Gender bias continues in courtrooms, which is why the National Judicial Education Program offers extensive training for judges across the country on such matters as conducting sexual assault trials, said Lynn Hecht Schafran, director of the program, during a taping of The Editors television show.

“We start with the basics,” Ms. Schafran said. “What are the myths about sexual assault, and why do judges need to know that they themselves may – I don’t want to [say] believe in them, but they may never have had the opportunity to be educated away from them.”

The training also emphasizes the importance of appropriate jury selection, because prospective jurors will come in believing the same myths. One myth is that women are raped by armed strangers, who women valiantly fight off, after which the crime is reported immediately to police.

“This is 180 degrees from the truth,” Ms. Schafran said.

The vast majority of rapes are committed by a known person armed most often not with a weapon but with the threat of force, she said. Women in those circumstances often offer little resistance because they fear the consequences. And women raped by a known person often delay reporting the crime, if they report it at all, longer than those raped by strangers.

The ramifications of not knowing such beliefs are myths will appear in the way judges conduct the jury selection process, the trial, and the sentencing. After taking part in the training, many judges offer favorable comments and remark that they didn’t know what they didn’t know, Ms. Schafran said.

She was questioned by Marilou Johanek of The Blade editorial board.

The Editors will be broadcast at 8:30 tonight on WGTE-TV, Channel 30, and at 12:30 p.m. Sunday on WBGU-TV, Channel 27.
Ms. Schafran was at the University of Toledo law school yesterday to speak about gender-related issues in the courts. Her program is a project of Legal Momentum – formerly the National Organization for Women Legal Defense Fund – and the National Association of Women Judges.

Gender bias has four components, Ms. Schafran said. They are:

- Stereotyped thinking about the nature and roles of women and men.
- How society values women and what’s traditionally perceived as women’s work.
- A lack of substantive understanding about the social and economic realities of women’s and men’s lives – which she cited as “the reason for so much bias in the courts.”
- Putting a burden on one sex that we don’t put on another.

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