PBS’ “To the Contrary”

Tarana Burke; Domestic Violence Scandal; School Tragedy

Host: Bonnie Erbe

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Panelists:

Ann Stone

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton

Patrice Onwuka

Siobhan “Sam” Bennett

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Bonnie Erbe: This week on *To The Contrary*: first, #MeToo founder, Tarana Burke responds to President Trump, then how the White House domestic scandal is playing with American women, and, school shootings have families wondering how to keep students safe.

Bonnie Erbe: Hello, I’m Bonnie Erbe, welcome to *To The Contrary* a discussion of news and social trends from diverse perspectives. Up first, my interview with #MeToo founder, Tarana Burke. In our one on one, the founder of the #MeToo movement says she’s skeptical of President Trump’s claim that he is totally opposed to domestic violence.

Tarana Burke: I don’t believe him, I believe in action, and words are not as significant as action. This story about Robert Porter is what, 2 weeks old? And our President has just come out after calling them mere accusations, or referencing mere accusations in the same breath as this being a national media story, and he comes out and says this after 2 op-eds come out from the former wives of this man, and now comes out and says he doesn’t support domestic violence?

Bonnie Erbe: Last week, Trump tweeted: “People’s lives are being shattered by a mere allegation. Some are true and some are false. Is there no such thing any longer as Due Process?” What do you think about President Trump’s remarks that the #MeToo movement is somehow destroying American society?

Tarana Burke: Yeah, I think that the tweet that he made when he used the words ‘mere accusations’ was really, really telling and was pretty much in line with what we’ve seen from him in terms of supporting women and women’s issues since he’s been in office.

Bonnie Erbe: Do you think women are going to make any progress, is he affecting our culture, and how young boys think they should treat women, as well as political laws?

Tarana Burke: I think that women are definitely emboldened by this administration, and are emboldened by the audacity of this administration to be so upfront and out front in the ways in which they don’t
support women’s issues, and that has galvanized women across the country to organize in ways that we haven’t seen in recent history, and so I think that the power of that collective strength of women who are really at the end of their rope because of this administration is going to move the needle significantly, particularly in this upcoming election.

**Bonnie Erbe:** Burke told me, it’s not just the President that doesn’t understand her movement, the media also misread her message, she wants stories to focus on survivors of sexual abuse and violence, not on the perpetrators.

**Tarana Burke:** What the media portrays #MeToo is not what the work of #MeToo actually is, even the hashtag was not what the media has made it, which is into something that people think is about taking down powerful men, or this is about some kind of witch hunt, the focus of this movement has always been about amplifying the voices of survivors, giving them the support they need, the resources they need to start their healing journey, and doing the work of ending sexual violence, that is what this movement is about. Even the women who first came out about Harvey Weinstein didn’t make a call for anything, they were simply sharing their truth.

**Bonnie Erbe:** What's next for the movement?

**Tarana Burke:** We’ll be rolling out different resources to women who want to start a healing journey, who survived sexual assault, sexual harassment, and sexual abuse. We also will provide a road map for people who want to be active in their community, really providing action steps for what community change looks like around sexual violence.

**Bonnie Erbe:** So, Congresswoman Norton, is social media a strong enough force to push back political attempts to take rights away from women?
Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: I think so Bonnie. Social media is a new form of self-empowerment, that produced the biggest march ever at the nation’s capital, and sent a message that this time, women mean business.

Ann Stone: I don’t know, let me Google that, but actually, I think if she wants to emphasize survival not victimhood that’s wonderful, and I think that’s something that social media can and will reinforce.

Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: Absolutely, it’s doing two things, its removing the cone of silence that often surrounds sexual abuse, sexual violence, and allows it to be perpetrated, and its building a safe haven of millions upon millions of women that are saying, #MeToo.

Patrice Onwuka: I mean, social media is extremely important and very helpful here, unfortunately there are some woes that sneak in and use social media as a way to bring false allegations, and that’s something that should be concerning.

