

Chapter One

Collective Representations

Human problems do not spring up, full-blown and announced into the consciousness of bystanders. Even to recognize a situation as painful requires a system for categorizing and defining events.

Joseph Gusfield, *The Culture of Public Problems*

My first task is to examine the content of the collective representations of wife abuse and the battered woman and to illustrate how these particular representations furnish a mandate for a particular type of social service: shelters. Certainly, the terms “wife abuse” and the “battered woman” have entered public consciousness, but what do these labels mean? What is their content?

My wish to deconstruct claims forming these new collective representations is not easy to achieve for several reasons. First, claims formulating these representations have been made on many stages of social problem construction such as in academic and mass media publications, in public policy hearings and in trade journals for social service providers. Obviously, the form of discourse varies according to writer and audience. Second, claims have been advanced by a variety of persons who do not share a common discourse; no authority is invested in any one person or group. Indeed, although wife abuse has been publicly labeled as a “woman’s issue,” not all claims-makers advance themselves as feminists, and there are recurring debates and disagreements among those who *do* identify themselves as feminist.¹ Third, my hope to deconstruct the content of these claims is made even more difficult by the fact that few claims even contain explicit definitions.

Since my interest is in the collective representations that have

drifted into public consciousness, I will cast a wide net so that I can look at claims made by academic psychologists, sociologists, and historians, by self-proclaimed feminist activists and by social service providers on all stages of social problem construction. Since I believe that any one claim is not all that important, I will bracket issues often of interest to academics. In particular, I will not examine nuances of differences among claims. Most certainly, claims-makers have not spoken with a united voice and the academic literature is filled with often contentious debates among them. Yet for my project, these debates *are* "academic" and of little interest to the general public. My concern, then, is with the general images, the public content of social problems rather than with the intricate theoretical frameworks sometimes underlying such images.

My data for this examination of the content of collective representations first of all include all seventy-seven articles referenced in the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, beginning with the first reference under a new heading, "wife abuse," appearing in 1974, and ending with articles published in 1986.² Furthermore, over the past decade I have collected texts of public policy hearings, academic journal articles, feminist publications, and social service manuals. While my bookcases and file cabinets are stuffed with this ever-expanding collection, I do not claim to have all treatments—the social problems industry surrounding this public problem is too large. So, I will leave it to the readers to decide whether or not I make my case about the content of these collective representations constructed through social problems claims-making.³

The collective representation of wife abuse

But a domestic spat is not battering, which involves a pattern of escalating abuse in a situation from which the victim feels she cannot escape.

Time, "Wife Beating"

Wife beating...is a pattern of physical abuse of a woman at the hands of her former husband, husband, or male companion. It consists of repeated blows with the intention of inflicting harm.

It is more serious than a mere dispute and it is not a single shove or a single slap.

Marjory Fields, "Testimony"

What, specifically, is "wife abuse?" I will begin with three constructions agreed upon by almost all claims-makers. The first is that this condition is *not* limited to any specific group of women. Indeed, since claims-makers often define "wives" to include women in *any* cross-sex relationship, and since the labels "wife abuse/woman abuse" and "battered wife/battered woman" are used interchangeably, as constructed, wife abuse is not limited to women who are married.⁴ Likewise, according to claims, this condition is not limited to any specific racial, social class, or ethnic group. This claim often is made by illustrating wife abuse with stories involving highly educated and/or affluent white women. Such women are called upon to tell their stories in public policy hearings; magazine readers are told "money in the bank or an expensive car is no guarantee against violence"; these stories have titles such as "Powerless in the Suburbs." Although claims-makers argue that wife abuse is not limited to women with particular demographic characteristics, they have paid *particular* attention to incorporating educated and affluent white women into the category of women experiencing this problem.⁵

Second, according to all claims-makers, "wife abuse" is a label for acts where women are the *pure victims*. This means that this condition is different from "mutual combat" where violence is jointly produced. While it is not common for claims-makers to make this distinction explicit, it is common for them to maintain simply that mutual combat is not a valid construction. This is accomplished by claiming that a woman, ipso facto is not violent, and/or that a woman's violence is limited to "self-defense."⁶ Also as clearly, claims construct wife abuse as events that are not "victim precipitated." Ideas that a victimized woman somehow deserves to be victimized because she is too bossy, too nagging, too domineering, or too anything are routinely labeled as "pure myth." As constructed, wife abuse is about those events where a woman is a victim.⁷

