# Understanding Coercive Control Within and Beyond the Domestic Environment

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**Abstract**

In England and Wales, 2015, the Serious Crime Act (section 76) implemented the criminalisation of controlling or coercive behaviour, closing a gap in the law around 'patterns of abuse' in intimate partner or family relationships. Coercive control is at the heart of most intimate partner/domestic abuse, however, conviction rates have remained low. This study therefore investigates why evidencing/seeking support for coercive-controlling offences remains a challenge. Founded upon feminist standpoint epistemology, the study was conducted via 20 semi-structured interviews: ten with survivors of coercive control; one with the parent of a 12-year-old survivor; nine with practitioners/professionals working with victim-survivors and perpetrators of coercive control. Experiences explored in these interviews are analysed using thematic methods, providing rich insights into coercive control and building on how theory/practice can take the concept of coercive control forward.

My research shows the definition of coercive control informing UK policy/service intervention is limited in its confinement to the domestic. Dominant conceptualisations fail to capture victim-survivors' experiences of coercive control that extend, structurally and/or systemically, beyond the domestic, across services intended to help, and enabling perpetrators to continue offending. This problem is also identified in relation to systematic patterns of abuse, perpetrated within workplaces, communities, and families, demonstrating how coercive control occurs both interpersonally and collectively: within and beyond the domestic on a continuum extending into organisational/institutional help-seeking contexts. My research addresses three key areas of coercive control in policy and practice: difficulties evidencing coercive control by criminal justice and support systems; how private/interpersonal and public/social/institutional violence intersect in coercive control; coercive control operating on a continuum. I argue existing conceptualisations and policy practices struggle to recognise and respond to the complex spectrum of coercive control; therefore proposing a framing not limited to domestic/interpersonal but operating on a continuum between private/public, individual/collective, domestic/institutional, meaningfully extending beyond the domestic.

# Table of Contents

**List of Tables**

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Last but by no means least, special thanks go to my very special family, it is impossible to put into words my gratitude for your love, support, care, and belief in me.

## Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the loving memory of Zuri Mwangi, he is forever in our hearts.

2nd May 2020

**Chapter One: Introduction**

**1.1 Research Focus and Key Concepts**

This study examines the findings of a doctoral research project in Women's Studies that endeavours to extend the scholarly conceptualisations of coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse. Simultaneously, the study seeks to cultivate a critical consciousness of coercive control, which is perpetrated beyond the domestic environment, such as workplaces and institutions. The project has three core aims: to develop the academic conceptualisations of coercive control to elucidate the issues that impede the evidencing of this type of violence and abuse; to investigate the connections between private and public violence/abuse in relation to coercive-controlling offending; and to situate the concept of coercive control beyond the domestic. This chapter provides an introduction to the project and illustrates why it makes an original contribution to a vital and developing area of scholarship. It begins by introducing the three core concepts that the study focuses upon, and how they are delineated: the difficulties of evidencing coercive control; the connections between private and public violence/abuse; the concept of coercive control beyond the domestic realm.

*1.1.1 Defining Coercive Control*

Coercive control has become a prominent theory relating to violence and abuse in intimate partner relationships since the early 1980s; it is conceptualised as a 'course of conduct' that is aimed at dominating and controlling another (usually an intimate partner, but can be other family members) (Home Office, 2023). The key element in all definitions of coercive control, is the emphasis on a repeated pattern of behaviour that is designed to undermine the autonomy of another person (Stark, 2007). Coercive control is essentially the invidious assertion of personal power, not necessarily by force and/or physical violence, but by strategies of psychological, emotional, and financial abuse (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Acts of physical violence may also be present, but they are not required in all cases of coercive control to instil the level of 'entrapment' that Stark (2013) contends should be the principal calculus of harm.

The embrace of controlling or coercive behaviour was included in the England and Wales Home Office 2014 definition of domestic abuse; and subsequently embedded into legislation with the introduction of section 76 of the Serious Crime Act in 2015 (Home Office, 2015) making coercive control a criminal offence and stating that:

A person (A) commits an offence if—

(a) A repeatedly or continuously engages in behaviour towards another person (B) that is controlling or coercive, (b) At the time of the behaviour, A and B are personally connected, (c) The behaviour has a serious effect on B, and (d) A knows or ought to know that the behaviour will have a serious effect on B (Home Office, 2015: 3).

Section 68 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (the 2021 Act) amended the definition of 'personally connected' in section 76 of the 2015 Act (Home Office, 2015). This removed the 'living together' requirement, which means that the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour now applies to partners, ex-partners, or family members, regardless of whether the victim-survivor and perpetrator live together (Gov.UK, 2021a).

### 1.1.2 The Difficulty of Evidencing Coercive Control

In the United Kingdom (UK) (and some jurisdictions beyond), while coercive control is a criminalised form of perpetrator behaviour in intimate partner or family relationships (Home Office, 2015; 2023; Northern Ireland Assembly, 2022; Scottish Government, 2019), problematically, it is not readily identified and evidenced by personnel within UK service systems (for example, the police and the Crime Prosecution Service (CPS) (Brennan and Myhill, 2021)) or by the wider public (Robinson et al., 2017). This permits many abusers to maintain their violence/abuse indefinitely, which is consistently reflected in the low conviction rates for solely controlling and coercive behaviour offences (ONS, 2021, 2022, 2023a).

The perpetration of coercive control, recorded by police forces in England and Wales, increased by almost a quarter in the year ending March 2022, which was indicative of a record high (ONS, 2022); however, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) data, 2023, shows a further increase in the cases recorded (ONS, 2023a). ONS also report that in the year to March 2022, only 3.4 percent of the 41,626 cases recorded resulted in a charge (ONS, 2022).This is despite UK domestic abuse service provision (see, for example, SafeLives, 2022) and UK police forces' (Barlow et al., 2020) awareness of at least 80 percent prevalence of coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse (Kelly, 2016). Coercive control in these contexts (including, for example, isolation, threats, control, sexual coercion, and fear (Myhill and Hohl, 2016)), is most often corroborated when it is accompanied by evidence of perpetrators' overt physical violence (McGorrery and McMahon, 2019). Thus, the issue remains of identifying abusers' covert forms of violence/abuse, such as coercive control, and the psychological harm (as opposed to evidencing the signs of physical violence) they cause to victim-survivors.

The ONS statistical data also shows a year-upon-year increase in the perpetration of coercive control recorded by the police in England and Wales: 33,954 cases were recorded in the year ending March 2021 (ONS, 2021); as mentioned, 41,626 cases were recorded in

the year ending March 2022 (ONS, 2022); and 43,774 cases (excluding Devon and Cornwall, due to an issue with data supply) were recorded in the year ending March 2023 (ONS, 2023b). There were 811 defendant proceedings, and 566 offenders were convicted of controlling or coercive behaviour (1.29 percent of the 43,774 cases recorded) in the year ending March 2023 in England and Wales (where controlling or coercive behaviour was the principal offence (ONS, 2023b)). Cases "recorded by the police" suggests that coercive control is reported, or identified by the police, while there is a huge discrepancy between recording occurrences and perpetrators being charged for coercive-controlling offences.

The annual increase in the perpetration of coercive control and the consistently low conviction rates for those offences raise the issue of how effective the law is in preventing and combatting these types of crimes. In turn, this justifies my investigation into the difficulties of evidencing coercive control, addressing the problem of not holding the majority of perpetrators to account for their offences, and examining how effectively the concept of coercive control translates in the England and Wales legislation, policy, and practice.

### 1.1.3 The Connections Between Private and Public Violence

The United Nations defines violence against women as:

> Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (United Nations, 1993).

Private and public violence complement and strengthen one another; through their interconnection, these forms of violence are maintained by harmful masculinities, discriminatory social norms, structural gender inequalities and stereotypes that repress women and girls both in the home and in public (CEDAW, 2017). Private violence and abuse - in the home and by intimate partners or family members - is upheld by public violence in the form of the ongoing threats and the everyday experiences of misogyny, violence, and abuse that are perpetrated against women and girls by men and boys (Dawson, 2024). Experiences that inhibit women and girl's movements and activities, keep them closer to home; this status quo is reinforced, despite claims of various systems (such as governments, police, and courts) and individual men that women and girls will be protected (Dawson, 2024). However, we need only to look at women in the public eye, including those in politics, women human rights defenders, and journalists to see that they are often targets of intentional acts of violence and abuse, both online and in person, with some attacks leading to fatal outcomes - a stark reminder that public violence serves to remind women to stay in their place (UN Women, 2023). Except that their place - the home - can also be a

place of violence and abuse (UN Women, 2023). Therefore, it is vital to not emphasise violence/abuse in one sphere over the other because they are complexly connected (Dawson, 2024). Furthermore, the way that women respond to the fear of sexual violence demonstrates that it is seen as a public sphere problem. While men tend to protect home and person in response to the fear of crime, women take social and lifestyle precautions which are most costly in terms of their personal freedom (Pain, 1991).

Women are not a homogenous group and gendered violence/abuse impacts some women to different degrees and in different ways, which calls for appropriate legal and policy responses (CEDAW, 2017). In particular, specific identities that are claimed or identified by others can lead to increased risks of facing disproportionate levels of discrimination, exclusion, and violence/abuse (CEDAW, 2017). These discriminatory factors include ethnicity/race, indigenous or minority status, colour, socioeconomic status, caste, language, religion, political opinion, national origin, marital and/or maternal status, age, urban/rural location, health status, disability, property ownership, being lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or intersex, and illiteracy (CEDAW, 2017).

### 1.1.4 The Perpetration of Coercive Control Beyond the Domestic Realm

Domestic abuse organisations, such as SafeLives (2022) and Women's Aid (2019), conceptualise a perpetrator's coercive control as "an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation, and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim" (Women's Aid, 2019:1). The UK domestic abuse sector, founded in the grassroots of feminist activism, has worked diligently to emphasise the key role that coercive control plays in patterns of perpetrator violence and abuse (Women's Aid, 2022a). What is less obvious and understood by much criminological and social science scholarship outside of feminist/Women's Studies, within the UK Government and the police, is the concept of coercive control that is perpetrated beyond the domestic. Limited conceptual understanding is one aspect of the problem, limited vocabulary and conceptual tools for victim-survivors' complex experiences on the coercive control continuum to be understood and responded to (for example, by community services and the police) are another part of the problem.

Institutionalised power and authority that enable a sense of entitlement can be evidenced in institutions and organisations; these are contexts where a person's status and authority, rather than nurturing an ethos of care, can be used to intimidate, manipulate, and silence individuals (Kelly, 2016). (Sara Ahmed, in *Complaint!* (2021) and *On Being Included* (2012), has provided examples of analysis that recognises and proposes ways of tackling 'everyday' institutional violence and abuse.) This results in a specific form of coercive control in settings where the law (or common definitions of coercive control) do not tend to have reach. For

example, the UK police are legally sanctioned to practice coercive and controlling behaviour as part of their everyday work: arrest, stop and search, strip search, the use of force, detention, mandatory questioning - all of which can be described as abusive if one person perpetrates these forms of violence and/or control against another (McBean, 2022).Yet this is how the police are permitted to routinely interact with people, often from structurally oppressed and marginalised groups, on a daily basis (McBean, 2022; Sistah Space, 2023).

As coercive control equates to power and control, it becomes significant that victim-survivors of this abusive behaviour are most often accorded less power in society: women and girls, sex workers, ethnic minorities, people of colour, the economically disenfranchised, disabled people, LGBTQ+ individuals, migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. And although not every police officer, or the professionals tasked with dealing with violence, are perpetrators of abuse, all police officers and these professionals operate within abusive systems (McBean, 2022). Therefore, the perception that the UK criminal justice system can resolve this form of violence and abuse without understanding the broader contextualities that enable coercive control to be perpetrated, I would argue, significantly restricts our comprehensive conceptualisation of controlling and coercive behaviour, as well as limiting the reach and effectiveness of any existing coercive control legislation and/or policy. Thus, existing scholarly conceptual understandings and policy practices are struggling to recognise, capture, and respond to the full complex spectrum of coercive control (to instil fear through power and control), given the dominant framings and emphasis on one-to-one relationships and domestic abuse, rather than a more in-depth conceptual understanding of coercive control beyond one-to-one relationships and domestic abuse, as well as understanding coercive control on a continuum.

## 1.2 Rationales for the Study

There are several motivations for conducting this study, both academic and personal, which I discuss below.

### 1.2.1 Academic Rationales for the Study

Domestic abuse accounts for almost a third of all violent crime recorded by the police in England and Wales (ONS, 2022); however, the UK Government acknowledge that the statistics are an inadequate indication of the true extent of this type of violence, which it describes as "hidden" and accepts that "the majority of victims of domestic abuse are unlikely to ever appear in the official statistics" (ONS, 2018: paragraph 2). In an endeavour to secure domestic abuse prosecutions, the UK Government focus on evidencing physical violence (CJJI, 2020), despite the academic knowledge that coercive control is the perpetrators most common mode of abuse (SafeLives, 2022; Stark, 2007), and it is also a

dangerous form of offending (Gov.UK, 2014; Richards, 2023*). However, in regard to coercive control, it is not widely academically considered that a form of predominantly gendered violence and abuse that is 'hidden' in one context may occur as hidden violence/abuse in contexts beyond the domestic.

In relation to perpetrators' coercive control, psychologist Lenor Walker (1980) has observed that domestic abusers' coercive-controlling techniques, although unique for each individual, are still remarkably similar. Hennessy (2012:17) also observes that "the tactics of abuse and control are common to all successful abusers in long-term relationships," and "the tactics of targeting, setting up, and grooming are universally used by skilled offenders" (sex offenders, domestic abusers, paedophiles, and fraudsters, for example) (2012: 98). He further contends that coercive-controlling abusers can operate in any context and culture, they are proficient adapters and con-artists, who can exploit any given relationship or situation to their advantage (Hennessy, 2012). Furthermore, Hirigoyen (1998) states that in the extensive course of her therapeutic practice, she has seen how emotionally abusive and controlling individuals tend to replicate destructive conduct in all areas of life: at work, in their intimate partnerships, and with their children. She further states that there are individuals whose path through life is strewn with people they have psychologically wounded or irreparably damaged (Hirigoyen, 1998).

Herman (1997) contends that the methods that enable one human being to enslave another are extremely consistent, and that the accounts of hostages, political prisoners, and survivors of concentration camps from around the world have an uncanny sameness. Amnesty International (1973) has published a 'chart of coercion', describing these methods in detail. Herman (1997) further states that these same techniques are used by abusers to subjugate women, in sex work, in pornography, and in the home. Even in domestic situations, where perpetrators are not part of any larger organisation and have no formal instruction in coercive-controlling practises, they seem time and again to reinvent them.

Although the perpetration of coercive control can be seen as a broadly used method of violence/abuse among offenders in a range of power and control contexts, in the UK (and beyond), the academic conceptualisations of coercive control have predominantly been siloed to the field of intimate partner and domestic abuse. However, the notion of the wider use of coercive control prompted me to investigate whether only addressing this form of violence and abuse in the intimate partner/domestic abuse context has become an individual response that excludes a broader, social violence/abuse problem.

A further academic rationale for this study is the concept of addressing victim-survivors' psychological trauma in the context of a powerful political movement. Herman (1997)

advocates that advances in the field of violence and abuse transpire when they are supported by a political movement that is powerful enough to legitimate an alliance between investigators and victim-survivors, and to counteract the everyday social processes of silencing and denial. In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness to psychological trauma inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting or silencing. Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social, as well as individual consciousness (Herman,1997).

However, as an intervention into addressing the subjugation of women and children in domestic life, Western European and North American feminism has traditionally focused on white women's experiences (Walby, 1989); therefore, when sex and gender are combined with race, White feminism has a tendency to lose its progressive edge (Moon and Holling, 2020). Rather, White feminism ideologically grounds itself in a gendered victimology that masks its involvement and functionality in white supremacy (Moon and Holling, 2020). By erasing people of colour, positioning women as victim-survivors of white male hegemony, and failing to hold white women accountable for the production and reproduction of white supremacy, White feminism manifests its allegiance to whiteness and in doing so commits "discursive violence" (that is, harm committed in/by discourse such as through the erasure of marginalised victim-survivors, for example, minority ethnic individuals and people of colour) (Moon and Holling, 2020: 1). Consequently, there is a reductive effect on who may be perceived as a victim-survivor that indicates the surfacing of a white epistemology (Moon and Holling, 2020). Moreover, when feminism is informed by a white epistemology, then its ability to challenge white supremacy is significantly curtailed. As long as White feminism continues to fail in this way, we cannot comprehend it as a politic of the liberation of the people (that is, those who seek racial and social justices such as equality), but instead lament its failure to continually disrupt/overturn white supremacy (Moon and Holling, 2020).

Feminism, at its best, is a movement that works to liberate *all people* who have been economically, socially, and culturally marginalised by an ideological system that has been set up for them to fail (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). White epistemology, however, is grounded in a way of knowing and understanding the world that colludes with and/or rationalises structural and systemic processes that uphold and reproduce racial inequality, structural oppression, and white supremacy (Feagin, 2013). This frame, as an efficient deflector, makes seeing deep structural, systemic, and racial inequalities difficult even while it affords users a convenient language, rationale, and perspective for maintaining everyday discrimination and related racist practices (Wingfield and Feagin, 2012).

Challenging a white epistemological framework when addressing violence and abuse therefore allows the understanding of the concept of coercive control to be situated in broader, inclusive contexts, where racial, structural, and systemic processes subjugate and oppress marginalised people. Moreover, only focusing on the subordination of women and children in domestic life, I would argue, is now (and has always been) too limiting in terms of recognising a broad range of subordinated victim-survivors, as well as recognising how their subordination transpires in a range of situations beyond the domestic. Equally important, is to understand the structural/systematic power and control dynamics that are used to enforce subordination - via the methods of coercion and control - which this study examines.

### 1.2.2 Researcher's Background and Motivation for The Study

Over a period of 25 years, working supportively and therapeutically with victim-survivors, it has become apparent to me that their stories of violence and abuse routinely communicate coercive control, perpetrated by a diverse range of abusers in a broad range of contexts: intimate partner and domestic abuse, family, parental, or sibling relationships, the workplace, institutions and organisations. Yet, the current UK academic and policy construct for conceptualising coercive control overlooks individuals who have experienced this form of violence/abuse beyond the domestic, which limits their help-seeking and support opportunities. Victim-survivors thus frequently remain isolated and unsupported by their communities and the services that are intended to help them, which, in turn, impedes their recovery from trauma and/or their ability to escape abusive situations.

Although coercive control can be described and articulated during one-to-one therapy, individuals rarely identify and name it as such, due to their lack of understanding of what coercive control is and how it manifests. Practitioners within general counselling services also do not always have the appropriate training and knowledge to recognise coercive control when their clients describe their violent/abusive experiences but cannot name them. Clients often also experience a sense of injustice towards the covert and ambiguous nature of the violence and abuse they have suffered, because it is unseen and/or incomprehensible to onlookers; thus, coercive control transpires as "invisible in plain sight" (Stark, 2007:14). Therefore, victim-survivors' attempts at communicating power and control dynamics, often find themselves misunderstood and unheard. This systemically silences them, invalidates their experiences and disempowers them further, while abusers are not held to account for their offences, which allows the abuse to continue unchecked; sometimes even inadvertently reinforced by the wider community, such as the family, and/or the societal and institutional structures where victim-survivors co-exist with their abusers.

Moreover, clients narrate intricate stories of violence and abuse that can only be thoroughly understood in the entirety of their complex abusive experience, as their stories gradually emerge in the collaborative therapeutic alliance. Notably, when I attended a seminar with SafeLives, 2022, a UK domestic abuse organisation, for the 'Enhanced Understanding of Coercive Control', this training was delivered in the format of survivors' comprehensive storytelling. This proved to be an effective means of communicating the covert and ambiguous nature of a perpetrator's coercive control to enable the understanding of pervasive power and control dynamics both in interpersonal relationships and in relationships/interactions within institutions and organisations. This reinforced my perception that coercive control cannot easily be conveyed in the academic theoretical sense when attempting to capture a course of conduct and the real-life perpetration of covert and ambiguous violence/abuse. Scholars (see, for example, Barlow and Walklate, 2022) have actually recognised this as a methodological problem: how do you track the development of sustained abuse over time and evidence, substantiate, or explain that - not just the effects of the coercive control - but the ways in which it manifests in the everyday?

I am also aware that bystanders, wittingly or unwittingly, may collude with perpetrators, because they too are often under the influence of abusers' power and control dynamics. For example, a person with an awareness of violence and abuse in the workplace may remain silent due to the fear of losing their job, missing out on a deserved promotion, or becoming another victim of the perpetrator's violence/abuse. However, this coercion and control is not usually publicly recognised or easily identifiable as an extension of the perpetrator's abuse, because patterns of violence and abuse are most often perceived by UK society in terms of "isolated incidents" (Bates, 2022: 59), rather than 'systematic' and enduring over time.

This study therefore draws on the narratives of survivors, and professionals working both with victim-survivors and perpetrators of coercive control. I elected to interview individuals who have lived experience of coercive control to obtain a deeply nuanced and intimate insight into their perceptions of this form of violence and abuse. Using qualitative thematic methods, their stories facilitate my analysis of the coercive control they experienced and their perceptions of, and feelings towards, coercive-controlling abusers. This allows me to elucidate the problems and limitations of the UK conceptualisations of coercive control both in scholarship and at policy/service provision levels.

## 1.3 Overview of the Thesis

Chapter Two outlines the theoretical foundations of the study, which are focused on coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse, and coercive control that occurs beyond the domestic environment, such as workplaces and institutions. The chapter is divided into two parts, the first part examines the history and development of the concept of coercive control in domestic abuse scholarship, legislation, policy, and practice; the challenges to theorising the concept of coercive control; and elucidating coercive control as gendered, clinical/psychological, social, and legal constructs. The second part of the chapter examines the broader UK public landscape of gendered violence and abuse; the continuum of sexual violence; and the systematic nature of bullying, psychological abuse in the workplace, and institutional violence.

Chapter Three elucidates the methodology for my research project, including the epistemological assumptions which it is built upon. The chapter also includes a discussion of how the survivor participant/respondents' and the professional participant/respondents' interviews were conducted.

The following two data/analysis chapters explore the findings of the study, using quotations from the research participants to illustrate the themes that were generated through my analysis of the data. Chapters Four and Five thus present the findings from the participants' interviews.

Chapter Six aggregates the different facets of the analysis and discusses the meanings in relation to the existing academic literature. Further, I consider the implications of the research findings for the future work on coercive control both within and beyond the domestic. The chapter then concludes the thesis with a summary of its main arguments.

In the appendices, participant information sheets, consent forms, and support information sheets can be found, which were issued prior to undertaking the participant interviews.

**Chapter Two: Part One: Understanding the Concept of Coercive Control**

**2.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundations of the study, which are focused on coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse, and coercive control that occurs beyond the domestic environment, such as workplaces and institutions. The wider discourse in terms of "beyond the domestic" realm highlights a common gap in the existing coercive control literature: that it does not fully engage with coercive control as something prevalent outside the domestic environment and beyond one-to-one relationships.

The research on coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse is complex and copious, and various scholarly disciplines (such as criminology, psychology, and sociology) have coined and engaged with the concept. This raises the issue of disciplinary and methodological differences and the challenges in theorising coercive control, which are addressed in this chapter. This allows me to demonstrate how transdisciplinary the concept is, while clearly articulating the project's disciplinary location; I thereby elucidate coercive control as a phenomenon of gendered violence and abuse that is perpetrated both within and beyond the domestic.

The chapter is divided into two parts; part one begins by examining the history and development of the concept of coercive control in domestic abuse scholarship, legislation, policy and practice, which allows me to establish who its predominant advocates have been and how its effects have been interpreted. Focusing particularly on Johnson (1995, 2008), Dutton and Goodman (2005) and Stark's (2007) work elucidates the nature and impact of this type of violence and abuse; and the ways in which academics, policymakers, and policy advocates have responded to the recognition of the harmful effects of coercive control on victim-survivors' lives. Coercive control is mainly conceptualised as a gendered process (Morse,1995; Stark, 2007; Walklate et al., 2022), therefore, I consider the efficacy of this hypothesis and the extent to which it resonates for a wide range of marginalised women (such as women of colour and ethnic minority women), men, and LGBTQ+ people.

In recent years, much attention has been paid to the attempts to criminalise and legislate coercive control, hence, I also explore the concerns that such efforts engender. The criminalisation of 'controlling or coercive behaviour' responded to a gap in the England and Wales law (and in other jurisdictions both within and beyond the UK) to address patterns of abuse in intimate partner or family relationships (Home Office, 2015, 2023). However, despite the academic recognition of coercive control as a 'course of conduct' (Stark, 2007), subsequent conviction rates have remained low (ONS, 2023c). This study therefore queries how proficiently the concept of coercive control, as a theoretical model, accurately translates

in practice; I also consider the future of how scholars and practitioners could handle the concept more effectively. Furthermore, drawing attention to how the existing scholarship on coercive control has engaged with policy definitions highlights the problems and limitations within these definitions.

Part two of the chapter examines the literature in relation to the broader UK public landscape of gendered violence and abuse that is perpetrated beyond the domestic, which allows me to investigate the connections between private and public violence/abuse. Examining Walby's (1989, 1990) work elucidates the transition from 'private' to 'public' patriarchy within the UK in recent decades. According to Walby, the core sites of women's oppression have moved from the private domain - the home - to the public sphere; for example, within institutions, organisations, and the state. That is, as women are no longer excluded from the public sphere, their subordination and exploitation now extends throughout UK society, and it is not exclusive to and contained within the privacy of the home (Walby, 1989). This does not reflect that the private domain is no longer a site for women's oppression, as it still exists through the gendered prevalence of intimate partner and domestic abuse (Walby, 1989). However, considering the growing significance of public forms of men's violence towards women (such as harassment in public spaces and online abuses), Walby's (1989, 1990) arguments are pertinent to comprehending the persistent, structural and systemic gendered violence/abuse that is perpetrated beyond the domestic realm. Kelly's (1988) 'continuum of sexual violence' is also examined in part two of chapter to further elucidate the connections between private and public violence/abuse.

Finally, investigating emotional, psychological, and nonphysical violence and abuse that is perpetrated within workplaces, institutions and organisations (Ahmed, 2021; Hirigoyen,1998; Martin and Klein, 2013) elucidates the parallels between these types of violence/abuse that are also perpetrated in intimate partner and domestic abuse. This illustrates the importance of endeavours to accurately name violence and abuse, as through its naming we can identify it, reflect on it, and openly discuss and explore strategies for tackling it (Boyle, 2019). Furthermore, understanding and correctly naming a phenomenon gives us a certain amount of power over it (Le Guin,1968).

### *2.2* The Emergence of Coercive Control to Make Sense of Domestic Abuse

Despite its long history and prevalence in UK society (and beyond), domestic violence only became a topical concern in the late 1960s (particularly in Anglophone - chiefly North American and British - scholarship), as part of the broader feminist organising in mass resistance to patriarchal structures and systemic male dominance (Johanssen, 2022).The domestic violence revolution was initiated by the civil rights, peace movements, and student

activism of the 1960s, and in the early 1970s domestic violence emerged as a political issue (Stark, 2007). Historically, domestic violence had been seen as a private matter to be dealt with in the family home (Mildorf, 2007); however, what came to be recognised as the second-wave feminist movement challenged this societal view and drew attention to the pervasive, gendered nature of domestic and sexual violence (Dobash and Dobash,1979). The feminist argument that domestic violence is a problem of power relations, and that men must be held responsible for their abuse of women and children, is an important one: it has been influential in developing polices for the criminalisation of the statistically evident prevalence of the male perpetration of such violence (Motz, 2014). Subsequently, in England and Wales, and elsewhere, there were changes to how intimate partner and domestic abuse was understood and addressed.

From the 2000s onwards, England and Wales (and other jurisdictions) have seen significant growth in resources and provision provided for domestic-related offences (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). This includes specialist domestic abuse courts; police domestic abuse risk assessment tools; the introduction of the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (also known as Clare's Law, implemented in 2014 and updated in 2024 (Home Office, 2024)); Domestic Violence Protection Notices/Orders (DVPN/O's); the expansion of the civil law (including non-molestation orders); and criminal law (including the criminalisation of controlling or coercive behaviours, as of 2015 (Home Office, 2015); this legislation was updated in 2023 to include partners, ex-partners, or family members, regardless of whether the victim-survivor and perpetrator live together (Home Office, 2023)). Other jurisdictions (particularly the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, among others) have likewise dedicated significant energy and resources to recognising and attempting to legislate around the problem of domestic abuse since the 1960s.

A further vital shift in understanding the nature, extent, and impact of domestic abuse has also taken place during this time: the recognition that abuse does not have to be physical to inflict significant harm to victims (Dutton and Goodman, 2005; Schechter, 1982; Stark, 2007). For some time, feminist critics had argued that the legal conceptualisation of domestic abuse focused too narrowly on isolated acts of physical violence (Dobash and Dobash,1992). This focus on the materiality of violence obscures the nuance and complexity of nonphysical and/or sustained 'chronic' abuse; therefore, impeding the adequate protection of victim-survivors and their children, as the extent of their abusive experiences was not being accurately captured (Dobash et al.,1992). However, despite this enhanced understanding of domestic abuse in scholarship and theory, the implementation of the criminal justice interventions (mentioned above), and the development of the concept of coercive control (examined below), the prevalence and pervasiveness of intimate partner and domestic

abuse remain highly problematic across UK society (ONS, 2023c), and within other jurisdictions, globally (WHO, 2021). Policy and criminalisation therefore appears to have made prosecutions/convictions even less likely and, perhaps, the services less effective at addressing the root causes of perpetrators' controlling and coercive behaviour offences.

### 2.2.1 From Physical Violence to Coercive Control

The impacts of emotional, psychological, coercive, and controlling abuse were not fully understood until 'coercion and control' was documented as a feature of intimate partner abuse during the early 1980s. The term was first coined by Schechter (1982), one of the original academics to name domestic abuse as a form of coercive-controlling behaviour. Schechter (1982) conceptualised this as gendered abuse in which mainly men sought to gain control over women through the strategic use of threats, and physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse to dominate female intimate partners. Schechter's (1982) work was published just after Straus' (1979) introduction of the 'Conflict Tactics Scale' (CTS), the result of over a decade of research to establish the degree to which such abuse was, or was not, gendered. The concept of coercion and control was subsequently differently accentuated in the work of Johnson (1995, 2008), Dutton and Goodman (2005), and Stark (2007, 2009), among others (see, for example, Walby and Towers' (2018) concept of 'Domestic Violence Crime' (DVC)). More recently, the harmful effects of coercive control in intimate partner and family relationships have been recognised in relation to children (Callaghan et al., 2018; Katz, 2016, 2019, 2023; Stark and Hester, 2018), on mothering practices (Heward-Belle, 2017), 'custody stalking' (Elizabeth, 2017), and within the digital landscape (Harris and Woodlock, 2019).

### 2.2.2 Johnson's Concept of Coercive Violence

Johnson's (1995, 2008) work, in several ways, can be positioned between that of Schechter (1982) and Straus (1979). He suggests that different forms of domestic abuse exist and has created a typology of four types. The first type, 'coercive violence', comprises of a pattern of emotionally abusive intimidation, and coercive control, accompanied by physical violence against partners (Johnson,1995). Johnson's conceptualisation of coercion and control is also comparable to the patterned abuse presented in the 'Duluth Power and Control Wheel', that was developed by Pence and Paymar (1986) in Duluth, Minnesota. This illustrative wheel depicts forms of nonphysical abuse, such as intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, minimising, denying, the assertion of male privilege, financial abuse, coercion, and threats (Pence and Paymar,1993).

Johnson (1995), in his early work, also refers to the term 'intimate terrorism' to portray coercive violence that is motivated by one partner to control the other. Johnson (2008)

further discusses 'violent resistance', conceptualised by others as self-defence. This seeks to capture victims' violent responses towards their coercive-controlling partners, in an effort to stop the violence being perpetrated against them. He also elucidates the category of 'separation-instigated violence': violence that occurs in a relationship at the point of separation. Perpetrators can use repeated threats, stalking, and harassment to terrorise their partners; such tactics are designed to prevent victim-survivors from leaving and can intensify at times of separation (Motz, 2014). This leads to the period after separation being one of greatest risks for those escaping abusive situations (Hill, 2019).

Johnson (2008) makes further distinctions between 'coercive violence' and other types of violence that are perpetrated within intimate-partner relationships. He contends that 'situational couple violence' is the most common type of physical aggression and that it has causes and consequences that are different from those of coercive-controlling violence. This type of violence is viewed as the result of 'mutual' arguments between partners, which may escalate to physical violence; however, this mutual aggression tends to be less severe in terms of physical injury, than in intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2008). Situational couple violence is also conceptualised as different to intimate terrorism in that total control over various domains (such as economic and sexual control) in a relationship is not the objective of either party; rather, conflict arises in relation to areas of stress, such as financial, social, and emotional issues (Motz, 2014).

Situational couple violence also depicts the gender-neutral 'conflict' measured by family violence researchers (see, for example, Edleson, 1999; Gelles, 1980; Wolfe et al., 2003), while intimate terrorism (the more serious form of coercive-controlling violence) refers to the phenomenon articulated by feminist scholars/activists (see, for example, Dobash and Dobash, 1979; McPhail, et al., 2007), which is shown to be qualitatively and quantitatively different (Johnson, 2008). That is, some family violence studies conclude that the rates of male- and female aggression are much more equal (Mirrlees-Black, 1999; Morse, 1995). However, gender symmetry in the perpetration of domestic abuse has been disputed in feminist studies on the grounds that family violence research measures the far less serious form of aggression of mutual couple violence, rather than intimate terrorism (Harne and Radford, 2008); and by reference to the fact of the severity of injuries, as injuries are likely to be far less severe in female-to-male violence than vice versa (Walby and Allen, 2004).

Coercive control is specifically conceptualised as a strategic pattern of perpetrator behaviour that is designed to exploit, control, create dependency, and dominate a victim-survivor; thus, their everyday existence is micro-managed and their 'space for action' (Ptacek, 1999), as well as their potential as a human being, is limited and controlled by their abuser (Richards,

2024). Stark's (2007) (and others') research shows that a range of coercive and controlling behaviours - often referred to as 'intimate terrorism' - can be devastating when experienced cumulatively. Intimate terrorism here is conceptualised as a highly gendered form of intimate partner and domestic abuse, and it is theorised as embedded in a pattern of male power and control. While intimate terrorism can include physical violence, it also exceeds it; male partners can use wider systemic inequalities (such as gender pay inequalities or the cultural emphasis on household duties and care work as 'women's work'), as part of a sustained coercion and control strategy (Stark, 2007).

Johnson's (2008) work on the gendered nature of some abusive behaviours, and the significance of the presence or absence of physical violence features in different ways. He states that the most severe forms of violence, those of intimate terrorism, are committed by men against women. Rates of gender symmetry in violence perpetrators occur in cases of situational couple violence where both men and women are violent, though this is to a lesser degree than in cases of intimate terrorism. However, offering this level of nuance to understanding the complexity of violence and abuse in interpersonal relationships, Johnson has been criticised for minimising the gendered nature of domestic abuse (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). More recently, Johnson (2017), greatly influenced by Stark's (2007, 2009) work, has acknowledged the ways in which victim-survivors of coercive control (statistically mainly women) experience a form of intimate terrorism that is rooted in gendered and patriarchal motivations. He further concedes that coercive control is about both the use and the threat of violence in combination with other controlling strategies, such as intimidation, manipulation, and isolation to terrorise one's partner (Johnson, 2017).

### 2.2.3 Toward a New Conceptualisation of Coercion in Intimate Partner Violence

Domestic abuse advocates have, for decades, positioned the notion of coercion and control at the centre of their analysis of intimate partner violence, in which perpetrators assert their power over victims through the use of threats and manipulation tactics, as well as using physical violence (Dutton and Goodman, 2005). Violence is simply a tool within this framework that perpetrators use to establish greater power in their relationships, aiming to prevent or trigger specific behaviours, triumph in arguments, or assert their dominance (Dobash and Dobash,1992). Other abusive strategies include the withholding of vital resources, such as money and transportation, and the abuse (or threats thereof) of children, relatives, or even pets (Dutton and Goodman, 2005). However, physical violence may not be the most significant factor in intimate partner abuse; it is highly probable that abused individuals' experiences demonstrate that they have been subjected to an ongoing strategy of intimidation, isolation, and control, which extends to all areas of their lives (Stark,1995).

Furthermore, although sporadic physical violence makes the strategy of control effective, the unique profile of victim-survivors arises as much from the "deprivation of liberty" implied by coercion and control as it does from "violence-induced trauma" (Stark,1995: 987).

Despite the common assumptions of coercive control described above, that are borne out of the everyday, heinous stories told by victim-survivors, Dutton and Goodman (2005) state that there was insufficient work to conceptualise and measure the key construct of coercion in intimate partner abuse. In the absence of a clear conceptualisation, measures of coercion that are typically embedded within broader measures of psychological abuse, were neither comprehensive nor internally consistent. Scholars have variously included behaviours that range from verbal insults to intimidation to kidnapping under the rubric of coercive control; therefore, the need for a more 'specialist' conceptualisation and operationalisation of coercion has gained new urgency (Dutton and Goodman, 2005).

The ongoing contentiousness of "gender symmetry", or the relative use of violence by men versus women, came to a head, as more and more women were being arrested in cases that police officers perceived as "mutual violence" (Dutton and Goodman, 2005: 744). One tradition of research - mainly conducted by family researchers - consistently indicated that women and men use violence at equal rates, and in some cases, women use violence more often (Gelles and Straus,1990). Another body of research demonstrates that men use physical violence, including homicide, against their female partners more often than women use such violence against their male partners (DeKeseredy et al.,1998); and that women's use of violence largely involves self-defence or fighting back (Bachman and Saltzman,1995).

Many researchers have emphasised that one reason (among many) for the lack of agreement on the relative use of violence by men versus women is that the measurement of physically violent acts alone cannot adequately characterise perpetrators' interpersonal and structural power and control dynamics in intimate partner relationships. Rather, it is necessary to comprehend the use of, and response to, intimate partner abuse in the context of the relationship, as well as understanding the situational, cultural, and structural contexts in which the perpetrator and the victim-survivor live (Dutton,1996; Edleson and Tolman,1992). Key to this context is the role of coercion; greater attention to this role would enable researchers to clarify gender power differentials in the very nature of topographically similar acts, as well as their effects on victim-survivors' psychological well-being and their future responses to violence and coercion (Dutton and Goodman, 2005).

In response to 'gender-neutrality' in theorising domestic and coercive-controlling abuse, I would argue that structural privilege gives privileged perpetrators more ammunition with which to abuse; the severity and complexity of their violence and abuse upon under-

privileged groups (for example, women, children, individuals with insecure immigration/employment status, people subject to class, racist and/or cultural violence in the wider world, such as Islamophobia or transphobia) has the power to inflict even more, deeper and more long-term, sustained damages (Srinivasan, 2021). Therefore, while this study strongly emphasises a focus on violence against women, it also acknowledges that marginalised and structurally under-privileged groups can be particularly susceptible to domestic, workplace, and coercive-controlling violence and abuse. Thus, this study advocates a diverse and intersectional understanding and response to intimate partner, domestic abuse, and coercive control, to ensure an inclusive approach to violence/abuse, victim-survivors, and perpetrators within UK society, violence/abuse agencies and service systems provision.

A further reason for the urgent need to reconceptualise and measure coercion in intimate partner abuse was the growing interest in developing subtypes of domestic abuse (for example, Johnson's (1995) typologies of domestic violence), rather than grouping them together under one common rubric. A rubric that would enable better distinctions could be extremely useful in numerous realms, including developing perpetrator rehabilitation treatments and risk assessment/safety planning for victims (Dutton and Goodman, 2005).

