



Coercive Control

Coercive control is a model of abuse that attempts to encompass the range of strategies employed to dominate individual women in personal life. Alternately referred to as coerced persuasion; conjugal, patriarchal or intimate terrorism; emotional or psychological abuse; indirect abuse; or emotional torture, it describes an ongoing pattern of sexual mastery by which abusive partners, almost exclusively males, interweave repeated physical abuse with three equally important tactics: intimidation, isolation, and control.

The easiest way to understand coercive control is to contrast it to the widespread equation of partner abuse with “domestic violence.” Domestic violence laws and most research in the field take an incident-specific focus and weigh the severity of abuse by the level of force used or injury inflicted what I call a “calculus of harms.” In marked contrast, the coercive control model relies on evidence that most battered women who seek help experience coercion as “ongoing” rather than as merely “repeated” and that the main marker of these assaults is their frequency or even their “routine” nature rather than their severity, a fact that gives abuse a “cumulative” effect found in no other assault crime. Physical harm and psychological trauma remain important in the coercive control model. But its theory of harms replaces the violation of physical integrity with an emphasis on violations of “liberty” that entail the deprivation of rights and resources essential to personhood and citizenship. In this view, the psychological language of victimization and dependence is replaced by the political language of domination, resistance, and subordination. . In the coercive control model, what men do *to* women is less important than what they prevent women from doing for themselves. In the forensic context where I work, women’s right to use whatever means are available to liberate themselves from coercive control derives from the right afforded to all persons to free themselves from tyranny not from the proximate physical or psychological means used to do this

The domestic violence model emphasizes the familial, cultural, interpersonal and psychological roots of abusive behavior. The coercive control model views the dynamics in abusive relationships from the vantage of the historical struggle for women’s liberation and men’s efforts to preserve their traditional privileges in personal life in the face of this struggle. The incredible strides women have made towards full equality, particularly since the 1960’s, have been widely documented. These gains make it increasingly difficult for men to ensure women’s obedience and dependence through violence alone. In the face of this reality, millions of men have expanded their oppressive repertoire to include a range

of constraints on women's autonomy formerly imposed by law, religion, and women's exclusion from the economic, cultural and political mainstream, in essence trying to construct a "patriarchy in miniature" in each individual relationship, the course of malevolent conduct known as coercive control. Although the aim of this conspicuous form of subjugation is to quash, offset or coopt women's social gains (taking the money they earn, for instance), this strategy relies for success on the persistent inequalities based on sex that remain, including the huge gap in job opportunities and earnings that continues to advantage men.

Coercive control shares general elements with other capture or course-of-conduct crimes such as kidnapping, stalking, and harassment, including the facts that it is ongoing and its perpetrators use various means to hurt, humiliate, intimidate, exploit, isolate, and dominate their victims. Like hostages, victims of coercive control are frequently deprived of money, food, access to communication or transportation, and other survival resources even as they are cut off from family, friends, and other supports through the process of "isolation." But unlike other capture crimes, coercive control is personalized, extends through social space as well as over time, and is gendered in that it relies for its impact on women's vulnerability *as women* due to sexual inequality. Another difference is its aim. Men deploy coercive control to secure privileges that involve the use of time, control over material resources, access to sex, and personal service. A main means men use to establish control is the microregulation of everyday behaviors associated with stereotypic female roles, such as how women dress, cook, clean, socialize, care for their children, or perform sexually. These dynamics give coercive control a role in sexual politics that distinguishes it from all other crimes.

The coercive control framework does not downplay women's own use of violence either in fights or to hurt or control men or same-sex partners. Numerous studies in the United States indicate that women of all ages assault male and female partners in large numbers and for many of the same reasons and with much the same consequences as men. However, there is no counterpart in men's lives to women's entrapment by men in personal life due to coercive control.

The Origins of the Coercive Control Model

The coercive control model reflects two concurrent realities, that the domestic violence is stalled and that our current predicament can be traced to the gap that separates how abuse is understood and the actual experiences of battered women with abusive men.

