

National Domestic Violence Fatality Review Initiative*
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Coercive Control**

by Dr. Evan Stark

I wrote *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* (2007) to help close the gap between how domestic violence is officially defined, assessed and understood and the realities experienced by battered women and their children. Based largely on my forensic caseload and mounting evidence on control tactics from the U.S. and the UK, it describes an ongoing pattern of sexual mastery by which largely male abusive partners interweave repeated physical abuse with intimidation, sexual degradation, isolation, and control. Alternately referred to as coerced persuasion; conjugal, patriarchal or intimate terrorism; or indirect abuse; the model formalizes many of the dimensions illustrated by the widely used “Power and Control” wheel. Until recently, it had little influence on the academic or treatment literature.

I argue that many men adapted coercive control as their abuse strategy of choice when gains in women’s rights and resources made violence alone increasingly ineffective as a means to sustain male privilege. The coercive control model illustrates the range of strategies employed to dominate individual women and the resulting harms far better than alternative models. The adoption of this model is important because the current, violence-centered and incident-based approach has caused the domestic violence revolution to stall. Shelters, arrests, court protections and other measures have undoubtedly prevented millions of women and children from being more seriously hurt or killed. Moreover, both partner homicide and serious partner assaults are down, a consequence of the focus of criminal justice on the most serious physical assaults. There has been a normative sea change in acceptance of physical violence in relationships. But if partner violence against women is no longer just life, 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:

- The drop in partner homicides has benefited men far more than women. The number of men killed by female partners has dropped dramatically since we opened the first shelters. But the number of women killed by male partners has changed very little among Caucasian groups, especially unmarried white women. It has declined more significantly among African-American women.

- Although severe violence by men against women has dropped, so-called “minor” violence has increased so sharply that overall levels of VAW today are about where they were in the mid-70’s. This type of violence—which survey researchers often term “normal” or “not abuse”— supports the most devastating form of abuse.
- Millions of partners have been arrested for domestic violence. But the chance that a perpetrator will be arrested or go to jail in any given incident is just slightly better than the chance of winning a lottery. Abuse has been turned into a second-class misdemeanor.
- Batterer intervention programs (BIPs) are widely offered as an alternative to incarceration. But these programs are little more effective than doing nothing at all.

The Domestic Violence Paradigm

To understand why domestic violence interventions are failing to improve women’s long-term safety, we must first consider the domestic violence model on which intervention and most research rely. Drawing on the criminal justice definition of assault, domestic violence laws and most research in the field equate abuse with discrete threats or acts of violence whose seriousness is assessed by applying a calculus of physical and/or psychological harms. Repeated partner assaults are referred to using the language of “recidivism.” There are three major problems with this model. To start, physical assault reoccurs in all but a tiny proportion of abuse cases and involves frequent or even “serial” abuse (more than once a week) in somewhere between a third (in population surveys) to a half (among victims who call police) of cases. Since abusive relationships last between 5 and 7 years on average, this means that a high proportion of victims experience dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of assaults, a major reason why they report abuse is “ongoing.” In fact, abuse resembles a chronic health condition like AIDS or a course of conduct crime like harassment, stalking or kidnapping more closely than a stranger assault or an acute, time-limited problem like the flu.

The second problem is that well over 90% of abusive assaults are non-injurious, relatively minor, and fall far below the radar of an injury-based model. Nevertheless because of their frequency in a typical abuse situation, low-level assaults have a devastating effect. A related problem with the prevailing model is that it fails to recognize that the level of fear and entrapment women present is the cumulative result of all that has come before rather than of the proximate event. When victims or

their children present with high levels of fear in response to a seemingly trivial assault, they are thought to be exaggerating, or, in family court, to be manipulating or “alienating” their children from a father figure.

The third and most important problem with the prevailing model is that between 60% and 80% of the victims who seek assistance are experiencing multiple nonviolent tactics as well as physical assault. These tactics run the gamut from sexual exploitation, material deprivation and imprisonment to the imposition of rules for how victims carry out their daily affairs. More than half of the offending men we are arresting for domestic violence acknowledge they have taken their partner’s money, for instance. Many of these deprivations and controls are structural and induce an objective state of dependence or subjugation independently of how a victim processes the abuse psychologically, making terms like “psychological abuse” inappropriate. Because stalking, surveillance and many of the other tactics transcend the physical proximity of the parties, they neutralize ‘separation’ as an antidote.

