

Coercive Control - What is it and what is being done about it



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The term “coercive control” has been in the spotlight recently, whether you read in the newspapers about various parliaments’ push to legislate that it be a criminal offence or watched the SBS TV series “See What You Made Me Do”.

BUT WHAT IS COERCIVE CONTROL AND WHAT IS BEING DONE ABOUT IT?



Sometimes known as “intimate terrorism”, coercive control is a form of family violence and is very strategic behaviour. Its aim is to isolate a victim from family, friends and social networks and to deprive them of independence. A victim’s sense of safety is slowly eroded and they feel as if they are being held hostage or constantly walking on eggshells.

Common behaviours of coercive control include:

- controlling finances
- constant criticism and belittling
- monitoring phone and online/social media activity
- making jealous accusations
- ostracising family/friends
- regulating sexual relationship
- depriving access to help – eg. medical
- policing lifestyle – eg. how to dress, what to eat
- gaslighting – eg. saying things they didn’t or finding things that weren’t really there

EXAMPLES OF COERCIVE CONTROL



Very real examples of coercive control were reported following the horrific murders of Hannah Clarke and her children in February 2020 and more recently of Kelly Wilkinson in April 2021. In Hannah Clarke’s case, her husband always knew where she was and would turn up at places unexpectedly; she was not allowed to wear

the colour pink or shorts; he demanded sex every night; and if she didn’t comply, he would sulk for days. In Kelly Wilkinson’s case, her husband harassed her every day; restricted her clothing, hairstyle and access to money; and prevented her from working or getting a driver’s licence.

Coercive control impacts communities across a wide range of issues, such as children growing up without learning positive and respectful relationships; higher rates of alcohol and drug dependence; the cost to the economy of assisting people who are experiencing family violence and the toll of their family breakdown.

So what is being done about protecting/assisting victims of coercive control? In the past few years, the UK, Ireland and Scotland have all passed laws making coercive control a criminal offence.

BUT WHAT IS HAPPENING IN AUSTRALIA?



On a Federal level, the Family Law Courts have implemented a project called The Lighthouse Project. The project involves early risk screening through a secure online platform; early identification and management of safety concerns; and assessment and triage of cases by a specialised team who provide resources, safe and suitable case management and referring high-risk cases to a dedicated court list, known as the “Evatt List”.

In addition to The Lighthouse Project, the Family DOORS Triage screening process has been specifically developed for use in the family law system. The process considers a range of safety risks that frequently arise in family law proceedings including family violence, mental health issues and drug or alcohol misuse. High risk cases are referred for immediate action through a video conference, telephone or as required, face-to-face appointment

with a family counsellor. The family counsellor provides a tailored, clinical follow up which includes a detailed risk assessment, safety and wellbeing plans and service referrals. The entire process is confidential. The matter is also referred to a Court Registrar for consideration to be placed on the Evatt List.

On a State level, the Queensland Government has set up a taskforce to investigate coercive control laws. The taskforce is being chaired by Justice Margaret McMurdo, former President of the Queensland Court of Appeal and head of the Lawyer X Royal Commission. The taskforce is expected to report back to the Government by October 2021. Currently in Queensland, coercive control is not specifically captured under the existing criminal code and unless a victim is injured, stalked or their property is damaged, they aren't fully protected and the perpetrator is unlikely to be detected or punished.

In other States and Territories, there are moves to legislate making coercive control a criminal offence.

For decades, survivors of family violence have been reporting that the most difficult thing about the abuse is not necessarily the physical violence such as the bruised ribs, chipped teeth or broken bones. The worst part is the psychological abuse such as coercive control. Australia is well on the path to criminalising this insidious behaviour.

WHO TO CONTACT?



If you or someone you know is a victim of family violence, there are a number of services on the Sunshine Coast to contact for support:

Sunshine Coast Integrated Family Safety Response Service – 07 5452 9797

Sunny Kids - 07 5479 6394

Domestic and Family Violence Service – 07 5430 9300

DV Connect Womensline – 1800 811 811

DV Connect Mensline – 1800 600 636

1800 Respect – 1800 737 732



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