

**EPISODE 1337**

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**FT:** So Money is brought to you by CNET, the site that shows how to navigate change all around us. So Money episode 1337, Tanya Selvaratnam, author of *Assume Nothing: A Story of Intimate Violence*.

*“TS: Well, in the case of Eric Schneiderman and Andrew Cuomo, for example, they had millions of dollars in their campaign funds that they could use towards their legal fees, defending themselves against allegations which they knew to be true. Those campaign finance laws have to be changed.”*

[INTRO]

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**FT:** Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. We are going to have an intimate conversation today with a very brave, very courageous woman, Tanya Selvaratnam. She is the author of *Assume Nothing: A Story of Intimate Violence*, which recounts the intimate abuse she suffered from former New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman. She uses her story as a prism to examine the domestic violence crisis plaguing America.

When Tanya met Eric Schneiderman at the Democratic National Convention in 2016, they seemed like the perfect match. Both were Harvard alumni. They both studied Chinese. They were both interested in spirituality and meditation. But behind closed doors, Tanya's life was anything but ideal. She writes how Schneiderman became controlling, mean, manipulative. 25% of women in America are victims of domestic abuse, and Tanya never thought she'd be part of that statistic. But the reality was she was trapped in a violent relationship with one of the most powerful men in New York, powerful.

That is the focus of a lot of our conversation, how to dismantle this abuse of power to be in a relationship with someone who is so controlling financially, politically. What are the economics

that lead up to powerful abusive men? Tanya Selvaratnam, in addition to being an author, she is an Emmy nominated and multiple Webby winning producer. She's also the author of a book called *The Big Lie: Motherhood, Feminism and the Reality of the Biological Clock*. We talk about all of it here. Let's get to it. Here's Tanya Selvaratnam.

[INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** Tanya Selvaratnam, welcome to So Money. It's a pleasure to have you on the show.

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**TS:** Thank you so much.

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**FT:** You volunteered to come on this podcast. I've reached out to my female friends, my colleagues on the list, which is a wonderful, powerful group of women in media and technology and everything in between, looking for new voices for this podcast. You were very generous and offered to come on, as you have already done so much press around your last book. But I thought there might be more to discuss on this show about your experience, abusive relationships, and the financial implications that come about that we don't always call out.

Now, before we get to what I'm alluding to let's, just set the stage for everybody to let them know a little bit about you, Tanya, your book, *Assume Nothing: The Story of Intimate Violence*. This is a book that captures your experience in a relationship with Eric Schneiderman, American lawyer and politician who was a one point the Attorney General of New York. He resigned in 2018. You're in a relationship with Him, and it was an abusive relationship that you kept secret for years. Maybe you want to tell us a little about how you first met, the beginnings of the relationship. Then we'll sort of move on through the journey. But tell us about the first time you met Eric. What connected you?

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**TS:** Well, we first met in 2016 at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia. At that time, it felt like a fairy tale that this very powerful and I thought progressive feminist man was paying attention to me. But then the darkness started to seep in, and it was after I had already been entrapped. When it first started happening and trigger warning about some of the content, but it was physical violence in the sexual context. It was emotional abuse. It was verbal abuse, criticizing my scars on my torso from cancer surgery, criticizing my breasts, my hair, the way I dressed. I started to feel like I was in hell.

I told some friends whom I trusted and also my therapist about the controlling behavior, but I did not tell them about the physical violence until many, many months later. As soon as I did, one of my friends who's like my sister, she asked me the question, "Does he hit you," when I described to her the other patterns of abusive behavior. Because I wasn't going to lie to her, I said yes, and she was furious. She asked if I would be willing to talk to a friend of hers, and that friend is a domestic violence expert. I said yes. At that point, I was broken, I was not myself, and I also had never been in an abusive relationship before.

As a child, I grew up watching domestic violence between my parents, my father hitting my mother and abusing her. I never ever thought that I would become a victim. In fact, my entire career, I've been an advocate for women's rights and children's rights. But I'm an example that even a fierce woman can get abused, and I'm just so grateful for my friends and my community and the fact that I had a job, that I was financially independent, because there are so many people who stay in abusive relationships because they are financially dependent on the abuser.

