sexual abuse had held *more* jobs than other women, but were employed for fewer total months. This finding suggests that the women continue to try to work, and the violence is associated with problems *keeping* their jobs, “thereby limiting [their] chances of skill acquisition and promotion.” It is clearly consistent with the finding of welfare cycling found in Worcester, and the high average number of jobs (10) found in Utah (Barusch et al., 1999).

Connections between Abuse and Work. Several studies have reported analyses that examine the influence of domestic violence on employment or welfare experience in combination with other factors. These analyses attempt to separate the influence of domestic violence from other factors that researchers often find are connected to work, such as education, job skills, and physical health. The picture that emerges at this stage of analysis is complex. Researchers have defined work and welfare involvement in different ways, have used different lengths of time to measure duration, and have included different variables as potential sources of explanation for work and welfare outcomes. Nonetheless, they agree that domestic violence can be devastating, but it is not the only, or even always the most influential, factor associated with women's experience of welfare and work, as the following studies demonstrate:

- **The Chicago study** of low-income women, for example, found that, when many factors were considered at once, women who were older and were married were significantly *more* likely to be employed at the time of the interview, while women who had less education, were African American or Hispanic, had health problems, and/or had children under the age of 6 were significantly *less* likely to be employed at that time. When all of these factors were considered, there was *no significant relationship between partner violence in general and women's current employment*. However, women whose partners had threatened to kill them at any time during their relationship were significantly less likely to be currently employed. In addition, when their partners had directly prevented them from going to school or work, or had threatened to hurt their children, women were less likely to have been employed in the past 12 months than were other women (Lloyd & Taluc, 1999).
- **The Connecticut study** (Canny, 2000) of women who had been discontinued from cash assistance looked at the relative impact of several common barriers on women's current employment (42% of the women in the sample were employed at the time of assessment). Women who reported domestic violence were only marginally less likely to be employed when the other factors were controlled. Instead, poor or fair reading levels and problems with drugs were shown to be significant barriers.
- **The Washington study** of households receiving AFDC or at risk for such support (Smith, 2000) examined the impact of different types of abuse on work experience. It found that women who were *both* physically and sexually abused as adults "fared substantially worse than their peers [those who had experienced one type of abuse or none at all] on every measure" of work, even when other factors were controlled statistically. They were least likely to work at least 30 hours a week for six or more months, and lost more than 13% of the average hourly wage reported by the women overall. In addition, when many factors were examined at once, whites and older women tended to have more jobs, more months with work, and higher wages than were reported by younger women or African American or Hispanic women.
- **The Michigan study** of welfare recipients looked at factors associated with working 20 or more hours a week. It found that women who had experienced "severe domestic violence" in the past year were nearly as likely as those who had not (55.4% compared to 57.1%) to work 20 or more hours; the difference is *not* significant statistically. In contrast, women who had less than a high school education, limited work experience, limited job skills, no car, major depression, experiences of discrimination, and/or problems with their health or their children were all significantly less likely to be employed 20 or more hours a week (Danziger et al., 1999).
- **The Worcester Study** found that women who had experienced physical violence or aggression in the past year were no more or less likely than others to be currently employed. However, researchers also found that just 12.2% of women who had experienced recent violence or aggression worked 30 hours a week or more for a minimum of 6 months ("sustained full-time employment"), compared to 27.1% of those who had not experienced such abuse. When many factors were considered at once, the study found that women who were African American, had been employed during the past 5 years, didn't speak to a clinician about nerves in the past 6 months, received job training or a job placement service, and/or experienced no recent physical violence were most likely to have sustained full-time employment. Even when these and other factors were controlled statistically, *women who received job training were about 7 times more likely than others to be working, and those who received job placement services were about 4 times as likely to be*

working; these two factors were the strongest predictors of sustained full-time work (Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1999).

Together, these studies show that, while experience of domestic violence can make “sustained employment” more difficult, there are many other factors that are influential as well. Education, work experience, physical and mental health problems, lack of transportation, discrimination, and race and ethnicity have all been found to affect employment, and may be more influential than whether or not a woman has experienced domestic violence. However, domestic violence may have more impact on women’s options, and on the *quality* of the employment they obtain. Certainly, services such as job training and placement have been found to be critically important for all women.

What Do Women Say Are Their Major Barriers to Self-Sufficiency?

