



Asset Funders Network



MAKING SAFETY AFFORDABLE

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IS AN ASSET-BUILDING ISSUE

This paper was developed in partnership with FreeFrom and Asset Funders Network (AFN). This publication is the fifth in a series of briefs that build on AFN's 2015 publication, *Women & Wealth*, to explore how the gender wealth gap impacts women, particularly low-income women and women of color, throughout their life cycle, and provides responsive strategies and best practices that funders can employ to create greater economic security for women.



FreeFrom is a national non-profit focused on creating pathways to financial security and long-term safety that support survivors of intimate partner violence.

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THE PROBLEM: THE INVISIBLE SURVIVOR WEALTH GAP

Our response to intimate partner violence isn't working, and the proof is in the prevalence. Despite a movement spanning over 40 years, 1 in 4 women¹ and nearly 1 in 2 transgender people² still experience intimate partner violence in the U.S. So, what are we getting wrong about this violence? The answer lies in how we frame the problem. We approach intimate partner violence solely through crisis intervention, when in reality **it is an asset-building issue.**

>74%

OF SURVIVORS
report their harm-doers
make them ask for
money and/or decide
how they can spend it.ⁱ

83%

OF SURVIVORS
experience interference
with work.ⁱⁱ

52%

OF SURVIVORS
experience coerced
or fraudulent debt, with
46% reporting damaged
credit as a result.ⁱⁱⁱ

The number one reason survivors stay in abusive relationships or return to abuse is because they cannot afford to leave or stay safe. In fact, 73% of survivors report financial insecurity as the reason for staying with their harm-doer and 50% of these survivors stayed with their harm-doer for two years or longer.³ Our society expects survivors to leave and judges them for staying but fails to acknowledge or address the fact that experiencing intimate partner violence is incredibly expensive.

According to the centers for disease control and prevention, intimate partner violence costs female survivors in the U.S. A staggering \$104,000 in medical bills and lost productivity over their lifetime.⁴ This figure is undoubtedly an underestimate since it does not account for damaged property; relocation costs; family court legal fees; the cost of new clothes, toys and furniture for the family; and other typical expenses. To make matters worse, in 99% of these cases, survivors experience economic abuse, which occurs when a harm-doer manipulates a survivor's financial resources as a means of control.⁵

Harm-doers employ a range of economic abuse tactics. These include putting a survivor on a strict allowance and/or demanding receipts for all purchases made, monitoring online bank accounts, forcing a survivor to quit a job or preventing them from going to work,



**A HARM-DOER
STEALS
AN AVERAGE OF
\$1,280
FROM A SURVIVOR
EACH MONTH,
AND INCURS
APPROXIMATELY
\$15,936
OF
DEBT
FOR A SURVIVOR
ANNUALLY.⁶**

requiring them to hand over their paychecks, and incurring debt in a survivor's name without their knowledge or consent through credit cards or loans." ⁶

Imagine having costs of over \$100,000, having thousands of dollars in debt, no assets, no income, damaged credit, no support system, and little to no confidence in your ability to make financial decisions. For survivors who are employed, **up to 60% will lose their job as a result of the abuse.**⁷ This daunting scenario is what systematically keeps survivors locked in the cycle of violence.

A 2020 survey of over 1,300 survivors across the U.S. reveals with dismal clarity just how financially insecure survivors are.⁸ Under the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's Financial Well-Being Scale, adults in the U.S. average a score of 54, and scores below 50 are associated with a high probability of struggling to make ends meet. Individuals who have the lowest level of savings (less than \$250) score around 41. In the 2020 survey, survivors averaged a score of 38, with 29 being the most frequently reported score — a full 12 and 21 points, respectively, below the threshold indicating financial insecurity.⁹ While only 4% of the general adult population in the U.S. has a score of 30 or below, nearly 16% of survivors in the sample fell in that range.¹⁰

SURVIVORS ARE TRAPPED IN ABUSIVE SITUATIONS AS A RESULT OF FINANCIAL INSECURITY

To disrupt the cycle of violence, we must support survivors in becoming financially secure — and we cannot wait until the moment of peak crisis to offer this support. Survivors measure their experience of intimate partner violence in months and years, not days. And the longer a survivor is trapped, the worse their financial situation becomes. Rather than relying solely on crisis responses — restraining orders, shelters, and temporary public assistance — we need earlier interventions that support survivors before they are so financially devastated by abuse that their only options are living in danger or becoming homeless. We also need an enduring continuum of support that goes beyond the immediate aftermath of crisis to ensure that survivors and their families can continue to financially recover, heal, and build the financial security they need to remain safe.

