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Her Story, Her Right: Narrative as a Basic Human Right

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**HER STORY, HER RIGHT:
NARRATIVE AS A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT**

**A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors with Distinction**

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University of Northern Iowa
May 2023**

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Entitled: Her Story, Her Right: Narrative as a Basic Human Right

**has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation
University Honors with Distinction**

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Dedication

To the women who have experienced violence, and to the women who hopefully never will. To the women who survived their trauma, and to the women who didn't. To the women who speak, and to the women that don't. It is your story, and it is your right.

Note to Reader

What you are reading right now is not only a research project, but a platform for the voices of women who have or have not had the opportunity to speak before. Part I through 5 all use previously told narratives and stories in order to understand the concepts being discussed. Part VI are newly collected stories, many of which have never been told before. This document holds pieces of people's lives. Take care when reading it.

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Introduction

When I began this project, I wanted to ask the question of whether or not our narratives are a basic human right. Looking back, I realize how naive it was of me to ponder on such a thought, for I have now realized that we have many rights just simply by being humans, and it is undeniable that having an accurate version of our narratives without fear of manipulation or silencing is a right. How can one argue not? The question is not and cannot be about whether or not something is a right, but instead whether or not we view the concept as worthy of protection. This, unlike the first question I wanted to ask, is not something that an individual decides or that one can answer simply by looking into their heart and saying yes or no. Something that would be considered or called a “protected right” is not for us to decide- it is decided by those in power.

Women in Afghanistan, as human beings, have the right to exit their house when they choose. Women in Afghanistan, as women, do not have the right to exit their house when they choose, and that is because the right is not protected. When we are speaking on human rights, we must talk about them in two separate categories: basic human rights and protected “basic” human rights. I put quotation marks around the word “basic” because when we are speaking on protected rights, it is not actually a conversation of inherent rights at all, but only what the government or some higher power in charge has labeled to be an inherent right. In another project, I would like to dissect the difference between these two categories, but for the sake of this project, I only say all of this because this project looks not at the first definition, but the second.

As I said above, the conversation on whether or not narrative is a basic human right is solved. The question we ask in these next pages is whether or not it is a *protected* basic human right. Here, in the second paragraph I will state the answer of, “No. It is not.”

Above, I used the example of women in Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban. That is a clear cut example on the difference between the two definitions of rights. In this project, it is not as clear cut. Women in the United States, as human beings, have the right to go to work and not have their colleague grab their breast as they are taking papers off of the printer. But... Do women in the United States, as women, have the right to go to work and not have their colleague grab their breast as they are taking papers off of the printer? Sure, there are laws against sexual harassment, even specific laws regarding workplace sexual harassment, but do these laws protect this right? If they do, it seems that it may be a protected basic human right to not have one's body violated. The catch here, though, is that a law written on paper is not protection. If you stay with me and read the following pages, we will see that what happens after that breast grab is more often than not, not nothing, but the manipulation and/or silencing of that woman's narrative, and when that narrative is silenced, no protection happens at all.

There is nothing more intimate to us than the story of our lives. We are made of our experiences, memories, and recollections of how we felt, what we did, and who was there to add to their influence to the situation. On top of that, only we ourselves can digest it all, and only we ourselves are going to build who we are based on what we have digested. When those experiences, memories, and recollections are toyed with, it toys with our whole personhood.

I say already that narrative is not a protected human right, and that is a statement proven quite easily by the fact that women who have experienced violence against them are a graphic demonstration of evidence. This project took a special emphasis on violence against women narratives because it is apparent time and time again that their narratives are mutilated, mangled, and maimed, and that is if they are not just downright silenced.

This project consists of six "Parts."

Part I will create a foundation for the project in order to understand some key definitions, the importance of the project, as well as analyzing misconceptions regarding violence against women that could prove unproductive in the conversation.

Part II will look at narrative itself as well as violence against women narratives and what distinctions may be present.

Part III will dive into identity and look specifically at how the “women” part in violence against women narratives plays into the equation of its protection.

Part IIII analyzes the legal system and its relationship with violence against women narratives.

Part V is specifically centered around Pieper Lewis, the Des Moines, Iowa trafficking victim who at fifteen stabbed her rapist, killing him.

Part VI is a collection of new narratives from women who have experienced violence.

Each part has its own purpose and presents its own discussion and can be read with relative ease separately. However, they are arguably strongest when put together as one whole piece.

It is her story and her right. That is something I stand by from the beginning. It is now time to look at whether or not it is her story and her protected right.

Part I: Creating a Foundation

Part I of this project will be setting the foundation of this research. Chapter 1 will be looking at key definitions in the project. Chapter 2 will dissect two misconceptions often involved in the conversation of violence against women. Chapter 3 will show the importance of studying violence against women narratives.

Chapter 1: Key Definitions

This project seeks to examine whether or not narrative is protected as a basic human right, specifically looking at narratives from women who have experienced violence against them. In order to fully understand the purpose, we need to first establish a few definitions this project uses when referring to certain terms. This relatively short chapter will act as just a quick overview of the definitions in need of clarification: woman, violence, narrative, basic human rights, and VAW.

Woman: Woman is defined in this project as *anyone who identifies as a woman*. It should be noted that though we do talk about topics such as identity, intersectionality, oppression, and discrimination, there is not an explicit focus on the transgender woman experience, which is going to have a long list of complexities that will differ from the cisgender experience.

Narrative: Narrative is taken to be *a story of someone's life, whether it be just a piece or an all encompassing autobiography*. This definition of narrative does not in itself require any sort of presentation or display of the narrative to occur, as this project will be examining inner narrative as well as those brought into the outside world.

Basic Human Rights: Part III Chapter 9¹ dives deep into the framework of basic human rights that is currently used in the United States. Just so we can have at least a decent idea now, the definition as given by the United Nations will be provided here:

Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights

¹ Pg. 99

include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination.²

Another quick note to be made is that in the introduction, I do talk about how I feel that there is a difference between a basic human right and a protected basic human right. This project talks about the latter, which is why legal definitions will mainly be what is referred to, as the legal system is what determines the protection part.

Violence: The definition used of violence takes an extremely broad approach and is as follows: *A physically, sexually, emotionally, and/or psychologically/mentally harmful action inflicted on someone.* The reason for this broadness is entirely intentional. Though many commonly used definitions of violence refer mainly to physical violence- such as that of the first definition in the Merriam-Webster dictionary that states “the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy,”³- limiting violence to only physical actions can work as an invalidation to non-physical actions that cause extreme harm and hold a violent nature. Examples of this include but are not limited to verbal abuse, manipulation, gaslighting, and/or threats. Invalidation is a prominent problem in the community of women who have experienced violence against them, so it was vital that this project did its best to not intentionally or unintentionally act in an invalidating or exclusionary way. Though accomplishing this goal fully may not have happened, keeping the definition as inclusive as possible was a key move and a great starting point.

² “Human Rights,” *United Nations*, accessed February 7, 2023, [Human Rights | United Nations](#)

³ “violence,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, accessed January 17, 2023, [Violence Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#)

VAW: This is an acronym that stands for *violence against women*. This will be used through the paper for the purpose of efficiency.

Chapter 2: Why Study VAW Narratives?

With any research project, there has to be the question of why? I have taken the time to research and write, many have taken the time to guide, edit, and review, and others may take the time to read at least parts of the finished product. There has to be meaning, and it is important to establish that before we even dive in.

So I will now ask that question. Why study VAW narratives? What is their specific significance in our world, why would I choose this focus, and why should the readers care and continue reading? Conveniently, I think the statistics of violence against women speak for themselves.

I am from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and I am conducting my research and writing this thesis in Cedar Falls, Iowa, so Iowa is obviously the state that I am personally closest to. Though the research altogether does not hold a specific Iowa focus, looking at Iowa's statistics can provide an initial lens to see the importance of this work, with this importance easily transcending to other states for similar reasons.

I am asking the question of why care? I'm going to provide five initial reasons to answer this:

1. 01/10/2023 **Dawn Orona**, 52, reportedly **beat to death** by husband Daniel Orona II, 51, Des Moines, Iowa.
2. 01/14/2023 **Sarah Zoelle**, 31, reportedly **shot to death** by boyfriend Austyn Self, 23, Sioux City, Iowa.
3. 01/18/2023 **Kristie Allen**, 45, reported **murder-suicide** by live-in boyfriend John Wilson, Windsor Heights, Iowa.
4. 1/31/2023 **Sheila Ann Kelly**, 59, reported **murder-suicide** by boyfriend Jack Gordon Heiss Jr.56, Indianola, Iowa.

5. 2/16/2023 **Nelcybert Estafani Castillo Mata**, 26, reported **murder-suicide** by boyfriend Felix Baccam, 36, Waukee, Iowa.⁴

The Iowa Attorney General’s Office has released a domestic fatality report twice a year since the year 1995. Included in this report are the deaths in Iowa that appear to have occurred due to domestic violence, with the cases dating back to January 1, 1995. The most recent report as this is being written was published on March 1, 2023, which means that the report being used here includes deaths up until March 1, 2023. The next publication is set to occur in September 2023.⁵ The report separates their statistics into three categories: women murdered by an intimate partner, men murdered by an intimate partner, and bystanders murdered in a domestic violence related crime. The definition used in the first two groups is “A woman/A man killed by her spouse, former spouse, or intimate partner with whom she had lived, dated, or had a child,” while the third group follows the definition of “A person killed at the scene of a suspected domestic abuse murder or was related to domestic abuse committed against a family member, friend, or another.” They identify four different statistical groups, which include: overall statistical summaries of the three lists, statistical summary of women killed, statistical summary of men killed, and statistical summary of bystanders killed. Included in these groups are also statistics regarding specifics of the cases, such as homicide method, the specific relationship to the offender, and what the outcome for the offender was, such as prison time, suicide, pending charges, etc.

⁴ Iowa Attorney General’s Office. “Domestic Violence Fatality Chronicle.” Vol: January 1995-March 2023, last modified March 2023, [DV Fatality Chronicle March 2023_181AD8533B7ED.pdf \(iowaattorneygeneral.gov\)](#)

⁵ Iowa Attorney General’s Office, “Domestic Violence Fatality Chronicle.”

385 reported domestic violence fatalities have occurred since 1995 with women making up 265, men 47, and bystanders 73. 250 were either a current/former spouse of a current/former dating partner with 61 being cohabitators.⁶

These statistics reveal a few points. The first is that the occurrence of domestic violence is not always a randomized pattern. For example, in 2008 there was a sharp increase, as well as in 2020 and 2021. 2008 was the year of the national recession, which provided intense financial stress, while 2020 and 2021 saw peaks in the Covid-19 pandemic where people were forced to stay in their homes and be with their living mates, often twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The impact of domestic and societal stress on the prevalence of domestic violence is a phenomenon thoroughly researched.⁷ Though we will not be diving deep into this for the sake of time, it is an important factor to note. It can very well lead us to a question of the impact of national/global events on domestic violence, which then leads to the question of how this impacts narrative. Perhaps there is another research project there in itself.

Another factor these statistics highlight is the fact that death by violence is disproportionately impacting women over both men and bystanders. Since 1995, 265 women have been killed. This statistic is harsh on its own, but it stabs a bit deeper when we see that this is compared to the 47 men and 73 bystanders.⁸ This is not to say that the number of men and bystanders is not valid, important, and worthy of attention, but what it is to say is that women's death makes up for approximately sixty-nine percent of domestic violence fatalities. There is a clear group that is falling under this category more than other groups, and it is irresponsible to

⁶ Iowa Attorney General's Office, "Domestic Violence Fatality Chronicle."

⁷ "Economic Distress and Intimate Partner Violence," *National Institute of Justice*, last modified January 4, 2009 [Archived | Economic Distress and Intimate Partner Violence | National Institute of Justice \(ojp.gov\)](#); Though we do not dive into the topic here, this is one example of a report published regarding information collected on the relationship between domestic violence and economic stress after the 2008 recession.

⁸ Iowa Attorney General's Office, "Domestic Violence Fatality Chronicle."

ignore that. Along with the statistics, the report also includes brief descriptions regarding various facts known about the specific cases.^{9 10} Within these descriptions, we often can find a history of domestic violence before the death occurred. The most recent death as this is being written of Nelcybert Estafani Castillo Mata, killed by her boyfriend in a murder-suicide, is an example of this. The excerpt about her death reads, “According to reports, Baccam was charged in Polk County with domestic assault against Castillo in both 2019 and 2021. Baccam was also charged with domestic assault against Castillo Mata in 2022.”¹¹ Though we lack a full history and account of what went on between Mata and Baccam in the entirety of their relationship, what we do know is that there was a reported and charged history of domestic violence years before their deaths occurred. This naturally leads to the question of why this cycle continued, and I would argue that oftentimes, it continues because the narrative of the women is not taken seriously enough by any party involved, whether that be familial, friendships, legally, or any other group that can be thought of.

The amount of names, stories, and deaths included in these reports are many, yet, I chose to use the five most recent deaths as my five main reasons. This was not because their stories held more significance in any way, shape, or form, as each story of the people who are included in this report hold great significance. So why? How did I make this decision?

In the beginning of March, though this project was not finished, I presented what I had done so far at a conference in Des Moines, Iowa. Because the March report had only been

⁹ Iowa Attorney General’s Office, “Domestic Violence Fatality Chronicle.”

¹⁰ Iowa Attorney General’s Office, “Archived Chronicle of Domestic Violence Fatalities 1995-2020,” last modified/archived 2023, [MARCH 2023 Archived DV Fatality 199 B92364B9B29FE.pdf](https://www.iowaattorneygeneral.gov/2023/03/march-2023-archived-dv-fatality-199-b92364b9b29fe.pdf) ([iowaattorneygeneral.gov](https://www.iowaattorneygeneral.gov)); The March 2023 report includes descriptions of events from 2020 to 2023 with no descriptions of events before 2021. However, descriptions of the events in the years 1995-2020 can be found in the separate “Archived Chronicle of Domestic Violence Fatalities 1995-2020.” These documents are updated often, so it is best to check the “Publications” tab on the website.

¹¹ Iowa Attorney General’s Office, “Domestic Violence Fatality Chronicle.”

released a few days prior, I was unaware that it had been updated. About a week later when I was double-checking my information, I saw that a new report had been released. At first, I wasn't too worried that much would be different from what I had presented, though I still wanted to go through and double check. It is not an exaggeration to say that I was astonished at what I found. Ten women had been added since the September publication, with five of them, the ones stated above, being fresh deaths in 2023. In fact, the 2023 deaths were often mere days apart. It has been said that once one's work is published, it is already outdated. I hadn't imagined that the timeline for outdatedness could be so quick. These statistics officially and in publication took six months to change. That is, however, only what was made aware to the public. Really, the statistics can change by the day. After five women from previous cases were added to the list, the numbers were at 260 females. On January 10th, that changed to 261. On January 14th, that changed to 262. On January 18th, it changed to 263. On January 31st, it changed to 264. On February 16th, it changed to 265. Writing this, it is now April 27th, and it is likely that the statistics I'm using here have already become outdated. In all reality, the statistics can change in the moment.

It doesn't matter how fast someone writes or how quickly someone publishes. The statistics regarding violence against women are continually changing, and if there isn't an equally continuous focus on the topic, everyone is already behind. And, when we fall behind on this subject, people continue to die. As stated above, the five deaths listed here had a history of domestic violence. If we aren't listening in every second we are given the opportunity, people perish.

I use the word "people" here strategically, as our next task before moving on to the project as a whole will be to bat down misconceptions, for having a productive conversation

surrounding violence against women cannot occur if there are two thoughts running through people's heads. The first is that this is simply a problem for women and women alone, as they are the group dying at a disproportionate number. Going off of that idea is also the claim that these women should just leave. Chapter 3 will be dissecting these misconceptions and will show their lack of validity.

Chapter 3: Misconceptions

This chapter will be split into two sections with each looking into two misconceptions regarding violence against women: Section A will dissect the misconception that this is a woman's problem for women to fix, and Section B will look at the claim made that women should just leave.

Section A: Just a Women's Problem

The five women's deaths listed in Chapter 1 have already provided evidence against our first misconception, as three of them ended in a murder-suicide.¹² Seeing as all three of the relationships involved a woman and a man, that would mean that three men have also died due to violence. In fact, 30.9 percent of fatalities in Iowa end in murder-suicide, largely with the men murdering their female partner and the men then killing themselves. Once again, it is important to remember that these cases, along with many of the others, had a history of domestic violence specifically with the women experiencing violence at the hand of the man. What if the situation hadn't gotten to the point of murder? Both the women *and* the men could have been saved. Not

¹² Iowa Attorney General's Office, "Domestic Violence Fatality Chronicle."

only is this seen in situations of murder-suicide, but it is also a point made apparent in other endings of domestic violence.

Adding on to the murder-suicide, we will look at three more pieces of evidence.

1. **(02/15/2020)** Gowun Park suffocated **Sun Woo Nam**
2. **(03/29/2020)** Carol Ann Davis shot **Steven Davis**
3. **(03/04/2021)** Jacqueline Holmes stabbed **Tremaine Williams**¹³

Three dead men.

Angela Browne's investigative novel *When Battered Women Kill* centers around the death of men as a result of domestic violence situations. In the book, readers see women, having been broken physically and mentally from the abuse they experienced at the hands of their male partners, reach their snapping point and murder their partners. Some basic patterns and details in these women's cases will be discussed in the next paragraph.¹⁴

A lot of the women interviewed by Browne first faced first-degree murder charges, but later were brought down to charges of manslaughter, though not all were able to take a lesser charge. Only two women were acquitted based on self-defense. All of the women experienced some sort of shock ranging from minor disbelief all of the way to psychotic breaks. One woman who went by Janet in the book was so shaken up after she shot her husband Rick that she had to be transferred to a psychiatric facility. The last detail we will mention here is that while some women were in immediate danger when they killed their husbands, others reacted based on either the violence they knew was coming or on a traumatic response built from past violence. Wanda, for example, sought outside help to kill her husband as a preventative measure of protecting her daughter from his abuse.¹⁵ Interestingly enough, the descriptions included in the male deaths in

¹³ Iowa Attorney General's Office, "Domestic Violence Fatality Chronicle."

¹⁴ Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill*, (New York: The Free Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill*.

the Domestic Violence Fatality report are far less revealing than the women's, so it is harder for us to confirm a history of domestic violence. What we can do, however, is see how many of the situations chronicled for us in the report follow a similar pattern of Browne's novel.

In March of 2021, Jacqueline Holmes fatally stabbed her boyfriend Tremaine Williams. She was initially charged with first degree murder, but after being acquitted of that charge was reduced to involuntary manslaughter.¹⁶ In April of 2020, Carol Ann Davis shot her husband Steven Davis in the head while he slept and was considered incompetent to stand trial due to her mental state after she killed him and was taken in by the police.¹⁷ Two months earlier in February, Sun Woo Nam was suffocated by his wife Gowun Park who said that due to her husband's violent nature, he would instruct her to bind him if he got too angry, which was what she was doing when he died.¹⁸ The patterns are the same from Browne's book to more than twenty years later. Again, I ask, what if these situations hadn't gotten to the point of murder? What if someone had listened and validated these women's stories before murder became a last resort?

Section B: Just Leave

At this point, readers may be having the thought "Why didn't these people just leave?" It is a question asked by many, a thought had by most, and one of the most prominent societal reasons for blaming the woman. Before we give credit to this line of thinking, I urge you to picture the face of three-year old Michael Xayavong who was shot by his father on December 20, 1995 before killing himself. The boy's mother Angela Wilson Xayavong was also shot. Angela had

¹⁶ Iowa Attorney General's Office, "Domestic Violence Fatality Chronicle."

¹⁷ Iowa Attorney General's Office, "Archived Chronicle of Domestic Violence Fatalities 1995-2020."

¹⁸ Iowa Attorney General's Office, "Archived Chronicle of Domestic Violence Fatalities 1995-2020."

been filing for divorce when the event occurred, and yet, all three are still dead.¹⁹ If you require a more recent case, you can also imagine the faces of the two little boys of twenty-four year old Shelby Woizeschke who now do not have a mother because their father and her ex-husband “approached Woizeschke in the parking lot of her workplace and shot her several times.”²⁰ And, if divorce and separation is not enough to erase the doubt that stems from the question above, look at thirty-eight year old Maggie Flint’s case from August 5, 2020.

08/05/2020 **Maggie Flint** 38, shot to death by her estranged husband, Justin Hurdel, in Fort Dodge. Hurdel had a history of domestic violence with multiple victims, documented in prior charges of harassment, stalking, burglary, and domestic abuse assault dating from 1996. Maggie reported to police in November 2019 that Hurdel threatened to kill her, stating "I will kill you if you try to leave." Four days before she was murdered, Maggie filed a police report stating that Hurdel had violated a no-contact order. The day of her death, Maggie was found with gunshot wounds in the garage of a home. Witnesses stated that Hurdel was waiting inside the garage with a shotgun when Maggie entered. He was "angry" and told Maggie he intended to kill her. Witnesses stated he shot Maggie twice and then sped away. Police found his vehicle, but did not locate Hurdel until the next morning, after a 17- hour manhunt. Hurdel was convicted of murder in the first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Maggie is survived by three children.²¹

What else should Maggie have done?

This idea that women can simply leave a violent situation is one of the most carefully crafted false pieces of information that is non-consensually interwoven by society into these women’s stories. It is important to know this now, and it will be important to remember throughout as we dissect this further. This is just one point in narrative manipulation that leads to the horrific deaths of women, men, children, and bystanders, and it is not just a problem for one- it is a problem for all.

¹⁹ Iowa Attorney General’s Office, “Archived Chronicle of Domestic Violence Fatalities 1995-2020.”

²⁰ Iowa Attorney General’s Office, “Archived Chronicle of Domestic Violence Fatalities 1995-2020.”

²¹ Iowa Attorney General’s Office, “Archived Chronicle of Domestic Violence Fatalities 1995-2020.”

Part II: Narrative

We will be studying narrative, specifically narratives from women who have experienced violence against them. With this in mind, we must establish what narrative is and what this project takes narrative to be. The answer to this is simple- a life story, whether it is of just one piece and experience or a full account, for our narratives are not complete without each piece, and if each piece is not safe, our narratives as a whole are not safe.

This part, Part II, will be exploring narrative in itself. Chapter 4 will be looking at a few different forms that narrative can take. Chapter 5 will look at the creation of narrative and what barriers are present from the start. Chapter 6 will point out key factors about specifically VAW narratives that make them unique.

Chapter 4: Different Forms of Narrative

The depiction and sharing of peoples' stories can and does happen in a wide variety of formats. Though we will not be able to discuss all of them, this chapter will look at some of the most common forms that VAW narratives present themselves in. Section A will look at creative writing methods, Section B will look at third-party media, and Section C will look at the publications of research and studies.

Section A: Creative Writing

When talking about the creation and sharing of narrative, one of the first places we can look to are some of the classic forms and genres of literature: fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. This type of creation/sharing process often occurs by first being written by someone, and then either published through a publisher as in-print, physical material such as a book or magazine, or will be distributed on any electronic platform such as online journals/databases, audiobook websites, or even just a post on social media. Section Aa will look at fiction, Section Ab will look at nonfiction, and Section Ac will look at poetry.

Section Aa: Fiction

The genre of fiction provides a very interesting dynamic to story-telling due to its ability to tell a true story while disguising it as simply a make-believe plot created by the author. For example, the classic literary figures of the Brontë sisters- Emily, Charlotte, and Anne- all seem to have autobiographical features within their works of fiction. The *Jane Eyre* author did in fact work as a governess, while *Wuthering Heights* included many themes of loneliness and isolation

that Emily herself experienced.²² Though these stories did include made up characters with carefully crafted storylines, hints of truth in the emotions felt and the events that occurred are interlaced all throughout. This phenomenon in fiction can become a particularly helpful tool when the topics that are wanting to be shared are considered tabooed or the author themselves and their experience is considered illegitimate.

Late author, activist, and self-proclaimed “revolutionary communist” Leslie Feinberg’s 1993 fictional novel *Stone Butch Blues* takes the reader through the story of a butch lesbian living in 70s America. Though Feinberg officially went by the pronouns she/zie and her/hir, the character in the book was both biologically a woman as well as an identifying woman- although does engage in hormone therapy at one point in the book- and draws from a variety of Feinberg’s own experiences as identifying as a butch lesbian himself.²³ 1970s America was not kind to the LGBTQ+ movements despite the fact that there was a surge in activism in the 1960s stemming from the Civil Rights Movement.²⁴ Though largely talked about, these moments of advocacy were slow rolling and came with disastrous risks and tragic consequences. The 60s and 70s were doused in hatred, physical retaliation, and police raids against the gay individual/community, and oftentimes, these stories ended in life-threatening and/or life-ending violence.²⁵ The dehumanizing experiences including (but not limited to) sanctioned rape, murder, beatings, slur calling, etc. are all recounted in Feinberg’s novel.²⁶ Though it may be wished that by the 90s,

²² Hephzibah Anderson, “The Family Tragedy that Inspired the Brontës' Greatest Books,” *BBC News*, last modified December 22, 2016, [The family tragedy that inspired the Brontës' greatest books - BBC Culture](#)

²³ “Self,” *Leslie Feinberg Homepage*, last modified November 15, 2014, [self – LESLIE FEINBERG](#)

²⁴ History.com Editors. “1960s: Counterculture and Civil Rights Movement.” *History*, accessed April 8, 2023, [1960s: Counterculture and Civil Rights Movement | HISTORY](#)

²⁵ History.com Editors, “Stonewall Riots,” *History*, last modified May 31, 2022, [1969 Stonewall Riots - Origins, Timeline & Leaders \(history.com\)](#)

²⁶ Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Firebrand Books, 1993).

when the book was published, that LGBTQ+ rights would have reached a more humanizing reality, this would be a tragic exaggeration to state.

By 1987, only six years prior to the release of *Stone Butch Blues*, the AIDS epidemic had vibrantly highlighted the lack of care and consideration the LGBTQ+ community both received and was going to receive. Leaving 60,000 dead and 40,000 HIV positive, the majority being gay men, the gay community were left to their own devices in creating awareness and figuring out how to stop the spread of disease as government intervention was next to nothing.²⁷ People didn't care that gays were dying, so they sure didn't want to hear a gay's recollection of their struggles. Not only that, but Feinberg's novel does not just discuss the experience of a lesbian, but instead, zir brings in concepts still not even fully grasped today such as transgenderism, gender-nonconformism, and the concept of a choice in identity as a whole. Providing a fictional recount, like Feinberg did, allows the audience to step out of their prejudice for a second and just read the book.

This is not to say that Feinberg abandoned zir identity completely in order to write the book or that zir went into hiding to publish. Feinberg was extremely open about zir identity and advocacy. What this does point out is a method that can be used when situations may be difficult to recount in a memoir for a variety of reasons. The violence seen in Feinberg's book is arguably hard to digest due to its horrific nature, and it can be even harder to digest for those that want to argue that LGBTQ+ voices are invalid, as they are forced to face harsh images of the consequences of their hatred.

Section Ab: Nonfiction

²⁷ Michail Takach, "How AIDS Activists Fought for Patients' Rights," *History*, last modified November 30, 2022. [How AIDS Activists Fought for Patients' Rights \(history.com\)](https://www.history.com/topics/aids/how-aids-activists-fought-for-patients-rights)

Often viewed as the opposite of fiction is unsurprisingly nonfiction. Story types including memoir, autobiography, and biography fit into this character, and often make up the most blatant depiction of narrative. Both memoir and autobiography are written by the individual/group themselves, with the difference often being the type of content included. Where autobiography is an all-encompassing recollection of a person's life, memoir often holds a focus on a specific theme or event.²⁸ Biography, on the other hand, is a story of a life but written by a different party. These three categories are also often created as full novels. Examples of VAW narratives that fit within these types include: *To Be Brave: A Memoir of Domestic Violence, Resistance, and Healing* by Karla McGray where she tells the tale of the abuse her and her family experienced as well as the road to healing from the trauma²⁹ and Kelly Sundberg's *Goodbye, Sweet Girl: A Story of Domestic Violence and Survival* which recounts her experience with an abusive marriage and her struggle to get out.^{30 31}

Embedded in nonfiction is the category specifically referred to as "creative nonfiction." Though the three types above could still fit into creative nonfiction, what we see a lot of the time in the creative category is specifically an expansion on form and structure. It almost gives nonfiction the same liberties as poetry, while still keeping the promise of truth- which can help the narrator in similar ways that fiction does. *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado is a memoir depicting her experience in an abusive lesbian relationship, but it is one specifically

²⁸ Britannica Editor, "Ask the Editor: The Difference Between Memoir and Autobiography," *The Britannica Dictionary*, date accessed May 11, 2023, [The Difference between Memoir and Autobiography | Britannica Dictionary](#)

²⁹ Karla McGray, *To Be Brave: A Memoir of Domestic Violence, Resistance, and Healing*, (Auburn, Washington: Lone Pine Press, 2021).

³⁰ Kelly Sundberg, *Goodbye, Sweet Girl: A Story of Domestic Violence and Survival*, (New York, New York: Harper Publishing, 2018).

³¹ For a longer list of domestic violence nonfiction pieces, refer to The New York Public Library's "A Domestic Violence Awareness Reading List"; Victoria James, "A Domestic Violence Awareness Reading List," *New York Public Library*, last modified October 1, 2022. [A Domestic Violence Awareness Reading List | The New York Public Library \(nypl.org\)](#)

done in a creative nonfiction style. Instead of just a constant flow of plot, the book's chapters act on their own while still painting a piece of the bigger picture. The sleeve of her novel describes her style in saying "Each chapter in this inventive memoir is driven by its own narrative trope—the haunted house, erotica, the bildungsroman—through which Machado holds her story up to the light and examines it from different angles."³² Each chapter's title is "*Dream House as...*" and then filled in with whatever the theme is. For example, the chapter "*Dream House as Spy Thriller*" recounts the secrecy involved in hiding the abuse she was enduring, and the feelings behind knowing that no one else knows but her.³³ Machado arguably exhibits the most creativity in her theme in the later chapter "*Dream House as Choose Your Own Adventure*©". This chapter engages the reader with a short story where they can choose the page they turn to, which will then change where the story goes. It includes tasks such as "If you apologize profusely, go to page 163. If you tell her to wake you up next time your elbows touch her in your sleep, go to page 164. If you tell her to calm down, go to page 166."³⁴ The chapter mimics the cycle those in abusive relationships can feel stuck in, as one finds it nearly impossible to move on to the next chapter with the choices given because it just keeps bringing the reader back to the same fight. In fact, page 167 completely separates itself from the cycle. It says "You shouldn't be on this page. There's no way to get here from the choices given to you. You flipped here because you got sick of the cycle..."³⁵

³² Carmen Maria Machado, *In the DreamHouse: A Memoir*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2020), specifically the sleeve.

³³ Carmen Maria Machado, *In the DreamHouse: A Memoir*, 91.

³⁴ Carmen Maria Machado, *In the DreamHouse: A Memoir*, 162-176.

³⁵ Carmen Maria Machado, *In the DreamHouse: A Memoir*, 167.

Machado's work powerfully shows not only her experience with domestic violence but also the way in which creative nonfiction can release an author from some of the rigidity in telling their narrative that more traditional forms of nonfiction require.

Section Ac: Poetry

Poetry is another format in which we can see these narratives take form. Poetry in itself is a wide genre with an endless amount of structures and is often seen as being without rules and limits. This can be extremely beneficial to narrators who are telling sensitive tales because there seems to be a sense of freedom within the practice. There is no expectation of length, wording, or content. This can inspire control within the narrator, which is a trait often sought by those who have felt a loss of control in their experience with violence. It also notably allows a short recollection of the event as opposed to a long one, which can be helpful for those who wish to tell their story but cannot yet withstand a too intentional focus on their trauma. Another key component of poetry that entirely distincts it from other genres is the fact that there is never clarification on whether or not the material is based on truth or based on a creation of the mind unless the author goes out of their way to make this clarification. Anything nonfiction involves the promise and trait that it must be true, and fiction, though it can include true facts, is still blatantly labeled a work of the imagination. In poetry, the reader can make their assumptions, but that is as far as that goes.

The collection called "Abuse Poems" on the site *familyfriend Poems* is both a helpful platform for authors as well as a beautiful example for the factors we are discussing here. Poem number 9 of the collection "Hush Little Sister" by Yerzinia recounts abuse from her father towards her and her siblings. It holds chilling lines such as "Uh oh little sister/He's lifting his

belt/Scream while you can, little sister/Call for help.”³⁶ This website allows a section for the author to explain the story behind their work, which is something Yerzinia decided to do.

I was abused from the age of four by my family, as was my older sister, who died from the abuse. I am now twenty-one, and this poem is what I sometimes wondered about - if she was looking down on me and helping me survive. When I was rescued at the age of twelve, I was encouraged to write down my feelings, and this poem was something I created back then. This is the first time I've shown it to anyone, and I dedicate this poem to my sister, whom I hope is at peace.³⁷

Yerzinia bravely highlights for us here how poetry allowed her to display her feelings when other ways would not suffice.

Distribution of poetry can also be a bit easier than distribution of other pieces, as also shown above on the *familyfriend Poems* site. For example, a new sub-genre of poetry often known as “Instagram poetry” has experienced a surge in both popularity and controversy. While some have argued that Instagram poetry is not “real” poetry with others claiming that “Instagram saved poetry,”³⁸ that is a discussion entirely irrelevant to the topic at hand.³⁹ What matters is that no matter what people would like to label it, Instagram poetry acts as a way for people to share their work without having to find a publisher or signing a business contract. The rise of Instagram poetry was arguably first widely recognized in 2013 by Cambodian-Australian poet Lang Leav, and five years later, the popularity grew with poet Rupi Kaur.⁴⁰ Kaur’s Instagram is littered with short poems partnered with simple drawings. Though not exclusively, her poems often depict her experience as a woman which includes events such as sexual assault,

³⁶ Yerzinia, “Hush Little Sister,” *Family Friend Poems*, posted April 2009, [Hush Little Sister, Abuse Poem \(familyfriendpoems.com\)](http://familyfriendpoems.com)

³⁷ Yerzinia, “Hush Little Sister.”

³⁸ Faith Hill, & Karen Yuan, “How Instagram Saved Poetry: Social media is turning an art form into an industry,” *The Atlantic*, last modified October 15, 2018, [Rupi Kaur and the Rise of the Instagram Poet-Entrepreneur - The Atlantic](https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/10/rupi-kaur-and-the-rise-of-the-instagram-poet-entrepreneur/)

³⁹ Carina Pereira, “Your Guide to Instagram Poetry: Trends, Instapoets, and More,” *Book Riot*, last modified July 14, 2021, [Your Guide to Instagram Poetry: Trends, InstaPoets, And More | Book Riot](https://bookriot.com/your-guide-to-instagram-poetry-trends-instapoets-and-more/)

⁴⁰ Faith Hill, & Karen Yuan, “How Instagram Saved Poetry: Social media is turning an art form into an industry.”

sexualization, and other forms of violence. Other popular Instapoets who tackle similar topics include Charly Cox, Monika Radojevic, and Yrsa Daley-Ward.⁴¹

Section B: Third-Party Media

One distinction we see in the creation and distribution of VAW narratives is that oftentimes, a specific form of narrative is chosen not for stylistic reasons but instead out of pure necessity. The sensitivity of VAW topics can often make it difficult for women themselves to tell their tales, but this sensitivity is not the only reason one may require help from a different party. Three largely significant and seen reasons for needing a third party to enter the situation is the access to resources, lack of vocal validation, and legal implications/reasons.

In cases of VAW, legal action can be pursued, and when this occurs, something called a Non Disclosure Agreement (NDA) can find its way into the mess. NDAs will be a subject described in a deeper length in Part III Chapter 10.⁴² However, we will give a brief overview here. NDAs are legal agreements between two or more parties that once a case or situation is settled (meaning that an agreement has come to pass by all parties involved), certain events and details concerning the parties are not able to be disclosed by the parties to anyone outside of the party.⁴³ NDAs are often though not exclusively created in situations regarding employment to build trust or any settlement regarding harassment and are largely seen in situations involving parties of high status and/or money. This means that either party would be legally restrained from telling their story, which then means that forms of narrative such as memoir,

⁴¹ Chloe Bowen, “These are the poets to follow on Instagram right now.” *Cosmopolitan*, last modified March 21, 2022. [The poets to follow on Instagram right now \(cosmopolitan.com\)](https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/a20220321/poets-to-follow-on-instagram-right-now/)

⁴² Pg. 108

⁴³ “nondisclosure agreement,” *Cornell Law School*, accessed May 3, 2023, [nondisclosure agreement | Wex | US Law | LII / Legal Information Institute \(cornell.edu\)](https://www.cornell.edu/legal-information-institute/nondisclosure-agreement/)

autobiography, and direct participation in any third-party narrative would result in severe legal action to be taken against them, leaving these forms as basically not an option. This is where investigative journalism and films can be particularly helpful.

In 2016, Fox news host Gretchen Carlson filed a sexual harassment lawsuit against Fox news head Roger Ailes. This one case would result in a large wave of harassment allegations in regard to Ailes as well as Fox anchors Bill O'Reilly and Brian Wilson. Though Carlson would later reach a settlement agreement which would result in her receiving both 20 million dollars and an official apology from Fox news, she would be unable to ever disclose the details of her harassment due to a mandatory arbitration agreement signed when she was first hired at Fox⁴⁴ as well as an NDA signed as a requirement for the settlement's completion. Carlson's former colleague Julie Roginsky also signed these silencing documents.⁴⁵ Though in 2020, both Carlson and Roginsky had asked to be released from these agreements, that was roughly four years after the news spread, and in those four years, their stories were already being told for them. Their stories, largely due to their intense national attention and the public connection to one of the top news stations, were pursued and depicted by a variety of individuals and corporations. Gabriel Sherman wrote the novel *The Loudest Voice in the Room*⁴⁶ which was then adopted into the Showtime limited series *The Loudest Voice*,⁴⁷ both of which chronicled the claims of sexual harassment. Arguably better known in the public, however, is the Oscar winning 2019 film *Bombshell*.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Kate Aurthur, "Gretchen Carlson, Five Years After Her Lawsuit Brought Down Roger Ailes: 'We've Made Immense Progress,'" *Variety*, last modified 2021, [Gretchen Carlson: Five Years After Her Lawsuit Against Roger Ailes - Variety](#)

⁴⁵ Mark Hudspeth, "Gretchen Carlson and the complicated truth about NDAs," *CBS News*, last modified March 1, 2020. [Gretchen Carlson and the complicated truth about NDAs - CBS News](#)

⁴⁶ Gabriel Sherman, *The Loudest Voice in the Room: How the Brilliant, Bombastic Roger Ailes Built Fox News-And Divided a Country*, (New York, New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2017).

⁴⁷ Tom McCarthy & Alex Metcalfe, *The Loudest Voice*, Showtime, 2019, TV Mini-Series.

⁴⁸ Jay Roach, et al., *Bombshell*. Lionsgate. 2020. Film.

Bombshell directed by Jay Roach, written by Charles Randolph, and starring Charlize Theron, Nicole Kidman, and Margot Robbie details the experiences of sexual harassment starting at the point of Carlson being fired.⁴⁹ Though Robbie's character was created as a symbolic representation of other women's experiences with Ailes, both Theron and Kidman's characters were based on real-life people. Theron plays Megyn Kelly, Fox News journalist who would come to be known as one of the most prized female anchors at Fox, while Kidman depicts Carlson.⁵⁰ There are definite risks in telling sensitive, second-hand material through third-party applications such as novel or film. Oftentimes, especially in film, creative liberties are taken in order to both better depict through visuals a certain event that cannot be explicitly explained in words to the viewer and to deal with the set time constraint that is given. An example of this can be seen in Robbie's character Kayla and Kate McKinnon's Jess. Though not fictional characters, both are meant to provide a depiction of workers who experienced this sexual harassment but perhaps were extremely early in their career and were significantly less known in the news sphere compared to Kelly and Carlson.⁵¹

After the release of *Bombshell*, Megyn Kelly, Rudi Bakhtiar, Julie Zann, and Juliet Huddy, all victims of Fox sexual harassment, along with Kelly's husband Douglas Brunt, watched the film for the first time together and gave their opinions to Kelly in a thirty minute discussion afterwards. One of the first comments we see comes from Huddy where she says "It's very surreal to see a story that involves you be told without you being able to tell it, and things they got a lot right but they got a lot kind of... not wrong..." with Megyn then chiming in with the comment that "they took liberties." Huddy continues with "it's a little weird, um but overall I

⁴⁹ Jay Roach, et al., *Bombshell*.

⁵⁰ Eliana Dockterman, "The True Story Behind *Bombshell* and the Fox News Sexual Harassment Scandal," *TIME*, last modified December 16, 2019, [The True Story Behind Bombshell and the Fox News Scandal | Time](#)

⁵¹ Eliana Dockterman, "The True Story Behind *Bombshell* and the Fox News Sexual Harassment Scandal."

thought it was entertaining.”⁵² This theme of liberties is something tackled thoroughly in the beginning of their talk with Kelly running down a list of things that were just downright wrong in the film such as the claim that Fox’s Irena Briganti did not participate in planting fake articles to tear down anchors and reporters, which was something that former employees believed to be true.⁵³ We also see Zann’s opinion that the movie was not successful in displaying the true severity of the harm Ailes inflicted on his victims. She states, “Yeah for *Bombshell*, it was, it was worse than, than that, um, so that was my immediate takeaway. It was like oh this is it, like wow you really let Roger off easy.”⁵⁴ However, where there was criticism, there was also praise.

When discussing the depiction of the harassment itself, each woman seemed to agree that there were successful scenes in depicting the emotion, confusion, and humiliation that occurred. Robbie herself received specific praise for being the one that depicted these scenes. We see Bakhtiar say “I think this is such a powerful movie, Megyn, it really puts people in our shoes I think and Margot Robbie does a great job as being the victim” with Zann commenting “It’s, it’s horrifying to know that you’re just trying to do a job and um be sent in by a woman you know it’s just, it’s just very very hard. And those scenes from the Margot Robbie scenes were very very close to what actually happened.”⁵⁵ At the end of the day, even with the liberties that may have gone off the accurate course, the movie touched the women emotionally, and they felt it to be a powerful depiction.

In addition, though Carlson was and is unable to work with the movie, corroborate any details, or comment after the fact, the movie does give a slight nod at the very end to Carlson’s

⁵² Katie Shepherd, “Megyn Kelly tearfully reacts to ‘Bombshell’ and the fallout of the sexual harassment scandal,” *The Washington Post*, last modified January 10, 2020, [Megyn Kelly tearfully reacts to ‘Bombshell’: ‘I do wish I had done more’ - The Washington Post](#)

⁵³ Katie Shepherd, “Megyn Kelly tearfully reacts to ‘Bombshell’ and the fallout of the sexual harassment scandal.”

⁵⁴ Katie Shepherd, “Megyn Kelly tearfully reacts to ‘Bombshell’ and the fallout of the sexual harassment scandal.”

⁵⁵ Katie Shepherd, “Megyn Kelly tearfully reacts to ‘Bombshell’ and the fallout of the sexual harassment scandal.”

voice in the dialogue that occurs between her and her two lawyers while she signs the settlement that includes the NDA. The dialogue is as follows:

Mullen: As you can see, it's 20 million.

Carlson: Plus the apology.

Smith: Mhm.

Mullen: Correct.

Carlson: I can't believe Fox agreed to the apology. I mean, it's unheard of. I mean, that never happens.

Smith: But you will have to sign that. It's a strict confidentiality agreement.

Mullen: Money will establish you told the truth, but no one can ever hear it directly from you.

Smith: You will be muzzled, Gretchen.

Carlson signs the agreement

Carlson: Maybe.⁵⁶

This was one approach of third-parties taking special care to ensure that their depiction of these stories were not merely money-makers but instead dedications to the voices that were left unheard. Bradley J. Edwards book *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein* on fighting for clients in the Jeffrey Epstein case also highlights a positive quality of third-party contribution, and his book will continue to be dove into further as the chapters continue.⁵⁷ Along with Edwards' book is the Miami Herald's Julie K. Brown's investigative novel *Perversion of Justice: The Jeffrey Epstein Story*.⁵⁸ Brown contacted Edwards when the investigation hit a peak in media attention in 2017 because she was interested in writing a piece on Epstein and Edwards

⁵⁶ Jay Roach, et al., *Bombshell*, 1:42:11-1:43:44

⁵⁷ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, (New York: Gallery Books).

⁵⁸ Julie K. Brown, *Perversion of Justice: The Jeffrey Epstein Story*. (New York: Dey Street Books, 2021).

was one of the people closest to the investigation and victims themselves, as he was the defense lawyer for many of those sexually abused/assaulted by Epstein.

Though Edwards was extremely hesitant at first, he agreed to work with her. At this point in the investigation, Edwards was starting to feel as though each individual was being grouped into one category, and in this phenomenon, they were losing their individual voices. Not only that, but many were labeled “prostitutes” in one of the first trials, meaning that even though legally he was attempting to give these women a platform, it still held restrictions. He asked “Was Julie the reporter who could help me breathe personality into the empty stereotypes that had been given to the public about the Epstein victims?” and ultimately, he decided yes. It also turned out to be a decision that he not only did not regret, but was extremely happy and thankful that he said yes. Brown released her article, and it played a key role in taking Epstein off guard and leading to his conviction. Later, she released her investigative novel. Brown is even listed in the acknowledgements in Edwards book: “Thank you for having the courage to finally publish what other major publications would not. You made the public listen when all other journalists were scared.”⁵⁹

Other pieces that employ this sort of investigative, third-party participation include *Missoula* by Jon Krakauer, the novel about the epidemic of rapes and coverups that took place in the college town of *Missoula: Rape and the College System in a College Town*⁶⁰ and *She Said* by reporters Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey⁶¹ along with the 2022 film adaptation by the same

⁵⁹ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 314-317.

⁶⁰ Jon Krakauer, *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*, (New York, New York: Doubleday, 2015).

⁶¹ Jodi Kantor & Megan Twohey, *She Said*, (Manhattan, New York: Penguin Random House, 2019).

name directed by Maria Schrader, written by Kantor, Twohey, and Rebecca Lenkiewicz, and starring Carey Mulligan and Zoe Kazan.⁶²

None of this is to say, however, that every third-party depiction is ethical, helpful, or even accurate. Though not a VAW narrative, Ryan Murphy's Netflix limited series *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* received widespread criticism due to a lack of respect and communication with loved ones of the victims as well as less than pleasant working conditions on the show.⁶³ Being deemed insensitive and a money-grab, this Netflix original is one of the most recent examples making news as an unethical depiction of third-party narrative.

Section C: Studies

One often overlooked, but interestingly enough an incredibly effective form of distribution of narrative is found in clinical/social studies and/or experiments. When conducting any sort of study based on VAW, it seems to be almost a necessity that interviews take place. When the results are published, either full interview scripts or excerpts of their responses are published with the research, allowing women to have their story told in their own voice and words.

Lisa E. Sanchez's "The Entanglement of Agency, Violence, and Law in the Lives of Women in Prostitution" provides a shining example of not only giving space for women's voices to be heard but actually making this idea a central concept in the writing of the study itself. Sanchez's study is dedicated to looking at the marginalization of women in prostitution and the relationship of agency and victimization that contributes to the negative impacts in their life and

⁶² Maria Schrader, et al., *She Said*, Annapurna Pictures and Plan B Entertainment, 2022, Film.

⁶³ Malik Peay, "Critics of Netflix's controversial 'Dahmer' open up about lack of respect they felt," *Los Angeles Times*, last modified September 30, 2022, ['Dahmer' on Netflix critics say they felt lack of 'respect' - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2022-09-30/dahmer-netflix-critics)

career.⁶⁴ Sanchez interviews five women who were involved in street prostitution on subjects such as abuse/violence experienced on the job and because of the job by either their customers, officers, or bosses/pimps, drug use and accessibility, their childhood and past history that occurred before entering into the work, among other topics. Throughout the study's publication, excerpts taken straight from the interviews were included so that the women's voices shown through in the exact way they had intended. Sanchez makes it clear that this was not only an intentional choice in order to provide an accurate depiction of these women's stories, but also because she recognizes the value in stories being given in the voice of the experiencer. She concludes the publication in saying "I end this chapter by highlighting women's voices" and then goes on to quote participant Amanda's explanation on the price of making money as a street worker- "Obviously, the price to be paid is that you have no freedom... and they pay you big bucks because you're being paid for your silence." Sanchez follows the quote with her final sentence- "By far, our most important role is to listen to what this silence tells us."⁶⁵ Though Sanchez's official goal in the study was to provide a different, ultimately theoretical approach in looking at sex workers by focusing on the relationship of violence and agency in their lives, she arguably also made it an underlying goal to highlight the importance of voice. Elizabeth Comack echoes and reinforces this idea in her study "Coping, Resisting, and Surviving: Connecting Women's Law Violations to Their Histories of Abuse" where she interviews women on their lives before ending up in the correctional system. This investigation takes a feminist criminology approach and begins the study by saying "One of the key projects of feminist criminologists has

⁶⁴ Lisa E. Sanchez, "Chapter 15. The Entanglement of Agency, Violence, and Law in the Lives of Women in Prostitution," Roxbury Publishing, 2000. *In Her Own Words: Women Offenders' Views on Crime and Victimization: An Anthology*. (Oxford, England: Oxford Press, 2006), 159-168.

