

inTouch!



Understanding Coercive Control

in Migrant and Refugee Communities

inTouch

Women's Legal Centre

WHAT IS COERCIVE CONTROL?

Coercive control is an underpinning dynamic of family violence that can affect individuals across all demographics. Coercive control is defined as a pattern of behaviour aimed at dominating and controlling another person, often through manipulation and intimidation. It involves various tactics to limit autonomy, isolate victim-survivors from support networks, and instil fear to maintain power and control.

Detecting coercive control is crucial, as it may initially go unnoticed but can intensify over time. The impacts of coercive control can be emotional, psychological, spiritual, cultural, social, financial, physical, or a combination of these. Coercive control is a significant risk factor for homicide, with coercive control often present in cases where a person has killed their partner and/or children.

Many of the behaviours used as part of coercive control are unlawful, including forced labour, servitude, and financial abuse. In Victoria, the Victorian Family Violence Protection Act includes coercive behaviour in its definition of family violence, allowing individuals experiencing coercive control to obtain a family violence intervention order for protection.

WHAT DOES COERCIVE CONTROL LOOK LIKE IN MIGRANT AND REFUGEE COMMUNITIES?

Coercive control behaviours include isolation, monitoring and surveillance, financial control, emotional and psychological abuse, threats and intimidation, sexual coercion, micromanaging, manipulation and gaslighting, and using children to control the victim-survivor. These dynamics may differ within Australia's diverse migrant and refugee communities, where cultural norms can influence how coercive control manifests. In certain contexts, family roles shaped by cultural and religious beliefs may be manipulated to justify and rationalise controlling behaviours in relationships.

MIGRANT AND REFUGEE EXPERIENCES OF COERCIVE CONTROL ARE COMPOUNDED BY:

- Language and literacy barriers
- Isolation and lack of support
- Community and cultural expectations
- Cultural norms and stigma
- Financial dependence on their partner
- Religious beliefs
- Visa status and fear of deportation – insecure immigration status is a significant factor
- Lack of understanding of rights in Australia in relation to abuse within a relationship
- Not being able to work and/or attend education
- Distrust of and unfamiliarity with authorities/law enforcement
- Legal and systematic barriers
- Trauma and past experiences

1 COMPLEX FAMILY DYNAMICS

Family dynamics can be intricate, and perpetrators may exploit familial obligations and cultural expectations to manipulate and dominate their partners.

For instance:

- Hierarchical Structure: Hierarchical family structures and strong adherence to cultural norms may create conditions where one family member, often the male head of the household, exerts significant control over others.
- Involvement of Extended Family: Extended family members can play a role in perpetrating domestic and family violence. They may directly participate in threatening, gaslighting, or mistreating women, contributing to a culture of control and fear. It's important to recognise that extended family members can be perpetrators themselves, actively contributing to the abuse experienced by victim-survivors.
- Threatening of Children: Using children as pawns or weapons to exert control, manipulate the woman's behaviour, or punish her for perceived transgressions.

2 VISA ABUSE & IMMIGRATION RELATED COERCION

Perpetrators of intimate partner violence may exploit their partner's immigration status to perpetuate coercive control. While migration-related abuse can occur in various contexts, research shows that it often manifests significantly in situations where a partner's visa or residency is dependent on their spouse.

Examples include:

- Threatening Deportation: Perpetrators may threaten to report the victim-survivor to authorities or withdraw sponsorship, putting them at risk of deportation and separation from support networks.
- Withholding Documentation: Perpetrators may confiscate essential documents such as passports and visas, further restricting the victim-survivor's freedom and ability to seek help.
- Sabotaging Residency/Citizenship Efforts: Perpetrators may threaten to sabotage the victim-survivor's efforts to obtain residency or citizenship, trapping them in the abusive relationship and perpetuating control.

3 DOWRY ABUSE

Dowry abuse, prevalent in specific cultural contexts with dowry traditions, represents a form of financial exploitation that can be used for manipulation and exploitation within intimate relationships.

Examples include:

- Demanding Additional Dowry: Perpetrators exploit dowry traditions by continuously demanding more dowry from the victim-survivor's family, leading to financial strain and leveraging control.
- Threatening Marriage Dissolution or Violence: Perpetrators may use threats of dissolving the marriage or subjecting the victim-survivor to violence if their dowry-related demands are not met.