Treating intimate partner violence as an asset-building issue requires that we consider the other intersecting systemic inequalities that impact survivors' ability to build wealth. Intimate partner violence costs male survivors significantly less than female survivors. According to the CDC, the lifetime economic burden of intimate partner violence on male survivors is \$23,414. That is \$80,000 less than for female survivors.¹¹ In addition to overcoming the costs associated with intimate partner violence and the effects of economic abuse, female survivors have to contend with the gender income and wealth gaps. These inequalities are even more stark for women of color who also face racial income and wealth gaps. Specifically, for every dollar White men earn, Asian women earn only 90 cents, White women earn only 79 cents, Black women earn only 62 cents, Native American women earn only 57 cents, and Hispanic women earn only 54 cents.¹² For every dollar of wealth owned by White men, White women own only 32 cents, and Black and Hispanic women own only pennies.¹³ Native American women own less than one-tenth of the median wealth of all Americans.¹⁴

The situation is similarly disheartening for the LGBTQ+ community. Overall, members of the LGBTQ+ community collectively experience poverty at a higher rate (21.6%) compared to heterosexual cisgender people (15.7%).¹⁵ In the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, respondents were more than three times as likely as

the general U.S. adult population to have an annual household income of less than \$10,000.¹⁶ Furthermore, transgender people of color are more likely to face poverty compared to White transgender people, with Black (19%), Hispanic (18%), Native American (16%), and Asian (15%) respondents more likely to have an annual household income of \$10,000 or less compared to White (9%) respondents.¹⁷ These intersecting structural oppressions make recovering from violence and getting to a place of safety that much harder for female and LGBTQ+ survivors — in particular people of color.

For the many survivors who become single parents and sole earners as a result of intimate partner violence, a minimum wage job is insufficient to cover their family's costs. A single parent living in Los Angeles and earning California's \$13/hour minimum wage earns just \$27,040 annually. These annual earnings are a mere \$5,320 over the poverty line for a three-person household in 2020, and a striking \$53,393.60 below the living wage for a family of that size in Los Angeles County.¹⁸

The financial devastation of abuse impacts survivors' ability to invest in their children's future. Wealth increases the likelihood that families make investments in home ownership or other assets for future generations.¹⁹ Conversely, those who experience poverty as children are more than twice as likely to experience poverty as adults.²⁰ Without inherited wealth, children of survivors are less likely to own a home, secure high-paying jobs, or move out of poverty. The intergenerational wealth impact for children of survivors is further compounded by the adverse health outcomes related to witnessing parental abuse, including increased incidences of depression, anxiety, diabetes, obesity, and heart disease.²¹ Economists have demonstrated that poor health as children leads to decreased wealth as adults, meaning the children of survivors face yet another barrier to financial stability in adulthood.²²

As a society, we have created and maintained systems of oppression that allow intimate partner violence to not only persist, but also thrive. Systemic problems are societal responsibilities. All of us must be accountable for disrupting the cycle of violence.

THE SOLUTION: INVEST IN SURVIVOR WEALTH

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IS AN ASSET-BUILDING ISSUE AND MUST BE ADDRESSED AS ONE

Long-term safety for survivors begins with financial security and investment in survivor wealth. Survivors need living wage employment. Survivors need savings and other assets. Survivors need wealth. When faced with costs reaching six figures compounded by the effects of economic abuse (no job, no cash, no savings), minimum-wage work will not lead to safety, healing, and recovery. Through products, services, early interventions, and enduring continuums of support that center on survivors' needs, we can disrupt the cycle of intimate partner violence in the U.S. and create generational safety, health, wealth, and prosperity.

In this brief, we explore three existing unmet needs that contribute to survivors' inability to build wealth: **money, tailored asset-building support, and safe and responsive banking and credit services.** Within each identified need, we discuss specific issues facing survivors, strategic actions in response to those issues, as well as innovative ideas and existing promising practices to help funders take action to prioritize survivor wealth.

— SURVIVORS NEED MONEY —

1

SURVIVORS DON'T HAVE THE CASH THEY NEED TO SECURE THEIR SAFETY

Existing resources for intimate partner violence such as restraining orders, emergency housing, and temporary public assistance are designed with one necessary but insufficient goal in mind: to remove survivors from immediate danger. The reality is, safety often means completely starting over — and starting over is expensive.

Survivors need cash and the freedom to spend it as they see fit so they can cover a range of costs such as rent, insurance, groceries, furniture, and new clothes. For survivors with children, the costs are even greater:

“Leaving made me a single parent overnight. And he’s refusing to pay child support. I can’t even begin to get my life back together until I make sure my kids are OK. Child care costs take priority over everything else, minus food. I had to let my vehicle registration lapse in order to cover day care this last month so I can work...I am in need of normal household costs like food, clothing for growing children, and basic essentials, including gas, to get to work.” —MICHAELA

When 1,300 survivors were asked to identify their most urgent need, flexible cash funding was overwhelmingly the most common response. Sixty-four percent of survivors identified unrestricted cash as a top necessity.²³

The most pressing expenses identified by survivors were food, household utilities, and safe housing, and the average amount reported as necessary to stay safe was \$730.²⁴ This means that a relatively small amount of cash assistance can help survivors stay safe.

