

Testimony of
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TESTIMONY OF GABRIELLE UNION
SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
THE CONTINUED IMPORTANCE OF THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT

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Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Sessions and Distinguished Members of this Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to address you today on the critical topic of sexual assault and the Violence Against Women Act. I am speaking to you today in a very personal way. I am speaking to you as a survivor of sexual violence, and this is my story.

I was born in Omaha and my parents raised me and my two sisters outside of San Francisco. I grew up in a very loving and stable family. Being raped was not supposed to happen to someone like me!

I was 19 years old working in a shoe store during my summer break from the University of Nebraska. It was the late shift, and I was cleaning up with another co-worker near closing time. All of a sudden, a man came in wielding a gun and demanded money. We did not fight back, and we immediately gave him the money. Then he declared, "I want you to go to the storage room," and that's when I knew he was either going to shoot me or rape me.

He then forced me out of the storage room and proceeded to rape me at gun point. I just went blank and had an out-of-body experience. As he was raping me, I felt as though I was floating over myself, thinking, "This isn't happening," and "I'm perfect, I'm a good person, I'm a good student." At some point, he put the gun down and he calmly asked me to hand it to him. Instead I grabbed the gun and spun around and did the best I could to hurt him, but we ended up fighting instead. He was almost twice my size, but it was a pretty fair fight for a while because I knew it was either him or me. I kept trying to shoot the gun, but the trigger was jammed. It felt like a war.

Finally, he grabbed for the gun at the same second he punched me in the face, and I let go. But, instead of shooting me, he asked me how to get out, and he left. He robbed another store and raped another girl before he turned himself in. He ended up making a plea bargain and was sentenced to 33 years in prison.

After that I just couldn't go back to the University of Nebraska. Instead, I enrolled at UCLA to study Sociology. To help get over the trauma of the assault, I immediately turned to a rape crisis center for support. It was there that I met my rape crisis counselor, and it was truly because of her that I was able to cope with this horrific experience and begin to move on. In addition, I participated in a rape survivor group which was also critical to my recovery. The support of my counselor and the support of my friends who had also been victimized gave me my life back. In

one fleeting moment, that man had taken my dignity and self esteem, but the support and services I received at the rape crisis center gave me my life back!

And this is my story. And this is why I speak out across the country. I want to help increase awareness about the impact of sexual assault and to help raise money to support rape crisis centers around the country. I also speak to girls in college about what happened to me, and my goal is to never hear anyone say "me too" after I tell them I was raped. I will use my voice to speak out against rape for as long as it's needed.

Rape victims are not strangers. They are your mothers, sisters, daughters and your friends. Justice shouldn't be for a select few but for all. Sexual violence is a complex and traumatic experience for both the victim as well as their support system - family members, friends, and colleagues.

The incidence rates of sexual assault in the country are just astounding. According to a 2007 fact sheet from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men reported experiencing an attempted or completed rape at some time in their lives. An estimated 20% to 25% of college women in the United States experience attempted or completed rape during their college career. Among high school students surveyed nationwide, about 11% of females reported having been forced to have sex. According to the CDC, these numbers actually underestimate the problem. Many cases are not reported because victims are afraid to tell the police, friends, or family about the abuse. Victims also think that their stories of abuse will not be believed and that police cannot help them.

It is important that we speak out about the hidden suffering of victims of sexual violence and shed light on the dramatic effects that sexual violence has on our communities. Though we have made great strides, victim blaming remains a powerful force that keeps victims from coming forward and keeps many cases of sexual violence from being brought to a jury.

Some victims may be reticent to come forward to seek help and speak out about the violence that has happened to them, but the struggles they encounter in their lives afterward reveal the impacts of hidden trauma such as depression, post traumatic stress disorder, suicide, substance abuse problems and homelessness. Others, like me, have come to a place where they can speak about the terrible crime that has happened to them and have been able to heal.

The current economic downturn our nation is facing increases the traumatic stress experienced by survivors of sexual violence. Losing one's job or home, or even both, can overwhelm normal coping mechanisms, which are already stretched to capacity by experiencing rape- or sexual abuse-related traumatic stress. During times of increased stress, survivors are more likely to seek services proactively to improve coping, or because the increased stress has so deteriorated the quality of their lives that they feel backed into a corner and 'have to' seek help.