Several studies have questioned women directly about their barriers to work or to cooperation with TANF requirements. In general, domestic violence is not a common response, even when results are reported separately for women who have experienced abuse. For example, 51% of all the sampled women in Florida’s WAGES (TANF) program cited transportation as an obstacle, 44% said child care, and 31% said lack of job skills (Merrill et al., 1999). The Missouri study found that women were most likely to say that child care and transportation were their two biggest problems interfering with work; abuse or lack of support by a family member was 5th on a list of 11 potential sources of interference (Sable, Libbus, Huneke, & Anger, 1999). The study of Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant women also found that transportation and child care were the major barriers – 56% of the women needed transportation, and 60% needed child care (Becerra, 1999). However, Connecticut data from a study of the first 226 clients who were discontinued from cash assistance after failing to follow program rules found that 35% of these clients listed domestic violence as a barrier to employment, although they were only marginally less likely to be employed (Canny, 2000).

What Do We Know About Women’s Response to the Family Violence Option?

As of August, 2000, 39 states had adopted the Family Violence Option (FVO), a provision of the federal welfare legislation that allows states to exempt victims of violence temporarily from work requirements while they receive services and take other steps toward self-sufficiency; it also allows women to apply for a waiver from cooperation with child support enforcement efforts (Nazario, 2000; Raphael & Haennicke, 1999). Among the states that have adopted this provision, methods of notification, assessment, the types of services, and the types of waivers and other responses have varied widely (Raphael, 1999a).

Disclosure Rates. While increasing attention has turned to the rates at which women report domestic violence to TANF or child support enforcement (CSE) staff, it is important to remember that women consider many things before they talk about abuse. Disclosure does not ensure their safety, nor is it an indicator of success of the FVO. In general, rates of disclosure to researchers have been substantially higher than disclosures to AFDC or TANF workers (which have ranged from 3% to 10%). In addition, states report that most disclosure is of past, not current, abuse (Raphael 1999a). However, to date, only a few studies have reported women’s rates of disclosure of violence in response to the FVO.

The Wisconsin study of domestic violence victims found that 70% did not disclose the violence or its impact to a TANF worker. Their reasons for non-disclosure were that 1) they did not think it was the worker’s business (31.8%); 2) they were ashamed (23.9%); 3) they didn’t think the worker had time to help them (10.2%); 4) the worker seemed insensitive (5.7%); and 5) they were afraid of losing their benefits (4.5%). Wisconsin relies on client-initiated disclosure, and that may contribute to the low rates, as well (Moore & Selkove, 1999).

The most comprehensive investigation of domestic violence disclosure rates has provided data from different stages of the process in Colorado, Minnesota, and Massachusetts (Griswold, Pearson, & Thoennes, forthcoming). It found rates of 40% in Colorado, 35% in Massachusetts, and 38% in Minnesota. It found, further, that rates were substantially higher in response to direct questioning by workers than they were from providing information about the FVO and waiting for women to self-disclose (35% vs. 9% in Massachusetts

and 38% vs. 6% in Minnesota). More important, this study reported that the women themselves said that it is better to ask directly about violence. For example, 63% of the women in Minnesota who disclosed domestic violence said that it is good for workers to ask everyone about problems like substance abuse or domestic violence. In Massachusetts, 71% of those who disclosed said they were very or fairly comfortable discussing domestic violence with their worker; 79% said workers should question women directly.

Further, this study found that most of the women who disclosed domestic violence want child support. Ninety-three percent of the women who disclosed in Colorado, 71% in Massachusetts (and half of those who said their abuser still posed a threat), and 60% of those in Minnesota wanted to receive child support.

Interest in the Child Support Exemption. Child-related issues are often a source of conflict between women and their abusive partners. The Massachusetts study, for example, found that over half (52%) of the women who had been abused in the last year had also argued with a man about child support, visitation, or custody in the past year, compared to 20% of those who had never been abused. Nonetheless, the three-state study found that interest in applying for an exemption (or “good-cause waiver”) from cooperation with child support was quite limited, even among women who disclosed domestic violence. In Colorado, 6.7% of those who disclosed domestic violence expressed interest in a waiver, as did 15% of those who disclosed in Minnesota.

In general, the studies report that women say they are not interested in a waiver because they want to receive child support. This was true for 77% of the women in Massachusetts who disclosed domestic violence and were not interested in a waiver; 71% of this group also agreed strongly that “the violence happened long ago, and there is no current danger” (Griswold et al., forthcoming).