One-size-fits-all restricted funding sources do not provide survivors with the support they need. Consider government housing vouchers that cannot be redeemed if the holder has unpaid utility bills.²⁵ For survivors who have fallen behind on their utilities (a significant portion of the survey respondents), this restriction renders housing vouchers essentially useless.

Worse still, restricted funding echoes the financial control that over 99% of survivors experience from their harm-doer. Reluctance to give cash directly to survivors reveals an uncomfortable truth: We don't trust survivors to make the “right decisions.” “Almost without exception, funders reinforce the colonial division of us vs. them, haves vs. have nots, and mostly White saviors and White experts versus *poor, needy, urban, disadvantaged, marginalized, at-risk people* (take your pick of euphemisms for people of color).”²⁶ Survivors know best what they need, and they're saying they need cash. **Trust survivors.**

Strategic Action

GIVE FLEXIBLE FUNDING DIRECTLY TO SURVIVORS

By providing survivors with flexible cash grants of \$800 to \$1,000 each, funders and service providers alike can directly support survivors' safety. In order to be effective, this funding must be given directly to survivors without any restrictions on how it is spent. For instance, one survivor might use the funding to fix their car or cover child care so they can continue to work. Another survivor might pay off their utility arrears, allowing them to redeem a housing voucher. Still another might use the funds to pay off their credit card debt and improve their credit score, enabling them to secure better housing or employment.

The possible uses for the funds are as varied as the survivors who need them, but the effect is the same — survivors will have the cash they need to stay safe. With this flexibility, survivors can remove the unique obstacles obstructing their path to financial security.

◆ PROMISING PRACTICE ◆

DASH'S FLEXIBLE FUNDING HOUSING INTERVENTION STUDY

The District Alliance for Safe Housing in Washington, D.C., provides access to safe housing and services to survivors of domestic and sexual violence.²⁷ In 2018, the alliance completed a study on the efficacy of flexible funding to support survivors in securing and maintaining stable housing.²⁸ During the study, 55 survivors received flexible funding of an average of \$2,106 over 18 months.²⁹ Six months after the initial payments, 95% of participants were housed.³⁰

The study notes that some of the participants were able to use the flexible funds for issues that were not

obviously housing-related but that impacted their ability to pay other bills, which if left unaddressed could have led to housing loss. For example, one survivor used the funds to send her kids to stay with relatives over the summer so she could continue working. With the income she earned by staying employed, the survivor was able to avoid homelessness.³¹

The findings from this study reveal that brief and relatively inexpensive flexible funding interventions that trust survivors can be a lifeline for those who are one crisis away from homelessness or who need immediate but brief assistance to avoid homelessness. DASH's study was made possible in part by funding from the Live to Give Equity and Justice Fund and the DC Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants.

◆ PROMISING PRACTICE ◆

LIFT LIFT is a nonprofit organization working to help families break the cycle of poverty through a holistic, hands-on approach to financial capacity building and career advancement, including one-on-one support from a financial coach.³² In addition to coaching support, LIFT gives families quarterly unrestricted cash transfers of \$150 for two years, up to a total of \$1,200. After one year of participation in the LIFT program, 62% of members who received at least three cash transfers were able to save money in the prior three months, compared with only 39% of members who joined LIFT before the cash transfers were initiated.³³ Similarly, those members were less likely to report paying late fees in the prior three months (29%) compared with members who did not receive the cash transfers (36%).³⁴ LIFT's innovative work is supported by Bank of America.

2

UP TO 60% OF SURVIVORS LOSE THEIR JOB AS A RESULT OF THE ABUSE

The experience of intimate partner violence is incredibly disruptive to a survivor's employment. This disruption can take many forms — survivors missing work to deal with any number of urgent matters (seeking medical attention, obtaining a restraining order), harm-doers preventing survivors from going to work, or at times disruptively showing up to a survivor's workplace.

Take Paula as an example. Paula fled her home as a result of the violence she was experiencing. However, there were no organizations in her community that could pro-

vide her with any resources. As a result, she was forced to travel to the closest shelter, which was hours away. While Paula had been employed in her community, she was unable to commute to work from the shelter. For Paula, receiving services meant she had to abandon her job.

Paula's experience is not unique. Up to 60% of survivors lose their job because of abuse.⁴³ Unemployment means no stable income, which for survivors can result in being forced to live in danger.

