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COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

Before the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security

2138 Rayburn House Office Building

**PREPARED TESTIMONY of Evan Rachel Wood
Artist and Advocate, Survivor
Implementation of the Survivors' Bill of Rights Act**

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Chairman Sensenbrenner, Ranking Member Jackson Lee, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today

My Name is Evan Rachel Wood and I am an artist. But I am also a domestic violence and sexual assault survivor and the single mother of a young boy.

When I was 5 years old I started working in film and every day since then I have worked to reach the very privileged place I am aware I occupy. I am here today to use my position as an artist, survivor, mother, and advocate to bring a human voice to the population 25 million survivors in the US who are currently experiencing inequality under the law, and who desperately need basic civil rights.

I struggle to speak to you today, because I am not sure what words are appropriate when discussing this issue. However, if you can't hear the whole truth you will never know true empathy and I believe in the saying, "If we have to live through it, you should have to hear it" .

This past year and the massive movements such as 'Me too' and 'Times Up' have been extremely empowering and validating for survivors but also incredibly painful. While no one had to tell me that Rape was such a worldwide epidemic, to see the flood of stories so similar to my own was both freeing

and soul crushing. Waves of memories and detail came flooding into my brain every time I read the words, “I froze”

I thought I was the only human who experienced this. I carried so much guilt and confusion about my response to the abuse. I accepted my powerlessness and felt I deserved it somehow. Why? After years of processing and looking back, I finally asked myself, “why would you feel this way?”

There are 2 specific instances of sexual assault I have experienced that really stick out in my mind. In fact, they are burned into my brain. Branded there for life, a mental scar that I feel, every day.

My experience with domestic violence was this.

Toxic mental, physical, and sexual abuse, which started slow, but escalated over time , including threats against my life, severe gas-lighting and brainwashing, waking up to the man that claimed to love me raping what he believed to be my unconscious body, and the worst part, sick rituals of binding me up by my hands and feet to be mentally and physically tortured until my abuser felt I had “proven my love for them”

In this moment, while I was tied up and being beaten and being told unspeakable things, I truly felt like I could die, not just because my abuser said to me, “I could kill you right now.” But because in that moment, I felt like I left my body. I was too afraid to run, he would find me. I froze, and it was as if I could see myself from the outside and for the first time in months I felt something, utter shame and despair. I had no idea what to do to change my situation. So I went numb, soon I couldn’t feel anything. I wasn’t alive.

My self esteem and spirit were broken.

I was deeply terrified and that fear lives with me to this day.

What makes me more hurt and more angry than the actual rape and abuse itself, was that piece of me that was stolen, which altered the course of my life.

Because of this abuse and my already spiritless person, when I was pushed onto the floor of a locked storage closet by another attacker after hours at a bar, my body instinctively knew what to do; disappear, go numb, make it go away. Being abused and raped previously made it easier for me to be raped again, not the other way around.

Not a day goes by when I don't hear the words this man whispered into my ear over and over, "you're going to be fine, you're going to be fine, I promise, you're going to be fine" and my small voice saying back, "no, no, no, no, no." until it faded into nothing. I remember the feeling of shutting down or 'freezing' and utter shock taking over. I couldn't even make a sound. I felt a piece of me disappear, a piece that has never returned. In other words, I was not fine. I am not fine.

I was told the signs. My mother is also a survivor, but even she couldn't protect her daughter from the messages women and men are fed by society that plays a role in determining our fate, or the dark magic of gas-lighting. Sometimes we are not only pushed down by our attackers but held there with the knowledge there may be no safe place to go.

The aftermath of rape is a huge part of the conversation that needs much more attention and In this case I can speak from my own experiences. So often we speak of these assaults as no more than a few minutes of awfulness, but the scars last a lifetime. I cannot stress this enough.

Even though these experiences happened a decade ago, I still struggle with the aftermath; my relationships suffer, my partners suffer, my mental and physical health suffers. Seven years after my rapes; plural, I was diagnosed with long term PTSD, which I had been living with all that time without knowledge about my condition. I simply thought I was going crazy.

I struggled with depression, addiction, agoraphobia, night terrors, so many times a sleeping partner of mine has awoken to their love screaming in the night and gasping for air in a pool of sweat, after having some sort of vivid dream of my abuser or hearing them say my name so loudly in my ear, or hallucinating a vision of them standing in the corner of my room. The feeling of paralysis returns when there is a loud noise and I am home alone, convinced someone is coming to hurt me I stay awake all night clutching a baseball bat which began to replace my distraught and absent partners as trust and touch became increasingly more difficult. I struggled with self harm, to the point of 2 suicide attempts which landed me in a psychiatric hospital for a short period of time. This was however a turning point in my life and when I started seeking professional help to deal with my trauma and mental stress. Others are not so fortunate and because of this, rape is often more than a few minutes of trauma, but a slow death.

I would like to say to my attackers, that I don't hate you, I feel sorry for you. I am not here to shame you, I want to understand you and want you to understand me, but you have to listen first.

This makes me think of my son, the world he will be raised in, and the day I will have to explain to him what rape means and why it happened to his mother.

When I knew I was to become a mother, I prayed for a boy. However, I realized, it could be just as easy for my son to fall prey to the lies society tells us about men. Things like ‘they have uncontrollable impulses to hurt people.’ How cruel to tell a child this is just how all men are and how cruel to turn a blind eye to all the ways we perpetuate this lie.

So I am also here to advocate for men and especially my son, who I hope grows up knowing he is much more valuable than that, and who I can only hope I will set an example for by continuing to fight for him, myself, and all the people affected by abuse, Because that is our job as parents and as leaders.

The way we change that starts with proper education and recognition of the humanity of everyone, regardless of their status as “a man” or “a survivor.” --not just about the medical terms, but about true connection with another person.

Above all this starts with the rule of law. It starts with people leading by example and coming to the aid of our girls but also our young boys, who are just as susceptible to the toxic messages we send THEM to break THEIR spirit and change their fate.

This bill is just one step in the right direction of setting the bar higher for what is right and what the standard will be that we set for Society. The recognition of basic civil rights for sexual assault survivors serves as a first step, a safety net that may help save someone life one day. It's called progress and it starts here.