During the 1950s, inspired by Lewin's work on power, which he defined as "the possibility of inducing forces of a certain magnitude on another person" (Lewin,1935:131), the Research Centre for Group Dynamics began work on different aspects of group power and influence (Dutton and Goodman, 2005). In this context, French and Raven (1959) began to develop a general theory of social power, defined, consistent with Lewin's work, as 'potential influence' or the ability of an 'agent' to influence a 'target'. They were particularly interested in the kinds of resources that a person might draw upon to exercise influence on another. Subsequently, in a key paper, French and Raven (1959) articulated five bases of power, each involving one person's ability to impose, give, or administer tangible or intangible outcomes on another.

Theoretical work existed on the concept of coercion at this time but few researchers had attempted to integrate this within the understandings of intimate partner abuse. Thus, Dutton and Goodman (2005), inspired by French and Raven's Social Power Model, applied this theoretical framework to a conceptualisation of coercion in intimate partner abuse. Central elements of their model include social ecology; setting the stage; coercion involving a demand and a credible threat for noncompliance; surveillance; delivery of threatened consequences; and the victim-survivor's behavioural and emotional responses to coercion. Dutton and Goodman (2005) contend that these elements occur in spiralling and overlapping sequences to establish an overall situation of coercion.

Dutton and Goodman (2005) subsequently proposed a model of coercion as a useful tool for both domestic abuse advocacy and perpetrator intervention. Within this model, they refer to the person who is doing the influencing as the "agent" and the person being influenced as the "target", and they state that both men and women may be agents of coercion in their intimate relationships, as well as the targets of it from their intimate partners (2005: 745). They suggest that coercion not only exists in intimate heterosexual relationships but also in lesbian and gay male (that is, same-gender) relationships. However, Stark (2007) contends that while sexual inequality and heteronormativity will shape abuse in all relational settings to some extent, the knowledge base is insufficient to determine the scope, dynamics, or consequences of coercive control in LGBTQ+ relationships. Johnson (2006) also hesitated to apply coercion and control models based on heterosexual domestic abuse to same-sex contexts. His rationale was that lesbian or gay violence and abuse does not take on patriarchal family values and therefore does not exhibit "intimate" or "patriarchal" terrorism in the same ways observable in heterosexual relationships (Stark and Hester, 2018: 90).

The purpose of Dutton and Goodman's (2005) model of coercion was to allow service providers to talk with victim-survivors and perpetrators in a much more nuanced way, and unravel the complex dynamics involved in coercion and intimate partner abuse more generally. Furthermore, in the legal arena, a more 'specialist' (rather than a 'generalist') conceptualisation of coercion in intimate partner abuse could help prosecutors and defence lawyers to explicate both victim-survivor and perpetrator behaviour in physical and sexual assault cases involving intimate partners. Legal professionals may also be able to understand the 'patterns of abuse' within which specific violent and abusive acts or events take place; and therefore enable more informed assessments of perpetrator dispositions and victim-survivor safety. Dutton and Goodman (2005) state that, over time, they became more adept at understanding the complexities of intimate partner abuse, bringing sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and stalking into their model.

### 2.2.4 Stark's Concept of Coercive Control

The most influential understanding of coercive control, particularly in the Anglo-speaking world, is through Stark's work. Stark's concept of coercive control has gained significant universal importance since his publication of *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* (Stark, 2007). His theoretical model became a key focus for researchers making sense of intimate partner and domestic abuse; subsequently, legislation, as well as praxis in domestic abuse support and intervention services, built on Stark's model and definition of coercive control to formulate, for example: the England and Wales, 2015, (Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act, 2015) controlling or coercive behaviour offence in

intimate partner or family relationships (Home Office, 2015); Scotland's, 2018, criminalisation of coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse (Scottish Government, 2019); Northern Ireland's, 2022, domestic abuse laws also making coercive control a criminal offence (NI Assembly, 2022). However, as illustrated above, the notion of coercive control was not a new theoretical concept at the time these laws were formulated, or even in 2007, when Stark coined the term.

Stark conceptualises coercive control as "calculated, malevolent conduct deployed almost exclusively by men to dominate individual women by intervening repeated physical abuse with three equally important tactics: intimidation, isolation, and control" (2007: 2). Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control aims to capture the "cage" of intimidating, degrading, and regulatory practices that are orchestrated by perpetrators to inculcate fear and threat in their victims' everyday lives (Myhill and Johnson, 2016: 357). Significantly, the threat of violence inhibits victim-survivors' autonomy, choice, and day-to-day activities (Stark, 2007). Consequently, their psychological well-being can be adversely effected, though the seriousness of this varies depending on factors such as the perpetrator's degree of control, the type of tactics used, and/or the victim-survivor's level of resilience and coping strategies (Williamson, 2010). The adverse effects of a continuous period of coercive control can result in severe psychological trauma and for some victims this may lead to suicide (Bettinson, 2020). Hirigoyen (1998) states that sometimes victims turn the violence against themselves, as suicide seems to be the only way to be rid of their aggressors.

Fundamental to Stark's (2007) theorisation of coercive control is that the perpetrator's abuse comprises of a sustained 'course of conduct', as opposed to isolated incidents of physical violence. Highlighting the importance of understanding power and control, he argues that by comprehending domestic abuse through the lens of coercive control, the perpetrator's abusive behaviours that have routinely been overlooked by the criminal justice system come to the fore. The ways in which such strategies of abuse impact a victim-survivor's sense of self also lead Stark (2007) to portray coercive control as a 'liberty crime'. This captures the ways in which an individual's freedom is constrained both literally and symbolically through manipulating and inhibiting their thoughts and behaviour.

Stark (2007) also compares coercive control to a hostage situation, emphasising the power imbalance, the victim-survivor's minimal capacity for autonomy, and difficulty escaping the relationship. While his concept acknowledges the harms caused by physical violence, he stresses that it is the cumulative impact of a range of coercive and controlling practices that perpetrators use, whether physical or not, which have an enduring, detrimental emotional/psychological effect on victim-survivors. He also accentuates that the harms

relating to psychological, emotional, coercive, and economic abuse in particular, are comparable to the harms which result in post-traumatic stress disorder (Stark, 2007).

Stark (2007) further contends that the immediate objectives of men's micromanagement of women's everyday lives through coercion and control are less significant than the greater role this plays in consolidating a woman's general obedience to male authority. The ways in which women perform femininity, that fulfils the perpetrator's stereotype of her gender role, permits men to perform masculinity as they perceive it should be enacted (Stark, 2007, 2009). For men to confirm their own masculine identity by this example, they must regulate facets of women's behaviour, such as the way that she manages the household and takes care of her appearance (Stark, 2007, 2009). This allows these men to differentiate themselves from women, by shaping the women in their lives as the sexual difference, which they dichotomously crave and fear; thus, their identities are reflexively intertwined with the ritual performances of coercive control that they command (Stark, 2007, 2009).

Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control - which has significantly influenced so much UK policy and practice - appears less effective, as the perpetration of coercive control continues to be highly problematic in the UK (see, for example, ONS, 2023c). In response to the low conviction rates for controlling or coercive behaviour offences, Stark and Hester (2018) have acknowledged that the challenge to measurement worth noting involves what might be termed the 'embeddedness' of coercive control. That is, the fact that a range of coercive-controlling tactics are deployed in the context of relationships that last for a long period of time, often over many years. Furthermore, Stark and Hester (2018) contend that the extent that coercive control has a duration, it stands with a small subgroup of criminal offences whose measurement has more in common with a comparable class of public health problems, than with conventional crimes like assault or robbery that end soon after they begin. Stark and Hester (2018) further contend that as sociologists, they lack the ready tools to grasp a social behaviour that, without a distinct beginning or end, nonetheless has a demonstrable impact that is cumulative over time and across social space on a group of victims whose lives and liberties become severely constrained.

Stark's (2007) research (originating from his work in the United States), as mentioned above, has significantly influenced the UK, and beyond, public policy agenda since it was first published. For example, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), provide some key considerations in defining coercive control that align with Stark's concept. ANROWS describe coercive control as the overarching context in which domestic family violence occurs; more specifically, they define it as "a course of conduct aimed at dominating and controlling another (usually an intimate partner but can be other

family members)" (2021:1)). This clearly depicts Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control as a pattern of abuse that is motivated by the perpetrator's desire for power and control, rather than conceptualising domestic abuse as isolated incidents of physical violence. However, the United States' policy on domestic abuse has not been significantly effective in decreasing this type of violence and abuse (Barlow and Walklate, 2022) (this could also be argued for other jurisdictions (WHO, 2021)).

Goodmark (2015) observes that the global recourse to the law to address violence against women has been a central theme in legislation and policy for some time; though the efficacy of this response has been widely contested (see, for example, Douglas, 2008; Goodmark, 2012; Walklate, 2008). While the recourse to law response to address violence against women is integral to international concerns (and also aligns with human rights' voices across the United Nations, the European Union, and other regional organisations), the exportation of the United States' law and policy to address violence against women globally does not consider the differences in structural and cultural contexts - both within and beyond the United States - in which violence and abuse is perpetrated (Sheley, 2020); or address the wider and varied social problems that contribute to intimate partner and domestic abuse (for example, the generation and perpetuation of gender inequality (Barlow and Walklate, 2022), and the structural and systemic subordination of marginalised individuals and groups (Srinivasan, 2021)). Stark's (2007) concept therefore fails to fully address how victim-survivors can be marginalised by criminal justice processes. That is to say, although gender is, importantly, key to Stark's (2007) concept, he has not wholly engaged with the ways in which gender intersects with other structural and cultural constraints to produce multiple inequalities and barriers for women (particularly Black, Indigenous, and ethnic minority women) seeking help for coercive control; his concept also fails to address men as victim-survivors or significantly include LGBTQ+ victim-survivors (Barlow and Walklate, 2022).

This summary of the history and development of the concept of coercive control shows the ways in which key advocates of the concept have comprehended its importance in making sense of intimate partner and domestic abuse since the early 1980s. The summary also demonstrates that while there is some mutual scholarly agreement on the presence of coercive control, there is not complete agreement on the extent of its presence and/or the ways in which it manifests. For example, Dutton and Goodman (2005) define coercion explicitly in the context of intimate partner abuse; they contend that coercion is a dynamic process in which a perpetrator makes a demand and threatens an adverse consequence for noncompliance with the demand. While their definition makes a clear distinction between coercion and force, Kuennen (2007) points out that Dutton and Goodman's definition focuses on the process of coercion itself, rather than also drawing attention to exemplar

behaviours, such as intimidation and isolation. Schechter's (1982) definition of coercion and control predominantly emphasises threats, emotional insults, and economic deprivation; comparatively, Stark's (2007) concept accentuates strategies of intimidation, isolation, and control. Although their definitions share parallels, and they both offer useful exemplar behaviours, neither include a clear definition of coercion itself.

**2.3 The Ongoing Challenges to the Concept of Coercive Control**

Two predominant issues within the ongoing debates surrounding coercive control remain unresolved in scholarship. First is the degree to which it is gendered, though the numeric extent of men's violence against women consistently statistically exceeds that of women's violence against men (Walby and Allen, 2004; Walklate et al., 2022). Second is the extent to which physical violence is, or is not, a central feature of coercive control (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Defining physical violence may seem relatively straightforward, however, using physical injury as a key measure of violence severity has limitations; for example, some injuries involve victim-survivors using weapons against their abusers in retaliation and/or self-defence, but such violence is different from coercive-controlling violence and abuse (Hester, 2013; Johnson et al., 2014). Further, in the context of coercive control, the cumulative effect of perpetrators' recurrent low-level assaults can be more devastating than their more visible or physically injurious, isolated attacks (Stark and Flitcraft, 1996).

In some ways, these ongoing debates surrounding coercive control resonate with the broader debate around the gendered nature and extent of intimate partner and domestic abuse. This is mostly portrayed as a methodological issue between those who advocate the Conflict Tactics Scale to measure intimate partner and domestic abuse, and those who support feminist-informed approaches. For example, the differences between the work of Straus (1979) and Dobash and Dobash (1992), often referred to as the gender-symmetrical versus the gender-asymmetrical debate (Fanslow et al., 2023). However, feminist-informed approaches recognise that intimate partner and domestic abuse demonstrates, reinforces, and helps to perpetuate women's inequality in their own lives and in society more broadly. That is, feminist-informed approaches consider the evidence on the nature and extent of women's inequalities in all aspects of their lives. Decades of feminist research, politics, and activism have shown that women's inequality (economically, politically, their access to services, and so on) also makes them more likely to become trapped in violent and abusive situations, thus, feminists do not subscribe to a gender-symmetry paradigm (Aldridge, 2020).

Historically, and in many ways persistently, the UK has been a patriarchal society, therefore, individuals from socially, politically, and economically privileged groups (such as white cisgender men) may display a range of entitlement (Srinivasan, 2021) such as adhering to

rigid gender roles and expecting women to undertake housework and caregiving, controlling household decisions and women's independence (Kivel, 2007); exercising power over women in the workplace in a variety of ways, for example, job segregation, sex discrimination, the gender pay gap, and sexual harassment (Collinson and Hearn, 2005). Furthermore, norms of masculinity are also a central factor in the continued pervasiveness of violence against women, with expectations of superiority, power, and entitlement over women continuing to be influential in perceptions of what it means to be a man (Connell, 2005). Moreover, research suggests that the strength of men's adherence to traditional masculine norms of this kind is a key risk-factor in the perpetration of violence against women (Burrell et al., 2019). Therefore, an intersectionality of displays of entitlement can be seen across the home, the workplace, and in the public realm. Such entitlement is borne of the persistent structural and economic privileges that men hold and the will to exploit and oppress women, girls, and marginalised people, through the use of these structural privileges (Srinivasan, 2021).

The impacts of UK systemic inequalities and gendered cultural norms are reflected in the 'gendered rationale' for comprehending and addressing men's violence against women (see, for example, the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (Gov.UK, 2021b)) (Srinivasan, 2021). Conversely, the England and Wales Government apply a 'gender-neutral' approach to controlling or coercive behaviours (to include family members) (Home Office, 2015, 2023). However, a gender-neutral approach tends to disguise or obscure the gendered nature of certain types of violence and abuse, such as coercive control (Pitman, 2017), that too often fall within the 'grey areas' of policy and systems intervention. Therefore, recognising gendered violence and abuse is vitally important; however, applying a '*gender-informed'* approach allows the inclusion of intimate partner and domestic abuse that occurs in same-sex relationships; and addresses that men also experience violence/abuse in intimate partner and domestic abuse, although they do so far less frequently than women and they are also significantly more likely to be the perpetrators (Hester, 2012).

Evidence also tells us that women use violence in very different ways from men in intimate partner and domestic abuse; for example, research from a range of methodologies not only indicates that both women and men can be violent but also highlight gender differences in the extent, severity, and impact of intimate partner abuse, with women less likely to use the ongoing pattern of "battering" involving "coercive controlling tactics along with systematic threats and use of violence" (Hester, 2012: 2). However, the contentious issue remains around how to acknowledge forms of female aggression while still preserving a gender analysis of coercive control, intimate partner, and domestic abuse (Haaken, 2010). This study, however, advocates a gender-informed analysis of coercive control, intimate partner

and domestic abuse to allow an inclusive, deeper reflection on the nuance and complexity of a range of violent and abusive behaviours that occur beyond only the heteronormative couple model.

In April 2023, the England and Wales Crime Prosecution Service (CPS) and Government updated the 'Controlling or Coercive Behaviour Offence in an Intimate or Family Relationship: Legal Guidance for Domestic Abuse' (CPS/Gov.UK, 2023). While a gender-neutral approach is still broadly applied to the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour (to include family members beyond the couple), the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (Gov.UK, 2021b) also features in the CPS/Government's domestic abuse policy paper. This strategy states that it provides an overarching framework for crimes identified as being primarily committed, but not exclusively, by men against women within a context of power and control; the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour, and other prosecutions related to domestic abuse, should be addressed within the overall framework of violence against women and girls and human rights; the patterns and dynamics involved in such cases need to be understood in order to provide an appropriate and effective response. The CPS/Government (2023) acknowledge that some offenders will be women, non-binary or identify in a different way, and some victims will be men, non-binary or identify in a different way. However, the CPS/Government state that "all references in this guidance are gender-neutral and are applied to all suspects and victims of crime irrespective of gender, or sexual orientation, in accordance with the Code for Crown Prosecutors" (CPS/Gov.UK, 2023:1).

While the CPS/Government (2023) acknowledge the importance of addressing violence against women and girls, they apply a gender-neutral approach in response to controlling or coercive behaviours in intimate partner and family relationships. This is an example of a 'grey area' in policy and systems intervention, which creates opacity around the mainly gendered nature of violence against women and girls. The gender-neutral approach in the England and Wales's Government's (Home Office, 2015, 2023) legislation to criminalise coercive control in relationships therefore arguably fails to address a broader problem: the obfuscation of men within public policy discourses relating to violence against women. Men as perpetrators are invisible within the coercive control legislation which, in turn, obscures the construction of men's violence against women. This implies that, fundamentally, the England and Wales Government is discursively de-gendering interpersonal violence and abuse by omitting to clearly acknowledge who its (statistically evident) perpetrators are.

### 2.3.1 Masculinity and Coercive Control: Debates and Contradictions

All societies have cultural interpretations of gender, though not all have the concept of 'masculinity', which is a term that assumes one's behaviour is a consequence of the type of

person one is (Connell, 2005). Thus, an unmasculine person would act differently: being peaceable as opposed to violent, assuaging rather than dominant, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so on. This concept of masculinity is also inherently relational, as 'masculinity' only exists in contrast with 'femininity'; therefore, a culture which does not regard women and men as having strictly differentiated character types does not have a concept of masculinity in the sense of modern European/American culture (Connell, 2005).

The terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' direct us beyond categorical sex difference to the ways in which men differ among themselves, and to the ways in which women differ among themselves, in issues of gender (Connell, 2005). That is, to define masculinity as "what-men-empirically-are" is to omit the use of calling some women "masculine" and some men "feminine", or some actions or attitudes "masculine" or "feminine" regardless of who exhibits them (Connell, 2005: 69). This understanding/distinction is fundamental to gender analysis, since if we spoke only of the contrasts between men as a bloc and women as a bloc, we would not require the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' at any point. However, normative societal definitions of masculinity and femininity point to distinct differences between them and thus propose a standard: masculinity is what men should to be (Connell, 2005).

'Hegemonic masculinity' is a significant theory of men and masculinities, which has been prominently expanded by Connell (2005). The key principle of this theory is that a plurality of masculinities are constructed in society and these are hierarchically ordered around the form which is hegemonic (hegemonic masculinity is defined as a practice that legitimises men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of the common male population and women, and other marginalised ways of being a man, such as gay men) though this ebbs and flows according to time and location. Connell (2005) contends that the main function of hegemonic masculinity is to grant legitimacy to patriarchal ways of understanding the social world; to idealise a particular form of manhood in a way that permits men's societal domination over women to appear innate, inevitable, and desirable. He states that patriarchy is primarily maintained through an efficacious claim to authority, which is achieved through influences such as cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalisation, and the de-legitimisation of alternatives. While such factors serve to uphold patriarchy, Connell (2005) stresses that patriarchal authority is often strengthened, supported, and maintained by male violence.

Connell (2005) contends that femininity and masculinity are gender projects; they are processes in which practice is shaped through time, and it is through these processes that the beginnings of femininity and masculinity in structures of gender are transformed. As a structure of practice, any one version of masculinity is at the same time situated in varying

structures of relationship, and these can follow different historical paths. Consequently, masculinity is always liable to internal contradictions and historical disruptions. Therefore, rather than simply being an identity or a series of role expectations, masculinity is rooted in actions: it is a pattern of practice (Connell, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity embodies, and is embodied in, the way of being a man that is contemporarily most valued in any particular context; furthermore, while it may not be considered the norm in regard to the numbers of men that are able to enact it, it is normative in requiring that all men position themselves in relation to it (Connell, 2005).

Connell (2005) elucidates the power disparities that exist between men themselves depending on the extent to which they effectively conform to hegemonic masculinity, with bisexual, gay, and transgender men being particularly marginalised. Hegemonic masculinity therefore legitimises the subordination of some men within the gender order. Furthermore, inequalities in relation to sexuality, class, ethnicity, age, religion, and economic status, for example, all intersect and interact with the category of 'men'; this means that the losses and gains of patriarchal power are also unequally distributed (Connell, 2005). However, whilst most men are unable to meet the normative principles of hegemonic masculinity, they all still benefit from the subjugation of women, through what Connell calls the "patriarchal dividend" (2005: 79). Many men therefore construct masculinities which are complicit with the project of hegemony and thus accumulate structural privilege, though they are not necessarily positioned at the frontline of patriarchy as individuals (Connell, 2005).

Messerschmidt identified that "wife beating/rape" is a specific behaviour designed to reflect one's accountability as a "real man" (1993:150); therefore, this acts as an efficient method for simultaneously performing gender and affirming patriarchal masculinity. This perspective enables the appreciation of the extent to which being victimised challenges a man's perception of himself as a man. Situating men's experiences of female-perpetrated violence, abuse, and coercive control within the understandings of masculinity thus troubles how men understand their experiences within the realm of masculinity and within heteronormative gender relations; but also how, if they seek help, they are responded to or perceived (Barlow and Walklate, 2022).

Research has found that men are unlikely to frame their interpersonal experiences as domestic abuse and/or family violence; they are also unlikely to disclose feeling fear in the face of their violent/abusive experiences (Barlow and Walklate, 2022) lest they are viewed as inadequately masculine and/or they are met with disbelief by those they disclose to, especially criminal justice professionals (Migliaccio, 2001). This does not reflect that men do not experience female violence, abuse, and coercive control, but that their experiences

require closer examination because domestic abuse frameworks have tended to emphasise manhood/masculinity as perpetrating violence and womanhood/femininity as victimised and vulnerable (Walklate et al., 2022). However, as deliberations around coercive control have gradually made their presence felt in the policy domain, the consideration of who does what to whom and how proficiently policy and practice can conceptualise the dynamics of coercion and control have come under even more scrutiny (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Such scrutiny challenges the gendered assumptions, as men's groups argue that men are also subjected to coercive control (see, for example, Westmarland et al., 2021).

There is widespread academic agreement that coercive control is gendered and substantial empirical evidence exists in support of this opinion (Walklate et al., 2022) (as well as the evidence of the relationship between patriarchal structures of privilege, which generate inequality and vulnerability for women and marginalised individuals and groups (Srinivasan, 2021)). Therefore, Stark's (2007: 377) statement: "I have never had a case that involved a female perpetrator of coercive control, and no such cases are documented in the literature" has been widely accepted as a "truism" (Walklate et al., 2022:1). However, Walklate et al. (2022) argue that Stark's statement elides and conflates victimhood and perpetration (women are victims and men are perpetrators) with femininity and masculinity (though, not all women are victims and not all men are offenders: women can be offenders, and men can be victims). Yet, Stark's (2007) declaration above has largely embedded an assumption, particularly in policy and practice fields, that it is entirely, or at least primarily, male perpetrators who use the processes of coercive control to victimise their female partners (that is, male-on-female perpetration has become widely understood as the more statistically significant phenomenon than the reverse, which has obfuscated important nuances of how domestic abuse and coercive control work). Walklate et al. (2022) suggest that Stark's (2007) assumption is problematic for several reasons: not least because it renders men as potential victim-survivors of coercive control invisible. Thus, the nature and extent of this invisibility attract considerable debate (Walklate et al., 2022).

*Male Victims of Coercive Control: Experiences and Impact Report* (Graham-Kevan et al., 2021) summarises the UK findings of a major international survey of the experiences of male victims of intimate partner abuse conducted in 2020. The survey focused on men's experiences of coercive control from intimate partners: the 538 UK respondents were mainly from England (80 percent), but also Scotland (11 percent), Wales (6 percent) and Northern Ireland (3 percent). The majority of participants had left their abusive partners (83 percent), while some respondents were still with abusive partners (17 percent). Most men were in heterosexual relationships (91 percent).

The report shows that the male victim-survivors represented by this participant sample/respondent group experienced persistent and severe patterns of coercive control similar to those experienced by female victim-survivors. Even in the areas that are often seen as affecting only female victim-survivors, such as economic abuse and sexual coercion, the report showed that over half the male victim-survivors had their earnings controlled, and one in five men were forced to have sex as an ongoing pattern of abuse. The report also showed that men's relationships with their children are often exploited to coercively control them, both within the relationship and post-separation (see also, Hine et al., 2020). False allegations of violence and abuse (or the threat of making them) to the police and social services, as a pattern of abuse, were experienced by almost two-thirds of male victim-survivors in the survey. Graham-Kevan et al. (2021) suggest that the impact of these types of behaviours (all of which fit the rubric of coercive control) resulted in eight out of ten men in their sample, displaying symptoms not dissimilar to post-traumatic stress.

Walklate et al. (2022) contend that in a fast-growing field of research, policy, and practice, there is limited understanding of how male victim-survivors experience patterns of abuse, and specifically the impacts of coercive control. Walklate et al. (2022) acknowledge that all forms of intimate partner abuse are disproportionately experienced by female victim-survivors. However, they advocate that there is value in building evidence based on how men understand and portray their own experiences of coercive control, and what implications this has for their participation in service system responses to domestic violence by women. Therefore, my study aims to add a degree of clarity to this debate by investigating men's experiences of coercive control, as well as their experiences of help-seeking. This also reaffirms that while coercive control is conceptualised as predominantly gendered violence and abuse, a 'gender-informed' approach and response to coercive control is important to ensure the inclusion of all victim-survivors (and perpetrators), as well as to further refine understandings and definitions of the concept of coercive control beyond the domestic and beyond male-on-female violence and abuse.

### 2.3.2 The Problem of Distinguishing Cultural Norms from Interpersonal Violence

A further challenge to recognising coercive control is how to distinguish the 'coercive' element from the normative ways in which men, and society at large, micro-manage women's enactment of gender roles (such as how they perform domestic tasks) by default, simply because they are women (Bishop and Bettinson, 2018). Feminist scholars and activists (see, for example, Dworkin,1997; MacKinnon, 2005) have famously queried: when we live in patriarchal structures - systems as well as cultures - that engineer the systemic inequality and oppression of women (and other marginalised groups, on the basis of race,

sexuality or class, for example), how do we distinguish cultural norms from interpersonal violence; to what extent can individual perpetrators be held accountable for exercising systemic, culturally normative behaviours that are constructed and enabled by our public systems and gender, racial, and sexual norms? This study therefore examines how systemic inequalities and cultural norms may influence victim-survivors' perceptions of their perpetrators' coercive-controlling behaviour (whether they perceive their violent and abusive behaviours as structurally and/or culturally normative); as well as exploring the impacts of systemic inequalities and constrains for victim-survivors within help-seeking contexts, for example, social services, the police, and the criminal justice system.

### 2.3.3 Contestations of the Concept of Coercive Control

Ultimately, as shown above, there is no single explanation for the complex problem of coercive control, intimate partner and domestic abuse. Furthermore, the academic and advocacy domain relating to violence against women is occupied by professionals and practitioners who are situated in different disciplinary backgrounds and practice orientations. Such differences inevitably lead to varied emphases in understanding, analysing, and applying the concept of coercive control to victim-survivors' lives, and how best to respond to the problem of this type of violence and abuse. However, examining these differences and the resulting contestations of coercive control allows deeper reflection on the concept itself (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Therefore, investigating coercive control as a clinical/psychological construct, a social construct, and a legal construct provides differently emphasised conceptualisations of coercive control (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). This multi-layered perspective (including the concept of coercive control as a gendered construct that is illustrated throughout the chapter) considers further possibilities for understanding and responding to the problem; while allowing the concept of coercive control to be examined beyond only a unitary phenomenon, perpetrated within the context of the domestic. Moreover, this perspective and understanding is important, as my project adopts a 'transdisciplinary approach' to coercive control, to enable a broader comprehension of this type of violence and abuse that is perpetrated both within and beyond the domestic.

### 2.4 Coercive Control: A Clinical/Psychological Construct

The enduring effects of coercion and control continue beyond individual episodes of interpersonal violence and affect a victim-survivor's sense of safety, identity, independence, and their attachments to others (Walker, 1980). Without understanding the dynamics of coercive control and its full impact, victim-survivors who have suffered this kind of trauma continue to be isolated by the complexity of their abusive experiences, and their needs for recovery are often misunderstood and unmet (Herman, 1997). Judith Herman, a

distinguished expert on the psychology of complex trauma and recovery, highlights the dangers of a society that fails to understand the dynamics of coercive control. She states that "observers who have never experienced prolonged terror and who have no understanding of coercive methods of control presume that they would show greater courage and resistance than the victim in comparable circumstances" (Herman,1997:115).

Understanding coercive control as a clinical/psychological construct also resonates with the work of Stark (2007). Embedded in advocacy and practice, his work places emphasis on listening to and providing support for victim-survivors in making sense of their lives, and how to rebuild them in the aftermath of an intimate relationship with an abuser (Stark, 2007). Barlow and Walklate further suggest that understanding coercive control as a clinical/psychological construct can inform therapeutic practice in powerful ways: "it can be understood as a clinical concept, grounded in practice, and as a psychological concept, grounded in experience" (2022:7). This presents a way for victim-survivors to understand their perpetrators' abusive behaviours, and process the impact of those behaviours on their sense of themselves as individuals with personhood.

The importance of understanding coercive control as a clinical/psychological construct is also evident in Roddy's (2024) work. She states that a lack of specialist training means that people who have experienced domestic abuse have poor experiences within general counselling, where counsellors do not always have specialist knowledge or experience with intimate partner abuse and coercive control. Thus, Roddy (2024) presents a strong case for improving post-domestic abuse support, which requires specialist training for practitioners working with victim-survivors, to prevent causing further harm to them.

UK society has become much more aware of what domestic abuse is, and of its prevalence in all types of intimate partner and family relationships, due to the increasingly more informed coverage by the media in the news, in television dramas, films, and novels. There is also increased public awareness that not all abuse involves only physical violence (especially with the rise of the #MeToo movement since the 2010s): some includes financial, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse, or controlling and coercive behaviours. However, Roddy's (2024) work shows that what is often still overlooked is the enduring impact of domestic abuse and coercive control, affecting both adults and children for years after the violence and abuse has ended. When survivors do seek help, it may not be obvious that specialist domestic abuse support is essential, therefore, the counselling they receive may not meet their needs. Roddy states that this is often the case when the abuse experienced is nonphysical; yet research has shown that survivors of domestic abuse and coercive control are more likely to suffer higher rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic

stress, and suicidal ideation than the general UK population (Potter et al., 2020). This suggests that survivors are likely to seek (or be referred for) counselling and that most therapists at some time during their career will work with a client who has experienced domestic abuse, including those who are not specialist practitioners (Roddy, 2024).

Despite requests from advocates in the field of domestic abuse to fund research to establish evidence-based practice in mental health services for this client group, funding has not been allocated by the UK Government (Hameed et al., 2020). Rather, funding has focused on the prevention of further episodes of domestic abuse instead of mental health support for the millions of survivors (Roddy, 2024). General funding for domestic abuse is mainly directed at improving the safety of victim-survivors and their children, such as providing advocates to support individuals through the UK court systems. While UK Government mental health funding is mainly assigned to general mental health services, despite evidence over the past 20 years that shows general services can be unhelpful for survivors and can also lead to re-traumatisation (Farmer, 2013). Roddy (2024) states that this information is not intended as a criticism of therapists in general practice but as a recognition that the way survivors present after experiencing intimate partner, domestic abuse, and coercive control can be quite different to any other client group, needing specialist care and understanding.

A comprehensive understanding of coercive control as a clinical/psychological construct emphasises the importance of professionals' 'specialist' knowledge of this type of violence and abuse, rather than an inadequate 'generalist' approach to the problem of intimate partner, domestic abuse, and coercive control. Furthermore, the oft-observed empirical finding from victim-survivors to be heard (Barker, 2007; Ginsberg, 2014; Herman, 1997; Walklate, 2016) also endorses this requirement from all those who may be aware of their violence and abuse situation. This includes health professionals, domestic abuse support services (whether their role is in one-to-one therapeutic support, Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA), or frontline police officer), education personnel, family and friends.

Being congruently listened to can be the first step for victim-survivors on their journey of action, if this is the course they elect to pursue. However, equally important is that action does not always necessarily follow. Therefore, not being judged by all those involved for not taking action is also imperative. Nonetheless, options and choices for help and support originate from listening; therefore, the importance of accurate, specialist knowledge and listening skills necessitates ensuring adequate coercive control training for all the professionals that victim-survivors come into contact with.

My study therefore advocates an understanding of coercive control as a clinical/psychological construct, and implementing a trauma-informed approach in response

to victim-survivors to prevent causing further harm to them; to promote recovery from violence and abuse; and to support victim-survivors who are experiencing perpetrators' controlling and coercive behaviour. Furthermore, a core value of asserting a clinical/psychological, trauma-informed approach in my scholarship also presents an argument for theorising, studying, and researching coercive control from a practice-oriented perspective. This resonates with one of my key strengths as a researcher, as I have been a trauma-informed practitioner for 25 years, which consistently informs my approach to data collection and analysis; as well as my arguments for what conceptual approaches to coercive control are necessary and practically applicable.

## 2.5 Coercive Control: A Social Construct

Stark's (2007) influential assertion of coercive control as a 'liberty crime' shows much about the social and cultural context of his work, as it was developed in the United States, in which the constitution affords individual rights. Yet the current scholarly literature recognises that structural constraints such as ethnicity, disability, and poverty hinder some victim-survivors' access to such rights and related resources (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Therefore, an awareness of structural context is important: first it is significant for understanding how and in what situations responses to coercive control may travel and be applied across varying jurisdictions, as well as in terms of service provision and access; second, understanding coercive control as a social construct raises awareness of the contexts in which it is most likely to have resonance for victim-survivors, and encourages reflection on the question of whose interests and experiences the concept captures. Specifically, whether the concept resonates most readily as a way of making sense of one's own life and developing a course of action for the "white, articulate, Northern woman for whom autonomy is taken for granted?" (Barlow and Walklate, 2022: 8). That is, I consider whether there are implicit groups for whom the concept works because it taps into their social positionality and its inherent structural privileges; and if there are groups of people for whom the concept does not resonate or whose practical experiences (for example, of violence, abuse, coercive control, and access to public services) are not adequately captured by the contemporary scholarly framings of violence/abuse and coercive control. If the recourse of the law is the preferred policy response to coercive control, such questions hold deep relevance.

### 2.5.1 The Significance of Context

Kuennen (2007:13) states that "in trying to understand the dynamics of coercive control, context is everything"; she emphasises that an awareness of the role of victim-survivors, in terms of the extent to which they are free to make choices themselves in abusive situations, is important. For example, a woman in employment, who has adequate access to resources,

may have a greater ability to resist coercion than a migrant woman who has no legal status to remain in her current country of residence (Barlow and Walklate, 2022), no recourse to public funds and no, or limited, access to resources offering help and support (CWJ, 2023).

The example above highlights the relevance of 'context' in understanding the process of coercion and victim-survivors' ability to exercise any level of agency within this process. Recognising an individual's capacity for choice in such contexts, and the structural constrains which may restrict such choices, is vital (Myhill, 2017). While people can and do leave violent and abusive partners (or relatives), to understand the role of coercion within structural contexts, we must also address individuals' broader capacity for autonomy, despite the seemingly impossible situations they may find themselves in (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). These can also be seen as important nuances when translating concepts of coercive control into law (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). That is, coercion, in reality, is not a dichotomous experience, though it is expressed in this way in law: the law forces the question of illegal coercion into a yes or no answer, and a boundary between free choice and coercion is imposed (one is either coerced or not) (Hanna, 2009), rather than recognising that coercion can exist on a continuum (Barlow, 2016; Kelly, 2011).

### 2.5.2 The Historical Absence of Inclusion in Relation to Violence Against Women

Second-wave feminism of the late 1960s and 1970s was concerned with radical social change on a broad scale (Johanssen, 2022), and feminists protested to achieve social, economic, and sexual equality (Schrupp, 2017). However, a criticism of the movement has been that it was largely white and middle class, at least in its most visible and widely historicised form; therefore, women of colour and working class women were excluded from it (or marginalised within the mainstream movement that would ultimately inform legislation and public policy) (LeGates, 2001). For example, in the United States, the Combahee River Collective (CRC) formed as a radical alternative to the National Black Feminist Organisation (NBFO); the NBFO itself was established in response to what Black feminists believed was the failure of white feminist organisations to adequately respond to racism in the United States (Taylor, 2017). Yet, the identification of racism alone, as a phenomenon in the lives of Black women, was inadequate as an analysis or as a plan of action. The legacies of this marginalisation of Black, Indigenous, and working-class feminisms continue to be recognised today and highlighted by UK groups like Sisters Uncut, Black Southhall Sisters, Sistah Space, the Ubuntu Women's Shelter, the Angelou Centre, and others.

The CRC women did not coin the phrase 'intersectionality' - Kimberlé Crenshaw did so in 1989 (Crenshaw, 1989) - however, they articulated the analysis that animates the meaning of intersectionality: the notion that multiple oppressions reinforce one another to create new

forms of suffering (Taylor, 2017). Black women could not quantify their oppression only in terms of racism or sexism, or of homophobia experienced by Black lesbians; they were never a single category, it was the amalgamation of those identities that compounded how Black women experienced oppression (Taylor, 2017). The CRC built on these observations by continuing the analysis of the roots of Black women's oppression under capitalism, and they argued for the reorganisation of society centred on the collective needs of those most oppressed. This analysis was crucial to understanding the particular experiences of Black women in contrast to white women and Black men, but also for the establishment of effective collective solidarities across the axis of intersectional marginalisation (Taylor, 2017). This was a vital aspect of the CRC's political intervention in the women's movement, as Black women could not be expected to be entirely active in political movements that did not represent or develop their interests (Taylor, 2017).

The inability or unwillingness of the majority of White feminist organisations to fully engage with antiracist issues impacting Black women (such as campaigning against sexual assault, sterilisation, and workers' rights), alienated Black women and other women of colour from participating in those organisations (Taylor, 2017). Women newly activated into the feminist movement did not necessarily join the CRC, however, the influence of that organisation and the generality of their analysis opened up the world of organising and radical politics to new Black feminists. The CRC and their sister movements did not only represent Black women, but they also united in solidarity around class, ethnicity, sexuality, and migration status (Taylor, 2017).

Although Stark (2007) emphasises the enunciation of women from all social backgrounds in his conceptualisation of gendered violence and abuse, he too portrays a white-dominant class-centric view of the Women's Rights Movement. Similarly, while Johnson (2008) briefly describes racial differences in his work, there is a large body of research relating to race, ethnicity, and domestic violence that is absent from his study (Durfee, 2011). For example, previous research shows that African Americans' violent resistance towards abusive partners is interpreted very differently than that of white women and Asian women (Durfee, 2011). Johnson (2008), however, limits his discussion of race and ethnicity to white people, African Americans, and Hispanics; he leaves out Native American women, who, in the United States, have the highest risk of victimisation of any racial or ethnic group (Rosay, 2016); and he does not include Asian women or biracial women in this work. Therefore, both Stark and Johnson's concepts of coercive control fail to fully acknowledge the problem of interpersonal violence/abuse alongside structural inequalities and constraints for non-white, non-Western, and Indigenous individuals and families. In other words, the most influential definitions and

policy applications of coercive control frameworks have a further way to go in implementing a fully intersectional approach.

### 2.5.3 Marginalised Groups

There are some groups for whom intimate partner and domestic abuse is particularly hidden, structurally unrecognised or addressed in practice (at the level of service provision and effective policy application); yet it is evident that intimate partner and domestic abuse transcends class, race, nationally and religious lines (Kanuha,1996), occurs in same-sex partnerships (Renzetti, 1992; Walsh, 1996), and in relationships where partners are vulnerable (Curen and Sinason, 2010; McCulloch et al., 2020). Social forces can also be instrumental in victimising people, such as forced marriage; the neglect of vulnerable young people in social care; the lack of provision for the help and support of homeless people with substance and alcohol problems; and the failure of some professionals within health and social agencies to routinely screen for intimate partner and domestic abuse (Motz, 2014).