The Effects of Using the Violence Model

The failures of intervention noted above follow directly from application of the violence model. Since well over 95% of domestic violence involves pushes, grabs, slaps, punches and the like, arrest is unlikely, even in mandatory arrest jurisdictions, and, if an arrest is made, almost no offenders go to jail. As abuse escalates and calls to police or visits to the emergency room are repeated over time, these victims are seen as ‘repeaters’ and the helping response becomes more perfunctory. Protection orders are predicated on the false belief that offenders and victims typically have the decisional autonomy to end abuse ‘between’ incidents. Because of stalking, surveillance and other forms of intimidation, however, these orders rarely end abuse, though they may change its dynamic. Because they take an incident-based approach, many judges become frustrated with victims and also adapt a perfunctory or punitive response. Everyone involved recognizes the situation is “tragic.” But because abuse is not understood as ongoing, its duration is attributed to the failure of victims to act on their own behalf. Few if any of the nonviolent coercive or controlling tactics are recognized, let alone incorporated into protection or prosecution.

Coercive Control

The coercive control model defines abuse as a malevolent course of conduct; identifies the hallmarks of abusive assaults as their frequency and “routine” nature rather than their severity; anticipates the use of a range of coercive and controlling tactics in addition to or instead of physical violence; and assesses risk, including the risk of fatality, on the basis of a woman’s subjective level of fear and her objective

entrapment rather than the level of violence or injury. My schema draws on the human rights literature to subdivide the tactics deployed in coercive control into violence, intimidation, isolation and control. Intimidation encompasses the tactics used to induce fear and humiliation and extends from literal threats, stalking and other forms of surveillance through varied forms of sexual abuse (such as inspections) to subtle threats only understood by victims and based on the unique knowledge a partner has because of his privileged access to his victim. Control includes the deprivation of basic resources (such as money, food or transportation); limitations on speech and movement; and the regulation of a victim's everyday life. Isolation refers to a subset of control tactics that constrain victims' access to friends, family, coworkers, helping professionals and other forms of support. Within a broad justice framework, it is useful to link violence to the right to security, intimidation to the right to dignity and to live without fear, isolation to the right to autonomy and control to liberty rights. Security, dignity, autonomy, and liberty are rights that are universally recognized as worthy of state protection. The emphasis on the violation of rights and liberties shifts the terms by which abuse is discussed from a psychological language of victimization and dependence to a political language of domination, agency, resistance, and subordination. Against this background, 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 subjugate them. Of course, before we accord women the same liberty rights we would accord men in a similar situation, we have to first grant that women have the same claims to liberty and equality as men. The absence of this recognition forces victimized women to provide proofs of psychological or physical victimization to gain full protection. 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 my book, I challenge the advocacy movement to join its justice agenda to the larger equality and rights agenda of the women and civil rights movements.

The Particularity of Coercive Control

Coercive control shares general elements with other capture or course-of-conduct crimes such as kidnapping, stalking, and harassment, including the fact that it is ongoing and its perpetrators use various means to hurt, humiliate, intimidate, exploit, isolate, and dominate their victims. 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. This is obvious not only from the gender specific distribution of coercive control, but also from the fact that the majority of control is the micro-regulation of behaviors associated with stereotypic female roles, such as how women dress, cook, clean, socialize, care for their children, or perform sexually.

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. But my claim is that female-to-male violence is largely confined to "fights" between relative equals (which I do not consider "abuse") and assaults where partners use violence to hurt or control a partner, but not structural deprivation, systemic isolation, sexual abuse and regulation. Outside prison or a similar institutional setting, there is no counterpart in men's lives to women's entrapment by men in personal life due to coercive control.

Control: Invisible in Plain Sight

The entrapment of women in personal life due to coercive control has been 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. My book is filled with such examples. Against physical bruising, it is hard to 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. When women told us "violence wasn't the worst part," we mistakenly thought they were speaking metaphorically.

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.

The risk that battered women will kill or be killed is a direct function of their degree of entrapment by coercive control. 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.

**The National Domestic Violence Fatality Review Initiative, housed at Northern Arizona University, is a resource center and technical assistance provider to state Fatality Review Committees examining the circumstances surrounding domestic violence homicide in order to better understand, intervene, and prevent it. More information is available at www.ndvfri.org.*

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