

CRIMINALIZATION OF SURVIVAL

**An Interdisciplinary Approach to
Understanding a Gendered Caste
System and Addressing Patriarchal
Violence**

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Introduction

Survivors of patriarchal violence are criticized in the media and in the courts, revealing an existing gendered caste system in the United States and its impact on due process. This existing hierarchy criminalizes the survival of patriarchal violence, a major social determinant for criminal behavior, further fueling the cycle of patriarchal violence. Looking at cases in which an abused individual has assaulted or killed their abusive partner reveals the prevalence of gender-based discrimination in US institutions and the presence of casteist pillars described in Isabel Wilkerson’s *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. Wilkerson introduces a universal framework and an underlying grammar that shapes not just race. Using the framework from *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, the pillars of caste systems can also be applied in a gendered context.

The term *patriarchal violence* was an intentional choice throughout this paper. Using the definition put forth by bell hooks in *Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics*, patriarchal violence has multiple parts to it that are both relevant and unique, so much so that using other terms such as *domestic violence*, *intimate partner violence*, or *child abuse* does not encapsulate the intricacies that are intrinsic to the issue of violence in the home. The most pronounced reason this term is used is that it demonstrates that violence in the home is connected to sexism and sexist thinking. One reason that this term is used is that it recognizes the reality of the violence experienced. hooks argues that the term patriarchal violence is useful because

for too long the term *domestic violence* has been used as a “soft” term which suggests it emerges in an intimate context that it is private and somehow less threatening, less brutal, than the violence that takes place outside the home. This is not so, since more women are beaten and murdered in the home than on the outside.¹

Finally, this term recognizes that anyone can be a perpetrator of patriarchal violence and anyone can be a survivor of patriarchal violence, including same-sex relationships, violence perpetrated by women, and violence committed against children. For this article, the scope is limited to just abused women who have assaulted or killed their abusive male partners, but the term has a significant and intentional broad scope. Cases were chosen for this body of research based on John Stuart Mill’s Method of Difference, with common themes across these cases being the presence of abuse or trauma in the home, significant media attention, and impact on legal discourse.²

1 bell hooks “Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics” 2000

2 John Stuart Mill “A System of Logic” 1843



Wilkerson’s seminal *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* chronicles the racial social hierarchy in the United States, Nazi Germany, and India, to demonstrate that the United States has a racial caste system fundamentally embedded in its institutions. In her studies of these three countries, she puts forth eight pillars that represent common themes found in all caste systems: divine will, heritability, endogamy, purity vs. pollution, occupational hierarchy, dehumanization and stigma, terror and control, and inherent superiority and inferiority. Considering intersectionality, these pillars interact, feeding off of and exacerbating one another. These pillars sustain a patriarchal system that fosters violence and prevents equally applied justice in the legal system.

Pillars

Divine Will

In *Caste*, Wilkerson argues that the recognized caste system in India and the unrecognized caste system in the United States are perpetuated through religious justification, stating

the United States and India would become, respectively, the oldest and the largest democracies in human history, both built on caste systems undergirded by their reading of the sacred texts of their respective cultures. In both countries, the subordinate castes were consigned to the bottom, seen as deserving of their debasement, owing to the sins of the past.³

Generally, God is taught as male in American society. It is argued that Christianity that is based on the doctrine is not a patriarchal religion. But rather, Christianity has become patriarchal as a result of interpretation. In the Christian Bible, God created Adam as a perfect image to rule among all God’s creatures. To appease his loneliness, God created Eve from one of Adam’s ribs. The interpretation of this story is that Eve was an afterthought, a secondary creation to appease men, and so women should be treated as second-class and as a supplement to men.⁴ After the fall of Adam, Eve is given the punishment of painful childbirth and a subservient place to men. Because of Eve’s sin, women are expected to demonstrate their worthiness of redemption through submission.