Bonnie Erbe: What about Ms. Burke’s comment that the mainstream media are covering the movement incorrectly, if they covered more stories of women telling of their abuse, how would that help as opposed to another picture of Harvey Weinstein on the front page of the New York Times?

Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: Well, I think the benefit of how the media is handling it is that the media is making it more difficult for things to get swept under the rug, which they have been for time and memorial, I think that is the biggest benefit to how the media is covering it, but I do agree with Ms. Burke and the sense that the real narrative how do survivors, like myself, go on to lead powerful and meaningful lives, in the face of the sexual violence that we’ve been muted out, I know Ann has some real strong thoughts on that.

Ann Stone: Well, and I got to tell you I really think the media still has too many old boys as editors and in the newsrooms. I have a case, I have some personal experience, but I have case where this reporter that
was trying to help expose sexual violence actually ended up quitting her job because her editors kept saying well he only hit her once, that doesn’t make her an abuser, and she said oh really, how many times do you have to murder somebody to be a murderer, so yeah, there’s a problem in the newsrooms.

**Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton:** I’m really concerned because all of this discussion, because all of this discussion, has never focused on, not one time that I can remember on the way in which sexual harassment faces the average woman in the workplace. That’s why I have a bill that I’m writing now that form a commission, a national commission on sexual harassment, the way wave done on gambling on other important problems, and it would go nationwide, it would hear from women in retail, and in offices, and in factories, who knows what they experience? So, for us to be dealing with women at the level of Harvey Weinstein, and not with the average women is on us, I’m trying to break us out of that.

**Bonnie Erbe:** We’re trying to break us out of that too.

**Patrice Onwuka:** What’s interesting is you’ve seen the #TimesUp movement initiative spring up in response to that, it’s a $14 million dollar legal defense fund for women coming out of retail, and low wage jobs who can’t afford to take on their bosses and take their cases forward, you know I do think I like her emphasis on the survivors, because actually I think it takes some of the power away from the people who are really not victims at all but are using it as a rose, #MeToo “what can I get out of it”, and it really focuses on women, and men who have been hurt and are moving forward with their lives, and it shows that you can move forward with your life at well.

**Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton:** You know, when I became chair of the EEOC to show you how “new” sexual harassment is, sexual harassment had not been declared a violation of Title VII of the anti-discrimination statutes, and we had to hold hearings, and we did and for the first time, it was seen as a form of sexual discrimination, if you look at the statistics, more than 20,000 complaints each year by average women, we have no idea what they go through, we’ve got to find out.
Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: Thank you for that Congresswoman, and I think what the Congresswoman is saying is very important, I think we have a culture that has perpetuated this, and it trickles all the way down, the idea that these are isolated cases is completely erroneous and misses the point, but I would say to you Patrice, it’s so hard to come forward to speak your truth, I would say there’s got to be one thousandth of one percent that are using it for their own ends, erroneously.

Bonnie Erbe: Let me ask a devil’s advocate question, do you think the #MeToo movement has created a masculinity crisis?

Ann Stone: Very interesting, and that is something I worry about a masculinity crisis, or will it also a perpetuate a backlash against women being hired in certain positions where men are uncomfortable because “oooooh I can’t take them on a business dinner, we can’t go on a business trip, etcetera, etcetera”, so both. It’s interesting, in Sweden where they were very aggressive in trying to neutralize the gender differences, there actually is a movement in Sweden where they’re importing men from Latin countries because they find their men to be too wussy, so there are women bringing men in because the Swedish men have become so neutralized.

Bonnie Erbe: And I’ll google that because that sounds very interesting, but go ahead.

Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: But I have to push you back on that one Ann, should we not be prosecuting murderers because it might make you know

Ann Stone: No, no, no, I’m saying we should but we have to have some kind of balance, there has to be some kind of thought to it so there isn’t a backlash.

Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: Yeah but I’m saying after hundreds of years Ann of this stuff going unreported and rampant in corporate culture, its time.

Ann Stone: We don’t want a backlash.
Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: And we’re trying to strike the balance now, it’s so the other way that we have a long way to go before any backlash.

Bonnie Erbe: But you’re already hearing critics about it?