Strategic Action

FUND ORGANIZATIONS ADVOCATING FOR PAID AND PROTECTED LEAVE FOR SURVIVORS ON THE STATE-LEVEL

A major contributing factor to the nexus between intimate partner violence and unemployment is the lack of paid and protected leave available for survivors to deal with the consequences of abuse. In fact, **only 17 states currently provide survivors with leave designated for intimate partner violence-related purposes.** While this represents progress, the leave is often unpaid, unprotected and/or unfairly requires survivors to deplete accrued sick or vacation days to deal with abuse, when they're neither sick nor on vacation. For example, while Massachusetts law mandates that employers provide survivors with 15 days of leave a year to deal with abuse, this leave does not have to be paid. It also depletes a survivor's available sick leave.⁴⁴ Similarly, Illinois mandates that survivors receive up to 12 weeks of leave a year to deal with abuse.⁴⁵ But again, this leave is unpaid. Most survivors can't afford to miss a day of paid work, especially if their job might not be waiting for them when they come back.

Both New Zealand and the Philippines require employers to provide survivors with 10 days of additional paid and protected leave to deal with the consequences of abuse. The U.S. should follow suit. Advocates across the U.S. need funding to support state-level advocacy to ensure widespread implementation of a survivor paid-leave policy so that survivors have fair access to traditional employment.

◆ PROMISING PRACTICE ◆

LEGAL AID AT WORK Legal Aid at Work is a nonprofit legal services organization based in Oakland, California, that has been assisting low-income working families for more than 100 years.⁴⁶ As part of its approach, Legal Aid at Work advocates for policies that strengthen civil workplace rights at the local, state, and federal level, including advocating for more robust workplace protections for survivors of intimate partner violence in California. For example, in 2013, Legal Aid at Work successfully advocated for the passage of SB 400, which prohibits employment discrimination against survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and stalking and requires reasonable safety accommodations. Legal Aid at Work's advocacy on behalf of survivors is funded by Blue Cross Blue Shield.



Innovative Idea

CREATE A SURVIVOR-FRIENDLY WORK ENVIRONMENT IN YOUR OWN INSTITUTION

While policy advocacy is necessary, a more direct and immediate approach to removing barriers to employment exists. In fact, it's one that AFN members can start implementing today: Create a survivor-friendly work environment in your own institution.⁴⁷ This includes:

- ◆ Paying a living wage and implementing a survivor paid leave policy
- ◆ Training management and staff on domestic violence and economic abuse
- ◆ Offering survivor-employees emergency grants
- ◆ Developing permanent resources for employees experiencing violence
- ◆ Creating an internal working group of survivors to innovate resources and revise problematic policies
- ◆ Covering medical insurance at 100%
- ◆ Providing childcare or allowing small children in the workplace
- ◆ Offering flexible schedules and options to work from home
- ◆ Creating opportunities for peer-to-peer support

◆ PROMISING PRACTICE ◆

BERKSHIRE BANK + THE WORKERS LAB This year, in partnership with FreeFrom and supported by funding from The Workers Lab, Berkshire Bank is piloting a survivor paid leave policy for all its employees.⁴⁸ This policy will provide employees with 15 days of additional paid and protected leave to deal with the consequences of abuse that will not deplete any accrued vacation or sick leave. Berkshire Bank will work together with FreeFrom to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the policy and develop permanent internal resources to further support its survivor employees. By modeling a workplace that is safe, accessible, and supportive of survivors, Berkshire Bank has emerged as a corporate leader in the movement to end intimate partner violence in the U.S.

◆ PROMISING PRACTICE ◆

ANNIECANNONS AnnieCannons is a social enterprise based in Oakland, California, that trains survivors of human trafficking and gender-based violence with the coding and design skills necessary to secure sustainable high-income earning jobs in tech.⁴⁹ In order to ensure that its programs are accessible to survivors, AnnieCannons tailors its training environment to meet their needs and the needs of their families, including on-site child care, counseling services, and opportunities for remote work. AnnieCannons' innovative work is funded by Cisco.

3 TRADITIONAL WORK IS OFTEN INACCESSIBLE TO SURVIVORS

Traditional 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. employment can be inaccessible to survivors for several reasons. Survivors have any number of issues that require attention during normal business hours (e.g., court appearances) or issues that are so urgent that they require a survivor to miss work (e.g., going to the hospital to treat injuries and wounds), thus making their schedules unpredictable and inconsistent. For survivors who are unable to afford child care, working after the school day is over is not an option as they are typically solely responsible for their kids. We also know that different types of gender-based violence intersect. Just as someone causing harm at home is likely to be causing harm at work, someone experiencing harm at home is also at risk of experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. In fact, 60% of women³⁵ and 53% of LG-BTQ+ people³⁶ experience sexual harassment at work:

“The shelter where I was staying forced me to do a welfare to work program. It was a 9-5 job paying \$10 an hour. My boss made me very uncomfortable. He would constantly make inappropriate comments and was aggressive and seemed to single me out. He reminded me of my abusive ex, which made it impossible for me to focus. I quit the job as soon as I could.” —SHONDA

Traditional 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. jobs are often impossible for survivors to maintain. Finally, for survivors who are undocumented³⁷ or are system-impacted (24% of survivors are arrested or threatened with arrest during an incident of intimate partner violence involving the police),³⁸ traditional employment may not be an option at all.

