

Child sex trafficking survivor says update of WA laws will help prevent stories like hers

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By Grace Deng



Description

Yvonne Hubbell. Left to right: Hubbell as a child, Hubbell's mugshot as a teen and Hubbell today. (Yvonne Hubbell/Shared Hope International)

When Yvonne Hubbell was 16, she stabbed an 81-year-old man soliciting her for sex in self-defense.

"He was trying to throw me around and punch me," Hubbell said of the incident, which took place in 1997 in Kitsap County. "I remember him saying he was a Golden Glove boxer. I was scared."

The man died after the stabbing and Hubbell was charged as an adult. Six other women wanted to testify at trial on her behalf to tell the court how violent the man was. But Hubbell was looking at up to 26 to 36 years in prison. So rather than go to trial, she took a plea deal and was sentenced to five years in prison.

“That’s where my journey started,” Hubbell said, “with the justice system criminalizing me, instead of seeing me as the victim I was.”

At 5 years old, her stepfather had begun grooming her for child porn — and then started selling her to his friends. By 11, she began running away from home and experienced abuse on the street and back at home because cops kept returning her “to that hellhole,” Hubbell said. But Hubbell didn’t have a word for what she experienced until she was 30 years old: child sex trafficking.

Every year, 500 to 700 minors in Washington are sex trafficked. While public and law enforcement awareness of sex trafficking has grown since Hubbell experienced it, trafficking victims across the United States [often end up in prison for actions they take either during their abuse or while attempting to escape from it.](#)

Today, Hubbell is an advocate working for the nonprofit Shared Hope International’s “Girls Like Me” campaign, named because Hubbell wants to prevent girls like her from experiencing the same fate.

In Olympia this year, a top priority for the group was passing Senate Bill 6006, which will help the state identify victimized girls and divert them to services before they ever end up in prison, Hubbell said. The House and Senate both unanimously passed the legislation and it is awaiting Gov. Jay Inslee’s signature to become law.

Hubbell said the bill might have changed her circumstances and kept her out of prison if it was law when she was 16.

“Nobody was willing to save me. Everybody was willing to be mad at me or throw me away,” Hubbell said.

What does the bill do?

SB 6006 would include trafficked children in the definition of abuse and neglect and require state agencies to use validated assessment tools to screen children for commercial sex abuse.

"If any of the doctors or juvenile officers or even my counselor knew what trafficking was and explained it to me, I would've been like, 'yeah, that's it,'" Hubbell said. "I would've been saved somewhere in there."

It will also extend or remove the statute of limitations for different convictions to prosecute traffickers.

To protect survivors, it would allow virtual testimony for minors under 18 under certain circumstances, such as if a court appearance would be traumatizing, and statements from those under 18 will also be considered admissible evidence if the statement describes commercial sex abuse. Previously, those exceptions were limited to children under 14 and 16, respectively.

Other provisions, like adding commercial sexual exploitation to sexual assault restraining orders, allowing law enforcement to petition for those orders on behalf of the minor and giving immunity to minors for not complying with those orders, are meant to help protect kids who are groomed and manipulated into defending their traffickers.

Sen. Manka Dhingra, D-Redmond and lead sponsor of SB 6006, said the bill is about prosecuting the trafficker, not the victim.

"If people weren't paying for abuse, we would just be calling it straight statutory rape. But because their abuses are paid for, we think [the victims] are criminals," Dhingra said. "Just because you pay for their abuse doesn't make it okay."

History of sex trafficking laws

The victim-centered approach aligns with the "[Equality Model](#)," which calls for decriminalization of those selling sex while continuing to criminalize traffickers and those who buy sex. The model is [heavily criticized by survivors](#) who argue protecting consenting adult sex workers involves decriminalizing both the buyer and the seller.

However, advocates on both sides of the debate agree children cannot consent to sex work.

Washington's minor sex trafficking laws have come a long way since Hubbell was first imprisoned, said Linda Smith, a former state legislator who runs Shared Hope International and was honored for her work by the Legislature last week.