⁶⁵ Lisa E. Sanchez, "Chapter 15. The Entanglement of Agency, Violence, and Law in the Lives of Women in Prostitution," 159-168.

been to remedy the invisibility of women in prison. We need to hear their stories. Who are these women? What have their lives been like?” and these are questions she looks into thoroughly throughout her piece. One of her conclusive statements keeps with this sentiment: “Listening to the women’s stories allows us a better appreciation of the complex ways in which a woman’s law violations become connected to her abuse history.”⁶⁶

Other studies take form as a whole novel such as the previously mentioned Angela Browne *When Battered Women Kill*, which, as a reminder, is an investigation into what drives a woman to kill her partner, and in the cases studied here, the answer to that question was a history of domestic violence against the women. Her book is split into chapters that tackle various factors and topics surrounding domestic violence, its path to death, and its aftermath. Beginning with “Chapter 1: Setting the Stage” where she lays out the facts and statistics based on female murderers, Browne continues the journey in Chapter 2 and 3 in discussing childhood impacts on violent futures and the early stages in a relationship where we see partners go from “affection assault.”⁶⁷ As the book continues, she also tackles the topics of the psychology behind both victims and perpetrators and the specific legal action and ramifications that occur when an assault is reported versus when a murder is reported. Though Browne includes a variety of statistics and studies in her piece, what makes the book so intimate and a platform for voice itself is the interviews she conducts with battered women who have killed their partners. The first interviewee that Browne introduces to us is a woman who goes by the name Molly in the study. Browne describes her as a “very beautiful young woman... petite and fine-boned, with long dark

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Comack, “Coping, Resisting, and Surviving: Connecting Women’s Law Violations to Their History of Abuse,” Roxbury Publishing, 2005. *In Her Own Words: Women Offenders’ Views on Crime and Victimization: An Anthology*. (Oxford, England: Oxford Press, 2006), 33-43.

⁶⁷ Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill*.

hair and delicate features.”⁶⁸ Partnered with this beauty, we also are shown that she held “numerous scars from knife wounds and bite marks, marks on her forehead from blows with cleated boots, permanent damage to the joints of one hand, and a partial loss of hearing in one ear” and “she kept her left hand hidden most of the time” which later revealed “that the fingers were bent out of shape and the back of the hand [was] crossed with scars.”⁶⁹ Molly suffered years of abuse at the hands of her once affectionate husband, and finally reached the point where she shot him after he threatened, and nearly succeeded, to kill their infant son. Molly was one of eleven women whose stories were told in the book. Though Browne tends to summarize the events told to her as opposed to using long word for word excerpts from the interviewees, the novel still acts as an effective platform for these women to tell their stories in their own words. Because of this, we are able to understand factors we do not receive when just reading court documents, such as that when the women were first interviewed after they were arrested, they “remembered little of that time period except for their own terror and confusion.”⁷⁰ We can also see the remorse often felt nearly immediately after the event spanning to years later where they may say things along the lines of the words from interviewee Karen Simon: “I didn’t want him dead! I thought it would be me. I didn’t want him to have to die!”⁷¹

One thing particularly special to using studies as a platform for narrative is that peoples’ narratives will often be a contribution to proving a certain conclusion. For example, with Sanchez and Comack’s study, they were trying to better understand how to validate women and their experiences in order to lower their imprisonment and better the quality of life in general. So, not only are we getting to hear women’s side of the story, but we are also receiving objective

⁶⁸ Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill*, 19-20.

⁶⁹ Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill*, 19-20

⁷⁰ Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill*, 159.

⁷¹ Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill*, 141-143.

information that helps make sense of these women's narratives. This is important for two main reasons. The first is in the recognition that there seems to be a need for reinforcement for VAW narratives with objective facts because society does not view a woman's voice as enough.

The collection of domestic violence stories produced by Parthenia Warford, who created the book after hearing of her daughter's secret experience with an abusive lover, is filled only with the words from people who submitted their stories.⁷² The book contains frank and gritty tellings of stories like Mira Cassidy's piece "Please Believe Me!" where she talks about her experience in an abusive marriage while having to work within the Jehovah's Witness religion⁷³ and Elder D.H. Bonner's exposure to "twenty-plus years of abuse, divorce, and rejection" as a black woman.⁷⁴ We are presented with chilling lines such as Cassidy's statement:

I had it narrowed down; I would shoot myself. It had to be the head or the heart. However, if I went with the head and missed, I could end up living like a vegetable for years and years, so I wasn't about to try that. Now, the heart. That's where the bullet needed to go. How fitting. Metaphoric even... I guess quite poetic. That was the part of my body that hurt daily anyway.⁷⁵

It is a complete embodiment of pure vulnerability and untouched narrative. While this vulnerability has the power to create raw reactions and emotions, it also leaves it in a place without defense. Just having stories makes it easier for people to invalidate and discredit the words. Having numbers and logical conclusions supported by someone with a PhD often legitimizes the information for the public. Though it may be sad how helpful and sometimes necessary it is to have these factors included, our second point of significance is simply in the

⁷² Parthenia Warford, *Bruised but not Broken*, (Independently published, 2022).

⁷³ Mira Cassidy, "Please Believe Me!," *Bruised but not Broken*, Independently published, (2022): 1-10.

⁷⁴ D.H. Bonner, Elder, "Unfinished: Pages from my Diary." *Bruised but not Broken*, Independently published, (2022): 55-67.

⁷⁵ Mira Cassidy, "Please Believe Me!," *Bruised but not Broken*, 1-10.

idea that it is sad but effective. These women's stories need to be told in a way that people listen, and right now, this seems to be a way of reaching many.

Chapter 5: Creation and Its Roadblocks

We've seen in the last chapter different forms that narrative can take, but in order for a narrative to take form, there must be a step before this that allows the creation to even begin. In the case of VAW narratives especially, this beginning stage holds a variety of factors that interact with the narrative's creation, and oftentimes, these factors can be toxic in nature. Manipulation of a narrative can not only occur after the narrative has been stated, but in fact can begin at the same time that the narrative is being written (written used here merely as a term referring to its creation and not necessarily an actual physical copy). Though many could be identified, there are two roadblocks found in the creation of VAW narratives that will be discussed here- both being relatively common in narratives across the board as well as acting as effective examples in showing a manipulation in creation. The two "roadblocks" I will be discussing here will be an inability to express and intentional isolation- the first happening largely within the person, leaving them impacted from external factors because of it and the second being an external factor pushing the woman into an isolative state. Section A will discuss the first, and Section B will discuss the second.

Section A: Inability to Express

We create narratives from a young age, for we start learning from our surroundings and experiences starting in the first year of life.⁷⁶ In fact, studies suggest that experiences had from birth can and do have an impact on the child’s development. This especially includes experiences of trauma, which have been shown to have a negative impact on babies’ development emotionally, and possibly cognitively and physically as well.⁷⁷ This context of trauma and stress extends not only to an experience the baby has first-hand but also the experiences they witness their loved ones going through, especially their parents' struggles and distress.⁷⁸ It is clear that the story of our life is ingrained within us before we may even realize it, and with this fact comes the question of what happens when there are things that we cannot express but are nonetheless present? Section Aa will look at a lack of understanding in addition to the impact of language impairments, while Section Ab will look at a lack of education.

Section Aa: Lack of Understanding

One of the main differences between a baby experiencing trauma and someone who is older and more developed is that the baby knows that something negative is occurring, but they really have no sense of deep understanding on what that is. For example, if the baby’s father raises his voice loud and hits the mother to the ground, the baby will likely experience a moment of fear, but they will be able to do very little about it. They may sit shocked and/or cry, but they will not be able to digest why they are scared.⁷⁹ When considering the construction of narrative,

⁷⁶ Committee on the Science of Children Birth to Age 8: Deepening and Broadening the Foundation for Success, et al., “Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation,” *National Academies Press (US)*, 4 (July 2015) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK310550/>

⁷⁷ “Trauma and children - newborns to two years,” *Better Health Channel*, accessed May 2, 2023, [Trauma and children - newborns to two years - Better Health Channel](#)

⁷⁸ “Trauma and children - newborns to two years.”

⁷⁹ Committee on the Science of Children Birth to Age 8: Deepening and Broadening the Foundation for Success, et al., “Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation.”

we are already hitting a roadblock for those that have experienced violence at such a young age. They were unable to understand the event, or may not even remember it, but they are still affected by it mentally as well as sometimes physically. How is one supposed to carry an accurate narrative of their life when there are parts of it that seemed to be locked away in babyhood?

This lack of ability to explain is not just central to babies and toddlers. In fact, it is a phenomenon seen in any age- it just changes form a bit and carries different factors. Patricia Eubanks' contribution to Warford's collection of narratives involving violence *Bruised but not Broken* details times in her life when she simply could not make sense of what happened to her.⁸⁰ She recounts how at age six, "Although I didn't know it at the time, I was sexually assaulted" and goes on to continue this theme of confusion with an anecdote during her thirteenth year:

Thirteen wasn't a good year for me. All of that sexual activity opened me up to something I wanted to understand because of another incident that occurred after that. I was walking down the street to the store and heard a man's voice asking for directions, so I looked over and saw him sitting in his car masturbating. What in the world is a thirteen-year-old girl supposed to do with all of this?⁸¹

Eubanks highlights a few things for us here. For starters, we see her unable to label her experience at six years old as "sexual assault" until later in life. This is far from an uncommon occurrence.

Language and expression are key in understanding, reporting, and coping with the infliction of violence, and thus are also key in moving on to have an accurate life story. Language impairment is a notable factor to understand when discussing the creation of narrative. Numerous studies have shown that children with disabilities have an increased risk of

⁸⁰ Patricia Eubanks, "It's Never Too Late." *Bruised but not Broken*, (Independently published, (2022): 15-28.

⁸¹ Patricia Eubanks, "It's Never Too Late." *Bruised but not Broken*, 15-28.

experiencing sexual assault, many reporting as much as three times more likely.⁸² When looking at specific disabilities, those that include any sort of communication impairment seem to leave the child with a heightened vulnerability. For example, the number of deaf children is particularly high, and it is observed that specifically girls with language impairments are more at risk than any other group.⁸³ There are a few reasons we may be seeing this. One is in the increased difficulty in reporting what happened to them. Not only can it be difficult for children with language impairment to tell someone they trust what occurred, predators will also understand this difficulty and view it as an advantage to them. Here, we should make a quick distinction between language impairments and speech impairments.

Language impairment is cited as dealing with the difficulty of expressing and understanding language, while speech impairment involves difficulties in the physical delivery.⁸⁴ For example, a language impairment may look as though a child does not feel able to comprehend what the word “assault” entails, thus, they are unable to label an action of assault as assault. With a speech impairment, the child may understand the meaning of the word assault and even understand that what occurred to them would fit under that category. However, it may be terribly difficult to tell others that this is what happened. Each impairment has significance both together and in their own separate realms. When talking about the creation of narrative, a speech impairment provides difficulties in reporting which can allow abuse to go on longer than if the child had been able to report easier. This can impact the course of the story by not only

⁸² Claire Chiamulera, “Children with Disabilities and Sexual Abuse: Risk Factors and Best Practice,” *American Bar Association*, last modified April 1, 2016. [Children with Disabilities and Sexual Abuse: Risk Factors and Best Practice \(americanbar.org\)](https://www.americanbar.org/publications/children-with-disabilities-and-sexual-abuse-risk-factors-and-best-practice/) and P. Sullivan & J. Knutson, “Maltreatment and disabilities: A population-based epidemiological study.” *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 24, (2000): 1257-1273.

⁸³ Claire Chiamulera, “Children with Disabilities and Sexual Abuse: Risk Factors and Best Practice.”

⁸⁴ E.B Brownlie, et al., “Language Impairment and Sexual Assault of Girls and Women: Findings from a Community Sample.” *J Abnorm Child Psychol*, 35 (March 2007): 618–626, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-007-9117-4>

having events nonconsensually written in, but can also make them a bit more susceptible to the age-old claim of “why wasn’t this reported?” What speech impairment may allow, though, that language impairment makes more difficult is the creation of a written account of what occurred. This is not to say that either impairment is superior, worse, or more difficult than the other. It is simply to show how each can have its own impact. In having the comprehension one has in a speech impairment, they may still be able to mentally make sense of what occurred and tell about it somehow. With a language impairment, the words and concepts connected to them are lost. They are not going to be able to be said, written, recorded, or anything of the such (obviously with varying degrees of difficulty, some more or less severe than others). Not only that, but the internal understanding of the event cannot occur in a smooth way. Our inner voice is often where we first work through our emotions and reactions, but with a language impairment, not even this inner voice has the tools to guide the child in a way that a child without language impairment might.

Another point that must be considered here is that language and speech impairments are considered “disabilities.” The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act defines “child with a disability” as follows:

... as having an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as “emotional disturbance”), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.⁸⁵

As can be seen here, language and speech impairments fit under this definition. In society, there is undeniably a stigma surrounding those with disabilities, and unfortunately, they may be

⁸⁵ *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, Sec. 300.8 Child with a disability, last modified in 2007, [Sec. 300.8 Child with a disability - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#)

viewed as deserving of different considerations. For example, one of the common claims surrounding sexual assault against a child with a disability is that it will cause less harm to them than a child without a disability because the child with will not fully understand what happened.⁸⁶ This is a complete and utter myth. Even if the child has a disability that makes it difficult for them to fully understand the situation, the harm is intense. In fact, it may even be intensified even more as they are left with the additional trauma of being unable to understand what is happening to them. The feeling of pain, hurt, and wrongness while not knowing why one feels this leaves a person feeling both uncomfortable and violated as well as wrong and maybe even stupid. Another stigma adopted around children with disabilities is that it makes them less of a target because they are viewed as less “attractive.” As Claire Chiamulera explains in her piece “Children with Disabilities and Sexual Abuse: Risk Factors and Best Practice,” this is based on the wrong assumption that sexual assault always has to do with attraction when in reality, it is more often a power play of control, and, many times, those with disabilities can be viewed as easier to control without the risk of consequence.⁸⁷ Labels, stigmas, and societal status will be discussed in depth in Part III, however, it is good to keep it in mind throughout the piece as we can see already that these points are holding great relevance.

Section Ab: Lack of Education

Sometimes, though, it is not a matter of disability but simply a matter of a lack of education and/or the occurrence of conversations that happen with young children. Eubanks’ story on being thirteen highlights a few more factors for us.⁸⁸ Eubanks found herself unable to

⁸⁶ Claire Chiamulera, “Children with Disabilities and Sexual Abuse: Risk Factors and Best Practice.”

⁸⁷ Claire Chiamulera, “Children with Disabilities and Sexual Abuse: Risk Factors and Best Practice.”

⁸⁸ Patricia Eubanks, “It’s Never Too Late.” *Bruised but not Broken*, 15-28.

understand her sexuality, which often left her susceptible to others who wished to prey on that ignorance. She talks about how she as a thirteen-year old had the body of around sixteen, and people definitely took notice. A twenty-three year old who labeled himself her boyfriend even attempted to give her to his friends for sex. The fact that sexualization was happening to her was no secret, but Eubanks was unable to fully understand both what sexuality was and why she was being targeted so heavily. This confusion vividly shows through when she tells of the man masturbating merely to her presence. She asks this question of “What in the world is a thirteen-year-old girl supposed to do with all of this?” and that question should be one plastered on a banner for all to see. What is expected of a thirteen-year old who has a man masturbate randomly while she stands there, or one who is almost pimped to her “boyfriend’s” friends? What Eubanks did know was that she didn’t have a clear answer, and she didn’t have someone in her life who would help educate her on it.

Not talking about sexual assault and bodily autonomy does not keep children from being sexually assaulted. In fact, it arguably increases their chance. Children who are unaware both of what appropriate touching is and the fact that they have the right to say no and are valid in their feelings that something feels wrong make for very easy targets to manipulate and play with to the offender’s will. Since they are much like a blank slate when it comes to this information, the information they believe and cling to is what they are being told by their offender. We do not keep young ones’ innocence safe by not having these conversations. In fact, we basically display their innocence for sale on a big red sign for all to see.

Section B: Intentional Isolation

In Section A of this chapter, we had a focus on looking at the influence comprehension and language has on the initial development of narrative, as well as the prevalence of education, but there is another prevalent factor that must be looked at before we move forward. This is a factor I will refer to formally as “intentional isolative forced focus on voice”, but can be referred to in short as “intentional isolation.” What I mean by this is the action of one person isolating another individual from others’ opinions, validation, input, among any other effects another voice could hold. This tactic goes as far as even isolating one from their own inner voice. In this complete isolation and silencing, only the silencer’s voice is left. Though there are other terms for this in a variety of practices that fit under manipulation, I have chosen to use my own here because I am talking specifically about its relationship with narrative. Previously mentioned Elder D.H.

Bonner from Warford’s *Bruised but not Broken* depicts clearly the phenomenon I am discussing here. In her story, she says:

However, I would soon learn that one of the primary ways abusive, extremely toxic, or domineering people gain control over a loving heart is by removing the voices of others, like those of close family and intimate friends... Why do they do this? So that the only voice you are left with is theirs. It’s their voice telling you how worthless you are. It’s their voice shouting about how difficult you are to love.⁸⁹

Here, we see Bonner recall how her partner was careful to separate her from anyone who would have pointed out to her that the actions going on were not fair or right to Bonner. This isolation can keep someone from having dangerous situations brought to their attention if they do not yet realize it as well as keep them from being validated in their worries if they do feel as though they are in a dangerous situation but feel unsure. Either way it has already created a playground of confusion, and in a playground of confusion, the manipulator ends up holding great power in creating a new playground based on their wants and their wants alone. After isolation is

⁸⁹ D.H. Bonner, Elder, “Unfinished: Pages from my Diary.” *Bruised but not Broken*, 55-67.

completed, it is only a slight step forward to having one's own inner voice completely replaced with their abuser's. Bonner gives examples above of being told constantly that she was "worthless" and "difficult to love." She also goes on to say "It was his voice throughout our years together, causing me to doubt myself and shape-shift into a version of a woman I no longer recognized."⁹⁰ Bonner's abuser ingrained his voice so deeply into Bonner that her personhood shifted to whatever he told her she was. He was the voice in her head, and he was the voice writing her narrative. Not only that, but because of the isolation, there was no other voice to make corrections. No power of creation or review was placed in her hand.

Chapter 6: Common Factors and Unique Distinctions of VAW

Narratives

This project has decided to hold a focus on narratives of women who have experienced violence against them. This was a specific choice made with a mountain of evidence supporting why this is the conversation that needs to be had. With this focus comes the question of how are the narratives in themselves distinct from narratives created by other demographics? The list is truly long, but I have identified four main distinctions seen in VAW narratives that work to define them as their own category: (1) the woman identity, (2) the community and solidarity aspect, (3) the adoption of a caretaker identity, and (4) the tendency to take blame upon themselves and/or make themselves the enemy. Each section will work to explain each category.

Section A: Woman Identity

⁹⁰ D.H. Bonner, Elder, "Unfinished: Pages from my Diary." *Bruised but not Broken*, 55-67.

The first, (1) the woman identity, is a strong point in itself, so much so that its impact on the silencing/distortion of female narratives became Part III of this project. For that reason, we will only briefly touch on it here. One of the defining factors of VAW narratives is the “woman” identity. Due to a world built on patriarchal and gendered norms, the differentiation between man and woman is often that one is worth hearing and the other is not. This applies to a variety of different situations, and when we explore intersectionality, labels and stigma, and status in Part III, we will have a better idea of what all of this entails.

Section B: Community and Solidarity

The second, (2) the community and solidarity aspect, refers to the idea that one story from one woman is often not just isolated to that individual. What I mean by this is that each woman’s story has the power to impact another woman’s story. This seems to be true whether the women have the same perpetrator, or whether their separate traumatic events are entirely disconnected from one another. Two examples commonly known about from national news that demonstrate this are the case against Jeffrey Epstein and the story of Chanel Miller, with the former displaying a common perpetrator and the latter displaying the development of community despite the events being unconnected.

Jeffrey Epstein was a multimillionaire investor who once was described as the “international man of mystery”⁹¹ due to his extreme wealth and intentionally hidden clientele and ways, but would later follow with titles of pedophile, sex offender, sex trafficker, and one of the most despised men of the year.⁹² Though identified as a “terrific guy” by Donald Trump, and

⁹¹ Landon Thomas Jr., “Jeffrey Epstein: International Moneyman of Mystery,” *New York Magazine*, last modified 2002. [Jeffrey Epstein: International Moneyman of Mystery \(nymag.com\)](https://nymag.com/jeffrey-epstein-international-moneyman-of-mystery)

⁹² Gregory Wallace, “Jeffrey Epstein’s world of wealth and powerful friends,” *CNN*, last modified August 10, 2019, [Jeffrey Epstein's world of wealth and powerful friends | CNN Politics](https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/10/politics/jeffrey-epstein-world-of-wealth-and-powerful-friends/index.html)

“both a highly successful financier and a committed philanthropist with a keen sense of global markets and an in-depth knowledge of twenty-first-century science” by former President Bill Clinton,⁹³ 2019 would mark a far different year for Epstein’s reputation. After an investigation spanning all of the way back from 2005, the FBI was finally able to build a strong case against Epstein for his crimes of sexual misconduct towards female minors. Charged with one count of sex trafficking of minors (maximum of 40 years) and one count of conspiracy to engage in sex trafficking of minors (maximum of five years), Epstein was arrested over Fourth of July weekend.⁹⁴ He would not see the outside of a cell after that, as he committed suicide on August 10th of that same year.⁹⁵

The amount of girls/women that came forward with their accusations towards Epstein was nowhere close to the amount of women that Epstein assaulted and traumatized. However, the women that did come forward created a visible display of the community this violence created. Bradley J. Edwards was one of the lead attorneys working for the victims of the fallen millionaire. Edwards’ involvement in the case that would ultimately bring Epstein to his end began in 2008 when the first non-anonymous victim, Courtney Wild, contacted him for help. Though she had been cooperating with an investigation led by the FBI, it became apparent to her that the slow speed and secrecy the investigation was holding was worryingly suspicious- a fact that will be discussed further in Part III.⁹⁶ Wild’s insistence and persistence in seeking justice led her to the lawyer and began what would be an eleven year journey for both attorney and

⁹³ Landon Thomas Jr., “Jeffrey Epstein: International Moneyman of Mystery.”

⁹⁴ United States Attorney’s Office Southern District of New York, “Jeffrey Epstein Charged In Manhattan Federal Court With Sex Trafficking of Minors,” *Department of Justice*, last modified July, 8 2019, [Southern District of New York | Jeffrey Epstein Charged In Manhattan Federal Court With Sex Trafficking Of Minors | United States Department of Justice](#)

⁹⁵ Jason Hanna, et al., “Jeffrey Epstein has died by suicide, sources say,” *CNN*, last modified August 11, 2019, [Jeffrey Epstein has died by suicide, sources say | CNN](#)

⁹⁶ Pg. 98

victims. Edwards worked hand in hand with the victims of Epstein and was there in the courtroom in 2019 when the victims were allowed to give their impact statements as a gesture from the courts for the lack of served justice due to Epstein’s successful suicide.⁹⁷ The scene Edwards describes in his book *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein* is one of extreme power and solidarity. He recounts walking into the courthouse and courtroom and how “This experience would have been overwhelming and stressful for any one of the victims alone; however, the fact that they all walked over together and had each other’s support seemed to ease their nerves”⁹⁸ which seamlessly sets up the tone for the rest of the hearing. He states:

The judge’s law clerk expressed that Judge Berman had been concerned the courtroom was so large that there might be too much empty space. It was the opposite. There were people from wall to wall, and many in the hallway who could not get in because the courtroom was too crowded. This was the most powerful scene I had ever witnessed: dozens of victims of the same perpetrator, who had been abused in different parts of the world at different times, banded together as one strong, forceful voice.⁹⁹

Chanel Miller’s story offers an additional, but distinct and different image of this solidarity phenomenon. Chanel Miller was sexually assaulted by Stanford swimmer Brock Turner in January of 2015 behind a dumpster when she was unconscious. The case would end with three guilty verdicts:

1. Count one- felony of assault with intent to commit rape of an intoxicated or unconscious person
2. Count two- felony of sexual penetration when the victim was intoxicated
3. Count three- felony of sexual penetration where where the victim was unconscious of the nature of the act¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 20-23.

⁹⁸ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 20-23.

⁹⁹ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 20-23.

¹⁰⁰ Court Documents: Stanford Rape Case (2016)

It was made immediately clear that Miller's win in guilty verdicts was a win for more than just her. In fact, it was a win for both people she knew and people she didn't. Throughout her case, Miller had numerous encounters that widened her view of violence against women. Two would be particularly vivid depictions of community. Both of her friends Claire and Athena had been assaulted before Miller, and neither of their stories had turned into cases, leaving justice and closure unserved. When Miller finally decided to confide in them of her own trauma, both girls had a similar response. Claire held Miller close and said "This is your opportunity" and "You're the one who's going to do it."¹⁰¹ Athena held her the same way, agreed to attend the trial, and kissed her cheek and walked her out after the victory.¹⁰² Each girl, as perfectly seen in Claire's statement, felt a little part of their own justice served in Miller's case. This win extended past those who knew Miller intimately even. After the trial came to a close, Miller received a card from a woman named Nadia in Ohio who reminded Miller that she was not alone. Parts of the card included statements such as "We are in awe of your courage and resilience and badassery" and "Know that you have a huge army of soldiers behind you."¹⁰³ This brought Miller to the realization that "[she] was surrounded by survivors, [and she] was part of a we."¹⁰⁴

What is particularly interesting in Miller's case is that these women banded together and found community despite the fact that they experienced completely separate events with separate perpetrators. An extremely unique dichotomy between beauty and tragedy is seen in this. On the one hand, the fact that these women were able to find validation and care with each other through their similar trauma is rather excellent in its nature. We see in the above quotes how Miller finds strength through these other voices, and on the other end of the support balance, how these other

¹⁰¹ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, (Manhattan, New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), 73.

¹⁰² Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 153.

¹⁰³ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 211.

¹⁰⁴ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 211.

women found strength in Miller's voice. This exchange of support transcends time and distance in a way unique to these cases. It is actually quite astounding. However, this is not just a happy ending to a sad story. On the other hand of this phenomenon, we see a completely disheartening truth- these women were forced to find validation in a story that was not their own because theirs was never to be validated. This need for second-hand justice should be bothersome to everyone who views it, and it creates a unique trait within a unique trait of VAW narratives. Many women are forced into solidarity as the only option for being heard. This means that oftentimes, this aspect of a woman's narrative becomes vital in gaining control of their story and their lives as they move forward.

This need for community and numbers in order to have their story heard connects directly with ideas that we will be discussing in Part III involving oppression, discrimination, intersectionality, and its application to VAW narratives and the women behind them. Specifically, philosophers Marilyn Frye and Iris Marion Young's pieces on oppression will help us better see how multiple voices are often needed in order to highlight just one.¹⁰⁵

One specific legal agreement works diligently to strip this communal/solidarity aspect away from women- the previously mentioned NDAs- and in doing that, it provides as arguably one of the most effective and efficient silencing techniques used towards women and their stories. This will be discussed in depth in Part III.¹⁰⁶

Section C: Adoption of Caretaker Identity

¹⁰⁵ Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," *Young, I. M. Justice and the politics of difference*, Princeton University Press, (1990): 39-65, and Marilyn Frye, "Oppression," *Gender Basics: Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men*, 2, Wadsworth, (2000) [Marilyn Frye, Oppression.pdf \(unam.mx\)](#)

¹⁰⁶ Pg. 98

Arguably stemming from the development and insistence of a gendered role society, another topic that will be discussed thoroughly in Part III,¹⁰⁷ we come to the third distinction of the (3) adoption of the caretaker role. Working hand in hand with their identity and societal image, women in their narratives of violence will almost always refer back to some sort of situation involving them acting as a caretaker. This is seen in a multitude of ways, but a few examples would be the protection of children, siblings, or anyone else she viewed as in need of her protection, the need to act as a parent to their parent/guardian, and a deep sense of loyalty to their significant other.

In the case of the women in *When Battered Women Kill*, the women who had children stated keeping their children safe as a top priority, whether it was children they shared with their abuser or children they had coming into the relationship.¹⁰⁸ To take that a step further, threats to the children were often what drove these women to kill their husbands. The interviewee known as Bella endured abuse at the hands of her husband for twenty years, but when he said that he was going to kill their oldest daughter, she shot him. Interviewee Wanda found herself in a similar situation when her daughter was severely beaten by her partner. Afterwards, she made a promise to herself that it would not happen again. She later put out a contract for his death. Though she changed her mind, her brother had already completed the deed. Previously mentioned Molly is another example, as she killed her husband after he tried to strangle their toddler boy. In these cases, the sentences that these women accepted also had the essence of caretaking. For example, in the case of Molly, her attorney was sure they could gain an acquittal

¹⁰⁷ Pg. 59

¹⁰⁸ Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill*.

if they went to court, but Molly instead decided to plead guilty to a reduced charge of manslaughter so that she could be reunited with her son quicker.¹⁰⁹

In some cases, we see women enduring further abuse to keep their abuser from hurting other loved ones. In Comack's study, the interviewee known as Merideth talks about her coping strategy in being sexually abused by her father starting at a young age with oral sex beginning at eleven and vaginal penetration at 12. She talks of disassociation by taking herself out of where her physical body was at. However, she also cites her younger sister as a reason to continue enduring. "And also," she states, "I had a younger sister who's four years younger, so fear for my sister made me cope... it was rather me than her..."¹¹⁰

Protection of younger siblings and the adoption of the parent role in the family represents a common trope. In the same study, the interviewee Brenda tells the story of growing up in a large family with two alcoholic, abusive, and neglectful parents that were often gone from the house lounging at a hotel, leaving the children to fend for themselves. Brenda stepped into the role as parent without hesitation at the age of ten after returning from six years of foster care. Not only did she take care of household chores such as laundry, cleaning, feeding and getting the kids to school, but she also tried to keep her siblings from abuse and violence. "So, you know, I'd always hide my little brother and sister just in case, you know? And I would hide myself because I knew, once my dad walked in it'd be all over with because he'd always get his belt out, or a cord or even a stick or whatever he could find to hit. I went through a lot of abuse with him."¹¹¹

Brenda felt a responsibility to keep her siblings safe from the abuse she was consistently

¹⁰⁹ Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill*, 187.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Comack, "Coping, Resisting, and Surviving: Connecting Women's Law Violations to Their History of Abuse," 33-43.

¹¹¹ Elizabeth Comack, "Coping, Resisting, and Surviving: Connecting Women's Law Violations to Their History of Abuse," 33-43.

experiencing, and she did the best she could to fulfill that responsibility before any consideration of her own well-being, needs, and safety.

This caretaker identity can be particularly dangerous to narrative when revealing details, experiences, and truths seem to harm the loved ones around the narrator. In the cases of Jeffrey Epstein, many of his victims refused to move forward with charges due to threats to their family, especially their kids and siblings. One of the victims called Marissa in Edward's book was one of the first to go to trial with Edwards as an attorney in 2010. Though she carried through with the trial and settled, she spent the weeks leading up to it in fear for her one-year old girl and grandmother, as well for herself after an SUV, supposedly one of Epstein's men, intentionally drove her off the road.¹¹² As has been said, Marissa did complete her trial with a settlement, but it wasn't the finale that Edwards had hoped for as Epstein still was not facing prison time. The question does arise of whether or not Marissa and the other women standing with her would have settled had their lives and families' lives not been threatened. Their fulfillment of their caretaker role ultimately had a huge role in deciding how their narrative would continue.

Section D: Identification as the Enemy and Self-Blame

Self-identification as the enemy or self-blame for a situation is prevalent often in VAW narratives. Section Da will center around victim blaming on a general note with the inclusion of a few examples, while Section Db will look specifically at Chanel Miller and her relationship with this unique factor of VAW narrative.

Section Da: Victim Blaming

¹¹² Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 155-159.

Though the term “victim blaming” was not officially created and coined until 1971 by sociologist William Ryan in his book *Blaming the Victim*, it is a practice that has been around since the dawn of day.¹¹³ When Ryan developed the term in his novel, it was mainly dedicated to tackle the misconception that poverty is the person’s own doing by diving into a discussion on the societal, and often uncontrollable by the individual, stigmas around class and race that play into people ending up in poverty.¹¹⁴ Ryan’s definition of victim blaming was as follows: “justifying inequality by finding defects in the victims of inequality.”¹¹⁵ In other words, victim blaming is justifying an action by looking at what the person did wrong that led them to be suffering the consequences. It is arguably not too difficult to see how this term translated so smoothly to acts of violence, especially sexual violence. In Robert Coles’ M.D. review on Ryan’s work, he describes victim blaming as a “scapegoat” and describes the practice of scapegoating as a “social art.”¹¹⁶ He further discusses Ryan’s point on our motivation in victim blaming, talking about how “we, too, have a stake in making this society more decent” and “the longer millions suffer, the more many of us more privileged citizens continue to feel queasy, feel ashamed- and feel obligated to vent our vague unease on *them*, who become to us irritants of a certain status quo our consciences seek after.”¹¹⁷ This point of scapegoating and accountability holds a world of relevance to victim blaming applied to VAW.

¹¹³ Tami Jacoby, “Blaming the Victim,” *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior*, 1-2, last modified 2017. [Sage Reference - The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior \(sagepub.com\)](#) and William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, originally Pantheon Books, 1971, (Northbrook, Illinois: Vintage, 1976).

¹¹⁴ William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*.

¹¹⁵ William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*. and The Associated Press, “William J. Ryan, 78, Sociologist; Explored the Blaming of Victims,” *The New York Times*, last modified June 13, 2002, [William J. Ryan, 78, Sociologist; Explored the Blaming of Victims - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

¹¹⁶ Robert Coles, “Review: [Untitled].” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 2 (September 1972): 448-450. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776512>.

¹¹⁷ Robert Coles, “Review: [Untitled],” 448-450.

The simple fact of the matter is that it is far easier for people to quell their own shame in not being able to protect the women of society by blaming the woman for not being more careful. The definition often used specifically in cases of abuse and victim blaming is as follows: “Victim blaming can be defined as someone saying, implying, or treating a person who has experienced harmful or abusive behaviour (such as a survivor of sexual violence) like it was a result of something they did or said, instead of placing the responsibility where it belongs: on the person who harmed them.”¹¹⁸

(1) Why did she wear that short skirt if she didn’t want male attention? (2) Why did she let her drink out of sight? (3) If the abuse was that bad, why didn’t she leave him? All of these questions are examples of victim blaming. However, when it comes down to the bare facts, possible and common answers to these questions do not adequately connect to these women being blamed for what happened to them:

- (1) She liked the skirt, and being raped is not “male attention”- a man making eye contact and smiling is male attention, or even a man asking for the woman’s number is male attention. A man grabbing a woman’s breast or butt, or pinning her down and forcing himself inside of her is not male attention- it is sexual assault, and that is in no way something a woman wished for as she slipped on her skirt.
- (2) She set her drink down for a moment, looked over her shoulder due to a loud noise and turned back to pick the drink up. She did not take the drink, push it towards her suitor, and ask if he would mind drugging her real quick so as to take advantage of her. When you go to a restaurant and indulge yourself in a meal of

¹¹⁸ Sexual Assault Center of Edmonton, “Victim Blaming,” *SACE*, last modified 2023, accessed May 17, 2023, [Victim Blaming | Sexual Assault Centre Of Edmonton \(sace.ca\)](https://www.sace.ca/victim-blaming)

rice and salmon and order a nice glass of chardonnay to go with it, do you take your drink with you when you go to the bathroom? No. Why is a bar setting different?

(3) She tried to leave him three times. The first time, he found her at the shelter after she filed a police report, dragged her to the car by her hair, and bruised her right kidney with the blunt force of his fists. The second time, he threatened to kill her younger sister if she didn't return home promptly. The third time, he raped her with the intention of impregnating her, forced her to bear his child, and threatened to kill the infant.

What the questions should be are: Why does a man view a short skirt, a clothing item picked entirely separate from the man, as an invitation to force himself inside of her? Why does a man believe that just because a woman sets her drink down and looks the other way for a moment, it is okay for him to drug her? Who is going to protect the children when the mom decides to leave the abuser? These questions have far more logical and productive connections to the issues at hand. These questions, however, would force us to uproot the patriarchal society, which is truly what all of our standards are built upon, and replace its toxicity with respect for the human, and social change is far too difficult for oppressors to swallow. It is much easier to simply blame the oppressed.

Another reason I believe that we see victim blaming so prevalent is in the fear we hold within ourselves. This is especially applicable to women victim blaming other women. We would like to believe that women would be the biggest support for other women and that solidarity among the community is untouchable, and in some cases, it really is quite strong as we have seen in the third unique factor of VAW narratives. However, this solidarity is not

unconditional. Though Miller had support from family and friends, the public was not quite as kind.¹¹⁹ Miller was consistently reading comments from mothers who would claim that their daughters would never be so stupid, with one “concerned aunt” of nieces and nephews in college dramatically downplaying the assault and trauma that occurred stating “It seems an extreme punishment for actions many of us may have made in our youth, and many youths are still making every day” in her letter to judge in favor of releasing Turner from a harsh punishment.¹²⁰ Why is this? I argue that its main source is fear. The experience of violence is terrifying, and women are taught from a young age to be on high alert when a man is in the room. They learn to walk with keys between their knuckles, and to check the backseat of the car before driving off. They are taught the sin and consequence of sexuality and are warned that trusting a man could end with bodily and mental destruction. It’s scary. Just like the oppressor does not want to own up to horrific actions because of shame, the oppressed don’t want to believe they can be oppressed. They want control over the situation, and a way to gain control is in the statement “Well, I would never do that, and if I never do that, I won’t end up in the news like Chanel Miller did in 2016.”¹²¹ If I just simply do not do what Chanel Miller did, it won’t happen to me. If I don’t go to a frat party, I won’t be stripped of my clothing. If I don’t drink, I won’t be nearly raped. If I don’t want to have hands on me, I would just fight back. It’s an understandable rationale when the fear is so highly ingrained within women, but nevertheless, it is intensely harmful and irresponsibly misguided.

¹¹⁹ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*.

¹²⁰ Court Documents: Stanford Rape Case. *People v. Brock Turner*, Case B1577162, Document 9 of 9, “Letters,” released on *Los Angeles Times* on June 10, 2016, [Court documents: Stanford rape case: People v. Brock Allen Turner \(9/9\) - Documents - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](https://www.latimes.com/news/nation/la-na-stanford-rape-case-people-v-brock-allen-turner-9-9-2016-story.html)

¹²¹ “Avoid Victim Blaming,” *Brigham Young University*, last modified 2019. [Avoid Victim Blaming \(byu.edu\)](https://www.byu.edu/avoid-victim-blaming) and Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*.

- College women ages 18-24 are three times more likely to be sexually assaulted and this occurs more often with a friend or acquaintance than it does with a stranger: Should women not socialize? Should women not make friends? Better yet, should women just avoid college?
- Ages 12-35 are at the highest risk of sexual assault: Should women skip those ages? Go from 11 to 36?
- Native Americans are shown to be the highest risk demographic: Should they just simply not be Native American?

If victim blaming is going to be the coping mechanism for both the oppressor and the oppressed, I want my questions answered first.¹²²

Sadly, victim blaming does not only occur with external forces pressuring the victim but instead can often turn into the victim blaming themselves. This is an almost unconditionally present aspect in VAW narratives in ways that other narratives may not include it. Self-inflicted victim blaming can take a variety of forms including but not limited to: questioning and punishing one's decisions that led to this point, changing one's self-image to something of disgust and discomfort, and a full lack of blame placed on the perpetrator. Another piece of self-inflicted victim blaming, however, can occur by the person blaming themselves for negative consequences to those around them. In Elizabeth Comack's study, previously referenced in the discussion on studies as a format, she talks to a woman called Janice who tells that the reason she did not move forward with charges against her rapist was because him being her brother-in-law would ruin her sister's family. She says: "My mother charged him and, (pause) what (sigh) ended up happening is I dropped the charge against him. Because I felt sorry for my sister... I

¹²² "Victims of Sexual Assault: Statistics," *RAINN*, accessed March 10, 2023, [Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics | RAINN](#)

felt sorry for her ‘cause she was pregnant at the time plus they had a little boy already. And, I didn’t want to ruin that, their family.”¹²³

Here, we see Janice’s thought process in her decision of whether or not to seek justice. If she is to do so, it would label her brother-in-law a rapist, and potentially take a husband and father away from her sister, whom she loves. Instead of recognizing that it is the brother-in-law’s actions that would ultimately lead him to receive the title of rapist and possibly a prison sentence, she views it as her own doing and takes full blame upon herself. The third VAW unique factor was one of acting as a caretaker, and these two aspects can work hand in hand in post-violence victim-blaming. Janice’s priority is to protect her sister, not to care for her herself.

Section Db: Chanel Miller and Emily Doe

Perhaps one of the starkest depictions where we see a victim make themselves the enemy brings us back to Chanel Miller’s case. The title of Miller’s memoir on the assault and all of the events that occurred after, *Know My Name*, is not only a catchy, cut to the chase title but also holds great significance and connection with her experience and story. The duration of the investigation and trial, Chanel went by the name Emily Doe so as to protect her privacy. This is a practice conducted in cases where the victim files a motion with the court explaining why the privacy of their identity outweighs the right of public knowledge.¹²⁴ Chanel’s case fulfilled the qualifications leaving her with the name Emily Doe in the news and Chanel Doe in and after court proceedings, for this is proper procedure. Though this was an effective method of

¹²³ Elizabeth Comack, “Coping, Resisting, and Surviving: Connecting Women’s Law Violations to Their History of Abuse,” 33-43.

¹²⁴ “Filing Pseudonymously: Federal.” *Without My Consent*, accessed April 7, 2023, [Filing Pseudonymously: Federal | Without My Consent](#)

protecting Chanel's identity from the public, it also seemed to create a whole other persona that Chanel could slip into in times of crisis. Above, we saw women blaming themselves for moments of weakness or anything they viewed as failures during their experiences as well as their coping mechanisms after. Chanel didn't blame herself- she blamed the newly formed Emily.

Chanel marks the birth of her persona Emily when she first begins to read reports on her assault in the very beginning of the investigation. These reports included facts and details she viewed as private as well as facts and details that she herself did not even yet know, such as that she was actually penetrated digitally, and not just "suspected" of having been assaulted. In addition, she also had some of her first, but not final encounters with external victim blaming. In this moment of vulnerability, Emily recounts that "I suppose this was when Emily Doe was born, me but not me at all, and suddenly I hated her, I did not want this, her nakedness, her pain. It was Emily, all of this was Emily."¹²⁵ By creating another person, she created someone to take on the pain and embarrassment she herself could not accept at the time. If it wasn't her, this wasn't her problem. She talks about living two separate lives, her own and Emily's. The former continued as normal with social interactions and fake smiles, while the latter was involved in complete isolation, loneliness, and pain. Throughout the book, we even see Chanel talk of Emily as though she truly is another physical being walking this Earth with the rest of us making, statements such as "Finally, I found the one, a sweater the color of old milk, soft and quiet. Emily's new uniform" and "The next morning, I woke up to the headline: WOMAN IN STANFORD SEXUAL-ASSAULT CASE TESTIFIES. I eagerly clicked on the link. Emily was described as

¹²⁵ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 37.

giving *emotional testimony*...”¹²⁶ Emily became the part of Chanel that she pushed away and would blame in times of weakness.

It should also be noted that when applying this concept to narrative as a whole, victim blaming is a silencing practice in itself. This is true in VAW narratives and any other cases where it shows its presence. Because blaming the victim and asking accusatory questions is such a common practice both socially and legally, there is deeply embedded fear in victims that if they take the step to tell their story, they will only be met with doubt or blame, and that can sometimes feel worse than the event itself, for this sort of invalidation leaves them with hurt from the experience as well as a feeling that they are the ones at fault.¹²⁷ It is a feeling that can feel impossible to escape. So, sometimes it is viewed as easier to keep the story to themselves, and not even face the enemy of invalidation and the confirmation that they are at fault for their trauma. When speaking on narrative, victim blaming can change the course by both keeping the story from being told, as well as manipulating it in the mind of the woman to change the antagonist from her abuser to herself. What twisted character development.

Part III: Identity

In Part II, we had a focus on narrative in itself, looking at the different forms narrative will often take, analyzing the creation of narrative and the roadblocks that appear from the start, and identified four main unique factors and common traits seen in VAW narratives. With a firm understanding on the nature of narrative, the many courses it could take, and the distinctions in

¹²⁶ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 108 and 121.

¹²⁷ Sexual Assault Center of Edmonton, “Victim Blaming.”

VAW narratives, we now must now focus on the person experiencing, creating, and perhaps sharing the narrative. The individual and their identity has an explicit relationship with narrative, and when talking about VAW narratives, the narrator's identity is going to play largely into whether or not their narrative is believed, manipulated, and/or silenced. Part III will be diving into key concepts involving identity as well as analyzing how these key concepts are applied to individuals. Chapter 7 will be defining discrimination, intersectionality, and oppression through different perspectives and frameworks, while Chapter 8 will be applying these ideas to real-world situations and commonly seen stigmas, labels, and stereotypes.

Chapter 7: Main Identity Concepts

Identity and the impacts that it has on the topic at hand is a conversation that is large and complicated in its nature. There is no possible way to analyze it in its entirety in this project, nor is there any possible way that me as a white woman is going to have as in depth of an understanding as people who have had different experiences. However, what we can do is establish a basic understanding of three main concepts in the conversation on identity's impact, and in doing that, we can develop a more all-encompassing and thorough vision of narrative as a basic human right. The three concepts discussed in this chapter will be discrimination, intersectionality, and oppression. Section A will base its viewpoint on the work of Kimberle Crenshaw who is a leading voice on the topics of discrimination, oppression, marginalization, and intersectionality, the term that she herself coined. Section B will work specifically with oppression and define it through frameworks and arguments created by Iris Marion Young and

Marilyn Frye. Section C will take a look at public discourse surrounding these concepts and why there is so much disagreement on what they truly mean and are in nature.

Before diving in, I will say that it was a significant struggle trying to decide what order to put these sections in. In order to responsibly talk about discrimination and oppression, one must do so through the lens of intersectionality. But, when talking about intersectionality, it is helpful to understand what discrimination and oppression at their core are. In other words, these concepts are highly interconnected and it is relatively vital they be studied together and not separately in order to have a well-rounded understanding.

Section A: Discrimination and Intersectionality

Initially, I had discrimination and intersectionality separated into different sections, however, in order to responsibly talk about discrimination, one must do so through the lens of intersectionality. For that reason, we will first look at common public perceptions of discrimination as well as looking at legal definitions of the term. We will be doing this with full knowledge that these commonplace perceptions can be problematic for the reasons we will see in Section Ab on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality.

Section Aa: Common Public Perceptions

According to the American Psychological Association, the definition of discrimination is as follows: “Discrimination is the unfair or prejudicial treatment of people and groups based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, or sexual orientation.”¹²⁸ Discrimination is a common

¹²⁸ “Discrimination: What is it and how to cope.” *American Psychological Association*, last modified October 31, 2022, [Discrimination: What it is and how to cope \(apa.org\)](https://www.apa.org/psychology/2022/10/31/discrimination-what-it-is-and-how-to-cope)

occurrence in society that holds firm roots in human history, and its impact on an individual's quality of life as well as the development of societal structure is clear and strong.

On an individual level, discrimination has been shown to dramatically decrease the well-being of a person. Studies have found that the stress experienced by the exclusion and judgment that comes with discriminatory behaviors weighs extremely heavily on a person, which ends up having both negative mental and physical impacts. Stress in general has been cited to be the cause of health issues in all of the physiological systems of the body including but not limited to: the respiratory system (system responsible for oxygen distribution), the cardiovascular system (the system involving the heart and blood vessels), the musculoskeletal system (the muscular system), the endocrine system (the system in charge of hormonal changes and distribution), and the nervous system (the system involved in communication with all parts of the body).¹²⁹ These effects can have short-term and long-term implications. For example, in regard to the respiratory system, stress can often cause shortness of breath or even full on asthma attacks, which results in the inability to breathe. This is both scary at the moment, but can also be dangerous as the body requires a flow of oxygen to function. We can see another example in the cardiovascular system where stress or moments of panic disrupt the flow of blood through the cardiovascular vessels. Though the disruption of blood flow in one moment of panic likely will not leave a long-term impact as it will return back to normal once the panic has passed, if these disruptions turn into a continuous pattern, it can cause inflammation in the heart which can lead to a blockage. This is one of the causes of a heart attack.¹³⁰ All of these physical impacts are on top of any emotional distress which will cause the endocrine system to increase its release of stress hormones, which

¹²⁹ William Shaw, et al., "Stress effects on the body," *American Psychological Association*, last modified March 8, 2023, [Stress effects on the body \(apa.org\)](https://www.apa.org)

¹³⁰ William Shaw, et al., "Stress effects on the body."

will then once again have a physical impact. It just creates a cycle of stress that feeds on each effect.

This is just stress in a general form, and though it is clearly a threat to good health, the stress that stems from discrimination can add a certain layer that increases the negative effects. Discrimination causes people to be treated with less consideration than others. One of the main negative societal impacts of discrimination comes from the denial of basic resources.¹³¹ Workforce discrimination and healthcare discrimination are two main forms of prejudicial treatment that are commonly seen and discussed in today's society. The Department of Labor describes workplace discrimination saying:

Employment discrimination generally exists where an employer treats an applicant or employee less favorably merely because of a person's race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability or status as a protected veteran. It may also occur if an employer disciplines, terminates, or takes unfavorable actions against an employee or job applicant for discussing, disclosing or asking about pay. Employment discrimination can be against a single person or a group.¹³²

They also cite a few examples which include placing all hispanics in one work area, paying women less than men, and not allowing paid sick leave for women recovering from childbirth while allowing paid sick leave for knee surgery. Each of these is considered illegal under workplace discrimination laws. Known as Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Laws, which include laws and acts such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, and the Civil Rights Act of 1991, these laws are meant to safeguard employees from

¹³¹ Brigette A. David, "Discrimination: A Social Determinant of Health Inequities." *Health Affairs*, last modified February 25, 2020, [Discrimination: A Social Determinant Of Health Inequities | Health Affairs](#)

¹³² Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, "Know Your Rights: Workplace Rights," *The U.S Department of Labor*, last modified September 2016. [Know your Rights Workplace Rights \(dol.gov\)](#)

discriminatory treatment within their place of work as well as provide punishment of reparation if discrimination occurs.¹³³

Despite there being laws against workplace discrimination, it still happens rampantly. Even though the Department of Labor literally cites paying men more than women as an illegal form of discrimination, the gender wage gap continues as lively as ever. A specific example can be seen in 2022 where ten black employees won a 70 million dollar lawsuit against the workplace of Glow Networks for racist conditions regarding pay, denial of promotions, and workplace hostility.¹³⁴ Along with workforce discrimination, healthcare discrimination continues to be a prevalent form among those who are discriminated against.

