# CINCLESSING CINCLESSING THE JOURNEYS OF BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN'S WOMEN FANS

## LORRAINE MANGIONE AND DONNA LUFF

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For all the women fans who shared their journeys with us with honesty and passion

LM: In honor of fan friends Martha Cook, the most prescient and creative, Cathy McKay Zarbo, the most fun and passionate, and Lisa McCann, the most reflective and mystical

DL: For Gareth, Ellen, and Nathaniel, my companions on the most important journey

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# MARY CLIMBS IN

# Introduction

**O**<sup>N A MILD AUTUMN DAY, two strangers sat in a sunny, suburban living room watching the documentary *Springsteen and I*. Lorraine, a professor of psychology, and Donna, a sociologist working in health care, had never met before, though their paths might easily have crossed earlier. They had presented separately at The Glory Days Springsteen Symposia, organized by a team of scholars and fans (led by Mark Bernhard, Ken Womack, and others) that took place at Monmouth University in New Jersey and, as a result of connections made there, they had both been invited to join the editorial advisory board for *BOSS: the Biannual Online Journal of Springsteen Studies*. Lorraine and Donna jumped at the chance to cowrite a review of the fan documentary, *Springsteen & I: "Friends since . . ."* and thus began a camaraderie and collaboration.</sup>

As Springsteen fans ourselves, we had varying experiences of comments and jokes about our fandom over the years, sometimes assuming it to be something that we should have outgrown or that was fueled by sexual fantasy, but those stereotypes did not reflect our own experiences, those of women fans we knew, the commentary by women at the conferences, or writings by women fans in both fiction and nonfiction (e.g., Bishop 2019; Edelman, 1996; Iver, 2019; Mason, 1985; Powers, 2016; Wurtzel, 1994). As we talked together and reflected on our own experiences, we felt so much of what it meant for women to be Springsteen fans remained underexplored.

It started with sharing our own stories with one another.

Lorraine grew up in Connecticut, a place where Springsteen occasionally gave small, intimate concerts-sometimes in high school gyms! Alas, she was an early skeptic toward her friend Martha who had "climbed in" right away, as she and her younger brothers teased Martha with witty names for Springsteen. Although her older brother had introduced her to many rock groups (as with many women in the study), his tastes veered toward the more esoteric—Emerson, Lake, and Palmer, Pink Floyd, and the Moody Blues—not Springsteen. Yet the connection with Springsteen's work was fermenting, quietly, under wraps, a bit buried. While not growing up on the Jersey shore, there was enough about small-town living, beach, community, shared Italian American Catholic ethnicity, New York City family from the Lower East Side, the Bronx, and Brooklyn with strong attachment to the New York Yankees to help Lorraine finally resonate with the world evoked by Springsteen. Her own journey started in earnest in the later 1970s, intensified with her first concert in Kansas City near where she attended graduate school. It was perhaps most of all the psychologist in Springsteen that spoke to the psychologist in this author, and that cemented the connection. How could it be that his music so mirrored the theories, research, and clinical work that she was studying? How did he understand so much of the human psyche? It feels fitting that her first concert was filled with songs from Darkness on the Edge of Town and The River, two intensely psychological albums, as well as all the dancing, shouting, and arm waving. She has acknowledged that Martha was light years ahead, opening the door for her to climb in.

Donna's journey as a Springsteen fan began at age sixteen in Britain. In the backseat of her father's car, she heard "Hungry Heart" blast from the radio. She asked her father to turn up the volume and her younger sister to quiet down. As she listened, she understood she had a hungry heart too.

As for many British youth of that time, music was a defining part of Donna's identity. Growing up in Birmingham, England's secondlargest city, a musical cauldron and a routine stop on tour itineraries, she went to concerts often. Just a few months after hearing "Hungry Heart," Donna got tickets to see Springsteen on the British leg of *The River* tour. Her first impression was that everyone in the audience was old: who are these people? But what she saw and heard on stage reflected her own yearnings—the promise of a bigger, more alive life. She saw herself in both the protagonist and the girl in the Springsteen songs.

