
SENATE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY

Senator Steven Bradford, Chair

2021 - 2022 Regular

Bill No: AB 939 **Hearing Date:** July 13, 2021
Author: Cervantes
Version: May 17, 2021
Urgency: No **Fiscal:** No
Consultant: SC

Subject: *Sex offenses: evidence*

HISTORY

Source: Author

Prior Legislation: AB 1996 (Bogh), Ch. 225, Stats. 2006
AB 3839 (Bogh), Ch. 61, Stats. 2004

Support: Alameda County District Attorney's Office; Associated Students of the University of California; Fem Dems of Sacramento; Work Equity Action

Opposition: American Civil Liberties Union California Action; California Attorneys for Criminal Justice; California Public Defenders Association; San Francisco Public Defender

Assembly Floor Vote: 75 - 0

PURPOSE

The purpose of this bill is to prohibit the court from admitting evidence of the manner in which the victim was dressed during the prosecution of specified sex crimes, by either the prosecution or defense on the issue of consent, regardless of whether the evidence is relevant or admissible in the interests of justice.

Existing law states that only relevant evidence is admissible, and except as otherwise provided by statute, all relevant evidence is admissible. (Evid. Code, §§ 350, 351.)

Existing law defines "relevant evidence" means evidence, including evidence relevant to the credibility of a witness or hearsay declarant, having any tendency in reason to prove or disprove any disputed fact that is of consequence to the determination of the action. (Evid. Code, § 210.)

Existing law authorizes a court in its discretion to exclude evidence if its probative value is substantially outweighed by the probability that its admission will (a) necessitate undue consumption of time or (b) create substantial danger of undue prejudice, of confusing the issues, or of misleading the jury. (Evid. Code, § 352.)

Existing law provides that relevant evidence shall not be excluded in any criminal proceeding, including pretrial and post-conviction motions and hearings, or in any trial or hearing of a

juvenile for a criminal offense, whether heard in juvenile or adult court, subject to the existing statutory role of evidence relating to privilege or hearsay, or inadmissibility. (Cal. Const., art. I, § 28, as adopted June 8, 1982.)

Existing law allows the credibility of a witness to be attacked or supported by any party including the party calling him. (Evid. Code, § 785.)

Existing law states that except as otherwise provided by statute, the court or jury may consider in determining the credibility of a witness any matter that has any tendency in reason to prove or disprove the truthfulness of his testimony at the hearing, including but not limited to any of the following:

- His or her demeanor while testifying and the manner in which he testifies;
- The character of his or her testimony;
- The extent of his or her capacity to perceive, to recollect, or to communicate any matter about which he or she testifies;
- The extent of his or her opportunity to perceive any matter about which he or she testifies.
- His or her character for honesty or veracity or their opposites;
- The existence or nonexistence of a bias, interest, or other motive;
- A statement previously made by him or her that is consistent with his or her testimony at the hearing;
- A statement made by him or her that is inconsistent with any part of his or her testimony at the hearing;
- The existence or nonexistence of any fact testified to by him or her;
- His or her attitude toward the action in which he or she testifies or toward the giving of testimony; or
- His or her admission of untruthfulness. (Evid. Code, § 780.)

Existing law provides for the following procedure if evidence of sexual conduct of the complaining witness is offered to attack the credibility of the complaining witness in specified sex offense cases:

- A written motion shall be made by the defendant to the court and prosecutor stating that the defense has an offer of proof of the relevancy of the evidence of the sexual conduct of the complaining witness proposed to be presented and its relevancy in attacking the credibility of the complaining witness.
- The written motion shall be accompanied by an affidavit in which the offer of proof shall be stated. The affidavit shall be filed under seal and only unsealed by the court to

determine if the offer of proof is sufficient to order a hearing. After that determination, the affidavit shall be resealed by the court.

