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**COERCIVE
CONTROL**

**A puppet on his string -
The abuse doesn't stop
when she leaves**

Understanding Coercive Control and its Impacts on Children

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UNDERSTANDING COERCIVE CONTROL

The lives and freedoms of victims are seriously limited

Coercive control involves situations where somebody subjects another person/s to **persistent, wide-ranging controlling behaviour** over a long period of time and **makes it clear that standing up for themselves will be punished**, i.e. 'do what I say, or else...'.

Punishment may take many forms; it is not always violence, but it will be something the victim dreads, such as cruel verbal putdowns, hurting loved ones, or forcing unwanted forms of sexual activity on the victim.

By repeatedly punishing the victim for non-compliance, the perpetrator intends to **demoralise and terrorise the victim into a state of permanent obedience** (Stark, 2007).

Domestic abuse has been estimated to cost our economy **£66 billion** annually (Home Office, 2019). That estimate does **not** include impacts on children, as these have been considered too complex to account for.

The lives and freedoms of victims are seriously limited

The perpetrator is motivated by their **deeply held and harmful drive to obtain control over the other people in their family** and to maintain that control indefinitely (Monckton Smith, 2020).

For perpetrators, this drive is so strong that tends to **dominate** their whole life — much of their time is spent pursuing the control they seek, and cultivating a positive public reputation that will reduce the likelihood that anyone will ever believe or rally around the victim/s, should the victim/s ask for help (Monk, 2017).

The **impacts** on the family will include confusion, self-doubt/self-blame, low self-esteem, trauma, PTSD, illness, deprivation, the feeling of always ‘walking on eggshells’, trying to please the perpetrator, and not being able to exercise self-determination over key areas of their lives (Sharp-Jeffs et al, 2018; Crossman et al, 2016).

There may also be attempts from victims to **fight back**, resist, speak the truth about what is happening, and protect themselves and the other victims in the family from further harm (Dutton and Goodman, 2005).

Coercive control is common and mainly perpetrated by men

Research by Michael Johnson and colleagues (2014) in the US found **22% of women** had experienced coercive control from ex-husbands, and **5.4% of men** experienced coercive control from ex-wives.

Analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales by Andy Myhill (2015) found that, out of a group of women and men who reported experiencing some kind of domestic abuse, **30% of women** and **6% of men** had experiences severe enough to be called 'coercive control'. (Their partners had repeatedly belittled them to the point of making them feel worthless and made them feel frightened by threatening to hurt them.)

97% of perpetrators convicted for controlling and coercive behaviour in England and Wales in the year ending December 2020 were male (Women's Aid, 2021).

All these abuses can occur as part of a campaign of coercive control



- **emotional** and **psychological** abuse and **manipulation**.
- control of **time** and **movement** and the **micro-management** of everyday life.
- **sexual coerciveness** and **rape**, **paranoia** about infidelity, intimate **image/video abuse** and **reproductive coercion**.
- **economic abuse**, including interfering with the victim's/survivor's employment, preventing them from having money/assets, refusing to contribute to bills, and creating debt for which victims/survivors are liable.
- **isolation** from sources of support, including family, friends and professionals.
- **monitoring**, **harassment** and **stalking** (including via technology).
- **manipulating others** (including children) to upset, marginalise and disempower the victim/survivor.
- using **legal** or **institutional** means to threaten, harm or discredit the victim/survivor.
- **physical violence**, **physical abuse**, **intimidation**, and **threats** of violence against the victim/survivor, their loved ones (including **pets**) and their **property**.

(Gutowski et al, 2022; Sharp-Jeffs, 2022; Spearman et al, 2022; Tarzia, 2022; Dragiewicz et al, 2021a; Monk and Bowen, 2021; Monckton Smith, 2020; Macdonald et al, 2019; Tarzia et al, 2019; Sharp-Jeffs et al, 2018; Pitman, 2017; Matheson et al, 2015; Sanders, 2015; Thomas et al, 2014; Stark, 2012; Lehmann et al, 2012; Miller et al, 2010; Stark, 2009; Stark, 2007.)

It's continual not episodic

Evan Stark's (2007) book *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* argued that our responses to coercive control-based domestic violence were **failing** female victims because they **wrongly** see domestic violence as discreet incidents or episodes of violence, and 'virtually all domestic violence research and intervention is based on this model' (Stark, 2009, p. 293).