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**FT:** That's an important thing you touch on, and I'd love to explore that a little bit more with you. But as I've had conversations with survivors before on this podcast, one of the really difficult things they say is leaving. Actually, leaving is really difficult. You brought up some of the reasons why, but sometimes it is more than just about their own economic security or feeling as though they have to start over in some cases. But everyone has their own reasons, and timing is really important. One survivor said to me, "Don't ever think that I didn't think about leaving every single

minute. But you have to trust that I am the only one who can decide when is the right time to leave because I know what the threats really are.”

So what were the threats for you in maybe not leaving sooner and ultimately for not really saying anything initially out loud in public about him? I mean, you ultimately wrote a book. So you did say a lot about him eventually, but it took a bit of time. What was that journey like for you? What were the things you are grappling with?

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**TS:** Abusers are very skilled at customizing the abuse so that you think it's specific to you. I thought that even though I might not have done anything to cause it, that he had not abused women before. What compounded the threat of my situation was that my abuser was the top law enforcement official in New York State. When I explored different avenues for getting out of the relationship and for seeking recourse, I found that all roads lead to him, and I was scared.

What helped me is the domestic violence expert because every victim is different, and it's very important to customize a safety plan. So with her, what made the most sense for me was to get out of the relationship as quietly as possible and get on with my life, which I fully intended to do in that fall of 2017. But then soon thereafter, the Harvey Weinstein story broke in the New York Times and then The New Yorker, and I felt this wave crash around me. On that day that The New Yorker story broke, Eric Schneiderman reached out to me saying that he wanted to continue to support my good work. I immediately forwarded that email to the domestic violence expert, and she's like, “He's not even keeping his cards close to his chest. He's trying to gauge what you're thinking. He knows that he's been bad.”

Then less than a month after that, through a mutual friend who happens to be an investigative reporter, I found out that, in fact, he had abused another woman almost a decade before me. I thought if there's her and me, how many others are there? That's when I realized that I couldn't just keep quiet. But I didn't know how exactly I was going to prevent him from harming other women. For me, it was very much about my conscience. I couldn't have it on my conscience that another woman would get abused by him because no one should have the memories that I have or that so many victims have.

Eventually, I decided that the court of public opinion was going to be my best chance because I was dealing with the top law enforcement officer in New York State. At that point, I have an exploratory off the record conversation with David Remnick of The New Yorker. He asked me to give him time to consider this story. Then in March of 2018, it was assigned to Jane Mayer of The New Yorker. Then Ronan Farrow was also brought on. Within weeks, they had identified multiple other previous girlfriends who had eerily similar experiences, and we were all interviewed independently of each other.

So then I knew that the story would come out, and that's when I began to take real steps for my personal, physical, and virtual safety. I did a training with a security team from Gavin de Becker's company. Gavin de Becker, who wrote *The Gift of Fear*, which is essential reading, I think, for everyone. It shows you the difference between good fear and bad fear. Bad fear which prevents you from living your best life, and good fear which helps you tap into your intuition and instincts and helps you protect yourself but live your best life. So I felt that even though I was scared, I was being guided by good fear because I knew that ultimately I had to do the right thing. Of course, it's been well documented. The New Yorker story came out in May 2018. Within three hours, he resigned.

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**FT:** Wow. Okay. So this speaks to what you're saying, this power of seeking help and the power of knowing that you're not alone. Knowing that you weren't the only victim empowered you to share your story. I just want us to recognize that because that is if you learn nothing else today, if that is the takeaway, listening to this, wondering how to you yourself get out of a bad situation, it is that you should not be doing this independently, that help is out there.

In your book, in your introduction, Tanya, you write that his power, and you're referencing Eric Schneiderman, was a thread that ran through our relationship. The word power is very triggering. For this reason, women, sometimes we have a hard time getting behind this idea of power because often it's referenced in the context of abuse, the abuse of power. We don't want to be associated with that. That's not who we are, and yet it shows up as abused, oftentimes. Can you elaborate on that and how his power became this presence throughout your

relationship that was threatening and perhaps how it showed up in your financial life? Did it get to that point as well? Were there conflicts, issues related to money where he was wielding his power?

