



Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Taskforce. As a male victim of coercive control by my wife I hope to provide you with a different perspective on the issues being considered. My experience will, I think, demonstrate that victims experience the same kinds of conduct regardless of gender across most of the various forms of coercive control.

I, obviously, do not have experience as a woman in the criminal justice system so will confine my comments and responses to the Taskforce's first task in relation to coercive control and how best to legislate against it.

I am, unfortunately, one of the 1 in 19 Australian men which the Discussion Paper 1 (DP1) refers to as having experienced physical abuse at the hands of a partner (my wife) and I also fall into the one in 7 men who have experienced emotional abuse.

What is coercive control? Discussion question 1

The bullet point list on page 11 of DP1 is a good list of examples to be included in some form in a legislative definition of coercive control. I can confirm that my experience of coercive control regularly included degrading put downs, humiliation and threats, checking my phone, deleting text messages she had sent me which incriminated her for violent and abusive behaviour, financial control and micro-managing aspects of my life including what to wear, when I could use the bathroom and when I could leave the house.

Based on my experience there are; however, some additional types of behaviour and particular vulnerabilities which I think should be considered for inclusion.

Exclusion from the family home

- My experience was that my wife would seek to demean, humiliate, and control me by refusing to permit me to reside in the family home for extended periods. In situations where I expressed reluctance to leave she would, for example:
 - Threatening to yell and scream at my older children (her step-children) to “tell them what I really think of them”. I.e. by threatening to verbally/emotionally abuse her step-children my wife would coerce me to leave the family home (with my older children) so that they would not be abused by her. This also isolated my younger children from me and their siblings;
 - Threaten to call the police and have me removed by making a false allegation I had physically attacked her;
 - Despite my wife having full knowledge of long-standing court ordered parenting arrangements with respect to my older children, she would regularly refuse to permit them to enter the house until I had begged her permission for them to enter. My wife took the view that she had a complete right of veto over “who comes through my front door” despite the children regularly living with us for many years.
 - My wife would also place cruel and controlling conditions upon me returning to the family home, for example in one case I was only permitted to return with my children to live in the family home if I agreed that my mother was “never to see [my children with my wife] again” and that my wife had “complete control over Christmas every year” so that we would always spend it with her family interstate and never spend it with my side of the family.
- My wife would try to maximise the practical and logistical difficulties for me by raising these issues at the last minute, often when my children were literally on their way home from school,

leaving me with mere minutes to try to quickly gather some clothes and essential items and then find alternative accommodation for myself and four children.

- Whilst I recognise the practical difficulties and potential safety issues involved with accommodation for all parties in these situations, my submission is that excluding a spouse from the family home, particularly where there are children involved, should be regarded as an element of coercive control and subject to sanction, perhaps as an element of aggravation to any offence.

Use of legal ownership to threaten, demean and exclude

- Whilst I recognise the importance of private property rights to our society and their place in our legal system, abusers can use this type of “financial” control as a threat or weapon in the coercive and controlling behaviour.
- My experience has been that although we both contributed roughly equally to our family's finances and assets, my wife insisted that all assets be registered in her name. Whilst she maintained a façade that it was to protect our assets from my ex-wife, the reality was that final property orders were made many years earlier so there was no genuine risk of claim against our assets. In fact, the purpose was to permit my wife, as she did on many occasions to berate me and threaten that because she “owned everything” she would throw me out and tell the police to give her back the keys to the car etc because she owned it all and could prove it. In this way, legal ownership and particularly the ability to exclude me from the family home was used by my abuser as a potent weapon of abuse, degradation and control.
- I submit that the Taskforce consider what steps can be taken to ensure that victims have at least access rights, perhaps supported by police or other professionals, to re-enter the family home to collect clothes and other personal items belonging to them and their children if an alleged abuser is refusing to permit entry. There needs to be a fast-track system so that this can be done relatively quickly to try to ease the logistical and practical burden on victims who have fled and their children.