Strategic Action

FUND INITIATIVES THAT CREATE PATHWAYS TO NON-TRADITIONAL EMPLOYMENT FOR SURVIVORS

While traditional employment must become more accessible, there are alternative ways for survivors to make an income such as street vending, making and selling beauty products online via Etsy or Shopify, entrepreneurship, and driving for Lyft or Uber. Despite these income-earning alternatives, shelters and organizations around the country still encourage survivors to seek traditional employment, even when it isn't a good fit. Ignoring these flexible income-producing, nontraditional employment alternatives is a missed opportunity to help survivors start making the money they need to get and stay safe. Rather than focusing solely on traditional workforce development, organizations need funding to support training and education programs offering information about alternatives to traditional employment.

◆ PROMISING PRACTICE ◆

DON'T KNOCK THE HUSTLE The Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence³⁹ developed its “Don't Knock the Hustle” training after hearing from community partners that traditional employment didn't fit survivors' needs. “Don't Knock the Hustle” is an in-person training that explores nontraditional ways for survivors to gain financial empowerment. The training centers on trauma-informed, survivor-focused, and empowerment-based approaches, helping survivors tap into and cultivate existing creative skills. “Don't Knock the Hustle” is implemented with the support of funding from the Allstate Foundation.

1

THE MOVEMENT TO END IPV IS NOT ABLE TO PRIORITIZE ASSET BUILDING

Survivors can't stay safe without financial security, but they are not getting the support they need to build financial security when they seek services. Under the intimate partner violence movement's crisis-focused framework, while survivors get some help leaving an abusive situation, it offers survivors only short-term fixes and little-to-no support in financial recovery, which is essential to long-term safety. Little to no resources exist to support survivors **before** reaching that crisis point. Once survivors are out of imminent danger, they are essentially left to figure the rest out on their own. Moreover, not every survivor leaves. For those who can't or decide not to leave, virtually no support exists.

In fact, early findings from FreeFrom's ongoing Financial Freedom Study, funded by Citibank, paint a bleak picture of the financial resources available to survivors. When asked how often their case managers assisted them with managing money, debt, credit, or finding employment over the prior three months, 88% of survivors surveyed around the Los Angeles area said they'd received no offers of help.⁴⁰ Similarly, when we asked service providers how often they assisted their clients with the same topics, the most common response was zero times.⁴¹

Service providers and shelter leadership identify a lack of unrestricted funding as a barrier to doing financial work with their clients. Existing funding for the movement consists largely of restrictive government and philanthropic grants that are tied to traditional crisis-focused responses. As one shelter CEO noted: "If we were to be truly trauma-informed, that has to include financial support for our survivors that's very individualized and based on the survivor's needs. But in order for us to do that, our funding source has to be on board. Some of the feedback that I get from [funders] is they understand the need for flexibility and that every survivor's situation is different.... but their response is, well, our structure doesn't allow for that."

In addition to preventing service providers from doing financial capacity-building work with their clients, restrictive funding suppresses innovation and prevents organizations from building financial resilience or investing in their staff.

This means that service providers, many of whom are survivors themselves, are overworked, underpaid, and left to constantly put out fires — making sure there are

enough shelter beds and connecting survivors with (unsustainable) public assistance — without any time to think about what comes next for their clients or their own financial security. We cannot expect service providers to do financial capacity-building work with survivors if they aren't financially secure themselves: "How am I supposed to talk to my clients about savings and credit when I don't have savings and have never checked my credit and feel like I'm barely making it through the month?" — Intimate partner violence survivor advocate

UP TO 44%

OF SERVICE PROVIDERS REPORT HAVING EXPERIENCED IPV.

SOURCE: FreeFrom, Ahrens, C. (2020). Preliminary findings from the Financial Freedom Study. Unpublished report, California State University at Long Beach.

To effectively integrate financial capacity-building work in the intimate partner violence space, organizations need access to unrestricted funding to support this work, foster innovation, and help the service providers who work directly with survivors become financially secure themselves.

