
Breaking the vicious cycle of violence:

Women's economic independence and employment strategies



This paper was presented by Lorraine Lim (Counsellor & Administrator of Star Shelter) at the 2013 Asian Conference of Women's Shelters by Garden of Hope Foundation in Kaohsiung, Taiwan on 2 - 4 December, 2013.

1 Women, economy and labour force participation

Singapore is often described as an example of economic success story, and ranked as the world's leading place to do business, as one of the least corrupt and most competitive economies, and as a country that continues to attract foreign investment, professionals and entrepreneurs. Furthermore, according to the UN Gender Inequality Index (GII), Singapore ranks on the 13th place (out of 148 countries) in the 2012 index due to good maternal health, women's educational attainment and relatively high female labour force participation.

However, despite women's equal educational attainment and access to paid work, the female participation in the labour force in Singapore is still lower than in many other developed countries. A total (ages of 15 to 70 and over) of 56% of women (76% men) in Singapore are in the workforce compared to other developed countries with 70% and more. In fact, statistics collected by the Ministry of Manpower in Singapore show that women are more likely to drop out of the labour force after marriage and childbirth, as in spite of their participation in the labour market, women still bear most of the responsibilities for the home too. Of women aged 40 to 49 years, only 52 % work, compared with 79% in UK, 71% in tradition steeped Japan or 62% in Korea.

In Singapore, there are numerous impediments faced by women in the workforce or intending to join the workforce, including lack of access to affordable childcare, long working hours and lack of flexible working arrangements. However, to address Singapore's labour shortage (due as a result of low fertility and an ageing population) and to attract more women to stay or return to work, the government of Singapore has recently introduced various programs and initiatives, such as the WorkPro or Flexi Works! schemes to provide funding support for employers to implement work-life measures and redesign jobs, as well as to provide financial incentives, such as Working Mother's Child Relief (WMCR) to encourage married women to remain in the workforce after having children.

2 Economic independence

Economic independence refers to a condition where individual women and men have access to the full range of economic opportunities and resources in order for them to shape their lives and meet their own needs and those of their dependents.

Thus, achieving economic independence is made possible when there is adequate social and economic support available including child care, housing, transportation, jobs that provide a sufficient wage and offer benefits and opportunities for career advancement, and education and training opportunities.

Although women in Singapore are doing relatively well by international comparison, there are groups of women who are a long way from becoming economically independent and those whose potential is being underused. Achieving greater economic independence presents the greatest challenge for women who do not have their own income and are dependent for e.g. spouse or other family members for sustenance (e.g. immigrant spouses, or housewives), for who those who want

to move from low -skilled, low-paid employment but lack opportunities to do so, and women who experience violence.

So while the recently introduced government initiatives may help some women to gain greater economic independence (e.g. the more low-skilled), additional measures are required to meet the needs of women leaving or living in abusive relationships as their situation is usually more complex and nuanced. Situation is particularly stark for unmarried or non-Singaporean women living in abusive relationships as they have a narrower range of social and financial support available.

3 Domestic violence & socio-economic status

Domestic violence occurs every day in all parts of the world cutting across age, religions, ethnicities and socio-economic status.

However, although violence occurs across socio-economic classes, research indicates that poorer women are more likely to be survivors of violence compared to those women with higher economic status. As illustrated by professional Sylvia Walby and Jonathan Allen in the context of the UK, women in households with an income of less than £10,000 are three and a half times more at risk of domestic violence than those in households with an income of over £20,000.¹ Correlation between low socio-economic standing and likelihood of intimate partner violence is also shown by other researchers, for example by Richard Tolman from University of Michigan, who in 1999 estimated that between 8.5 % and 41.4% of women receiving welfare benefits are victimised by intimate partner violence in a given year.

Studies also point out that women with long-established economic power tend to be at lower risk of violence, compared to women whose economic standing is in transition. Men are more likely to feel threatened by female empowerment when traditional gender roles are challenges, or due to status incompatibility, which in turn may lead to spike in male violence against women (see e.g. Koenig et al, 2003; Kaukinen 2004)².

Socio-economic standing of the family affects the likelihood of violence in other ways too. For example according to the study by World Bank, poverty and lack of economic opportunities make men more likely to engage in violence and substance abuse, increasing the risk of gender-based violence.

According to the mentioned study by Sylvia Walby and Jonathan Allen (2004), women who find it impossible to find £100 at short notice are three and a half times more likely be subject to domestic violence than if this no problem. Also, women who are economically dependent on their abusers are more likely to stay in the abusive relationship due to lack of alternatives. Further, the degree of women's economic dependence on an abuser is associated with the severity of the abuse they suffer.