Nothing in the coercive control model is meant to discount the enormous gains achieved by the domestic violence revolution since we opened the first battered women's shelters in the 1970's. Nor, as some critics of our movement have argued, do I want to turn back the clock by retreating from the important protections we have won for women in the legal, criminal justice, health or mental health arenas. Hundreds of thousands of women and children owe the fact that they are alive to the availability of shelters and to criminal justice and legal reforms. What is less clear is whether women as a group are safer today or are less likely to be beaten, controlled, or killed by their partners than they were before the domestic violence revolution began.

Partner violence against women is no longer just life. But anyone with reasonable sympathies and a passing acquaintance with interventions to stem men's abuse of women will sense the failure of a range of systems to mount an adequate response, the justice system included. Among the most dramatic facts are these:

- Partner homicides have dropped precipitously. But this change has benefited men far more than women. The number of men killed by female partners has dropped dramatically since we opened the first shelters, particularly among blacks. But the number of women killed by male partners has changed very little. While severe violence by men against women has dropped, the so-called "minor" violence that makes up the infrastructure of coercive control has increased sharply. Women as a group are not appreciably safer today than when the domestic violence revolution began.

- Though domestic violence is an ongoing crime and is almost always complemented by acts of intimidation, humiliation, isolation and control, in most communities abuse is treated as a second-class misdemeanor. While victims repeatedly insist that "violence isn't the worst part" and mounting evidence points to structural constraints on independence and personhood as the most devastating aspects of abuse, these dimensions remain officially invisible. Millions of men may be arrested each year for domestic violence. But the chance that a perpetrator will go to jail in any given incident is just slightly better than the chance of winning a lottery.

- Batterer intervention programs (BIPs) are widely offered as an alternative to incarceration. But these programs are little more effective than doing nothing at all. Regardless of intervention, the vast majority of perpetrators continue their abuse.

- Shelters are the core response to abused women and so they should remain. But in hundreds of communities, shelters today are indistinguishable from the traditional, paternalistic service system they arose to challenge.

. Perhaps the key fact is that the domestic violence revolution appears to have had little or no effect on coercive control, the pattern evidence shows characterizes between 60-80% of the relationships for which women seek outside assistance. Refocusing on coercive control would be a giant step toward changing this situation. The domestic violence movement began with a vision, to provide women worldwide with a safety net that protected them against harm in personal life. Such a net is in place in most countries. But long-term protection still eludes us.

The limits of current interventions can be directly traced to a failure of vision, not of nerve. Conservatives attack the advocacy movement for exaggerating the nature and extent of abuse. In fact, because of its singular emphasis on physical violence, the prevailing model minimizes both the extent of women's entrapment by male partners in personal life and its consequences.

Viewing woman abuse through the prism of the incident-specific and injury-based definition of violence has concealed its major components, dynamics, and effects, including the fact that it is neither "domestic" nor primarily about "violence." Failure to appreciate the multidimensionality of oppression in personal life has been disastrous for abuse victims. Regardless of its chronic nature, courts treat each abuse incident they see as a first offense. Because well over 95% of these incidents are minor, in that the physical

assault involved is not injurious, almost no one goes to jail. In custody or divorce cases, because abuse is framed as incident specific or as only involving injurious violence, when women or children present with claims based on the ongoing, multidimensional and cumulative nature of abuse, these are often treated as fabricated. Worse, a protective mother may be blamed when her expressed level of concern or fear is at odds with evidence of assault: in the dependency court, her children may be placed in foster care; in family court, she is alleged to be engaged in alienating her children from the “good enough father.” As calls to the police or visits to the emergency room are repeated over time, the helping response becomes more perfunctory and may actually contribute to making abuse routine, a process called normalization.