The Controlling or Coercive Behaviour legislation in England and Wales (Home Office, 2015, 2023), problematically, does not take into account the structural issues relating to intimate partner and domestic abuse. There is increasing emphasis on the criminalisation of coercive control at the individual level; this imbues a powerful societal message that such behaviour will not be tolerated, while providing routes to support for victim-survivors, who may wish to engage with the criminal justice process. However, the fact that intimate partner and domestic abuse is statistically widely gendered (Walklate et al., 2022) does not mean that all women's experiences of violence and abuse are the same. Rather, structural variables, such as culture, race, Indigenous status, socio-economic conditions, insecure immigration status, disability, sexuality, and gender/transition can deepen and complicate the oppression that victim-survivors already experience as a function of intimate partner and domestic abuse (Canning, 2020; Goodmark, 2018; Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005). Therefore, the implications of the criminalisation process for victim-survivors from marginalised groups, and the different ways they may experience coercion and control in their relationships, warrant further consideration. This includes analysis of how the dominant framings of, and approaches to, coercive control within and beyond the domestic may need to be revised, so as to be more intersectional and effective in the support of systemically marginalised groups.

### 2.5.4 Black, Ethnic Minority, Migrant and Asylum-Seeking People

The majority of research on domestic abuse, and related policy and intervention practices, focus predominantly on white women's experiences (Barlow and Walklate, 2022; hooks, 1984; Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005; Walby, 1989) and largely exclude individual's experiences that fall outside of these structural characteristics. Furthermore, Sistah Space (2023) argue

that public services like the police and the criminal justice system criminalise race itself; thus, people of colour fear racist violence/abuse from the police and public services alongside fearing for their personal safety at the hands of individual perpetrators. Moreover, reporting violence and abuse can be seen as disloyal, or as equivalent to fuelling prejudice (Sistah Space, 2023); marginalised victim-survivors are therefore less likely to willingly engage with the police and criminal justice system, due to fears of racism and discrimination both for themselves *and* their partners (Graca, 2021; Sistah Space, 2023).

Coker (2001) contends that state intervention and criminalisation can cause more intrusion and harm for poor Black and ethnic minority people, with increasing risks of arrest for victim-survivors themselves and the unwanted removal of children by the state. Hence, victim-survivors can spend considerable time and energy battling 'the system' and the state, which emphasises the ways in which their 'space for action' can be constrained by structural barriers (Sharp-Jeffs et al., 2018). Therefore, the emphasis on a criminal justice approach to address domestic abuse and coercive control is likely to exclude minoritised individuals' experiences and cause further marginalisation; such complexities are particularly exacerbated for migrant and asylum-seeking victim-survivors (Bosworth and Turnbull, 2015).

Migrant and asylum-seeking people are faced with many cultural and structural barriers if they seek support for intimate partner and domestic abuse, such as language barriers; geographic isolation from family and support networks independent of the perpetrator; lack of access to public funds; financial dependence on their partner or the state; insecure legal and migration status; little or no knowledge of the support available; and relying on their home country as a frame of reference for the criminal justice system (Graca, 2021). Therefore, many victim-survivors tend to avoid engaging with the criminal justice system when experiencing intimate partner and domestic abuse. Rather, in the absence of adequate criminal justice interventions, they are inclined to rely on discrete and informal strategies in their endeavours to protect themselves against the violence they are suffering (Graca, 2018). For example: hiding the violence, seeking help from friends, or adapting their behaviour to minimise their perpetrator's violence. Graca (2018) states that such behaviours are deemed by women themselves to be forms of resistance, rather than passive behaviours, as their deepest fear is bringing state intervention into their private lives. Hence, the coercive and controlling behaviour of a partner (or family member) or the risk of offending the family honour (Gill and Harrison, 2016) may be perceived as more tolerable than the coercive and controlling responses of the state and its authorities (Nancarrow, 2019; Wilson, 2020).

The criminalisation of coercive control may work for some people but it will not work for all people, and it can further marginalise others. The policy response of criminalisation, determined by the influence of Stark's (2007) work, therefore, is not without issues. The process of criminalisation implies a unitary experience of coercive control when, as explored above, the reality is much more complex. For instance, the idea of an individual perpetrator, like a spouse, is based on the two-partner nuclear family model, which does not apply to many communities' experiences and everyday realities within structural and/or cultural contexts. There is also much more involvement of the state in victim-survivor's lives as a result of the processes of criminalisation, which can impose further substantial, negative effects for those whose lives are already impacted by structural inequalities and constraints.

### 2.5.5 Coercive Control and Sexuality

Compounded impacts of coercive control have been documented by Donovan and Hester (2014) in regard to same-sex relationships. They argue that an unintended consequence of the success of feminist scholarship and the activism around violence against women has been the construction of the 'public story' of domestic abuse. The domestic abuse narrative constructs a problem that heterosexual (cisgender) men create for heterosexual (cisgender) women; a problem primarily of physical violence and an issue of a specific presentation of gender: a large, strong (cisgender) man being physically violent towards a small, weak (cisgender) woman (Donovan and Barnes, 2019).

The public story of domestic abuse is consistent with the widely cited empirical evidence that women are most often victimised by men (Stark, 2007; Walklate et al., 2022). However, this story makes it very difficult for those whose experiences do not align with this discourse to either tell their story or for their story to be heard in their communities or at the public service and policy level (Donovan and Barnes, 2017; Machado, 2019). Moreover, the public story of domestic abuse excludes not only those individuals who are LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) and/or T+ (transgender) victim-survivors but also cisgender heterosexual men, and any victim-survivor, regardless of their sexuality (or gender identity), whose experience is not predominantly of physical violence (Donovan and Barnes, 2017). The male-to-female domestic abuse discourse also excludes anyone who has used violence and/or abusive behaviours themselves in retaliation, or in self-defence, or anyone who is deemed physically larger or stronger than their abuser (Donovan and Barnes, 2017).

There are fewer studies exploring the impacts of coercive control in same-sex relationships in comparison to heterosexual partnerships (NCADV, 2018); Machado (2017) also highlights this in relation to butch/femme abusive dynamics. However, Frankland and Brown (2014) identified that around one-quarter of their survey sample of 184 same-sex couples used

controlling and coercive behaviours. This was particularly evident in male same-sex relationships, and they noted markedly high levels of sexual coercion and physical violence. Raghavan et al. (2019) surveyed 126 men in same-sex partnerships in relation to their experiences of coercive control; they also reported high levels of physical violence, entwined with non-physical abusive methods, such as intimidation and psycho-emotional abuse. However, the men in the study experienced less micro-regulation and deprivation when compared to the literature exploring heterosexual relationships (Raghavan et al., 2019). Overall, both studies highlight the reticence of same-sex victim-survivors to engage with the criminal justice system, due to their fear of prejudice. Both studies stress that while gender is key to understanding the experience and prevalence of intimate partner abuse, especially coercive control, further structural and cultural constraints also need to be considered to understand the ways in which multiple inequalities can impact victim-survivors' experiences of coercive control and subsequently influence their probability of help-seeking (Frankland and Brown, 2014; Raghavan et al., 2019).

Donovan and Barnes (2017) advocate that 'intersectionality' is an important aspect in any analysis of intimate partner and domestic abuse in LGB and/or T+ intimate relationships; the structural discrimination and oppression associated with positioning as LGB and/or T+ (or in relation to ethnicity, race, and other identity statuses), is also used by perpetrators in their range of abuses. In turn, this justifies their argument that LGB and/or T+ intimate partner and domestic abuse is a social problem, not simply an individual one: a problem that is exacerbated by cisgendered heteronormativity, heterosexism, and LGB and/ or T+ invisibility. Shifting responsibility onto societal institutions and challenging the propensity towards individual responsibilisation is vital if LGB and/or T+ people's needs as victim-survivors are to be met in an effective and inclusive way. Thus, the need for a concept of intimate partner and domestic abuse that does not assume heterosexuality, or a heteronormative perpetrator/victim dynamic, as the norm is important (Donovan and Barnes, 2017).

## 2.6 Coercive Control: A Legal Construct

Since the implementation of the criminal offence of controlling or coercive behaviour in England and Wales, 2015, (Home Office, 2015, 2023); the more comprehensive offence of partner abuse in Scotland, 2018, (Scottish Government, 2019); and the criminalisation of coercive control in Northern Ireland, 2022, (NI Assembly, 2022), the coercive control model of partner abuse has become a topic of legal controversy (Stark and Hester, 2018). Introducing these new laws reflects the shared international perception that the previous focus of the criminal justice system on isolated, injurious assaults was too narrow. This impeded capturing victim-survivors' lived experiences of violence and abuse, while a

growing body of research and personal testimony reported that many individuals who seek protection from intimate partner and domestic abuse endure patterns of coercion and control (Stark and Hester, 2018). However, critical scrutiny of the ways in which the law responds to coercive control and domestic abuse in practice continue to drive academic, legislative, and policy debate internationally (Burman and Brooks-Hay, 2018).

The powerful and highly effective presence of coercive control as a feature of intimate partner and domestic abuse has gained a deeper and more nuanced understanding in recent years; there is also an awareness of the difficulties relating to determining its presence and the translation of its criteria of recognition into policy. The translation of coercive control has predominantly focused on the role of the law as a response in jurisdictions within the UK and beyond (such as Tasmania and parts of Australia (Douglas, 2015)). However, there are ways, other than criminal law, that coercive control can be recognised and addressed in relation to professional practice (such as a clinical/psychological approach to facilitate the appropriate support and interventions for victim-survivors). Yet, in many ways, in regard to policy debates, those who advocate criminalisation and finding a role for the law have dominated the policy and practice-focused debates (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Furthermore, as Stark (2007) demarcated coercive control as a 'liberty crime', many of the contemporary debates surrounding coercive control have been less concerned about whether it is a feature of intimate partner and domestic abuse; there is more concern with the extent to which there is a role for the (criminal) law in responding to this type of violence and abuse.

As previously mentioned in this chapter, the notion of a 'liberty crime' (Stark, 2007) originates from a specific United States socio-legal context, which has its own traditions in regard to the relationship between citizenship, rights, and the role of the local and federal states in both protecting and delivering these. Situating the notion of a liberty crime in its contemporary context therefore raises the question of the transferability of this view of a response to coercive control from one criminal justice jurisdiction to another. However, since the 1970s, views among practitioners, academics, and campaigners on the efficacy of the law to address domestic abuse more generally have varied (Lewis et al., 2001). Therefore, in terms of twentieth- and twenty-first-century concerns with criminal law responses to coercive control, as discrete from civil/family law responses, there are important matters to consider when policy responses that are intended to improve the lives of victim-survivors (and hold perpetrators to account for their offences) are proposed (Barlow and Walklate, 2022).

### 2.6.1 The Debates Surrounding the Criminalisation of Coercive Control

Perpetrators' controlling or coercive behaviours can result in severe consequences for victim-survivors (Hill, 2019; Richards, 2024); while recognising the impacts and significance of these experiences is vital for all those working in the field of domestic abuse, the extent to which the criminal law creates a 'space for action' (Sharps-Jeffs et al., 2018), especially for victim-survivors, divides opinion.

Tolmie (2018) suggests that criminalising coercive control can situate any physical violence experienced by victim-survivors in the context of their relationships and also sensitises police responses to non-violent and other types of low-level offending. However, such more minor abuses may escalate to overt physical violence over time (Bettinson, 2016). Increased awareness of the context and history of a case (such as the presence of psychological abuse, financial abuse, and the abusive use of digital technologies), if it is prosecuted, can help to validate victim-survivors' experiences of violence and abuse; this can also allow courts to make more informed decisions, particularly in relation to the dispositions of the offenders (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Offences that are documented in such a way as to capture what has happened, especially over time, can also facilitate appropriate sentencing (Youngs, 2014). Douglas (2015) suggests that criminalising coercive control can have an educative purpose (rather than only a symbolic function) and may help victim-survivors to make sense of theirs and others' experiences. Furthermore, Johnson et al. (2019) tendered the view that the law has the power as a preventive strategy: if coercive control is recognised as a common feature of lethal relationships, this might stop such deaths from happening. Yet, within the jurisdictions in which specific offences of controlling or coercive behaviour have been implemented, juries are still undecided on whether such legislation can deliver these presumed positive outcomes (Barlow and Walklate, 2022).

The problems associated with a recourse to the criminal law generally, and the development of specific offences of coercive control particularly, especially in regard to their implementation, are not novel in the field of intimate partner and domestic abuse. There are, and have been historically, difficulties in directing the criminal justice lens away from evidence-led, isolated incidents of physical violence to a 'course of conduct'; yet, the latter is vital for the recognition of coercive control (Kelly and Westmarland, 2016), as well as evidencing this type of violence and abuse (Brennan and Myhill, 2021). However, part of the debate that the recognition of coercive control has created is how and to what degree the criminal justice system is the most appropriate route through which to respond to a 'course of conduct' when criminal justice systems are designed to respond to 'incidents' of violence, rather than 'processes' or 'patterns of abuse' (Barlow and Walklate, 2022), which may

involve or employ wider structures of oppression, as well as community members and environments beyond the 'couple' and even beyond the domestic.

The offence of coercive control also relies on the willingness of victim-survivors to engage with the legal and criminal justice process to achieve 'successful' prosecutions (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). That said, it is important to acknowledge that there is generally less physical evidence in coercive control cases in comparison to other domestic abuse related offences, such as signs of actual bodily harm or criminal damage. However, victim-survivor testimony can be crucial in securing a charge, especially in evidence-led (physical/empirical) prosecutions. Problematically, Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control as a 'liberty crime' is anchored in the assumption that victim-survivors would wish, or feel able, to give a detailed account of their experience in court or would rely on another to do so for them. Yet, coercive control is deeply complex, with perpetrators routinely distorting perceptions of the reality of what is actually happening; this can become internalised by victim-survivors and cause their engagement with the criminal justice process to be enormously challenging (Hill, 2019). Furthermore, victim-survivors often believe what their abusers have told them about their ability as a parent and the likely probability of them losing access to their children if they report their abusive behaviour (Hine et al., 2020; Katz, 2023). Such fears become more severe the more marginalised people are, and these silencing processes increase victim-survivors' feelings of being unsafe within their own families, as well as within a system that is intended to help them (Wilson, 2017). I interrogate the practical consequences of this challenge for victim-survivors in the data/analysis chapters four and five.

Tolmie (2018) points out that assuming victim-survivors can escape their abusers by choosing to leave, or that they can keep themselves and their children safe by contacting the police or obtaining a protection order, is greatly problematic. Physical and psychological abuse are not mutually exclusive; neither is one the requirement of the other, and they do not exist in a hierarchical relationship with each other. The existence of either/both, however, can lead to victim-survivors' lives being marked by fear, intimidation, and loss of autonomy, and can all reduce their capacity to leave their abusive partners (Buzawa et al., 2017). Victim-survivors of coercive control can also experience the full force of power and control by their abusers during their efforts to access criminal justice interventions (Douglas, 2015).

### 2.6.2 Gaps in Implementing the Controlling and Coercive Behaviour Offence

In response to the inefficacy of the criminalisation of coercive control, debates have focused on improving legal definitions; better methods of counting occurrences; improved training for criminal justice professionals in comprehending and identifying coercive control; and improving ways of collecting evidence of its presence (Barlow et al., 2020; Brennan and

Myhill, 2021). Refining law and practice in this way is intended, over time, to facilitate improvements in criminal justice professionals' understandings and responses to coercive control as a criminal offence, and also as a feature of everyday life (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). However, while nuanced attention to the implementation processes may address some of the features of the implementation gap, these initiatives cannot respond to the conceptual gap. That is, the embrace of the law as a response to intimate partner and domestic abuse in general, as well as coercive control in particular, also parallels an embrace of governing through crime (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Yet, it has been well-documented that the law is ineffective in implementing change to the wider social practices of violence and abuse rooted in gender inequality (Goodmark, 2018). Moreover, the law can act as a site of abuse, adding to or exacerbating the abuses that victim-survivors already experience in their relationships (Douglas, 2018; Mills, 1999).

Goodmark (2018) (and others) emphasise that for some women, turning to criminal justice law to address intimate partner and domestic abuse has led to greater state control over them and their children's lives. For example, the different legal realms occupied particularly by marginalised people requires they perform themselves differently as individuals to comply with the expectations of these different authorities' view of what establishes them as a legitimate victim (Stubbs and Wangmann, 2015). Victim-survivors are expected to do this to ensure legal redress and safety for themselves and their children (McCulloch et al., 2020), which implies that such expectations, and the practices they create, also constitute a form of coercion and control (Barlow and Walklate, 2022).

The process of criminalisation creates complainants and defendants (victims and offenders), who are conceptualised as jointly co-existent, as they are each brought into being by the criminal law (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). In law, defendants and complainants are closely connected as legal subjects by the legal comprehensions of responsibility and the related constructions of responsible subjects (of law) (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Responsible subjects are gendered (and also racialised and classed), therefore, in law, the understandings of who did what to whom and why are also interconnected and gendered (Lacey, 2013). This fundamental framing of the complainant and defendant as interlinked and equal in the eyes of the law (an idea both reflected in and further exacerbated by the so-called 'gender-symmetrical' or 'gender-neutral' approach to coercive control and violence against women) exposes much about the limitations of seeking to change the law per se. That is, offering the means through which to change perpetrators' gendered, violent and abusive behaviour, while the process of the recourse to law fails to understand the gendered constructions of who is responsible for what, on which the criminal law is based (Barlow and Walklate, 2022).

Being considered responsible (in law) and being determined as responsible (in law) refract the perpetual presumption that the responsible subject of the law is the entrepreneurial, rational, white male (Naffine,1990). This presumption frames the responsible subject of the law in national as well as international law and pervades the understandings of, and responses to, both complainants and defendants (victims and offenders) (Houge, 2016). This gendered subject, however, impacts on women's experiences of the law in numerous ways, including addressing the perpetrator's coercive control. For example, Mills (1999) details the ways in which the state reproduces the harms experienced by abused women, such as by failing to hear her, and/or rejecting her views to taking away her freedom when she - the victim-survivor – becomes reframed as an 'abuser', due to her retaliation and/or self-defence. Douglas (2018) emphasises the ways in which the criminal justice system itself facilitates the further abuse by a partner, which she calls 'legal system abuse'; she contends that victim-survivors' engagement with the law often extends abusers' behaviour as they are permitted to haunt, battle, and play with victim-survivors through law (Douglas, 2021). Therefore, victim-survivors fear the legal process alongside the fear of their partners; though, arguably, such fears become more severe the more marginalised people are.

The exploration of gender constructions in law demonstrates how complex lives become controllable via the law; and how they are at the same time sanitised into something akin to 'normal' (heterosexual) relationships (Dawson, 2016), by which they are also made intelligible in law (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). The pursuit of gendered, individualised responsibility transpires; yet, the reality of individuals' real lives may be multifaceted and complex, contingent on more than their one-to-one relationships with abusers and, again, reaching beyond the domestic. However, in law, the responsible subject is constituted by whatever ways possible, as a neoliberal, governable, gendered subject (O'Malley, 2010). Thus, the responsible subject of the law and its (in)visible presence marginalises the status of women as subjects of law and the intricacy of their lives which, when under legal examination, are certain to be obscured along with the impact of their gendered positionality (Gerard and Kerr, 2016).

Gender frames how the legal process responds to complainants and defendants (victims and offenders) and informs how they are constructed as responsible (neoliberal) subjects (Lacey, 2016). While these are not new understandings, they are not included in the contemporary debates to extend the remit of the criminal law to capture controlling and coercive behaviours (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Failing to recognise the silent but pervasive influence of creating the responsible subject in this recourse of the law raises the question of who the subject of criminalisation is, as well as whose interests are served in the construction of this subject (Barlow and Walklate, 2022).

Gender thus permeates struggles to interpret and/or reform the criminal law, while failure to take account of this pervasive influence of gender is likely to cause the continuing repetition of mistakes, which are unlikely to meet the needs of victim-survivors (Hanna, 2009). History shows that reforms are likely to serve the needs of men, which is the opposite to their intended purpose (Smart, 1989). Gender also continues to be pervasive in this way due to the criminal law and its operation being closely connected with the construction of governable (responsible) subjects in the interests of law and order. This process prospers on maintaining public and private violence(s) as separate and separable, for which individuals can be responsible and over whom the state holds the power to penalise (Gribaldo, 2021). The construction of blameless victims is vital for this greater project; however, the project to criminalise coercive control overlooks these problems and is also silent on them (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Thus, for victim-survivors - for whom the state and/or their family may be feared more than their partner - to engage "successfully" with the criminal justice system and its processes, they must prove they are "blameless victims" (Barlow and Walklate, 2022: 93).

Proposals to translate the offence of coercive control into a defence for crime do not account for the coercive nature of the law in and of itself, though the coercive nature of the law has been expansively theorised by legal scholars and philosophers (Edmundson, 1995; Lamond, 2000). Agents of power can exercise law and justice, which can be coercive (Edmundson, 1995); and the law can be inherently coercive as there is the provision and means by which what it says can be (Lamond, 2000). The law is frequently enforced by agents such as the police, whose practices generally result in people complying with the law when they may not have otherwise done so. Therefore, the coercive and power-imbalanced characteristics of the law need to be routinely scrutinised, while the extent to which women (and marginalised individuals) can scrutinise the law and guarantee that their voices are heard is highly debatable (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). This is especially the case for women already by definition marginalised by legal processes and social structures, and/or cultural norms/privileges, such as Black, ethnic minority and Indigenous women, disabled women, and women living in poverty (Reeves et al., 2021). Furthermore, this concept of the coercive nature of the law is not considered in relation to victim-survivors in same-sex partnerships, or for men as victim-survivors of female-perpetrated coercion and control. Therefore, this study seeks to scrutinise the extent to which these victim-survivors are heard and responded to within criminal justice processes.

Victim-survivors of coercive control frequently face additional structural constraints, such as their Indigenous status, economic marginalisation, and racism; yet punitive legal responses and systematic failings by the state, often experienced by abused individuals, also need to be considered within the wider context of coercion. The coercive nature of the law and the

state more broadly can intensify the harms that victim-survivors experience. This broader structural context is highly significant, as it is within this space that the controlling or coercive behaviour offence was created and sanctioned. However, it is questionable how a defence that is created in this context can adequately reflect coerced and controlled individuals' experiences, especially in the absence of considering the ways that harmful structural inequalities contribute to their experiences of coercive control (Barlow and Walklate, 2022).

**Part Two: Examining the Broader UK Landscape of Gendered Violence: Key Concepts Informing the Study**

**2.7 Introduction**

For several decades, feminist scholarship has consistently demonstrated that interpersonal violence is asymmetrical in relation to gender, as it is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality. Phenomena such as intimate partner/domestic abuse is produced by patriarchal social relations, which simultaneously serve to reproduce those power inequities both among individuals and more broadly across society (Westmarland, 2015). Therefore, to understand the perpetration of gendered violence and abuse, it is important to understand its positionality within unequal, oppressive patriarchal gender orders, which endure universally.

*2.7.1 Theorising Patriarchy*

The concept of 'patriarchy', while crucial to feminist analysis has, historically, been criticised for being unable to address the historical and cross-cultural disparities in the forms of women's gender inequality at different times and places; nor the diversity between different women, particularly in relation to ethnicity, race, and class (Barrett, 1980; Beechey, 1979; Carby, 1982; Coward, 1978; Molyneux, 1979; Rowbotham, 1981; Sargent,1981; Segal, 1987). For instance, ethnic variation and racism means that the main sites of oppression of women of colour can be different from those of white women (Walby, 1989). This is not simply asserting that women of colour experience racism and white women do not; rather, it is a suggestion that variation of context may change the basis of structural inequality itself (Walby, 1989). Some women of colour, for example, bell hooks (1984), have argued that the family can be a site of resistance and solidarity against racism for women of colour; therefore, the domestic environment may not hold as the central location for their subordination, as it may for white women. This acts as a warning against generalising from the experience of a limited selection of women (white) to that of women as a whole (Walby, 1989). Therefore, I would argue that predominantly focusing on (white) women's experiences of coercive control in the domestic environment can obscure a broad range of victim-survivors' experiences of coercion and control in contexts beyond the domestic, such as within institutions, organisations, and workplaces.

Walby (1989) developed a new way of theorising patriarchy to meet the objections against 'base-superstructure models' in which there is only one base, which, she contends, leads to rigidities in the concept. She therefore developed a theory that is flexible enough to take account of patriarchy in its various forms, and thorough enough to be an effective tool for analysis. Walby, thus, defined patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (1989: 214).

Walby (1989) argues that men's violence forms one of the six partially interdependent social structures that are central to the constitution of patriarchy, together with patriarchal relations in paid employment; the state; sexuality; cultural institutions (such as religion, the media, and education); and the mode of production. These six social structures are defined in terms of the social relations within each structure; they are not identified in terms of spatially located sites. For instance, the concept of the 'household' has a similar place in this schema to that of the 'workplace' in Marxist analysis: it is merely a concrete place, not a high-level theoretical concept (Walby, 1989). Thus, patriarchy is conceptualised at different levels of abstraction; at the most abstract level, it exists as a system of social relations (Walby, 1989).

Walby (1989) maintains that male violence is often perceived as an arbitrary, individual phenomenon; yet, in reality, it has a social structural nature. Social structures can be understood as being institutionalised features of society which span across time and space, which involve the dual aspects of reflexive human action and their continuity over and above the individual involved in any one instance. Walby argues that the different structures of patriarchy are closely interconnected and often mutually reinforcing. Therefore, conceptualising patriarchy as a system of social structures enables society to see beyond the notion of biological determinism as the cause of men's violence; and also beyond the unitary idea that each individual man is always in a position of dominance, and all women are always in a position of subordination. Walby (1989) emphasises the complex ways in which other systems of power and inequality, such as capitalism and racism, interact and intersect with patriarchy across different societal landscapes. This is particularly relevant to understanding men's violence, as structural inequalities and constrains, such as ethnicity, race, disability, class, religion, sexuality, and age have major impacts on victim-survivors' experiences of violence, as well as the resources (such as structural and economic privileges) that abusers use in their perpetration of violence (Walby, 1989).

Not all men, however, actively need to use the potential power of violence for it to have an impact on most women. Men's violence has a regular social form, therefore, women's well-founded expectations of its routine nature has consequences for their actions (Walby, 1989). As men's violence is significant in determining women's preventative actions against it, it can

be considered to have causal power (Walby, 1989). Moreover, as such violence is common, it cannot be dismissed as exceptional (Hanmer and Saunders, 1984; MacKinnon,1989; Sedley and Benn,1982). Thus, violence against women is not viewed as the result of a few pathologized men (Amir, 1971), nor restricted to a violent sub-culture, it is related to routine, everyday patterns of masculine behaviour (Jackson,1978). That is, the patterning of male violence cannot be comprehended only in terms of individual psychologies; rather, men use violence as a universal form of power and control over women (Walby, 1989).

There are particular forms of interpersonal violence and abuse that are perpetrated by men against women which are markedly pervasive. The most routine and normalised of these is men's sexual intrusions/harassment against women within the public arena, with contexts ranging from the streets to the workplace to the online digital landscape (Kelly, 2011; Westmarland, 2015). Other pervasive and prevalent forms of men's violence and abuse include intimate partner abuse (or violence/abuse against an ex-partner), domestic abuse, rape, 'corrective rape', sexual violence, stalking, sexual exploitation, human trafficking for sex work or labour, forced marriage, so-called 'honour-based violence', female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, child sexual abuse and exploitation, and technology-facilitated violence (for example, cyber bullying, non-consensual sexting, and doxing) (UN Women, 2024). Both private settings (such as interpersonal relationships and the family) and the public realm are the main contemporary sites for different forms of violence against women in the UK, and globally (Walby,1989; Westmarland, 2015).

According to Walby (1989), there has been a transition from 'private' to 'public' patriarchy in the UK in recent decades, with the main sites of women's oppression moving from the private domain - the household - to the public sphere (for example, the workplace, institutions, and the state). Walby (1989) contends that private patriarchy is based upon the exclusion of women from the realms of social life - apart from the household - with a patriarch appropriating women's services individually and directly within the relative privacy of the home. Public patriarchy does not exclude women from particular sites, rather, it subordinates women in all of them; therefore, the appropriation of women transpires more collectively, as opposed to individually (Walby, 1989). Walby (1989) further contends that public patriarchy is the most prevalent form in the UK and can be divided into two: one form is based on the market, the other on the state as the basis of bringing women into the public sphere. In each of these forms, the six social structures (constituting patriarchy) exist, although they have differing levels of importance in the subordination of women.

Both historically and presently, there is comprehensive feminist academic knowledge of the intersectional harms that victim-survivors of gender-based violence and abuse experience.

Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 2018), lawyer and advocate for civil rights, gender and race issues, coined the term 'intersectionality' to define the overlap and interaction between different forms of oppression that victim-survivors experience: for example, institutional racism, systemic failures of people with disabilities, the heteronormative foundations embedded within our societies, class barriers, prejudice on the grounds of religion, mental health, immigration status, gender identity, ethnicity, sexuality, and economic background (Crenshaw, 1989; 2018). Furthermore, bell hooks, late author, professor and feminist activist, described intersectionality as the "white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" - a term she used to describe "the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality…a shortcut way of saying all of these things actually are functioning simultaneously at all times in our lives" (hooks, 2004:17). Therefore, when feminist scholars/activists refer to 'patriarchy', this is with reference to the historical system that has been developed by and for those individuals and groups who have always achieved the most power in UK society: white, wealthy, non-disabled men, which manifests as a racist, classist, heteronormative, ableist system - white supremacy (Srinivasan, 2021).

Social contexts in which men dominate women across the institutions and structures of society are central to different forms of men's violence against women (Walby, 1990). This 'gender order' (Connell, 2005) can be seen as the primary social factor which underpins and perpetuates that violence. Thus, different forms of men's violence serve to reproduce and generate patriarchal power relations, both against individual women, as well as collectively against women across society as a whole (Walby, 1990). This mutually reinforcing relationship with gender inequality helps to elucidate why it is that particular forms of men's violence against women persist and are so prevalent and pervasive across different societies worldwide. Violence against women is not only perpetrated by pathological men, but also embedded in the core of the structures of society. Therefore, an analysis of men's violence against women as a social structure must take into account not only why some men choose to use violence, but also why it is that the patriarchal state condones men's violence through its failure to act to prevent or stop it (Walby, 1990).

### 2.7.2 The Continuum of Violence

The term 'continuum thinking' draws on Liz Kelly's (1988) influential work on women's experiences of sexual violence; she argues that the pervasive nature of men's sexual violence means that women make sense of individual actions in relation to a continuum of related experiences across a lifetime. Kelly (1988) contends that the continuum can allow us to identify a "basic common character that underlies many different events" and/or "a continuous series of elements or events that pass into one another and cannot be readily

distinguished" (1988: 76). Boyle (2019) states that continuum thinking has been a crucial component of feminist theories of gendered violence for decades; it has become mainstream to the extent that policy and practice (in some contexts) is less focused on isolated acts of violence and more attuned to the 'grey areas' of women's experiences and the connections between them. The concept of a continuum of violence thus allows us to make sense of experiences which have no name - or no name which women recognise - and to understand the ways in which gender-based violence is itself an expression of gender inequality. Furthermore, naming violence and abuse practices make more or less visible who is doing what to whom, bringing to the fore differing sets of connections (Kelly,1988).

In the 1980s, Kelly argued that, in feminist activism, finding a language for women's experiences of violence that were previously normalised or rendered invisible was crucial; thus, feminist consciousness-raising allowed women to identify and understand the gendered, structural nature of their individual experiences of male violence (Kelly, 1988). This enabled women to name certain forms of men's violence for the first time: incest (Armstrong, 1978); wife battering (Dobash and Dobash, 1979); and sexual harassment (MacKinnon, 1979). This process of uncovering women's experiences and naming gender violence has continued, for example, the widespread recognition of technology-facilitated sexual violence (Henry and Powell, 2015) and image-based abuse (McGlynn et al., 2017). Importantly, feminist naming practices transpire within an analysis of patriarchy in which an understanding of systemic gender inequality is vital. Across different contexts (public/private; offline/online); relationships (intimate/familial/collegial/acquaintance/stranger); temporalities (one-off/repeated/sustained) and cultures, feminists ask what their experiences of gender-based violence have in common and how they differ (Boyle, 2019).

As acknowledgement and understanding of the issues of violence has shifted, so too has language. For example, early work on men's violence and abuse of their intimate partners frequently used terms such as 'wife battering' (Walker, 1980). As the understandings of intimate relationships and the range of men's violence against women within those contexts developed, this language has changed (Boyle, 2019). The relationship of perpetrator to victim is still understood to define this kind of abuse (emphasised by terms such as intimate partner violence and domestic abuse); while language which implies only physical assault (violence, battering) has been questioned (Boyle, 2019). Can 'abuse' better capture the range of physically, emotionally, financially and sexually controlling behaviours that women experience? Or does this minimise the severity of specific violent incidents? Feminists have also been critical of the use of "domestic" and "intimate" as qualifiers, arguing that they imply a less severe form of violence, and the complicity of victim-survivors as co-creators of the violent home/relationship (Pain, 2014: 534). As these examples suggest, finding the

appropriate language remains a challenge, not least because of the need to allow women to name the 'everydayness' of their experiences without minimising the severity (and, implicitly, criminality) of their specific experiences (Boyle, 2019).

More recently, 'coercive control' has become part of the lexicon as a way of seeking to address the problem of correctly identifying and naming violence and abuse that manifests in subtle, mundane, and continuous ways; thus focusing on conceptualising domestic violence and abuse as enduring and cumulative (Stark, 2007; 2009). Stark's work highlights the ways in which men's physical abuse of female partners is interwoven with intimidation, isolation, and control, such that the meaning of individual actions cannot be understood as independent of the cultural context in which they occur. An act which may seem inoffensive in one context can be experienced very differently as part of a pattern of behaviour extending over a long period, which resonates with Kelly's (1988) concept of the 'continuum of violence' in women's experiences over a lifetime.

Considering continuities in women's experiences across time allows us to make conceptual connections between child and woman abuse specific to girl children. This highlights the everydayness of men's attempts to control women and girls and the ways in which the understandings of gendered selves are shaped through these (inter)actions from childhood onwards (Boyle, 2019). This is not to argue that women and girls are always and only victim-survivors but rather to consider the diverse ways in which women and girls are culturally conditioned and coerced to accommodate, collude, cope, resist, and survive. That is, we must see victimisation and survival as (shifting) points on a continuum, rather than as binary and all-consuming identities (Kelly et al.,1996). A person's movement across this continuum is not uni-directional or strictly chronological (such that, for example, child victim becomes adult survivor). However, this is a dynamic way of understanding girl's and women's multi-faceted experiences of victimisation and survival in relation to male violence (Boyle, 2019).

A key principal of continuum thinking has been to establish the ways in which "typical" and "aberrant" male behaviours blend into one another (Kelly,1988: 75). This demands that we focus not only on women's experiences of male behaviour, but also on that behaviour itself and how it is rendered meaningful for men. The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (as previously defined) is useful here, as it emphasises a pattern of practices (not all of which are explicitly abusive), which are enacted in mainstream culture and institutions, as well as in normative gender performance and interpersonal relationships, which allow men's dominance over women to continue (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832).

Boyle (2019) argues that it can be equally useful to feminist analysis to consider men's behaviours (rather than only women's experiences) on a continuum. The continuum of men's

violence(s) allows the consideration of violence as being gender-based not because of whom it targets, rather, because of how that violence is understood in relation to perpetrators' own gender performances. This can allow us to make gendered sense of behaviours which do not seem to fit comfortably on the contemporary continuum of violence, such as coercive control that is perpetrated beyond the domestic realm, I would argue.

## 2.8 Coercive and Controlling Behaviour in the Workplace

Marie-France Hirigoyen (1998), family therapist, psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and victimologist, has extensively researched the oft-undetected manipulative *patterns* of destructive abuse that transpire interpersonally, both within and beyond the domestic. Hirigoyen (1998) contends that although the contexts of intimate partner abuse and workplace abuse are different, one can still use the "couple model" to understand certain behavioural patterns in the workplace (1998: 51). The overpoweringly destructive examples of emotional abuse in intimate partner and domestic abuse are less likely to be found in the workplace; however, the abuses of daily living that exist in the workplace are largely trivialised, misunderstood, or ignored. Yet, in organisations, companies, universities, and institutions harassing and abusive practices are more stereotypical than in the private domain, and they can be very destructive (Hirigoyen, 1998).

### 2.8.1 Emotional Abuse in the Workplace

Hirigoyen (1998) states that 'emotional abuse' in the workplace refers to any abusive conduct, whether words, looks, gestures, or in writing, that infringes upon the personality, the dignity, or the physical or psychic integrity of a person; it is behaviour that jeopardises the employment of a person and/or degrades the climate of the workplace. Although harassment in the workplace is a phenomenon that has long been recognised, it is only since the early 1990s that it has been clearly identified as a process that can destroy the working environment, reduce productivity, and encourage absenteeism, due to the psychological harm that it causes (Hirigoyen, 1998). This process has been studied in mainly Anglo-speaking and Global North countries, though, organisations and the media tend to focus on sexual harassment, which is one of several categories of harassment in the broader sense. Hirigoyen (1998: 52) states that "psychological war" in the workplace consists of two elements: the abuse of power that is often quickly revealed and not accepted by the employee(s); and emotional abuse which, from the outset, is more insidious and destructive.

Hirigoyen (1998) contends that emotional abuse and harassment in the workplace appear to begin harmlessly but spread insidiously, as over time the attacks multiply and the victim-survivor is routinely besieged; they are made to feel inferior and subjected to hostile and degrading manoeuvres *over a long period*. While one does not die on the spot from these

aggressions, Hirigoyen (1998) states that one loses parts of oneself, returning home every night worn out, humiliated and damaged, and it is difficult to recover. The destructive element of emotional abuse is caused by the repetition of covert provocations and humiliations; the process of emotional abuse is terrifying because it is inhumane: soulless and pitiless. A sequence of deliberate abusive behaviours on the aggressor's part are designed to provoke anxiety in their victim. This anxiety can result in a defensive attitude that generates new attacks: the sight of the hated victim provokes icy rage in the abuser, while the abuser induces fear in the other - an aggressive or defensive conditioned reflex. Fear disposes the victim-survivor to behave pathologically, thereby setting up a reactive alibi for the abuser's further aggression; everything the victim-survivor initiates or undertakes is turned against them by their abuser, while the aim of this strategy is to completely disorient the victim-survivor, bringing them to a state of complete confusion and a sense of their own serious shortcomings (Hirigoyen, 1998).

Hirigoyen (1998) further contends that emotional abuse becomes possible when it is preceded by the devaluation of the victim-survivor by their abuser; depreciation vindicates, after the fact, the cruelty perpetrated against them, and leads work colleagues to believe the victim-survivor deserves this treatment. Once the process of emotional abuse is underway, victim-survivors are stigmatised: they are impossible to work with, they have a terrible disposition, or they are crazy. Their defective character is framed as the cause of 'conflict', forgetting what they were before or what they are now in a different context; pushed to the limit, they often become what their abuser wants them to be because an abused person cannot live up to their potential. Inattentive and inefficient, the victim-survivor opens themselves up to criticism due to the declining quality of their work; they may then be dismissed because of incompetence and/or a lack of professionalism (Hirigoyen, 1998).

Hirigoyen (1998) states that to maintain power and control over the victim, problems are never articulated, instead of attempting to find a solution the abuser begins to erode their victim's identity. Emotional abuse in the workplace goes through different stages, all of which have the refusal to communicate as a common theme. Abuse, although subterranean, is enacted daily by means of behaviour to invalidate the victim-survivor; the abuser refuses to explain this behaviour and an unwillingness to do this paralyses the victim-survivor, who, unable to defend themself, cannot deal with the aggression. By refusing to name and discuss the problem, the abuser obstructs finding a solution. This process of emotional abuse prevents the other person from thinking, understanding, and reacting, while the perpetrator's withdrawal from discussion is an effective means of aggravating the problem and simultaneously gaining influence. Covert abuse works beneath the surface in a non-verbal framework: exasperated sighs, shrugs, contemptuous looks, innuendos, things left

unsaid, and malicious or unsettling allusions. This allows the abuser to progressively cast doubt on their victim's professional competence, questioning everything they say and do, yet they cannot report innuendos, looks full of hate, or implications (Hirigoyen, 1998).

