

Lifting the Curtain of Silence: Survivors Speak About Rape Behind Bars

Lara Stemple, JD

In the struggle to end sexual violence behind bars, personal stories of abuse serve as an important advocacy tool for organizations such as Stop Prisoner Rape (SPR). The first-person accounts of men and women who have endured this abuse help to personalize, and thereby, humanize the issue. Statistics about the frequency of prisoner rape are powerful, but they can also be numbing, conveying the sense that nothing can be done to stop the problem. Personal accounts in contrast, have an emotional impact that encourages action. Speaking out about abuse also helps survivors, freeing them from a sense of shame, guilt, and humiliation and providing an avenue of political engagement that can be tremendously empowering. This article presents the first-person accounts of four individuals whose lives were powerfully affected by rape behind bars.

J Am Acad Psychiatry Law 31:361–3, 2003

A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths, in Stalin's haunting words, is merely a statistic. For more than 20 years, Stop Prisoner Rape (SPR) has worked to bring the tragedy of the individual prisoner rape survivor to the forefront of its fight against this abuse. Faced with an indifferent public seemingly inured to the magnitude of the problem, SPR seeks to portray the abuse as more than just a statistic. Throughout the history of the movement against rape behind bars, individual stories told by survivors of this violence have served as a powerful and essential advocacy tool.

Several of the leaders of the decades-long drive to bring this issue to the public's attention have been survivors of prisoner rape who have refused to remain silent about the abuse they endured behind bars. Indeed, their stories of rape have served as the centerpiece of SPR's advocacy for many years. These survivors have used their own experience of rape to personalize and, thereby, humanize the abuse.

Victims of prisoner rape have been left beaten and bloodied, they have suffered long-term psychological harm, they have been impregnated against their will, and they have contracted HIV. Yet public indifference about rape behind bars remains profound.¹

When seeking to raise awareness about the abuse, we have found that astounding statistics about its prevalence can numb the listener to the injustice or

can convey the sense that little can be done. In contrast, nothing is more compelling than another person's experience, vividly related. In hearing a survivor's testimony, each of us feels and understands the full weight of the tragedy. Because we understand, we care. We are open to learning about the problem, to changing our minds, and to lending a hand to help work toward a solution.

Talking about prisoner rape also helps survivors. Survivors report that telling their stories helps to unburden them of the shame, guilt, and humiliation of being raped. Others welcome the opportunity to speak out as a way to fight back against a social injustice. Because survivors are often ignored by the institutions in which the abuse takes place,² providing a forum in which others will listen helps to validate the survivor's experience. And, significantly, by speaking out, they let other survivors know that they are not alone.

Finally, emphasizing survivor testimony helps to ensure a central role for the core constituency in the advocacy process. Change cannot happen in a vacuum; the legitimacy of the movement depends on the inclusion of those in whose name it is advanced. Today, more survivors than ever before are actively engaged in advocacy by speaking to policymakers and the media about the abuse they have endured.

One example of this effort occurred recently in the course of advocating for the first-ever federal legislation designed to address the abuse, the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003. SPR brought seven male

Address correspondence to: Lara Stemple, JD, Executive Director, Stop Prisoner Rape, 6303 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 204, Los Angeles, CA 90048. E-mail: info@spr.org

and female survivors of rape behind bars to speak on Capitol Hill at an event called, "Stories of Survival: Recognizing Rape Behind Bars." Never before had a group of survivors of prisoner rape spoken at the Capitol, making this a powerful "first" in the history of an issue traditionally shrouded in secrecy. Although the Members of Congress cosponsoring the bill made introductory remarks, they stepped aside and allowed the seven men and women to tell their personal stories, knowing that these stories would serve as the most powerful argument for ending the widespread tolerance of this abuse. In 2002, SPR also submitted versions of the following four stories for entry into the Congressional record as part of the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on the legislation.

Narrative 1

When our son was 16, he and his brother set a dumpster on fire in an alley in our neighborhood. The authorities decided to make an example of him. Even though only about \$500 in damage was caused by the fire, they sentenced him to eight years in an adult prison.

We were frightened for him from the start. At 16, our son was a small and lightweight guy. And as a first-time offender, we knew he might be targeted by older, tougher, adult inmates.

Then, our worst nightmares came true. Our son wrote us a letter telling us he'd been raped. A medical examination had confirmed the rape. A doctor found tears in his rectum and ordered an HIV test, because, he told us, one-third of the prisoners there were HIV positive.

But that was only the beginning. Our son knew if he went back into the general population, he would be in danger. He wrote to the authorities requesting to be moved to a safer place. He went through all the proper channels, but he was denied.

After the first rape, he was returned to the general population. There, he was repeatedly beaten and forced to perform oral sex and raped. He wrote for help again. In his grievance letter he wrote, "I have been sexually and physically assaulted several times, by several inmates. I am afraid to go to sleep, to shower, and just about everything else. I am afraid that when I am doing these things, I might die at any minute. Please sir, help me."