Decades later, and through her move to live in the United States, Donna remains a Springsteen fan. The realities of life, and of life in the United States, have proved more complicated, of course, than her youthful romanticism—the gap between dream and reality that Springsteen's music has long explored. But, through the contradictions and her ever-growing feminism, Springsteen has remained an unlikely life guide. For Donna, Springsteen is like a trusted friend who is always a little way ahead of her, illuminating stages on the journey. His music showed what lay ahead and, remarkably, how she would feel about it.

The idea of transforming our personal fan relationships to include research about fans, in addition to obsessing over music and concerts, came gradually through our participation in The Glory Days Springsteen Symposia and from that viewing together of *Springsteen & I*. As a psychologist working in an academic setting to educate and train doctoral students becoming clinical psychologists, and a sociologist working in health services training and research, we bring differing backgrounds to our work together, and to the research that formed the basis for this book. One of us frames the world in more individual and small-group interactions and the other in larger group and society-level phenomena. Both views have contributed to our understanding of Springsteen and his female fans.

As women, writers, and academics, much of our scholarship and interest had focused on women, always curious about what happens in women's lives and between women and men, from the women's point of view. It seemed almost natural to explore how women fans view Springsteen and his work, specifically as women and about women. Among many excellent pieces of Springsteen scholarship, one stands out as an impetus for this book: Daniel Cavicchi's (1998) groundbreaking work on Springsteen fans, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans*, the first in-depth exploration of the experiences of Springsteen fans. However, Cavicchi did not specifically explore gender in the fan experience and noted that work remained to be done about women fans. This is the challenge that we claimed. Cavicchi's work inspired us to search further to see how fandom and Springsteen had evolved over the decades and what fandom held for women.

Cavicchi's groundbreaking work and Robert Coles (2003), who articulated the magnitude of Springsteen's work to fans in his compelling narrative account, Bruce Springsteen's America: The People Listening, A Poet Singing, laid the foundations for our study. Springsteen and I moved the conversation further forward by depicting the experience of some women fans, but these are individual experiences, chosen (we assume) in part for "dramatic" or "cinematic" effect, rather than representing women fans' perspectives more broadly. Five years after our initial survey, we read Gina Barreca, noted author and professor of English, and a contributor to the Springsteen seventieth birthday compilation *Long Walk Home* (2019), in describing her own fan experience, ask a similar question to one that motivated this project: "Why do so many of us, not only American women but also those from around the world, find Springsteen's music compelling?" (p. 163). It appeared to us that this question was still alive and waiting for more answers.

Watching that documentary together sparked conversations between us that we continued through conducting a survey of women fans, poring over the results, publishing a book chapter and an article based on some of the results, conducting a second survey, and finally writing this book. We hope to move the wider conversation about Springsteen fans forward by focusing on women's experiences. We hope you will join us for the ride.

## Women Fans of Bruce Springsteen

## Why Listen to Them and What Might They Tell Us?

His music and influence have no doubt made me into the person I am today. Over the years, I have not just listened to his music—I have metabolized it.

T IS COMMONPLACE to say that an album, a song, or a musician's work is the soundtrack of one's life, and soundtracks of our lives are undoubtedly important. But soundtracks remain outside us, a background to the central events of our lives. To metabolize suggests something more profound—a taking into your very core, transforming and being transformed in the process. It is striking for this fan to describe their engagement with Bruce Springsteen in this way. What is it about Springsteen and his music that can inspire this kind of intense connection? And is the quote even more interesting when we know that the fan is a woman? We wanted to find out more about what being a Springsteen fan means for women and what impacts it has on their lives.

Saying anything new about Bruce Springsteen is a challenge. The year 2020 marked 50 years since his first album. In those years, Springsteen has gone from Jersey Shore music scene legend to international icon, with increasing cultural stature and influence. He has been widely honored, awarded, quoted, and debated. His live concerts have become the standard against which other performers are judged, and his music catalog has spanned stadium rock anthems to spare, acoustic ballads that draw on folk, country, and blues traditions to create something uniquely his own. Springsteen, now a septuagenarian, shows no sign of slowing down or moving into complacency or retirement. Instead, he continues to widen the boundaries of what a rock star can do, most recently with his memoir, groundbreaking and Tony Award–winning Broadway show, debut as a movie director, and support for fans and New Jersey throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

