

2-29-2020

## Free Battered Texas Women: Survivor-Advocates Organizing at the Crossroads of Gendered Violence, Disability, and Incarceration

Cathy Marston PhD

*Free Battered TX Women*, cmarston.fbtw@gmail.com

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### Recommended Citation

Marston, Cathy PhD (2020) "Free Battered Texas Women: Survivor-Advocates Organizing at the Crossroads of Gendered Violence, Disability, and Incarceration," *Verbum Incarnatum: An Academic Journal of Social Justice*: Vol. 7 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://athenaeum.uiw.edu/verbumincarnatum/vol7/iss1/3>

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### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dr. LuElla D'Amico, Dr. Zenon Culverhouse, Dr. Doshie Piper, Dr. Emily Clark, Dean Kevin Vichcales, and the University of the Incarnate Word for their support of me and FBTW.

# Free Battered Texas Women: Survivor-Advocates Organizing at the Crossroads of Gendered Violence, Disability, and Incarceration

Cathy Marston

*Free Battered Texas Women*

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## Abstract

This article is primarily the text of my presentation on April 12, 2019 at the University of the Incarnate Word's Conflict and Aftermath symposium hosted by UIW's Women's and Gender Studies program and Trauma Studies Center. I attempted to maintain its oral quality, while incorporating the academic style required of this journal and the voices of two other survivor-advocates. Feminist anthropologist Margery Wolf reminds us that as feminists and critical scholars, we have a responsibility not to use obscure forms which will make our work accessible only to other academics. She argues that "[e]xperience is messy" and "[w]hen human behavior is the data, a tolerance for ambiguity, multiplicity, contradiction, and instability is essential."<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

I'm a survivor and victim advocate who grew up here in a northern suburb of the San Antonio Metro area. I founded Free Battered Texas Women (FBTW) while I was in prison related to defending myself against my abusive ex-boyfriend. FBTW's mission is to educate regarding ultimately stopping wrongful arrest of battered women and expeditiously granting clemency to battered women who defended themselves and/or their children, as well as to support released women in their reentry.

In the 1990s, the Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV) recommended more than 100 imprisoned women and a couple of men for clemency for evidence of being survivors of

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<sup>1</sup> Margery Wolf, *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 129.

battering or defending a third-party from battering, related to their offense. Ten women have been released from prison since I came home in July 2014: four of them were TCFV clemency recommendees from the 1990s.

I've been to the legislature a half-dozen times in the past four years. My most recent visit to the legislature was on April 4, 2019, when I testified to the House Corrections Committee in support of House Bill 3078: that law creates a clemency review panel for survivors of domestic violence or sex trafficking who acted under coercion or duress related to their holding offense. As I prepare this for this journal in June 2019, Gov. Greg Abbott has just issued a last-minute veto of that bill – when his office had supported its unanimous passage in both the Texas House and Senate.

I take at least one crisis call per month, for which I usually make a community referral. I publish and do public events like this. My efforts were recognized by the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, who awarded me a 2018-19 Margaret Fuller Grant to write a book proposal on my work. This grant provided transcribing I needed of interviews I had conducted of formerly incarcerated women and victim advocates. The UUWF awarded a 2020 Equity and Justice Grant to FBTW for me to write workshop curriculum to teach Unitarian Universalist congregations to start their own women's prison ministries.

## Surviving Abuse

Let me tell you my story: I was the drum major, yearbook editor, and valedictorian for the class of 1986 at Randolph High School. 1986 was also the year I met Alan. I was finishing high school and receiving scholarships to attend Trinity University. Alan was a guy I worked with at a local restaurant the summer before I went to college.

Alan was verbally abusive and always putting me down. Me saying “no” to sex meant “yes” to him: he’d rape me. He came to my dorm room on campus when I wasn’t there: my suitemate let him in to appease him. He proceeded to break the mirror; and TUPD banned him from campus. He repeatedly slapped me and threw me into a wall on my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. Now, Alan also shoved my prior boyfriend at his workplace and left threatening messages at his house. Glenn refused to report him to the police; Glenn’s dad readied his gun instead. Alan also came to campus anyway to stalk me and my new boyfriend, Wolf, as we went to class. When Wolf left the class to get a drink, Alan jumped him. TUPD arrested Alan. But the prosecutor dropped the charges when Wolf didn’t show up to court because he had not been notified of the court date.

