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Exploring the Literature on Relationships Between Gender Roles, Intimate Partner Violence, Occupational Status, and Organizational Benefits

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Studies of intimate partner violence (IPV) and work have been primarily conducted with women in low-wage low-status (LWLS) positions, as much of this research has focused on poverty, welfare, and homelessness. Although women in LWLS positions represent a large percentage of working women in the United States, it is also important to investigate experiences of women in high-wage high-status (HWHS) positions because a growing number of women are employed within such jobs. We propose gender role theory can be used to explain occurrences of IPV among women in HWHS positions and their utilization of organizational benefits. We suggest those in HWHS positions may be likely to have access to organizational benefits (e.g., medical, vacation, and flexible work schedules) and the ability to utilize the Family and Medical Leave Act. However, prevailing gender roles existing in organizations may render women in HWHS positions unlikely to use benefits or to take leave.

*Keywords:* employment; gender roles; intimate partner violence; organizational benefits; occupational status

Intimate partner violence (IPV), although clearly a serious issue for women’s health and well-being, is also becoming an organizational concern. Adult women (older than age 18 years) experience about 5 million
incidents of IPV in the United States each year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Given that 56% of women in the United States are employed (U.S. Department of Labor [USDOL], 2005), it is likely that IPV affects women’s capacity to be productive workers (Swanberg, Logan, & Macke, 2005). It is estimated that women lose 8 million workdays per year due to IPV and that IPV costs employers nearly US$4.1 billion per year in direct costs of medical and mental health care (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2003). Furthermore, many medical, tardiness, absence, turnover, productivity, and replacement costs associated with IPV are not attributed to IPV because women may not disclose the violence they are experiencing to supervisors, personnel specialists, and coworkers.

Unrecognized costs associated with IPV may increase organizational expenses significantly (CDC, 2003). Because of the costs associated with IPV and the growing awareness of IPV in the general public, human resources managers, executives, and security directors are beginning to recognize the organizational consequences of partner violence on organizations (Kinney, 1995; Solomon, 1995; Swanberg, Logan, & Macke, 2005). This increased recognition has been documented in corporate surveys. For example, in one survey 91% of senior corporate executives expressed their belief that domestic violence affects their employees, and 56% were aware of employees who had been affected by domestic violence (Patrice Tanaka & Company, Inc., 2002). In another survey, 66% of executives said they believed that their organizations’ financial performance would benefit by addressing domestic violence among their workers (Roper Starch Worldwide for Liz Claiborne, 1994).

The importance and cost of IPV and its negative effects on women and employing organizations have drawn the attention of researchers in numerous disciplines including psychology, social work, sociology, occupational health, and criminology (e.g., Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1999; Moe & Bell, 2004; Riger & Krieglstein, 2000; Swanberg & Logan, 2005; Tolman & Rosen, 2001). The majority of these studies, however, have focused on women in low-wage, low-status (LWLS) positions. Considerably fewer studies have included women in high-wage, high-status (HWHS) positions—which, for the purposes of this article, we consider to be those in which women are employed in managerial levels or as professionals. Examining the relationships between partner violence, occupational status, and organizational factors unique to women in HWHS jobs seems particularly important because of the rising number of women who are entering and sustaining employment within HWHS positions (Catalyst, 2000).
According to the USDoL (2005), 38% of employed women occupy HWHS positions (management, professional, and related occupations). Furthermore, the percentage of women entering the workforce has increased 15.5% since 1973, and women are expected to account for 51% of the increase in total labor growth by 2014 (USDoL, 2005). Many of these new entrants will obtain HWHS positions. For example, it is estimated by 2010 there will be a 13.6% increase in management-related positions and a 26% increase in professional and related positions among women (USDoL, 2005).

We are not aware of any studies that have specifically focused on psychosocial aspects associated with partner violence among women in higher wage, higher prestige jobs, or the extenuating workplace issues associated with partner violence among women employed in higher paid professional occupations. In particular, we are interested in learning more about the experiences of IPV victims employed in HWHS jobs within the context of organizations that have gendered policies. Although we acknowledge the value of results of previous studies examining relationships between organizational supports, disclosure, and employment, we suggest that women’s occupational status may be a particularly important, but often overlooked, job characteristic that may help to explain conflicting results. Thus, this investigation contributes to the growing literature on relationships between IPV, work, and organizations by specifically theorizing about experiences of workers of higher occupational status, who have been relatively understudied in such research.

