

Minnesota Must Continue Global Leadership on Ending Violence Against Women

“I’m here today because I don’t want another life taken due to domestic violence.” Anna Grunewold, whose daughter Ashley Sullivan and husband Chester Grunewold were killed by Ashley’s ex-boyfriend, made this statement during testimony to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women (UNSRVAW) in St. Paul last week. Ms. Grunewold described how the Minnesota “criminal justice system failed Ashley and Chet,” who were murdered after their killer had been arrested, charged, and released from jail three times for incidents related to domestic abuse.

This testimony stands in contrast to Minnesota’s long history of leadership on domestic violence legal reform and services for victims. Hosted by Minneapolis-based nonprofit The Advocates for Human Rights, the UNSRVAW Ms. Rashida Manjoo came to Minnesota to view first-hand the ‘best-practices’ that our state is renowned for around the world. She toured the Domestic Abuse Service Center, which was founded in 1994 as the first one-stop center for victims and is now a model replicated around the country; learned about the Coordinated Community Response that was created in Duluth in the 1970’s; met with the founder of Women’s Advocates, the first battered women’s shelter in the nation in 1972; heard about our state’s groundbreaking civil and criminal laws; and learned about our strong police protocols and training on domestic violence.

However, Ms. Manjoo also learned, as the *Star Tribune* recently reported, that 28 women, men and children died in Minnesota last year as a result of domestic violence, according to the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women’s 2010 Femicide Report. In fact, while Ms. Manjoo visited Minneapolis last week, Nicole Meier of Circle Pines was slain by her ex-boyfriend at his townhouse, after confiding to co-workers that she was afraid to visit him alone. In a Town Hall Forum organized by The Advocates for Human Rights, the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women, the Sacred Hoop Coalition, and the Minnesota Office of Justice Programs, Ms. Manjoo heard survivors of domestic violence tell their stories and describe the legal system’s response to the violence they suffered.

Although Minnesota has long been a global leader in the movement to end violence against women, Ms. Manjoo’s visit also brought to light gaps in the state’s response to domestic violence. Despite the committed efforts of our partners working within the justice system, testimony at the Town Hall Forum highlighted the difficulties in enforcing restraining orders; the problem of repeat offenders; the failure in some cases to recognize predictors of lethal conduct; the prohibitive time and financial strains the legal system presents; the inadequate resources available to refugees and non-native English speakers; and other obstacles to justice and protection for domestic abuse victims.

In June 2011, Ms. Manjoo will present her findings and recommendations on violence against women in the United States to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. She will report on the longstanding, hopeful work being done in Minnesota to prevent more lives from being taken by violence against women, but she will also bring the testimony of people like Anna Grunewold, mother and wife of domestic abuse victims. As Minnesotans we should be proud of our tradition as leaders in the fight to end violence against women. Our state is a model for reform and a beacon of hope for survivors around the world. We must be vigilant in maintaining that leadership.

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