EFFECTIVELY SUPPORTING VICTIM-SURVIVORS TO FIND EMPLOYMENT AFTER FAMILY VIOLENCE

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KNOWLEDGE PAPER
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

WIRE acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the traditional – and only – custodians of country across Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to maintain their wisdom and rich culture—the oldest continuous culture on the planet—despite having experienced genocide, dispossession and colonisation. We recognise their continued connection to land, waters and culture, and pay our respects to their Elders, past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded. This land always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Supporting family violence victim-survivors to find employment through the Sustainable and Transformative Employment Pathways (STEP) project has been a collective effort. WIRE gratefully acknowledges the contribution of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CommBank), who have supported the project through Commbank Next Chapter, a program designed to respond to family violence and financial abuse for their customers and the community.

Thank you to the victim-survivors and human resources professionals who co-designed the project and the numerous WIRE staff who either worked directly on the project or contributed knowledge, skills and ideas from other roles in the organisation. Thank you to the job coaches and guest speakers who generously lent their time and expertise to the Job Seeker Program. Thank you to the workplaces and professionals who have contributed to development of the workplace standards so far and to the other organisations working in this area who have joined with us to learn and problem solve.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2019 WIRE established an innovative project designed to assist family violence victim-survivors to gain and maintain paid work; the Sustainable and Transformative Employment Pathways (STEP) project. The project was established with support from CommBank Next Chapter, which aims to address financial abuse for their customers and the community. It was found that existing job seeker programs did not address barriers that victim-survivors encounter while job seeking and trying to stay in employment and that an opportunity existed to create a more effective and supportive program, using understandings and best practice approaches from family violence work.

WIRE staff co-designed the project with family violence victim-survivors from a range of backgrounds, as well as human resources (HR) professionals. This process identified the need to work simultaneously with victim-survivors and employers to reduce and remove barriers to gaining and maintaining employment that victim-survivors encounter at an individual level, and in their environment.

Since the project began, WIRE has delivered two pilot job seeker programs for family violence victim-survivors. Participants have been supported to develop their confidence and skills in job seeking and prepare to enter paid work through a series of group workshops, as well as one-on-one support from job coaches. Topics covered during the program address specific barriers that victim-survivors encounter as job seekers and employees, while four best practice approaches for supporting family violence victim-survivors are embedded within program content and delivery. These are:

- Trauma-informed practice
- Strengths-based practice
- Intersectional feminism, and
- Use of a village-of-support-type model.

Twenty-four victim-survivors took part in the STEP Job Seeker Program over two years, and across the two pilot programs 79% of participants had found employment by the end of the program. This is an encouraging result, particularly when compared with the Victorian Government's Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN), where the mean job placement rate was 41%.[1]

Alongside the STEP Job Seeker Program, WIRE has worked with family violence victim-survivors, HR professionals, job coaches, and a number of different organisations, to create a set of workplace standards and guidance materials, which are still under development. These resources are intended to support employers to develop recruitment and employment policies and practices that respond to barriers victim-survivors encounter when job seeking and trying to maintain employment. These too incorporate trauma-informed, strengths-based and intersectional understandings. Thirty percent of respondents in a survey of Australians in paid work identified that they have experienced family violence during their lifetime.[2] It is therefore anticipated that these resources hold the potential to benefit a large number of people.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this knowledge paper is to share key learnings from the Sustainable and Transformative Employment Pathways (STEP) project so far with organisations and governmental bodies interested in supporting family violence victim-survivors to find employment, as well as researchers working in this area. We will:

- Discuss the process behind the STEP project's design, which involved producing a problem analysis paper and theory of change and working with family violence victim-survivors and human resources (HR) professionals as co-designers. Outcomes of this process included recommendations to work with employers and victim-survivors simultaneously to reduce and remove barriers to victim-survivors finding sustainable paid work.
- Provide an overview of the STEP Job Seeker Program for victim-survivors and describe four key approaches used to improve its appropriateness and usefulness. These include using trauma-informed practice, strengths-based and intersectional understandings and establishing a 'village of support' for participants.
- Provide an update on work done so far to produce workplace standards and guidance materials for employers that will help them develop employment policies and processes that are more supportive of victim-survivors.
- Offer reflections on future considerations for work in this area.

We hope that by sharing what we have learned so far from this innovative project, organisations working in this area around Australia will consider incorporating similar approaches into their programs for job seekers who are victim-survivors.

FAMILY VIOLENCE, FINANCIAL ABUSE AND THEIR IMPACTS

WARNING – PLEASE BE AWARE THAT ACTS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE ARE DESCRIBED IN THIS SECTION.

People who use family violence employ a range of abusive behaviors, in attempts to gain power and control over people they are in relationships with. This includes abusive behaviour towards partners, ex-partners and family members, as well as within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship networks and other relationships that can be family-like.[3] For example, relationships between people with disabilities and their carers. Most people who use family violence are men and most victim-survivors are women and children.

> Children are exposed to family violence when they see and overhear abuse of another family member and when it is directed at them personally. Research has shown that where family violence is used by men against female intimate partners, children are also being directly abused 50% of the time.[4]

While it occurs across all parts of our society, some groups experience family violence at higher rates than others. The reasons for this are complex, however it is understood that family violence is driven and impacted by inequality and forms of discrimination that are pervasive within our society, including racism, sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and ageism.[6]

Forms of abuse include physical and sexual violence, which can involve shoving, slapping, choking, throwing objects, rape, sexual coercion and enforced pregnancy, as well as emotional, social, spiritual, cultural and financial abuse. These forms of family violence can involve sabotaging connections to culture,[7] stalking, sabotaging friendships, threatening to make public someone's sexuality,[8] using put-downs, screaming and shouting, using temporary visa status to threaten and control,[9] threatening to self-harm or harm children, denial or overdosing of medication[10] and controlling household income and spending. While there are commonalities between victim-survivors' experiences of family violence, the forms and severity of violence used against them, as well as their experiences seeking help, can differ significantly according to their background, circumstances and identity. This is because of the ways that inequalities and forms of discrimination intersect and are expressed between individuals, within families, communities, workplaces, formal support systems, government and all through society.[11]

