What causes women to feel trapped in abusive relationships with men? Consider how four women from different social classes describe this situation. A woman I call Jackie spoke to me about feeling completely dominated by her partner. He punched her repeatedly and threatened her with a knife. A white woman, she was poor and homeless during part of her relationship:

I was too afraid to leave. I was too afraid to run. I felt like he would come find me no matter where I was, especially after I was pregnant and then after I had my [child] he would come and find me because I had one of his possessions. . . . I was so afraid.

She was fired from her job for being pregnant, which made it even more difficult to survive and protect herself on the streets.

Cheryl, a white woman raised in a working-class community, was regularly hit, kicked, threatened, and sexually assaulted by her partner. He would threaten to kill himself if she didn’t do what he wanted. This is how she describes her marriage:

I was emotionally and spiritually dead. I wasn’t allowed to make decisions about what I wanted to eat. . . . I couldn’t make any decision. . . . I am a
smart person. . . . The world should have been opened up to me and he had
hammered me away into this tight little pine coffin and had buried me six
feet under and that’s how I lived my life.

Her husband’s behavior at her workplace caused her to lose her job,
making her even more dependent on him.

Debra, a professional African American woman, talked of her own
feelings of despair. She was severely beaten and sexually abused by her
husband:

I felt like he had complete control over me and I couldn’t do anything about
my situation. I had this grief inside me and I felt powerless to him. I felt
weak. I’m not that kind of person. . . . I’d get on my knees and pray for God
to change him, change me. . . . I tried everything. . . . I felt I was in bondage.

Her status as a highly educated professional did not protect her from
abuse; her husband was a professional as well, and his status helped
him evade any consequences for his violence. At her workplace, when
she talked about the abuse she was told she must be doing something
to cause it.

Finally, Beth, a white woman who had substantial investments in her
own name, was married to a man who frequently yelled at her, hit her,
and threatened to kill her. She had black eyes, cuts, and many bruises
from the violence. At one point, she felt so desperate that she spent sev-
eral days contemplating what would happen if she killed him:

I wanted to figure out how many years I would get in . . . jail if I killed him,
because I thought, well, this would be better. You know, like, I was think-
ing, I don’t think I could do it, but I was, like, I thought, well, I wonder how
long. . . . Because I thought my parents would feel really bad if he killed
me. . . . Maybe they won’t feel as bad if I killed him and they could come and
visit me in jail. Where does that come from, you know?

Despite having her own money, for a long time she felt unable to protect
herself or change her marriage. She didn’t kill him; she divorced him.
Her awareness of her homicidal feelings helped her to leave. But she
suffered for many years before doing so.

These women express feelings of fear, overwhelming depression,
powerlessness, and desperation. But they did not remain trapped: they
all left their violent partners and changed their lives. Now that they
are safe and free from the abuse, it is unsettling for them to recall such
feelings. As if to distance herself from such despair, Cheryl asserts that
she is “a smart person.” Debra says, “I’m not that kind of person.” Beth
asks where her homicidal feelings came from. There is pain, guilt, and shame in the telling of their stories. This despite having left these men, despite all the things they did to avoid further victimization, and the many efforts they made to change their violent partners.

This is a book about traps and women’s resistance to them. Why do so many women feel trapped in abusive relationships with men? And just how does social class affect this feeling? These questions are examined through interviews with sixty women from different social classes. All were abused by their husbands or boyfriends.

In this introductory chapter, I present the theoretical frameworks of the study, describe how I conducted the research, and offer an overview of the book.

MYTHS ABOUT INTIMATE VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL CLASS

The relationship between class and intimate violence is much misunderstood. Two opposing myths about class circulate in public discussions. The first myth is that social class is all that matters, that it is only or mostly poor and working-class women who are victimized. Called the “class myth,” perhaps this could be more memorably seen as the Stanley Kowalski myth, after the violent character in Tennessee Williams’s play A Streetcar Named Desire. After all, the sleeveless undershirt Marlon Brando wore in his film portrayal of the working-class Kowalski has become known, hideously, as a “wife beater.” At the program where I worked as a batterers’ counselor for eight years, many of the men in the groups were working-class or poor. But the men attending these groups included doctors, lawyers, journalists, scientists, business executives, psychologists, divinity students, and college professors. In trainings with health-care workers and criminal legal officials about violence, I often made note of these occupations. The disbelief this list provokes among professionals is powerful.

