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Book Review

The Healing Journey: Intimate Partner Abuse and Its Implications in the Labour Market, by Linda DeRiviere

ERIN EPP*

WOMEN WHO EXPERIENCE INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE face many barriers to leaving the relationship. A major barrier, though relatively under-researched, is access to employment. In *The Healing Journey: Intimate Partner Abuse and Its Implications in the Labour Market*,¹ Linda DeRiviere demonstrates that an important component of the study of intimate partner violence is its impact on women's labour market participation and their financial stability more generally. To do this, DeRiviere offers an innovative, largely quantitative analysis of women's employment and training participation after experiencing intimate partner violence, as well as an exploration of the policy environment for these women. What emerges is a holistic view of the women's interactions with training and employment and how federal and provincial policies fail to support them.

The Healing Journey is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter introduces the methodology and goals of the book. Chapters two through four deal with specific issues around the women's employment and training. Chapters five and six explore broader themes, such as the participants' employment aspirations and outcomes, and their physical and mental health issues in employment. The final chapters look at the larger structural context; chapter seven examines some of the costs associated with intimate partner violence, while chapter eight looks at the policy environment.

The quantitative analysis is based on a three-province (data was collected from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta), seven-wave study called, "The Healing Journey: A Longitudinal Study of Women Who Have Been Abused by Intimate Partners."² The data for the book was taken from the baseline interviews of participants as well as the labour market study, which was included in the sixth wave and comprised 414 women.³ The study relied on social service agencies to recruit participants.⁴ A key aspect of the data is that 45.7% of the women were Aboriginal.⁵ This is important given the disproportionate rate of intimate partner violence experienced by Aboriginal women in Canada. The sample also included 3.9% immigrant women, 4.6% women from racial or ethnic backgrounds other than Caucasian or Aboriginal, and 9.4% women who identified as lesbian, bisexual, or two-spirited.⁶ Of the study participants, 61.1% had children living at home.⁷

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¹ Linda DeRiviere, *The Healing Journey: Intimate Partner Abuse and Its Implications in the Labour Market* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2014).

² *Ibid* at 160.

³ *Ibid*.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ *Ibid* at 25.

⁶ *Ibid* at 24-25.

⁷ *Ibid* at 50.

The Healing Journey offers insight and an empirical basis for an important area; women leaving abusive relationships are frequently faced with serious economic barriers. Though there are many facets to an abusive relationship, looking at the effect of intimate partner violence on women's labour market participation and education is important in designing policy interventions to support survivors of abuse. DeRiviere states the purpose of the book is, "to learn about the trajectories of abused women's employment, earnings, and training outcomes over their healing journey."⁸ DeRiviere's thesis is broad. She argues, "although employment, education and vocational training are only a few variables that play a role in the multi-faceted dynamics of partner abuse, these are nevertheless crucially important ones."⁹ Indeed, as the federal and provincial governments have, over the last few decades, pursued social policies that favour workplace earnings and cut other public sources of income, it is critical to understand how those cuts affect people who are economically vulnerable, particularly women in abusive relationships.

In the second chapter, DeRiviere looks at employment participation of the women in the study. A key finding in this chapter is that the employment rate was negatively correlated with the last year of abuse, which DeRiviere suggests may mean that episodes of abuse delayed women's entry or re-entry into the labour market.¹⁰ This in turn suggests many women may not be able to access financial assistance for as long as they need after leaving an abusive relationship; provincial welfare schemes are woefully inadequate and left the study participants living below the poverty line. In the last chapter, when she turns to a discussion of the policy environment, DeRiviere argues that provincial labour market policies and programs are often, "workfare under the pretext of assisting individuals and families to become economically self-sufficient."¹¹ Unfortunately, DeRiviere finds that in the three provinces involved in the study there is little gender-specific policy and programming, which means that the needs of women who have experienced intimate partner violence are not being met by provincial welfare schemes.¹²

The focus of chapter three is women's educational and vocational training. DeRiviere finds that a higher proportion of women who had left an abusive relationship had partially or fully completed a university education compared to women who remained in an abusive relationship. DeRiviere finds many factors which affect women's educational attainment, including their ex-partner's reliability in paying child maintenance support and their financial independence.¹³ She argues that the policy response must be a holistic one, to target the multiple needs of women so they could have better chances for positive educational attainment.¹⁴

DeRiviere next turns to the important issue of employment earnings and household income of the women. She begins this fourth chapter by calling for "a feminist goal of economic equality for women who have lived with intimate partner abuse."¹⁵ She goes on to identify barriers to employment the women identified in the study, including lack of

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid* at 27.