Healthcare discrimination can be defined as “negative actions or lack of consideration given to an individual or group that occurs because of a preconceived and unjustified opinion.”¹³⁵ Important clarifications of this definition include the fact that harm does not have to come from the discrimination and that the person discriminated against does not need to be a part of a group that experiences discrimination- simple perception by the discriminator is enough to qualify it as discrimination.¹³⁶ The Department of Health and Human Services, specifically its Office of Civil Rights, is the government organization that is mainly responsible for monitoring healthcare discrimination. Some specific acts and laws that are involved in this section include but are not limited to: Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education

¹³³ “Federal Laws Prohibiting Job Discrimination Questions and Answers,” *U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, last modified November 21, 2009, [Federal Laws Prohibiting Job Discrimination Questions And Answers | U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(eeoc.gov\)](https://www.eeoc.gov/federal-laws-prohibiting-job-discrimination-questions-and-answers)

¹³⁴ Eric, Bachman, “\$70 Dollar Verdict Against Texas Company in Employment Discrimination Case,” *Forbes*, last modified March 21, 2022, [70 Million Verdict Against Texas Company In Employment Discrimination Case \(forbes.com\)](https://www.forbes.com)

¹³⁵ Brandon Togioka, et al., “Diversity and Discrimination In Healthcare,” *StatPearls Publishing*, last modified 2023.

¹³⁶ Brandon Togioka, et al., “Diversity and Discrimination In Healthcare.”

Amendments of 1972, and Section 1557 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, one of the more recent acts of legislation.¹³⁷

Much like workplace discrimination, healthcare discrimination still finds ways to thrive. For example, PBS noted in an article on healthcare racism that black patients will intentionally prepare and adjust their behaviors to what they believe will be most presentable to healthcare workers.¹³⁸ One black mother described thoroughly brushing her children's teeth before going to the dentist in order to "protect myself from being treated unfairly," while another black man described how he feels his behavior must be self-monitored because he does not want to represent the black race as a whole poorly, as he feels that what he does will be generalized.¹³⁹ In addition to personal accounts, the article also listed a few statistics from a study looking at black racism in healthcare. These statistics included that 32% of the participants paid attention to dress, 35% monitored and changed how they spoke, and 41% found a way to make it clear that they were educated.¹⁴⁰

There is also the factor of discrimination built into the legal system. Though discrimination is considered illegal and subject to great punishment, it would be a large mistake to believe that discrimination cannot be legally sponsored.

One very current and popular form of legal discrimination that has been making headlines in the news as this is being written is towards the LGBTQ+ community. Though

¹³⁷ "Laws and Regulations Enforced by OCR," *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*, last modified November 22, 2021. [Laws & Regulations Enforced by OCR | HHS.gov](https://www.hhs.gov/ocr/foia/laws-regulations)

¹³⁸ Annie Sciacca, "Black patients adjust behavior to reduce chance of discrimination in health care settings, survey finds," *PBS NewsHour*, last modified March 17, 2023, [Black patients adjust behavior to reduce chance of discrimination in health care settings, survey finds | PBS NewsHour](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/black-patients-adjust-behavior-to-reduce-chance-of-discrimination-in-health-care-settings-survey-finds)

¹³⁹ Annie Sciacca, "Black patients adjust behavior to reduce chance of discrimination in health care settings, survey finds."

¹⁴⁰ Linda Cummings, PhD, "Listening to Black Californians: How the Health Care System Undermines Their Pursuit of Good Health." *California Health Care Foundation*, last modified October 4, 2022. [Listening to Black Californians: How the Health Care System Undermines Their Pursuit of Good Health - California Health Care Foundation \(chcf.org\)](https://www.chcf.org/research/listening-to-black-californians-how-the-health-care-system-undermines-their-pursuit-of-good-health)

LGBTQ+ activism is a present part of society, the very reason this activism is part of society is because they still face such harsh and target discrimination and oppression. Just in these past few months, anti-drag legislation has been adopted or at least talked about being adopted in a number of states, some legislation such as Arizona's proposed legislation involving a potential ten-year prison sentence if a drag performer performs in front of someone younger than fifteen no matter the venue or dress. The performances in these legislations not only refer to the lip-sync dance routines that are often associated with the group, but also activities such as "drag queen storytimes" where drag queens would read children's books in a library or school.¹⁴¹ In addition, there is also still the prominent conversation surrounding adoptions of legislation known as "Don't Say Gay" bill, where schools are not allowed to educate or even speak on topics surrounding LGBTQ+ topics. These sorts of bills are cited as being protections to children who are too young to be engaging in these conversations. However, it doesn't take much focus to see the underlying belief that is laced within that statement. In saying that these are bills of protection, what is being said is that LGBTQ+ is something that people must be protected from. Though some drag shows would be undeniably inappropriate for children, the only difference between a drag story time and a story time where perhaps a female is dressed as Cinderella, is that a man will be wearing a blue dress and not a female. Where is the danger in that? Well, perhaps the better question is "Where is the *objective* danger in that?" In asking these questions, religious beliefs and prejudicial ideas towards the LGBTQ+ community have to be taken out of the equation. Once we do that, it is arguably difficult to find this "danger" legislators that the public are so worried about.

¹⁴¹ Solcye Burga, "Tennessee Passed the Nation's First Law Limiting Drag Shows. Here's the Status of Anti-Drag Bills Across the U.S.," *TIME*, last modified April, 3 2023. [Here's the Status of Anti-Drag Bills Across the U.S. | Time](#)

I have laid these situations and different forms of discrimination and asked these questions- even though there may not be an obvious connection to VAW narratives- because in doing this, it helps us build a foundation of understanding that people in society do not start nor live their lives with the same resources and societal perceptions. Though the connection to our topic may not seem explicit or loud, it does show that women, a group who is consistently discriminated against, face increased pressure and judgments against them, which has a direct connection on whose voice will be listened to. This is something we will dive deeper as we move forward.

Section Ab: Crenshaw's Intersectionality

Above we have seen public perceptions and common discourse surround general discrimination. However, in order to responsibly analyze and define discrimination, it must be seen through a lens that is thorough and focused on key elements of the impact of discrimination. The generalized lens we looked through above does not fully accomplish this. This is a fact that American civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw, herself a black woman who spends her time and education focusing on discrimination and oppression in America, witnessed, and is the root cause of her creation of what she coined as "intersectionality." First introduced in 1989, intersectionality provides a framework that recognizes all traits of a person's identity and how these traits together add great complexity to discrimination and oppression towards those that are involved in numerous groups that have been labeled "oppressed" or "discriminated against." For example, a black woman would be both a part of the oppressed and discriminated against black community as well as the oppressed and discriminated against female community. This partnership in identity comes together to create a whole new form of oppression and

discrimination that has its one implications and impacts.¹⁴² This was something discrimination and oppression studies as well as societal practice and legal ongoings were not considering, and it was leading to ignored injustices.

A few examples that Crenshaw herself uses in her paper “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies” display these sort of injustices in action. Listing three Title VII¹⁴³ court cases- *DeGraffenreid v General Motors*, *Moore v Hughes Helicopter*, and *Payne v Travenol*- Crenshaw shows how a disregard of intersectional ideas ends in erasure of discrimination.

In *DeGraffenreid v General Motors*, five Black women sued General Motors for a racist seniority system that resulted in the firing of black women, as well as a lack of hiring black women. The court ruled that they could not file discrimination based on being “Black women.” It had to be that they were being discriminated against because they were black *or* because they were women. Because they could not successfully do either, as the discrimination was not happening to white women and it was not happening to black men, they lost their case and their discrimination was invalidated. *Moore v Hughes Helicopter* made a similar claim of specific discrimination occurring due to being a Black female and was met with similar pushback, while also being told she could not represent all women, meaning they couldn’t claim sex discrimination, because she was explicitly identifying as a Black woman. In *Payne v Travenol*,

¹⁴² “A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States: Feminism and Intersectionality.” Vernon E. Jordan *Law Library: Howard University School of Law*. last modified January 6, 2023. [Feminism and Intersectionality - A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States - HUSL Library at Howard University School of Law](#)

¹⁴³ Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is as follows: “To enforce the constitutional right to vote, to confer jurisdiction upon the district courts of the United States to provide injunctive relief against discrimination in public accommodations, to authorize the attorney General to institute suits to protect constitutional rights in public facilities and public education, to extend the Commission on Civil Rights, to prevent discrimination in federally assisted programs, to establish a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity, and for other purposes.”; Civil Rights Act of 1964, “Title VII,” United States Government, signed by Lyndon B. Johnson, (1964).

the defendants were told they could not claim racial discrimination because they could not represent black men as black females. In this first case, we see a denial based on the idea that the Black woman experience isn't real, and in the second two cases, we see denial because the Black woman experience is too narrow and is in fact different from other experiences.¹⁴⁴

Crenshaw's description of what occurred in these cases is what could be called intersectional injustice. These Black women were not successful in seeking justice or receiving validation specifically because of the combination of their Black and woman identities. In her commonly cited TED Talk, "The Urgency of Intersectionality," Crenshaw provides a visual for how intersectionality works. Looking specifically at Emma DeGraffenreid's case, as it was an interaction with her that inspired the development of the concept, she says:

So if we think about this intersection, the roads to the intersection would be the way that the workforce was structured by race and by gender. And then the traffic in those roads would be the hiring policies and the other practices that ran through those roads. Now, because Emma was both Black and female, she was positioned precisely where those roads overlapped, experiencing the simultaneous impact of the company's gender and race traffic. The law -- the law is like the ambulance that shows up and is ready to treat Emma only if it can be shown that she was harmed on the race road or on the gender road but not where those roads intersected.¹⁴⁵

Section B: Oppression

Something that will be dove into more in Section C is the idea that there are deep disagreements on what oppression actually means. Two philosophers Iris Marion Young and Marilyn Frye offer thorough explanations of the concept which we will look at here in order to gain a better understanding.

¹⁴⁴ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, article no. 8, (1989). <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>

¹⁴⁵ Kimberle Crenshaw, "The Urgency of Intersectionality," *TEDWomen*, released on 2016, 09:25, [The Urgency of Intersectionality Transcript.pdf \(ucsd.edu\)](http://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle-crenshaw-the-urgency-of-intersectionality-transcript)

Section Ba: Marilyn Frye

Frye describes oppression by comparing it to observing a bird in a cage. If one were to look at a wired cage with a bird inside and only focus on one wire, they would not understand how it is that the bird is trapped. If the bird wanted to, they could just simply leave the cage. However, if that person were to expand their scope of observation and look at the cage as a whole with all of its wires connected to each other, they would understand that leaving is not an option for the bird. They would see that the bird is not facing one barrier or inconvenience that could be avoided with a slight change in direction, but instead that no matter how the bird routes their path, the bird will always be stopped by a wire.¹⁴⁶ Frye uses this specific image to demonstrate what she feels are key elements of oppression: pressure closing in from all sides, the idea of a barrier, and the public's insistence on only focusing on a single part. Frye begins Section I of her piece "Oppression" by taking the definition root of the word oppression, press being the root, and showing how we already receive a basic idea on the nature of oppression through that. "Presses are used to mold things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk, sometimes to reduce them by squeezing out the gasses or liquids in them. Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict, or prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce."¹⁴⁷

Here, Frye emphasizes the unique and key distinctions of the barriers and pressure involved in oppression. She points out that the barriers involved in oppression are not singular or independent but instead work together as a system of barriers to intentionally press people into a certain group and area where their choice and freedom is inhibited. These barriers *mold* people

¹⁴⁶ Marilyn Frye, "Oppression."

¹⁴⁷ Marilyn Frye, "Oppression."

into society's desired image and role for them, they *immobilize* their freedom in the situation and keep them from being able to escape the mold, and they *reduce* the people to the idea that they are there merely to serve as what society has molded them to serve. As Frye continues, she identifies a main trait of oppression and this mold, immobilize, and reduce system to be the "double bind." The double bind refers to the idea that all options have been taken away from the oppressed by the oppressor so that no matter what choice the oppressed makes, they will receive some sort of a negative consequence. Frye uses the example of women's sexuality stating that if a woman is sexually active, she is labeled loose, unpure, and undesirable by society, while if a woman is not sexually active, she is labeled as a prude, stuck-up, snobby, and in need of letting loose. In each situation, the woman can not only not win in her image, but she will also experience negative consequences because of the image society created of them. If she is sexually active, she may be outcasted as a whore and only included in groups when it involves sexual subjects or actions. Frye also points out in this situation that she may be forced to hide from her activity leading her to seek unsafe medical help in regard to contraceptives and such. If she is not sexually active, she will be bombarded by men who tell her that if they just try it once with them, they will love it. Men will line up to objectify her and label her a task to finish. On an even more severe side, Frye also shows that rape is involved in this double bind phenomenon. If an active woman is raped, it is assumed she liked it because she has consensually engaged in sex before. If an inactive woman is raped, it is assumed she liked it because she would have come to the realization of how pleasurable sex is. The example of women's sexuality thoroughly demonstrates the idea that no matter what choice is made, there is no peace for the oppressed. Not only is there no peace, however, but there is actually increased chaos.

This example of suffering is also clearly different from the suffering that occurs in situations that are not involving those oppressed. Frye lays out another example of an oppressor going through a certain stage of suffering. She tells of how a “rich white playboy” who has investments in South African diamond mines (work that is notoriously considered inhumane and a large form of oppression) breaks his leg in a skiing accident and is forced to wait alone in a freezing blizzard for hours on end until someone hopefully saves him. This is no doubt an image of suffering, but what it isn’t an image of is oppression. For starters, once he is rescued, his leg is repaired and the suffering is done. Though he may suffer Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from experiencing the trauma he did, this sort of ongoing consequence is far different than the ongoing consequence of a woman’s rape being not labeled as so due to the response that she liked it. We do not see the double bind that has a necessary presence in oppression in the man’s struggle. There are no ongoing barriers working together to keep the broken-legged man in a cage. He has experienced a singular event of misfortune. He has not been locked in a place where wires upon wires keep him and will keep him for the rest of his life from escaping. A second reason can be seen in the lack of intentionality present in the man’s suffering. In the case of women, they have been intentionally molded, immobilized, and reduced by man in order to keep women in the image and category that they deem fit. For the white playboy, he has experienced an accident that had nothing to do with any sort of intentional molding or reduction. Even in the case that it was someone’s fault that he broke his leg, such as that he fell off of the ski lift because a worker was not paying attention, the worker’s negligence did not stem from a systematic intention of harming the playboy because of his identity. It was just a simple mistake, and it was a mistake that stops immediately after it happens.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Marilyn Frye, “Oppression.”

Frye gives us key traits of oppression that must be present in order to label it as so. These traits being an intentional method of molding, immobilization, and reduction as well as the phenomenon of the double bind. In doing this, Frye offers a basic, foundational understanding on what makes oppression distinct from other forms of suffering. Philosopher Iris Marion Young takes this framework and further builds on it in her framework of what she calls the “five faces of oppression.”

Section Bb: Iris Marion Young

Where Frye offered a broad layout of distinct factors of oppression, Young takes a bit more of a narrow perspective and splits up the large concept of oppression into five groups. Her main reason for doing this being the fact that oppression is one substantial term that is supposed to encompass a multitude of different experiences. However, she questions whether that can even be done effectively. Though the different kinds of oppression can have similarities across the board, such as Frye’s double bind, these kinds are far too complex to fit under one term. She says of her framework’s purpose that “Because different factors, or combinations of factors, constitute the oppression of different groups, making their oppression irreducible, I believe it is not possible to give one essential definition of oppression. The five categories articulated in this chapter, however, are adequate to describe the oppression of any group, as well as its similarities with and differences from the oppression of other groups.”¹⁴⁹

The five faces are as follows: (1) exploitation, (2) marginalization, (3) powerlessness, (4) cultural imperialism, and (5) violence.¹⁵⁰ These faces are not meant to be strict categories where situations of oppression can only identify with one. In fact, many situations will identify with

¹⁴⁹ Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression.”

¹⁵⁰ Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression.”

more than one. The categories' purpose is to be able to more thoroughly discuss oppression while considering the distinctions that are going to be present from case to case. Here, we can actually go back to an image created by Crenshaw in her discussion on intersectionality. In her 1989 piece, Crenshaw instructs the reader to imagine a basement with a trapdoor up to the next level. The people in the basement are those that experience oppression and discrimination, leaving them unable to ever reach that trapdoor up to the level of those that do experience oppression and discrimination. However, some are stacked upon others, thus having easier access to that trapdoor, and may even find themselves able to sneak through.¹⁵¹ For example, a black man with a large amount of money, meaning a certain socioeconomic class that would be high in status, may be able to pass into the level above despite his black identity because his sex, gender, and wealth status give him enough advantages and similarities to those up top that he will be able to pass through. A black woman who does not have a large amount of money, meaning a certain socioeconomic class that would place her in lower status, however, has each identity trait that is discriminated against, meaning that she is even lower in the basement level and farther away from that trapdoor entrance. In regard to the conversation here, what we can see is that each individual is a part of something large, but they still have their own individual experience with their own individual oppression. In addition, each group is going to have their own oppressive implications. The five faces are meant to provide a way to more thoroughly examine these similarities and differences.¹⁵²

(1) Exploitation. Both basing and building on/expanding his view, Young begins to look at the faces of oppression through a Marxist lens pointing out how a capitalist society interacts

¹⁵¹ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."

¹⁵² Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression."

with the idea of commodity, production, and value. One of the main issues philosopher Karl Marx takes with capitalism is the idea that when people lack choice and freedom in their decision to work, they become mere tools to society, leading to a form of dehumanization.¹⁵³ Young states the main idea of capitalistic injustice in saying “The injustice of capitalist society consists in the fact that some people exercise their capacities under the control, according to the purposes, and for the benefit of other people.”¹⁵⁴ In other words, people are molded into the purposes of others, becoming merely a tool for their needs which leaves them abandoning their own needs. Labor is something expected of all human beings, whether that labor takes the form of factory work, child-bearing, running a corporation, or even reality television. The necessity for labor ends up providing a structure that encourages oppressive behaviors. Young states “The central insight expressed in the concept of exploitation, then, is that this oppression occurs through a steady process of the transfer of the results of this labor of one social group to benefit another.”¹⁵⁵ When one is working under another, they lack power. For example, one reason the oppression of women is able to continue smoothly is because women are consistently working under men. Though we have seen and are seeing an increase in working women and women in higher positions of power, it is still disproportionate.

(2) Marginalization. Though exploitation is undeniably present, she argues that marginalization is one of the lead faces of oppression in the United States. She defines “marginals” as “people the system of labor cannot or will not use.”¹⁵⁶ Even knowing this definition, it becomes easy to see how this oppression holds such prevalence in the workforce as

¹⁵³ Karl Marx, “Estranged Labor,” *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Translated by Martin Milligan, (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2007).

¹⁵⁴ Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression.”

¹⁵⁵ Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression.”

¹⁵⁶ Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression.”

it has been not even fifty years since people of different identities, such as race, sex, gender identity, etc. were allowed to work certain jobs or even work at all. Not to mention, as we saw in Section A, that workplace discrimination continues at full force. Young marks marginalization as one of the most dangerous forms of oppression due to its firm labeling of people as without a use for society, which in extreme cases can lead to forms of extermination. Eugenics and genocide continue to be common occurrences around the world, and marginalization is where such movements begin. Even if marginalization does not reach exterminative efforts, it still holds everyday consequences such as the stripping of basic needs, which will also strip liberties.

(3) Powerlessness. Going back to the example of women lacking power due to their position of working under men, Young highlights the fact that United States workplaces do not function in a democratic power, nor is there an inherent value for voice. She says “In the United States, as in other advanced capitalist countries, most workplaces are not organized democratically, direct participation in public policy decisions is rare, and policy implementation is for the most part hierarchical, imposing rules on bureaucrats and citizens. Thus most people in these societies do not regularly participate in making decisions that affect the conditions.”¹⁵⁷ This means that when decisions are made, they are likely not made for the benefit of those who are not allowed to speak, further pushing them down the social class ladder. She also points out that workplace hierarchical structures do not only impact people’s nine to five shifts. The workplace is what constitutes people’s financial status, which is what puts them in a certain social class such as working class, middle class, or high class. These classes are what determine social well-being outside of work, meaning that different qualities of life are going to be impacted.

¹⁵⁷ Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression.”

(4) Cultural Imperialism. Cultural imperialism refers to the domination of one culture by another culture, making the culture that dominated the social norm of the community. This type of oppression moves away from the labor force focus of the above three and instead shows the different ways people can and will be exiled if they do not fit within the newly established norms. For example, language represents a large barrier to participation in society. When cultural imperialism occurs, a total cultural reset is what happens, oftentimes forcing the language upon the people. If those in society cannot speak the language, they both lose the ability to act as active participants and will also experience discrimination due to their outsider status, meaning that no one would want to listen to them anyways. By not allowing to be an active participant, they lose advocacy for themselves entirely.

(5) Violence. Violence is the idea that oppressed groups live with a constant, significant, and realistic fear that at any moment, some violent action could be taken against them. Some of the most current examples would be sexual assault of females and police brutality towards the black community.¹⁵⁸ It is important to note here that much like Frye pointed out in her piece, not every moment of violence is one that stems from oppression. The consistency and realism involved are key distinctions made. If a straight man enters a store and is punched by another man he does not know, that is violence but it is not oppression. It can be safely argued that the man who entered the store did not have the fear that someone would assault him at the forefront of his mind. Instead, he was most likely running through his grocery list in his head. When a woman enters a store, she is careful to hold her keys between her knuckles as she walks, she identifies at least one person she could call to for help, and she talks to her mother on the phone as she walks to her car, describing features of the man walking just a bit too close behind her.

¹⁵⁸ Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression."

These are all intentional actions taken by the woman time and time again in order to keep themselves safe from the ever-looming threat of violence. In the example of police brutality, we may see a white man get pulled over and experience irritation at this set-back, while the black female trembles at the thought that if she says just one wrong word, she could be shot.

Young's five faces clearly lay out ways in which oppression can take different forms, while still allowing observers to see overlap. For example, the first three faces have deep interactions with the labor force and economic status, and each trait of oppression works in a way to make the oppressed an outsider from mainstream society.

Section C: Roots of Disagreement

Though discrimination and oppression are separate terms and refer to separate phenomena, they do have a directly interconnected relationship with one another. A pattern is easily seen between the two with those being oppressed also often being the ones that are discriminated against. It would, however, be a mistake to say that they are one in the same. In this section and the last, we have worked to build a basic definition of these two concepts for two reasons. The first reason being that we must know that oppression and discrimination play a key role in the silencing and manipulation of VAW narratives (and arguably narratives in general), and the second being that there is such large disagreement surrounding the definitions of these terms that we could not just simply state the two terms and move on, for it would be unlikely that all readers would be reading with the same lens.

Though this is true with both terms, it seems that oppression deals with more disagreement than discrimination, specifically a disagreement on who is truly experiencing oppression. This disagreement highlights two main considerations that will be discussed here.

The first is that human emotion and unwillingness to look deeper into a situation leave oppression with a definition that leaves no validation for anyone, and the second is the power of the law.

Young offers a historical explanation for the root of disagreement in “Five Faces of Oppression.” She points out that traditionally, the definition of oppression referred to high power of tyranny imposing their power unfairly on the classes below. Colonialism is another large-scale, traditional form of cited oppression. Beginning in the 1960s and 70s, however, the multiple civil rights movements that were taking place began to take down the idea that oppression was a fight between a controlling political power versus the people and replace it with the idea that oppression occurs not through a dichotomy of politics and the people, but instead by everyday systemic functions involving both politics/law as well as the actions of the common folk. Though this is indeed a more accurate lens to see oppression through, one negative consequence that occurred was that now that oppression could happen from person to person on the street, people began to feel themselves that they could adopt the oppression label when their situations had nothing to do with oppression.¹⁵⁹

Now, this leaves us with one of the most common difficulties in discussing oppression, which is that oppression has come to be equated with everyday struggle, and in doing that, it has reduced the complexity in need of discussion in cases of actual oppression. Frye blatantly states this point in the second paragraph of her piece “Oppression” while discussing the statement made in the relationship between men and women. Frye states “When the stresses and frustration of being a man are cited as evidence that oppressors are oppressed by their oppressing, the word ‘oppression’ is being stretched to meaninglessness; it is treated as though its scope includes any

¹⁵⁹ Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression.”

and all human experience of limitation or suffering, no matter the cause, degree, or consequence.”¹⁶⁰ This is the pattern Frye believes society has fallen into, and she goes on to say how because of this pattern, people read a denial of oppression as a denial of emotion and suffering all around which doesn’t sit well with those that don’t want to feel invalidated in their struggles. What is interesting is that this invalidation stems from the insistence that oppression and suffering must be one in the same. This leaves those who are not oppressed invalidated because they feel that if they can’t be labeled as oppressed, then all of their hardships mean nothing, and it leaves those who are oppressed invalidated because oppression has more factors than mere suffering that don’t get addressed because it is seen just as suffering.

We will now move on to discuss the second consideration. Part III dissects the law’s relationship with VAW narratives but already we can begin to see just how prevalent and powerful the law’s impact on these topics are. People may say that they have been discriminated against, but there is a clear legal definition that can be used in order to determine that and move on (This is not to say that it will end fairly, as we saw with Crenshaw’s discussion that discrimination is still far more complex than the law has it laid out to be. All that this statement is meant to show is how the majority of the public digests this information). With oppression, the law is still involved, but it is not as clear cut and there are very few if any legal protections dedicated purely to oppression. Though Young provides a thorough framework of oppression that works effectively to help give an easier understanding of the true nature of oppression, it is a philosophical framework, not one with legal backing. That is not to say that either is more superior to the other but instead just shows who the public looks to for confirmation on subjects.

¹⁶⁰ Marilyn Frye, “Oppression.”

It should also be noted that this is not to say that discrimination is more fair or reaches fairer decisions purely because it has more legal ground. Both discrimination and oppression function in the curricular snake pattern, consistently eating itself without being able to escape the cycle. In addition, as we saw with Crenshaw's framework, discrimination is still far more complex than the law has it laid out to be, and because complexities are ignored, lack of fairness continues. The point made in this last paragraph is purely talking about how the majority of the public digests the information at hand, and unfortunately, it seems to be digested on the more simpler side.

Chapter 8: Application

It is one thing to be able to know within oneself the truth of their story, but stories in their nature are meant to be told and shared. However, with VAW narratives, the moment they enter the presentation phase, they immediately become subject to the public's manipulation, and that initial manipulation is often based not on the story itself, but on who the person is or appears to be. In the previous chapter, we saw how discrimination, intersectionality, and oppression all are involved in the treatment of people, and when it comes to women, they fit within the oppressed and discriminated against. This means that when talking about VAW narratives, the control of the experience and story is not always held by the narrator herself. Though there are many identity factors that play into narrative, there are three specific factors that are brightly prevalent specifically with VAW narratives. Each section will walk through one. Section A will talk about a woman's work status. Section B will discuss rejection of heteronormativity and gender conforming. Section C will talk about the relationship between the woman's identity in comparison with her assaulter's.

Section A: Work

As we saw, especially in Young’s “Five Faces of Oppression,” the labor force and economic set-up of a society has an undeniably inseparable relationship with oppression, meaning that it has an undeniably inseparable relationship with whose story is kept safe and whose is cut into pieces and locked in a drawer. The title of working woman is still one that is relatively new, as besides writing anonymously, it was seen as improper and even unbelievable that a woman could responsibly hold a job. It should come as no surprise, then, that the working status of a woman would impact society’s image of her. There will be three subsections discussing three main and broad areas of work that women engage in, with each area of work having its own stigma surrounding it. Section Aa will look at women in the workforce, Section Ab will look at women who are not in the workforce, and Section Ac will look at women in sex work.

Section Aa: In the Workforce

The United States didn’t truly recognize working women until 1920 when the Women’s Bureau was established in the U.S Department of Labor. Giving the Bureau the duty to “formulate standards and policies which shall promote the welfare of wage-earning women, improve their working conditions, increase their efficiency, and advance their opportunities for profitable employment”¹⁶¹ as well as giving authority to investigate matters in which women’s welfare was at risk, one would hope that the establishment of such a bureau would mean change

¹⁶¹ “History: An Overview of 1920-2021,” *U.S. Department of Labor: Women’s Bureau*, accessed April 8, 2023, [History | U.S. Department of Labor \(dol.gov\)](https://www.dol.gov/history)

for women, and it did in many ways. However, a bit over one-hundred years later, women are still not even being paid the same wage as men for completing the same work.¹⁶²

Not only that, but as we have seen in the case of Roger Ailes and Fox News and Harvey Weinstein, both cases that will be analyzed further in Part III, the Bureau may have the power to investigate discriminatory working conditions, but that doesn't mean that they have the chance to do so as the stories of this behavior rarely leave the office. These sorts of pressures in the workplace keep women in a lower class than men in a variety of ways. The first, being that status and wealth have a loud voice in society. Jeffrey Epstein was a man of wealth and power and because of that, his one voice was more powerful than hundreds of others. Another is that, like previously mentioned, women are kept in lower positions leaving them consistently working under men. As Young pointed out, the dynamic of people working under people already creates a hierarchy that only works to benefit those on top.¹⁶³ A third, though there are many more, can be seen in the absolute drain and defeat that can result from these conditions. Not only can women experience devastation from knowing they are being valued less at the workplace, as wage is often considered to be an acknowledgement of how valuable your work is, but seeing as they are already being viewed as less valuable, they may feel as though they have to work ten-times harder than their peers. In addition to that, on the topic of harassment and inability to speak on it, being forced to not only stay silent about your experience but also have to show up to work day to day potentially being in the same room as one's harasser or abuser takes a toll on the mental well-being. All of these factors come together to equal complete and utter exhaustion for these women, and it is only common sense that when people are too tired to speak, they don't.

¹⁶² Wendy Chun-Hoon, "5 Fast Facts: The Gender Wage Gap," *U.S. Department of Labor Blog*, last modified March 14, 2023. [5 Fast Facts: The Gender Wage Gap | U.S. Department of Labor Blog \(dol.gov\)](https://www.dol.gov/eow/2023/03/14/5-fast-facts-the-gender-wage-gap)

¹⁶³ Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression."

Being viewed as a lower class also subjects women to increased and harsher judgment, as there are already questions as to whether or not they actually belong there. Though the stigmas are many, one blog “InHerSight” identified nine prevalent stigmas that impact women in the workforce on a daily basis.¹⁶⁴ Each of these stigmas not only can be harmful to the individuals’ well being, but they also work to keep the toxicity in the system in place. We will do a quick overview of four of the stigmas stated with two being directly connected to silencing certain conversation in the workplace and two referring to a woman’s appearance.

- (1) Talking politics: Though people feel by avoiding politics one avoids personal upset, what this avoidance actually ends up doing is excluding conversations based on many of the social movements that occur, including movements that could be fighting for that worker’s rights.
- (2) Talking about salary: Women continue to work in a society that has a gender pay gap, meaning that women are making less than men. When no one can talk about who is getting paid what, they lack proof that their place of employment is a perpetrator of this wage gap, meaning that the women cannot demand more.
- (3) Wearing black hairstyles: The stigma surrounding traditional, natural black hair is wide and intense, and many companies argue that their hairstyles are unclean or unprofessional, forcing them to adopt hairstyles that would be considered closer to a “white” hairstyle. This in turn entirely manipulates a part of their identity and works to tell them they are not up to par with other non-black colleagues.
- (4) Having body hair, piercings, and/or tattoos: Much like the hairstyles, these three traits of a woman’s body are viewed as unclean and unprofessional. Though under work

¹⁶⁴ Cara Hutto, “We’re Over It: 9 Stigmas in the Workplace that Have to Go-Now,” *InHerSight*, accessed May 3, 2023, [We’re Over It: 9 Stigmas in the Workplace That Have to Go—Now | InHerSight](#)

discrimination laws, appearances such as these should not be a factor, by using the terms “unhygienic,” many companies are able to get away with these as valid complaints, valid reasons to refuse hire, or even valid reasons to terminate employment. This means that in many cases, these women are forced to hide part of their appearance and conform or risk being unemployed, which we have seen from the labor hierarchy has many consequences a lot of women cannot afford to face.¹⁶⁵

The department of Human Resources (HR) also becomes a large factor with women in the workforce, their identity, and their narrative. The purpose of HR can be comfortably summed up in seven key duties: (1) recruiting, hiring, and retaining talent, (2) employee engagement, (3) performance management, (4) compensation and benefits, (5) development and training, (6) risk management, and (7) audits and legal compliance. Involved in risk management is the task of investigating any complaints of discrimination, harassment of any sort, or any other behavior one may feel is inappropriate.¹⁶⁶ Meant to be a bridge between employee and company, HR holds a lot of the power when it comes to whether a claim is taken seriously versus if a claim is discarded.

Section Ab: Not in the Workforce

Though the number of women in the workforce has increased in the last century, there are still women who do not enter the workforce for a variety of different reasons, and if we remember Frye’s double bind, we can guess that this decision is going to come with its own

¹⁶⁵ Cara Hutto, “We’re Over It: 9 Stigmas in the Workplace that Have to Go-Now.”

¹⁶⁶ Robert Lloyd & Wayne Aho, "The History of Human Resources in the United States: A Primer on Modern Practice," *Management Open Educational Resources*, last modified 2021, https://scholars.fhsu.edu/management_oer/2

oppression and stigma as well. There are three factors that will be discussed here that work against VAW narratives and the women behind them.

The first is in the labeling of women who stay home as submissive and weak. There is a large stigma surrounding the idea that housework and child raising are easy, and that is why women do it. While their partners go out into the world and do the hard work, the women get to opt out and stay in the luxury and comfort of their home. For anyone who has raised a child or actually cared for a house, it is arguably easy to discount that stigma as false. One woman from an article working to discount the stigma of stay-at-home mom's states, "This isn't an easy gig like many are led to believe. I am running around doing what needs to be done from the time I wake up to the time my head hits the pillow. There is never any downtime for me to just 'be,'" pointing out that there are definite difficulties and hardships to staying home.¹⁶⁷ Here we see her highlight the fact that there is no dedicated break given or even a dedicated time to eat and breathe, like that a job in the workforce would be required to have. As she continued talking, her statement highlighted another key difference that proves difficulty. She says, "And even on the rare occasion where I do find a moment to myself," she adds, "it's often intruded by the mental load of motherhood. I don't think people understand how large of a toll that takes on a person," showing the key idea that in housework, not bringing your work home is impossible.¹⁶⁸ Yet, even with these facts in mind, the stigma continues marching on. One of the largest reasons for that is going to be in the historical context of women and the workplace. The idea of women staying home due to their inability to handle jobs outside of the home holds deep origins in history, and it directly connects the idea of housework to the idea that it is the easier job, as women were seen

¹⁶⁷ Nikkya Hargrove, "It's Time to Finally Ditch the Stigma Against Stay-at-Home Moms," *Healthline*, last modified March 31, 2022, [Stay-at-Home Mom Stereotypes and Stigmas \(healthline.com\)](https://www.healthline.com/health/stay-at-home-mom-stereotypes-and-stigmas)

¹⁶⁸ Nikkya Hargrove, "It's Time to Finally Ditch the Stigma Against Stay-at-Home Moms."

as too weak to handle anything else.¹⁶⁹ When talking about narrative and VAW narrative, this depiction of women who work in the house as weak plays into their claims of violence as they are labeled as perhaps too submissive or weak to fight back. There is also an extra layer of criticism from women themselves who have adopted the sexist idea that women *must* be in the workforce.¹⁷⁰

The second is in the manipulation of housework or child rearing in order to completely isolate the woman. Though it may begin as what appears to be an endearing gesture of wanting to take care of the woman, the abuser will often demand the woman should not work and should just focus on either caring for them and the house or caring for any children that are present. What appears to be care, however, actually turns out to be a commonly used tactic in domestic violence relationships in order to work towards complete isolation. Not allowing women to work is one common tactic used in domestic violence to control their lives, to isolate the women from anyone who may question their situation, or to even feed their own ego that they are the sole provider of the family. All three of these are often thoroughly accomplished once the choice to work is taken away. In Part II Chapter 5,¹⁷¹ we talked about how intentional isolation is a key barrier or obstacle imposed on someone that completely disrupts the creation of narrative. Elder D.H Bonner described how her husband completely separated her from anyone who could have provided some sort of validation that what she was going through was wrong. In doing this, her husband not only erased other voices, she tells of how he even erased her own as all she had in

¹⁶⁹ Hannah Verdier, “The League of Extraordinary Housewives Review - the stigma of ‘women’s work,’” *The Guardian*, last modified July 21, 2016, [The League of Extraordinary Housewives review – the stigma of ‘women’s work’ | Radio | The Guardian](#)

¹⁷⁰ Sarah Menkedick, “The Modern Stigma of Being a Housewife,” *JasReflections*, last modified March 9, 2012. [THE MODERN STIGMA OF BEING A HOUSEWIFE – JasReflections \(wordpress.com\)](#)

¹⁷¹ Pg. 35

her head was his insulting and degrading words telling her that she was nothing.¹⁷² When the woman is isolated from all other voices, he is the one person in the room, and sometimes, that person ends up being louder than your own voice. It can end up in a complete loss of self with no one that can pull you out.

The third plays on the second in the way that once the woman is not working, there is a view that she should be grateful or maybe even indebted to her partner that is working. Their partner is now viewed as the sole provider for the family, and she is viewed as the parasite who is taking their money and benefiting from their hard work. In this line of thinking, excuses for the violent partner's behavior both from the survivor themselves as well as anyone else who they tell of their experience. These excuses can include "They are just stressed from" followed by a "You don't work, so you wouldn't know" or "They are the reason that you have a roof over your head and food in your stomach" followed by a "Why are you being so cruel and not understanding. You should be loving them through their struggle." The list of statements such as these is endless, but they tend to follow the same pattern- they are working hard and you are doing nothing, so stop complaining.¹⁷³ There is no violence, there is no abuse, there is no suffering.

Section Ac: Sex Work

What is commonly known as "prostitution" but has shifted in terms due to the very stigma we will be discussing here almost always erases any story involving violence. This is largely for two reasons. The first is that she is getting paid to have sex, so she clearly wanted whatever occurred, even if the man she was engaging with held a gun to her head. It is labeled a

¹⁷² D.H. Bonner, Elder, "Unfinished: Pages from my Diary," 55-67.

¹⁷³ All of the narratives studied and listed in the project had this pattern in one way or another.

job that she chose and because of that choice, she has to live with any consequence that follows. If she didn't want to be raped, she shouldn't have become a "prostitute." The second is the widespread societal image that women who work in sex work are impure, dirty, whores, and liars. They are dehumanized and objectified as nothing more than sexual objects to an even more severe extent than women on a day to day basis are objectified. In sex work, all complexities of the situation are ignored, and everything is simplified to the idea that she is just a dirty whore who was immoral enough to sell her body for money. This narrative created by the public is wholly false and careless. First of all, we can see a long history of the idea that sex and sexual activity is an unforgivable taboo, especially when women are the ones that are engaging in it. This label of "impure" or "dirty" stems from the century's long argument that women should keep themselves pure for their future husband that they will inevitably marry as that is one of their main purposes in life. Second of all, the argument that this work was "their choice" is problematic both emotionally and logically for a variety of reasons. The first being that they may have consented to having sex with someone for money, but they did not consent to rape or any other violent action, so if something cruel occurs, no, it was not her choice to experience that. The second is that though some women may purely enjoy the work and choose it based on their own wants and needs, more often than not, it is far more complex than just working for pleasure.¹⁷⁴

Stacey Diane Aranez Litam's article "She's Just a Prostitute: The Effects of Labels on Counselor Attitudes, Empathy, and Myth Acceptance" explores the acceptance of these stigmas and stereotypes, specifically looking at counselor's attitudes on sex work and crimes with a main

¹⁷⁴ Elizabeth Comack, "Coping, Resisting, and Surviving: Connecting Women's Law Violations to Their History of Abuse," 33-43. and Lisa E. Sanchez, "Chapter 15. The Entanglement of Agency, Violence, and Law in the Lives of Women in Prostitution," 159-168.

focus on prostitution versus sex work.¹⁷⁵ Litam points out early on based on four other studies she includes in her piece that “Most narratives about sex workers and prostitutes do not adequately examine the influence of structural factors, such as poor economic and social conditions, which may perpetuate the choice to become sex workers.¹⁷⁶ Instead, existing studies focus on aspects of morality attributed to sex workers¹⁷⁷... Continuing to focus on labels based on the perception of individuals’ consent, agency, and choice perpetuates the presence of stigma.”¹⁷⁸

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Previously, I mentioned that society has tried to switch from using the term “prostitution” to “sex work” in order to help assuage some of the stigma surrounding the work and these women. This is another point Litam makes in saying that sexual commerce research supports the idea that when the label of “prostitute” or “prostitution” is used, it receives the most backlash and negative responses, whereas when we use something such as “sex work,” it not only moves away from a history of negativity associated with prostitution, but it also provides a sense of legitimacy as it has the word “work” in the title.¹⁸⁰ Litam documents that studies have shown poorer mental well-being when labeled specifically a prostitute and an overall decrease in health as a whole.¹⁸¹ The difference in reaction and stigma between the words of prostituion/prostitute

¹⁷⁵ Stacey Diane Aranez Litam, “She’s Just a Prostitute: The Effect of Labels on Counselor Attitudes, Empathy, and Rape Myth,” *The Professional Counselor*, 9, issue no. 4, (November 2019), [She’s Just a Prostitute: The Effects of Labels on Counselor Attitudes, Empathy, and Rape Myth Acceptance - The Professional Counselor \(nbcc.org\)](https://www.nbcc.org/publications/She%27s%20Just%20a%20Prostitute%3A%20The%20Effects%20of%20Labels%20on%20Counselor%20Attitudes%2C%20Empathy%2C%20and%20Rape%20Myth%20Acceptance%20-%20The%20Professional%20Counselor)

¹⁷⁶ C. Schwarz, E.J. Kennedy, & H. E. Britton, “Aligned across differences: Structural injustice, sex work, and human trafficking,” *Feminist Formations*, last modified 2017, 1-25.

¹⁷⁷ M.B. Alvarez & E.J. Alessi, “Human trafficking is more than sex trafficking and prostitution: Implications for social work,” *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, (2012): 142–152.

¹⁷⁸ F. Bettio, M. Della Guista, & M.L. Di Tommaso, “Sex work and trafficking: Moving beyond dichotomies.” *Feminist Economics*. (2017): 1-22.

¹⁷⁹ Stacey Diane Aranez Litam, “She’s Just a Prostitute: The Effect of Labels on Counselor Attitudes, Empathy, and Rape Myth.”

¹⁸⁰ Stacey Diane Aranez Litam, “She’s Just a Prostitute: The Effect of Labels on Counselor Attitudes, Empathy, and Rape Myth.”

¹⁸¹ M.S. Bradley, “Girlfriends, wives, and strippers: Managing stigma in exotic dancer romantic relationships,” *Deviant Behavior*. (2007): 379-406. and M. Tomura, “A prostitute’s lived experiences of stigma,” *Journal of*

and sex work/sex workers is perhaps one of the clearest examples in showing just how much power a label can have.

Prostitution is also interesting in its stigma because of its necessary involvement of at least two people. So far, we have seen how the woman who engages in a sex act for money is treated, but there is also always someone participating in the sex work with her. What about them? Do they experience any stigma? Though sex work can happen with people of any sex or gender, most the reported cases tend to be male and female, with the female being the sex worker and the male being what is commonly called a “John”- a generalized name for the man who is paying for the sex. Sanchez looks at all of the different people involved in sex work as well as what happens when the legal system gets involved. When talking about how the women involved will often face charges or at least long nights in jail, the men are able to speed away or get off without any consequence at all. She cites the “prostitute” label as a key reason why. She says “Male customers are viewed as nameless, faceless bodies while the bodies of the women are inscribed with the prostitute identity.”¹⁸² In other words, the men get to live on as though nothing happened, meaning that the narrative of their lives, because society allowed it, need not even include such an event. The women, however, will not be able to escape what society branded upon them, nor will they be able to continue their narrative in an unmanipulated way due to the fact that people have already made assumptions on what their story is.

Section B: Separation from Heteronormativity and Gender Normativity

Phenomenological Psychology, (2009): 51-84.; These are two of the main studies Litam cites when speaking on decrease in different aspects of health.

¹⁸² Lisa E. Sanchez, “Chapter 15. The Entanglement of Agency, Violence, and Law in the Lives of Women in Prostitution,” 159-168.

As seen in the previous chapter that spoke on discrimination, separation from heteronormativity, defined as “the attitude that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality”¹⁸³ and adoption of gender nonconformity, defined as “exhibiting behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits that do not correspond with the traits typically associated with one's sex: having a gender expression that does not conform to gender norms”¹⁸⁴ can hold negative consequences to one’s societal image. Previously, we dove into the legal structure and actions that perpetuate discrimination, but this sort of legislation perfectly highlights a common opinion held in society- LGBTQ+ are others and because of that, there are distinct stigmas surrounding them. We will be looking mainly at author Carmen Maria Machado’s experience with violence. Though her experience alone cannot encompass the experience of all of the LGBTQ+ community, it can provide an example of the stigmas and labeling that occurs.

Before we move forward, we must clarify that though LGBTQ+ is an identity within itself, it is also an identity that is composed of different identities (L= Lesbian, G=Gay, B=Bisexual, T=Transgender, Queer, with the + encompassing groups such as Intersex and Asexual) and each of these identities are going to have their own nuance to their stigma, labels, and stereotypes, thus impacting their stories in different ways.¹⁸⁵

Machado’s experience of domestic violence in her lesbian relationship is a depiction of just one stereotype and stigma that is common in society and that has a large impact on VAW narrative. Machado’s *In the Dream House*, talked about previously in Part II Chapter 4¹⁸⁶ when

¹⁸³ "heteronormative," *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, last modified March 31, 2023, [Heteronormative Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#)

¹⁸⁴ “gender nonconformity.” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, accessed on May 2, 2023, [Gender nonconformity Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#)

¹⁸⁵ HRC Foundation, “Glossary of Terms,” *Human Rights Campaign*, accessed on April 9, 2023, [Glossary of Terms - Human Rights Campaign \(hrc.org\)](#); The Human Rights Campaign provides one of many glossaries of definitions of terms in the queer community. This glossary expands into many more terms that were not discussed here.

¹⁸⁶ Pg. 17

discussing forms of narrative, chronicles Machado's experience in an emotionally, verbally, and mentally abusive lesbian relationship.¹⁸⁷ Telling her story through a series of creative nonfiction essays, Machado tells of times when her partner would gaslight her and spew intentionally harmful insults. We also see in Machado's account her partner blatantly order her to never write about their relationship. "You're not allowed to write about this," she says. "Don't you ever write about this".¹⁸⁸ Not only is this a direct and explicit attack on narrative as a whole, it is also an attack on her identity, as Machado authorship is both her career and her passion. Machado's partner has denied her access to both of these with those six words.

One of the main stigmas that harmed Machado's creation of narrative, not allowing her to frame this as abuse plus harming the ability to present, lies in the fact that she was in a lesbian relationship. The majority of this project has referred to violence against women with the violence stemming from men, and the reason for that is not necessarily because heteronormative violence is more prevalent but instead more likely because of a lack of reporting due to stigma surrounding LGBTQ+ violence that takes place within the group itself as well as a lack of care overall for LGBTQ+ quality of life. In fact, it was only in 2021 that North Carolina, the final state to do so, finally legally recognized that partners in relationships that are not heterosexual deserve to have protections against domestic violence.¹⁸⁹ Referring back to Crenshaw's intersectionality, women as a whole are an oppressed group and LGBTQ+ as a whole is an oppressed group, but when these identities mix, they result in a double oppression that often ends up in erasure. This is true when talking about VAW narratives that are not heteronormative and/or gender conforming.

¹⁸⁷ Carmen Maria Machado, *In the DreamHouse: A Memoir*.

¹⁸⁸ Carmen Maria Machado, *In the DreamHouse: A Memoir*, 44.

¹⁸⁹ Jo Yurcaba, "LGBTQ people now eligible for domestic violence protections in all 50 states," *NBC News*, January 6, 2021, [LGBTQ people now eligible for domestic violence protections in all 50 states \(nbcnews.com\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/health/lgbtq-people-now-eligible-domestic-violence-protections-in-all-50-states-nbcnews.com)

Because those with this intersected identity receive little attention and evaluation, the stigma and stereotypes surrounding these relationships often stay as they are with no debunking of myths or promise of change. A few specific stigmas that have embedded themselves in queer relationships include but are not limited to the idea that straight relationships experience more domestic violence, if there is a toxic environment surrounding the couple it is assumed that the violence is mutual or it is just labeled a “lovers’ quarrel,” and even that LGBTQ+ couples tend to be rougher or kinkier in the bedroom, so any action of violence was just a form of BDSM- a type of sexual activity that centers around acts such as bondage, discipline/domination, sadism, and masochism.^{190 191} All of these stereotypes and judgments paint a picture that says that LGBTQ+ violence does not exist or even that the violence is valid, wanted, and reasonable. This works to completely erase the possibility that someone could claim abuse and violence.

While the above stigmas worked to differentiate LGBTQ+ from heteronormative and gender conforming relationships, there is one intensely harmful stigma that does the opposite and equates the two group’s violence- the idea that the domestic violence in one group involves the same factors as that of the second group. As briefly mentioned all of the way back in Part I,¹⁹² stress, whether it be individual, national, or international, has a relationship with the increase of violence. The LGBTQ+ community has extra layers of stress from the fact that they must worry about certain factors in society such as anti-LGBTQ+ legislation as well as the public push for such legislation to pass.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ “BDSM,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, accessed May 28, 2023, [BDSM Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#); It should also be noted that in order for sexual activity to be considered BDSM, full consent must be established even though the sexual activity may intentionally include rough aspects that mimic violence.