Two of my closest friends on campus shunned me after that, saying that I had exercised poor judgment in not leaving Alan earlier. This was not my first experience with victim blaming. I blamed myself. I should’ve been able to handle it myself, I thought. I felt ashamed.

Of course, I’ve been socialized into a victim-blaming, violent culture which encourages an inherently violent definition of masculinity. To paraphrase bell hooks, a black feminist cultural critic, “Patriarchy has taught [men that their] masculinity has to be proved by the willingness to conquer fear through aggression.”<sup>2</sup> We all are taught sexist gender roles that pit men against women; and frame men as superior to women.

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<sup>2</sup> bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 195.

### **Coming out as Bisexual and Surviving Work-Related Disability**

After Alan, I went on to have a dozen or so healthy relationships as I worked for the *San Antonio Light*, completed my M.A. in journalism at UT Austin, copyedited for the *Austin American-Statesman*, and completed my Ph.D. in Communication from the University of Iowa.

I acquired computer-related, repetitive strain injuries (RSI) as a copy editor from the inherently injurious work of sitting, staring at a screen, and typing on deadline nightly. I've had pain in my hands, arms, neck, and back dating back to December 1992. I cannot sit and work at the computer all day; nor should anyone else because it is injurious. I cannot lift, nor perform a lot of activities of daily living without pain.

### **Pedagogy Part One: Social Construction of Disability Exercise**

Susan Wendell, a feminist disability scholar in Canada, says that a disability is a social construction based on a biological reality.<sup>3</sup> The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and its amendments in 2008 recognize disability as a social construction. We're going to consider the first person you knew with a disability, what the disability was, and what attitudes were around that disability.

I often draw a chart with three columns, like so:

PERSON

DISABILITY

ATTITUDES

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

The disability is the biological reality or impairment; and the attitudes show the social construction of the disability. For example, someone might feel solidarity with my repetitive strain injuries, because they also have RSI: a positive construction. Or you might think I'm just a slacker, because my disability is invisible: a negative construction.

For my doctoral work, I became an expert on RSI, journalists, and disability rights from a feminist perspective.<sup>4</sup> I used feminist ethnography to study the college newswriters at the *Daily Iowan* about how they were learning work practices and work ideologies that were damaging to their bodies. The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication's Media & Disability Interest Group gave me a research award for this work in 1998.

I came out as bisexual and co-presented about the intersection of being queer and disabled. I also guest co-edited the January 1999 special "disability" issue of the *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity* with Dawn Atkins. She and I coauthored the intro to that journal.<sup>5</sup>

### **Creating a Justice System from the Prison Industrial Complex**

In 2000, I started dating Tom long distance: I had known him for eight years since we had worked together in Austin. I moved in with him in June 2000 right after I turned in a draft of my dissertation. I'd known him as a funny, generous person. This changed when we moved in together.

It's easy now to see, in retrospect, the telltale signs before we moved in together. We'd make a decision together, then he'd go do something else. He'd buy a gift to "make it better." But he would not change his conduct. I made a trip down before my move. We were arguing in

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this, see Cathy Marston, "Learning to be a Journalist: A Feminist Disability Critique of Cyborgs, College News-workers, and RSI Work Culture," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (1999): 266-287.

<sup>5</sup> This piece can be found here: Dawn Atkins, and Cathy Marston, "Creating Accessible Queer Community: Intersections and Fractures with Dis/ability Praxis," *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, & Bisexual Identity* 4, no. 1 (1999): 3-21.

the car: he kept locking the car doors when I tried to get out. Then he'd claim I was the one who didn't know how to operate the locks. He injured me; and then blamed it on me. I thought it was an accident.

It was just the beginning.