¹ Walby & Allen in Domestic violence, sexual assault & stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey. Home Office research, 2004.

² It has been noted that status incompatibility between the partners, e.g. when her job has higher income and prestige than his, is likely to increase intimate partner violence.

Those women who manage to flee violence, often return for financial reasons. In fact, a significant proportion of women who return to the relationship attribute their inability to deal with their finances as a major contributing factor, which is often enhanced by the fact that the abuser often has all of the economic and social standing and complete control over the family finances, according to the US-based National Coalition against Domestic Violence.

Most women living in abusive relationships do not have accumulated savings, or even have access to cash or bank or credit accounts. Many also have dependent children. For these reasons, decision to leave the partner would most likely lead to a decline in living standards and financial security for women and their dependent children. The situation is usually worse for immigrant women with no right to work in Singapore, who often depend on their husbands for economic survival. For them, thus, it is sometimes about deciding between an abusive partner and leaving sufficient food and shelter (or custody of their children.)

4 Role of employment

Studies on the relationship between women's employment status and intimate partner violence victimisation indicate that women with a history of intimate partner violence victimisation are as likely as women without such a history to want to work and to be currently employed³. However, intimate partner violence victimisation appears to negatively affect women's employment in a number of significant ways, depending on the severity and frequency of the violence experiences. For some women, experiences of violence may lead to absenteeism or lower productivity at workplace, while others may face greater difficulty sustaining employment due to violence. An abusive spouse may for example actively interfere with her partner's attempts to work, affecting her ability to obtain or maintain employment.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, woman's changed socio-economic standing may challenge the status quo and traditional gender roles in the family, and consequently increase the risk of violence.

At the same time, employment can have a protective effect for women too. Employment provides not only important financial resources, but also may raise a woman's self-esteem, thereby providing her with psychological resources to cope with or end an abusive relationship. Research also shows that abused employed women who received social and tangible support from co-workers and supervisors experienced less social isolation, improved health, and fewer negative employment outcomes.⁴

Employment is often the key to financial independence too. But for abused women to become financially stable and independent, it must be ensured that work opportunities are available also for women with children and that work provides sufficient income to support a family.

In Singapore, while many steps have been taken to encourage more women to stay or return to workforce, little attention has been given to the widening income equality gap, affecting especially

³ Intimate Partner Violence as an Obstacle to Employment Among Mothers Affected by Welfare Reform (S. Riger & S. Staggs, 2004)

⁴ Renzetti et al., 2011

women. Women in Singapore are earning less than men and accumulating smaller retirement and healthcare savings (AWARE, 2012). More women are also struggling to make ends meet, and the number of female headed households on public (social) assistance scheme has been increasing over the years (MCYS, 2009). While the government has introduced assistance schemes such as the Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) to help the supplement wages of the low-income earner, according to a recent survey study by the National University of Singapore, however, most Singaporean feel that the amount spent to help the “working poor” is not sufficient. Further, while most feel there are jobs available for aid recipients⁵, but only 15 per cent of the respondents think the jobs pay enough to support a family (The Straits Times, 25 September 2013).

To help sustain or obtain employment, and to ensure that the family does not fall into poverty, low-wage earners should be provided with access to affordable (if not fully subsidised) childcare and other support schemes. But also more long-term alternatives are required, such as training and skills development opportunities, to ensure that women have the opportunity to improve their situation and shape their own lives.

5 Survivors of intimate partner violence in Singapore

There have been a few studies focusing on female victims of violence in Singapore and studying those victims that had turned to public hospitals for medical assistance⁶, family court for a protection order⁷, social service agency for counselling support⁸, or households to measure the incidence and prevalence of domestic violence⁹.

According to the International Violence against Women Survey, a household survey on violence conducted through random sampling of 2006 respondents:

International Violence against Women Survey: Singapore Report (2010)	
Experienced violence	9.2 %
Experienced physical violence	6.8 %
Experienced sexual violence	4.2 %
Experienced repeated victimisation	58.8 %
Not likely to report	71.7 %

Of those who had experienced violence in the past 12 months:

⁵ In fact, the overall unemployment rate in Singapore as of June 2013 was at 2.1%. (Ministry of Manpower, Singapore)

⁶ See Foo & Seow, 2005.

⁷ Subordinate Courts Singapore, 2004.