We begin by considering the influence of gender roles on IPV among women in HWHS positions. Utilizing a gender-role theory framework, we propose that incongruity with expected gender roles may affect men’s perpetration of IPV among women employed in HWHS positions. We discuss women’s work in gendered organizations and argue that prevailing gender roles that exist in organizations may affect the likelihood that women in HWHS positions will access benefits within gendered organizations. We conclude with implications for researchers and practitioners, emphasizing research that may help increase understanding of relationships between worker status, IPV, and organizational support.

**Gender Roles and the Perpetration of IPV**

Despite the limited amount of research investigating the experiences of women in HWHS positions and IPV, evidence suggests that women from all educational, employment, and income levels experience IPV and that this
IPV negatively affects their ability to work (Browne et al., 1999; Lloyd, 1997; Moe & Bell, 2004). Perpetration of IPV is part of a “systematic pattern of dominance and control” (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000, p. 6); and the attempts to dominate and control women are not exclusive to men who earn more than their partners, whose partners are unemployed, or who work in low-paying jobs. In some cases, as we discuss, women working in HWHS positions are subject to IPV (e.g., Anderson, 1997; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Goode, 1971), yet this has been explored relatively little by researchers.

Gender plays a complex role in perpetration of violence (Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Leukefeld, 2006; Schwartz, 2005). According to gender role theory (O’Neil, 1981), men who hold strong beliefs in masculine gender norms, particularly with regard to providing for one’s family, may be more likely to perpetrate violence if they feel these norms are being violated. Similarly, Goode (1971) argued that men who lack power (measured as lower income, occupational status, or less education than their partner) will be more likely to perpetrate violence to obtain power in the relationship. Inherent in gender-role conflict theories is the idea that socially constructed gender roles can be physically and emotionally damaging to individuals and those close to them (Blazina & Watkins, 1996; Mahalik, Cournoyer, DeFranc, Cherry, & Napolitano, 1998; Pleck, 1995). Gender role conflict is defined as the occurrence of negative consequences due to societal pressures to conform to prescribed societal expectations based on one’s socially identified gender (Eagly & Karau, 1991; O’Neil, 1981; O’Neil & Good, 1997). For many men, those gender roles include that of being the primary or sole financial provider for the family regardless of the spouse’s employment.

Studies have found that men who experience high levels of gender role conflict are more prone to anxiety and depression, hostility, “acting out,” passive-aggressiveness, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, straight-trait anger, low self-esteem, and alcohol and drug abuse (Blazina & Watkins, 1996; Hayes & Mahalik, 2000; Mahalik et al., 1998). Empirical research has yielded mixed results with respect to IPV and women’s employment (e.g., economic power). Although some research suggests that women who are employed and less financially dependent are less likely to experience abuse (e.g., Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002; Goodman, Dutton, Vankos, & Weinfurt, 2005), other studies found working and financially dependent women are abused. For example, Tauchen, Witte, and Long’s (1991) study found evidence of a positive relationship between IPV and a woman’s income.

The relationships between IPV, socioeconomic status, and women’s individual and family income are complex. For example, Anderson (1997)
found a relationship between IPV and the proportion that women’s income contributed to family income. Women who contributed 31% or less to the family income were the least likely to experience IPV. Women who earned between 55% and 60% of family incomes were more than 3 times as likely to experience IPV. Women who earned 70% or more of the family income were even more likely to experience IPV—5 times more likely than women who earned smaller proportions of their family’s income. Although not a direct test, these results support the idea that male partners whose perceived masculine gender role including that of sole or primary provider may perceive a successful working partner as threatening (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Bell, Moe, & Schweinle, 2002) and may perpetrate violence in response to the perceived threat.

Anderson’s (1997) empirical research and our arguments suggest that the income contribution of women, relative to their male partners, in some cases may be central to the perpetration of IPV. USDoL (2004) data indicate that 24% of married women earn at least $5,000 more than their working husbands and that 5% of married couple families are composed of working women and unemployed husbands. When combined, these data indicate that nearly 30% of employed wives earn at least 50% of their family’s income. Following Anderson’s (1997) research, it is possible that these women experience IPV. In her research on the negative effects of the help seeking process of abused women, Lempert (1997) described verbal abuse that included the derogatory term career woman hag, that was used by an abuser. In this regard, women who are employed in HWHS positions may be victims of IPV, and, as we suggest, particularly unlikely to use the resources to which they have greater access because of perceptions of competence they are trying to maintain when in professional, managerial, or executive positions.