Invalidation includes indirect criticism under the guise of jokes, banter, and sarcasm; the language is spacious, every word hides an insult that rebounds back onto the victim-survivor. Furthermore, to ruin a person's reputation, one sows doubt in others. Once the collective becomes persuaded or intimidated into siding with the abuser, the abuser is then vindicated when the victim-survivor becomes depressed or reaches a breaking point (Hirigoyen, 1998). Once a decision has been made to psychologically destroy an employee, to prevent any possible defence, they are isolated by breaking up any potential alliances; it is difficult for the victim-survivor to rebel if they feel that everyone is against them. Discord among colleagues is sown through insinuation and preferential treatment, provoking jealously and turning people against one another. Furthermore, systematically depriving the victim-survivor of information and omitting to invite them to meetings virtually quarantines them as the process of emotional abuse develops. Isolation generates more stress and damage than work overload, thus, management finds this an easy way to have someone they no longer need resign (Hirigoyen, 1998).

I would suggest that it is possible to draw a link here between this form of workplace abuse, the continuum of violence, and coercive control, in order to emphasise the recurring theme of violence/abuse that is continuous, insidious, and that involves drawing the wider community/collective into it. That is, violence and abuse is no longer an isolated one-to-one abusive dynamic but the collective has been swept up and cast into the abusive mechanism.

### 2.8.2 The Coercive Nature of Bullying

Martin and Klein (2013) state that the self-reports of bullies, and victim-survivors of workplace bullying, result in confused workplace responses that fail to clarify who is doing what to whom. Therefore, they endeavoured to understand whether personnel within organisations differentiate bullying from other types of interpersonal problems. Martin and Klein (2013) capitalised on insights from the field of domestic abuse to highlight the need for clarity surrounding the nature of coercive control that would be valuable to individuals and organisations tasked with dealing with workplace bullying. Their interpretation of individual bullying behaviour is grounded in coercive forms of interaction between individuals, and their research is informed by Stark's (2007) work on coercive control:

> To distinguish abuse from fights, […] it is necessary to know not merely what a party
> does - their behaviour - but its context, its socio-political as well as its physical

consequence, its meaning to the parties involved, and particularly to its target(s) and whether and how it is combined with other tactics (Stark, 2007: 104).

Stark's (2007) conceptualisation of coercive control in domestic abuse accentuates the systematic, rather than the episodic, nature of bullying and emphasises the harmfulness that underpins what may appear to be innocuous events. Martin and Klein (2013) state that their participant sample/respondent group offered various examples of 'conflicts' between employees that lacked context and therefore obscured the coercive nature of the behaviours being described. When pressed for contextual detail, it became evident that the participant sample/respondents suspected or knew that an interpretation of bullying was possible; however, they lacked the means to identify, track, and evidence the type of coercive tactics linked to workplace abuse. Furthermore, in this skills gap, staff adopt what they perceive is a neutral stance in which 'conflict' seems to be an objective classification; that their suspicions might warrant more detailed and systematic investigation are viewed as too subjective. Yet, neutrality is not a viable position when dealing with the abuse of one person by another. Reframing coercion cases as 'conflicts' involves a shift from individual accountability for abuse to mutual responsibility for interpersonal clashes. Staff appear to overlook the ways in which the imbalance of power limits mutual influence and therefore the potential for individuals to negotiate or participate equally in mediation (Martin and Klein, 2013).

Whilst most relationships involve degrees of mutual influence, the use of coercion and control in sexual, domestic, and workplace abuse deliberately alters the power balance in favour of the perpetrator (Martin and Klein, 2013). Coercion, as a strategy to constrain the negotiation of differences, can often be evidenced in situations where there are pre-existing inequities (of gender, sexuality, status, class, or resources, for example). Martin and Klein (2013) report that Human Resource (HR) understandings of the dynamics of power imbalances in the workplace seem restricted to more overt cases of discrimination against minority or marginalised groups. When bullying is suspected, staff tend to impose an interpretation of mutuality in which the abuser and the victim-survivor are presented as equal contributors to the problem.

Zizek (2008) discusses subjective and objective violence in organisations, with objective violence (that is, the institutional supports for bullying) being harder to quantify. In the domestic abuse field, challenging institutional supports for abuse has led to calls for coordinated community responses in which doing nothing is not an option (Stark, 2007). Furthermore, it can reasonably be argued that a position of neutrality is a form of bystander collusion with the abuser; assumptions about bullying scenarios being mutually constructed

is also collusive and allows the organisation to ignore its ethical responsibilities to victim-survivors (Rhodes et al., 2010).

A vital factor in managing interpersonal problems is the process of distinguishing between conflict and coercion, a process which is familiar to forensic psychologists and practitioners in the domestic and sexual violence/abuse fields (Martin and Klein, 2013). Deriving knowledge from those fields, Martin and Klein (2013) argue that the assessment process for bullying in the workplace requires the triangulation of self-reports with any third-party observations; and each claim and counterclaim needs to be examined closely with an emphasis on supporting a presumption of conflict or coercion. As bullying often involves reported behaviour that is contested and has no witnesses, workplace practitioners are forced to adopt a position of scepticism (rather than one of neutrality). They must also be alert to the possibility that they are being recruited by the alleged abuser into a collusive interpretation of the problem (Martin and Klein, 2013).

Martin and Klein (2013) note that it is common for HR and Occupational Health (OH) practitioners to be aware of the coercive pressure directed at them by alleged abusers. Yet despite feeling the pressure to collude with them, practitioners assessing abusive situations are reluctant to formalise their 'gut feelings'. Martin and Klein (2013) further report that HR officers and mediators acknowledge (though informally) that alleged abusers inject negotiations with a general sense of menace. Body language, an insistence on either/or statements, interrogation of the victim-survivor and/or practitioner, and assumptions by alleged perpetrators that they offered objective fact imbues an atmosphere of intimidation. However, such feelings of intimidation are considered by practitioners to be irrelevant to the assessment process and they are not formally registered. Moreover, the complex interplay of context, meaning, and impact emphasised in Stark's (2007) conceptualisation of coercive control, is absent. Thus, if individual factors fail to account for the problem of bullying and the threat of something more systematic, targeted, and psychologically sinister emerges, the preferred explanation by personnel is one of 'mutuality', as opposed to coercion and control (Martin and Klein, 2013).

Martin and Klein (2013) state that where it is evident that a case is not mutual but involves one person systematically targeting the other, the response is one of workplace incredulity. It has been argued that the potential for an adult employee to arrive in the workplace with the psychological motivations of a child is unthinkable (Obholzer and Roberts, 1994). Mutuality, as a concept, therefore, serves to uphold the optimism that maturity arrives with adulthood and that human beings are fundamentally pro-social in the workplace; when this latter belief

is promoted, the rules of engagement in conflict apply, while the risk of victim-survivors being further abused increases (Stapley, 2006).

Martin and Klein (2013) contend that combining psychological and socio-political perspectives on bullying proves particularly useful in moving conflict to coercion; identifying the presence of coercive-controlling tactics distinguishes interpersonal abuse from bullying interactions. This finding is not new; it is replicated knowledge from the domestic abuse field where a specialised assessment of coercive-controlling behaviour supplants notions of mutuality (Dobash and Dobash,1998; Dutton et al., 2005). In the realm of the family, terms such as 'marital disputes' or 'toxic relationships' serve to mask the presence of domestic abuse and instead promote the idea that both parties are mutually engaged in abusive behaviour or 'conflict' (Stark, 2007). Comparatively, focusing on coercive control exposes an underlying pattern of instrumental behaviour from the abuser. As reported earlier in the chapter, Dutton and Goodman (2005) examined the instrumental nature of coercion as a means of establishing power in interpersonal relationships. Their model for measuring coercion includes social ecology; setting the stage; coercion involving a demand and a credible threat for non-compliance; surveillance; delivery of threatened consequences; and the victim's behavioural and emotional response to coercion. Where perpetrators have established their positions they also make clear that resistance to their demands comes at a high cost (Dutton and Goodman, 2005).

The importance of linking domestic abuse and workplace abuse is also evident in the research that demonstrates that children raised in families where domestic abuse has occurred are more vulnerable to bullying either as victims or perpetrators (Bowers et al., 1994). Research by Falb et al. (2011) shows a correlation between men's reports of bullying their childhood peers in school and their later physical and/or sexual abuse of female partners in adulthood. Thus, Martin and Klein (2013) state that we cannot assume that children simply 'grow out' of relating patterns that have been established in their developmental process.

Research also provides some support for the observation that individuals who abuse are more likely to attribute hostile motives to the actions of others (Dodge, 2006; Neuman and Baron,1998). As a way of surviving, this reading of others has significance for those who grow up with experiences of abusive parenting. Ireland (2002) shows that in a prison environment, bullies reveal a bias in favour of hostile problem solving. She suggests that this aggressive style of problem solving may arise in response to context and may have been reinforced by early successes. These research connections between early environmental influences, social processing, problem solving, and current context are echoed in the field of

domestic abuse. In this context, it has been shown that domestic abuse is most prevalent in cultures with greater degrees of gender inequality (Ferguson et al., 2004), supporting the view that individual, structural, and cultural factors combine to make violence and abuse a stubborn problem (Martin and Klein, 2013). When the workplace replicates the atmosphere of a dysfunctional family, it runs the risk of generating increased anxieties, competitiveness, and interpersonal hostility, an atmosphere which may suit the purposes of the organisation. Rhodes et al. (2010) argue that bullying is as much embedded in organisational cultures as it is in the behaviour of individuals; where excessive demands, market-driven perspectives, long hours of work, insecure structures, and multiple organisational changes are taken for granted, they found the institutionalisation of objective violence.

Martin and Klein (2013) conclude that their participant sample/respondents appear to have a limited grasp of the types of behaviours listed under most contemporary definitions of bullying available to them in their workplace. Bullying dynamics are most often asymmetrical with inequity being a contributing factor and their participant sample/respondents experienced an asymmetrical pattern in their everyday encounters with their abusers. However, they experienced a 'felt' response that they viewed as subjective, which was therefore neither neutral nor evidential. Martin and Klein (2013) suggest that a psychological-informed understanding of this response to the less obvious abusive communications of others could be a useful aspect of training in this field. In the field of counselling and psychotherapy, the capacity to empathise is inextricably correlated to noticing one's counter-reactions in relation to the other. These 'intuitions' can assist the interviewer in attending to the kinds of non-verbal cues that contribute to a deeper sense of relating styles. Martin and Klein's (2013) approach and response to workplace abuse resonates with a clinical/psychological construct to understand coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse, to facilitate the appropriate interventions and support for victim-survivors to prevent causing further harm to them.

The non-coercive management of people and a commitment to promote their well-being at work is a prerequisite to reducing abusive behaviours in the workplace. However, Martin and Klein (2013) report that HR staff can find themselves between a rock and a hard place, as they are unable to critique the organisational culture or confront abusive individuals who instrumentalise the institutional structure in their abusive strategies. In this sense, ambiguity has a strategic and protective function. The disadvantage of this ambiguity is that bullying becomes medicalised because OH practitioners are prepared to systematically assess the underlying causes of 'sickness' in relation to the victim-survivor. This is an assumption that can be used to support the notion that they are mutually responsible in some way by failing to resist coercion (Martin and Klein, 2013). Yet, Brady-Wilson (1991) speaks of the harms of

workplace trauma in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (comparable to the psychological harm that is inflicted by coercive-controlling abusers in intimate partner/domestic abuse), with mental stressors being the largest single cause of absenteeism in the workplace.

### 2.8.3 Institutional Mechanisms of Violence

Ahmed (2021) argues that it appears complaints of harassment or bullying go further depending on the extent to which people situated higher-up in organisations express them, or lend their support to them. Therefore, the trajectory of a complaint, where a complaint goes, how far it travels, can teach us about what Ahmed refers to as "institutional mechanics" (2021: 6). The institution is what individuals come up against when they report abuses of power (such as harassment or bullying). However, power is not simply what complaints are about; power shapes what happens when people complain about inequalities and power relations within institutions (Ahmed, 2021). Ahmed's (2021) work demonstrates how complaint procedures that are used as tools to redress harassment and bullying, can also be used as tools to harass and bully. That is to say, many complaints about problems within institutions are dealt with by methods that reproduce the problems; thus, complaints result in being complaints about how complaints are conducted, therefore, many complaints made within institutions end up being complaints about institutions (Ahmed, 2021).

Ahmed (2021) elucidates how some people within institutions can abuse the power they are given by how they *do not appear*. For example, harassment is not always (or even often) a singular event that appears very different from the norms of behaviour; it can be a series of actions that are performed over time, and the difference between each action is slight, a small, almost undetectable difference (Ahmed, 2021). The harasser's transgression of boundaries is spatial but also behavioural; there are small changes of behaviour such as intimacy as intimation and ambiguous ways of speaking and doing. Therefore, harassment is not fully revealed all at once to individuals, until it is too late and much harm has been inflicted upon them (Ahmed, 2021).

Harassment also frequently operates in ways that go unnoticed to others, while the abuser is often regarded as a good person (Ahmed, 2021). Consequently, complaints about harassment can be incompatible with institutions' investments in some employees. Hence, when people are disbelieving of harassment within institutions, they are saying 'this person is not like that' - abusive - however, what they are really saying is that 'this person is good *to* me or good *for* me' (Ahmed, 2021). Thus, positive profiles of persons can be used both to deny harassment and defend investments in people. In this way, denial can act as a best defence against reports of harassment. Therefore, recipients of violence/abuse from others

can feel, or they are made to feel, responsible for what has happened to them (Ahmed, 2021). Ahmed (2021) states that a complaint is thus experienced as a distressing exteriority, what has to be done to escape an abusive situation, but at the same time, the complainant is faced with further problematic dynamics and processes, levied by the institution.

Ahmed (2021) shows that complaint processes within institutions can feel surreal for survivors of abuse, due to the gap between what is supposed to happen and what actually transpires. When people make a complaint, often there is a lack of clarity around policies and procedures; therefore, complainants know that someone is 'pulling the strings' but they do not know who, leaving them feeling that however much they are doing to aid the complaint process, so much more is happening behind doors that are closed to them (Ahmed, 2021). Moreover, when people are subjected to institutional decisions that are made without their knowledge or consent, making a complaint of harassment or bullying can feel like being harassed or bullied all over again - becoming subjected, again, to another's will (Ahmed, 2021). Consequently, people acquire a sense of the institution through the experience of restriction; hence, a complaint "provides a phenomenology of the institution" (Ahmed, 2021: 41). Becoming attuned to the institution is how many survivors of abuse discover a gap between an appearance and experience. In other words, what people experience is not how the institution appears (Ahmed, 2021), which is akin to their experience of their primary abuser - their harasser or bully - of which their original complaint is about.

Complaints of harassment or bullying are also often contained because of what they threaten to reveal about harassers and bullies who are positioned higher-up in institutions (Ahmed, 2021). Complaints that people express in their own way and in their own terms, can subsequently end up contained in spaces in which they were made or which they were about. Doors can be closed on complaints, and on those who make them, in order to open doors for others (rather than impeding the perpetrator's progress by revealing they are abusive) (Ahmed, 2021). In this way, hierarchies can make handling harassment and bullying difficult, which is how hierarchies enable harassment/bullying (Ahmed, 2021).

To explain how complaints are contained is to elucidate how institutions are reproduced, how the paths of complaints that allegedly can be followed, can be made too difficult for victim-survivors to traverse, by preventing them from trying to question how things are going or attempting to go a different way (Ahmed, 2021). Yet, when people gather evidence that an institution has failed to follow its complaints policies and procedures, this can be seen as evidence of insubordination, as that evidence implies that those who govern the organisation should be bound by something other than themselves (Ahmed, 2021).

Ahmed states that we might suggest that people who govern or manage institutions should be bound by laws, policies and procedures, however, "what should be the case is not always the case" (2021:47). In making a complaint of harassment or bullying, or in challenging the decision of a 'superior body', people come up against the emptiness of that *should* (Ahmed, 2021*).* That *should* not only does not mean anything, but those who indicate that it does mean something become insubordinates. The implication is that only those who are in subordinate positions are bound, or even should be bound, by policy. Thus, people who challenge how power works come to see how power works (Ahmed, 2021). Consequently, people who complain may leave an institution because of what or who remains. And when the people who complain leave, what or who they complain about remains (Ahmed, 2021).

## 2.9 Summary

This chapter has outlined the key scholarship and theory that informs the concepts of coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse. Examining the differently emphasised conceptualisations of coercive control (as a gendered construct illustrated throughout the chapter, and focusing individually on the clinical/psychological, social, and legal constructs) demonstrates how a range of conceptualisations illustrate the varied understandings and ways of responding to coercive control. Each conceptualisation is not mutually exclusive; they are differently contested as they each contain within them varying inclusions and exclusions, while each of the different understandings of coercive control imply differently accentuated points of intervention.

The clinical/psychological construct emphasises the importance of practitioners' specialist knowledge of coercive control and the necessary listening skills to accurately contextualise what victim-survivors of coercive control disclose to them; and to provide the appropriate help to prevent causing further harm to them. Understanding the dynamics of coercive control in the workplace discerns asymmetrical, systematic abuse from 'episodic' bullying or mutual 'conflict.' Therefore, applying a clinical/psychological construct to workplace abuse would also facilitate practitioners' understanding of the less obvious, hidden, or unquantifiable abusive communications of others and lead to appropriate interventions.

Applying a gender-informed approach to the concept of coercive control also considers men (and all genders) as the focus of activity (rather than only women). The recognition of men as victim-survivors, rather than only perpetrators, not only requires specialist knowledge and listening skills - a clinical/psychological approach - but also a gendered understanding that men's responses to coercive control are likely to manifest differently. I therefore advocate applying a 'gender-informed' understanding of coercive control to encompass and

comprehend differing experiences of this type of violence and abuse, as well as the variance of experiences across help-seeking contexts.

The observations in the gendered construct of coercive control overlap with the social construct perspective and demonstrate the ways in which social processes and expectations include and exclude some groups of legitimate and illegitimate victim-survivors. These same social constructions inform responses and intervention practices for those same legitimate/illegitimate victim-survivors. Ensuring professional agencies adhere to practices that are unimpeded by a range of assumptions associated with legitimate victim-status (such as 'good parents' and heteronormative relationships) presents a real challenge. Hester (2011) refers to this problem as the 'three planets model', in which competing frameworks of child protection, the family courts, and the criminal justice system comprise a difficult path for victim-survivors to traverse.

The debates surrounding the criminalisation of coercive control have captured the policy imagination in very significant ways; yet, the focus on the law as a response to coercive control can generate dire consequences for some victim-survivors, many of which impact those who are least able to bear them: marginalised people. However, as suggested within the clinical/psychological construct, there are different intervention routes to consider when offering help and support to victim-survivors of coercive control.

Understanding coercive control as a multi-faceted, complex phenomenon allows the concept to be situated both within and beyond the domestic; that is, interpersonally in familial, intimate, or workplace relationships, as well as within broader structural contexts (for example, within institutions/organisations, the criminal justice system, and service systems provision). Walby (1989) and Kelly's (1988) work is useful here to elucidate the importance of recognising how different forms of violence against women (and marginalised individuals) exist on a continuum. Addressing the relatedness of different manifestations of men's violence/abuse is crucial to understanding the role of violence/abuse as a core structure of patriarchy, and how it is generated and enabled through the social construction of men and masculinities. Connell's (2005) conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity provides a vital contribution to understanding these gender relations, adding further complexities to theories of patriarchy by demonstrating that there are many forms of masculinity, though, while some are more powerful than others, that which is hegemonic legitimises male domination.

Boyle (2019) suggests that it can be useful to feminist analysis to consider men's violent and abusive behaviours (rather than only women's experiences) on a continuum. The continuum of men's violence allows the consideration of violence/abuse as being gender-based not because of whom it targets, rather because of how that violence is understood in relation to

71

perpetrators' gender performances. This can allow us to make gendered sense of behaviours which do not seem to fit comfortably on the contemporary continuum of violence, such as coercive control that is perpetrated beyond the domestic. These issues have been explored further within the participant interviews as part of this study; the next chapter discusses how the research methodology was put into practice.

**Chapter Three: Methodology**

**3.1 Introduction**

This methodology chapter focuses on how the research project has been conducted and outlines the aims of the study. It explores the ontological, epistemological, and theoretical assumptions that underpin the study and illustrates how the research questions were addressed by the study design. The chapter also justifies the selected research method and elucidates how this was put into practice; it further explains the sampling of research participants; addresses the ethical issues involved; reflects on the research process; and provides information on the research data collection and how the data was analysed.

**3.2 Study Aims**

My research has three core aims: to develop the academic conceptualisations of coercive control to elucidate the issues that impede the evidencing of this type of violence and abuse; to investigate the connections between private and public violence/abuse in relation to coercive-controlling offending; and to situate the concept of coercive control beyond the domestic. The three core concepts that the study focuses upon are therefore: the difficulties of evidencing coercive control; the connections between private and public violence/abuse; the concept of coercive control beyond the domestic realm.

The Home Office review of the coercion and control law in England and Wales, 2021, states that greater understanding of coercive control in domestic abuse is needed:

> There is still likely to be significant room for improvement in understanding, identifying and evidencing coercive or controlling behaviour (CCB), as prevalence estimates from the Crime Survey for England and Wales suggest that currently only a small part of all CCB comes to the attention of the police or is recorded as CCB. The literature and stakeholder engagement exercise point to difficulties for both victims and police in recognising CCB, and academic studies have found specific examples of missed opportunities to record CCB (Home Office, 2021: 5).

In light of the Home Office review, I deemed it necessary to first understand the prevailing issues around comprehending and evidencing coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse before situating the concept of coercive control beyond the domestic.

To achieve the aims of the study, the project utilises 20 qualitative semi-structured interviews to understand survivors' and professionals' lived experiences of coercive control within and/or beyond the domestic realm. This method of utilising qualitative semi-structured interviews was adopted to obtain answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the factors that can impede the evidencing of coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse?

2. What is the significance of understanding the connections between private and public violence and abuse in relation to coercive control?

3. What are the advantages of situating the concept of coercive control, as gendered violence and abuse, beyond the domestic?

I elected to interview ten survivors, as they have lived experience of coercive control; I evaluated that this would provide me with a deeply nuanced and intimate insight into their perceptions and experiences of this type of violence and abuse. Six survivors told their stories of the coercion and control that they had experienced in intimate partner and/or domestic abuse, including their perceptions of their abusers' conduct/social lives, beyond the domestic environment. Four survivors told their stories of the coercive control that they had experienced in the workplace (two of the four survivors are also professionals working in the field of workplace abuse, for example, delivering training to organisations, and both are conducting research on workplace abuse). I elected to conduct four interviews with survivors of workplace abuse to gain insights into structural and systemic violence/abuse. I also interviewed the parent of a young survivor of coercive control to contribute towards understanding the problems involved when trying to access support across a range of help-seeking contexts.

I interviewed nine professionals with extensive experience of working with victim-survivors and perpetrators of coercive control (six of the nine professionals are also survivors of coercive control). They were also able to communicate their perceptions of offenders and illustrate how perpetrators perform their identities across the broader contexts of their lives, such as at work, within family relationships, and social environments. I felt that it would be advantageous to interview professionals working with victim-survivors and perpetrators, to gain broader and different perspectives on the perpetration of controlling and coercive behaviour offences. Therefore, the interviews with both survivors and professionals captured detailed stories of coercive control, as well as their insights into perpetrators, which provided different perspectives but they were equally informative and valuable.

I had intended to interview perpetrators of coercive control but I had to re-evaluate when it became apparent that there were difficulties in recruiting offenders to interview. Contacting perpetrator support organisations was particularly difficult during the Covid-19 lockdowns. The few gatekeepers I was able to contact passed on my request for interviews to their client groups, however, I received no responses.

Both the survivor and professional participants also gave deeply informative accounts of their experiences and perceptions of professionals; who they had come into contact with in the course of the survivors' help-seeking, and the professionals' liaisons within UK service provision as part of their work (for example, within counselling services, domestic abuse and sexual violence agencies, social services, human resources (HR), the criminal justice system, and the police).

**Table 1: Interview Participants (all names are pseudonyms)**

| Participants | Participant Experiences |
|---|---|
| Survivor (Mai) | Coercive control/domestic abuse |
| Survivor (Jasmine) | Coercive control in intimate partner abuse from 15 to 18 years-old. Perpetrator the same age |
| Survivor (Lola) | Coercive control/domestic abuse; grew up in a domestic abuse environment |
| Survivor (Liz) | Coercive control/domestic abuse spanning decades |
| Survivor (Celia) | Paternal coercive control/domestic abuse |
| Survivor (Jon) | Female-perpetrated coercive control/domestic abuse; grew up in a domestic abuse situation |
| Survivor (George) | Coercive control in the workplace |
| Survivor (Peter) | Coercive control in the workplace |
| Survivor and professional (Lauren) | Survivor of coercive control in the workplace; workplace bullying consultant/trainer/campaigner |
| Survivor and professional (Mica) | Survivor of workplace abuse; workplace bullying consultant/trainer/campaigner |
| Parent (Naomi) of a young survivor | The interview participant spoke about her 12 year-old daughter who was coercively-controlled by her 12 year-old boyfriend; and the participant's (Naomi's) own experience of help-seeking for her daughter |

| | |
|---|---|
| Professional and survivor (Katrina) | Delivery of domestic abuse services including supporting victims/survivors and working one-to-one with perpetrators; delivering perpetrator programmes; survivor of coercive control/domestic abuse; 15 years' experience in domestic abuse services |
| Professional and survivor (Michael) | Delivery of domestic abuse services; experience of female-perpetrated coercive control/domestic abuse; survivor of childhood domestic abuse (perpetrated by his stepfather); grew up in a domestic abuse environment; campaigner for improved services for male victim-survivors of domestic abuse |
| Professional and survivor (Maya) | Delivery of domestic abuse services; specialises in working with women from Black and minority ethnic groups; survivor of coercive control/domestic abuse/sexual violence |
| Professional and survivor (Jerome) | Extensive experience of delivering domestic abuse perpetrator programmes within a range of services including prisons; counsellor working one-to-one with perpetrators and victims/survivors of domestic abuse; working with victim-survivors of workplace abuse; experience of coercive control in the workplace |
| Professional and survivor (Marc) | Advocate/campaigner for men and children - survivors of domestic abuse; training delivery: domestic abuse; survivor of female-perpetrated coercive control/domestic abuse; experience of male-perpetrated violence and abuse in the workplace |

| | |
|---|---|
| Professional and survivor (Issac) | Counsellor; personal experience of paternal coercive control/domestic abuse |
| Professional (Kasia) | Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) at a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) where the majority of clients are BAME individuals (all genders/sexualities) and have experienced sexual violence within intimate partner and domestic abuse |
| Professional (Dan) | Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) delivering domestic abuse services; specialises in working with/supporting LGBTQ+ victims/survivors; experience of delivering domestic abuse perpetrator programmes |
| Professional (Aisha) | Manager of perpetrator groups and delivering perpetrator programmes within a family service |

## 3.3 Conceptual Theoretical Framework

A feminist methodological approach shapes the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning this project, the formulation of the research questions, and the research methods used.

I identify as a feminist and my values align with Black feminist theories of intersectionality (Adichie, 2014; Collins and Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris-Perry, 2011; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 2007); therefore, my position as a researcher is informed by feminist theory that applies an intersectional lens. This implies my position that contemporary, Western society is built on the foundations of imperialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy (hooks, 1989). These are also the foundations of systems that therapists and their clients may be involved with when addressing violence and abuse, which includes the UK police and the criminal justice system. Intersectionality, as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), examines how the intersectional identities of individuals are linked to power and inequality, arguing that the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism. Therefore, at the heart of intersectional feminist enquiry is the analysis of the construction of power and knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2012) and in alignment with this, feminist research methodologies seek to trouble the hierarchies of power (Coterill, 1992; Wolf, 1996). This is a particularly

useful research approach to my study, as this allows me to consider the potential identification of the connections and overlaps between interpersonal and structural/systemic coercive-controlling abuse.

Further, feminist criminologist Lois Presser (2005: 2067) argues that feminist researchers are "sensitive to our place in such hierarchies, so we disclose the multiple, historically specific positions we hold in relation to both study questions and participants". Thus, feminist research methodologies recognise that researchers write themselves into the analysis (Gilgun and McLeod, 1999), which can be accomplished by the transparency of values and reflexivity in regard to how the researcher is positioned. Therefore, when designing and conducting my research (to develop the understanding of coercive control that is perpetrated both within and beyond the domestic), I was deeply mindful that it would be inadequate to only apply critical analysis and document the interview participants' narratives. I also needed to consider how the participant stories are constructed within their social and institutional environments, and how my analysis of them could be shaped by my own positionality. For example, during my research, I was mindful to attune to the survivors' and professionals' experiences of violence/abuse and perpetrators, as well as situating their experiences within the operation of the UK political economy relating to victimisation and the perpetration of violence/abuse. Therefore, it was important to recognise the socially mediated construction of victim-survivors (statistically, mainly women (ONS, 2022)) within the public narrative of victim-blaming, which permits violence/abuse to be minimised as isolated incidents (Bates, 2022) (as opposed to recognising perpetrator patterns of violence and abuse); in turn, this allows the obfuscation of continuums of violence and the perpetuation of gendered violence and abuse more broadly across UK society.

While there is no single cohesive feminist theory, nor one common feminist methodology, there is a spectrum of ontological and epistemological viewpoints adopted in feminist research (Skinner et al., 2005). Notably, however, there are recurring methodological principles and characteristics within feminist research, particularly research on violence and abuse, that I adhere to, including: the implicit or explicit focus on gender and gender inequality rooted within women's lived experiences of the world (Crenshaw,1989; 2018); a rejection of the conventional academic distinctions between 'researcher' and the 'researched' and the quest to minimise the potential for power imbalances between the two (Coterill, 1992; Wolf, 1996); prioritisation of enabling the minoritised to be heard and valued (hooks, 1989); emphasis on political, activist, and emancipatory research, thus closing the gap between research and practice (Hesse-Biber, 2012); the importance of reflexivity when conducting research (Skinner et al., 2005); emphasis on the emotional and physical safety and well-being of the researcher and research participants as part of the research process

(Gilgun and McCleod, 1999); a critical approach to the choice of research methods based on how well they facilitate the research process and that reflect upon participants' experiences, rather than masking them (Presser, 2005). That is, as coercive control is an effective method of violence and abuse in terms of perpetrators' obscuring their offences, my choice of semi-structured interviews allowed survivors' and professionals' voices and experiences of covert and ambiguous violence/abuse to be heard and documented.

However, an intersectional feminist approach is more than gender-focused and must be:

> A lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts (Crenshaw, 2018: paragraph 3).

Intersectional feminism focuses on the voices of those who experience overlapping, parallel forms of oppression, to comprehend the depths of inequalities and the relationships between them in any given context (UN Women, 2020). Adhering to an intersectional lens also means recognising the historical contexts surrounding a problem. Long histories of violence and systemic discrimination have created deep inequities that disadvantage some individuals and groups from the outset of their lives (UN Women, 2020). These inequalities intersect with each other: for example, poverty, caste systems, racism, and sexism deny people their rights and equal opportunities, and the impacts can extend across generations. Intersectional feminism shows societies that fighting for equality means not only contesting gender injustices, but exposing all forms of oppression. Hence, intersectional feminism facilitates a framework through which to build inclusive, strong movements that endeavour to solve overlapping forms of discrimination, simultaneously (UN Women, 2020).

Reflexivity in relation to my own personal and political commitments, and applying an intersectional feminist lens to my research, has permitted me to take account of the research participants' experiences of coercion and control and the possible impacts, for example, of culture, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, immigrant status, economic disadvantage, religion, and disability; and individuals' invisibility/visibility within UK violence/abuse service provision, and the structural intersectionalities of the violence/abuse that they experienced.

### 3.3.1 Social Constructionist Epistemological Paradigm

My research project has utilised qualitative research methods to inductively explore a broad range of experiences, understandings, and meanings around coercive control, inclusive of the participants' experiences and perceptions of perpetrators. This design was built upon the

social constructionist epistemological paradigm: where there are objective facts, social researchers can only perceive them via their own socially constructed notions and meanings, and those of their research participants (Beasley, 2005). Furthermore, social scientists should be interpreting those meanings, which feminists and other critical schools of thought have demonstrated to be considerably influenced by structural power relations, and in which comprehensive qualitative methods of research and analysis are most appropriate to investigate (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Resonating with feminist methodological approaches, the social constructionist approach addresses the active role the researcher takes in how meaning is created (Stratton, 1997) and emphasises being explicit regarding values alongside vital reflexivity in the position as a researcher. Social constructionism is based on the premise that no one 'truth' exists, that realities are socially constructed, influenced by shared assumptions and broader cultural ideals specific to a particular context; therefore, the researcher must hold a critical stance towards the taken-for-granted notions of viewing the world (Burr, 2015).

Social constructionist research and theorisation is also separated into micro and macro social constructivism. The former relates to the analysis of language and individual discourse, while macro social constructivism recognises the constructive power of language by viewing this as derived from, or bound up with, material and social structures, social relations, and institutionalised practices (Burr, 2015). Furthermore, constructionist thematic analysis is not chiefly concerned with individual meaning but seeks to investigate the structural and social contexts which permit individual accounts to make sense (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method of analysis facilitates the deeply nuanced exploration of coercive control themes and connects them to the wider sociocultural constructions. That is, it facilitates the exploration of the micro analysis of language relating to personal experiences of coercive control and the covert methods that perpetrators use to inflict this type of gendered violence and abuse; while also examining these methods more broadly within patriarchal social structures, relations, and institutionalised practices, which are conducive contexts for the perpetration of gendered violence and abuse (Kelly, 2016).

### 3.3.2 A Feminist Standpoint and Researching Men and Masculinities

Complexities and contradictions arose when conducting feminist research on men as victim-survivors of coercive control, while seeking to understand men as perpetrators of violence and abuse. The subject of men and masculinities has grown significantly as a field of study, with a range of theoretical and epistemological perspectives influencing scholarship in this area; however, it cannot be assumed that such research is grounded in feminist approaches. Many feminist scholars have maintained a degree of scepticism towards the pro-feminist

credentials of research on men and masculinities (Flood, 2013, 2015) but a number of academics worldwide continue to engage in feminist-influenced critical studies on men and masculinities (see, for example, Connell, 1995, 2000); research on men's violence against women (Bancroft, 2002; Hearn, 1998; Hennessy, 2012); and engaging men and boys in constructing gender equality (Burrell et al., 2021; Men Engage Alliance, 2023).

I feel it is important to differentiate studies that adopt this critical approach to men and masculinities from research on men and masculinities more broadly. And while I seek to align with these critical traditions *and* feminist principles of social research to effect change in the field of coercive-controlling violence and abuse, I recognise that as a woman it is impossible for me to be an 'insider' of the gender order that I am at times studying. Therefore, social relations cannot be neutral; feminist research emphasises the importance of transparency, our social position, and the necessity for reflexivity, particularly in relation to how this shapes the research process. I strive to provide such transparency here. However, researchers do not hold positions relating to only gender, but to all social positions, for example, ethnicity, culture, race, disability and sexuality; therefore, it is crucial to take an intersectional approach in the practice of reflexivity (Locke, 2015; Peretz, 2016).

### 3.3.3 Hearing Stories of Racism

As a white woman, hearing participant stories of racism, I was acutely aware of my position of privilege, standing 'outside' the violence and abuse that I am studying and hearing about. I believe that research on these social relations cannot be 'neutral'. They are based upon a particular standpoint within them and my own strong convictions against racism. At the same time, while I endeavour to deeply understand racism, I also acknowledge that I have not lived those experiences. Feminist scholarship has highlighted the importance of being honest, open, and transparent about our social positions, and to exercise reflexivity in relation to the ways in which they shape the research process; my positionality against the intersectionalities of violence and abuse, such as racism, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny, were established before I began my research process, but hearing real-life stories was nonetheless greatly disturbing and led me to feel anger and shame towards some of the communities that I am part of.

### 3.3.4 A Feminist Standpoint When Researching Female Perpetrators

Complexities and contradictions were evident while undertaking feminist research that frames women as perpetrators of violence and abuse. From a psychodynamic perspective it is frequently acknowledged that women's perpetration of violence and abuse is a manifestation of their own early experiences of deprivation and maltreatment (Motz, 2008, 2014), or a response to the enduring violence perpetrated against them (CWJ, 2016).

However, society's expectations of women remain significantly different from those experienced by men, and the behaviours women display are deeply affected by their development and place in power structures (Kennedy, 2005). Furthermore, coercive control is subject to interpretation, not objective fact, which distinguishes it from other, more visible forms of violence and abuse (for example, physical violence that leaves marks). However, I am mindful that while cycles of violence/abuse are acknowledged as applicable to all genders, victim-survivors are still predominantly women and the perpetrators are mainly men (Motz, 2014; ONS, 2022; Welldon, 2008).

### 3.3.5 A Trauma-Informed Approach to Research

I am an experienced, British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists (BACP) registered integrative psychotherapist (trained in a range of interactive theoretical modalities, rather than one). I specialise in working with victim-survivors of intimate partner and domestic abuse, sexual violence/abuse, violence/abuse and bullying. I have a Master of Arts degree in Understanding Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence; additionally, I am comprehensively trained in rape crisis intervention and delivering sexual violence/abuse support services for women/girls, men/boys, non-binary, gender-fluid, and LGBTQ+ individuals, who have experienced various forms of violation at any time in their lives. I also have two years' experience working in a mental health nursing home, with victim-survivors of violence/abuse and perpetrators - including murderers and paedophiles released on license from prison - and I became thoroughly acquainted with both victim-survivors' and perpetrators' life stories and case histories. I have ten years' experience service coordinating and working within a national mental health helpline service, taking calls from a broad range of people (sufferers, victim-survivors, carers, and professionals) in varied contextualities.

I work within a person-centred framework, while adhering to a trauma-informed approach. This enables a collaborative, client-led, therapeutic intervention that focuses on what has happened to a person, rather than what is 'wrong' with them. This facilitates a safe-space for reflection that permits people to tell their stories confidentially, and process and make sense of their violent and abusive experiences without being judged or pathologized.

Working as a therapeutic practitioner, my training and experiences influence how I understand both victimisation and offending behaviour; therefore, adhering to the theoretical concept that many offending behaviours are rooted in the experiences of structural inequalities and personal traumas, and how these interact (Jahanshahi et al., 2021). Moreover, structural inequalities may also be experienced as traumas and inequalities that are inherent in patriarchal, white supremacist, and capitalist societies (hooks, 1989). Therefore, from a trauma-informed perspective, I am not endorsing or encouraging those

experiencing inequality to accept this position, but reminding them that it is fair and just to assert themselves in pursuit of their entitlement to equal rights.

Further, within the UK National Health Service (NHS), historically, clinical mental health training is grounded in a privileged male-centric/masculinist perspective. Contemporary psychological theories are predominantly written by white men and promote a medical model of mental health, which ignores systemic factors and power, and victim-blaming is reflected in practice: for example, applying a diagnosis of personality disorder to victim-survivors, rather than acknowledge complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) as the consequence of the perpetration of violence/abuse. I do not adhere to a medical model of mental health in this sense; rather, I advocate an understanding of the effects of psychological trauma that incorporates a feminist perspective (Herman, 1997), challenges the basic concepts of normal development and abnormal psychology in all genders.