Heritability

3 Isabel Wilkerson “Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents” 2020

4 Jake Ed “The Sexism of Adam and Eve: A Feminist Perspective on the Bible” 2013



As defined in *Caste*, heritability refers to the rank at birth and the role to perform that is ascribed to each person. While gender is more malleable than the racial parts discussed, there are clear examples of the role to be performed being assigned to women. Societal expectations, roles, and limitations are passed through generations and reinforced by cultural norms. In all of these cases, these women inherited a lack of power.

Social learning theory, one of the most popular explanatory perspectives of violence in the literature, asserts that people model their behavior based on what they have been exposed to as children. Through these observations, primarily through families, one learns how to be. They learn what is socially acceptable to respond with. At an early age, children can learn what colors, toys, and behaviors are appropriate for their perceived gender. Violence, too, can be learned at an early age through the role models in one’s life. Either through witnessing or surviving violence, the power of violence as a mode of social control is reinforced and continues in adulthood as a method of conflict resolution.⁵

Endogamy

In Wilkerson’s *Caste*, endogamy refers to the custom of marrying within one’s own group. Again, gender is more fluid and socially constructed than race, but the focus on marriage remains relevant when looking at social hierarchies through a gendered lens. Women are pressured to enter into marriage within a traditional binary in a form of gender endogamy. The underlying cause of the importance of marriage is maintaining economic and cultural capital within the dominating group while removing autonomy to those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. For many women throughout history, marriage was the largest attainable goal of their lifetime.

American perspectives on marriage were largely formed from the British model through the process of colonization. Through the Christian understanding of family and social order, monogamy became the mode of marriage seen to best benefit the social order as it “harnessed sexual desires, it supplied a support system for the care of children and the dependent, and it provided a means for wealth management.”⁶ The division of labor continued to prescribe that a good wife was a wife who would work only within the domestic sphere and that a proper head of the household would be a man capable of funding his family. Family historian Stephanie Coontz stated that many American states retained laws that give husbands the final say over the management of the family, such as where the family lives.⁷ Coontz states, “According to the legal definition of marriage, the man

5 Albert Bandura “Aggression: A Social Learning Analysis” 1973

6 Elizabeth Garner Masarik & Marissa Rhodes “Marriage in America: A Brief History” 2018

7 Stephanie Coontz “Our Family Myths” 2006



was required to support the family, while the woman was obligated to keep house, nurture children, and provide sex...Prevailing opinion held that when a bride said, ‘I do,’ she was legally committed to say ‘I will’ for the rest of her married life.”⁸

Purity and Pollution

In the context of *Caste*, the author discusses purity in the dominant caste and the fear of pollution from the castes deemed beneath it. In the three examples given in the book, one major way this was demonstrated was that individuals in the lower caste, untouchables, Jews, and/or Black individuals had to remain away from those in the dominant class. This was in both formal and informal ways, such as having to walk a certain distance away from a higher-class person in India if one were a Dalit—a member of the untouchable caste—and the Jim Crow laws in the United States, which legalized segregation. In the context of gender, there are spaces where women were historically not able to occupy.

Purity can be used in a different sense for the same meaning. Sexual purity persisted as an important form of mobility and status for early American women. if a woman lost her virginity outside of marriage, society considered her “ruined” and if she were to enter into an adulterous relationship with a married man, she would be accused of corrupting an upstanding citizen.

In El Paso’s city government, prostitution was a fundamental part of their economy, so much so that the local government could not eradicate it. The spread of venereal disease became a public health crisis, with three in four adult males having contracted gonorrhea in the second decade of the twentieth century.⁹

One solution to the spread of venereal diseases was to engage in social and moral reform, including establishing vice zones and subjecting sex workers to medical exams. Reverend Antoinette Brown Blackwell argued that these regulations were a “flagrant injustice to all women.” Additionally the sexual double standard that policed these women “to increase the depravity of the depraved” failed to recognize that unfaithful men maintained a demand for sex work and perpetuated a system where sex work was appealing, primarily because of the ability to earn a high income with the independence to set one’s hours and boundaries (although these were not always followed.)¹⁰