¹¹ *Ibid* at 148.

¹² *Ibid* at 149.

¹³ *Ibid* at 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid* at 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid* at 61.

childcare, lack of adequate housing, lack of transportation, and a lack of jobs.¹⁶ These factors once again support DeRiviere's call for a holistic policy scheme; each of these factors will greatly affect the study participants' involvement in the labour market and overall quality of life.

DeRiviere follows her discussion of the economic barriers to employment with a chapter focusing entirely on the physical and mental health impacts on participation in employment, education, and training. While there is a significant body of literature on the health impacts of intimate partner violence, *The Healing Journey* takes a novel approach in examining the ways in which labour force participation can exacerbate health issues for women leaving abusive relationships. Women in the study who found employment were often occupying the lowest-paid jobs in their field. For example, in the healthcare sector, the women tended to work as home-care workers or aides, not as nurses or physicians.¹⁷ Women whose primary source of income was provincial welfare schemes fared no better. DeRiviere links the inadequacy of welfare with the exacerbation of health issues for study participants, stating,

The notion that putting fixed limits on welfare duration will result in self-sufficiency for women who would be holding down well-paid jobs is not one that works for many women who are struggling with disabilities and illnesses. In fact it could lead to more "dangerous dependencies," as some women return to an abuser or start up another abuse relationship to survive.¹⁸

DeRiviere also notes that rates of intimate partner violence are disproportionately high for women with disabilities compared to women without disabilities.¹⁹ Overall, this chapter links critical findings to show the health impacts of abuse on women, and how public welfare schemes deal with these health impacts in inadequate ways, ultimately further marginalizing women who live or have lived in abusive relationships.

Throughout *The Healing Journey*, DeRiviere notes the impact of ex-partners continuing to harass the study participants even after separation. She found that the continuation of psychological abuse, stalking, and harassing behaviour is a serious reality for women who have left abusive relationships, and has significant negative impacts on the women's employment and training participation. Chapter two discusses the effects of partner sabotage and harassment on current and past employment, education, and training experiences, finding that for many of the study participants, harassment had occurred frequently enough that it made it difficult for them to maintain employment or attend schooling.²⁰

One of the most interesting parts of the book is found in chapter six, which takes DeRiviere's findings in chapter two a step further to examine the impact of harassment and emotional abuse on women's career and training aspirations. In what is likely the book's most unique chapter, DeRiviere analyzes the women's answers to a series of questions regarding their employment aspirations before and after their involvement with

¹⁶ *Ibid* at 64.

¹⁷ *Ibid* at 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid* at 99.

¹⁹ *Ibid* at 91.

²⁰ *Ibid* at 36-37.

one or more abusive partners.²¹ She found that, “in spite of often difficult personal circumstances, these individuals had plenty of aspirations about their academic achievements and workforce participation in the future.”²² However, while some women met or exceeded their goals, approximately half the women downscaled their aspirations significantly after leaving an abusive partner.²³ She found that low self-esteem due to continued controlling or harassing behaviour by the abuser, “affects a woman’s ability to make substantive investments of energy for promotion and advancement in the job market.”²⁴ Linking employment success with the more abstract notion of employment aspirations is a novel and important component of *The Healing Journey*.

Indeed, *The Healing Journey* does not shy away from taking a broad approach to a specific subject. DeRiviere excels at linking employment issues with the broader context that women experience after leaving an abusive relationship, demonstrating that women face barriers to employment and training at both an individual and structural level. For example, while the chapter on physical and mental health explores the effect of abuse on individual women’s ability to participate in employment or training, DeRiviere also draws on Evan Stark’s concept of coercive control, arguing that women are particularly vulnerable in their private lives due to larger structures of gender discrimination, such as income inequality.²⁵ Both perspectives are essential in determining how best to support women leaving abusive relationships.