The second and opposite myth is that class doesn’t matter at all, and that the same levels of violence can be found in every class level. This “universal risk” or “classless intimate violence” myth denies that class status matters for women in the United States. This myth is repeated whenever a celebrity is named in a case of intimate violence. But while violence against women may be found in virtually every neighborhood, poverty and economic hardship increase women’s vulnerability to intimate violence. Research indicates that rates of such violence are
significantly higher in poor and working-class households than in economically privileged ones.\textsuperscript{4} Poverty and racism affect women’s trust of the criminal legal system.\textsuperscript{5} Intimate violence may further be compounded by women’s abuse at the hands of the police or the Border Patrol.\textsuperscript{6}

Both of these myths distort the relationship of social class to women’s victimization. This study challenges the first of these myths, the notion that intimate violence is only a problem for people in working-class and poor neighborhoods. This idea is clearly false. But while some incidents of battering and rape involving Hollywood celebrities or professional athletes have received widespread attention, such cases are often so extreme and sensationalized that they offer no real understanding of women’s experiences in economically privileged communities.

This study also seeks to challenge the second myth, the notion that class has no bearing on violence against women. While it is true that this violence can be found at every class level, social circumstances, especially poverty and racism, significantly affect women’s risk of abuse. Following the lead of Patricia Hill Collins, who suggests a “both/and” way of framing social inequalities, it might be said that it is true both that intimate violence can be found in virtually every community, and that there are social circumstances, such as poverty and racism, that make it difficult for women to resist or escape violence.\textsuperscript{7}

Illustrating the power of these myths, one woman explained how she was forced to fit someone’s image of a person who was victimized. She has spoken publicly about her experience. On one occasion she had a chance to share her story on local television. But before going on camera, the director of the shoot, a man, insisted that she take off her earrings and change her clothes. He said she was too pretty and too well-dressed to portray a “battered woman.” He felt he knew what such a woman looks like, and so he changed her appearance to fit his image.

CLASS AND PRIVILEGE AND CLASS DISADVANTAGE
To explore why it is that women so often feel trapped, I conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with sixty women, all of whom had been abused in intimate relationships with men. They had all been separated from their abusive partners at the time of the interviews. These conversations explored the meaning, the context, and the dynamics of violence and abuse. The interviews lasted from one to six hours; a number were completed in two parts. I recruited women through flyers sent to shelters, women’s advocacy programs, counselors who work with
abusive partners, therapists, and community activists. As the term “intimate violence” was in the heading for the flyer, it is likely that women responding to this kind of recruitment would be more severely abused than women contacted through other methods. On the whole, the violence and abuse these women suffered was more extreme than what I had found in a study of women seeking domestic violence restraining orders in the criminal courts. The violence was also more extensive than what I had seen in my time as a group leader in a program for abusive men.

I chose to interview women who had left abusive relationships, hoping that distance from the relationship might offer some perspective on their experiences and shed light on the long-term consequences of abuse. The study flyer invited participants who had been out of abusive relationships for a number of years. The length of time between the separation and the interview varied from one to thirty-two years, but most women had been separated for fewer than ten years. Having had some time away from these abusive relationships gave the women a chance to talk about the separation and the extent to which they had healed from the violence. Of the sixty women, 73 percent (n = 44) were white, 23 percent (n = 14) were Black or African American, one was Asian American, and one identified as Hispanic.

I grouped the women I interviewed into four class categories: poor, working-class, professional, and wealthy. Let me explain these categories. From a Marxist perspective, classes represent deep social divisions formed by domination, exploitation, and social exclusion in capitalist societies. There is much confusion about the number of classes in the United States and how they should be defined. The term “middle class” is particularly troublesome. Social scientists have found that this term lacks either a clear or a consistent definition. Many scholars use “middle class” to refer to professionals, managers, and those credentialed by higher education. But in news articles, government reports, and some academic studies, “middle class” is often used interchangeably with “middle income.” This is confusing, because families at the median household income are best seen as part of the working class. For instance, in 2020 the US median household income was $67,521, according to the US Census Bureau. This is not even close to the average income of professionals. In 2019, the average salary for lawyers was over $120,000; for doctors, it was over $200,000.

