

## Research Brief

### ***Can men be victims of coercive control? Making sense of men's experiences of coercive control***

#### **Introduction**

Stark's (2007) presentation and analysis of coercive control takes as given that such experiences are gendered. Indeed Stark (2007: 377) states: 'I have never had a case that involved a female perpetrator of coercive control, and no such cases are documented in the literature'. This view has embedded the assumption that it is male perpetrators who use coercive control to victimise females. There are several features of this assumption which are problematic, however the view that victimising experiences of coercive control are the preserve of women not men, is increasingly being subjected to challenge in academic and policy debates. To be fair, some care needs to be taken in understanding the nature of this challenge since much of the work in support of it emanates from several different conceptual starting points concerning the nature and impact of domestic and family violence, uses differently constituted data samples, and offers differing visions of intervention (Robertson and Mirachver 2011).

The purpose of this research brief is to reflect upon this challenge to Stark's work, to explore men's reported experiences of coercive control, to document what the impact of those experiences might be, and to offer one way of making sense of them.

This brief takes as its starting point that understanding coercive control as gendered does not mean that men cannot be victims of such abuse. The evidence suggests that some men clearly are victims of domestic abuse and that may well include coercive control. For example, according to the Crime Survey of England and Wales 7.3 per cent of women (1.6 million) and 3.6 per cent of men (757,000) experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2020. Unfortunately, police recorded crime data for coercive control, the only specific offence of domestic abuse in England and Wales, over the same time period, is not disaggregated by sex. This is one of the evidential barriers in the ability to make sense of claims about who is doing what to whom (Hester 2013) in relation to coercive and controlling behaviours. However, absence of sex-disaggregated data does not necessarily imply that within these global figures some men are not victims of coercive control. In the absence of administrative data, it is important to question how to make sense of the claims made about the nature and extent of men's experiences of such abuse. One place in which to start might be with understandings of men and their relationship with masculinity.

#### **Men, masculinity, and victimisation**

Early work on men's experiences of victimisation clearly points to the reluctance of men to express such experiences in terms of victimhood (see inter alia Stanko and Hobdell, 1993). At the same time, when they do give voices to such experiences, these experiences are unlikely to be expressed in terms of fear and vulnerability. Work on the fear of crime, for example, points to men's greater propensity to express anger rather than fear (Ditton et al 1999). Moreover, Javaid's (2018: 200) empirical work on male victims of rape points to the problems faced by men when expressing feelings of vulnerability in relation to these experiences since such feelings can mark them out as not 'real'

men. Indeed, Machado, Hines and Matos (2016) observed that the men in their sample simply did not recognise their experiences as victimisation nor did they seek help in relation to them. Hine et al (2020) suggest that this reluctance to embrace themselves as victims of domestic abuse is an ongoing barrier for both reporting behaviour and for those offering support. Stanko (1990), in her work on personal safety, found it of value to ask men different kinds of questions to elicit from them what their fears and vulnerabilities might look like. Work endeavouring to document men's experiences of coercive control has done just this.

#### **Men, victimisation and coercive control**

In their study Walker et al (2020) explored behaviours that men considered 'boundary crossing' (for example impeding their right to safety, privacy, self-esteem). In their sample 55.4 per cent of men talked of a pattern of abusive behaviours which for them constituted boundary crossing. These behaviours included physical, sexual, and controlling abuses which for some also included undermining their relationship with their children alongside filing false accusations against them. Over ninety per cent of the men in this work report having told a friend or family member about their experiences and those who did so were met with very mixed responses. The impact of kinds of behaviours documented by Walker et al (2019) on men has been expressed by Bates (2020) as spending their lives 'walking on eggshells', by Westmarland et al (2021) as 'living a life by permission', with Bates and Carthy (2020) drawing particular attention to the impact that such abuse has on older men with one of their respondents stating, 'she had me believing I had Alzheimer's'. In sum Graham-Kevan et al. (2021) suggest that the impact of these kinds of behaviours (all of which fit under the rubric of coercive control) resulted in 8 out of 10 men in their sample displaying symptoms not unlike post-traumatic distress.

