

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Sonya Passi

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Sonya Passi, where I ask her: What is the cost of intimate partner violence? As a sensitivity warning, this episode does discuss intimate partner violence in detail. We hope that centering an episode on this important topic helps to bring awareness to survivors' experiences, and the incredible work that Sonya and other advocates are doing through organizations like Freefrom. Welcome to Getting Curious, I'm Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited to welcome our incredible guest this week, who I learned about from one of my very favorite people in the entire world, ALOK. Our guest this week is Sonya Passi, who is the founder and CEO of Freefrom, a national organization working to dismantle the nexus between intimate partner violence and financial insecurity. Sonya, that's like a major paragraph.

SONYA PASSI [00:01:00] Thank you! Also one of my favorite people, ALOK.

JVN [00:01:06] I mean, I think most of the best things that I know about the world have been, like, vis-a-vis ALOK. OK, so I'm not at all surprised that I found your incredible work and your incredible mission through talking to ALOK. So our kind of overall theme here is: what is intimate partner violence? I think so often people kind of take for granted, like, what intimate partner violence, like, even is because it has so many different ways that it can show itself from, you know, physical, verbal, financial, emotional, like, your space, sexual. There's so many different ways that we can, that people can experience this abuse. And so I kind of want to break down even just to start: what is it?

SONYA PASSI [00:01:48] It's such a great question because the way that our states define intimate partner violence is so limited. So, basically every state just defines intimate partner violence as physical and psychological abuse, and within psychological, it includes emotional; within physical, it includes sexual. But there's all these other kinds of abuse that are not included. So you mentioned financial abuse. Financial abuse is essentially controlling another person's finances or their access to finances. And financial abuse occurs in 99 percent of all cases of intimate partner violence. So that it is not included in our state's definitions or a federal definition is extremely problematic.

So let's say, for example, you go and you get a restraining order against the person that is harming you. And that person is checking your bank accounts every day as a way of tracking you and physically locating you. Your restraining order doesn't cover that person not being able to check your bank accounts because that's financial abuse, and the courts wouldn't recognize that as being covered by your restraining order, because the definition

that they're following is physical and psychological. Now, of course, you can, we can very easily say "Tracking my physical location through my bank accounts is psychological abuse or is physical abuse in a form." But courts are not that nimble in the way that they interpret the law.

Another big form of intimate partner violence is litigation abuse. It happens all the time. And in these situations harm doers, particularly where there is family courts involved. Maybe there's a divorce, maybe there's custody issues will use the courts to terrorize you, whether that is filing motions on every single part of the process, forcing you to come to court. I, we worked with a survivor once who, her harm doer was tracking her through her, through her technology. Technology abuse, another form of abuse. So he always knew what was going on. I always knew her emails, always knew when she had a job interview. And he would file a motion in the court. Every single time she had a job interview in a way that it would conflict with the job interview. If she didn't turn up in court, it would default a judgment to him. And so he was making it so that she couldn't ever go through a job interview process by dragging her into court.

JVN [00:04:59] So who-, gross, we hate that story.

SONYA PASSI [00:05:03] Gross.

JVN [00:05:04] Who commonly experiences intimate partner violence in the United States and really just, you know, anywhere.

SONYA PASSI [00:05:10] Yeah, so intimate partner violence really doesn't have any religious bounds, any socioeconomic bounds. It happens to everyone. But it does disproportionately impact certain demographics, so one in four women and one and two trans folks in the US will experience intimate partner violence. But within those statistics, BIPOC folks and LGBTQIA+ folks are even further disproportionately impacted. So forty one percent of Black women will experience intimate partner violence. Up to 60 percent of native and Indigenous women will experience intimate partner violence. One in four gay men will experience intimate partner violence. Sixty-one percent of bisexual women, 40 percent of lesbian women.

So that one in four stat for women is, is worse for women of color and for queer women. And the stat for men in the US is one in seven, but one in four gay men is disproportionately affecting, affecting gay men. And then one in two trans folks. And we never, ever talk about that. One in two trans folks. We have no data right now on the extent to which it impacts non-binary, gender fluid, gender nonconforming folks. One of the things that Freefrom is actually working on is gathering that data, because, of course, if

we don't know the data, then we don't address the problem. And so that we have limited data is a huge problem.

JVN [00:06:54] OK, scientist. Obsessed. We're obsessed. We love data. We do love data, even if it's, like, on hard stuff. I think this is a really common question that doesn't really-, and I can only imagine the answer is going to be difficult. But for people who have people in their lives that are maybe involved in an abusive relationship, I think we've all known someone or been someone who is involved in an abusive relationship in some way. Why-, what makes it so hard for people to leave?