Third, claims-makers agree that men are *offenders*. Here, too, claims invariably construct such a man as one found in any walk of life and

here, too, illustrations often involve a man who is white and affluent. According to such claims, although such a man might appear quite normal in public—or even, as one magazine claimed, “slick and charming”—inside his home he is simply a brute or a monster.⁸ Furthermore, claims-makers agree that such a man intends the violence he produces; “wife abuse” is not a label for “accidental” violence. It is formally defined as behavior by a man “in order to coerce her to do something he wants her to do without any concern for her rights”; such men are explicitly defined as men who “use violence in order to control and dominate their wives”; magazine readers are told “wife abuse is a pattern of coercive control, done by men who need to control women,” and that it happens when “wives do not do what their husbands want them to do.” This claim about men’s intentionality to produce women as victims most often is advanced through stories labeled as “illustrating the condition.” For example, in one magazine article, a woman told of being slapped and pushed to the floor when she did not cook a meal fast enough, another woman told of experiencing a bruising pinch whenever she voiced an opinion not shared by her husband. In her book, *The Battered Woman*, Lenore Walker tells the story of Anne, a woman who had been threatened with violence if she did not marry her husband, who had been thrown across a room because she had lunch with a woman friend he did not like, and who had been slammed against the wall because she asked her husband to drive her to work.⁹ Of course, all such illustrations promote claims that wife abuse is not accidental, while simultaneously and graphically illustrating that a woman is a pure victim and a man is an offender.

In summary, most claims-makers construct wife abuse as a phenomenon crossing all demographic lines which involves men as offenders who intend to do harm and women as victims who do not create their victimization. These are the actors and motivations encompassed by the label, “wife abuse.” But what, exactly, is “abuse?” This is an evaluative, not a behavioral term.

Some claims-makers argue that abuse should be defined broadly to include *any* behavior in which women are controlled by men.¹⁰ But in their emphases and illustrations, most claims-makers construct wife abuse to be primarily about *physical violence*. It is explicitly defined in terms such as the “use of physical force,” a “physical assault,” or a

“physical attack.” Since wife abuse is defined in terms such as “real and serious physical assault,” or “savage abuse,” such events of physical violence are particularly those seeable as *extreme*. As defined by one policy maker, wife abuse is a label for a “good, harsh, brutal beating up.”¹¹

This content of wife abuse as extreme violence is found most often in claims-makers’ illustrations. At a 1978 policy hearing in California, for example, policy makers heard about a woman whose husband first broke her neck and then followed her to the hospital where he tried to kill her; at the United States Commission on Civil Rights, policy makers heard about a woman who first was stabbed and then was thrown out of a second story window.¹² Expectably, mass media magazines also promote a brutal image of this condition. To take an example from *Readers Digest*:

In the final beating . . . the wife was stabbed repeatedly . . . The husband then stomped on his wife’s face and ran inside the house. He returned with their young son, and in front of the young boy, cursed and kicked the woman in the head.¹³

Such extreme images of the behaviors encompassed by the label, “wife abuse,” are not limited to public policy hearings and mass media magazines. They also figure prominently in books about this subject. Popular books such as Del Martin’s *Battered Wives*, Lenore Walker’s *The Battered Woman*, and Mildred Pagelow’s *Woman Battering*, each open with long personal stories demonstrating the extent of depravity encompassed by the label “wife abuse.”¹⁴ To take one example, *Battered Wives* begins with a “Letter from a Battered Woman.” This woman says of her experiences:

I have had glasses thrown at me. I have been kicked in the abdomen when I was visibly pregnant. I have been kicked off the bed and hit while lying on the floor—again while I was pregnant. I have been whipped, kicked, and thrown, picked up again and thrown down again. I have been punched and kicked in the head, chest, face, and abdomen more times than I can count.¹⁵

My point here is simple: While claims-makers often give a nod toward condemning all forms of violence, their claims construct the core of wife abuse to contain *extreme physical violence*. As explicitly defined

and as implicitly illustrated, "wife abuse" is not "just slapping or shoving," it is not the same as a "marital quarrel," a "domestic spat," or a "domestic disturbance." According to claims, wife abuse is a label for events seeable as those of "conjugal terrorism."¹⁶

