

IN HER WORDS

A Fashion Show With an Unexpected Focus: Sexual Assault Survivors

The show, organized by Rise, was designed to upend a question often asked of survivors: ‘What were you wearing?’



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“Tonight is about us reclaiming our power.”

— Amanda Nguyen, founder of the civil rights organization Rise, which hosted a fashion show at New York Fashion Week to celebrate survivors

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On Friday evening, in the middle of New York Fashion Week, a small crowd dressed in everything from evening gowns and suits to T-shirts and sneakers, descended on the Museum of Modern Art for a fashion show.

But this show wasn't about a new collection of clothes or the designers behind them. The focus was on sexual assault — a form of violence so pervasive that the World Health Organization has deemed it a “global health problem of epidemic proportions.”

To a soundtrack of pop anthems by Demi Lovato and Ariana Grande, survivors walked down a catwalk set up in the lobby of the MoMA alongside activists and an eclectic sprinkling of stars: The actor and former NFL player Terry Crews, a survivor himself, opened the show in a shiny black suit and knee-high boots; the actor Kelly Marie Tran, of Star Wars fame, strutted out in a blue jumpsuit and glittering boots; and the astronaut Kellie Gerardi walked in her navy blue flight suit. Chanel Miller, the artist and author of “Know My Name,” who, in her sexual assault case wrote a victim statement in 2016 as “Emily Doe” that was so powerful it went viral on BuzzFeed, glided down the catwalk in a striped floor-length wrap dress.





Terry Crews, who opened the fashion show, gave testimony with Ms. Nguyen at the Senate Judiciary Committee in 2018 on “the implementation of the Survivors’ Bill of Rights.” Stephanie Mei-Ling for The New York Times

The event was hosted by the civil rights organization Rise to create a space for survivors that celebrated “not just surviving, but thriving,” said Amanda Nguyen, founder of the organization and a rape survivor.

“The words ‘What were you wearing?’ or ‘What are you wearing?’ in the fashion context are fun,” Ms. Nguyen said. “It’s literally saying, ‘I love the choices that you made.’”

“But years ago, when I was raped, I had to answer the same question and it was meant to be shameful. It’s victim blaming — it was meant to say, ‘You incurred the violence against you because of the outfit you were wearing,’” she said.



Kelly Marie Tran walking in the Rise survivor fashion show. Stephanie Mei-Ling for The New York Times

For the survivors walking — dressed by designers including Chloé, Diane von Furstenberg and Veronica Beard — the show represented a way to confront that question head on and upend the stigma associated with sexual assault.

“We’re taking back something that was taken away from us — our self-confidence,” said one of the participants, Jessica Long, a managing director at an investment firm in New York who, several years ago, was drugged and assaulted while on a work trip overseas. She also volunteers for Rise.

‘Flutter of Justice’

A few hours before the start of the fashion show, in a hotel suite in Midtown Manhattan, Ms. Nguyen floated around in a white Áo Dài — a traditional Vietnamese dress, and a nod to her heritage — that she would wear while walking down the runway that night. She raised her arms to showcase the outfit’s long, flowing sleeves.



Ms. Nguyen tries on her outfit before the show. It was designed by the artists Suzanne McClelland and Alix Pearlstein, and covered in the text from the federal Survivors' Bill of Rights. Stephanie Mei-Ling for The New York Times

Her outfit was covered in the text from the federal Survivors' Bill of Rights — legislation that was proposed by Ms. Nguyen in 2016 and, in a rare example of bipartisanship, sailed through both houses of Congress without a single dissenting vote. It was signed into law by President Barack Obama.

“You’ll look like a delicate flutter of justice,” a friend told her, as Ms. Nguyen practiced her walk.

The dress was a collaboration with the artists Suzanne McClelland and Alix Pearlstein as part of their recent series that places text onto garments. In 2019, they created a trench coat with all the questions that were asked of Christine Blasey Ford, who accused Justice Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault, in her Senate testimony. In 2020, the artists printed Anita Hill’s testimony against Justice Clarence Thomas onto a shirt dress.