Financial abuse is an often-overlooked form of family violence, yet it is common and occurs in a range of relationships. In close to 50% of intimate partner relationships where there has been emotional abuse, women also experience financial abuse,[12] and financial hardship and insecurity caused by financial abuse are significant barriers to victim-survivors ending abusive relationships.[13] As with other forms of family violence, financial abuse is used in an attempt to gain power and control over victim-survivors and it is enabled by sexist cultural norms, attitudes and beliefs. For example, men in heterosexual marriages feeling entitled to make all of the decisions about money for their family and myths about women being less skilled than men at managing finances.[14]

These types of expectations can make it difficult to identify relationships as abusive and as with family violence more broadly, financial abuse is likely to be underreported.[15] Again, the impacts are differently felt. People with disabilities are more likely to experience financial abuse in intimate relationships[16] and it is often present in elder abuse.[17] Discrimination in society against older people and people with disabilities, intersects with racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination to enable, conceal and minimise the problem.[18]

Financial abuse takes many forms and occurs both within relationships and post-separation. It can involve controlling household income and paying an allowance to victim-survivors, preventing them from accessing information about their finances, as well as making them provide receipts for things they spend money on and punishing them for purchases made without permission from the person who uses violence.[19] It can also involve causing a family member to accumulate debt by taking out credit cards or loans in their name, abusing powers of attorney,[20] not allowing victim-survivors to seek paid work, sabotaging existing employment, withdrawing all funds from joint bank accounts after separation, refusing to pay child support, and driving-up legal costs by repeatedly initiating and drawing-out court proceedings.[21]

Victim-survivors always resist family violence, continually employing strategies to minimise harm to themselves and their children (if they are parents),[22] while their lives are impacted in numerous ways by the abuse used against them and their experiences within support systems. They can live with these impacts for many years, even after ending relationships with people who use violence. Many victim-survivors live in environments characterized by danger, fear, deprivation, isolation and shame, where regular efforts are made to degrade and undermine them.[23] Physical and sexual abuse can lead to serious injury, disability and death, and victim-survivors experience psychological and emotional trauma.[24] Exposure to family violence also profoundly affects children, who can experience distress, despair, loss of self-esteem, nightmares and behavioral changes, while their relationships and learning and development are also impacted.[25] Financial abuse can result in victim-survivors becoming dependent on people who use violence, debt, being unable to afford necessities or decide what to spend their money on and a low credit rating that makes it difficult to obtain housing and set up utilities in future.[26]

The harms caused by people who use violence are compounded by experiences of racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination that victim-survivors encounter within 'formal' support systems and their broader environment (including workplaces).[27] For example, child protection services remove Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at a rate eight times higher than the rate at which they remove other children,[28] and women reporting abuse are often met with victim-blaming and stereotypes about women making false or exaggerated claims about family violence. Despite encountering significant challenges, victim-survivors are resilient and resourceful, continually identifying and making use of opportunities to create safety and wellbeing,[29] both within and outside of 'formal' support systems.[30] Whatever pathways are chosen, recovery is possible and made more possible where safe, respectful and appropriate supports are available and work is underway to create necessary change.

Financial hardship and instability resulting from family violence, as well as insufficient supports available within formal support systems, limit the options available to victim-survivors, while financial independence offers them choice and the opportunity to end relationships with people who use violence. The risk to victim-survivors and their children typically escalates when they end abusive relationships and people who use violence employ a range of tactics to try to bring them back to the relationship.[31]

Financial independence makes it possible for victim-survivors to leave and stay away, despite these factors. It makes it possible for them to obtain safe and stable housing or independently maintain their existing home, buy furniture, appliances, groceries and clothing, pay for transport and utilities and meet other household needs, as well as engage private lawyers to negotiate child custody and financial settlement and cover the costs of counselling. It also makes it possible for them to eventually move beyond establishing safety and stability, into other aspects of wellbeing. Reaching financial independence, and being able to sustain it, are critical components of victim-survivors' recovery. Finding paid work is central to this for many, including those whose ability to gain and maintain employment has been obstructed by abuse.

In order to reach financial independence and financial wellbeing, victim-survivors need an income that is sustainable and which covers their expenses, with money left over.[32] However, they encounter a range of barriers to gaining and maintaining appropriate paid work. These are related to the ongoing impacts of family violence and the necessity of seeking work within employment systems designed on the presumption that the majority of workers will be men, who have not traditionally been expected to perform caring duties or be victim-survivors of family violence.[33] Approaches are called-for that support victim-survivors to overcome barriers they have control over, while simultaneously working with employers to incorporate an understanding of family violence and its impacts into their policies and processes. The goal is to improve access to job opportunities for victim-survivors, as well as their chances of keeping jobs, while enabling workplaces to account for the true nature of the workforce and experience the wide-ranging benefits of this.

ORIGINS OF THE STEP PROJECT

Supported by CommBank Next Chapter, WIRE established the STEP project in mid-2019 to support the financial recovery of victim-survivors through employment. At the time, WIRE identified that existing job seeker programs, including those designed for disadvantaged job seekers, did not address the specific barriers to gaining and maintaining employment that victim-survivors encounter. For example, dealing with the ongoing impacts of family violence, gender inequity in the workplace, victim-blaming and lack of understanding around family violence and its impacts. Using co-design, an approach has been developed that applies a gendered and increasingly intersectional lens to the issue, which draws on the expertise of family violence victim-survivors, HR professionals and WIRE's extensive previous work on family violence, financial abuse, financial capability and employment. [34]

Job seeking programs that do not acknowledge and engage with the gendered dimensions of job seeking and employment,[35] as well as the impacts of family violence, offer an incomplete and sometimes inappropriate set of tools for job seekers who are victim-survivors. Working to develop confidence and skills in job seeking is helpful, however programs that do not also address the challenges victim-survivors face that are beyond their control, run the risk of being ineffective and unfairly apportioning blame to them for their situation, compounding the suffering caused by family violence.[36] For victim-survivors who have not been in paid work for some time, or who have significant gaps in their employment history because of family violence, a job seeking program that values the knowledge and skills they have developed through life experience, is also important.

