

Private abuse too common

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Until recently coercive control was not something often spoken about. But February 19, 2020, was the turning point.

That's the day Hannah Clark and her three children were set on fire and died at the hands of Hannah's husband and the father of her children.

It was a crime that shocked the nation and mobilised advocates for the victims of family and domestic violence.

Unfortunately, the debate and legislative inquiry into coercive control does not go far enough.

That activity has been almost solely focused on intimate partner relationships, but coercion and control can happen in any kind of relationship with a power imbalance.

It's happening with alarming frequency to older people and those with disability.

Abusers can be both men and women. They may be intimate partners but they can also be siblings, adult children, or even care workers.

One of the difficulties of identifying coercive control is the behaviours are nuanced to every relationship.

For example, someone with cognitive impairment may require a substitute decision-maker, usually with an Enduring Power of Attorney, to make financial decisions in their best interests.

In a different context, or with a different person, monetary limits may be used to control personal freedom. Fear is the

common denominator in coercive control.

Commissioner for Victims of Crime, WA Kati Kraszlan said

the defining thing for all coercive control cases was the presence of fear. Victims of coercion and controlling behaviour are fearful; the relationship with their abuser is dominated by fear.

A 2021 survey by the Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre provides valuable insight into what victims and survivors of coercive control experience.

Respondents reported multiple types of abuse, with the most prevalent being 97 per cent emotional and psychological abuse, 86 per cent

verbal abuse, 80 per cent intimidation, 79 per cent humiliation and degradation, 79 per cent isolation from family and friends, 64 per cent limited access to money and finances, and other forms of economic abuse, 64 per cent infliction of rules on day-to-day living, 54 per cent sexual abuse, 53 per cent physical abuse, 52 per cent threats to harm if not complying with the abuser's rules.

The survey was for adult Australians who experienced coercive control in a domestic and family violence context.

The study shows what Advocare already knows, that psychological abuse underpins all other abuse.

Older people experience the same kinds of abuse in coercive and controlling situations but their natural vulnerabilities can make it even more terrifying. Other vulnerable groups include people who speak English as a second language or have limited

English language skills.

Migrant and refugee families, especially family members who haven't been granted an independent visa, can be susceptible to coercive control situations. The Monash survey reported 19 per cent of respondents were living with a disability and 21 per cent identified as LGBTQIA+.

Coercive control can be hard to spot. Nearly all victims (97 per cent) experience psychological abuse, compared to slightly more than half (53 per cent) who also experience physical abuse.

Perhaps most alarming is the vast majority of victims don't recognise coercive control when it's happening to them.

The Monash survey showed only 38 per cent of respondents viewed the abuse as domestic and family violence when they were experiencing it.

Each State is approaching the issue of coercive control differently. This State-by-State approach can be problematic for many issues, like guardianship and migration, but it also creates confusion in the wider community about who is a victim.

Advocare is asking that all people be included in the current legislative inquiries.

We need to expand our understanding of coercion and control at the national level to include anyone who is being victimised in a power imbalance. The defining feature of coercive control laws should not be that it's occurring in a family or intimate partner relationship, but that the relationship is dominated by fear.

We would like to see a future where the community

understands the impact of coercive control and ensures it is not tolerated. We want to shine a light on abuse that too often happens behind closed doors. We want abusers to be held legally accountable.

One thing we learnt from Hannah Clark is, when left

unchecked, the consequences of coercive control are unimaginable.

Advocare is asking the public, law enforcement, aged care, and disability professionals to garner support for an expanded definition of coercive control and a national

approach to legislation.

Let's not limit the good work already in progress to domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence only.

Older people and those with a disability also need a voice.

Shawnee Van Poeteren is an aged-care advocate at Advocare



Illustration: Don Lindsay

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