

Economic Abuse: A Literature Review of a Salient yet Overlooked Form of Intimate Partner Violence

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Economic abuse is another form of intimate partner violence (IPV) used by batterers to maintain power and control over their partners which often goes unreported, unrealized, and under-supported by IPV survivor advocates. Economic abuse is misunderstood as an IPV and is often incorrectly considered a financial crime, financial fraud, or white-collar crime. Economic abuse impacts the victim's short and long-term physical and mental well-being in efforts to achieve economic wellness for basic living conditions as well as job placement and professional development opportunities. Healthy minds fuel healthy bodies and economic self-efficacy contributes to both mental and physical health. The awareness and impact of economic abuse is grossly understudied, lacking empirical evidence on victims and survivors of economic self-sufficiency during and at the conclusion of an abusive relationship. The current research has primarily collected and reported data on heterosexual women, leaving a gap in the research regarding the impact of economic abuse in LGBTQ+ relationships. This paper serves as a literature review into current economic abuse research by discussing three constructs: economic control, economic exploitation, and employment sabotage as well as possible solutions for educational opportunities and financial self-efficacy. Further research is needed to raise awareness and provide financial literacy to IPV survivors in all gender communities. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2021 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

Economic abuse is another form of intimate partner violence (IPV) used by batterers to maintain power and control over their partners. Economic abuse is not widely recognized as a form of IPV or domestic abuse and is vastly understudied; consequently, it often goes unreported, unrealized, and under-supported by IPV survivor advocates (Adams, Sullivan, Bybee, & Greeson 2008; Chowbey, 2017; Christy & Valandra, 2017; Kutin, Russell, & Reid, 2017; Postmus, Plummer, McMahon, Murshid, & Kim, 2011; Postmus, Hoge, Breckenridge, Sharps-Jeffs, & Chung, 2018; Sanders, 2015; Stylianou, Postmus, & McMahon, 2013). Scholarly research has provided little attention to this form of violence until only the past decade, when economic abuse gained momentum as a topic of interest in scholarly communities as it has been proven to be a distinct form of IPV (Christy & Valandra, 2017; Kutin et al., 2017; Stylianou et al., 2013; Postmus et al., 2018). One of the reasons that this form of IPV has received minimal study over physical, psychological, and sexual abuse is due to the lack of a measurement tool to assess the presence of economic abuse (Adams et al., 2008; Kutin et al., 2017; Postmus, Plummer, & Stylianou et al., 2016; Stylianou, 2018). A pivotal study by Adams et al. (2008) conducted extensive reliability and validity testing, thus developing the first of its kind instrument to measure economic abuse as a distinct form of abuse. The Scale of Economic Abuse (SEA) as developed by Adams et al. (2008) confirmed the need for such an instrument as evidenced that 100% of the women in their study suffered psychological abuse, 98% suffered physical abuse, and 98% suffered economic abuse. Moreover, many recent studies have shown correlations of the overlap between economic abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and physical abuse, confirming that economic abuse is not an exclusive IPV (Christy & Valandra, 2017; Postmus et al., 2018; Sanders, 2015; Stylianou et al., 2013; Stylianou, 2018). As reported by Stylianou (2018) 93% of participants experienced economic abuse from their intimate partner and nearly half of those participants reported psychological, physical, or sexual abuse. Results from the Stylianou et al. (2013) study provided evidence that demonstrated economic abuse will be correlated to psychological abuse and physical abuse and further supported that economic abuse is a separate form of abuse.

A largely misunderstood type of IPV, economic abuse has been erroneously confused with the downturn in Wall Street, financial crimes, and white-collar crime (Postmus et al., 2011). Christy & Valandra (2017) discussed that other constructs such as socio-economic status is closely

linked to economic abuse; however, it is not synonymous, and as such, economic abuse remains a distinct form of domestic abuse (Adams et al., 2008; Christy & Valandra, 2017; Stylianou et al., 2013). While most of the studies reviewed for this paper reported that study participants are low-income women, and they are at the highest risk and incur the greatest amount of economic abuse, it is notable to mention that women from middle- to higher-income levels can also become victims of economic abuse (Christy & Valandra, 2017).