The goal of the STEP project is to support victim-survivors to find appropriate and sustainable paid work that enables their financial recovery. It approaches this by addressing barriers that victim-survivors have control over, as well as barriers beyond their direct control, working with them in a way that is respectful of their dignity and expertise, sensitive to the impacts of trauma, strengths-based and supportive of victim-survivor's autonomy, rather than reproducing the disempowerment of family violence. By taking this approach, WIRE has developed a job seeker program that is significantly more effective at supporting participants to find paid work than more generic, large-scale approaches. Across the two STEP job seeker programs run so far, 79% of participants had found employment by the end of the program, whereas the mean job placement rate for the Victorian Government's Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN) was 41%.[37] Although the STEP Job Seeker Program was being piloted and involved a smaller group, early results are promising.

DESIGNING STEP

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Further work is required to clearly understand unemployment rates for family violence victim-survivors before and after they end abusive relationships. However, some research indicates that one third of Australian women reporting family violence by a current partner are not in paid work (it is unclear what percentage would like to be).[38] Another more recent study has found that, after separation, single mothers who have experienced family violence by an intimate partner are in a significantly worse position financially than other single mothers. This study predicts that much of the difference is related to gaps in employment rates.[39]

The quality of responses that victim-survivors receive when they take steps to recover from family violence hold the potential to either increase their distress or encourage them to persist.[40] It is important therefore that methods used for supporting victim-survivors are attuned to their circumstances and needs, as individuals living within complex social, political and economic systems that shape their everyday lives and either limit or increase the opportunities available to them. Narrow conceptualisations of barriers to employment that focus mainly on the individual, are unable to produce sufficiently comprehensive or supportive strategies. Instead, they may compound the harm of family violence by focusing on perceived deficits within victim-survivors and not acknowledging the range of external factors that lead them to experience financial hardship and which make gaining and maintaining employment especially difficult. For example, the need to devote significant time, energy and courage to preparing for and attending court hearings, where the person who has used family violence against them is using the court system to perpetuate their abuse and purposefully disrupt their life.

The first step in the design process for the STEP project was to produce a problem analysis paper and preliminary theory of change. This allowed WIRE to develop a detailed understanding of environmental factors that contribute to victim-survivors experiencing financial hardship and a suitable strategy for overcoming these.

Figure 1 – Key findings from the STEP problem analysis paper on factors that contribute to family violence victim-survivors experiencing financial hardship.[41]

> **Patriarchal, colonialist and capitalist ideologies intersect to inform social, political, judicial and economic policies, systems and services. This creates hierarchies and power imbalances by deciding who is useful and valued within society… They inform how policies, systems and services are designed and accessed, and in turn create vulnerabilities and structural barriers for certain groups within society.**
>
> STEP PROBLEM ANALYSIS PAPER

The goal of the STEP problem analysis paper[42] was to develop an understanding of factors contributing to financial hardship from the perspectives of all victim-survivors that WIRE supports. Family violence victim-survivors are people of colour, as well as white people. They are lesbian, gay, and bisexual, as well as heterosexual. They are people with disabilities and people without disabilities. They are gender diverse, non-binary and cisgender. They come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and relative privilege. They are refugees and migrants, and they are born in Australia. They also belong to a number of these categories (and more) all at once. Models for understanding why and how victim-survivors experience financial hardship need to account for the full range of barriers to financial wellbeing in their environment.

Figure 1 describes key factors contributing to financial hardship for victim-survivors identified in the STEP problem analysis paper. The paper identifies ideologies that are dominant in Australian society – patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism – and forms of inequality and discrimination that arise from them. As well as driving and impacting family violence, these forms of inequality and discrimination are understood as being inherent to governmental and non-governmental systems, shaping the way they are structured, as well as laws, policies, services and practices.

The biased nature of these structures, laws, policies, services and practices can create barriers or opportunities for individuals, depending on their background, circumstances and identity. This analysis, which considers the individual in their context, demonstrates that employer policies and practices (among others) are shaped by a number of forms of discrimination, including racism and sexism, that create a range of barriers to financial wellbeing for victim-survivors. For example, unpaid care work and other domestic and family-related duties are often treated as if they are optional and people with these responsibilities penalised by assigning greater value (higher status and wages) to roles that are full time, with fixed start and finish times.[43]

In order to successfully support victim-survivors in their financial recovery, the project needs to address individual as well as environmental barriers to financial wellbeing, including discriminatory policies and practices in the workplace, while also responding to the diversity of victim-survivor's needs. These understandings were used to develop a preliminary theory of change (see Figure 5) that informed WIRE's contribution to the co-design process and which was subsequently adapted.

CO-DESIGNING WITH VICTIM-SURVIVORS AND HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS

Family violence victim-survivors are the experts on their own lives and needs. Projects like STEP need to be designed with victim-survivors to be effective. Services and programs intended to help also need to avoid reproducing the disempowerment, condescension and victim-blaming used in family violence. Laws, policies, services and programs are frequently developed without appropriate involvement from the people they are designed for. This is a common and critical error.