I was socially and geographically isolated from others when I lived with Tom, as well as financially dependent on him as I tried to start my post-academic career. My family and friends can tell you that I lost a lot of weight from stress. I also became withdrawn, indecisive, self-deprecating, and continually fearful. He subjected me to continuous verbal abuse by criticizing my hair, my glasses, everything. He twisted my neck, punched me, shook me, and tried to strangle me. He hurt my dog.

Again, I thought that I was the problem. If only I was making more money, he wouldn't do that. I started writing letters to my friends who were far away. I told my best friend's mom, who told me that I didn't have to put up with that and offered me a place to stay. Then I became more confident to articulate myself to family and colleagues.

Tom ultimately tried to kill me in a 90-minute beating in January 2004 where he broke my foot and left me bruised and bloodied. He tried to smother me by shoving my face into the sofa: I saw gray and could not breathe. I thought I was dead. He let up, then wrapped his arm around my throat in a stranglehold: I bit his arm to protect myself. If I had not done so, I would not be standing here today.

Now, Texas has a self-defense waiver under Subchapter C, Section 9.31 of the *Texas Penal Code*: our Stand Your Ground Law. Again, Texas has been aware since the 1980's that we have the highest wrongful arrest rate in the U.S. of battered women who defended themselves and/or their kids. The Austin police found Tom on top of me: they arrested me instead of him. I



found out the above statistics when I posted bail and was staying at Safeplace, the battered women's shelter in Austin.

If we truly found it unacceptable that battering happened in the first place, we would commit more governmental and cultural resources to preventing battering. I believe this begins by teaching self-worth, respect for difference, nonviolent communication, active listening, and conflict resolution to children. That's right: we need to teach children healthy ways to express their own emotions and opinions. We need to teach them to use their channels of grievance. House Bill 366 was filed in the Texas Legislature for the 2019 session to mandate the teaching of healthy relationships with age-appropriate curriculum in our public schools.

Once we accomplish this with children, we need to teach all these things to adults. Most of us did not learn these things as children. This is just the beginning.

I would also like to see area police departments create Family Assistance Crisis Teams (FACT) like the San Antonio Police Department. Once we learn what healthy relationships are, we will still – unfortunately – have citizens who batter. The rest of us must learn how to intervene as bystanders and as a community to hold accountable those breaking the law. We must do this simultaneous to creating support for victims.

Supporting victims means telling them that they are strong: those of us who are survivors of violence do not have a disorder! Those of us who defended ourselves do not have a syndrome! It is our *right* to defend ourselves. Men who defended themselves and others are celebrated as heroes. Women are labeled “deranged and dangerous” – as my prosecutors did to me – then sent to prison instead.

Let me take a moment here to stress this: The psycho-pharmaceutical industry is a big moneymaker in our capitalist society. The operatives of that industry make money when they

victim-blame women for the societal prevalence of men battering us. Susan Faludi writes that the American Psychological Association long promoted “masochistic syndrome” in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) as a way to blame female survivors.<sup>6</sup> This made it look like we women sought men who batter, which is counter to the reality that we live in a country with one of the highest rates of male battering of women in the world, according to the US Department of Justice.<sup>7</sup>

The psycho-pharmaceutical industry also makes money convincing men that they cannot control their violent behavior – as well as psychiatrizing women for legitimate anger and fear against their abusers. Generic “therapy,” “couples’ counseling,” or “anger management” is often useless because traditional techniques may backfire by focusing “responsibility” on victims.<sup>8</sup> When I lived with my ex and finally got him in couples’ counseling, he admitted he had punched me to our counselor. The counselor told him that was not okay and asked if my ex could promise to keep me safe in the house. Then the counselor joined my batterer in agreeing that I needed to be in counseling. When we outlaw psychiatry and its money-making, victim-blaming, mythic mental maladies, then we will still have plenty of work due to create a justice system.

We will be closer to right relation when we truly support victims by assisting with an exit strategy of financial stability, housing, and a safe community with a lifetime of support.