While less extreme physical violence lies somewhere outside the core of this social problem, wife abuse can be expanded to include *emotional violence*. This is sensible given the common sense assumption that emotional violence would accompany physical abuse. In the popular press, this is the claim that "between beatings he controls her with shouting, name calling, intimidation, and other emotional blows"; in public policy hearings it is the claim that wife abuse is a label for a constellation of behaviors which "may include being knocked down stairs and being demeaned and debased."¹⁷ Although not as common, wife abuse also can be constructed to include emotional abuse occurring without physical assault. But when such nonphysical abuse stands alone, it typically is constructed as "severe," or, as Lenore Walker told policy makers, the problem is "life-threatening" emotional abuse.¹⁸ Stories labeled as those of wife abuse in magazine articles illustrate that the content of emotional abuse is not a run-of-the-mill domestic problem: A man pouring gasoline on his wife's naked body and then flicking matches around her, a woman locked into her bedroom every day without any clothes and with the door handle wired with electricity to prevent her from escaping naked into the street, and a woman whose husband threatened to lock her into a coffin-like box he had built specifically for that purpose.¹⁹

For sensitive readers, I no doubt have lingered too long in describing the severity of acts labeled as those of wife abuse.²⁰ But this is the critical core of the collective representation and my point is that this core image is of brutalities and atrocities. The claim that wife abuse is a social problem is further supported by three other characteristics.

First, the label, "wife abuse," is not really a label for an event, per se, since it is defined explicitly as a *pattern* of physical abuse, or as a continuing *series* of abusive and degrading acts.²¹ Thus, as constructed, wife abuse is a label for a series of events and hence a "battered woman" is explicitly defined as a woman who has been "systematically and severely beaten by her husband for many years."²² As explicitly constructed, then, wife abuse is not a label for an "occasional slap." Further-

more, as constructed, this series of events is characterized by their *increasing severity and frequency*.²³ Still further, these events are characterized as *unstoppable*. True, after a violent event, an abusive man might feel guilty, he might act loving, contrite, and charming to this victim, but wife abuse is about those events where he *will* return to his abusive behavior. This claim is logical given the construction of the type of man who engages in wife abuse. While claims-makers complain that little research has focused on the characteristics of such a man, they also claim that a man guilty of wife abuse is one who believes abusing a woman is his right, and/or one who consistently denies the troublesome nature of his behavior. Given such an image, it follows that the prognosis for his change is poor indeed. So, claims construct wife abuse as increasingly frequent and severe behaviors that will not stop. Magazine readers are told simply "violence often starts mildly with a push, a shove, a slap. If no one interferes, it grows worse."²⁴ Most certainly, no claims-maker argues that one act of violence is acceptable, but it remains that in their emphases and explicit definitions, wife abuse is about *continuing, escalating, and unstoppable* victimization.

The next characteristic of wife abuse is not surprising and follows from other claims about the content of this social problem: Wife abuse is a label for acts producing *physical injury*. As explicitly defined, it is a label for acts yielding "severe, repeated, and demonstrable injury," for acts where women are subjected to "serious and/or repeated physical injury as a result of deliberate assaults." Indeed, one claims-maker even specified an expected degree of injury when she claimed that "severe bruising" was the "minimal injury" for acts of wife abuse.²⁵ Most commonly, this characteristic is not explicitly defined because it is to be expected that the kinds of violence encompassed by the label would produce injury. So, most commonly, claims about injuries are advanced through personal stories. For example, the "Letter From a Battered Woman" opening Del Martin's book is a story of a woman who experienced "painful bruises, swelling, bleeding wounds, and unconsciousness";²⁶ magazines contain stories about a woman who suffered a "ruptured spleen, broken bones and ribs," and another who "reached the hospital emergency room with a puffed and purple face, blood flowing from her ear, and two broken ribs."²⁷ Given that claims-makers on all stages of social problem construction frequently cite statistics on the

number of women *killed* by wife abuse, it is clear that this is a label for acts producing *physical injury*.

The final characteristic of wife abuse follows from all others. As constructed, this is a label for acts perceived by victims to be *terrifying*. Explicitly and implicitly, wife abuse is not "masochistic" violence or "playful" violence. Indeed, it is antithetical to such constructions since magazine articles have titles such as "If You Loved Me, You Wouldn't Hurt Me," and "I Don't Want to be a Battered Wife." In brief, the label, "wife abuse," labels acts experienced by its victims as *terrifying*. Hence, women experiencing this tell of "Life in a Domestic Hell," and they talk of "Being an Abused Wife and Living in Fear."²⁸

When combined, these claims constitute the collective representation of the public problem we now call "wife abuse." In the composite image, wife abuse is a label for severe, frequent, and continuing violence that escalates over time and is unstoppable. Such violence is that in which unrepentant men intentionally harm women and where women are not the authors of their own experiences which they find terrifying.

