



REGROUPEMENT DES MAISONS
POUR FEMMES VICTIMES
DE VIOLENCE CONJUGALE

Tool 1



Understanding

Coercive control

(Long version)



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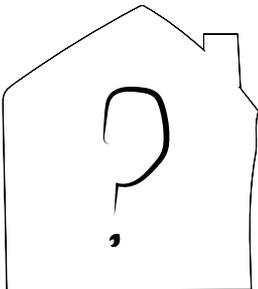
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In addition to this toolbox, the Regroupement provides training on coercive control for social/legal professionals. [Contact us](#) for more details on the proposed modules and modalities.

A – Definition

Coercive control refers to an ongoing continuum of violence, exploitation, humiliation and manipulation committed by abusers to establish and maintain dominance over their victims and continuously deprive them of their rights.

- It is an insidious and progressive takeover of the victim, which does not necessarily depend on inflicting pain or injury.
- This pattern of behaviour is designed to make victims dependent by isolating them from support, depriving them of their independence and regulating their behaviours through daily micro rules.



B – A broader understanding of conjugal violence¹ that is closer to the real life experiences of victims

While physical violence and femicide are universally condemned, behaviours that involve non-physical violence in relationships are still too often normalized, downplayed, and even romanticized. Yet, between 60% and 80% of women who seek help for domestic violence have experienced coercive control, including multiple tactics to scare, isolate, degrade, and subordinate them, as well as assault and threats.²

The concept of coercive control underscores the need to address conjugal violence in its most common, banal, invisible form. It reveals the scope and variety of control and coercion strategies underlying conjugal violence, and its devastating impact on victims.

Coercive control is not a new form of conjugal violence, it is at its core.



¹ Côté, S. Lapierre, [https://revueintervention.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ri_153_2021.2_Cote_Lapierre.pdf].

² Evan Stark, "Re-presenting battered women: coercive control and the defense of liberty," in *Prepared for Violence against women: complex realities and new issues in a changing world*, Les Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2012, p. 7. [https://www.stopvav.org/uploads/evan_stark_article_final_100812.pdf].

Coercive control legislation around the world and in Canada

In recent years there has been an international movement to criminalize coercive control. It has become a crime in England and Wales (2015), Ireland (2019), Scotland (2019) and some states in the United States such as Connecticut, Hawaii and California.

In Canada, while some manifestations of coercive control, such as harassment or intimidation, are included in the Criminal Code, coercive control is not criminalized as such, so that some strategies are exempt from prosecution. However, significant steps have been taken towards greater legal recognition of the impacts of coercive control, particularly in family law.

- Recent amendments to the *Divorce Act*, effective March 1, 2021, explicitly recognize the cumulative impact of coercive and controlling behaviour in the definition of family violence.
- Under the *Divorce Act*, courts must now consider coercive and controlling behaviour when assessing the best interests of the child in determining access rights.

Coercive control as a manifestation of gender domination

Although violence in a conjugal context can be used by women or men, the victims of coercive control are overwhelmingly women and the aggressors are overwhelmingly men. Coercive control is rooted in relationships of domination and inequality in the heterosexual couple and in society.

- According to data collected by Quebec police forces, 75.8% of victims of conjugal violence were women (2020).³
- UK data shows that 95% of coercive control victims were women (2019).⁴

³ Ministère de la Sécurité publique (2022). "Criminalité au Québec – Infractions contre la personne commises dans un contexte conjugal en 2020." [https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/adm/min/securite-publique/publications-adm/publications-secteurs/police/statistiques-criminalite/violence-conjugale/stats_violence_conjugale_2020.pdf].

⁴ C. Barlow, S. Walklate, "Gender, risk assessment and coercive control: Contradictions in terms?" *The British Journal of Criminology* (2021) 61, 887-904. [<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/law-and-social-justice/3research/Gender,Risk,Assessment,and,Coercive,Control-Barlow.and,Walklate,2021.pdf>].

C – Impacts on women victims and their children

1. Impacts more devastating than those of physical violence

Victims' daily lives are defined by fear, anxiety, hypervigilance, loss of confidence and mental confusion. Women who experience coercive control—and their children—report that the cumulative effect of control, threats, harassment and isolation is often more devastating than physical abuse and as difficult to recover from.

Coercive control has the effect of eliminating victims' sense of individuality and preventing them from believing in their own ability to make decisions. They no longer make decisions based on what is best for them, but, rather, based on the fear of what the other person will do to them if they don't make the "right" decision.

