The Monument Quilt

A Community-Based Approach to Sexual and Domestic Violence
Introduction

FORCE is a Baltimore and Mexico City based collective that seeks to disrupt rape culture and support victim-survivors through art and communication campaigns. Our work includes consent education, survivor support, criminal justice work, and national action. FORCE is dedicated to creating a community without rape. We have asked our supporters to think about what such communities would look like, to consider what it would feel like. We have also asked survivors of sexual violence how they think we, as a community, can create a world without rape. Through projects such as the Monument Quilt, FORCE is engaging victim-survivors within our communities to make that vision real.

It will not be easy. What constitutes sexual assault is unclear to many. In the current socio-political atmosphere, issues of rape and sexual assault are hotly contested. When victim-survivors come forward to describe their experiences, many people still do not believe them. People ask, “Are they a credible accuser?” and “Why didn’t they report sooner?” These are the wrong questions to ask. Instead, we need to learn to

Executive Summary

FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture is a Baltimore and Mexico City based collective that works on a national scale and focuses on supporting victim-survivors of sexual and domestic violence. FORCE creates national action art campaigns to promote consent and uplift the intersectional realities of sexual and intimate partner violence. In 2013, FORCE created the Monument Quilt, which has been displayed forty-nine times in thirty-three different cities. The Monument Quilt is a collection of over 3,000 stories by victim-survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence and allies, written, painted, and stitched onto red fabric.

Victim-survivors’ stories literally blanket highly public, outdoor places to create and demand space to heal and resist a singular narrative about sexual violence. The Monument Quilt was displayed for the fiftieth and final time May 31 – June 2, 2019 on the National Mall. This report reflects on how FORCE and the Monument Quilt’s relationship to national community-based projects embody and aspire to an intersectional approach to healing and organizing with victim-survivors.
The Monument Quilt, launched in 2013, is FORCE’s most well-known form of community-based healing. The Monument Quilt is a survivor-led project that is comprised of 3,000 victim-survivor’s stories of rape and abuse, written, stitched, and painted onto fabric squares. The Monument Quilt serves as a public healing space. Members of the community can attend workshops and design their own quilt squares. The Monument Quilt has created a space for thousands of people to come together to share their stories of sexual and domestic violence. To commemorate the Monument Quilt’s fiftieth and final display on the National Mall, this report will survey the history of some of the legal and non-legal responses to sexual and domestic violence, discuss the weaknesses in the legal system’s response, and highlight the Monument Quilt as a survivor-led project that creates room for survivors to determine what alternative visions for responding to rape and abuse should be.

FORCE’s work fosters honest conversations around the realities of sexual and intimate partner violence.

1 We use the term “criminal legal system” in recognition of the fact that the system often fails to provide justice for the most marginalized members of our community.
Sexual and domestic violence are most often addressed by involving the criminal legal system. But the criminal legal system has failed victim-survivors by not providing adequate support and resources to help them heal. Moreover, the criminal legal system is neither a safe nor welcoming environment for many victim-survivors, especially for Black women, women of color, trans and gender non-conforming people, and those who are undocumented. Sexual and domestic violence and oppression based on race, gender, gender identity, ethnicity, sexual identity, and immigration status are inextricably linked. An intersectional approach to sexual and domestic violence recognizes that the criminal legal system is not a viable option for all victim-survivors and provides opportunities for individuals to seek help in and from their communities. The Monument Quilt and other community-based healing campaigns organize with victim-survivors to educate our communities and begin to identify alternative forms of justice.

The History of the Anti-Sexual and Domestic Violence Movements

Until the 1970s, sexual and domestic violence were not considered public issues. The anti-rape and battered women’s movements, however, increased societal awareness about sexual and domestic violence. These movements exposed the failures of the law and the lack of community support available to the two to four million women who were subjected to violence annually. Through these movements, both non-legal and legal solutions were created to help victim-survivors. However, the solutions centered the experiences of white women, and often failed to acknowledge the intersection of sexual and domestic violence and oppressions like racism and poverty. The lack of an intersectional framework led to an overemphasis on carceral solutions. These solutions have had unintended consequences, such as increased mass incarceration rates and increased distrust in the criminal legal system for victim-survivors, especially among people of color, trans and gender non-conforming people, and people who are undocumented.

3 Jami Ake & Gretchen Arnold, A Brief History of Anti-Violence-Against-Women Movements in the United States, SAGE PUBLICATIONS, 9 (2017), https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/79117_Chapter_1.pdf. Historians like Becky Thompson and Sherna Berger Gluck have argued that “efforts by women of color to confront violence against women have largely been written out of the history of the feminist movement.” Id.

“The criminal legal system is neither a safe nor welcoming environment for many victim-survivors, especially for Black women, women of color, trans and gender non-conforming people, and those who are undocumented.”

A quilt square saying “When Institutions Protect Statistics They Protect Their Rapists.”
The Anti-Rape Movement

The early anti-rape movement focused both on educating communities about rape and developing structures within communities to address sexual violence. One significant achievement of the anti-rape movement was the creation of Rape Crisis Centers (“RCCs”). In 1972, RCCs were created to fill a void in community services for victim-survivors healing from the trauma of sexual violence.\(^5\) RCCs offered a number of community-based resources, such as 24-hour crisis lines, prevention education, and counseling.\(^6\) Local anti-rape groups also organized community-centered programs such as speak outs and self-defense classes to advocate for changes in how society viewed sexual violence. As RCCs grew and the movement developed, coalitions formed to advocate for legislation that would provide compassionate treatment to victim-survivors and continue providing resources to help victim-survivors heal. The anti-rape movement advocated for law reform to correct the worst failures of the state’s responses to victim-survivors of sexual violence.\(^7\) This meant expanding the definition of rape, enacting rape shield laws, removing requirements that women prove they fought back against their rapists, and eliminating the marital rape exception.\(^8\) Throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s the movement successfully modernized rape law; however, after the initial rape reform laws passed, legislative changes slowed significantly.\(^9\) At the same time, community mobilization in response to sexual violence decreased and state control of community-based programs, like RCCs, increased.\(^10\) State control led to increased government funding, most notably to services linked to the criminal legal system. Increased funding to the criminal legal system shifted the focus from a victim-centered perspective to a focus on investigation and prosecution of sexual violence.\(^11\)

![A consent rally organized by college students in Annapolis, MD, to advocate for a “Yes Means Yes” campus sexual assault bill, proposed by Delegate Maurice Morales. February 2016.](image-url)

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6 Id.
7 ROSE CORRIGAN, UP AGAINST A WALL, 24 (2013).
8 Id. at 34.
9 Id. at 40.
10 Id.
The Battered Women’s Movement

The battered women’s movement (now called the anti-violence movement) began as a grassroots movement, with community members providing shelter and support for victim-survivors of violence in their homes and community-based agencies. It became clear, however, that community shelters did not have the resources to help all victim-survivors. To keep up with the growing demand, shelters began to apply for government resources. But reliance on government money led to restrictions on the types of services shelters could provide. For example, the Wisconsin legislature allocated one million dollars in 1980 for battered women’s services, but prohibited awards to shelters that housed unmarried women with children. 12

As the battered women’s movement expanded, Congress and state legislatures increased funding for services related to domestic violence. In 1994, Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act (“VAWA”). 13 VAWA created programs that earmarked federal funds to improve the legal system’s response to domestic and sexual violence. Since 1994, the Office on Violence Against Women (“OVW”) has awarded nearly four billion dollars in grant funds to state, tribal, and local governments, and non-profit organizations focused on ending violence against women and expanded protections for Native women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and other marginalized groups. 14

Government funding was funneled mostly to the criminal legal system, providing support for police, prosecutors, courts, and community-based services supporting the criminal legal system. In 1994, sixty-two percent of VAWA’s resources funded the criminal legal system; thirty-eight percent went to social services. By 2013, eighty-five percent of VAWA funding supported the criminal legal system. 15 The funding preferences in VAWA highlight how the legal solutions have overshadowed and out-funded the non-legal solutions initially implemented by the anti-rape and battered women’s movements.

Ama Chandra leading a healing activity at the Gather Together Survivor Convening, at the Walbrook Branch Library in Baltimore, MD. May 2018.

11 Id. at 43–44.
12 SUSAN SCHECHTER, WOMEN AND MALE VIOLENCE, 124 (1982).
14 Id.
Increased criminalization was expected to deter domestic violence. But the impact of criminalization on rates of domestic violence remains unclear. Criminalization has had unintended consequences, particularly for people of color. Moreover, government funding of criminal justice bureaucracies shifted the focus of domestic violence policy from community-based social services to policing and incarceration.

**Carceral Solutions Are Not for Every Victim-Survivor**

The criminal legal response to sexual and domestic violence has become the norm in society. If you were to ask most people what should be done after a rape occurs, they would more than likely answer, “Report it to the police.” For some victim-survivors, the intervention of the criminal legal system is a positive experience and delivers them justice. For others, however, the criminal legal system fails to meet their needs. And criminalizing sexual and domestic violence has had a number of unintended consequences for victim-survivors, including underreporting and prevention of the development of alternative responses.

Underreporting

Approximately sixty-five percent of sexual violence and forty-six percent of intimate partner violence is not reported. Lack of trust in the criminal legal system and fear of repercussions are two of the reasons for the underreporting of sexual and domestic violence. Less than a third of all people living in the U.S. have a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the criminal legal system.

Victim-survivors tend to have even less trust in the system, with eighty percent of victim-survivors who had once called the police due to domestic violence reporting that they would be afraid to call the police in the future because they believed that officers would not believe them or would not do anything about the violence.\textsuperscript{20} People of color report distrust and fear of the criminal legal system at even higher rates. For every African-American woman who reports her rape, at least fifteen African-American women do not report theirs.\textsuperscript{21} A study conducted by the American Civil Liberties Union ("ACLU") found that forty-six percent of respondents said police were "sometimes" demeaning or disrespectful when reporting sexual or domestic violence and thirty-nine percent said this occurred "often".\textsuperscript{22} The survey also found that victim-survivors fear reporting sexual and domestic violence because of the collateral consequences of reporting, such as fear of reprisal by the abuser, economic detriment, child welfare concerns, immigration complications, and punitive measures against the victim-survivor.\textsuperscript{23}

Fear of repercussions makes some victim-survivors choose not to involve the police. However, sometimes victim-survivors are unable to keep the criminal legal system at arm’s length, even when they would prefer to do so. Many victim-survivors become involved with the criminal legal system against their will due to their abusive partners. Survivors of sexual and domestic violence are often incarcerated for defending themselves against their abusers. In California, ninety-three percent of the women that were incarcerated for killing their partners had been abused by those partners in the past.\textsuperscript{24} Victim-survivors who call police, particularly women of color and trans women, sometimes find themselves victimized by the same officers who they thought would protect them. And calling the police can lead to disastrous consequences for undocumented women, or for women who come to the attention of the child welfare system as a result of seeking help. These unintended consequences of reporting cause many victim-survivors to distrust the criminal legal system.

\textsuperscript{22} American Civil Liberties Union, supra note 17, at 12.
\textsuperscript{23} Id. at 24.
Lack of Resources

Survivors experience discrimination when reaching out for support in almost every arena – including treatment centers, shelters, mental health counseling, and employment. Victim-survivors of color and those who are trans, LGBTQIA+, and undocumented often need additional resources including culturally appropriate services as well as prevention and supportive resources in diverse languages, which are difficult to access or nonexistent within many communities.\(^{25}\) With so few options, people affected by sexual and domestic violence are often isolated. It is not surprising that victim-survivors are more likely to seek help from friends and family than the criminal legal system.

What society needs is policies that protect and honor victim-survivors. Prisons are not the only answer to sexual and domestic violence. We need investment in community accountability models, public health campaigns, and education on healthy relationships and consent.

Rather than over-funding carceral consequences, communities and governments should focus on increasing funding to local resources such as RCCs, shelters and other community-based programs.

Recent Movement Work to Shift from Carceral Strategies

Community-based organizations are working to respond to the unmet needs of victim-survivors by focusing on restorative, intersectional, community-based justice. Many of the leaders at the forefront of this movement are women of color, who have re-focused the goals of the movement to highlight the experiences of those facing intersectional oppressions. Activists are shaping the conversation for decades to come by helping people understand the overlapping and crosscutting relationships among race, class, gender, and sexuality.\(^{26}\)

The most well-known of these organizations is Me Too, which is also referred to as the #MeToo Movement. Tarana Burke founded Me Too in 2006 with a focus on helping victim-survivors of sexual violence. The goal of the organization is to reframe and expand the global conversation around sexual violence to speak to the needs of a broader spectrum of survivors, particularly Black women and girls and other young women of color from low wealth communities.27 The organization has sparked a public conversation surrounding sexual and domestic violence, especially among celebrities and high-ranking officials. While Me Too came to the public attention in 2018, even before the national recognition, the organization was working to connect victim-survivors to local resources.28

A number of organizations have implemented creative community-based responses to sexual and domestic violence. INCITE! is a nation-wide network of radical feminists of color working to end violence against women, gender non-conforming, and trans people of color within our communities and support victim-survivors through direct action, critical dialogue, and grassroots organizing.29 In 2000, INCITE! hosted the first Color of Violence Conference, which addressed the gaps within anti-violence and racial justice organizing.30 Workshops were created to educate attendees on violence against people of color, including attacks on immigrants' rights and Native American treaty rights.31

Organizations such as the Black Women's Blueprint, Minnesota Indian Women’s Resource Center (MIWRC) and
Fix the Hurt continue to promote an intersectional, community-centered approach. In 2012, the Black Women’s Blueprint, founded by Farah Tanis, held the nation’s first Black Women’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The focus of the Commission was the increased rates of rape and sexual assault of Black women in the United States.\(^{32}\) The MIWRC works to bring public awareness to missing and murdered indigenous women by holding marches and has recently launched an Ally Art project in honor of indigenous women.\(^{33}\) Fix the Hurt creates powerful and educational artistic performances that engage audiences and empower them to help in preventing domestic and dating violence.\(^{34}\) The organization visits schools, universities, correctional facilities, and military bases to present their plays.

The work that these organizations do is crucial in providing spaces for all victim-survivors to heal.

There are also organizations that focus on a niche issue within the broader context of sexual and domestic violence. Within the last decade, an increasing number of organizations have worked to address sexual violence on college campuses and in the military. End Rape on Campus advocates for direct support of survivors and their communities, prevention through education, and policy reform at the campus, local, state, and federal levels and educates students on their Title II, VI, and IX rights and consent.\(^{35}\) Yes Means Yes, a campaign organized by End Rape on Campus, advocates for the use of affirmative consent standards in campus sexual assault cases.\(^{36}\) Protect Our Defenders works to end the epidemic of rape and sexual assault in the military and combat a culture of pervasive misogyny, sexual harassment, and retribution against victims.

There are numerous other organizations working towards the common goal of creating community-based, victim-survivor centered responses to sexual and domestic violence in the United States. FORCE’s existence and development parallels the emergence and growth of many of these survivor-led organizations. FORCE is proud to join in that work.
The Monument Quilt

Six years ago, FORCE created the Monument Quilt as a tool to reconnect victim-survivors to their communities and to bring communities together to publicly support victim-survivors. Since then, the Quilt has been displayed fifty times in thirty-three different cities. The Monument Quilt’s final display was May 31 – June 2, 2019 on the National Mall. It blanketed a third of a mile of land and share over 3,000 stories from survivors of sexual and domestic violence and their supporters. People across the world submitted quilt squares for display.

The Quilt embraces all victim-survivors, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, gender identity, and immigration status. The Monument Quilt specifically honors and centers the stories too often left out of public conversations on sexual assault and domestic violence, including those of Black women who are criminalized for self-defense and Native survivors whose search for justice is entwined with tribal sovereignty. Dedicated to all victim-survivors, the Monument Quilt memorializes trans and gender non-conforming people whose lives were taken by violence and shares stories from immigrant, LGBTQIA+, and male victim-survivors of sexual and domestic violence.

“The Monument Quilt specifically honors and centers the stories too often left out of public conversations on sexual assault and domestic violence.”

Helping people heal and connect with their communities is why FORCE orchestrates public displays of the Monument Quilt, both in Baltimore and in communities around the U.S. and Mexico. FORCE has partnered with hundreds of orga-
nizations to host quilt making workshops, including the Baltimore Transgender Alliance, with whom FORCE worked in 2017 to create quilt squares memorializing trans women of color who were lost to violence that year. During FORCE’s Not Alone Baltimore Campaign in April 2016, FORCE hosted storytelling, conversations about accountability, and a presentation of the Monument Quilt closing down two blocks of North Avenue.

The Quilt has also helped to spread awareness of sexual assault on campuses in Maryland. More than twenty percent of female college students report being a victim of sexual assault.37 One in four college women surveyed are victims of rape or attempted rape.38 For three years in a row, from 2016-2018, the Sexual Assault Resource Unit (“SARU”) and Center for Health Education and Wellness (“CHEW”) at Johns Hopkins University hosted the Monument Quilt. 450 stories were displayed across the Hopkins lawn, known at “The Beach.” 39 The Monument Quilt also made an appearance during the “Yes Means Yes” rally in February 2016, where over 100 college students met in Annapolis to support legislation proposed by Delegate Maricé Morales to require affirmative consent policies on campuses.40

FORCE foregrounds the well-being of victim-survivors through the Monument Quilt. The goal of the Monument Quilt is to show victim-survivors that they are not alone in their journeys. Victim-survivors who have participated in the quilt square making process have said that it is a “cathartic process” that was “very therapeutic”. One victim-survivor found that working with FORCE on the Monument Quit was a “healing process” and was happy to learn that “I’m not alone in my experiences and that there are people who support me”. Over eighty-five percent of people who participated in Monument Quilt displays or making quilt squares felt that those events made them feel less alone. Almost all who participated said that they learned how trauma works and how to support a victim-survivor on their path to heal.

Moving forward, FORCE will work to continue to support victim-survivors by providing an open forum that supports an intersectional, multi-dimensional approach to dealing with sexual and domestic violence.

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37 Rachel Chism, Monument Quilt, Created by Survivors of Rape and Abuse, Visits Johns Hopkins (Sept. 24, 2015), https://hub.jhu.edu/2015/09/24/forces-monument-quilt/.
39 Chism, supra note 48.
40 The Monument Quilt, Students Rally for “Yes Mean Yes” Bill to Curb Crisis of Campus Sexual Assault in Maryland, https://themonumentquilt.org/consentrally/.
FORCE within the Context of Movement Building

FORCE is a creative activist collaboration founded to disrupt the culture of rape and promote a culture of consent. FORCE designs communications campaigns to generate media attention and get millions of people talking about sexual and domestic violence. Nationally known for producing large-scale public art projects, FORCE believes that a more difficult and honest conversation will force America to face the realities of sexual and domestic violence and envision a world where sex is empowering and pleasurable rather than coercive and violent.

FORCE is a national organization with roots firmly planted in Baltimore. FORCE’s staff has presented at the National Sexual Assault Conference, Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault Women of Color Network, Tennessee Coalition Against Sexual Assault Annual Prevention Conference, Louisiana Conference on Sexual Assault and Family Violence, and North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault Prevention Training, in addition to local and national anti-violence, communications, art, and media conferences. FORCE also holds lectures and workshops at colleges across the U.S., Mexico and Canada. Additionally, FORCE hosts events at its studio located in Baltimore and at other local venues and community-based healing events. FORCE’s art actions work towards social justice in a variety of contexts, including tribal sovereignty, immigration, and decriminalizing survival.

Tribal Sovereignty

Rates of sexual violence against Native women are two and a half times higher than for any other ethnic group. Seventy percent of the perpetrators of violence against Native women are non-Native. To support the organizing of Native activists bringing attention to these facts, the Monument Quilt has partnered with these activists on two important issues, tribal sovereignty and the Dakota Access Pipeline construction.

FORCE supported tribal sovereignty by presenting the Monument Quilt to protest the Dollar General Case at the U.S. Supreme Court. In that case, a Dollar General store supervisor sexually assaulted a 13-year-old Native boy. Dollar General fought the victim-survivor’s family and tribe to avoid responsi-

A circle dance by members of the Quapaw Tribe in Quapaw, OK. August 2014.


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Dollar General argued that the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Tribal Court could not exercise jurisdiction over Dollar General because Dollar General is a non-Native business. The Supreme Court heard the case and in a 4-4 opinion, reaffirmed the lower court’s decision allowing the tribal courts to exercise jurisdiction over Dollar General.

On December 7, 2015, FORCE, the National Indigenous Resource Center, and the Indian Law Resource Center, organized a demonstration outside the Supreme Court while oral arguments were being heard. Hundreds of Native advocates gathered to demonstrate against the attack on tribal jurisdiction through marching, song, speeches, prayer, and a large quilt containing stories from survivors of rape and abuse. Fabric squares were sewn onto shawls and worn by Native Women on the steps of the Supreme Court. Across the street on the U.S. Capitol lawn, another 700 testimonials from The Monument Quilt underscored the human stories behind and real consequences of the threat on tribal jurisdiction.

FORCE also worked to bring visibility to the Dakota Access Pipeline and its connections to higher rates of rape and sexual assault. Tribal communities who were at ground zero of the Pipeline reported a doubling and tripling of calls for sexual assault and domestic violence. In November 2016, FORCE joined D.C. Standing Rock Coalition during a busy morning commute at Union Station, Washington, D.C. to pray and urge President Obama not to approve the pipeline.

“Rates of sexual violence against Native women are two and a half times higher than for any other ethnic group.”

43 Id.
46 Id.
Immigration

In April 2017, the Monument Quilt traveled to several Western states displaying victim-survivor’s stories. To raise awareness of high rates of sexual abuse amongst immigrants and protest President Trump’s xenophobic immigration policies, on President Trump’s 100th day in office, over 2,000 quilt squares were displayed on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border. The display was organized by FORCE staff in collaboration with Juan Ortiz, Mora Fernandez, Lorena Kourousias, and Ixchel Villareal, in partnership with La Casa Mandarina, Feminismo Consciente, UTEP-Women’s and Gender Studies Program, Center Against Sexual and Family Violence, Violence Intervention Program, Inc., Mujeres en Movimiento, and Make the Road NY.

More than seventy percent of undocumented immigrant women experience sexual assault while migrating to the U.S. Once in the U.S., immigrant women are three to six times more likely to experience domestic violence than U.S.-born women. Abusers and perpetrators use undocumented immigrants’ fear of police and deportation to commit rape and abuse with impunity. FORCE is working to shift the narrative by using victim-survivors stories to make visible the ways that U.S. policy and culture collude to make high rates of sexual and domestic violence.

Self-Defense in Domestic Violence

Victim-survivors are often forced to defend themselves from their abusers and are criminalized for defending themselves. FORCE works to mobilize communities around the need to decriminalize self-defense. Tondalo Hall was twenty-two years old when she was arrested for “failing to protect” her children from her abusive partner. Her boyfriend regularly abused Tondalo, both physically and mentally. When he began to abuse her children, at first Tondalo did nothing, too afraid to confront him. However, when she saw swelling on her infant’s leg, she took her kids

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49 Id.
to the hospital. Both Tondalo and her boyfriend were arrested and charged with child abuse. Tondalo is serving a thirty-year sentence—fifteen times longer than the two-year sentence the man who abused her and her children received. FORCE supported Tondalo by inviting people across the US to make quilt squares, and by traveling to Oklahoma in partnership with Ultraviolet to display the quilt squares during Tondalo’s commutation hearing. With this solidarity action, our goal was to show that Tondalo was not alone.

Through the Monument Quilt, FORCE has embraced the stories of other victim-survivors who acted in self-defense and were punished by the criminal legal system. Marissa Alexander is a Black mother who fired a warning shot into the air to stop her ex-husband from abusing her. Marissa was charged, convicted, and sentenced to twenty years for aggravated assault, despite the fact that no one was harmed. Marissa was finally released in January 2017 after serving three years in prison and two years on house arrest. FORCE supported Marissa by organizing through the Free Marissa Now campaign to collect Monument Quilt squares bearing messages of support and by using the Monument Quilt to spell out “NOT ALONE” at the Duval County Courthouse in Jacksonville, Florida, during her final sentencing hearing. Since her release, Marissa has gone on to become an advocate for victim-survivors who are criminalized for self-defense.

FORCE’s “decriminalizing survival” campaign began as a Twitter Open Mic in solidarity with Bresha Meadows. Bresha was fourteen years old when she was arrested for aggravated murder for defending her family from her abusive father.

51 Free Marissa Now, We Did It!, http://www.freemarissanow.org/.
In May 2017, FORCE, in partnership with activists around the country, hosted several “Love Poems for Bresha” actions to write letters of support and raise funds for Bresha. These events served as healing spaces that used poetry to celebrate Black girls, women, and trans victim-survivors who have been criminalized for their survival.

Most recently, FORCE, paired with MOMCares and Nzuri Malkia Birth Collective, created a “Love Letters for Survivors Campaign”. The campaign was in honor of Black victim-survivors of sexual and domestic violence. In January 2019, during an event called Hear Our Stories: Honoring Black Victim-Survivors, a love letter writing event was held to honor Marquita Sutton, who is currently serving a ten-year sentence in Maryland for killing her abusive husband after years of physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse.

People were invited to gather at FORCE’s studio to learn about Marquita and write her love letters for Valentine’s Day. The Love Letters Campaign supports and celebrates victim-survivors whose stories are not always part of mainstream abuse narratives. FORCE is working to shift the narrative to help all victim-survivors heal and feel welcomed into their community.

Our Vision for the World

Our vision for the world is to end all sexual and domestic violence. FORCE understands that will be a difficult goal to reach, but it is not impossible and this aspiration is necessary to decrease rates of violence. Accomplishing our vision involves organizing and building leadership with fellow victim-survivors to envision and create the world we want to live within; creating healing spaces by and for victim-survivors; and offering opportunities for our communities to listen and learn from victim-survivor’s lived experiences.

Ending Rape Culture

In a rape culture, people do not have control over their own bodies. In a rape culture, people are surrounded with images, language, laws, and other everyday phenomena that validate and perpetuate rape. Rape culture includes jokes, TV, music, advertising, legal jargon, laws, words and imagery that make sexual violence and coercion seem so normal that people believe that rape is inevitable. Rather than viewing the culture of rape as a problem to change, people in a rape culture think about the persistence of rape as the norm.

Rape culture often involves blaming the victim, rather than confronting the abuser. Sometimes rape culture is evident. Asking a victim-survivor, “What were you wearing?” or “How much did you have to drink?” rather than focusing on the violence done to them are examples of rape culture. Other times it is less evident – for example, when school systems enforce one-sided dress codes that regulate girls’ behavior.

Organizing with Victim-Survivors

FORCE is currently organizing with victim-survivors in our hometown of Baltimore, through FORCE’s Listening Campaign to Disrupt Rape Culture (“Listening Campaign”). In this Listening Campaign, FORCE asked victim-survivors to envision a rape free city. The Listening Campaign was designed to create a dialogue about the actions we can take to work towards this vision. Using participatory action research, the Listening Campaign was organized by Gather Together members, with support from FORCE collective member Charnell Covert. Charnell was hired in early 2018 to guide the Listening Campaign, deepening and enhancing the work significantly by developing a model for Listening Circles to complement one-on-one interviews between survivors.

The Listening Circle tool was launched in May 2018, when FORCE and Gather Together led a Survivor Convening in West Baltimore. The event brought together 40 victim-survivors from all across Baltimore to envision what a Baltimore without rape can look like.

The goals of the campaign are to:
1. Build relationships between survivors of rape and abuse in Baltimore;
2. Tell an intersectional story of survivorship in Baltimore;
3. Build a survivor-led movement organizing for change;
4. Create a survivor advocacy platform, available in print and online, that calls for concrete policy change.

The Listening Campaign is strengthening and amplifying the leadership of victim-survivors from the communities that experience the most barriers to aid: people of color, LGBTQIA+ communities and individuals with history of incarceration. It is building coalitions between FORCE and allied organizations working to end violence. The Listening Campaign built a base of engaged voters who have been impacted by sexual and domestic violence. Gather Together members trained an initial group of twenty-five fellow Gather Together members to register voters, partnered with six organizations to hold Listening Campaign interview trainings, and joined another twelve organizations throughout Baltimore to host Listening Circles in order to engage 126 victim-survivors in the interviews or listening circles.
During the Listening Campaign, Gather Together partnered with the GLCCB, STAR TRACK, Baltimore Transgender Alliance, BARS: Baltimore Asian Resistance in Solidarity, WombWork Productions, the League for People With Disabilities Women’s Group, Clay Pots/Union Square Association, Restorative Response Baltimore, Waller Gallery, Shontina Vernon + Grrl Justice Film, Catharine’s Cottage, Paul’s Place Women’s Group, Out 4 Justice, GLSN/I Slay Youth Conference, Full of Faith Love and Outreach Ministries, Sex Workers Outreach Project (“SWOP”), and Heal 2 End. Listening Campaign interviews ended in December 2018. FORCE is now planning community teach-ins, as we work to compile the rich and important data from the past two years into a comprehensive report. This report will include a guide for community organizing to be shared locally and nationally.

Conclusion

FORCE is a survivor-led organization that employs art actions to build leadership among victim-survivors, support the healing journey from the trauma of sexual and domestic violence and spark a dialogue and action about how to end rape culture. For the last six years, the Monument Quilt has been FORCE’s largest survivor-led project. Through this project, one thing that FORCE has learned is that not all victim-survivors want carceral solutions to sexual and domestic violence. Victim-survivors are asking for intersectional community-based healing projects where they can voice their opinions and educate people on the trauma they face. As we reflect on the culminating display of the Monument Quilt, we are also reflecting on our Baltimore Listening Campaign findings within the national context of the Survivor Policy Convening, co-hosted by Collective Action for Safe Spaces in DC, where non-carceral solutions to sexual and intimate partner violence were discussed. As the Monument Quilt comes to a close, FORCE focuses in more on our community organizing efforts in our home-bases of Baltimore and Mexico City, taking the knowledge learned from the Monument Quilt project and applying it on a deeper level. Through our ongoing organizing work initiated by the Listening Campaign, FORCE is involving our local communities in order to learn how to better serve victim-survivor’s needs, and evaluating how our methods and lessons learned can be applied by organizers globally.