And supporting victims means holding those who batter accountable. But I’d like to talk a little bit about what accountability means. As I’ve already said, despite the fact that I lawfully defended myself in January 2004, the system wrongfully labeled me the “offender.” So, the first

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> US Department of Justice Office on Violence against Women. <https://www.justice.gov/ovw>.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Ducote, *The Family Law Commentator* 4 (January 1998), n.p.

thing to keep in mind regarding people with conviction records is: we are people. Secondly, we may have been wrongfully charged.

I straddle lines as a victim advocate and criminal justice reformer. No matter what side of the handcuffs that we are on, I hope we all can agree that what we have now is a Prison Industrial Complex that is not working. It's our job to create a true JUSTICE system.

Unfortunately, a 2018 study in Travis County found the number one factor determining whether or not someone is convicted or sentenced to prison or jail is whether or not that person had a paid or appointed attorney: 88 percent of defendants with a court-appointed attorney were found guilty, compared to 48 percent who hired their own counsel. Of those with an appointed lawyer who were found guilty, 88 percent were sentenced to incarceration. Defendants who hired their own lawyers were sentenced to incarceration in only 58 percent of the cases.<sup>9</sup>

Discriminating against low-income people is not justice!

Discriminating against women is not justice either! There has been a 700 percent increase in incarceration of women over the past 30 years in the United States – as the incarceration of men has decreased.<sup>10</sup> The *Texas Tribune* recorded 8,500 less men in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice between 2009 and 2016 – while there was an increase of 500 women in that same time period.<sup>11</sup>

Feminist criminologist Meda Chesney-Lind writes that there's been a 90 percent increase in women being labeled “violent, female felons” with enactment of mandatory arrest laws for

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<sup>9</sup> Ryan Autullo, “Study Finds Serious Shortcomings in Travis County Indigent Defense,” *Austin-American Statesman*, April 14, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this, see Sharona Coutts and Zoe Greenberg, “Women, Incarcerated,” *Prison Legal News* 26, no. 6 (2015): 3-16. See also Laureen Snider, “Constituting the Punishable Woman: Atavistic Man Incarcerates Postmodern Woman,” *British Journal of Criminology* 43, no. 2 (2003): 354-378; and Van Jones and Topeka Sam, “The Powerful Movement for Incarcerated Women,” March 10, 2018, *CNN*.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Barajas, “Texas Prison System Sheds Men, Swallows Even More Women,” *Texas Observer*, March 15, 2018.

battering.<sup>12</sup> She believes this comes from increased prosecution of battered women who defended themselves and/or their children here in the United States: a gender-biased misapplication of the law.

With this in mind, how can we create accountability through restorative justice? How can we stop mass incarceration that is inherently another form of violence?

First of all, there is a model of a successful, unique, jail-diversion program for first-time, domestic-violence arrestees right here in San Antonio: Project ADVANCE. ADVANCE stands for Addressing Violence and Abuse through Networking and Client Empowerment. It is housed at the PEACE (People Ending Abuse through Community Effort) Initiative. Project ADVANCE is a multi-week Batterer Intervention Prevention Program (BIPP) that provides lifetime, wrap-around services such as crisis counseling, community referrals for resources, etc. When students complete the class, the referring judge can choose to dismiss the charges. Most BIPP programs end when the classes are completed, without further assistance.

Project ADVANCE has what I call an 87% success rate: this means that 87% of those who complete the classes go on to not have a subsequent arrest. Or, to flip it around, the program has only a 13% recidivism rate.

BIPP programs are taught differently for women than men. The classes for women recognize that women may be in them because they defended themselves against a batterer. I am probably preaching to the choir on these types of post-arrest interventions.

Let me also speak to the benefit of my white privilege in a system rife with racism. My words were seen as more credible, because of the color of my skin – as well as because I was

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<sup>12</sup> Meda Chesney-Lind, “Criminalizing Victimization: The Unintended Consequences of Pro-Arrest Policies for Girls and Women,” *Criminology and Public Policy* 2, no. 1 (2002): 81-90.

educated and had money in my inmate trust fund. I was also targeted because of these reasons, but it was mainly a benefit.

