

Criminalising coercive control in South Australia – Engagement with women with lived experience

A summary of initial consultations

On 17 January 2023 the Department of Human Services (DHS) held an engagement session with women who have lived experience of family and domestic violence, to discuss their views around criminalising coercive control and gain and understanding of the implications of this legislation, once it takes effect. Participants were members of the Embolden Voices for Change program and are active in the prevention and advocacy space.

Prior to the session, participants were provided with discussion paper – [Criminalising coercive control in South Australia for women with lived experience](#). This paper provides a definition of coercive control, explains the unintended consequences that legislation may have and asks a number of questions for participants to consider.

This is a summary of the key themes and issues raised by participants.

Please be aware that the content in this document may be distressing or raise issues of concern for some readers. There are a range of services available if you require support after reading this paper. Lifeline provide 24/7 crisis support and can be contacted on 131 114. Beyond Blue also provide support services and can be contacted on 1300 224 636. Confidential information, counselling and support services can also be accessed through 1800RESPECT.

Understanding of coercive control from a lived experience perspective

Participants agreed that coercive control can manifest in many different ways. Common themes included acts of manipulation – seemingly subtle behaviours that are often not recognised for what they are in the moment and before you realise, you are ‘stuck’ in the relationship.

The insidious nature of coercive control was also a common theme. There was agreement that many of the behaviours are difficult to define, while others are quite black and white. Similarly, some forms of coercive control are common across relationships, other forms are very individual and specific to the person being coercively controlled.

‘Coercive control is when an intimate partner identifies all the things that make you up as a person, and then begins to chip away at them and uses those things as a tool against you in their bullying behaviours’.

A very common form of coercive control is the use of children to bully and instil fear in the victim-survivor.

Participants agreed that the nuanced differences between emotional and psychological abuse, and coercive control are also difficult to define – but agreed that the abuse is a spectrum, or a continuum of violence.

A common picture of a coercive control perpetrator emerged as the ‘smiling assassin’ – a person who presents well professionally, is thought of by others as being nice or charming, but who is actually very manipulative and careful not to show those controlling behaviours in public. Someone who says they are doing things for their partner ‘in their best interest’, ‘for their protection’ and because they are ‘just looking out’ for them.

Community understanding and education requirements

It was broadly agreed amongst participants that education about respectful relationships should begin in kindergarten and continue throughout schooling, for all children in all schools. A common concern raised during all consultations to date has been that school-aged children are using social media apps to monitor friends’ or partner’s movements and friendships.

The importance of targeting older people specifically was also raised, as participants felt that older people had less of an understanding of non-physical forms of abuse, and possibly less-progressive views about relationships more generally.

All participants thought that education about coercive control and trauma informed responses must extend to the legal profession, medical profession, and government departments including Centrelink, who will often speak to women experiencing coercive control.

Community education, and common perpetrator tactics and ‘red flags’

‘You’re such a good friend, you’re always the one doing everything. I don’t see your friends calling you, why don’t you see what they give back if you don’t speak to them?’.

Participants expressed a desire to see community education about ‘red flags’ and early warning signs of coercive controlling behaviours, suggesting that posing questions such as ‘do you have a say in what is happening in your relationship?’, or ‘do you make your own decisions?’ would be beneficial. One participant disclosed that she had always felt as though her relationship was a ‘rollercoaster’ but is now aware that is the cycle of violence, suggesting ‘do you feel as though your relationship is a rollercoaster?’.

Specialist family and domestic violence sector understanding about coercive control, and survivor experiences

‘Fear. Fear is invisible but it is so powerful’.

The level of fear a woman is feeling was something that was brought up as being important when assessing her level of risk. Participants stressed that women must be believed and supported when reporting violence and cited the rarity of false allegations.

Participants shared their personal stories, citing negative experiences with service providers for instance, savings being removed from a victim survivor’s account by the bank at the request of the perpetrator, despite him not having access to that account.

There was unanimous agreement that more funding is needed for the FDV sector and agreement that women and children are being turned away from services with nowhere to live.

The need for response and recovery services, in addition to crisis services, was raised as services do not have capacity to continue supporting women after that crisis point. Participants felt it is important for women to have ongoing support, to ensure their recovery, but also to ensure that they are not forced into returning to an abusive situation because they don’t have access to the support they need to stay away.

Accountability for perpetrators

A very strong theme was the need for greater accountability – for perpetrators who breach bail conditions, perpetrators who breach Intervention Order (IO) conditions and perpetrators who lie to police and justice systems. Participants expressed a desire to see the legislation reflect greater penalties for breaches and some assurance that police will enforce them. There was general consensus that if perpetrator actions had consequences that were followed up and reinforced, that the behaviour might stop.

The need for cross-jurisdictional records of perpetrators who attempt to relocate, or change their name was also raised. One participant shared her experience of a perpetrator who changed his surname, and the police were unaware it had occurred.

Other suggestions included:

- A way to remove perpetrators from the home – women should not be made to leave
- Women’s advocates in men’s behaviour change programs
- Promotion of the Serial Offender Database.