**Women’s Work in Gendered Organizations**

Gendered organization theory argues that gender assumptions are deeply embedded within work cultures, and that organizations are designed around masculine norms that make it difficult for women to attain credible positions of authority (Williams, 2000). The theory further postulates that structures, cultures, policies, and norms in organizations are constructed in ways that advance the interest of men who usually are in the positions of authority (Kanter, 1977).

Furthermore, gendered organizations do not support women’s advancement efforts because their policies are based on traditional gender stereotypes
(Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002). For example, in the not too distant past, women were frequently barred from entering male-dominated fields by men who felt that women’s presence would devalue their wages (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Women’s work was viewed as supplementing men’s work, which was viewed as being more important, and prestigious (Cleveland, Stockdale, & Murphy, 1999). Occupational sex segregation was prevalent, with the majority of women occupying only 25 of 252 occupations in 1900, and 11 of 451 occupations in 1940 (Cleveland et al., 1999).

Today, women in the United States represent 51% of the population and 47% of the workforce. A significantly smaller, but growing portion of women workers are employed in HWHS jobs, which provide better wages and more job flexibility, security, and opportunities for advancement (Catalyst, 1998). Younger women now earn more of the new bachelor’s and master’s degrees awarded than younger men in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). More education contributes to better employment opportunities, thus, though still proportionately fewer than in LWLS jobs, more women now work in HWHS positions than ever before. Even so, prevailing gender role stereotypes in organizations confine many women to low-level management positions or supportive roles (e.g., human resources, communications, or customer service) and prevent them from advancing at rates comparable to men (Maume, 1999; Padavic & Reskin, 2002). The low-level management positions to which many women are confined rarely lead to high-level management or chief executive officer positions (Catalyst, 2000; Hurley, Fagenson-Eland, & Sonnenfeld, 1997; Powell & Graves, 2003). For example, just eight of the Fortune 500 CEOs are women (Inskeep, 2005). As more women attempt to move into higher level jobs outside of positions typically viewed as appropriate for women, they are likely to face obstacles that may prevent them from achieving these goals, including gendered organizational cultures and perceptions that women are unqualified for the positions they hold (Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992; Padavic & Reskin, 2002).

In gendered organizations, managers and organizational structures reward those who set aside personal and family commitments and are dedicated primarily to their jobs (Heilman et al. 1992; Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Gendered cultures and perceptions of inadequate qualifications often impede women from entering high-level and management jobs. Moreover, these factors may also affect women’s willingness to portray any semblance of weakness, fear, or need for assistance, as this may be viewed as a sign of vulnerability (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). For this reason it is plausible that
women in such positions may resist help seeking in the face of IPV. Researchers have argued that being perceived as a “victim” undermines women’s sense of self-confidence and perceptions of being in control and generates impressions of them as incapable of managing their own situations (Holstein & Miller, 1990; Lempert, 1997; Loseke, 1992). The term victim implies a level of helplessness that may cause well-meaning family, friends, and associates to offer advice or intervene in the victim’s affairs (Lempert, 1997), along with implying that women coping with IPV are not capable of managing themselves without help (Loseke, 1992). Although women in all job types and occupations are likely to prefer to avoid the stigma associated with IPV, for women in HWHS positions, the “victim” status could negatively affect a career. For instance, colleagues or senior executives may wonder whether a woman who is a victim of IPV will perform effectively if she cannot even take care of her own family problems.