Throughout this remarkable and wide-ranging career one facet has remained a constant: the devotion of his audience. Though the audience itself has grown, the intensity of the devotion has remained a consistent and noted feature, from old fans to new. Commentators have argued for a quasi-religious dimension to Springsteen fandom (Cavicchi, 1998; Cullen, 2005; Symynkywicz, 2008; Woge, 2011) such that his audience is almost a secular religious community, with a level of devotion and ritual with few parallels among other music fans (The Grateful Dead, Dylan, and Phish are possible comparators, see Swirsky, 2014). Consequently, his fans have become worthy of study in their own right. As with Springsteen, can there be more to say about Springsteen fans? The answer, we argue, is a resounding yes.

So what is there to say? We explore something that we perceived as missing in previous works on Springsteen fans: a nuanced understanding of the particular and relational nature of fandom for women. Women have featured heavily as characters in Springsteen's work and among his fan base, yet little has been written about how women fans see themselves and his work. Our perspective on this question is unique—our work brings a psychology lens to an exploration of fandom that can deepen our understanding of women's felt, lived experience of being a Springsteen fan. Based on an unprecedented analysis of the perspectives of hundreds of women fans, our work examines themes that emerged about relationship, meaning-making, healing from a range of issues or life events, personal growth, creating the self, identity formation, and the power of groups and community as central to the fan experience, and it illuminates the ways in which Springsteen fandom is for many women a developmental "journey" that helps to shape their lives.

As writers Cohen and Sawyers noted in *Long Walk Home*, their edited volume commemorating Springsteen's 70th birthday, Springsteen recognized that his music belongs to his listeners and that people turn to it not to find out about him, but "to find out about themselves" (Cohen & Sawyers, 2019, p. 3). For many women fans, as we will explore, Springsteen is on that journey of self-discovery with them, thus the book title which brings together a compelling image from "Thunder Road" and the journey taken together. Many women resonate and identify with Springsteen, feeling heard and understood through his music. They feel they have a relationship with him and are involved in an ongoing process of personal growth accompanied by his work and presence. They are active co-creators of that fan relationship rather than being a solely receptive audience.

Others have asked why Springsteen's music is so personal for many people and why it attracts so many fans (Cohen & Sawyers, 2019), but few have asked in what *particular* ways it resonates for *women* fans. In an age where gender is both an increasingly mutable category and a political flashpoint, the devotion of women fans to a male rock star can seem, on the surface, questionable or concerning. Further, especially early in his career, some commentators criticized Springsteen for his use of lyrics like "little girl" to describe women and argued that his work supports sexist or patriarchal views (Alterman, 1999; Delmonico, 2011; Palmer, 1997). Yet fans often hear and see things differently than academic critics. We wanted to explore how this "problem" of Springsteen's writing on women, past and present, seems to fans.

To answer our questions, we needed to hear directly from women fans themselves. In 2014 we conducted a large, international survey of Springsteen's women fans. We explored their answers in a book chapter, journal article, and conference presentations (Mangione & Luff, 2018, 2019). In 2021 we created a second survey to explore reactions to Springsteen's work in the intervening years, his legacy, and the evolving role of fandom in their lives. Our analysis of the rich and complex responses from both unique surveys forms the foundation for our conception of women's fandom of Springsteen as a personal, relational, and developmental journey.

### Why Study Fans?

As we reviewed academic writings on fandom, questions arose for us, as they might for others: Why study fans? Why is this important? What does it mean to be a fan? And, specifically, what does it mean to be a rock fan? Is being a rock fan the same as being a sports fan or a fan of video games? Are those fandoms the same as being a "Bruce fan"? As the word derives from "fanatic" what does that say about societal views of "fan"? Are those of us who are Springsteen fans actually "fanatics"? Finally, when there are other, perhaps seemingly more consequential things to study, why is this topic important?

A basic reason to study fandom is that it is a significant part of our culture and our humanity and therefore worth understanding in depth. Any casual look at social media platforms, a newsfeed or newspaper, or television reveals the magnitude of fandom in our lives. Fandom of many kinds—sports teams, social media personalities, films, and music among them—seems to provide something important to individuals and groups, perhaps something that they cannot get elsewhere. Fandom is central to many families and individuals, to how people connect, participate in intense emotions/battles/dramas, and create and share in a culture. It is sociological in its societal manifestations, and anthropological in that fans have existed over the years and across cultures. Psychological aspects are abundant given fandom's role in people's lives and psyches: What is it that fans do, and why do they do what they do? Where does it fit in their lives and who they are? How does one become a fan, and what makes one stay a fan or become a "diehard" fan?