SONYA PASSI [00:07:22] Such a good question. It is the question. And it is so hard for us to not judge people that are in these situations, to not judge folks for staying, for not judging folks, for not leaving soon enough, not seeing the signs. And part of it is we misunderstand the problem in the first place. The way that we in our society are thinking about intimate partner violence is a case of bad luck, or a case of bad choices, or both. And there's very much this idea, it's driven by misogyny in large part, but it's also just driven by misunderstanding and our own trauma around this issue, because, like, you said, so many of us have experienced or know someone who has experienced intimate partner violence.

We think of it as sort of, like, "You got yourself into the situation. You've got to get yourself out." And we don't ever think about what, what's actually going on here. I mentioned earlier, in 99 percent of cases of intimate partner violence, economic abuse occurs. Well, what is economic abuse that can look like anything from not being allowed to work, working, but having your paycheck taken from you. Not having access to your own bank accounts. Having credit cards and debt and loans in your name that are impacting your credit score negatively, that you don't even know about. Being given an allowance, they can look like all of the above.

And on top of that, it's also incredibly expensive to experience intimate partner violence. So the Centers for Disease Control estimates that intimate partner violence will cost a female survivor a hundred and four thousand dollars. So now, imagine, you've got six figures in costs and you don't have a job. You've got a credit score that's been destroyed over the last two years because of debt being taken out that you don't know about. You have no fallback system because the whole way that abuse thrives is that it isolates you from your community.

So you've got no cash, no job, no savings, no fallback, no credit, six figures in debt, and now ask the question of why don't people leave? And actually the number one reason people stay in harmful situations or return to harmful situations, the biggest obstacle to safety for survivors is financial insecurity. And that's the piece that's missing from the way

that we understand it, from the way that we're addressing it. And if we're not really understanding that, then all of our solutions are, are not getting at the root of the problem. This is a systemic economic problem that we're talking about.

JVN [00:10:20] What you just said is something that I feel like we, we continually, I continually learn in the last year and change. I know a lot of people learned it before, but it's-, a lot of times what we have assigned as an individual burden or an individual's fault is actually related to, like, a much larger systemic issue that is multifaceted and intersectional. And it affects you more based off of kind of where you are starting off from in the spectrum. So I, so I think that's you know, it's-, because one thing I was thinking was like when you were saying, like, "Well, you know, they can check where your bank account is." It's, like, "Well, why don't you just change your password?" But then it's, like, but what if the person that you're with is, like, "Change your password and I'll fuckin', like, slash your tires or, like, call your boss, and X, Y, Z."

Like, there are ways that people can intimidate you into having, like, full access, like, once you're in that web it's, like, it really-, it-, not everyone can be JLo from "Enough." And that's, like, a really, like, nightmare movie to quote anyway. But when I think about intimate partner violence, a lot of times I think JLo from "Enough," like, sometimes I think it's, like, really dramatic. It's like this Hollywood thing. And sometimes I think, what I've noticed with friends, it's, like, it, it's very all of a sudden in the way that it seems they can go from like all's well, this is, like, the first of your dreams to, like, not OK really pretty quickly.

SONYA PASSI [00:11:44] Well, and I think that's the problem. And to go back to your earlier idea of like, "Well, why don't you just change your password?" But what if you've been in a relationship with this person and now they know you're social, and they know your childhood nickname, and they know the name of your first pet and all your security questions so you can keep changing your password and they can keep putting in the security questions to figure out how to change it and figure out what it is.

JVN [00:12:11] OK, well, I'll just just say really quick. So if anyone's ever listening because I got really paranoid about passwords, so if you're in that sort of situation, you need to change your password, your ideal. I do a random phrase, a completely random phrase. Then I take the first letter of each word from the random phrase and I reverse it.

SONYA PASSI [00:12:29] How do you remember what the random phrase is afterwards?

JVN [00:12:32] Well, I have to I fucked up a lot of passwords and I had to reset a lot of times. But I'm just saying that if you do get worried that, like, too many people know your share and, you know, if there is some villain in your life, I just, you know, made up a rhyme,

reverse the first or you even do the, the last letter, maybe, if you want to get-. Whatever, focus, Jonathan! I'm just saying it's, like, a good technique if someone-. What your thing is, like, sometimes it really is that someone can get all the way into, like, know you so intimately that they can really, like, circumvent all those protections.