¹⁹¹ “Myths and Facts of Battering and Abuse in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans Communities,” *Pacific Lutheran University*, based on information from Amy Caffrey, accessed on April 27, 2023, [Ten Myths about Lesbian and Gay DV \(plu.edu\)](#)

¹⁹² Pg. 4

¹⁹³ “Myths and Facts of Battering and Abuse in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans Communities.”

Continuing on a path of false judgments and stereotypes keeps situations from being thoroughly analyzed and validated. In the case of Machado, she was a woman of color in a lesbian relationship whose main form of violence was already mental manipulation. The manipulation inflicted by her partner in addition to the invalidation of society as a whole, specifically in regard to lesbian violence, played a part in making it difficult to not only present her story but also to come to terms with it within herself.

Section C: Their Abuser's Status

The factors involved within an individual's identity play a significant impact on the course and acceptance of narrative. However, the perpetrator of violence and their identity also works hand in hand with narrative's course. A quote that will be discussed later on in Part III¹⁹⁴ by Chanel Miller talks about how the courtroom felt like it was just a game of who's voice would be louder and who's story would be believed.¹⁹⁵ The same is true from the start of violence to the end of it. It is a game one did not consent to play but has to in order to be heard. Whether they be survivors of male violence, female violence, or trans violence, each altercation establishes a disadvantage from the start for the women involved in VAW narratives. With men, men are the societal oppressors of women meaning that their voices already hold an inherent legitimacy that women's do not. With female, females are not seen as violent creatures, and in fact usually seen as the exact opposite, being caring, loving, and gentle, in addition to the fact that as discussed above, lesbian violence is deemed nearly impossible. Trans violence follows relatively the same line of

¹⁹⁴ Pg. 98

¹⁹⁵ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 175-181.

thinking as lesbian violence. Frye emphasized the image of the double bind, and we can see that clearly coming into play here- there is only disadvantage no matter the situation.¹⁹⁶

The inherent disadvantage seen in VAW narratives is just the start, as seen especially in these last few years, society has seen a dark image of just how many people in high power have acted as harassers, abusers, and tormentors of countless women. Again, I will point out that the harassers and abusers that were largely in the spotlight in these last few years were men. That does not mean that there are not other people in power who are not men that are inflicting harm from violence. It only acts as further evidence of what the stigma the above section spoke of as well as the discrimination, intersectionality, and oppression discussion of the first section.

- ❖ Head of Fox News Roger Ailes: Threatened the careers of the women who worked under him if they did not perform the sexual acts he wanted.
- ❖ Fox's news anchor Bill O'Reilly: Sexually harassed and raped his female co-workers.
- ❖ Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein:
- ❖ Multi-million businessman Jeffrey Epstein: Sexually coerced, abused, and trafficked countless girls ranging from the ages of 13-17 as well those who were no longer minors but were as close to eighteen as possible.
 - AND his "crew": Those who were not proven to have engaged in Epstein's trafficking, but had either strong allegations or strong ties that were difficult to discredit.
 - Former President Bill Clinton
 - England's Prince Andrew

¹⁹⁶ Marilyn Frye, "Oppression."

Stories were told, accusations were made, and yet, they all found a way out one point or another. In the workplace harassment category, reports were made for inappropriate behavior, but each case was either ignored or excused because the men were just playing around and the women got it wrong. Epstein even faced charges in 2008,¹⁹⁷ but by working hand in hand with the government, as he himself was a man extremely high up in society with countless high class friends, he was able to enter into a Non Prosecution Agreement that barred the victims in the case from seeking charges against him. In exchange for the survivor's of Epstein's inability to seek justice, Epstein had a six month jail sentence where he received work release and a luxury room with a television and food as well as having to register on the sex offender list, a punishment that did nothing because his name held enough power to overshadow any title.¹⁹⁸ He was back to abusing women before his jail sentence was even over.

One of the first survivors of his abuse to step forward and fight fiercely for legal action, Courtney Wilde stated in her statement that "Jeffrey Epstein has done nothing but manipulate our justice system"¹⁹⁹ and she could not have been more correct. This held true even leading up to his successful suicide in prison in 2019 where he convinced the workers he no longer required suicide watch. He killed himself almost immediately having to face no charges or trial where the women could stand in court and tell him to his face what he did.²⁰⁰

Each of these individual men had more than one woman who had a story of them actively imposing their violent disposition upon them. Though not all came forward for a variety of reasons, oftentimes surrounding fear of retaliation because these men held such control of the path of their lives, it is still true that at least two people in every case did speak, and yet, that one

¹⁹⁷ Will be discussed further in Part III Chapter 10 Section Ca, pg. 121

¹⁹⁸ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*.

¹⁹⁹ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 23.

²⁰⁰ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*.

voice silenced them all. Epstein's case in particular paints the most vivid picture of all. There were hundreds of voices and stories who even corroborated each other's stories, and there was one Epstein. It was hundreds against one, and he won a disproportionate amount.

Though there is a large focus on social class here, it does make sense. If we refer back to Young's five faces of oppression, three of them are directly intertwined with social class and the labor force, social class is not the only factor.²⁰¹ For example, race, academic achievement, family history and upbringing, and the amount of supporters in a corner will all be factors explored in Pieper Lewis' case in Part V of this research.

²⁰¹ Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression."

Part III: Relationship with the Law

In Part III, we began to see exactly how external factors play into narrative. Both the narrator's and the people involved in that narrative's identities and societal image play a key role in the course of narrative whether we are talking about creation, manipulation, or silencing. When speaking on VAW narratives, another outside factor can often find its way into the equation- the legal system. Due to the presence of violence, it is not uncommon for police to be called, arrests to be made, and/or charges to be pressed. The legal system is an influential power when it comes to VAW narratives, meaning that its impact is something that must be analyzed. This is where we will do that. Chapter 9 will lay out what exactly our basic human rights are considered to be on a legal and definitional level as well as examine how the right to narrative may fit within this framework. Chapter 10 will look at legal rights as stated in the United States and will also analyze specific legal language used that has an influence on VAW narratives. Chapter 11's purpose is to see how the interactions with different groups of the legal system- officers, the court, and reporters- have an impact on the narrator and their story.

Chapter 9: Basic Human Rights

The overall mission of this research is to look at narrative as a basic human right. In order to accomplish this, we must take a look at what exactly “basic human rights” entails. This chapter will not only look at what exactly our basic human rights are considered to be, but it will also try to apply the right to an unmanipulated, unsilenced narrative to the current framework we work within. Section A will talk about the first point, while Section B will be the part of application.

Section A: What Are Our Basic Human Rights

Though it may seem a large and daunting starting point, I view looking at international law to be the most logical of places to first seek our answers due to the fact that many of a country’s domestic laws are often required to adhere to internationally agreed upon frameworks. By first knowing our government’s rules based on international expectations, we can know before going deeper what kind of broader framework these laws and rules have to work within. This brings us to looking at the United Nations (UN), the international organization dedicated to global missions involving peace, equality, and human dignity.

Though the UN is involved with a plethora of topics and issues, human rights is one of their main and strongest focuses. With 193 member states, the UN offers a widely used framework for the definition and enforcement of basic human rights. This means that when trying to define what basic human rights are, the United Nations gives us an excellent starting point. Human rights are defined by the United Nations as:

Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of

opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination.²⁰²

The definition above is what is used as the main concept of what our basic human rights are. Built upon this definition are certain legal obligations and/or covenants that have been developed in an attempt to allow each human to share in the rights stated above. The UN holds multiple different documents and agreements regarding this purpose. We will first look at the International Human Rights Law (IHRL). IHRL is the framework for obligations of governments to act or not act in certain situations and in certain ways in regard to the rights of its people and is actually one of the UN's proudest features. They even state "One of the great achievements of the United Nations is the creation of a comprehensive body of human rights law—a universal and internationally protected code to which all nations can subscribe and all people aspire."²⁰³ In this quote alone we can see that this compilation of expectations and obligations into one law is viewed as both in need of respect and in want of as many participants as can be found.

IHRL has its foundations in two different documents: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the UN Charter. The UDHR includes thirty articles pertaining to the protection and definitions of human rights. Written by a variety of people from a variety of backgrounds, this declaration was meant to provide a nice starting point in the creation of a common standard for human rights and the obligations around its protection. Though proclaimed on December 10, 1948 by the UN General Assembly, it should be noted that the Declaration itself is not legally binding.²⁰⁴ The UN Charter, signed three years before the proclamation of UDHR on June 26, 1945 and officially enforced starting on October 24, 1945, is at its roots a

²⁰² "Human Rights."

²⁰³ "Human Rights."

²⁰⁴ UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, United Nations, adopted 1948, [Universal Declaration of Human Rights | United Nations](#)

collection of the UN’s mission and goals when it comes to its work.²⁰⁵ It is also a binding document to UN State Members who must agree to the mission, goals, terms, and obligations set out in the Charter in order to be considered a member state. In other words, any member state’s government must adhere to the definitions and obligation of protection that the UN has identified, and if they fail to do so, they risk having their membership stripped. It should also be noted that though this is one of the founding documents in the creation of the UN, it is a live document that is accustomed to change. For example, amendments have been made a total of three times in the years 1963, 1965, and 1973, each of the amendments largely dealing with the expansion of the quantity of members in certain councils as well as different procedures for voting on time and place of general conferences in regard to future amendment changes.²⁰⁶

Included in the IHRL is the International Bill of Human Rights. This bill combines the UDHR, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESC), with the ICCPR having two optional protocols and ICESC having one optional protocol that can be accepted or denied on a government by government basis.²⁰⁷ The ICESC, adopted in 1966, centers around certain rights regarding the quality of life and work, while the ICCPR, also adopted in 1966, is largely focused on legal equality and topics surrounding freedom of movement.²⁰⁸ This is definitely a vast understatement of an explanation in showing what these covenants do, but nevertheless it will suffice for the conversation at hand. As said above, all of these combine into the International

²⁰⁵ UN General Assembly, *UN Charter*, United Nations, adopted 1945, [UN Charter | United Nations](#)

²⁰⁶ UN General Assembly, “UN Charter: Amendments to Articles 23, 27, 61, 109,” United Nations, accessed April 25, 2023, [Amendments to Articles 23, 27, 61, 109 | United Nations](#)

²⁰⁷ “Human Rights.”

²⁰⁸ UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, United Nations, adopted 1966, [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights | OHCHR](#) and UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*, United Nations, adopted 1966, [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights | OHCHR](#)

Bill of Human Rights, which is a bill that country's must adhere to in order to be a member state of the UN.

When countries become members of the UN, as all but three have done with Russia's membership being in a particularly difficult position while this is being written due to President Putin's vast war crimes, this means that the majority of the world is expected to concede to the expectations laid out here. Whether they do is a whole different question, but that is a question we cannot ask until we understand the expectations themselves.

With the main definitions, framework, and legalities laid out, it now becomes necessary to look at how and if the right to narrative fits within all of this.

Section B: Applying Narrative to BHR Framework

In the definition of basic human rights given above, we can arguably see three main qualifications: (1) the right is given at birth and requires no quest of earning it, (2) the right is given to all human beings no matter any difference that could apply, and (3) the right has to do with an impact on the individuals' life. Let's take a moment and run the hypothetical right of having an accurate story of one's life/experiences without fear of manipulation or silencing through these qualifications, and see if it is even something that is present in the foundational requirements.

(1) For starters, is it accurate to say we begin the creation of our life story at birth? Referencing back to Part II Chapter 5²⁰⁹ in its discussion on the creation of narrative, I argue that we can. Studies have shown that even in the womb, we will take in experiences, and they can become hardwired into us as humans. This means that the creation of our narrative does begin at

²⁰⁹ Pg. 35

birth without a need to earn it. So, we know that it is something that is indeed inherent to human beings.

(2) All humans, despite any differences, create some sort of narrative of their life, even if it is just within themselves and not shared out loud. As said above, we learn from our experiences one way or another which encodes within us a sort of narrative.

(3) Once again, we move to the fact that our experiences largely end up being what shapes our next moves and our personhood in general. We learn and we act based on what we know so far, meaning that our narrative to this point often has the biggest impact on what our lives looked like then and what our lives will look like going forward.

So, we can see that a person having a narrative of their lives is inherent, available to all, and is in connection with the quality of the individual's life, but does that make it a right? Perhaps we may find the right to an accurate narrative in one of the explicitly stated examples. Examples given in the definition included "right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more."²¹⁰ Can a right to narrative fit into any of these categories? Freedom from slavery and torture seems to me to be too far a stretch and the right to work and education may entail narrative in some way, but it currently does not seem to be the most promising argument. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on the "right to life and liberty" and the "freedom of expression and opinion." Knowing that narrative involves the expression of one's story, it would seem to be the most logical action to first check freedom of expression and opinion. One of the first steps in acting as though having and expressing one's story as a basic human right is to first recognize that there must be the freedom for that expression, which means that this specific right does seem to give

²¹⁰ "Human Rights."

power to narrative as a basic human right. However, does it provide all of the power needed? I am wary of saying so. Yes, we have recognized that there is a right of expression which would include the right of expression of narrative, but what this does not cover is protection against manipulation of a narrative. Running through an example will be helpful here. I would also like to note before moving forward with the example that we will be using a heteronormative relationship and dynamic by having the people be Woman and Husband. However, this could easily be applied to any other relationship dynamic while still proving the same point, even familial if the situation was switched up a bit.

Imagine Woman has been in an isolated, physically and mentally violent relationship for the last three years. Husband has repeated to her that she is worthless, no one loves her, and it is her own actions and fault when he hits her. Due to years of hearing these statements daily, Woman believes that Husband's violence does in fact stem from her own faults. In the fifth year, Woman attempts to leave Husband and seeks help from her mother. Her mother tells her that if she didn't talk back, she wouldn't get hit, and if she runs away, she is going to get beat worse. Her mother informs her to go back, and Woman does. In the tenth year of their marriage, Husband dies of a heart attack. Woman then decides to tell the story of her marriage, which she is free to do, but she does not label the behavior abuse and instead makes the claim that her husband hit her because she talked too much. Woman is practicing her freedom of expression and opinion, and does in fact have her actions protected as a basic human right. However, this freedom of expression is displaying itself as a false narrative written by someone else. Yes, she can speak freely but what she cannot do is voice the truth of the situation which is that she was violently abused for years, and she cannot do that because there was no protection in place to keep her from adopting this false narrative as her own. Expression of lies is not the same as the

expression of truth, and it is clear that the freedom of expression and opinion does not differentiate, which leads to a complete lack of inherent protection for the truth.

Seeing as freedom of expression and opinion is not going to cover what we seek it to, we can then move on to see if the right to life and liberty affords any hope. The right to life and liberty is often connected with the words of Thomas Jefferson in the foundational document of the Declaration of Independence that sought to separate America from Great Britain in 1776.²¹¹ ²¹²These pivotal words in American history have acted as the basic foundation of human rights in America, so it is no surprise that it is included in the UN's definition. What this right basically boils down to is that humans have the right to continue living and the right to freedom in their life. Perhaps one of the most broadly stated human rights, it could be both very easy and very difficult to prove that a right would sit itself within this category.

On the easy side, because it is so broadly associated with life itself, any action that involves the living has the chance at qualifying under this protection. On the other hand, in its broadness is also a terrible difficulty. Yes, we have a right to life and liberty, and yes, they may be considered basic or foundational, but there are a variety of times in which society takes these rights and makes exceptions, and, because they are so broad, these exceptions become acceptable. For example, it is stated that we have the right to life, but what about deathrow? It is stated that we have liberty, but we undeniably lack one-hundred percent liberty to do whatever we want. In fact, we have whole legal systems to keep our liberty under control. Because these are such big terms, there are situations, sometimes valid and sometimes not, that it is agreed

²¹¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*, written 1776, (Jackson, Missouri: Applewood Books, 1997).

²¹² "Intellectual Influences on the Declaration of Independence," Southern Methodist University, accessed June 6, 2023, [Religion and the Founding of the United States » Intellectual Influences on the Declaration of Independence \(smu.edu\)](#); It should also be noted that though written by Thomas Jefferson, the statement involving the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is largely based in John Locke's idea of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of property. Locke's work not only inspired this statement but also other values and ideas present in both the declaration and the framework of American beliefs.

upon that this right cannot be fulfilled in full. This is one large reason why we must have the subset rights such as freedom of expression and freedom from torture. When we are asking the question of whether the protection of narrative and its distribution is included in the right to life and liberty, I do admit that it would be very easy for people to use this broad nature against narrative and state that it isn't protected, and I would also argue that we do not act as though it is protected.

However, before we move on, I will be suggesting a possible perspective to think on. It is claimed that we have a right to our lives, but when our lives' stories are manipulated without our consent and we are facing the constant threat of this occurring, can we truly say that we have the right to our lives? Though the right to life is often understood to be referring to physical qualities of health, one could still argue that our experiences make up our life, or at the very least have a great impact on our lives. If our experiences are continually taken and distorted, it very well can have the effect of distorting our lives and our act of living. In extreme cases, it can even feel as though our lives are not our own, which would directly oppose the right to life. I do feel that I could receive backlash to this logic, and though I think there is merit, we will also focus on another point.

If this is not satisfactory, there is also the state stipulation of the "many more." It seems to me that having an accurate, untouched life story is one of the most intimate aspects we have within ourselves. It fits the same qualifications as the other basic human rights, and I fail to see how having our own narrative causes any worse harm than the harm caused by the other stated human rights. In the case of VAW narratives, it is often argued that these stories ruin the offender's reputation, and special care must be taken in order to not carelessly do this. This is an entirely accurate and fair point- we do not want a false narrative to ruin the life of someone, thus

manipulating their narrative. That would be entirely counteractive to what I am arguing here. This, however, is not the problem. The problem is that if a man sees an unconscious woman lying on the couch and sticks his penis inside of her, the man saw an unconscious woman and stuck his penis inside of her. If a woman lies unconscious on the couch and she wakes up to a penis inside of her, the woman had a penis inside of her while she was unconscious. While some may argue there are no objective truths, I fail to see how that is not the truth of the story. Sure, there can be other details such as that the man was so drunk that his inhibitions were lowered or that the woman drank to the point of blacking out, but none of those details change the truth of the situation. Manipulation of a narrative is not often what causes the offender's reputation to be ruined, but instead their own actions in the situation. The harm to reputation, as well as the harm to emotional and psychological stability, occurs most often in the manipulation of the victim's story. In the right, "the right to freedom and expression," there is also the risk of harm to people, yet, it is still a right. Why should narrative be any different?

Chapter 10: Domestic Legal Rights

Above, we looked specifically at the legality of basic human rights, which takes more of an international approach as the framework used mainly comes from the international organization of the United Nations. The United States, however, is still its own country with its own stipulations, meaning that there are going to be a variety of different legal definitions and protections that are involved with both basic human rights as well as with VAW narratives. Section A is about laws and legal language that often find themselves impacting VAW narratives. Section B will look at specifically the rights the United States affords “victims.” Section C will analyze two legal agreements that are both prominent in VAW narratives and have an inherent nature of silencing in general.

Section A: Specific Laws and Legal Language

When law is involved in VAW narratives, the specific charges and the language of those charges have an impact on how the case and the women’s stories will unfold. Though there are many definitions that hold an impact and a plethora of charges that could occur either towards the perpetrator or against the victim, there are two particularly prevalent charges/definitions that seem to consistently be interwoven into these women’s experiences that I want to discuss here. Section Aa will look at the charge of prostitution while Section Ab will look at the legal defense of self-defense.

Section Aa: “Prostitution”

Previously, we discussed the label of “prostitute” as an identity that was deemed less trustworthy, even one of a purely dishonest nature, that resulted in a complete invalidation of any

violence that occurred. The complexities surrounding prostitution continue to be relevant when we look at it through a legal lens. Both of these factors work hand in hand with VAW narratives. First, we should look at what the legal definition of prostitution is. Though many definitions could be used, we will be looking at Cornell Law School's, located in New York, as these are legal matters being discussed. They define prostitution as "engaging, agreeing, or offering to engage in sexual conduct with another person in return for a fee."²¹³ Sexual conduct in this definition refers to a broad group of sexual actions, even spanning in some states to equal just the contact of skin to skin for sexual gratification.²¹⁴ Besides a few Nevada counties, anti-prostitution legislation is used across the nation, with each state using very similar definitions to the one stated above. The first three words of the definition deserve extra attention: "engaging, agreeing, or offering." These three words, though not explicitly stated, imply that an amount of consent between the two parties is given. The person who would be labeled as a prostitute, though sex worker is deemed to be the more respectful term, freely agrees to engage in a sexual action with another person in exchange for some sort of commodity, often money. Consensual. Freely agrees. Though there is an argument to be made surrounding the definition of consent and freedom, as some sex workers may agree to engage in prostitution but are doing so as a complete last resort, for the sake of this section, we will be more so focusing on the difference between willingly accepting the tasks involved in prostitution versus being physically or mentally coerced by a different party into doing so.²¹⁵ In other words, coercion by the arguably unfair class system

²¹³ "prostitution," *Cornell Law School*, last modified 2020, accessed April 30, 2023, [prostitution | Wex | US Law | LII / Legal Information Institute \(cornell.edu\)](#)

²¹⁴ "Prostitution," Section 9A.88.030, Washington State Legislature, effective 2024, accessed May 14, 2023, [RCW 9A.88.030: Prostitution. \(<i>Effective until January 1, 2024.</i>\) \(wa.gov\)](#)

²¹⁵ The idea of consent in sex work is one that goes back to Marx and his work on capitalism and the stripping of choice that occurs through a capitalistic framework. He argues that capitalism actually takes away the ability to consent to any sort of work due to the fact that they have become merely machines to the economic system. Applying this to the conversation on the relationship of sex work and consent, a Marxian view would argue that sex work could not be consented to in any way, shape, or form because they have been forced to enter into a work not by

will not be the focus, though, it is an extremely vital conversation to have. As was being said, a certain type of consent must be involved in the act of prostitution. How is it then that the fourteen to seventeen-year olds abused by Jeffrey Epstein could be labeled as prostitutes in the charges brought against him in 2008?

The initial charges brought against Epstein in 2008 ended in a Non Prosecution Agreement (which will be discussed in Section C) and did significantly more harm to the victims and justice as a whole than good.²¹⁶ In fact, it would be difficult to argue that his charge did anything good for anyone except Epstein and the people who worked closely with him in his crimes. The NPA was troubling enough as it took away many victims' right to a trial or to express their story, but what ends up being particularly troubling is that the specific charges brought against Epstein implied that the only recently pubescent girls he was abusing were engaging in prostitution. Epstein was charged and pleaded guilty to two felony criminal charges, one being a sum of three misdemeanor solicitations of prostitution and the procuring a minor for prostitution. All charges point to prostitution with not one labeling his behavior as coercion, assault, abuse, or rape.²¹⁷ Edwards says it better than anyone else with his comment on this choice of charge and settlement. "For Epstein's part, all he had to do was plead guilty to the charges in state court that effectively labeled his victims as prostitutes, endure what would be a cakewalk sentence, and go back to life as usual. It was a win on many levels for Jeffrey Epstein. His lawyers basically got to characterize him as a wealthy philanthropist who unknowingly had

their own want, but instead because the capitalistic society has pushed them into whatever career would allow them to fulfill basic needs; Karl Marx, "Estranged Labor."

²¹⁶ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 46-57.

²¹⁷ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 55-57.

underage girls at his home- the poor guy who was just trying to get a massage and he had no idea that these girls were minors.”²¹⁸

If it isn't enough proof to say that these girls could not have been involved in prostitution because what they experienced was abuse, we can also cite the legal age of consent, which defines at what age a human is able to legally consent to sexual activity. Each state has their own consent rules and tend to differ just slightly from one another. While Iowa's age of consent is sixteen, their neighbor to the right is seventeen.²¹⁹ The average across the nation tends to be around the sixteen mark.²²⁰ However, there are certain stipulations involved in many states' laws that make it a matter of more than just age. Only twelve states have what is called a “single age of consent,” meaning that no matter the circumstance, people under that age are not to engage in sexual activity. In the other states, the difference between the two ages engaging in sexual conduct is where the main focus lies. For example, Iowa has what is commonly known as the “Romeo and Juliet” exception that states that as long as all participants in the sexual act are at least fourteen years old and their sexual partners are four years apart in age or lower, it will not be labeled statutory rape.²²¹ If people engage in sexual activity with someone who violates any of these consent laws, it is called statutory rape and is a sex crime. The difference between statutory rape and rape is in the idea that though the people involved could not legally consent, they personally consented to the actions. If they had not, that would be rape or a different form of sexual assault/abuse.

²¹⁸ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 64.

²¹⁹ A. Glosser, K. Gardiner, & M. Fishman, “Statutory Rape: A Guide to State Laws and Reporting Requirements,” *Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation*, last modified December 15, 2004. [Statutory Rape: A Guide to State Laws and Reporting Requirements \(hhs.gov\)](#)

²²⁰ Susan Bernstein, “What is the Age of Consent?” *WebMD*, last modified 2021. [More Than Just Age: Consent to Sex \(webmd.com\)](#)

²²¹ Jessica Gillespie, “Iowa Statutory Rape Laws.” *Criminal Defense Lawyer*, last modified November 6, 2019, [Statutory Rape Laws and Age of Consent in Iowa | CriminalDefenseLawyer.com](#)

Epstein, a man in his fifties and sixties, was engaging sexually with girls below the age of consent and would not have been protected by any of the exceptions due to his age gap. This means that even if someone wanted to argue that these young girls were acting as prostitutes in sexually engaging Epstein in exchange for money, they could not officially do so because these girls did not have the right to consent.

With all of this being true and dare I say blatantly undeniable, the court and government not only kept the victims from sharing their piece, but they also protected Epstein's reputation by painting him to be a man who had sexual mishaps regarding prostitution- not a man who sexually abused, manipulated, rented out, and extorted girls who had just started to learn how to clasp their bra, and they did this at the expense of the victims' reputation and mental well-being.

Epstein's case is not the only example of the prostitution charge being used as a weapon against VAW narratives and the women behind them. Trafficking victims in general often get caught into the careless application of prostitution. The relationship between trafficking and prostitution is often recognized to be a deeply interconnected one. Starting in 2002, the United States Government labeled prostitution a toxic enemy of society and tightened up on their legal actions against the work. This position mainly derives from the December 2002 National Security Presidential Directive which listed what studies had found to be extreme harms of prostitution. It was argued that "prostitution is inherently harmful and dehumanizing, and fuels trafficking in persons, a form of modern-day slavery."²²² At least according to the government, these are the reasons for providing stricter anti-prostitution legislation. There is no denying there is a relationship between trafficking and prostitution, as when both are legal, it becomes a task to figure out which is occurring, which leaves room for confusion that perpetrators can feed on.

²²² Bureau of Public Affairs, "The Link Between Prostitution and Sex Trafficking," *U.S. Department of State Archive*, last modified November 24, 2004. [The Link Between Prostitution and Sex Trafficking \(state.gov\)](https://www.state.gov/the-link-between-prostitution-and-sex-trafficking)

However, having a connection to a relationship does not make the terms equal, and this type of equating is something that happens all too often.

Above, we have the definition of prostitution. Let's now look at definitions regarding trafficking.

Sex Trafficking: When a person is required to engage in a commercial sex act as the result of force, threats of force, fraud, coercion, or any combination of such means, or when a person under the age of 18 is caused to engage in commercial sex, that person is a victim of sex trafficking. Under such circumstances, perpetrators involved in recruiting, enticing, harboring, transporting, providing, obtaining, advertising, maintaining, patronizing, or soliciting a person for that purpose are guilty of the federal crime of sex trafficking. This is true even if the victim previously consented to engage in commercial sex.

Child Sex Trafficking: U.S. law explicitly includes a distinct definition of "sex trafficking of children." Any child (under the age of 18) who has been recruited, enticed, harbored, transported, provided, obtained, advertised, maintained, patronized, or solicited to engage in a commercial sex act is a victim of human trafficking, regardless of whether or not force, fraud, or coercion is used. Children cannot consent to commercial sex, therefore, child sex trafficking occurs regardless of whether or not force, fraud, or coercion is used.²²³

With the definition of prostitution, our keywords involved an aspect of consent. The complete opposite is true here. Here, we have words such as "force" and "harboring" and "threats"- all words that indicate no consent can be found anywhere, and again, in child sex trafficking, there is no possible way to argue around the crime due to the legal age of consent. The definition even includes a clarification statement differentiating the acts here from sex work that was consented to. Such careless application and labeling holds both consequences legally while also feeding a powerful manipulation on these girl's and women's narratives.

²²³ United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking, "Annual Report 2022," *U.S. Department of State*, last modified September 2022, [Annual Report 2022 \(state.gov\)](https://www.state.gov/annual-report-2022)

Section Ab: Self-Defense

As mentioned previously, there are times that women fight back against their abuser, and in some cases, this ends in the death of the perpetrator. After being physically and/or mentally attacked anywhere spanning from just once to decades, it seems that the reason of self-defense could be one that is utilized in these cases. However, a successful claim of self-defense is nowhere near as common as violence in itself. Why is that? We can start by once again referring to Cornell Law School and their definition of self-defense, also because we are diving into legal matters. They define it as “The use of force to protect oneself from an attempted injury by another. If justified, self-defense is a defense to a number of crimes and torts involving force, including murder, assault and battery.”²²⁴ While the definition itself is rather self-explanatory, the term “justified” brings up a few inquiries. Self-defense is often considered to be a basic human right (I am not suggesting it is protected, but I am saying it is a value on paper) for everyone has the right to life, thus meaning they have the right to protect it in cases where it is seriously threatened. What, however, qualifies “seriously threatened”?

Four qualifications are necessary to be met if self-defense is considered to be legally justified. The defendant must prove that...:

- (1) they did not provoke the situation.
- (2) injury or death was imminent, meaning that it was going to happen very soon.
- (3) the force used in self-defense must be reasonable. In other words, only the amount of force needed to keep oneself alive or in a non-life threatening condition should be used. It would not be considered reasonable to torture them or chop up their body, but it would be reasonable to shoot them in order to incapacitate them.

²²⁴ “self-defense,” *Cornell Law School*, accessed February 11, 2023, [self-defense | Wex | US Law | LII / Legal Information Institute \(cornell.edu\)](#)

(4) they had an objectively reasonable fear that they were going to be harmed or killed.²²⁵

If these are not met, it is not going to be a fully justified defense, and their actions will not be considered self-defense. It can be wildly difficult for these four qualifications to be objectively proven, as there are often no witnesses, the answers to all of them rely solely on the observations of the living person which are likely to be jumbled after such a traumatic event, and one of them deals with the emotion of fear, something that is going to be different for every single person. In addition, VAW narratives in themselves can often not follow all of these qualifications, qualification two of imminent danger being lost the majority of the time. Some women will defend themselves in the heat of the moment when they are sure this moment will be what kills them, or their child. This was true in cases such as the previously mentioned Molly from Browne's *When Battered Women Kill*, where her husband was choking their two-year old son to death and wouldn't stop or Irene from the same book who shot her husband in the midst of a near-death experience. Other women, however, reach their breaking point not during an active event of violence but during times when their abuser is at ease or hasn't escalated the situation yet, but they feel they know that the situation is going to get to the point of life-threatening. For example, Wanda from Browne's novel feared that her husband was going to seriously hurt or kill her daughter, so she had him killed by her brother and another accomplice. In another case, Bella shot her husband, and her and her daughter burned the house to the ground. Neither of these women were considered to be in imminent danger when they murdered their partners, so self-defense was not granted to them in any form. Yet, these women were indeed defending themselves from overall life-threatening conditions. Browne tells of how Bella was so badly injured by her husband over a span of years that her health would never recover fully and she

²²⁵ *Criminal Law*. University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing. (2015): "Section 5.2 Self-Defense." [5.2 Self-Defense – Criminal Law \(umn.edu\)](#)

would most likely not live to see parole, and Wanda had an intense fear that if her husband stayed alive, it would kill her and her daughter.

The current definition of self-defense poisons these women's stories in two main ways. The first is that it implies that they had another option, which would be most likely cited as leaving. However, if we refer back to Part I Chapter 3,²²⁶ we know that this option cannot be made a realistic and universal option. The second is the simplification of these women's experiences, for battered women or women of violence's experiences with things such as imminent danger and fear are more complex than what is in the above definition and qualifications. Women who have been trapped in a cycle of violence often have a different conception of these traits than those who have not had repeated experiences. The gaps in this definition is something Browne highlights when talking about plea deals and agreements. She says "The imminent danger component of the self-defense plea is predicated on the one-time violent encounter most common to male adversaries or attacks by strangers. It does not take into account the cumulative effects of repeated violence in the future. Yet women who have been repeatedly assaulted by their partners over time become sensitized to cues of impending assault."²²⁷ She then goes on to provide a quote from Elizabeth Bochnak which talks about how these women can sense from even a slight change in tone of facial expression that danger is coming. So, even though it is not yet there, they know it is inevitable.

When these facts are not taken into consideration, it strips women of the self-defense title and purely paints them as murderers with no context to the murder. In fact, most women often first face the first-degree murder charge, and then will be given the opportunity to plead down, still making them admit that they had other choices and they should have acted on those instead.

²²⁶ Pg. 12

²²⁷ Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill*, 171-177.

Section B: Victims' Rights:

Though the courtroom is often one of invalidation, silencing, and manipulation through strategic questioning tactics and efforts to dismember a person's story to fit whoever is trying to get away or press charges, there are ways in which it does protect victims. In fact, at least in one specific way, it can act as a platform for voice.

Previously, we discussed definitions and frameworks of basic human rights. However, in the United States, there are also categorical rights specific to certain situations. Rights for victims is one of those situations. The framework of victims rights is largely based on two key acts: the Crime Victims' Rights Act of 2004 (CVRA) and the Victims of Crime Act of 1984 (VCA). VCA deals mostly on the monetary support aspect regarding victims and provided a federal fund within the Treasury²²⁸ and is considered an act that deals with providing "services" to victims, while CVRA provides "rights" of victims.²²⁹ Other key differences to note would be the fact the differences in the definition of "crime victim." In VCA, crime victim refers to "a person that has suffered direct physical, emotional, or pecuniary harm as a result of the commission of a crime," while CVRA's definition is "a person directly and proximately harmed as a result of the commission of a Federal offense or an offense in the District of Columbia."²³⁰ As can be seen, VCA has a bit broader of a definition while CVRA is far more narrow. Another point to consider

²²⁸ *Victims of Crime Act of 1984*, H.R. 6403, 98th Congress, (1984), [H.R.6403 - 98th Congress \(1983-1984\): Victims of Crime Act of 1984 | Congress.gov | Library of Congress](#)

²²⁹ *Crime Victims' Rights Act of 2004*, 18 U.S.C. 3771, last modified 2022, accessed on May 13, 2023. [U.S. Attorneys | Crime Victims' Rights Act \(justice.gov\)](#)

²³⁰ Merrick B. Garland, "The Attorney General Guidelines for Victim and Witness Assistance." *U.S. Department of Justice*, last modified 2022, effective March 31, 2023, [The Attorney General Guidelines for Victim and Witness Assistance 2022 \(justice.gov\)](#)

between the two is that there does exist some overlap such as that some points, such as “reasonable protection” is protected by both as a service and a right.

With all considered, we will find the majority of the protections for victims in the CVRA.

CVRA provides ten federally protected rights of a victim:

1. Right to Reasonable Protection
2. Right to Reasonable, Accurate, and Timely Notice
3. Right Not to be Excluded from Court
4. Right to be Reasonably Heard
5. Reasonable Right to Confer with the Prosecutor
6. Right to Full and Timely Restitution as Provided in Law
7. Right to Proceedings Free from Unreasonable Delay
8. Right to Fairness and Respect for Dignity and Privacy
9. Right to Be Informed in a Timely Manner of Any Plea Bargain or Deferred Prosecution Agreement
10. Right to Be Informed of Rights and Services²³¹

These rights are enforced with what is called the “best efforts” by any department personnel involved in the case. What is meant by best effort does seem to be a bit broad (which is something that we will encounter later on in Jeffrey Epstein’s case), but it generally tends to be considered active engagement between the victims and the department even if inconveniences arise. For example, the department may be obligated to make multiple efforts to contact a victim regarding the notification of a plea bargain if they do not reach them on the first attempt. However, there does come a point where they have made enough efforts to count towards a best effort qualification and can just continue.

Right number four, Right to be Reasonably Heard, often includes the right to have what is called a victim impact statement. Victim impact statements are given in court proceedings such as sentencing or plea deals and gives the victims, or sometimes the family of victims, the chance to tell the courtroom the harm the offender has caused them. These statements can take

²³¹ *Crime Victims’ Rights Act of 2004*, 18 U.S.C. 3771.

the form of written statements, audio recordings, video recordings, a public speech, etc.²³² Court proceedings and interactions can be a very strict time for victims, as even their testimonies can be twisted by leading questions that are meant to trip the witness up to make a mistake in favor of the other side. Victim impact statements, however, are moments when the victim is given the chance to speak without interruption or questioning.

Once more, we will refer back to Chanel Miller's assault by Brock Turner. In Miller's book, she chronicles her time in the courtroom and highlights specifically how the questioning from the lawyers, Turner's own responses, and the media's reaction to these responses inflicted its own special brand of harm. This is something largely touched on in Part III in discussion of interactions with the legal system as well as in Part II where victim blaming is looked at.²³³

However, Miller's opportunity for an impact statement gave her a platform where she could say exactly what she thought and how she felt. It gave her an opportunity to tell her story the way that she experienced it. Beginning with the blunt statement "You don't know me, but you've been inside me"²³⁴ Miller not only sets the true scene of her experience by describing her intentions to merely have a fun time with her younger sister, hoping to embarrass her with goofy dance moves in the way an older sister often enjoys doing, but she also corrects statements and assumptions made throughout the entirety of the case. She compares the experience of learning that both Turner and the public claiming that this was consensual and enjoyable to saying that a car probably enjoyed being hit in a car wreck, and it isn't that big of a deal because it happens all of the time. One of the most powerful regainments of voice, however, is when she herself

²³² Iowa Code 915.21: Victim impact statements, accessed on February 28th, 2023, [915.21.pdf \(iowa.gov\)](#)

²³³ Can specifically be seen in Part III Chapter 11, pg. 138 in various sections and Part II Chapter 6 Section D, pg. 51.

²³⁴ Court Documents: Stanford Rape Case. *People v. Brock Turner*, Case B1577162, Document 7 of 9, "Exhibit Sixteen," released on *Los Angeles Times* on June 10, 2016, [Court documents: Stanford rape case: People v. Brock Allen Turner \(7/9\) - Documents - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](#)

dissects and responds to sections of Turner’s statement. Throughout the case, alcohol and her state of unconsciousness was used against her and in favor of Turner. Here, Chanel was able finally move the narrative back to her assault and away from all of this focus on alcohol.

Examples are given here: (the bolded statements are her quoting him, with the unbolded being her response)

You said, **Being drunk I just couldn’t make the best decisions and neither could she.**

- Alcohol is not an excuse. Is it a factor? Yes. But alcohol was not the one who stripped me, fingered me, had my head dragging against the ground, with me almost fully naked...

You said, **I stupidly thought it was okay for me to do what everyone around me was doing, which was drinking. I was wrong.**

- Again, you were not wrong for drinking. Everyone around you was not sexually assaulting me. You were wrong for doing what nobody else was doing, which was pushing your erect dick in your pants against my naked, defenseless body concealed in a dark area, where partygoers could no longer see or protect me, and my own sister could not find me...

You said, **you are in the process of establishing a program for high school and college students in which you speak about your experience to “speak out against the college campus drinking culture and the sexual promiscuity that goes along with that.”**

- Speak out against campus drinking culture. That’s what we’re speaking out against? You think that’s what I’ve spent the past year fighting for? Not awareness about campus sexual assault, or rape, or learning to recognize consent?... You have been convicted of violating me with malicious intent, and all you can admit to is consuming alcohol. Do not talk about the sad way your life was upturned because alcohol made you do bad things. Figure out how to take responsibility for your own conduct.²³⁵

After pages of talking, one of her closing statements finally kills the idea that this was a case of less severity due to the intoxication level with the few words of “It felt serious. That’s all I’m going to say.”²³⁶ It should also be noted that the final paragraph of her statement is dedicated to

²³⁵ Court Documents: Stanford Rape Case. *People v. Brock Turner*, Case B1577162, Document 7 of 9, “Exhibit Sixteen.”

²³⁶ Court Documents: Stanford Rape Case. *People v. Brock Turner*, Case B1577162, Document 7 of 9, “Exhibit Sixteen.”

the females out there who are “doubted” and “dismissed,” and Chanel ends it all in saying “To girls everywhere, I am with you”²³⁷ - another depiction of the solidarity and community of VAW narratives.

This impact statement gave Chanel the opportunity to rewrite her narrative to what she felt was the accurate story, and it gave her the right to do it in public. When we are talking about the idea of narrative being a basic human right, victim impact statements are the most powerful, if not the only, way in which the legal system gives and protects the direct right of a victim to be able to state their story and keep it untouched and unmanipulated. However, it would be misleading to act as though this was an unconditional right as will be demonstrated to us in the following section.

Section C: NPAs/NDAs

As we have seen previously in this chapter, the law has a significant impact in both the protection of silencing/manipulation of VAW narratives. There are two legal practices and agreements, however, that are at the forefront of impact specifically regarding VAW narratives. These agreements are Non Prosecution Agreements (NPA) and Non Disclosure Agreements (NDA). Each will have its own subsection in this section with NPA being covered in Section Ca and NDA being covered in Section Cb.

Section Ca: Non Prosecution Agreements (NPAs)

²³⁷ Court Documents: Stanford Rape Case. *People v. Brock Turner*, Case B1577162, Document 7 of 9, “Exhibit Sixteen.”

Before we begin discussing the impact of NPAs, it should be noted that the case we will be looking at here is possibly an extreme case, and there may be purposes for NPAs whose sole nature is not to silence the victim of violence. However, with even one case present, it is important to see the full impact NPAs can have on a victims' story.

To begin, an NPA is a contractual agreement between an individual/corporation and the government that once the person in question of committing the crime agrees to and abides by certain requirements given by the government, prosecution for the crimes at hand will not be sought.²³⁸ Much like an NPA is the Deferred Prosecution Agreement (DPA) which runs in a similar way, except instead of receiving the promise of no further prosecution, the charges will instead be simply dismissed.²³⁹ This is a decision that is made solely by those in court and in the government, a.k.a people in high power. The NPA in itself and on a general note can have an impact on VAW narratives as these women are unable to legally seek the justice they may want to seek. They lack final say in any of the process and can often lack any say at all. One of the ways the courtroom protects victims' voices is by allowing them to speak in trial. NPAs often take that away without the victims' permission. Though the court is required to alert victims when this agreement is made, this alert does not do anything for the victim themselves. It just prepares them that their abuser is free on the streets. In addition to that point, although under the CVRA victims have the right to stay updated on court proceedings, both subtle and legal loopholes can be created to ignore that right.²⁴⁰

²³⁸ W.A. Kaal & Timothy Lacine, "The Effect of Deferred and Non-Prosecution Agreements on Corporate Governance: Evidence from 1993-2013," *The Business Lawyer*, 70, last modified 2014.

²³⁹ W.A. Kaal & Timothy Lacine, "The Effect of Deferred and Non-Prosecution Agreements on Corporate Governance: Evidence from 1993-2013."

²⁴⁰ *Crime Victims' Rights Act of 2004*, 18 U.S.C. 3771.

An extreme, though very real example of this is seen in Epstein's case. The fight for justice for the victims of Epstein largely took as long as it did due to the fact that all of the way back in 2008 (quick reminder that he wasn't arrested until 2019) the government entered into a Non Prosecution Agreement (NPA) with Epstein. (Though DPAs are mentioned above, it should be clarified that when talking about Epstein, we are only focusing on NPAs).²⁴¹

By 2005, there was clear evidence that Epstein was soliciting and sexually abusing minors. Not only that, but there was a list of known victims. With strong evidence and an organized investigation, it would have been time to prosecute Epstein for his crimes. However, this was not the path taken. Instead, the government entered into an NPA. The NPA's contents can be summarized as follows: He would plead guilty to two felony criminal charges (most of which officially and legally labeled his abuse as engagement in prostitution), serve six months in jail and file as a sex offender while all of his co-conspirators would receive immunity for crimes committed from 2001-2007. If he did this, no further prosecution in regard to his sex crimes could take place.²⁴² With this agreement, it meant that his victims themselves could not seek charges against him. They even had to sign a confidentiality agreement when viewing the NPA, meaning they could not tell anyone about the details of the settlement.²⁴³

Because of this stipulation, under the Crime Victims' Rights Act, it is a requirement that each victim be informed of this action. It is a right protected under subsection (a) point (9) of the CVRA: "The right to be informed in a timely manner of any plea bargain or deferred prosecution agreement."²⁴⁴ The victims of Epstein, however, were not informed. It must be noted that there is

²⁴¹ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 58-65.

²⁴² Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 58-65.; Once again, it should be noted that his six month prison sentence consisted of work release, a personal television room, and what would be considered peak comfort.

²⁴³ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 58-65.

²⁴⁴ *Crime Victims' Rights Act of 2004*, 18 U.S.C. 3771.

also a “Multiple Crime Victims” clause in subsection (d) point (2) that states “In a case where the court finds that the number of crime victims makes it impracticable to accord all of the crime victims the rights described in subsection (a), the court shall fashion a reasonable procedure to give effect to this chapter that does not unduly complicate or prolong the proceedings.”²⁴⁵

Though this is a true statement, not even that was implemented for the victims of Epstein. This meant that not only were the victims’ rights of knowledge violated, but their chance to speak up about this decision and share their narrative was also taken. Attorney Edwards did have a case validated for the fact that Epstein’s NPA violated the CVRA, but even with the agreement that their rights were violated, the government fought hard against the idea that the victims should be given the right to prosecute.²⁴⁶ Yes, Epstein in the end was given a conviction and prison sentence, but that doesn’t change the fact that the government stripped many of their rights as a victim.

Section Cb: Non Disclosure Agreements

Non Disclosure Agreements are another story and arguably have an even closer relationship to the silencing of narrative. Where in an NPA one would not be able to prosecute their assaulter, an NDA is an agreement that certain information about a person’s situation will stay confidential either for an agreed duration of time or simply forever. In other words, the person themselves is not able in any way to talk about the events or tell their story to anyone considered an “unauthorized party.”²⁴⁷ While both NPAs and DPAs are agreements made by the government and the party being convicted, NDAs are agreements made by the people involved

²⁴⁵ *Crime Victims’ Rights Act of 2004*, 18 U.S.C. 3771.

²⁴⁶ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 364-365.

²⁴⁷ J.P. Finet, J.D., “What is a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA)?,” *FindLaw*, last modified September 26, 2022, [What is a Non-Disclosure Agreement \(NDA\)? - FindLaw](#)

themselves. So, for example, when talking about a case of violence, the victim and the assaulter would come to an agreement that would keep both of the parties from talking about the events that occurred to others outside of the situation. Though NDAs can be agreed upon by anyone in a legal situation, oftentimes, we see these agreements made when a place of employment or a party with a high status in society is involved. Within that factor, there are often two main reasons that people will agree to sign an NDA. The first is that the parties will be entering into business with one another and use NDAs as a form of trust, and the second is that an indiscretion or crime has been committed. The relevance to our discussion is found in that second reason.²⁴⁸

While some of Epstein's cases involved NDAs, his method of silencing was often geared more towards threats and fear, which meant that NDAs were not often necessary- fear for their lives was enough to keep them quiet. Two of the most recent high attention cases involving NDAs involve the case against Harvey Weinstein and the case against FOX News' Roger Ailes. In fact, the case against Weinstein is widely considered the case that sparked the movement against both accepted and protected sexual harassment in the workplace, as well as bringing to light the exceptional harm that is caused by the common practice of NDAs.

Before *New York Times* journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey embarked on their article based on an accusation regarding sexual harassment at the hands of an unnamed, high up Hollywood producer, the practice of NDAs was not apart of everyday discourse. In all actuality, for being such a prevalent path in legal issues, it was not even a topic heavily focused on in law schools around the nation, meaning that though these are indeed legally binding agreements, it was businesses running the show when it came to the settlements, not the courts.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Jodi Kantor & Megan Twohey, *She Said*.

²⁴⁹ Jodi Kantor & Megan Twohey, *She Said*.

NDA's can also cause great harm not only due to the individual silencing that takes place but also because it directly attacks what I have identified as the second factor of distinction in VAW narratives- the idea of solidarity and the creation of community and a communal narrative. NDAs become the exception to this factor and are actually a complete enemy of them. NDAs are one of the most effective ways of achieving complete isolation from others who could provide validation and support in both making these women feel heard as well as being by their side when it comes to them making the decision of what to do next. Not only that, but women who have had similar experiences by the same perpetrator will not know they are not alone, nor will they realize that they are just one of many incriminating stories that could bring the abuser to justice. *She Said's* film depiction includes a scene where Pettigrew and Laheen, the actresses that play Kantor and Twohey, talk about how "the only way these women are going to go on the record is if they all jump together."²⁵⁰ What they mean by this is that it was unlikely one individual woman would feel safe enough to be the sole person to speak out, but if others would speak out with the individual, the women would be more likely to come forward. In other words, these women needed the strength created once community and solidarity are established. This is a phenomenon seen in many movements regarding VAW, one of the largest and most recent being the reignition of the MeToo Movement. Though the MeToo movement officially began in 2006 with Tarana Burke coining the term, it reached a peak in 2016 and 2017, largely at the hands of Kantor and Twohey's work and the women who came forward against Weinstein.²⁵¹

The MeToo movement was entirely built upon the idea of community and solidarity. It embodied the idea that women are not alone, and all it would take for women to know that is for

²⁵⁰ Maria Schrader, et al., *She Said*, 0:41:04-0:41:10.