Wolff (2018) describes the fan/academic dilemma and controversy in a way that resonates with our thinking by explicitly addressing the tension between academics' views of fans and fans' views of themselves. Wolff argues for and acts on including fans in the discourse, letting them self-define what it means to be a fan, and incorporates his own research with fans on Twitter. Our work here similarly does not seek to define fans and what they are about, but to let them selfdefine who they are and what their fandom means to them. That is what this book explores—how women fans of Bruce Springsteen understand the nature of their fandom and what they do with it: how they live it out, what it means to them, how it shapes who they are.

Whole schools of psychology and psychotherapy devote themselves to themes we explore in this work: feelings, identity, meaning, purpose, healing, personal growth, loss and other existential issues, and relationships. We look more deeply at these experiences in exploring views of women fans. The foundational importance of relationships—from family relationships to friendships to sexual and romantic relationships-and attachment in people's lives and wellbeing, from childhood through old age, weaves throughout this work. We explore the significance of meaning in life, including how people find and create meaning, and what happens when life feels empty and meaningless. Another emphasis is the task of identity development, figuring out whom one is and where one finds a place in the world. In some chapters, trauma, social justice, marginalization, and diversity, particularly socioeconomic diversity, emerge. Loss, grief, and mortality on an individual or societal level figure too as universal experiences at the heart of our existence. We could not delve into Springsteen fandom without addressing the value of community, shared experiences, and engagement. Many of Cavicchi's themes around the meaning of Springsteen's work and the communal experience are echoed here.

Our framework for this book draws heavily on relational aspects of psychology and psychotherapy, broadly speaking: a common factors and relational approach to psychotherapy (Safran & Muran, 2000; Wampold, 2001, 2010); existential psychology (Bruner, 1993; Frankl, 2006; Markman et al., 2013; Overholser, 2005; Yalom, 1980); relationalcultural theory (Jordan, 2018; Jordan et al., 2004); and attachment and development throughout the life span (Bowlby, 1980; Wallin, 2007). Psychological themes in Springsteen's work framed Mangione and Keady's discussion (2007) on how relationships can transform people and their experiences, particularly around suffering, loss, and disconnection. These theoretical approaches were not developed with Springsteen in mind of course, but their power is such that they allow us to see things about him—and the fans who love him—that we otherwise could not see.

### What Does It Mean to Be a Springsteen Fan?

Why are people able to remain fans of Springsteen over decades, so that some fans feel that they "grew up with" him and he has been a companion for life? Musical groups or performers come and go, and fandom vacillates, but Springsteen's longevity, presence, and nearness to fans are hallmarks of his career. He also attracts new, sometimes younger, fans. It must be more than just glamour or celebrity status, two huge markers of success in our culture, that brings in new fans and nurtures old fans. Perhaps he continues to connect with so many fans, and to mean something significant to them on a personal level, because of two changes in society's relationship to popular music that Springsteen embraced.

The first is social relevance, in that Springsteen, from the early days, engaged with diverse genres of music that question and examine our culture and our relationship to that culture. His version of rock and roll looked incisively at the world, at individuals and relationships and social and political context. He commented on society and issues of social justice as they were becoming more clearly front and center in American popular culture.

The second reason Springsteen was able to connect is personal relevance, the ways in which he explicitly addresses the internal world of personal meaning, identity, developmental questions, and crises, searching for the self, and foundational relationships. Springsteen's work has always focused on uncomfortable realities and often sad or tragic moments, as well as the fun, the easy, the joyful. In this way his work connects with the interests of psychology.