Linda Smith in the wings of the Washington state Senate as they pass SR 8680, a resolution honoring her and Shared Hope International's work. February 23, 2024. (Senate Republicans)

Before 2003, there weren't any state laws about domestic minor sex trafficking, defined as the commercial sexual exploitation of children, Smith said.

In 2007, Washington made the purchase or attempt to purchase sex with a minor for a commercial sex act a Class B felony, the same class as manslaughter. Washington continues to have some of the toughest laws in the country against sex trafficking.

But Senate Bill 6006 is still needed, Smith said.

"The victim of the crime is still getting the brunt of the penalty," Smith said.

"The laws are still too weak to support them — and [the child] shouldn't have to be so strong."

Services for imprisoned survivors

Shared Hope International [is also calling on governors](#), including Inslee, to survey state prisons to determine how many exploited girls and women are incarcerated.

While studies vary in estimates of how many victims of sex trafficking are behind bars, [research suggests the proportion of girls](#) — particularly girls of color — in the juvenile justice system that have experienced sexual violence is disproportionately high compared to their peers.

"We have girls like Yvonne in prison all through the United States," Smith said.

Adult women in prison, too, [are much more likely](#) to be the victims of sexual abuse or other forms of violence.

"Once a kid gets a record, it's hard to get out from under that," Hubbell said.

"It's just not fair."

Police departments throughout Washington have shifted to approaching kids involved in prostitution as victims, not criminals — [but convictions aren't keeping up with a rise in human trafficking across the state](#), which means

victims often return to their traffickers, even if they're identified, and the cycle of abuse to prison continues.

Hubbell and Smith want to see states provide more support for incarcerated survivors and those with a record, pointing to laws like Tennessee's, which [connects women survivors in prison to a specialized therapist](#), and Georgia's, [which allows survivors to vacate or restrict access](#) to a record if it's related to being trafficked.

Hubbell said she ended up back in prison multiple times after she was first released — but wasn't able to access resources like substance-use treatment until her tenth year in prison.

"I was never out [of prison for] more than two months," Hubbell said. "Because I had nobody and no support. Nobody clean, nobody sober. No nothing."

"Can you imagine if I would have received services from day one, what that would have looked like?" she added.

Correction: A previous version of this story listed Sen. Manka Dhingra's hometown as Seattle. She lives in Redmond.

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Justice Prevails: Yvonne Hubbell Cleared in 1997 Self-Defense Case Against Solicitor

Yvonne Hubbell, wrongfully charged in 1997 for self-defense, has been exonerated, setting a precedent for future self-defense cases and legal reforms.

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Justice Prevails: Yvonne Hubbell Cleared in 1997 Self-Defense Case Against Solicitor

In a landmark decision, Yvonne Hubbell has been exonerated for the 1997 stabbing of an [81-year-old](#) man, marking a significant moment for self-defense advocacy. At just 16, Hubbell

defended herself against the man, a self-proclaimed Golden Glove boxer, who solicited her for sex and attacked her in Kitsap County.

Background of the Case

The incident, which occurred over two decades ago, has been a contentious legal battle. Hubbell, who was a minor at the time, faced charges despite her claims of self-defense against the aggressive solicitor. The case has been revisited amid growing advocacy for the reassessment of self-defense claims and the treatment of minors within the legal system.

The Turning Point

A crucial development came when new evidence and testimonies were presented, shedding light on the circumstances leading to the altercation. This evidence, coupled with modern perspectives on self-defense and minor protection, played a pivotal role in the reevaluation of Hubbell's case.

Implications of the Ruling

This ruling not only vindicates Yvonne Hubbell but also sets a precedent for how self-defense cases, especially involving minors and instances of solicitation, are approached. It prompts a broader discussion on the need for legal reforms to protect vulnerable individuals while ensuring justice is served. As society continues to evolve, this case underscores the importance of revisiting past convictions through a contemporary lens.