

Coercive Control: A New Model for Understanding Domestic Violence

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According to Evan Stark, a professor at Rutgers University, the traditional view and response to domestic violence ignores the actual experience of many abused women.¹ Traditionally most domestic violence has been viewed as individual incidents of assault or threats, so that the severity of the violence is measured by the physical and psychological harm that results from those discrete incidents. Stark's work is part of a new body of research that suggests that instead of being victims of individual acts of violence, most abused women are subjected to a pattern of domination through intimidation, isolation, degradation, and deprivation, in addition to physical assault. This pattern of abuse is referred to as coercive control.

Coercive control, in contrast to the "violence model," includes tactics such as stalking, monitoring or regulating the victim's activities of daily living such as her access to money, food and transportation. The tactics may include controlling how the victim dresses, cleans, cooks, or performs sexually. These types of extreme control measures target the victim's autonomy, independence and dignity in ways that compromise her ability to make decisions to escape from the subjugation.

Professor Stark suggests that by failing to recognize the pervasiveness of coercive control and addressing all domestic abuse through the lens of the violence model, current interventions have limited effectiveness. Reframing domestic violence as coercive control will require law and policy changes that recognize its "ongoing" and cumulative effects. It will recognize psychological and emotional abuse by offenders while avoiding manipulation by offenders who claim emotional abuse by their victims. This recognition will result, in turn, in a changed response by police, clinicians and social service providers who will shift their efforts away from encouraging victims to "leave" to denying offenders access to their victims. This shift will have implications for how protective orders are framed and how social services are provided.

The Advocates for Human Rights recommends that laws that include the term "psychological violence" in their definition of domestic violence be amended to omit that term and instead target coercive and controlling behaviors as suggested in Professor Stark's article. Laws that include psychological violence in their definitions have resulted in victims being arrested and charged.

¹ Evan Stark, "Re-presenting Battered Women: Coercive Control and the Defense of Liberty" (prepared for Violence Against Women: Complex Realities and New Issues in a Changing World, Les Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2012), http://www.stopvaw.org/uploads/evan_stark_article_final_100812.pdf