

Coercive Control

“Coercive control” is a term coined by sociologist and domestic violence expert Evan Stark, PhD, founder of one of the first American shelters for women fleeing domestic violence, to describe regular patterns of behaviour used to create fear and gain compliance. Anyone can experience coercive control, but studies show men are more likely to use coercive control than women (Swan, Gambone, Caldwell, Sullivan, & Snow, 2008; Robertson & Murachver, 2011).

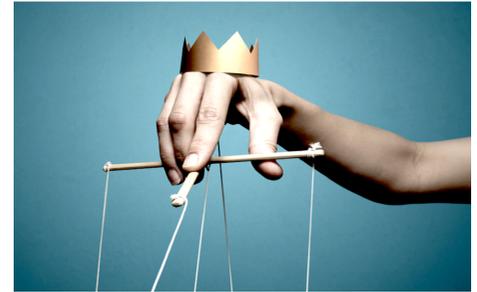
According to Stark, coercive control is found in 86% of all reported domestic abuse cases. Coercive control is sometimes, but not always, accompanied by physical violence. When it is, the violence can be greater than in relationships with no coercive control, and lethality rates higher (Campbell et al. 2003).

“These guys go on search and destroy missions. They listen to the phone messages, they go through the computer, they go through the drawers, they go through the pocketbook – every place that you might breathe the air of a free person, they are trying to be there and choke you off. Learning that violence is not always physical, and that it takes the form of coercive control, is a very important issue.”

Evan Stark, PhD

In an article for Healthline, [How to Recognize Coercive Control](#), Cindy Lamothe describes coercive control as “a strategic form of ongoing oppression and terrorism used to instill fear”. Lamothe describes 12 major ways abusers exercise coercive control, all of which are reminiscent of the Duluth Model Power and Control Wheel so familiar to anti-violence workers.

1. **Isolating her** from her friends and family.
2. **Monitoring her activity**, including using cameras and tracking devices.
3. **Denying her freedom and autonomy** (not allowing her to work/go to school, changing her passwords, stalking).
4. **Lying, manipulating and “gaslighting,”** to make her doubt her own mental health.
5. **Name calling, criticizing and belittling.**
6. **Controlling the finances** and limiting her access to money; hiding financial resources.
7. **Reinforcing traditional gender roles** (men are the breadwinners and women the homemakers; men set the rules).
8. **Trying to turn the children against her** (criticizing her parenting, belittling her to them, undermining her authority).
9. **Controlling basic activities** like eating, sleeping, what she wears, how much time she spends in the bathroom, and access to medication and medical care.
10. **Exhibiting extreme jealousy**, even of friends and family, and restricting the time she spends interacting with them.
11. **Controlling sex**, including frequency and types of sexual activities, and condom use.
12. **Threatening her and others**, including children and pets, accusing her of abuse, threatening to take the children, blackmailing.



Reframing intimate partner violence to incorporate coercive control, as opposed to isolated incidents of physical violence that are not intended to control the survivor, better portrays the different experience of individuals experiencing intimate partner violence. Additionally, it will serve to validate the psychological and emotional distress experienced by survivors of intimate partner violence in the absence of physical assault.

Defining Coercive Control in Comparison to Situational Couple Violence
Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children

Stark's ground-breaking work became the basis of domestic violence policy in the United Kingdom, where coercive control was made illegal in 2015 (much of Europe then followed suit). UK law defines coercive control as a **“continuing act, or pattern of acts, of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim”**.

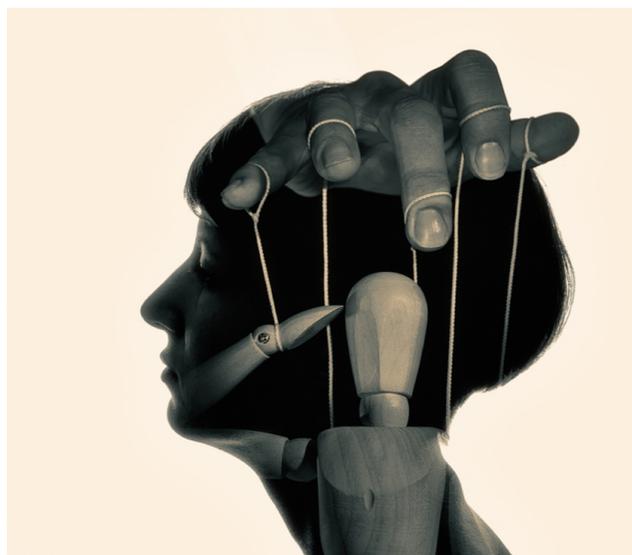
Those who are found guilty of the crime face a maximum five years imprisonment and/or a fine. In the year following the new law, reporting of abuse went up 31% in Britain, and prosecution and conviction rates also rose.

The Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children (CREVAWC) suggest that a facet of coercive control that should be further investigated is how technology can be used to perpetuate the control. This includes image-based sexual abuse, harassment on social media, monitoring emails and accounts, and publishing private information.

“Observers who have never experienced prolonged terror and who have no understanding of coercive methods of control presume that they would show greater courage and resistance than the victim in similar circumstances.”

Judith Herman, M.D.
Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence
- from domestic abuse to political terror

In a 2019 Research Brief, *Defining Coercive Control In Comparison To Situational Couple Violence*, CREVAWC explains that a unique aspect of coercive control is that it is “omnipresent and psychological in nature, affecting all aspects of life for the one subjected to the abuse. Within the context of coercive control, the abuse often permeates many or all facets of life including, but not limited to, personal hygiene, sexual relationships/performance, relationships with family and



friends, finances, and performance of household duties. As such, an individual cannot easily escape the violence because so many areas of their life are controlled.”

Additional Resources:

Video: *Understanding Coercive Control* with Professor Evan Stark (2016)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RCEQplot34>

Defining Coercive Control in Comparison to Situational Couple Violence, CREVAWC (2019)
<http://www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca/content/defining-coercive-control-comparison-situational-couple-violence>

What Is Coercive Control in a Relationship?, Lauren Paige Kennedy (2017)

<https://www.webmd.com/women/features/what-is-coercive-control#1>

Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life, Evan Stark, Ph.D (2007)
Oxford University Press

Living with Coercive Control: Trapped within a Complex Web of Double Standards, Double Binds and Boundary Violations, Toma Pitman (2017)
<https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/47/1/143/2622273>