- If the court finds that the offer of proof is sufficient, the court shall order a hearing out of the presence of the jury, if any, at the hearing allow the questioning of the complaining witness regarding the offer of proof made by the defendant.
- At the conclusion of the hearing, if the court finds that evidence proposed to be offered by the defendant regarding the sexual conduct of the complaining witness is relevant and is not inadmissible, the court may make an order stating what evidence may be introduced by the defendant, and the nature of the questions to be permitted. The defendant may then offer evidence pursuant to the court's order.
- An affidavit resealed by the court shall remain sealed, unless the defendant raises an issue on appeal or collateral review relating to the offer of proof contained in the sealed document. If the defendant raises that issue on appeal, the court shall allow the Attorney General and the appellate counsel for the defendant access to the sealed affidavit. If the issue is raised on collateral review, the court shall allow the district attorney and defendant's counsel access to the sealed affidavit. The use of the information contained in the affidavit shall be limited solely to the pending proceeding. (Evid. Code, § 782, subd. (a).)

Existing law states, except as provided, that in the prosecution of specified sex offenses, the introduction of opinion evidence, reputation evidence, and evidence of specific instances of the complaining witness' sexual conduct, is not admissible by the defendant in order to prove consent by the complaining witness. (Evid. Code, § 1103, subd. (c)(1).)

Existing law states, except as provided, that evidence of the manner in which the victim was dressed at the time of the commission of the offense shall not be admissible when offered by either party on the issue of consent in any prosecution for the specified sex offenses, unless the evidence is determined by the court to be relevant and admissible in the interests of justice. The proponent of the evidence shall make an offer of proof outside the hearing of the jury. The court shall then make its determination and at that time, state the reasons for its ruling on the record. For the purposes of this paragraph, "manner of dress" does not include the condition of the victim's clothing before, during, or after the commission of the offense. (Evid. Code, § 1103, subd. (c)(2).)

Existing law states that evidence of a victim's sexual conduct or their manner of dress at the time of the commission of the offense may still be admissible when offered to attack the credibility of the complaining witness using the procedure specified in Penal Code Section 782. (Evid. Code, § 1103, subd. (c)(5).)

This bill prohibits the admissibility of evidence of the manner in which the victim was dressed at the time of the commission of the offense on the issue of consent in the prosecution of specified sex crimes regardless of whether the court finds the evidence to be relevant and admissible in the interests of justice.

This bill states that its provisions shall be known, and may be cited, as Denim Day Act.

COMMENTS

1. Need for This Bill

According to the author of this bill:

Assembly Bill 939 seeks to address the ambiguity in current law to ensure that we do not further traumatize survivors of sexual violence. There are deep negative implications for Rape and Sexual Harassment cases when we make clothing probative of intent. Assembly Bill 939 will prohibit the courts from admitting evidence that deals with the sexual characterization of their clothing if the courts decide that it must be admissible in the “interest of justice.” We need trauma-informed policies that ensure that we do not victim blame in the pursuit of justice. Current law fails to consider the power imbalance that exists between survivor and perpetrator. To even consider whether a survivor’s manner of dress should be admitted as evidence of consent wrongly scrutinizes the actions of the survivor, instead of placing that scrutiny where it truly belongs: on the actions of the perpetrator. When we trivialize sexual assault, we uphold stereotypical beliefs that survivors of sexual assault invite their own rapes and sexual assaults. When we maintain inadequate policies, we enable violence, silence survivors, and reduce access to justice. Assembly Bill 939 will reinforce and improve court procedures to ensure that we address policy weaknesses and ensure trauma-informed practices.

2. California’s Rape Shield Law

The Rape Shield Law was passed in California in 1974. The Legislature created limitations on the introduction of evidence in specific sex-related cases to recognize that victims of sex-related offenses deserve heightened protection against “surprise, harassment, and unnecessary invasions of privacy.” (*People v. Fontana* (2010) 49 Cal. 4th 351, 362-63, citing *People v. Rioz* (1984) 161 Cal.App.3d 905, 916-17.) The crimes that implicate the Rape Shield Law are: sexual battery, rape, unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor, spousal rape, incest, sodomy, oral copulation by force, sexual abuse of a child under 14 or a dependent person, continuous sexual abuse of a child, forcible penetration with a foreign object, indecent exposure, and annoying or molesting a minor.