Both “middle class” and “middle income” obscure the bright line between those with class privilege and those with class disadvantage.
Poverty, the most obvious disadvantage, clearly contributes to why some women feel trapped in abusive relationships. But the difference in life chances between the working class and the professional class is also important to understand. This gap has been growing. Anne Case and Angus Deaton charted the increase in deaths among those without college degrees due to suicide, drug abuse, and alcoholism. They call these “deaths of despair.” This increase among working-class people is so significant that in recent years, life expectancy for the US population as a whole has decreased.15

This book was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, the line between the working class and the professional class has been illuminated, in terms of jobs that remain steady and jobs that have disappeared, jobs with health insurance and jobs without any benefits whatsoever. Economically marginalized people and communities of color have been the most harmed by this disease, in terms of the number of cases and the number of fatalities.16 Deaths among Black, Native American, and Latinx individuals are nearly twice as high as deaths among white and Asian American people.17

In the first ten months of the pandemic, women lost significantly more jobs than men; this was especially true for Black women, Latinas, and Asian women.18 In 2020, 3.5 million mothers of school-aged children left the paid workforce.19 By early 2021, women’s overall labor participation was the lowest it had been in over thirty years.20 Service sector workers were especially affected. This gendered job loss is related to increased demands upon women for caretaking at home.21 There is early evidence that the pandemic has increased intimate violence, likely due to increased isolation and economic stress.22 At the same time, since the start of the pandemic, the wealth of US billionaires has risen by 70 percent.23 This global crisis has dramatically exposed class, race, and gender divisions in the United States.

In their map of the US class structure, Earl Wysong, Robert Perrucci, and David Wright avoid the term “middle class” entirely and mark the greatest division as between the “privileged class” (which includes the wealthy, along with professionals and managers) and the “working class” (which includes the poor).24 I also avoid the term “middle class” and all the confusion it represents. Instead, based on their occupations, household income, and investments during the abusive relationships, I have categorized the women’s households as poor, working-class, professional, and wealthy. This offers the best way to explore class privilege and class disadvantage.
Women are referred to by the class category they were in during their relationships. Most of those from poor communities reported no regular income. Some were on disability or other forms of state assistance. The occupations of those who were employed included the hotel industry, food service, drug dealing, and prostitution. Most did not have high school diplomas. None were married; most were not raising children. These women’s relationships with their abusive partners averaged five years in length.

The working-class group had household incomes generally from $30,000 to $90,000, without significant investments. They worked in the building trades, food service, transportation, and clerical jobs. Unlike the wealthy and professional men, many of the working-class men’s jobs were unstable; some men worked on and off, did seasonal labor, or held a variety of minimum-wage jobs. Like many of the wealthy and professional women, working-class women largely worked part-time in order to care for their children. Very few of the men or women had college degrees. Most women were married and had children; the average length of their relationships was less than ten years.

Those in the professional category had household incomes from $100,000 to $300,000, but mostly without substantial investments. Their occupations included higher education, information technology, medicine, and sales. Half of the women worked full-time and half part-time. Most of the women and half of the men had graduated from college, and many had advanced degrees. Most were married, and most also had children. The average length of the marriages or relationships was nineteen years.

The wealthy households had either incomes from $500,000 to several million dollars a year or millions in inheritance or investments. The occupations (largely of the men) included finance, medicine, and business management. Most of the men and women were college graduates, and some held advanced degrees. Most of the women in this category were married, had children, and worked part-time. The average length of the relationships was over fourteen years. Overall, the women in the privileged classes (wealthy and professional) were in much longer relationships than women in working-class and poor communities. Since most women said they felt “trapped” in these relationships, this means that the professional and wealthy women felt trapped for a much longer period of time.