Such a collective representation was successful in overcoming popular public interpretations that violence by husbands against wives was not serious, was victim-precipitated and limited to poor and/or minority women. In defining such traditional interpretations as "myths of wife abuse," what had been previously interpreted as personal troubles were transformed into a public problem.²⁹ At the same time, the construction raises its own question: Why is such abuse repeated?

Of course, asking why abuse is repeated could be transformed into a question about men who abuse: Why does such a man persist in such despicable behavior? But the public and claims-makers alike have transformed this question about repeated behaviors into one about women victims: Why do they stay? After all, by definition, women victims are terrified of their abuse, which is extreme and repeated and consequential and only grows worse over time. Since the prognosis that a man will change is poor, it is justified for claims-makers to label a woman's hope for such change as a "false and futile dream." The collective representation of wife abuse leads to the common sense conclusion that a woman *should* leave such a relationship, and this prescription is a part of the collective representation: A woman experiencing wife abuse must leave her relationship. Within claims, a failure to leave is labeled as "maladaptive

choice behavior," or as "self-destruction through inactivity"; social policy makers are told that the goal of policy should be to "help the battered woman leave the situation," that the issue is "how can we help her to leave"; social service providers tell one another that they should work to "effect permanent separation," and to help such a woman "terminate the relationship."³⁰

It is not surprising that claims-makers have devoted considerable attention to answering the question, "why does she stay?"³¹ If wife abuse is to be publicly accepted as a social problem then the behavior of staying in a relationship containing wife abuse must be constructed in a way not challenging claims about the content of this social problem. In other words, if a woman stays because violence is not "that bad," if she stays because she does not mind the abuse, indeed, if she stays because she *chooses* to stay for any reason, then claims about the content of this public problem are challenged. In the process of accounting for a woman's behavior of staying in a relationship containing wife abuse, claims construct a new type of person—a "battered woman"—a woman whose unexpectable behavior of staying in a relationship containing wife abuse supports rather than challenges claims about the content of this public problem.

The collective representation of the battered woman

Women stay with men who abuse them because of factors such as: fear; helplessness; guilt and feelings of failure; lack of resources signified by lack of freedom of movement, economic dependency and dependent children.

Mildred Pagelow, *Family Violence*

Battered women are often trapped: They lack the money to escape with their children, cannot earn a living and have lost hope of regaining control of their lives. And many hide the fact that they are abused in order to preserve the family unit.

Glamour, "Scarred Lives of Battered Women"

Without exception, the construction of the battered woman type of person begins with the obvious: She is a woman experiencing violence

of the type known as “wife abuse.” As such, her behavior of staying in her relationship ipso facto is defined as “unreasonable.” Further, with few exceptions, the construction of the battered woman begins with an attribution: Her unreasonable behavior is not her fault. Claims formulating the battered woman construct her as a type of person who *is* deviant—she engages in unreasonable and unexpected behavior—yet she is a woman who does not freely choose to be deviant. Claims construct this type of person through common sense and stereotypical associations to the social positions of wife/mother, woman, and victim.

Most commonly, claims-makers describe a battered woman as a stereotypical and traditional *wife* who has been economically dependent on her abuser and who has little opportunity to be otherwise. The characteristic of economic dependency is the most common term used to describe this type of woman and, according to almost all claims, this characteristic excuses her behavior of staying. Simply stated by one such woman who told her story in a magazine article:

What am I supposed to do? Where am I going to go? I don't have any money and I don't know how to do anything. You tell me: Just what am I supposed to do when he beats me up?³²

Furthermore, the majority of claims construct a battered woman as a *mother* with small children. This characteristic of motherhood serves to magnify the characteristic of economic dependency:

Why does she not leave? The answer is simple. If she has children but no money and no place to go, she has no choice.³³

We have a powerful image here of a type of woman who obviously does not choose to remain in her abusive relationship. When such a woman does attempt to leave, she is described as “the wife who grabs her children and flees her violent husband in the middle of the night . . .”³⁴ Or, as described by Senator Hatch in Congressional testimony:

When a battered woman makes the decision to leave her husband, she may be in fear of her life. She commonly has nothing but the clothes on her back and the children she is afraid to leave with a violent spouse. For all too many of these women, there is no place to go.³⁵

Most typically, the collective representation of the battered woman has at its core a wife/mother who remains within her abuse only because she has no place to go. But a careful reader might recall that the condition called "wife abuse" is constructed as a phenomenon crossing all social boundaries. Are affluent women also trapped by economic dependence? According to claims, many such women *are* trapped because their present affluence depends on their connections with affluent men. Indeed, claims-makers argue that an affluent woman might perceive even greater economic entrapment than a poor woman since she has a "long way to fall" if she leaves her partner.³⁶

