

Sarah Buel
University of Texas Law School

Too much to gain

I think that if we wanted to stop family violence in this country we could do so within five years. That there is far too much to gain, far too many powerful particularly men, but there are also women abusers for whom domestic violence works. They're able to get what they want by terrorizing their family and their partner. And they're not willing to give up that power.

Financial empowerment

I think one of the greatest obstacles is economic disempowerment, the refusal in a number of jurisdictions to enforce child support orders, forcing a number of victims to seek welfare assistance, which has been drastically cut. And after the 1994 welfare reform act in every state, there's a five year lifetime limitation on the ability to receive welfare, regardless of the consequences. And for example in Texas, a family of three, a mother and two children get \$228.00 a month, you can't live on that. In New York it's \$568.00. You can't rent an apartment never mind pay your rent, buy food or provide for your children. So I think that financial empowerment has to be at the top of our agenda. That every lawyer, prosecutor, advocate, doctor, has to be willing to at least provide a brochure, or basic information about job training. What is your dream? What is the path to economic independence for abuse victims? And second that we have to get serious about enforcing child support orders.

Bias of class and race

Another key obstacle is the continuing race and class bias, that victims of color are disproportionately arrested, in spite of their clearly being victims in these cases. Certainly low-income victims are disproportionately arrested, as well and many of the service providers, not having diversity in their staffs, making it clear that they not only don't understand issues for victims of color, but may not be particularly welcoming. Many view non-traditional religions or faiths and I use that term loosely, in Texas that can mean anybody who's not Baptist, is viewed as somehow -- you're not coming to group on Saturday because you want to go to Synagogue, or your Muslim and you need to pray five times a day that's not convenient for us. So, a lot of work that the battered women's movement needs to do around practicing what we preach. We want the police departments, and courts to be diverse, but in many communities we haven't done a very good job amongst ourselves.

Witness tampering

And third, our tremendous problem with witness tampering, that at this point because of three recent supreme court decisions prosecutors have been hamstrung in their efforts to go forward when a victim has been terrorized out of testifying. And that we need to completely rethink how the system responds to somebody who has been threatened, coerced, promised all kinds of outrageous money or harm if they cooperate with the prosecutor. Making it virtually impossible to hold batterers accountable for their crimes. That is going to take some creative thinking on the part of the legal community.

Community involvement

My belief is there is a role for every single person in our community. From the hairstylist, who get access to victims and as we saw started with the hairstylist in Brooklyn having the little brochures on the counter, and survivors who were patients, asking questions and being willing to get themselves trained, and how to respond if a customer does say, yes I'm getting beaten. Or as it happens all too often, comes in with a bruise. Something very obvious. How do you begin that conversation. Because what we find is most members of the public from a car mechanic, to a hair stylist, to the guy who runs the drug store on the corner, they want to help they don't know what that script is. When we give people specific language and as survivors say to them of course I'm going to be embarrassed, but I'd much rather you ask me. It may take me five times coming into your drug store and you saying, "are you okay at home, do you want a copy of the safety plan? There are people who will meet with you, you don't even have to go to the police station, they'll come here to talk to you." Teaching them what those interventions are, for example pharmacists were trained beginning in Spokane Washington to identify elder abuse. Because the one place that elders would go is to get their prescriptions filled. Tremendously successful program and the pharmacist embraced it whole heartedly. Similarly hairstylists beginning here in Brooklyn, we've expanded that in Boston, we're doing it in Oklahoma, in Utah, now in Texas, so really identifying, "one of my brothers is a car mechanic," asking him, "can we put the brochures, safety plans in the bathrooms at garages?" Absolutely. And sure enough victims come forward, so even if the mechanics don't want to go get training, they at least know enough to say, "call that number on the back then. shelter advocate will come, and talk with you or you can go there or you can call anonymously and get help with safety planning." But, I think our challenge is to develop menus of options that any employer, any person in the community can use to assist victims.