Withholding clothing and other personal effects

- In what I suppose is a related point to being excluded from the family home, my experience has been that my wife would also refuse to permit me to get both my and my children's clothing, toys and other personal effects when excluded from living in the family home.
- Again, presumably the purpose was to cause as much hurt, humiliation, and inconvenience as possible to assert further control over me.
- Whilst I acknowledge that there may technically be other criminal conduct involved with the withholding or destruction of the victim's assets, my submission is that the act of unreasonably withholding or preventing a victim from recovering his or her clothing and personal effects and those of any children in his or her care should be included as an element of coercive control and subject to sanction, perhaps as an element of aggravation. As noted above, an enshrined right to recover those items with timely police or other service provider support would be a very positive step for victims and their families.

Isolation from family and friends

- My experience was that my wife would regularly decide that members of my family, particularly my mother, were “banned from her house” and were “never to see [our children] ever again”.
- I recognise the challenges in what might be seen as the law seeking to regulate and force family relationships. I acknowledge that there may be situations where friends or family members

might legitimately not be welcome in a household. However, where that exclusion from contact is mandated by the abusing spouse as a form of abusive coercive control that should not be permitted. Perhaps some element of intent might be inferred from the surrounding context?

- My submission is that both:
 - unreasonably refusing to permit a spouses' family members into the family home; and
 - denying or threatening to deny grandparents reasonable access to a grandchild,

should, in the absence of any reasonable excuse, each be included as coercive control and subject to sanction.

Ongoing nature of coercive control

- I agree with the comment on p12 of DP1 that rather than focussing on isolated acts it must be recognised that coercive control manifests itself and is experienced by the victim as a series of acts and words which are used to subordinate, demean and control the victim both physically and mentally.
- I also confirm that the discussion on p12 of DP1 under the heading "Why focus on female victims and male perpetrators?" is equally applicable to my experience as a male victim. The abuser does not need to be physically stronger than the victim for there to be unequal power and autonomy. I can confirm that I consistently feared reprisals and violence when we had relationship difficulties or when I expressed a need or difference of opinion.
- My wife's form of punishment and reprisal towards me was usually emotional and psychological, rather than physical (although sometimes it was physical too). To be frank the emotional and psychological abuse was just as bad as the physical abuse. My comments in this regard echo what I understand many female victims have said. These reprisals would occur merely for expressing a difference of opinion, doing anything she did not want me to do, doing things she did want me to do but not in the way she wanted or directed or doing something or not doing something which was inconvenient to her. The worst reprisals were meted out for conduct which she felt might have "disrespected" her in some way.

Abusers who maintain a positive public image

- I submit that the Taskforce also needs to consider the deceptive and manipulative nature of the abuser. It will often be the case that the abuser is publicly a charismatic and convincing communicator and is skilled in deceiving and manipulating others to maintain a positive public persona which is at odds with their behaviour in private.
- My experience is that my wife was able to put on a very convincing chameleon like public display of "normality" in communicating with neighbours and friends, presenting herself as a charming and vivacious person whilst privately treating me in a degrading, demeaning, cruel and manipulative manner. On one occasion, even when Police attended our family home she was able to immediately "switch on the charm" to conceal her abusive behaviour. One officer was happy for me to take the children, or at least our older child, and leave the house as she had requested me to, but my wife was able to mislead the other officer into insisting that the children remain with her.

Discussion question 2

Whilst I appreciate the terms of reference have led to the framing of this question, the answers apply equally for men. Aspects which need to be taken into account are:

