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Freedom for Survivors of Domestic Violence

As warriors in the war against domestic violence we have all been privy to stories of survivors. Stories that have driven every social worker, court advocate, shelter worker, and call center volunteer present tonight to fight harder for victims of intimate partner abuse. Stories like that of the Chelsea, Massachusetts woman who was unable to complete college courses because her abusive husband controlled her time and her access to transportation and money. Or the Yemeni-American woman from Chicago who was beaten by her husband during three pregnancies, but was encouraged to be “obedient” by her father. And the military wife from Texas who was choked by her husband, an Iraq War Veteran, on Christmas day.

These women all suffered from on-going abuse. Each of them lacked significant education and were rendered financially dependent by their situations. Equipping survivors of domestic violence with educational opportunities and sources of funding helps them to gain the independence that will lead to the end of their abusive relationships.

According to the Interfaith Domestic Violence Coalition, one in four women will become a victim of domestic violence. Women with deficiencies in education and limited financial resources are more vulnerable to abuse. As advocates of survivors, we are charged with providing tools that will enable victims to start new lives without falling

into abusive relationships ever again. Education and financial independence can end the cycle of domestic violence.

When assisting a survivor in establishing a life free of violence, a starting point is to educate her about the abuse she has suffered. Many women have a limited understanding of what abuse is. While it may seem useless to educate a survivor about the abuse she has suffered, victims are often confused about what acts constitute domestic violence. As a result, they rationalize the abusers behavior and blame themselves. Survivors should be informed that domestic violence includes denying medical assistance; controlling her access to money, transportation, and education; sexual coercion; and threatening to harm a victim's children and family. Some abusers even use the threat of self-imposed harm to control their victims.

Having a solid understanding of the violence she has endured and the causes of it will put a survivor on the road that ends the cycle of abuse. Once survivors are clear on the many layers of intimate partner abuse, they can then be guided to programs that will build their knowledge and skills. With these tools, they can seek and achieve financial independence.

Education, as we all know, opens doors and allows for a multitude of opportunities. A lack of education, on the other hand, keeps doors closed tight and acts as an opening for a lifetime of abuse.

With education a woman can find work making a living wage to provide for her children, and to solidify financial independence. In this country, 30 percent of women twenty-five and over have a high school diploma, nearly 17 percent have a bachelor's degree, and only 9 percent have graduate or professional degrees. Without a high school

diploma just under 28 percent of women in this age range live in poverty with earnings around \$14,000 a year. With a bachelor's degree, many women earn annual incomes of \$38,000. Education and job training programs such as the Allstate Foundation Education and Job Training Fund and the Dreamers Too, Inc. organization based here in Atlanta are essential partners in the education of survivors.

Women who are educated are in a position to provide timely medical care for their children and themselves. They also gain a sense of self-worth that will steer them away from abusive relationships. Educated women act as role models for their children to continue with their schooling.

Once a survivor of domestic violence has had the opportunity to educate herself, she will gain a broader understanding of work and business opportunities that will allow her to become financially solvent. A woman with her own money is not dependent, thus destroying a familiar reason for remaining in an abusive relationship.

In her book, *Domestic Violence*, Margi McCue reported a correlation between intimate partner abuse and poverty. The author described research from a 1990's study on welfare in Chicago that found 33 percent of those on welfare had experienced violence in a relationship. Broader studies have set the number as high as 82 percent. Without her own money, a woman is likely to remain in an abusive relationship. A solid education can pull a woman out of poverty, out of the cycle of abuse, and into newly opened doors of opportunity.

With education and the heightened sense of self-worth that accompanies it, a survivor can begin to look beyond her abuse history to a future that may include a

business of her own. While obtaining funding for a small business may seem daunting, there are opportunities available that will allow survivors to overcome the odds.

Microfinancing programs loan money in small amounts, most often to at risk groups. Women represent 70 to 90 percent of borrowers for these loans. The availability of microfinancing from organizations such as Project Enterprise in New York, the Plan Fund in Dallas, and Microbusiness USA out of Miami, can put a survivor in the position of solidifying her financial independence. These loans, coupled with education, enable a woman to map out a future in which she can provide for her children and maybe even members of her extended family. As a result, she will be in a position to protect those she loves and also act as a role model.

Two years before her husband attacked and choked her, the military wife from Texas was cornered by her drunk husband as he swung at her with a baseball bat. She was holding their baby boy. A 20 year-old woman endured three years of intimate partner abuse that ended only after her boyfriend murdered her and dismembered her body. Her remains were found in trash bags.

As providers and business owners, women contribute to the improvement of their children's lives and they also become more productive members of society. Such achievements will catapult a woman out of the cycle of abuse. They will also save her children and set a new standard for their future.

Some 3.3 to 10 million children are directly impacted by domestic violence. Children living in households where violence is prevalent grow up with emotional and psychiatric problems and with the idea that violence in the home is normal.

Teenagers who live with domestic violence are greatly influenced by what they witness: boys may take on the characteristics of the aggressor, becoming participants in the cycle of violence that can continue through generations. Girls become more vulnerable to abusive relationships when they witness their mother's struggles.

Mothers who leave abusive relationships and stay away can expose their children to a reality that does not include violence. They can also end their dependence on society for assistance.

Women of low-income status with little education and a lack of financial independence who are victims of domestic violence cost society millions of dollars annually in medical fees, crime investigations, mental health care and other areas. An estimated national cost for medical services for survivors derived in the late 1990s was \$857.3 million.

Domestic violence drains society's resources, brings chaos into the lives of children, and threatens the futures of untold generations. It is in all of our best interests to support survivors. An educated woman with job skills and opportunities for funding a productive small business can end the cycle of abuse, provide for her family, and contribute to society as a worker, an employer, a consumer, and parent.

Education informs women about the dimensions of intimate partner violence and it enables them to gain knowledge and skills that will strengthen marketability and confidence. The skills and knowledge gained from education can open a survivor of domestic violence to microfinancing programs that will put her in a position to start a business, creating financial independence.

When a woman can support herself and her children she becomes empowered. When she is empowered her sense of self-worth strengthens and she will not subject her children or herself to violent relationships. When a woman's sense of self is strengthened, she becomes a positive role model for her children and provides them with a life that is nurturing and safe with the promises that education and financial stability bring. A woman who rises from her life of violence to become a model of strength and positive change for her children will contribute to society as a highly functional citizen with experiences and knowledge to share with other women; as a consumer who can provide for her family; and as a survivor who stands as an example that unimaginable obstacles can be overcome.

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