8 Jill Flipovic “Offensive Feminism: The Conservative Gender Norms that Perpetuate Rape Culture, and How Feminists Can Fight Back”

9 Ann R. Garbert “Prostitution and Moral Reform in the Borderlands: El Paso, 1890-1900

10 Ibid.

This double standard persists today in neutralization theory, or colloquially, victim-blaming. Whi ac-
ademics do not necessarily use the theory of neutralization to endorse victim-blaming behavior, this theory is
applied to explain criminal behavior by evaluating the perceived value a victim has as justification for their vic-
timization. For example, a robber could steal from a rich man and claim his actions do not hold weight because
the victim of his robbery already has many resources (denial of injury).

After an assault, perpetrators of sexual assault claim that their bad acts were at least partially neutralized
because of the victim’s sexual history, and that their previous frequency or type of sexual acts with others made
the impact of the assault less profound because of a perceived lack of worth directly linked to the victim’s prox-
imity to virginity (denial of victim). Despite legislative attempts to restrict the use of sexual history evidence
in trials involving patriarchal violence, it continues to be admitted in some cases, contributing to the idea that
prostitution or the number of sexual partners reflects notoriously bad character.¹¹

American society forms sex around a commodity model, treating women as gatekeepers for the com-
modity of sex, where traditionally women can then trade, sell, give sex, or have it stolen by men. Women are
warned from a young age that men will not buy the cow if they can get the milk for free, describing how wom-
en are valued for what they provide but not as human beings. Men may appreciate the milk, but this does not
extend to appreciation of the cow. In this model, gender inequality has continued to persist, assigning value to
women based on their sexual history.

The commodity model reinforces patriarchal structures by understanding consent as the absence of “no”
instead of an affirmative act. The commodity model is fundamentally not equal and relies on bargaining power
and coercion while reinforcing that no matter how women engage in this trade, their value is depreciating.¹² This
framework reinforces that women as gatekeepers of sex in a commodity model have the capacity to become
impure and pollute those they have sex with.

Occupational Hierarchy

In *Caste*, the author discusses how those descended from slaves or Black Americans were pushed out
of high-prestige jobs. Historically, women’s ideal role was that of stay-at-home mothers or wives. Women
working outside were perceived as nasty wenches, and more vulnerable to assault because they were not pro-
tected by a man, and so “it became a matter of class status to have the ability to control sexual access over one’s

11 Clare McGlynn “Rape Trials and Sexual History Evidence: Reforming the Law on `Third-Party Evidence”

12 Thomas Macauley Millar “Toward a Performance Model of Sex” 2008



female family members by being able to afford to have them work only within the domestic realm.”¹³ In times
of distress, such as war, women saw an increased presence in the workforce to supplement the smaller working
population but were relegated to mostly secretarial or other pink-collar jobs. The glass ceiling prevented women
from moving forward. Notably, this generalization does not apply to women of color or individuals who were
descended from enslaved people, as they had to combat both the racial caste system that already worked to de-
humanize them and also the gendered caste system.

As women continued to enter the workforce, they had to balance dual responsibilities in the domestic
and formal sectors, commonly referred to as the double-shift. Women who worked outside the household were
able to attain increased economic power, but this created tension between the traditional gender ideology and
the modern equality fought for by feminists.¹⁴ With increased financial instability and inflation, more families
could not sustain themselves on just one income. As more women entered the workforce, the expectation was
still to fulfill domestic roles, creating a double shift and resulting in an increase in women working in informal
domestic roles as mothers or wives while also working in formal sectors.