I tried to use this benefit to stand up against racism. Essie, an African-American woman in her late teens or early 20s, was in the cell next to mine. The correctional officers told her that she smelled and called her “stinky.” This is presumably because she never left her cell to take a shower. However, they had not harassed the two white women who were in her cell prior to her for the same refusal to leave the cell. Essie frequently asked me for extra soap. The COs came into her cell one time to take all of her sheets and bedding, because she used it to cover the window for privacy and to block the sun from heating up further our already sweltering, un-air-conditioned dorm. Then they refused to bring her food. At first, I wrote my own grievances and memos to rank about the discrimination. Simultaneously, I introduced myself to her through our vent: I told her to call me by my first name, to try to ease some of the difference between us in race and age. Finally, she came to me through the vent to ask me how to spell words to write her own grievances against the staff.

This is just one example of the benefit of my white privilege in a system that overwhelmingly incarcerates people of color – especially African-Americans (Alexander, 2012).<sup>13</sup>

To benefit those of us who are already out, I would like to suggest that we adopt in this city and county a Fair Chance Ordinance. This state needs to adopt a statewide Fair Chance Law/Second Chance Law. Such laws and ordinances waive the collateral consequences of criminal convictions. In other words, this would eliminate barriers on housing and employment for people with conviction records.

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<sup>13</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

In December 2019, the U.S. Congress passed the Fair Chance to Compete for Jobs Act of 2019: this bill “bans the box” on positions with federal agencies and private employers who contract with the federal government. According to the National Employment Law Project, “By prohibiting conviction inquiries of job applicants until after the employer has made a conditional job offer, over 700,000 people with an arrest or conviction record will have a fairer chance at seeking employment and securing a future for themselves and their families.”<sup>14</sup>

Lastly, Second Chance grants from the federal government through the county could help those of us with conviction records build businesses. I’ve proposed such an ordinance to my suburb’s city council and Chamber of Commerce.

We are PEOPLE. We have to eat; have somewhere to live; pay for utilities; have health insurance; and take care of kids and/or elderly parents. The Equal Justice Initiative says that one-third of all adults in the US have conviction records. ONE-THIRD! Prejudicial hiring and housing practices put at risk one-third of adults and those who are dependent on us.

### **Modes of Organizing: Putting Our Pens in the Wind**

The prison phrase “putting my pen in the wind” means advocating for oneself, usually in a written form. I have delineated several strategies throughout this article that I have used to deal with the trauma in my life. Here are some more:

#### A. Written resistance

From a prison cell, I wrote articles for media and created FBTW. From home, I continue that writing and have added correspondence to the 50 incarcerated battered women and 20

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<sup>14</sup> National Employment Law Project, “Congress Passes Landmark ‘Ban the Box’ Legislation.” <https://www.nelp.org/news-releases/congress-passes-landmark-ban-the-box-legislation>.

released battered women who comprise our convicted membership of FBTW: this includes birthday cards, holiday cards, and a newsletter. I always tell them that they are strong to have survived their batterers and TDCJ.

I was trained to be a worker in the media industry. Let's face it, MEDIA STIGMATIZE PEOPLE WHO WERE ARRESTED. The coverage dehumanizes us and fuels bigotry against us. Simultaneously, the media glorify violence and inundate us with violent movies and TV shows. Media are a primary perpetrator of violence against women in our culture, in this way. Feminist media scholar Marian Meyers has shown that coverage of battered women who were murdered by their male significant others blame the women for their own murders.<sup>15</sup>

We now live in a world and country where mass shootings are the norm. Filmmaker Michael Moore showed in his 2002 documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*, that Canada has a higher percentage of gun ownership than the US with vastly less violent crime.<sup>16</sup> He also shows that their newscasts focus on government social programs and other complex topics, instead of the US media's "if it bleeds it leads" operating philosophy. Moore himself empowers the survivors of the Columbine High School shooting by helping them to visit the corporate headquarters of the company that sold the bullets their assailants used.