As for the Survivors’ Bill of Rights, it was inspired by Ms. Nguyen’s own personal experience.

In 2013, in her final year at Harvard, she was raped in her dormitory. After getting a rape kit at the hospital — invasive exams that collect crucial evidence in assault cases — and speaking with legal advice groups, she learned two things: That rape trials often take years, even decades, with low conviction rates, and, unless a survivor presses charges, rape kits are often destroyed before they are even tested, though timelines vary by state.

In Massachusetts, where Ms. Nguyen was living at the time, rape kits were being destroyed within six months, even though the statute of limitations was 15 years. That meant that twice a year, Ms. Nguyen had to apply for an extension to keep her kit in the system, forcing her to relive the traumatic experience over and over.

“I just remember feeling so betrayed. Survivors are told to go to the police and go to the hospital to get a rape kit only to find out that the system is like a Kafkaesque game of ‘Saw,’” she said, referring to the horror movie franchise. “Why is the deck so stacked against survivors?”

Navigating the labyrinthine process spurred Ms. Nguyen to create her organization, Rise, and lobby lawmakers for better protections. The Survivors’ Bill of Rights mandates that rape kits are preserved for a state’s maximum statute of limitations, that victims are not charged a fee for getting rape kits and that victims can access results from the rape kit.

Since then, Rise has helped pass similar protections in 30 states and D.C., and, in 2018, Ms. Nguyen was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for her activism.

Over the last two years, Ms. Nguyen has also been spearheading an effort for a global version of the Survivors' Bill of Rights, in the form of a U.N. resolution that will be introduced by Sierra Leone at the General Assembly later this month.

Broadly, the resolution would urge world leaders to provide "access to justice for survivors of sexual violence," said Ambassador Victoria Sulimani of Sierra Leone, who gave a speech at the fashion show on Friday and walked down the catwalk.





Ambassador Victoria Sulimani of Sierra Leone taking part in the Rise survivor fashion show. The country has been working with Ms. Nguyen on a U.N. resolution to provide “access to justice for survivors of sexual violence.” Stephanie Mei-Ling for The New York Times

But, like most General Assembly resolutions, it would be nonbinding with few enforcement mechanisms.

‘Multitudes’

In 2018, the Senate Judiciary Committee invited Ms. Nguyen back to Congress to provide testimony on “the implementation of the Survivors’ Bill of Rights” and to “explore additional ways to encourage more victims of sexual violence to come forward.”

The committee also invited Mr. Crews to share his experience of being assaulted by a top executive at the agency that previously represented him.

Mr. Crews and Ms. Nguyen stayed in touch after the testimony and became close friends — “she actually hangs with my daughters,” Mr. Crews noted — so when she asked him to walk in the show, he “jumped at the opportunity.”

“I want to give this issue all the publicity and attention that it needs,” he added.



Backstage, Ms. Nguyen gathered with the more than a dozen people who walked in the show. Stephanie Mei-Ling for The New York Times

Before the start of the show, Ms. Nguyen gave a speech. “Tonight is about us reclaiming our power,” she said. “We are multitudes.”

Six dancers crept into the room and performed a routine titled *You Are Safe*, eventually stripping their costumes to reveal nude bodysuits covered in the words “attack,” “target,” “community” and “dignity.”

Backstage, Ms. Nguyen gave the more than a dozen celebrities, activists and survivors a pep talk.

“This was a mad dream,” she told them, “but now my favorite people in the world are here. Just have fun.”

Then they streamed out wearing graphic printed streetwear, patterned cocktail dresses, monochromatic suits and T-shirts.

Ms. Nguyen closed out the show. She walked down with her arms outstretched so the sleeves of her Áo Dài formed a kind of superhero cape behind her while Little Mix’s “Wings” played in the background.

The crowd erupted into applause and cheers.

Sanam Yar contributed reporting.