



*Sexual Assault in the Prison System
Dawn Rowe MS; MA
President and CEO*

Girl Vow, Inc. & The National Taskforce for Missing & Murdered Women & Girls of Color

A great thank you should be afforded to the Honorable Senator Alessandra R. Biaggi, Chair, of the Committee on Ethics and Internal Governance; and the Honorable Julia Salazar Chair, on the Committee on Crime Victims Crime and Correction. Thank you immensely for this special invitation and everyone who made today's testimony possible in an effort to highlight the atrocities rape victims experience.

My name is Dawn Rowe. I am the CEO and founder of Girl Vow, Inc. and the National Taskforce for Missing and Murdered Women and Girls in New York City. I am submitting this written expert testimony in support of the Joint Public Hearing on Impact of Sexual Assault in the Prison System with a focus on how rape exposure leads to trauma or incarceration on this 3rd day of March 2022 and as a fierce advocate for women and girls.

In my capacity, not only have I worked directly with crime victims my entire career but I have witnessed the erasure of victims needs through broken policies, the fight for safety transfers, re-victimization, and waiting for the return of rape kits, while women work to navigate appointments relative to their own victimhood. In this written testimony, I will speak to the ways in which rape victimization leads to incarceration and deepens trauma using a pseudonym to protect the name of the person I speak of who has experienced unimaginable pain.

Established in 2015, Girl Vow, Inc. is a 501c3 non-profit dedicated to the intensive mentoring and advocacy of girls and gender expansive youth impacted by failed crossover systems. The organization was born to address the inequities befell on girls who have been overlooked and suffered at the hands of systems saturated with the neglect. Girl Vow's mission is to reduce the risks that young girls, femmes, and gender-expansive youth face by providing direct services, cooperating with private, and public enterprises. Through education, mentorship, and life skills training, our mission is to open the door to economic sustainability and personal transformation for future generations of women. We are uniquely poised to meet the needs of girls, particularly those known to criminal justice, foster care, victims of crimes, and poverty systems.

We mentor girls/lgbtq youth pre/post aftercare, as an alternative to placement, preventive/respice, and as an alternative school where girls/lgbtq youth are failing. Our participants range from 12-24, are housed at Rikers Island, in foster care placements, identify as crossover youth, are impoverished, gang involved, chronic runaways, or may reside in juvenile justice facilities. We have youth who have been sex trafficked, raped, kidnapped, and have used hard core drugs to escape the prison of victimization, although they are not of legal age to cast a ballot vote.



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For the purpose of this testimony, I will draw on the particulars of Jane Land (pseudonym) who grew up in a household of abuse leading her into a life of sex trafficking. She was raped by her father repeatedly at the tender age of 14. When she established enough courage to speak up for herself, no one believed her. Her dad was considered a “family man”. JL’s experience would cause her to become drug addicted, incarcerated, and eventually a victim of her brother. By the time we met her she had been through every system, tried to commit suicide several times, was on psychotropic medications, and gained a significant enough amount of weight to be declared morbidly obese. Obesity was her safe place. She traveled the world by the age of 21 as a sex worker with her pimp as a result of her introduction to incestual rape.

Research and anecdotal stories of incest or other sexual abuse support that rape is associated with subsequent psychological dysfunction in adulthood; such as significant interpersonal violence, isolation, alienation, and distrust. The majority of rape victims experience clinically significant fear, depression, sexual dysfunctions, problems with self esteem, and social adjustment.

Even after 6 years, victims have problems with fear and depression. 8.6% of victims of one rape and 20% of victims of two rapes currently meet the diagnosis for major depressive disorder. 45.7% of single-incident victims and 80% of two-incident victims met the lifetime diagnosis of major depressive disorder.

In a similar pattern, JL’s experiences created a direct association to her mental health and overall decline as illustrated in the research. JL’s life story confirms that young women sexually abused as children are reportedly more likely to attempt suicide, self-mutilate, become drug dependent, and involved in sex work. Like many women and girls, JL’s trauma was a gateway to more trauma and interpersonal violence which led to incarceration. Her life spiraled out of control without lack and care for her own needs when the adults in her life responsible for her safety miserably failed her.

If we look at JL’s timeline her victimization was the precursor to self destruction. In one of our many conversations, she stated she would continue to give her body to the men who propositioned her. There were times she did not use protection. She preferred incarceration and death. She could not fathom living in a safer place anywhere.

In order to help women and girls like JL, we must deepen our understanding of generational and institutional trauma. Every girl should have a safety plan. Very early on in my academic career, I learned that the home is the most dangerous place for women to experience private violence. Many of us are taught and stand by the adage “What happens in the home stays in the home”.



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When we question why women wait years to share one of the most demeaning experiences, perhaps the old adage is the reason why. We learn not to tell. Let's begin to change the notion of rape, judgement, and responsibility. Let's think and understand how the world breeds rape through policies, race, and subjectivity. We must question, how we over sexualize women's bodies? Do we know the real stories of women and girls who have experienced the threat of rape and have we failed to help little girls and women navigate systems of support?

References:

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Dawn Rowe is a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice City University of New York. Her work is centered on the intensive mentorship of girls of color who have been impacted by poverty, foster care, and juvenile justice where she has worked in jails, juvenile institutions, psych wards, and foster care agencies. She is the Founder/Executive Director of Girl Vow, Inc. The National Taskforce for Missing and Murder BIPOC Women and Girls of Color.

If you have suggestions or are interested in learning more about Girl Vow, Inc. or The National Taskforce for Missing and Murdered Women and Girls of Color, please email taylor@girlvow.org .