In conflict theory, Marx asserts that the inherent class struggles between the proletariat working class
and the bourgeoisie ruling class would lead to a perpetual conflict because of competition for the means of
production. C. Wright Mills expands on this theory, focusing on the unequal distribution of resources in soci-
ety and how inequality leads to conflict for groups with different interests and motivations. Within the realm of
feminism and the economy, conflict theory posits that

since it is usually women who do housework, it has been observed that it is
through the reproduction of labor power that women are articulated into the
surplus value nexus which is the sine qua non of capitalism. Since no wage is
paid for housework, the labor of women in the home contributes to the ultimate
quantity of surplus value realized by the capitalist.¹⁵

Based on Gayle Rubin’s writings, the oppression of women is not simply a byproduct of capitalism or
biological differences, as argued in biological determinism but a deeply rooted hierarchical system that struc-
tures relationships around the exchange of women and men. Private domestic labor is intrinsically connected to

13 Elizabeth Garner Masarik & Marissa Rhodes “Marriage in America: A Brief History” 2018

14 Jessica Staheli “Cut to the Quick: Lorena Bobbitt and America Gender Ideology” 1998

15 Linda Nicholson “The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory” 1997



the public sphere of capitalist production.¹⁶

Dehumanization and Stigma

Wilkerson writes in *Caste* that

to dehumanize another human being is not merely to declare that someone is not human, and it does not happen by accident. It is a process, a programming. It takes energy and reinforcement to deny what is self-evident in another member of one’s own species.¹⁷

Wilkerson continues to state that when one dehumanizes a group, they have completed the work of dehumanizing any single person within it. This is seen in the way that politicians address patriarchal violence. In 2012, former United States Representative Todd Akin stated “women rarely get pregnant as a result of ‘legitimate’ rape because ‘the female body has ways to try to shut the whole thing down.’”¹⁸

Within the media, women who have survived patriarchal violence may experience sense of objectification and a loss of identity, as their cases become media spectacles. As Akin exemplified, survivors can be blamed for their abuse or have their experience minimized. The looking-glass self describes how people view themselves based on the perception of how others perceive them. In a scenario where one has been devalued, relegated to a set value depending on their status relative to men through marriage, virginity, and behavior, they may start to evaluate themselves as inferior. In a study on mass shooters, researchers found that a male shooter’s perceived inability to achieve popularity, wealth, sex, and relationships with beautiful women, which they evaluated as a necessity to be a true man, resulted in increased aggressive behavior and violent fantasies.¹⁹ As Jacqueline Rose states, “No man comfortably possess masculinity. Prowess is a lie, as every inch of mortal flesh bears witness. But like all lies, in order to be believed, it has to be endlessly repeated.”²⁰

Terror and Cruelty

16

Gayle Rubin “The Traffic in Women: The Political Economy of Sex” 1975

17

Isabel Wilkerson “Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents” 2020

18

Mary Anne Franks “Real Men Advance, Real Women Retreat: Stand Your Ground, Battered Women’s Syndrome, and Violence as Male Privilege” 2014

19

Kimberly Rogers, Kaitlin Boyle, & Maria Scaptura “Through the Looking Glass: Self Inauthenticity, and (Mass) Violence” 2023

20

Jacqueline Rose “On Violence and On Violence Against Women” 2021



This is the most pronounced pillar in its connection to the topic of patriarchal violence, but it’s important to recognize that all of these pillars interact and intersect. Patriarchal violence will persist if our society continues to dehumanize women, subjugate them in the workforce, or define their worth based on their virginity. Systematic violence, fear, and brutality are used by the historically dominant class to enforce the social order and continue to perpetuate the inferiority of the subjugated group, in this case, women.

Inherent Superiority and Inferiority

As the final pillar discussed in *Caste*, this pillar posits that the dominant caste fundamentally believes itself to be superior to the subordinate caste, who is inherently inferior in their eyes. While all of these pillars support each other, this pillar is exceptionally strong. This contributes to the internalization of these power dynamics. In 1990, Maine Representative Lawrence Lockman stated,

If a woman has [the right to an abortion], why shouldn’t a man be free to use his superior strength to force himself on a woman? At least the rapist’s pursuit of sexual freedom doesn’t [in most cases] result in anyone’s death.²¹

Historically and in the current day, the system established and perpetuated by the dominant caste demonstrates that there is a fundamental belief in the inherent superiority of men, masculine attributes, and the patriarchy. At the same time, there is an inherent inferiority of women and feminine attributes.

