

Economic Abuse: The Disproportionate Impacts on Black Women

As you scroll through your newsfeed, you read, “Black women suffer disproportionately from abuse.”

You stop scrolling and think. If your newsfeed is filled with important messages about the fight against racial inequality, perhaps you interpret “abuse” as structural abuse against institutions with histories that are both racist and sexist. If you’re well versed in domestic abuse literature, perhaps “abuse” elicits images of violent encounters between intimate partners. This would also be reasonable, considering black women experience intimate partner violence [up to three times](#) more than white women.

After this reflective exercise, you shrug and keep scrolling. Chances are, one crippling kind of abuse, economic abuse, didn’t come to mind. And it isn’t your fault.

As a women’s rights advocate and defender of all things feminist, I was surprised I hadn’t heard of this term until I reached out to the Canadian Center for Women’s Empowerment ([CCFWE](#)), an Ottawa-based NGO fighting to expose the silence behind economic abuse in marginalized communities. Economic abuse is a major—and understudied—kind of abuse usually grouped with domestic violence. [As explained by Women’s Aid \(2019\)](#), economic abuse encompasses “a range of behaviors which allow a perpetrator to control someone else’s economic freedoms.” While financial abuse refers to denying or restricting access to money, economic abuse extends to other forms of economic control such as denying someone’s access to education and/or employment.

The Numbers

As you might have guessed, the impacts of economic abuse play out differently depending on the ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic position of the victim in question. Since 95% of women who experience domestic abuse report experiencing economic abuse ([Surviving Economic Abuse, 2020](#)), and black women make up a disproportionate number of domestic abuse victims, it’s reasonable to deduce that economic abuse disproportionately impacts black women in terms of sheer numbers.

In a private chat room for victims of domestic violence, one anonymous participant explained that economic abuse is so dangerous precisely because it

leaves survivors without the financial means to escape. For black women, this is accentuated for multiple reasons.

In [Statistic Canada's 2020 report](#), black women consistently had lower employment rates, higher instances of unfair treatment or discrimination at work, and lower median annual wages than black men, white men, and white women from 2001 to 2016. With these structural factors at play, black women are more likely to face hardships than white women when seeking employment after fleeing an economic abuse situation.

Insight from Meseret Haileyesus: The Barriers

Although academic work about economic abuse can be telling, not many articles discuss the specific challenges of economic abuse for black women. In order to learn more, I spoke with Meseret Haileyesus, founder of the Canadian Centre for Women's Empowerment ([CCFWE](#)). She has experience working with survivors of all races and backgrounds. In her words, "Women of color are disadvantaged by [economic abuse] for various socio-economic injustice factors." Haileyesus says there are multiple, "hidden and very complex" challenges for non-white women who are facing economic abuse. She grouped these barriers into three main categories, including 1. stigma, 2. lack of information, and 3. non-intersectional service.

The first barrier, **stigma**, refers to the double-edged of stereotypes and shame associated with talking about economic abuse. Amani Allen, associate professor of community health sciences and epidemiology at the University of California, Berkeley, explains that there are complicated implications of breaking out of the too-often imposed "[strong woman](#)" mold that black women face. Seeking help cannot only lead to potential embarrassment for the victim but can also make them feel as though they are betraying the black community. If overcoming stigma doesn't seem to be an option, they may be tempted to flee in silence without a support network, potentially leading to further precarity. It isn't surprising then, that black women are [less likely to report when victimized](#). This is especially if stigma prevents them from exploring what options are available to them.

This brings us to our second barrier, **lack of information**, both about the resources available to survivors and about economic abuse itself. As one survivor confessed in a private conversation, "I didn't even know that him controlling my finances was abuse because he had been doing it for so long." When this woman finally left the relationship, she realized he had put her name

on \$200,000 worth of loans without her knowing. She said, “I left him, but I wish I could have seen the warning signs sooner.” Although lack of information is a barrier for victims from all backgrounds, information is more easily accessible by privileged classes for reasons associated with education, community resources, and access to technology.

Non-intersectional service is the third barrier for non-white survivors of economic abuse. One woman in particular shared her difficult experience accessing services at a food bank after fleeing an economic abuse situation. In a private conversation, she said, “People treat me like a caricature of a lazy, black, homeless woman without understanding what I’ve been through and how hard I’m working.” Unfortunately, this example is not an exception. Discrimination faced by women of colour is accentuated when they also fit into other minority categories, not limited to religion, country of origin, legal status, and sexual preference. Of course, even wealthy black women face microaggressions. In doing research for this article, one black businesswoman explained how a social worker told her “post-traumatic-stress-disorder doesn’t happen to people like you.” From the [banking sector](#) to the [housing sector](#), black women experience prejudice at every level of seeking support, which makes accessing services more tiresome than for white women.

What can be done?

The good news is that knowledge about economic abuse is on the rise, especially with organizations like the Canadian Centre for Women’s Empowerment (CCFWE) at the forefront. Equipped with a multi-disciplinary team ranging from top policy experts to mental health specialists to community activists, the CCFWE is pushing for economic abuse stories to be heard.

“We need new Canada-wide policies as part of the solution to creating meaningful structural change for women facing economic abuse.” Haileyesus says, “There’s no other organization in Canada that talks about economic abuse.”

Beyond economic abuse advocacy, the CCFWE has a support group in Ottawa specifically for black and minority women to discuss ways of coping with economic abuse. The organization plans to have another support group for survivors seeking to bolster their financial literacy. Other projects include developing a trauma-informed guideline for survivors recovering from economic abuse, including a wellness program. Since perpetrators often leave victims of

economic abuse with credit scores that are too low to take out loans, the CCFWE is seeking partnerships with financial institutions and other non-profit organizations to offer small entrepreneurship loans. Finally, the organization is building a mentorship program and creating an online community of support.

Perhaps the best strategy for allies in the fight against economic abuse is educating oneself about the [warning signs](#) and starting conversations with coworkers, peers, and family. For black women specifically, economic abuse reinforces structurally-imposed racial and gendered hierarchies. Of course, completely removing the agency of survivors doesn't do much to amplify their voices. After all, survivors are resourceful, and when equipped with the right information, can take control of their circumstances. This said, allies do have a role to play in easing their struggles by speaking out against stigma and listening intently. Sandra Koppert, on the CCFWE Board of Directors, said it well when she wrote, "The voice of survivors and lived experience is essential to guide us. We are stronger together."

--

If you want to get involved in CCFWE's work, please know they are currently looking for members to join the [National Working Group for Economic Justice](#) and the 360 Expert by Experience group. The goal of the 360 Expert by Experience group is to provide women an opportunity to express their emotions, receive support from others who have experienced domestic abuse, understand the dynamics of economic abuse, learn coping skills and improve their self-esteem. For more information, please contact canadiancenterfwe@gmail.com.