There is not one modality of therapy or counselling that can be labelled 'feminist'; yet, there is an approach that includes such common features as an anti-hierarchical stance, awareness of rhythmical and cyclical processes, the interconnection of opposites, and the recognition of the influence of society on everyone's psyche (Chaplin,1988: vii). Feminist therapy rejects the prevailing model of thinking that one 'side' must always win, but distinguishes the interconnection between different, even opposite, sides of life and of ourselves (Chaplin,1988: 3). This is a different approach to learning to strive for goals and move in one direction up a hierarchical ladder. Rather, the interconnections between people and materiality are related to ecology and progressive movements that are struggling towards greater justice and equality. It is about celebrating differences between people, opposing the view that difference is concerned with superiority and inferiority, winning or losing, or the denial of difference entirely (Caplin,1988). Therefore, feminist therapy is extremely social and political, as well as personal and individual. The essential feature of feminist therapy is the recognition of the interconnectedness of our internal psychological worlds with the external social and material worlds. That is, our psyches as well as our bodies are impacted by life in a competitive hierarchical society. Furthermore, the impact of 'second-class' status and gender-stereotyping affects the way that women, non-binary, and LGBTQ+ individuals, and other minoritised groups perceive themselves, while also acknowledging the damage that masculine stereotyping has inflicted upon male psychologies (Chaplin,1988: 4).

Feminist therapists are troubled by the profound influence of other social hierarchies, based on race, ethnicity, nationality, class, religion, disability, gender, and sexual orientation. In place of hierarchical thinking, feminist therapists advocate that people value all sides of

themselves, in the same way they believe that society can use and value differences between groups, as opposed to defining one group as superior to and controlling of the other (Chaplin,1988).

The concept of a rhythm model helps to make sense of the world and our own selves, and it is fundamentally different to the model which is widely accepted in UK society, referred to as the "control model" (Chaplin,1988: 5). A model is essentially an image of the way society generally perceives the world, a half-way point between inner imagination and outer reality. The rhythm and control models are two diverging ways of viewing relationships between objects and subjects and the supporting structures of two opposing ideologies: one pro-equality and the other pro-hierarchy (Chaplin,1988). The control, hierarchical model is applied most of the time in Western cultures, therefore, feminist therapists are committed to transforming hierarchical relationships into more egalitarian ones, whether these be in society more broadly or in the therapy room.

My position as a researcher is informed by feminist theory that applies an intersectional lens and a trauma-informed approach to violence and abuse. The conceptual theoretical framework for this project is social constructionist; my interest as a researcher is in understanding the experiences of victim-survivors, perpetrators, and the perpetration of coercive control within intimate relationships, the domestic environment, and beyond in wider UK society.

### 3.4 Study Design

In alignment with the conceptual theoretical framework and the issues raised in my project, the method chosen for this research is semi-structured interviewing and thematic analysis.

### *3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews provide the opportunity to explore in-depth the unique experiences and perspectives of each of the interview participants (Kvale, 2007), while also permitting them to tell their stories, express their views, and reflect on their thoughts and perceptions, with relatively few constraints imposed by the researcher (DeVault and Gross, 2012). Furthermore, qualitative interviewing provides a "roundness in that data", which means that rich, nuanced, detailed information emerges; this would be harder to achieve in quantitative methods, such as surveys and questionnaires (Mason,1996: 41).

While my research questions provide a framework to explore participants' experiences of coercive control, their experiences of seeking help to deal with perpetrators, or escape violence and abuse, and how they perceived their perpetrators - although common themes emerged in their stories - each story was unique to each individual and provided a wide

range of insights. On reflection, I had not anticipated that the interviews with survivors and professionals would provide such detailed narratives about their experiences of professionals, either in help-seeking contexts and/or through their work with other professionals. The comprehensive information they shared became a significant part of the research data in terms of how violence and abuse can connect to constitute continuums of violence/abuse. Interviewing people who had experienced structural and/or systemic abuse in a range of help-seeking contexts provided both insider and outsider perspectives on violence and abuse. That is, violence/abuse that was perpetrated in intimate partner and domestic abuse was also structurally/systemically extended beyond the domestic, thus, constituting a continuum of violence and/or abuse. This reflects that semi-structured interviews facilitate interaction with participants during the interviews, which helps to establish trust and a safe environment where they can reflect more deeply (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Therefore, semi-structured interviews allow for the data collected to be pertinent to the research questions while simultaneously providing the flexibility to explore responses in greater depth. In contrast, quantitative methods do not enable a deep level of richness and the flexibility to explore individual views, nor the complexities and nuances of violence/abuse that emerge in the stories told (Byrne, 2004).

### 3.4.2 Diversity and Inclusion

I elected to interview survivor and professional participants from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, to include a range of demographics (I did not receive responses from two potential participants in Northern Ireland; this may have been due to coercive control not being criminalised there until 2022). This allowed me to avoid colluding in the UK north/south political divide and neglect the cultural, economic, and social differences between them. I also chose to interview survivors and professionals who reside in metropolitan cities, as well as those in more rural areas, to discern the differences in their experiences of UK service provision. Interviewing a diverse range of participants (relating to gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity) can highlight how structural and systemic inequalities shape the lived experiences of marginalised individuals and communities. These factors are significant as they create additional risks and experiences of harm.

### 3.4.3 Thematic Analysis

The methodology considered to be the most appropriate to the research questions and the theoretical and epistemological framework is thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This project is significantly linked to themes that have already been identified in the established coercive control literature, therefore, thematic data is most suited to the project. Moreover, I am not disputing the contemporary scholarly concepts of coercive control;

however, considering the difficulties of fully understanding and evidencing coercive control (Home Office, 2021), my aim is to enhance the contemporary academic theorisations.

The advantage of thematic data is that it is not anchored in a specific theory or epistemology and therefore can be applied to a variety of approaches. It is argued that the theoretical freedom of thematic analysis generates a useful and flexible research tool that has the potential to provide rich and comprehensive, yet complex, forms of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, thematic analysis is researcher-led, while capturing participants' voices, ideas, and reflections. The researcher is active in identifying and selecting themes most relevant to the research questions and, again, emphasises the importance of the transparency of the researcher's assumptions and values (Holloway and Torres, 2003). To achieve transparency in practice, I had to be true to my critical analysis and my interpretations of the themes that emerged in the research data. However, I am also aware that interview participants reading my thesis might be surprised by or contest my analysis; therefore, while mindful not to offend, all my findings are authentic and align with my personal and political values and commitments, but I always endeavour to respond to the research data with sensitivity.

To answer the research questions, the research focuses specifically on survivor stories of coercive control and their experiences of perpetrators; and professionals' personal stories, knowledge, and experiences of working in the field of domestic/sexual violence or workplace abuse. The research is also concerned with identifying discrepancies and contradictions between the lived experience of coercive control and the academic conceptualisations of coercive control. Therefore, the decision to use qualitative semi-structured interviews was deemed the most appropriate method, as it is boundaried of the specific participants personal and/or professional experiences. Furthermore, qualitative interviewing provides participants with the autonomy to develop their narratives, while also accommodating of space to explore responses in depth. The data collected is specific to the research questions, but I am interested in investigating the broader social contexts that participants reveal to allow me to understand any issues that I am unaware of. Therefore, I consider semi-structured interviewing the most fitting as the content can be broader, but it is boundaried by a particular area of participant experience.

### 3.4.4 *Changes to the Research Plan*

Changes to my research plan were, firstly, not interviewing perpetrators of coercive control (discussed below) and secondly, being unable to interview research participants in person. Due to Covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions on travel it was not possible to meet interview participants in confidential, public spaces (such as a quiet room in a library). As an

alternative, video interviews were confidentially conducted online. Otherwise, I did not need to alter my fieldwork plan or the interview method during the research data collection; this worked so well, I accrued more than sufficient, rich research material.

A difficulty that remained constant throughout the research process has been the problem of conceptualising "the peculiarity of invisible violence" (a phrase coined by my supervisor). There have been periods when I felt I had a good grasp of covert and ambiguous violence/abuse and times when conceptualising covertly-perpetrated violence/abuse has felt as elusive as the violence/abuse itself. Trying to distil violence and abuse that is perpetrated covertly and remains hidden, and to justify this as a concept of violence/abuse, has been a prevailing challenge. Trying to present something intangible as concrete evidence led me to realise why coercive control is so effective as a form of violence and abuse. I return to the training that I attended with SafeLives, 2022, for the Enhanced Understanding of Coercive Control, which was communicated through the stories of the lived experience of victim-survivors. In turn, my research most effectively communicates covert and ambiguous violence/abuse through the research participants' stories of coercive control, in an endeavour to do justice to elucidating the violence and abuse that they endured.

### 3.4.5 Perpetrator Participants

I had originally intended to interview perpetrators of coercive control but I was unable to recruit participants from this group. This transpired for a number of reasons: the UK was in the midst of Covid-19 lockdowns and many people were working from home, therefore, gatekeepers at organisations working with perpetrators most often did not respond to my telephone messages or email requests. Apparently, twice, my details were passed on to perpetrators attending behaviour change programmes, but I did not receive a response. The perpetrators that had been reported on in the mainstream press, whom I tried to contact (via journalists and reporters), also did not elicit responses. I also appreciate that perpetrators may not have wanted to discuss their coercive control in their homes.

I also attended online training for working with perpetrators; aside from the learning being relevant to my study, I anticipated that 'getting in' to the organisation would allow me access to perpetrators. However, the training generated an informative interview with a professional who was reticent to put me in contact with perpetrators. The main reason cited was confidentiality, questioning if it was appropriate in a professional role to divert from the 'contracting' established in professional relationships with perpetrators. The person was also concerned that an interview would be disruptive of the work they were engaged in; that is, "perpetrators would be allowed a platform to air their self-justifying views".

Despite offering assurances on all counts, regarding my own training, work background, and professionalism (I have reflected deeply on this), I was left feeling there was more to the refusal to invite perpetrators to be interviewed. Perhaps group facilitators thought I would not know how to 'handle' perpetrators and would be manipulated, since professionals portray their work with perpetrators as a difficult balancing act: always having to be "one step ahead in the game" and anticipating their next move.

The lack of opportunity to make direct contact with potential perpetrator participants meant that I could not be perceived as approachable and non-judgemental, nor have the opportunity to establish trust. For reasons such as confidentiality and protection from public abuse, perpetrators seem to be shielded within the service systems supporting them and it is not possible to make direct contact.

After spending considerable time on the process of recruiting perpetrators and exhausting all avenues, I had to concede that it would not be possible to arrange interviews. My original intention was to visit prisons to interview perpetrators who had been convicted of coercive-controlling offences. I felt that once convicted, and with nothing to hide, perpetrators may be more willing to tell their stories, but due to the Covid-19 lockdowns and meeting restrictions, visiting prisons was not possible.

### 3.4.6 Interview Sampling

A purposive, selective sampling method was used to ascertain the most relevant organisations to approach and individuals to invite to take part in the research. Potential participants were identified by contacting third-sector organisations in the field or people directly who had spoken publicly or written about their experiences. The latter was via online social media platforms used for professional networking.

20 interviews were conducted and participants comprise a diverse demographic relating to age, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, and geographic location within the UK. Due to the sensitive nature of coercive control and issues of safety and confidentiality, such as professionals working with victim-survivors and perpetrators, counsellors working with clients in private practice, and survivors remaining safe from perpetrators, I have refrained from providing detailed participant information to preserve absolute confidentiality and anonymity.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the project was granted by The Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee (ELMPS) at the University of York.

### 3.5.1 The Particular Significance of Ethics in Violence and Abuse Research

Violence and abuse research can assist practitioners and client groups to inform social policy and guide the future route of service provision; at the same time, there is a clear requirement for ethical guidance to ensure that the rights of research participants are promoted and protected (Downes et al., 2014). Research governance, including research ethics committees and the Data Protection Act 2018 (Gov.UK, 2018), is committed to protecting the rights of individual participants in research. Furthermore, research ethics committees that are situated in higher education institutions have a deep-seated gatekeeping role in health and social care research, deciding which academic research is conducted, with whom, and how it is facilitated (Downes et al., 2014).

Conducting social research with survivors, and professionals working victim-survivors and perpetrators of coercive control, domestic abuse, and sexual violence, I was mindful of the pressures between the ethical requirements of the university research ethics committee (who protect individual rights and freedoms, as well as their institutional reputation) and my own professional judgement and commitment to implement social justice for victim-survivors through my research (Downes et al., 2014). I was also aware that the research ethics committee may view my research on violence and abuse as 'sensitive', and may also classify my participant group as 'vulnerable'; these assumptions meant that my study proposal would likely be thoroughly scrutinised (Downes, et al., 2014). Therefore, I was diligent in emphasising my safeguarding training relating to vulnerable adults and children, but also how my safeguarding knowledge and professional ethical protocols would translate in practice when corresponding with and subsequently interviewing participants. For example, treating all participants equally, at all times being mindful of their well-being, being respectful, non-judgemental, transparent, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, while also making participants aware of the limits of confidentiality if they disclosed a safeguarding matter that I would be obliged to share with the appropriate authorities.

Where a research study, such as coercive control, is identified as being on a sensitive topic, this carries an increased level of responsibility for a researcher and research team (Downes et al, 2014). For example, I had to consider the potential emotional costs for research participants (such as anger, sadness, guilt, shame, or embarrassment) or the more serious issues around re-traumatisation for those who have been victimised; as well as considering the potential consequences for those who have perpetrated violence, who may disclose on-going abuse that places a victim-survivor at risk (Downes et al, 2014). An advantage of my therapeutic training and extensive experience of trauma-informed practice meant that I was well-positioned to prevent participants experiencing re-traumatisation during their interviews.

I was able to balance the need to promote openness during the interviews, while demonstrating care and concern for the well-being and safety of the research participants. Ethical and safety protocols that emphasise a possible limit to confidentiality in violence and abuse research and engaging with (rather than ignoring) unforeseen ethical dilemmas can increase the safety and well-being of research participants throughout the research process (Downes et al., 2014).

### 3.5.2 Recruiting Interview Participants

Complying with my ethics approval, interview participants were recruited via third-sector organisations, or they had spoken and/or written publicly about their experiences of coercive control. I contacted potential interview participants to ask their permission to send information explaining the aims of the project, what taking part in the research entails and invite them to consider participating. Participation was emphasised as voluntary and stated on both the information sheet (see appendix A) and consent form (see appendix B). Once participants had agreed in a reply email, we arranged a convenient date for the interview.

When potential participants did not respond to requests to consider taking part in the project or said they would take part but did not respond to subsequent emails to arrange a date, ethically, I had to decide how appropriate it was to pursue them. I decided to send two follow up emails a week apart, but if they did not respond, I accepted this as their way of saying they did not wish to participate. Two participants did not attend arranged interviews; I emailed to say that I hoped all was well and they were welcome to reschedule if they would like to. I did not hear from them and accepted they had decided not to take part.

### 3.5.3 Obtaining Consent

All participants were asked to provide informed consent prior to the interview by signing and returning a consent form. All participants promptly returned their signed consent forms before the interview date. Each participant was reminded that they were under no obligation or pressure to take part in the interview, or answer questions they were uncomfortable with; they could stop the interview at any time and take breaks whenever they wished to. They were also reminded that they could withdraw from the study, without giving a reason, up to one month after the interview if they changed their mind about participating. None of the participants withdrew.

As briefly mentioned above, I had intended to travel to meet participants and conduct audio-recorded face-to-face interviews in confidential settings, but due to the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, this was not possible. Therefore, I decided to conduct interviews via online video

calls. I had been working therapeutically with clients via secure video calls and felt the sessions worked well, therefore, I was confident that video interviews would be suitable.

I obtained consent to record video interviews and reminded participants of the recording at the beginning of interviews to reconfirm consent; none of the participants objected to being recorded. All participants were emailed a video call invitation that included a meeting access link, a unique personal identity number and a passcode; they could not join the meeting until I authorised entry. I live alone so; I was able to provide a confidential setting where interviews could not be overheard and I used a quiet room where I knew I would not be disturbed. At the beginning of the interviews, I informed participants that I was situated in a confidential setting, so that they were aware they could not be overheard. I had respectfully requested that the participants were in a quiet, confidential space; they all adhered to this.

### 3.5.4 Participant Well-being

Due to the sensitive and distressing nature of coercive control, which often involves a range of abuses (for example, manipulation, humiliation, intimidation, exploitation, psychological abuse, physical and sexual violence), I was mindful that it may be emotionally difficult for participants to tell their stories of violence and abuse. I took great care to gauge when it was appropriate to ask further questions and not encourage participants to talk more if they became upset; rather, I gave them space to recover their composure before moving on, offering to take breaks and checking that they were willing to continue. As I work therapeutically from a trauma-informed perspective, I was aware to avoid survivors' re-traumatisation by respectfully recognising when participants were struggling to tell particular aspects of their stories and to not push them and cause them distress.

I allowed for a de-brief period at the end interviews to reflect on each participant's experience and all participants were offered suggestions for sources of support should they need them (see appendix C). I sent a follow-up email the next day to thank them again for their time and check on their well-being. All participants responded positively and said they were okay.

I offered professional participants the option to keep in touch via email in a professional capacity. This was partly because the aim of the research was to avoid exploiting professionals for their knowledge and information but to contribute towards the development of a deeper understanding of coercive control, and develop professional networks in a common field to share research findings.

### 3.5.5 Confidentiality

I adhered to absolute confidentiality regarding the interview participants, but I also respected the privacy of the people whom they discussed in relation to their work, in books or articles they have published, the telling of family histories, or the details of perpetrators. Regardless of whether interview participants used pseudonyms, all names and places were anonymised when the interviews were transcribed and any references to confidential or identifying information are not written into the two data/analysis chapters. In addition to anonymisation, quotations selected do not reveal the participants' views in such detail that their identities, or the identities of others, can be detected. Inevitably, participants reading my thesis may recognise their own words and accounts of violence and abuse, but I ensured that these are recorded accurately, treated sensitively and respectfully, and with the purpose intended for the project: contributing towards developing a deeper understanding of coercive control within and beyond the domestic environment, and the victims-survivors and perpetrators of coercive control.

There are sections of the interviews that contain very detailed and graphic accounts of sexual violence and physical injury, and while the participants who told their harrowing stories did not object to them being used for the project, I decided not to publish all the details. This is not to avoid or shy away from the reality and authenticity of their stories. I am deeply appreciative of participants' candidness and allowing me such deep insight into their personal experiences. However, I feel protective of participants' privacy and do not wish to publish material that could constitute voyeuristic reading. I am also concerned that in the moment and the privacy of the interviews taking place, participants might have been so absorbed in telling their stories that they lost sight of the fact such details could be published, albeit their details are anonymised. However, during the analysis, I was still able to authentically convey the essence of the participants' stories, to do justice to the experiences they shared, but without voyeuristically exploiting them.

Three of the participants were unconcerned about confidentiality and anonymity and they have published their own personal stories. However, I feel it is *their* right to publish their own information, but as I have stated, all the material that I have gathered is anonymised and kept confidential. I adhere to this in all cases.

### 3.5.6 Interview Transcripts

Complying with the ethics approval, the interviews were transcribed soon after the meetings - within a couple of days - and the videos were then promptly deleted. The anonymised transcripts are stored, password-protected and encrypted, and backed-up on the University of York Google Drive. Participants were informed of, and consented to, the anonymised

transcripts being kept securely for a maximum period of four years, to possibly use in further research or publications. All the participants were offered a copy of their anonymised transcript but only one of 20 accepted the offer. I set a period of a week to supply this and forwarded the transcript within the agreed timeframe.

I was surprised that all except one participant chose not to receive a copy of their transcript and I reflected considerably on this. All the interview participants who were survivors of coercive control, were no longer being victimised; therefore, they were revisiting their experiences of violence and abuse to tell their stories and take part in my research. Thus, it seems logical that they would want to move forward in their lives and leave the violence/abuse in the past. Participants may have also been concerned about confidentiality and subsequent partners or family members coming across their transcript; they may have wanted to protect others from knowing the extent of the violence and abuse that they had suffered, and/or they may have been concerned about exposing themselves if they had not disclosed the violence/abuse; or they did not wish to risk their children reading about an abusive parent. Many participants expressed shame that they had stayed with their abusers for so long and had not left sooner, so perhaps seeing their stories in print would make difficult reading, and narratively telling one's story is possibly easier than recording it in a tangible form. In hindsight, I regret not asking participants their reasons for declining the transcripts of their interviews.

### 3.6 The Interview Process

My study for the project is focused on developing a deeper understanding of coercive control that is perpetrated both within and beyond the domestic environment, and to understand the difficulties of evidencing coercive-controlling offending. While there is a growing body of research on coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse internationally, coercive control continues to be problematic, including evidencing perpetration and attaining justice for victim-survivors. As mentioned above, coercive control beyond the intimate partner and domestic abuse context is currently under-investigated. The interview schedule was developed on themes that emerged from my earlier literature reviews; my extensive therapeutic work with victims-survivors of coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse, sexual abuse, the workplace, family relationships (for example, parent-to-child coercive control), coercive control perpetrated peer-to-peer in young people's relationships; and the research questions themselves. The data sought from the interviews was divided into professionals' experiences (and their personal stories of coercive control that were unexpectedly disclosed during their interviews) and survivor stories. As mentioned, I had intended (and attempted) to interview perpetrators, but this was not possible.

### *3.6.1 Professional Participants Working in the Field*

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, I had intended to visit third-sector organisations to discuss their work and the services they offer, prior to recruiting interview participants. This would have been beneficial to establish a rapport and trust before attempting to recruit perpetrator participants to interview. Furthermore, this would have enabled me to establish extensive professional networks to return to if I had further inquiries. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most professionals were working from home, organisations had closed their doors, and as victims-survivors were isolated with perpetrators during periods of lockdown, domestic abuse services were extremely busy and stretched beyond service capacity (Mankind, 2021; Women's Aid, 2021b). I was left with the impression that many professionals in the field did not have the time, understandably, to respond to research requests. Despite domestic abuse services being enormously busy, I was deeply encouraged by the motivation of some professionals to take part in the research and their willingness to make time in their busy schedules to share information, their thoughts, knowledge, and feelings relevant to the study.

I was unaware that most of the professionals I interviewed were also survivors of coercive control until they disclosed their own survivorhood during the interview process. Interviews with professionals were intended to gather data on their professional practice, knowledge, and viewpoints, as well as descriptive and informational data around coercive control, supporting victim-survivors and working with perpetrators. Six of the nine interviews with professionals transpired to be partly participants' own personal stories of coercive control and their perpetrators, plus detailed information and reflections on their work. The combination of personal experience and professional insight provided rich and comprehensive data both around coercive control in intimate partner/domestic abuse and coercive control perpetrated in the workplace. Moreover, it was strongly evident that professionals with personal, lived experience of coercive control had a much greater understanding of the covert and ambiguous nature of this type of violence and abuse than those who had not. That said, the three professionals without lived experience, who had worked in domestic abuse and sexual violence services over many years, were also very knowledgeable about the methods/strategies of coercive control.

It would have been difficult to have a generic set of questions for this target group because professionals' work varied. For example, the participant specialising in supporting LGBTQ+ victim-survivors shared different insights and information comparative to the professionals working holistically with young families to support victims-survivors, children, and work with perpetrators. However, with the research questions in mind, the interviews were structured to discover feelings towards, and views of, perpetrators; responses to coercive control across

service systems, such as social services and the police; participants own thoughts about what needs to be known about coercive control and working with their specific client group.

### 3.6.2 Survivor Participants

The aim of interviewing survivor participants was to hear their stories of coercive control, focus on their experiences of violence and abuse, whether/how they sought help to resolve or escape violence/abuse, service system responses to them, and thoughts/feelings about perpetrators. And while I asked each participant set questions, each individual story raised further questions relevant to the unique events and situations they related. This, in turn, allowed me to seek clarity or gain more detail; however, all the interviews were structured around the following three questions:

1.  Can you tell me about your experience of coercive control?

2.  What was your experience when seeking help to deal with the violence/abuse and your abuser?

3.  What are your views of and feelings towards the perpetrator? (Coercive-control had occurred over long periods of time, the shortest relationship being three years and the longest several decades; survivors had known perpetrators well and spoke in detail about their behaviours and lives, therefore, providing useful perspectives on perpetrators.)

Recruiting participants that are survivors of coercive control was a straightforward process, as they wish to be heard, understood, make a positive contribution towards research, educate others to recognise potential abusers, and understand the difficulties of communicating the coercive control that was perpetrated against them.

I opted to interview only survivors who were no longer being coerced and controlled and had attained a good degree of recovery from the violence and abuse that they had suffered. This was for two reasons: firstly, if participants are being abused and suffering the effects of complex trauma, "their traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" (Herman, 1997: 38); secondly, there is the possibility that a victim of coercive control could be significantly under the influence of the perpetrator while telling their story of violence and/or abuse (Hennessy, 2012), which could jeopardise the authenticity of the research.

I made two exceptions: first, I interviewed a male participant of ongoing abuse in the workplace; however, he had been working from home for several months due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, to a great extent he was removed from the situation and he also

had a withdrawal plan to prevent his return to the workplace. Second, a participant told his story of growing up with his coercive-controlling father; his father continues to be abusive in some respects but the participant feels that as an adult he responds assertively and manages the situation well. He sees his father, but he asserts boundaries around his attempts to coerce and control him.

### 3.6.3 Reflections on the Interview Process

The interviews were conducted between September 2020 and July 2021; each interview was scheduled to last for a maximum of 90 minutes, which included time to de-brief after the interview. The average length of the interviews was two hours and none were shorter than 90 minutes. Although I informed participants the interview would take up to 90 minutes, all the interviews drew to a natural conclusion when participants felt ready to end. When we had reached the 90 minutes, I alerted participants, to check they were aware of the time.

I scheduled interviews in groups of three and then transcribed them. This allowed a break between phases of interviews, as some of them were particularly difficult stories to hear. It was also more manageable to transcribe frequently as the interviews were lengthy and prevented a long period of only transcribing.

Reflecting, on the one hand it was difficult to conduct interviews and study the emotive subject of coercive control during the pandemic lockdown periods, when usual sources of support and socialising with family and friends were diminished. There were also frequent news reports on domestic abuse due to the impact of lockdown isolating victim-survivors with perpetrators. However, there was little to do other than study and a small amount of online therapeutic work with victims-survivors of violence and abuse. Therefore, on the other hand, this imposed total immersion in the fieldwork, though difficult at times, I believe was beneficial in terms of the study, as I have felt utterly absorbed in the project.

All the interviews were a positive experience; I felt there was a good rapport established with all the participants because generally there were a few emails exchanged first to arrange dates and answer questions. Additionally, interacting with participants during the interviews was beneficial in establishing trust and seemed to make it easier for them to tell their stories and/or reflect candidly upon their work and experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2013). However, during the interviews, I endeavoured to intervene as little as possible to avoid interrupting the flow of participants' narratives, but timely prompts, reassurances, and observations were made to reflect my empathy and understanding, or that I valued what was being expressed.

The use of online video interviewing did not detract from the interview experience and participants being in their home environments seemed to enable them to feel more

comfortable to talk. Furthermore, online interviewing was financially economical due to not travelling, arranging overnight accommodation, and booking interview rooms; and not travelling extensively around the UK, was less time-consuming.

### 3.6.4 Interviewing Professionals

The interviews with professionals were focused on asking more general questions relating to coercive control and also their particular specialised area of work; their views about what is most needed to take the field of coercive control forward; aspects of their work they find the most difficult; and what motivates them to work in domestic abuse, sexual violence, or workplace abuse services. The aim was to gain deep insights from the interviews regarding what the participants perceived to be the key issues, dilemmas, and opportunities in coercive control policy and practice; what could be learnt from the present context to help inform the development of work in the field of coercive control in the future.

Speaking with participants who are experts in the field of coercive control meant that some of the ethical issues typically relating to research on violence and abuse did not apply to the same extent as interviewing survivor participants; for example, in terms of considering potential harm or distress. However, I was aware that interviewing participants working with victim-survivors and/or perpetrators of violence and abuse could elicit emotional responses when talking about clients with a history of trauma, or current vulnerabilities, and that working in the field of violence/abuse can be challenging work.

The professional participants whose stories were interspersed with their own personal narratives of violence and abuse transpired to be different in comparison to hearing survivor stories. Professional participants mainly recounted their stories to demonstrate that as they had experienced coercive control, they were astute in spotting the signs in others, whereas their impression was that some of their colleagues with no personal experience, were not.

All the interviews with professionals were prefaced with the reminder they could take breaks if needed and all the interviews included a de-brief period at the end. However, all the professional participants, except one, spent only a short time de-briefing, mainly reflecting on the interview experience. Most participants said that it had been interesting, and they were glad to have taken part in the research; my questions had allowed them to consider issues they had not thought of (for example, the notion of whether domestic abusers pose a risk beyond the domestic) and in that sense the interview was informative for them. Three interview participants had been granted permission by their workplace organisations to attend the interview during their work hours and, therefore, they were mindful to adhere to the scheduled 90 minutes.

There were further ethical issues to consider when transcribing the interviews, the most significant being confidentiality and anonymity, given the unique and prominent roles occupied by professionals working in the field of coercive control, which could make it easy to identify participants from their anonymised comments. This could be problematic where critical observations were made about other organisations, in the details of their working lives, or their motivations for undertaking their field of expertise. Therefore, every effort was made to ensure that information that could identify participants, the organisations they work within, or individuals they work with, were anonymised.

### 3.6.5 Interviewing Survivor Participants

While some participants became upset or angry when recounting their experiences, I responded sensitively, allowed time for them to compose themselves and asked if they needed a break. Despite considering themselves 'recovered' from the experience of violence and abuse, recounting their stories and 're-living' events was still difficult, and the dialectic of trauma is evident in all the survivor transcripts.

Notably, despite telling harrowing stories of coercive control, most of the survivors doubted what they were saying, that is, whether they could rightly justify their experiences as coercive control. With all participants, it became evident when they had reached a limit in their narrative and they mentally went 'off-line.' An advantage of my training in trauma work meant that I could recognise this and knew to pause, help them to come back to the present and not push them into harrowing places that would have been psychologically unsafe.

The debrief time at the end of the interviews was recorded but not transcribed. Recording the debrief was not initially intentional but after the first couple of interviews, I realised the act of turning off the recording and saving the interview interrupted the natural flow into the debrief period. I asked all participants how they had experienced the interview, to which most replied that they were glad to have had an opportunity to reflect. All participants said they were pleased to contribute towards research and the interview had been a meaningful and/or a cathartic experience for them. Several survivor participants stated that this was the first time they had told the entire story of what had happened to them; they subsequently spoke about how they felt recounting the entirety of their violent and/or abusive experience.

Prior to the interviews, participants had expressed concern about contributing usefully to the research, and at the beginning of the interviews often participants said they felt nervous. I reassured them it would be valuable for me to hear about their experiences and if it transpired that I could not use the data, that would be fine. I was surprised by the level of participant disclosure, the personal nature of the experiences they were willing to divulge and the importance of recounting accurate information, taking time to recall events and going

back to correct themselves or report something they had forgotten to mention. All the interviews were enormously useful and reflected the purposive selection of the participants.

As well as offering participant information sheets with sources of professional support, such as telephone numbers for helplines (see appendix C), I checked that they had personal sources of support if they needed them, such as friends or family they could talk to, and they all said that they had. I asked how they were feeling to ensure they were not going away still in the midst of the stories they had told and enquired what they were intending to do after the interview, so they had a sense of direction and plan for what they would do next. I mentioned that reflecting deeply on their experiences of violence and abuse might evoke feelings that had previously receded, and while understandable, if that was the case, to try and be compassionate towards themselves, take extra good care of themselves for a few days, such as doing something they enjoyed or spending time with loved ones.

### 3.6.6 Notetaking and Writing a Journal

After each interview, I immediately made notes to capture my thoughts and feelings in the moment that I may otherwise have forgotten in time; this allowed me to return to new ideas or avenues that I needed to explore. I kept a reflective journal throughout the interview process and transcription to record my feelings in response to the participants and the stories they told. Writing a journal was also useful to reflect on my research practice, and as a matter of course to challenge myself on the transparency of my research, examine my thoughts and regularly question my biases. For example, when the research findings have contested my own preconceived ideas, I had to reflect to accommodate new information.

### 3.6.7 Transcription

All the interviews were video-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcribing interviews from the video recordings and 'being with' the participants again generated new thoughts, ideas, and feelings, and it was useful to add these to my journal and/or notes. I am trained to work with individuals who have experienced trauma and abuse, therefore, I have a level of resilience to cope with this type of work. However, for any researcher there are challenges in hearing difficult stories, then going on to re-listen and transcribe this material. I meet each month with my clinical supervisor to process my therapeutic work; during these meetings I was able to confidentially explore difficult feelings or thoughts that arose during the data collection and analysis. There were also frequent, meaningful discussions with my PhD supervisors relating to the interview process and the emerging data.

### 3.6.8 Maintaining a Researcher Stance

There are challenges for researcher-practitioners maintaining a researcher stance when interview participants are discussing case material; contestations can be sensitively challenged or refuted within the therapeutic relationship when deep trust has been established, whereas in the interview context it became a matter of 'holding' what was said and later going on to process this information.

As this chapter will explore, my position placed me both as an insider and outsider, which meant that it was crucial to remain fully aware of my suppositions around my therapeutic practice when dealing with violence and abuse, to maintain my position as a researcher. Continual reflection of my position is consistent with a feminist theoretical framework and the epistemological foundation of social constructionism, and I referred to the insider/outsider framework (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

During the interview process, I most often remained neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the participant views expressed. The interviews were a process of listening to stories and asking further questions, for participants to provide more detail, to clarify information, or expand on their stories. The impact of my researcher positionality was therefore more significant during the research data analysis.

### 3.6.9 Reflecting on the Researcher Position

Positionality is a concept that is used to signal the social location of the researcher - in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, age, ability, citizenship status, and so on - and its impacts on the research (Jackson et al., 2023). Positionality should therefore be engaged intersectionally, paying particular attention to how sociopolitical context influences and transforms how we come to understand and experience our various social identities. This allows a closer examination of power and the interlocking dynamics of privilege and oppression operating within ourselves, our environments, and our research (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 2008).

As researcher, I am aware to constantly acknowledge my positionality, recognising that it remains fluid within an ever-evolving social landscape. Consequently, I am tasked with embracing reflexivity, a deliberate and reflective practice involving self-awareness, self-assessment, and self-disclosure (Beltrán, 2019; Holmes, 2020). This active engagement allows me to determine and comprehend my positionality, while being reflexive requires that I identify and scrutinise my preconceptions, my encompassing values, beliefs, motivations, and qualifications that I bring to the research; and that I need to analyse how these elements relate both to the participants involved and the perspectives of my supervisors; as well as

examining the interaction of these preconceptions within the research context, comprehending their influence and implications within my specific framework; and assigning time and effort to navigate through this complex process (Beltrán, 2019; Holmes, 2020).

Clarifying my positionality and how this shapes my research, is also a vital component of critical feminist praxis; a way of practicing accountability for who I am, the reasons that I do the research I have elected to do, the questions I ask, what I find stimulating and important (or not) (Jackson et al., 2023). The integration of positionality in my research analysis and writing is not intended to slight or elevate myself nor to serve as habitual steps to a set of intellectual rules; rather, integration of positionality is a fundamental component of conducting socially just research (Jackson et al., 2023).

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and Dorothy Smith (1987) (and other feminist scholars) developed standpoint theory as an epistemological critique of the sociological scholarship of white male researchers who presented their work as universal, objective, and unbiased. Demonstrating the impossibility of neutrality because of the social situatedness of all researchers, standpoint theory exposed the relationship between "the production of knowledge and the practices of power" (Harding, 2004:1). In alignment with standpoint theory, my application of positionality in my research is an articulation of the inherent connections between myself as a researcher and my research. Thus, as a researcher, I am aware to routinely acknowledge my positionality, recognising that it is susceptible to changes within my evolving social environment. Reflecting on questions of power, oppression, privilege, and social location as I designed, conducted, and documented my research became ongoing work that is part of all feminist scholarship, as I believe that research and knowledge production can and should be a form of truth-telling, a counter-narrative to those that have created the systems and structures that uphold and perpetuate inequality.

Insider research refers to research conducted on samples of which the researcher is a member; outsider research refers to research conducted on samples where the researcher is not a member (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Within reflective research, the insider/outsider binary is viewed as restrictive when considering the range of experiences in qualitative research methods. Furthermore, membership of a group does not signify complete sameness within the group; similarly, not being a member of a group does not signify complete difference; therefore, reflective research requires the examination of the researcher position from both insider and outsider perspectives (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). This resonates with the fluidity of my insider/outsider experiences within the qualitative research, that are reported below.

My motivation for the project was driven by my desire to create an inclusive, sociological concept of coercive control that extends beyond the contemporary academic conceptualisations of intimate partner/domestic abuse. Contributing to the scholarly understandings and my congruent empathy with victim-survivors positions me as an insider in the initiatives for violence/abuse prevention. In my role as a psychotherapist, I am considered an insider of the 'caring professions' and I have always elected to work in the third-sector, as a means of therapy being more accessible to marginalised groups, which reaffirms my insider position on violence/abuse support and prevention.

Before contacting research participants, I had to consider the implications of disclosing my role as a psychotherapist; I decided that divulging to professionals would likely situate me as an insider and they would be more willing to participate in the research. During the early phase of each interview, I further disclosed that while I had trained and worked therapeutically in domestic abuse, sexual violence, and rape crisis services, I have very little experience of working with perpetrators. Therefore, to an extent there was common ground, so professionally I was both an insider and outsider. I was an outsider seeking knowledge of professionals' particular experiences that differed to my own; I was certainly an outsider to their work with perpetrators, especially as most of perpetrators they spoke about were men and I have predominantly worked with women, as statistically women suffer the highest prevalence of gendered violence and abuse (ONS, 2022). My position as a 'professional' insider was an advantage, as this meant the interviews with professionals were of a collaborative nature and we were mutually interested in and respectful of each other's work.

Interviewing professionals who are survivors and/or working in the field of workplace abuse positioned me firmly as an insider. This was partly because so few people recognise the true nature of the abuse that they experienced; and those working in the field are also trying to bring perpetrators' systematic patterns of abuse to the fore of workplace violence/abuse knowledge and prevention. The participants felt that I was championing their cause and they were relieved to speak to someone that was open to understanding their stories. They had been cast as outsiders within workplace organisations and institutions, so they were appreciative of me positioning myself as an insider by believing their stories, empathising with their experiences, and aligning myself with their pursuit of a better understanding of workplace abuse, particularly coercive control.

Working therapeutically with clients is a collaborative venture, therefore, therapists avoid adopting the seniority of a professional position, as this creates an unequal alliance. Although I was mindful the interviews were not therapeutic work, I was aware that creating an equal alliance is important, not only in a professional role but to treat all individuals

equally. I disclosed my professional role to the survivor participants as I anticipated that this would signify that I could cope with hearing their stories, while also taking care of their well-being; that is, I would facilitate a safe environment in which they could tell their stories of violence and abuse. I also hoped that disclosing my profession would signify trust, as I am required to work (and conduct my social/personal life) within a strict code of professional ethics, confidentiality, and care. My experience in the field of domestic abuse/sexual violence and working with victim-survivors of trauma positioned me as an insider but, again, an outsider to (professionally) understanding perpetrators of violence and abuse. That said, I have undertaken training towards working with perpetrators, I have worked with a range of perpetrators in a mental health nursing home, and I have significant experience of perpetrator behaviours from the perspective of working extensively with victim-survivors.

Interviewing male participants presented both insider and outsider dynamics. I was an outsider by being a woman but an insider, in some cases, relating to profession, working in the caring professions and the field of violence and abuse, the subject of violence/abuse, and the shared desire to better understand the perpetration of coercive control.

My position as an outsider was most evident when trying to recruit perpetrator participants to interview. Despite my professional role, there were barriers to accessing even gatekeepers at organisations (which may have been solely due to the Covid-19 pandemic and professionals mainly working from home). I attempted to obtain insider status by attending training for working with perpetrators; and while briefly, I became an insider and obtained an interview with a professional that I hoped would also lead to interviewing perpetrators, I was soon cast back to the outsider position. It is as if the world of perpetrators has a default outsider position, as the way professionals talk about perpetrators - in terms of the work being a balancing act of containment of behaviours and reform - this appears to be a 'them and us' dynamic, in comparison to the collaboration of the therapeutic alliance.