²⁵¹ Chicago Tribune, "#MeToo: A timeline of events," *Chicago Tribune*, February 4, 2021, [#MeToo: A timeline of events \(chicagotribune.com\)](https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/entertainment-arts/me-too-a-timeline-of-events/2021/02/04/#)

them to simply say “Me too.” The amount of women that came forward was astonishing, and the amount of abusers that were exposed was at the very least larger than what had been experienced previously.²⁵² Community and solidarity is not only a trait of VAW narratives, but it is also a trait that often itself acts as a protection or silencing phenomenon. Removing that trait from the narratives becomes a crucial game changer in how/if the narrative will be told as well as how the narrative will continue on. This can continue to be seen in the case against Fox News staff.

The case regarding Roger Ailes was introduced in Part II Chapter 4 Section B²⁵³ when talking about third-party depictions of a story that is not the individual’s, so we will provide a brief recap here. Ailes officially came under fire in 2016 when former Fox News host Gretchen Carlson filed a sexual harassment lawsuit against him.²⁵⁴ Her lawsuit would act as a spark in the fight against Ailes and sexual harassment at Fox in general with many coming forward, including Fox News’ Megyn Kelly, to corroborate and make similar claims to Gretchen’s against Ailes and other hosts. As mentioned previously, Carlson did reach a 20 million dollar settlement and a formal apology from Fox, but included in this settlement was an NDA barring her from discussing details of the case and her experience.²⁵⁵ This secrecy is unconditional and extends to absolutely anyone in their lives, leaving the story confined completely within the self. So, not only was Carlson not able to share her narrative in her own words, she was also not even able to work or give input on depictions of her story such as Showtimes’ *The Loudest Voice* and the Oscar winning *Bombshell*. The absolute only way Carlson’s story can be told is by someone else,

²⁵² Chicago Tribune, “#MeToo: A timeline of events.”

²⁵³ Pg. 23

²⁵⁴ Eliana Dockterman, “The True Story Behind *Bombshell* and the Fox News Sexual Harassment Scandal.”

²⁵⁵ Benjamin VanHoose, “Gretchen Carlson on ‘Immense Progress’ 5 Years After Roger Ailes Suit: ‘Women Are Being Believed,’” *People*, last modified July 7, 2021, [Gretchen Carlson Talks Progress 5 Years After Roger Ailes Lawsuit \(people.com\)](https://www.people.com/article/gretchen-carlson-talks-progress-5-years-after-roger-ailes-lawsuit)

and these someone else's only have the details that have been made public. The parts of her story, the parts that arguably caused the deep-rooted trauma, remain unrevealed.

In a CBS article on the truth behind NDAs, University of Pennsylvania law school professor David Hoffman discussed the harm that these agreements can and will cause. Referring to them as “hush contracts,” he says:

There's two major ways that hush contracts can affect organizations and can affect the world. They can make it harder for us to learn about, and therefore prevent, actual harassment that's going to physically harm individuals, psychologically harm individuals. The second is with respect to the victims themselves. There's a psychological harm that results from agreeing to not tell the story of your own life. And that psychological harm is not one that you'd appreciate, probably, when you first sign that contract.²⁵⁶

Hoffman highlights key points in truly understanding the effects of NDAs. Not only is there psychological harm to the individual themselves, but without notice that these events are happening to people, action cannot be taken and more people will fall victim to the behaviors that have been so strategically hidden. In addition, Hoffman points out that when first signing the contract, the person is not yet in full understanding of the impact silence can have on them. At the end of the day, an NDA is often just a piece of paper one signs so that their fight for justice can be over. No one is providing counsel, advice, or insight into the specific harm locking a story within oneself can cause. It could be compared to the image of being eaten from the inside out and that is not something these women are signing off on.

In addition, there is also the topic of arbitration, an agreement made when first being hired that if issues arise, the employee will go to arbitration within the company instead of a

²⁵⁶ Mark Hudspeth, “Gretchen Carlson and the complicated truth about NDAs.”

court setting.²⁵⁷ This was also an agreement made by many women at Fox News upon hire, including Carlson. Essentially, what this does is keep any dispute or complaint within the company, thus barring it from reaching outside forces that could help or bring to light the true harm. When situations are isolated, it makes it significantly easier to silence any matter that does not fit within the harasser's wants.

There are some, however, that feel that NDAs have an important place in the legal system and that they can actually be beneficial to a victim. Attorney Debra Katz commented in the same article as Hoffman emphasizing that the NDA not only keeps the victim from sharing details, but also the employer. She lays out the following situation as an example:

You come forth, you report sexual harassment in the workplace. You settle your case. And some legislature says you can't do that on a confidential basis, which means every prospective employer knows you've come forward. Every person who looks at your workplace history will know that you are someone who is litigious. You're not gonna be hired, and that's the problem.²⁵⁸

Here, Katz is suggesting that many women are scared of carrying the label of a whistleblower against their company and that it will impact their prospective employment, something that women desperately wish to avoid. Though this does seem to be a factor that should be considered, as one's future is important all around and employment will be a worry for the future, Carlson seems to quickly bat down this claim with the mere fact that both her and Roginsky, the other woman who signed an NDA when settling, were left unable to receive work even with the NDA. In fact, Carlson even seems to directly connect an NDA to a lack of work opportunity saying, "I would say that for women signing settlements and then signing an NDA, not only are they signing to be quiet, which is what the general public thinks, in the majority of

²⁵⁷ "employment arbitration agreement," *IRMI*, accessed April 21, 2023, [employment arbitration agreement \(irmi.com\)](https://www.irmi.com/articles/expert-commentary/employment-arbitration-agreement)

²⁵⁸ Mark Hudspeth, "Gretchen Carlson and the complicated truth about NDAs."

the cases, you are signing to never work in your chosen profession ever again.” Roginsky supports this claim with the statement “We'd rather be working. I mean, neither of us wanted to *not* be working anymore,” further highlighting that the NDA did not in fact protect them in their future employment endeavors. It actually accomplished the opposite.²⁵⁹ Kantor and Twohey’s investigation also seems to discredit Katz’s claim.

When interviewing and talking with women who had signed an NDA in a Weinstein settlement, Kantor and Twohey found similar situations to Carlson and Roginsky. Not only that, however, but the two reporters also found that the NDA severely harmed one person in particular when she attempted to re-enter the job market. The story of Rowena Chiu vividly highlighted multiple points and factors that Kantor and Twohey would be further diving into as they continued writing. Chiu, an aspiring producer described as “creative” and “driven,” was hired in 1998 as another of many assistants that would tend to Wienstein’s more personal needs. Chiu’s hirer and soon-to-be confidante, Zelda Perkins, had been working as Weinstein’s assistant for two years before Chiu was hired, and Perkins knew well the name of the game. Perkins was in charge of caring for Weinstein in the mornings, meaning that she would go into his room, and awake him, oftentimes finding a naked or half-naked body. She was expected to do a list of tedious things one would expect a grown man could do himself, such as turn on his shower. Though Perkins was never subject to sexual assault or rape like other women, she was severely abused emotionally through Weinstein’s carefully crafted and perfected sexual harrasment techniques. Perkins recounted to Kantor of how he would always make sexual remarks or even try to pull her into bed with him. Perkins also detailed how since there was no office, such as a human resources office to complain about this behavior, the women would create their own

²⁵⁹ Mark Hudspeth, “Gretchen Carlson and the complicated truth about NDAs.”

safety procedures that the women would share with one another. For example, Perkins would be careful to sit in armchairs and not couches where it would be easier for Weinstein to make physical contact or corner her into a position. Another tip given to her by a colleague was to wear her winter parka no matter how hot the room was. Both of these, Perkins followed diligently. After having two years of experience with Weinstein's harassment, Perkins then became a sort of protector to newbie Chiu.²⁶⁰

Though Kantor's interview with Perkins took place before Chiu's, Perkins would not tell of Chiu's experience, as she respected that it was her own right to tell her own story. Later on, Kantor would get the chance to talk to Chiu, and the details would be of a heartbreaking nature. Chiu had experienced Weinstein's sexual harassment from some of the very first interactions she had with him, however, it hit a peak at the Venice Film Festival in 1998. Chiu had been in charge of caring for Weinstein in the evening, her shift ending as late as 2am. On the second or the third night of the festival, Weinstein attempted to rape her, saying things such as "with one single thrust, it would all be over."²⁶¹ Though she had worn two pairs of tights, another one of the precautionary tips to survive an interaction with Weinstein, he had managed to take off both of the pairs and insist that she take off her underwear next. He was not successful in this specific advance, but he was successful in leaving extreme damage to Chiu's mental state, her quality of life as a whole, along with her career. When Chiu was finally able to get away at the end of her shift, she confided to Perkins what had occurred. Perkins, absolutely furious, confronted Weinstein only to hear denials where he swore on his family that he would never do such things. Both Perkins and Chiu resigned and sought legal help and justice. They would receive only partially the first, and none of the second. Due to the lack of evidence, police reports in Venice

²⁶⁰ Jodi Kantor & Megan Twohey, *She Said*, 59-70.

²⁶¹ Jodi Kantor & Megan Twohey, *She Said*, 64.

of the incident, or even just reports to an HR office (which did not exist), no criminal action could move forward. The closest thing to legal action the women could seek was a settlement. The women first requested that any money they received in a settlement would be given to a charity, as they wanted to make it clear that money was not in any way what they were seeking. However, they were informed that no settlement would even be considered if there wasn't a dollar amount involved that went directly to the two women. Feeling as though the only choices the women had were to either seek no legal action or to go with a settlement, they attempted to play the system to theirs and other women's favors. They would sign the settlement but only under strict conditions including: Weinstein attend therapy with Perkins at the first session in order to keep him from lying and manipulating, his production company Miramax to develop a sexual harassment policy with an HR office, and if anyone made a similar allegation in the next two years, it would be reported to Disney or he would be fired. In exchange for this, the two women were silenced completely and totally. The women were subject to a list of conditions, all of which kept them from speaking about any part of what had occurred. They even had to seek permission from the company to talk to a therapist, and they would forever be barred from talking to family, friends, and spouses.²⁶² Now that we understand the extent of this silence, we can circle back to the point that brought us to Perkins and Chiu's stories- the idea that NDAs can protect a person's future employment.

As stated above, Perkins and Chiu were bound to strict silence, and because of this, they were unable to explain to future employers why it is that they quit such a well-known and successful company. This was a barrier that neither Perkins nor Chiu could successfully overcome if they wanted to stay in the industry. Having a job at Miramax was a dream come true

²⁶² Jodi Kantor & Megan Twohey, *She Said*, 59-70.

for many people, as there were very few production companies as successful at the time. This was a fact that everyone knew whether they worked within or were on the outside. While looking for a new job, both Perkins and Chiu were met with this question, and when they couldn't provide an explanation, they were labeled as difficult and impossible to please- two qualities that can blacklist a potential employee especially in Hollywood.²⁶³ Katherine Heigl is still under fire from both the industry and mainstream public for being accused of being a “difficult” actress and person in general to work with after comments made regarding the “sexist” depiction of women displayed in the 2008 movie *Knocked Up* where she played main character Alison Scott as well as criticizing the writing in hit series *Grey's Anatomy* during her speech in winning an Oscar for her depiction of beloved character Dr. Izzie Stevens. In fact, she actually abstained from her nomination altogether.²⁶⁴ She also criticized the set of Shonda Rimes in pointing out the exhaustion that occurs from having to work seventeen hour days. Both incidents taking place in the years surrounding 2008 and 2009, Heigl became what is often referred to as “blacklisted” in the industry for her “difficult” demeanor- a demeanor that especially in the wake of the MeToo movement would come to be known simply as a women expressing an opinion. Years later in 2021 after a long silence of job prospects, Heigl began a Netflix project called *Firefly Lane*, which would come to be a favorite among Netflix viewers with it making it past its first season and holding great potential for future renewals. During this time, she also became significantly more vocal about her situation. In reflecting on her past and her unwillingness to stay silent, she told the Washington Post “I may have said a couple of things you didn't like, but then that escalated to ‘she's ungrateful,’ then that escalated to ‘she's difficult,’ and that escalated to ‘she's

²⁶³ Jodi Kantor & Megan Twohey, *She Said*, 59-70.

²⁶⁴ Alex Taylor, “The actresses speaking out over being labeled ‘difficult’,” *BBC News*, last modified January 29, 2021, [The actresses speaking out over being labelled 'difficult' - BBC News](#)

unprofessional,’... What is your definition of difficult? Somebody with an opinion that you don’t like? Now, I’m 42, and that shit pisses me off.’”²⁶⁵ In 2022, former co-star Ellen Pompeo, who plays the lead character Meredith Grey in *Grey’s Anatomy*, came to Heigl’s defense on her podcast “Tell Me with Ellen Pompeo.” When talking about Heigl, she stated:

“I remember Heigl said something on a talk show about the insane hours we were working and she was 100 percent right... And had she said that today, she’d be a complete hero. But she’s ahead of her time, made a statement about our crazy hours and of course, [it was like] ‘Let’s slam a woman and call her ungrateful.’... The truth is, she’s 100 percent honest and it’s absolutely correct what she said. She was fucking ballsy for saying it — she was telling the truth. She wasn’t lying!”²⁶⁶

Actress Janet Hubert notably from the series *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* experienced a similar blacklisting experience when co-star Will Smith spoke out against her outspoken behavior. During an HBO special reunion of the show, Hubert shared with Smith that:

I lost everything. Reputation. Everything. Everything. I understand you were able to move forward, but you know those words - calling a black woman difficult in Hollywood is the kiss of death. It's hard enough being a dark-skinned black woman in this business. But I felt it was necessary for us to finally move forward - and I am sorry that I have blasted you to pieces.²⁶⁷

Here, Hubert highlights how the label she received left her career in shambles. It is also important to note that there is a specific emphasis on how her black female identity added great nuance to the situation, a topic seen in Part III.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ Ashley Spencer, “Katherine Heigl is done apologizing,” *The Washington Post*, last modified January 28, 202, [Katherine Heigl is done apologizing - The Washington Post](#)

²⁶⁶ Zack Sharf, “Ellen Pompeo: Katherine Heigl was ‘100% Right’ to Condemn ‘Grey’s Anatomy’ Working Hours,” *Variety*, last modified April 21, 2022. [Ellen Pompeo Praises Katherine Heigl for Slamming ‘Grey’s Anatomy’ - Variety](#)

²⁶⁷ Alex Taylor, “The actresses speaking out over being labeled ‘difficult’.”

²⁶⁸ Pg. 59

Heigl and Hubert are just two widely known and talked about examples of Hollywood women being blacklisted from future employment due to being labeled “difficult.” It should truly come as no surprise that this is a pattern that would also come to impact Chiu and Perkins.

Unable to get jobs, the two women were forced to make a decision- they could leave the industry altogether or they could go back to Weinstein for help, as in their contract, he was obligated to provide a reference and aid in the women getting employment. Perkins discarded her aspirations, traveled to Guatemala, and began training horses. Chiu wasn’t ready to leave the industry and was forced back to Weinstein. Though she simply asked for a reference, she was not given that. Instead, she was only told that she was valued by Weinstein and he wanted her back under his employment. Chiu agreed to come back to Miramax but in the Hong Kong office far away from Weinstein himself- a move that gave her a salary, but contributed greatly to the degeneration of her mental health. She would also find her work receiving very little attention from anyone at Miramax, and no matter how much effort she put into her film recruitment job, Miramax was clear in showing they lacked interest.²⁶⁹

The lawyer Katz has tried to argue in the pages before that NDAs protect future employment, but all it did for Chiu was force her to return to the company that worked diligently to ruin her life and all it did for Perkins was force her into the equine field. It is difficult to find evidence on the side of Katz’s perspective when all we have is stories of women who never again worked in the field or could only plead to their abuser for a job. Katz’s response to NDAs not only makes a statement that appears simply not true, it also highlights an intensely interesting point- Katz is not the only lawyer defending NDAs, and in fact, when we look at those defending

²⁶⁹ Jodi Kantor & Megan Twohey, *She Said*, 59-70.

NDA's, the victims do not make up that party. It is the lawyers and the people whom the settlement is being brought against.

In Kantor and Twohey's investigation, the most common response they would receive from those in the legal field regarding NDAs was that it in the end protected victims' privacy. This was true even in talking to a renowned lawyer often seen as the mother of legal feminism, Gloria Allred. Though Allred had made headlines for protecting female clients against harassment, one of the most recent and notable cases being those against former President Donald Trump in the wake of his nomination for presidency, Kantor rather quickly found out that Allred was at the forefront of a significant amount of NDA settlements. In fact, she would even later find out that Allred was involved in settlements regarding Weinstein himself. Not only did Allred have a bright red hand stuck in a variety of settlements, but she also was at the forefront of keeping them a commonplace practice. The two investigators recount in their book how in 2017, California had been beginning a journey of changing the NDA system, pointing out how these agreements keep perpetrators hidden for them to continue to commit these crimes. Allred threatened these efforts saying that she would speak out against the group at the state capitol. Being such a respected lawyer and voice in the legal system, everyone backed down.²⁷⁰

And why did she do that? Why did she oppose new legislation so vehemently? Perhaps it was because of her ever popular opinion that the victims' privacy needed and deserved to be protected. Or, perhaps it was because, as she pointed out when she learned of the revolutionary legislation above, that no payments would be made to victims without the guarantee of the victims' silence. In other words, no transaction of money would take place if NDAs would change. However, why would a lack of transaction be such an issue for people like Allred? It is

²⁷⁰ Jodi Kantor & Megan Twohey, *She Said*, 75-78.

hard to believe that this argument is driven purely by concern for the victims' mental and financial well being when we consider the fact that the finalization of an NDA also finalizes a set sum given to the lawyer who advised this agreement.²⁷¹ As pointed out in the film depiction of Kantor and Twohey's book, the lawyers involved can receive as much as forty-percent of the settlement that takes place. So, who really is benefitting from NDAs? The victims who lose their voice and their choices in life or the lawyers who receive a fat amount of cash and the perpetrators who are able to safely continue perpetrating?

On a more positive note, largely because of Kantor and Twohey's work in uncovering the use and impact of NDAs along with Carlson's refusal to have her voice muted forever, changes have been and are currently under way in order to battle the toxicity of NDAs. After Carlson's lawsuit was settled, she continued and has continued to advocate for the voice of women. This has specifically been seen in the fight to end mandatory arbitration agreements and the end of the use of NDAs as a way to silence sexual assault survivors. TIME reported in 2016 that Carlson had agreed to testify before Congress on the lack of fairness and abundance of harm that comes from forced arbitration agreements, and even in these past seven years, Carlson has remained a loud and present voice in the fight for women and victim rights.²⁷²

In 2022, President Biden signed a bill that bans the enforcement of mandatory arbitration agreements in the workplace in cases of sexual harassment and assault, meaning that employers can no longer legally force their employees to bring disputes to an arbiter as opposed to public court.²⁷³ While this is an action against the silencing of women, this could have been

²⁷¹ Maria Schrader, et al., *She Said*, 0:42:03-0:43:37.

²⁷² Belinda Luscombe, "Gretchen Carlson's Next Fight," *TIME*, last modified October 21, 2016, [How Gretchen Carlson Is Fighting Sexual Harassment | Time](#)

²⁷³ Lisa Nagele-Piazza, "President Signs Bill Banning Mandatory Arbitration for Certain Claims," *SHRM*, last modified March 3, 2022. [President Signs Bill Banning Mandatory Arbitration for Certain Claims \(shrm.org\)](#)

accomplished a long time ago, and it is only minorly addressing just one piece of the carefully crafted puzzle.

Chapter 11: Interactions With...

The legal system as a whole seems to have a systemic impact on VAW narratives, however, the official legal language, agreements, and structure are not the only legal relationship present with the narratives. If the experience of violence moves into the legal system, the interactions between the woman herself and the people involved in her case also hold a great impact on the presentation and continuation of the narrative. I want to dissect three interactions here: interactions with the court, interactions with officers, and interactions with reporters. Though reporters are not legal employees, unless they are court reporters, they still are often the ones who update the public on court and legal proceedings. Section A will look at interactions with officers, Section B will be the court, and Section C will be reporters.

Section A: Officers

Situations can and in many situations do escalate to the point of needing law enforcement, and when this happens, police officers are the first interaction with the legal system the woman is going to have which means that the officer has the power to leave a positive or negative impression on the legal system as a whole from the start. Not only do they have power in leaving an impression on the woman, but they also will be the ones who write a report on their observations, meaning that their account of the situation they showed up to holds intense weight with how the situation will proceed. Though the requirement of officers wearing body cameras, which was meant to provide safety for the officer and offer a more objective account of what

occurred, research has shown that these goals are not being achieved with the desired effectiveness. A study published by the National Institute of Justice stated that “A comprehensive review of 70 studies of body-worn cameras use found that the larger body of research on body-worn cameras showed no consistent or no statistically significant effects.”²⁷⁴

None of this is to indicate that officers consistently lie or create faulty statements, but what it is to point out is that officers are humans. They make mistakes, they perceive situations falsely, and they can only move forward with the amount of information they have at the time. This immediate information often does not include a list of details that could explain why a woman was moments away from being killed by her husband or could show that the girl that got drunk at a party was drugged when she looked over her left shoulder. Yet, the officers still hold more sway and power in the narrative they write than the people involved in the situations themselves. There is a power imbalance from the start, and the victim can sense that, which brings in the conversation of the impact the officer can have on how the victim both views her own narrative as well as how she will move forward.

Previously mentioned Jon Krakauer’s *Missoula* investigates the startling amount of rapes, sexual assault, and cover-ups that occurred at the beloved University of Montana in the span of three years.²⁷⁵ One thing that Krakauer’s investigative novel vividly depicts is the roles of officers and detectives in the assault cases these women had to go through. Though the book is filled with numerous examples, there are two, one positive and one negative, detectives who perfectly display the power of influence on the court and the women that we discussed above. Before analyzing, we will just present the facts of how each detective handled their victims.

²⁷⁴ “Research on Body-Worn Cameras and Law Enforcement,” National Institute of Justice, last modified January 7, 2022,

<https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/research-body-worn-cameras-and-law-enforcement>

²⁷⁵ Jon Krakauer, *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*.

(1) Detective Baker was leading the case against Beau Donaldson after he raped his best friend Allison Huguet. In an attempt to gain a confession, Baker asked Huguet to call Donaldson and try to get him to make a statement of guilt. Krakauer includes quotes from Huguet as she describes the moments after the call was over: “‘That call was extremely emotional,’ she said. ‘Beau was someone I had cared deeply about for most of my life. Even though he raped me, I couldn’t help still caring about him on some level, and I knew I had just sealed his fate... When I explained to Detective Baker why I was bawling, he was like, ‘Allison, you need to keep in mind that you are doing the right thing.’”²⁷⁶ Baker would continue this professional and stern, but caring demeanor throughout her case, even driving to her home to tell her in person that they had arrested Donaldson.

(2) When Kelly Barrett was assaulted and experienced attempted rape by student and stranger Zeke Adams, she was assigned Detective Jamie Merifield as the lead detective in her case. Merifield told Barrett that they could move forward with the case but emphasized how difficult it would be to reach any conclusion. Merifield told her “Shy of him confessing,.. we have nothing to go on” but suggested they could still move forward and “scare the shit out of him.”²⁷⁷ Later on when Merifield interviewed Adams, she provided deep assurance to Adams that it was going to be okay. She made statements such as “I think this is just a big misunderstanding... If there were charges, I would only recommend misdemeanor charges.” She even went as far as to tell Adams “We have a lot

²⁷⁶ Jon Krakauer, *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*, 46.

²⁷⁷ Jon Krakauer, *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*, 55.

of cases where girls come in and report stuff they are not sure about, and then it becomes rape. And it's not fair. It's not fair to you. ... You guys both went into this together.”²⁷⁸

The differences between these two interactions are bold and stark. Baker offered empathy and legal knowledge throughout the process, assuring her of what would be necessary to do, while still making sure her emotions and well-being were not further harmed by his actions. Merifield discouraged Barrett with her first few sentences but poured assurances and encouragement onto Adams, even going as far as to claim that Barrett was lying before the case had even progressed. Both women had horrifically difficult times with the legal system during their cases, but Barrett having the detective she did was set-up to fail from the beginning. The officer that attended to Barrett before Merifield even entered the picture set the same tone. Upon making her report, she was asked the question of what she wanted to come from this because the lack of witnesses and proof left her with nothing- a statement similar to Merifield's reaction, meaning she had already heard this twice with absolutely no legal validation of her assault at all. The officer also asked her when she took him to Adams' address where the assault occurred if she had a boyfriend because he wanted to make sure she wasn't lying in order to cover up cheating. Thankfully for Barrett, as she didn't need any more obstacles to her case, she did not.²⁷⁹

These initial interactions not only gave influence to how other legal officials saw their case, but they also left the victims with a certain feeling. With Huguet, she was obviously still terribly upset and suffered greatly, but her receiving some validation from the people who were supposed to protect her provided just a very small buffer. Barrett was discouraged from the start with no man/woman in blue making her feel like any part was valid.

²⁷⁸ Jon Krakauer, *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*, 55-60.

²⁷⁹ Jon Krakauer, *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*, 54.

When talking about validation, we aren't only talking about legal validation. When Merifield claimed that she was sure no assault had occurred, she is taking Barrett's experience and lacing it with doubt, leaving Barrett unable to decipher whether or not she herself was correct in her observations. As has been said previously, validation in VAW narratives is one the vital parts to present if these women can tell their stories the way they happened for them and the way they felt during them. When there is no validation, or even explicit invalidation, the confusion results in a jumbled mess of a story.

When talking about officer interactions with women, it is also important to highlight police brutality specifically towards black females. The SayHerName movement, though reignited after the death of George Floyd in 2020 began in 2014, is a movement dedicated to uplifting black female voices in the conversation on police brutality. Recently dedicating a lot of their energy to "direct advocacy," the forum diligently works to educate the public, provide spaces where stories can be told and people can come together and lobby the government for changes in the system.²⁸⁰

Section B: The Court

Going back to Chanel Miller's memoir *Know My Name*, Miller goes into great detail involving the impact the court had on her. Before her trial began where she would have to testify, she was prepped for the idea that the questioning that occurred was going to be harsh and offensive.²⁸¹

The defense attorney was no doubt going to question her about things such as her drinking habits and her reason for being at the party when she was older and didn't attend Stanford. The defense

²⁸⁰ The African American Policy Forum, "Standing Up for Antiracism and Multicultural Democracy," *AAPF*, last modified 2022, [b77e03_35bf4c04fd3445799329f0721e956443.pdf \(aapf.org\)](https://www.aapf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/b77e03_35bf4c04fd3445799329f0721e956443.pdf)

²⁸¹ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 144-212.

would try to spin the narrative so that blame laid on Miller, leaving Turner appearing to be innocent. This is exactly what occurred. Miller recalls how Turner's attorney was "compact" and "rigid" and how he gave no greeting or eye contact before his first question. He asked specific questions regarding her height and weight and was careful to point out that it was her choice to drink. The entire focus was shifted from Turner's assault on Miller to the fact that Miller consumed alcohol.

Though the District Attorney's questions were kinder, as she was the one trying to charge Turner, they still had an impact on how Miller would digest what just occurred. Having to go back and forth between two people that were creating two different narratives about her was difficult. During redirect examination, her DA asked her questions in order to give clarification of what had been said or twisted by the defense. In regard to this process, Miller states:

I was attempting to tell the same story through two different filters; through the questions of my DA and the questions of the defense. Their questions created the narrative, building the framework that shaped what I said. When I'd been questioned by my DA, I felt gutted, forced to come face-to-face with my painful memories reliving it for the jury to see. Being questioned by the defense was stifling. He didn't want to open up the emotional territory that she did; he wanted to smother it, to erase my specific experience, abstract me into stereotypes of partying and blackouts, to ask technical questions that tied my shoelaces together, tripping me as he forced me to run.²⁸²

Another important point depicted by Miller is in the amount of self-doubt the courtroom and its questioning embeds in these women. Miller chose a style of memoir writing that utilized narration, dialogue, and inner dialogue, meaning that readers get to hear Miller sum up the things that happened, quotes from what people said, and quotes from her own inner thoughts she was having at the time. All three are used about equally in the scene she gives us where she is being questioned by Turner's attorney, which allows us as readers to view how with each question that

²⁸² Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 179-180.

is asked, the person being questioned can begin to doubt everything. The defense attorney's second question asked what time it was when she could last remember the night she was assaulted. When she gave a time, he asked her if that was only an estimate since she would have no way of knowing. Miller then narrates "I already felt I knew less than I originally thought" and this was only after the second question about a relatively small detail. The rest of her questioning followed a similar pattern of inflicting doubt.²⁸³

The women involved in VAW narratives are likely already struggling with putting together what happened to them purely out of shock, confusion, or lack of understanding in general. When one is put on the stand and asked direct questions whose sole purpose is to discredit their experience, it creates a whole new obstacle to the creation and presentation of that narrative.

Attorneys are meant to provide a fair trial for both parties, and that is a goal that must be kept intact. However, we can step back and wonder if the type of questioning the defense attorney used against Miller, this being a common tactic, crosses the line of fairness to manipulation. Court may be a place of justice, but it has also turned into a game of who gets to keep their story intact. Miller's experience shows that completely.

Section C: Reporters/Media

When charges are given or arrests are made, it doesn't take long for the public to be notified through some sort of news outlet or social media. Living in the age we do with the technology we have at our disposal, word travels quick and it travels awfully far. We will be staying with

²⁸³ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 176.

Miller in discussing the impact of these interactions, as her descriptions of dealing with reporters, media, and the public's comments prove the point of impact that is trying to come across here.

As stated previously by Bradley J. Edwards in his novel, relationships with reporters and victims are difficult waters to tread.²⁸⁴ When Julie K. Brown approached him for her own reporting project on Epstein, he was extremely hesitant. This was largely because he knew the special care and truly hard work it would take in order to do victims justice in reporting their cases. Though Brown ended up completing her work in a way that Edwards not only praised but credited as a reason why Epstein was finally charged, Edwards also stands by the fact that this isn't always the case.

Intentionality in reporting has great impact but so does unintentionality. When Miller first read some of the articles reporting on her assault, she "almost choked," for she was receiving more details from this report that she found on the internet than what she had received from anyone else. Miller details how she was only referred to as "victim," which is a bit of a double-sword decision.²⁸⁵ By referring to Miller as "victim," her privacy is protected which is a vital thing to protect especially so early on. At the same time, however, in using this label and this label alone, her identity was entirely diminished to nothing but the assault. In fact, her identity in the papers and reports included more of Turner's identity than Millers, as she was being labeled his victim with nothing else except that, while Turner got to be the alleged assaulter on top of a Stanford student, athlete, and young man.²⁸⁶

Not only what would be considered professional reporting have its toxic traits, but there is a whole other part of media that holds power- the comment section. When Miller encountered

²⁸⁴ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 314-317.

²⁸⁵ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 45.

²⁸⁶ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 45.

the comment section on the reports of her assault, she was met with accusations, disbelief, and even jokes. One comment painted Miller as the criminal saying “He was only nineteen! She hooked up with a freshman? Doesn’t that make her the predator” and then went on to note that she herself would never get that drunk. Another stated that it was “hard to credit” that Turner would do this because “one might think he’d find lots of girls who wanted to hook up with him” due to his athletic, smart, and handsome demeanor. Miller was labeled as “finger lickin’ good” and people could not stop bringing up jokes involving the “breastroke.”²⁸⁷

In the end of viewing all of the reporting and media, she was left with a question. “I wondered how in an instant my identity had been reduced to the blacked-out and raped woman.”²⁸⁸ She was also met with the recognition of her upcoming battle. “How do I protect my life? From the investigators? From the reporters? I was being equipped with a prosecutor, going into battle, but no one could tell me how to hold all this hostility, this wrecking sadness. I was alone, my story now sealed inside me, a faceless lady feeding me platitudes through the phone.”²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 48.

²⁸⁸ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 48.

²⁸⁹ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 52.

Part V: Pieper Lewis

Up to this point in this research piece, we have discussed narrative in itself and its creation, the ways in which identity plays a key factor in the development and presentation of narrative, and narrative's relationship with the legal system, both on an international level in looking at basic human rights and a more domestic level regarding specific legal language, laws, and interactions. All of this was done with a specific and intentionally chosen focus on narratives from women who have experienced violence against them. In each part, we were able to take bits and pieces from brave women who have come forward, either anonymously or not, and use their stories and experiences as a tool to better understand the different phenomena we dissected. Part V, the part you are reading, will be dedicated to taking one story still in the midst of unfolding and seeing how each part discussed previously is working into her narrative.

As stated in Part I, I am writing this in Cedar Falls, Iowa, and because of that, throughout this research, one female was actually quite prominent in the news for the very reasons that I am writing about here. Seventeen year old Pieper Lewis was charged with first-degree murder after killing her alleged rapist in June 2020 when she was fifteen. However, she later plead guilty to involuntary manslaughter and willful injury, which though could have resulted in a total of twenty years prison time, ten years each charge, ended up resulting in a sentence of five years probation and the payment of a restitution of 150,000 dollars to the family of the man she killed.²⁹⁰ On November 4th of 2022, after receiving her verdict, she fled from her women's shelter and was found five days later. This escape violated her probation, thus leaving her future up in the air at the time that this is being written. She potentially could still complete probation

²⁹⁰ The Associated Press, "An Iowa teenager who killed her accused rapist is sentenced and ordered to pay \$150K," *Iowa Public Radio NPR*, last modified September 14, 2022, [Iowa human trafficking victim Pieper Lewis sentenced, ordered to pay \\$150,000 : NPR](#)

and have her record expunged, but she could also face either some or all of the original prison time assigned to her.²⁹¹ This will be a difficult decision to sort out, however, as the judge deferred his judgment on the prison time in order to give her the probation and restitution deal, meaning that no real prison time was ever truly sentenced.

All previous examples discussed occurred in the past, which can create a third misconception with readers that we no longer live in a world that functions in the way that has been presented in this piece. Though the Domestic Fatality Report's statistics work effectively to take down such a claim, we lack many details in their cases, which makes it a bit more difficult to see the presence of the relationship between narrative, identity, legalities, and manipulation. Lewis' situation provides infallible evidence that everything presented in this piece is still loudly prevalent in the society we are all currently functioning in. In Lewis' story, we can see each and every part discussed in this research present in her narrative, and we see these parts working together to manipulate the entirety of her experience. Lewis has her own part because her story requires it. I worry I will fail to even do justice to her here, and that worry is warranted and likely to happen, but we will try nonetheless. The hope is that in seeing Lewis' case and experience through the lens we have been analyzing everything through thus far, we can begin to understand just how prevalent an issue narrative manipulation is, and on top of that, proving the answer to the question of whether narrative is protected as a basic human right- the answer being a firm "no."

²⁹¹ Andrea Marks, "Teen Who Killed Her Alleged Rapist - and Ran - Could Now Face Jail," *Rolling Stone*, last modified November 17, 2022, [Sex Trafficking Victim Pieper Lewis to Face Judge After Escape – Rolling Stone](#)

Chapter 12: Pieper's Story, Pieper's Right

When Lewis entered into the world, the creation of her narrative began. When Lewis gained membership into the club of women who have experienced violence against them due to her adoptive mother's emotional abuse, her narrative began developing in regard to external factors that were outside of her control. When Lewis ran away from home and was trafficked into a world where the violence was heightened, the narrative course steered even further from her control. When Lewis and her narrative officially entered the legal system, her narrative was the public's property and the public's property alone where her identity, societal judgment, legal implication, and barriers that were developed for her long before she was born all worked diligently to mutilate her story into whatever the public deemed fit.

Though I have not the right to split Lewis' story in any way I choose, I do want to look at her story through a few different lenses and will work to do so as respectfully as I can. That there is a responsibility when one is bringing in a deep dissection of another's story to do so in a way that is not dehumanizing to the person being talked about is another important point to note. This was a point discussed in Part II Chapter 4²⁹² when talking about third-party media. In that chapter, defense attorney Bradley J. Edwards mentioned how it is easy for a voice to simply become a statistic and to lose its individuation. This was one consideration he had when thinking about whether or not to work with journalist Julie K. Brown when she wanted to do a piece on Epstein and the women he abused. He felt it vital that these women stay human. This is something we will try to do here, and further research projects should keep in mind as they take on stories that are not their own.²⁹³

²⁹² Pg. 17

²⁹³ Bradley J. Edwards, *Relentless Pursuit: My Fight for the Victims of Jeffrey Epstein*, 314-317.

Each section will be looking at a few different themes that we have discussed throughout the project, though they have not been labeled with the direct titles that the past sections have. This is in order to give Lewis' story a bit more of a narrative feel as opposed to just a dissection. In addition, there comes a point when the reader themselves needs to make connections as well. This is something that hopefully will be done thoroughly in Part VI, but we will ease into the process of self-observing in this part. Section A: No Grace will compare Lewis and Brock Turner's stories with the differences being revealing in themselves. Section B: Tell Your Story, but Play By My Rules will lay out depictions of Lewis' story from outside sources, and in Section C: Pay Your Rapist's Family, Frye's oppression image of the double-bind will come to life.

Section A: No Grace

Lewis is a black female teenager. If we think back to Crenshaw, Frye, and Young, we can already guess at the barriers Lewis is going to encounter.

In talking about this topic, I would actually like to refer back to a statement made by a concerned citizen for Brock Turner that I had mentioned previously in Part II.²⁹⁴ I am confident this comparison will say all we need to hear. As a reminder, her letter stated that "It seems an extreme punishment for actions many of us may have made in our youth, and many youths are still making every day" referring to the possibility of a lengthy prison sentence for his crimes against Turner.²⁹⁵ I am not writing now to condone the actions of Lewis. She murdered someone,

²⁹⁴ Pg. 16

²⁹⁵ Court Documents: Stanford Rape Case. *People v. Brock Turner*, Case B1577162, Document 9 of 9, "Letters."

and that is an objective fact. If we are going to state and stick by objectivity, let's present some more facts.

Turner forcefully “digitally penetrated” unconscious Chanel Miller behind a dumpster and appeared to have been willing to proceed to rape her had he not been interrupted by passersbyers. He was drunk at the time, as had been clear from observations reported by others at the party he and Miller were attending. According to reports, most people were significantly drunk at that party, yet Turner’s assault on Miller was the only reported. He ripped her clothes, stripped her of her underwear, and decided that her body was his own plaything, and that is just the physical facts of what occurred. The physical harm arguably does not even compare in severity to the mental harm he caused.

Next, let's look at Lewis.

Lewis was held at gunpoint and taken to her rapist’s home. She was forced by her rapist to take in enough marijuana and alcohol to make her pass out. She was then raped for who knows how long. Then, she awoke and killed the sleeping man. These are only the facts present in just that night. There are also the unavoidable details that Brooks had allegedly raped her before this event, in addition to the fact that she was a trafficking victim who ran away from her home to escape abuse.

I understand that Brooks was sleeping when Lewis stabbed him, leaving the idea of “imminent danger” difficult to legally argue,²⁹⁶ and I understand that Turner was a young man with what was supposed to be a bright future ahead of him. The pill I have a hard time swallowing is in the fact that someone can look at Turner’s sexual assault and so easily give grace to it. Not only did they give grace, but there were people providing support by relating to

²⁹⁶ Pg. 113

the situation in stating that Turner's actions were "actions many of us may have made in our youth, and many youths are still making every day."²⁹⁷ While Turner's actions were labeled common, relatable, and understandable, the public and media have the utmost trouble of relating to the idea of killing their rapist that would not stop raping them. Turner gets to mistakenly sexually assault a girl with the intention of rape but Lewis becomes an inexcusable killer. Turner gets to make the "mistake" of digital penetration on an unconscious woman, but Lewis is not allowed the "mistake" of killing her rapist.

Why? How did we get here? Why does Turner's narrative have so much protection in keeping his title of a standup college swimmer, but people don't care if Lewis' narrative is dismembered by those around her? Perhaps we should continue the pattern of analyzing objective facts. This time, looking at Turner and Lewis' life history leading up to their crimes.

Brock Turner is a white male who was born on August 1st, 1995 to a registered nurse mother and an electrical engineer father. With two siblings, he is a part of a family of five whose residence was Dayton, Ohio. Excelling at swimming, even earning state titles and breaking records at his high school, and having high enough grades to qualify, Turner earned a swimming scholarship from Stanford University which he attended starting in 2014. Continuing his success in swimming, he was a name known by professors and students among the university. Though there is evidence that he would use drugs such as marijuana and LSD recreationally, the only time he was caught with a substance he wasn't allowed to have was in 2014 when he was caught walking to a football game with his friends while holding alcohol. Being underage, he received a ticket, this being his only history of caught and recorded criminal behavior. The nation would see later on through the letters written in his defense that professors, friends, and family held Turner

²⁹⁷ Court Documents: Stanford Rape Case. *People v. Brock Turner*, Case B1577162, Document 9 of 9, "Letters."

in high regard, describing him as a nice, hard-working guy who had a bright future ahead of him.²⁹⁸

Pieper Lewis is a black female who was adopted when she was three after being put in foster care. In 2020, her adoptive parents divorced, and she was left with her mother, after which, her mother became emotionally abusive. She engaged in full control over Lewis to the point of requiring her daughter to ask permission to use the bathroom and would verbally assault her with claims that Lewis was ugly, promiscuous, and would never be anything other than that. Her mother was not present in any court proceedings. Lewis' top two allies, and perhaps the only two in her life at fifteen, were her high school freshman math teacher, who described her as "extremely kind, sweet and very funny" and even set up the GoFundMe dedicated to paying Lewis' restitution, and social worker Jana Rhoads who said Lewis was "delightful — very engaging, very clear about her plans for her future goals"²⁹⁹- two people who are enough outside of Lewis' life that they can only ethically step in at certain moments. At fifteen, Lewis ran away from her mother and the abuse, which left her sleeping in a Des Moines apartment hallway, alone, unprotected, and entirely without finances of any sort. This hallway was where a twenty-eight year old man found her and promised to care for her like a boyfriend would. Without a bed, food, or people to care for her, she went with him. Though the age-gap was illegal and arguably unethical as a romantic relationship, the relationship that developed would hit a whole different level of criminal behavior as he began trafficking her to other men. Forcing her to have sex with

²⁹⁸ "Timeline of significant dates in the life of Brock Turner," *AP News*, last modified June 11, 2016, [Timeline of significant dates in the life of Brock Turner | AP News](#) and Court Documents: Stanford Rape Case. *People v. Brock Turner*, Case B1577162, Document 9 of 9, "Letters," released on *Los Angeles Times* on June 10, 2016, [Court documents: Stanford rape case: People v. Brock Allen Turner \(9/9\) - Documents - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](#)

²⁹⁹ Rekha Basu, "Too rarely is justice meted out as thoughtfully as it was in Pieper Lewis' case," *Des Moines Register*, last modified September 15, 2022, [Opinion: Finally, Iowa teen Pieper Lewis saw what justice looks like \(desmoinesregister.com\)](#)

whoever he chose, sometimes even putting her at gunpoint, Lewis had to choose to allow herself to be raped (as even if she wanted to have any sex, she was under the age of consent, leaving her unable to consent to any act at all) or to possibly be killed.

The differences present in these two's histories are arguably quite obvious, but it would be beneficial to point out at least three that contributed to each of their narratives being mangled and mutilated with the other coated in stained bullet-proof glass.

(1) Turner is a white male in a high social class with money and attended what was considered to be a prestigious school using his not only able-body but rather athletically skilled body to earn positive fame and reputation. Lewis is a black female who had no money as well as no position in society where she could have built an image of herself people would run to defend. Turner's identity is built from every trait of the oppressor, and Lewis' identity is built from every trait of the oppressed. And, it is important to remember that oppressors do not continue oppressing merely because of their identity- there is a sort of either intentional or unintentional protection of the oppressors which allows them to keep the pattern going.

(2) Frye and Young's frameworks of oppression label participation in the workforce to be a key factor in who stays on top and who is molded into the bottom. Turner was an established swimmer at an established college. His skills were viewed as valuable enough by society to even receive a scholarship to continue doing what he was doing. Though he didn't yet have a career, he was a college student on scholarship, and that in itself can often be considered a suitable replacement for traditional employment until college is over. Lewis was a teenager whose only entrance into the workforce was illegal sex work. She has two blatant points working against her there. Not only was she not in an official position of employment, meaning that society views her

as not having labor value (which is one of the top if not the top values of capitalism)³⁰⁰ but she was involved with the highly stigmatized category of illegal sex work. Even though she was a trafficking victim, and she by definition cannot be considered a sex work employee, the public stigma surrounding it stays very similar.³⁰¹

(3) Turner assaulted a female. Lewis assaulted a man. Both victim and perpetrator's identities play a key part, and that is no different in either of these cases. The stigma surrounding women and their expectation or protecting themselves from uncontrollable men painted the survivor of Turner's assault, Chanel Miller, to be the one to blame for ending up unconscious behind a dumpster for Turner to come force his hands into. Lewis, on the other hand, took a father away from his kids, and kids need their fathers.³⁰² Miller is a floozy drunk who should have stayed home, and Brooks was a doting father who only would have wanted to be with his kids. Turner is a stand-up young man who was at the wrong place at the wrong time with just a bit too much alcohol in his system, and Lewis is a rebellious runaway who should've kept her composure after being raped. It isn't a coincidence that no matter whether the male is in the victim slot or the perpetrator slot that he is excused, and when the female is in the victim slot or the perpetrator slot that she is in the wrong.

Section B: Tell Your Story, But Play By My Rules

When talking about the court, legal, and media interactions that occurred between Lewis, the people of the court, and journalists from a variety of outlets, it actually becomes quite a

³⁰⁰ Karl Marx, "Estranged Labor."

³⁰¹ Pg. 88

³⁰² Philip Joens, "Des Moines teen Pieper Lewis, who killed alleged rapist, gets probation, deferred judgment," *Des Moines Register* last modified September 15, 2022. [Iowa teen Pieper Lewis, who killed alleged rapist, avoids prison \(desmoinesregister.com\)](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/crime/2022/09/15/des-moines-teen-pieper-lewis-who-killed-alleged-rape-gets-probation-deferred-judgment/7011172002/)

complex conversation. Specifically, the interactions between Lewis and the appointed judge in the case District Judge John M. Porter holds a lot of substance to dissect and analyze. In Rekha Basu's opinion piece for the Des Moines Register "Too rarely is justice meted out as thoughtfully as it was in Pieper Lewis' case," Basu expresses great satisfaction, and even a hint of admiration in the way Lewis' case was handled. She specifically points out the behavior of Judge Porter. Basu uses intentionally positive language in telling the outcome of the trial saying "Emotionally abused, sexually trafficked and raped at 15, then in state custody for more than two years, and now grieving the death of her father, Lewis finally caught a break. Instead of 20 years in prison, District Judge David M. Porter sentenced her to five years of probation and a deferred judgment that could be wiped off her record, along with fines."³⁰³ Before moving forward into Basu's focus on Judge Porter, I do want to take a moment and comment on the specific language used here.

The piece of media presented here is an opinion piece, meaning that it reflects merely the thoughts of the author herself with no affiliation to the paper's beliefs, the court's beliefs, or really anyone other than Basu's beliefs for that matter. Opinion pieces in journalism allow a different amount of freedom than other pieces of journalism. Oftentimes, at least what is supposed to be the standards, journalism is entirely objective, for journalism is meant to be what gives the community the facts of the situation for the community to then develop their own opinions. Though the idea of "fake news" and biased networks is a conversation widely talked about now, leaving this idea of objective journalism highly in question, that is not necessarily the focus here, so we will be moving on. The point that is relevant is that because Basu's piece is an opinion piece, she is able to use emotionally charged language that clearly depicts how she feels

³⁰³ Rekha Basu, "Too rarely is justice meted out as thoughtfully as it was in Pieper Lewis' case."

about the situation. In the above quote, we see her say that Lewis “finally caught a break.” This wording is significant not only because we can see how Basu feels about the situation, which helps us better understand how the public may be reacting to Lewis’ case, but also because those four words are creating a narrative for Lewis that she has not approved. Yes, I would be fairly comfortable with guessing that Lewis would not have been thrilled with a twenty-year prison sentence but would she call 150,000 dollars of restitution a break? Just because Lewis did not receive the most severe sentence doesn’t mean that all is well and good, and when the media depicts it as so, there is impact. This is something to keep in mind when moving forward here and in viewing media in general.

Moving forward into Basu’s analysis of Judge Porter, we see her continue this upbeat attitude. She talks of how she would love to “bottle up” the atmosphere and mood of the courtroom upon Lewis receiving her verdict, creating this image of a movie-like victory where the good guys win and the bad guys lose. It’s a simple image of goodness and only goodness, with Judge Porter being the changed hero of Lewis’ story. Basu paints the judge as a stern man of the law forcing Lewis to remain shackled in her first few days in court but after hearing Lewis’ tragic story, his heart grows three times its size. Basu states, “In two days of sentencing hearings a week apart, he had gone from initially denying a defense request to let Lewis so much as dress in regular clothes, without shackles, in court, to championing her future: “Tell your story to other young people in our community.””³⁰⁴ “Championing” Lewis’ future- what a man.

These descriptions are all well and great, but did Lewis feel this burst of euphoria that Basu describes? Was seventeen-year old, a legal minor, Lewis basking in the bliss of being told that she needed to pay her rapist’s family 150,000 dollars? Was it pure ecstasy being told that she

³⁰⁴ Rekha Basu, “Too rarely is justice meted out as thoughtfully as it was in Pieper Lewis’ case.”

was a criminal having her future “championed” by the great and powerful Judge Porter?

According to Basu, Judge Porter encouraged Lewis to go on and tell her important story, and that is a really nice sentiment for him to present, but where is she going to do that? When are we going to hear her confirm the utopic atmosphere and graceful sentence she was given?