SONYA PASSI [00:13:06] The point that you made about, like, thinking about JLo is such an important one, because I also think it's part of the problem is we have this stereotype, for lack of a better word, of what a survivor is. And it's typically a heterosexual, cis gendered per-, woman who is, like, very violently physically assaulted, pushed down the stairs. Has a black eye. Left for dead. Somehow manages to escape, grabs the keys, grabs the kids and runs. And the problem is there is a whole spectrum of what intimate partner violence looks like, and there is no one type of survivor.

And because we focus on this sort of, like, very extreme, very limited case, so do all of our solutions to the problem. And what it makes us do, including us as survivors, is say, "Well, I'm not a survivor, because that didn't happen to me." You know, "It's just that he or she or they berate me, but they don't hit me." Or, "They just really like to know where I am all the time. But that's OK," you know. And so until we can really start to talk more honestly about all exactly like your very first question, all the different kinds of abuse. Then we're just going to look at that one stereotype and say, "Well, that's not me," or "That's not my friend," or "That's not my sister." And, and people are going to be in harmful situations that we're essentially excusing.

JVN [00:14:57] So I feel like I'm at a fork in the road and in my interview where I could go with the question in the order that I thought it was going to go in, or I could ask this other question that just came to me. [CROSSTALK]

SONYA PASSI [00:15:08] Always ask. Go free. Be free.

JVN [00:15:11] Yeah. So it's, like, what if you're, like, "Oh fuck." Like, so for instance, like, in our cults episode, we learned that there's, like, these, like, four criteria for, like, what qualifies, like, a cult as a cult. And she was, like, "Don't freak out. Like, most religions, like, you know, automatically check off two." So it's not that far of a fall from, like, two to four, you know, because you've got to, I think you've got to have, like, three of the four or four of the four for it to be a cult. Just usually, the usual thing. A lot of us kind of already start out there. So, you know, where this comes into intimate partner violence, this is, like, what if you realize all of a sudden, you're like, "Oh, no, I, that is kind of some of the stuff is kind of sounding like things that I go through." Is it possible to, like, heal intimate partner abuse? Is it possible that one person's, like, not a horrific person? Can people get just, like,

set boundaries? Do you gotta, like, do you gotta cut and run? Like, what if you're in an abusive relationship?

SONYA PASSI [00:16:03] Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. OK, so the first thing I would say is if you have that moment where you're, like, "Wait a second, this doesn't feel right." Don't ignore it. It might be too much to take in at once. That's OK. Don't force it, but don't push it away either. And don't judge yourself. You did not fuck up, you did not miss the signs, you're not-, it's not embarrassing, it's not "you should have" or "you could have." Abuse is so ingrained in our society, it is so normalized. We see abuse every single day on the TV, in the movies, song lyrics that we love, and then you're, like, "Wait a second."

There was, like, a Justin Timberlake song that my wife and I heard in a restaurant yesterday. And she was like, "This song is about him harassing a woman on the dance floor and telling her not to walk away quickly." You know, and we've not-, it's so normalized. So you are not supposed to undo all of that conditioning that is placed upon you and see behavior that you have been told your whole life was normal as abusive. Also, people who abuse are incredibly charming. And so you weren't missing signs. Those signs weren't there.

Like, one of the statistics is abuse typically escalates post pregnancy for women. And part of the reason that that happens is you are in a more vulnerable position, and so a person who is inclined to do that is more likely to get more comfortable being abusive because "Where are you going to go, what are you going to do?" is essentially the idea. But you made a really good point, which was: "Can you heal abuse?" And I always talk about abuse as a thing and I talk about people who are harming other people as harm doers, not abusers. Because I do believe that you can change. I do believe that you can heal. And on the flipside of that, it is not your responsibility as a person who is being harmed to fix anyone to wait around while someone heals, to-. You can know that someone can be better, you can know that someone can heal, and also they don't have to. That doesn't have to be your problem, you know.

So I think all of that's really important to remember. And then it's about. Reaching out to your community, you know, we don't have, and it's part of what Freefrom is really working on doing, we don't have in our society, like, a really robust ecosystem of support for survivors, like, "Oh, you got diabetes? Got it. Like, this is what you have to do now to change your life." That's not how we're addressing intimate partner violence. That is not. So I cannot tell you there's all of these resources going to avail yourself of them. There isn't. And so this really has to be what works for you. Do you have someone you can trust? Do you have someone you can talk to?