Selected Case Studies

To aid with readability, briefs and key facts of the case studies are listed below. These are intentionally written using a trauma-informed lens. This results in an overview of the cases that provide necessary information while avoiding unnecessarily violent language or details that may be triggering. While these individuals survived profound and horrid abuse, it is counterintuitive for the purpose of this article and to the healing of survivors of patriarchal abuse to discuss graphic details unless completely necessary. These were written under the guidelines of the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health.²²

Lorena Bobbitt

Lorena Bobbitt, who has now returned to her maiden name Lorena Gallo, met John Bobbitt after im-

21

Mary Anne Franks “Real Men Advance, Real Women Retreat: Stand Your Ground, Battered Women’s Syndrome, and Violence as Male Privilege” 2014

22

Rachel White “How You Write Is as Important as What You Say: A Guide to Trauma-Informed Writing” 2014



migrating to the United States from Ecuador in 1988. The two married the next year, when Lorena was twenty and John was twenty-two. She said it was her first relationship. According to Gallo, John began to assault her following their marriage and forced her to get an abortion after she became pregnant. In February 1991, John pleaded guilty to assault and battery, but the charges were dismissed after he went through counseling. They separated in October 1991 but reunited a year later, and on June 21, 1993, Gallo began the process of filing for a protective order against Bobbitt.

On June 23rd, 1993, Lorena Gallo was allegedly sexually assaulted by her husband and then, subsequently, severed her husband’s penis. She drove away and threw the penis which was later recovered and re-attached out of her car window. John was tried for marital sexual assault, and Lorena was tried for malicious wounding; both were acquitted of their alleged crimes. Lorena spent forty-five days in a mental health institution before her release.

John was able to capitalize on the situation, using the media attention to start a career in pornography after being charged, tried, and convicted of domestic violence charges against future partners. Lorena fought for John to stop having affairs, and John allegedly physically and emotionally abused Lorena. In 1994, Bobbitt was charged with striking Kristina Elliot, a twenty-one-year-old former exotic dancer. He was convicted of battery and was sentenced to only fifteen days in jail.²³ Bobbitt was sentenced to prison in 2003 after violating his parole for a theft in 1999, with the violation being battery charges against his then-wife, Joanna Ferrell. He was arrested two more times for battery charges against Joanna Ferrell in 2004.²⁴

Nicole “Nikki” Addimando

Nicole “Nikki” Addimando met Chris Grover in 2008 when they both worked as coaches at the same gymnastics center. They developed a relationship and eventually, Addimando became pregnant with Grover’s child and they moved in together. Six weeks after the birth of her child, Grover assaulted Addimando after she declined his sexual advances. The violence in the household continued, and after she found out that Grover had recorded the assaults, Addimando confided in her social worker. Following another assault during her second pregnancy, Addimando came into contact with Sarah Caprioli, a worker at a victim assistance program. Addimando was examined for a forensic exam but refused to file a police report because she feared that Grover would retaliate and take her children. Two days after this first exam, Addimando was assaulted again and had

23 “Jail for John Bobbitt” 1994

24 “John Wayne Bobbitt faces new battery charges” 2005



another exam where she was encouraged to press charges, but she declined. After the birth of her second child, the abuse worsened, and Addimando was placed in the highest-risk category for homicide based on an assessment Caprioli completed.

Addimando discovered that Grover had uploaded videos of some of the assaults to Pornhub with degrading and dehumanizing titles. Family services contacted Jason Ruscillo, a detective in Hyde Park, and Caprioli prepared an affidavit for the abuse Addimando was a victim of, but Addimando refused to sign it. After the mother of one of the children at the gymnastics center witnessed Addimando’s wounds, she called Child Protective Services. Addimando said she hoped that the investigation would stop the abuse but was also afraid that her children would be removed because of the abuse she was suffering.