This **overlooks** that coercive control perpetrators are using many other abusive tactics besides physical violence – including emotional abuse, monitoring, isolation, stalking, and economic abuse – and **perpetrators are using these tactics continuously**.

Victims-survivors are therefore being **constantly abused**, even if there has not been an incident of physical violence for months (or ever).

Coercive control is caused by the perpetrator

Perpetrators tend to be extremely **self-centred** and often have a highly inflated sense of **entitlement**.

They believe their needs come first and that their partner and children should make pleasing them their overwhelming priority (Bancroft, 2002).

Coercive control is **not caused by a ‘toxic relationship’**: It is **caused by** the perpetrator’s deeply held **belief systems, attitudes and expectations**, things that they held before the relationship began.

The perpetrator’s tendency to **coercively control doesn’t disappear when the relationship ends** — it remains within the perpetrator.

Put simply — **the problem is in the perpetrator**, not in the relationship (see Monckton Smith, 2020).

It is **perpetrators** who are costing the people more than **£66 billion** every year (Home Office, 2019).

Minimise- justify- deny- counter-accuse

Perpetrators of coercive control typically **minimise**, **justify**, or outright **deny** their abusive behaviour, or seek to **turn the blame on the victim** by making false accusations and counter accusations (DARVO) (Bancroft et al, 2012; Monk, 2017; Meier et al, 2019; Harsey and Freyd, 2020).

Perpetrators who have admitted to some kind of domestic violence **typically talk about themselves and their partners in ways that seek to justify or excuse violence/abuse**, e.g. she was ‘domineering’, ‘messy’, ‘lazy’, ‘spends too much time away from the home/ambitious’, ‘crazy’, ‘incompetent’, ‘nagging’, a ‘bad mother’, ‘violent’, etc.

Perpetrators use these depictions to convince others that their domination, oppression and terrorisation of their partner were justifiable (LeCouteur and Oxlad, 2011; Downes et al, 2019).

Adult victims/survivors

Coercive control victims-survivors come from all walks of life and are affected in different ways:

Some victims fight back and some don't, depending on the context.

Some maintain employment and outwardly seem confident and successful.

Some turn to alcohol, medication or drugs to try to cope with the perpetrator's abuse.

Many become temporarily psychologically distressed *because of* the perpetrator's abuse — their distress is a symptom of the perpetrator's abuse (Clements et al, 2021; Humphreys and Thiara, 2003).

They are all real victims.

IMPACTS ON CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Perpetrators harm children

Research evidence from multiple countries highlights that male coercive control/domestic abuse perpetrators are usually harmful fathers or father-figures.

(e.g. Thompson-Walsh et al, 2021; Haselschwerdt et al, 2020; Katz et al, 2020; Humphreys et al, 2019; Mohaupt et al, 2019; Smith and Humphreys, 2019; Heward-Belle, 2016; Øverlien, 2013; Bancroft et al, 2012; Harne, 2011)

Perpetrators harm children

Perpetrators have substantially elevated risks of physically, psychologically and sexually abusing and neglecting the children in their care (Heward-Belle, 2016; Bancroft et al, 2012; Harne, 2011).

Perpetrators may also stalk, threaten and terrorise their children as part of their abuse of ex-partners (Nikupeteri et al, 2021; Katz et al, 2020; Thiara and Gill, 2012).

Perpetrators harm children

Straus (1990, cited in Bancroft et al, 2012, p.55) in a large-scale study involving over 6,000 people, found that half (49%) of DV perpetrating fathers frequently physically assaulted their children, compared to 7% of fathers who were not DV perpetrators.

20% of DV perpetrating fathers require the children to watch them as they abuse the child's mother (Mbilinyi et al, 2007, cited in Bancroft et al, 2012, p.58).

Perpetrators harm children

There is also a major overlap between fathers who perpetrate DV and those who sexually abuse their children.

Bancroft et al (2012, p.109) reviewed a range of different studies. They found that these studies suggest that between 44–73% of incest perpetrating fathers are also perpetrating domestic violence towards the child's mother.

Children experience coercive control too

The child of a perpetrator may experience the perpetrator rigidly and malevolently controlling their daily activities, excessively controlling and limiting their contact with friends and family, hurting their beloved pets, and depriving them of access to amounts of money and resources that are normal for their age.