Design approaches that equally involve victim-survivors in decision making, such as co-design,[44] are increasingly recognised as best practice because they are ethical and effective.[45] Co-design moves beyond consultation with victim-survivors, ideally creating an environment in which power is shared between people with lived experience, professionals and funders. Power imbalances between these groups are openly acknowledged and steps taken to dismantle traditional hierarchies and instead form partnerships, where lived experience is valued and people are paid for their contribution.

Within these partnerships, power imbalances linked to racism, ableism, ageism, sexism and other forms of discrimination, also need to be acknowledged and accounted for. Relationships based upon trust and mutual respect are established, in which the knowledge and experience of all co-designers is valued. Perspectives and ideas are shared and negotiated in a way that enables all to learn and develop and actively participate in setting agendas and making decisions about policies and programs.[46] The collective expertise and more comprehensive understanding behind projects that have been co-designed improves their effectiveness, while victim-survivors are appropriately involved in making decisions about what will work best for them in a given context.

> “ Co-designers make decisions, not just suggestions.
>
> FROM ‘BEYOND STICKY NOTES: CO-DESIGN FOR REAL: MINDSETS, METHODS AND MOVEMENTS’

For the STEP co-design process, WIRE staff worked with family violence victim-survivors with job seeking experience and HR professionals interested in improving employment policies and processes. This involved two phases. In the first phase, victim-survivors and HR professionals met with WIRE staff as separate groups, where they identified barriers to victim-survivors gaining and maintaining employment, discussed strategies for reducing and overcoming these barriers and developed success indicators for the project.

In the second phase, all co-designers came together to discuss the outcomes of the first phase and review a proposed project plan, developed by WIRE staff on the basis of these outcomes. Twelve co-designers with lived experience of family violence took part, including people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people with disabilities, people who have been criminalised, people who are part of the LGBTIQA+ community, older people, and single parents. WIRE did not receive applications to participate from people identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or transgender. Eight HR professionals took part, with backgrounds in a range of industries. These included the banking, finance and insurance industry, health and welfare services and the pharmaceutical industry. Outcomes from the STEP co-design process included identifying what constitutes meaningful and appropriate employment for victim-survivors, identifying key barriers to gaining and maintaining employment and strategies for improving victim-survivor’s access to paid work, as well as ways of measuring the impact of the project. As part of this, co-designers concluded that it is necessary to work with victim-survivors and employers simultaneously to achieve the best possible outcomes.[47]

Figure 2 – Key findings from 'Sustainable and Transformative Employment Pathways (STEP) Project: Co-Design Learning Paper' on what constitutes meaningful and appropriate employment for victim-survivors.[48]

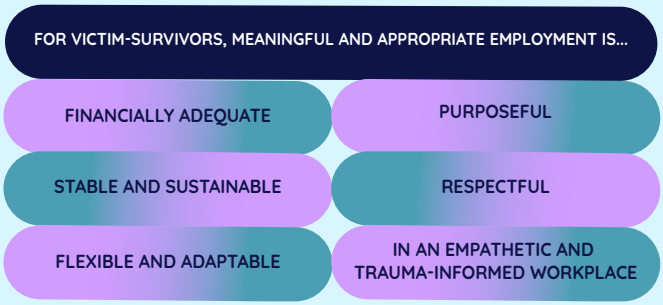


Figure 3 – Key findings from 'Sustainable and Transformative Employment Pathways (STEP) Project: Co-Design Learning Paper' on key barriers to gaining and maintaining employment for victim-survivors.[49]

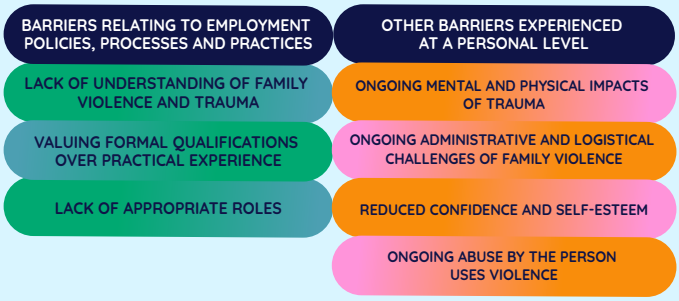
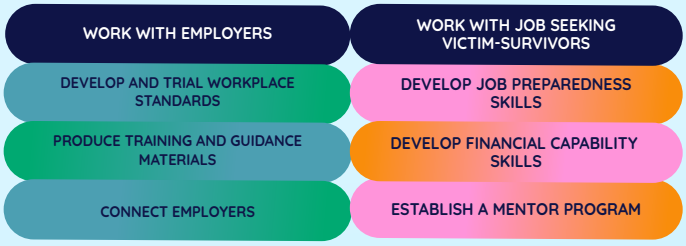


Figure 4 – Strategies for working with employers and victim-survivors to reduce and overcome barriers to victim-survivors gaining and maintaining employment, from 'Sustainable and Transformative Employment Pathways (STEP) Project: Co-Design Learning Paper'.[50]



Figures 2, 3 and 4 describe key findings from the STEP co-design process, which have shaped implementation of the project. In addition to these, the co-design process produced detailed guidance for implementation, including areas to be addressed in the workplace standards, employer training and guidance materials and topics for group workshops for victim-survivors. The STEP co-designers also produced detailed guidance on how to measure impact for both the work with employers and work with victim-survivors and on monitoring and evaluation approaches to be used.