⁸ See Basu, 2009.

⁹ See Chan, Bong & Anderson, 2010.

International Violence against Women Survey: Singapore Report (2010)		
Age	30 to 39 years	47.2%
Education	Secondary School	43.4%
	University / Postgraduate	30.2%
Ethnicity	Chinese	73.6%
	Malay	18.9%
	Indian	7.5%

Other studies have also found that the highest proportion of victims are in their 30s (47.2%) and have secondary school qualifications (43.4%) or higher (30.2%). While Chinese form the largest group, in comparison to Singapore's ethnic demography, Malay¹⁰, Indian and other ethnic group are over-represented in among those who reported having experienced domestic violence in several studies¹¹.

Furthermore, according to a study by Singapore Subordinate Courts in 2004, many victims of violence are housewives (22.1%), unemployed (12.8%), or come from relatively low paid work and industries such as sales and services (16.7%) or clerical (12.1%).

Of those victims of violence who turn to formal support, approximately 400 women and children are referred to crisis centres for safe, temporary accommodation every year.

6 About Star Shelter

Star Shelter opened its doors in March 1999 to provide a safe temporary refuge for women and children who are survivors of violence. It is a place where they can heal from the trauma of abuse and be empowered to rebuild their lives free from violence through therapy, practical assistance and case management.

SCWO (Singapore Council of Women's Organisations) started this essential fundamental service that was in short supply in our community 14 years ago. Currently, there are 4 such crisis shelters, including Star Shelter, spread across different parts of Singapore.

Star Shelter has a maximum capacity of 30 beds and serves on the average about 120 women and children per year who stay between 3 to 6 months. Some may need to stay for longer periods of about 9 to 12 months if they lack resources in finding alternative housing arrangements.

¹⁰ 18.9 % Malays. See Chan, Bong & Anderson (2009). The proportion of Malay female population amounted to 13.2% of Singapore's total female population (Population Trends, 2012).

¹¹ I.e. Subordinate Courts, 1998 and Chan, Bong & Anderson, 2009.

Majority are admitted because of family violence and about 20% are in a crisis situation due to homelessness. Of the family violence cases, based on our recent baseline survey covering the period 2009 to 2012, 81% have experienced intimate partner violence, 6% faced violence by male siblings and 10% by parents or relatives. The remaining 3% were elderly women being abused by their grown male or female children.

80% of our clients are referred to our shelter by social workers or counsellors from 41 Family Service Centres¹² located throughout Singapore. The rest are referred by the Family Court (3%), hospitals (10%), the police (2%) and the Ministry of Social and Family Development (5%).

7 Profile of Star Shelter Residents

Although violence occurs across all socio-economic classes, women who stay in the shelter tend to be from the lower socio-economic group. Women with higher economic status may have more resources available for them, including financial means to look for other accommodation options such as renting a room from the open market, or pay for childcare. It may also be easier for them to stay with a family member or friend if they are able to help contribute to the additional household income and not be an added financial strain to their family or friend.

Profile of Star Shelter Residents		
Age	31 to 40 years	33 %
	41 to 50 years	24 %
	51 to 60 years	12 %
	61 to 70 years	6 %
Education	Primary School	44 %
	Secondary School	37 %
	Pre-University / Polytechnic	11 %
	University / Post- Graduate	8 %
Average Income per Month	S\$800 to S\$1,300	85 %
	S\$1,301 to S\$1,800	15 %
Ethnicity	Chinese	29 %
	Malay	28 %
	Indian	28 %
	Others	15 %
Nationality	Singaporeans	75 %
	Permanent Residents (PRs)	15 %
	Foreigners (such as those on work permit or Long Term Social Visit Pass)	10 %

¹² Family Services Centres are partially government funded Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) that provide social services to the community.

Most residents of Star Shelter are from multi-stressed low income families. They are likely to be in their 30s (33%), with primary or secondary school education (81%). They hold low-skilled and low-paying jobs such as cleaners, kitchen helpers, shop assistants and factory workers; earning between S\$800 to S\$1,300 per month.

Majority of the Star Shelter residents are Singaporeans (75%), followed by permanent residents (15%), and foreigners make up the remaining 10%. While the number of foreigners is still rather low, it has been increasing over the years as more Singaporean men are marrying non-Singaporean spouses.