Over time, all of these routine abuses create a feeling of being trapped and held hostage in the relationship, unbeknown to the outside world.

«He never laid a hand on me, he didn't have to. The fear was there every day.»

[our translation]





Here is what victims tell us:⁵

- I have the impression I'm constantly walking on eggshells, in a state of hypervigilance.
- The fear is always there, in the pit of my stomach. I am afraid of what might happen to me or my loved ones.
- I never see my family and friends anymore.
- I no longer make decisions for myself, for my family.
- I don't do the things I used to do. I don't remember the last time I went out with my girlfriends.
- I have no money of my own, no bank account.
- I've lost contact with my family and friends because of my partner's judgments and reactions.
- I feel like I'm going crazy, I doubt myself all the time, my feelings, my opinions, I don't recognize myself anymore.
- I'm ashamed, I'm afraid to talk about it to anyone and I feel guilty.
- He constantly puts me down as a mother, in terms of my appearance, my clothes, my way of cooking, my way of educating my children, etc.
- My self-esteem is gone, I lack confidence, I avoid interactions with others and stay in the background.
- I had to quit my job.
- I have difficulty concentrating, I forget things, I feel disoriented.

⁵ This list was drawn from the following tools:
- CAVAC brochure *Parlez-en - Les réactions et les conséquences de la victimisation* (undated) [https://cavac.gc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/d.cavac_parlez-en_fr2019.pdf].
- Safe Ireland brochure *Help make her world BIGGER again - A quick guide to the criminal offence of coercive control* (undated) [<https://www.safeireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/Safe-Ireland-Coercive-Control-Leaflet.pdf>].

2. Growing up in a climate of tension and fear

For a long time, children were viewed as “witnesses” to conjugal violence. Today we recognize that they are also victims.

Here are some examples of controlling and coercive behaviours that have major impacts on children. The abuser:

- Physically abuses the child/children, or kidnaps or endangers them in order to intimidate, threaten or punish the mother
- Prevents or controls the children's activities and reduces their time with their mother and grandparents
- Monitors them
- Forces them to participate in the abusive assaults on their mother
- Instrumentalizes them by asking them to follow their mother's activities, send threatening messages or harass her
- Limits resources so that the mother cannot meet their needs
- Prevents the mother from comforting and caring for them; and
- Belittles their mother in front of them, etc.⁶



Keep in mind that child contact provisions can be used by the perpetrator to continue controlling a mother and her children. This can have serious and lasting consequences for their safety and well-being. Protecting the mother protects the children.

⁶ Some examples have been drawn from *Children experiencing interparental coercive control*, Dr Lauren Smith, Iriss, Scotland, 2018 [<https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/esss-outlines/coercive-control>].

3. Additional vulnerability factors

Certain individual or social factors may increase a victim's vulnerability or risk of isolation and make it easier for the abuser to engage in controlling or coercive behaviour.

