

Advocating for economic justice

By Dr. Rachel Dolechek and Dr. Ziwei Qi, Fort Hays State University

HAYS, Kan. - In rural northwest Kansas, we like to think our lives are safe and secure. But many experiencing gender-based violence are leading lives within our midst that are anything but safe and secure. In fact, survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) in northwest Kansas face higher rates of victimization compared to other regions of the U.S. due, in part, to scarcity of resources.

The economic impact of GBV exceeds \$8.3 billion per year when considering factors such as medical expenditures, lack of employment opportunities, and housing instability. In addition, federal and state budget cuts have further threatened abused individuals and their families.

Financial abuse is one of GBV's most common but least recognized tactics. Abusers seek to control and sabotage the ability of the victims to acquire the resources, sustain self-efficacy, and leave the abusive relationship. Those living in poverty experience intimate partner abuse at twice the rate of those who do not, deepening the devastation between abuse and economic hardship.

Economic security is fundamental to survivors of GBV. Meeting basic needs such as housing, transportation, food, childcare, healthcare, and a financial safety net provides the means to leave an abusive relationship or negotiate safety.

Faculty at Fort Hays State have recognized this critical social injustice. As a result, they are working to create an enterprise that provides power and freedom to GBV survivors through a community-based project.

Following the example of grassroots entrepreneurial businesses focusing on housing and employment opportunities for GBV survivors, FHSU has launched the Economic Justice and Advocacy Certificate program. This innovative program aims to equip professionals in business management and human resources with the skills and knowledge to support and advocate for GBV survivors, with a focus on financial empowerment and career development. The initiative is led by Dr. Rachel Dolechek (Applied Business) and Dr. Ziwei Qi (Criminal Justice).

Rural survivors face unique challenges, including geographical isolation, limited resources, and cultural tolerance of violence in intimate relationships. The Economic Justice and Advocacy Certificate program seeks to address these issues by providing professionals with the tools to empower survivors and promote economic independence.

Funded by the FHSU Innovation and Entrepreneurship grant sponsored by FHSU President Tisa Mason, the program also offers scholarships for completing the certificate, comprising ten credit hours of coursework. In addition, students will acquire foundational knowledge of victim advocacy and develop strong written communication skills through criminal justice, business communication, and sociology courses.

Economic justice is a fundamental right and should be extended to the most vulnerable of our neighbors. To find out more about the Economic Justice and Advocacy Certificate program, contact Dr. Rachel Dolechek at rdolechek@fhsu.edu and Dr. Ziwei Qi at z_qi5@fhsu.edu.