Furthermore, when are we going to hear Lewis paint the good ole’ judge as the hero Basu seems to think he is? I personally anxiously await this moment.

It should be stressed here that this is not a personal attack on Basu, nor is it a call to end opinion pieces in journalism. Basu’s work is important, and I am not here to silence voices. That statement applies with full force to Basu. The perspective she gives in this piece is powerful. By providing the perspective she does, we as readers and participants in this community and legal system can observe how outsiders are viewing and digesting certain situations. I know it sounds like I am not a fan of Basu, and I in fact may sound even a bit unprofessionally harsh. However, I respect her role in this game of storytelling. She should continue to do what she does and provide her perspective. We just also need to remember and realize that each piece of someone’s story that is shared not by them has an impact, and it is irresponsible and arguably unethical to simply take one’s perspective as is and adopt that as the full narrative. Basu’s positive tone is not the full story, and we in fact can actually see that through other articles and recounts of the trial as well.

Above, we have an image of Judge Porter as a modern-day protector of justice, a hero for those of unfortunate circumstances. In fact, we even can see him be a hero for our own cause in this paper- a legal cheerleader for narrative. Let’s not plaster his face on the cover yet though. Where there were positive comments that may induce the want of smiles and claps, there were also antagonistic, pointed words that lacked the compassion to the seventeen-year old we saw in

the previous paragraph. NPR was another one of the many outlets that reported and continues to report on Lewis' situation. Here, I think we see a little less of a favorable view of the judge. The

Associated Press reported:

The judge peppered Lewis with repeated requests to explain what poor choices she made that led up to Brooks' stabbing and expressed concern that she sometimes did not want to follow rules set for her in juvenile lockup. "The next five years of your life will be full of rules you disagree with, I'm sure of it," Porter said. He later added, "This is the second chance that you've asked for. You don't get a third."³⁰⁵

Section C: Pay Your Rapist's Family

I have asked multiple times throughout the entirety of this research what is expected of these women that are caught in seemingly impossible situations, and I ask that once more. What was expected of Pieper Lewis? Judge Porter "peppered Lewis with repeated requests to explain what poor choices she made that led up to Brooks' stabbing."³⁰⁶ What part is he referring to? What poor choices does he have in mind? The fourth unique factor of VAW narratives was the idea that women will make themselves the enemy or the villain.³⁰⁷ In this, I identified the ever-prevalent practice of victim-blaming to be a key component in keeping this factor alive and well. Lewis stabbed Brooks because he repeatedly raped her. Here, we have one of the most clear causes and effects. Had Brooks not raped her, Lewis likely would not have had reason to kill him. Going back further, if Lewis had not been forced by gunpoint by her trafficker to go to Brooks' house, she would not have even been in the same vicinity to kill him. Going back even further, if she had not been abused by her adoptive mother, she would not have had a need to run away and she would not have met her trafficker who then would not have forced her to have sex

³⁰⁵ The Associated Press, "An Iowa teenager who killed her accused rapist is sentenced and ordered to pay \$150K."

³⁰⁶ The Associated Press, "An Iowa teenager who killed her accused rapist is sentenced and ordered to pay \$150K."

³⁰⁷ Pg. 51

with men upon men, which means she would not have been connected to Brooks. Which of these choices were poor on Lewis' part? Which of these were choices at all? Should she have been expected to continue enduring abuse from her adoptive mother? Should she, a lost and scared teenager, have been smart enough to identify the sweet and caring twenty-eight year old that approached her in a hallway she was sleeping in as a trafficker and ignored his advances at the risk of never receiving any help, or even facing retaliation from a man thirteen years older than her? Should she have refused to go to Brooks and accepted the bullet pointed at her head? Which of these choices were poor? Which of these choices were her choices? Judge Porter took Lewis' story of her life and twisted each event into an event of her own fault. He blamed the victim, and in Lewis' case, because she did commit a crime, this event of victim blaming worked to smudge the victim identity and pencil the criminal identity in dark black lead.

Whether we look at Basu's story of Porter's encouragement to tell her story or we give attention to his widely spread antagonistic words regarding her unfairly perceived inability to follow rules, Lewis' identity of victim was completely overshadowed by the title of criminal, and the ramifications of that are severe.

Porter's words, behavior, and depiction of Lewis was questionable, but her charging and sentencing made headlines even more so than Porter's words, specifically, the stipulation that Lewis must pay 150,000 in restitution to the family of the man she stabbed. We could also fairly word this as that Lewis, fifteen at the time of the rape and seventeen when receiving her sentence, had to pay 150,000 dollars to the family of the man who raped her. Remember that what led her into the hands of her trafficker was the fact that she had zero familial and financial support. Yet now, she was going to have to pay a sum of money many established adults would have trouble or even zero chance of budgeting out, and she was going to pay it to the family of

the man who drugged and raped her. Though Porter may have shown a bit more consideration in his behavior towards Lewis, it is true that her sentencing and the restitution was not entirely up to him. Porter as a judge was forced to work within a certain legal framework, and in Iowa's legal framework, there were a variety of stipulations diligently working against Lewis. Three of the most prominent are the requirement for restitution, the lack of human trafficking protective legislation, and the definition of imminent danger in regard to self-defense.

Iowa Code Chapter 910: Restitution says that if someone is convicted of a felony in causing the death of another person, they are required to pay at least 150,000 dollars to the family of the deceased. Enacted in 1997, the law has been a present legal factor in cases for around twenty-six years.³⁰⁸ The specific section that pertains to Lewis is Chapter 910.3.B

Restitution for death of victim. It states that:

In all criminal cases in which the offender is convicted of a felony in which the act or acts committed by the offender caused the death of another person, in addition to the amount determined to be payable and ordered to be paid to a victim for pecuniary damages, as defined under section 910.1, and determined under section 910.3, the court shall also order the offender to pay at least one hundred fifty thousand dollars in restitution to the victim's estate if the victim died testate. If the victim died intestate the court shall order the offender to pay the restitution to the victim's heirs at law as determined pursuant to section 633.210. The obligation to pay the additional amount shall not be dischargeable in any proceeding under the federal Bankruptcy Act. Payment of the additional amount shall have the same priority as payment of a victim's pecuniary damages under section 910.2, in the offender's plan for restitution.³⁰⁹

Though Lewis was not charged with the initial first-degree murder, she still was charged with two felonies that left her legally responsible for the death of a man. This means that Lewis fits under the restitution chapter as it is stated without a doubt. What is particularly interesting about this code is that it does not provide any exceptions regarding circumstantial considerations or

³⁰⁸ Iowa Code Chapter 910: Restitution, accessed on February 28th, 2023, [910.pdf \(iowa.gov\)](#)

³⁰⁹ Iowa Code Chapter 910.3B: Restitution for death of victim, accessed on February 28th, 2023, [910.3B.pdf \(iowa.gov\)](#)

even age, much like other laws would. Lewis has not been the only minor expected to find a way to pay this money.

Fifteen-year old Daimoney Richardson pleaded guilty to second-degree murder in 2014 after having aided her nineteen year old boyfriend D'Anthony Curd in 2013 in the stabbing and killing of Ronald Kunkle. Like Lewis, Richardson had run away from home and had been trading babysitting favors with an apartment tenant in exchange for basic needs, as well as drugs. Her relationship with Curd was considered to be predatory in nature, and she had experienced sexual assault and overall general but severe dysfunction leading up to the event of the stabbing. Richardson showed extreme remorse for her actions, and in the moment, accepted the sentence of “an indeterminate term of incarceration not to exceed fifty years with twenty-five years of the sentence to be suspended” in addition to the 150,000 dollar restitution without argument or hesitation.³¹⁰ In 2017, however, she did appeal the court on the restitution and the restitution alone. She did so on the grounds that the court could have used discretion under a recently established section that would have allowed for a lower amount as well as arguing that the restitution demand she received went against the Iowa Constitution due to her age and her circumstances.

The court denied the appeal as well as defended the code as a whole. Not only did they defend it, but they argued that youth are better suited to pay this amount than many adults. Reports state that the court said “In fact, juvenile offenders like Richardson could be in a better

³¹⁰ *State v. Richardson*, No. 14–1174, Iowa Court of Appeals, Supreme Court of Iowa, filed 2017, [State v. Richardson :: 2017 :: Iowa Supreme Court Decisions :: Iowa Case Law :: Iowa Law :: US Law :: Justia](#)

position than comparable adult offenders to repay \$150,000 restitution because of their younger age and the shorter period for which they will be incarcerated,” the ruling states.”³¹¹

So, in Richardson’s case, she was not only forced to make this payment under code, but she was told that receiving a 150,000 dollar bill was a mercy due to her age. Such manipulation left Richardson’s case in the dirt, as the court effectively swept her voice under the rug. Though Richardson would not be successful in arguing against the restitution practice, Lewis’ case has sparked prominent outrage across the nation and has led the state to begin conversation on the true validity and purpose of this specific Iowa Code. It was reported in February 2023 that the Iowa Senate was advancing a bipartisan bill to change the restitution law. Known as Senate Study Bill 1069, this bill would allow the restitution to be given at the judge’s discretion instead of being a requirement by law no matter the situation.³¹² Each bolded “shall” stated in the above statement from the restitution code would no longer be “shall,” but instead would be replaced with “may,” showing the judge has both the power to make it a piece of the sentencing and the power to decide it is not. In addition, the considerations allowed by the judge are not broad and open to all. For example, age is still not to be considered a factor that could release the judge from deciding to not give restitution. The exception born from this bill is specific: “In determining whether to order the offender to pay restitution to the victim’s estate or the victim’s heirs at law, the court may consider any criminal offenses committed by the victim against the offender.”³¹³ It can be assumed then that in a case like Richardson, the restitution would hold,

³¹¹ Ty Rushing, “Explainer: The Iowa Law That Requires Pieper Lewis to Pay Her Abuser’s Family,” *Iowa Starting Line*, last modified September 15, 2022, [Explainer: The Iowa Law That Requires Pieper Lewis To Pay Her Abuser’s Family - Iowa Starting Line](#)

³¹² Stephen Gruber-Miller, “Pieper Lewis’ case prompts bipartisan victim restitution bill in Iowa Senate,” *Des Moines Register*, last modified February 9, 2023, [Pieper Lewis sex trafficking case prompts Iowa bill on victim restitution \(desmoinesregister.com\)](#)

³¹³ Senate Study Bill 1069, Introduced by The General Assembly of the State of Iowa, 2023, [Iowa Legislature - BillBook](#)

while in a case such as Lewis, she perhaps would have a chance at not having to pay the restitution. The exception granted by Senate Study Bill 1069 is a fantastic start to developing a more complex picture and understanding of these women's, these girl's, situations, but it isn't even close to a final step. We cannot excuse Richardson's actions as she did murder someone, but, what we can do is see that situations are not black and white in the way the restitution law paints it to be. Richardson's case would still not receive considerations under this stipulation.

It is also worth noting that both Richardson and Lewis argued against the restitution stipulation, but only one girl's voice made it to the public. Judge Porter's words of inspiration in telling Lewis to be vocal is tempting to be seen as a step towards the protection and even encouragement of narrative. However, where there is one Lewis, there is a Richardson. In reality, it is most likely at least one-hundred Richardson's for every Lewis, and that is probably being a bit too generous.

Lewis made national news. The people involved in her case or those that had heard about it demanded attention and because of that demand, the pressure is put on the legal system to keep the public relatively content, for uncontent people have a tendency to rebel- a behavior that law likes to avoid. Had others not taken the time to highlight Lewis' story, it is easy to imagine that this bill would not have even been created. Lewis not only highlights all of the concepts and philosophical topics we have discussed here, but when compared to Richardson, she is also an image of what happens when we do value VAW narratives- we get change.

Lewis sparked questions on the restitution law that was impacting other minors like her in similar situations, but her case also built a fire for a whole other conversation based on legal human trafficking protection. Other states have certain legal protections for victims of sex

trafficking that have committed crimes against their perpetrators. Iowa is not among that group, and Lewis' case vividly showed the impacts of such a vacancy.

One of the reasons that states do implement these laws is because trafficking situations hold a variety of special circumstances. No, Lewis' actions do not fit under self-defense because they don't meet the definition of imminent danger due to Brooks being asleep, but this girl experienced trauma unlike that many could even imagine. Murder is rarely ever simple, the aspect of trafficking adds in complexities that should not be ignored if justice is to be the main goal. Perhaps justice is not the main goal, however, or perhaps even the definition of justice itself is unclear. This is another thought that though we will not dive into it here, it requires attention.

Conclusion

When I began this project, I wanted to ask the question of whether or not our narratives are a basic human right. In the introduction, I answered that question with a stern "no." We then moved on to the question of whether or not the protection of our narratives from silencing and manipulation is protected basic human right. After many pages of investigation, I once again must answer no. In each part of this project, we saw both firm barriers and active antagonists work against the protection of VAW narratives. Whether it was due to societal standards and stigma or the legal system, it is clear that society, even in the area that is supposed to be in charge of protection, does not view nor protect VAW narratives from outside influence. With this in mind, the next questions that come up is what are we supposed to do? And, that is an awfully tough question for me to answer because I feel as though the solution is not as difficult as society has us believe. In fact, I find it rather simple and able to be summed up in five steps.

1. Educate
2. Listen
3. Validate
4. Change
5. Decide

Educate: A topic heavily touched on in Part II Chapter 5,³¹⁴ education on topics such as sex, bodily autonomy, emotion, and availability of resources is vital for both girls growing up in a society where there is a constant and prevalent risk of violence as well as girls and women that have already had experiences with it. When girls and women are not taught that they control their body and have the right to say no, it develops confusion on appropriate and consensual touch. The same goes for the idea of sex, as the abuser/perpetrator gets to define the situation if the one being abused is unable to create and define the situation itself.

Listen: I would like to believe that there is inherent power in words whether they are given attention or not. However, I also do think that in order to reach optimal power, someone has to listen, and with VAW narratives, we must be willing to listen to all aspects, no matter how uncomfortable the details make us.

Validate: It has been a common theme here that validation is often necessary for VAW narratives as if validation is not present, the voice that prevails is the one that is saying this is a normal life that the woman must simply sustain. If we do not validate, women won't speak because they won't realize that they have something worth saying.

These next two have proven to be the most difficult.

Change: Change has to come both societally and personally. The world that VAW narratives are functioning in is built to silence and manipulate these narratives, both in a social and legal aspect. These foundational blocks have to start to be whittled down. However, I am a

³¹⁴ Pg. 35

firm believer that there is power in individual change. The people in society often fall into the mindset that if they are the only one to take action, that their efforts are not enough and they don't matter. We see this with voting, environmental care, bullying, among so many other situations. Much like many of the lies we see surrounding violence against women, I believe that this is just another one crafted to keep change from happening. One person deciding to listen and validate in just one moment can provide a survivor of violence enough strength to find a way out or to speak up. Because of that moment, that woman may survive, and one life saved means everything, especially in a world of so much death.

Decide: I am not naive to how daunting all of this feels, nor am I clueless to the fact that I sound as though I am preaching in a way that is so much easier said than done. That is where this final step comes in, and this is the real kicker when it comes to moving forward at all. People need to make the decision that this is a change that is worth it. Here is our problem. People don't decide, and they don't decide because they don't care. I don't know how to make people decide. I really don't. I attempted to do this in Part I³¹⁵ in exploring how VAW can impact those other than women and how high the statistics are specifically in Iowa, but I am not going to pretend like that is enough. Making that decision is the key step here. We have to figure out how to make that decision an important one.

In Part I Chapter 2,³¹⁶ I asked the question of why study VAW narratives, and one of the points that was brought up was the speed in which the statistics held in this project become outdated, and this outdatedness is particularly important because the statistics represent women being traumatized, violated, and/or dying. Everything discussed in this project is happening while this is being written as well as while it is being read. There isn't time to ignore the

³¹⁵ Pg. 4

³¹⁶ Pg. 7

treatment of VAW narratives. I feel nauseous at the idea of how the numbers will look when I check the report in September, and I hope that you'll care enough, or at least be curious enough to check them now for yourself. I'll even provide the link: [Publications | Iowa Attorney General](#).

Final Remarks & Introduction to Part VI

I have decided to put the conclusion and final remarks before the piece is finally finished because I do not think this is a project that can end with my words.

Up until this point, we have examined concepts, facts, and arguments. We have also been presented with a variety of different narratives that both aided in the discussion at hand while also were presented to us purely for the sake of their existence. The next and final part of this project seeks to expand upon what has been established in the above pages by being a platform for women to tell their stories, for I believe a project on voice without the inclusion of voice is nothing but hypocrisy. Contained in the following pages are the narratives of seventeen women who have experienced violence against them at some point in their lives. Some have told their story previously. Others for the first time. Some wrote with many words. Others completed their story in a shorter form. Some told of multiple experiences. Others only told of one. Despite these differences, there is one similarity that can be found amongst this group.

All women decided to tell their story in the way in which they wanted it told. That's the key statement. All women decided. They took their story and decided that it was their right to tell it. In the content above, we've seen that the right to one's narrative is not one that is protected. This means that it is unfortunately entirely the responsibility of the individual to make the decision.

The women in these pages decided they had a right to their story, and with that right they decided to tell it. However, there is still another side to that decision- there are a variety of women who saw this opportunity and decided it was their right not to tell. This part of that equation is a key factor in understanding the right to one's story- it has to be the person's decision in what they do with their story, and with that fact, there must be a complete avoidance of pressure or judgment for either. This piece is for those women as well.

Though this is true, this project will still be ending highlighting the power that using the right of a person's narrative *can* have. The women below told their story, and in doing so, they have brought attention and awareness to the events that occurred to them. They have stood tall against the antagonist of silence. They have taken back the control on the telling of their life story, and now because of that, it is in writing in the way that they themselves have willed it. Even if other versions or complaints arise, their stories now officially and publicly exist the way that these women want them to. There is great power in that, thus, there is great power embedded in the pages that you are about to read. I've said multiple times throughout the creation of this piece that without Part VI and the women who made it, this project is nothing. I stand behind that.

A few notes on the process in collecting these narratives may be helpful to know before we move forward. In order to protect the women who decided to engage in this project, the entire interview process was reviewed and approved by the University of Northern Iowa's Institutional Review Board, a board that is dedicated to protecting the rights and well being of participants and investigators in a study. This process involved creating various documents including consent forms, resource documents, interview scripts, and recruitment flyers. The only qualifications to participate were to have experienced violence at some point in their life, have identified as a

woman during the experience of violence, and that there was no criminal investigation at the time regarding the incident. The definitions used for “woman” and “violence” were the same used in Part I³¹⁷ and were kept broad in order to keep the study open to as many people as possible. I will add that broad definitions are especially important when talking about violence because it is common for women to minimize their experience. When it came to the collection of responses, two options were offered. Women could either participate in an in-person interview or a Google survey which allowed for responses no matter the location of the person. In order to protect the women and their privacy, as well as the privacy of those involved, all names have been changed as well as sporadic minor details. The violence and emotion, however, were not changed at all. All words included in these narratives are the words straight from the women whether it was a transcript from an in-person interview or a copy and paste from the survey. In regard to the survey, answers to some of the guiding questions were rearranged so that it read as a full narrative and not just a question and answer format. A few points throughout the narratives, there may be words in brackets ([...]). This indicates words that I have added in order to provide clarification or a smoother transition. This was necessary for both methods. Once again, words that are not in brackets are the words of the women. These were not my stories to tell, and besides the very few words I felt needed to be put in for the sake of the reader’s understanding, my words do not belong here. This is why I chose to have them tell the story completely instead of the method of interviewing and recounting myself.

To continue with this theme, my final words on this topic will in fact not be my words at all, but instead the words of a woman who found herself time and time again met with violent

³¹⁷ Woman: “anyone who identifies as a woman.” Violence: “The definition used of violence takes an extremely broad approach and is as follows: A physically, sexually, emotionally, and/or psychologically/mentally harmful action inflicted on someone.”; Pg. 5.

experiences and knows firsthand the consequence of forced silence. Though she was not ready to tell her story in full, as is her right not to, she did have one final statement that she wanted included in hopes of empowering future voices. She says,

“Her story is his life sentence, and sometimes, that’s all the justice a survivor gets.”

- Anonymous

Part VI:

Her Story, Her Right

Victoria's Story, Victoria's Right

I had experienced a history of violence when I was a child with my father, and that was formative in preparing me to, or to sort of priming me to be open to an abusive relationship later on. So I will focus on the relationship that I had with my partner of seven years, which included physical violence and many other forms of control and abuse.

I met my partner Matt when I was 18, and he was 10 years older than me, so he was 28, and we became very attached. I moved in with him in a matter of weeks, and so I moved very, very quickly toward this person. He seemed to feel very familiar, and the physical violence started building a couple of years into that relationship.

I was in my early 20s when I was first targeted physically by him. There were other forms of violence that were occurring in our relationship, such as just emotional... I would call it at this point some emotional torture, control of who I was able to spend time with, control of my finances, there was sexual abuse that was happening in our relationship. So violence became kind of a last resort, but it was always present. There was always the threat of violence from about the age of probably 19 or 20, until I left him right after I had my daughter when I was 25.

The violence always happened in my home, and it was behind closed doors. This was something that I was experiencing without many people knowing. The first time I was in my kitchen, and we had been up all night fighting about something. Then in the morning, I was making breakfast or tea or something, and we were boiling water, and he took the kettle off of the stove and lifted my clothing and touched the hot metal to my skin and poured the boiling water on me, burning me. And I was shocked, like I had no idea that this person would enact violence on me in my own home, in my kitchen that I've invited him to live with me in. At this

point, I had seen him be violent to other people, like he had punched his best friend in the face so many times that he had to be taken to the emergency room. Like I knew he was capable, but I always thought that I was sort of different and that the safety of our love or whatever it was would keep me from being the target of his rage. So, primarily this was happening at home, and it was not every day, but it was enough to let me know that I wasn't going to be immune from that kind of reaction of his.

For the rest of our relationship, there was a lot of going back and forth. I moved to another city 2 years into our relationship, and another state 5 years into our relationship but we always stayed connected. We moved out of each other's homes, but we stayed in each other's lives. And it wasn't because of that that I ended up leaving. I knew that I was gonna stay with him. I knew that, even though he had hurt me, even though I was injured, I knew that I wasn't going to break up with him. I kept sort of following him, and there was all of these makeups, and like this remorse after these incidents. I felt that I knew him better than anyone else, and I could help him if I was just there and I was strong and present for him. And he to me seemed very weak and childlike, and it wasn't something that I felt I needed to address very seriously. So, I stayed for a long time after that, and I also noticed that I was increasingly angry and increasingly isolated from more people and more people as they saw how ugly my relationship was and how I was refusing to leave.

And so, I would also like to address the final straw. There had been other situations where I was being physically abused, but the last time was when I moved back in with him after I had my daughter. I learned I was pregnant around the time I was really feeling kind of fed up with this relationship, and so I had a therapist at the time. We had discussed me leaving him, and then I realized I was pregnant. And, I sort of had a choice to make whether I would let the

relationship end there, because I knew if I was going to have a child, I couldn't really trust him to be around that child. And, there was a part of me that knew too, if I had an abortion and just terminated the pregnancy, I would probably still stay with him. I don't know that I would have left just for myself. So I decided to have my child, and I had a sense, and this was correct, that when I was a parent and caring for another person, I would be more protective of them than I would be of myself.

So I decided to have my daughter, and, still was with him, trying to make a relationship work. The violence- and he's also a drug addict- the violence and the addiction became worse and worse and worse as I got closer to having this baby. But I just kept hoping that either things would explode, and I would be forced to leave, or things would change and I would be able to salvage the relationship. There were times when I could wrap my mind around living in his world and raising my child. And so I moved in with him to just kind of test and see what would happen. I had an infant at that time, and he had become really obsessed with guns at this point, and he was stockpiling weapons. He lived 50 miles away from the nearest town in a community that primarily just grew huge farms of marijuana. There's just marijuana everywhere, there's just mountains of it. He had a very large operation, and he was very wealthy, and he had lots of money and lots of land, and he was afraid of law enforcement. It still isn't federally legal, but states have legalized it, and the state I was living in had not yet. But the town we were living in was in the middle of the woods, and it was a community of like-minded people. They had voted to basically defund the police, so there was minimal law enforcement. There was more like a martial law type of situation. So, I'm there with my infant, and I think that it had been almost six years at this point of being with this person and the sort of dogma and his worldview had really clouded my own. I was thinking, well, maybe he's right. Maybe this is the way you're supposed

to live. You're supposed to live off of the grid, and you're supposed to buy bricks of gold and bury them in your backyard. That's what you're supposed to do. You're not supposed to live in the real world.

I tell you that just to kind of describe how remote and removed we were or I was at that time and he was and still is from everything, and why people looked at me with confusion and frustration. I was a classical pianist growing up. I was highly educated. I had a lot going for me. And I chose this person in this life that was so far removed from anything that any of my family or friends could understand. So I was way out there.

The last sort of straw was having my child in this environment and seeing the depth of his addiction had grown more than I had realized. He was starting to use heroin on a daily basis, and he was hiding it from me. I was asking him to get clean. It was really tumultuous. I was sober at the time, and I had been for throughout my pregnancy. I knew that I could change my life for my child, but I thought maybe he would too. He wasn't able to. Or he didn't choose to.

Although I had been threatened and I had been disrespected. I had been sexually abused. I feel like most of my mind and will and everything had been kind of decimated at that point. I didn't feel like I could even string a logical sentence together. But, I didn't realize that my life was in danger until he threatened me with a gun. That was when I realized that I was really scared.

It was a loaded gun. I know that it was because it was the gun he kept always loaded by his bed. So that was like the pivotal moment of violence that finally scared me enough to move with a lot of trepidation and to really start planning in detail how I was gonna leave. I'm a therapy girl, and I found a way, even though he took all my money- like I didn't have any money. I think he would give me an allowance of about \$150 a month because I was living in another

house because he was harvesting all of his products in the house that I was living in. And I had a baby and I was like, "I want to move. I want to get out of here while you have like 50 people living in my house," and it was really crazy. So I left and he would give me like \$150 a month to buy groceries for me as I was breastfeeding at the time. I thought to myself, I kind of need this money for other things. So I, without his knowledge, got on food stamps so that that could pay for my food. Then I would save the cash he gave me every month so that I could pay a therapist. I didn't have a job. I had left my really good job to move there with him, and anyways I was fortunate to find a counselor who, I didn't know at the time, was trauma informed and also an expert in domestic violence. She had also worked in a domestic violence research facility for many years before I met her.

I just called her off of the Internet, and I said "I just, I don't have that much money. Would you, could you... how much would you charge me to visit with me," and she said, "Well, how much can you pay?" I think she let me come for like \$15 an hour or something like that. She really worked with me, and she felt like she heard something was going on and she really wanted to help. So she was able to help me put a safety plan in place, and she was able to just encourage me to be really careful after that happened because I explained to her why I was worried, and she was definitely worried too. There were times that she wished I could have put a protective order in place. But because of where we lived, and the fact that I was not able to call the police- like they won't even come to those properties. Even if law enforcement from another city was gonna come, they won't usually enter that type of property. They know who's up there. They know there's drugs and guns and dogs, and they won't go. So, I never reported any of the violence because of the situation that I was in, and the person that I was with. And I knew a lot of other girls at the time who were living in situations like that, and they never reported either, because

they were really isolated, and they didn't have the ability, for one reason or another, to get another physical presence there that would step in between them and whoever they were seeing at the time.

During my exit plan, there were a few scary situations with my daughter. I left when she was eight months old, but I left her with him briefly, two or three times in her first months. The first time it was kind of like, OK, well, he just left her alone. She was in her baby chair, but she was alone. Like that was bad, you don't do that with a one month old baby. But... I don't know. He had some kind of ego tied into me trusting him with her, and so he just pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed saying like, "I know how to do this. I'm fine." So then the second time I came back, she was alone again, but this time she was up by a speaker, and it was blaring loud music into her ears, and he was downstairs making himself a drink. Then I was like "OK, he's never staying with her again." This is just negligence. But then the last time was the worst. I didn't allow him to take her, but I think I fell asleep and she was next to me. He came in and took her, and I didn't notice. Then I woke up, and she was gone and I ran outside. He had these hills on his property, and he was on a four Wheeler, and he had her on his back. She was maybe six months, and the baby carrier was not latched. It was open. One side was latched and the other was open. She was on his back, and he was riding up this steep hill on his four Wheeler racing around. I knew he was high, and I knew he had been drinking. Then I asked him to stop and was screaming, and he saw me and he laughed and he took off with her. I got into my car, and I didn't know... like what could happen. I didn't know what to do. I drove after him so that I could catch him, and then he was laughing at me. He pulled off the side of the road. I jumped out of my car. I grabbed her and put her in her carseat. He just had this maniacal laugh. He's like, "You're so fucking crazy", "You're such a fucking crazy bitch. What's your problem?" He just went off on

me, and I didn't really care. I left for the day. But. Yeah, that was the scariest part with her. I think I might have moved away like a week or two after that, and that was all sort of part of the next step of the plan. And then right after, I always had my door locked because I felt like he would come in and take her.

When I moved, I moved to the state of Texas, and he helped me move out there. I had finished my masters right before I had my daughter, and then I took a year off when I was living with him, and then was kind of like waiting to see if funding would come through for this doctoral program I'd applied to. Then when I got the letter that I had an assistantship, I left and kind of told him, like, "I'm just moving here for this program, and they're going to pay me to go" and, you know, "I'm not breaking up with you" you know, kind of a thing, and "You can come whenever you want." And for him, that was kind of like a nice deal because I would kind of be out of his hair, he could do whatever he wanted and then he could feel like he had a girlfriend and a baby that he could visit in another state when he wanted to. So, it took me some time to kind of slowly back away. He still came to where we were living a few times, and that whole insanity continued, but I was much more guarded. I learned a lot after that experience about what I think could be diagnosed as malignant narcissism or psychopathy and antisocial personality disorder and how much he fed off of my emotions. He fed off of me, my positive emotions and then also my negative emotions. So my reactions to him, I think that's what gave him his little sort of juice. So I learned to be very very very like nothing, like unresponsive, and I learned to be really guarded with what kinds of emotions and reactions I would show him and then just kind of in general.

Actually, he drove my stuff out there, and he bought me a house there. He said "I want to buy you a new house with my cash." I moved into that house, and he let me know that he'd also

gotten a storage unit a block from my house, and he put all his guns there. I didn't know if this was true, but I at the time was like, "probably fucking true," like I didn't question him. I knew that he was the only one with the key, and he told me that for a reason. So I still felt very scared for my safety, even after I left for a while. So when I filed for custody, I made sure that I had left the house he bought for me. I moved out and fortunately, but unfortunately for this poor lady, he had gotten into another relationship pretty quickly afterwards, so he was a little distracted. Since that time I know things have been bad for her. But. I've never tried to reach out. His ex girlfriend's tried to reach out to me, and I didn't listen, so. Anyway, he was just a little distracted. He wasn't calling me all the time. He wasn't showing up unannounced. So I thought, "This is my chance," and I packed up everything and moved out. I left anything that was his. He had furnished the place with his stuff, and I just left the house, and I moved. I got a grant from a domestic violence relocation facility called House of Hope through the Potawatomi Nation. I met with their intake counselor, I told her what was going on, and she was so supportive. She said, "We have furniture, we have money. We have trucks. We will move you out," and they came at night, and we moved everything in. At the time I had someone else living with me there. I had a fucking au pair from Brazil living with me, taking care of my daughter during the day, and I had to tell her "Look. We're leaving," and "We're moving into this little apartment. This is what I can afford," because he had been sort of helping me pay for her stipend. "We're gonna go, you're gonna stay with us through the summer and then you're gonna have to be placed with a different family because I'm not gonna be able to afford you" and... and she was amazing. She understood. She had met him, he had been in the house, she was very creeped out by him. And. She was super supportive. But we got out of there and so by the time I filed for custody, he didn't know where I was. I mean, he knew I was in that area, but I wasn't in the house. And he's not

very tenacious, like he didn't work that hard. I work 1000 times harder than him. I'm 1000 times more resourceful, and he wanted easy- easy and convenient. And he wanted me to be there when he wanted me to be there, but if he had to really look... I was very scared, but I learned later that he really didn't have any interest in working really really, really hard to find me.

The police were never involved and that was a little bit hard in my custody battle because they think "Oh, you didn't call the police" and "There's no record of this happening." So I kind of thought that might be an issue so I recorded him several times when he would come to my house and when I was living in Texas. He would get really wasted, and I would record him talking about certain events, and at that time I had kind of learned to not react and just to let him talk. So I did feel like I had thought ahead about certain things. I was able to share those narratives, and honestly, the thing he was the most concerned about was his finances. He didn't want to go through the court system because he has a lot of illegal money, and so he was primarily concerned about that. He kind of shoved off the custody order. He didn't really pay attention to it for a while. Then, I don't know exactly what happened, but he decided to get a lawyer and then sue me for custody, and that's when I... maybe this isn't super related but I had hired a lawyer, and they had just taken more and more money from me, and they hadn't done anything. So I had paid maybe like \$12,000, I had taken out a student loan to pay this lawyer, and they had used all of it. And then they hadn't filed anything. They had just written some emails, and that's it. And they're like, "Oh, you have to pay another retainer like another six grand," and I did it. Then when he got one clean drug test, like, "Congratulations," and he sent his request for custody. At this point the lawyer said, "Well, he's got a clean drug test. You're just gonna have to give him half custody." I was like, "The fuck I am," I'm not doing that. "I've given you all my money, you haven't done anything."

So I finally told my advisor at school what was going on. I was like “Something really bad is going on. I'm not gonna be able to go to my final exam,” and... She was amazing. I didn't ever really tell her in detail what was going on, but she got on the phone with the president of the university and the Dean of the college. Anybody she could think of, anybody in the law department, and she got me a call with like the top legal counsel for the University of Texas, and he gave me free counsel, and he got me an interview with the best lawyers in my town. She dipped into their scholarships to give me money, and I was able to pay another retainer. And it's just like... She totally saved me. So I'm really grateful to her. Because then I just got this amazing lawyer, and this lawyer just like... she wouldn't give up.

And it took a lot, but I got full custody and I got this super restrictive visitation policy. He never came around again. He wouldn't follow the rules, he wouldn't. By that time, there were just too many steps involved, and he just stopped visiting completely. He just left us alone, and we haven't seen him since. It's been five years or six years almost. My daughter's going to be 9, and he saw her last when she was 2. So then I was just kind of, I was still scared, but I was kind of free at that point. So the courts really helped me and being in probably a pretty conservative state helped too. I had moved from the West Coast. They are a lot more favorable to fathers and biological fathers there, and then I moved to the Midwest, and they were like, “This dude does drugs? Get him out.” So I didn't have to prove all the violence, and I didn't have to prove the psychological stuff, and I could just focus on, “Yeah, this person uses drugs,” and they were like, “That's enough for us. We'll put safety orders in place.” and I'm sure that they listened to the my testimony of abuse as well. I'm sure that had made a difference, and that's why they gave such strict orders. But yeah. It really changed everything. Finally I felt like the legal system got behind me.

However, one of the other reasons that I've been hesitant to share my story is because I am surrounded by so much privilege. I'm white. I was educated. I had this educational community around me. I had so many advantages, and I just feel sick about the people who don't have that same privilege and how much harder it is for many women; women of color, undocumented women, trans women, women with fewer means in society to get through the legal system, and how much harder it is for them to even have their stories listened to. Like nobody doubted me really. I mean, some people were jerks about it, but the women primarily in my life that I opened up to, they all helped me. And part of me feels like... I know I deserve it, but so does everybody. And I feel conflicted about that aspect of my story.]

I have not described my story in detail to people who weren't in my life at the time. I had described to my lawyer in great detail everything that had happened for the last six or seven years, and when I went to fight for custody of my daughter, I was pretty vocal about what had happened in court. But. I never described in detail what had happened to the large group of friends that I had at the time who were connected to him because I knew he would paint me in their eyes a certain way. I told a few friends about certain things that had happened but they always said, "Well he was just "joking" or you know, "He would never really hurt you," and they would say "look how much he loves you. He just told me that you're the most amazing person he's ever met, blah, blah blah." So... they were no help, and I told little bits and pieces to members of my family, but there was a lot of blame. Like I remember one of my brothers, one of my younger brothers just really, really jumping down my throat at how selfish I had been and how irresponsible I was, and how staying in this relationship had been my choice. I then moved into this really high pressure doctoral program surrounded by all these people that seemed like they had it all together. I had literally just come out of the most insane world. I just didn't know

how I could have described it to them. So I didn't have anyone around me who I felt like I could speak to at that time.

My family was extremely frustrated with me. And I can obviously see why it was hard. In some ways, their frustration was a catalyst for change, but in a lot of other ways, it just further isolated me from their support. It wasn't until I had my daughter that I actually felt like I knew I could count on their support. But because I had a child, they opened back up to me.

I do feel like I had changed after this relationship. Before I met him, I was a lot more trusting, obviously and really saw the good in people, and definitely after my experiences with him, I struggled to open up even to friends. I have found myself just hesitant to bring new people into my life even though I value trusting others. I think I've had to really develop more trust in myself that I will know who or what doesn't look right and doesn't sound right and doesn't feel right. But that didn't exist in me for a long time after. I didn't feel like I could really trust myself. I just kind of threw myself into parenting and working, and directly after I felt that I needed a lot of help. I felt like I would kind of disassociate, and I had a really hard time focusing, which was hard because I was in school. Over the last 6 years, my daughter and I have both been in consistent therapy, which has been a tool for growth and healing. We both still really struggle. Her with some significant anxiety, me with anxiety and quite a bit of depression. Regardless, I count myself really lucky to be a mom to an amazing kid and to have realized a lot of my own personal goals and dreams. Despite all that had occurred with my previous partner.

Message from Victoria:

I would just say to anyone who is interested: believe the people that open up to you about what's going on with them. People don't benefit from making up these stories. I would say if you

know someone who's been abused, or if you have been abused, to understand that it's not your lack of intelligence or because of any sort of lack within. It's usually because of a surplus inside of you - a surplus of kindness, a surplus of intelligence, a surplus of ingenuity, a surplus of openness. Be vigilant about building those things up again. Because, while these qualities may have attracted somebody who was only there to take from you, they're also your greatest strength. Those qualities that you possess are your strength, and they're not your weakness. When somebody has gone through something really hard and really horrific, their vulnerability is a huge light to other people. And finally, protect each other and give support to people who may have different experiences than you. Give people the benefit of the doubt. I wouldn't be here in the same way if I hadn't had people in my life who gave me the benefit of the doubt, and supported me without question.

Ruby's Story, Ruby's Right

I entered into a relationship with my ex-boyfriend, and we dated for a year and a half. I had concerns about being sexually active because I wanted to finish my degree without risk and I did not think, and still don't think, sexual relations make a relationship whole. They are an outpouring of love and a natural development of good relation. He began to push my boundaries and wouldn't take no for an answer when I started to be clear that I no longer felt safe with him. We would study together, or say that we were going to study, but this almost always led to his physical advancement. He would kick me out of his apartment if I didn't want to be physical with him, and I would go back to my apartment hurt and confused. I didn't know until after we broke up, though I had suspicions, that he was cheating on me for the majority of our relationship.

The second event was after I graduated with my bachelors. I moved to a new state and started a new job. I lived at the location I worked with my other coworkers and my bosses. One specific boss took a liking to me and began trying to hug me at the end of the work day and find himself alone with me. Nothing ever happened, because I was clear upfront that I was not interested and felt uncomfortable with him trying to hug me. He ended up sleeping with another one of my coworkers and that caused me a lot of drama because she was convinced I was trying to date him. I never felt safe in my living space because I knew that he could literally come into my living space at any time because he had a key. I got a door jam but still never felt at peace. I had an event similar to this happen with a landlord here in Cedar Falls.

The final instance that I wish to include would be the same time as the previously mentioned job. I was overworked and had no time to make friends outside of the place I worked and lived. I visited a nearby business and became acquaintances with the owner. He was significantly older than me in age. In fact, he had a daughter who was older than me. I thought

we were becoming friends and felt mildly safe. He invited me to visit with his daughter on a holiday, but I couldn't go. I took him cookies the next evening, during business hours to thank him for his invitation, but when I arrived, there were no customers and he wouldn't let me leave. He forced physicality on me before I could escape. I texted a coworker to call me with a work emergency so I could leave immediately, and it still took an extended period of time for me to exit the space.

In each of these circumstances, I could not have foreseen what I was walking into. I believe there probably were signs, but I was not trained to recognize them. Whenever these situations happen, I freeze, and try to exit the situation as quickly as possible. I usually cut ties after things like this. After any of these situations, I remember feeling terrified, trembling uncontrollably, and feeling immense frustration for my lack of understanding and foresight. I felt dirty and violated afterwards and felt as if I meant nothing in this world. I hate sex now and the idea of physicality with any future partners.

[Before,] I think I had a lot of trust in people and would often make friends with the opposite sex. I had lots of guy friends growing up and often prefer them to female friends. My lack of trust in others, especially men, is much greater now. I have crazy anxiety, which I am receiving treatment for, and panic attacks when dealing with men in most situations.

My anxiety is incredibly heightened, and I am very sensitive to the male gaze. I am often asked out after meeting people and it makes me very stressed, and I have a hypersensitivity to moments when men decide that they are interested in me. I do not want to be seen as an attractive person, or a desirable person. I don't want to spend time with men alone. I get very stressed when hanging out with men typically. I have immense anxiety now, trust issues, and it is heightened in situations similar to these. I don't want to date anyone at this time.

I told my father and three friends about each of these experiences. My friends were supportive of me leaving these experiences behind. My dad encouraged me to reenter my relationship with my ex, because he apologized and seemed remorseful.... He encouraged me to stay at my job after I had bad interactions with my boss. After the situation with my acquaintance at his business, my dad encouraged me not to go to the police unless I was certain it was sexual assault. After I came home for a bit to recover after that experience, he changed his tune. When I had a bad landlord, he told me to start documenting experiences that made me uncomfortable. But I am still hurt by the lack of support and protection my dad offered to my experiences.

The police were not involved. I was discouraged by people I respected.

Samantha White's Story, Samantha White's Right

Our relationship before was amazing. We hung out all the time and talked 24/7 about everything- he was my best friend. Our relationship after was complicated. I did not fully understand what had happened right away. It took me a few months to realize that I did nothing to provoke it and that it was bad. We continued being friends until I came to the realization that he sexually assaulted me, then I ended the friendship.

Him and I had gone to get ice cream, and we were eating it in a random parking lot in his car. He suggested that we move into the backseat so that we can have more room, which was a normal thing that we did. After we were done with our ice cream, he started touching me in a different way than he had ever touched me before. He started to graze his fingertips up and down my arms and legs. I giggled and told him to stop because it tickled. He then shoved his body on top of mine and began to kiss me. At this point I did not know what to do. I thought "maybe I do like him and this is okay" and "I don't want to try and stop him and make this awkward". Then he started tugging on my shorts and pulling them off. By this time I started to internally freak out. I did not want to have sex with this man, he was just my friend and I was a virgin. I began to resist and attempt to push him away, but he was too strong and overpowered my attempts. I started saying "no", "stop", "I don't want to do this", and "please stop". My efforts were useless, he successfully penetrated me while I silently cried. Afterwards, I pulled up my pants, and he said that he was taking me home, all I could do in that moment was nod. I did not speak the whole way back to my house, all I could think was "I'm going to get pregnant, what am I going to do?" I built up the courage a few days later to ask him if he wore a condom, he said yes and that I don't need to worry about a thing. The feeling I felt in the moment was a feeling I cannot fully express- I felt grateful towards my sexual assaulter.

The emotions I felt before were joy and excitement because we were just having fun, hanging out, and eating ice cream. My feelings during were scared and confused. I was scared because I did not really know what was happening, and it hurt really bad. I was confused because I did not know why he was doing it and the whole time I couldn't remember if I had said "no" or "stop" or "I don't want to do this". I remember now though, I said all of those things multiple times. My feelings after were again confusion, but also disgust. I was still confused and processing what had happened and still did not know what I did to make him do that to me. I was disgusted with him for doing that to me, but also with myself for allowing it to happen.

I do feel as though I have changed because of this experience. Before the experience I was a very affectionate person, I loved to hug and cuddle with people. My life before the event was filled with happiness and laughs, perfect, simple, and innocent. I would describe my life after the event as forever changed, not as happy and full of laughter, ruined in some aspects, and in general more gloomy. I am also more reserved and shy towards people that I do not know very well, it takes me longer to warm up to people and to let them in. This experience has affected my trust in my romantic relationships. It is hard for me to trust the men I date now. It affects my sexual life a lot. Right away, I slept with someone else almost everyday as a way to like, get my sexuality back and make it my own again. Present day it still affects my sexual relationships. Sometimes it's all I can think about when I'm having intercourse, and I can't get his face out of my head. When this happens it is oftentimes followed by a panic attack.

I told another close male friend of mine about the situation, but he was also friends with the person who harmed me, so he did not believe my story. He said "I know him, he would never do that". I have never told anyone since because I don't think they would believe me.

Sydney's Story, Sydney's Right

I was in a relationship where I saw and ignored the red flags and the disconnect in values and morals, yet I was providing him with what he thought he needed. With that it turned into more of an attachment issue rather than a healthy bond between us. I let him push me to a point of defensiveness, insecurity, and fear to where I got violent. I felt as if no one would see the manipulation through texts and did not show or tell the whole truth about situations we had had. He had a habit of taking my possessions, gaslighting, and manipulating me to make me feel like I had to prove something to him.

Well I expected it to get worse but truly wanted to slip away/separate before it did. This last weekend, it crossed that line. I finally got to the mental point where I couldn't take it anymore. He slapped, punched, spit, and was demeaning towards me, [and it happened in] my home, which has caused more problems with healing for me. All because I wanted to break-up. [I felt] trapped, stuck, sadness, confused, anger, rage, fear, depression, isolated, embarrassment, ashamed. After, an additional sense of relief that it's over, but I still feel the emotions above. My roommate saved it from becoming worse. She saved my life in my eyes!

Both me and my roommate called [the police] after I saw I was injured. They pressured me, rushed me to tell the story while I was clearly in shock and couldn't feel anything, let alone accurately recount the incident. Then told me that I incriminated myself by forgetting to include parts of the incident. They have discouraged me from wanting to get involved with the court system and to just continue to feel unsafe. They told me they couldn't tell who the aggressor and who the victim was.

I am very independent, I am a great student, a reliable person. I liked to have safe, harmless fun. I loved to have the freedom to be by myself and have control of where I was going.

Now I want to be by myself. I have no sex drive or attraction to anything related to intimacy. I do not have trust for men around me nor authorities for how they treated me. I'm working hard to not allow myself to isolate too much, but to have a healthy amount of space to heal.

I feel as if I've lost a part of me. I'm nervous to be alone but do not want to be a victim or pitied. I want people to see me and understand that it can happen to the people you least expect it too. I am anxious, and sometimes want to hide but trying to get back to how it was.

This wasn't someone I just met over a dating site, but someone who I have had over social media for years prior. I feel like I no longer can trust anyone that I already don't, and that I need to spread awareness to get out at the first point where they cross the line, not the tenth.

Joe's Story, Joe's Right

Throughout childhood I would say from 8 to 19 at my home [I experienced some emotional violence,] but one of the main ones was when I was 19.

For my childhood, [the violence was from] my dad. We had a decent relationship, now when I talk about him, I don't really, if anything, but, when it was happening, it was just so normalized that we would just kind of [think] "Oh, it's just how my dad is," you know, the typical. It was more so verbal abuse and emotional abuse. So when I was young, early elementary, we adopted a sibling set of three biological siblings. But my dad just did not do a good job of integrating them into the family. They were the scapegoats a lot, but they were all very similar in age to me and my other siblings. My dad is a pastor figure in the community, in a small community. I personally hold that he adopted for the wrong reasons and that just added a lot of stress and strain to the entire family, and I think he just took that out on my adopted siblings. So, a lot of the abuse that was happening for a long time was directed towards my other adopted siblings, but would kind of also get pushed on to the rest of us. So it's more indirect, but it was the fact that I witnessed so much of that for so long. He was definitely hitting strong on the religious aspect of things internalized shame or guilt or "you have to be perfect because that was what our religion calls for," that kind of stuff. But it wasn't until I was in high school and some of my older siblings were getting out of high school where it started more. The more stressed he got, the more it would continue on.

I've been financially independent since 16, and I moved out of my parent's house at 19. It was a weird relationship in which my dad and I didn't see each other well on politics. We butted heads on that and then anytime we would have very highly logical conversations, and it would be "oh we're just talking," he would always need to win. So that would usually just kind of escalate,

and then the more stress he got and especially the more beliefs differed, that's when that stuff would start to get bad.

So when I was in early childhood, I remember my dad just doing weird punishments to my adopted siblings, but not to the biological children in the family. So for my adopted siblings, my dad was convinced that it was just hyperactivity or they're doing this on purpose. So instead of normal punishments of grounding and stuff, it would be punishments of “You have to go run outside in the backyard and do laps” or “Just do 100 push ups. Do a whole bunch of jumping jacks” or something. It was like my father was running a Marine boot camp. Come to see a couple of years later when all of my adopted siblings were done with high school, they all went into the Marines, and that was literally what he would say was doing. It was like the Marine boot camp. My dad has never been in the military, so that was ridiculous. So those are the kind of punishments that I was used to seeing. But we were “good kids,” the biological children. So it was my mom would just scold me or I wouldn't be doing anything that would warrant “that sort of punishment.”

I remember as a kid thinking, it seems like they're getting these extreme punishments for such small things, what would happen to me? It was always the idea of what happens to them, since we're so close in age, could very easily happen to me, and just living on that edge. Both my dad and my mom would bring up “adoption is never final.” Like, if something happens, we could always give the adopted kids back. So that was the same thought here.