Coercive Control

The coercive control model is built on earlier work that has remained marginal to mainstream intervention, a mountain of data that contradicts every major tenet of the domestic violence model; and a growing body of literature documenting the prevalence of tactics to isolate, intimidate and control women in abusive relationships. But its major source is the real-life experiences of perpetrators and victims of abuse

As I’ve suggested, the most important anomalous evidence indicates that violence in abusive relationships is ongoing rather than episodic, that its effects are cumulative rather than incident-specific, and that the harms it causes are more readily explained by these factors than by its severity. Among these harms, the dominant approach identifies two for which it fails to adequately account, the entrapment of victims in relationships where ongoing abuse is virtually inevitable, and the development of a problem profile that distinguishes abused women from every other class of assault victim. The prevailing view is that women *stay* and develop a range of mental health and behavioral problems because exposure to severe violence induces trauma-related syndromes, such as PTSD or BWS that can disable a woman’s capacity to cope or escape. In fact, however, only a small proportion of abuse victims evidence these syndromes. Most victims of abuse do not develop significant psychological or behavioral problems. Abused women exhibit a range of problems that are unrelated to trauma, the vast majority of assault incidents are too minor to induce trauma, and abuse victims can be entrapped even in the absence of assault. The duration of abusive relationships is made even more problematic when we appreciate that abuse victims are aggressive help seekers and are as likely to be assaulted and even entrapped when they are physically separated as when married or living together. Thus, whatever harms are involved can cross social space as well as extend over time and appear to persist regardless of how women respond. If violence doesn’t account for the entrapment of millions of women in personal life, what does?

The answer is *coercive control*, a strategy that remains officially invisible despite the fact that it has been in plain sight at least since the earliest shelter residents told us in no uncertain terms that “violence wasn’t the worst part.” Cognitive psychologists in the late 1970s and 1980s tried to capture what these women were experiencing by comparing it to “coercive persuasion,” brainwashing, and other tactics used with hostages, prisoners of war, kidnap victims, and by pimps with prostitutes. Largely ignored by researchers, the understanding of abuse as coercive control was developed in popular literature and

incorporated at least implicitly into how various practitioners approached the problem. Working on men's control skills has provided one template for batterers programs since the founding of Emerge in Boston. Prosecutors are increasingly charging batterers with stalking, or harassment as well as domestic violence, crimes that typically involve a course of intimidating and controlling conduct as well of violence. Scotland and Canada are examples of countries that now define violence against women or abuse from a human rights perspective that includes a range of coercive and controlling behaviors in addition to assault. The most widely used graphic representation of abuse is the Power and Control Wheel introduced by the Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DAIP) in Duluth, Minnesota. Although violence is the hub of the original wheel, its spokes depict isolation, economic control, emotional and sexual abuse, and other facets of coercive control. This attention is merited. The several dozen studies that attempt to measure control and psychological abuse suggest that victims have been subjected to multiple control tactics, among which the denial of money, the monitoring of time, and restricted mobility and communication are prominent.

Despite these inroads, coercive control remains marginal to mainstream thinking. It is rarely acknowledged in policy circles, has had almost no impact on domestic violence policing or criminal law, and commands no special funding. Although providers and advocates may ask about elements of coercive control, I know of no programs or interventions that address it. Everyone acknowledges that domestic violence is about power and control. But we have yet to incorporate this truism into our understanding of abuse or our response.

The major source for the model of coercive control are the victims and perpetrators of abuse with whom I and others have worked. The women in my practice have repeatedly made clear that the most serious harms they have suffered involve how their partners have kept them from fulfilling their life projects by appropriating their resources; undermining their social support; subverting their rights to privacy, self-respect, and autonomy; and depriving them of substantive equality. This is the evidence on which I base my claim that coercive control is a liberty crime. Preventing a substantial group of women from freely applying their agency in economic and political life obstructs overall social development .

