

The Girlfriends: Jailhouse Lawyer Listener's Guide & Conversation Companion

Overview

In 2010, Kelly Harnett says she witnessed her abusive boyfriend commit a violent crime. So how did she end up serving time for it?

Season 3 of *The Girlfriends* follows Kelly's story, from childhood trauma and intimate partner violence, to a murder conviction, and ultimately to her transformation into a jailhouse lawyer fighting for the freedom of other women like her.

This guide offers context on key themes related to abuse, survival, and justice, and raises thought-provoking questions for people to reflect on as they listen to this new season.

Key Themes Explored This Season

Criminalization of Survivors

Thousands of women are incarcerated for acts linked to surviving domestic or sexual violence. These may include:

- Defending themselves physically
- Being coerced into criminal activity
- Committing crimes under threat or duress
- Failing to protect children, even when they're also victims

Despite being victims, many are prosecuted and imprisoned instead of protected.

Did you know?

50 to 95% of incarcerated women have been raped, sexually assaulted, or subjected to physical violence by an intimate partner (Huffington Post).

And, as many as **90%** of women who are in prison for killing a man had been previously abused by that man (Domestic Shelters).

The Myth of the “Perfect Victim”

There are societal expectations that put pressure on survivors to behave and present themselves a certain way, appearing likeable, virtuous, and morally inscrutable, in order to have credibility as a victim.

But survivors often make choices that don't fit that narrative, including:

- Staying with their abuser
- Fighting back (or not)
- Abusing drugs or alcohol
- Committing crimes under pressure

These behaviors can be misunderstood and mischaracterized, and are sometimes weaponized in court, undermining their access to justice and, in some cases, leading to their criminalization.

Discussion Prompt

Have you ever heard about a victim of abuse being asked why they stayed in an abusive relationship, or whether they were under the influence of alcohol or drugs when an assault occurred, or why they struck their abuser?

Do you think these questions put blame on the victim?

Coercive Control & Legal Blind Spots

Coercive control is a form of non-physical abuse which can involve manipulation, isolation, surveillance, threats, and financial control, stripping away a person's autonomy over time. It can trap victims in unsafe situations and push them toward actions they wouldn't otherwise take.

The justice system often struggles to recognize the impacts of coercive control, in part because it can be more difficult to prove and still isn't consistently defined as a crime.

Did you know?

Coercive control is illegal in several countries (including the United Kingdom and Ireland), but still isn't recognized as a standalone crime in most U.S. states.

Impacts of Trauma

Police, courts, and juries often lack the training and frameworks to understand trauma and its effects on memory, behavior, and decision-making. These can include:

- Incomplete or inconsistent recollections
- Emotional numbness or detachment
- Delayed or hesitant disclosure of what happened

Past trauma can also affect how survivors respond in situations they perceive to be dangerous. These reactions are natural, but are often misinterpreted as signs of dishonesty, manipulation, or unreliability.

Discussion Prompt

What do you think would change if police, courts, and juries better understood the effects of trauma on survivors?

Power Imbalances & Abuse Behind Bars

Incarcerated women face unique vulnerabilities to abuse, including sexual coercion by prison staff. Even when labeled “consensual,” such relationships involve extreme power imbalances.

In all relationships, consent requires:

- The freedom to say no without fear of punishment or negative consequences
- A clear understanding of what’s being agreed to
- No pressure, manipulation, or coercion
- Equal ability to make a choice freely and willingly

When there’s a power imbalance, these conditions often don’t exist. The person with less power may feel unable to refuse, making true consent impossible.

In prison settings, the ability to consent can also be undermined by threats of retaliation, loss of basic needs or privileges, or false promises of legal help or early release.

Did you know?

It’s illegal in all 50 U.S. states for correctional officers to have sex with inmates, yet thousands of such cases go unreported or unprosecuted each year.

Repercussions of Reporting Abuse

Systems meant to protect survivors can fail, or even punish, those who come forward. For some survivors, reporting abuse can result in:

- Retaliation from abusers or peers
- Loss of jobs, housing, or child custody
- In some cases, arrest, criminal charges, or incarceration

Discussion Prompt

Why do some survivors face negative consequences when they speak up? What would make it safer for people to report abuse?

Long-Term Justice for Survivors

For many survivors, the justice system may never deliver justice at all. Instead, their sense of justice may come from safety, accountability, healing, and freedom enabled by support systems and resources in their community.

For survivors who have been criminalized or incarcerated, accessing long-term justice can be even more complicated.

They may face lasting consequences, including:

- Social stigma
- Barriers to employment, education, or housing due to criminal records
- More limited access to adequate healing resources

Discussion Prompt

What should long-term justice look like for survivors?

Resources

If you or someone you love has been affected by abuse, there are tools and communities available to support healing, safety, and justice:

NO MORE Global Directory: Connect with local support services in over 200 countries and territories.

Bright Sky US: Download the discreet app for information and resources for survivors and their loved ones.

NO MORE Silence: Speak Your Truth: Share your story safely and anonymously and connect with a global support network.