

MOBILIZING ON ALL FRONTS TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Erin A. Gordon

The San Francisco Police Department's expert on domestic violence is Inspector Antonio Flores. As acting lieutenant of the Special Victims Unit, he sees domestic violence up close. According to Flores, recent trends include the use of technology to commit violence against women. "If you Google, 'How do I spy on my girlfriend?' you'd be amazed at how many videos come up," explains Flores, a San Francisco native who experienced domestic violence in his own family growing up. "You may hear a woman bragging that her boyfriend is buying her an iPhone 8, but she doesn't realize that he plans to keep track of her" through the phone's apps and GPS.

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Statistics support what Flores sees in the field. Seventy-eight percent of stalking victims are women, and women are significantly more likely to be stalked by intimate partners, according to the Center for Policy Research's report on stalking in America. Eighty percent of women who are stalked by former husbands are physically assaulted by that partner; 30 percent are sexually assaulted by that partner.

And stalking is just one type of violence against women. Characterized by behaviors that isolate, neglect, or exercise power and control over an intimate partner, domestic violence can include physical, sexual, psychological, or economic abuse, according to the 2016 *Comprehensive Report on Family Violence in San Francisco* by the San Francisco Family Violence Council. Direct violence such as domestic violence is the number one cause of injury to American women. Twenty percent of women in the United States have been victims of severe violence by an intimate partner. In California, the rate jumps to 40 percent. Women also experience indirect violence in the culture at large, such

as rape culture and health-care issues that include rising maternal mortality and decreased access to reproductive health care.

In San Francisco, Flores has witnessed another growing trend: the interplay between domestic violence and immigration. Abuse rates among immigrant women are almost three times the national average, according to the National Immigrant Women's Advocacy Project. Many men control noncitizen women by threatening to call immigration officials, and undocumented victims of domestic violence may be especially reluctant to come forward for fear of deportation.

To combat this, U visas are increasingly being used as a crime-fighting tool, according to Flores. Created by Congress in 2000 as part of the Violence Against Women Act, the U visa is a temporary visa for noncitizen crime victims who are willing to cooperate in the detection, investigation, and prosecution of criminal activities. Domestic violence accounts for more than 45 percent of U visa criminal activities.



Women's March 2017, National Mall

“In one case, I saw how obtaining a U visa changed the victim’s whole life,” Flores recalls. “She was able to work, get a driver’s license and a temporary work permit.” To help streamline the U visa process, Flores, along with Julie Traun, director of BASF’s Court Programs, led a training for the ACCESS Center at the San Francisco Superior Court, which provides self-help services for family law matters.

In addition to tools like the U visa, certain factors make it less likely that women will experience domestic violence or at least increase their resilience when faced with violence. One of those factors, according to the San Francisco Family Violence Council report, is the coordination of resources and services among community agencies.

To that end, The Bar Association of San Francisco and its Justice & Diversity Center (JDC) are working to improve the lives of women both by directly assisting victims of violence and by collaborating with other organizations that assist women who’ve experienced violence. Specifically, JDC provides life-saving legal services to nearly 1,300 at-risk and low-income women in San Francisco, many of whom are domestic violence survivors. Typical matters include marital dissolutions, child custody, and child support. JDC lawyers also assist with related issues such as restraining orders and powers of attorney.

“Sixty percent of our cases involve domestic violence,” says Stephanie Bilinski, JDC’s family law supervising attorney. Domestic violence “impacts everything,” from divorces and custody to asset division, spousal support, and debt, Bilinski adds. She’s seen violence against women “even in the simplest of cases” such as a divorces involving no kids or assets.

This kind of violence includes not only physical abuse and severe harassment, but also emotional and financial abuse. For instance, a man may refuse to put his wife’s name on their house, forbid her from working, deny her access to assets, or tell her she’s too stupid to go to school or do anything

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other than work at a minimum wage job. Once she leaves the relationship, he may steal her identity or get her evicted. When the couple is in court, “he may testify that she’s crazy or an alcoholic when none of it’s true,” Bilinski says.

To help these women, JDC, which handles about 350 cases at any one time, relies on pro bono volunteers, placing as many as 140 attorneys a year. Bilinski also runs a clinic four times a month with Compass Family Services and the Homeless Prenatal Program in which the “overwhelming majority of clients have domestic violence issues.”

In addition to its direct service work, JDC is also a founding member of the San Francisco Domestic Violence Consortium (DVC), a network of seventeen agencies that provide coordinated, comprehensive services to domestic abuse victims. Services include emergency shelter, transitional housing, crisis lines, counseling, prevention programs, education, and legal assistance. The goal of the consortium is “to create a well-coordinated network of services to maximize resources, advocate for social change, work collaboratively, and reach the diverse populations of San Francisco,” according to Beverly Upton, the consortium’s executive director. “Because domestic violence crosses all lines of culture, economics, age, sexual orientation, ability, and other backgrounds, our services must be coordinated

to meet the needs of all survivors of domestic violence and their children. DVC members are committed to connecting women to a community of support, beyond one program alone, to help break the isolation and provide safety, healing, and a network of resources.”

A battered parent would find it difficult, if not impossible, to navigate the judicial system alone, Upton adds. As a result, “JDC’s membership in the consortium is a gift to so many battered survivors and their children.”

Barristers Club board member Jessica Ryland is similarly committed to protecting women in the community. A litigator at Lewis Brisbois Bisgaard & Smith, Ryland is helping to spearhead a women-helping-women event at which the legal challenges facing low-income women in San Francisco are at the forefront of the discussion.

“We are reaching out to the legal community and women leaders in the broader San Francisco community so together we can tackle issues facing women,” Ryland explains.

Ryland’s involvement with JDC is “a passion project,” she says. “I’m often reminded of that Margaret Atwood quote that men are afraid that women will laugh at them and women are afraid that men will kill them. A woman is beaten every nine seconds. It’s the number one cause of injury to women. And we now have a president who is so dismissive of his own sexual assault charges that it has emboldened a new culture. Low-income and minority women are disproportionate victims of violence, as are young women. JDC empowers these women by giving them options, a way out.”


In addition to preventing violence against women, Ryland is passionate about reversing the societal inequalities that women face, especially in terms of access to health care and job opportunities. “While women in the workforce have made great strides, women’s growth in top management and C-Suite positions is still underwhelming,” she says. “Women hold just 5 percent of CEO jobs in the S&P 500,

for instance. There’s also still a sizable pay gap between men and women. In California, this pay gap is nearly \$79 billion per year.” Even in the local legal market, although women now make up more than half of all associates in San Francisco law firms, they compose just a quarter of all partnerships, and minority women make up only 4 percent of partners, Ryland adds.

Women in the United States also struggle with health care in a way that shouldn’t be seen in a developed country, according to Ryland. “Maternal mortality rates are on the rise in the United States, defying a worldwide trend in the opposite direction, due in part to a lack of access to health care.” Women face even more cuts to their health-care options and restrictions to reproductive and preventative health care under Trump’s health-care proposals.

“So there’s still a lot of work to be done to achieve gender equality both inside and outside the professional sphere,” Ryland explains. “That’s why it’s important to bring these issues to the forefront and mobilize, especially by women in the position to help other women. These are issues that affect all women, and we must come together to help one another achieve progress, gender equity and an end to violence for all.”

A former lawyer, Erin A. Gordon is a freelance journalist living in San Francisco. She is the author of Cheer: A Novel and Heads or Tails, both available on Amazon. She can be reached at ErinGordonSF@gmail.com.



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