When they were in these relationships, 15 percent (n = 9) of the women’s households could be categorized as poor, 43 percent (n = 26)
were working-class, 23 percent (n = 14) were professional, and 18 percent (n = 11) were wealthy. But class status can be fleeting, especially for women. Research has shown that recently divorced women are twice as likely to be living in poverty than recently divorced men, and that women are more likely to receive public assistance following divorce than men.\textsuperscript{25}

Based on their circumstances at the time of the interviews, most of which took place years after their separation, there was a marked decline in women’s economic status. Of the sixty women, 35 percent (n = 21) were now poor, a category that more than doubled in size; 28 percent (n = 17) were working-class; 25 percent (n = 16) had professional status; and 10 percent (n = 6) remained wealthy. Most of the wealthy and professional women did not lose class status, although some certainly did. But many of the formerly working-class women were now poor. At the time of the interviews, almost half of the women who were poor were homeless or had been homeless since separating from their partners. In some cases, women’s physical injuries were disabling; in other cases, men had succeeded in damaging their ex-partners financially, both during the relationships and after separation. For a number of women, being single mothers created overwhelming dilemmas around work and their children’s needs. Problems with addiction, depression, and other mental health issues in the wake of the abuse were also consequential.

In a capitalist society, social class is part of our identities. Annette Kuhn writes: “Class is not just about the way you talk, or dress, or furnish your home; it is not just about the job you do, or how much money you make doing it . . . . Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being.”\textsuperscript{26}

Social class shapes the comparisons we make between ourselves and those in other classes. Class affects our desires and our feelings of envy, contempt, anger, guilt, and shame. Since racism causes poverty, class divisions are racially coded in the United States. In this study, class is examined on three levels. I explore the similarities and differences between the women from different classes. Social class is also addressed as it appears in conflicts within these relationships. And last, class is discussed at the individual level. As I show, class divisions inspired a range of feelings in both the women and their abusive partners. These feelings help to explain men’s motives for violence and women’s ability to name their experiences as abuse.
THE INTERSECTION OF MULTIPLE INEQUALITIES

The concept of intersectionality addresses the simultaneous operation of privilege and discrimination in people’s lives. This term was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose quote opens this chapter. Since there are many dimensions of identity—including class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, health, religious affiliation, criminal history, and citizenship status—most people occupy complex social locations in which they are privileged by some parts of their identities while being discriminated against because of other aspects. For those women in the study who had class or racial privilege, this privilege obviously did not prevent them from being physically and sexually abused. In fact, half of the wealthy women had been in more than one abusive relationship. Nonetheless, privilege and discrimination affected women’s experiences.

Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge emphasize that the different forms of inequality—such as gender and class and race—shape one another. “Intersectionality,” they write, “examines how power relations are intertwined and mutually constructing.” As they put it, “Within intersectional frameworks, there is no pure racism or sexism. Rather, power relations of racism and sexism gain meaning in relation to one another.”

This feminist approach inspired the design of this study and the kinds of questions I asked about feeling trapped. The class and racial identities of the women are named in this book to raise this complexity.

THE SOCIAL LOCATION OF THE AUTHOR

A researcher’s personal background can both help and hinder the process of the investigation. One report on social-scientific methods states, “Every researcher has a biography that becomes an element in and an aspect of the collection and analysis of data.” Like all scholars, I bring strengths and limitations to this project.

In one way or another, I have been engaged with the problem of violence against women since 1981. I worked as a group counselor with abusive men for eight years. I trained hospital, mental health, and criminal legal professionals on intimate violence. I conducted research on men who abuse their partners, on intimate violence and sexual assault on college campuses, and on women seeking domestic violence restraining orders. I explored innovative approaches to violence against
women used in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.\textsuperscript{31} I taught college courses on violence against women for over thirty years. In addition, I have learned much from my life partner, Bonnie Zimmer, who founded and directed a hospital-based program for women who were abused.

Relevant to the matter of social class, while in my twenties I volunteered as a labor union organizer in the taxicab and restaurant industries and also became involved in a newspaper strike. Talking to people about improving their working conditions gave me a vivid understanding of class conflict.