(See Callaghan et al, 2018; Fellin et al, 2019; Haselschwerdt et al, 2019; Katz, 2016, 2019; 2022; Øverlien, 2013.)

My research on children and coercive control

Interviewed 15 mothers and 15 of their children (total: 30) who had experienced coercive control.

Children's ages ranged from 10 to 14 (with the exception of one 20 year old).

Interviewed 9 girls, 6 boys.

Perpetrators were the children's biological father or stepfather.

All interviewees were living in the community and had separated from perpetrators.

My findings



Control of time and movement

Perpetrators/fathers demanded high levels of attention from mothers at the expense of children and stopped mothers and children spending time together:

'[My daughter] Leah used to want me to sit and brush her hair – that wasn't allowed because he'd be jealous. He'd say things like: "You've spent enough attention on her, what about my attention?"' (Marie, mother).

'It felt like Mum wasn't there because I didn't spend time with her or anything' (Leah, age 11).

'When Mum was giving me attention he'd tell her to go over to him so she'd have to leave me to play by myself' (Shannon, age 10).

Control of time and movement

Perpetrators'/fathers' coercive control limited the amount of maternal attention children could enjoy, and reduced the opportunities for fun and affection in their homes.

Children described feeling sad, annoyed and angry at these situations.

Some children started to have doubts about whether their mother loved them or not.

Isolation from the outside world

When perpetrators/fathers controlled mothers' movements outside the home, this severely restricted children's social lives. It prevented children from engaging with wider family, peers and extra-curricular activities:

'They [the kids] couldn't have any friends round because he'd kick off or something. Kids' parties were another problem because he'd be accusing me of trying to [have sexual relations] with one of the dads, so parties were out the question. We couldn't do any after school clubs because [he insisted] I had to be back [home] by a certain time. Me and the kids weren't allowed to go round to see their grandparents.' (Isobel, mother).

Isolation from the outside world

The multiple benefits that positive experiences with grandparents, friends or in after-school clubs can have on children's social skills, confidence and development were denied to these children by fathers/step-fathers.

Because of perpetrators'/fathers' behaviour, **many children were living in the same isolated, lonely worlds as their mothers.** This was especially the case for younger children, who were more reliant on mothers to facilitate their access to friends' houses, playgrounds, days out, etc.

Deprivation of resources and imprisonment

Extreme tactics for depriving the family of freedom, independence and resources impacted on children as well as mothers:

Eloise (mother): 'He'd tell us we couldn't touch the food in the fridge, that we weren't allowed to eat, he'd lock us in the house a lot of the time so we couldn't get out, he'd unplug the phone...'

John (Eloise's son, aged 20): '...He'd take out the power because in the hall we've got an old electrical box where you can take things out and that's it – you've got no power...'

Eloise (mother): '...He used to take an element out the central heating so we'd have no heating. He'd lock us in the house and go out. He'd take the modem so John couldn't do his homework and I couldn't do my banking on the computer. So we were prisoners in a way.'

Deprivation of resources and imprisonment

This highlights how some perpetrators/fathers directly and purposefully extend their coercive controlling abuse over their children as well as their girlfriend/wife.

Constrained behaviour

Many children could not say and do normal, age-appropriate things at home.

Children had to constrain their own natural behaviour to comply with perpetrators'/fathers' demands:

'When he came home from work he'd want to spend time with them and they were always *his* girls. He used to say to Zoe: "You're my little angel." But at the same time they couldn't shout, they couldn't make noise, they couldn't be children around him unless it was on his terms. It was alright if he wanted to play with them, but at other times it was like he wanted them to disappear.' (Lauren, mother)

'I would be sort of quiet, I didn't shout-out or run around.' (Bob, age 12)

Positive impacts of mothers' parenting

Most mothers entrapped by coercive control tend to do what they can to keep their children as safe and okay as possible (Wendt et al, 2015), though their ability to do this can be limited by the perpetrator's/father's determination to abuse in ways that harm the children (Buchanan, 2018).

Even though mothers cannot stop the father's harmful behaviour, positive parenting from mothers is a major factor in helping children to cope with fathers' domestic violence (Letourneau et al, 2007).