The new model is rooted in the same tenets that gave birth to the battered women's movement—that the abuse of women in personal life is inextricably bound up with their standing in the larger society and therefore that women's entrapment in their personal lives can be significantly reduced only if sexual discrimination is addressed simultaneously. In the early shelters, the interrelatedness of these tenets was grounded in the practice of empowerment, whereby the suffering of individual victims was mollified by mobilizing their collective power to help one another and change the institutional structures that caused and perpetuated women's second-class status, an example of women doing for themselves. Our challenge is to resurrect this collective practice and broaden its political focus to the sources of coercive control.

Control: Invisible in Plain Sight

The victims and perpetrators of coercive control are easily identified. Many of the rights violated in battering are so fundamental to the conduct of everyday life that it is hard to conceive of meaningful human existence without them. How is it possible then that it has attracted so little attention?

I have already pointed to the prominence of the domestic violence model. Another explanation is the compelling nature of violence. Once injury became the major medium for presenting abuse, its sights and sounds were so dramatic that other experiences seemed muted by comparison. The radical feminists who led the fight against rape and pornography also inadvertently contributed to the invisibility of coercive control. Placing so much political currency on violence against women as the ultimate weapon in men's arsenal made it a surrogate for male domination rather than merely one of its means. It was a short step to replacing the political discussions of women's liberation with the talks of "victims" and "perpetrators." Another explanation for why coercive control has had such little impact is that no one knows what to do about it.

The entrapment of women in personal life is also hard to discern because many of the rights it violates are so basic—so much a part of the taken-for-granted fabric of the everyday lives we lead as adults, and so embedded in female behaviors that are constrained by their normative consignment to women—that their abridgement passes largely without notice. Among my clients are women who had to answer the phone by the third ring, record every penny they spent, vacuum "till you can see the lines," and dress, walk, cook, talk, and make love in specific ways and not in others, always with the "or else" proviso hanging over their heads. What status should we accord to a woman's right to have toilet paper in the downstairs bathroom or to the right of a woman I will call Laura who had to beep in periodically so her boyfriend would know her whereabouts or who could not go to the gym without being beeped home? Given the prominence of physical bruising, how can we take these little indignities seriously or appreciate that they comprise the heart of a hostage-like syndrome against which the slap, punch, or kick pale in significance? Most people take it for granted that normal, healthy adults determine their own sleep patterns or how they drive or laugh or make love. The first woman who used our home as her safe house described her partner a tyrant. We thought she was speaking metaphorically.

Violence is easy to understand. But the deprivations that come packaged in coercive control are no more a part of my personal life than they are of most men's. This is true both literally, because many of the regulations involved in coercive control target behaviors that are identified with the female role, and figuratively, because it is hard for me to conceive of a situation outside of prison, a mental hospital, or a POW camp where another adult would control or even care to control my everyday routines.

What is taken from the women whose stories I hear almost daily—and what some victims use violence to restore—is the capacity for independent decision making in the areas by which we distinguish adults from children and free citizens from indentured servants. Coercive control entails a malevolent course of conduct that subordinates women to an alien will by violating their physical integrity (domestic violence), denying them respect and autonomy (intimidation), depriving them of social connectedness

(isolation), and appropriating or denying them access to the resources required for personhood and citizenship (control). Nothing men experience in the normal course of their everyday lives resembles this conspicuous form of subjugation.

Some of the rights batterers deny to women are already protected in the public sphere, such as the rights to physical integrity and property. In these instances, law is challenged to extend protections to personal life. But most of the harms involved in coercive control are gender-specific infringements of adult autonomy that have no counterpart in public life and are currently invisible to the law. The combination of these big and little indignities best explains why women suffer and respond as they do in abusive relationships, including why so many women become entrapped, why some battered women kill their partners, why they themselves may be killed, or why they are prone to develop a range of psychosocial problems and exhibit behaviors or commit a range of acts that are contrary to their nature or to basic common sense or decency.

In the late 1970s, we reached into the shadows to retrieve physical abuse from the canon of “just life.” Now it appears, we did not reach nearly far enough.

<#>

Evan Stark
Eds203@juno.com