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**TS:** His power was intertwined with his status and his relationships, his connections to the most powerful politicians and business people in America. Although I had my own career as a filmmaker and an organizer and a writer, I did not have that level of power. Wherever there are hierarchies and power dynamics, they're breeding grounds for abuse. I think the challenge for all of us because it's a collective project is to chip away at those hierarchies, chip away at the patriarchy and also what I call the female patriarchs that support that patriarchy because their power is intertwined with the patriarchy. We have to convert from a power over culture to a power with culture.

What I mean by that is a power over culture operates from a place of scarcity, where there's not enough space, where not everyone belongs. A power with culture is one where principles of power sharing and everyone belonging can exist and can thrive. That's the big challenge. I mean, we see it all around us with the attacks on gender justice, on trans rights, on reproductive rights. These are all attempts to control and oppress people and also to keep a scrambling, fighting back. So it's like we have to get ahead of it. I think one of the ways we get ahead of it is by recognizing that we're not alone and we're not crazy, by sharing our stories and doing the right thing.

It's a personal decision. Like I've had so many dozens of people who have been victims reach out to share their stories about being victims by both very powerful men and just regular citizens. Most of them don't come forward, and I have to respect that decision. I wish I didn't have all these stories in my head because these perpetrators are out there, and they're also running companies. They're making billions of dollars. But there's nothing I can do about it because it's not my story to tell.

But in my case, I found only recently the unexpected power of being a survivor. I didn't really see myself as powerful before, but the unexpected outcome of my sharing my story is that New

York State has two women at the top of the political ladder, Attorney General Letitia James and Governor Kathy Hochul. So that I feel proud of. I don't take credit for it, but it's an unexpected outcome.

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**FT:** Yes. When we were chatting about what we would talk about on this podcast, in addition to, obviously, your book and your story and your important message, is that you have some thoughts on this, what you describe as the interconnectedness with inadequate accountability of powerful abusive men. You reference, obviously, with Eric Schneiderman, that was the case, but also more recently former Governor Andrew Cuomo who resigned amidst scandal. You can even point to Harvey Weinstein for a while, how he got away with so much of his abuse for as long as he could.

How do we dismantle this, besides becoming a victim and then speaking about it? How can we get ahead of this, while we wait for wealth gaps to narrow? Because it is, let's be honest, also about the inequalities that we have with our wealth system, and racism, and sexism, and ableism, and all of those biases. But do you have any action steps for us? Or maybe we can even start with your thoughts on this, and then we can get into some advice?

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**TS:** Well, in the case of Eric Schneiderman and Andrew Cuomo, for example, they had millions of dollars in their campaign funds that they could use towards their legal fees, defending themselves against allegations which they knew to be true. Those campaign finance laws have to be changed. Another thing that they are able to do with those campaign funds is make donations to various organizations. I found out that Eric Schneiderman was reaching out to various organizations because one head of an organization reached out to tell me about it and to let me know that they were rejecting it. But that they were being harassed to take it.

What made me very sad is an organization that did take the money is Girls for Gender Equity. So that is an organizational decision, but not to consider what that might do to tarnish their image and to burnish his, I think, is myopic. I think we have to change the campaign finance

laws. I think that people have to stop. They have to be more accountable for where they get their money from and what they use their money for. It shouldn't have been up to Eric Schneiderman to take money from his donors and make philanthropic contributions. It should have been automatically returned to the donors for them to choose which causes they go to.

I actually have a funny episode in my book where I write to his campaign fund to get my own donation back so that I could donate it to an organization, which I did. It was a small amount. It was \$750. But I made sure I got it back so that my money wasn't used by him to burnish his image. The other thing that needs to happen is education. It starts from the time we are born. We're born into trauma, we are conditioned to accept trauma, and then we perpetuate that cycle of violence.