A critical reader, though, might still wonder whether or not such a collective representation of the battered woman is sufficient to account for the behavior of staying. For example, would not friends offer a woman a place to go to escape her abuse? According to claims—no. First, a battered woman is constructed as a woman isolated from others. Such isolation might be self-imposed since she is constructed as a type of woman who is "embarrassed over her plight," or isolation might be imposed by her partner as a "technique of control." Second, even if she is not isolated from others, claims-makers argue that such a woman should not expect any assistance. Her friends might perceive themselves to be in danger if they help; since an abusive man often appears normal, her friends might not believe her stories of brutality; they might not be familiar with the characteristics of wife abuse and believe she created her own victimization. In brief, a battered woman is constructed as a person who cannot rely on friends for assistance.³⁷

But what about the social welfare system? Would not formal organizations offer assistance to this woman who desperately wants and needs to leave her home? According to claims—no. First of all, claims-makers argue that agency specialization, rules, and regulations often prohibit them from offering real assistance. To take only the most obvious examples, a woman might well want to leave her home at night or on the weekend when agencies are closed; she might well require immediate financial assistance even though her partner is legally responsible; she might well have many needs not fitting specialized agency mandates. But second, even if she does negotiate this bureaucratic maze, according to claims she will not be helped by the "professionals" who work in such places. According to claims, professionals treat this type of woman as

the problem and they deny, discount, or ignore women's stories of brutality. On all stages of social problem construction there are many testimonials offered by women who were told by their clergy to be more tolerant, who were given anti-depressant drugs by physicians who merely treated injuries and did not even ask about their source, and who were told by counselors and psychiatrists that a woman's behavior provokes victimization. Thus, claims-makers are all but united in constructing a battered woman as a woman who will receive no adequate social services.³⁸

The collective representation of the "battered woman" is of a woman who is alone in her plight. She is defined as "this outcast member of society."³⁹ Within this construction, such a woman *does* want to leave, yet she is unable to gather the material resources necessary to do so. Obviously, this is a public problem because social life is keeping her trapped within her continuing victimization—the problem is a woman's economic entrapment, unresponsive friends, social service providers, and the traditional organization of social services. But still, such a collective representation might not be judged sufficient to account for the unexpected behavior of staying. After all, wife abuse can happen to *any* woman, so we certainly would expect not all such women to be economically dependent mothers with small children. Furthermore, even the most pessimistic person might find it hard to believe that all friends and social service providers would refuse to help a woman in the dire situation known as "wife abuse."

All claims constructing a battered woman as objectively trapped begin with the imputation that such a woman *does* have the motivation to leave. But other constructions portray her as a type of person who might reasonably *not* have this motivation. According to claims, a battered woman might not be economically dependent, she might not be a legal wife nor a mother, but regardless and by definition, she *is* a woman, and characteristics commonsensically and stereotypically associated with femininity describe a "battered woman," and excuse her behavior of staying even when she has an objective route to safety.

A variety of terms are used to describe the femininity of a battered woman. Often, she simply is constructed as "traditional" in her beliefs about families and women. Such a woman, for example, is constructed as one who believes that divorce is a stigma, that marriage of any quality

is better than no marriage, that her children need their father. Most often described as "emotionally dependent," such a woman is constructed as one who believes she is responsible for her partner's abusive behavior. According to claims, such characteristics describe a battered woman type of person and these characteristics prevent her from defining "leaving" as the most reasonable course of action.⁴⁰

While such associations with traditional femininity become part of the collective representation of the battered woman, they pose an implicit challenge to claims about the condition known as "wife abuse." That is, if such a woman *chooses* these beliefs, then her continued victimization is not a public problem. Claims-makers have deflected this threat by a further attribution, a battered woman type of person does not choose such traditional beliefs, she is a pure product of her environment. She is constructed, for example, as a woman who has been "*conditioned* to believe she is not complete without a man," "*conditioned* to be passive and submissive," "*conditioned* to accept dependency and to be selfless."⁴¹ (emphases added). Since her femininity is attributed to her socialization, which was not under her control, a battered woman is constructed as a person who has been victimized by life's experiences:

. . . the battered wife is a victim of over-socialization into a stereotypical feminine role. She has learned to be docile, submissive, humble, ingratiating, non-assertive, dependent, quiet, conforming, and selfless. Her identity is founded on being pleasing to others, but not to herself.⁴²