When I was in an abusive situation, I started seeing a crisis counselor because I felt like for me, leaving was something that I wanted to do very quickly. And so I wanted to make a plan. I started seeing a therapist. I was seeing that therapist every single day, five days a week. I started talking to lawyers. You might not want any of that. You might just actually be like, "OK. What happened this weekend was not OK. I recognize that. And I'm going to take my time to figure out what I do next." And one of the other big things that our society does is it says, "If you are being harmed, you must leave." That is incredibly problematic. It is incredibly unfair and all it means is that most survivors don't end up getting access to services because they don't leave.

And we already talked about the financial obstacles to leaving. So if you're not getting support until you leave, but you can't afford to leave, well, then you're really stuck in a situation. And for a lot of people, like, you know, I use the word "survivor," survivors are incredibly strategic. They know how to survive. Sometimes the safest thing that they have decided for themselves is not to leave. Maybe it means that they'd have to give up their kids. Maybe it means that they'd have to give up the whole community or their job or their life in a way that they just don't want to. And so I guess the other thing I would say is don't feel pressure to do this in any kind of way that you think society expects of you. It's really, like, go inwards and listen to yourself, listen to your gut, listen to what your body is telling you about what the next move is.

JVN [00:21:19] Ah! Wisdom! Whenever I hear, like, go inside, it's, like, I feel like that is such-, that's wisdom because the answers are in there and that it's different for everyone. Like, everyone that can find themselves in the same situation will have a totally different experience of what, of what was best for them to, like, find, you know, so I love that story. When it comes to, we've talked a lot about you know, like, states and the federal versus state and what we imagine that, maybe not a lot, don't get too excited, Jonathan. But currently, because I do want to talk about it from, like, a legislative and, like, you know, fundamental, like, day-to-day level. How is intimate partner violence currently treated in the US?

SONYA PASSI [00:22:07] So basically, the way that we address it is like it's a crisis, almost like disaster relief in a lot of ways. So if you experience intimate partner violence, you have access to temporary shelter, you have access to public assistance, you have access to a temporary restraining order. And everything's very short-term focused. The problem is we think in our society, we treat intimate partner violence like it happens over days and weeks. But for survivors, it actually happens over years and generations. And so all we have at this is this concentrated sort of surface level support at a moment of acute crisis. That's what we have right now. And when you think about where resources are going: eighty-five percent of all federal funding for intimate partner violence goes to law enforcement.

JVN [00:23:06] No! No!

SONYA PASSI [00:23:10] And 80 percent of survivors would not call the police.

JVN [00:23:20] Wow, that's such a good reason to defund the fucking police.

SONYA PASSI [00:23:26] Right.

JVN [00:23:27] Because we, I mean, so even, I think my mind was so blown from those two sentences that it glossed over what you said right before, which is basically that right now, when it comes to people that are in or if you're in a position where you're surviving an abusive relationship, it's only, like, acute, like, "right now" resources. It's, like, maybe a shelter for the week. And it's, like, you know, maybe, like, who even knows? But like, it's, it's just it's for the right now there's very few, like, it's like, you know where to go if you want to, like, go to gymnastics classes, you know where to go if you want to sign up like an after school activity. But there really is not, like, some extracurricular activity.

There is there is not like, like, an AA for, like, you know, or a 12 Step Program or, I guess there's CoDA, but, which, I love a good CoDA meeting. But still, that's not, like, doesn't give you, like, you know, straight up insight into, like, you know, "These are the steps you need to take to, like, you know, get yourself more resources towards healing." So law enforcement. So we know that, like, law enforcement, because that's, like, if you call the police because, like, you know, your, your husband or your wife or your partner is, like, is going ballistic physically on you, and then we call the police the.

But then for so many communities, like, if you're a person of color, if you're a Black person, if you're a queer person, like, maybe you live in a community where, like, you're not trying to call the police, just maybe you smoke weed, wink, wink, and you're not trying to, like, call the police over and you got, like, jars of weed, but you're in, like, this abusive relationship. But then the person is, like, "Well, you shouldn't have smoked weed." Well, we have systemic racist issues with weed is fucking illegal in this country anyway, fuckers. Shut up, Karen. But the point is, is that, like, there are so many reasons why people wouldn't call the police.

SONYA PASSI [00:25:14] Eighty-eight percent of survivors report that sometimes or often the police don't believe them or blame them for the violence. Twenty-four percent of survivors are arrested or threatened with arrest during an intimate partner violence incident involving the police.