Patrice Onwuka: I mean the LeanIn organization, Sheryl Sandberg group, they just released some numbers, I think it’s something like 6 out of 10 male managers do not want to be mentors to young women because they’re afraid to be in a room alone with them or to have dinner, so there’s been a little bit of a chilling effect, and I talk to regular guys in my life, and they say that I worry that I will have a meeting with someone and they will take something inappropriately or they will just come up with something, and my career is over, so I think the pendulum has swung a little bit too far.

Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: Quickly, I would just say it’s all part of the process, right? It’s all part of the process, we need to keep moving forward with raising the cone of silence with this, moving forward.

Bonnie Erbe: Alright, let us know what you think, please follow me on Twitter @BonnieErbe. From #MeToo to domestic violence. The White House is under fire for its handling of two staffers who resigned last week amid accusations of domestic violence. President Trump has yet to supports the women, and condemn either Rob Porter or David Sorenson, the 2 alleged abusers, but he did say late in the week that he is opposed to all forms of domestic violence. Activists charged the White House is not particularly concerned about protecting women from this serious crime. Even Republican women have expressed exasperation at the administration for not dealing with abusers more forcefully. This week the FBI revealed its security clearance investigation into Porter was complete when he was up for his controversial promotion, this contradicts the White House claims that the investigation was still ongoing when the scandal went public, and the White House did not know about his history of abuse. So, if the #MeToo movement is expanding, this circle of abusers who are outed so to speak, but you have a White House that’s protecting them, what image does the public get?
Ann Stone: This was not their finest hour, the way they handled this, but I do have to say that you do
have to understand this is a guy that all of them had worked with closely, all of them were friends, one of
them was dating, all of them were in this bubble.

Bonnie Erbe: They knew 2 years ago.

Ann Stone: Well some of them knew, they were in this bubble, and none of them knew that, well you
never do when you knew someone that well, I mean look in the celebrity world, when someone’s liberty
has been out you just don’t want to believe it, but it’s true. Hopefully this is a real teachable moment, and
they can move forward, I have some suggestions I’m making to them, and some other things that can be
done, stuff I can’t talk about yet, but, clearly not their finest hour.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: You know, there are ways to handle this, I can understand if you work
closely with someone, the last thing you want to do is get out in front and say they’ve done something
bad, I can understand, I really felt the President, because you can see where his mind is, when it is clear
that it was all out, he came out and he didn’t say a word about the women, so he could’ve started, just as
you would if a colleague of yours was found, you know I’ve worked with this person, and perhaps
working with them has made me think hard about it, but I want to say right now that while they’re my
friends, I certainly want to make clear that domestic violence is unacceptable. The fact that it never
occurred to him, either in his tweets or in his speech, shows you where his head is and it was very
disappointing.

Bonnie Erbe: Do you think we’re going to see more situations like this at the White House?

Patrice Onwuka: I hope not, I think at this point everyone who may still have pending security
clearances are still being scrutinized, but I think Ann you made a really good point, I think very often
these people.
Bonnie Erbe: Really you think, hold on a second, you think they’re going back over people.

Patrice Onwuka: I would hope so

Bonnie Erbe: who are up for security clearance and look more closely on domestic violence?

Patrice Onwuka: I should hope so because there’s a greater scrutiny on this number 1, but number 2 the greater essence of this is that yeah, there was someone working with you, no matter what their qualifications are and their skills level and everything else, there is a character flaw with them, and you need to address that, and I think that’s true in society, we need to stop being blindsided by an athletes ability or an actor’s intelligence and poise on camera, and focus on the character flaws there.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: I think they need to learn their lesson, they need to oust them before the press does.

Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: And let’s be clear, it’s not a character flaw, it’s a crime, and we have to look at these situations as the crimes they are and treat them accordingly.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: It’s both.

Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: It’s criminal.

Bonnie Erbe: But what about the National Inquirer buying the stories of Stormy Daniels and Karen McDougall and then not letting them talk for the longest time and then now they’re able to talk, does that show we have a presidential abuser of user of women?

Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: Oh, I think there’s no question about that, he himself has exercised, to be kind to him, and to be respectful of the office, let’s just say the President in his personal life has not exercised the best personal use of judgement, in his own life, and now he’s under a new level of scrutiny as is his
administration, and he again, I just want to repeat this, we are talking about not character flaws, but crimes being perpetrated.

**Ann Stone:** And character flaws.

**Siobhan “Sam” Bennett:** Well, okay.

**Ann Stone:** I think that Sam makes a good point, we have to look at him now that he’s in office, I think that other stuff, whether it’s true or not, it’s so yesterday, and you can take it for what it’s worth, and maybe it does factor in, but let’s start with a long list of Presidents, that’ve have worse, cause it’s long, it’s a long list, and let’s judge him for what he is now, and lets leave whatever flaw from those stories between him and his wife.

**Bonnie Erbe:** Forget about the 1800’s when we had completely different standards

**Ann Stone:** I’m not talking about the 1800’s.

**Bonnie Erbe:** But even John Kennedy, you know, Marilyn Monroe, today you think it’s okay to have a man in the White House, woman if it were possible, to have serial relationships with prostitutes, and

**Ann Stone:** Alleged, well, again all of its alleged.

**Bonnie Erbe:** And then what are there, ten women suing him?

**Ann Stone:** Alleged, all of its alleged.

**Siobhan “Sam” Bennett:** Okay Ann, you’re parsing words here Ann.

**Ann Stone:** No, I’m trying to be fair.
Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: There is a long list, I am all about respecting the office even when I disagree with the one who holds it, but you cannot dispute the fact that there is a mounting body of evidence that shows, which is why, but there’s a benefit to it. I think Ms. Burke alluded to it, there’s never been a more galvanizing administration for women, this has woken up women, driven them to the streets with the largest march that Washington has ever seen.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: And to the polls.

Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: And to the polls, and so I’m going to go down as saying.

Bonnie Erbe: Will that energy last until November?

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: Oh, its lasting.

Ann Stone: Well, the generic ballot went from 13, to now the Republicans are down by 1, so, not sure, not sure, well, on the coast, may, but it’s not going to fly over the country, so it’s not. I do want to get to back to the point that with these women, it’s not, you have to stick to these allegations, and what he did or didn’t do with these women, it’s in his private life, it’s between him and his wife at this point.

Bonnie Erbe: Alright, from the White House to the school house. Parents nationwide are worried that sending their children to school has become the equivalent of sending them into warzones. This week’s slaughter of 17 teachers and students in South Florida by a former student who’d be expelled, highlights what activists believe is the need to keep automatic weapons out of the hands of mentally ill Americans. There was also a backlash against President Trump and other pro-gun politicians, offering their thoughts and prayers to victims of mass shootings, 18 so far, this year in schools alone. In social media, survivors said forget the thoughts and prayers and start passing legislation to protect students. So now the White House is putting the focus on catching the mentally ill people before they act out, is that humanly possible?
Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: Well, just to put some framing around it Bonnie, I’m wearing this black jacket in mourning, right, for this terrible tragedy, covering up my very proud Eagles shirt following the Eagles win, from Pennsylvania, as a parent myself of a 15 year old that could’ve very well been in that same school, the thing that disappointed about the framing of the White House currently is guns were not mentioned once, they’re focusing on other things, but not guns, and the largest law enforcement body in the country, the Police Chief’s Association, has long maintained that assault weapons should not be in the hands of ordinary citizens, and there are statistics out there, and maybe Congresswoman Norton could speak to this a little more grandeur than I can, but when assault weapons are not available, violent crimes go down by 66%. And so that is really where the conversation should be, not on whether there are mentally ill people out there.

Bonnie Erbe: Patrice.

Patrice Onwuka: You know, I think the White House is trying to not make a kneejerk reaction, which is what they very often do in situations like this.

Bonnie Erbe: Is that why they keep offering thought and prayers, to push back the discussion?

Patrice Onwuka: Well, I think there’s nothing wrong with thoughts and prayers Bonnie.