At this point, the collective representation of the battered woman is of a stereotypical wife/mother/woman, she becomes describable as the "worst-off among all women." As such, she is not a qualitatively different type of person, she is *any* woman, she is *all* women:

The plight of the battered woman illustrates and clarifies the issues raised by the woman's movement. For the battered woman magnifies what most women have experienced at some point in their lives.⁴³

This construction of the battered woman as any woman is compatible with claims that the condition known as "wife abuse" can happen to any woman, and it is compatible with many feminist constructions label-

ing all women as “victims of male domination.” Such a construction, though, is insufficient for two reasons. First, if a battered woman is *not* a special kind of person then there is no support for claims-makers who argue that she is a “specific kind of victim,” that such a woman forms a “special population,” or a “specific class of citizens.”⁴⁴ Second, since wife abuse is explicitly constructed as a *specific type of problem*, it follows there would be specific consequences associated with it. In brief, although a few claims-makers, particularly those identified with and writing for feminist audiences, emphasize that a battered woman is *any* woman, claims entering the public consciousness often construct her as more than a wife/mother/woman. She also is constructed as a *victim* of the specific experience known as “wife abuse.”

Characteristics associated with the experience of victimization describe a battered woman and further account for her deviant behavior of staying in a relationship containing wife abuse. For example, recall that wife abuse is a label for acts experienced by victims as terrifying. Given this, it is logical that a battered woman would be constructed as a woman filled with fear who has “lived in a state of terror for so long.” According to claims, the fear experienced by such a woman is more than fear for immediate safety, it is a generalized characteristic that “immobilizes them, rules their actions, their decisions, their very lives.”⁴⁵ Of course, this characteristic of fear also serves to prevent a woman from leaving her home even though she might want to do so.

As constructed, a battered woman also is characterized as “emotionally confused” and this, too, is understandable. Recall that a man who abuses his wife might appear normal to outsiders, and after a violent incident he might act loving and contrite—for a while. Furthermore, recall that wife abuse is a label for events having nothing to do with a woman’s characteristics or behavior. When these constructions are combined, it is only logical to construct a “battered woman” as emotionally confused. How is she to understand her experiences? According to claims, objective entrapments combine with traditional beliefs and insanity of experience to lead such a woman to “eventually lose awareness of her own needs” and to “erroneously blame herself.” Such a woman is further constructed as justifiably angry, yet one who will “hide,” “suppress,” or “disguise” her emotions, as one who becomes “afraid to feel,” as one who develops techniques to “inhibit her sense of

outrage," as one who "transforms her rage and anger into depression." Such emotional confusion, furthermore, leads her to "exhibit a lack of acknowledgement that her batterer really is in control." Given this confusion, it is logical to claim that when such a woman says she loves her abuser it is because she has been "brainwashed." On all stages of social problem construction, in brief, the battered woman is constructed as a type of woman who is emotionally confused and therefore unable to define leaving as her most reasonable course of action.⁴⁶

Still further, a "battered woman" is a woman who is routinely abused by her partner in life and how does she understand this in relation to her self? According to claims, "each beating serves to reinforce the abused woman's negative self-image." A battered woman therefore is characterized by "devastatingly low self-esteem," she "accepts the image of herself as unloveable." Such a woman, of course, might not leave because she does not believe she deserves anything better in her life.⁴⁷

Finally, according to claims, the process of victimization might lead a battered woman type of person to develop a range of physical and psychological illnesses. In addition to injuries from the physical violence, such a person is constructed as one who is prone to develop headaches, asthma, gastrointestinal problems and chronic pain, "anxiety and depression are endemic" to such a type of woman who might "end up drinking, taking drugs prescribed by her physician for depression, abusing (her) children or attempting suicide." Clearly and most certainly, claims-makers are united in arguing that such physical and psychological illnesses are the *result* of victimization. Most claims-makers go further and construct such illnesses as *transient* reactions to abuse not existing before abuse and disappearing after abuse. But it remains that a battered woman type of person is characterized by illnesses that might well block her route to leaving a relationship containing the behaviors known as "wife abuse."⁴⁸

In the process of accounting for the unexpected behavior of staying in a relationship containing wife abuse, claims-makers have constructed a new collective representation—a "battered woman." The fully described ideal type would be a woman of any age, race, social class, or marital status who was in the social roles of wife and mother. Such a woman would want to leave—or would want to leave if she was not so

confused as the result of her victimization—but she would be trapped within her continuing and brutal victimization by economic and emotional dependence, by friends and social service providers who refused to help, and by her traditional beliefs. Such a woman would be isolated from others, overwhelmingly fearful and emotionally confused; she would have little faith in herself and she would suffer from a range of physical and emotional illnesses that were understandable reactions to her terrible plight. This particular experience, biography, and subjectivity describes the collective representation called the “battered woman,” and this collective representation excuses the unexpected behavior of staying in a relationship containing experiences known as “wife abuse.”