Once we all kind of got older, it was less of punishments as a form of violence, but more of my father's stress and that just he would explode a lot. He also has a bad back disease, and he did not believe in mental health things, so he would be doing things on his own. His physical health was declining, and when his back would be bad and then he'd be stressed, he lost his job

as a pastor or he resigned. We were poor, poor, poor, so especially when he got stressed, there would be things we would help with, fix up improvements around the house. The idea was, “OK, we get this house, we improve it, we sell it for more” kind of thing. So my dad couldn't physically do the labor, but I could. It would be a lot of my dad being, “OK, do this, do that.” Normally that would be OK, but everyone knew after an hour and a half, there was always that spot when he would get fed up or annoyed. If my mom was home, then she'd come out and she'd say, “Calm down,” you know, “blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” There are definitely times where I remember my mom wasn't home, and I think it got worse the more there were different protective factors out of the house.

When I was younger, I remember my mom would say something or my older sister would say something. Then I remember when my oldest sister moved out, it was my older brother would say something first or he'd be like, “I'm done working with you, dad,” and then that would chill out or whatever. But then when my mom was out of the house at different times or my brother was out of the house, then it would rely on me to say something, and I could have only been 17 or 18 at the time. And I'm a triplet, so I have two other siblings the same age.

There were several times we were doing improvements, but one of the ones I remember the most is we were down in the basement fixing some electrical wiring. I was on the top of a ladder working on that and actually doing different things. And my brother, my triplet brother was down on the standing holding the ladder, and my dad was yelling something. There was a door that we had to install laying on this sawhorse. My dad had been yelling and he'd taken a hammer and banged into the door so we couldn't use it anymore and he just out of anger did that. I remember my brother was crying, and I said “Just go, you don't have to stay here”, just “You can go cry in the bathroom.”

I remember my dad came back into the room and was like “Where did he go?” And I said “Oh, they just didn't want to keep working.” My dad, I think, could tell that he left because he was scared, so he kind of calmed down after that, after seeing some emotion, but that's not how it normally would go. So that was the idea that this could happen, but it didn't this time.

So sometime in that timeline, I remember we were in the basement working on the stairs or replacing something, and we had taken out the carpet so it was just wooden stairs. My dad, even with his back- it is a genetic disease so he can't move very fast or he's in pain a lot- but he played soccer throughout high school and into college. So, he's still strong and stuff. He can't move fast, but he can throw things. So I remember it was just the door where he had taken a hammer. He was angry and out of anger had smashed into a stair. And I just remember having friends come over and just be like “Oh, just skip over that step.” That's where my dad put a hammer through it. And my dad isn't a pastor now but was a pastor, and he didn't drink anything. That was just pure sober rage.

Then I remember during my graduation party, we were setting up a canopy over our backyard, and I remember that I wasn't getting things thrown at me but... it was just weird. I don't know. I was never the one that was getting things thrown at, but it could have always been me because my dad didn't really know the difference between me and my triplets. He just wasn't looking... So I remember we were setting up something using tent pegs to hold down this canopy in different areas. My dad yet again had a hammer, and out of anger had thrown it at the fence, but it was in the direct line of one of my other triplet siblings. That's the weird kind of thing that it just always happens and you just kind of hope that you dodged. I think the way that it kind of just kept going on was that it would be in your line, but he could kind of be like, “Well, I wasn't throwing it at you, I'm just throwing it to the side.”

So then the one I remember being the one that I thought, “I have to step up. It has to be something big.” It was at the end of my senior year and it was around when COVID had just started. So I was a senior in high school or was the summer before my senior year, so I was only 17 or 18. Me and my triple siblings were gonna go to babysit at a house a couple miles out of town, and we were going to leave around four or five, but we ended up leaving super, super early in the afternoon because my mom was at home. It was only us with my dad at the house. We were helping him spackle in his bed, and one of my brothers was up on a step stool, but it was a decently high step stool, not just a one step. With the triplets at least I'm the leader. I'm the one that's gonna talk the most. If anyone is going to stand up to my dad or say something in that moment, it would have been me. And I remember that I was in the kitchen doing the dishes and all I hear my dad yell, and then I hear my brother that wouldn't normally say something, say something. I heard a crash or something, so I came running in and I'm already yelling at my dad. This was the first time that I yelled back because my dad is someone that if you're like, “whoa, whoa,” he'll get even more mad.

So I had to come running in and say, “What's going on?” And my dad goes storming out. He doesn't even look at me because once he gets angry, he's not looking at anybody. Maybe that's what he wants you to think- it's not intentional. But so he storms out and both my brothers are crying. And it takes a lot to have two 17 and 18 year olds crying. And I'm just like “don't finish. Go down to your room. We'll talk to mom or we can go” because we had our own car at that point. They told me that he had thrown a spackle at one of my brothers that was holding the ladder for the other one. I think the brother on the ground was worried that the brother on the ladder would fall, and with all of that was just very shaken up. That's not uncommon for us all to get very shaky. I told them to go down to the basement. My dad comes through the kitchen from

the garage through the kitchen and he was like, “Well, where are they?” And I said, “You scared them.” That's one of the many times that I remember saying something and actually having the ability to say something or to speak back. That never really happened again. So that really small amount of times kind of added up to all of it.

The thing to add there is that I have two trans brothers. So at the time they both were being seen as women, so my father looked at us as three girls that were seventeen. That does add a little bit to it as well. So my sophomore year of college the three of us had all [started identifying differently than how our father saw us]. I identify as a Butch lesbian, Andy and Milo both identify as non binary trans men, so they both transitioned. So we came back to the house at the beginning of my sophomore year, and I had talked with my older sister to kind of be , “OK, how are we going to do this or what's the best way to kind of go about this?” We tried to do it at a nice time in which it wasn't near any holidays. So it is kind of “This is how it is. These are our names and pronouns.”

Before that, though, [to provide some context], when we were in our senior year of high school, we had been very big in the church because my dad was still a leader in the church. None of us had transitioned socially or anything, but the three of us had talked about being gay or whatever, but we were thinking “We're not going to do anything super big with that.” Then, people in the church found out, and that's when my parents found out, and we were put through conversion therapy sponsored by the church. It was a lot of emotional and psychological sort of stuff, like “This is how women act, this is how men act, there's no yada yada yada.”

So we talked about it once or twice with them, and my dad actually didn't get angry about that. He was more just gas lighty and called us perverts, and then we never really talked about it again. So come sophomore year, we came to the house and were like “Hey, this is how it

is. These are our names and pronouns. Just respect us, and we can still try to make this work.” It was only a 20 minute conversation, and my mom started crying. My dad got very angry and tried to argue logically a way out of it and then it just kind of spiraled into horrible, transphobic, homophobic, just a whole bunch of horrible bullshit. So that's another time I stood up to him and said “We're not doing that. That's the end of that.” I gave him this piece of paper that explains how to use the right pronouns or how to contact us if you ever feel the need, but that's about it. And then I just haven't seen my parents in a year and a half, so that's pretty much the end of that story with my dad. But, then it goes into my freshman year of college.

In the first couple weeks of school the three of us would go to pick up soccer games with just a whole bunch of boys, and I met this guy. The boys were just how normal college freshmen boys are and whatever, so it wasn't the best soccer I have ever played but it was still fun. And I remember the boys were just “Oh don't pass to that sucker.” So it was fine, but I remember this guy, The Coward we'll call him, who was one of the players. Normally he texted me on Snapchat or something and was just like, “Hey, don't let the boys get you down. You're a good soccer player. I hope that doesn't make you not keep going.” So we ended up talking just for a little bit on Snapchat, and then I had mentioned something along the lines of, “Oh, we should meet up for brunch or something the next day,” just to get acquainted. At that time I didn't know I was a lesbian. I was at the stage of “OK, I know I'm queer in some way, but I don't really know.” So I thought, maybe this is a date kind of thing. So I kind of dressed up like it was a date. Then we were talking and I was trying to figure out, does he have a girlfriend? What's the situation? He ends up saying that he's bi-sexual and so I say “Oh, I'm queer too.” So we talk about that for a little bit, and then later in the conversation he mentions his girlfriend. So I thought, OK, cool. That's how it is. That's fine. That's all right. He has a girlfriend, and we had

that full conversation. Then we keep having soccer games or whatever and I end up hanging out more with Coward. We would get dinner after the game, just Coward and I. And that was the first time I had a friend that wasn't Milo and Andy's too. We always kind of share friends. So I was thinking, "Oh, this is the first friend that I have on my own." We would sometimes go on night time drives or yadda yadda yadda or sometimes we would go to his dorm and watch movies or something.

I remember one time we were driving late at night, he wanted to get something from Culvers. So we're in the Culvers drive-through, and he says that he needs to tell me something that he always tells all of his female friends and he likes to usually do it in an open space so that if they get uncomfortable they can leave. I was like, "oh, I'm sure it's nothing that crazy. You can just tell me, that's fine." He goes on to tell me that in high school, this girl accused him of sexual assault, and she tried to run him out of town. He said "She accused me because she was mad that I was gay or mad that I didn't like her back" or something like that. So, I was like, "Oh. OK," but he was very much lying in on the "I am the .1% that got falsely accused." So we just don't really talk about it again.

So then it kind of turns into we're just together all the time. Well, not all the time, but often. We only hung out usually late at night whether if we were taking a drive or if we were watching a movie late and I'm someone that I go to bed now 8:30 or 9:00 o'clock and I was up at 12:30, 1:30 just heading over to his dorm at that time, which is not typical for me and he knew that.

There was just that weird tension and then it kind of turned into we would be sitting on his futon and he'd playfully kick me. And then I would just kick back because I grew up with boys. I'm thinking, OK, we're wrestling or I don't know. And then I would say, "Oh, I bet you

can't pick me up.” And then he play wrestles, and then it would turn into he's holding me down or throwing me off of the futon or holding me down.

It would just slowly progress each night. It would start the same way and then it would just be a new level that got added on. And at the time, I didn't present at all as a butch lesbian. I had longer hair, I presented pretty feminine, so that makes sense. But I was still very strong, and I played varsity high school but it was just weird. I'm 5/2 and at the time I weighed maybe 130 pounds. He's 6/2 and probably weighed 175 at least so he had a lot on me, and it all would just progress every time we'd hang out or something. He had a roommate at the time, but the roommate wouldn't be in the room sometimes, or Coward would use that as the idea of locking the door. I actually remember me being the one that would go and lock his door. He'd say, “Oh, you should go lock the door just in case Nate comes back.

Then it turned into he was holding me down one night, play fighting, and he had held both of my wrists down. Then I was on my back, and he was holding both of my wrists above my head, and then he was yanking at my shirt and I said something like, “What?” And he said, “Oh, accidentally, accidentally.” So I was able to wiggle my way out of that or whatever and just kind of brush it aside. But I remember after that... well I had two different types of bras at the time. I would wear sports bras or I had almost a more full coverage bra. So I remember that I would make sure to wear the full coverage one so that it would be harder to get off.

And I remember there was another night too where we would start on opposite ends of the futon. And then he'd lay down and then I'd think, “Oh, OK, I'll kind of lay down on my side.” And then he was like, “Oh, well, you could lay down on your side in front of me and then we'd be spooning.” But then he'd always say, “I have a girlfriend, this is nothing. So, I'm not even interested.” But I remember he had put his arm around me and he'd always say he's a touchy,

feely kind of person. He would always asked “Is it OK if I hug you? Is it, is it OK that we're sitting this close on the futon? Is it OK that I put my arm around you when we're spooning?” You know, asking, asking, asking. And then I remember he slipped his hand under my shorts and then was going under just the top of my underwear rubbing. And he blamed it on his ADHD. Another time I had said no, and I moved his hand and he never did that again. But I remember after that I started wearing normal underwear and the tight Spanx underwear almost with a long normal underwear sometimes. Or even sometimes add on my normal shorts that have built in underwear just to add as many levels. But I also was just like, “Whatever, it's fine.” Well no, it's not.

So then, after kind of those first levels of things, we were talking about something over Snapchat, and he had something along the lines of “There's just so much tension when we wrestle, I almost saw something and we're both just humans.” and “It's just bodies. We shouldn't be ashamed of it. So I think next time you're here, just show me your boobs so we don't have to have all that tension.” At this point, I've never had a boyfriend before. I've never kissed anyone before. I didn't know anything. I came from a very secured Christian household. I'm a pastor's kid. So I'm just like “OK,” “sure.” And he was always saying “I love my girlfriend so much. These are all the things I do for her.” I guess I thought maybe he understands, you know, this is whatever. So I go over one day before work or something, and his roommate wasn't there and he said, “OK, just show me your boobs.” So he has me lift up my shirt and then he says “We'll just take it off, just, there's nothing wrong with it.” And I remember just sitting on the futon, just thinking this is weird. And then he told me “You can put it back on.” And that's when I was ... this man just told me that it's OK to put my shirt back on. I should be able to do it whenever I

want. It was just weird. But I thought I'm just not going to tell anybody. I don't know. It was just so weird.

Then as soon as that happened, things just kept accelerating, and the next time we were together, we went from “I've already seen your boobs” to “Just have it off” or he would rip it off now that the boundary had been crossed. It was always like that. I remember being held down a lot. Or when we would play wrestle every fucking night he'd he'd hit my head down a lot, actually, I guess accidentally. And he'd always be like, oh, are you all right? So I don't think that was purposeful, but also the fact that we're already really wrestling, it's hard to say what's purposeful or not.

And I remember one of the later nights we heard someone in the room next to us having loud ridiculous sex or something. And he said “We should just recreate that and be louder.” So he was lying on his futon on his back and he pulled me up onto his lap, onto his genital area. He placed his hand on my thighs, not like he was holding me down, but they were definitely on me. And then, I didn't have a shirt on or he didn't either. I don't remember. But we never kissed or anything. So it was that weird gray area between, you know, what is this? But I remember he was wanting me to make noises. He was making noises and then he was almost pushing me up and down, and so I had to wriggle off of that and be kind of like, what the fuck? There was one time where I was on his lap, and he grabbed my boobs hard. And then I went under him and grabbed his ass and I said “Oh, it doesn't feel so nice does it?” Another thing that always felt weird was the way he was positioned. When he was lying on his back, he would be looking at his desk and right behind me would be a picture of his girlfriend that he would be looking at.

Another night, I was putting my clothes back on, and I remember he had said something along the lines of “Oh well since I've seen your boobs, you might as well see my penis.” And

I'm turning around and he must have pulled out his penis. And once again, I'm a lesbian. Never been in a relationship before. I've never seen a penis in my life. Nothing. Thank God it was dark, and I couldn't see anything but that scared the shit out of me.

I know there's a lot of different times and I can't remember all of them, but that was pretty much the typical progression. And then after that, it kind of just stopped. I didn't really do anything. I don't know, I've talked with a therapist about this, and I didn't do anything different. I don't know if he just kind of got what he needed. I don't know if something happened that he knew if he kept going farther, I just don't know.

So, the rest of that relationship, we'd still see each other, but it lasted for 3 months and then it just kind of fizzled out. Then it was the beginning of my sophomore year. It was only a week or two after I came out to my parents and left the house that I was taking a gender knowledge or gender based violence quiz on campus. It took me a lot longer than everybody else, and I kept thinking, "Does this count or does that count?"

I reported to my RA who ended up reporting to campus. There was an investigation. Lasted forever. It came out as not guilty. But he had made a mistake of mentioning this person back from high school, and he said her name. So, the next year when I was realizing everything, I stalked the shit out of her. I found her, connected with her. She told me her story. It's the same story that I have almost, I mean so close. She connected me with someone else, a friend that she has on campus. I talked with that friend. The friend has another same story as me, same guy. She goes, "Hold on, let me make a group chat quick. I think I've got a couple other girls for you to talk to." We found about eight girls. A couple of them didn't want to say anything. There wasn't even much they could say because the police wouldn't take it as an actual investigation. So campus would only take my story or anything that happened on campus.

So we end up going through the investigation, but even though he did get not guilty, I kind of was thinking, “OK, if I had to go through this shit, I'm going to make sure that he has to go through shit.” So, he was also an RA at the time. And I just thought, if he's doing this to me, as an RA now he has even more ability. So, I get in contact with all these girls. I'm adding in different puzzle pieces. I'm figuring stuff out while also getting ready for this investigation.

He was not asked to go back as an RA. I don't know if it was because of what was going on with me or just he wasn't a good RA, but I knew what was at stake. He had told me his whole plan too, of for my life, I need to, I need to, you know, I need to be an RA and then I need to be able to finish school so that I can do this and then I can do that and do that. So I just thought, OK, well, I'm just gonna make sure you can't do any of that. So I talked to all these girls. I even reached out to his girlfriend at the time because I was sure she didn't know. Turns out she was still his girlfriend at the time of other incidents, and she hadn't left. So I figured I would say something, and then that's all I could do. He ended up dropping out of school after the trial [and word spread to his hometown]. And then because my plan was take his girlfriend, take his friends, take his school, take his RA position, take his job, do anything, you know? And I didn't even try very hard. That just kind of happened. If I'm not going to get a guilty, I'm going to do that, so that kind of ends.

But at the end of my sophomore year, I was speaking for Sexual Assault Awareness Month in April on campus, and I was speaking in a big hall. And I've been speaking for about three years now, and every time I speak, I kind of remember there could always be someone in the crowd that actually knows me or actually knows someone else. You know, I always think about it. And I remember in this hall I couldn't see all the faces because I'm good at remembering faces and remembering names. So there's always a chance there's someone there that I don't

know and you know I wouldn't be able to place them, you know. So actually it turns out that the roommate of Coward, who I was telling my whole story about in pretty close detail, was in the crowd. He didn't actually come up to me afterwards, which thank God because it would have freaked me the fuck out, but he reached out to the girl that I reached out to that also had a similar story because they come from the same hometown, and he wants everyone to meet. So we meet with Nate, ... he was supportive, he ended up going in person to see Coward, chewed him out, and said he never wanted to speak to him again.

[You know, the logistics of the legal process was rough.] When I reported, I don't think it was handled well, and that's another reason why I want to go into advocacy because I want to be someone on campus who can say "This is horrible." So I reported to my RA, and I remember just kind of opening her door, and she's just sitting on her futon and we're joking like on a friend level. And I think she thought I was going to say something like, "Oh, I need you to flip my breaker or something." But I remember closing the door and just saying "Hey, I think I have to report sexual assault." And she said, "Oh," just "Oh my God." So, she's doing that. So by campus standards, as soon as you report the RA has to then get in contact with other people, which is a wonderful safeguard. But I didn't even realize what was happening until I was halfway through it? And so I ended up talking to somebody else. I almost had to talk to a man, and I was like, "no fuck I ain't doing that shit."

So they sent me to an administrator, super sweet in the beginning, and then I got in contact with an advocate, and thank God I did because shit... So I remember meeting just one-on-one, so I could actually talk about things. But when I was talking to the administrator, she was explaining the different routes. She gave me the option that you could just put in an anonymous note, just to say that it happened just to have another addition onto his file, or

something on there just in case someone else comes forward. She said you could do an option where you make sure that he gets training. Or, you could go into an investigation. I said fuck the bullshit of training, that's not going to do anything because he knows damn well. But half of me almost just thought, put a note on the file and let it go. Just don't talk to him and hope that's enough. If there's someone else that comes through, they come through, they see. It's passing the torch. And I remember thinking too, but... Elise did that. Elise, back in high school, when it happened to her, she put the sticky note on his file, theoretically, and his own stupid ass told me, and she lit the torch first and she's handing it forward. And I can't drop that.

I can't be the one that doesn't pass it on because it will go out.

So that's the one that was when I decided, no, we have to do it completely and fully. We have to continue on. Let's just do the whole fucking thing, and let's just get it over with. So I had to be given an advisor, and I remember the person that I first reached out to literally two months into it was like, "Hey, I actually don't have the time to do this," and then didn't give me a reference of who else to talk to. So I'm just like, "I guess I have to find someone else." I found someone in HR who was super sweet. Love her. But she'd never done this before. They don't have someone that knows sexual assault to help the person in a legal proceeding about sexual assault on And I just remembered the entire process was really confusing. I wasn't really sure what was going on. I wasn't sure how much Coward knew. I wasn't sure anything really.

I would have meetings with my advisor. The other thing that saved me, not saved me, but I remember in high school or middle school through high school, I competed in mock trial, and I won star witness and star lawyer two different years, and I know how to fucking be a witness. So I wrote my own questions for myself. My triple brother, who used to compete with me as my lawyer in mock trial would help me practice. He would ask me the questions, and I would

practice how I was going to talk on stand or try to get at least a sense of what they would ask me, and ... I don't know that I did a whole different layer, kind of bringing me back to a high school competition. But then with the feeling of this is really impactful, and it's crazy.

The detective on campus was chill enough, I'll say that. It wasn't anything crazy. I remember feeling like OK, he's kind of doing his job." I remember when he had called Coward, and said, "We need your statement" that obviously scared Coward a lot. And I remember thinking, "Yeah, there you go." I remember I was in class or something and I saw that the UNI Police called me, so I picked up as soon as I could, and I remember the detective telling me "Yeah, and Coward refused to speak, so he obviously is hiding something," and, "There's a really good chance that he lawyered up to because of the way that he responded to me on that phone call." So he gave me that heads up, which is all I could ask for, honestly.

The case was ridiculous. The trial was 3 hours. Both my siblings talked and stood on stand. My friend and my cousin stood on stand. It was on zoom so I didn't have to see him and ... I just remember ... My friends and my friends and my brothers walked me to Gilchrist fucking Hall, and they were down in the basement. I was up in Title 9, just we were on our different computers, and I just ...

It was so weird seeing that my brother is zooming in from downstairs to talk about this. And I don't know. It's nice though, because I didn't have to see Coward in person. And I could almost stare him down through the fucking computer screen and that's good enough for me.

I knew it was going to be bad after one moment happened. I remember we all went in, me and a whole gaggle of people. My advocate was there, a whole bunch of people. We walk into the Title 9 office. I get a drink of water, and we're all sitting there, "OK, it's going to be fine." And I'm not religious, as I stated before, or I am religious. But, at that point I was just

really like “what's going on” And I remember that my advocate was religious. And I remember that my brother had asked to pray. And ... they prayed together as I was leaving, and I'm trying to tear up and almost, “I gotta, I gotta go and fucking do this shit.” And for them to be praying I was thinking, “This is bad.” It's serious. So. Umm. But I remember I'm going into the room with my advisor. I'd given my advocate, one last hug, and then she was praying with my brothers. And I'm going into this room, and I remember I can hear them crying, and I close the door and then they're leaving. And the person at the Title IX, at the front had been , “Hey, we have other people in the office. Could you guys go out into the hall?” as they're crying. And I was like, “Oh my God. Oh my God.” So then I just had to be like “whatever,” and we went through the trial, it was 3 hours long and the judge was a black woman. She's not affiliated with the college. I was like, “OK, we have a chance. This isn't some white, old white guy that doesn't get it. This is hopefully somebody that I could at least get.” And I understand where she's coming from with policy, and we're going through strict campus guidelines. The whole point is so that they don't have to pay for anything and they don't have to deal with it. But some of the questions that were asked to me... I remember she asked one of my brothers. She said “If you could tell that your sister was going through so many, hard dramatic things, why would you let her keep going back?” And then she asked the same thing to me, she said “Why would you keep walking up those staircases then?” “Why would you keep walking up to his room?”

So that's obviously not a good way to go about it. Not at all. My advisor and I were trying to point out he's bigger than me, he could have done anything at any time. Of course I'm not going to say anything when I feel physically threatened. And a lot of our questioning didn't go through, and I ended up having to speak. Thank God that I went through mock trial because I wouldn't have known the fuck to say. I gave my own fucking closing statement. I was the one

who knew what to say when to say it because my advisors from HR. She's done HR hearings, but not anything like this. We were all working with the best that we had, but it was not very good. And then we just went home... and I didn't hear about it for a week later.

I was at work and I thought, "I won't open this until I get home," but then I opened it- this fancy schmancy letter. But I knew going into the trial, I didn't have any evidence. We talked on Snapchat, so that all got deleted. So I knew I needed more evidence. I allowed them to go through my phone to look for stuff, but they couldn't find anything. So, I entered a journal I wrote in every single day, every single night. In my journal, I would write the dates and times I was there and what we were doing, and, but in the journal, I'm trying to convince myself at that time that it's fine, it's OK. And so I just thought, I'm going to put in anything and everything and even if they use it against me, I'll know that I did everything that I could, that I put in as much evidence that I could. You never know. But. So going back, would I enter those? Yeah, but some of the lines of questioning were based on some stuff that I've written in a personal journal. Or I had to define different words that I was using or she'd say, "Well, if you didn't like it, why did you write? Why did you put a smiley face in your journal?"

After that, I don't journal anymore. I don't write things down. Or if I do, it's very vague, and I'm working on that myself. So, I got this letter, but I [wasn't confident] and basically it was almost like reading a college acceptance letter where you kind of got to get through the bullshit to find that one line, and it just said "The defendant is not guilty" or something. And I just started calling people. I called Elise first. I said, "We didn't get a guilt. We didn't get it." And then I called all these other people, and I called my older sister and I told her "We didn't get it."

I think that was the worst part. It's good because it's validating because people would say "Shit, that fucking sucks." But it was also devastating, especially to hear Elise on the other side.

[And that feeling kind of follows when thinking about all of the people that I had with me because they had similar experiences.] There's a lot packed into just that idea of how does it feel to have other people? Because if I could go back again, it would be only me, so that I'm the only one, just in the matter of I'm the only one who has to go through it. [I will say that even if I don't see the people I connected with everyday, there is a connection, and we check in on each other.

It's so comforting to have people that at a moment's glance or at a moment's notice would be there, would know what to do and have gone through something and can understand the level at which I'm working through things.

I will also say when I was at the beginning of the reporting process, it almost feels like a win when you're not the only one and there's a pattern and there's more. But then it's almost also devastating when there's so many of us. and this isn't a movie. When I tell people it feels like this is a movie, you like the extra validation. But it's not a fucking movie. When this is real life, it is just like fuck this shit. It makes it so much worse and so disheartening to think he's gotten away every single time and he still is doing it, and there's literally no way to stop it because people won't listen. There's also the idea that I don't know, I know that I'm not in charge or responsible, but that's what it felt to me, and I gladly took on that responsibility. And it sucks that it felt like the responsibility had to lie on one survivor and that was it. But that was the way that the policy had to go through. And I had so many people, and it was so nice to hear all of these people telling me, "That's my same story." And that's so incredibly validating and in the way that, this wasn't just some stranger in the back alley. This was still someone I didn't know, but was so intrinsic, he was grooming me, used so many levels of manipulation and I think that happens a lot. But the level in which it was happening to me is not something that I knew could happen. And to hear other people saying, "he "tricked" me too. He got me too..." Because I thought, I'm

a really smart person. I know I wouldn't let that happen, and I'm in control. So to see that I wasn't the only one that felt that way...

So [I guess bringing everything full circle, a question that sometimes comes up is why report?] The only reason that I took the survey and I thought "it's time to say something" is actually because of some stuff with my dad. There was some, weird sexual abuse vibes, but I never experienced anything like my dad touching me or something, and as far as I know none of my siblings and at this age and the way that we all communicate with each other I would know by now or if any of us remembered something I would know. But my dad was also someone very much, "It's just the human body." My dad was also really big on one in four women get raped and as soon as you get on campus, you'll get raped. And if you dress these ways, you'll get raped kind of thing, and so the only reason I thought, the only reason I knew that it was time to report was because my dad had drilled it into me.

Pretty much, this is horrible, but the idea of if you have to bear the shame of being assaulted, you might as well fucking report it. So to me there was no other option because it's more to the way I was raised, which is horrible, but the idea of instead of being silent, you might as well try to get some respect back. Now I think that definitely fueled my entire idea of I need to do everything and anything to get back to this guy, short of something illegal.

I remember when I was young, I don't think I was in high school yet, my dad had me and my triplet siblings read the book *It Could Happen To You*. And I remember that so vividly because in the way the book made it sound, it was men that cannot control themselves, and it's up to you to make sure to keep yourself safe. In this situation, I was , oh shit, it was my fault because I didn't do all these different things or I because I wore this. Me now, of course, doesn't believe that. Even me then would never tell someone else that. But that was so ingrained that I

just thought “Oh, it's my fault. And now I have to do something to redeem that.” And it was when I reported, a lot of it was I knew, yeah, I'd report for me, but I already knew about the girl in his hometown. So I was like, well, if I can be anything, I can be a champion for the people. It's not all about me. I'll try to help other people. That fueled my entire life. I think if I only knew about me, I probably just wouldn't have said anything, Maybe said something, just dropped it. But since there's so many other people, as an activist at heart, I have to say something. So do I regret saying it? No, not at all. I do. If I went back in time, I'd always do it the same way. But it sucks that that's the only reason I went into it- for other people or it would have been different. I only reported because I knew that if my father found out or if this were a different time where my parents knew, my siblings knew the only way to take control of my own story is to report it and go hard on reporting and do all that.

I do want to say, at the end, that there are a lot of pros. A lot. And my life got so much better, so much quicker than I thought it would. I remember during the assault or during my trial and stuff, I remember thinking , “Oh it's almost the end,” but it just seemed to be one thing after another, and it just didn't stop. But it does stop eventually. I remember my advocate would always tell me because I'd always say “It's just always one thing after the other,” but she would always try to help me broaden my viewpoint that it's not forever. It's big, and it is going to affect you for a long time. But these day-to-day different dramatics and different additions to the whole situation are not always going to keep adding on.

When I finally closed that chapter of life, when it was done, I'm now speaking at panels. So I went from not telling anybody and holding that in to telling everybody and anybody. Now I can provide the space that I wish I had had for me for other people to talk about it and for it to be normalized. I find now that when I first started talking about my assault, I didn't want to talk to

people because I was worried that I might hurt them from me sharing my story. But now, I find that when it's normalized, especially my household with people I know and love, it's so healing for me for other people to disclose to me. It's healing for me to say "See, this person feel comfortable to disclose" and then they can lean on me and I can lean on them because they get it too. So, things do get better and I live in a house off campus. I am able to live the life that I want to live.

And after my assault, I did realize I was a lesbian, and even some people will ask "Oh did you become a lesbian because you were assaulted?" Who can say? That's a really nuanced conversation. But, that shouldn't be a bad thing that I chose. I mean. Maybe. I do always say I knew that I was probably a lesbian a lot before that, but if someone asked, I would just say maybe, and it's not a bad thing. And if anything, it was the best thing that happened because I realized I didn't have to cater to men, and I didn't have to do what they wanted. As soon as I made that decision, I started being very clear on this is what is OK and this is what is not, and this is how I want to be treated, and this is how I don't want to be treated, and this is how I'm going to live, and the rest of you just have to be OK with it. And that's when my life started to just be OK all of the time and actually worth living.

I just want people to know that everything gets better, not everything is always, and everything changes. It's always a cycle, but not a cycle two-dimensionally. A cycle in a spiral. Things look similar when go down that spiral or up a spiral or through the ring, but it's 3D. Things look similar, but they're never actually the same.

Message from Joe:

I will say, first of all, my whole story is a movie, and no one needs to have to do that shit. I always say if I had to go back, I'd do the same, and if I had to go back, I would do the same. But if I was talking to me from an alternate lifeline or something, and I was talking to another me and they were like, "Oh, should I do it the same way that you do it?" I'd say no. It's never your responsibility to stop someone else because you can't. Even though I went full throttle and tried to do everything, the only thing that matters is that you're still here. The only thing that matters is that you're still trying to heal. So it doesn't matter if you tell someone about it or not, what matters is that you're still alive. So it's all about protecting yourself so that you can protect your loved ones. That's all it is.

And the idea that you're not alone, even though it feels so much like it. And don't be ashamed to talk. You don't even have to tell the story. Just as soon as you start talking about some anything related to violence for women or sexual assault or anything like that, other people will start talking. That's how we change our community and the way we talk about it is that, people just say a few things and that's all it is. Because we could have a lot of leaders saying a lot of different things, but those are only one at a conference or at a specific time. When we each are opening the communications and talking about it, that's when every single person, hopefully in our community, is able to start to feel more comfortable talking about it and understanding that there's so much power in just the smallest word of affirmation or in the smallest, "Oh, it happened to me too." I'll talk about my assault in class, and I'll talk about it when it's related to my career. I'll say, "Oh, I want to be a sexual assault advocate," but that's it. That's all I say. I won't say "because it happened to me." A lot of people don't know about it. And that goes to say, even though I'm someone who talks about it all the time, I don't actually. I don't tell a lot of

people at all or I'll very vaguely be like, "Oh, this is something I'm passionate about" but I won't tell the full story.

I also think in this culture right now too where we've gotten better about the stigma of sexual assault. But I think we've moved into the stigma of "I don't want to tell you if it's triggering to you" or "I don't want to tell other people just in case they feel uncomfortable about it." So I think we kind of changed one title to the next with, at first it was bad stereotypes or myths about people who get assaulted and now it's survivors don't want to tell their stories in the case that it actually triggers someone, or just in case, just in case, just in case. And that's just still the same name or still silent. I think just understanding that sometimes you might as well just say it, and it's going to be better in the long run. So just not being ashamed and not being ashamed of the hurt that's been done to you. I think a lot of people are, "I just don't want to say it just in case other people get uncomfortable," but that just means that you're not talking about it, and it's so appropriate to talk about the hurt. Other people talk about their hurt all the time and sexual assault should be no different.

Rose's Story, Rose's Right

During college I went through a break up that brought me to an all time low for my already struggling mental health. I met a guy a month or two later who I will call Liam. Liam was incredibly sweet to me and made me feel so important. I spent a lot of time with him or talking to him, [and it] helped fill a space in my life that my ex had left. He gave me confidence and comfort when I didn't know how to stand on my own two feet alone. Shortly after knowing him, Covid hit, and he was the only person in my life I spoke to regularly and he became a constant.

I spent hours and hours with Liam, and he made me incredibly happy. I thought he was everything I wanted in a relationship, and I was head over heels for that man. I eventually made a commitment to him and we were officially dating.

My life changed incredibly fast over 6 months, but the few months prior to dating Liam, I was living a blindly happy life. I say blindly because I wasn't happy and was really far from it. I was partying a lot, ignoring responsibilities, failing classes and hating myself, but if anyone saw me they thought I was thriving. Sometimes I thought I was thriving too but I was far from it.

Shortly after, his controlling behavior started to pick up and it eventually became physical.

It happened so regularly I can't really remember specific details of an argument or what started it. Usually it was because I went out with friends and went drinking. He never was okay with that. Usually I didn't respond fast enough or had a typo in a text that gave him a reason to say I was too drunk and didn't know my limit. He always went through my phone after a night out and would look at every one of my friends stories to find something. A guy friend of mine would ask me a question or there would be a group photo when I was too close to someone. I

would be called a slut, whore, cunt, bitch, say I had daddy issues and was an attention seeking whore. Those words eventually stopped hurting my feelings, but it really ruined my self esteem at the beginning.

I was always a nice sweet girl that everyone liked, and he ruined the one thing I felt sure about. One incident was on our way to meet his siblings to watch a football game. I was driving and noticed a small spot of something on my shirt and wanted to cover it up with a sweatshirt in my back seat. He told me it was stupid and they wouldn't care so I couldn't put the sweater on. I insisted and before we met his siblings, I pulled over in another parking lot to change and then kept going. He practically screamed at me for the whole drive about how stupid I was. He acted normal once around people, but that night I told him I didn't appreciate being told what to do when it was so simple to make me feel comfortable. He insisted that he was doing it for my own good. That he was pushing me outside my comfort zone and trying to better me and make me more confident. He was mad because I was clearly not trying to be a better person and he didn't want to be with a person like that.

One thing I have done for years is work on myself. I have gone to therapy for years during high school and some during college before meeting him. I actually have worked really hard at being a better person and being happy so him saying that again broke me. It targeted an area of my life where I felt confident. I ended up having a panic attack on the floor of my bedroom where he dumped a glass of water on me and mocked me for having something on my shirt. He said I better put a sweatshirt on so nobody sees the tiny drop on my shirt. He hovered over me while I was curled up in a ball hyperventilating yelling at me while I was now sopping wet and sitting in a puddle.

It was only a few months that he was physically abusive and I don't know what made him change, but he really did. He would grab me, choke me, throw things at me, spit on me, throw me or hold me down. He threatened suicide if I left and was manipulative in how he talked to me. He rarely would do something hard enough or long enough to leave a mark though. Only once did he give me a fat lip and somehow was insistent that it was my fault because it was my hand that did it. His behavior didn't let up and it drained all confidence from my body. The only way to describe myself at that point was a shell of my old self.

When things were at their worst, I broke down and called my mom for help. My parents and friends all became involved, and it made it worse for a while. They were so forceful in trying to make me leave him and it wasn't something I was ready for. Eventually they settled in supporting me the best they could and I made decisions for myself when I was ready. That was what was helpful.

I started therapy and never once thought I was in an abusive relationship. I also didn't think Liam was controlling or manipulative. I thought he was broken and needed fixing. Therapy also showed me that a lot of the behaviors I witnessed from Liam, my mother did too.

While my mother wasn't physical with me, she was also narcissistic and controlling throughout my childhood. We didn't get along but I thought the way she acted was normal and how a mother daughter relationship should be. Therapy opened my eyes and after almost 2 years, I eventually gained back the confidence and strength to cut ties with Liam.

Therapy helped me gain confidence to be independent from him, but I was also an incredibly empathetic and hopeful person through it all. I always believed he had the capability to be the person he was when we first started talking, the person I thought I'd marry one day. I felt sympathetic towards his rough upbringing and the mental health issues he suffered with. If I

left I was always worried of what he would do to himself and especially worried he would think I gave up on him. I tore myself to pieces to try to keep him whole and eventually gained the strength to put myself first. I still feel bad for him and always will.

I am now a part time student and have a full time job in a field I love. I am working harder and taking on more than I ever thought I could handle successfully, and I'm so proud of myself for it. I feel like my goals are possible for the first time in a long time.

I've grown an immense amount. I've become comfortable with being alone. I have confidence in myself. I have goals that felt unachievable for so long, but I'm back to working on them. I'm not 100%, but I will never stop trying to get there.

Quinn's Story, Quinn's Right

I was married by age 21 and had two children with this man. The relationship was toxic, and I only knew this type of relationship as I came from a troubled home. I had many ex boyfriends that were just as bad, however, I did not stay with them long enough to have the relationships pan out in the same manner. His narcissistic, controlling and manipulative behaviors soon became that of affairs, gaslighting about affairs, lies, cheating, abuse of money, taking cars apart so I could not leave, threatening me with the military to draw their guns on me if I chose to leave the army base, using children and their safety against me, stealing money from me and leaving me with empty bank accounts and no food when living out of state on an army base with no family around.. and so much more. This toxic behavior only increased as the years went on. I left the marriage with 2 children under the age of 3.

Through it all, I felt so much anger, frustration, hurt, feelings of resentment, sadness on why I kept finding myself in these relationships, sadness that my children had to see this, but thankful it was directed towards me and not them. Staying for fear of not knowing who or what would be around my children if I was gone.

He always seemed to get off scot free. He knew the insides of the law and how to word things and always seemed to know how to use the system to benefit himself. I took large hits emotionally, financially and was always trying to work on things due to the kids involved.

I later married again and was married for 16 years. His mental health was something that he was very good at hiding. It was discovered after having one kid with him that he was bipolar, but later to be found out as autistic with PTSD, not bipolar. He was living a double life, lies, abuse of money, affairs, verbal, mental and emotional abuse. This is what ended the marriage.

I dealt with everything, and [with outside factors,] the most that happened was divorce and failed attempts to get DHS to help protect the kids and I. [The police] had very little impact as I was already on my way out and doing what I needed to do to protect my kids. I learned the system had too many flaws and I wanted to take a step in making these flaws something that occurs less. Despite it all, I became stronger, and got into the mental health field as I began to grow personally.

Lucy's Story, Lucy's Right

I was a victim of domestic violence at age 19. This domestic violence lasted approximately three years. However, the emotional trauma has lasted a lifetime.

My romantic partner at the time, my boyfriend, inflicted the violence on me. Over the course of three years I was a victim of domestic violence from emotional abuse to physical abuse.

These events occurred multiple times over the span of three years. The emotional abuse began during experiences when alcohol was involved. I began blaming his unsafe choices on his consumption of alcohol, shifting the blame from him to alcohol. However, he quickly showed this abuse occurred when he was sober as well. He could only hide his true colors for so long.

He began isolating me from family and friends- pointing the finger at my friends, as if they just weren't understanding with losing time with me. He slowly isolated me into feeling I needed him and only him; while also making me feel so alone. [There was] emotional violence and physical violence. I can recall one experience that really stood out to me. We were on a drive, he became angry and jealous about something. Jealousy drove his actions often. He drove to a gravel road, and pushed me out of his truck onto the gravel road. He then drove away. I began walking, attempting to walk back into town. This was one of many situations in which he cared so little about my wellbeing.

I was so happy before I met him. I was raised in a happy and healthy home- raised by parents that were in a healthy and successful marriage. Our home was full of love and compassion. [During,] I felt sad, isolated, hopeless, anxious, misunderstood, confused. Overall physical sickness. I became mentally unstable. Dealing with many strong moments of PTSD and anxiety. The PTSD was impairing my life choices.

[However,] I have received support and healing from this trauma in my life. Through years of counseling I am now stronger than ever. I thank God for protecting me during years of abuse and during my healing. PTSD and anxiety no longer run my life. I become stronger everyday and can now share my story with other women who are going through similar challenges.

Louis' Story, Louis' Right

At 14: the boyfriend at his home

He was 4 yrs older and wouldn't stop until I gave in. I must have liked his attention, but it was frightening, and [I was not] wanting to continue. I pretended to faint as I couldn't handle it.

Unfortunately, I continued with him for a few years having sex consensually. I felt alone. Having an early introduction to sex caused me to be very casual about it. My self esteem and values, morals and worth were degraded.

At 16: the date at a party

[He] pulled me into a room after drinking. It all happened so quickly, and after, I didn't talk to him or want to see him again. I felt alone.

At 18: the stranger in the field

As a group of girls, we were invited to a bonfire. I was grabbed and pulled into a field and raped. Before, I was oblivious to the danger, and during I was afraid for my life. After, I felt extremely victimized. It happened when I was newly married. Some responses from two adults were causing shame on my part.

At 20-28: the husband in our home

[My] husband used force when drunk. I was always unsure what condition he would come home in. During it, [I was] afraid that the kids would wake up, so I tried to keep peace. But after, I was

so angry and full of hate. Sometimes I would leave the home and stay at my parent's for a while. I went to the station once when my husband had physically hit me. Actually, the officer or counselor I was talking to wanted me to press charges, I could tell he was disappointed when he saw I wasn't ready. My coping skills were accepting in my head that life is just tough and unfair.

Jan's Story, Jan's Right

It was over a series of years. To be honest, I didn't even realize that it was sexual abuse until Last October, so currently I still don't have a lot of concrete memories of what happened, but [I believe it was] roughly from the age of three to four until I was 13 or 14.

My dad was the one who abused me. I mean throughout most of my childhood, I was always closer with my mom, you know, we're pretty tight. And with my dad, for the most part, I was pretty comfortable around him for a long time. Around my junior year of high school, I started flinching whenever he would touch me or I just got uncomfortable with things like hugs and any sort of physical interaction. Just like certain things weren't starting to sit right with me and the way he treated my mom or me. Currently I don't have any like face to face contact with him. I haven't spoken to him since September, and I would say, once I got to college for my freshman year, I mean, we still talked. Everything was more or less fine. But then that summer and moving forward, it just wasn't great. There was always some sort of tension just because a lot of other things were going on, I guess. And I was kind of realizing like, oh, there's a lot of things that happened growing up that weren't OK. Then also I studied abroad last spring for a couple months. During that time I did not regularly talk to him, so for the most part, like since I've been at college, we haven't been very close. Before that, we were pretty close and a lot of the time, he told me, "Oh, we're so similar," you know, like... I don't know. Things like that, I guess.

It's kind of difficult to trace back to exactly when I started realizing. I think the first time that I could recognize and I was like, "That's kind of weird" was I think in 9th grade, and I had a teacher. She told me, "Hey, I'm gonna put a sticker on your back," and I knew that she was going to touch my back, and then I just flinched and she was like, "Whoa, that's kind of a big reaction." So with that, I was just kind of like, "Hmm, that's kind of weird," but I didn't really think much

of it. When I got to college, with my roommate, we talked a lot about the trauma that he went through growing up and then how I related to some of those things and our dads were both pretty similar in the sense that they're narcissistic with emotionally abusive things like that. So with that, I was kind of starting to pick up like, "OK, I shouldn't have been treated like that," just emotionally and like, "That's not how every family functions." So little things like that where it's just kind of like, everything's not as perfect as I thought it was.

This is something that kind of spurred some of the realizations. I have little to no memory of my dad before the age of 13 or 14. At that point I remember him tickling me and telling him like, "Stop. I don't like that." And he wouldn't stop. The only reason he did stop is because my sister walked in, but before that, I mean he was working a lot and was gone quite a bit, but I just thought it was weird even asking my roommates, like "You can actually remember your dad before that age?" So yeah, I mean it's kind of difficult to know exactly that it would be like three to four, but it could have been earlier than that or later. But at that point, it would have been before my family moved here to Iowa from Indiana. But after they had moved there right before I was born. So, I'm not exactly sure, but I do know that my dad was assaulted when he was 8 or 9, so definitely it would be around that range at least just because sometimes how you do get in those cycles of trauma and reenacting it, I guess. But yeah, I think just because from such a young age I was so anxious, super shy, and I just didn't trust a lot of people, it was very difficult to do that. I think that's kind of how I realized that was definitely happening pretty early on because I can even remember back to first or second grade, not being able to go to bed just because I was anxious. I always had to double check things and being that young and doing that, I feel like just isn't something that a ton of kids experience. There was also a portion of time around that age after we had just moved to Iowa where I was having frequent bladder infections.

Which that was one of the things that I was kind of like, “That's weird.” My mom just told us it was the soap we were using, which is plausible I guess, but at the same time that can be a symptom of an STI. So, I figured then at that point at least, something would have been happening.

That time where I do kind of start remembering my dad being in my life, I was, I guess, I don't know what the best word is for it, but I was always emotionally regulating my mom and in a sense, kind of serving as that sort of partner just because my dad wasn't there, and he wasn't emotionally available. After a while, it kind of started building up to where I was like, you know, I'm only 15. I shouldn't be having to do this for my mom. But I still wanted to do it because I loved her and cared about her and knew that my dad just wasn't providing for her in that way. But I guess when I really started noticing some of that was during quarantine, and my sister and I were talking a lot and just kind of getting into things like you know “I don't like how he is the one who's always talking when we're at the dinner table after church.” Like both of us are expected to stay quiet. And our mom, just like wouldn't talk as much either. Like, it could be part of the grooming process, but I was barely acknowledged a lot of that time. Just with some of that and I was seeing how he didn't help out around the house unless if it was doing work outside, and just kind of seeing how there were very traditional gender roles- that nuclear family kind of thing, but how we're living in a time where that isn't the norm as much anymore.

So right before I left for studying abroad, I got to the point where I was like, OK, I was scared of my dad growing up, and I just kind of blocked out a lot of that. So I was at a point where I just needed to get away from everything. So you know, I did a lot of self reflection and kind of learning about myself, that sort of thing. Then last summer, I'd set some boundaries with my parents. Just like, “We're gonna have some limited contact. I just need time and space.” And

with that, I just kind of kept reflecting on things and all of that. So then, the date that I officially realized that I was assaulted was October 11. And with that, it's kind of difficult to describe, but I kind of had this feeling that, like, I act in ways where it feels like there's more going on, like more trauma than I thought I had. Then I was kind of thinking like, well, what else could have happened? And then when I came to that conclusion, I could just feel in my body that "oh." Like that's it. Something did happen. So yeah, it took me a long time. I mean, it hasn't been terribly long since then, but just to kind of realize that even though you don't remember or have specific memories of things, it doesn't mean it didn't happen.

Then fairly recently I've been having more memories. I guess I've gotten to the point where I think my brain is, I guess, at a point where it knows that I can handle remembering some things. For the most part, it has been just a lot of memories in my body, like how I don't like feeling touched, how there's certain areas that are more tense. But fairly recently I've been having more, like if there's a trigger or something I see in a show, and then it keeps playing over and over in my head. Last weekend I was watching the new *Bridgerton* show with my roommates, and there's a scene where one of the main characters was being raped by her husband. And like, they kept showing it over and over, and I just couldn't shake it. Even going to bed that night, I was like, "Why can't I get over this," you know? And I kind of realized that I was raped or molested in some sense. And every once in a while I'll just have like... very small brief flashbacks, so it's not even like a clear memory, but it's maybe seeing the ceiling of my bedroom or I mean just a feeling in my body like, "Oh, this is how I felt during that time," things like that. I kind of describe it as a mosaic in a sense where there's lots of different bits and pieces, but at the moment, I don't know quite how it all fits together yet. So yeah...

I came to the conclusion that something happened with my dad, just because I have felt uncomfortable around him for so long and I think just in my gut, I knew. I mean, there wasn't anything that would have happened with my brother and my sister. I feel comfortable enough around them. With my grandparents, I've always felt pretty close to them and not like anything happened there. So I think just kind of that gut feeling. And with my mom, I've always been close to her, so I think just kind of with that, I definitely don't trust my dad. I don't like how he treats other people. I think just over the past couple of years, kind of picking up on things but not finding a concrete reason with sort of how I came to that conclusion that there must have been something bigger that did happen. So I kind of tried drawing out things, but since there wasn't anything super clear, I think that's kind of how I got to that point where it is something just very complex and how there are repressed memories and kind of how that could have gotten to that point. So I think a lot of it did just come from a gut feeling, and then also sometimes I speak out loud to myself just to sort of process things. So around that time I was kind of thinking like, "Well, was I physically abused? Was it just emotional abuse? Then when I kind of came to sexual abuse, it just connected and made sense and even in my body I could feel like that exhaustion and kind of that sense of like, "Oh yeah, that actually is what it is, isn't it?"

