In the 1950s, people called it masochism; in the 1990s, people call it codependency. Kathleen Ferraro calls it woman battering. Woman battering, or domestic violence, is a pattern of repeated emotional and/or physical abuse intended to control and degrade an intimate partner. The intention to degrade and control distinguishes woman battering from other forms of violence.

“Because it’s visible, physical abuse is the most obvious,” says Ferraro, associate professor and associate director of the Asu Women’s Studies Program. “But emotional abuse which includes intimidation, using male privilege, using children, and destroying property can be just as destructive. Those are all things that are done for the purpose of undermining a woman’s sense of control and manipulating her to obey.”

There have been laws against domestic violence throughout American history. In the early 1600s, the Plymouth colonists condemned wife beating. Enforcement of domestic violence laws has been a different matter. During the past 20 years, the battered women’s movement has lobbied police departments and the criminal justice system for stricter enforcement of the laws.

Ferraro testifies as an expert witness in woman battering court cases in addition to her academic work. As an expert witness she spends long hours gathering information for case histories. She says that stricter enforcement is probably the only substantial change in the history of woman battering.

“There have been a lot of changes in the criminal justice system. But the system still cannot end domestic violence because it cannot end sexism,” Ferraro says.

The Asu researcher explains that the criminal justice system is grounded in what she calls the “culture of power.” The culture of power grew out of a modern philosophy that people make rational decisions to increase their own benefits. The culture of power defines the jobs of police officers and reinforces a particular world view.

Police officers arrive at domestic violence scenes with certain expectations. For example, they expect that the woman who initiated the call for help wants the man arrested and will bring charges against him. Police officers become frustrated when these expectations are not met. This frustration can support the myth that the battered woman enjoys her abuse or, at least, willingly prolongs her abuse.

Ferraro believes the battered woman lives in a different culture. She calls it the “relational culture.” The battered woman sees a different situation, one in which police officers are unwilling to help resolve the domestic abuse crisis. She sees a different picture because the culture of power does not accurately define her experiences.
Within the relational culture, Ferraro says that a person’s position is snagged in a web of relationships that determines decision-making, daily activities, values, and goals. When the police officer arrives on the battered woman’s doorstep, she wants the abuse to stop. At the same time, she might not want her husband or boyfriend taken to jail.

“Often, the guy that hit her is the guy that’s bringing home the paycheck. He’s the father of her children. He’s been a part of her life for many years,” Ferraro explains. “So, from the relational point of view, to treat him as if he is a stranger-offender doesn’t make sense.”

Each Time You Leave My Door

“Why didn’t she just leave?” Many people mistakenly believe that battered women never leave their situations. Ferraro says battered women do leave their batterers. Leaving is a coping strategy that a battered woman uses to create a safe environment for herself and her children. But she usually goes back when a specific episode of violence has ended.

The intimate relationship between a battered woman and her husband or boyfriend is not solely based on violence. Love and children can provide a foundation for the relationship. Ferraro believes that a clear understanding of the culture of relationships makes it irrelevant to ask “Why didn’t she just leave?”

In her work, Ferraro examines all the factors a battered woman uses to make the decision to stay or leave. The battered woman considers much more than a single act of violence. She weighs the good aspects of the relationship, her economic situation, and the welfare of her children against a concern that leaving could escalate the level of violence.

Permanently leaving a batterer poses different problems. The batterer often sees the relationship as ongoing and fulfilling to his needs. Ferraro explains that he will not usually allow the relationship to end peacefully.

“These relationships are complex. They don’t end just because a woman says ‘OK, it’s over now,’” Ferraro says. “He’s going to find her and beg her to take him back. Or he might threaten to do terrible things if she doesn’t take him back. Sometimes he does do terrible things to her.”

Ferraro uses her research as a link to activism. The culture of relationships produces unique intervention models. One example is the Women’s Street Support Center in Phoenix. The center is run by the women it serves and does not depend on government funding. The center does not have a shelter, but it offers its clients everything from clothes and coffee to employment referrals and support groups.

Ferraro works as a board member at the Women’s Street Support Center, but her work with women’s shelters extends back to her graduate student days. Her doctoral dissertation was a study of how to start and run a successful shelter.

Because of a growing awareness of feminism in the 1970s, Ferraro says there was a growth boom of shelters. After the 1970s, many of the shelters were co-opted into mental health agencies because of the need for government funding. Reliance on state and federal funds caused shelter operators to conform to regulations that worked against empowerment.