To summarise: men are unlikely to frame their interpersonal experiences in terms of being victims of domestic and family violence, neither are they likely to express fear in the face of these experiences. Indeed, any fears expressed are likely to be more associated with the fear of not being seen as masculine if they were to disclose their experiences alongside the real fear that they would be met with disbelief when they did disclose particularly from criminal justice professionals (Migliaccio, 2001). Of course, men are not the only group to experience the heteronormative barriers of the criminal justice system in this way (see inter alia, Donovan and Barnes 2019) but this evidence does suggest that such experiences, alongside men's experiences of coercive control, demand closer scrutiny. Interestingly a recent study by Policastro and Finn (2021) reported that the 'odds of men being subjected to surveillance by their intimate partners were significantly higher than females'.

Making sense of findings such as these, and the causal mechanisms underpinning them, is clearly subject to debate. The voice and space given to men's experiences has grown alongside the growth and presence of men's movements (Durfee, 2011). These developments have coincided with increasingly vocal concerns and media coverage of issues surrounding children and child custody when partners separate and/or divorce. Harman et al (2020) point to the significant use of children, by both men and women, as a weapon of control. The different ways in which coercive and controlling behaviour can manifest itself under these conditions has given space to invocation of the concept of 'parental alienation' as the lens through which some men, and some men's groups, choose to express their experiences and that these experiences count as

coercive control. Given that parental alienation is most frequently given voice to in the family courts, and that such courts are an important point of intervention, it will be of some value to discuss its origins and use in a little more detail.

### Parental alienation: meaning and consequences

The concept of parental alienation has its origins in the work of American psychiatrist Richard Gardner who, in the early 1980s developed the concept of 'parental alienation syndrome' (PAS). This concept emanated from his clinical practice in which, according to Meier (2013: 2) he described how 'vengeful mothers employed child abuse allegations as a powerful weapon to punish ex-husbands and ensure custody to themselves'. Again, according to Meier's (2013) reading of his work, he went on to theorise that these campaigns against the father served to 'brainwash' children against them. The empirical validity or otherwise of the presence of this syndrome (and Meier's review suggests that there is no robust empirical evidence in support of PAS), PAS has more recently morphed into the idea of parental alienation. This concept has provided some men with a shorthand way to express their discomfort and displeasure with the processes of child custody arrangements which seemingly favour mothers.

Whilst there is no one single definition of parental alienation, its use generally captures the different ways in which one parent may manipulate a child in such a way as to undermine the child's relationship with the other parent. In a systematic review of the research conducted on parental alienation Doughty et al (2020: 72) conclude that there is a paucity of robust empirical studies on this, and they go on to comment that it is thus, 'unsurprising that the concept is promoted by organisations representing parents and therapists, rather than by those that represent or advocate for children.'

The absence of robust work on this concept and its efficacy has not impeded its increasingly effective presence as both a tool and a bargaining point in relation to custody disputes. Indeed, as the recent work by Douglas (2021: 239) documents and has been evidenced by others (Hooker et al 2016), abusive men can and do use custody and care issues to threaten their female partners. Of course, it is also likely that women engage in similar strategies under similar circumstances. The motivations for doing so may differ for men and women. However, the use of parental alienation as strategy under these circumstances belies the poor evidential on which claims about its use by women (as opposed to men) is based. Nevertheless, it has become a rhetorical device used by campaign groups speaking on behalf of men rather than an evidenced based phenomenon. There is a clear need to look more closely at how, when and why this concept is being deployed and its value, if any, for making sense of the weaponisation of children during separation, and divorce.

### Conclusion

The hotly debated and contested nature of parental alienation should not detract from the very real experiences of coercive and controlling behaviour perpetrated by women on men documented in the work of Bates (2020) and Westmarland et al (2021). There is more work to be done to understand the dynamics, motivations and impacts of coercive control exercised by women over men. However, what is beyond dispute is that whilst some men are victims of such behaviour and that such victimisation poses different issues for them than those posed for women, empirical evidence to date suggests that overall domestic and family violence is predominantly a gendered phenomenon. It is important that debates surrounding men's experiences are made visible but not so visibly dominant as to take precedence over this well-established fact.

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