



Ending PUSHOUT Act Congressional Briefing
Testimony Delivered by Oumou Kaba & Ana Corona
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Testimony of Oumou Kaba

Good afternoon. My name is Oumou Kaba. I am a 17 years old and I'm from Crown Heights, Brooklyn. I am an first-generation Guinean activist. For over a year, I have been a youth organizer with Girls for Gender Equity, a Brooklyn-based organization working to end violence against Black girls. Over the last year, I have given testimony to make sure that New York City expanded Title IX protections. Through this organization, I have used my voice to directly impact policy change. I am here to bring awareness about my experiences going to school in a low income community with other Black girls just like me.

My school looks like a prison - there are just a few windows and the air conditioning barely works. Imagine 300 students in one space like that - it's hot. And we share space with a number of other schools. When I was in the 10th grade, I came to school with ripped jeans on. As soon as I walked through the door, I was put in the main office. I was in a public space - the principal, the guidance counselors and students going in and out, and they were all watching. The school administrator went into a storage room and she found a piece of cardboard. Purple and blue - I still remember what that paper looked like. She cut it up and started taping pieces of cardboard on every piece of my body that they deemed a distraction. At first, I let it happen - but suddenly, something in me woke up. I started removing the cardboard as she was putting it on. In response, the administrator threatened suspension. I ended up just going home. I missed out on class time and an opportunity to learn. The *Pushout* documentary says that we push girls from schools into the streets. No one knew that I was removed from school. No one called home. I was left on my own. My aesthetic is my identity. They made me choose between these two things - but I chose myself. I never told my family about this experience. I feared being in trouble at school, **and** in trouble at home because I'd be blamed for starting drama or creating distractions. I wonder - how is my body the one that is at fault? Why do I have to change my body and how I show up, when boys and men have nothing to worry about. Why is it on me to change - when our system of discipline and policing Black girls is **actually** what needs to change.

This should have never happened. No student should ever have to choose between their identity and their education. Thinking about it now, this situation brings up so many emotions. Since this incident, I have seen this happen to other Black girls. In my school, the darker you are, the harsher the discipline. Girls that have hips and curves - their bodies are immediately sexualized. No one should be disciplined for what they wear to school. And yet - I see girls that are different than me who don't get the same criticism. They get a pass, they get support. They get the presumption of innocence. We get punished. We are never seen as innocent. We are never seen as children. We are always as seen as objects - as if we want negative attention.

Today, I want to thank Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley for using her platform to advocate for girls and women like me. I wonder if she - or people she knows - had these very same experiences. It takes more of us in positions of power to shape our future. Thank you so much, Representative Pressley, for opening so many doors for us. You're holding the flashlight so we can walk through the tunnel.

My experiences as a Black girl have shaped me. I am really concerned about what happens to Black people in the United States, especially at the hands of law enforcement. I see myself right back here in Washington DC - hopefully at Howard University - where I can learn why African Americans are treated the way we are. I need to know my history - and I need to know **our** history. Down the road, I see myself sitting where Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley is sitting. I want to use my platform to bring even more awareness to these issues. Thank you for introducing the PUSHOUT bill, and for letting us speak for ourselves.

Testimony of Ana Corona

Good afternoon. My name is Ana Corona and I am 17 years old. I'm from the Bronx, NY and I am a senior in high school. For the last year, I have participated in Sisters in Strength at Girls for Gender Equity. Sisters in Strength is a program for survivors of abuse and assault, and their allies. We learn how trauma impacts our lives, and how to heal - and most importantly, that we deserve to experience joy. I'm here today to talk about how important the introduction of the PUSHOUT bill is to me, and how it will directly impact women and girls like me who have been ignored by the school system.

I grew up being bullied - for my height, of all things. No adult in school responded to my complaints, and no one saw me suffering. After it happened multiple times, I started fighting back. I had to defend myself. It was only then that the school responded - and of course, disciplined me for having my own back. My mom had me young and she didn't have a lot of experience. I would complain to her about my experiences in school - but somehow, she took the school's side. I wish she saw how I was suffering. My experiences got worse as I got older. In middle school, I was body slammed by a boy in my grade. Later, I was thrown down the stairs. In high school, I was jumped.

Each and every time, I was not heard. I was not listened to. Each and every time, I did my best to defend myself. I remember thinking, "they weren't seeing me when I was suffering. Maybe they will see me when I fight back." My mom didn't create a safe home for us. My sisters had

similar experiences as I did, both at home and at school. But school was not a place that saw the abuse we experienced. School was a place that amplified our anxiety, while continuing to ignore our pain. School was a place that triggered us - and when we tried to stand up for ourselves, we were blamed. This is how girls are pushed out of school. I know that our society has finally started paying attention to boys of color and how they are disciplined, or how they deal with police violence. But the experiences of girls are somehow not seen. I cannot understand why. Girls like me who are dealing with abuse at home, should not also have to deal with abuse in school. Someone has to stand up for us. Someone has to protect us.

Schools are supposed to be sacred places for young people. They are supposed to be places where we feel safe - and where we can actually learn. After multiple transitions and foster homes, I am now at a high school where, for the first time, teachers and students really see me. They check in on me. Kids who I don't know invited me to their homes for Thanksgiving. Teachers who are not mine see me when emotions are running high, or when I'm having a bad day. They make sure that I know I can come to them if things get rough. I say this because - it is possible. Schools can, and must, do better.

It means so much to me that Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley is an advocate for girls and women like me. I watched the *Pushout* documentary and realized that girls of color, and Black girls especially, have had so many experiences similar to my own. I am not alone.

I see a future for myself in the law, or in helping to support people who have been abused, like myself. My experiences have shaped me - but they have not broken me. I dream of finishing college, of having my own house, and of continuing to be a leader in my community. It's because of leaders like Congresswoman Pressley that more of us will be seen, and more of us will be heard. Thank you for introducing the PUSHOUT bill, and for giving me the opportunity to share my story.