OTHER EXAMPLES:**Cultural and religious restrictions**

Perpetrators may exploit cultural or religious beliefs to impose strict rules and limitations on the victim-survivor's behaviour, clothing, and social interactions. This can include:

- Dictating what the victim-survivors can wear, where they can go, and who they can associate with based on cultural or religious norms.
- Using religious teachings to justify controlling behaviours, such as prohibiting the victim-survivor from seeking education or employment outside the home.

Language barriers and isolation

Language barriers can exacerbate feelings of isolation and dependency, making it difficult for victim-survivors to seek help or communicate their experiences. Perpetrators may:

- Control the victim-survivors' access to language classes or interpreting services, further isolating them from mainstream society.
- Deliberately misinterpret or withhold information to manipulate the victim-survivors' understanding of their rights and options.

Financial exploitation

Financial abuse is a common tactic used to maintain power and control over victim-survivors, particularly in multicultural communities where economic dependence may be heightened. This can include:

- Controlling access to finances and resources, such as bank accounts and income, leaving the victim financially dependent on the perpetrator.
- Forcing the victim-survivor to hand over earnings or welfare payments or sabotaging their employment opportunities to maintain control.

Threats of honour-based violence

In some cultures, honour-based violence may be used as a tool to enforce compliance and uphold family reputation. Perpetrators may:

- Threaten the victim-survivor with physical violence, including honour killings or other forms of retribution, if they defy cultural expectations or attempt to leave the abusive relationship.
- Use the fear of shame and isolation from the community or home as a means of control, preventing the victim-survivor from seeking help or leaving the relationship.

Servitude

Various forms of servitude intersect with coercive control, creating a dynamic where victim-survivors are compelled to undertake tasks such as house cleaning, caregiving, or other laborious duties without fair compensation or consent. Domestic servitude manifests within the realm of domestic work, and sexual servitude involves the threat, use of force, or detainment of another against their will for the provision of sexual services.

It is important to recognise that servitude is a Commonwealth Criminal Offence, and victims should be encouraged to report such instances to the Australian Federal Police for assistance and intervention.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH CLIENTS EXPERIENCING COERCIVE CONTROL

Recognising coercive control often requires digging beneath the surface, as evidence may not be obvious. Effective communication involves asking targeted questions and actively listening to clients' experiences to uncover subtle patterns indicative of coercive control. Some tips for asking questions:



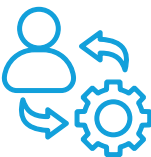
Talk to the client separately

Ensure privacy and confidentiality by speaking to the woman individually, away from her partner or family members. Community or familial ties may shape a woman's perceptions of her rights and options, affecting her willingness to seek help outside of her cultural or religious community.



Avoid using the partner/family as interpreters

Use professional interpreting services to facilitate communication, ensuring accuracy and confidentiality.



Avoid assuming understanding of the system

Recognise that the woman may have limited knowledge of legal and support systems and provide information in a clear and accessible manner.



Inform about available support services

Inform the woman about available support services and resources, emphasising that help is available when she is ready to access it.



Respect the woman's choices and decision-making

Respect the autonomy and decision-making of the woman, acknowledging that this is her experience.



Build trust and make the woman comfortable to talk

Create a supportive and non-threatening environment where the woman feels comfortable expressing herself and seeking assistance. Understand that women from certain cultural groups may have historical or personal reasons to distrust law enforcement, government agencies, or mainstream service providers, making them hesitant to seek assistance.



Listen without judgment and be aware of your own cultural bias

Practice active listening without imposing personal judgments or biases, allowing the woman to share her experience openly and without fear of judgment. You should also reflect on and challenge personal biases to provide culturally sensitive and non-judgmental support.

WHAT TO DO WHEN COERCIVE CONTROL IS DISCLOSED



Immediate response

Believe and validate the woman's experiences, ensure safety by assessing immediate needs and offering support, maintain confidentiality and document disclosures.