Of course, Springsteen was not the first or only musician to address social or personal relevance, to step into the psychological realm. Many versions of popular music were moving in that direction in the 1960s and 1970s, and some had always cohered around societal reflections and critique (folk music, protest music, Joe Hill, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan) or around the complexities of personal relationships (the blues, all the love and loss songs, Frank Sinatra, Ray Charles), and certainly the Beatles and John Lennon, among others, inhabited both realms. Yet Springsteen elegantly intertwined the societal and personal with hard-driving rock and roll and all-night celebrations in concert, tossing the mix high into the air and deep into the psyche. Something emerged synergistically, paying homage to those coming before him yet bearing his own stamp. What made Springsteen special is that he fused those explorations with other dimensions of everyday life—including the pure joy of party music and dancing.

The emergence came as more traditional places for people to find meaning and take a moral stance on society's ills were foundering or outright disappearing, as families, churches, shared traditions, and belief systems faced challenges, something heard poignantly on "Independence Day." The song, which is explicitly about fathers and sons, also addressed how an uncritical handing down of expected personal identity for the individual, or at the societal level of shared values and meaning, no longer worked. The need and desire for people to create the architecture of their own values and identity have grown along with Springsteen's attention to these issues, adding to the resonance some fans feel in listening.

### The Need for Women's Voices

As we have previously noted (Mangione & Luff, 2018), differences in fan experience based on gender cannot be presumed; however, many commentators have argued that female music fan experiences are different than male experiences, not least that women's music fandom is more often derided or sexualized (Anderson, 2012; Cline, 1992; Duffett, 2013; Hill, 2016; Larsen, 2017; Rhodes, 2005; Wise, 1984/1990). Digesting works in fan studies contributed to our thinking and helped formulate our questions. In reading prior work on women fans, many of the criticisms of portrayals of female fandom resonated with us in relation to Springsteen fans. These included a lack of investigation of women's experiences as distinct from those of men, stereotypes of Springsteen's masculine appeal as related to women, and an idea that some kind of problem or pathology exists with women fans of male rock stars. Depth and a specific point of view seemed missing in considering fans and fandom in relation to Springsteen and women. As fans and as scholars, we felt a gap in the voices that were heard and the understanding that resulted. Overall, the gendered experience of Springsteen fandom remained underexplored or only partially understood.

We set out to uncover what draws women to Springsteen, how some women have been fans for decades, how the relationship with Springsteen and his work is perceived, what role his work plays in their lives, what it is like being a newer or younger fan, and how women feel about Springsteen's apparent relationship with and attitude toward women in his work. These are the essential topics in our surveys and in this book. In respecting these issues as important to women, and prioritizing women's voices and perspectives, we locate our work within a feminist and qualitative research framework.

We wanted to understand fan attraction in all its levels and manifestations, beyond stereotypical assumptions. Fandom for women has traditionally been thought to relate heavily to sexual and romantic fantasies toward the rock star, though some feminist writers have argued for a variety of motivations in women's fandom (Cline, 1992; Gray et al., 2007; Hill, 2016; Larsen, 2017). We wondered about the larger meaning of attraction in both initial and ongoing connection to Springsteen. This work aims to draw out the multiple dimensions of women's connection to Springsteen to offer a broader perspective on becoming and staying a fan. Cohen and Sawyers (2019) comment that their book "does not claim to represent every Springsteen fan" (p. 5), and of course neither does this one, but the goal was to enlarge the pool of commentators. We want women fans to have their say here, and have it heard, shared, enjoyed, and mused upon, just as Cavicchi (1998) and Coles (2003) had done years before. We still resonate with Coles's title that includes the people listening, wanting to listen to women who have listened so well to Springsteen.

Our work adds to a growing body of work on and interest in diverse experiences among Springsteen fans. In a section specifically on gender and sexual identity, Wolff's (2018) collection includes commentary on feminist theory (Moss, 2018), heterosexuality (Hubbs, 2018), and queer identity (Casio, 2018), all of which launch questions about women in his work. Another article examines the multifaceted role of the character Mary in Springsteen's work, often a theme in essays on Springsteen, drawing on religious and cultural imagery and meaning (O'Donnell, 2018). Within this mostly academic volume, notably in the section on gender and sexual identity, is our chapter (Mangione & Luff, 2018) and Casio's (2018) giving voice to women fans.