If these are strengths, I certainly have limitations. I am a straight, white, professional-class man with US citizenship. I identify with the gender I was assigned at birth. While I have occasionally encountered angry men on the streets, I actually have no personal experience of being truly terrified, of fearing that someone actually meant to do me serious harm. Most women I know can’t say this. Many gay men I know can’t say this. But I do have a relevant story. A girlfriend I had in high school had been abused by her former boyfriend. I discovered this during an argument. In the middle of an angry exchange, she suddenly curled up on the sofa and said, “Please don’t hit me.” I was horrified that a woman would say this to me. At one point I felt the wrath of this former boyfriend quite directly. He snuck up to me at a football game and punched me in the head hard enough to knock me down. Apparently he felt entitled to control who this young woman dated, even after she had broken up with him. When I am asked how I came to study intimate violence, I think about the impact of these experiences.

I was fortunate to have had loving parents who modeled a true partnership while raising five children (three of them boys). My father worked in a factory. My mother was a schoolteacher who marched for the Equal Rights Amendment and walked picket lines for her union. Along with my other privileges, having such parents has at times made me think I am the wrong person to study intimate violence.

I grew up in two overwhelmingly white, Christian cities near Milwaukee, Wisconsin, one working-class and one professional. The second of these cities, Wauwatosa, is a suburb just outside of Milwaukee. When I was growing up, it was said to be a “city of beautiful homes.” In practice, what that meant was beautiful homes for white people. The first Black resident bought land in Wauwatosa in 1955. His unfinished home was damaged by vandalism and arson; he received threatening phone calls. The city council repeatedly tried to block construction.\textsuperscript{32} Milwaukee is
one of the most racially segregated metropolitan areas in the country. Racially segregated cities like Wauwatosa are created intentionally.33

I have no history of abusive treatment by the police. I assume that my gender, class position, race, sexual orientation, religious background, and citizenship have generally served to protect me from violence. These are privileges, which operate as the flip side of discrimination.

How does my background affect the research? If I don’t have personal experience of being terrified, this creates obstacles to understanding what these women have gone through. I believe my gender made it more difficult for me to find women to interview. My inability to speak Spanish limited the number of Latinas I was able to connect with. Owing to my whiteness, my efforts to find Asian American and Native American women to interview were largely unsuccessful.

While these are surely limitations, I believe that good work on social inequalities can be done if researchers are honest about their backgrounds and make efforts to compensate for their lack of lived experience. I conducted interviews with counselors, antiviolence activists, and women’s advocates in preparation for this research, half of whom were women and men of color. I called upon a number of people to offer insights on this study, including women who work with survivors and who have suffered intimate violence themselves.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Consistent with the guidelines of feminist research methods, I gave women an opportunity to tell their stories at length.34 I sought to express respect, empathy, and support during the interviews. I checked in about the process regularly and encouraged women to take breaks or come back again another day to complete the conversations. A central goal was to avoid doing anything that would cause these women to feel I was shaming them in any way. My questions provoked strong feelings. Shame, a feeling sharply affected by race, class, and gender, is a major obstacle to women’s seeking help.35 I was determined to offer an anti-shaming presence. I believe I generally succeeded, but I know I failed at least once. I was interviewing a white woman who had been married to a wealthy man, and I asked about her income. She was working part-time. When she told me what she earned, I felt the sting of reflected shame on my face. In at least this one case, my question about income somehow evoked this response. In a class-divided society, income is used as a singular measure of individual worth in a most damaging way. A
few women declined to talk about what they earned; my classifications are estimates in some cases. For some, questions about money raised more protectiveness than questions about intimate violence.

Before participating in the interviews, some women had not talked about their abusive relationships for many years. Others talked often about their experiences in their roles as advocates or public speakers. Some were shy and nervous, while others possessed self-confidence and a terrific sense of humor. These were emotionally intense conversations. One professional woman had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She knew the interview would bring back overwhelming feelings about the abuse, and so she made sure to schedule an appointment with her therapist for the following day. During the interview I checked in with her:

[Are you still doing okay?] Oh, I’m so far gone. It’s all right. It’s like I’m extremely triggered. I’m really motivated to share my story. There’s no other way. . . . I can certainly handle this. But I’m not optimizing my rationality.

Another woman thought she might have difficulty sleeping after our interview, as she hadn’t talked about her experience in many years. Yet another woman said she would take a long walk after our conversation to clear her head.