#### B. Visual arts

Now, I know you were expecting fine art here, but I am no artist! I **am** a writer. I took this TDCJ T-shirt of mine and turned it into my very first FBTW T-shirt when I got home in July 2014. As you can see, I ironed on purple letters. I used a purple art pen to write the names of all the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated battered women that I knew of at that time.

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<sup>15</sup> Marian Meyers, "News of Battering," *Journal of Communication* 44, no. 2 (1994): 47-63.

<sup>16</sup> *Bowling for Columbine*, directed by Michael Moore (2002; Burbank, CA: MGM Home Video, 2004), DVD.

I didn't know what my first steps were going to be to manifest FBTW once I was home. This was a way that I could feel like I was doing something productive. It made its first public appearance at the Texas Families for Justice Rally at the Texas Capitol in November 2014:



Cameron Carr (AKA Phoenix Rising) is a formerly incarcerated, white, survivor who considers herself to be gender non-conforming. She designed our postcards and is currently redesigning our logo with a thorny rose in handcuffs. She served 16 years in prison before coming home nearly 2 years ago. She killed her little brother when she was 15 years old. Her dad physically abused her, her neighbor sexually molested her, and female classmates bullied her at school.



She describes herself this way: “At 15, I was put on a drug named Paxil [which caused her to spend] 4 months fighting the urges to kill myself and everyone else.” Then, she says, she “simply broke” from the pain the day she had her braces tightened; and her father forced her to babysit her two little brothers. She killed her youngest brother, Jack.

She does not know where her other brother was at the time she killed Jack. But says the courts punished Logan, too. Logan killed himself in January 2015, three weeks after the TDCJ’s Board of Pardons and Paroles gave Cameron a set off for her first parole review.

Cameron calls her 16 years in prison, “a form of living hell” that she experienced “because my government does not protect us children from drugs they knew were banned in the United Kingdom.”<sup>17</sup> She blames the FDA and the drug company that made Paxil, “because all they care about is making money and they do not care who they hurt in doing so.” She says she drew the rose to symbolize FBTW, because it historically has been linked with womanhood. She goes on to say, “The soft, delicate petals of the rose, its color vibrant and enticing – yet still with its thorns, willing to defend itself. ... For woman to kill, it takes an extreme of pushing force and threat.” So, she is essentializing about women’s nature. She believes that essence is “to love and nurture and care for those we love.” She calls FBTW’s women “imprisoned roses, flowers looking for a second chance,” because most of them were forced to defend themselves and/or loved ones:

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<sup>17</sup> Cameron Carr, in discussion with the author, n.d.



### **Pedagogy Part Two: Social Construction of Criminality**

When I give talks to the public about my experience with the criminal justice system, I often will do an exercise similar to the Social Construction of Disability one, above. My goal is similar. I usually provide a handout and/or overhead of the law here in Texas showing the language of the waivers to protect oneself or a third-party under imminent harm. I then will give scenarios of various incarcerated and formerly incarcerated battered women, including my own scenario under a pseudonym. Then I will ask the audience, “Do one of these laws apply? Should there be a new law; and, if so, what would that law look like? Or is she just guilty?” I want the audience to be engaged in the process of realizing that they have the power to name who is innocent and who will be forever branded a “domestic violence offender.” They deconstruct and reconstruct “criminality” for themselves.

### **Poetry**

I have written poetry since I was a little girl to process my emotions. It's a pleasure to be able to read these in an academic setting. The first deals with the disability determination system here in the United States. It includes real quotes from my journey of more than 27 years as someone with RSI.

### **The System**

We need to be able to *measure* you  
Put you in a category  
Do you meet our criterion?  
You have to work within the System  
To use the System  
You have three degrees  
You *are* the System

You're unemployable  
Have you sought psychiatric  
help to cope with this?  
It doesn't matter how  
You think the world should be  
The world is the way it is  
Most people are happy

It doesn't matter that computers  
have taken over everything  
Worsening your pain, caused  
by society's constructions of work and  
what constitutes "normal," "able" bodies

If you want to be seen as "disabled"  
You have to play by the System's rules  
If you have RSI, you're unemployable  
in a computer economy –  
and repetitive motion syndrome  
doesn't exist

If you want to be seen as "disabled"  
Accept the stigma  
The rolled eyes  
The medical model that you –  
not the System – need to be fixed  
We have to categorize you so  
you're the "deserving" poor

We can't have everyone being "disabled" now,  
can we?

