



## Research Brief *Coercive Control*

### Introduction

Coercive control, also known as psychological abuse, emotional abuse, mental torture and patriarchal or intimate terrorism, is a concept used to describe the broad context of intimate partner abuse. Buzawa, Buzawa and Stark (2017: 105) describe coercive control as 'a strategic course of gender-based abuse in which some combination of physical and sexual violence, intimidation, degradation, isolation, control and arbitrary violations of liberty are used to subjugate a partner and deprive her of basic rights and resources'.

Coercive control is a gendered pattern of abuse: it refers to control and coercion exercised over women by a male (current or former) intimate partner. Stark (2009) argues that coercive control is the primary strategy used by men to subordinate female intimate partners. Research into coercive control in same-sex relationships remains limited.

The theory of coercive control stemmed from the realisation that tactics of abuse in intimate relationships and effects on the victim were similar to those found in situations involving, for example, hostages and POWs (see for example Jones 1994; Okun 1986; Serum 1979; Singer 1979). The work of Evan Stark (2007b; 2009) has been key to the subsequent development of the theory of coercive control.

### Understanding Coercive Control

Crucially, the concept of coercive control highlights that intimate partner abuse is ongoing, chronic and routine. This understanding contrasts with incident-specific views of partner abuse, which see it as consisting of acute, discreet incidences of violence. Coercive control is carried out by men against female intimate partners, it manipulates and preys upon gendered and sexual inequalities between men and women, and it includes the reinforcement of unequal gender and sex roles (Stark 2007a; Stark 2009). The oppression of women as an aspect of coercive control, and women's status in society as unequal to men, means that coercive control cannot be seen in gender-neutral terms, or as a pattern that affects men in any comparable way (Stark 2007a).

Coercive control can include components such as coercion, sexual coercion, intimidation, regulation, surveillance, limiting resources and outside support, degradation, control and isolation (Buzawa et al. 2017; Stark 2007a). It can involve the use of physical violence and fatal violence, though physical violence is not always present in a situation of coercive control (Buzawa et al. 2017). However, when such violence is present it is often relatively minor, routine, frequent and ongoing, rather than in the form of outbursts during conflicts (Stark 2007a).

### Effects of Coercive Control

A major consequence of coercive control for victims is the experience of entrapment, which Buzawa et al. (2017: 106) describe as 'the most devastating outcome of partner abuse'. The experience of entrapment results from sustained control,

violence, fear and restriction in the intimate relationship. Coercive control and entrapment can have severe effects on a victim's perception, sense of self, personality, sense of worth, autonomy and feeling of security (Buzawa et al. 2017; Stark 2007a).

The diverse range of women's experiences means that coercive control will have varying impacts on different women. Marginalised women may be particularly impacted by aspects of coercive control. Intersections such as "race", class, ability, culture and sexuality affect experiences of gendered abuse (Sokoloff & Dupont 2005). Immigrant women, for example, may be more susceptible to isolation as a result of fewer networks, less knowledge of resources in the destination country, and precarious residence status (Buzawa et al. 2017; Gill 2004).

Coercive control may be a risk factor for intimate partner homicide (IPH) (Buzawa et al. 2017; Campbell et al. 2003; Stark 2007b). A recent Australian study found that half of a sample of men convicted of IPH reported no physical or sexual assaults against the victim in the year prior to the homicide (Johnson, Eriksson, Mazerolle & Wortley 2017). The study authors suggest that 'extreme violence ... can take place in relational contexts of male control and intimidation where expected warning signs of escalating assaults and injury are absent' (Johnson et al. 2017: 16).

### Implications of taking coercive control seriously

Buzawa et al. (2017) argue that interventions into abuse of women are ineffective when patterns of coercive control are not taken into consideration as part of intervention and prevention efforts. They suggest that '[a] first reform is to incorporate coercive control into working definitions of partner abuse at all levels of protection, support, counselling, and accountability' (Buzawa et al. 2017: 114). Taking coercive control seriously has important implications for thinking about, understanding and responding to partner abuse and gender and family violence. These implications include:

#### *Understanding abuse as chronic*

The concept of coercive control makes a crucial contribution to understanding control, coercion and violence as ongoing, cumulative and routine, rather than as incident-specific. The perspective illuminated by the theory of coercive control is critical for ensuring victims receive the support they need. It can additionally help reframe questions such as 'why does she stay?': coercive control and the resulting experience of entrapment affect a victim's perception and autonomy, and understanding coercive control shows that there are not necessarily windows of time during which abuse ceases when women can contemplate options or leave.

#### *Police Responses*

Buzawa et al. (2017) point out that without an understanding of the ongoing, everyday character of coercive control, reports of violence made by victims to the police can seem disproportionate to the incident. Victims may be viewed as overreacting or as "crazy", a perception the abuser is attempting to perpetuate too (Buzawa et al. 2017).

### *Further Criminal Justice System Responses*

Coercive or controlling behaviour was introduced as an offence in England and Wales in 2015 (Home Office 2015; s. 76 Serious Crimes Act 2015 (UK)). However, in the Australian context, the Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) found that such a new offence would currently be unsatisfactory/inappropriate for ensuring the safety of victims.

Walklate, Fitz-Gibbon and McCulloch (2018) affirm the value of the theory of coercive control, but highlight the difficulties of translating a concept established in clinical practice into legal practice. As a result of these difficulties, they suggest that in the case of coercive control, "more law" is not the answer, and could in fact have further negative impacts upon victims. They suggest it might be useful for experts to explain the context of coercive control in trials, but that the legal system will require significant reform before a legal offence of coercive control can be meaningfully utilised (Walklate et al. 2018).

### **The Context of Coercive Control**

Stark argues that coercive control concerns the basic rights and liberties of people to be free from subjugation and entrapment and to be protected from physical harm (Buzawa et al. 2017; Libal & Parekh 2009; Stark 2009). Stark (2007a: 172; 2009) states that coercive control hinders women's development, their ability to exercise citizenship, and the 'well-being of families, communities, and society'.

Because it is entrenched in gendered and sexual inequalities, preventing coercive control will require broad change to cultural, social and legal norms and inequalities (Buzawa et al. 2017; Walklate et al. 2017). Tackling coercive control will require collaboration between a wide range of actors and sectors, including stakeholders, service providers, academics, governments, and the justice and health systems.

### **Legislation**

Serious Crimes Act 2015 (UK)

### **References**

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