The next morning at around four a.m., Richard Sisilli, a police officer, pulled Addimando over. The detective testified that “She told me she tried to leave, but he said he would kill her... She said he’s still in the apartment and the gun had just gone off.”²⁵ On July 2, 2018, Addimando pleaded not guilty to charges of second-degree murder, first and second-degree manslaughter, and second-degree criminal possession of a weapon. She claimed that Grover had threatened to kill her and she shot him in self-defense. She was found guilty and was sentenced to nineteen years to life in prison. Her defense petitioned for a reduced sentence under New York’s Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act, which the court initially denied but an appeals court eventually accepted in 2024.

Discussion of Cases

PTSD and Social Context

In the 1970s, police officers would not arrest someone for a misdemeanor unless they saw the crime occur. This meant that for Francine Hughes, who was one of the first to use “battered wife syndrome” as a defense, the police would not make an arrest, despite her bruises and looking abused. ²⁶ Leading up to this period and persisting up to now, violence in the home was considered a family affair both by the perpetrators and the criminal justice system.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a debilitating condition that is brought on after a traumatic

25 Christopher Hamilton “Alive but Still Not Free”: Nikki Addimando and Judicial Failure to Apply the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act 2020

26 Anna Boots “‘The Burning Bed’ Recalls the Case That Changed How Law Enforcement Treats Domestic Violence” 2020



event, or prolonged traumatic events for Complex PTSD. One common symptom of those with PTSD is emotional dysregulation. After one experiences trauma, the threshold for conflict and negative emotions can become shortened. Traumatic stress can result in individuals feeling overstimulated or numb. Trauma affects the brain’s development, including changes in the limbic system, the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, and the neurotransmitter-related regulation of arousal and endogenous opioid systems. In short, the effects of trauma rewire the brain to be in a state of hyperarousal, ready to have a response to perceived danger, but the brain is more likely to perceive itself as being in danger. The effects on the endogenous opioid system may worsen the brain’s way of processing stimuli and exacerbate the risk of substance abuse.²⁷

Why They Didn’t Leave

Despite advances in the neuroscience and psychology of surviving trauma, social perceptions of violence and gender persist, as demonstrated in these cases. One of the major questions from these cases is why not just leave? Why continue to put up with abuse when one could just leave? In Gallo and Addimando’s cases, the prosecution recognized the presence of abuse but disputed the perpetrator and questioned why these women resorted to violence rather than how the abuser prevented their partner from leaving.

Leaving an abusive relationship is when the individual is most at risk of being killed. Another factor is fear that they may lose custody of their children, as in the case of Nikki Addimando. A cornerstone of these relationships is removing control from the victim. Often, they are isolated away from their potential support systems and have been forced into domestic roles, leaving limited economic resources to escape. Finally, the emergence of abuse in a relationship is not immediate. Perpetrators of patriarchal violence capitalize on existing sexist ideology through the pillars explored in this paper and dehumanize the survivor.

If the survivor goes forward, there may be media attention or barriers in the future because of their choice to come forward. They may go through all the hardship of recounting their trauma and be sentenced to prison for the rest of their lives, only to see their abuser go free. Beyond the courtroom, women who come forward may watch their abuser find more success,, such as in the cases of Brett Kavanaugh, Clarence Thomas, and Donald Trump, all of whom were accused of committing some form of patriarchal violence.