'Mothers are cited more frequently by children who have lived with domestic abuse as their most important source of help than anyone else in their lives... Their relationship with their mother is most children's major support in coping. (Mullender et al, 2002, pp. 210–11)

Positive impacts of mothers' parenting

'Mum's helped me a lot because, if you have a bond with your mum, that can help strengthen you, get you through it. Loads of people out there going through this don't have a bond with either parent, with anybody, so it's just themselves, but if you've got somebody, at least one person, that can be tremendous.'

(John, age 20)

Positive impacts of mothers' parenting

'He wanted all of me, all the time when he was home. [. . . But when he was at work] Shannon and I used to play, usually upstairs. The upstairs was sort of our area and the downstairs was his area. . . . I made this wonderful fairy- tale world for her upstairs in her bedroom, and just all upstairs really, and we spent most of the time together up there.'

(Ellie, mother)

Eloise: We did things together. When we went to the pictures or we went shopping we could just "let our hair down" and do what we wanted to do.

John: When we would come back with shopping bags, sometimes we had to hide them.

Eloise: We used to throw them over the hedge...

John: ...Into the garden so he wouldn't see them.

Eloise: Clothing, or anything I'd brought John, because he [the perpetrator] would go mad [that I'd spent money on John].

How some mothers felt

'I was on auto-pilot as a mum. I was looking after them, but with no energy to enjoy the relationship—you're just completely gone. It's like you're outside your own body, just looking at someone else's life, just doing what you can to get by. It's like being on autopilot: You're just functioning because you have to.'

(Lucy, mother)

'I didn't feel close to [my son] Jack back then. I felt like I was his protector, but not like I could enjoy him...It's hard to play [with your child] when you're feeling sad and anxious all the time...I was so ground down by it all.' (Sybil, mother)

'I couldn't invite her friends from school, because I didn't know what he might do. But I used to play with her, and one time, when she was about 5, she'd made all these paper cut-outs of like little people and she said: "these are my friends," and I just felt terrible. I felt so guilty.' (Ellie, mother)

IMPACTS ON CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE AFTER PARENTAL SEPARATION

Post separation coercive control

Coercive control perpetrators don't tend to respect their partner's decision to end the relationship.

They typically continue in their efforts to control and dominate their partner's life and/or punish them for trying to break free.

(E.g. Clements et al, 2021; Dragiewicz et al, 2021a, 2021b; Monk and Bowen, 2021; Feresin et al, 2019; Humphreys et al, 2019; Sharp-Jeffs et al, 2018; Campbell, 2017; Elizabeth, 2017; Coy et al, 2015; Thiara and Gill, 2012; Harne, 2011; Beeble et al, 2007.)

Post separation coercive control

As Hill (2020, p. 244) explains, women can ‘choose to leave an abusive relationship. But the choice to end the abuse is not in their hands.

If the perpetrator is hellbent on maintaining control, they don’t need the victim in physical proximity: they can control them through the system.

The courts, child support, social security, a rental tribunal— these can all become another weapon in their armoury.’

My research on coercive control: post-separation

Let us again explore the findings of my interviews with children and mothers who had separated from coercive control perpetrators/fathers.

This time, we will look at the fathers' post-separation relationships with their children.

My findings



Terrifying the children

'He used to bring some other men and try to break into the house, and me and my brothers feared for our lives because he used to smack on the doors, and I used to hide.' (Vince, age 13)

'My dad's injunction ran out, he kept turning up at the house... Then he wrote something on the back door, he wrote "dead bitch", and my mum tried to get it removed before we could see it, but I saw it before it got removed.' (Roxie, age 11)

Terrifying the children

Perpetrators' terrifying actions could make children's and mothers' lives frightening and unpredictable.

Perpetrators'/fathers' actions drastically limited the safe space available to children and mothers, often leaving them 'under siege'.

This frightening fathering undermined children's mental health, well-being, physical security, and education.

'Admirable' fathering

Perpetrators/fathers often used 'admirable fathering' as part of their ongoing attempts to control ex partners and children (Katz et al, 2020).

They often chose to present themselves as admirable fathers to school staff and other parents, wider communities (both online and offline), and professionals and courts.

The persona of the 'admirable' father could include playing the roles of being a caring, committed and/or vulnerable victim father — a father deserving of praise and support.

This appeared to be part of perpetrators' strategies to increase their own power, while further marginalising and weakening their ex-partner, who is then thought of negatively.

