

TESTIMONY OF
NADIYAH SHEREFF
YOUNG WOMAN FORMERLY DETAINED IN THE
JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

**SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING
GIRLS IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM:
STRATEGIES TO HELP GIRLS ACHIEVE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL**

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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My name is Nadiyah Shereff. I am 23 years old. I was born in a women's prison where my mother was locked up. When I was 2 days old I was taken from my mother and placed with my Grandmother in San Francisco, California. I never knew my father and my mother was incarcerated my entire life.

I was raised by my grandmother who was forced to go on welfare to pay for the extra expense of caring for me. We lived in public housing also known as the projects. Every day, on my way to school, I had to navigate through drug dealers, drug addicts and poor folks looking for their next crime victim. I saw my first shooting when I was 9 years old. My house was accidentally shot into twice, luckily we were not hit. Although shootings were a regular scene where I lived, the instantaneous fear that comes when you hear a gunshot always left me and my family trembling for days and saying things like "we got to get out of these projects". We all knew it was a very real possibility that one of us could be accidently or purposefully shot at and killed.

Over the years I witnessed countless murders, many of which were classmates and friends. This made it difficult for me to focus in school and before long I began smoking marijuana and drinking as a way to escape the daily violence. At that time I didn't see much of a future for myself, due in part to a lack of positive role models. The positive role models that existed at that time were not made visible to me in my neighborhood or in my school. I attended the worst of the worst public schools complete with run-down facilities, out-dated-books, curricula that undervalued minority communities, and overall had a very low standard of excellence.

At 13, I got arrested for the first time and was charged with assault. I was taken to San Francisco's juvenile hall and began a cycle of going in and out of detention. I was locked up ten different times within a two year period. Inside juvie I met other girls like myself that were there for prostitution, assault, theft, and truancy. We were not violent girls. We were girls who were hurting. All of us were from the same neighborhoods, poor families and seemed to have the same disposition of trauma, anger mixed with hopelessness. Being confined to a tiny cement room was one of the hardest things I have ever had to experience. Being locked up all I could do was reflect on my life but it didn't seem to help. I became even more withdrawn and angry. I felt completely disconnected from my family, from friends and the counselors inside offered no support for the real problems I was facing. I felt like nobody believed that I could actually do something positive with my life especially the staff inside the facilities, who treated me like a case number not like a person. At that time what I needed, was to talk to folks about all I had been through, to feel connected to people, to feel useful so that I could find my own direction in life. I needed to heal from the trauma and to be supported with love and encouragement.

It was inside the walls of juvenile hall that I was introduced to the Center for Young Women's Development also known as CYWD. Members of their organization came monthly to meet with all the young women in lock up. When it was my turn to meet with them, Marlene Sanchez who is now the Executive Director, talked to me in a way that showed me she felt like I had the potential to do something with my life. She said "as soon as you get out come straight to CYWD, we can support you". I learned that they ran a program for previously incarcerated young women run by young

women who had also been locked up. I mean it when I say this. That meeting changed my life forever.

Once out, I applied for the **Sister's Rising 9 month Employment Training Program**, and was hired in spite of having just gotten out of lock up. I spent the next 9 months taking part in healing circles, one-on-one counseling and building sisterhood with other young women who shared similar experiences. I learned about our hard and proud history as African Americans, Latinos and Pacific Islanders, things they never taught us in school. I learned about the criminal justice system and disproportionate minority confinement. I learned how to advocate for myself and other young women and how to organize our community to fight for fairer policies and practices. CYWD gave me opportunities to lead projects and workshops that helped improve my community, sparking in me, a passion for social justice and community work. The staff treated me like someone who was important rather than a "juvenile delinquent." They helped me enroll back in school and got me a tutor to keep my grades up. What if I had gone directly into CYWD instead of being locked up—and when I think about all the girls who are detained, how much better would their lives be if they were placed in programs like CYWD instead of jail.

CYWD instilled in me a sense of purpose and hope and it was there that my world changed and I began to find myself. CYWD helped me begin the process of healing from all the things that occurred in my life and after graduating from Sister's Rising I felt like a truly transformed person.

CYWD's youth leadership development model empowers young women by providing them with the opportunity to advance within the organization. I have worked at CYWD in several leadership roles beginning as a Sister's Rising Intern and then moving into the Program Associate position. At 18 years old, a senior in high school, I served as the Sister's Rising Program Coordinator. I have also worked as the Education Advisor and currently serve as the newest and youngest board member.

CYWD has inspired me to dream more, learn more, and DO more for the betterment of my future and the future of other young people. By sharing my personal testimony I hope to convey how CYWD's programs and youth leadership development models are a long-term investment for the future of young women and the future of this country. Through building community, having a space to heal, learning about my history and having access to leadership opportunities I became empowered. I was able to complete my juvenile probation, graduate from high school, and go to college. I recently graduated from California State University Eastbay with a Bachelors Degree in Political Science and I am now in the process of applying to law school. I am proud to be a positive example for my daughter and other young women.