The book’s capstone is the concluding chapter, in which DeRiviere discusses the policy environment. DeRiviere identifies that in Canada overall, policies around employment and vocational training are increasingly gender neutral, which fails to address the particular issues facing women who experience intimate partner violence.²⁶ DeRiviere argues that a gender neutral policy scheme—which generally operates as workfare, obliging welfare recipients to find employment as quickly as possible—is problematic, stating, “it will likely result in a situation of poor living conditions, substandard housing and food insecurities, as well as a revolving door of access to government income supports.”²⁷ Indeed, though study participants identified employment, education, and training as important components to their healing, DeRiviere finds that employment and training did not necessarily improve the lives of women across the board,²⁸ and concludes that it is in fact counterproductive to impose strict rules around governmental assistance and support.²⁹

DeRiviere’s policy recommendations are persuasive because, once again, she takes a broad approach: rather than limiting her recommendations to issues or matters of financial assistance and employment policies, she identifies how housing, transportation, and mental and physical health are crucial components of the healing process for women

²¹ *Ibid* at 116.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid* at 128.

²⁵ *Ibid* at 70; Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁶ *Ibid* at 146.

²⁷ *Ibid* at 146-147.

²⁸ *Ibid* at 149.

²⁹ *Ibid* at 153.

who have experienced intimate partner violence.³⁰ She also calls for living wage legislation to facilitate economic independence for women, no matter where they are located in the labour market.³¹ The holistic approach taken by DeRiviere is important; it's impossible to explore the impact of intimate partner violence on employment participation for women without exploring other financial and health barriers. As DeRiviere concludes, employment and training “are entirely wrapped around every facet of life, including child rearing, housing, social satisfaction, health status, income sources and quality of life.”³²

Though the subject matter is important, a book on employment participation could easily veer into the utilitarian—there is a danger in subjects such as these to look at people as vessels of economic growth, and in a case like this, to focus only on how to increase the economic outputs of women who have left abusive relationships. In the first chapter, DeRiviere seems to go down this path, stating, “women have talents and abilities, and when they are prevented from utilizing their full potential, society loses the value of the productivity that could have been generated.”³³ Despite this single allusion, DeRiviere avoids this trap. Her nuanced approach throughout the book makes it clear that there are circumstances where women may not be able to work or attend school, and that has to be taken into account in a policy regime. Importantly, DeRiviere argues that while employment and training policy is important, it should not always be the end goal.³⁴ Implicit in this argument is that women are valuable for their own sake, and not simply as means of generating wealth for others.

DeRiviere could have included more excerpts from interviews with study participants or details from individual stories, to bring her data to life. DeRiviere notes that she tried to add a qualitative dimension to the primarily quantitative analysis whenever possible, but further reliance on the actual voices of women themselves could have increased the reader's understanding of the impact of intimate partner violence on women. In the third chapter, women's experiences are successfully placed in the forefront of DeRiviere's analysis. DeRiviere includes interview excerpts of women discussing the impact of continued stalking behaviour from their ex-partners on their health, employment, and training. One participant wrote, “[my ex-partner] threatens me; watches me, everything I do, from walking my daughter to school and from. I am feeling too confined to my home because of fear. Hoping to relocate.”³⁵ The quantitative data provided by DeRiviere and the qualitative interview excerpts are both important to understanding intimate partner violence and the policy environment. Other chapters could have included more interview excerpts to develop a deeper empathy and understanding of women's experiences.

The Healing Journey is a crucial contribution to the literature around intimate partner violence. Indeed, DeRiviere states in the first chapter, “[i]t is my hope that this book will strengthen the social scientific understanding of violence against women in Canada.”³⁶ *The Healing Journey* certainly accomplishes this goal. The quantitative data

³⁰ *Ibid* at 154-155.

³¹ *Ibid* at 156.

³² *Ibid* at 158.

³³ *Ibid* at 21.

³⁴ *Ibid* at 115.

³⁵ *Ibid* at 56.

³⁶ *Ibid* at 26.

should undoubtedly form the basis of other academic work examining domestic partner abuse and women's training and labour force participation. Further, policy-makers should use the data and DeRiviere's recommendations to create evidence-based policy that supports women in, and coming out of, relationships of intimate partner violence.