The next poem is one of many birthed from my experience as a criminalized battering survivor critiquing the Prison Industrial Complex.

### **My lesson**

"She hasn't learned her lesson yet,"  
said the judge –  
after my ex admitted AGAIN  
that HE was the one who injured ME  
Is your lesson that  
when a batterer has me in a stranglehold,  
I'm supposed to let him kill me?  
Is my lesson that  
when a batterer has me in a stranglehold  
and I exercise my right to bite him  
TO SAVE MY LIFE,  
that I'm supposed to shut up  
and let the police, prosecutors, and YOU  
falsely call ME the batterer?

Is your lesson that I was supposed to die in prison?  
That I'm supposed to be quiet now –  
living in poverty with my life topsy-turvy –  
while my batterer's name is clear and his life is perfect?

You bet I haven't learned your lesson yet!  
It's taken me decades to UNLEARN  
sexist, misogynist, patriarchal victim-blaming!  
I love myself too much to go back now.  
When will YOU learn that?

## Create an Organization

I created FBTW from prison as a way for those of us who were survivors, formerly incarcerated survivors, and other citizens to effect change and support each other. I organize and create what I call survivor-advocates with educational materials on the law and history of our cause. I let these women know that they had the right to defend themselves and defend their kids. We have raised enough money and established a consistent volunteer group and advisory board to incorporate as a 501(c)(3) with the IRS. We are working on that process right now, but always welcome donations.

U S Army Retired Sergeant First Class Cheryl A. Craig, M.A., is a formerly incarcerated survivor who is one of my core volunteers. She is an African-American woman who served 22 years and was deployed in Rwanda, Afghanistan, and Iraq. She says that she joined my work three years ago after listening to my story. Years ago, she had to defend herself against a female housemate. Texas considers members of the same household a “family” for “family violence” charges:

... I served time for defending myself against my own roommate, while pregnant, who tried to stab me with a butcher knife while I was sitting down eating dinner with my boyfriend. I was only two months pregnant with my son at the time.<sup>18</sup>

Cheryl was sentenced to 6 months and charged with attempted murder. She spent 90 days in prison and was released for good behavior. She says, “I was considered a ‘lethal weapon’ since I was Army Combative Level 4 certified: my hands are registered as Lethal Weapons (with the local police department).” Because of that Army training and because she was pregnant, TDCJ assigned her to an all-male prison and put her in solitary confinement: a bizarre, simultaneous recognition of her perceived dangerousness and need for protection from others.

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<sup>18</sup> Cheryl A. Craig, in discussion with the author, n.d.

Her lawyer said that she “got off with a slap on the wrist” due to the damage she did to her roommate. Cheryl disagrees with that lawyer, she argues, “Do they understand, that woman came at me with a knife; and I was pregnant? I was not only protecting myself, I was protecting my unborn child. I took the necessary action to stop her.” Her charges were later downgraded to a misdemeanor.

Cheryl was a victim of battering from a boyfriend as a teenager. She says, “I was lucky enough to get away without too much physical or psychological damage due to having a strong mother that stood by my side.” She adds:

I feel strongly that women in our country do not get fair treatment and are most likely to be wrongly convicted. I had a witness that testified that my roommate came at me with the knife while my back was turned; and I was sitting down eating. So, I was no threat to her at all. I still got convicted and charged. She did not.

Cheryl says she is a part of FBTW “to make a change for the better for women that go through abuse and get arrested because they tried to defend themselves.” Please note that I did also ask her how she felt her race affected this experience. She has not provided an answer on that.

### **The End or the Beginning? It’s Up to Us**

The solution is each person today taking responsibility for their own actions and healthy expression of their emotions. Each person today must commit to community action to end violence, support survivors, and create restorative justice for those who violate the law. These ideas are just the beginning. What will your next step be?