Strategic Action

INVEST IN MOVEMENT INNOVATIONS THAT SUPPORT SURVIVORS' FINANCIAL SECURITY

The lack of available funding is an easy problem to solve. By providing direct, unrestricted funding to allow organizations and programs to invest in their staff and go beyond the typical crisis response, funders can help shift the paradigm of the movement from a crisis focus to one that works toward more sustainable solutions.

◆ **PROMISING PRACTICE** ◆

DAYA, INC. RAISES WAGES AND STARTS ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAM

Daya, Inc. is a compassionate and culturally sensitive organization for South Asian survivors of intimate partner violence based in Houston, Texas.⁴² After completing FreeFrom's financial capacity-building Survivor Wealth and Wellness Certification and Training Program, Daya launched an entrepreneurship program to

support survivors in building income through small business creation. Since its launch in 2019, Daya’s entrepreneurship program has already helped 14 survivors start their own small business. Also as a result of FreeFrom’s

program, Daya’s executive director found money to support a salary increase of \$4,000 for each staff member to further invest in their expert team. This innovative work was funded by the Simmons Foundation.

2

ASSET-BUILDING PRODUCTS ARE NOT MADE FOR SURVIVORS

While asset-building products are designed to help move individuals, families, and communities out of poverty, they were not built with survivors in mind. Most of these products assume that users have at least some disposable income, access to assets, and financial capability to navigate and use the products. However, as a result of intimate partner violence, survivors rarely have the foundational assets, resources, or confidence necessary to benefit from these products.

For example, products meant to encourage saving (e.g., fintech savings apps such as *Digit*) assume users have the income necessary to save and use or trust banks. However, the cost of experiencing intimate partner violence compounded by the experience of economic abuse makes saving impossible for many survivors. Additionally, survivors are often unbanked or don’t have access to their bank accounts as these accounts are under their harm-doer’s control.

Making matters worse, some products actually retraumatize survivors by echoing aspects of the abuse they’ve endured. Take Gina. Gina’s harm-doer regularly accessed their⁵⁰ online bank account to monitor their savings and forced Gina to produce receipts to account for every penny they spent. When an advocate introduced Gina to the fintech app *Mint* as a way to manage their finances, they were immediately triggered when the app asked them to share their bank account information. Gina refused to use the app.

Even inclusive loan programs fail survivors. For a survivor in crisis and in the process of rebuilding, a \$35 monthly payment can be overwhelming. No matter how favorable the rates or low the monthly payment, survivors with little-to-no income simply cannot pay these loans back, resulting in the accumulation of more debt. This means that these loan programs can actually *harm* survivors.

It’s not enough to build products for low-income individuals or women. With 1 in 4 women and 1 in 2 transgender people experiencing intimate partner violence in the U.S., survivors are a significant subset of our population with

unique experiences and challenges. Products must be designed to respond to these challenges and meet survivors where they are.

Strategic Action

CREATE ASSET-BUILDING PRODUCTS THAT ACCOUNT FOR THE ENDURING FINANCIAL DEVASTATION OF ABUSE

Responsive asset-building products have the following characteristics:

- ◆ Free to use.
- ◆ Offer non-judgmental and trauma-informed support.
- ◆ Utilize accessible language.
- ◆ Offer easy or automatic enrollment.
- ◆ Offer mechanisms to pause credit impacts so survivors can rebuild their finances without continued damage.
- ◆ Provide financial support (e.g., access to emergency grants).

◆ PROMISING PRACTICE ◆

SAVERLIFE’S MATCHING SAVINGS PROGRAM Through its engaging and accessible platform, SaverLife⁵¹ helps users start to save — and matches those savings even if an individual is only able to save \$1 a month. SaverLife’s platform gamifies saving, rewarding users when they save and providing nonjudgmental and easy to understand financial tips. SaverLife’s platform has been incredibly successful at helping low-income earners start to save, having already supported its 115,000 members save \$9 million. While SaverLife’s platform doesn’t account for all aspects of the financial devastation of abuse (e.g., users must have a bank account and allow SaverLife access to it), it provides a much more accessible alternative to traditional asset-building products. SaverLife’s program is supported with funding from MetLife.⁵²



Innovative Idea

CREATE A REFUNDABLE SURVIVOR TAX CREDIT

By reducing tax burdens and increasing access to liquid assets via cash refunds, tax credits serve as effective asset-building products for low-income individuals and families. In 2018, 5.6 million people were able to move out of poverty with support from the federal Earned Income Tax Credit, which also reduced the severity of poverty for another 16.5 million.⁵⁵

A refundable Survivor Tax Credit could provide survivors with the liquid cash they need to get to safety and start saving so they can begin to heal and rebuild. Such a tax credit would meet survivors where they are, giving them much needed cash regardless of income, whether banked or unbanked, and without shaming or discouraging participation. As an added bonus, such a tax credit would — for the first time ever — act as a public acknowledgment of the devastating financial implications of abuse and signal to survivors that they should not be left alone to deal with the economic burdens of a systemic problem.