'Admirable' fathering

Some perpetrators directed performances of 'admirable' fathering at their children, for example by claiming to be vulnerable victims:

'[During our weekend visits to him] he'd say "oh your mum makes me cry, your mum makes me do this stuff; I can't see you because of your mum", he'd just paint such a bad picture of her... he blamed her and us for everything... He said he was on antidepressants because I wasn't seeing him often enough... I felt very small and bad... [After our weekend visit with our father, my sister Zoe] would be off school most Mondays because she felt so ill, she was on the sofa being held by mum and crying... He would call [my sister Zoe] and say "you're the only one who really loves me"... I was just so drained and I felt like crying all the time.' (Grace, age 14)

'Admirable' fathering

Here, this father was producing 'guilt trips' in his daughters and refusing to take responsibility for his own emotional state.

By presenting himself as a 'vulnerable victim', he was coercing his daughters into maintaining relationships with him that were harmful to their well-being.

By making his children feel as though they were responsible for his welfare, he was disguising the emotional power he was actually wielding over them.

Omnipresent fathering

Many children experienced their father as a constantly negative presence in their post-separation lives, whether they saw him frequently or not.

Those children who did not see their father frequently were still aware that nothing was stopping him reappearing in their lives at any point and causing harm.

This left the children in a continual state of anxiety and worry, and this harmed their ability to live normal lives.

Omnipresent fathering

Children often feared that they might encounter their father and be harmed by him, and this could lead to panic attacks, bedwetting and nightmares. Some children described monitoring their surroundings continuously as a protective strategy:

'I have it so that I check that the doors are locked and windows closed.' (Lotta, age 10)

Children also sought to increase their own and their mother's security by remaining with her:

'Now sometimes I'll sleep in my mum's bed because I feel more comfortable there and I feel more safe sleeping there.' (Bob, age 12)

'Sometimes we weren't able to go to school... I didn't want to leave my mum alone for the day.' (Rosa, age 12)

Conclusions

Coercive control is a severe form of abuse, and perpetrators of coercive control cause high levels of harm.

Coercive control perpetrating fathers tend to parent their children in negative ways, and subject their children to coercive control in ways that profoundly harm the children's day-to-day experiences of life.

Mothers separating from fathers is unlikely to be enough to make the children safe, as fathers tend to be determined to continue their coercive control post-separation.

The problem lies within the perpetrator (usually the children's father or father figure). Tackling the problem means **tackling the perpetrator**, holding them **accountable**, **curbing their ability to continue abusing**, and **helping the adult and child victims to be safe** (really safe, not just safe on paper).

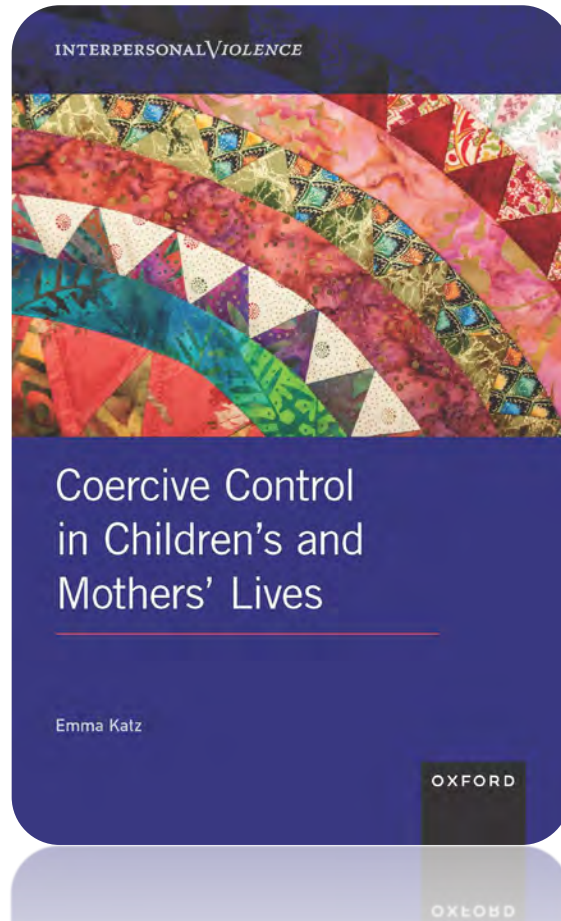
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