The Rape Shield Law generally prohibits the introduction of evidence against a victim about that person’s prior sexual conduct, sexual reputation, or manner of dress in order to show that the person consented to the sexual act in question. (Evid. Code, § 1103, subd. (c).) The law allows a court to find that evidence of a victim’s manner of dress is admissible on the issue of consent if the court finds the evidence to be relevant and admissible in the interests of justice. (Evid. Code, § 1103, subd. (c)(2).) The proponent of the evidence must make an offer of proof outside the presence of the jury and the court is required to state the reasons for its ruling on the record. (*Ibid.*) Additionally, impeachment evidence of an alleged victim, or a witness, that relates to sexual conduct, including manner of dress, may be introduced by following a specified procedure — filing a written motion with the court in a criminal jury trial where the judge will make a ruling on admissibility of that evidence. (Evid. Code, § 782.) Other impeachment evidence intended to attack the credibility of a witness that is not sexual in nature is not required to be vetted first by a judge.

This bill removes the ability of the judge to allow evidence to be admitted in a criminal trial of the manner in which the victim was dressed at the time of the commission of the offense under the limited circumstances where there is a finding that the evidence is relevant and admissible in the interests of justice. However, this bill retains the admissibility of this evidence to impeach the credibility of the victim using the existing procedure where the evidence must first be vetted by a judge pursuant to Evidence Section 782.

3. Proposition 8 Truth in Evidence

In 1982, the California voters passed Proposition 8, also known as the Victim’s Bill of Rights. The initiative enacted the “Right to Truth in Evidence,” and adopted a constitutional provision pertaining specifically to evidence in criminal proceedings. (Cal. Const., art. I, § 28, as adopted June 8, 1982.) The provision of the California Constitution prohibits laws that exclude relevant evidence in criminal cases except upon a two thirds vote by the Legislature. Because this bill would exclude all evidence of a victim’s clothing in a sexual assault case when offered on the issue of consent, even when a judge determines that it is relevant and that the interests of justice favor its admission, it has been marked as requiring a two-thirds vote.

4. Argument in Support

According to Alameda County District Attorney’s Office:

Evidence offered in a criminal case is generally admissible if it is relevant to any issue in the case. For evidence of the victim’s clothing to be admissible in a sexual assault case, as evidence of either consent or lack thereof, the party seeking to introduce the evidence must first make an offer of proof as to how the evidence would be relevant. That offer of proof must take place outside the presence of the jury. Once the offer of proof has been made, the judge must determine that the evidence is, in fact, relevant to the issue of consent, and also that admitting the evidence would be in the interests of justice. The court must also state the reasons for making the determination on the record.

Assembly Bill 939 seeks to address the ambiguity in current law to ensure that we do not further traumatize survivors of sexual violence. There are deep negative implications for Rape and Sexual Harassment cases when we make clothing probative of intent. Assembly Bill 939 will prohibit the courts from admitting evidence that deals with sexual characterization of their clothing if the courts decide that it must be admissible in the “interest of justice.” We need trauma-informed policies that ensure that we do not victim blame in the pursuit of justice. Current law fails to consider the power imbalance that exists between survivor and perpetrator. When we maintain inadequate policies, we enable violence, silence, and reduce access to justice. Assembly Bill 939 will reinforce and improve court procedures to ensure that we address policy weaknesses and ensure trauma-informed practices.

5. Argument in Opposition

According to San Francisco Public Defender's Office:

Under existing law, Evidence Code Section 1103(c)(2), evidence of the manner of dress offered on the issue of consent *is not admissible unless a judge rules that the evidence is "relevant and in the interests of justice."* Outside the presence of the jury, the judge listens to the party that seeks to have the evidence admitted to hear what the evidence is, why it is relevant, and why it is necessary to admit it. Then the judge decides stating the reason for the decision on the record.

AB 939 is not necessary. Evidence Code Section 1103(c)(2) is fair and balanced. The entire process takes place outside the jury and is not unfairly prejudiced if the judge decides not to admit the evidence of how the victim was dressed. Moreover, the evidence is not admitted, unless and until, the judge has heard from both parties about why the evidence should be admitted. This protects the rights of both prosecution and defense.

AB 939 abrogates judicial discretion and is fundamentally unfair. California judges weigh evidence and balance the competing constitutional rights of the victim's right to privacy and the defendant's right to a fair trial routinely. Judges have been entrusted with that responsibility in all kinds of settings. AB 939 seeks to strip discretion and decision-making ability from judges and have a one size fits all approach.

-- END --