



Coercive control and the primary prevention of family violence

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Introduction

Respect Victoria is the statutory authority charged with leading and advising on the primary prevention of all forms of family violence and violence against women. Our focus is stopping violence before it starts by changing the culture that allows it to happen.

We apply a primary prevention approach to all forms of family violence and violence against women. This addresses the social norms, practices and structures across the whole community that influence individual attitudes and behaviours and allow violence to happen, particularly those linked to gender equality.

Within Australia, coercive control has emerged as an issue of intensive media coverage and public discussion. This includes debate about whether the introduction of a standalone criminal offence of coercive control would lead to greater safety for victim-survivors and improved mechanisms for holding perpetrators to account.

After initial consultation with key stakeholders in Victoria, Respect Victoria has developed this foundational perspective to support effective policy discussion and ensure that a primary prevention perspective remains prominent in this debate.

We do not seek to make a judgement on the merits of legislative change but to support better understanding of the dynamics underlying coercive control, highlight the role of primary prevention in addressing the attitudes, structures and norms that drive these behaviours, and ensure that any legislative framework and implementation approaches are designed to also have effective preventative impact.

Understanding coercive control

Coercive control is not a new concept. The current community discussion about coercive control represents a growing awareness, and more sophisticated understanding in the community about the manifestations of family violence and violence against women. The discussion is a good opportunity for us to better understand the underlying drivers of this particular characterisation of family violence and violence against women – to ensure we can reduce and ultimately prevent this violence together.

Respect Victoria recognises coercive control as key element of family violence and violence against women, and as an overarching term incorporating many commonly recognised manifestations of violence, such as psychological, emotional, financial, spiritual, physical and sexual abuse, as well as other forms of abuse.ⁱ

Coercive control is often characterised as a pattern of ongoing, continuous abuse over time that often is covert and difficult to identify. While coercive control may co-occur with more overt incidents of physical and/or sexual violence, it is critical to recognise that coercive control may be an insidious and extremely harmful feature of a violent relationship long before any physical violence takes place.ⁱⁱ

Coercive controlling behaviours are often very direct expressions of key underlying drivers of family violence and violence against women, particularly in regard to rigid gender stereotypes, men's control of decision making and limits to women's independence and an inappropriate sense of entitlement.

Respect Victoria acknowledges coercive control as a phenomenon predominantly experienced by women and perpetrated by men. We note however that it is not unique to intimate partner relationships

and can exist in a range of familial or family-like relationships, including in same sex relationships, between children and older parents and in carer relationships to name a few.

Noting these differences, coercive control may present differently and require tailored approaches (to both prevention and response) depending on systemic issues and/or the individual circumstances of the victim and perpetrator – for example, migrant status (in the form of visa abuse), the power a disability support worker may have over a person with a disability (in the form of limiting freedoms and supports), or gender identity (in the form of denial of gender-affirming medication).

Respect Victoria believes that whilst building the evidence base on coercive control relating to male to female intimate partner violence is required, there is also a need to enhance the knowledge and understanding on the perpetration, experience and impact of coercive control outside the context of heterosexual, intimate partner relationships.

Preventing coercive control

Respect Victoria advocates an approach to coercive control that is rooted in primary prevention. We believe we must prevent all forms of coercive and controlling behaviours before they start. By addressing the underlying attitudes and behaviours that drive coercive control early, we can prevent it and other forms of family violence that may follow or accompany it.

Primary prevention efforts are by nature long-term, and require ongoing investment and attention. Preventing coercive control – like other long-term social and behavioural change efforts including road safety, smoking cessation, and skin cancer reduction – requires a whole of community response, across all the areas we live, work, learn and play. This is to ensure prevention activity reaches all populations, engages individuals and organisations to change attitudes, practices and systems that lead to violence.

As with any form of family violence or violence against women, the key to addressing coercive control is to recognise that it is the product of social norms and structural inequalities. These include the gendered drivers of violence against women as outlined in *Change the Story*ⁱⁱⁱ, a false sense of entitlement and power imbalances that exist within society.

Respect Victoria also recognises that efforts to prevent coercive control must address other forms of inequality and discrimination that can drive and intersect with the gendered drivers, including racism, colonisation, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, bi-phobia, acephobia, and heterosexism.

Respect Victoria views an effective primary prevention-based approach to coercive control as involving the whole community in making changes to policies, practices, and skills to address the issue at a systemic and structural level. It means designing primary prevention policies and programs that more explicitly address coercive control as part of broader spectrum of family violence and violence against women.