There has been an increase in the number of abused foreign women staying in Star Shelter in the last few years as the number of Singaporean men marrying women from other countries grows. In fact, according to data from 2011 showed 6,900 Singaporean men married foreigners or permanent residents, which is a 35% increase from 10 years ago. Over nine in 10 of these women were from Asia, most commonly from China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.¹³

8 Star Shelter Services

Holistic Approach

Star Shelter provides residents with various services and interventions, taking a holistic approach from providing their basic needs such as safe accommodations, clothing and food; to meeting their emotional needs through therapy to help them heal from the trauma of abuse.

Shelter workers and social workers from the referring agencies work collaboratively to provide case management for residents, looking into issues such as job matching, securing future housing, application for Personal Protection Orders (PPOs) and providing legal advice through SCWO's free legal clinics.

As many residents are from low income families, we also provide financial assistance for their practical needs. For example, giving them transportation allowance so that they are able to go for a job interview, travel to work, or send their children to school.

Therapeutic Programmes

Residents participate in either individual counselling or art therapy to help them in their journey to rebuild their lives free from abuse.

Art therapy is especially beneficial for those who are not able to express themselves well verbally. For some survivors the emotional pain is so overwhelming that they are not able to talk about it. Art creation gives them another medium to express their emotions.

Group work is encouraged for those who have self-esteem issues and require group support to help them work on the challenges that they face.

¹³ The Sunday Times, 8 September 2013

The goals of all the above therapies include, regaining self-confidence, managing emotions, empowerment through employment, strategising to achieve independence and financial self-reliance.

Case A

Ms A, is a 39 year old single woman who has been in a relationship with her boyfriend for 17 years. Her boyfriend has been verbally and psychologically abusive towards her for the last 10 years. He often makes threats to take his own life if she were to leave him, puts her down, isolates her from her friends and family, and is overly controlling, dictating what she wears and where she works.

Ms A felt depressed, trapped and without hope for many years. She was not motivated to work as he would discourage her from staying too long at one job, fearing that she will get close to a male colleague and leave him. Her depression gradually worsened the more hopeless she felt, she finally sought help from a social worker at a Family Service Centre who referred her to Star Shelter.

When she first came to the shelter, she felt depressed and aimless. 'I felt like my life was like a cloud, floating about without direction,' she said. She had low self-esteem and was pessimistic about the future, she claimed that she had 'no future' and hence was not motivated to work. However, one of the conditions of stay at the shelter is that residents must be motivated to be self-reliant. Shelter worker matched her to a few jobs and she finally settled on a kitchen assistant job at a bakery.

At the same time, she started counselling sessions, and was more confident and optimistic after several sessions. 'Counselling helped me handle my emotion and improve my relationship with my bosses and colleagues. I learn how to get along better with people'. She was motivated to perform better at work and was given a pay increment, earning S\$1,500 per month.' This enabled her to rent a room for about \$500 on her own. Through the therapy, she realised that she had been trapped in an unhealthy and abusive relationship, and decided to leave her boyfriend, with a stable job and income, she had the option to do just that.

Programmes for Employment and Financial Self-Reliance

Star Shelter has various programmes that help residents who are low income earners find sustainable employment and achieve financial self-reliance.

Job Matching

Residents who require help in searching for a job will be assisted by shelter worker in various ways, from teaching them how to prepare a resume to working closely with job agencies in finding a suitable job match.

Childcare

Though the shelter does not offer child care services, the shelter worker will provide assistance to residents in finding and enrolling their children to childcare centres in the community. When childcare arrangements are taken care of, mothers are enabled to return to the workforce.

Case B

Mdm B, 39 years old, a Singapore Permanent Resident was in an abusive marriage for 7 years. During the last violent episode, her husband chased Mdm B and their 3 year old daughter out of the house. She had no family or social support and was referred to Star Shelter. She had never worked in Singapore before and was afraid that no one would hire her as she could not speak English. However, she was willing to work to support herself and her daughter as she had decided to leave the marriage and be independent.

In order to look for a job, she needed to send her daughter for childcare. Shelter worker and social worker helped enrol her daughter into a childcare near the shelter and obtained a government subsidy for a significant reduction in the childcare fees.

Once her daughter started going to the childcare centre, Shelter worker matched Mdm B to a job as a food stall assistant earning \$1,000 monthly. Mdm A was grateful to be able to work, she worked very hard and was prudent. She was able to start saving and hopes to achieve her goal of renting a room for her and her daughter when she leaves the shelter.

Financial Assistance – Rebuild Programme

In June 2005, the Rebuild Programme was launched. This programme provides financial assistance to help rebuild the lives of the shelter residents after the violence.