Pearson and her colleagues looked more closely at women’s interest in good-cause waivers in Colorado (Pearson et al., 1999; Pearson & Griswold, 1997). Of the 6.7% of abused women who applied for a waiver, just one-third were successful; the rest had their application denied due to insufficient documentation. Of the women who wanted to apply, most wanted child support, but 76% said that their abuser was dangerous, and child support would make their situation worse. Thirty-eight percent said that he did not know where she lived, and 72% had moved to avoid him. Researchers found that there were 8 factors that predicted that a woman would want to apply for a waiver: threats to harm the children; threats to harm, isolate, or hit or beat her; preventing her from working; monitoring her telephone calls; abuse in the past 6 months; and having called police. The women whose children were threatened were most interested in good-cause waivers (Pearson et al., 1999).

Experience with Domestic Violence Services. A few studies have investigated services sought and obtained by women in connection with their experience of welfare. The three-state study, for example, reported that 30% of the women in Massachusetts who said that they had experienced domestic violence said they would have liked to see a specialist. However, about half did not remember being told that a specialist was available, and nearly half of those who told researchers they wanted to see a specialist had not mentioned it to their worker. A large majority of women who actually saw specialists in Massachusetts and Minnesota found that they were helpful (Griswold et al., forthcoming).

In Texas, about 7% of TANF clients had contact with family violence specialists in a 3-month period. The issues discussed included violent relationships, the impact of violence on children, health care, transportation, and safety planning (Center for Social Work Research, 1999).

A domestic violence program in Chicago designed to provide support to interested women receiving TANF benefits found that 19% of the women expressed interest in specialized services, and one-third of these attended at least one session with advocates. Over half (57%) of those who attended at least one session were placed in work activities: 37% entered paid employment, 11% enrolled in school and 10% entered training programs (Levin, 2000).

The Utah study reported that 87.3% of the women receiving welfare had a self-sufficiency or employment plan, and 72.2% overall were participating in program activities. Of those who said their partner objected to their

working, however, only 26.9% had talked about it with an employment counselor, and 46.7% of these found that talk to be helpful (Barusch et al., 1999).

In Wisconsin, 26.8% of the women who disclosed domestic violence to a worker were referred to counseling; workers asked nearly one in five (19.5%) of the women who disclosed for further proof of abuse. Just 14.6% of women who disclosed were told that funds were available if she was homeless because of the abuse; and less than 5% were told about the child support exemption (Moore & Selkove, 1999). Similarly, a study of California's program in six counties found that only half of the women who were receiving domestic violence services were informed about the FVO (Meisel & Chandler, 2000).

The data currently available about rates of disclosure and women's subsequent experience, then, remains limited. It is clear that most women who have experienced domestic violence have not so far disclosed it to their caseworkers. When researchers have asked, women have told them that workers should ask directly about domestic violence rather than wait for disclosures. However, women should not be questioned without clear explanations of the implications and options, and referrals to specialized domestic violence advocates; disclosure must be voluntary and confidential. The available evidence about what happens after women disclose demonstrates that subsequent services and interventions have sometimes been helpful and sometimes not. When services have been provided by referral to domestic violence specialists, such services have been helpful (Burt, Zweig, & Schlichter, 2000). Systematic training for TANF workers and TANF agency protocols are clearly needed.

Summary Considerations

The available research clearly demonstrates that women who have experienced domestic violence are prominent among TANF recipients. These women are even more likely than other impoverished women to have a variety of physical and mental health problems; to have partners who oppose or interfere with school, training, or employment; and to have more frequent periods of unemployment and welfare receipt. For some women, the physical, emotional, and employment effects of abuse have been prolonged and extreme.

However, these studies also provide evidence of many women's remarkable resiliency: over time the physical and emotional effects have declined substantially for some women, and the women have continued to seek and obtain employment. They average more jobs within a given time period than recipients who do not report abuse experience, showing that they make an effort but perhaps have trouble keeping a particular job. Some studies have found that women who have been abused are more likely than other low-income women to have work experience.

Further, many of the most recent sophisticated studies have found that experience of abuse in general is not significantly associated with current employment when other factors are taken into account. Instead, extreme threats, direct partner interference, threats directed at children, and a combination of physical and sexual abuse, combined with educational deficits, depression, limited work experience or skills, and lack of transportation, have been found to be associated with problems in sustaining employment. Further, job training and placement services have significantly helped women continue full-time work. These results have been supported by women's own reports of their barriers to work: most say that difficulties with child care and transportation are their major impediments; when they mention domestic violence, it figures less prominently.