“The traditional approach is to force people through a process that makes them into a self-sufficient person,” Ferraro says. “Somebody tells the women what to do and who to be. I’m interested in how shelters can be more proactive in terms of promoting self-determination.”

Ferraro’s activism also affects her research. She focuses on certain groups of people. Advocacy work with homeless people, prostitutes, and other women at the Women’s Street Support Center keeps her sharply aware of all the different women who are victims of violence.

“Activism exposes me to a diversity of experiences and helps me to keep an open mind,” she says.

Ferraro’s research is supported by the Asu Faculty-Grant-in-Aid Program, the Office of the Dean of Public Programs, and the Women’s Studies Program. For more information about specific projects, call Kathleen Ferraro, Ph.D., Women’s Studies, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 602.965.2375.
Imagine being at a heavyweight boxing match. You sit in the audience to watch the two fighters. There’s a boxing ring, a defined time limit, a referee to enforce the rules, and judges to decide the victor. The referee does his best to insure a fair fight. The judges base their decision on which fighter hits best and hits hardest.

Now picture a man and a woman fighting, sometimes with weapons. There are no rules. Even if there were, there is no referee. The only decisions will be who goes to jail and who goes to the hospital. There is no such thing as a fair fight. You’ve just caught a glimpse of woman battering.

Lynne Norris studied woman battering and its effects to earn a master’s degree in justice studies from Arizona State University. In fact, Norris wrote her thesis on one effect in particular: she focused on victims, specifically women, who were arrested and convicted of domestic violence offenses.

Many communities have adopted policies that mandate an arrest in cases of domestic violence. They use domestic violence research results as justification. Norris looked at the development of mandatory arrest policies. She interviewed 10 women in Phoenix, Ariz. Each had been arrested and convicted of domestic violence offenses.

Norris says that mandatory arrest policies across the country are based on an experiment performed in Minneapolis, Minn., in 1984. Results of that work seemed to prove that arrest did deter men from beating women. Closer examination of the study uncovered problems with how the experiment was conducted. As a result, the National Institute of Justice funded six new studies to determine if the findings of the Minneapolis Experiment could be replicated.

The findings were mixed. Results from three studies did not support the Minneapolis idea that arrest can deter future assaults. Another found that mandatory arrest does not place women in greater danger, but it also does not stop woman battering. The fifth study showed that mandatory arrest was neither more effective nor less effective than any other deterrent strategy used in that city. Results from the last experiment are still not available.

Norris has strong opinions about mandatory arrest. Not only is it an ineffective deterrent to future incidents of woman battering, she says it has backlashed on women. The gender-neutral language of Phoenix’s mandatory arrest policy has resulted in women being arrested and convicted for domestic violence crimes. Even when the women themselves are the victims.

“Feminists fought long and hard to get the laws on the books. Then they had to fight long and hard to get them enforced,” Norris says. “The law has come full circle. We went from nobody being arrested to anybody being arrested.”

In her study, Norris explores police statistics about who is being arrested for domestic violence offenses. Unpublished data from the Phoenix Police Department show that women are being arrested in greater numbers. In 1991, women accounted for 13 percent of the field arrests for domestic violence offenses. In 1992, this figure rose to 18 percent. The total number of field arrests decreased in 1993, but women still accounted for 18 percent of all arrests.

After Norris received her master’s degree, she made follow-up contact with some of the women she interviewed. One woman’s husband had been arrested four times since her interview. His fourth arrest was for attempted murder. The woman told Norris that she had heard he was going to be let out of jail and the charges were going to be dropped.

Another woman’s husband had visitation rights with his child, but brought the child back before the end of his visitation period. The woman was unprepared to take the child at that time. He called the police and complained that she was being combative. The police arrested her. Now she is afraid that she might lose her job, her children, and her home.

“There are two values to my thesis,” Norris says. “Number one, I’ve established the need for more research. Number two, the consequences of arrest. Through nobody’s fault, the consequences have been greater for the women because men have caught on that arrest is another way they can control (women).”

In traditional Socratic fashion, the title of Norris’ thesis begins with a question: “Dangerously Equal or Equally Dangerous? A Comparison of Men’s and Women’s Violence in Intimate Relationships.” In the clearly defined world of boxing, the answer might be simple.

— Stephanie N. Mabee