JVN [00:25:35] That's a quarter.

SONYA PASSI [00:25:38] Yeah. In one study, 29 percent of police officers indicated that they had been physically violent themselves with an intimate partner or family member. Twenty-nine percent.

JVN [00:25:54] That's not who I'm trying to get pulled over by or call in the event of a violent, like, you're, like, a big dude who's, like, looking out-, a big anybody who's looking for-. Because that's the thing. I feel like police are, like, they're always looking for, like, a little bit of weed or a little bit of this or a little bit of that. And if you invite someone into your home, it's, like, it's all over at that point because, like, they're all up in your shit.

SONYA PASSI [00:26:15] Well, and, you know, if you want, if the federal government needs a reason not to spend eighty-five percent of its funding on law enforcement, eighty percent of survivors don't want to call the police. So why don't we instead ask survivors what they want and Freefrom did. We asked survivors what they want. And the number one thing survivors said that they wanted and needed was cash. Because if I can get my hands on \$350 this month. I don't have to go to a shelter. I can actually keep the apartment that I'm in, you know. And really we talked about how there is no one size fits all. There is no one way to be a survivor, one way that this looks. And so survivors know what they need, but what they need costs money that they don't necessarily have access to because the abuse is so financially devastating.

JVN [00:27:16] In all of your work and all of your experience and all the survivors that you've worked with, what-, how could that-, how could we do that? Like, how could we, like, would it be, like, you know, a state reallocating, like, some of their budget or the, like, for their budget towards, like, law enforcement to doing, like, some sort of, like, long-term, like, just, like, how we have, like, HIV-AIDS, like, Medicaid, Medicare programs and, like, other, like, programs that help, like, medical things, like, just have that for like survivors?

SONYA PASSI [00:27:46] It's a great question. And I wanted to share one story because I think it really helps to reframe the problem. So at the beginning of covid, we started surveying survivors about their needs. And one person that we talked to shared that at the beginning of 2020 they thought 2020 was going to be the year that they got out of the abusive relationship they were in. And so they started every day when their harm doer went to work, they started baking cookies and cakes. And they'd go out and sell them. Then they would store the money at a friend's house. Come home, clean up, and when they're harm doer got back, they were none the wiser.

And they were doing this every day. And so they had calculated that nine months after they began this, they would have enough money saved up, that they would be able to get out. And then the pandemic happened and that completely ended, and they weren't able to, to make money in that way. And so they shared with us they were, like, "You know, I thought 2020 was going to be the year that I left, but I think it's going to be 2021." And why that's important is because we have this idea of, like, what survivors need is that emergency relief at the moment of acute crisis, which is either a shelter or the police. And actually, if we can change the way that we're thinking about the problem and think about people live in harm for so long and what they need is support at multiple different times, then we can start to think, "OK, I don't have to replace the police with another version of that, I need to think outside of the box about what my solutions are."

And so I'll share with you a couple of, of, of ideas. The first is, so we've talked about intimate partner violence being a systemic issue. Well, like any systemic issue, our whole society is responsible for it. Our whole society has created conditions in which it thrives, and the burden right now falls exclusively on survivors. So one of the things that needs to happen is all of our society's institutions need to start taking responsibility and doing their part. Sixty percent of survivors lose their job as a result of the abuse. What does that tell me? That tells me that employers have a role to play here. One of the things that we are pushing employers to do is to implement intimate partner violence paid and protected leave. So that if you are in a situation where you need to go, God forbid, get a rape kit done, go to court, get a restraining order, look for a new apartment, you can actually do that without risking losing your job because you have this allocated leave.

Forty-eight percent of survivors do not have access, safe access to a bank account that is not being monitored or controlled by a harm doer. In other countries, they have created things like safe bank accounts that you cannot monitor online. You as an individual have to go into a branch to take money out or put money in. They have enhanced fraud protections so that if I'm, if I'm in California and my card's being used in New York, that I'm, and I'm telling you that it's my harm doer that's using it. And you're like, "Well, your harm doer is your partner. So you're telling us you didn't tell them to use your card." You know, things like this, there's so much here that banks can do in other countries that's being done, we want to have the same thing happen here.

You mentioned, like, there's no AA for survivors. So Freefrom has started a peer network of survivors building financial security in community with each other. And we actually studied the AA model and Weight Watchers as like, "How do we do this in a way that's really community based?" We have people in the groups that haven't left. There's still very much in the harm. And we have people that have just left and we have people that are kind of years into their healing and they're coming together and they're sharing stories and like,

"Oh, this is what you should know about filing for bankruptcy or this is what you should know about." Like, "If you can just find these documents before you leave, it's going to make rebuilding after you leave that much easier."