Such a collective representation deflects challenges to the wife abuse problem posed by the behavior of women who “stay.” Simultaneously, this representation furnishes a warrant for public intervention. Indeed, the representation furnishes a *mandate* for intervention since, in the final analysis, a battered woman type of person *requires* help if she is to be able to remove herself from her plight. After all, she is constructed as a person who “cannot cope with the outside world without some assistance and intervention,” as “too demoralized to assert herself,” as “bewildered and helpless,” and as “overwhelmingly passive and unable to act on her own behalf.” Such a person requires assistance since her self-image is “to the point where she has very little to work with,” since she is “deficient in coping strategies,” and “cognitively, emotionally, and motivationally deficient.”⁴⁹ The content of the collective representation of the battered woman therefore supports the claim that this type of person is “society’s problem.”

As constructed, “wife abuse” is a social problem and, as constructed, the “battered woman” requires help. But what is to be done? While some claims-makers writing for feminist and academic audiences have focused attention on describing how to stop wife abuse *before* it happens, what has captured public attention is the image of the battered woman as a person needing help *now*. Public attention has focused narrowly on the immediate problem of her safety and hence, the call for “shelters for the battered woman.” According to all claims-makers on every stage of social problem construction, a battered woman first and foremost needs a shelter.

Not surprisingly, claims-makers are not a united group advancing

one homogeneous image of what shelters should do or how they should do it. My interest, though, is in claims about organizations that “fit” claims about problems and persons. Since the public problem called “wife abuse” is defined as behavior *not* created by women, I am not interested in shelters where a battered woman is defined as “a person who created her victimization.” Furthermore, since wife abuse is defined as unstoppable violence, I am not interested in shelters seeking to save families. Shelters treating women as the problem and those focusing on repairing families now are labeled “shelters of the past,” and they are explicitly contrasted with modern shelters arising from the collective representations of wife abuse and the battered woman.⁵⁰ How are such places to help this victim of wife abuse?

The collective representation of shelters

A shelter can be a place where a woman who has lived in fear and isolation can find security and safety as well as the love and support of other women.

Jennifer Baker Fleming, *Stopping Wife Abuse*

Most battered women, in order to leave violence, primarily need safety and support. They feel isolated and dependent and blame themselves. They need recognition that their experience is shared and that their problem is social and political, not individual.

Gail Sullivan and Jane Weiss,
“How We Support Battered Women”

Beginning with the public image of a battered woman as trapped because she has no place to go, it follows that shelters must offer her and her children a place to go. This is the core image of such places—they are hotels for the battered woman. More precisely, they are *emergency hotels* given claims about how a woman reaches them. She is described as the “woman who grabs her children and flees her violent husband in the middle of the night”; magazine readers are told “women often arrive at the shelter—with children—in a police car after being rescued from a beating”; social policy makers learn that most women “arrive at shelters in the middle of the night . . . frightened and injured.” Furthermore,

according to claims, such places might *look* like emergency hotels. A magazine article, for example, described one such place as “in shambles—bare floors, peeling wallpaper, no furniture, slabs of foam rubber propped upon telephone directories for beds,” and other observers have described such places as “over-crowded,” “noisy,” and “disease ridden.”⁵¹

It seems the general public has been more or less satisfied with this image of shelters as emergency hotels because this is where the vast majority of public claims stop. Granted, such places might be over-crowded—a claim supporting the call for more shelters—yet they do resolve the most immediate need of a battered woman for a place to go. Within such an image, a shelter is a black box; it is nothing but a place.