I want to advocate for sex education being rebranded as healthy relationship training, and I feel that it needs to be tiered at different ages, at which kids might experience those life changes. Like for instance, why are we scared to talk about periods? I hear that there's like a big uproar about the new animated film *Turning Red* because they talk about periods. Like, no, we need to start talking about periods when girls are about to get them. In my case, I got it when I was eight, and I thought I was dying. So I feel that you know, start talking about periods and healthy relationship training and also self-defense. I think self-defense needs to be an integral part of it. Because we're taught that if a boy punches you, he likes you. If he teases you, he likes you. No.

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**FT:** That is a big thing we're trying to combat in our house where it's just so ingrained. I have a daughter. She's five. "So-and-so hit me." Well. Then she'll hear from someone I won't name but will say, "Oh, he probably likes you." I'll say, "There are so many ways to show affection. That is not one of them."

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**TS:** Well, one of my missions is to make peace and kindness more exciting than violence. We need and we do that through narrative change. We do that through popular culture and mass media. Another way that we do that is I think more accountability, so increased education, better

education. There are five states, including Arizona, that have opt in sex education, where the parents can decide whether or not their kids get sex education. Then we wonder why gender dynamics are so messed up. We need to re-overhaul it, and I think stop calling it sex education because the word sex gets people tizzy. More accountability for perpetrators because I think for all the strides that have been made by me too, I am not optimistic about the actual impact when it comes to out rooting violence because a lot of these perpetrators that have been publicly outed, they still have tons of money.

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**FT:** Including female supporters. Right, right.

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**TS:** Yes, and a lot of women supporters. I mean, I've had people recommend Russell Simmons to me for projects, and like I hear he's been hanging out at private clubs, Zero Bond. Whereas like there have been dozens of people who've spoken out about his harassment and assault. Then you look at Les Moonves and Bill O'Reilly. So I have this idea that there should be reparations for victims, that the perpetrators should pay for their victims' legal and therapy bills, and that they should pay for every year their victims had to deal with the trauma after the abuse. Also, we have to scrutinize and publicize the investment portfolios and charitable donations of perpetrators. Because people like Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein, they wash their dirty laundry with donations to things like rape crisis centers and Planned Parenthood.

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**FT:** I mean, it's unfortunate that that has to become now a red flag. What I can do, hopefully, this show can help to promote his female financial independence. There are so many reasons why we should strive for this, but everything you just characterize and explained is another reason why. We need to be able to afford ourselves the options to leave relationships that are violent. A lot of times, as you mentioned earlier, it's because of our economic fragility and the threats to our financial well-being that keeps us endangered longer than really, really we should be.

I was reading even during Me Too a little bit of coverage on this of just women who attempted to go into Hollywood and become actresses and started to experience a lot of this culture of predatory nature of directors and producers and casting agents and saying, “You know what? I’m out. Instead, I’m going to become a writer. I’m going to become a producer. I’m going to make my own work. I’m going to start making money on my terms.” It’s unfortunate that that’s what happened in some ways but also realistic. I mean, I support that a lot. Sometimes, you can’t wait for the system to change. You need to figure out your own plan, and money is important. Money is important.

Before you go, Tanya, you wrote a book before you wrote *Assume Nothing*, and it was about motherhood and feminism. It’s called *The Big Lie*. The subtitle is *Motherhood, Feminism, and the Reality of the Biological Clock*. In that book, do you talk about money and maybe some big lies that women have been fed around financial independence or money?

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**TS:** Well, the cost of having a family and raising a family puts an unfair and unjust burden on everyone but especially people who are from poor communities, marginalized communities. We have to make it more feasible for people to have a child, and raise that child in a healthy and productive way. In the book, I write a lot about this cost of having and raising a family and also the cost of fertility treatments. How if you don’t have an employer who’s covering them, there are people who go into enormous debt to realize their dream of having a child.

Another reason I wrote the book is I wanted people to embrace the different paths to becoming a parent, that it’s not just about having a biological child, that it’s also through adoption and other means. I wrote the book after I had a series of miscarriages and then tried to pursue fertility treatments. I was frustrated by how much inaccurate information was out there online about our fertility, and also frustrated by the sex education that I had that taught me about preventing STDs and pregnancy but did not teach me about my fertility span. The onus should not be on the woman and the man to understand their own fertility, and OBGYNs are often not fertility experts. So I wrote the book to provide people with the tools and resources that I wished I had going into my own fertility journey.

