DENVER, Colorado (AP) – Days after the news broke that NBA star Kobe Bryant was accused of assaulting a 19-year-old hotel employee, victims’ advocates worried the intense focus on the accuser would frighten other women away from reporting assaults.

Wall-to-wall media coverage, publication of the woman’s name and photo on the Internet and in tabloids, and the release of embarrassing court documents deepened their fears.

Long before the charges were thrown out Wednesday, the case had a chilling effect on other women, one advocate said.

“I think (the damage) was already done when the judge decided her sex life could be exploited or explored, however you want to look at it,” said Jeri Elster of Los Angeles, who was raped in 1992 and has lobbied for changes in California rape law.

“I’m not sure if dropping it or not dropping it is a big deal,” she said.

Wendy Murphy, a professor at the New England School of Law in Boston and a former prosecutor, said the case has shaken many women’s faith in the justice system.

“The rules, the laws, the things that are supposed to make us treat each other with civility are a big joke, it doesn’t matter,” she said.

But Kathy Redmond of the National Coalition Against Violent Athletes said the relentless focus on the accuser may help strengthen public support for rape shield laws, which limit the information about alleged victims that can be used in court.

“They’re looking at this and saying, “This has been hard on her and not on Kobe,” Redmond said.

“There has been so much sympathy that has shifted to the victim. I think they are seeing why we have rape shield laws,” said Redmond, who works in Denver with women who have been assaulted by athletes.

Murphy agreed the case may have rallied public support for rape shield laws.

“You really have to have an extreme example of injustice to make the public take notice,” she said.

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