Practical aspects of a coordinated effort to eliminate coercive control across the community include:

- building the evidence-base for the types and appearances of these behaviours, who perpetrates them, and what drives and reinforces them;
- community education initiatives that increase public understanding of these behaviours, their unacceptability, and how we can all help by intervening at the earliest point as bystanders
- engaging with a wide range of sectors working in different settings to prevent the emergence of these forms of family violence, ensuring that such efforts are accessible, acceptable and tailored to diverse communities
- working with organisations to ensure that they do not tacitly or overtly condone or foster attitudes and social norms that fuel coercive control
- investing in monitoring and evaluation of family violence prevention programs in a way that ensures that such programs capture specific aspects of coercive control
- supporting improved data collection on the experiences of as well as the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours associated with coercive control to better inform primary prevention programs.

All these efforts in prevention must be inclusive of and led by the diverse experiences of the Victorian community, including Aboriginal people, people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, LGBTIQ+ people, older people, and people with disability.

Complementary action on coercive control

Primary prevention is the only way to substantively reduce the overall prevalence of family violence and violence against women across the population and ultimately prevent this form occurring in the first place. For this reason, Respect Victoria asserts that society's efforts to police and punish family violence should support and advance a broader primary prevention approach.

Enforced legal sanctions against coercive control and primary prevention have the potential to complement each other. Legal sanction can clarify what is considered unacceptable behaviour within relationships, and validate the experiences of victim-survivors, of which includes highlighting the seriousness of non-physical forms of abuse.^{iv} It can place serious, negative associations on ongoing, non-physical forms of violence. In this way, increasing the possibility of apprehension for coercive control may act as general deterrence for specific sections of the population^v, and help to accelerate broader cultural changes. But criminalisation and enforcement alone will not prevent coercive control as it is an inherently reactive approach dealing with situations once they have developed to a harmful point.

Respect Victoria stresses the importance of centring the voices of prevention of family violence and violence against women experts and those organisations who work with and represent people from diverse communities in the criminalisation debate. Many advocates from Victoria have rightly expressed concerns regarding the impact of criminalisation^{vi vii viii ix}, including:

- risk that placing more behaviours under an enforcement regime will drive them underground, rather than encourage positive, prevention-oriented action.
- possible unintended consequences, particularly for at-risk individuals and marginalised communities.
- potential to cause more harm to victim-survivors of abuse, particularly in those communities with a valid distrust of law enforcement and the justice system.
- risk of perpetrators using the legal system to commit systems abuse and further terrorise victim-survivors.

For these reasons it is particularly important that any legislative approach not be pursued without attending at the same time to the more fundamental drivers of family violence and violence against women— including discrimination, marginalisation, inequality and abuse of power - which also often drive inequality in access to justice and support. Any legislative response to coercive control, of which includes education, capacity building, other policy changes, must also be supported and complemented by a whole-of-community primary prevention approach.

A primary prevention-based approach to addressing coercive control will strengthen partnerships across the prevention and response sector, building a more sustainable family violence system. It will encourage the entire community to take responsibility for preventing coercive control, ultimately creating a safer Victoria.

Further considerations

Respect Victoria is continuing to work with partners across the family violence prevention sector, and associated sectors, to advance understanding of this issue and to identify practical and effective ways to implement a holistic primary prevention approach.

There are many voices within the Victorian community that should be part of the conversation about the most appropriate way to address coercive control. While noting that the current debate is broad and complex, Respect Victoria is keen to explore the following challenges that we believe are critical for government, policy makers and community organisations to consider when addressing this issue:

1. How can we best identify, describe and monitor the attitudes, social norms and behaviours that underpin and drive coercive control for diverse communities and cohorts?

2. What specific types of primary prevention activity will be most helpful in addressing the patterned occurrence of coercive control and how can we advance these building on existing primary prevention capacity in key community settings?
 3. How best can a primary prevention approach support and respond to any legislative or response measures to coercive control? In particular, how can it best support diverse communities and those most marginalised and experiencing discrimination, including Aboriginal communities?
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About Respect Victoria

Respect Victoria is an organisation dedicated to the primary prevention of all forms of family violence and violence against women. Our focus is stopping violence before it starts, by changing the norms, practices and structures that allow it to happen. Our work spans all manifestations of family violence and all forms of violence against women across all Victorian communities.

Respect Victoria is a statutory authority established under the Prevention of Family Violence Act 2018 (the Act) to fulfil Recommendation 188 of the Royal Commission into Family Violence (the Royal Commission). We exist to drive primary prevention over the long-term and ensure prevention efforts are considered and coordinated and deliver on commitments under Recommendation 187 of the Royal Commission and Free from violence: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women.

Respect Victoria's legislated responsibilities under the Act include providing advice to the Victorian Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence on policy, decision making and funding. We monitor and report on trends in family violence and violence against women. We undertake and disseminate research into the drivers of family violence and all forms of violence against women. Using this research, we develop and promote best practice primary prevention programming.

References

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