GENDER AND ECONOMIC ABUSE

Our patriarchal society has yielded to the differential in power regarding relationships. “When one takes account of the differentials in resources typically available to men, such as greater physical strength, socially sanctioned power, and control of wealth, it becomes clearer why women will more often be victims of coercive control while in relationships and persistent pursuit when attempting to leave relationships” (Davis, Swan & Gambone, 2010, p.337). Economic abuse affects all communities and genders comprehensively in every aspect of life and is not gender-restrictive (Christy & Valandra, 2017). For example, economic abuse constructs have amounted to lost employment of 8 million days each year, and 21% - 60% of IPV victims have lost their jobs as a result of economic abuse tactics (www.ncadv.org). Given the ubiquitous nuclear family and traditional gender roles women have played in terms of household financial holdings, financial decision making, not returning to work after starting a family, and the tenacious gender wage gap, women in heterosexual relationships have largely been affected and targeted in studies regarding economic abuse even though economic abuse affects men and individuals who may identify outside of traditional genders roles (Adams et al. 2008; Chowbey, 2017; Christy & Valandra, 2017; Postmus et al., 2012; Postmus et al., 2018; Sanders, 2015).

Recent research has slightly expounded empirical findings to population-based studies. Buller, Hidrobo, Peterman, & Heise (2016), examined IPV with a lens toward financial incentives in Ecuador; Chowbey (2017) examined economic abuse impactive on South Asian women living in Britain, India, and Pakistan; and Kutin, et al. (2017) examined economic abuse between intimate partners in Australia. Further, the Christy & Valandra (2017) study conducted a deep dive into the gender wage gap, and thus confirmed and additionally supported the correlation of lower pay and IPV (Adams et al., 2008; Hahn & Postmus,

2014). All studies reviewed were consistent regarding demographics and reported that non-white participants endured higher amounts of economic abuse. Noticeable was that overwhelmingly the study participants self-reported to be heterosexual women. Possible limitations could be that the gender choices available on the survey options were selective only to male or female, or no gender choices were present at all, resulting in an assumption by the researchers that all participants identified as heterosexual female.

This paper's review of current literature has returned a paucity of findings reporting economic abuse by intimate partners who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transsexual, or Queer (LGBTQ). "In addition to physical violence, one way of maintaining power in a relationship is to retain control over financial resources" (Sanders, 2015, p. 4). A call for research to include non-heterosexual relationships and persons identifying as LGTBQ is timely and would be highly regarded. The Christy & Valandra (2017) study was the only one in this literature review that even isolated lesbian women as a demographic and extended this group to a higher vulnerability to IPV in terms of economic abuse. No other papers for this review returned results in LGTBQ demographics or a discussion of needs for individuals identifying as such.

ECONOMIC ABUSE CONSTRUCTS

The awareness and impact of economic abuse is lacking empirical evidence on victims and survivors of economic self-sufficiency during and at the conclusion of an abusive relationship (Postmus et al., 2011, Postmus et al., 2018; Sanders, 2015). The Adams et al. (2008) study provided the first measurement tool for economic abuse and as such ushered a slow wave of research concerning this distinct form of IPV. Shortly after the Adams et al. (2008) study developed the SEA measurement tool, this form of abuse maintained its infancy with most of the myopic research efforts on women's employment (Christy & Valandra, 2017; Sanders, 2015; Stylianou et al., 2013). Armed with the SEA as a baseline, researchers were able to further develop research beyond the effects on women's employment and began to consider predictors of this IPV. Advancing knowledge on economic abuse and its relationship with economic self-sufficiency first demanded an understanding of the predicting factors of this IPV (Postmus et al., 2011).

Sanders's (2015) qualitative study acknowledged that previous studies had examined the effects of economic abuse tactics on women's employment and thereby extended the research by their examination into

the role of financial issues and economic circumstances for battered women. The Sanders (2015) study identified eight themes in which money and economic issues were predictors for economic abuse: 1) monetary control and lack of access to financial resources; 2) economic dependence and the role in staying or leaving; 3) financial issues as an impetus to verbal, physical and/or sexual abuse; 4) impact on employment or education; 5) impact on debt or credit; 6) stealing and construction of property; 7) dealing with the aftermath of economic abuse; 8) financial strategies.