The recent studies also show that most women do not disclose domestic violence to TANF staff, even when they report such experience to researchers. Since many women are working, and most services are not specifically designed for women who have experienced domestic violence, they may not have reason to disclose. Further, most of the women who disclose abuse are interested in receiving child support – they are not likely to be interested in applying for a child support exemption. The primary source of interest in an exemption is threats to harm the children. This suggests that child support enforcement agencies need procedures to safely enforce child support (see Turetsky & Notar, 1999).

Finally, the studies show that many women who have experienced abuse are not provided with complete information about the services and options available to them. Many have reported that they would like to have

seen a domestic violence specialist. When specialists have been involved, most women have found them to be helpful.

The studies clearly demonstrate, then, that women's interests and needs are complex and highly variable. Some of them face extreme circumstances and will need special supports and considerations, such as additional advocacy and services, or short- or long-term waivers/exemptions from welfare or child support time limits or requirements. These women are most likely to be those who are experiencing current or very recent abuse, and whose abusive partners are directly interfering in their efforts to move toward self-sufficiency or are seriously threatening them or their children. Safe procedures, policies, and programs are essential for these women. Even though the available data suggest that these special considerations will not be needed by a majority of women receiving TANF support, some women clearly experience long-term consequences and ongoing danger, and will require additional services.

Since the studies also clearly demonstrate women's interest and involvement in work, it is crucial that they be provided with maximum options through flexible policies that can respond on a case-by-case basis. Economic independence and employment are central considerations in women's safety: options should include training and placement which respond to immediate and longer-term needs, as well as safely enforced child support. Sensitivity to women's concerns about their children should be central; threats to children interfere significantly with women's participation in work and training, and increase their interest in child support exemptions.

Clearly, assisting battered women will require sensitivity to differences in women's strengths and needs, which can be achieved by providing safe and confidential opportunities for communication, and attention to what individual women say they need to achieve both safety and self-sufficiency. Women should be given the opportunity for voluntary and confidential disclosure of domestic violence, and assessed for other issues that have been identified as barriers to employment. Studies indicate that women are most likely to disclose abuse when they are asked directly, and most are comfortable being asked. However, women also need to be informed of all the implications of disclosure, and must have the opportunity to explore the consequences of disclosure for their ongoing safety. In order for TANF staff to engage in such initial screening safely and effectively, it is important that they receive specific training about the dynamics of domestic violence, and women's highly variable reactions and sources of risk.

Further, safety considerations should be reflected in TANF protocols covering the entire process: initial screening, all written notices, all program referrals and job placements, and all sanctioning considerations (see Davies, 1998a, 1998b, and forthcoming). The use of on-site specialized domestic violence advocates should be expanded, and protocols for regular referral to off-site programs, when women are interested, should be adopted. In addition, states should consider allowing ongoing financial support for battered women, as well as options for restarting benefits when women experience abuse after benefits have been exhausted.

Since women who have been abused have many concerns that are similar to those held by all recipients, such as child care and transportation, services and supports in these areas are likely to benefit battered women, as well. Similarly, comprehensive mental health services and systematic access to health care will help all recipients. Job training and placement services have been identified as particularly important. In fact, programs that provide financial incentives for work and participation in employment-focused services to all recipients have been found to be associated with reduced rates of reported domestic violence (Knox, Miller, & Gennetian, 2000).

While recent research has added substantially to our knowledge of abused women's experience with TANF and work, still more will be needed to identify what policies will be most helpful to assist women in their path to self-sufficiency. Research is still needed to investigate how women's age, race, ethnicity, ability/disability, religious affiliation, and immigration status affect their experiences and decisions. Research that includes opportunities for women to describe their experiences with TANF staff, programs, and policies, and what these have meant in the context of their efforts to ensure safety and well-being for themselves and their children, is especially important. Research that looks beyond simple employment, and investigates the *quality* of work, and the *income* it provides, is also vital; it is important to learn if domestic violence constrains women's choices of *types* of work.

Such formal research, coupled with careful staff attention to individual women's concerns and circumstances, should provide guidance for more sensitive and responsive policies. More states have begun to collect information about TANF recipients and services, and to participate in comprehensive comparative studies; clearly, studies should include information about domestic violence, as well as other difficulties. These efforts are crucial if we are to learn more about how waivers, exceptions, or special services are used, and how they can help battered women continue to move toward enhanced safety and self-sufficiency.

