

U.S. Senate VAWA Briefing: The Need to Reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act
Tuesday, January March 20, 2018
226 Dirksen Senate Office Building

*Amanda Nguyen, CEO and Founder
Rise*

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Feinstein, and Distinguished Members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on the Violence Against Women Act Reauthorization.

My name is Amanda Nguyen. I never thought that I'd be made to suffer a greater injustice than what I went through on the day that I was raped. Growing up, I'd believed in those familiar American promises: that our rights were sacred, that everyone was equal in the eyes of the law, and that the legal system existed to right wrongs and restore justice. It was only after my ordeal that I discovered firsthand the ways in which rape survivors are continually re-victimized and betrayed by our country's failure to make good on these promises.

When I went to research my options, I discovered huge irregularities and shortfalls in the civil rights available to survivors. Some states destroy untested rape kits before the statute of limitations, other states deny survivors a copy of their police report or medical records. Some don't even tell survivors what rights they have. I realized I had a choice: accept the injustice or take change into my own hands. So, I decided to rewrite the law. I founded a team called Rise, and together we organized and did the impossible – help drafted and unanimously passed the Sexual Assault Survivors' Bill of Rights. The law, signed by President Obama on October 7, 2016, codifies a basic set of comprehensive civil rights for at least 25 million rape survivors across the country. Before Rise came along, only 20 bills, or 0.016%, in modern United States history had passed through Congress with unanimous support. Ours became the 21st. I remember when I couldn't get anyone's attention on this issue. I once poured my heart out to an intern in the hallway for 5 minutes just to talk to anyone about these rights. Now, I'm returning to these same halls, with you listening here today, having won my fight. We've come a long way, but the fight isn't over yet.

From the bottom of my heart, I want to thank this committee, thank Senator Grassley, for helping me pen my civil rights into existence. My story is not mine alone. One in three women have been victims to some form of physical violence within their lifetime. When I was raped, I remember being given a choice. Choose justice or choose my career - one or the other. This is not a choice any woman, any person, should be put through. Violence against women has a price tag. According to a 2016 McKinsey study, violence against women costs the US economy at least \$5 billion dollars annually, from medical costs to lost productivity. I remember taping up a sign after my rape. It said "Never Never Never Give Up". And though the HIV/AIDS prophylactic made me throw up, I was determined to not let my rapist prevent me from achieving my dream of graduating. 3 months later, I graduated from Harvard. This is a choice no survivor should be put through but it was only by the help of people along the way that I was able to thrive. Programs in VAWA made it possible for a trauma informed counselor to be there when I first went to the hospital for my rape kit. This is an example of a VAWA program that helped me during my moment in crisis. When one is assaulted, trauma training is important. VAWA makes funding available to train police, prosecutors and counselors and it is important we make funding available for these programs. Many survivors do not report because they feel betrayed by a broken criminal justice system. It is critical that survivors feel they can be treated with respect and are able to interact with trauma trained professionals.

I know firsthand the failings of America's justice system, but I also know the change that ordinary Americans can bring—after all, I lived it. Here's what I learned: no one is powerless when we come together. No one can make us invisible when we demand to be seen. On one of my trips to Washington, my Uber driver and I rode in silence until he asked why I was going to Congress. When I told him, this huge, stoic man began tearing up, and said, "My daughter is a rape survivor. The police asked her what she was wearing and if she was drinking, blaming her. The system isn't working." When he stopped the car, he asked to shake my hand and thanked me for fighting for his daughter. We are all living in a collective story—a narrative of progress. Today, with this hearing. I celebrate that my voice is met with a government of the people, by the people and for the people.

The story of woman is written on her body in a sharp pen. I hope to use my voice today to convey the importance of creating a country where women have the right to live free from violence, free from fear, and free to exercise our unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. When women succeed, America succeeds. That is why Congress needs to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act.

Thank you.