Treatment in Trial

In Gallo’s case, the prosecution took a stance of acknowledging that abuse may have happened, but that John was not the perpetrator. Her defense argued that because of PTSD brought on by years of alleged abuse by

John Bobbitt, Gallo had an episode of temporary insanity. The prosecution attempted to capitalize on the sexual nature of the assault by introducing evidence that aimed to create doubt on Lorena’s character, playing a clip from a taped conversation with Detective Peter Wentz, stating, “He always have orgasm [sic], and he doesn’t wait for me ever to have orgasm. He’s selfish.”²⁸ One law professor, in describing Lorena Bobbitt’s case, said, “If the case had happened 50 years ago, she would have been convicted ‘without a shadow of a doubt’ because the jury ‘would not have listened to any argument that her deed was justified by a history of abuse.’”²⁹

Responses to Lorena’s case varied from comedic comments on gender tensions of the time to anti-domestic violence advocates struggling to back her because she did not commit violence to save her own life; she attacked John Bobbitt in a pointedly charged way. Bobbitt denied he was abusive during the marriage, and his attorney stated the abortion was mutual. Bobbitt argued that Gallo was upset that he was planning to divorce her because it would put her ability to become a citizen at risk. Gallo denied this, stating

I thought John was very handsome. Blue eyes. A man in a uniform, you know? He was almost like a symbol—a Marine, fighting for the country. I believed in this beautiful country. I was swept off my feet. I wanted my American Dream.³⁰

In Addimando’s trial, the prosecution argued that she had killed Grover in his sleep. Both sides recognized that the injuries she suffered over several years were real, but the prosecution argued that the injuries were self-induced, that the videos of her assaults were from another man, and that she had reported this abuse over time as a calculated preparation to kill Grover.³¹ Her case gained media traction after the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act was passed in New York State, which aimed to enact sentencing reforms for victims of domestic violence who committed first-time felonies. She was originally not granted a reduced sentence under this statute, despite arguably meeting the criteria. Addimando was released from prison in early January of 2024 after serving 7.5 years.

Implications

When an individual has experienced the pillars of a gendered caste system— lacking economic resource-

27 “Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health: Chapter 3 Understanding the Impact of Trauma



31 Rachel Louise Snyder “When Can a Woman Who Killers Her Abuser Claim Self-Defense” 2019



es due to occupational hierarchy; lacking assistance due to dehumanization; experiencing a sense of guilt because of divine will, heritability, virginity purity politics— and is told that they are inherently inferior to their abuser because of their gender, they lack control and personhood. Without a criminal justice system to aid in bringing their abuser to justice, they are stateless. With nowhere to turn, they perceive their fate in two ways: either they can kill their abusers or they can be killed by their abusers. It is a reality that the abused could be killed by their abuser. While no death is justifiable, and that certainly should not be the take away from this article, it is essential to understand that these women did not just wake up one day and decide to take a life for no reason; they took a life to survive and are then forced to survive justice.

Since the 1970s, the number of women in prison has grown by nearly 800%, twice the rate of men.³² Black women are abused and incarcerated at higher rates than White women, and those who fight back against their abusers face an uphill battle in the courts. Black women are dehumanized for being a woman, dehumanized for being Black, and dehumanized for being a Black woman. Often, this results in their history of abuse hardly being addressed at trial. The majority of women who are incarcerated have been victims of patriarchal violence. The prevalence of patriarchal violence, or household violence, is profound enough for this to be a concern. But the common dialogue around women and violence reveals a deeply patriarchal state. Children are taught at a young age that violence is an acceptable way to express anger or enact social control.

The lack of willfulness to address patriarchal violence demonstrates a lack of interest in addressing women’s rights. hooks states,

Men are not the only people who accept, condone, and perpetuate violence, who create a culture of violence. I urge women to take responsibility for the role women play in condoning violence...In our nation, masses of people are concerned about violence but resolutely refuse to link that violence to patriarchal thinking or male domination. Feminist thinking offers a solution. And it is up to us to make that solution available to everyone.³³

The options for respite for women experiencing patriarchal violence are limited. She can leave, which almost instantly increases her chances of being killed. This also means admitting to the abuse and possibly losing custody of her children. She can kill her abuser, which provides an immediate and permanent solution to the abuse, but is arguably not a morally right decision and rarely successful legally. Options are increasingly limited

32 The Retro Report “The Domestic Violence Case That Turned Outrage Into Action” 2020

33 bell hooks “Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics p. 65-66” 2000



for individuals with little economic resources, social support, or pathways to success. This is just looking at the tip of the iceberg because other forms of abuse, such as psychological or economic abuse, can often go unnoticed in comparison to the visible physical or sexual abuse. Women who face less visible forms of abuse could struggle even more to prove the violence they face, which further limits the support they could get.