As well as influencing implementation and monitoring and evaluation of the project, co-designers who were HR professionals identified that co-designing STEP enabled them to develop their understanding of the experiences of victim-survivors seeking employment and that they felt motivated to use what they had learned to make recruitment and employment processes more supportive. Meanwhile, co-designers who were victim-survivors found value in forming connections and working in solidarity with people who had been through similar experiences. It was meaningful and useful for them to be able to share their experiences, validate as a group the challenges they face when job seeking and exchange strategies for navigating these. Victim-survivors also identified that using their experiences to co-design a project that will help others, increased their confidence and sense of self-worth.[51]

USING BEST PRACTICE APPROACHES FOR WORKING WITH FAMILY VIOLENCE VICTIM -SURVIVORS TO SUPPORT THEM WITH JOB SEEKING

Guided by a co-design process that involved family violence victim-survivors, HR professionals and WIRE staff, the STEP project has endeavoured to support victim-survivors to find appropriate and sustainable employment by working with employers and victim-survivors simultaneously. This approach is reflected in the STEP Theory of Change, shown in Figure 5.

In the following section, we will discuss specific approaches used in the STEP Job Seeker Program, which works with victim-survivors to develop their confidence and skills in job seeking, as well as preparing them to enter or reenter paid work. By applying four best practice approaches for working with family violence victim-survivors and addressing specific barriers that they encounter to gaining and maintaining employment within program content, WIRE has created a program that significantly increases the likelihood of victim-survivors finding paid work.[52]

Between October 2020 and June 2022, WIRE conducted two pilots of the STEP Job Seeker Program. 24 victim-survivors[53] remained substantially engaged across the two pilot programs and 79% (19) had found employment by the end of their program. The programs ran for approximately nine months each, in which victim-survivors attended weekly group workshops on a range of topics and worked one-on-one with job coaches. Topics covered included the relationships between gender, money and employment, identifying skills and employment interests, telling your story to potential employers and financial considerations when starting employment. Workshops were originally intended to be in-person, however the COVID-19 pandemic meant that the majority were held online using Zoom.

Workshops were facilitated by STEP project staff and included guest speakers with expertise in relevant areas, including job coaches, financial coaches, representatives from Services Australia, lawyers and union organisers. Program participants also attended sessions with Fitted for Work where they received personal outfitting for work attire, took part in makeup workshops and had professional headshots taken.

As well as covering topics relevant to family violence victim-survivors, the STEP Job Seeker Program uses best practice approaches for supporting them. It is trauma-informed, strengths-based, intersectional and uses a village-of-support-type model. Using these approaches means that the program is more responsive to the needs of victim-survivors, working to create a safe, respectful, encouraging environment, where the diversity of their experiences is acknowledged and welcomed and they have access to support from a number of people with different things to offer.

Figure 5 – The STEP Theory of Change.

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

Trauma-informed practice is commonly considered best practice for working with family violence victim-survivors in Australia and has been used within the STEP Job Seeker Program. When discussing trauma, it is important to bear in mind that distress, despair, extreme fear, high levels of vigilance, anger, grief and shock are among a number of healthy and reasonable responses to being targeted by people who use violence, who continually attack, undermine and attempt to control victim-survivors. Diagnosing victim-survivors with trauma can be problematic because it is categorised as a mental disorder[54] and contains implications that there is something wrong with them.[55] It is also a culturally-specific way of framing expressions of suffering resulting from family violence.[56] However, it can be validating for victim-survivors to have the seriousness of their experiences acknowledged via diagnosis[57] and approaches for providing them with more effective support have been developed on the basis of this.

Using trauma-informed practice means being sensitive to the effects of trauma and developing services, policies, programs and practices that account for and attempt to mitigate them. Key aspects of this approach include creating safe environments for victim-survivors, encouraging social connection, having cultural awareness, supporting the autonomy of victim-survivors and their ability to make choices for themselves, sharing power and using a strengths-based approach.[58] The goal is to support the recovery of victim-survivors, rather than compounding their trauma.[59]

Trauma-informed practice was embedded within the STEP Job Seeker Program from the beginning through co-design and it is one of the guiding principles behind the program. It informs practices used (for example, styles of communication), program content and choices made by project staff. It can be observed in the use of group agreements for workshops, that support creation of a safe environment that is confidential, non-judgmental and respectful. Employment is framed within the program as a part of victim-survivor's broader recovery from family violence. Victim-survivors are supported to develop their sense of autonomy and control by adopting an intentional approach to job seeking, that responds to their existing skills and experience, preferred roles and personal values.

Trauma-informed practice can also be observed in the decision to bring the same group of people together for workshops over a long period of time, creating a sense of predictability and safety and supporting social connection. Project staff endeavored to be as responsive as possible to the needs and preferences of program participants. For example, adjustments were made to a group activity after participants identified that aspects of the activity were potentially triggering. And finally, WIRE worked with the Centre for Multicultural Policy and Program Evaluation to apply a critical cultural lens to evaluation of the most recent pilot program.[60]

An advisory group of participants from the second program was formed to review findings from the evaluation, determine whether these were reasonable interpretations of the group's experiences and provide feedback on proposed ways of understanding what a culturally responsive program will look like. Feedback received from participants during the two pilot programs and their evaluations illustrates some of the positive impacts of trauma-informed approaches used, as well as areas for improvement. As part of the evaluation for the most recent pilot program,[61] just over ***71% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe (and protected from their perpetrator) in the STEP learning environment. Seventy-five percent of respondents identified that they had a sense of social connection during or after participating in the program and just over 62% of respondents identified that they felt more in control of their financial situation.***[62]

> "I had been applying for work for a while, with no traction. I knew that the biggest hurdle was that I had gone through a trauma recently, and have been stripped away of all my confidence and autonomy and that needed to be worked on to really put myself out there for work, and be confident enough to sell myself to get the jobs. There weren't any programs [other than STEP] set up specifically looking at that.
>
> STEP JOB SEEKER PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

> "I feel like I've gained a couple of friends from the program, which is great because I had none before. Even when I [felt socially anxious], I could tell myself no it's fine, it's a safe group. It helped me get out of that cycle.
>
> STEP JOB SEEKER PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

USING A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

Taking a strengths-based approach means identifying and accounting for real and existing strengths in victim-survivors and their lives. These include resources and opportunities already available to them, which can be cultural, social, material and personal (among other types). For example, culturally appropriate ways of understanding and creating wellbeing[63] and individual resilience, expertise, resourcefulness, humor and courage. Strengths also include steps that victim-survivors are already taking to resist family violence and create safety and wellbeing for themselves.[64]

Strengths-based approaches offer many benefits. They:

- Create hope
- Are motivating and empowering[65]
- Enable confidence
- Are restorative after experiencing family violence, and
- Illuminate opportunities and solutions.