So, one, it's about building more community responses. Two, it's about building more structural responses. But, like, I said, the number one need that survivors say they have is cash. We just saw the federal government give every single person in this country cash without worrying that it would be fraudulent, without worrying that, or without asking for proof of X, Y or Z. There is truly no reason that we cannot start giving folks who need cash, cash. All of the old reasons that we've been told, like, "Well, what if they commit fraud or well, what if they don't spend the money, how they're supposed to spend the money?" All of that's bullshit.

JVN [00:33:11] Yes, you are so right. And we and I think a lot of our listeners know that, like, a lot of those come from, like, really, you know, racially motivated or misogynistic-motivated stereotypes that are really problematic. And I know that the, the solution is way more outside of the box than acute temporary care. I think that the reason that I was honing in on the law enforcement thing is to hear that eighty-five percent of the budget of what we currently have to help with domestic, intimate domestic partner violence is going through law enforcement.

Which, that's a huge budget, first of all. So there's like a lot of money there currently. And second of all, because there is so much harm and, like, and court system costs. And I would also imagine, like, physical altercations, because if you're a survivor of abuse, then you call the police and the police come in and, like, hurt you or do something to cause you to not be able to work longer or you end up dealing with court fees because you get arrested. I'm just saying that there's a lot of wasted money there. There is, of course, additive money. But to think that eighty five percent of all the budget is going to fucking law worth it is just so maddening.

And I just, I was just thinking, like, we just can't say it enough. Defund the fucking police. We need to take some of that money and do things that are just so much more important for people that need it so much more, just need it so much more, because the police aren't even equipped to deal with so many of these issues that survivors are going through. That's, but that's where that was coming from in my brain. But I realize that it's like a way bigger structural issue. And we need to think out of the box and so many more ways, which leads me to our next question, which is what are survivors up against when they seek out financial assistance other than the fact that there, like, isn't any?

SONYA PASSI [00:34:44] I think the biggest is that there isn't any. And then. The problem is, I mean, the problem is that there isn't any. And the reason there isn't any is because people are not thinking about this as a, as an economic issue. And so to your point, about, like, eighty-five percent of funding, like, where could that be reallocated, like, that could all be reallocated as cash grants. So actually at the beginning of this year, the Biden Harris administration pledged five billion dollars in cash assistance for survivors to spend as they need. Now, it's a pledge. They have not made good on that pledge yet. We are doing what we can to make sure that they make good on that pledge. Five billion dollars is-, would be the biggest influx of cash for this problem. And it would also be, just, forget the fact that it's actually what survivors are saying they need, because apparently that's not enough of a reason. It would also be incredibly cost effective.

JVN [00:34:48] Yes. Because the money that's wasted in all these other ways, like, it, like, actually it's, like, it's, like, when you-. Yes, yes, it would be. Can you. I think I'm buying it already. But can we just explain a little bit more to people that maybe don't understand? It's like we're already spending more to do more harm to survivors of abuse than we would if we just actually got the five billion and pledged it to people to spend as they needed it for survivors of abuse.

SONYA PASSI [00:36:13] Yeah, like a really good example. So we started a cash assistance program last year. So far, we have distributed a little over a million dollars to forty one hundred survivors in fifty states.

JVN [00:36:24] Wow. Yes, yes, yes!

SONYA PASSI [00:36:27] And we did not ask for proof. We did not ask you to tell us how you spent the money. Like, "We don't care how you spend the money. Here's cash. We trust you." And that's how this is how the program could and should run. But one person was like, so the grant was \$250. And they were like, "This money couldn't have come at a better time." It allowed me to fix my car. And why fixing this person's car was so important is because they had joint custody with their harm doer, of their kid. And their harm doer kept threatening that if they didn't drop off the kid at the exact time that he was going to take the kid and keep the kid and not bring him back. And so fixing her car for \$250 meant that she was able to keep her kids safe and she didn't have to then go through twenty, thirty thousand dollars of legal fees to now fight to get custody of her kid back.

JVN [00:37:30] I am so glad that you brought this up, really quick, because you earlier said that the average cost to someone who is surviving intimate is, what'd you say, one hundred and six thousand dollars.

SONYA PASSI [00:37:39] A hundred and four thousand, yeah.

