

This testimony was presented by Karen Mulhauser in 1979 before the Senate Labor – Health Education and Welfare Appropriations Subcommittee. At the time, Karen Mulhauser was the Executive Director of the National Abortion Rights Action League, NARAL. A copy of her archived testimony was provided to Karen Mulhauser by the Schlesinger Library, where NARAL documents are stored. She is granted permission to circulate her public testimony.



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Box 254 #

TESTIMONY BEFORE CONGRESS 1979

I am Karen Mulhauser, the Executive Director of the National Abortion Rights Action League. NARAL is a national membership and lobbying organization with the single purpose of protecting the right of every woman to have a safe and legal abortion. We have presented testimony before this Committee before, urging the federal government to include funding for abortions for poor women as part of the package of health services available to the nation's most needy. On numerous occasions, we have described the public health benefits of legal abortion, and pleaded that you respond to the needs of low income women who are entirely dependent on a compassionate government for all of their health care and for the health of their families. We wonder how the needs of poor women, who carry severely deformed fetuses can be completely overlooked by the Medicaid plan if they should choose to have an abortion. Or the young girl who is a tragic victim of rape by her stepfather and told no one of the incident until she was five months pregnant.

Today, I want to speak on a more personal level for I have had a disturbing experience and can no longer remain silent when I see such injustices as the Hyde amendment re-enacted yearly.

I was raped a few months ago, at gunpoint, by two men who broke into my home. My seven-year-old son was at home and my husband was out of town.

I was aware of the problems that rape victims experience, had read analyses of the psychology of rapists and their "needs." Like most women who have never been victims, I had tried to imagine how I would react if ever I was threatened by rape. One can never know. I had imagined that I would resist. But that morning, at 1 AM, when I looked up from my work at the kitchen table and saw a gun pointed at my head, resistance was the farthest thought from my mind. My first thought was for my sleeping child. I knew I must not scream. I pleaded

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with them not to make noise and wake him. For 2½ hours, while they stole everything of value from our home and raped me repeatedly, I could think only of survival - mine and my son's. What would they do if he awoke, as he often does at night? Would they tie and gag him as they had done to me and force him to watch them rape his mother? What if he screamed? All these thoughts rushed through my mind. And my husband - would he return home to find us both dead? He would have to find a way to survive us. Nothing could have prepared me for the torment, the terror, I experienced that night.

It's easier for me to talk about it now, because they are convicted and have satisfyingly long sentences. The police, my husband and my friends have been very supportive and that helped enormously. I can understand how women who must deal with the terror alone - without that support - could be reluctant to speak of the experience or press charges against their assailants. I imagine the fear of reprisal could be immobilizing. But I know that unless more women speak out about their experiences and unless more rapes are reported, and there are efforts made to arrest the rapists, we will continue to witness the deplorable insensitivity that exists in the minds of so many policy makers, other opinion leaders and the public in general.

In the months since I was raped, my feelings about the experience have changed. At the time, I was overwhelmed with terror. I was convinced that if anything went contrary to their plan, my assailants would kill me and my child. Now, although the terror returns sometimes, the primary feeling is one of anger. I am grateful that anger is replacing terror, because I can do something about that. I am angry at the rapists, for they invaded my home, my privacy and subjected me to one of the most violent acts that one human being can inflict on another. But I am angered, too, by the insensitivity that I see in our society. There are still many people who do not understand rape. Rape is an act of criminal violence. It is an expression of men's anguish toward women, of physical power, a conscious process of intimidation as well as an ugly sexual invasion. It is an attack against body

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and mind. Rape is the taking of sex through brutal force. And it is part of male mythology that women enjoy being raped and that they cannot be raped against their will.

I am angry when I hear judges like the one in Wisconsin ask the prosecuting attorney, "are we supposed to take an impressionable person 15 or 16 years old and punish the person (rapist) because (he) reacts normally?" The male judge had more compassion for the male criminal than for the female victim. His words only support the falsehood that rape is a "normal" sexual outlet.

I am angry when I hear lawmakers like Congressman Ed Patten of New Jersey, who said, in a conference committee dealing with the Labor-HEW Appropriations bill, that the issue is not whether or not the rape was forced but how much the woman enjoyed it. This kind of cruel and thoughtless statement leads to the cruel, thoughtless and discriminatory Hyde amendment. Recent data presented by Secretary Califano demonstrates that 99% of the low income women in need are denied federal funds for abortions, and yet there are many Members of Congress who claim that the present restrictions on the Hyde amendment are not enough, that the rape clause is a loophole which allows anyone who wants an abortion to claim she was raped. Such unconscionable statements by elected officials reflect the insensitivity in Congress to rape victims in general and a complete disregard for the integrity of women. Recent votes in Congress and statements from lawmakers merely confirm a basic principle expressed by Susan Brownmiller in her book, Against Our Will:

There is good reason for men to hold tenaciously to the notion that 'all women want to be raped.' Because rape is an act that men do in the name of masculinity, it is in their interest to believe that women also want rape done, in the name of femininity.

I suppose that if a male Congressman or Senator believes women enjoy rape, he might also believe that women would not mind a pregnancy that results from rape.

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If I had become pregnant as a result of the rape and was told there were no funds to pay for an abortion, I would have found some means to abort - I would even have considered a risky self-induced abortion. There is no way that I would be twice victimized by such a forced pregnancy. It is hard even to imagine suffering nine months of pregnancy which would continually remind me of the horror of rape. And how would I behave as a mother to a child who would be a visual symbol of that violent act? I am fortunate because, if necessary, I could afford to pay for an abortion. But Congress has passed a discriminatory law that tells low-income women they do not have the same rights as wealthier women. In the years before abortion was legal, the rich could find a way to buy safe medical abortions and poor women suffered at the hands of criminal abortionists. Now, an official government policy, passed by Congress and sanctioned by President Carter, endorses this discriminatory policy.

I began by saying my life has been forever changed by rape. Part of that change is learning to live with fear and learning to direct anger in constructive ways. People who write the laws that affect women who live in poverty are all too often entirely unaware of the impact of these laws. This is obviously the case when the laws are directly related to reproductive decisions.