## 3.7 Interview Data Analysis

I investigated coercive control both within and beyond the domestic environment through 11 months of fieldwork. In the analysis, I utilise survivor stories and interviews with professionals to uncover the mechanisms and trace the processes via which coercive control operates, alongside the ways in which perpetrators perform their identities within and beyond the domestic environment.

My interview methodology allowed for the development of a deeper understanding of coercive control as covert, ambiguously perpetrated violence and abuse; the in-depth interviews also helped to uncover the mechanisms concealed in the complex social phenomena. That is, participant stories were particularly useful for contextualising coercive

control in the macro contexts of victim-survivors' lives, as the details of their stories highlight how large-scale forces shape and impinge on practices in the field of violence/abuse and within service systems (Abu-Lughod,1991). In addition, as opposed to imposing a rigid framework, the participant stories allowed for experiences to emerge on the participants' terms (Atkinson, 2007).

Boyatzis (1998) states that researchers utilising thematic analysis are required to determine if themes will be identified at a semantic or latent level prior to the analysis of the data. A semantic approach focuses on the identification of surface or explicit meanings that emerge from the data and involves a progression from description. Explicitly, where the data has merely been organised to show patterns in semantic content, and summarised prior to interpretation, with an attempt to theorise the significance of the patterns and the broader meanings and implications (Braun and Clarke, 2013). A latent approach involves moving beyond the semantic content to begin to identify or investigate the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations, and ideologies that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2013). As this project is exploring and seeking to enhance some established notions and assumptions around coercive control, a latent level of thematic identification is deemed more appropriate. Rather than providing a descriptive account of themes in the data, this research provides in-depth accounts and analysis relating to both the experience and perpetration of coercive control and perpetrator behaviours in a range of contextualities.

The thematic analysis was implemented through the six-stage model of data analysis based upon the approach devised and developed by Braun and Clarke (2013):

1. Familiarising oneself with the data

2. Initial coding

3. Identifying themes

4. Reviewing themes

5. Naming themes

6. Reporting on findings

The first stage of the analysis and familiarising myself with the data began during the transcription process. This was a huge advantage of transcribing the interviews myself, as it allowed me to become closely acquainted with the data and to begin to identify potential patterns and themes of interest whilst transcribing. Subsequently, during multiple intensive readings of the interviews, I highlighted recurring meanings and patterns within them and

noted relevant issues. I then wrote a shorter memo account of each of the participant interviews, which allowed me to preserve each interview as a whole piece of data. This research aims to develop a conceptual explanation, rather than generalise to a population; memo-writing and coding are useful in this case-based causal analysis (Headworth, 2019).

Following the memo-writing, I began the second stage of analysis, which involved assembling the initial codes from the transcriptions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I systematically highlighted sections of the data that seemed to be relevant or of interest and then summarised the interpreted meanings of the extracts as an essentialised form through a code (these later became NVivo11 nodes). At this stage, the data was coded as broadly as possible to capture anything of significance to my research questions and not only the information that correlated to my own prior assumptions and inquiries. Some of the data was coded several times, for example, if sections of the data related to multiple interesting or relevant meanings. Where different sections of data fit into the same code, they were grouped together into one. This process complete, I collated numerous codes based upon the extracts from each of the interviews.

The third stage involved broadening the analysis to evidence themes among the codes that had been developed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This entailed analysing the codes and seeking to identify patterns across the interviews where the codes could be detected as belonging within a key theme (these later became child nodes in NVivo11, with themes created as primary nodes). At this stage, I found it useful to group the codes originally identified on colour-coded sticky notes placed on a large sheet of paper, in order to map out the patterns shared across the interviews. I was able to move the notes and spend time testing different themes to establish the most relevant patterns in the data. Some of the initial themes were removed as too insignificant and broadening the data too far, while other themes could be incorporated into broader themes. At the end of this stage, I had developed four themes comprising a collection of different codes.

During the fourth stage of analysis, the developed themes were reviewed and refined (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A reassessment of the participant themes showed that in some cases there was inadequate data to justify a theme, the data was too expansive within a theme, or the themes overlapped too closely with one another. Therefore, I followed the two-level process of theme refinement (Braun and Clark, 2006). First, I examined whether the coded data extracts within each theme fit with one another adequately enough to form a cohesive pattern. Where this was not the case, I looked at whether the extracts worked better within a different theme or considered their relevancy to all the themes. Second, I studied the extent to which individual themes and the range of the thematic map reliably and accurately

captured the range of meanings and perceptions within and throughout the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Re-reading the interview transcripts allowed me to test the efficacy and congruence of the themes that had been developed while also incorporating any previously unidentified data. At this stage, I felt I had explored all options and possibilities to evidence themes in the data and was satisfied the process had been both methodical, exhaustive, and had reached the point of saturation.

To ensure the validity of the data analysis, once I felt confident that the indexing was congruent with the data, I began using the coding software NVivo11. Recreating the index on NVivo11 permitted me to see how much of the raw data was coded using the index for each interview and I was able to review the index to see how much of the raw interview data transpired to be coded. This allowed me to check that I had not selectively used data from particular interviews and could compare coded data from different transcripts within the index. NVivo11 enabled me to store and organise the codes more effectively and included collapsing some codes and creating conceptual hierarchies with primary codes and subcodes that are referred to as parent and child nodes on NVivo11.

I was assured the themes were both internally coherent and externally clear and valid after all the interviews were coded; the index was made up of four primary themes that correlated to those I had constructed prior to using NVivo11. These are outlined below:

**Table 2: Themes Identified from the Interview Data**

| Themes | Sub-Codes |
|---|---|
| **The obfuscation of victim-survivors of coercive control** | a. Victim-survivors' trauma symptomatology is often viewed in isolation of coercive control; thus, mental health problems can be pathologized and/or criminalised by service systems/abusers<br>b. Coercive control is most evident in victim-survivors' symptoms of trauma/behaviour, rather than perpetrators' evidential offences, though this is often overlooked within service systems provision (such as the police)<br>c. Victim-survivors often have difficulty in understanding and communicating their experiences of coercive control<br>d. Professionals' unethical practices can obfuscate victim-survivors and permit abusers to continue offending<br>e. Structural/systemic inequalities and gendered cultural norms can be used to victim-blame victim-survivors - by perpetrators, professionals and the wider public |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Lack of professional and public understanding of coercive control** | a. Victim-survivors' 'storying' their experiences more adequately captures coercive-controlling offending and victimisation |
| | b. Specialist knowledge of coercive control is required to catch/understand the nuance and meaning in stories of coercive control |
| | c. No conceptualisation of systematic abuse that is perpetrated in workplaces/institutions/organisations |
| | d. No recognition (beyond feminist scholarship/activism) of coercive control on a continuum of violence/abuse |
| | e. Without lived experience, coercive control is difficult for professionals and the wider public to comprehend |
| | f. Professionals can have difficulty differentiating who is the victim-survivor and who is the perpetrator |
| | g. Lack of understanding of the dynamics relating to victim-survivors' empathy and care towards abusers. |
| | h. Insufficient victim-survivor and professionals' recognition of perpetrators' fabricated victimisation narratives |
| | i. Professionals' neutrality/scepticism (sitting on the fence between perpetrator and victim) |
| **Perpetrators' range of violence, abuse and criminality** | a. Difficult to isolate coercive control as a stand-alone type of violence and abuse; perpetrators also often hide/obscure their physical violence |
| | b. Perpetrators can display a range of violence/abuse/criminality that extends beyond the domestic |
| | c. The perpetrator's range of violence/abuse/criminality can indicate dangerous individuals |
| | d. Perpetrators use their own victimisation narratives as a tactic of coercive control |
| **The obfuscation of perpetrators of coercive control** | a. Absenting/excusing/justifying perpetrators' violence/abuse |
| | b. Perpetrators' coercive control is most often covert, ambiguous in presentation and hidden |
| | c. Power in professionals' authority and status (in workplaces/institutions) to obscure and/or perpetrate/perpetuate violence and abuse |
| | d. Dangerous individuals not recognised, or overlooked by professionals in UK service systems |

The fifth stage of analysis involved defining and naming each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This entailed interpreting the meanings at the core of the themes, both individually and collectively as a whole, in relation to the research questions and the data. I subsequently evaluated how the various extracts of data within each theme were relevant to each other and the story the themes told in combination with one another. This allowed me to develop a coherent account of why the themes both individually and collectively provided relevant information and insights to the research questions.

The sixth and final stage of the analysis involved reporting the findings that emerged from the themes using the most informative extracts from the data, relating the analysis to the research questions which forms the basis of the two thematic data chapters that follow:

Three dominant themes used to structure the two thematic data/analysis chapters:

1.   The factors that can impede the evidencing of coercive-controlling offences

2.  The connections between private and public violence

3.  Coercive control that is perpetrated beyond the domestic environment

Chapter Four, the first of two data/analysis chapters, focuses on the theme of coercive control as covert and ambiguous violence/abuse in intimate partner and domestic abuse, and the factors that can impede the evidencing of coercive-controlling behaviour offences.

Chapter Five, the second data/analysis chapter, focuses on the theme of coercive control that is perpetrated as systematic abuse beyond the domestic, such as within workplaces, institutions and organisations; and the theme of perpetrators' coercive control, violence, and abuse that extends beyond the domestic to the public realm.

**Chapter Four**

**Coercive Control: The Problem of Evidencing Covert and Ambiguous Violence and Abuse**

**4.1 Introduction**

This chapter addresses the findings from my interviews with survivors of coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse, and professionals working with victim-survivors and perpetrators of coercive control. These semi-structured interviews were conducted to find answers to research questions; firstly, what are the factors that can impede the evidencing of coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse? The aim of this first question is to develop the understanding of coercive control to investigate how and why evidencing and seeking support for coercive-controlling offences remains an enduring challenge.

The interviews with both survivors and professionals explored their experiences of coercive control and their perceptions of perpetrators. I particularly encouraged survivors to story their experiences of coercive control. Hearing narratives of the course of relationships proved useful to gain deep insights into coercive control and understand the importance of paying attention to the nuance in those stories. This allowed me to identify themes that are not evident in the contemporary coercive control literature, which may have been missed in more limited conversations that focused on enhancing particular aspects of coercive-controlling offending that are already elucidated.

The chapter is divided into sections based on the different themes that were generated from the analysis of the interview data. The findings show that coercive control is predominantly perpetrated as covert violence and abuse, which is also often ambiguous in its manifestation - a theme that resonates deeply across my fieldwork interviews. However, the perpetration of coercive control is most evident in victim-survivors' trauma symptomology, distressed behaviour, and often reaching a "breaking point". Crucially, my thematic data offers evidence of the problems associated with the UK authorities (for example, the police and social services) identifying or obfuscating victim-survivors' experiences of coercive control and the subsequent inadequate intervention that enables perpetrators to continue offending. Elucidating the issues that impede better outcomes for victim-survivors and that prevent holding perpetrators to account for their offences could inform UK policy makers and service systems provision of the structural and systemic factors that can perpetuate coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse. The concept of coercive control has predominantly been siloed to the domestic (see, for example, Johnson, 1995, 2008; Stark, 2007), therefore, the connections between private and public violence in relation to coercive-controlling offending are presently under-investigated.

## 4.2 The Difficulties of Implementing the Coercive Control Behaviour Legislation

The controlling and coercive behaviour offence legislation (Home Office, 2015, 2023) has been welcomed by UK domestic abuse organisations as a move forward in recognising the persistent, enduring nature of intimate partner and domestic abuse. Organisations have acknowledged progress in establishing a framework for urging criminal justice professionals to embrace the concept of coercive control as a 'course of conduct' that occurs over time, rather than only addressing isolated incidents of physical violence (Women's Aid, 2022; SafeLives, 2022). However, the extent to which the law can combat/prevent intimate partner and domestic abuse has long been subject to debate (Hanna, 2009; Stark and Hester, 2018; Walby and Towers, 2018). In other words, the law does not exist in isolation but requires interpretation and implementation; therefore, when new offences are introduced by the UK Government, demands and expectations of the broader criminal justice process, from the police officer, to the prosecutor, to the judge, are also created (Barlow et al., 2020).

Since the implementation of the controlling and coercive behaviour offence in England and Wales, 2015, prosecution rates have, however, remained disappointingly low (Women's Aid, 2021a). The professional interview participants working with victim-survivors of coercive control related the various challenges they face within and across service systems (such as the police, the crown prosecution service (CPS), and social services), as they often inadequately respond to reports of coercive-controlling offending.

My interview participant, Katrina, a domestic abuse worker with 15 years' experience in the field and a survivor of coercive control, stated:

> The law of coercion and control that was introduced in 2015 was supposed to recognise that abuse doesn't have to be just violent to reach the criminal justice arena. However, because of the lack of being able to compile evidence, my experience is that [police] officers look at the situation and say, am I going to actually be able to get that through the CPS?, no, I'm not, so they don't take it seriously. With prosecutions that have been made for coercive control there's always been other abuses like physical abuse as well. I haven't come across any cases locally, where perpetrators have been convicted solely of coercive control. So, then we just have victims who are even more isolated and believe they can't be helped. And it's almost like, in a way, I find it's making it worse for people, because they're being encouraged to go to the police, so they're told, but then knocked back.

Katrina's narrative is an example of my thematic data findings that demonstrate that the England and Wales Government's policy/statutory guidance (Home Office, 2015, 2023) for responding to reports of coercive control is not routinely translating in professional practice.

Victim-survivors are informed within violence and abuse service provision that the controlling or coercive behaviour offence in England and Wales was implemented to protect them and hold perpetrators to account for their offences. In reality, victim-survivors face various barriers (elucidated throughout this chapter) within UK service systems, such as the police, when attempting to make use of the coercive control law.

Similarly, Kasia, an Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) at a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC), said:

> You're always going to get low conviction rates because the police just look at that one act or acts of assault and not all the other intersecting difficulties like coercion and control. For example, a client I'm working with, she has six open cases between domestic abuse, revenge porn [image-based sexual abuse], sexual assault, so many different cases that are open to the police right now, and he can keep persistently perpetrating domestic abuse against her, and she's still in a relationship with him. And she keeps going back, and back, and back, and back to him. I often say to my manager and her IDVA [Independent Domestic Violence Advisor], how can we keep her safe? He's manipulated or blackmailed her to come to his house during [the Covid pandemic] lockdown, he's recorded her having sex, he's sent it to people, he's beat her black and blue, he's done absolutely everything and it's like, what can I do to keep this client safe?

Kasia stated, however, that the police perceive her client is choosing to stay with her abuser, rather than recognise that the perpetrator's coercive control maintains his hold over her.

Michael, a domestic abuse worker and a survivor of domestic abuse, stated:

> They [the police] get a domestic abuse call-out *and it's just flagged up as one incident*, it takes someone to say to them, look at the history of the address, there's lots of 'incidents' here that have occurred over and over and over. They don't even consider coercive control.

Michael's stating the need to remind the police to "look at the history of the address" demonstrates a lack of police continuity in domestic abuse call-outs and not always considering a 'course of conduct' despite academic and service systems' knowledge that coercive control occurs in at least 80 percent of intimate partner and domestic abuse (Kelly, 2016; SafeLives, 2022).

Katrina, Kasia, and Michael's comments in regard to the police evidencing coercive control resonate with the concerns that have been expressed in the domestic abuse sector. For the criminalisation of coercive control (Home Office, 2015, 2023), ambiguity concerning its

success has been especially acute, as England and Wales was only the second jurisdiction to implement this law (Brennan and Myhill, 2021). With scant precedence with which to gauge the use of the new law, academics and professionals have questioned whether 'more law' (see, for example, Walklate et al., 2018) is an appropriate strategy to respond to and prevent non-physical domestic abuse. Critics are sceptical about the ability of the UK criminal justice system to recognise, investigate, and prosecute coercive control and victim-survivor reports of pervasive, enduring fear when the prosecution of physical domestic violence is already lacking (Brennan and Myhill, 2021). This chapter therefore elucidates the issues that are evident in my thematic data findings, which impede the detection and/or the acknowledgment of perpetrators' coercive-controlling offences.

## 4.3 Storying Coercive Control: The Importance of Deciphering the Nuance in Victim-Survivors' Narratives of Violence and Abuse

My data suggests that the Home Office (2015, 2023) conceptualisation of controlling and coercive behaviour presents a too-generalised formulation of violence and abuse that does not adequately reflect the complexity of perpetrators' covert and/or ambiguous violence/abuse, the pervasive fear that they instil in victim-survivors, or the confusion that victim-survivors experience - inculcated by perpetrators - that prevents their full understanding and articulation of their lived experience of coercive control.

My data further demonstrates that, problematically, perpetrators' methods of coercive control are insidious and most often remain inexplicable to victim-survivors, as well as their families, friends, the wider public, and professionals within UK service provision. Thus, it becomes very challenging for victim-survivors to communicate their experiences to people who also do not adequately comprehend coercive control and its effects. Moreover, it would be very difficult for victim-survivors to assimilate their experiences into a classification framework that does not accurately portray their real-life experiences of violence and abuse, and then proceed to try to prove to a court of law that controlling or coercive behaviour offences have been perpetrated against them.

For example, Katrina, a survivor and a domestic abuse worker, expressed the difficulties of conceptualising even her own experience of coercive control, despite her extensive knowledge of this type of violence and abuse:

> It was definitely a game though, definitely a game, like he'd, you could see the thrill he would have as to getting me to, again, it's really odd trying to… again, I can't think of specific examples. But I do remember being at the point where I'd smash-up the bathroom because I was, he would, he'd systematically break me, but if someone else was watching, I'm not sure they'd have seen that. It was just in my response.

As Katrina elucidated, the perpetration of coercive control was only evident in her deeply distressed response to the violence and abuse that she was suffering. Anyone witnessing her destructive behaviour could view this out of context and disconnected from the perpetrator's insidious, covert offences. Across my research data, the survivors and professionals more readily communicated the effects of coercive control, rather than describe the tangible methods that perpetrators utilise to inflict their violence and abuse. This is evident in Katrina figuratively communicating "he'd systematically break me" to convey the effects of her perpetrator's coercive control, as she could not state in any literal, material sense the violence and abuse that he had perpetrated against her. Katrina also explained that no-one else (except her and her abuser) would perceive the dynamics of coercive control that he perpetrated against her in public, let alone comprehend the violence and abuse that occurred in private:

> With coercive control, it's the subtle look, it's the tone of voice, it's the: I don't need to make a threat to you, but you know if you do that, of course you can do that, darling, *but the look says,* when you get home you're going to have a very hard time about it. So, you don't do things because you want to avoid the difficulties about it when you get home. People had no idea what went on at home, so for him it was easy. And I sometimes say to people, if I had to take a case to the police now, if I had to write a list of what it is he does and how he, um, exerts his coercion and control, how would I present that to the police to actually think I was presenting a good case? And I don't think I could.

Katrina knew that she had been coercively-controlled but she could not easily verbalise her perpetrator's methods of abuse because words, behaviours, and tone of voice are all symbolic (Mehrabian, 1972). Often these symbols are only comprehensible to the abuser and the abused, making them impossible to explain to others. Nonverbal communication conveys a huge amount of information, for example, gestures and facial expressions: as Katrina stated, "the look says". Such coded signals have powerful impacts, and dominance is most often expressed nonverbally through posturing (Novak, 2020). Therefore, victim-survivors must try to convey the *effects* of abuse that they *feel*, such as immense fear or being "systematically broken" (a strong theme that emerged in my data). However, this reality of victim-survivors' experiences of coercive control is incongruent with the evidence requirements of the controlling and coercive behaviour law, reporting requirements, and the criminalisation process.

Liz, a survivor, expressed ambivalence towards whether she had experienced coercive control. This was, in part, because of the ambiguity of the violence and abuse that had been

perpetrated against her, but also due to Liz still fearing her ex-partner, though their relationship had ended several years ago. Liz explained:

> I'm still struggling to try and work out, for me, whether it's even [coercive control], yes, because when you asked me about coercive control, you know, the first thought I had, I felt guilty that I talked about him [the perpetrator] in that way. You see, but I also know that's part of how it makes you feel, and also I had a fear - yes, this does show the control - I had a fear that if he came across your thesis and recognised himself in it, he would come and hurt me. But he didn't stop me seeing people, this is the thing, this is why I've wondered how much of it was coercive. And I've really struggled with feeling whether it's valid you interviewing me because I'm thinking, was it coercive control? I know there were some aspects that were, but it's not as bad as some that you will probably hear about.

Liz, unknowing, proceeded to illustrate the coercive control that had been perpetrated against her, yet she hesitated to confirm that her ex-partner was a coercive-controlling abuser; seemingly, she feared that this was a label too far. Liz continued:

> I had a breakdown and was really struggling because of that relationship really, mostly. I mean there were other factors, I was drinking too much and cannabis was an issue. Um, so, I decided to get away, it was the only way to break the pattern and get out, get away from this toxic relationship. So, I moved away and I really tried to cut off from him but then, um, he started visiting me and, argh! so it went on. In the end, I mean, I tried to forge a new life there and I really wish I had because it's a beautiful place, I had a good job and everything was going great, but then he asked me back. Um, so, I gave up my job and, um, then I had cold feet and was going to change my mind at the last minute, but I felt he coerced me into going with him and I was frightened; I was frightened to let him down. He'd already found a house, I think he'd booked the van to come and get me, but I just had a very strong sense that I shouldn't go, that this is the wrong thing. And my employer and my colleagues, they were all begging me to stay, but I came back here and really it just went badly wrong and, um, I felt very isolated.

Subsequently, Liz was coercively-controlled by her on-and-off partner for decades, but it is only by knowing the long history of his covert violence and nuanced abuses that it is possible to understand how Liz remained under the control of her partner for so long (though, as Michael stated, if the police do not consider the 'history' of domestic abuse and they respond to an 'incident' of violence, coercive control can remain undetected). However, Liz did not fully acknowledge (or understand) the dynamics of her perpetrator's abuse. This is evident in

the way that she described the situation, for example, she said that she "felt very isolated", as opposed to saying that her partner had isolated her; that she had a mental health breakdown because of the "relationship", not because of her abuser; and she referred to "*the* control*", as opposed to *his* control. Liz also minimised her perpetrator's abuse by saying, "but it's not as bad as some that you will probably hear about".

Liz also blamed herself, rather than her abuser for her distress, by intimating that she had had a substance abuse problem and implying that that, not her partner's violent and abusive behaviour, had caused her mental health problems. While Liz recognised that drinking too much alcohol and using cannabis was an issue, she did not question whether her substance misuse was a coping strategy against the violence and abuse that she was suffering, and/or whether she was self-medicating her pervasive symptoms of trauma. Rather, Liz spoke about alcohol and cannabis in the context of causing problems in the relationship: a theme of self-blame that emerged throughout her narrative - blame that had been instilled in her by her abuser. Liz also framed the relationship as "toxic", which apportions equal blame for the violence and abuse in the relationship, in the eyes of the law, while also denying the perpetrator/victim dynamic. Thereby, Liz does herself a disservice, by exonerating her abuser of responsibility for the violence and abuse that he perpetrated against her, thus taking the perpetrator out of the story of coercive control.

By stating "he started visiting me and, argh! so it went on", Liz implies that she had not invited her then ex-boyfriend to stay with her. She instinctively knew that she should not return home with him and her employer and colleagues were begging her to stay, which suggests that they may have been concerned for her well-being. Liz said that "he'd already found a house", rather than both choosing a home together. This indicates that her abuser was in control of the situation and this was reinforced when Liz reported:

> I felt isolated because we lived out, sort of a bit on the edge of the city, and it was hard, I didn't have a car and it was difficult to get to see people.

While Liz said that her abuser did not explicitly stop her seeing people, he chose a house that made it difficult for her to socialise. Yet Liz had the ability to relocate to a different part of the UK, to find a good job and a new home, which shows that she is a strong, autonomous person. Conversely, she was frightened of her abuser, such that she could not say no to him, which is indicative of his power over her. It is also apparent in Liz's narrative that she still lives in fear of her ex-partner. She stated, "I felt guilty that I talked about him in that way" (despite the cruel violence and abuse that he had perpetrated against her for decades), because she believed that talking about his coercive control would infuriate him if he found out, and that there might be dire consequences, as at times Liz expressed fear for her life:

I'm actually scared that if things did finally fall apart for him, um, I, I think, you know, if he had people he wanted to take out, who would it be? And it would possibly be me.

Despite suffering decades of coercive control, there was not a single act of violence or abuse (or a course of conduct) that Liz could readily prove in a court of law, which demonstrates her perpetrator's skill at hiding both his physical violence and emotional/psychological abuse. Liz explained:

We were out and everything was going well, then somehow we argued and the next thing I knew he'd abandoned me, I was abandoned on my own in a dark street, frightened. Then I got home and he wouldn't let me in, and he did hit me because I went berserk. Well, I was outside saying, please let me in, and he wouldn't […]. So, I think I went berserk, smashed a window and then, of course, he got me in and there was some kind of tussle. And, um, I think he banged my head against a door really hard because I remember at the time thinking, oh my god! I could get concussion from this! I was alright, sort of, but I remember that being really scary. It had got to such an extreme, and he called the police on me. So, you know, if you told this story to some people, it'd look as if I'm the violent one.

Liz smashing a window is analogous to Katrina "smashing-up the bathroom": a perpetrator pattern in coercive control that is driving victims to breaking point and then reframing them as violent. Liz stating, "he did hit me because I went berserk" reflects that she claimed the blame again for her perpetrator's violence. Going "berserk": Liz drew attention to her partner and his violence and abuse but he called the police and presented Liz as the offender, possibly before concerned bystanders could intervene (it was late in the evening and a window had been broken). However, missing from the perpetrator's account of events to the police is the context of his coercive-controlling offending that had led Liz to go "berserk". The police were only informed of a woman "out of control", and without considering the possible context of her distress they consequently sympathised with her abuser. This also reflects how easily the police played into the historical stereotype of the "unhinged/hysterical woman" that Liz's perpetrator had presented to the police.

In this situation, there is a real sense that the police's focus is on the person in control - the perpetrator - who framed the entire situation by positioning Liz as the problem; his physical assault and his coercive-controlling abuse did not come to light in the police report. Again (highlighted by Michael), not questioning the 'history' of a situation but instead responding to an 'incident' of violence, allows the 'pattern' of abusive/controlling behaviour over time to be left out of crisis responses like this. Rather, the perpetrator manipulated the police into believing that there was an issue with Liz's behaviour, thus, extending his abuse beyond the

116

confines of the relationship and drawing the police officers in, to collude in hiding his violence. This situation can also be seen as constituting a continuum of violence (Kelly, 2011), as the police officers' alignment with the perpetrator not only criminalised Liz - a victim-survivor - but she was also left in a violent and abusive situation to endure further harm by her abuser.

Although Liz still lives in fear of her ex-partner, there is no place for her within the Home Office (2015, 2023) coercive control framework. There is no recognition of the effects of coercive control that Liz still experiences more than 40 years from first meeting her abuser, and several years after her estrangement from him. Liz's story of violence and abuse, her escape, her subsequent entrapment, the police's failure to recognise her as a victim-survivor of coercive control, and still living in a state of fear, despite the relationship long being over, could not possibly be captured within the UK Government's sanitised conceptualisation of controlling or coercive behaviour offences. Liz's story demonstrates a small fraction of a vastly unquantifiable sequence of violence and abuse that was perpetrated over decades, and therefore cannot be summarised within a brief overview, or represented in a list of potential perpetrator behaviours. It is impossible to adequately capture the complex story of Liz's authentic lived experience, as it is too difficult for her to communicate due to the ambiguity of the violence and abuse that was perpetrated against her, and her fear of serious reprisal if she publicly disclosed her experience of coercive control. Therefore, I would argue that the England and Wales Government (Home Office, 2015, 2023) have attempted to 'fit' coercive control, an unquantifiable course of conduct, into a quantifiable form, and this is an inadequate, ineffective response to coercive control/violence prevention.

### 4.3.1 The Impacts of UK Systemic Inequalities and Cultural Norms on Survivors' Perceptions of the Gendered Violence/Abuse Perpetrated Against Them

Above, I have mainly examined Liz's experience of coercive control from the perspective of interpersonal, relational dynamics and the strategies of coercive control. However, her narrative below shows the broader impact of UK systemic inequalities and gendered cultural norms, which influenced and impacted on Liz's perceptions of the gendered violence and abuse that had been perpetrated against her; Liz (unknowing) also illustrated her abuser's expressions of misogynistic, patriarchal entitlement:

> He always looked after number one and he never fully committed, but those times that we were together as a family [with their children], I would be trying to keep the house clean and do the meals, you know, even though I count myself as a feminist. I would be very much trying to, yes, get his approval but he was always withholding. He wouldn't want sex with me, and I would feel like I had to really try, work out a way

to get him interested. And affection - he didn't kiss me - he always told me that he would have liked that his ideal woman would have been tall with full lips, really nice teeth, with pert breasts and a tighter vagina. So, I got all the details about his sex life with other women and, you know, who had a tighter vagina, which was usually the key thing. And he always wanted me as a friend, he didn't want me as a partner, he wanted me as a friend who he could sleep with now and then; that was because I didn't meet his ideal as a perfect woman. He still wanted to be looking for the perfect woman but have me as this 'little woman' he could sleep with occasionally.

Despite Liz accommodating her partner's needs while enduring his gendered violence and abuse, and trying to live up to his (and the UK societal) notion of 'ideal female norms' (Bates, 2022; Srinivasan, 2021) - "trying to get his approval" - Liz situated the cause of her partner's violence and abuse in the context of his own experiences of victimisation:

So, it's very complicated and that's all been part of the story, feeling sorry for him because he did have it tough, he actually had a very traumatic childhood. His father would hit him, punch him, you know, so he's been through hell. It's very hard because when I met him, I heard about his upbringing and how his mum used to blame him for everything and compare him to his sister, she would always hold her up as the cleverer one, the more capable one. Really emasculating as well to a boy against his younger sister. So, then he was sexually groomed in his teens by a man who took advantage of him. You know, when I met him, I knew that story, that he'd been through that, and of course we all felt for him, me and his friends, we felt for him that he had been through that. Terrible childhood and then this awful thing had happened to him.

Liz, understandably, empathised with the traumatic experiences that her partner had suffered but she surmised that his victimisation was at the root of his violence and abuse. This allowed Liz to excuse his violent/abusive behaviour and reflects the ability - impossibility - of holding a coercive-controlling abuser accountable, as well as the way that coercive control constantly gets reframed as something other than violence and abuse - a theme in my data findings that prevents victim-survivors from reporting coercive-controlling offenders.

While Liz considers herself a feminist, she unwittingly colluded in her partner's misogynistic narrative of women, she empathised that it was emasculating for a boy to be compared unfavourably to a girl. Liz also accepted her partner's woman-blaming narrative in relation to his mother, while she did not recognise that he did not have a comparative derogatory view of men, despite that he had been abused by his father, and that he had been groomed and sexually abused by a man. Liz did not acknowledge that her partner objectified women, nor

identify his gendered abuse when he compared her less favourably to other women, or that he misogynistically hierarchised women according to their physical attributes. Rather, Liz inferred that she had not felt good enough for her partner, due to her appreciation of his masculinity, as opposed to his derision of her as a woman:

> He was extremely good looking when he was young, very good looking and physically very attractive, and I was very drawn to him, but I felt very inferior to him. I felt almost like I was lucky, I felt lucky to be with this gorgeous man.

Although Liz partially acknowledged that her on-and-off partner had coercively-controlled her for decades (though she mainly focused on separate "aspects" of his behaviour, rather than recognising a cumulative history), throughout the interview she frequently questioned her judgement of this. However, self-questioning her perception of reality is indicative of the effects of coercive control (Hennessy, 2012), while the power of insidious blame-shifting resulted in Liz feeling that she was responsible for the problems in the relationship. My data shows that by a constant and deepening transfer of responsibilities, victim-survivors become convinced that the reason they are unhappy is because of their own failings (such as not meeting the standard of 'ideal female norms'), rather than due to perpetrators' violent/abusive behaviours. Liz was also hesitant to name her partner's violence and abuse as such because she did not see it as intentional. She continued:

> He had a real confidence about his sexual prowess and other women had flattered him, so he'd soaked up that flattery. He also had very low self-esteem as well. He had both, the real narcissistic thing, thought he was special, better than other people, cleverer than other people, something different about him; but also, he often said he just felt like a lump of shit inside, and has been very suicidal throughout his life as well. In more recent years he's suffered a lot of trauma, he was very traumatised, and he became suicidal; and I got back with him and lo and behold, I discovered what a wreck he'd become. And he was actively suicidal, so then I felt controlled by the fact I mustn't upset him because he might kill himself. And I would be frightened coming home to the house - what if I find him dead? And that, that felt like, oh my god! this is really hard, I don't know how to deal with this.

While Liz perceived that her partner had frequently felt suicidal throughout his life, she said that he had never attempted suicide, but her fear that he would take his own life had influenced her behaviour towards him, such as being aware not to upset him and "push him over the edge". Liz did not consider whether her partner's suicide narrative had kept her in a state of worry for his well-being. However, research shows that the use of suicidal behaviour can be a deliberate and calculated response by which some perpetrators maintain influence

or control over victim-survivors. Together with other forms of physical, emotional, economic, and psychological controlling behaviour, threats of self-harm and suicide are intended to instil fear and exert power over victim-survivors (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). Liz's partner's victimisation narrative controlled her because she was careful not to upset him, by going along with whatever appeased him. He appeared to take advantage of his victimisation (especially when his life was not going well) to manipulate Liz into feeling sorry for him and to exploit her compassion, instrumentalising it as a further strategy of control.

Jasmine, a survivor of coercive control, perpetrated by her boyfriend when they were both 15 to 18 years-old, told the story of her boyfriend's use of his own victimisation narrative in order to control her and excuse his violent and abusive behaviours. Jasmine, however, experienced ambivalent feelings between the violence/abuse that she had suffered and the empathy she still has for her now ex-boyfriend. Her narrative also demonstrates her boyfriend's continuous lack of concern for her and his pervasive expressions of entitlement:

> When I was 15, I got pregnant and even, like, when I found out, I told him and he was just angry at me, um, and very, um, I don't know, I guess kind of like it was my fault and why was I even telling him. And then we were in this mess together and it was very much like, you deal with it, I don't give a crap if you're freaking out because it's not my problem. I had to go to the GP, I had to find out where the abortion clinic was, I had to, you know, ring everyone and keep all of this under wraps, because he made it very clear to me that I was not allowed to tell anyone. He didn't want to go [to the clinic], it wasn't his place, it was too hard for him, he would always say it was too much of an emotional strain and he was really struggling with everything. And to be honest with you, I was like, I'm so sorry, this must be so hard for you, like, I wasn't angry at him for not coming, I was worried about him because he kept saying how hard he was finding it. Um, and I was finding it incredibly hard, but I didn't, I don't know, I didn't consider my own feelings, it was always his feelings were most important and mine were secondary.

Jasmine's narrative shows that her boyfriend framed her as solely to blame for getting pregnant while presenting himself as the victim in the situation. This pattern of the perpetrator reframing his abuse (his victim-blaming) as victimhood and her victimhood (an unplanned/unwanted pregnancy) as abuse, is a recurring theme throughout my data. For example, Liz accepted her partner blaming her substance misuse for causing problems in their relationship, rather than recognising that her abuser's coercive control was causing her, as a victim, to suffer mental ill-health.

A theme in my data shows that abusers use their own victimisation narratives to elicit victim-survivors' empathy to ensure that they gratify their perceived entitlements (or avoid their responsibilities). Coercive-controlling abuse can manifest through perpetrators' patterns of presenting as vulnerable victims that are in need of care and attention. This dynamic, perpetrators positioning themselves as a victims, while manipulating their victims into caregiving roles is difficult for victim-survivors to comprehend, as they experience ambivalent feelings. On the one hand they experience a felt sense of abuse (because an abusive/inequitable dynamic is occurring) but on the other hand they do not recognise they are manipulated to feel compassion for perpetrators' (often fabricated) victimisation; thus, not recognising how they are manoeuvred into a caregiving position, to provide care for the person abusing them.

Jasmine's acceptance of her boyfriend's blame is evident in her narrative: "I'm so sorry, this must be so hard for you", while her boyfriend prioritising his own needs made the situation about him needing care and attention, rather than Jasmine, when she was in a very vulnerable position. His lack of empathy for her is also evident in him denying her support from family or friends, making her go through her abortion alone to keep it a secret, which Jasmine said was to protect his reputation. Jasmine also shows the effectiveness of her boyfriend's victimisation narrative as she responded by adhering to his demand to keep her pregnancy and abortion "under wraps", rather than autonomously make her own decision about any support that she needed. Jasmine stated, "I was finding it incredibly hard, but I didn't, I don't know, I didn't consider my own feelings, it was always his feelings were most important and mine were secondary", therefore demonstrating that this was not a reciprocal relationship and that her boyfriend's demands took precedence over her needs.

Jasmine subsequently developed an eating disorder which, in hindsight, she felt was a coping strategy, as controlling food and weight gave her a degree of autonomy over her body while being controlled and coerced by her boyfriend. She said that her low weight and a lack of nutrition, however, led to her developing physical illnesses:

> I had glandular fever and kept getting tonsillitis, I was really ill, but for my boyfriend that was just boring. I remember one of our first few days of college and I was like, I'm going to have to go and be sick somewhere, and he said, oh, hurry up would you, I need to get to the canteen and be with my mates. And I guess at that point, I kind of stopped involving him in that side of me because he didn't want to know that side of me, he wanted the fun, happy, popular girl, he didn't want the sickly, anorexic girl.

Jasmine inferred that when she needed to be sick, she had inconvenienced her boyfriend, rather than elicit his empathy and support; again, she accepted his blame, as she responded

by no longer involving him in her illness, rather than challenging his punitive behaviour towards her. Comparatively, when Liz's partner had derided her: "he wanted me as a friend who he could sleep with now and then; that was because I didn't meet his ideal as a perfect woman", she accepted the blame for his lack of interest in her; rather, she responded to his disparagement by "trying to get his approval". Liz and Jasmine's narratives show how blame is apportioned to victim-survivors to frame *them* as the problem, while (fabricated) victim-survivor's shortcomings and/or wrongdoing allows perpetrators to position themselves as victims of these fictitious inadequacies and/or transgressions.

Jasmine's boyfriend had suppressed the "fun, happy, popular girl" and his coercion and control had caused her to become physically and psychologically ill, yet still he showed no care or compassion towards her:

> I had to have my tonsils taken out and, um, he said, I'll come and visit you in hospital. And I remember sending my parents away, being like, don't wait here, he's coming to visit me. Then it got to the time, and he wasn't here and I rang him and said, where are you? He said, I don't think I'm going to be able to make it. I was like, what's wrong, what's happened? I was worried about him, and he was like, I don't think I can afford it really, and I said, afford what, the bus fare? And he was like, yeah, and I said, I'll send you the money for the bus fare, please come and visit me, you said you were going to be here. Um, and he was like, no, don't send me money, I actually do have the money but I'm spending it on Xanax [a benzodiazepine used to treat anxiety]. I said, can you not wait until tomorrow? And he said, nah, I really want to try this Xanax it's meant to be really good. So, I said to him, please come, and he was like, I'll think about it. Um, hung up, an hour later I rang and again, like, are you on your way? And he was just slurring his words, he was completely out of it and they'd [boyfriend and friends] obviously taken some Xan'.