— SURVIVORS NEED ACCESS TO SAFE AND RESPONSIVE — BANKING AND CREDIT SERVICES

1

CREDITORS AND CREDIT-REPORTING AGENCIES PROVIDE LITTLE TO NO RELIEF FOR IPV-RELATED FRAUDULENT AND COERCED DEBT

Fraudulent and coerced debt in the context of intimate partner violence occurs when a harm-doer obtains a credit card or loan in a survivor's name without their knowledge or through coercion and threats of violence. Take Nadia, who discovered after she fled an abusive situation that her harm-doer had taken out numerous credit cards in her name without her knowledge and incurred debt in excess of \$17,000. Even though most of the charges occurred locally while she was out of the country and the address on file for her bills was not her own, several credit card companies refused to acknowledge the debt as fraudulent. At the time, Nadia was living on \$345 in monthly public assistance with two children to care for. Unable to pay these debts, Nadia's credit score dropped from the 700s into the low 300s, which made finding employment, housing, and insurance extremely difficult for the next three years.

Fifty-two percent of survivors report fraudulent or coerced debt with 46% reporting credit damage and 14% reporting they were unaware of any damage because they hadn't checked their credit score.⁵³ Fraudulent and coerced debt have disastrous implications for survivors that reach beyond their financial well-being and persist long after they've fled abuse. However, as Nadia's story demonstrates, credit card companies and other creditors provide little to no relief from fraudulent and coerced debt within the context of intimate partner violence.

Instead, the systems and processes created and implemented by credit card companies, other creditors, and credit-reporting agencies are only designed to protect and relieve customers from fraud committed by strangers, not intimate partners. For instance, most banks, credit card companies, and credit reporting agencies require customers to provide a police report establishing fraud before they will offer any relief. However, survivors rarely call the police based on an increased risk of violence either from their harm-doer or from law enforcement. According to a 2015 study by the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 80% of survivors are afraid to call the police, 30% felt less safe after calling the police, and 24% who called the police in the past reported they would not do so again.⁵⁴

Even when survivors do involve law enforcement, some officers refuse to complete police reports for fraud between intimate partners, as happened to Nadia. After one credit card company demanded a police report pertaining to the fraud, she contacted the officer who had signed her restraining order. Despite being aware of the abuse, the officer refused to complete a police report for the fraud, claiming that it was "a matter for the courts."

Existing credit-related systems and processes not only fail to protect survivors, but in fact they also protect harm-doers from being held responsible for committing financial crimes.



Innovative Idea

PROVIDE DEBT RELIEF AFTER A QUALIFIED THIRD-PARTY CERTIFICATION

Survivors should be entitled to the same relief and protections from fraudulent and coerced debt by their harm-doer as those who have been victims of fraud by a stranger. To that end, banks, credit card companies, credit reporting agencies, and other entities that provide credit to consumers should offer relief to survivors who have established the existence of fraudulent or coerced debt via a qualified third-party certification.

A qualified third-party certification refers to a form letter completed and signed by a medical doctor, social worker, therapist, intimate partner violence counselor or rape crisis counselor, or accountant. The letter’s content would establish that 1) the survivor has experienced intimate partner violence and 2) the debt in question was incurred as a result of fraud or coercion. A survivor would then submit any evidence that they were in fact not responsible for the charges in question along with the certification. This straightforward option would increase survivors’ ability to safely obtain relief from damaging fraudulent or coerced debt, thus creating a pathway to financial security and long-term safety.⁵⁶

2

EXISTING BANKING SYSTEMS DO NOT SUPPORT SURVIVORS

Banking as a survivor is not always easy or safe. Harm-doers use banks to commit economic abuse through tactics such as monitoring and controlling survivors’ on-line bank accounts, using banks to locate survivors after they leave, and incurring debts in a survivor’s name. Take Clem, for example:

“My husband wouldn’t allow me access to our bank accounts. Instead, he put me on a strict allowance which made it impossible for me to save money. When my mom wanted to give me money to pay my medical bills, my husband and I went to open a new account. He told the bank employee that under no circumstances was I to have access to the account, even though the money was meant for me. The bank employee did as she was told and opened an account just in my husband’s name. I couldn’t believe she actually listened to my husband. So, my mom made the deposits and I never had access to them. The day I left, he emptied all our joint accounts, leaving me with nothing. He also maxed out my credit cards.”