Claims-makers have focused on advocating for more shelters yet a thoughtful reader might wonder: Does an emergency hotel fulfill the needs of the battered woman who leaves her home? If such a woman was trapped only because she had no where to go, then yes, an emergency hotel would be sufficient. Thus, some claims-makers have constructed a battered woman as no longer a victim once she leaves her home: A woman’s request for shelter in such claims is constructed as her “declaration of independence” from further abuse; a woman who enters a shelter is constructed as one who is “euphoric as a result of achieving liberation from years of violence and oppression.”⁵²

But according to other claims, when a battered woman leaves her home some of her troubles might actually worsen. She now is constructed as a person who feels guilty about leaving, a person who feels like a failure because she left; she is constructed as a person who fears for her future. It is no wonder that policy makers are told shelter clients are “women in poor condition.”⁵³ Furthermore, given claims about the confusions of such a woman we might predict that she would check into an emergency hotel at night and then check out the next morning, still passive, confused, helpless, and dependent.

Since the battered woman has been constructed as a type of woman experiencing many troubles in addition to her lack of a place to go, it follows that, if shelters are to assist such a woman, they must offer more than emergency housing. Yet few claims made in public policy hearings or in mass media magazines go further than simply advocating the need for shelters. But the absence of claims on these public stages does not

mean an end to claims-making.⁵⁴ Rather, a smaller public of shelter insiders continues to make claims. Within this set of claims written by and for academics who study shelters, persons who organize and work in such places and persons who train those who work in such places, the black box image is given specific content.

To begin, while the core image of shelters as emergency hotels fulfills the needs of a woman who needs a place to go to escape victimization, the definition of wife abuse as continuing, escalating and unstoppable behavior raises a disturbing possibility: What good is accomplished if a shelter only gives a woman a short respite from victimization? It is, bluntly stated, a troublesome image somewhat equivalent to repairing a soldier so that she can be sent back into battle only to be wounded again. Obviously, this is not the image of claims-makers, who argue that shelters should not be "simply residences, or temporary hotels along the way in women's violent lives," and that such places should not be "simply places for troubled relationships to cool off."⁵⁵ Commonsensically, given wife abuse as a label for unstoppable violence, it follows that it would be counterproductive to have an organization repeatedly used by women who kept returning to unchanged, violent relationships. As constructed, then, shelters are more than emergency housing; they *should* do something to change the situation bringing a woman to them.

Of course, organizational goals of changing situations could mean many things. Publicly, shelters are described as places helping a woman "determine her options," or helping a woman "make up her mind about the future"; policy makers are told that shelter workers ask each woman, "What do you want? What do you need?" But commonsensically, only some forms of change are compatible with the construction of the wife abuse problem. Would shelters want to help a woman become a "better wife?" No, that is not sensible given that wife abuse is violence not created by a woman's behaviors. Would a shelter want to train her in how to cope better with the violence she experiences? Of course not—as defined, a battered woman is a woman who already has such coping skills—the attitudes and behaviors which keep her trapped. Given the construction of the public problem called "wife abuse," and given the construction of the type of person called "a battered woman," only some goals for shelters are sensible. Within claims, the general goal of "effect-

ing life change" is further operationalized; the ultimate goal is defined as the "achievement of independent living arrangements." Most simply, the goal of shelters is to keep the woman from returning to her husband.

This goal of shelter services is found in magazine articles where individual women credit such places for helping them remain away from their former abusers; this goal is implicit when claims-makers define as shelter service failures those women who use services and then return to their former partners; it is implicit when shelter rules prohibit reentry to any woman who uses services and then returns to her former home, and when shelter rules prohibit contact between shelter clients and their partners.⁵⁶ This is sensible. After all:

. . . batterings usually escalate rather than stop when a woman returns to a battering man. Can a shelter, in good conscience, be accessory to a battering or murder by denying a woman the support she needs to get out of this situation? If many women leave a shelter to return to a battering man, it's a sure sign that the shelter has failed them in some way.⁵⁷

As constructed, shelters have *two* service goals. They offer "a secure escape from violent men and a stepping stone to independence"; they offer "immediate protection and long-term life change."⁵⁸ As such, shelters are social service organizations and the battered woman is their client, defined as "a person requiring more than emergency housing."

So, if a battered woman is to become a successful client, she needs to become independent. What does such a woman need from a shelter? Obviously, the answer to this question depends on the image of her problems; anything encouraging a woman to stay in her relationship must be overcome. First, her need for a place to go is resolved by shelters as always open emergency hotels. But if she is to *remain* independent she will need more. At the minimum, she will need permanent housing and money to support herself and her children. But relatively few claims-makers focus on overcoming objective dependence and their logic is simple: What would be the use of helping a battered woman gain the material means to independence if her subjectivity prevented her from achieving emotional independence? Thus, shelters are constructed as "reconstitutive milieus," as places concerned primarily with "consciousness-raising." Stated most explicitly, shelter services are for the