



**Never feeling completely free**  
**How women experience coercive control pre and post separation**  
Briefing paper, September 2014

Perpetrators of intimate partner violence exert coercive control pre and post separation. Women continue to undertake extensive 'safety work' as they seek to rebuild their lives free from abuse.

### **Background**

This briefing paper draws on the findings of a three year longitudinal study which followed 100 women and their children as they rebuilt their lives after domestic violence (Kelly, Sharp and Klein, 2014). It describes how women experience coercive control pre and post separation and makes recommendations about how statutory and voluntary agencies can best support them.

### **Key messages**

- Coercive control is a central component of intimate partner violence and it is its ongoing everydayness which takes a toll on women's energy, sense of self and capacities.
- Removing themselves from the immediate control of an abusive man was, for many women and children, only the first step in establishing safety.
- The coercive control that existed before separation continued post-separation as abusive men found other ways to maintain dominance over their partners.
- Intimate partner violence was understood by professionals to be incidents of physical assault rather than a pattern of coercion.
- The impacts of post-separation abuse is minimised by professionals, something which the current policy focus on short term risk reduction exacerbates.
- Limited effectiveness of criminal and civil law provisions and enforcement, alongside inadequate support from statutory agencies requires women to undertake a huge amount of 'safety work'.

### **Experiences of physical, sexual, psychological and financial abuse**

96 per cent of the women experienced intimate partner violence (54 per cent from a male partner; 42 per cent from their husband). The remaining 4 per cent of cases involved domestic violence perpetrated by male family members (two fathers and two brothers). More than a third (n=37) reported experiencing all forms of abuse measured (physical, sexual, psychological and financial); the entire sample, except for two women had experienced physical abuse and one other form (sexual, psychological or financial) of abuse. Two women reported only psychological abuse.

### **Experiences of coercive control pre-separation**

95 per cent of the women reported experiencing coercive control. This meant that physical and sexual abuse was interwoven with control, intimidation and isolation (Stark, 2007). Women in the study described a range of tactics used to achieve this, including perpetrators manipulating any particular vulnerability; with race and immigration status, personal histories and/or faith used to demean and/or create a climate of fear.

### **Experiencing ongoing coercive control**

Removing themselves from the immediate control of an abusive man was, for many women and children, only the first step in establishing safety. Over 90 per cent (n=72) experienced post-separation abuse (PSA),

which interfered with both being and feeling safe. Indeed the term 'post-separation abuse' is, in some ways, an artificial distinction since the behaviour of the perpetrator was an ongoing exertion of the same coercive control that existed before separation. Abusive men were able to find ways to maintain dominance over their partners, even without physical proximity. Living with this ongoing fear and anxiety had negative impacts on women's well-being, from physical reactions such as stomachs turning, feeling sick and shaking through to difficulties in sleeping, nightmares and flashbacks.

### **Supporting survivors**

Women overwhelmingly reported that criminal and civil laws were limited in their effectiveness to respond to coercive control. Throughout the research period women also talked about poor practice by statutory agencies characterised by victim blame, delay and misinformation. Intimate partner violence was understood by the police and other professionals to be incidents of physical assault rather than a pattern of coercion. This led to inappropriate responses, such as being told to go back to the abuser if they had not been physically harmed, and the impacts of post-separation abuse being minimised. The current policy focus on short term risk reduction contributed to this. The data on post separation abuse also revealed that perpetrators continued to manipulate the statutory agencies to which women turned for help. Over a quarter (28%) reported that their ex-partners had complained to the police that they had been abusive; and almost a fifth (18%) said that their partner had made false reports about them to social services.

### **Safety planning**

Limited effectiveness of criminal and civil law provisions and enforcement, alongside inadequate support from statutory agencies required women to undertake a huge amount of 'safety work' (Kelly, 2012) in relation to themselves and their children, for example:

- Moving home (including out of London).
- Making use of sanctuary schemes and taking other safety precautions such as staying away from windows.
- Keeping new addresses secret through arranging meeting points for child contact and selling the car so it was not recognised parked outside of the new home.
- Changing locations known to the perpetrator such as workplace, school, doctors, children's clubs and gym or otherwise changing routes to and/or routines in visiting such places.
- Precautionary personal safety strategies such as locking the car door, having a mobile phone at all times and taking the dog out with them.
- Managing social networks through keeping them small and placing priority on trustworthiness: this helped to minimise potential overlaps in friendship groups therefore preventing information about new routines being passed onto the abuser and minimising the likelihood of 'bumping into' him.

These continuing constraints on women's freedom, even three years after separation (and for some women considerably longer), highlight the need for community and statutory services to be able to work beyond risk-based interventions and focus on support and interventions that help women *feel* safe.

### **Recommendations**

- Training is needed which focuses on coercive control rather than incidents of physical violence and which alerts professionals to the reality that leaving does not necessarily end abuse.
- A system of monitoring the delivery of sensitive and responsive services to survivors needs to be developed. A key component would be regularly convened panels of survivors whose recent experiences of service use – good and bad – is considered as evidence.

Kelly, L., Sharp, N. and Klein, R. (2014) Finding the Costs of Freedom: How women rebuild their lives after domestic violence can be found at: <http://www.cwasu.org> and <http://www.solacewomensaid.org>