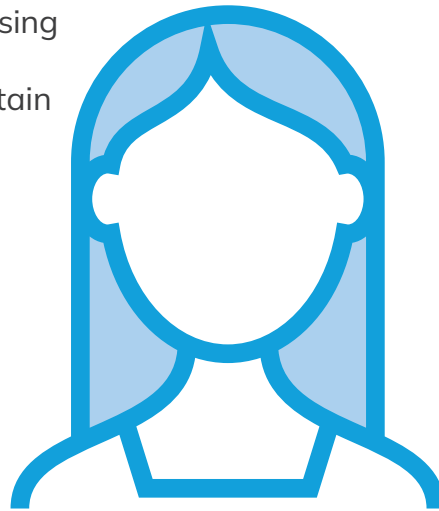
Safety planning

Help the woman develop safety plans tailored to her specific circumstances, considering cultural factors and potential barriers.



Cultural sensitivity

Provide culturally competent and language-accessible services that acknowledge the unique challenges faced by multicultural women and use female interpreters where appropriate.



Collaborative approach

Work with other service providers, establish clear referral pathways to connect survivors with specialised services, and coordinate safety planning efforts tailored to the woman's circumstances.



Empowerment and support

Encourage decision-making, provide information on available support services and legal rights, offer emotional support and schedule follow-up appointments.

Example questions you may ask to help identify coercive control include:

“What does he do when he wants to hurt you?”

“Do you feel like you have to justify your actions or choices to your partner?”

“Do you get the chance to see your friends/family when you want to?”

“Do you have access to money when you need to?”

“What do you use to buy yourself something?”



CASE STUDY — FATIMA'S STORY

Background

Fatima is a 35-year-old woman who immigrated to Australia five years ago with her husband, Ahmed, and their two children. Fatima's cultural background values family honor and obedience to male authority figures. She speaks limited English and relies on Ahmed to communicate with others and manage household affairs.

Presentation

Fatima presents to a women's local community support centre seeking assistance with her marital situation. She appears anxious and hesitant to speak, often glancing at Ahmed for reassurance.

Upon further inquiry, Fatima discloses that Ahmed controls all aspects of her life, including finances, social interactions, and even her clothing choices. She expresses fear of Ahmed's anger and retaliation if she were to defy his wishes.

Recommended service provider response

The service provider ensures privacy and confidentiality for Fatima and conducts a risk assessment to address immediate safety concerns. They validate Fatima's experiences and offer emotional support while empowering her to make decisions regarding her safety and well-being. The worker provides information on available support services, legal rights, and options for safety planning tailored to Fatima's cultural background.

They establish a referral pathway to connect Fatima with culturally competent support services and legal assistance, ensuring ongoing follow-up and support.

Outcome

- With the support of the service provider, Fatima develops a safety plan and accesses community resources to address her situation.
- She gains confidence in her ability to make decisions for herself and her children, and begins taking steps towards independence from Ahmed's control.
- Through ongoing support and empowerment, Fatima is able to navigate her journey towards safety

Coercive Control Indicators



Financial dependence

Fatima has no access to money and must ask Ahmed for permission to make purchases.



Emotional abuse

Ahmed frequently belittles Fatima, undermines her confidence, and threatens to harm her or their children if she questions his authority.



Isolation

Ahmed monitors Fatima's interactions with neighbors and restricts her from attending community events or seeking employment.



Cultural pressure

Fatima feels obligated to uphold cultural norms of obedience and submission, fearing judgment and shame from her community if she were to seek help.

Further information and support:



inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence

Call **1800 755 988** to speak to support staff, or email intake@intouch.org.au.
Open 9:00am – 5:00pm
Monday – Friday
www.intouch.org.au



Safe Steps

Call **1800 015 188** for crisis support, information and accommodation
Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
www.safesteps.org.au



1800RESPECT

Call **1800 737 732** for domestic, family and sexual violence counselling, information and support. Live online chat available.
www.1800respect.org.au



The Orange Door

Find help for family violence near you.
www.orangedoor.vic.gov.au



Red Cross

Emergency Relief for Temporary Visa Holders payment information
www.redcross.org.au/migration/emergency-relief

Coercive control in multicultural women, including refugee and migrant populations, presents complex challenges that require a nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics and barriers.

By recognising and understanding these unique factors and their implications and providing culturally sensitive support, service providers can better assist survivors in breaking free from abusive situations and rebuilding their lives.

If you need an interpreter for any of these services, call TIS (Translating and Interpreting Services) on **131 450** and ask them to call the above numbers. Visit www.tisnational.gov.au

If information about potential criminal offences such as forced marriage or servitude are disclosed or suspected, woman should be encouraged and provided support to report to the police.