In these conversations, I felt I was able to create good rapport, although this owes as much to the generosity and grace of these individuals as it does to my own skills. They told me about many things that our culture sees as shameful. Women shared details of their own drug and alcohol addiction, of depression and suicide attempts. They talked of losing their children to child protective services and of working in prostitution. They spoke frankly about sex; a few discussed having affairs. This openness convinced me that I had succeeded in making meaningful connections during the interviews. The questions I asked expressed a sense that intimate violence is a serious and highly consequential crime. One question was, “Was your partner held accountable by anyone for his abusive actions?” Another was, “Did anyone acknowledge the injustice of the abuse you experienced?”

At the end of each interview, I asked women how the conversation had gone for them. The feedback I received was very positive about the interview experience. Women felt supported and validated by the conversations, and they appreciated the chance to talk about their experiences. Research indicates that when in-depth interviews are conducted carefully, survivors generally have positive responses to them.36
A woman friend who had survived intimate violence advised me that I might not be able to tolerate all the pain I would encounter. She was right. The degradation, sexual abuse, and physical violence women described overwhelmed me. Women often cried as they explained the struggle with their partners and the toll this had taken on their children.

Kate was a white woman who like her husband was raised in a working-class community. She was attacked by her partner at least thirty times; she suffered concussions, extensive bruises, and cuts. Her husband threatened to kill her more times than she could count. At one point in our conversation, the violence Kate described actually took my breath away. She was relating an incident in which her husband punched her in the face so hard that she was lifted off the floor. I looked down and froze as I was trying to take this in. She stopped to ask me, “Are you breathing?”

Following many interviews, I was exhausted and irritable for the rest of the day. One day a woman described being repeatedly raped by her husband. That night, I had nightmares of being captured by the Nazis during World War II. This is how the dreams of a privileged man interpreted such violence. At one point my spirits were so affected from a series of interviews that I sought guidance from my minister. Since she had previously worked in a battered women’s shelter, she was able to offer useful ideas about taking walks and finding solace during the research process.

It may sound surprising, but there was actually more laughter than tears in the interviews. Humor creates a friendly bond between strangers. It breaks tension in an emotional conversation. Women would sometimes laugh even while describing extreme violence. One white woman spoke about her avoidance of relationships after she had left an extremely violent man. Their household income had been over $100,000. He “almost strangled me to death,” she said. At the time of the interview she was unemployed and had no place to live. “I’ve stayed away from relationships or dating, just because [of] the situation I’m in, being homeless right now,” she told me. “And I don’t like men very much. No.” At this point she looked directly at me, and as I am a man, she laughed very hard. I laughed with her.

There was a lot of good-natured humor at my expense. One thing I asked about was the division of household labor. For a number of women, this question was oddly funny, in that it appeared remarkably naïve:

I did 99 percent of it [much laughter]. He wouldn’t do anything, are you kidding? (a white working-class woman)
Conversations with Women about Abuse

Housecleaning [laughter]? There was no division. (a white professional woman)

[Much laughter] You gotta be kidding me! . . . Zip, nothing. [He would say]: “I’m rich. I have money. . . . You do that.” (a white wealthy woman)

With their laughter, these women seemed to be saying, “You don’t know what it’s really like to actually live with an abusive man, do you?” If that is what they meant, they were of course correct.

VIOLANCE AND GENDER INEQUALITY

To explain why most women from every social class felt trapped in these relationships, it is important to examine more than the abuse and its consequences. There are broader dimensions of gender inequality that are relevant to women’s experiences of abuse. An understanding of patriarchy is essential here.

In feminist writing, the term “patriarchy” has apparently fallen out of use in recent years. Critics of this term have said that it oversimplifies gender inequality; that it suggests a universal and unchanging type of societal power; and that it fails to address multiple inequalities, and therefore differences among women and men based on race and culture. 

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that many activists continue to use this language, and that its usage in public conversations seems to be increasing. A look at the number of articles in the New York Times containing the word “patriarchy” indicates the growing popularity of this term. Using the New York Times archive search engine, there were more than five times as many articles mentioning “patriarchy” in 2020 as in 2010. Over this same time period, there were also increases in articles mentioning “feminism,” “feminist,” and “violence against women.”