And [those feelings,] like feelings of panic and high stress things. Kind of like, how you feel when you're having a panic or anxiety attack in the sense of like, "Oh, I feel like I can't breathe. I'm feeling really frustrated. I can't think straight." I think that's kind of the biggest thing that goes along with it and also being triggered by other men in my life who I know haven't done anything wrong. There's no reason for me to act that way, but because I do draw some sort of association, it kind of leads to that build up.

This summer, my family and I sat down and had a conversation, and our family rarely sits down and actually talks about things. So it was a pretty big deal. But I was just kind of talking about like, “Hey, I really didn't appreciate how you've been treating me or just some of the ways that you acted toward me when I was younger.” And he pretty much immediately said “Well, that's how you feel, but...” and then provided excuse after excuse after excuse. It was very subtle, which is why I didn't catch it for such a long time. There was another time during the middle of my senior year of high school, I was pretty depressed. I couldn't even look people in the eyes anymore. Basically, he was yelling at me telling me to like, “Pull yourself out of it. You're not actually depressed,” and things like that. So in the sense of that's more dismissing emotions, but at the same time, kind of gaslighting.

It was pretty rough. When I first found out I was dissociating a lot, and then when I chose to tell my sister, she didn't believe me and was basically just providing excuses. So that was pretty tough. Then I told my mom and set that boundary saying “I'm not going to talk to dad anymore” and “This is what happened.” She didn't really speak on it. We don't talk about it much. I mean, once or twice she's brought up like asking, “Well, what exactly is sexual assault?” And I've explained it a little bit, but I can tell she doesn't believe me either. I think there's some questions she has, like there are things where it's like, “OK, interesting,” like “I could see how you got to that point.”

For those first couple months, I pretty much denied it. Just saying like, “Well, this is just something that popped in your head. It's not like that could have actually happened.” And then, over winter break, there's a friend who identifies as a man who came over, and I had a really bad panic attack. So just kind of with some of those feelings where I'm really tense and then I feel like I'm kind of back in that situation with my dad has really sort of reminded me of how I felt

then and how it connects to how I react now. But emotionally, I definitely kind of blocked out a lot of it for that first bit of time, just because it was so much that I couldn't really process any of it. But I've definitely gone through different stages. I guess growing up as a kid and for a long time, I've just been angry a lot because that was the only way I knew how to deal with emotions, but there's definitely been a lot of grieving, especially with the relationship with my mom and my sister. This might sound kind of bad, but with my dad I could care less just because of what happened. I'd say for a lot of it, emotionally, I've just been feeling pretty sad and just kind of grieving. You know how I have to deal with all my shit now that I wouldn't have had to deal with if that didn't happen, and really processing and dealing with things. I'd say that's the biggest kind of sensation I've gone through. Then also kind of noticing where I feel tense in certain areas, so like in my back I feel pretty tense and my shoulders, I don't like being touched there. I feel a lot of tension in my legs, things like that. Where it's just kind of recognizing, you know, you feel tension in these places because that's where that trauma is being stored and kind of how those memories are processed, just not consciously.

So right after I told my mom, I received a text from my dad. He said and this would have been like the day after I told my mom, "I totally understand why you feel the way that you do. It was never my intention to harm you, and it was what I wrongly thought a way to relate to you when you were younger. I'm so sorry. And know I'm proud of you and love you no matter what. I hope you'll be able to forgive me someday." Which on the surface it sounds pretty nice, but growing up with my dad there was a lot of gaslighting and using words that sound nice, but it doesn't align with his actions. So that's the only concrete comment I've gotten. But a lot of the time, like when my mom and I meet up every month or so, she'll say, "You know, like you can take your time, You can come back whenever you want. Your dad and I are waiting for you."

Which again, it sounds nice, but at the same time, there's that undertone of "We don't believe you. Nothing happened." Yeah. So that's kind of where it gets complicated in the sense of that I'm acting a certain way, but only owning up to the tickling. That was the only thing he admitted happened. So he hasn't really commented on it much. Last spring, he did come forward to at least tell my sister that he was sexually assaulted by a cousin when he was younger. So he commented on that aspect but not in the way that he abused me.

After I realized what had been going on, I think like a week or two later, I reached out to the local sexual assault support organization, and I started meeting with an advocate through their program. So I've been meeting with Ashley since November-ish. That's been pretty helpful to at least kind of start processing things, and since I was in a pretty dark place for a while, it helps to just have something to look forward to every couple weeks where I could talk about it and kind of start working through some of that trauma.

It's been really nice, I do feel more empowered and like, I can actually talk about it. And seeing how Jo has kind of gone through the process of really stepping forward and being a big activist in that sort of sense, I guess it's just kind of nice that I feel like I don't have to be quiet about it if I don't want to. It has [also] been nice to specifically work with an organization that serves that population so they do have people that know what you've gone through, or at least can relate.

Having an advocate is kind of like having a bridge in the sense that I kind of have that extra support and that is helping me bridge that gap between how I feel and what happened and just having someone that can put words to those feelings and also just reassures me. I think a big thing that really helps was that Ashley told me "It's real to you," and also that, I mean that idea that even if you can't explicitly remember something, it doesn't mean it didn't happen, and really

just learning to trust your body. She recommended a book that a lot of people in my social work classes have also read called *The Body Keeps the Score*. I'm almost done with it. It's been really good, but I definitely learned a lot about how that trauma is stored in the body and then also how sometimes your brain does things like repressing memories to protect you when you're in that environment, so you can just survive and get through what you need to get through. But yeah, it's definitely helped a lot, especially since in the past I have struggled a lot with suicidal ideation and during that time I was kind of nearing that point. So it really helped to just kind of have that person to be the bridge to really kind of connect some of the things going on and helping guide me toward how to move forward and also giving advice on what to do with family members, especially with my mom and my sister and navigating that.

I told my roommates Christopher and Jo, and then their brother Mark. I briefly mentioned it to their partners, but I think that's pretty much it. I haven't even told my brother or my grandma just because at least with my grandma, I don't think it would help anything. With my brother, he wouldn't believe me anyway, so there's not really any point in doing that. But [my roommates] were super great about it. My roommate Jo is very open about being assaulted. They've been a huge support for me through it all. I felt very validated for sure. But yeah, I think it was just kind of that day that I realized what was sort of going on. That's the only time I've really explicitly talked about that with anyone other than Jo just because I think it's something that people don't know whether it's something you should talk about or something you shouldn't. Also, it's easier to talk to Jo because I can tell that she gets it and understands.

[I also] went to an event through the local sexual assault resource organization with Jo and Christopher and his partner Julie where Aly Raisman talked about her experience with being sexually assaulted herself and coming out with all of that. She mentioned how when people in

your life don't believe you, when you come forward about going through that, that can be retraumatizing. I think that's something that, I don't know, has been pretty validating for me in the sense that people don't always believe you, and that's been something really tough to deal with because it can seem like something that's so little to some people, but to that person it is really a big deal because it is such a big part of you and your experience and how you see the world.

I briefly considered [seeking legal help], but I kind of got to the conclusion where if none of my family members will believe me, I have no sort of evidence that could be used in a trial, and how even I didn't believe myself for so long that it's just not likely that anything would come out of it. But it did kind of go through a period where I wanted to seek out justice, but I've learned it looks a lot different, and especially in this kind of situation where there are a lot of complexities.

Message from Jan:

In general, trust yourself. Even if everyone else is telling you it's not true, believe yourself. I think just knowing that you feel a certain way for a reason, you don't feel emotions or feel things in your body just randomly, there's always some kind of motivation or action behind it. And then also kind of recognizing, especially when you do have a family member that has sexually assaulted you, that family can look a lot different. It doesn't have to be biological family. You can find family and friends and community in a lot of different ways, and this might be kind of cheesy, but I have found a sense of family in myself and just really kind of having to learn to trust myself and know that if I didn't have anything else that I would be OK.

And another thing that Jo initially told me was to really take your time with processing and working through things, that there's not really a timeline where I need to process all of this within the next six months just because that's not realistic. So be gentle with yourself because there are a lot of things in this kind of situation that you don't have control over, so with that just give yourself a lot of grace, and also to family members or friends of people who are survivors. Believe survivors, just because that is something that a lot of people say, but know that if it happens in your life, you do have a choice of... I mean, even if you don't believe at first, at least reassure them in some way because they've gone through a lot, and it takes a lot to speak up and tell someone about it. I think just recognizing that this is something that happens to a lot of people and you probably know someone that's been assaulted or abused in some way, and giving people grace and being patient with them with that process.

Jane's Story, Jane's Right

It began at age 19, lasted until I was about 35.

The first few big arguments we had (before things got physical) ended up in him trying to humiliate me. He spat in my face while screaming at me, made very specific degrading comments about my body/weight, and would make sure he knew he was telling his friends these things as well. This was not something that happened every day. It was the textbook abuse cycle: lots of time together as companions/lovers, irritation with each other then mounting tension (both of us), exchange of hurtful words instead of any attempts at effective communication (both of us), then rage (him). There would be a cool off period, apologies and regret, then love bombing; which in my younger years I thought was true remorse and desire to change but as I got older realized it was a tactic/strategy for him to keep me near. Rinse and repeat.

The rage got progressively worse. There were a few "wrestling matches" between us early in our marriage. (We had dated 7 years and were married for 10 by the time things were said and done.) He became very good at hurting me without any marks. If we started yelling at each other he would corner me, stick his head right in my ear and yell in it as loud as he could reminding me that he always would "win" any yelling match. He also would bear hug me from behind when he was frustrated with me and pick me up like that, squeezing me so hard that to this day, when I jog, one of my right ribs feels displaced.

This is more triggering than I thought- I have never told anyone about that before.

During one of our wrestling matches, he threw me to the floor and when I went down, my nose hit his knee and started bleeding. He immediately grabbed me, helped me up and started crying and apologizing. Maybe that helps people understand why victims of domestic violence stay. "Things got bad, but he didn't mean to, then he really cared when they got too out of

control". When I was 7 months pregnant with our daughter, he threw a lamp at me. I blocked it with my arm so that it didn't hit my stomach. The worst and probably most memorable incident was the time he had me pinned on the side of our bed. He was holding me down by the wrists and straddling me. I think I was sitting on the side of the bed and he pushed me backwards forcefully. When he was screaming at me for whatever reason, he took his hand (open-palmed) and smacked me so hard in the head that I saw stars. It was the only time in my life I had ever seen stars from any trauma to the head.

There was a span of a year or two where the abuse stayed verbal and venomous and didn't get physical. A lot of threats. During the last couple of years of our marriage, I found many of his secrets out. My clothes would go missing. I'd find bizarre contraptions hidden in the ceiling of our basement. I'd find bottles with powdery residue. Some of it I now know what it was; other things are still a mystery. I wouldn't consider myself a particularly sheltered person, but the time and energy he put into hiding who he truly was/is and did/does is actually quite astonishing. I kicked him out of the house March 2018 after we had decided to separate. I had planned to file for divorce but hadn't yet. We set up a meeting spot at a church parking lot to exchange our daughter as he was still spending time with her multiple times a week. I had called him out on not smoking cigs around our daughter as I pointed out a pack of them I could see under the passenger seat of his car. This threw him into a rage. He chess checked me while standing on my toes and yelling at me. I couldn't move. The second I could, I got into my car and locked the doors. My daughter was in her car seat in the back seat. He attempted to punch through my passenger window, then the back window WHERE OUR DAUGHTER WAS. Thankfully the windows did not shatter. He did manage to bust off my side mirror, so I left the parking lot with that dangling and my daughter screaming in terror in the back. I immediately

dropped her off at my parents house and went straight to the police dept to file a report. I filed for divorce the next day.

I remember at one point looking in the mirror and hating myself. Our daughter was probably about 3 and even though she hadn't witnessed anything physical (that I know of or can remember), I knew she was growing up hearing all of the awful stuff he was saying to me. I had a lot of fight in me in the beginning. I would find ways to degrade him verbally as much as he would me. But by the time our daughter was born, I went into mom mode; trying to blanket and de-escalate any anger toward me so that our baby girl would be as exposed to it as little as possible. I do remember one day all 3 of us were in the kitchen and he was yelling at me. I was standing across the room from him. He said "Look at you. You're a disgusting pig. You look like a wildebeest. (Daughter's name), I'm sorry your mom is such a fat cow". Our 3 year old, sweet, innocent and perfect little happy girl, not understanding why Dad was so upset, looked up at me with her big, sympathetic brown eyes and in her little 3 year old voice said "I'm sorry, Mama".

This may have been the beginning of the end of my marriage to him. And it may have been the day I looked at myself in that bathroom mirror and hated who I was. I have that incident documented in a notebook and referenced it several times throughout the process of my divorce from him just in case I was ever having a weak moment of potential regret for leaving him. It was a pivotal moment that solidified that notion that I was going to get her out of that environment and no matter how hard it was, she would NOT be growing up with that kind of exposure. I feel I should note that he was never physically abusive to our daughter. Ironically, he was a very good caretaker of her. He was an involved father in terms of feeding, diapering, and making sure she was engaged with age-appropriate learning opportunities. Over the years it has become harder for him to adapt to her growing up, but he is present.

When I was with him, I put so much time and energy into making sure *he* was okay. I loved him and knew he had some demons, so I always felt it was my duty that he felt love and loyalty from me though it was rarely reciprocated. After I left him, I got to focus on myself. What I liked about myself, what my strengths were, what I needed to work on as a human being. I learned a lot during that process, and I made tremendous gains in terms of personal growth. After my daughter and I started our life over in a new condo, I began to build my own happy home. And we loved coming back to it day in and day out without the stress of some black cloud waiting at the doorway to make it miserable for us. I am an anxious person by nature, but stressors feel so much more manageable without that type of toxicity in my life.

He began to call my mom names (and estranged himself from his mom and sister) throughout the divorce process. I am still quite close with most of his family and he couldn't accept that for a long time. Also, notice the pattern of everyone he had/has so much anger toward? All female. Would say my dad was a good guy. Praised his dad for always being there for him. Speaks highly of my new husband (though my husband is not a big fan of him).

When I first met my (now) husband, my ex had a meltdown. Begged me to meet him at a park so he could explain some things. I let my loved ones know where I was going. My ex explained that he was leaving the state to go kill himself. Said he had been addicted to adderall for 10+ years. Said he was doing coke. Said he had a porn addiction that was ruining his life. Promised he would go to therapy if I would come back to him. Bought our daughter a bracelet and told her that was to remember him. She was confused about this 2 years ago and is still a little unsure what he meant by it. I basically told him he was stupid and selfish to leave his daughter, then walked away. The next day he left a suicide note for his dad, packed up his car and left. They found him in Kentucky (he was on his way to NC) and admitted him to a psych

ward there. Upon his return he had to wait for bed in IA but a psych doctor deemed him safe and no longer suicidal. At this point I was granted a restraining order due to his mental instability. He had told his sister that he would kill me if I ever tried to take our daughter away from him. And that was enough to keep him away from us. I was in contact with officers who stayed with me while I packed a bag to leave (upon his return to IA just in case he came after me) as well as a mental health counselor who works with the police department. I found them helpful. I want to say, at one of the points around this mental break, I suspected the use of drugs around my daughter and even at this point he was threatening suicide as he did many times throughout our divorce process. I called CPS or DHS (I can't remember which) and asked them to remove her from his custody. The social worker on call said "We can't do anything even if you know it's going on. We have to wait for something to happen before we can intervene". I could tell as the guy was saying this that even he knew it was asinine.

Most of the police were professional and understanding. The only one who wasn't was the officer I spoke to right after the church parking lot incident when my mirror was punched off. I was shaken up, but am totally aware that emotional women are many times deemed hysterical or over dramatic. I made it a point to make sure I was composed and articulating my words into factual statements when requesting to file a report. This guy was in his early 20s and when I stated a brief description of what happened, he ROLLED HIS EYES AT ME then proceeded to tell me he couldn't do anything bc even though we were separated and already living in different spots (we had sold our house by this time too so as not to drag it into the incoming divorce proceedings) my car was still his too since we were legally married. I explained that my car was in my name and my ex's car was in his name, so that surely that made a difference. HE ROLLED HIS EYES AT ME AGAIN. About this time, his boss came around the corner and very

professionally took over. This man was completely different. Sympathetic to the situation, let me give my statement, explained the process and what my options were. I will still never forget that first officer. Ever. Disgrace to the profession. I think he's a puke.

I was supposed to [go to court,] but I got the court dates mixed up. I have voicemails from the clerk saying I didn't need to be at one of the court dates. So I went to work only to have my email ding with an alert that stated by a bailiff that I didn't show up. My heart dropped and I ran home to write an affidavit to the judge. This is probably the mistake of my life. It was my chance to have a more firm custody plan in place. My chance to have my ex drug tested for amphetamines. And I messed it all up. The worst part is that my brother told me I purposely skipped out on (I am a rule follower and would NEVER blow off a court date EVER) to not hurt my ex or make him look bad. Basically that I had too much sympathy for my ex. Not the case at all. The judge responded and basically believed me. Lots of legal jargon but that's the gist of it.

Divorcing him and leaving that situation was probably the most difficult, stressful, awful experience of my life. But my life is incredible now. I still have to deal with him and that is shaky but my only communication with him pertains to co-parenting. There were a lot of nasty things said the year following our divorce. At one point he had a breakdown. I'll explain that below. But there's just so much less stress now. I control my money. The vibe in my home. I feel safe, always. I feel more focused. I feel like I can put energy into being a positive role model for my daughter. I've switched jobs. Met and married an incredible man. Had another beautiful daughter. My life is COMPLETELY opposite of what it was 5 years ago and I am so grateful for that. As of now, my story has a happy ending. I am very lucky.

Message from Jane:

Make a plan to leave. It will seem like an insurmountable undertaking. But you can do it. Do not tolerate it. Make sure you have supports. Let people help you. Stay as low key as possible. Most importantly make sure you (and your children if applicable) are safe and aware. I have never met a woman who regretted her divorce. It will be difficult, but it will also be extremely empowering. You may not be ready to leave yet even though you want to, but when the unknown becomes less scary than what you're experiencing on a day-to-day basis, it's time.

Jamie's Story, Jamie's Right

The first story happened when I was 13. I had expressed that I did not want to do any sexual acts because I wanted to wait for marriage. He said if we started “practicing” now it wouldn’t matter because we are going to get married someday. I originally said okay but then right after it started, I asked him to stop and I started to cry. He didn’t care and continued. I just laid there and cried because I didn’t know what to do. Unfortunately, he continued to do things like this for a few years but I stayed, so I blamed myself. It wasn’t until a couple of years ago that I realized this was a problem. Sometimes even now when I try to have sex, I get overwhelmed and I start crying. This same partner a few years later would come to put his hands on me and shove me all the time.

The second thing happened at 17 at a friend’s house. . I was under the influence and so was the other person. They started kissing me and touching me and I was so drunk I didn’t register what was happening. Finally, as he tried to pull my pants down I came to and told him to stop and got myself out of the situation.

Both of them were overwhelming, but I didn’t really come to the conclusion that it was a problem until years after these experiences. I didn’t realize how traumatic they were for me until I finally let myself accept it wasn’t okay what they did.

I was young but I was happy. I would say I struggled more mentally now but there are so many factors to that. I have changed. I am more skeptical to trust people. I struggle with a lot of anxiety. Sex can sometimes go from being fun to overwhelming to me in seconds.

Jackie's Story, Jackie's Right

When I was approximately 19 years old, I was physically attacked by a friend of my brother. He had come to my home, looking for him. He had been drinking. We sat and talked for a while. I felt he was like another family member. The next thing I knew, he had me on the floor, had my arms pinned down above my head and was trying to take my pants off. No one else was home. I tried to fight him off, screaming “no” and “stop,” kicking as much as possible. Before he did anything, he stopped, said he was sorry and left. I can't remember if possibly it was something I yelled that got him to stop, but I was grateful. I never told anyone about it, for I thought no one would believe he would do something like that to me. He treated me like a sister.

[Before,] I was happy and trusting. [After,] I became quiet, was real careful of who I was with when alone. I have occasions where I feel uncomfortable when someone is trying to get close to me. Even with my spouse, I still have flashbacks to this day.

Anna's Story, Anna's Right

I was 20 and 21. The abuser was the same age as me- my ex-boyfriend, who was my boyfriend at the time. Before the violence began, our relationship started out pretty normal and loving. It progressively got worse, as he became more controlling over who I was friends with, who I talked to, and who I hung out with. Manipulation, gaslighting, and reactive abuse were common. After I left the relationship, he tried to contact me multiple times, before I cut all contact.

There were multiple events of sexual and emotional abuse that occurred. I will talk about the events I remember the most clearly.

During arguments, he would be verbally abusive. On multiple occasions, he called me "worthless", "pathetic", "the worst person to live", and many other demeaning things. I would be quiet for the most part. When I couldn't anymore, I'd yell at him and tell him to stop saying those things to me, or tell him that he didn't mean it. He would counter that by calling me crazy and emotionally abusive.

After these things started happening, I no longer wanted to be intimate with him. I didn't want to touch him or be touched by him. When I said no, he would get angry and tell me if I didn't do something, it meant I didn't love him. He said that when he got angry and mean, it was my fault because I wouldn't have sex with him. There were multiple (a rough estimate would be 20) nights where he would physically not allow me to sleep until I had sex with him. This came in the form of ripping the blankets away, screaming at me, slamming and hitting things, and grabbing me.

On the last night that I was with him, I was trying to go to my best friend's house. I had been attempting for the past week to break up with him. He wouldn't let me and always managed

to manipulate me into staying. So that night, he wouldn't let me leave, and he locked me in the bedroom. There were no windows or anything, and he blocked the doorway so I couldn't go anywhere. He told me he would never let me leave. He then pushed me on the bed and got on top of me, putting almost all of his body weight on me and holding my arms down. He was around 180lbs and muscular, whereas I was around 110lbs, so even with me thrashing and kicking, I could barely move him. It was getting really difficult to breathe and I kept telling him I couldn't breathe and he told me I was lying because I was still talking. I began to scream, hoping the neighbors might hear. It was about 11:00pm. He covered my mouth and told me he would get off me if I shut up, so I did. After that, I waited for him to fall asleep and texted my mom what happened, and she drove 3 hours to come get me. I stayed with her and my stepdad for a few days, before they came with me to pick up my things from the apartment.

During the arguments when the verbal abuse occurred, I felt ashamed and heartbroken. I really did love him at the time and wanted to be happy with him. Hearing him say those things to me was absolutely devastating and each time felt like my heart was being stomped on, especially when I tried to remain calm and he would keep going to the point where I was breaking down, and then he had the nerve to say I was the abusive one.

Whenever he sexually assaulted me, I felt angry, violated, and really disgusted. I would say after the first couple times, I no longer loved him and I started to try to figure out how to leave. I was in a really hard financial spot, so I had no idea how I was going to, and it was a really hopeless and scary feeling. Whenever he touched me, it made my skin crawl. I never told anyone the full extent of what was going on until after I had left him.

The last night, when he was on top of me and I could barely breathe, I considered the possibility that I would die. I'd never thought of that before because I didn't think he was capable

of doing anything that terrible. When it happened though, I was more scared than I'd ever been in my life. A lot of things went through my mind, like how I'd never see my family and friends again, or that they would never know what happened to me if he covered it up. It was absolutely terrifying.

It was March of 2022 when I left. Since then, I would say my life has been relatively normal. I have mostly good days, and I'm in a very healthy relationship now. I do feel like I have some slight trauma. I can't watch assault/rape in tv shows or movies because it'll bring up my own experiences, and I'll start nearly panicking like I did when he was on top of me. I can't breathe and I can't stop crying, but I don't think it's a full-on anxiety attack because I know that I'm okay now.

I feel like I have changed a lot. I would not say that I'm happy for this experience AT ALL, but I learned a lot about emotional/sexual abusive behavior. I feel like I may be able to help women who are going through similar abuse, or who have gone through it.

At the same time, I don't feel very whole. I struggle with this a lot because I don't really know how to describe how I feel. Sometimes I feel like I'm hollow, maybe like my soul has pieces missing. I don't feel as happy or as carefree as before, and I feel like parts of my personality are just gone. I haven't gone to therapy yet because I don't feel like therapy has helped me in the past, but I've considered going back to see if it would help with whatever I'm feeling.

Stacy's Story, Stacy's Right

My boyfriend at the time, Stuart, was the one who psychologically and emotionally tormented me. Our relationship began in high school and was pretty typical for the first 6 months. Then when we went to separate colleges, the distrust began. He wanted to control me. If I didn't visit him every weekend, I didn't love him. If I didn't spend every moment of the weekend with him (even if he was napping) then I didn't care enough. I was supposed to choose his family Christmas over my own. Then he began criticizing my looks. My teeth were not white enough or straight enough. I was too pale. He wanted me to wear my hair like the actresses he saw in movies. My boobs were too small. And I could NEVER weigh more than him even though I was very lean and athletic (and was three inches taller than him). We definitely had many laughs together and good times over the years which kept me in the relationship, but I hated how he treated me at times and also hated how I began comparing myself to other women physically. I really began to think less of myself. The good old self-fulfilling prophecy...if you tell me how crappy I am enough then I'll begin to believe it.

As I advanced in college, I didn't spend every weekend with him. At that point, he accused me of infidelity all the time. Our relationship was now more like a bad habit for me now, but I really dislike hurting people so I didn't know how to get out of it. So I began treating him like crap, hoping he would break it off with me. The relationship became horribly toxic.

Before him I had a very healthy self-confidence. With him, I usually felt not good enough, ugly and unworthy of his affection. He made me feel so little. I had a lot going for me but saw none of it. He did not acknowledge, nurture or value the inherent goodness in me.

The breaking point came when his mom suggested our problems would go away if we got engaged. I thought HELL NO!!! It scared me enough to break it off. He tried to get me to

come back to him but I shut him out. I ended up meeting the best man for me, got married and have a family. But for at least seven years after the toxic relationship ended I had nightmares where he would capture me and imprison me. At first I would have the dreams often...every other week. But they eventually lessened. I haven't had one in a long time.

The relationship definitely changed me. I am stronger now, more compassionate(as much as the guy wronged me, he had some mommy issues. She was not a loving and kind woman) and more vocal.

Lisa's Story, Lisa's Right

It was from 17-19 with my boyfriend. I was young, and it started out rather manipulative, full of challenge and guilt. It just got more intense after, and I was afraid to leave for fear he would hurt or kill me. [It was] at his home, in his car, where other people couldn't see.

I was not ever physically struck. He always kept it short of that. Held me down. Put a knife to my neck and said "I could kill you right now." Driving in the car, he played a song with the lyrics, "To die by your side, the pleasure, the privilege is mine," and said to me, "I could kill us both right now." Then he drove toward a telephone pole and swerved at the last minute. He threatened to hang me from my front porch. Violence comes in multiple forms. That felt violent and manipulative.

No one else was involved, but others were aware. They talked about it with each other I learned later but not to me, and that was hurtful. I felt they should've stepped in and supported me better.

After I'd gotten away, I did go to [the police] and tell them if anything happened to me, it was him. But that was it. I think they thought I was nuts. They listened. It was mildly weird of me to do then, but I was scared he would hurt me and if I needed to call them I wanted some history on file, so I kind of didn't care.

I felt scared, depressed. I stopped associating with friends, felt I couldn't trust myself anymore. That I'd made a terrible mistake. That I was weak for not walking away. That I'd lost myself. Before that, I liked me. I trusted me. I had friends, was excited about my future. After, I didn't care. I didn't trust myself. I second guessed myself. I apologized for everything. Even when I didn't need to. But I was used to being scared, and I acted that way everywhere. I changed after, not trusting myself, and it took me a long time to come back from it fully.

Message from Lisa:

That physical or emotional effort to make you do as another wishes, for you to do over what YOU want for you, may not seem as 'bad' as being hit, but it is all a violence against the very essence that is you. No one has the right to decide that you are wrong for being you and try to take that from you. Controlling someone physically or emotionally is wrong, and no one has the right to control someone else, nor invalidate someone for being upset about it. People also have the right to determine what is their limit without judgment from others.

Lily's Story, Lily's Right

So, it's really important to talk about this because in order to be successful and to survive as a woman, it's essential nobody knows what happened. So silence does help you survive, but it also perpetuates the inability to move past it because if you keep it hidden, it becomes part of your identity. But you're also afraid that if you let it out, other people will define you by it. And, so, when I think about my intersectional identity markers, I am white, and my family immigrated to Iowa a long time ago and set up farming farmsteads in eastern Iowa. But, as a woman- especially a woman that's trying to follow in the cultural norms of getting married and having children and doing what our society deems is successful as a woman- in order to operate within those, you have to silence yourself. And so one of the things that I've been recognizing is that by accepting the silence, I'm perpetuating oppression of other people as well. Our patriarchal, neoliberal society has us believe that if we want to be successful, we have to be X, Y, and Z.

When asked, "Does anybody wanna offer their story?" I thought this would be a great opportunity for me to live out what I believe. And what I believe is that human rights are contrary to the way that we build our society. So in order for us to have this neoliberal, individualistic society in which we can achieve success, and that's oftentimes in monetary forms, the people that have to maintain power are typically white men. So, as a white woman, I play into their success by being silent, and if I'm feeling that I have to be silent to be successful, it also takes the side of the oppressor because silence also keeps people of color in silence as well.

So my family was very, very poor. My mom is 68 or 69, and they didn't have enough money to own their property, so they rented farms around eastern Iowa. They had an outhouse in the sixties and seventies. They didn't even have a bathroom. So my mom grew up really, really, really poor, and my dad came from a family that did own a little bit of land, but they also farmed,

and they can trace their ancestors back forever. When my parents met, they weren't aware of all of the influences of trauma that were influencing the way that they did life. But growing up, my my grandparents went through the farm crisis and my grandma talked about the urge to commit suicide. But, with our religious sort of German Protestant background, suicide is not an acceptable form of escaping from your problems. And so, she left the farm and came and lived with us for a while and worked at the university hospitals as an aide. She was a huge part of my growing up.

Another thing that I never really feel comfortable sharing with people is that I was homeschooled. We started before it was even legal in Iowa. My mom was part of the families that lobbied for it to become legal, and although I think that there's wonderful things about homeschooling, and I think that our schooling system reproduces a lot of white supremacy, I think that there's a limiting factors within home schooling, especially if it's religious based. We were home all the time with my grandmother and my mom. That's my background.

My grandma would tell us stories about how when she was seven, her older brother's friend raped her, and when she was 10, a cousin raped her. Her father beat [the family] like horribly, horribly, horribly. Her mother, my great grandmother, just gained weight and gained weight and gained weight, and maintained her silence about it. And so domestic violence was a part of the narrative of our family. My dad never hurt my mom, but my mom was very verbally and emotionally violent towards my dad. I think it was out of her anger of the way that she grew up, so there's lots of stories behind this.

But me growing up, we were within a very narrow understanding of what is God, the Bible and religiosity. Within that narrowness, I think my parents felt like they had to home school, and we weren't allowed to wear dresses, we weren't allowed to shave our legs or do

things that would be part of the mainstream society. My parents ended up having a TV, but we weren't allowed to watch it. And all of those kinds of oppressive factors that my parents put into place I think were well motivated, but I think it was because my mom grew up in this environment where her mother was so beaten down by her father. Then her husband died when my mom was two. Then, she was a single parent, and then she had people try to hurt her and take advantage of her. She just married the next man that came along, and the stigma of having two husbands and having children from different families, my mom saw my grandmothers trying to survive. My mom thought, "If I don't want to repeat that, then I have to go like this." So she went inward and tried to control absolutely everything.

What it did was it made me with my personality feel as though I could be controlled and that was normal. With my mom, of course there was corporal punishment, which I personally don't believe in as a parent. But when it came time for me to sort of be an adult, my mom decided she was kind of done homeschooling us, and we moved to California, and she sent us to community college. I started college when I was 16. My sister was 14. My mom was just kind of done with us. There is no transition between being from Iowa and homeschool to going to California and just dropped off at a community college. It was as though my world had spun out of control, and I had no skill sets in order to reconcile not only the climate difference, but how do you control yourself when other people have always controlled you?

I ended up doing some really, really, really cool stuff with my life. I did an honors thesis, and it was all about voice- women's voice. I worked in the urban center of Los Angeles at a grassroots organization. [My life has] always been really community based and always working with other people to help give other people a voice, not realizing that I needed it. When I was working with these young women, I had gone to the director of the program and said, "You

know, I have this opportunity, is there anybody you would want me to work with? Is there anybody within your neighborhood that really needs people to be with?" There was a group of girls that were in the neighborhood that were kind of loosely involved with the organization- because they did food and they did like all kinds of stuff, and I had helped start at preschool that we ended up getting Head Start certified. There was a medical clinic I translated in, and these were girls that were in gangs. They were high school age, and they either dropped out or were close to dropping out, but they were all either being initiated into gangs or they were gang members. So what I did with my honors thesis was I took other females, I interviewed a whole bunch of women from the university, and picked a handful of people I thought were really mature, really critical thinkers, and we paired them.

We would go to these parks and hang out, and we would bring stacks and stacks and stacks of magazines, and we would collage. It was this form of therapy of being able to express yourself and have a voice and be able to talk about it. So without going into more detail, I started my life wanting to give other people a voice. Our family is not super educated. My grandma got pregnant and ended up going back and finishing your GED later. My mom actually did her undergraduate. But I had never thought about doing school like school... like I didn't have the trajectory of education. This is not super valued. And so I'm doing this work in the community and really, really excited about it, but I have all this internal stuff that has never been resolved. I still have these ideas about who I should be and what's acceptable. So I figured I have to get married. That's the next thing that has to happen.

I ended up getting this internship in Washington DC and meeting this very charming young man who just fell head over heels in love with me. We knew each other for two months, and he proposed to me and I figured I had to accept it. I said, "Well, you have to fly out to

California to meet my parents.” And he did. He was just very, very charming, and he was from Germany. He was in the United States on an internship and he was white. I'd always fallen in love with men that were Latino, and we were not allowed to date, so I'd never dated anybody and never had a physical relationship with anybody. My parents were very, very, very against people that were different. So this man was white. He had a bachelor's degree, and he spoke English. And I thought he accepted me.

We knew each other for two months. Then we got engaged and started this long distance relationship, and he said that if I didn't marry him that he would end the relationship. I felt all of this pressure. My parents wanted me to get married. They liked him. They finally accepted the first person. And again, I've never had a physical relationship with anybody. I've never truly dated anyone because of our religious background.

So I decided, “Well, I guess I have to marry him, otherwise I'll lose him.” I consulted with a lawyer, and he was back to Germany, and in order for him to live in the United States, we had to go through this procedure. He said “no.” So we got married one day and the next day I moved to Germany. Now looking back, I understand it as a tactic for isolation, and I now can see signs of the domestic violence popping up before we got married, but I didn't know them as that. I was so used to being controlled, and I was so used to being told what I could and couldn't do. He was educated and he came from an educated family and he came from a family of money. I thought that if money wasn't a concern, because poverty is something that I've always struggled with, then there shouldn't be any problems. Because money issues can really lead to anger or anxiety or all kinds of emotional stuff.

The abuse started the minute I signed the marriage contract. I remember after our wedding night, he didn't speak to me again. He used the silent treatment at first. That was the

first thing he started doing, and everything I did was wrong. I'm a people pleaser by nature, and my mom was a very angry person, and so I learned very quickly that in order to sort of have a peaceful life, I had to do whatever that person needed or wanted. Not having had a physical relationship or sexual relationship or a relation with somebody else, there wasn't any barometer for what was normal versus what wasn't normal. The abuse was very insidious because I didn't know what abuse was. I mean, being raped at 7 sounds like abuse to me, but I didn't realize that I had been raped.

So, taking it back a bit, this is a long story, but I ended up graduating and took a job in the urban center right next to this ministry. I was teaching elementary school, and I was emergency certified and I was working towards finishing my certification, working really hard in this classroom. My kids didn't speak English. I was learning Spanish as fast as I possibly could, and it was a very exciting time for me. But retrospectively, I'm helping all of these other people and giving them voice and doing all of these kinds of things in the community, but I didn't have an understanding that I had been abused my whole life, like the way that the corporal punishment was done, the emotional abuse was incredibly severe. And I had never told anybody that my grandfather had sexually abused me. Well, I had tried to tell my parents, but they say that I never did. My father's father molested me multiple times from 4 to like the age of 14. Over 10 years he molested me on multiple occasions. I did tell another young peer, and she tried to tell my mom, too, but my mom has no recollection of it. So. The only thing that saved me from that with him was us moving when I was 15. And when we moved, we didn't go back. I never was with him alone again. But I didn't realize I'd been abused. Like I had no idea. I didn't realize I was and never identified it. So when my husband started the classic textbook D.V., I didn't identify it.

[Moving back to the marriage,] we ended up having two children together, and he physically and sexually abused both of them.

When the youngest was nine months and the oldest one was 2, I had this out of body experience where he had gotten angry with me and had hurt me and hurt our daughter and had left the house in a fury of anger. I didn't realize he was doing it on purpose, and looking back, it is so unbelievably calculated. But I remember laying on the bed, and she was never allowed to be on the bed with me. That was one of the rules. And it's really hard for me to talk about the kids because they're teenagers now, and they're still really dealing with the effects of the abuse.

Anyways, I had moved to Germany. I knew when I was pregnant with my oldest one that if I'd stayed there, I wouldn't survive. So I got back to the United States, but he followed me. At that time it was before 9/11, and so immigration was a totally different story. It was super easy, and he was from a country that had easy immigration. Like I don't even remember filling out a paper or anything for him. So, he followed me. She was born there at the time my parents lived there and that's why I went there, thinking that somebody would help me. But I think my parents grew up and were used to it, and they didn't know what it was. With my dad's father having sexually abused me, who knows how many other people has he abused? After he died, it came out that he had actually touched my mom's breast, and groped her. She never told anybody about it. I don't understand why they would send us there for weeks at a time if that had happened to my mom. That's something that I still don't understand. In their mind, why would he ever do that to a child? Or just stupid excuses that adults make for other adults.

So fast forward, I'm in California. I now have two children. I knew once I had the first child, I could never have another child with him. He didn't really like sex, and he was the first experience I had had, so I didn't know anything about what was normal or not normal. When I

ended up being pregnant with the second child, I was so surprised because we rarely had sex. I was always really sure to use protection. He told me later that he had manipulated the condom so that I would get pregnant because I think that he thought that would be a way to control me. I had been accepted in my PhD, and I ended up not doing my PhD in order to save this relationship with him.

So now I have two kids. I can't breathe. I can't speak. I gained like 60 pounds in my first pregnancy. I don't remember a lot of things. But the first months that we were in the United States, we lived with my parents because he had to find a job. I was very, very pregnant, and my mom said he would force feed me. I don't have any memory of it, but my mom thought it was the weirdest thing but never said anything. I gained all of this weight, and I think having me be overweight and having me be pregnant, like continuously, was a control tactic. So here I am. Fast forward. The oldest one is two, the youngest one is now born. I remember laying on the bed. He just hurt both of us and had left in an angry fury. I must have drifted off, and I kind of woke up and I saw something and I heard "If you don't leave now, one of you will die." And it was just as if someone lifted this fog off of me. It was the weirdest thing because our church had this counseling program associated to it, and I kept telling him "We need to go to counseling." So he would go to counseling with me, but he ended up using the counselors to manipulate and keep me. It was the weirdest thing. He used religion to keep me underneath him.

The counselor that we would normally see had been out, so we saw the head of the whole program, and she said, "Why don't I meet with you individually?" And she slipped me this paper about DV, and she said "Why don't you just keep that somewhere where nobody else could see it. Just keep it. If you ever have any questions, you can call that number." I remember calling that number that day and somebody just listened, and I don't have any idea what I told that person,

but I remember crying and not being able to breathe and doing it as fast as I could cause he would check my phone. I didn't want him to come back, and he would lock us in the house. So where we were, they had bars on the windows and they had bars on the doors. We had one car that I paid for that I was not allowed to use. I think he probably left with the keys to the house and the car. So, I remember deleting it off of my phone and meeting up with somebody in secret about going to the DV shelter. I can't remember how many times I met with her, but it took me months just to get myself to meet with them in person and to ask for help. I finally told my parents because they had left the state at that point, and I was alone there with the two kids and him. I said "I have to leave," and we were going to this really small church that my parents thought was such a great idea. And the pastor's wife and pastor would come over and pray with me and my husband.

One day I told the pastor's wife, and I told her how he beat us. And especially my daughter. I didn't say anything about myself. I just said I was really worried about how he leaves all these marks on her. I remember her telling me "You just have to pray more." And I said "I think I have to leave." Inside of me I knew what was right and wrong, but I didn't know what to do about it. People say, "Why don't women leave?" The only thing that occurs to me, I know that there's psychology behind it, but it's as if your energy stops working and everything within your being shuts down. All you can think about doing is surviving to the next moment, and the thought of leaving, leaving that person for whatever control they have over you feels as though it might be death. And when there's kids involved, at least for me, I was thinking, "How would I survive beyond this experience with the kids?" Having two of them and then I have no career at this point. I had a degree, but my licensure hadn't been kept up and I didn't go to my PhD and I didn't have a car and I had no money and nothing. He wouldn't let me work. There's so many

things about the abuse that I could get into details about. But I told my parents. My dad said “My car is still in California. I have to drive it to Indiana. I'm coming to pick you up.”

Moving into a side note, I'm just going to mention it because I think it really plays into this moment with my dad, but a colleague raped me at work when I was teaching school. At night, we were fixing a room, and I thought that it was my fault. I really, really felt like it was my fault because I never had sex with anybody ever. I had never had a physical relationship with anybody. I ended up in the hospital that next day because it just really hurt my body, and it made me sick. I didn't tell anybody for a long time what happened to me, but I kind of went into this psychosis, like I couldn't function. I just stopped functioning, and I eventually had to tell my parents because I couldn't go back to work and see him. So my dad went with me to talk to the Superintendent of that district and tell them what happened. The Superintendent said that that was not OK and that they would handle it internally, but I was not allowed to make a police report. My dad agreed. My parents had never stood up for me, and I think if I could have made a police report, I hate to say this, but if I had made a police report and reported his rape, I don't think I would have married the father of my children. I don't think so because I think once you stand up for yourself once, it kind of breaks the cycle. And, I think watching my parents over and over and over and over again be OK with whatever was happening to me played a part. I remember my mom telling me that it was my fault because I must have led him on, and it ended up reinforcing all of these kinds of things I believed about myself, which allowed me to be in the relationship. So that was chronologically before I married him, or even met him before I left California.

But back to the story. I think it is important to highlight that he wouldn't work, and he was fantasizing about these things he would like to do with his life. He had left me for the very

first time in our whole relationship like overnight, and my dad came. I think he must have flown down and got me and my two kids. I remember packing a diaper bag and having to leave everything. I had \$20. We just got in the car, and we started driving so that we would be as far away as possible. I didn't understand anything about laws. I didn't understand if you take the kids away from him that he could file against you. I had no idea. There was no education around this. There was nothing. My sister, who I don't even know where she was in the world, I just remember her telling me you need to go down to the courthouse and file a restraining order. That's what saved me, was filing that restraining order. They give you a sheet of paper, and they say "Fill this out" and it says, "What did he do to you?" I remember I couldn't write anything down. There's just so many holes in the system and the system is so against anybody that's ever been hurt before. But, I'm trying to write it down, and my sister took the paper in the pen and she said "Just tell me and I'll write it for you." There wasn't enough paper or pen.

I felt like something happened because the judge saw us the same day and everything happened and I can just remember just feeling like, if I had not done that, I would have been in a whole bunch of trouble. Because I didn't understand anything about the system and the judge granted it. And I also remember thinking that someone would find out I was lying. Someone wouldn't believe me, or someone would tell me how you've done this wrong or and someone would tell me it was my fault. Then we got in the car, we just started driving, and we didn't stop. I had these two really, really, little kids, and when we got there, my mom told me "You need to go find a job."

Now this is the hardest part because I think it's still inside of me, like it's still my fault. Because I think if I had stopped earlier, left earlier, if I'd done something different, it wouldn't have happened to my daughter. He had hurt her so badly. He had violated her physically and

sexually and emotionally and spiritually. He just completely demolished this two-year old. He started when she was eight months. It was very systematic. I remember by the time she was two, she would move herself into the back, herself into a corner, and she would scream like as if she was an animal. She pulled out the majority of her hair. He wouldn't let me comfort her when she was a little girl. He would physically restrain us. When we got to my parent's house, I remember thinking "Now I can finally hug her" and I remember her not wanting me. He wouldn't let her lay down in our bed, and I remember thinking "I can finally sleep with her," and she wouldn't sleep with me. I remember there was this closet that had these sliding wooden doors on them, and she just backed herself into the closet and wouldn't come out. She destroyed those doors as a two-year old. I think about the work that I do now, training teachers, and how teachers talk about these kids who don't behave or can't sit still, or they scream or they throw chairs, and inside I just want to say "You don't understand! There's no way you could really, really, really understand! It hasn't happened to you." It's so hard to know how it affects human beings when you're treated like an animal.

He continued the abuse over the next five and a half years through the court system. I had to file a restraining order every six months, and eventually they got denied. The abuse didn't end. We had two full evidentiary hearings. He would call me back into court for whatever reason, and we were in court every six weeks for five and a half years. He eventually got the judge to give him unsupervised visits with the kids, and that's when he sexually abused our son. As a parent, and after you wake up, and after everything you can do, to know that the system cannot protect you and your children, it's just devastating. I've done everything I can do to get help for my kids, but when they have been so badly violated by someone they should have been able to trust, and

then this system doesn't believe you, doesn't have enough evidence, and you can't prove it concretely, just knowing that he was sexually abused after... it's really, really hard.

During that whole five years, I was doing my PhD. When I finally graduated, I remember my advisor saying “Just take another year, you need another year.” I was in counseling, and I was very traumatized by the court system. We had to have two full evidentiary hearings, which means we had to have all this battery of psychological testing and the psychological testing in and of itself, and the fact that they would put us in the same room together and all this kind of stuff was very, very, very, very traumatizing. Then eventually, because with so many years passed since the abuse, they wouldn't renew the protective order. All of that stuff got very complicated, and the fear lives inside your body, and it's not necessarily just of your perpetrator, it's of the entire world. So, getting my PhD was like the only safe place I had. I finally graduated and I was like, “I have to get out of here” because I thought it meant getting away from him. I took the first job that they gave you an offer which ended up being a horribly abusive work situation. It just replicated. I really believe this, you just replicate over and over and over and over and over again the same things until you figure out where the exit is.

The judge gave me permission to move out of state to this new job. So after he sexually abused our son, he was allowed supervised visitations. In their last supervised visitation, he told the kids that if they chose to go with me, he would never speak to them again. So after having been abused on different levels over different periods of time, he abandoned them. I look back at it as the best thing that's ever happened to them. But it has created a deep, deep, deep woundedness in them. As children that were vulnerable, they didn't have the choice to have a relationship with him, and then he chose not to have a relationship with them. And people think, “Aren't you really happy that he's not in their life?” and I am. From the psychological testing, he

was found to be a sociopath and a narcissistic. That was not me. That was a professional diagnosing him with things that now are very obvious. So I don't think that he would have been a good and continued influence on their life. But, they hold abuse and abandonment. And sometimes, abandonment hurts worse. Because I know growing up for myself, having been abused by all the people I should have been able to trust, the worst moments that I can remember are being abandoned. So when you think about someone who's recovering from domestic violence, there is a reason why they're in it, but it's not their fault. And then the recovery from it is really complicated because it spans abandonment, woundedness, and what led up to the abuse which is oftentimes like hyper control or hyper supervision. You feel very strange when you're alone or you don't know what to do when you have to load the dishwasher and everybody's always told you did it wrong because you don't know how to create your own way of doing things. So end of story. We're still in counseling.

Message from Lily:

I think the message is for people who are not being abused, and I think it has to do with the ability for us to co-exist in different realities. So, the pressure to have a normative existence is driven by white supremacy, and I think if we were all to wake up and realize that the implications and the legacy of- I'll call it white supremacy but there's so many different names for eurocentric, western view on life, whatever you want to call them- that we all have to actively dismantle white supremacy in order for anybody to experience freedom. Paolo Ferri and Ellie Weisel both talk about the idea that there's no such thing as being neutral, and if you believe that you don't want to take sides, you're actually siding with that of the oppressor. So I believe that for anybody, whether you understand it or you don't understand it, you have to be on the side of

being an activist, and I think that takes different forms for different people. But I know that in my journey, I didn't understand what was going on to me. There are still parts in me that I don't understand. There's things I have to take responsibility for, but then there's things that I have to realize weren't my responsibility, like primarily seeing the impact on my children as years have gone and they are now teenagers- I'm responsible for the negative impact I've had on their life based on the choices that I've made. I still don't understand how in some ways to take responsibility for that, to give them freedom. It's really, really difficult, but we all have to allow each other's orbit to exist in the same space at the same time, and actively deconstruct weights privacy because that's at the center of this in my opinion.

I think for women that are experiencing abuse, I don't know what I would advise because I think everybody's situation is very different, but it all follows the same pattern. When I think about resilience, it's just never give up. So whatever it is, just never give up. Just keep trying over and over again because eventually the light will come into the darkness, and it only takes a little tiny bit of light in order for the darkness to dissipate, because there's so many times I've just wanted to die, like dying would have been so much easier. I think that that's very understandable, and having lived that, it's a very real reality, but the desire for wanting to die was because no one would listen to the pain. If any woman can find anybody that would listen to them, non-judgmentally, that they really believe that they could trust... because the thing that I suffered from over my life time has been the sense of betrayal because the people that did abuse me were people that I should have trusted, like a parent or grandparent. So trusting now for me feels very complicated because like what if my name were revealed from this study? Would people not think of me as a legitimate working woman now that they understand that I've gone through so many of these things that in some ways make me look stupid right in our society? Or weak?

Which I get are normative things that reinforce the people that are already in power. I think for a woman, if she could find someone to talk to, it'll be ok, I think things will come into the light.

Don't give up.

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