Note

1. Strategic use of welfare by abused women was also suggested by Brandwein (1999b) in her study of 3,147 domestic violence incidents reported to Salt Lake City police over a three-year period. She found that between 38% and 41% of the women who reported domestic violence to the police and used welfare opened their cases within one year (before or after) of the report. Nearly a fifth of those who made reports to police started welfare within a year afterward. A slightly larger percentage of women reported abuse *after* they began to receive welfare. Brandwein suggests that the first group could be using welfare as part of their response to abuse, while the second could experience abuse in retaliation for their moves toward independence. The data directly related to these speculations were not obtained in this study.

Appendix 1: Findings on the Prevalence of Domestic Violence

- ***In Harm's Way? Domestic Violence, AFDC Receipt and Welfare Reform in Massachusetts***, a probability sample of 734 women receiving AFDC in 40 of 42 welfare offices in the state, found that 64.9% had experienced physical abuse by an adult male partner during their lives, and 19.5% reported such abuse during the past year. (Allard et al., 1997).
- ***The Effects of Violence on Women's Employment***, a random survey of 824 women (one-third currently receiving AFDC, two-thirds not) in one of Chicago's low-income neighborhoods, found that 33.8% of the AFDC recipients and 25.5% of the non-recipients had experienced "severe aggression" by a partner in adulthood. Further, 19.5% of the recipients and 8.1% of the non-recipients currently in a relationship had experienced serious aggression in the last 12 months (Lloyd & Taluc, 1999).
- ***The Passaic County Study of AFDC Recipients in a Welfare-to-Work Program***, a sample of 846 women in a New Jersey AFDC Job Readiness program, found that 57.3% reported they had been physically abused by an adult male partner, and 19.7% of those currently in a relationship (65% of the sample) said they were being abused physically (Curcio, 1997).
- ***The Worcester Family Research Project***, a study of 436 homeless and housed women (409 received AFDC), found that over 60% reported severe physical violence by an adult male partner; 32.4% had experienced such violence by their "current or most recent partner" in the past two years (Browne & Bassuk, 1997).
- ***Domestic Violence Among AFDC Recipients***, a survey of 404 AFDC recipients in 6 offices in Missouri in 1996, found that 29% reported they had been hit, slapped or kicked by an adult partner – 10.6% in the past year (Sable et al., 1999).
- ***Barriers to Self-Sufficiency and the W-2 Response***, a survey of 274 current or former AFDC/TANF recipients who sought help from a Wisconsin domestic violence program in 1998, found that 68.9% reported current physical abuse (Moore & Selkove, 1999).
- ***Washington State Family Income Study***, a random survey of women in 1,300 households receiving AFDC and 800 "at risk" households interviewed annually between 1988 and 1992, found that 24% reported physical abuse in adulthood, 5% reported sexual abuse, and 19% reported both (for a total of 47.8%). Forty percent reported physical and/or sexual abuse in childhood (Smith, 2000).
- ***Immigrant Women and Welfare Reform***, a study of 75 Mexican and 75 Vietnamese women who were current or former recipients of AFDC/welfare, found that 40% of the Mexican women and 16% of the Vietnamese women had experienced domestic violence (Becerra, 1999).

Appendix 2: Findings about Partner Interference

- ***The Passaic County study***: 39.7% of the women who were currently abused reported that their partner tries to prevent them from obtaining education and training, compared to 12.9% of the total sample (Curcio, 1997).
- ***The Massachusetts study***: 21.7% of the women who had been abused in the past 12 months reported that their current or former partner wouldn't like them going to school or work, compared to 12.9% of those whose abuse was more than a year ago, and 1.6% of the women who had never been abused (Allard et al., 1997).

- ***The Chicago study:*** Of the women currently in a relationship, 38.7% said their partners had tried to control them in the past 12 months, and 8% said their partner had prevented them from going to school or work in the past 12 months (Lloyd & Taluc, 1999).
- ***The Utah study:*** 21.1% said their partner did not support their working, 42% had been harassed at work, and 36% had had to stay home from work at some point because of domestic violence (Barusch et al., 1999).
- ***The Missouri study:*** Women who had experienced abuse reported high rates of job and training interference. For example, 19.1% had missed work because of their partners, 17.8% said their partners interfered with work or school, and 14.6% had lost jobs because of their partners (Sable et al., 1999).
- ***The Chicago shelter study:*** In-depth interviews with 69 women in three Chicago battered women's shelters in 1997 found that nearly half said their abusive partner had forbidden them to get a job. Of those who worked, half were fired or forced to quit their jobs because of abuse (Riger, 1998).

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