Taking a strengths-based approach is also now considered best practice in working with family violence victim-survivors in Australia, and is another guiding principle behind the STEP Job Seeker Program. Strengths-based approaches provide an alternative to deficit-focussed ways of viewing victim-survivors, that are amplified around some people in particular due to racist, sexist, ableist and classist attitudes and beliefs (among others) that exist in society. The issue with deficit-focussed understandings does not lie in the identification of problems,[67] but rather in the use of thinking, language and narratives that inaccurately frame people living with and responding to these problems as weak, inferior, inactive, disordered, incompetent and any number of other negative judgements. This framing is directly informed by discriminatory ideas.[68]

The strengths-based approach can be seen in the STEP Job Seeker Program in the continual use, by project staff, of language and narratives that highlight the strengths of victim-survivors and opportunities available to them. This influenced workshop delivery and topics covered and led to use of exercises that support victim-survivors to identify their existing strengths and resources and develop strategies for job seeking that make use of these, as well as identifying new opportunities.

Understanding and respecting the value of victim-survivors is inherent to the strengths-based approach. This informed decisions to involve victim-survivors in project design, as advisors during evaluation, and as key providers of support for one another. Feedback received from participants again illustrates some of the positive impacts of the strengths-based approach used. During evaluation of the most recent pilot program,[69] just over ***87% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that completing the program made them feel more optimistic about their financial future. Seventy-five percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the confidence they held in their existing skills had increased and 75% identified that the program increased their sense of self-worth.***

> “ The program has helped me think more broadly of what I’m capable of, what do I need in this moment, and what do I need to help me get to where I want to be next.
>
> STEP JOB SEEKER PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

> “ I am starting to own my value again. And so, I think it’s probably the beginnings of building confidence again. I wouldn’t go as far as saying I’m confident, but I’m finally understanding that I’ve been denying the fact that I have certain skills and abilities, and now my traumatic experiences are not defining me as much…I’ve gone from not believing that anyone would hire me to turning down jobs. That’s pretty significant.
>
> STEP JOB SEEKER PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

> “ [The program] has really allowed me to overcome imposter syndrome and that negative self-talk. I’ve stopped asking if I’m worthy, and am now like ‘yeah I can do this!’
>
> STEP JOB SEEKER PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM

Intersectionality is a framework that enables understanding of how different forms of oppression and privilege interact within people's lives and shape their experiences. This includes their relationships with other people, laws, government policies, organisational practices and physical spaces. People may experience a number of different forms of discrimination at the same time - for example, racism, ableism and sexism - and these combinations generate complicated, intensified experiences of oppression. Intersectionality requires that we maintain an awareness of these dynamics and the harms they cause, which include treating people from particular groups as though they are less valuable, ignoring or minimising their needs and making decisions that affect their lives on their behalf. The problem does not lie within oppressed people, but in the people and social systems that oppress them. It is therefore essential that in our work we strive to both avoid and repair these harms by using intersectional practice.

The STEP Job Seeker Program uses an intersectional feminist lens to understand family violence, financial hardship and instability and the experiences of victim-survivors trying to gain and maintain employment. Intersectionality[70] is increasingly recognised by governments and community services as a necessary framework for production of policies, services and programs that are fair and beneficial, including to those whose experiences are frequently overlooked and misrepresented. For example, people from the LGBTIQA+ community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Policies, services and programs informed by intersectionality hold the potential to meet the needs of all people, rather than being developed on the basis of incomplete understandings of issues like family violence and employment. While family violence is understood as being driven by gender inequality, intersectionality demonstrates that there is no universal experience of gender inequality, describing complex, interdependent relationships between forms of discrimination and highlighting the needs of commonly marginalised people.[71] Racism, classism and other forms of discrimination shape people's experiences of sexism and family violence, just as sexism[72] and other forms of discrimination shape their experiences of racism.[73]

Intersecting forms of oppression and privilege affect many areas of victim-survivor's lives, making experiences of financial hardship and job seeking especially difficult for some. There is a need for policies, services and programs that are able to make sense of the specific burdens, struggles, benefits and experiences that arise at the intersections of different power relationships in people's lives.[74] Where this is not achieved, the needs of people from commonly marginalised groups are not met. Their efforts to deal with issues like family violence can be undermined and further harm is caused by encounters with systems that do not treat their perspectives and needs as important.

Intersectional feminist understandings informed development of the STEP problem analysis paper[75] and victim-survivors from a range of backgrounds co-designed the project, influencing implementation of the Job Seeker Program. However, embedding intersectional practice within programs such as STEP is challenging because the perspectives of white people, men, people without disabilities, middle class and cisgender and heterosexual people (among other privileged groups), continue to be prioritised in many areas of Australian society. Having been immersed in these perspectives for so long, organisations and programs can habitually return to them, especially where there is not representation of diverse perspectives at all levels and in all areas within them. Intersectional practice requires profound shifts in understanding for many and this process is complex. In order to address these challenges, project staff continually monitor how effectively intersectionality is being practiced in the STEP Job Seeker Program and measures for doing this have been incorporated into its monitoring and evaluation framework.