**Access and Utilization of Employee Benefits in Gendered Organizations**

Employee benefits are essential for women to escape IPV. Benefits and workplace supports can give victims of IPV physical, emotional, and logistical support. Women experiencing IPV who take advantage of these benefits and policies should be more likely to successfully end partner violence (Moe & Bell, 2004). However, organizations’ policies and practices may sustain gender inequalities that usually benefit male employees (Swanberg, 2004). Gender role perceptions can influence how people react to others’ behavior in organizations, leading to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Powell & Graves, 2003). For example, in the early to mid 20th century, men typically earned more than women in part because organizations regarded them as heads of households, necessitating a “family wage” for men only (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Because millions of women now qualify for the head of households, occupational status has supplanted the head-of-household criteria as the principle for assigning wages (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Catalyst’s (2000) study found that the majority of the women sampled perceived that gendered policies in organizations still exist and that taking time to focus on one’s personal and family responsibilities was a barrier to advancement. Swanberg (2004) found that even though an organization may have gender neutral policies, the interpretation and implementation of the policies were still gender biased to the benefit of male employees.
Although blatant forms of sexism such as the ‘family wage’ are not as obvious today, women continue to be stigmatized in terms of their roles in labor market, as women employees, especially those of childbearing age, are still viewed by organizations as less dependable than men employees (Williams, 2000). Pregnancy, marriage, and family responsibilities are more likely to hinder the progression of careers for women than men in corporate organizations (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Although often inaccurate, women are often regarded as having shifting loyalties, viewed as less committed to their jobs, and more often than men experience periods of leave or unemployment, as domestic responsibilities continue to disproportionately land on them (Crittenden, 2001). Indeed women who are mothers earn less than women who are not mothers; however, men who are fathers earn more than men who have no children (Budig & England, 2001). Therefore, we believe that women employed in HWHS positions, who are more likely to have access to benefits and policies earned with tenure (and job stability), may opt not to use this benefit or policy for fear of being negatively stigmatized in the workplace.

Family and Medical Leave

The U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) allows employees to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for illness but requires one work at least 1,250 hrs in the previous year to qualify. Covered employers must employ 50 or more workers for 20 or more weeks in the previous year. Overall, 39% of people making $20,000 or less and 66% of people making $50,000 or more work for firms that fit FMLA criteria (Gerstel & Mcgonagle, 2002). The purpose of the FLMA is to provide time off and job security for employees who are experiencing personal difficulties. Taking advantage of FLMA can help women make life changes necessary to escape IPV. However, gendered organizations may prevent women in HWHS positions from utilizing FLMA.

Although workers in HWHS positions may be able to afford some leave without pay because of their jobs, we speculate that they may perceive themselves unable to take significant time off from their jobs. In a tenuous position, perhaps one in which women are negatively stereotyped, extended or frequent absence from work may be negatively perceived by coworkers and/or supervisors. In a longitudinal large-scale study, Judiesch and Lyness (1999) found that managers who took leaves of absence (89% of whom were women) were less likely to be promoted and received lower salary increases than those who did not. In her study that included workers of various levels, Swanberg (2004) highlighted a case study where a woman who
took FMLA leave reported that her request for the time off was not fully supported, she experienced lower performance evaluations compared to the rest of the employees, and was also requested to return to work early. Fears of being penalized for having taken leaves of absence may render women who are financially able to do so (such as those in HWHS positions) unlikely to take those leaves of absence.

**Medical and Vacation Benefits**

Women in HWHS jobs are more likely to have employer-provided health insurance that may be helpful in the event of physical and mental health needs resulting from IPV (Foster, 2000). For example, although 73% of full-time workers have health insurance through their employers, only 39% of part-time workers do (Foster, 2000). Although there is much variation between industries and benefits that are provided to employees, paid time off is generally granted based on tenure with an employer. As with unpaid family and medical leave, it is possible that even women who have earned paid leave may be unwilling to take it, particularly those in HWHS positions. As discussed earlier, researchers have found that female managers who took leaves received lower performance evaluations, fewer promotions, and lower salary increases (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Swanberg, 2004). For women in HWHS jobs who have obtained significant education and lucrative careers, paid or unpaid leaves of absence may be viewed as a sign of lack of commitment and may be detrimental to careers (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999). We emphasize that leaves for any reason may be viewed negatively, and when coupled with leaves because of IPV, potential negative effects on a woman’s career or perceived competence may be magnified.

