

“Why Isn’t Everyone Talking About This?”

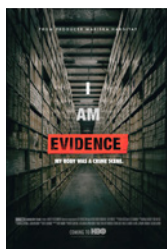
ACTRESS, FILMMAKER, AND ACTIVIST
MARISKA HARGITAY ON GETTING JUSTICE
FOR VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

I got a sense early on that *Law & Order: SVU* and my role on it were going to have more significance in my life than I’d initially anticipated. After I started filming the first season in 1999, I was invited to a dinner for Mt. Sinai Hospital’s Sexual Assault Violence Intervention program to honor [the show’s creator] Dick Wolf. That was the first time I heard the sexual-violence statistics that to this day rock me back on my heels: At some point in her life, one in three women reports being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend. I started doing the math whenever I was in a group of women, and I was just floored. And I thought, “Why isn’t everyone talking about this?”

I was looking for ways to respond, beyond simply being outraged, so I decided to become a rape crisis counselor to learn more. As I was educating myself, *SVU* began airing. Almost 20 years ago, the conversation around sexual violence was very different, virtually nonexistent, but I think the show helped give people permission to talk about it more openly. That’s when I started getting letters from survivors, many of them saying, “Your show saved my life. I’ve never told anyone this before.”

I wanted to continue to build out my response, so I started the Joyful Heart Foundation in 2004 to help survivors heal and reclaim their lives. A key element in that process can be the pursuit of justice. That’s why we’ve prioritized the elimination of the rape-kit backlog, the hundreds of thousands of untested kits sitting in storage facilities in the U.S. It is still one of the most shocking demonstrations of how these crimes—and women—have been regarded in this country. We’re working toward passing comprehensive legislation in all 50 states [to eliminate the backlog].

We are obviously in an unprecedented moment of cultural change on the issue of sexual violence. I am so deeply grateful for the courage of the women who have come forward, who have made the world pivot. And I will always look up to the heroes in this movement, like Gloria Steinem. This has been a truly awe-inspiring display of strength in numbers—and the strength of collective outrage has brought



Inset, from top:
Hargitay in
character on
*Law & Order: Special
Victims Unit*;
the poster for
her upcoming
documentary

about this hard-won time of change. We must continue to move forward, fearlessly and relentlessly. I don’t want my kids to grow up in a victim-blaming culture.

Outrage is still a very potent source of fuel for me. At the same time, I think that one of the many reasons this change is so vital is that it will ultimately make space for vulnerability, which I consider a superpower, in both women and men. Compassion and empathy toward survivors are vital in this process, now more than ever. You don’t need to be an expert to make a difference—I’m not. There’s deep, transformational power in the act of bearing witness, in listening.

It has been an incredible privilege to tackle these issues on- and offscreen. It’s also been overwhelming at times, but whenever things get difficult and I feel like I can’t do something, I always hear my father asking me, “Why not?” He’d always ask me that question when I was younger, and it really taught me that no one can ever tell me what I can or can’t do. —AS TOLD TO SAMANTHA SIMON

In her documentary, I Am Evidence, premiering April 16 on HBO, Hargitay sits down with sexual-assault survivors and discusses the backlog of rape kits in the U.S. For more information on her foundation, visit joyfulheartfoundation.org.