Rape crisis services play a critical role in mitigating the trauma of sexual violence and helping survivors with the possible severe consequences on their well-being and stability. Around the country, however, rape crisis services are woefully underfunded at the state and federal levels.

The funding through the new Sexual Assault Services Program (SASP), which was authorized in the Violence Against Women Act of 2005, provides the first dedicated federal funding stream to local advocacy and direct service providers that are specifically designed to meet the individual

needs of each survivor. The President's budget includes \$12 million the Sexual Assault Services Program. These funds must be shared among States, Territories and Tribes, which will then determine their own mechanisms to disseminate the funding to the 1,315 rape crisis centers in the U.S. and the Territories and to the 20 rape crisis centers that operate upon tribal lands trying to serve victims from more than 550 Indian tribes. This certainly is not a lot of money to spread around for the great demand for services we know exists.

As we well know, currently, most States are experiencing drastic budget short falls that include cuts to sexual assault services such as hotlines, crisis intervention and assistance to get through the criminal justice system. Each victim of sexual assault has suffered terrible trauma. We must ensure that each victim is also offered an opportunity to heal.

As we look toward the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, it is imperative that we stay focused on the needs of sexual assault victims in rural areas, underserved communities, communities of color and tribal areas for whom there remains a dearth of adequate supportive options.

While tremendous gains have been made over the last 15 years through the services of the Violence Against Women Act, I want to express my concern that these benefits have not reached across all communities to all women.

To that end, we must acknowledge the reality that some women have a greater vulnerability to violence and significant barriers to accessing services. Women of Color remain at a distinct disadvantage because of the lack of appropriate and relevant services, as well as resources, within their communities to address domestic violence and sexual assault.

Recognizing this great need, Congress made a historic shift by intentionally including language to focus on Communities of Color as part of the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act of 2005. The "Culturally and Linguistically Specific" language was intended to specifically address the needs of Communities of Color. This language provides Communities of Color resources to create interventions and preventions that are relevant, responsive and culturally appropriate for their communities.

Further, we must recognize that resources and services for victims in the US Territories, who are primarily Communities of Color, receive adequate services. Guam, American Samoa, US Virgin Islands and Northern Mariana are far away from similar resources found on the mainland US, but victims of domestic violence and sexual assault feel the same pain and deserve access to the same level of services.

I am also concerned about the extremely high rates of sexual assault committed against American Indian women. It is estimated by the Department of Justice that 1 of 3 Native women will be raped in their lifetime. At the same time, the lack of prosecution of sex crimes committed against Native women is a growing public concern. In fact, the Denver Post did a series of articles on injustice in Indian Country in late 2007 and reported that the Department of Justice declined to prosecute 76.5% of adult rapes between 2004 and 2007.

Each of the over 550 federally recognized Indian tribes confront complicated jurisdictional barriers to protect Native women from perpetrators of rape. A graphic example of this lack of response by tribes are the statistics recently released by the Navajo Nation that reported the most frequent violent crime committed on the reservation in 2008 was rape. An average of 6 rapes occurred every week within the Navajo Nation in 2008. Yet of the 300 rape cases reported in 2008 only 25 of the cases resulted in an arrest at the end of the year. This pattern of violence is repeated across this country on tribal reservations and Alaska Native Villages.

The federal government can and must act to increase its assistance to Indian tribes and Native women. It must address the public myth that the rape of American Indian women is not a serious crime that will not be prosecuted.

Victims of sexual assault also need access to legal assistance to ensure their rights are upheld. Law enforcement and the courts must build capacity to hold offenders of all types of sexual violence accountable. Victims of acquaintance sexual assault are especially unlikely to receive their day in court and see the offender brought to justice.

No one likes to talk or think about the crime of sexual assault, and as a result, this crime is kept in the dark and its victims often forgotten. We're asking you, as you begin your work on the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, to keep victims like myself, and the millions of others like me across the country, in the forefront of your mind.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony.