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### Commentary

## California's Parole System Abuses Battered Women

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By Sandra Kobrin  
WeNews commentator

*Gov. Schwarzenegger is about to make another decision in the case of Flozelle Woodmore, a model prisoner whose release has been recommended by parole boards six times. Sandra Kobrin says the governor must stop playing politics with her life.*

**Editor's Note:** The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's eNews.

(WOMENSENEWS)--Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California is scheduled to make another decision on the parole of Flozelle Woodmore Aug. 10.

Let's all encourage him to do the right thing.

California has been groundbreaking in its defense of battered women. It is one of the few states where an abused woman on trial for killing a domestic partner is allowed to present expert testimony about battery and its effects during the trial.



Sandra Kobrin

More importantly, it is the only state that has a "habeas project," which allows an incarcerated battered woman who was not allowed to present testimony on the effects of battery in her initial trial (it only became allowable under law in 1992) to petition for a retrial and bring in the evidence that was banned. In the five years since the California Habeas Project was created, 19 incarcerated battered women have been released from prison.

But sadly, the state remains in the Stone Age when it comes to paroling the survivors of domestic violence.

Numerous battered women have served the term of their original sentences, have been found suitable for parole (often more than once) yet remain imprisoned at the whim of the governor.

In California, when someone convicted of first-degree or second-degree

murder is recommended for parole, the governor has the opportunity to reverse the decision of the parole board. Woodmore's plight shows why this can be such a bad system.

Over 20 years ago, then 18-year-old Woodmore killed her long-time abusive boyfriend Clifton Morrow.

For the five years they were together, Woodmore stated he beat her in public, in private and even when she was pregnant.

### **Threatened With Death**

One day in August 1986, he had beaten Woodmore and she said he had threatened to kill her 2-year-old son. "I started screaming at him," Woodmore said, according to press accounts. "He knocked me down and I went and got my purse."

She had hidden a gun belonging to her stepfather in the purse. Woodmore shot Morrow in the chest.

Woodmore was confused at the time of her trial. She thought she had acted in self-defense, to save herself and her son, but because the laws did not allow evidence of battered women's syndrome to be brought into the trial, her public defender told her to plead to second degree murder. She did and was sentenced 15 years to life. There was no trial.

Since then, Woodmore, who dropped out of high school, has been a model prisoner. She got her general equivalency diploma, became a battered woman's counselor, president of Alcoholic Anonymous, received numerous vocational certificates and not one disciplinary write-up.

Woodmore has expressed profound remorse and the victim's mother and sister have written in favor of her parole.

The judge who sentenced Woodmore wants her released. He believes Woodmore was suffering from "intimate partner abuse and its effects" and that evidence could have made a huge difference in her defense if she would have gone to trial.

Here's the kicker. Woodmore has been granted parole six times. In a row. She has appeared in front of the state's parole board six times in six years and each time the board members have found her suitable for release.

### **Six Decisions Denied**

But to her horror, two governors--first Gray Davis and now Arnold Schwarzenegger-- reversed every one of the parole board's decisions.

In the past two years, Schwarzenegger has earned political currency by consistently reversing decisions and currying favor with the extraordinarily powerful correction officers' union, which represents prison guards in the state.

"The parole system is a form of abuse," says Gloria Killian, executive director of the Pasadena-based Action Committee for Women in Prison and a wrongly convicted former inmate who spent more than 16 years in a California prison for a crime she didn't commit. "It's a law in the state of California that when the parole board finds you suitable, that's exactly what it means, technically you should be released right then. But the parole system has turned into a political game where a former Austrian bodybuilder makes his own rules."

During his campaign, Schwarzenegger, elected in the special election of 2003 after voters recalled Davis, said he was going to "let the parole board do their job."

Initially that was true. In 2004, 72 lifers, including eight survivors of domestic violence, were paroled and he upheld their parole. In 2006, however, not a single battered woman was paroled.

### **2005 Ad Campaign Worked**

This seismic shift is no accident, says Andrea Bible, director of the San Francisco-based Free Battered Women. She says that it's a response to the commercials that the California Correctional Peace Officers Association ran in 2005 slamming him for lenient paroles. "What he's doing now, not paroling survivors of domestic violence, is purely political and had nothing to do with their cases. These women are not dangers to the community."

Bible cited the recent case of Sandra Redmond, who was granted parole twice by the parole board, the second time in March 2007, and blocked by Schwarzenegger both times.

In June, a petition filed by the Habeas Project and Redmond's lawyer, Carrie Hempel, argued that if evidence of battery had been admitted at her trial she would have received a different verdict. The judge in the case changed her conviction to voluntary manslaughter and released her on time served.

"She was denied parole in March by the governor yet released by the courts in June," Bible said. "Nothing changed about her dangerousness."

Governors appoint parole boards to decide if prisoners have redeemed themselves and deserve release.

Women such as Woodmore--who some of us think do not belong in prison at all--should not have their lives revolve around politicians looking to score points with unions or get re-elected. They have suffered enough.

The governor can be reached at (916) 445-0873, e-mailed at <http://www.govmail.com.gov>, or faxed at (916) 445-4633.

*Sandra Kobrin is a Los Angeles based writer and columnist.*

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at [editors@womensenews.org](mailto:editors@womensenews.org).

**For more information:**

Free Battered Women:

<http://www.freebatteredwomen.org/>

Office of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger:

<http://gov.ca.gov/>

California Correctional Peace Officers Association:

<http://www.ccpoa.org/>

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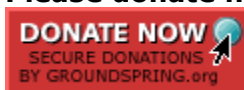
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