Another decisive study (Postmus et al, 2016) adopted Adam et al.'s (2008) SEA and condensed the instrument to a 12-item scale. The results of the SEA-12 culminated from prior longitudinal exploratory studies, exploratory studies, and articles (Hahn & Postmus, 2014; Postmus et al., 2011; Stylianou 2013; Stylianou 2018) that resulted in three distinct subscales of economic abuse: economic control, economic exploitation, and employment sabotage. The 2011 Postmus et al. exploratory study reported that correlations between all three subscales were significant, ranging from .34 to .73. The final 2016 Postmus et al., SEA-12 study reported a total reliability coefficient of .89; where alpha coefficients were .87, .89, and .86 for economic control, economic exploitation, and employment sabotage (respectively) which demonstrated good internal consistency of all three subscales. In the purview of this literature review, economic abuse will be further analyzed by the Postmus et al. (2016) subscales.

Economic Control

The overarching premise to economic control is the abuser's proclivity to monitor and restrict the victim's ability to freely use financial resources in her life (Adams et al., 2008; Postmus et al., 2011; Postmus et al., 2016). Examples of tactics used: make the victim ask for money, put the victim on an allowance and account for how all the money was spent (i.e., receipts or other forms of justification), make important financial decision without her, demand to know how money was spent, do not allow any bills/titles/mortgage to be put in the abused person's name, and making the victim hand over their paycheck (Adams et al., 2008; Postmus et al., 2011; Postmus et al., 2016; Stylianou et al., 2013; Stylianou, 2016). Disallowing the victim to be a part of the conversation for important financial decisions only debilitates and reduces any financial self-efficacy the victim may have had (Hahn & Postmus, 2014). In addition, disallowing the victim to place any bills or titles in her name

reduces the likelihood for the development of credit history, making leaving the abusive situation that much more difficult.

Economic Exploitation

In 2011, the exploratory study by Postmus et al. found 94% of participants experienced some form of economic abuse and specifically 74% reported that they experienced exploitive behaviors. Exploitation tactics can involve the abuser paying bills in the participant's name late or not at all, spending money needed for basic needs, intentionally building up debt in the batterer's name, taking out loans unbeknownst to the abused, or creating certain acts to ruin credit (Adams et al., 2008; Postmus et al., 2011; Postmus et al., 2016; Stylianiou et al., 2013). Exploitation can take other forms such as gambling shared money and/or stealing the abused person's checkbook, credit, or debit card (Adams et al., 2008, Stylianiou et al., 2018). Overall, exploitation has the tendency to destroy the victim's economic situation. Ruining credit scores that have taken years to build will also take years to repair, leaving a shock wave of economic exploitation as a powerful and persistent form of abuse even after the victim transitions to a survivor (Hahn & Postmus, 2014).

Employment Sabotage

Employment sabotage is carried out by means of blocking employment opportunities (physically and intellectually) or restricting the ability to obtain resources for employment for further advancing employment opportunities (educational opportunities, necessary tools/equipment) (Adams et al., 2008; Postmus et al., 2011; Postmus et al., 2016; Postmus et al., 2018; Stylianiou et al., 2013). Specifically, physical forms can manifest via stealing the car keys or destroying any other means of transportation to employment, hiding clothes intended for employment, injuring the victim so that she cannot or is embarrassed to work with visible signs of injury, physical harm if she refuses to quit working, sabotaging child care so employment out of the home is unattainable, and doing things to prevent her from getting to work on time (Adams et al., 2008; Postmus et al., 2011; Postmus et al., 2016; Stylianiou et al., 2013).

Stylianiou et al. (2013) discussed that while economic (employment) sabotage tactics may be overt, such as physically checking in at a workplace, that forms of economic control can also be covert, such as

hiding or preventing the abused from viewing her bills/paperwork. Training IPV advocates to recognize covert behaviors which may seem normal under non-abusive situations is important, in order to validate that economic abuse is taking place, intervene in these situations, and to realize that covert behavior impedes victims in leaving the relationship (Stylianou et al., 2013).

ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The severe negative persistent impact that economic abuse can have on its victims as achieved from economic control, exploitation, and employment sabotage, makes it necessary to develop economic self-efficacy for victims and survivors so they can advance their lives. Economic abuse impacts the victim's short- and long-term physical and mental well-being in efforts to achieve economic wellness (Adams et al., 2008; Hahn Postmus, 2014; Kutin et al., 2017; Stylianou, 2018). Further substantiated, Christy & Valandra (2017) acknowledged that one of the reasons women are not able to leave an abusive relationship is due to financial difficulties stemming from the constructs of economic abuse. Addressing this issue requires "cultural change at the individual, community, and societal level" (p.83). Elevating the need for the development and implementation of financial literacy programs leading to economic self-efficacy for victims and survivors has received recent attention (Christy & Valandra, 2017; Hahn & Postmus, 2014; Kutin et al., 2017; Postmus et al., 2011; Stylianou et al. 2013).

Stylianou (2018) put forth a call for the development of assessment tools to be used by domestic violence advocates to assess a victim's economic abuse experiences. Training for advocates would need to involve education on the economic abuse constructs, covert and overt tactics. Implications for practice would involve domestic violence organizations collaborating with victims to protect their current financial situation, develop financial safety plans for clients, and adopting economic empowerment into their organization's vision and mission (Stylianou, 2018).

"In general, the term economic empowerment refers to one's ability to access and control economic resources" (p.87) and can be broken down into financial literacy, improvement in economic self-efficacy, and an expansion in economic self-sufficiency (Hahn & Postmus, 2014). The offering of financial literacy to IPV individuals to develop their money management skill set is not a new concept, and Hahn & Postmus indicated at the time of their 2014 study that only two programs were

recognized at the scholarly level which focused on economic abuse victims. “Realizing your Economic Action Plan” was the only program evaluated at length by the study and while found to have increased financial savviness with victims and survivors compared to the control group, no statistically significant conclusion was drawn as to the effectiveness of this program, calling for more emphasis on this need (Hahn & Postmus, 2014).

Asset-building programs have also been proposed as a method to develop financial security leading to economic self-sufficiency (Christy & Valandra, 2017; Hahn & Postmus, 2014; Sanders, 2015). Assets in this context are regarded as savings, real property, vehicles, all of which have the potential to build human capital and nourish economic empowerment (Christy & Valandra, 2017). Both studies (Christy & Valandra, 2017; Hahn & Postmus, 2014) discussed using the asset-building program Individual Development Account (IDA) for IPV victims and survivors in order to achieve further economic empowerment. The IDA is a Federal program born from the federal law for facilitating asset building, the Assets for Independence Act of 1998. IDAs are commonly used as a matching-fund account for low income impoverished individuals to build resources for home ownership or education (Hahn & Postmus, 2014). It has been recommended that IDAs could be extended for economic abuse victims and survivors to build economic self-sufficiency; this proposal could be evaluated to understand the relationship between asset accumulation and economic self-efficacy for survivors.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to review current scholarly literature on economic abuse, a salient yet overlooked form of intimate partner violence. Economic abuse has been established as a distinct form of domestic abuse, yet only in the last ten to twelve years have researchers begun to understand economic abuse correlations with other forms of domestic abuse, economic abuse constructs, and ways to measure this form of abuse. Overarching recurring themes call to bring awareness to economic abuse, educate IPV advocates to identify and assess economic abuse, and provide economic empowerment opportunities whereby victims and survivors can leave abusive relationships and begin to build economic self-efficacy.

IPV victims and survivors are often left in financial stress and crisis; this crisis can affect: access to viable living conditions, access to medical services, access to healthy physical resources, as well as exacerbate

mental illness (existing or new illness as a result of economic abuse). Advocates of IPV victims and survivors understand the importance of mental well-being which has correlations to physical well-being for their clients to successfully navigate their narrative forward. Hence, a call to bring a greater awareness of how financial health affects domestic abuse victims' mental and physical health is warranted.

This paper's review of current literature returned that financial literacy has largely been focused on low-income women and primarily those involved in heterosexual relationships. A much broader set of diverse samples of IPV are needed in the development of financial literacy programming leading to address all individuals who identify as heterosexual, LGTBQ+, or other to promote economic self-sufficiency. Further research on diverse groups is needed to develop financial literacy curricula specifically targeting victims and survivors of all gender identities in all socio-economic communities.

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