Bonnie Erbe: Yeah, but there’s been a whole social media movement saying enough with your thoughts and prayers, we want action and we want anti-gun laws and legislation.

Patrice Onwuka: Well, I can understand people are hurt and they want something to be done, but at the same time, there’s nothing wrong with people wanting to look at not just guns, but also looking at the flags and the markers that made this evil young man do the things that made him do what he did, and when you look at law enforcement, they feel like they don’t have the tools.
Bonnie Erbe: Well, what are they going to do start arresting people who just look dangerous?

Patrice Onwuka: Well, when you look at his social media pages, how he was bursting out in many different ways.

Bonnie Erbe: But he didn’t commit a crime.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: Well nothing can be done by looking at people’s (social media pages), otherwise you’re going to be arresting a lot of people

Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: Not to mention violating the Constitution.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: Right, and free speech. Notwithstanding thoughts and prayers of the President, I don’t know if you noticed, we did not even have a moment of silence in the Congress, and I think that was very deliberate, because the Republicans in Congress knew there would be a horrific backlash if they dared come forward with thought and prayers if they won’t pass legislation for background checks, when they won’t pass legislation that says you can’t get on a plane if you are on the list of people who shouldn’t be in this country, and so they for the first time at least since I’ve been in Congress, they had not one word to say, not even a prayer, because they were so afraid even to pray.

Ann Stone: Interestingly enough, Congressman Scalise, who he himself is a victim of a shooter, a rabid Bernie Sanders supporter, said he appreciated thoughts and prayers and still needs them and he gets upset when people say they’re not working. And the studies have shown that following a ban for assault rifles, violent crime didn’t go down, and in fact…

Siobhan “Sam” Bennett: That is not true.

Ann Stone: It is true, and in fact I will show you the information on it. So, the point is that guns alone are not the problem, there is a problem of this kid was so disturbed, two things, 1: his neighbors said they
moved when the police stopped coming to that house because they were there 39 times, short of taking a billboard, what else does that kid have to do say, I’m right here!

**Bonnie Erbe:** The FBI also just admitted that they dropped the ball on this. We don’t have enough FBI agents to track every mentally ill person in this country.

**Ann Stone:** And so, you know what, the President, as Patrice said is going to take a thoughtful approach to this, he is pulling together disparate people together, not just Congress, others, to look at real solutions, they would probably be recommending more people be hired in that capacity, and getting retired military and police in the schools.

**Bonnie Erbe:** Why is this a debate about guns? Why is it not a debate about weapon sales, because the NRA which used to be about gun safety and lobbying, etcetera?

**Ann Stone:** They still are.

**Bonnie Erbe:** Not now, people who knew it long ago say it’s a very different organization than 30 years ago, and all they’re doing now, the reason they oppose banning even the smallest thing, even a bump stock, I mean come on, who needs to be shooting, killing, you know 60 some people at a time?

**Patrice Onwuka:** I mean.

**Bonnie Erbe:** But wait a minute, because it’s something that the manufacturers can sell, and NRA has become nothing but an ad agency for gun manufacturers.

**Patrice Onwuka:** Well, I’m not going to defend the NRA, what I am going to defend are the people, regular Americans who want their right to own an arm and defend themselves. There are lots of neighborhoods where you can call the police, and they’re there in 2 minutes, there are lots of neighborhoods where if you call the police, you’re lucky if they show up. There is, I think a lot of
Americans they hear this outrage and they think we need to do something about gun laws, and they worry, what about me, what about my constitutional rights.

**Bonnie Erbe:** Quickly Sam, because we’re about out of time.

**Siobhan “Sam” Bennett**: Why can a 19-year-old buy an assault weapon, as easily as going, almost as easy as buying a loaf of bread. If you want a gun to defend yourself against a single assailant breaking into your home, I’m fine with that, get a regular gun, but an assault weapon?

**Bonnie Erbe:** Alright, we are out of time, that’s it for this edition, please follow me on Twitter and visit our website: pbs.org/tothecontrary and whether you agree, or think to the contrary, see you next week.