JVN [00:37:41] Hundred and four. So this is a huge number. And I think that I could feel some people, now, I, I believe this. I one hundred percent believe, and I never, I didn't conceptualize how much one hundred four thousand dollars was until I was probably, like, I don't know, like, 25, 26. I started to run my own business and started to, like, I have to pay employees and, like, pay taxes and see, like, how much you make and how much you go out, whatever. But it's, like, I could see how a hundred and six could happen really quickly because if you lose a job, if you-, as a result of the abuse, if you your state court fees, like if you go into a relationship and you're already like dealing with someone who's got a lot more financial resources than you, and then you do get into a custody battle or something and you are late or you're this or that, you get you get cut off from their money, from whatever the initial divorce proceedings are, then they can always kind of bring you back in a situation. Like, this I could see could being really bad. But what are some of the other ways that, that, that, like, those fees can add up, like, could it just be from when you're supporting them? Like, what are the other ways that it happens?

SONYA PASSI [00:39:43] So, one big one is medical costs. Like, you've, you know, you've got a fractured shoulder, and you've got the immediate medical costs and then you've got the ongoing physical therapy and acupuncture and, you know, dealing with chronic pain from both the physical and psychological impact of the abuse. Another big one is property damage. And that's everything from, you know, "They punched a hole in the wall," to "They threw out my laptop and my phone." So I would estimate about \$18,000 a year in property damage. And actually, you know, it's interesting that \$104,000 that the CDC estimates, that doesn't even include lost wages.

So it's really just things that you would have a receipt for, so, like, litigation, court costs, debt that doesn't include but should include debt that you have in your name. We work with a survivor who, she was a year and a half out of her marriage when she called us, and she had been, she had started getting calls from debt collectors. And she had no idea why they were calling. Turns out her husband had taken out seven credit cards in her name. He had had the cards sent to his brother's house and him and his brother racked up \$21,000 in debt on these cards in her name, and they never paid it off. And now her credit score had gone from the mid-700s to the low 300s. And she couldn't get-

JVN [00:40:27] You can't buy a house, can't get a credit card, you, yeah, you've got nothing.

SONYA PASSI [00:40:30] Couldn't do anything.

JVN [00:40:33] OK, so-, ugh, fuck, God, it's just, ugh! So, what-

SONYA PASSI [00:40:38] That's exactly the sound. The sound of, of intimate partner violence. And the problem that it is and our failure to deal with it is that noise.

JVN [00:40:51] So one thing that Celeste Watkins-Hayes says, it's like, you know, with reference to the HIV social safety net is that it's, like, "Yeah, we're all in this together, but we're all like very different boats." Like, you know, the HIV social safety net is like an ocean. We all, some people got yachts, some people got nice speedboats, some people are on, like, the fucking head rests from the Titanic. And, you know, you can't balance on that fucking thing. And it's a nightmare. And so when it comes to the survivors of intimate partner abuse or violence social safety net, depending on who you are, what you have, it's, like, there's just, some people are really, really going through this. And it is such, like, a just horrific issue. So what does it look like for us to start to treat intimate partner violence as a structural and economic issue?

SONYA PASSI [00:42:36] Yeah, it looks like, first of all, actually defining the problem as an economic issue. It looks like all of our-. What I try to explain to people sometimes is the way that we address intimate partner violence is, like, if our response to racism was to offer people who experienced racism time in a shelter. It's ludicrous. And so just as now we are calling on all of our society, societal pillars to do something that's actually helpful about racism, to really shift structure, to shift policy, to understand inequity. The same is true of intimate partner violence. Banks need to make sure bank accounts are accessible for everyone. People who are creating apps and technology need to be thinking about "How could a harm doer use this to stalk, harm, control someone that they're harming?" and then "How can we mitigate against that?" Literally everything that we create needs to be done with an understanding of intimate partner violence because it is so pervasive in our society, just like we're asking ourselves, like, "How could, how is our media representation racist?" How is it also perpetuating and normalizing abuse?

JVN [00:43:14] That, we're going to literally have to have, like, this, like, get, like, a sociologist and you to come back for a second episode about the ways that, like, the media is perpetuating this. I have two more quick questions. So but what I already know, we're going to take you back for a second episode, I'm a nightmare. This is not the episode to have an actual hour to do. We need to, like, we have to have you back for a second episode. So I'm just telling you we have to have you back for a second episode. OK, but next question. Is there any, like, local or state legislation on this that you're particularly inspired by or think, like, has anyone anywhere done anything, like, "Ooh, that could be a good model." Or "That kind of is, like, something I haven't heard before is, like,

interesting and could maybe be a good solution?"Definitely creating cash assistance programs for survivors of abuse is an interesting thing.