There is scholarship that is mindful of these criticisms of patriarchy and that uses the term in careful ways. Patriarchy has been used in many studies of violence against women. Many Black feminist scholars use this concept, often in connection with intersectionality.

The treatment of patriarchy that is most useful to this study was developed by Sylvia Walby. Her work argues that patriarchy cannot be fully understood without attention to class and racial inequalities. Walby sees patriarchy as constantly being challenged and defended, rather than as being universal or fixed. “Women are not passive victims of oppressive structures,” she writes. “They have struggled to change both their immediate circumstances and the wider social structures.”
Oddly enough, while Walby continues to write on gender inequality, she no longer uses the term “patriarchy” herself. Despite her contributions to clarifying this term, she believes this word is often “misinterpreted” for the aforementioned reasons. Nevertheless, it is my argument that her theory of patriarchy illuminates the sources of women’s entrapment in abusive relationships. Her theory highlights the role of violence in creating inequality. Her work further shows where change needs to be made to transform gender inequality. Patriarchy remains a useful concept, so long as its meaning is made clear.

Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women.” Drawing from several different kinds of feminist theory, including Black feminism, Walby sees women’s oppression as located in six different sites in Western societies. Discrimination in the paid labor force is one site of inequality. A second site is unpaid domestic labor; as I have shown regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, this has direct consequences for women’s ability to do paid work. Sexuality is a third site; inequality in heterosexual relationships is apparent in the sexual double standard and in the denigration of lesbian and gay love. The state is a fourth site, involving the legal system, the government, and welfare assistance. Cultural representations of masculinity and femininity are a fifth site. Central to this study, violence against women is a sixth site of inequality. Walby argues that in the West, this violence is so common and has such predictable consequences that this must be seen as its own basis of women’s oppression. These different sites are explored throughout this book.

These six bases are distinct, and yet they are related to one another. The state is involved in violence against women in many ways. The “sexual abuse to prison pipeline” offers one such link, a way of naming the harm the state does to girls. According to a report by the Human Rights Project for Girls, overwhelming numbers of girls in the juvenile justice system have been sexually abused. Some studies found that most girls in detention have been victimized. Instead of addressing this reality, the juvenile detention system criminalizes the ways that girls react to this violence. Common responses to abuse such as running away from home or resisting parental authority are treated as crimes. Girls are then placed in foster care or youth detention, which frequently exposes them to more abuse. Without adequate support, girls make more attempts at coping that are again criminalized, creating a cycle. The sexual abuse to prison pipeline is especially relevant for Native American, Black, and Hispanic
girls, who are overrepresented among those detained and committed. Girls who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or gender nonconforming are also criminalized at high rates. It is therefore unsurprising that high rates of victimization have been found among women in prisons and jails. Research shows that at least half of women in detention previously suffered some form of trauma, including child sexual abuse, adolescent and adult sexual violence, and physical abuse from intimate partners. Sexual violence committed by correctional officers compounds this trauma. Between 1980 and 2019, the number of women in prisons and jails increased by more than 700 percent. Native American women, Black women, and Latinas are disproportionately confined in prisons and jails. Most women’s crimes are nonviolent; they are either drug offenses, property crimes, or violations of public order such as prostitution. What this means is that the crimes these women personally suffer are generally more severe than the crimes they are incarcerated for. Feminists of color and human rights activists have long argued that the US prison system is racially discriminatory, brutal, cruel, and in violation of both the US Constitution and principles of international human rights.

This increase in women’s incarceration does not reflect a surge in crime rates. Rather, it is the result of heightened penalties for drug use and difficulties that women encounter when leaving prisons and jails. Larger economic and political matters also contribute to the mass incarceration of men and women. The “prison industrial complex” is a way to name these issues. The activist group Critical Resistance defines this term as follows:

The prison industrial complex (PIC) is a term we use to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems. . . . This power is . . . maintained by earning huge profits for private companies that deal with prisons and police forces; helping earn political gains for “tough on crime” politicians; increasing the influence of prison guard and police unions; and eliminating social and political dissent by oppressed communities.