The aim is to allow them to move on from their difficult years by assisting them to be self-reliant, to restore dignity and confidence in them.

There is an emergency fund that offers practical help such as providing transport allowance to enable residents to go for a job interview, to travel to work or send their children to and from school or childcare. This can be about S\$80 per month depending on the needs of the applicant as assessed by the shelter worker.

There is also a home set-up loan to help residents with the start-up cost of setting up a home such as the initial rental deposit, purchase of basic furniture and appliances. This is in the form of an interest free loan to be paid back on an installment basis.

Case C

Mdm C, 30 years old, was admitted to Star Shelter after she managed to run out of the house to escape the violence from her husband. However, she had no opportunity to take most of her belongings and money with her. At Star Shelter, she was given emergency funds, for transportation to go to work and to purchase pre-paid phone card to be contactable for potential employers to call her as she was looking for another job.

With the transport allowance she was able to continue working as she needed the income to pay for some arrears accumulated from her son's child care. The pre-paid phone card helped her to be contacted by prospective employers. After two months, she managed to secure a job with better career advancement opportunities and salary.

Budgeting Workshops

Star Shelter works with partners in the community such as The Institute of Financial Literacy an initiative between MoneySENSE (the national financial education programme under Monetary Authority of Singapore) and Singapore Polytechnic to conduct budgeting workshops for residents.

The objective is to equip our residents with skills and knowledge to make wise financial decisions and learn how to be financially self-reliant. The workshop comprises of two sessions held a month apart. In the first session, participants learn how to keep track of their income and expenditure. They learn ways to increase income, such as getting a supplementary job, and to reduce their expenditure in order to increase their savings.

They have to use the strategies for a month and share the outcome at the second session. Participants have shared positive feedback how the workshop helped them manage their finances better.

Other Employment Strategies, Job Skills Training and Upgrading

Star Shelter offers a range of programmes to assist residents who need to acquire new skills to find or sustain employment or to switch to a job with better pay and prospects.

Star Shelter works collaboratively with volunteers and community partners to provide residents with opportunities to learn and upgrade their skills to improve their employability.

There are English language improvement classes, courses in IT skills, food handling certification courses and workshops for grooming to be confident at job interviews.

To promote a healthy lifestyle and to minimise absenteeism at work, there are yoga and meditation classes and gardening for residents to take some time out to exercise and de-

stress from their multi-stressed lives. Self-care is emphasised as an important part of their healing and gaining financial self-reliance.

Case D

Mdm D, 33 years old, is a Singapore Permanent Resident from a neighbouring country. She and her 3 year old son were admitted to Star Shelter due to domestic violence. She had problems finding employment as she was not able to speak English. She participated in the shelter's weekly English language classes to learn how to speak, read and write English.

After two months, she was able to go for a job interview speaking English and secured the job working in a fast food outlet. She performed so well at work that she was given a promotion after 8 months. With a stable income of \$1,300 per month she was able to rent a place for her and her son upon leaving the shelter.

Referrals to other Community Resources

Star Shelter refers residents to community resources and partners to offer various employment programmes. They include Social Enterprises such as: *The Mother and Child Project* which provides home-based sewing contract work for women-in-need. Through this, they may be able to become financially self-sufficient, while caring for their children at the same time. This social enterprise is run by Singapore Anglican Community Services.

Another social enterprise, *Blooms of Hope* is an initiative by REACH Family Service Centre to help women from low income families gain financial self-reliance through making and selling floral arrangements and gift hampers.

Star Shelter also refers residents to the job matching services of CDC (Community Development Council) a local administration that offers a wider network and number of available jobs for those in need.

The goal is for women to be empowered through gainful employment, so that they may be economically independent.

10 Conclusion

There are many tools needed to help break the cycle of violence, women's economic empowerment being one of them.

With economic independence, survivors of abuse have access to opportunities and resources to enable them shape their lives to meet their own needs and those of their dependents. Furthermore, financial independence may have a spill-over effect, equipping women with greater self-confidence and more optimistic outlook on life, - all of which can help to improve their lives and help make a lasting change.

But while women's economic independence is important, greater self-confidence and other life skills go in hand in hand with it. Therapy, counselling and encouragement are equally important tools to help women to heal, move beyond the violence and find the motivation to improve their lives, as the case studies shared showed. Based on Star Shelter's experience, therapy and case management with access to diverse services, provide a holistic approach to supporting survivors and a greater chance of success in helping them the break the cycle of violence.

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