In order to determine whether intersectional understandings are being effectively practiced in the program, we can consider the proportion of participants who feel like their needs are being met, as well as looking for feedback that raises concerns about discrimination, marginalisation and related problems. As part of the evaluation of the most recent pilot program,[76] 87.5% of respondents identified that the program addressed their unique needs and aspirations, and so far, participants have not raised any concerns about discrimination or marginalisation. In order to better understand how effectively the program is meeting the diverse needs of participants, the Centre for Multicultural Policy and Program Evaluation has incorporated measures into the STEP monitoring and evaluation framework that will allow project staff to understand how useful weekly topics are for participants in comparison with their demographic attributes.

> "The diversity [of the STEP program] has been its strength, [participating with] women from other backgrounds and different perspectives. It sends a really nice and powerful message about how women from diverse backgrounds can come together and support each other.
>
> STEP JOB SEEKER PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

ACCESSING A 'VILLAGE OF SUPPORT'

Finally, the STEP Job Seeker Program has used a village-of-support-type model, in which victim-survivors have access to support from a number of people with different knowledge and experience, and receive group, as well as individualised, support. The STEP 'village of support' includes other program participants, WIRE staff, job coaches, financial coaches from the Good Shepherd Financial Independence Hub and other subject matter experts who attend and present at workshops. By bringing a range of supports in around program participants, they have access to expertise gained through lived experience as a victim-survivor seeking employment, expertise on establishing financial wellbeing, employment expertise and expertise on factors that drive and impact family violence and financial hardship, as well as knowledge of support systems (among other things).

The benefits of attending group workshops, while receiving individualised support from job coaches, include motivation, a sense of social connection and solidarity, access to a range of expertise and support from job coaches that responds in more detail to individual's needs. For example, working together to identify suitable job opportunities, discussing topics from workshops that participants have questions about or particular interest in, providing feedback on job applications, and practicing for interviews. Including support from job coaches enables the STEP program to better meet participants where they're at in terms of employment readiness. Meanwhile, participants have valued group workshops and connecting with people who deeply understand the barriers they face and who are working through the challenges of recovering from family violence and job seeking alongside them. This feeling of connection can be especially important for victim-survivors because people who use violence often take steps to isolate them. Victim-survivors who are refugees or migrants may experience intensified loneliness where family violence works in conjunction with forms of social, political and economic segregation. For these participants, the 'village of support' approach holds particular value.

Participants found both being part of the group and working with their job coach motivating, and as discussed earlier 75% of respondents in the most recent evaluation identified that they had a sense of social connection during or after participating in the program. Seventy-five percent also agreed or strongly agreed that the skills, knowledge and support their job coach provided were very useful.[77]

> "I had a team of people I wanted to be accountable for. I wanted to be able to say I'd applied for a role. It was a part of it, just feeling like we had this group of people that was in it together and working things out and setting goals and trying to go for those goals together.
>
> STEP JOB SEEKER PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

> "Every session we learned something, from [the facilitators] or from the external people you brought in, or from other participants. I don't know which is more useful!
>
> STEP JOB SEEKER PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

> "The biggest thing [I worked on with my job coach] was really letting me see that I was underselling myself, and that I had a lot of skills but you couldn't see that in my CV and I wasn't owning it. We did a lot of work on that...we had a look pragmatically at my skill set, which in turn got me out of that small space I was putting myself into [applying for junior roles].
>
> STEP JOB SEEKER PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

By applying best practice approaches and addressing specific barriers encountered by family violence victim-survivors, WIRE has created a job seeking program that increases their likelihood of finding employment and beginning (or continuing) their financial recovery. However, workplaces need to be accessible to and supportive of victim-survivors in order for them to maintain paid work once they find it. If we do not simultaneously address individual and systemic barriers to victim-survivors gaining and maintaining employment, we are likely to have limited success in supporting them to achieve financial wellbeing. For example, assisting victim-survivors to gain but not maintain employment and creating impact on an individual basis, rather than on a larger scale.

SUPPORTING EMPLOYERS TO IMPROVE RECRUITMENT AND EMPLOYMENT POLICIES AND PROCESSES

STEP co-designers identified the need to work with employers and victim-survivors simultaneously in order to most effectively support victim-survivors to gain and maintain employment. This is the approach described in the STEP Theory of Change. The STEP co-design learning paper identified specific strategies for working with employers to establish recruitment and employment policies and processes that are inclusive and supportive of victim-survivors. These include development of workplace standards, producing training and guidance materials and connecting employers who are endeavoring to make these changes in their workplaces.

Recognising that there is still a lack of awareness and understanding around family violence and its impacts in parts of the community, and that there is a gap in terms of regulations and standards enabling workplaces to support employees who are victim-survivors, significant work has been done in this area as part of the project. STEP co-designers, including family violence victim-survivors and HR professionals, job coaches from the STEP Job Seeker Program, utility companies, specialist family violence organisations, global consulting and engineering firms and small business experts, have contributed to development of a set of workplace standards and guidance materials. These resources, which are still under development, respond to barriers that victim-survivors encounter when job seeking and trying to maintain employment and apply trauma-informed, strengths-based and intersectional understandings to employment policies and processes. Guidance in these resources spans the entire employee experience, from recruitment to ending employment, and also addresses workplace culture.

This part of the project has so far produced a draft set of workplace standards that cover three key areas – recruitment, employment and workplace culture – as well as guidance materials, including a self-assessment tool for workplaces and toolkits that provide practical guidance and example templates for implementing the standards. Types of guidance provided include how to write victim-survivor-friendly position descriptions and job advertisements, recommendations for making application processes more accessible by offering candidates different ways of demonstrating their suitability for roles, as well as adapting shortlisting processes to become accessible and fair. For example, avoiding making assumptions about gaps in people's resumés or where incomplete contact details have been provided. There is also guidance on creating flexible, transparent, supportive on-boarding processes, establishing flexible workplace practices, employee assistance programs and effective family violence policies, among other things. When the workplace standards and guidance materials are finalised, the intention is to trial their implementation with workplaces from a range of industries. This trial will include providing training for key staff and establishing communities of practice where employers can connect, discuss their progress, share strategies for overcoming challenges that arise and work together to problem solve.