Jasmine's narrative shows a pattern of her boyfriend's dismissive behaviour towards her and gratifying his own needs; however, like Liz, Jasmine demonstrated a pattern of assuaging care in response to the abuse she was suffering. Jasmine was frequently worried about her boyfriend, she showed him kindness and care, yet *she* was in deep pain and crisis. Following her abortion, and suffering pervasive ill-health, she was increasingly struggling to cope both physically and emotionally, but her boyfriend continued to abuse her while still presenting himself as a victim:

> He completely weaponised his relationships with other girls as like, these girls fancy me, these girls think I'm so cool; so, don't think this relationship is safe because I have loads of other options, and you're welcome by the way, for sticking with you,

122

even though you're being so ill and boring. And I didn't want to be seen naked, I didn't want people to touch me, I didn't want to touch other people, I had absolutely no sex drive, I just, I just didn't want it. And he completely used that to say that I'm not a good girlfriend because I wasn't having sex with him, I wasn't providing what I needed to. It was all about him and he would be like, [whining voice] do you not find me attractive? Do you not like the way I look? Is it because I'm so short? I knew you didn't find me attractive.

Jasmine and Liz's stories resonate here in their descriptions of their abusers' disparate narratives that switch from prowess to victimisation. Liz said that her partner "had a real confidence about his sexual prowess and other women had flattered him, so he'd soaked up that flattery. He also had very low self-esteem as well". Jasmine's boyfriend was goading her about other girls (seemingly, aiming to make her feel insecure with his comments), then mocking her while presenting himself as a victim, expressing that he felt unattractive when Jasmine did not want to have sex with him (which was in fact the result of his abuse). However, after Jasmine had said that she did not want to have sex with her boyfriend, he sexually violated her:

I was never like, no! I don't want to have sex with you! It was very like, I can't do this right now, I'm scared, I can't have sex, and he would just make me. He didn't care, I guess; he was getting sex and that's all he wanted. Um, and it happened, that scenario, it happened a lot because he wanted sex every time we hung out. And every time we hung out, I was like, I haven't eaten anything all day, I actually hate myself right now, I can't be vulnerable and be exposed to anyone. There were points when we were having sex and I'd just be crying.

Jasmine said that following sex, her boyfriend declared his love for her, his expressions of victimisation dissipated, and this cycle of sexual violence and abuse was routinely repeated. Furthermore, she said that her boyfriend was not often physically violent, however, when he was, he would typically blame her for his actions, saying "look what *you're* making me do" and he again presented himself as a victim:

I was saying stop it, you're hurting me, like, screaming, and he just kept opening the door and repeatedly slamming it on my arm. And then he would just threaten to kill himself, um, whenever I expressed, like, this is crazy now, you need to stop, you're scaring me, I don't know how much longer I can be in a relationship like this. It would immediately switch to him threatening that he was going to kill himself.

This is another example of the pattern of Jasmine's boyfriend reframing his violence/abuse as victimhood and Jasmine's victimhood as abuse. My thematic data shows that as

123

relationships deepen, victim-survivor forgiveness becomes less important because perpetrators no longer accept blame; rather, they hold onto their ability to evoke their victim-survivor's empathy and then weaponise that as another control tactic. Moreover, the survivors that I interviewed showed that perpetrators' adhering to the role of 'victim' is one of the more effective ways by which they avoid sanctions for their violence and abuse. They become so skilled at this method of abuse that they deflect victim-survivors' responses away from their offences and redirect it to fulfilling their perceived entitlements.

Jasmine searched for an explanation for her boyfriend's motivation to abuse her as her feelings of empathy towards his 'victimisation' did not align with seeing him as a perpetrator of violence and abuse. Jasmine, however, stated:

> I was close with his parents, and I do think they were really good parents, but I think it's his personality and approach to life and how he treats other people. His mum was very doting and very, like, she would do anything for him, and she would give him whatever he wanted. If he wanted to eat dinner at six and, actually, no, he didn't want that meal he wanted this meal, absolutely fine, no problem, I'll do that for you, no problem. And she would bring it to his room, all of that kind of stuff. So, I think that did not help his entitlement, and also just sort of disrespect towards women. I would say that, actually, he was just a misogynist. Um, and at the time, all the jokes and comments and stuff, funny, ha, ha, but you grow up and that's not actually humour, that's him being sexist.

A young man commanding and expecting to have his needs met by women is also evident in his assumption that his girlfriend should provide sex for him, no matter how bad she is feeling, and resorting to a victimisation narrative to justify perpetrating sexual violence. Jasmine continued to express ambivalent feelings towards her ex-boyfriend; her instinctive response to his abuse was that it was wrong and she recognised his misogyny. However, without realising, she still colluded in his victimisation narrative relating to the UK cultural notion of ideal gender norms:

> I genuinely think a big part of it was him being so short and me being so tall. It punctuated our relationship throughout the entire time. There was such an insecurity about how I looked physically and how he looked physically, and that was a very big factor in our relationship, though not for me. You know how you see people in cults, willing to die for their leader and bloody crazy - that was me. I worshipped the ground he walked on; I would do *anything* for that boy. Even years after we broke up, I was still so dedicated to him. Now, I would like to say that I'm not, and that actually after

124

our final few interactions, I cut that tie, but his voice, like, [taps head] his manipulation is still there. I've worked really hard to, like, whatever, but it is still there, his voice.

Jasmine expressed empathy towards her boyfriend's perception of ideal gender norms, that she felt it was difficult for him being shorter than her, while she attributed her dedication to him (despite his violence and abuse) for his voice still being in her head, rather than recognising the lasting effects of his victimisation narratives and coercive control. This demonstrates how coercive control makes victims do the work of their own subjugation and such harm is a recurring pattern in my data. Jasmine continued to put her ex-boyfriend's needs before her own. He contacted her while he was struggling at university, she was living the other side of the country and was so concerned for his well-being (in response to his victimisation narrative) that she contacted his parents to intervene. However, Jasmine's ex-boyfriend viciously, verbally attacked her for "interfering" in his family life. He was painfully, misogynistically scathing about her body and spitefully criticised her past sexual performance. Jasmine, however, remained loyal to her ex-boyfriend despite this further abuse, which, I would suggest, is indicative of the lasting, powerful, indoctrinating effects of coercive control, as well as the influence/impacts of UK gendered cultural norms.

My data shows that although survivors recognise their perpetrators' abusive behaviours and misogyny, they do not trust their perceptions or listen to their own instincts. Rather, they endure the UK cultural gender system, sharing its belief that men must be accommodated and not have their masculinity threatened or; if perpetrators' present real or fabricated doubts about their masculinity (manifest as victimisation, which Liz and Jasmine elucidated), women feel responsible for assuaging male unease. They grit their teeth and remain silent, even when feeling violated by men's demands, they appease the male sense of victimisation, borne of the male sense of entitlement (Gilbert and Webster, 1982).

Lola, a survivor of coercive control, physical, and sexual violence, also situated partner's coercive control, violence, and abuse in the in context of his victimisation (his criminal career, serial violence against women, and prolific online sexual offending are discussed in the following thematic data chapter). Lola stated:

> I was broken and drinking a lot; I was drinking from 12 in the day, and I was neither use nor ornament, and he knows what he does to us [women], he knows. But his dad was violent, his dad was alcoholic, so there was a lot of me forgiving who he is because I thought no wonder, he's bloody nuts and like this [violent and abusive]. And his mum was a very difficult, difficult woman. He said she could be very charming, very loving, very sweet, then you could make one mistake and she was vile. So, I often felt empathy towards him, I thought no wonder he's the way he is. […]

125

I was giving him whatever sex he wanted, putting up with his cheating, cleaning his flat, cooking for him, lying to his work for him. I thought it was all part of my 'fixing process' and he'd become the wonderful person he really is inside. So, I know now that it was his upbringing […], he hated his sisters, didn't get on with his sisters or his mum, so I'd say there is a bit of a Bate's Motel kind of thing going on [referring to Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film, *Psycho*]. You know, all these women in his family who just didn't do what he wanted them to do and ruined his perfect upbringing with his mummy adoring him, because it was just him and his parents until his first sibling, his sister, came along when he was 11.

Like Liz and Jasmine, Lola responded to her perpetrator's victimisation narrative by trying to assuage his difficulties and meet his needs. While her abuser took advantage of her accommodating his needs, Lola said that he always demanded more from her, still coercively-controlled her, routinely physically and sexually assaulted her, habitually cheated on her with other women, and committed prolific online sexual offences. However, in theory, Lola responding to her perpetrator's victimisation narrative - his historical lack of care - could translate in practice: as meeting his needs would have had a reparative effect on him, but clearly that was not the case. Similarly, in Jasmine's story, the perpetrator's victimisation narrative is consistently evident throughout her story of coercive control but despite her constant worry, concern, and dedicated care towards her boyfriend - even long after the relationship had ended - he continued to abuse to her. In Liz, Jasmine, and Lola's accounts of coercive control it is significantly evident that the perpetrator strategy that worked on them is the 'fixer' narrative and the notion that abusers are victims in need care and attention. However, the mutual sharing of care and attention that exists in healthy relationships, remained absent for victim-survivors, even when they were in deep pain and crisis.

Liz, Jasmine, and Lola's narratives also show that, as survivors, they did not question whether their abusers' sense of *entitlement* was at the core of their violent and abusive behaviour, nor that their power and control served to meet their needs. Rather, 'need' is conflated with 'victimisation', as opposed to expressions of 'entitlement' being conflated with the perpetration of violence/abuse to ensure that perpetrators' needs are met. However, survivor ambivalence - condemning violence/abuse while supporting perpetrator 'victimisation' narratives - seemed to be at play; therefore, the survivors were torn between their intuition (violence is fundamentally wrong on every level) and the influence of UK systemic inequalities and cultural norms (men should be respected and accommodated).

In the UK, coercive control is chiefly theoretically conceptualised as gendered violence and abuse (see, for example, Walklate et al., 2022) from a *perpetrator perspective*. While the

126

broader UK influence/impacts of systemic inequalities and cultural norms on victim-survivors' *perceptions* of the gendered violence and abuse that is perpetrated against them is widely unacknowledged beyond feminist scholarship and activism (the England and Wales Government (Home Office, 2015, 2023) approach/respond to coercive control from a gender-neutral perspective). This lack of victim-survivor knowledge can be seen as a barrier to violence/abuse identification and prevention, while their access to appropriate support is impeded. Liz, Jasmine, and Lola did not report their abusers to the authorities because at the time of experiencing coercive control, they did not recognise it as such.

Liz, Jasmine, and Lola's narratives (as examples of my thematic data) demonstrate the need for a more informed UK service systems' understanding of the dynamics of coercive control, as a lack of knowledge (at an interpersonal level but also the insidious influence/impacts of UK systemic inequalities and gendered cultural norms), I would suggest, are factors that could contribute towards the low conviction rates (ONS, 2021, 2022, 2023), and reporting ability to meet evidentiary standards for controlling and coercive behaviour offences. Rather, my data shows that victim-survivors take themselves out of their stories of violence and abuse, therefore, many do not even get as far as reporting. Furthermore, the themes evidenced and analysed in this chapter (in response to enhancing the understanding of the concept of coercive control to understand the difficulties/challenges of evidencing this type of violence and abuse), show that the ways in which coercive control is strategically implemented by abusers perpetually make their violence/abuse 'uncatchable' and unaccountable. For example, my data shows that perpetrators' manipulate victim-survivors to accept the blame for their violence and abuse; thus, accepting blame, victim-survivors see no violence and abuse to report.

### 4.3.2 The Practical Difficulties of Evidencing and Accurately Responding to Coercive Control

I perceived a coercive self-victimisation narrative in an interview participant's story that my other participants had revealed in their own perpetrators. This gave me a feeling of unease as the participant demonstrated a particularly significant difficultly with conducting research on coercive control: what if you as a researcher find yourself coercively-controlled by a participant who presents themself as a victim of violence but who may possibly be a self-victimising perpetrator? Or what if a participant who has genuinely experienced coercive control happens to also show problematic beliefs? Jon's story below is an example of the curious evidence of the practical difficulty of evidencing and adequately responding to coercive control in research, as well as in the law and in service provision.

I approached Jon to interview him as a survivor of female-perpetrated coercive control; however, in telling his story, a complex, contradictory narrative emerged. Jon appeared to be deeply influenced by his father's patriarchal ethos, therefore, muddying the water in relation to whether Jon was in fact a survivor- or a perpetrator of violence and abuse. Jon stated:

> My dad had seven children and my mum had a five-year long affair with him, he obviously wasn't getting round to leaving his wife, so she got pregnant with me. And because my dad had such good morals, he immediately left his wife. Then, because he didn't want me born out of wedlock, he got the divorce through and got married before I was born.

Jon said, contradictorily, that "his dad had such good morals, he immediately left his wife", even though his father had conducted a secret affair for five years. Furthermore, Jon said that his mother had a five-year long affair with his father, rather than stating that his parents, together, had had a five-year long affair. This suggests that Jon apportions blame exclusively to his mother for their difficult family situation. Jon continued:

> My mum had played my dad because, no doubt, she did this intentionally, because years ago, apparently, she said she couldn't have any more children, then, conveniently, got pregnant. But, yeah, my whole growing up was dealing with my dad's resentment, knowing he'd been tricked, missing his family, his divorce had been very messy, and because he had seven kids, they took all the money off us.

Jon's woman-blaming narrative, that his mum had "played" his dad, demonstrates a misogynistic view of women, implying that women obtain what they want by trickery and deception, rather than acknowledging that his father had made choices and was complicit in the family situation. Jon did not consider that his father had seven children to whom he had a responsibility. Instead, Jon inferred that "they" - his father's ex-wife and the children they had together - "took all the money off us".

Later in the interview, Jon stated that his father was a domestic abuser, but he justified his father's violence and abuse against his mother on the basis that she had tricked him. Jon did not consider his mother's suffering and the impact of his father's violence/abuse on her emotional and physical well-being:

> Mum became an alcoholic, she was just drinking every day, mostly in the morning she had the sherry out. I think my mum also resented me being born because she probably had a fantasy that we'd all be a happy family and it wasn't like that, now she was lumbered with this child.

Jon only depicted his mother as a woman with a serious drink problem and not also a victim-survivor of domestic abuse; and he assumed that his mother "resented him" and felt "lumbered with him". Therefore, it was difficult to know whether Jon was repeating his father's woman-blaming narrative; and insinuating male entitlement by inferring that women expect too much from men - a "fantasy" that he assumed his mother had had - or if Jon had experienced actual resentment from his mother.

Jon said that he grew up in a middle-class family, his father was a white-collar worker, and he described him as an authoritarian man, who performed his identity as head of the family; he narrated delineated gender roles and prescriptive beliefs about gender when talking about his life and his family. Growing up with a patriarchal, authoritarian father and an imbued, distorted version of "respectability", Jon did not question his father's morals and values or empathise with his mother as a victim-survivor of his father's domestic abuse. Thus, it became difficult to determine - when Jon expressed a misogynistic view of women and justified his father's domestic abuse by presenting him as a 'victim' - whether he is a survivor of female-perpetrated violence/abuse.

Jon's narrative highlights the importance of professional curiosity, probing to establish the context and meaning in stories of coercive control, and paying close attention to our intuition. While intuition is the perception of the truth or fact, independent of any reasoning, what is directly perceived by one individual cannot be easily perceived by other individuals or not at all. In particular, people with specialist knowledge can sense many more phenomena directly, therefore, experts will have better intuitions on specific subjects (such as coercive control) than laypeople. While intuition cannot be used to evidence coercive control, it can help to alert us to question our perceptions of stories of violence and abuse when what we hear appears to be incongruent or presents as an ambiguous narrative.

### 4.4 A Gender-Neutral Approach to Coercive Control: The Problems Created

The England and Wales Government's controlling and coercive behaviour legislation presented the first opportunity to consider domestic abuse as a "course of conduct" (Home Office, 2015: 3). However, this differs from Stark's (2007) and other feminist scholars/activists' gender-based framework, as the England and Wales Government endorse a 'gender-neutral' approach, at least on the surface, to include family relationships within these legislative terms (Home Office, 2015, 2023). My thematic data shows that overlooking the impact of coercive control on all genders, however, does a disservice to people of any gender. Rather, a gender-informed understanding of the perpetration of coercive control highlights the gendered issues relating to the identification of a range of victim-survivors, and the gendered factors that can impede holding perpetrators to account for their offences.

Dan, an IDVA working within the LGBTQ+ community, elucidated how the contemporary heteronormative 'public story' (Donovan and Barnes, 2019) of intimate partner and domestic abuse impacts LGBTQ+ victim-survivors within UK service systems:

> Most services expect two [gay] men to just deuce it out, you know, have a five-to-ten minute altercation and then that be it. They imagine these two manly men, or whatever, punching the lights out of each other, when that's not really how it is. And they're [services] dismissing financial abuse, emotional abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and it's not coming up on the radar at all. So, say if you have a gay couple where one's deemed to be bigger, or they're seen as a stereotypical man and they have a femme male partner, they'll [the police] generally gravitate towards the bigger guy as being the issue than potentially the more slender, feminine bloke; they put a heteronormative lens on the abusive relationship. Similarly, within lesbian relationships, it's seen as more likely, um, psychological behaviour within those relationships, um, and it's understanding that, like, services will say two women wouldn't harm each other, so they don't see all the other forms of abuse like sexual and physical violence.

The public story of domestic abuse is also iterated by the England and Wales Office for National Statistics (ONS), by stating that attention is paid to how domestic abuse survey questions accurately reflect the experiences of both 'female' and 'male' victim-survivors (ONS, 2022). My thematic data shows, however, that presenting only a cisgender and heteronormative operationalisation of gender overlooks critical evidence and statistics on all genders. This strengthens an already limited cis-normative public story of intimate partner and domestic abuse, and arguably permits vulnerabilities in the feminist analyses of gendered violence and abuse. This could encourage anti-feminist approaches and the ignorance and/or avoidance of gender factors to violence and abuse (Donovan and Barnes, 2019). Meanwhile, the ONS (2022) quantitative model/framework for gathering statistical data on violence only addresses violence between cisgender and heterosexual men and women, while failing to understand and respond to any other gender dynamics.

The England and Wales Government's (Home Office, 2015, 2023) gender-neutral approach to controlling and coercive behaviours also does not adequately acknowledge that these types of offences can occur in any relationship regardless of gender. An approach to coercive control that highlights an awareness of the positionings of social groups, which are also inclusive of, for example, race, ethnicity, nationality, immigrant status, age, disability, faith, social class, and sexuality, is important (Donovan and Barnes, 2019): a diverse and inclusive response to violence and abuse would facilitate an informed awareness of the

possible intersectional nature of violence/abuse and promote an understanding of the wide range of victim-survivors' experiences. For example, Dan, an IDVA, also elucidated the importance of an intersectional approach to violence and abuse:

> If I talk about gay men, for example, you know, as one myself, the aspects of domestic abuse that can affect gay men, um, we think primarily of shame related to homophobia and the societal judgment of gay men as victims of violence, but there's still not enough understanding. So, outing someone when they're in a faith-based situation can make them unsafe; or because of a prejudiced family's homophobia, that can result in full-on depression or suicide because gay men do not see a life beyond 'staying in the closet'. They may have to marry a woman, have children, just to appease their family, because if they don't do that, they have nothing, their life is worth nothing. Or, they're being told they're sinful, disgusting, and everything else, like, they're no longer part of a religious community and they'll rot in hell.

Dan's narrative brought into sharp focus some of the issues that arise in intimate partner and domestic abuse within LGBTQ+ relationships, and subsequently within victim-survivors' families, religious communities, and living with homophobia. However, the current UK legal and service response model is decisively not intersectional by this definition. Therefore, LGBTQ+ groups have to fight for their human rights and face societal oppression, such as homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia, which can intensify the feelings of shame, fear, and isolation that occur in intimate partner and domestic abuse (NCADV, 2018; SafeLives, 2021). These factors also produce their own specific effects of shame, fear, and/or vulnerabilities within wider UK social and legal/public/justice systems. However, the majority of the intimate partner and domestic abuse awareness movement has focused on one-to-one heterosexual relationships (NCADV, 2018). My thematic data confirms that this focus continues to prevail, as Aisha, a manager of domestic abuse programmes, stated:

> You don't have enough [LGBTQ+] people coming through the system to be able to run groups for that population. And I'm not personally aware of organisations that cater for [LGBTQ+] perpetrators, but I know it was on Respect's [support for male victim-survivors and perpetrators] agenda to try to set groups up in the community for that. I don't know how far they've got with it; I don't think they have because it is, it's just so unfortunate, it's the dynamics and the relationship base, it's just so diverse, it's hard to know where to pitch that work.

Aisha stating that "it's just so diverse, it's hard to know where to pitch that work" suggests that service systems do not know how to respond to victim-survivors who do not fit into the prescriptive heteronormative framework/model of intimate partner and domestic abuse. This

is reflected in the facilitation of only binary groups for the support of female victim-survivors, and behaviour change programmes for male perpetrators. Michael, a domestic abuse worker, stated:

> There's not really anywhere that you can send female perpetrators, um, you know, we've done lots of research, trying to find what's out there and we are yet to come across anywhere you can refer a female perpetrator, because they're [perpetrator programmes] all designed for [heterosexual] men.

Research conducted by domestic abuse organisations shows that LGBTQ+ individuals fall victim to intimate partner and domestic abuse at equal or higher rates compared to their heterosexual counterparts (NCADV, 2018; SafeLives, 2021). Furthermore, marginalised individuals often have prior experience of the intersectionalities of physical and/or psychological trauma, such as bullying, hate crime, and racism. This can mean that LGBTQ+ victim-survivors of coercive control, intimate partner and domestic abuse are less likely to seek help due to their previous oppressive systemic experiences within UK society (NCADV, 2018), as well as structurally within UK service provision, as Dan, an IDVA, further reported:

> In a work situation, I basically just gave them [the police] a rundown of everything and said this is why there's a danger, and this is why my client has disengaged with the police because, quite frankly, a really bad response. At the MARAC [Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference] the detective inspector basically just sort of shrugged it off and wondered why I was even there. So, he's [the victim-survivor] taken matters into his own hands, especially with the history of LGBT people with the police, the police as an institution. Professionals, the police, they're still putting a heteronormative lens on abuse because that's their only point of reference.

As a consequence of the public story of domestic abuse, my data confirms that structural and systemic perceptions still largely exist that only (or primarily) women are victims and only/primarily men are perpetrators. Furthermore, in a relationship between two women or two men, any violence is deemed equal, or mutual, because two women or two men are assumed to be equally matched based on their gender (Donovan and Barnes, 2019). Violence is not considered to be sufficiently serious, either because they are women and women are not perceived as violent (Motz, 2008, 2014), or because they are men and they are viewed as used to (physically) fighting to defend themselves against violence (Donovan and Barnes, 2019).

My thematic data further shows that the influence of UK gendered cultural norms also impact in the LGBTQ+ intimate partner and domestic abuse service provision context, which is evident in Jerome's (a counsellor) narrative:

> I've worked individually with some same-sex couples but, generally speaking, in my experience of perpetrator groups and behaviour change programmes, they are heterosexual, and I'm not sure how easy it would be for a gay man to be in that environment because there's a lot of prejudice and stuff around.

Jerome approached discrimination, prejudice, and homophobia from the perspective of the 'other', or the potential victim, rather than from the standpoint of addressing perpetrators' problematic discrimination, prejudice, and homophobia; and how these problems could be addressed within perpetrator groups/behaviour change programmes.

Similarly, Aisha, a manager of perpetrator programmes, stated:

> The programme attendees are all men, men in heterosexual relationships, who are in or have been in heterosexual relationships. LGBT people wouldn't fit in, it's different, it's different dynamics; the material wouldn't fit because this programme is designed for male heterosexual men.

I considered what constitutes a programme "designed for male heterosexual men" and how much, in the development of perpetrator programmes, organisations are accommodating toxic masculinity because they are addressing gendered violence and abuse from a gender normative perspective. This was implied by Aisha stating that, "LGBT people wouldn't fit in"; perhaps, by this, she meant that they would unlikely be welcomed by perpetrators of gendered violence/abuse, situated in a heteronormative, toxic male environment. On reflection, I wished that I had asked Aisha to more explicitly discuss how the male perpetrators would not accept LGBTQ+ members to the programme and in what ways she deemed the service itself unsuitable for LGBT people of various genders. I might then have asked how the service would address the issue of prejudice, discrimination, and homophobia when working with perpetrators who are enacting toxic masculinity - domestic abusers - while also addressing the potential intersectionality of their offences, which may extend beyond the domestic environment.

The point here is not to challenge the very real extent of violence against women and girls; it is to emphasise that the research analysis does not evidence that *only* women are victimised and harmed by violence and abuse. Rather, that they constitute the largest percentage (and numbers) of those victimised (Donovan and Barnes, 2019), but that other identity and relationship categories are systematically excluded from the public story of coercive control,

intimate partner, and domestic abuse. Therefore, UK service systems and communities systematically fail to effectively respond (or do not respond at all), in support of many victim-survivors. This suggests that a more complex and nuanced approach to gender, which also includes an understanding of, for example, sexuality, faith, race, ethnicity, disability, immigration status, class and/or ageism, is required to make sense of how and why a wider diversity of people, other than only heterosexual (cisgender) women and men, are being victimised and what their needs are in violent/abusive situations (Donovan and Barnes, 2019). Moreover, caution is essential to not inadvertently favour a theoretical paradigm (of violence or gender) over the need for *all* victim-survivors of coercive control, intimate partner/ domestic abuse to have access to the appropriate support and interventions (Donovan and Barnes, 2019), and to hold all perpetrators of violence/abuse to account for their offences.

### 4.4.1 'Unhinged/Hysterical Women': Pathologizing Survivors Based on Their Responses to Coercive Control

The concept and understanding of 'false reality', I argue, is not recognised within the England and Wales Government's (Home Office, 2015, 2023) conceptualisation of coercive control. False reality is evident, for example, in Liz's narrative, when her perpetrator called the police after she had broken a window. The police colluded in the false reality that Liz's perpetrator had fabricated, by accepting his narrative of Liz's 'violence', leaving her experience of coercive control completely unaddressed. The police appeared to lack understanding and/or the willingness/ability to consider the possibility of coercive control; however, the police also seemed to readily accept and collude in the perpetrator's intentional construction of the 'unhinged/hysterical woman' trope in his own police report. My thematic data shows that creating a false reality can extend victim-survivors' experiences of violence beyond that of their primary abusers, where both interpersonal and structural violence combine to transgress the boundaries between private and public and constitute a continuum of violence.

Jasmine, a survivor of coercive control, illustrated the false reality that her boyfriend had created in the context of his violent and abusive behaviour towards her (such as his sense of victimisation to elicit Jasmine's empathy, and justify/distract from his offending) and the impact of this on her mental well-being and physical health (she developed anorexia nervosa). Jasmine's boyfriend also presented a false reality in public, which enabled him to manipulate her peer group to abuse her. Jasmine explained:

> I wouldn't know what I had done to warrant such a switch in his behaviour, because it
> was so intense between us and so, like, claustrophobically in love, like, it was insane.
> Then he'd just suddenly start being really cold and distant with me and with that

alternating dynamic my mental health plummeted. But he's a very manipulative person, um, and in retrospect, hearing from people, like, he painted me to be highly strung and very emotionally unstable; people believed him because he's attractive, he's cool, he plays the drums and guitar, and he's popular and, like, relevant.

It seems that Jasmine's peers were more willing to accept the story of a male friend who they deemed "popular" and "relevant", rather than question the gendered meanings of "highly strung" and "very emotionally unstable" in relation to the young woman he was in a relationship with. The community did not question his lack of empathy or understanding of mental ill-health; and did not themselves consider the cause of Jasmine's emotional distress, or show concern for a friend who had become emaciated. Yet, while Jasmine was suffering violence and abuse in her relationship, she was also judged, rejected, and ostracised by her peers. Jasmine recalled:

Somehow, he was still really good friends with my ex-friends *and* dating me, but I was kind of, I only had him, um, at that point in my life. Um, I would eat my tiny lunch in the toilet at school, I would listen to the girls make mean comments about me and then I'd run to him and be like, this is so hard and I'm really struggling, and he was truly like my only person and I did not have anyone else.

Creating the false reality that Jasmine was mentally unstable - the 'unhinged/hysterical woman' trope - allowed her boyfriend to manipulate her friends into isolating her and, perhaps, unwittingly colluding in the abusive situation. The perpetrator's abuse was therefore extended beyond his dyadic intimate relationship, as he drew Jasmine's friends in to perpetrate abuse against her by proxy; thus, severing her friendships with (and potential support from) her peers, and isolating her. This situation also constitutes a continuum of violence and shows how coercive control in particular works by design - by implicating the wider community, beyond the couple, in the abuse.

### 4.4.2 False Reality in the Context of UK Violence/Abuse Service Provision

My data demonstrates that false reality can also be created by professionals within UK service systems provision. Katrina, a survivor of coercive control and a domestic abuse worker, described the presentation of false reality (though she did not name it as such) and how it impedes seeking justice for victim-survivors, while allowing perpetrators to continue offending. Katrina explained:

So, in this example, for years he's [the perpetrator] chipped away at her, and chipped away at her, and he's never had to resort to using physical violence because his coercion has allowed him to be so much in control. She's then reached a point when

135

he made her think she's absolutely bonkers and crazy when, in fact, she's had a breakdown [due to his abuse]. Then her behaviours have been viewed in isolation and she has looked like the problem. You know, the police said, this '*mother*' had a knife to her throat in front of her children [saying she wanted to kill herself], this mother wasn't able to get out of bed or cook food, this mother was screaming and shouting. So, if we only look at that and, actually, we have the notes for the police call-out and the officers' summary is, this '*female*' is obviously fulfilling an old fashioned role [her partner would not allow her to work, to economically abuse, monitor, and isolate her], she's obviously bored, and when she's bored she creates issues in the home. And what they've done there is purely look at one instance of behaviours, without any context whatsoever but, in turn, clearly re-victimised her by validating that all the things her abuser is telling her are true.

The police officers' summary report of the call-out appears to be clouded by personal perspectives and judgements of women. They stated that women who do not work have nothing meaningful to do, that they are bored and therefore cause trouble - this is a false reality. The police officers' report of the domestic abuse call-out also reveals a contradictory narrative: on the one hand stating that "this mother wasn't able to get out of bed or cook food", which implies that, as a mother, she could not fulfil the patriarchal expectation of female-allocated domestic obligations; on the other hand, claiming that "fulfilling an old-fashioned [female] role" meant that the victim-survivor was "bored and creating issues in the home". The stereotype of the 'bored housewife' is also perpetuated here (Freidan, 1963). The police report shows how gendered, structural abuse manifests within the ordinariness of everyday dialogue and under the guise of the authority that is afforded to police officers. The officers failed to demonstrate empathy and understanding for a woman who was displaying complex symptoms of trauma, and were therefore unprepared to intervene in the perpetrator's coercive control, reinforcing and inadvertently colluding with the abuse instead.

Although Katrina stated that the police do not take coercive control seriously, because of the lack of evidence, I would suggest this is due to more than perpetrators successfully hiding the signs of their violence and abuse. That is, the police allowed for broader misogynist and sexist stereotypes to influence the outcome of criminal proceedings, rather than following the England and Wales Government's statutory guidance/best practice (Home Office, 2015, 2023) in response to a report of coercive-controlling offending. Katrina continued:

Coercive-controlling behaviour is very calculated and planned and the perpetrator knows exactly what they're doing. In that sense, I find them a lot scarier because they slip under the radar. And, actually, if you haven't got somebody - if I was a bit

more naïve - and maybe if I didn't have personal experience of coercive control, I could have ended up working with this perpetrator who was referred to me as a *'victim'.* Social workers described him as very eloquent, very calm, and said he's always such a nice gentleman, you know, and they detailed all the *awful* things his partner was doing in the home, but I know this [serious mental health problems] is the result of years of him coercively-controlling her.

In this instance, Katrina implied that social workers had also colluded in the false reality that the perpetrator had created (and the police had validated and extended): that his partner is the problem because she is "crazy, psychotic, and off the wall". Social workers had believed the perpetrator (despite his pejorative language in relation to his partner) on the basis - the false reality - that "he's always such a nice gentleman". They had not considered that the perpetrator might have been covering his tracks by presenting himself as a victim, now that his partner had become mentally ill because he had coercively-controlled her for years.

Professionals (women and men) who inadvertently adhere to the "unhinged/hysterical woman" trope (Maxwell, 2021: paragraph 7) - when women display serious mental health problems/symptoms of trauma - demonstrate a notable and troubling lack of understanding of coercive control experienced by individuals who are driven to an emotional/psychological 'breaking point', caused by the perpetrator's insidious violence and abuse (for example, the psychological breaking point that Liz reached when going berserk and breaking a window; when Katrina would smash-up the bathroom; when Katrina's client above was holding a knife to her throat, saying that she wanted to die; when food and weight became the only element of control in Jasmine's life; and when Lola became emaciated and was drinking from 12 noon each day to self-medicate her unbearable symptoms of trauma). My research data shows that the archaic, patriarchal ideology behind the 'unhinged/hysterical woman' trope is still dismantling victim-survivors within UK institutions and communities; the phrase is still active, and although the axiom may sometimes be disguised, the sentiment remains the same, enduringly (if often inadvertently) influencing professional practice and community responses to the effects of violence/abuse and coercive control.

Abused men also reach a 'breaking point' or they are 'broken', as Dan, an IDVA, elucidated:

With the victims that I've worked with, they've said it's the psychological and emotional abuse, *that's* the stuff that really breaks them down. I've spoken to men twice, thrice my age, and they are completely broken, completely and utterly broken.

A trope, narrative, or strategy that is weaponised against men in the way that the 'unhinged/hysterical woman' trope is weaponised against women is also evident in my data. Male victim-survivors of female-perpetrated violence and abuse can be 'feminised' by female

perpetrators, the wider public, and professionals within service systems; thereby, implying that 'real men' would be able deal with the female violence and abuse that is perpetrated against them, which I elucidate below.

The cultural stereotype of the 'unhinged/hysterical woman' is an outdated but prevalent UK societal, patriarchal reflection of the inner workings of female victim-survivors. It is a stigma that devalues women's emotions and brings about their submission when they are presented as 'crazy' by their perpetrators, or this false reality is created or reinforced by professionals tasked with supporting victim-survivors of coercive control. Thus, the association of women with the word 'crazy' is more than a mere epithet: it is the depiction of women as too emotional and irrational to have their stories or experiences validated (Maxwell, 2021). The implication that women are inherently over-emotional and irrational means that they have no other reason for their actions or feelings (Maxwell, 2021), which obscures their experiences of violence and abuse and further hides their perpetrators' violent/abusive behaviours.

The England and Wales Government's statutory guidance for professionals and the authorities responding to reports of coercive control (Home Office, 2015, 2023) assumes there is a working understanding of coercive control and that an appropriate response will ensue, in accordance with their recommended best practice. Yet my professional interview participants, working in domestic abuse/sexual violence services, and the survivors of coercive control, consistently expressed their frustration that the police do not adequately respond to, or simply do not identify, coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse. That is, policies, in theory, do not always translate in practice, as Katrina demonstrated above and concluded below, in her narrative of her client:

> And it's that dilemma of do you not report it because you're kind of trying to safeguard the victim even more, because I know this isn't going anywhere. And that could make her feel like, oh my god! maybe I am just making this all up in my head, but equally we need to make him accountable. So, we, um, she's being supported to report to the police so that it's on record, but she's had her expectations managed by her IDVA, to say, look, it's very unlikely the police will act, unfortunately, and that is nothing to do with your case, it's due to the system, but it doesn't feel nice to have to say that.

My thematic data demonstrates that within UK service provision (such as the police and social services), in the absence of material evidence of coercive control, often professionals give no consideration to victim-survivors' distressed behaviour/trauma symptomatology, as a response to the violence and abuse that has been perpetrated against them. Therefore, Katrina's destructive behaviour, for example - smashing-up the bathroom - would be framed

as a 'behavioural problem' within service systems; this would, however, benefit her abuser, because (akin to the perpetrator in Katrina's case history above) false reality removes the perpetrator from the story of coercive control, or sometimes reframes the perpetrator as a victim, and the victim as perpetrator or a problem (as in Liz's and Jasmine's stories recounted earlier). Moreover, understanding the fabrication of false reality highlights the importance of training professionals to recognise and understand coercive control and its effects from a clinical/psychological construct perspective. This would facilitate the recognition of victim-survivors' trauma symptomatology, as well as the ways in which perpetrators (and some professionals within service systems) can obscure their coercive-controlling offending through the use of archaic, ideological tropes. All of this is to say, that the 'evidence' indicating the presence of coercive control looks rather different to the evidence of physical violence. Therefore, the systems and structures responding to coercive-controlling violence and abuse need to be better informed and prepared for what coercive control evidence actually looks like and how it can be detected.

### 4.4.3 The Feminisation of Male Victim-Survivors of Coercive Control and Domestic Abuse

The 'public story' of intimate partner and domestic abuse can be investigated as invoking the portrayal of white, able-bodied cisgender heterosexual women as victim-survivors of white, able-bodied cisgender heterosexual men (Donovan and Barnes, 2017: 1). This public story can make it more difficult to accept that men (and this will also be contingent on their sexuality, whether they are able-bodied or not, their social class, race, and ethnic identity, as well as their age) can be victimised or that women (and this will also be contingent on their sexuality, whether they are able-bodied or not, their social class, race, and ethnic identity, as well as their age) can be violent (Donovan and Barnes, 2017). This public story can also be reasoned to facilitate the strengthening of the binary conceptualisation of intimate partner and domestic abuse that links 'survivor' with heterosexual femininity and women, and 'perpetrator' with heterosexual masculinity and men (Ristock, 2002).

While most offenders prosecuted for coercive-controlling offences are male - 97 percent (ONS, 2018: 51) - my thematic data demonstrates that female perpetrators of coercive control are largely unrecognised (or unacknowledged) by the police. My data further shows that even when women perpetrate overt physical violence against men, the police may not take female violence seriously, nor consider the possibility of controlling and coercive behaviour offending. Three of my male interview participants, working within male domestic abuse service provision spread widely across the UK, consistently reported the lack of

recognition of female perpetrators, by the police and within UK service systems (such as the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)). Michael, a domestic abuse worker and survivor, stated:

> In terms of male victims with female perpetrators, in 90 percent of the cases a report is made and if, and that's *if* the police decide to interview, they go out and a false allegation is made against the male victim, which is then accepted by the police. Or, for example, we supported a male with over three-years of serious assaults by his [female] partner. Um, you know, numerous times turning up at family members' homes with his shirt ripped, gouges across his face and chest; he'd had a TV smashed over his head, a countertop freezer thrown at him. And what upset me was that every time the family called the police, they would just leave it there. The police wouldn't interview her, wouldn't ask him about the situation, even though it was quite clear that he'd been assaulted. Another case, the male victim has tried to take his own life on several occasions now, because he's been to the police about numerous incidents that have happened. And we can go anywhere from malicious emails to people shouting at him in the street; he's also been stabbed on two occasions [causing permanent, debilitating nerve damage]. On one of the occasions it was the perpetrator, um, on the other occasion it was the people that are associates of hers. And on both occasions, because there were no witnesses and just him, there was no further [police] action taken.

Michael firstly alluded to heteronormative gendered bias that reflects the belief that women are generally non-violent (Motz, 2008, 2014), which allows the inaccurate framing of male victim-survivors as the likelier perpetrators within stories of violence. Furthermore, Michael illustrated an example of the extension of violence and abuse, perpetrated beyond the domestic - constituting a continuum of violence - as the victim-survivor also experienced violence/abuse perpetrated by his abuser's associates. All the victim-survivors that Michael spoke about had also experienced further abuse, within law enforcement, no less, as the police failed to act. Therefore, leaving victim-survivors vulnerable to further violence/abuse at the hands of abusers and potentially suffering mental health problems (due to the consequent effects of trauma).