**Flexible Work Schedules**

Flexible work schedules have the potential to be quite beneficial to women experiencing IPV. Flexible work schedules not only allow IPV victims the opportunity to adjust their working hours based on their needs when recovering from abuse (e.g., attending doctor appointments, therapy sessions, court dates) but also provide an important subversive strategy for resisting continued abuse, harassment, and stalking by allowing workers the opportunity to vary their work schedules. This can be vital to a victim’s survival, as violence often escalates on separation from an abusive partner (Campbell, 1992; Ellis, 1987; Logan et al., 2006; Mahoney, 1991; Sev’er, 1997; Wilson & Daly, 1993). As with access to benefits, those working in
HWHS positions are likely to have access to flexibility in work schedules (Swanberg, Pitt-Catsouphes, & Drecher-Burke, 2005). However, gendered organizations may discourage women in HWHS jobs from utilizing the inherent flexibility in their positions. Gendered organizations encourage a culture of long work hours, and they are not usually supportive of benefits such as flex-time scheduling (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Therefore, women in HWHS positions may be unwilling to be physically absent from their jobs, particularly if the employer values and rewards “face time” in the workplace.

Conclusions and Implications

We have suggested that although women in HWHS may underutilize job-related benefits, they are likely to have access to them. The stigma associated with IPV and the fear of being perceived as unable to manage one’s own affairs may contribute to the reasons why women in HWHS positions underutilize these benefits. In particular, we have argued that workers in HWHS positions may want to avoid being perceived as “victims” who are not in control of their lives because they may suffer career penalties for using benefits that may be useful to them.

Theories such as gender role theory, that we have discussed, and others from disciplines not commonly employed in organizational research, may be helpful in the development of additional hypotheses about IPV. Research on role incongruity and conflict may also increase understanding of men’s perpetration of IPV, women’s responses to it, and observers’ reactions. We have focused on men’s gender role as it relates to the perpetration of IPV; however, including women in such studies may also provide some insight on whether women’s gender role conflict (e.g., guilt about performing as provider, desire to compensate for exhibiting masculine gender roles) affects their willingness to seek help when resources are available. In their studies of economic dependence, gender, and the division of housework, Brines (1994) and Greenstein (2000) found that the larger the proportion of a woman’s income to the family, the less housework (a typically feminine behavior) her husband performed. Brines proposed that “by doing less housework, economically dependent husbands ‘do gender’ ” (p. 652) to emphasize their masculinity. Women in such relationships also appear to pay more attention to and engage in traditionally feminine behavioral displays as possible compensation for breadwinning (see Atkinson & Boles, 1984; Greenstein, 2000; Hochschild & Machung, 1989).
As a conceptual paper, this article is limited in that it does not test the ideas we propose. We hope to generate interest from researchers and practitioners in these ideas about gender roles, occupational status, IPV, and organizational resources and that special effort will be made to include HWHS workers in samples. In addition to shelters, researchers should consider recruitment methods that will increase the chances of collecting data from women across all economic spectrums. Large-scale organizational sampling, including organizations in which significant numbers of women in HWHS positions are employed, should be utilized. Analyses of large-scale Employee Assistance Programs data that includes workers in HWHS positions may shed light on the ideas we propose and on the proportion of women in different occupational categories who experience IPV. In all studies, in addition to measuring gender role beliefs, researchers should carefully measure education levels, as well as individual and family income, as these appear to be related to the prevalence of violence differently for workers in HWHS positions.

Practitioners (i.e., social service agencies, employee counselors) should work to destigmatize the experience of IPV, communicating that being targeted by abuse does not reflect personal failure or suggest any inadequacies on the part of targets. Including IPV awareness training for all employees can help to destigmatize the experience of IPV, fears of negative ramifications, and make it easier for all employees to discuss this very prevalent social problem. Managers and executives should be trained about IPV, so they are able to identify its signs and symptoms. Managers and executives should also work to remove gendered barriers and presumptions of incompetence for female managers, allowing them freedom to succeed and fail as men are allowed to do and to seek help when needed. The fear of being perceived as weak may prevent women from seeking assistance or utilizing employee benefits. In addition to wasted organizational resources (benefits), employers may incur additional costs associated with lost production and turnover (e.g., Swanberg, Logan, & Macke, 2005). Although lost production costs are quite variable and hard to estimate, average recruiting costs for professional positions are about $12,000 per hire (Prizinsky, 2000).

We encourage other researchers interested in this topic to include occupational and organizational status as potentially important variables. As women increase as a proportion of the workforce, and as their representation in HWHS positions grows, focused study of these relationships is increasingly important. The relationships may be different from those we propose, yet any study that includes a broader representation of IPV targets and types of jobs and income levels should contribute to our knowledge of women, work, organizational supports, and IPV.


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