

Children and young people's experiences of coercive control

Women's experiences of domestic abuse are increasingly being recognised in law, policies and services through the concept of coercive control [link to 'What is coercive control?']. Coercive control involves a range of behaviours such as emotional and financial abuse, isolation and monitoring which are intended to intimidate, humiliate, degrade, exploit, isolate and control (Stark, 2009). Despite this, the focus on children and young people's experiences of domestic abuse continues to be largely framed around the physical violence inflicted on their mother rather than the micro-regulation of behaviour which constitutes coercive control. This approach ignores the impact that coercive control can have on children and young people, and does not accurately reflect children and young people's lived experiences of domestic abuse.

Research suggests that coercive control can have equally devastating impacts on children and young people as physically violent domestic abuse; in one study, children in families where physical violence was not a regular part of perpetrators' abuse of mothers experienced the same negative impacts (e.g. emotional and behavioural issues, mental health problems) as those who had lived with frequent and sometimes severe physical violence (Katz, 2016).

The study found that the harmful impacts of coercive control on children and young people can include:

- **Control of time, movement and activities within the home-** Children and young people can be affected by the control of their mother's activities in the home, with children and mothers being restricted in spending time together and being able to enjoy each other's company. This can undermine the mother-child relationship, depriving children of feeling stable, protected and nurtured.
- **Restricted space to act:** Children's freedom to say and do things may be restricted by the perpetrator's controlling behaviour; for example, not being able to play, or being made to keep quiet.
- **Isolation from sources of support:** Control of the mother's movements outside the home also negatively impacts on children, who may not be allowed to see friends and other family members (eg; grandparents), or take part in extra-curricular activities. This deprives children of the resilience-building influence of positive relationships outside the family home.

Coercive control can continue after separation from an abusive partner, with child contact and accompanying legal proceedings sometimes being used as a way for the abusive ex-partner to be involved in a woman's life and to continue exerting control over her and her children.

It is clear that a physical incident model is inadequate when it comes to exploring children and young people's experiences of domestic abuse; services supporting children and young people affected by domestic abuse must recognise the impact of coercive control on children and young people's everyday lives, and tailor their responses appropriately.

References

Katz, E. (2016) 'Beyond the Physical Incident Model: How Children Living with Domestic Violence are Harmed By and Resist Regimes of Coercive Control', *Child Abuse Review* 25:1, 46–59.

Stark E. (2009) 'Rethinking Custody Evaluation in Cases Involving Domestic Violence', *Journal of Child Custody* 6: 3, 287-321.