It is fundamentally important—and perhaps one of the greatest take away of this article—that this patriarchal binary and its subsequent violence affect everyone. There is no innocent bystander or observer. No one is a fly on the wall. A woman is physically assaulted every nine seconds.³⁴ Globally, an average of 137 women and girls lose their lives each day at the hands of a family member or intimate partner.³⁵

Patriarchal violence is a public health issue that festers because of the everyday microaggressions, barriers, and challenges women face, and it disproportionately affects women who fall into other marginalized groups. While 85 percent of intimate partner violence victims are women, 15 percent of men are also abused. When one invests in a system that promotes male attributes and devalues feminine attributes, not complying with the gender performance inherited—whether transgender, fluid in gender presentation, or just exhibiting traits commonly seen as feminine—can result in subjugation.

At its core, anyone can be a victim of patriarchal violence, and anyone can be a perpetrator of patriarchal violence. Because of its prominence, this system is deeply rooted in American society and should be a foremost issue to be addressed in the legal system and beyond. As Wilkerson states,

With an old house, the work is never done, and you don’t expect it to be. America is an old house; we can never declare the work over and are already. The owner of an old house knows that whatever you are ignoring will never go away, and what you are choosing to ignore will fester. Ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction.³⁶

Limitations

While this research focuses on the axis of gender, it is important to recognize that gender oppression interacts with and feeds off of all other forms of oppression. This is not meant to compete against Wilkerson’s thesis but to corroborate the framework’s applicability across marginalized populations. Due to the existing

34 National Coalition Against Domestic Violence “Domestic Violence National Statistics”

35 Korenblik et. al “Femicides in 2024: Global estimates of intimate partner/family member femicides” 2025

36 Isabel Wilkerson “Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents” 2020



biases in research, this article may disproportionately represent the White middle-class woman’s perspective.

When possible, research was sought out that is intersectional and discrepancies toward experiences of different races were included. Black women face different experiences in the workforce or the courtroom than White women do, and attempting to generalize the experiences of all women works against the significance of intersectionality.

The cases covered in this paper are of one White woman, Addimando, and one Hispanic woman, Bobbitt. Because of this, these cases do not translate into expressing the experiences of women of color. There are existing gaps in the literature on patriarchal violence and a history of underreporting this class of crime, which makes it difficult to obtain comprehensive statistics and case studies. If women similar to those in these cases—middle-class and fulfilling traditional gender roles—are experiencing profound violence and are being prosecuted with lengthy, maximum sentences, then what happens to people from marginalized communities? Further research could benefit from larger-scale and intersectional research to address these limitations.

Conclusion

As Wilkerson covers in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, the hierarchies that make up American society are deeply seated, insidious, and violent. She highlights how oppression festers into violence, and using this same process, one can see how there is a gendered caste system in the United States. This gendered caste system enacts social control on women through a society that facilitates patriarchal violence and perpetuates femicide. It is only through political, legal, and cultural change that our society will be able to end patriarchal violence. When you survive violence, in a way, you are no longer seen as human. You’re a caricature, a statistic, a journalist’s story, or a lawyer’s bottom line. Without a government to support you, you are stateless. Survivors are at the mercy of those enacting social control. You are no longer a person. It kills others, and it kills yourself. That hate becomes you.

Only through challenging gender stereotypes, empowering women, promoting education, and advocating for equality will our society transform the misogynistic norms that our culture has lived off into a culture that sees survivors of violence as human.

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