In Long Walk Home (Cohen & Sawyers, 2019), commentary on women in Springsteen songs, fans, and personal experience by Barreca (2019), Bishop (2019), and Adler (2019) is included. Bishop's writings of Springsteen and the magic in rock and roll would likely resonate with many women in our study. As the editors of that volume have noted, so much has been written about and by Springsteen, but "what remains to be examined is the impact he and his art have had—and will continue to have—on audiences in the United States and across the globe" (Cohen & Sawyers, 2019, p. 6). We agree that that is where the conversation needs to head.

#### How to Listen—What We Did

So how were we going to find out more about women fans? We felt like anthropologists engaging in an ethnographic study of a distinct but complex culture, and we, who had been part of that culture, were now stepping back and observing through research. Given our background disciplines, we favored qualitative research methodology to explore personal experiences in depth, yet the typical small number of participants in qualitative research would not reflect an extensive fan base. We decided on a survey with mostly open-ended, reflective questions, and hoped that participants would write from their hearts and speak their minds. We constructed questions from reading prior work on Springsteen fans and from a few interviews with a sample of women fans, contacted through our networks and representing a cross-section of fans in some respects (age, longevity, international and U.S. fans, race and ethnicity). Analysis of these interviews helped in constructing survey questions.

Creating a survey to hear women's voices was a joyful task as we imagined women telling their stories. After basic demographic questions, such as age, location, and length of fandom, the survey delved into the music and the man. We asked women for their perspectives, feelings, thoughts, and values, and they answered—in large numbers. Hoping for 100 respondents, we contacted the well-respected fan site Backstreets.com to see if we could publicize our survey on their site. Within a week or so we had a thousand respondents and were simultaneously overjoyed and overwhelmed! It was moving to us that so many women wanted to respond and took our questions seriously, yet the scientist portions of our psyches wondered how to do justice to such rich information. Part of that information is included in a chapter for the book, Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music: Essays on Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture, edited by William I. Wolff (2018), and in an article (Mangione & Luff, 2019) in a special issue of Interdisciplinary Literary Studies marking the anniversary of Darkness on the Edge of Town, edited by Eileen Chapman and Kenneth Womack. Given the large number of enlightening responses from so many women, the idea for this book, and a follow-up survey, was born. We invite readers to share in the experiences of women fans who participated in the studies, and to reflect on the role of music and Springsteen in their own journeys through life.

#### GATHERING THE DATA

We hoped the first survey would answer these questions: What is it that women fans get from Springsteen's music? Why is his music important to them, and in what ways? How do they feel as women about him? How do they feel about his perspectives on women? Do they have a relationship with Springsteen? Of the 1,158 respondents, 908 answered demographic questions. Of these 908 women, 602 were from the United States, representing 44 states and the District of Columbia (including 105 from New Jersey), and 306 were from 24 other countries. These other countries were: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates, and United Kingdom. Of all respondents, 66% were aged 45–64, but the overall age range of fans was 15–88 years. Fifty-one percent had been a Springsteen fan for 30–39 years, 9.5% for 9 years or less. Ninety-six percent had seen Springsteen perform live at least once.

We fielded the second survey in 2021 to gather responses to specific recent Springsteen activities and works and garner ideas regarding his legacy. Of the 742 individuals who took part in the second survey, 434 women completed demographic questions. Of these 434, 43.32% were aged 55–64, but ages ranged from 18 to older than 75. Of the 434 women that completed the survey, 299 respondents were from the United States, including the District of Columbia (with 31 from New Jersey), and 134 from 22 other countries (all included in the countries listed earlier from the first survey). In terms of longevity, 47.70% of respondents stated that they have been a Springsteen fan for more than 40 years, but the range was from 1 to 39 years.

There are inevitable limitations to our surveys in that respondents were a self-selected sample who had internet access and were comfortable answering an online survey. In the first survey, we did not ask about dimensions of diversity, such as race/ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. A sample is always a sample, not representative of all fans everywhere, but still we gathered a wide range of opinions.

#### FIGURING OUT THE DATA

To analyze data for this book, both authors read all the survey responses and generated initial themes and then refined these in discussion together. The resulting main themes are represented by our chapters. In choosing representative responses to include, we worked continuously in the collaborative practice of qualitative analysis to best embody participants' thoughts and feelings in order to communicate to readers. There were always more eloquent responses than could be included. We did not substantially edit women's responses