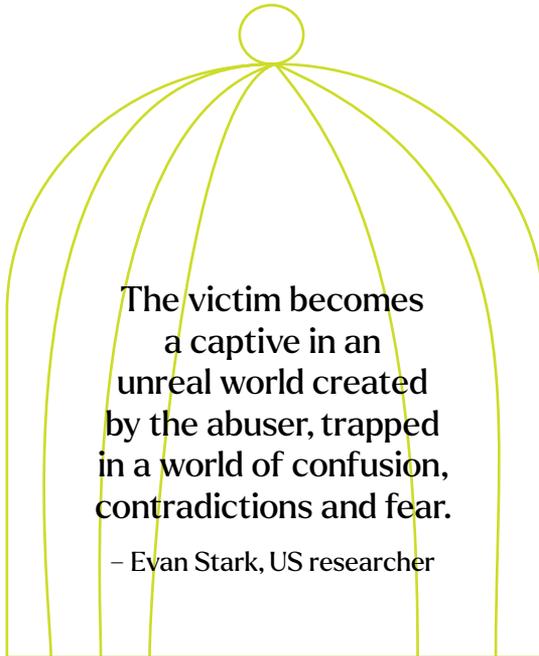
This a non-exhaustive list:⁷

- **Immigration status:** fear of deportation, fear of being reported to border services.
- **Membership in an Indigenous community:** barriers to disclosure and help-seeking, economic dependency, difficult access to services and resources, intergenerational effects of historical trauma.
- **Cultural barriers:** fear of seeking help, religious beliefs, distrust of police, threats from family or community members, gender inequality, or social isolation.
- **Isolation or marginalization:** living in a remote, rural or reserve area, lack of socially or culturally appropriate resources, lack of public or affordable transportation, language barrier, literacy, digital divide, advanced age, pregnancy or involvement in the sex industry.
- **Disability, physical or mental health problems, alcohol or drug abuse problems**
- **Financial precariousness:** poverty (difficulty or impossibility of finding a new home) impossibility of obtaining the first social assistance cheque in her name before leaving the partner, financial dependency, homelessness, lack of transportation.
- **Partner in a position or context of authority** (lawyer, judge, doctor, police officer, criminalized partner, her boss, etc.): tendency to be less believed, fear of damaging his reputation, fear of retaliation, abuser manipulates the system.

⁷ This list is based on the *Intimate Partner Violence Risk Factor Summary* (IPVRS) developed by the British Columbia police force.



Knowledge of the specific vulnerabilities of some victims is essential to understanding their experiences and the obstacles they face. Referring them to local organizations that have developed expertise in these particularities is a way to take an active part in building a support network around them.



**The victim becomes
a captive in an
unreal world created
by the abuser, trapped
in a world of confusion,
contradictions and fear.**

- Evan Stark, US researcher

D – Manifestations and patterns of behaviour

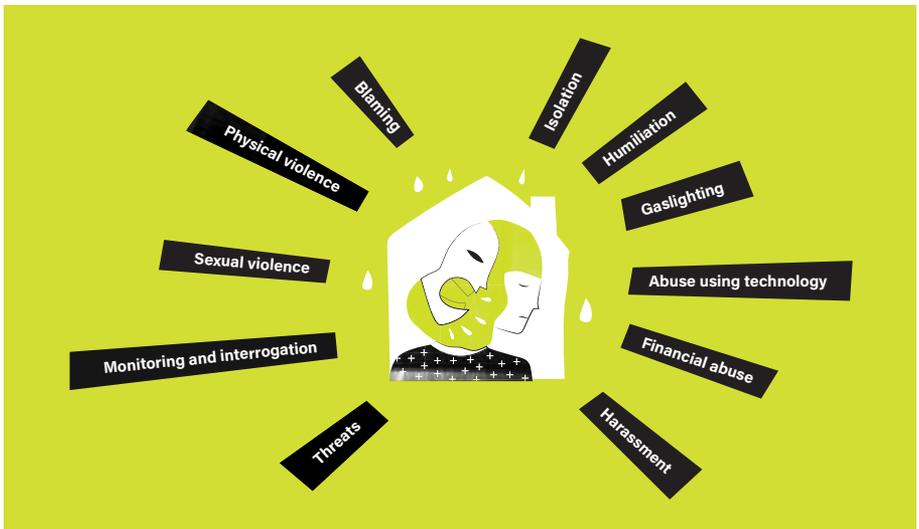
These patterns of behaviour are progressive, cumulative and often perpetuated over a long period of time. They do not stop at the moment of separation. On the contrary, they tend to intensify as soon as the violent man feels that he is losing control over his partner or ex-partner.

The "Manifestations of Coercive Control" tool provides a detailed overview of the main manifestations of coercive control with examples from real-life situations.⁸

Regardless of its form, conjugal violence is often very difficult to recognize because it is camouflaged behind a diverse array of masks that form the public face of the intimate relationship.

– SOS violence conjugale

[our translation]



⁸ These examples are taken from various sources on the Internet and from different tools, the main ones being:
– guide from the Carrefour familial des personnes handicapées "Femmes handicap violence conjugale" (HVC) [http://www.cfph.org/_guide-hvc-2021/guide-hvc.pdf]
– chart produced by the West Island Women's Shelter "Coercive Control Screening Questionnaire and Evaluation Grid" [<https://wiws.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Outils-Complementaires-English-v4.pdf>].
Evaluation tool concerning children in a conjugal violence setting (Protection des enfants en contexte de violence conjugale) [<https://pevc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Outil-evaluation.pdf>].