Just as the concept of the “military industrial complex” identified a set of shared interests involving the military and private companies, the prison industrial complex is a set of powerful connections between private companies, politicians, and government officials. These relationships shape the expansion of state control in ways that are independent of crime rates.
As Crenshaw indicates in the quote that opens this chapter, race and class operate together with gender in women’s experiences of violence. Walby’s institutional sites are places where racism is entrenched along with sexism. She says that the state is “patriarchal as well as capitalist and racist.” An intersectional analysis of patriarchy informs the investigation in this book.

**INTIMATE VIOLENCE AS SOCIAL ENTRAPMENT**

Along with a broad theory of gender inequality, this study is guided by a more specific understanding of why women feel trapped in abusive relationships. In my study of women’s experiences seeking domestic violence restraining orders in Massachusetts, I argued that intimate violence against women should be seen as a kind of *social entrapment* rather than just as an individual experience. The power that abusive men exert over women lies in more than just physical force. There is a social dimension to the endless dilemmas women face when they are abused by their partners. This perspective was inspired by Linda Gordon. In her history of family violence in Boston, she said, “One assault does not make a battered woman; she becomes that because of her socially determined inability to resist or escape: her lack of economic resources, law enforcement services, and quite likely, self-confidence.”

To name intimate violence as social entrapment is to connect men’s violence and women’s suffering to community responses and to institutions such as hospitals and the criminal legal system. How friends and family members act when informed about abuse matters greatly. Nurses and doctors, police, judges, and religious leaders all have opportunities to support women and their children in the wake of violence. These responses can be corrupted by sexism, racism, contempt for the poor, and biases of many kinds. Seeing the experience of intimate violence as social entrapment links private violence to public responses and connects social inequalities to women’s victimization. This study seeks to provide a window into both individual women’s experiences and the responses of their communities to this violence.

**OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK**

Every chapter examines why women feel trapped in abusive relationships. Chapter 2 addresses the cultural images of masculinity that are dominant in US society. How are violence and abuse related to the kind
of masculinities these men present? How do these abusive partners view themselves as men? How do their abused partners see them? What similarities and differences do women report across social classes? And how do the dramatically different kinds of masculinity these men present in public and in private contribute to women’s feelings of entrapment?

Four major dimensions of intimate violence are often identified by activists and researchers: psychological abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and economic abuse. To explore these overlapping dynamics, it is best to start with psychological abuse. Chapter 3 examines the psychological cruelty that women reported, placing this in the context of cultural images of women as “bad wives” and failed women. The verbal degradation experienced by women is explored for their insights into men’s motives for the violence and abuse. For many women, the psychological attacks caused the most lasting harm. Such attacks have a lot to do with why women feel trapped.

Chapter 4 details the physical abuse and threats that women suffered, with attention to class similarities and differences. Explanations for the abuse are examined, along with the harm caused by the violence.

Chapter 5 is devoted to sexual abuse. Inspired by Liz Kelly, this topic is developed as a “continuum of sexual abuse” and includes delusional jealousy, surveillance, infidelity, reproductive abuse, the use of pornography, child sexual abuse, and rape. These aspects of sexualized domination form their own dynamic of entrapment.

Chapter 6 focuses on economic dependence and economic abuse. The role of money is investigated at every class level. Economic abuse is key to understanding why many women felt trapped in these relationships.

Women were asked about feelings of love, fear, anger, guilt, and shame in order to map the emotional dynamics of their relationships. This forms the substance of chapter 7. These feelings play an important role in women’s entrapment. How did the men seek to control their partners through fear? How did men attempt to create guilt and shame in these women? How did the women manage these feelings? What roles did friends, family, religious leaders, therapists, and feminist activists play? How does social class affect these emotional processes?

All of the women either left, or in a few cases were left by, their abusive partners. Chapter 8 investigates the process of separation, with attention to social class. Since the women had left their partners often many years before the interviews, there is an opportunity to examine the extent to which the women had healed from the violence and abuse since separation. Women were asked what justice would look like in the
wake of this abuse, and what they would like to have happen to their ex-partners.

The book’s conclusion draws together the many ways that women felt trapped and resisted entrapment. A revised model of social entrapment is presented, and the conclusion ends with a discussion of what this model suggests about a way forward in stopping intimate violence against women.