SONYA PASSI [00:44:03] Yeah, totally, the problem is that no state has done it right. OK, ok, so one of the things that Freefrom released this year was we spent a full year going through every single state policy across all 50 states, and we cataloged that policy is either helping survivors' financial security or harming survivors' financial security. And so I can tell you, most states are doing very little, but there are a couple that are exciting. So Maine is doing some really interesting work to protect survivors against coerced and fraudulent debt. And they are basically preventing debt collectors from collecting on debts incurred as a result of economic abuse, which is huge for survivors in Maine. We talked about court abuse before, so Washington state now recognizes court abuse and is requiring people who, harm doers, to pay attorneys fees and costs associated with court abuse or litigation abuse. And Nevada is one of the first states to have a paid and protected leave policy. And so in Nevada, survivors have at least 10 days of protected leave in order to deal with the consequences of abuse that doesn't, like, force them to use their vacation days or their sick days or force them to have those in the first place.

JVN [00:45:44] OK, so then this is kind of, like, a dual question for our final question and then I'll give us Yogini recess. So, what are ways that, that you can get involved, if listeners now, if you want to, if you're inspired by Sonya's incredible work, if people want to get involved with Freefrom. I would also-, so that's the first question is how can people get involved with Freefrom or donate to Freefrom. And then kind of the second question is, I would imagine that you need lawyers, activists, politicians, everyone, like, it's, like, all hands on deck, I would imagine, because this is a societal problem. We need everyone to come with their solutions, with their empathy, with their compassion. So who does Freefrom need, and how can they get involved?

SONYA PASSI [00:46:29] Such great questions, and thank you for asking. So our website is Freefrom.org and if you donate via our website, one hundred percent of that money goes directly to survivors, through our cash assistance. So you can donate knowing that you're going to get that money directly to someone who needs it in this moment. Another way to get involved, if you're just someone that wants to support, is get involved in our policy work. So we, like, we lay out on our website, "This is what, how your state needs to do better work," to get them to do better. You can actually, like, tweet your governor or your state legislator and tell them like this is how badly our state is doing and this is how we need to do more. Those are like really easy steps anyone can take. If you're a survivor and you're, like, "I want to, I want to get some support here." Anyone can join our peer financial support groups that are completely free. They're completely easy to join.

It's also really easy to get involved in policy work as a survivor through our work. And then in terms of what we need, you know, I think this will be something that we talk about in our next episode, but we are really focused on changing the way that media. Talks about this issue every single time I talk to a journalist, they say, "What, what can, what can women do to help themselves in these situations?" And I always say, "What can we do to help survivors in these situations? You're asking me the wrong question." And so anyone who's in PR media communications like that is a whole branch of our work that we have got to do more on and have more access, and start controlling the narrative better. So I would be so grateful for that kind of support. And just, you know, if anything I've said today has you wondering, has you thinking about a way to collaborate with love, to hear from you.

JVN [00:48:38] I can't emphasize enough the idea that it's, like, the onus has to stop being put on the individual. This is the group effort. This is a societal effort. And when we think about the statistics of BIPOC folks, LGBTQ folks, marginalized people that are so disproportionately, and women, that are so disproportionately impacted by this, this really is an intersectional issue that needs everyone's attention. My, my final question for this episode, we will definitely be having you back is what's next for you, Sonya, and your efforts to protect survivors?

SONYA PASSI [00:49:11] We are really focused right now on our societal action strategy. So getting banks to take accountability and make bank accounts accessible to all survivors, getting employers to do their part so that survivors aren't having to choose between getting safe and keeping their job and getting states and the federal government to implement policies that are actually allocating money to community responses and prioritizing this issue as an economic issue. So that's our, the next five years are going to be very heavily focused on that. And building a movement of survivors who are calling for the change that they want and making sure that they are listened to. Because we have, we do not listen to survivors. We don't ask survivors what they need and we don't trust survivors. And all of that has to change.

JVN [00:50:06] Mic drop. Sonya Passi, thank you so much for your time. We appreciate your work so much. You're incredible. I have so many, just just so much respect for you. I'm so grateful for your work and so much thanks and gratitude to you for coming on Getting Curious.

SONYA PASSI [00:50:19] Thank you.

JVN [00:50:22] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Sonya Passi.

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