LITTLE BANK SUPPORT

OF THE 25%
OF SURVIVORS
WHO SOUGHT SUPPORT
FROM THEIR BANK,

16% FOUND SUPPORT
“VERY HELPFUL”



64% REPORTED
SUPPORT AS
“UNHELPFUL”



SOURCE: “Survivors Know Best: How to Disrupt Intimate Partner Violence During COVID-19 and Beyond The Safety Fund Report,” FreeFrom, (2020).

Exacerbating the problem, bank employees, policies, and products are unresponsive to the needs of survivors. For instance, survivors who tell bank employees about abuse at best may be required to repeat their story multiple times and at worst are not believed or taken seriously. Most survivors need time to financially recover without enduring further credit damage, but requests for extra time to repay debts or for enhanced fraud protections are often denied. Moreover, banking products are unaffordable for survivors who don't have the income or assets necessary to meet minimum balance requirements, cover maintenance fees, or pay overdraft fines. As a result, many survivors are either unbanked, distrustful of banks, or banked and underserved. Without access to bank accounts and services that consider their unique needs, survivors are unable to build the savings and other assets necessary to remain safe.

Banks have the opportunity to help millions of survivors and their families. There are approximately 28.4 million survivors that are banked and underserved in the U.S.,⁵⁷ and 51% of survivors indicate that they would seek support from banks if they knew banks offered services for survivors.⁵⁸ To meet this potential, banks must tailor banking products and services to meet survivors' unique circumstances and needs.

Strategic Action

TRAIN STAFF AND IMPLEMENT POLICIES THAT KEEP SURVIVORS SAFE AND PROTECT THEIR FINANCIAL RESOURCES

In order to make banking systems more supportive and responsive to survivors, bank employees must be trained to understand and recognize intimate partner violence, economic abuse, and the significant financial implications that both have for survivors. Of course, training alone will not be sufficient if existing policies and products are themselves unresponsive to survivors' needs. Thus, alongside comprehensive training, banks must implement policies and offer products that keep survivors safe and protect their financial resources.

◆ PROMISING PRACTICE ◆

NAB ASSIST AND SEA'S BANKING WORK After learning that most customer defaults were due to significant life events, including intimate partner violence, National Australia Bank created the Assist Program to shift its

collections approach from one that penalized those in default to one that assists customers in developing a payment plan and offers survivors emergency grants of up to \$2,500 for urgent needs. As a result, over 90% of customers in default were able to make their payments and improve their credit, all while saving National Australia Bank more than \$80 million annually.⁵⁹

Surviving Economic Abuse collaborated with major United Kingdom banks to launch the first UK Finance Financial Abuse Code of Practice in 2018. This voluntary code helps banks respond to economic abuse in a survivor-focused and ethical way.

◆ PROMISING PRACTICE ◆

FREEFROM'S SURVIVOR SAFETY BANKING GUIDELINES

This year, FreeFrom has brought the innovative work of our international colleagues to the U.S. via our **Survivor Safety Banking Initiative**.⁶⁰ After working closely with survivors, FreeFrom has developed a set of guidelines for the banking industry that, once implemented, will make banking safer and easier for survivors across the U.S.:

- ◆ Offer affordable checking and savings accounts.
- ◆ Keep survivors' confidential information secure.
- ◆ Implement enhanced fraud protections on survivors' accounts.
- ◆ Offer Safety Accounts for survivors.
- ◆ Designate internal team members to handle survivor accounts.
- ◆ Hire FreeFrom to train bank staff to detect and respond to economic abuse.
- ◆ Allow survivors to open accounts with ID and address alternatives.
- ◆ Offer interest-free deferred payment emergency loans for survivors.
- ◆ Refrain from reporting defaults on coerced/fraudulent debts to credit reporting agencies.
- ◆ Offer flexible repayment plans for survivors in default.
- ◆ Provide survivor paid leave and other resources to employees.

CONCLUSION

As a society, we misunderstand intimate partner violence as an interpersonal issue instead of a structural problem, and so we treat the perpetual existence of intimate partner violence as a foregone conclusion. Structural problems require structural solutions and we must expand our framework to address this violence as an asset-building issue. In so doing, we can create a world where safety is affordable for everyone and survivors are able to overcome the extraordinary costs and financial harm associated with intimate partner violence, to heal, rebuild and create safe homes, and pass on wealth to their future generations. Funders have a ripe and unique opportunity to influence and develop individual, community, and structural interventions to end the cycle of violence in the U.S. The key to doing so is **investing in survivor wealth**.

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- 47 If you are interested in ensuring that your work environment is safe, supportive, and accessible for everyone,

ENDNOTES

- we're happy to help! Contact Director of Law & Policy, Amy Durrence (amy.durrence@freefrom.org) to learn more about participating in FreeFrom's Survivor Work Safety Lab.
- 48 Berkshire Bank is piloting the Survivor Leave Policy as part of FreeFrom's Survivor Work Safety Lab.
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