Examples of controlling and coercive behaviour⁹

- Constantly criticizing: the way his partner or ex-partner takes care of the children, her clothes, her cooking, etc.
- Repeatedly humiliating her in front of witnesses, belittling her
- Jealous or possessive behaviour, such as incessant phone calls to check on the victim's whereabouts and activities, or checking on the victim's phone or social networks
- Controlling family finances or restricting victim's access to a bank card
- Isolating the victim by preventing her from visiting friends and family
- Restricting the victim's movements by, for example, confining her to a room in her home or checking her pedometer
- Dictating the victim's routine or schedule, for example, by imposing schedules for going to school or shopping
- Preventing the victim from working outside the home, or monitoring her at work
- Restricting access to communications, such as the telephone or computer
- Changing behaviour when the police arrive in order to create fear in the victim of not being believed
- Devious use of legal proceedings to control, harass, intimidate, coerce and drain the victim's financial and emotional resources
- Hindering the victimized parent's post-separation decisions and ability to act as a parent

⁹ Adapted from *Context and dynamics of domestic abuse*, College of Policing UK, undated. [<https://www.college.police.uk/app/major-investigation-and-public-protection/domestic-abuse/context-and-dynamics-domestic-abuse>].

«I had to work 40 hours a week and continue my college education while being a perfect housewife and, most importantly, always available when he wanted sex. I had to take care of everything in the house, especially him. . . . When things didn't go his way, he would break things, humiliate me, ignore me for days.»

«He kept me away from everyone. I was not allowed to have friends, he prevented me from communicating with my family, from going to see them. When I wanted to go to the movies . . . he had to agree to my going first. When I got home, it was a grilling: who I talked to, what I talked about, etc.»

[our translations]



Watch for less visible patterns of behaviour surrounding recognizably criminal acts that have a devastating impact on victims. Identifying these manifestations allows you to link events together and document the chronology at the time of the police response and throughout the legal process.

E – Intensified coercive control in the context of separation



Separation does not guarantee an end to the violence or the safety of women and children who are victims of conjugal violence. On the contrary, several studies show high rates of post-separation violence, and demonstrate that violence tends to escalate when women decide to leave their partners.

Leaving an abusive partner can be extremely dangerous. 67% of domestic homicides occurred while the couple was separated or separating¹¹.

Women with children face additional difficulties in the post-separation period. It is generally much more difficult for them to sever all communication with their ex-partner, since he often remains in contact with the children and will seek to instrumentalize them. Research reveals that incidents of post-separation violence often occur during father-child contact.

¹⁰ Dobash and Dobash cited in *In Control: Dangerous Relationships and How They End in Murder*, Jane Monckton Smith UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, p 164 [<https://www.bloomsbury.com/ca/in-control-9781526642929/>].

¹¹ Domestic Violence Death Review Committee 2018 Annual Report, Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario [<https://www.ontario.ca/document/domestic-violence-death-review-committee-2018-annual-report>].



Being aware that separation is a high-risk period for the victim and her children increases the likelihood that you will detect warning signs of danger and take concrete steps to make the victim feel safer, both physically and psychologically.

«It took me a long time to understand what I was going through. I knew it wasn't normal to always be walking on eggshells. Until the day I started to be afraid of the man I loved. Insults, shouting, financial control, hitting the walls, intimidation and so on. Anything to prove to me that he was the one in control of my life, that I was never right and that I was not as good as him. I would spend nights crying in the bathroom, because I felt trapped in this nightmare.»

[our translation]



F – Coercive control: Predictor of homicidal risk

Many experts believe that the presence of coercive control in a relationship is a warning sign of femicide. In fact, it is one of the strongest indicators of the level of lethality.

- An Australian study of domestic homicides in 2019 found that all cases involved the pre-existence of coercive control.¹²
- In over 40% of homicides committed by men who had exercised coercive control over their partners, no physical violence had been reported in the year before they killed their partner.¹³



Whether you are a police officer, probation officer, lawyer or prosecutor, you can play an active role in the early identification of coercive control. By being aware of the associated risks, you can help build the safety net needed to better protect victims.



¹² "Intimate Femicide: The Role of Coercive Control," H. Johnson et al., Ontario, *Feminist Criminology* 2019, vol. 14(1) 3-23 [<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1557085117701574>].

¹³ *Ibid.*

G – Towards a paradigm shift in judicial intervention in conjugal violence

From

Vision of conjugal violence focused on **visible physical violence**



To

Vision focused on **the range of invisible strategies** for taking control of the victim (social isolation, economic control, micro-regulation of daily life)

Search for **isolated episodes or incidents**, without linking them to each other



Search for **ongoing and cumulative patterns of behaviour (history)**

Focus on the **victim's reactions or lack thereof**



Focus on the **perpetrator, his actions and underlying intentions**



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