

Male Victims of Coercive Control: Experiences and Impact

Domestic abuse is treated as a gendered issue, with male perpetrators and female victims. Despite the Office for National Statistics reporting that one in three victims of domestic abuse is male, research has centred on the experiences of women. This means that men's experiences may be minimised or ignored.

The Serious Crime Act 2015 created a new offence of controlling or coercive behaviour used within intimate or familial relationships. This is when the perpetrator repeatedly or continuously uses a pattern of behaviour that includes isolating a person from their friends and family, monitoring their time and movements, depriving them of their basic needs, and taking control over their everyday life.

This report summarises the UK findings of a major international survey of the experiences of male victims of intimate partner abuse carried out in 2020. We focussed on men's experiences of coercive control from intimate partners. The 538 UK respondents were mainly from England (80%), but also Scotland (11%), Wales (6%) and Northern Ireland (3%). The majority of participants had left the abusive relationship (83%), with some respondents still in an abusive relationship (17%). Most men were in heterosexual relationships (91%).

What did we find out?

We found that male victims experience persistent and severe patterns of coercive control similar to those experienced by female victims. Even in areas that are often seen as affecting only female victims such as economic abuse and sexual coercion, we found that over half of the male victims had their earnings controlled, and one in five men was forced to have sex as an ongoing pattern of abuse. We found that men's relationships with their children are often exploited to coercively control men, both within the relationship and post-separation. False allegations (or the threat of making them) to the police and social services as a pattern of abuse were experienced by almost two thirds of male victims in our survey.

We uncovered men's experiences of specific types of abuse:

- **Threats** - such as threats to harm (66%), threats to harm self (49%) and threats to disclose damaging information (66%).
- **Intimidation** - such as being nasty to friends or family (74%), smashing property (57%), forcing the person to do things they didn't want to do (84%).
- **Isolation** - such as restricting time spent with family and friends (84%), limiting activities or movement (80%), and checking up on movements (76%).
- **Economic abuse** - such as controlling money (71%), refusing to share expenses (75%), or making it difficult to work or study (87%).
- **Emotional abuse** - such as putting the person down (79%), showing them up in public (77%), or gaslighting (84%).
- **Using children** - such as threatening to take the children away (84%), arguing in front of the children (85%) and making the person feel bad about the children (88%).

Some examples of what men told us:

"She insisted I drop many friends and relatives. She would make things up about me and prevent me seeing the children. My work suffered and eventually I had to take redundancy."

"It had a devastating impact on my mental health. I would describe myself as a shell of what I was".

"I went from being a very confident high-achiever running my own business to being unable to make a decision for myself without getting the opinion of my abuser. The effect on self-confidence and self-esteem is the worst."

"I became very skinny, doctors were worried, as she controlled how much food I was able to get and when I was able to eat."

"I retreated into myself and attempted suicide."

These experiences of coercive control severely limited male victims' sense of choice and freedom. The distress of experiencing abuse had a physical impact and psychological affect that would be of clinical concern in eight out of ten men.

What do we recommend?

We advise that male victims of domestic abuse should no longer be categorised by the UK Government as being victims of "Violence Against Women and Girls." They should have a parallel strategy: "Ending Intimate Violence Against Men and Boys" to ensure their voices are equally heard and addressed. There should also be consideration of a strategy tackling violence within the family as there are wider issues here that need to be addressed.

We recommend a large-scale national study investigating the experiences of male victims of coercive control in terms of impact. The findings of this should inform the wording of the Office for National Statistics impact questions for male victims of coercive control.

The Police, Crown Prosecutors, judiciary, general practitioners, social services and CAFCASS officers should work together to develop a whole-system approach towards enhancing the understanding of the prevalence and specific experiences of male victims, including how men experience coercion, how they communicate this to others, what factors are more relevant to male victims, and what support they need. This should include the experiences of children so that these agencies can work together to protect them.

There is need to adapt national awareness campaigns to reflect male victimisation and to educate the public about who may be a victim of coercive control. This will raise understanding of male victimisation and women's coercive controlling behaviour - and may encourage abusive women to seek help to change.

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