- **The need for the victim to care for children, particularly where there are children in the household who are not the biological children of the abuser.**
 - My experience of coercive control was that my attempts to resist and survive abuse were made all the more difficult because my wife used my desire to try to provide a stable home for my older children (her step-children) as a way of controlling me and forcing me to do what she wanted as the “price” for her permitting the children to reside with us, despite the fact that I contributed equally to the household both financially and non-financially. I often felt powerless to resist because attempts to disagree with her or put a different perspective which took into account the needs of her step-children would lead to her becoming aggressive, insulting and ultimately lead to her refusing to let me or the children reside in the house.
- **The practical and financial challenges of having nowhere to go when trying to leave the abusive situation.** This is exacerbated for male victims as there are no refuges for men fleeing family violence, particularly with children in their care.
 - My experience was that a key part of the coercive and controlling behaviour to demean and distress me by placing me in a position where my children and I had nowhere to live or sleep at short notice. My wife would make goading comments like “well you’ve got a real problem now” when threatening to verbally abuse my children (then aged 9-12) if I didn’t intercept them before they got home from school and take them and myself elsewhere to live until she relented and let us come home.
 - The inability to access necessities of life, particularly for children in the victim’s care, like clean underwear and clothes, toys, pyjamas and toothbrushes further disincentivises victims from fleeing the abusive situation. This is the key point of failure amongst Police and support services in these circumstances. My experience is that there is no understanding and acceptance of the “rock and a hard place” the victim of coercive control finds themselves in. My experience was that I just had to continue to suffer the ongoing abusive behaviour to try to provide a stable environment for all my children for as long as I could.
- 2. **If the victim is unable to take their children with them when they flee the abusive situation the abuser should not be permitted to restrict or deny access to the children to further coercively control and demean the victim due to the lengthy delays in the family and federal circuit court processes.**
 - My experience has been, and continues to be, that because my abuser remains in the family home (having forced me out with threats and abuse) she has prevented me from spending time with our children until she was forced to do so by court order. In fact although the relationship had then ended the coercive control and abusive behaviour continued through deliberate withholding of our children coupled with threats and gloating in text messages that it would be “months” before I’d see the children. Abusers in this situation know how slow the court processes are and use them to their advantage to continue to exert control and dominate their victim. I was initially forced by my abuser to agree to demeaning conditions to see our children including that she confiscated my car key during the visit, that I only see them at the former family home and with her hovering around and making disparaging remarks whilst I played with our children or attended to their needs.
 - Support services and Police need to be acutely aware that the coercive control and abusive behaviour often continues, albeit in a different form, after the victim flees the home.

Discussion question 3 – how to improve community understanding

- I think there needs to be much more advertising, through different media, with more examples taken from the bullet points on p11 DP1. Perhaps the campaign could highlight and seek to educate how to disagree respectfully. It sounds trite and like it should go without saying but there needs to be a level of community education and acceptance of what's "acceptable" and what's "abusive" in terms of relationship interactions.
- Also making clear that it is not just one or a couple of isolated incidents of abusive or controlling behaviour but perhaps showing that it's usually an ongoing and gradual degradation and subordination of the victim. It was certainly true in my case, and I expect in many others, that victims "hang-in" for as long as they can because of their children and the challenges and disruption for their children mentioned earlier which inevitably results from fleeing the abuse.

Discussion questions 4 & 5 – Opportunities for the media to improve & terminology

- There seems to be some pervading notion, in my experience, about "domestic" violence somehow being less heinous and newsworthy than violence between strangers. I think the term "family violence" has less stigma attached to it, but still has the implicit notion that there needs to be some physical element to the abuse.
- I wonder whether a change to terminology like "relationship abuse and coercion" might be helpful to broaden the community perception of what the issues are?

Discussion question 7 – victim assistance: what worked and what didn't

- I probably have a somewhat one-sided view on this topic because very little worked well in terms of support for me seeking assistance as a male victim of family violence and coercive control.
- What worked well was the automated referral/contact details to various support telephone lines after reporting incidents to the Police. Those came through promptly each time.
- What didn't work well is a much longer list:
 - Triple Zero dispatchers literally saying to me "it's very difficult for police in these types of situations, you know if you were bleeding it would be much easier for them".
 - Police sergeants, advising through the PoliceLink call operators that "well if you were actually worried about your children, you would have taken them with you". No response was provided when I advised that on one occasion, I had tried to do exactly that after enduring a day of abuse and being screamed at to "just take the children and go then", but was physically assaulted by my wife and prevented from leaving with our children.
 - In one incident my wife had chased me into my car and pounded on the window demanding the keys after I had locked myself in to escape her assaulting me. My abuser then stood behind my car so I could not back out to leave without running her over. When I related this when providing a statement to police, the officer said the incident did not warrant any further consideration because "well you could have just got out of the car and left". I find it hard to imagine that this would have been said to a woman if her husband had been the one chasing her and pounding on the car window.