In a 2011 survey of Australians who are in paid work, 30% of respondents identified that they have personally experienced family violence during their lifetime.[78] This demonstrates that a high proportion of both job seekers and employees within workplaces are living with the ongoing impacts of family violence in some form. The goal of working with employers to improve their recruitment and employment policies and processes, is to make workplaces more accessible to and supportive of family violence victim-survivors. However, it is also anticipated that making these changes will benefit employees living with trauma for other reasons and all employees generally. The potential benefits from employer perspectives are numerous. They include gaining access to a pool of skilled and knowledgeable employees who might otherwise be overlooked during recruitment or deterred from applying for jobs with them, retaining valuable staff, improving staff wellbeing, preventing discrimination and harassment and strengthening their reputation and brand.

Although it may be difficult to measure the impacts of this type of work and it may take time to see its fuller effects, understanding the number of workers who have personally experienced family violence, enables us to imagine the level of impact for potential and existing employees (and their families). Importantly, when workplaces make these changes, it will benefit existing and potential employees now and into the future. This indicates the potential to establish a significant legacy of positive social change.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Pilots for the STEP Job Seeker Program indicate that the approaches being used substantially increase the likelihood of victim-survivors finding paid work compared to less targeted job seeking programs. In this way, the program has successfully supported the financial recovery of a number of victim-survivors and consequently supported their broader recovery from family violence. Participants who have not yet found paid work, or who have decided that it is not the right time to enter the workforce, have indicated that the skills and knowledge they gained during the program will continue to be of use to them in future. These are strong positive outcomes, however the financial recovery of victim-survivors also depends on their ability to maintain employment and there are barriers to this beyond their direct control that require growth and change on the part of employers. This is why the STEP workplace standards and associated support for employers is so important, and as discussed, the potential impact of this work is significant.

This paper does not discuss in detail the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Job Seeker Program, however it is important to note that both pilots ran during the pandemic and so its impacts may only begin to be fully understood once the program has also run outside of these conditions. Feedback received from participants so far has indicated that although it was more difficult for them to connect with other participants with the majority of workshops being held online (rather than in-person as planned), being able to attend on Zoom made participating in the program easier because they did not have to factor in commuting to WIRE each week. For those who would have needed to use paid childcare to attend in-person workshops, the cost involved may have prevented them taking part. Running workshops on Zoom enabled access to the program for some parents in this situation. Finally, while some participants felt that there were fewer jobs available as a result of the pandemic, others experienced it as a time of increased opportunity. These different responses are likely to be related to the industries participants were trying to find employment in.

Since the project began, the job seeker program landscape in Victoria has shifted and other programs have emerged that are designed to support family violence victim-survivors. This is likely to be a positive development for victim-survivors, however it is recommended that during the next phase of the project, a map of the current job seeker program landscape be created. It is important to increase our understanding of the environment that the STEP Job Seeker Program belongs to and its relationship to other programs for victim-survivors. Doing this will prevent organisations working in silos and allow WIRE and other organisations to take a strategic and collaborative approach that has the greatest impact for victim-survivors.

ABOUT WIRE

WIRE is a free, generalist information, support and referral service for women, non-binary and gender diverse people in Victoria.

As well as phone, online and in-person one-on-one support, we offer training, information seminars and workshops in a range of areas and also research and advocate for issues affecting women, non-binary and gender diverse people in the Victorian community, such as family violence, financial abuse and financial capability.

WIRE is committed to intersectionality and becoming an Intersex, Trans and Gender Diverse-friendly service.

OUR VISION

A just and inclusive society where all people can thrive.

OUR PRINCIPLES

Our principles underpin how we work as a team, the partnerships we form and the way that we research, design and deliver our programs.

- Human rights and social justice
- Courage and leadership
- Intersectional feminism
- Person-centred and responsive
- Evidence and improvement
- Sustainable and interdependent change
- Transparent and accountable
- Respectful collaboration and co-design
- Curiosity and growth

END NOTES

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30. Use of 'informal' supports, including extended family, friends and community, can be effective and victim-survivors who expect to encounter violence, homophobia, transphobia, racism and other forms of harm during encounters with police and the courts (for example), may deem 'informal' pathways safest amongst the options available to them. It is important to acknowledge that this framing of formal versus informal uses the perspective of governments established by Europeans since Australia was colonized. It is rooted within colonizing ideologies that devalue and marginalise approaches to dealing with family violence used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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32. Z. Arashiro, 'WIRE's approach to financial capability & financial wellbeing', WIRE (Melbourne, Mar. 2022), 6, https://www.wire.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Final-knowledge-paper-2203-PDF.pdf, accessed 10 November 2022.

33. In recent years there has been increased momentum in efforts to make workplaces more equitable, with implementation of the Victorian Gender Equality Act 2020 and recent improvements to family and domestic violence leave entitlements under the National Employment Standards. For examples of Australia's employment system being designed to accommodate men, see the Commonwealth Public Service Act 1922, which required female Commonwealth Public Service employees to resign when they married, as well as the failure to build female toilets for Members, Senators and Officials at Australia's former house of parliament until 1974, 31 years after women were first elected to the Australian parliament.

34. Intersectionality is increasingly recognised by community services and government as an essential approach to understanding, and responding to, the needs of the community. It is fair and inclusive of all members of society. See Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', 1241–1299 for the origins of this term.

35. Experiences of sexism in society and the workplace are not universal. The gendered dimensions of job seeking and employment are inextricably linked to the racialized dimensions of job seeking and employment, as well as the impacts of disability, sexuality, age, class and other sites of inequality. Victim-survivors experience a complex mixture of oppression and privilege on the basis of their relationship to all of these factors, at the same time.

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