Still, officials told him that he did not meet "emergency grievance criteria." We all tried to get him to a

safe place. I called the warden, trying to figure out what was going on. He said our son needed to grow up. He said, "This happens every day; learn to deal with it. It's no big deal."

We were desperate. Our son started to violate rules so that he would be put in segregation. After he was finally put in segregation, we had about a 10-minute phone conversation. He was crying. He said, "Mom, I'm emotionally and mentally destroyed."

That was the last time I heard his voice. Our son hanged himself in his cell. He was 17 and felt afraid, and ashamed, and hopeless. He lay in a coma for four months before he died.

We know that what happened to our son could have been prevented. There are ways to protect the vulnerable inmates and ways to respond to the needs of prisoners who have been sexually assaulted. Even so, vulnerable prisoners are being sexually brutalized across the country every day. Our son tried to ask for help, and we tried too. But nothing was done.

Rape in prison should no longer be tolerated. It destroys human dignity, it spreads disease, it makes people more angry and violent. It kills.

This is not what we mean when we say justice. Rape should not be considered a part of punishment. Rape is always a crime.

Narrative 2

In 1968, I was arrested for civil disobedience. I was placed in a cell with 30 other prisoners, for the next 24 hours I was tortured and gang raped.

To add to the horror I was experiencing, I later learned from a cellmate that my rape was deliberately orchestrated by the guard who put me there as something called a "turning-out party." Among other things, the guards lied to my cell mates, telling them that I was a child molester and promised them an extra ration of Jell-O if they would "take care of" me.

Two years later, I got married and started a business that was quite successful for a while. But as often happens in post-traumatic stress disorder, there was a delay of about six years before the full impact of my rape hit me. The trauma of the experience came back daily, and I was no longer able to live my normal life. The only trauma I have had in my life was the rape in jail. I lost my business and my wife. I was homeless for 10 years, until I received a disability pension from the Veterans Administration in 1987 for the mental health disability that resulted from my rape.

Rape is crazy-making. It may be the ultimate humiliation, with very serious and long-lasting psychic damage to the victim as well as to close loved ones who are secondary victims.

I have struggled for a long time to try to understand this kind of cruel act, and while I still don't understand it, I am sure part of it was politically motivated. I was a peace activist. To the guard and the government at that time, I was the enemy.

Whatever the reason, however, my story is not unique. I consider my rape and resulting trauma mild compared with most of the prisoner rape cases I've heard or read about. Some survivors of prisoner rape report that guards sometimes use rape as a management tool, putting people in dangerous situations to punish them and to reward the would-be rapist.

I was tortured, the authorities knew it was happening, and no one did anything to stop it. In fact, it was encouraged.

Narrative 3

I was raped by my supervisor during my incarceration at a women's facility. Other state employees had told me to be careful with him and not to turn my back. One day he called over to me at the shop and had me get the toolbox. He said that we were going to the Facility Gym to fix a short in the wiring system. At this time there was no one on the main yard or in the gym, as both places were closed.

We reached the gym and went inside. I stopped to use the restroom as he proceeded on through the gym.

When I came out, I called to him to see where he was. And he answered. I followed his voice to the back of the gym, past the office. He was standing by an open door that led into a catwalk between the gym and the library. As I stepped in, he stepped in and closed and bolted the door. He flipped the light switch off. It was pitch black in there. He pushed me down onto a mattress and proceeded to pull down my pants and panties. He bit my forearm in three different places, I had bruises on my legs and back where I fought him and tried to turn over, as I was face down. Anyway, I ended up hysterical.

I never got to talk to any police officers. They never let me talk to anyone, no police, no detectives—nothing.

Narrative 4

My rape took place very shortly after arriving at a county jail. It took place in a shower with no staff around. I was a pretrial detainee at the time. I had never been in a jail before, and I had come in with an injury to my side so I was not expecting to be attacked. The rape resulted in a life-long disease: herpes type II. I have also been diagnosed now with posttraumatic stress disorder. I believe rape is used as a weapon to harm.

Judges either don't care or don't know what to do to protect those they incarcerate.

I have nightmares that come every night, and uncontrolled waves of fear toward correctional officers. I don't know how to work this out with my family. Although they are very supportive they want me to be more "up" and I don't know how to do that. A person who has been raped has no ability to heal without some kind of change of attitude in the system.

In many correctional systems, there just are no courses to teach correctional officers and staff including wardens how to handle this problem.

The victim needs to be treated as a victim and not told to stuff it. The same officers that abused me were the ones who turned the other way during my rape, and still they asked me to share how I feel.

My feelings are like walking into a town that was hit by a nuclear weapon. You're there and there is not much, only gray dirt and skeletons of buildings you used to know. Everything is gone as you remember it.

Everything seems changed and you're told to just start over. Where do you start? The people are changed or have moved on. I feel changed forever from the fallout.

References

1. Dumond RW, Dumond DA: The treatment of sexual assault victims, in *Prison Sex: Practice and Policy*. Edited by Hensley C. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002, p 74
2. Human Rights Watch: *No Escape: Male Rape in U.S. Prisons*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2001, p 144