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**FT:** Thank you for writing it, and you're right. We say we want to promote and foster parenting and bringing more children into the world. There are TED talks about how America is like falling behind because we're not producing children as much as we were like 50 years ago, and that's a crisis. Yet we are not setting individuals up for success, whether you look at it from the fertility standpoint, economics. We don't prioritize families and households enough in this country to really be able to win at that. Thanks for that book as well. What are you working on now, Tanya? How can we support you?

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**TS:** Well, I'm working on a project for the Pop Culture Collaborative, which I hope people will check out. It's [popcollab.org](http://popcollab.org). I'm the Senior Director of Gender Justice Narratives. So we're identifying ways to address the structural and narrative barriers to advancing gender justice because what we're witnessing now, with all the attacks on gender justice, is the result of seeds having been planted 50-plus years ago to erode and destroy gender justice and oppress women. So I'm working on that.

I'm also working on my first novel, which I'm really excited about. My past two books and many of my essays have been about difficult experiences I've had that I've thought let me turn – When life throws you lemons, make art. So I'm grateful that I'm an artist and a writer, and I turned my difficult experiences into books that I hope help others. But now, I'm writing a book that is giving me a lot of joy, where I'm not like crying and getting frustrated writing it, which is very cathartic but also fatiguing. I'm writing a book called *Leaf Me Alone*, about how I grew to like plants more than people during the pandemic.

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**FT:** I love it. Maybe in there, you could include some advice because I need it on how to keep my plants thriving.

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**TS:** Well, don't overwater. That's something that I learned after I lost a few [inaudible 00:28:11] plants early on.

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**FT:** Yeah. And then I don't water them, and then they say, "You didn't water them enough." Finding that happy medium. The plants will speak to you though. They'll tell you sometimes.

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**TS:** They do, and that's what I found. It's because the plants kept me company when I was doing the book tour last year in 2021. I started acquiring more and more and more plants in elephant planters and unicorn planters, and I found that they did comfort me and keep me company. Also, I learned a lot about how to care for them. We can't tell our plants what to do, but they give us clues about how to keep them with us. I learned it's very important because I travel a lot. I don't have a green thumb. So I suggest buying plants that are very low maintenance. Like I had a shopkeeper tell me, "Buy a ZZ plant. It can grow in a closet." So I bought three ZZ plants.

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**FT:** Mine died.

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**TS:** I highly recommend the ZZ plant.

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**FT:** I'm on ZZ plant number two right now, but I think it's because I just overwatered it. I gave it too much attention.

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**TS:** Yeah. I also got a moisture meter that I found very helpful.

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**FT:** I think I'm just a mortician when it comes to plants.

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**TS:** No, you're not. You just haven't found the right plant yet.

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**FT:** Yeah, I'm determined. Well, Tanya, thank you so much for joining us. I'm really happy to know that you are finding joy in your work right now. Thank you for the contributions that you are making and have made to the rise of women and our ability to find safety and solace in times of trauma. I encourage everybody to read your book, *Assume Nothing: The Story of Intimate Violence*, and also your first book, *The Big Lie*. I'll be reading that for sure because I'm all about – My friend just had a baby on her own by choice after many rounds of fertility, and I'm very excited to become an auntie.

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**TS:** That's amazing. Yes.

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**FT:** Yes. Tanya, thank you.

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**TS:** Thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:30:24]

**FT:** Thanks so much to Tanya for joining us. To learn more about Tanya, please visit [tanyaturnsup.com](http://tanyaturnsup.com). Her books, again, are called *Assume Nothing* and *The Big Lie*. Stay tuned for Friday's episode of Ask Farnoosh. It is just me solo this Friday. No co-host, just me, your questions, and a lot of honesty. Thanks for tuning in, and I'll see you back here. I hope your day is So Money.

[END]