Marc, a survivor of coercive control and now an advocate for men and children - victim-survivors of domestic abuse - told his story of coercive control and physical violence:

> We'd had the police involved on a number of occasions in *three different counties* and every single time, regardless of the evidence, regardless of my injuries, regardless of her never having injuries, every single time I was treated as the perpetrator. The main incident that causes me the issues that I have today is not

what she did to me, it's the way I was treated by the police. I was clearly the victim, um, yet I was the one that was arrested, 'cuffed, put in a prison van, taken to court and bailed for five months, during which time I tried to kill myself. And they let her go. And they let her take our child. Yet I was the one that made three 999 calls, screaming down the phone for help; wasn't a mark on her but I was black and blue. And I thought I was going to prison, you know, for nothing; wasn't allowed to see my child. On the day of the court case, we were in the court house, we didn't even go into the court room; my solicitor came over and went, you can go home. I said, what do you mean, I can go home? And he said, well, the case has been dropped, there's no case to answer. And that was it, just like that!

Marc described the false reality created by the police, that he was the perpetrator, rather than the victim-survivor, and how the police made decisions, seemingly, based on personal judgements, rather than following domestic abuse/coercive control statutory guidance in response to reports of coercive-controlling offending and physical violence.

Dan, an IDVA, also shared his experience:

It's always the same issue with female perpetrators, in my experience. Um, with the male victims I've worked with, they're the ones always arrested, they're the ones that are always pulled in for questioning, they're the ones identified or assumed as the risk on the risk assessment. They [the police] basically have always, always sided with women because male clearly equals perpetrator in their eyes.

Dan, Marc, and Michael's narratives reinforce my argument for the England and Wales Government to implement a gender-informed, as opposed to a gender-neutral, approach to coercive control. A feminist critical analysis of coercive control, intimate partner and domestic abuse should include an accurate evaluation of the impacts of heteronormative gendered bias, which can be at the core of authoritative police power/control, and works to the advantage of perpetrators. This is an abusive dynamic that, once again, constitutes a continuum of violence, as victim-survivors remain in violent and abusive situations, and/or needing to defend a fabricated perpetrator status.

Michael, a domestic abuse worker and survivor, further explained that the judicial system also has difficulty recognising male victim-survivors of female-perpetrated violence:

When the Cafcass [Children and family court advisory and support service] officer asked to speak to the dad I was supporting, the officer sat there and he kind of looked at the paperwork […] and he said, the problem I have here is that I don't believe she's a perpetrator of abuse. *I do not believe* you are suffering domestic

141

abuse. I asked, are you trained in the field of domestic abuse, have you completed some sort of training course with Cafcass? He replied, young sir, I don't need training.

Michael's narrative is another example of the false reality - a distortion narrative - that my participants repeatedly reported in their interactions with individuals in positions of authority. And while Michael said that he had challenged the Cafcass officer, he stated that initially there was no room for discussion and that he was, at first, cut off from further contestation. However, the Cafcass officer assumed that Michael was attending the court hearing as a friend of the male victim-survivor. When Michael subsequently made clear that he was attending as a professional trained in domestic abuse, the Cafcass officer was willing to listen to him.

Michael's narrative, at the beginning, resonated with Katrina's experience of police dealing with reports of coercive control/domestic abuse and following their own personal agenda, rather than the England and Wales Government's (Home Office, 2015, 2023) recommended best practice - an example of professionals in positions of authority having the power to control the direction of criminal justice proceedings following victim-survivors' reports of violence and abuse. However, Michael's story differed from Katrina's account because the Cafcass officer was eventually willing to listen to a professional man, whereas the police were unwilling to concede to a professional woman, which resulted in the perpetrator being referred to work with Katrina as a 'victim'.

My thematic data also shows that the stereotypical male-to-female-violence response to coercive control, intimate partner and domestic abuse can make it difficult for male victim-survivors to seek help due to the gender-shaming they experience by professionals and the wider public. A structure of gender inequality is relatively prevalent in many modern societies, which requires men to present as powerful and strong or be victimised, stigmatised, and consigned to lower social and feminised status (Connell, 2005). Often, this construction of manhood takes place within male peer groups (such as 'lad culture') where aggression, force, and contempt for women and marginalised men may be symbolic of being a "real man" (Connell, 1995:45). Thus, men's violence is not purely about dominance over women but can also be viewed as society creating hierarchies among men, defending perceived or actual challenges, or threats to male power, respect, and masculinity that maintain or advance a man's position in the social hierarchy (Connell, 1995).

My thematic data further reveals that a barrier men face when seeking support for female-perpetrated violence and abuse lies in the UK societally constructed gender norms that exist and dictate that men should be powerful, self-reliant, and emotionally controlled (Rice et al.,

2021). Therefore, when the male survivors in my data did not fulfil this notion of 'toxic' masculinity (by fighting back against their female perpetrators or standing up for themselves), their female abusers "flipped the script" to weaponise the men's sexuality and gender against them (Sweet, 2019: 2). By drawing from and emphasising the association of femininity with emotionality and irrationality (Sweet, 2019), the female abusers implied that the men were more like women because they did not enact the stereotype of aggressive masculinity - representing power - and being the only way for male victim-survivors to legitimise their manhood. Thus, the women implied "you're not a real man", as Michael, a domestic abuse worker, elucidated:

> 'Man-up' for me is the worst thing you can say to men, especially to male victims of coercive control and domestic violence, because it's basically saying, you're not behaving like a real man. The men I've worked with have often said the women, their abusers, call them effeminate or 'poofs', and say things like, man-up, or grow a backbone and act like a real bloke. You know, when the rapper JayZ was attacked by a female relative, the newspapers came up with the headline 'JayZ's 100th Problem', and the assault was all reported in a very jokey way. I remember reading that article and I was outraged by it. I've worked with two male victims [of female-perpetrated violence] who committed suicide. I get emotional still talking about it now, these men had tried to reach out, you know, it's just door shut in their face after door shut in their face after door shut in their face and they get to the point that they see no way out of it. They see no future.

Although Michael works in the field of domestic abuse, he said that he has not spoken publicly about his own experience of female-perpetrated domestic abuse, due to his fear of reprisals:

> Because of the threat that was there, you know, with people that know me in my local area, they know my ex-wife. If I came out and said I was a victim of domestic abuse, um, you know…Well, I bumped into her dad once since we separated and saw him coming towards me and thought, I'm going to do the bigger thing and say hello, before I could even speak he just stepped forward and spat in my face.

Michael said that this experience had acted as a reminder of what could happen to him if he spoke out about the violence and abuse that was perpetrated by his then wife. However, Michael's experience also shows how fear can be instilled in victim-survivors to silence them through their abusers' coercive tactics, which often involve the wider community, such as family and friends.

Marc, a survivor and an advocate for men and children - survivors of domestic abuse - stated that the men he socialises with have no concept of female-perpetrated coercive control and domestic abuse, because they cannot understand how a man could possibly allow himself to be abused by a woman. Marc stated:

> When I started the domestic abuse work, I kept it to myself, um, but then I started talking to the lads that I am friends with, and then all the lads took the micky out of me. It was the usual stuff, oh, I wouldn't let a woman do that to me, bloody hell, what kind of man allows that?

The pervasive UK societal 'script' of emphasising the association of femininity with emotionality and irrationality - the 'unhinged/hysterical woman' trope - I would suggest, works in parallel with 'you're not a real man' to become 'two sides of the same coin'. In other words, non-aggressive men are feminised and compared to emotional/irrational women, to judge their victimisation as a form of emasculation and infer that, like women, they too are emotional and irrational, as opposed to strong and rational and, therefore, 'real men'.

It is important to highlight here, feminist discourse recognises that UK patriarchal culture and society teaches, rewards, and enforces traditional masculinity (Srinivasan, 2021). Men are afforded a privileged position in society as long as they conform to the approved traits and behaviours that constitute traditional masculinity and avoid those which are labelled feminine (Rozdzial, 2013). This process results in the subjugation of, and violence against, women; however, men can also pay a price for this arrangement. The aggression and competition that are part of the normative male role often spill over into intra-male violence: stoicism, self-reliance, risk-taking, and the avoidance of 'weakness', which can result in physical injury, the ignoring of symptoms, reluctance to seek professional help, and the discouragement from expressing the full range of human emotions (Rozdzial, 2013). However, within the context of feminising male victim-survivors of female-perpetrated coercive control, intimate partner and domestic abuse, I would suggest that the real issue is how UK society views femininity. Femininity, viewed from a patriarchal perspective, involves the disparagement and denigration of women (Srinivasan, 2021). Thus, misogyny is used as a weapon against male victim-survivors of female-perpetrated violence and abuse as well.

My thematic data shows that the police tend to align with female offenders who perpetrate violence/abuse against men, yet they also tend align with male offenders who perpetrate violence/abuse against women (due to contempt for women and marginalised men). Both men and women are therefore victimised via gender-stereotyping and there is generally a hegemonic form of masculinity at the heart of gendered power (Connell, 1995). The construction of a hierarchy of masculinities itself is a source of violence: power is used to

144

define and maintain the hierarchy. Defining a man as a "poofter" or "sissy" is a familiar method of training boys and men to participate in combat and violent sports, reinforcing the narrative that "real men" are violent and aggressive (Connell, 2000: 217). Yet many men and boys can have divided, anxious, or oppositional relationships to hegemonic masculinity, which is often obscured by the pervasive societal attention (such as by the media) that is focused on hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). Clear alternatives are often culturally condemned and despised, as the male survivors of female-perpetrated violence in my data, who tried to seek help, demonstrated. Moreover, powerful, patriarchal groups benefit from patriarchal dividends; therefore, they have few incentives for gender change. However, the hierarchy of masculinities may provide other groups (non-toxic men) with the incentive to change, to be accepted in society, because of the discrimination and/or violence and abuse they experience when they do not live up to masculine norms (Connell, 1995).

Issac, a survivor of paternal coercive control, and now a counsellor, highlighted his shame and fear of disclosing his father's violence/abuse to his male friends when he was younger:

> I had two good friends at school and I knew a few people college but as I got older it was harder to explain to my mates why at, say 18, I might not be allowed out at night or weekends. They used to rip the piss out of me for being a 'daddy's boy' because he took and collected me from school, the same at college. I was too scared to stand up to him and he controls my mum and sister as well, so she [mum] couldn't do anything. I couldn't tell my mates that my dad called all the shots and I had to go with it because I was terrified of him, you know. Um, what would that have made me?

Issac's narrative resonates with the 'not a real man' trope and shows how men can fear derision for not standing up to both female and male violence.

In evidence of UK gender stereotypes that are applied to categorise male/perpetrators and female/victims, I would suggest that female perpetrators of coercive-controlling abuse (and physical violence) are unlikely to accurately appear in the UK Government's statistics on violence. While the England and Wales Government (Home Office, 2015, 2023) advocate a gender-neutral approach to coercive control, this prevents a feminist and critical gendered analysis of violence and abuse that would elucidate the UK heteronormative gendered bias that obscures male victim-survivors, as well as their female perpetrators.

## 4.5 The Symbolic and Private Language of Coercive Control

The England and Wales Government (Home Office, 2015, 2023) state that perpetrators' controlling or coercive behaviour must take place repeatedly or continuously, but it is not limited to actions that cause the victim to change their way of living. Courts look for *evidence*

of a pattern of behaviour established over a period, rather than one or two isolated incidents that do not appear to establish a pattern. However, each case must be considered on an individual basis and there is no set number of incidents in which controlling or coercive behaviour has been displayed but which must be proven. The controlling and coercive behaviour legislation further states that as much evidence as possible must be gathered to show that offences have been perpetrated. Yet the England and Wales Government's literature lacks significant awareness that perpetrators' coercive control most often manifests as covert and/or ambiguous violence and abuse, and/or the ways in which victim-survivors are silenced by perpetrators (and, as demonstrated above, often by the UK service systems that are intended to implement the controlling and coercive behaviour legislation).

### 4.5.1 The Constructed Incommunicability of Survivors' Experiences of Coercive Control

My thematic data substantiates the difficulties that victim-survivors encounter when they attempt to bring perpetrators' violence and abuse to light. Often, they are not understood because bystanders, who potentially could offer support or intervene in violence and abuse, are unaware of the dynamics of coercive control and/or the magnitude of the victim-survivor's abusive situation. Jasmine, a survivor of coercive control, explained the difficulties of communicating the entirety of her violent/abusive experience:

> One of the things I struggle with the hardest is coming to terms with things because nobody else gets it. Unless you're prepared to sit here and listen for two hours and talk about every little detail, because there's times where I'm quite open about the fact, now, that actually one of my past boyfriends was abusive and I was in an abusive relationship. And I don't know, if anyone asks me about it any further, I'm kind of like, what do I say? Um, because I can give you a few snippets but it doesn't sum it up, because it was all-consuming and it was the smallest little thing that he could do that he knew would trigger me and turn me and it would completely, like, destroy my world. *And they don't get it.* […] Um, and that's the kind of thing where it's like, I don't know how to say that to people when, actually, if you don't have the background with domestic abuse, or even, like, if you're not good with understanding mental health and emotions, *you just don't get it*.

Jasmine stating that, "it was the smallest little thing that he could do that he knew would trigger me", again, reflects the private symbolism that perpetrators weaponise to make reporting to others so difficult. The absence of victim-survivors' ability to effectively communicate their experiences of coercive control, coupled with a society that largely does not comprehend the true nature and terrifying reality of perpetrators' coercive-controlling

offences, often leaves victim-survivors isolated. Survivors, as Jasmine, Liz, and Lola elucidated, also suffer alone in the aftermath of coercive control, which continues in its effects in the future, even after relationships have ended.

Celia, a survivor of paternal coercive control, told her story of living in perpetual fear of her father, a state of terror that was collectively experienced by her whole family (Celia, her mother, and three brothers), and how her father most often perpetrated his abuse by means of nonverbal communication:

> Me and my brothers were all terrified of him. I say we were all terrified but no-one actually said that, you just knew and it was never spoken about. He was never discussed between us, not even my mum would say anything. I don't think he was physically abusive towards my mum, not that I was ever aware of, but we were all of us terrified of him. And although he wasn't violent there was something menacing about him, just in the way he would look at you. It's hard to describe, but he would show disgust, disapproval, contempt, all without saying a word; he could reduce you to a nervous wreck without saying a word.

Celia described how her father subjected the family to living in a perpetual state of fear, which remained unacknowledged because he silenced them. The family were too terrified to give life to their father's abuse; Celia felt that if they verbally manifested their fear, they would likely suffer the consequence of his physical violence. The combination of abuse perpetrated through nonverbal communication and the imbued *threat* of physical violence controlled and silenced the family. Celia described one of her brothers as being "completely crushed" by their father (figuratively communicating the violent effects of coercive control). Although it is impossible to know how Celia's brother might have developed had he been nurtured, she reflects:

> He can't really stand on his own two feet, can't really cope with life very well, struggled at school. I'm not even sure he can read and write properly. Now, he might be considered as having learning difficulties but I don't think he does. He was very quiet and withdrawn, shy, but I think, again, in hindsight, I think he was just completely crushed by my dad. He learnt to stay quiet so as not to say the wrong thing or annoy him, just stayed inside himself and was too terrified to come out.

Celia's account of her father's coercive control demonstrates how a person's spirit can be broken - a non-reportable crime. The UK justice system does not currently have mechanisms that cover this as violence, or recognise that oppression pushes people back into themselves, to the point where they become trapped in their bodies and can eventually suffer mental illness (Gordon, 2019). If a body is physically broken and crushed, violence

becomes literal, obvious, recognisable, and legible as evidence of domestic violence. However, my data demonstrates that coercive-controlling abuse often does not meet this evidentiary standard, thereby making the existing justice and intervention mechanisms incapable of capturing the full extent of such violence and abuse.

Celia said that her three brothers suffer long-term serious mental health problems; two of her brothers, both in their 40s, did not complete their secondary education and have never been psychologically well enough to work, and she described her third brother as a "functioning alcoholic". Celia stated that she and her brothers are all diagnosed as suffering from anxiety and depression, yet she reported (in response to my enquiry regarding the mental health system) that there has been no consideration by medical or mental-health professionals that they may be suffering symptoms of trauma. Therefore, evidentially, their father's coercive control has remained undetected, as survivors they are invisible, and their abusive experiences, at the time of writing, are invalidated.

While survivors wish to move beyond their traumatic experiences, the part of the brain that is dedicated to ensuring our survival (buried below our rational brain) is not proficient at denial (van der Kolk, 2014). Therefore, long after the traumatic events are over, they may be reactivated by the slightest threat of danger (or experience/perception of such a threat) and mobilise disturbed brain circuits, thus secreting huge amounts of stress hormones (evident in Liz recalling her experience of violence/abuse and her fear of her ex-partner). This causes unpleasant emotions, intense physical sensations, and impulsive aggressive reactions. These complex post-traumatic responses feel incomprehensible and overwhelming; and feeling out of control, victim-survivors may fear they are too damaged to recover from trauma (van der Kolk, 2014), in fact losing trust in themselves and their own perceptions of reality - a symptom of being coercively-controlled. Experiencing post-traumatic stress is particularly acute when violence and abuse has been hidden and/or ambiguous in its manifestation; the cause of the victim-survivor's distress and suffering is unseen to their families and/or communities (and professionals with no understanding of the effects of coercive control) and thus remains incomprehensible to many onlookers.

### 4.5.2 The Obfuscation of Physical Violence

The UK police and the criminal justice authorities, in pursuit of evidence-led domestic abuse prosecutions, focus on the materiality of physical violence (CJJI, 2020). However, my research data shows that the UK criminal justice requirement to provide evidence of coercive control over a period of time (Gov.UK, 2023) does not take account of perpetrators' powerful, dark acts of violence and abuse at work, which defy the logic of statistics and tidy forensic

mapping, and leave victim-survivors "caught in the eye of the non-locatable storm" (Evans and Parr, 2021: 34).

Across my interviews, my data consistently demonstrates that perpetrators' physical and/or sexual violence, combined with coercive-controlling abuse, makes many perpetrators' methods of violence and abuse hard to evidentially identify by onlookers and the UK authorities tasked with supporting victim-survivors and dealing with perpetrators. My data shows that the majority of perpetrators the survivors discussed ensured they concealed their physical violence, as well as their varied, insidious methods of coercive control. In other words, physical violence is inculcated within, rather than being separate from, perpetrators' courses of conduct.

Mai, a survivor of coercive control and physical violence in domestic abuse, described how her husband's physical violence was perpetrated behind closed doors, out of sight and hearing of witnesses. And while Mai told her story of physical violence that was enmeshed within coercive-controlling abuse, she had no conceptual awareness of this abusive dynamic or the vocabulary needed to communicate her experience to someone who could intervene in her husband's violence. Mai explained:

> When we moved into this house there was no neighbours or anything, so there was just us, which made it easy for him because there was no-one to hear what was going on. He'd chuck things at me, so, like, he threw a pushchair at me, threw a TV at me once.

Mai continued to describe living in perpetual fear of her husband, partly because of the unpredictability of her husband's physical violence and partly knowing his violence could escalate to more serious harm:

> Oh god! I was so scared of him, I was scared all the time, he would threaten things like, if I didn't go and get money or whatever, he'd threaten to kill my dogs. He said he would cut my dogs' throats and stuff like that, and I believed him. I felt he was capable of losing it and doing something like that, because there was once when we had his daughter here as well and he said, if I didn't get the kids out the house, he didn't know what he would do. He had a knife in his hand and I took the kids to the park because he was just mad.

Mai's husband controlled her through fear; the fear that he would kill her, the children, and/or her dogs, and he wielded a knife to reinforce his threat, as well as causing extensive damage with the knife to the interior walls of the house (symbolically showing Mai the bodily harm that he could inflict upon her). Furthermore, the unpredictability of his violence kept Mai

living in a state of perpetual fear because she did not know what he would do next. She said that she had experienced the escalation of his violence, so she could not judge whether he was only issuing threats. Mai described her husband's escalation of violence that led her to fear his potential to perpetrate more serious harm:

> The violence became much, much worse; it had started when I became pregnant, until then it was pushing me about a bit, but then he started being properly violent, he was then pushing me over all the time and dragging me around by my hair. I remember him dropping the [car] seat on the floor with the baby in it, not from a great height, but deliberately. Yes, I remember that, I was crouching over the baby and he was hitting me over the back of the head.

Pregnancy and the birth of a child can be the catalyst for or exacerbate violence and abuse in a relationship for a variety of reasons. Often, it is because the perpetrator feels they have less control over their partner, or they feel threatened by the attention being paid to the pregnant person or the new child (Crime Report, 2022). The act of deliberately dropping the baby, and hitting Mai over the head while she was attending to their child, presented a high-risk factor for further serious violence to occur, as Mai's husband clearly showed a lack of care or regard for them, both when Mai was pregnant and after the baby was born. Mai also said that her husband used the baby to punish her:

> He would physically take the baby out of the house and walk off with him, to frighten me, which, obviously, it terrified me. He'd say, I'm taking the baby and not coming back, and he'd go. Just walk off with him. He used the baby then as another tool to control me.

Although Mai lived in a constant state of fear and was being controlled by her husband, who also hid the signs of his physical violence, she could not prove to anyone the domestic violence that she endured over a period of years, as no-one witnessed his violence. Mai had also become isolated, as she explained:

> I didn't really go anywhere or see anyone because he didn't like my friends for whatever reasons. He always said that right from the beginning, so I just didn't see them anymore and my phone was always unlocked and available to him, he would automatically go through my phone.

From an evidence-led perspective of the police responding to domestic abuse, Mai's husband ensured that there was no material evidence of his physical violence (he mostly hit her with his forearm which, he said, did not count as violence). Therefore, Mai had no proof of his violence. Yet the real clue to Mai's silencing lies in her narrative of living in a perpetual

state of fear - "I was scared all the time". This was maintained to a degree by her husband's non-evidential physical violence. Crucially, there was a prevailing threat and reminder that more serious violence could ensue - involving the use of a knife - if Mai did not comply and meet her husband's demands. Furthermore, Mai said it was just her trying to fend off her husband all the time with no-one to see and back her up, no witness to come to her aid, or substantiate her husband's violence if she exposed him. If Mai had reported her husband's violence to the police, with no witness or material evidence, she may have been left at risk of more severe violence in retaliation; that is, if she had reported his violence and abuse but, without evidence, no further police action would be taken.

Mai was controlled through fear-based compliance to fulfil her husband's demands which, predominantly, maintained his cocaine addiction. Mai said that she had, however, sought help for her husband:

> We went to a drugs rehabilitation centre together, and he talked about it [his violence] to a counsellor but then he never went back. The man asked if he was at risk of hurting anybody and he said yes. He [the counsellor] asked lots of questions and I left feeling it was really good that he had opened up.

Despite Mai's husband being candid about his violence and admitting that he was at risk of inflicting more harm, when he did not return to the drug rehabilitation centre, his violence disclosure was not followed up by the counsellor. No action was taken, either out of concern for Mai or as a child safeguarding matter, despite that there would have been a statutory safeguarding policy in place at the registered third-sector organisation, outlining safeguarding procedures, and a designated safeguarding lead could have provided information and guidance. It appears that the perpetrator's brief verbal account of violence could not convey the true gravity of his coercive control and physical violence that Mai was experiencing. Perhaps, only Mai telling the whole story in detail, which she did not comprehend as coercive control at the time, could have communicated her terror, her hidden experience that remained invisible even amidst the talk of violence in the counselling room.

Harm is not always overt and blatant; harm can also be caused by professionals' unseen inaction against the knowledge of violence. The professional within service systems, in Mai's case, seemed to treat domestic violence as a private matter and failed to intervene. Some practitioners/professionals may feel powerless and have a sense of inadequacy, like they do not have the skills or knowledge to deal with the issue of violence; time pressure may also prevent them from delving into the problem (Mildorf, 2007); or professionals may fear repercussions from the perpetrator. That said, professionals failing to respond to safeguarding matters is a serious breach of professional ethics and standards in practice

and theoretically constitutes a disciplinary matter in the workplace. However, the counsellor's inaction against the violence Mai's husband disclosed, and his risk of inflicting more harm, was unlikely to come to light within the organisation (due to the privacy of the counselling room), which further obscured and inadvertently reinforced Mai's experience of violence that was hidden in the home.

Mai said that, eventually, when their children were at school and she was closely involved with medical services for one of the children, she became less isolated and was able to end her marriage. Her ex-husband, however, continued to abuse her, though not at the level that he had maintained when they were married. Mai said that much later, when she had met a new partner, her ex-husband ceased abusing her, but she expressed concern that he had engaged in a succession of relationships with women and that he was habitually violent and abusive towards them (the counsellor might have prevented this if he had acted on his knowledge of the violence). However, Mai did not seem to recognise that her ex-husband, at times, *was* still coercively-controlling her, even after the relationship had ended:

> When he first got with his latest girlfriend, he talked to her about what had happened with me, as though it was nothing, which really pissed me off. He was like, oh, yeah, I told her everything I did, I even told her I hit you in the face. And that really upset me because he said she was okay with it. He called me on loudspeaker and said all this while she was in the room.

Mai recalled her difficult feelings evoked by the telephone call, when her ex-husband had caught her off guard. She described his minimisation of his violence and abuse while not seeing that he had, possibly, intentionally drawn Mai in and that he was gaslighting her to collude in his violence and abuse in his current relationship. Mai did not recognise that he may have made her an accomplice - perhaps allowing him to issue a veiled threat - to casually ensure that his new girlfriend realised his potential to physically harm and humiliate her. And while Mai, once again, experienced his abuse, she did not relate the difficult feelings that emerged as a response to the *actual* abuse that was perpetrated against her. Like Liz, Mai was inclined to question or overlook the palpability or validity of her feelings of upset, her response to this trauma-triggering telephone call.

Even after Mai's marriage had ended, she still could not fully communicate her abusive experience, due to the ambiguity of her ex-husband's manipulation. Mai did not recognise the coercive control during the telephone call, that he was likely instilling fear in his girlfriend, which was akin to him inculcating fear in Mai, through his threats to kill her dogs and fatally harm her and the children. And while Mai's ex-husband said that his girlfriend was okay with

knowing that he had abused her, Mai did not question his interpretation or consider that his girlfriend might be being silenced and not have a choice other than to comply with him.

Mai's story is representative of my thematic data that portrays the perpetrator's ability to maintain a high level of coercive control, often over many years, using a degree of *hidden physical violence* to create enduring fear through which to control victim-survivors. Notably, Mai's perpetrator is aware of how to evade an evidence-led prosecution (leaving no signs of his physical violence) and, therefore, he is free to continue offending. He also knows that even when he has spoken about his violence - in the counselling assessment - there is not enough concern from a person, sufficient to take action against him and intervene in his violence. Mai's situation can also be viewed on a continuum of violence, as akin to Liz, she was left in a violent and abusive situation through a professional's inaction against violence/abuse. Moreover, Mai's ex-husband, at the time of writing, was still controlling and coercing women and perpetrating violence against them.

### 4.5.3 The Perpetrator's Distortion of Physical Violence

The England and Wales Government's (Home Office, 2015, 2023) literature relating to coercive control shows no awareness of the perpetrator's skill - part of coercive-controlling strategies - to commit and present physical harm as non-physical violence to their victim-survivors. Rather, the Home Office offers examples of the types of material evidence that can be used to substantiate perpetrators' coercive control, which includes copies of emails, phone records, text messages, evidence of abuse over the Internet, via digital technology (such as tracking devices), and social media platforms (Home Office, 2023). The England and Wales Government show no explicit recognition of (or willingly ignore) the danger perpetrators may pose, as their acts of physical violence can be insidiously disguised, and they may never emerge as deliberate physical violence, even to victim-survivors.

My thematic data shows that where physical violence occurs in coercive-controlling abuse, the perpetrator may reframe it as non-violence - physical violence under the guise of "sport" or "play", for example. Liz, a survivor of coercive control, stated:

> He [partner] became a black belt in a martial art, so in terms of even if somebody's not violent, you know that if they wanted to, they could really hurt you. At times when we argued, he would just sort of throw me, do a judo-type throw and I've got scars from when I landed.

Liz said that her partner's large, muscular frame (initially, she found this attractive) became frightening, as he weaponised his body to instil fear in her. He used his physical strength as a threat of his potential to inflict more serious physical harm, which was occasionally

demonstrated by a "throw", though he framed this as "sport". A "throw" by a physically larger, stronger man was therefore presented as acceptable by the perpetrator, rather than as a blatant act of overpowering and controlling a much smaller female body, yet this resulted in permanent physical (as well as emotional) scars.

In an equitable relationship, a strong body can represent health and vitality; however, my data shows that in the context of coercive-controlling abuse, the powerful body can symbolise the ever-present threat of annihilation. Ambivalence arose in Liz's narrative of the physical violence that was perpetrated against her; she experienced the brutality of her abuser's physical violence but she was too confused (or afraid) to name it as such, even years later, because the violence was ambiguous in its reframed presentation as "sport".

When Liz had contacted a domestic abuse organisation for advice, she was fearful of attaching their label of "woman beater" to her abuser. On occasion, albeit ambiguously, he was a woman beater, but this was not in the conventional sense of physical violence, perpetrated, for example, by using his fists, which Liz could have named as violence. However, *naming* him a "woman beater" and illuminating the reality that he was a *violent man* would have risked incurring his wrath and could have potentially positioned Liz in danger of more serious physical harm. Liz's story therefore highlights how narrative itself can take on a particular power in coercive-controlling abuse and become a weapon that silences victim-survivors. Labelling violence itself and naming individuals as perpetrators or abusers introduces a degree of tangibility to ambiguous violence, bringing the problem of violence into the light and exposing the perpetrator, which Liz, it seems, dared not risk.

The perpetrator's metaphorical, ever-present dark shadow of threat had prevented Liz from acknowledging the truth of her violent/abusive situation. Seeking help, Liz recognised the domestic abuse that she was suffering, yet a narrative confirmation of 'domestic violence' left her too afraid to heed the advice given - to leave him. Hence, while Liz questioned whether violence had been perpetrated against her, due to her abuser framing his violence as "sport", the potential for life-threatening violence had trapped her in a state of fear for decades, silencing her from speaking out, or challenging her abuser's ambiguous physical violence.

Similarly, Celia described how her father physically harmed her and her brothers under the guise of "play", yet she had said in her narrative above that her father was not physically violent, or not that she was aware of. Celia explained:

> With my brothers it would start out as a play-fights, they *had* to play-fight him, so it would begin with my dad goading them to attack him. At first it would be fun, but then he crossed a line into holding them down in a way that they couldn't breathe and their bodies were horribly twisted. My brothers always ended up crying and gasping for air,

it was like dad couldn't stop until he'd reduced them to complete powerlessness, then he'd declare victory. With me, it would start as tickling until I couldn't breathe but instead of stopping at that point, he would be holding me in a vice-like grip, I couldn't breathe or move and it was torturous. Then when we cried we were 'babies', or he called my brothers 'girls', which was humiliating and shaming. As I became older, I was acutely aware if my knickers were showing, so I felt exposed, couldn't move or breathe and I was trapped, and it wasn't over until he decided it was over.

Celia's father weaponised misogyny against her brothers: a form of abuse and control through the combination of gender shaming and intimidation. Gender shaming/intimidating victim-survivors transpires as victim-blaming, by inferring, in this example, their inadequacies as boys; being unable or unwilling to stand up for themselves against violence is conceptualised as the problem, rather than the perpetrator's violence - thus removing the perpetrator from the story of violence. Celia's story here, resonates with Marc and Michael's accounts of adult men struggling to have their experiences of female-perpetrated violence validated. Celia's father called her brothers "girls" to imply they were not behaving like strong boys, that they were weak, like girls. Yet implying girls are weak did not stop him physically (and psychologically) enacting sadistic violence against Celia.

The framing of violence as "play" and "fun" prevented the children from complaining to other adults, as this ambiguous presentation discursively invalidated their encounters with physical violence and forced them to question their own experiences. However, while Celia and her brothers experienced violence ratified through the vehicle of "play", this served to remind them they were powerless against a physically stronger adult, who caused them to suffer greatly, before releasing them. The perpetrator held the power to prolong the children's pain and humiliation for as long as he wished, while the children had no control over their contorted bodies or the adult. Unable to barely breathe, they could not even speak out to object against the sadistic harm their father was subjecting them to. Harm, made invalid through "play", also created a state of fear: the children learnt the potential for the perpetrator's more serious physical violence, which enforced their fear-based compliance with their abuser, in the everyday, frightening course of family life.

In terms of evidencing violence as only an overt, physical act that inflicts visible bodily harm on a person, and violence enacted, confusingly, not in anger, but as "sport" or "play", raises questions regarding how ambiguous acts translate in relation to the visibility/invisibility of violence. If blatant physical violence or overt expressions of anger are absent, can we still evidence such forms of violence? In Liz and Celia's situations, physical violence was present but both survivors had difficulty with the interpretation of the violence perpetrated against

155

them: they could not label the violence as such and therefore they had a problem with the narrative or the story of violence. (This is also an example of the problem of conceptualising violence and coercive control that would not fit into a DASH tick-box survey risk assessment (see DASH risk model, (2022)).

Ultimately, the perpetrator's (distortion) narrative took precedence because ambiguous violence imbued a high level of fear in the victim-survivors while, simultaneously, preventing them from conceptualising the violence in a visible or tangible form, or from their own narrative or story of violence being heard. However, the intent of the violence was acutely felt; ambiguous violence was more than enough to communicate the threat that more serious physical harm could occur. This inculcated fear silenced both Liz and Celia (and her brothers), they could not speak of their fear because then an even more serious form of the perpetrator's physical violence may have been perpetrated against them.

It is Important to address here that four times in Celia's short section of narrative above, she mentioned being unable to breathe, which can be viewed as akin to the sensation of non-fatal strangulation (NFS). While Celia's father did not have his hands around his children's throats, he still significantly restricted their breathing (leaving the children "gasping for air"), without them knowing when, or even whether, he would release them. This is an example of the experience of violence that evokes victim-survivors fearing death, which can result in post-traumatic stress. Celia alluded to this when she described her and her brothers enduring, serious mental health problems, for which they are all now 'medicated'. This is also an example of when professional curiosity, knowledge of coercive control from a clinical/psychological perspective, and accurately deciphering the nuance in the narratives/stories of violence could lead to the recognition of serious trauma symptomatology - inflicted via the covert and ambiguous methods of coercive control - and where an appropriate trauma-informed intervention could potentially lead to trauma recovery. However, without adequate training for professionals in the methods and effects of coercive control, both perpetrators and their victim-survivors are likely to slip under the radar of appropriate service provision (as Celia and her family did) and not offered trauma-informed care, and/or any intervention to prevent further violence and abuse.

Within therapeutic practice, there is the recognition that clients will often 'open the door to trauma' for the therapist (see, for example, Jacobs, 1998). Without paying close attention to Celia's narrative and having no understanding of coercive control, the theme of "being unable to breathe" might be missed. However, paying close attention to Celia's narrative would allow the sensitive exploration of her experiences (the therapist's expertise can

ensure working in a way that prevents re-traumatisation) and the facilitation of collaborative work to process the significant trauma that is portrayed in Celia's narrative of violence.

Understanding coercive control not only informs therapeutic practice from the therapist's perspective, but it also allows practitioners to communicate to survivors, such as Celia, a congruent understanding of the dynamics of violence/abuse that have been perpetrated against them. For example, by recognising and acknowledging the seriousness of their experiences which, in turn, can validate the feelings/emotions that correlate to the severity, as well as the long-term effects, of their trauma and suffering.

## 4.6 Summary

My data shows that the covert and ambiguous nature of coercive-controlling offending can make it very difficult for victim-survivors to understand, conceptualise, and communicate their real-life violent/abusive experiences - to their families, communities, and within service systems. The evidence of coercive control victimisation typically manifests in victim-survivors' consequent mental ill-health and trauma symptomatology, as opposed to perpetrators' methods and strategies of coercive control being evident against the terms set by the England and Wales (Home Office, 2015, 2023) coercive control policy and legislation. This highlights the importance of understanding the concept of coercive control as a clinical/psychological construct and facilitating a trauma-informed approach and care for victim-survivors.

Victim-survivors' experiences of coercive control (and perpetrators' offences) can become more evident when listening to victim-survivors' comprehensive stories of violence and abuse. A specialist understanding of coercive control is vital for deciphering the nuance in those narratives, as victim-survivors have difficulty translating the ambiguity of the violence and abuse that has been perpetrated against them (including ambivalent feelings towards their abusers). However, many practitioners in the UK criminal justice system and support services are not equipped with the necessary tools to spot those ambiguous signs and nuances let alone act on them.

In the UK, the *perpetration* of coercive control is widely conceptualised (academically and within service systems) as gendered violence and abuse. However, my data shows that there is a lack of recognition - beyond feminist scholarship/activism - of the influence and impacts of UK systemic inequalities and gendered cultural norms on victim-survivors *perceptions* of the gendered violence and abuse that is perpetrated against them. Thus, victim-survivors often conflate perpetrators' own 'victimisation' narratives with the perpetration of violence and abuse, rather than conflating violence/abuse with perpetrators' pervasive expressions of entitlement. Subsequently, victim-survivors experience ambivalent

feelings towards their abusers: acknowledging that their violence and abuse is fundamentally wrong (correlating to feeling abused), while excusing them in light of their stories of 'victimisation', as justification for their offences. Arguably, while victim-survivors empathise with their abusers and feel sorry for them, they are unlikely to seek justice and restitution for the coercive-controlling offences that they have perpetrated against them. This appears be a factor (a tactic of coercive control) that contributes towards the low conviction rates for coercive control and allowing perpetrators to continue offending.

My data further shows that in the absence of material evidence of coercive control, perpetrators, professionals in service systems, and the wider public can use victim-survivors' mental-ill health (resulting from coercive control) as a weapon against them, to frame them as 'crazy' or mentally unstable. Thus, the UK societal trope - the 'unhinged/hysterical woman' - is a victim-blaming narrative that is used to pathologize and/or criminalise victim-survivors and invalidate their experiences while, simultaneously, removing perpetrators from the stories of violence/abuse.

Unethical practices can insidiously manifest in some professionals' responses to reports of coercive-controlling offending. Under the guise of professional authority and status, abuse can be masked in 'normalised', ordinary, everyday narratives. In this way, victim-survivors can be further victimised by professionals acting on biases of gender stereotyping, inequality, prejudice, and discrimination. Similarly, creating 'false reality' in the context of professionals' authority and status prevents victim-survivors from challenging the structural abuses that work against them, while acting in favour of perpetrators. These abusive dynamics resonate with the same gendered inequalities and motivations that are at the core of intimate partner and domestic abuse. The boundaries between private and public violence/abuse thus shade into one another and constitute a continuum of gendered violence and abuse.

My data demonstrates that within UK service systems, a heteronormative lens is often applied to LGBTQ+ victim-survivors and perpetrators of coercive control, intimate partner, and domestic abuse. Therefore, UK service systems and communities systematically fail to effectively respond (or do not respond at all) in support of many victim-survivors. This suggests that a more complex and nuanced approach to gender, which also includes an understanding of, for example, sexuality, faith, race, ethnicity, disability, immigration status, class and/or ageism, is required to make sense of how and why a wider diversity of people, other than only heterosexual (cisgender) women and men, are being victimised and what their needs are in (or to escape) violent/abusive situations.

The 'feminisation' of male victim-survivors of female-perpetrated violence and abuse invalidates their experiences and obfuscates both the abused and their abusers. However, my data shows that all genders can be further victimised by gender-stereotyping; therefore, the England and Wales Government's gender-neutral approach to coercive control (Home Office, 2015, 2023) means that the lack of a gendered and feminist understanding of this type of violence and abuse ignores the gendered issues relating to the identification of a range of victim-survivors, as well as the gendered and intersectional factors that can impede holding perpetrators to account for their offences. Thus, de-gendering coercive control supports, maintains, and perpetuates gendered violence/abuse and the oppression of victim-survivors, as opposed to UK service systems supporting them, holding perpetrators to account for their offences, and engaging in violence and abuse prevention effectively.

New insights into perpetrators and coercive control have emerged in my thematic data and have been developed in this chapter. For example, my data has revealed that narrative itself is systematically and intentionally weaponised and used as a tool to distort and hide the perpetration of physical violence. This demonstrates perpetrators' abilities to reframe even irrefutable evidence of physical violence (for example, bruises and scars) into something innocuous such as 'sport'. Similarly, sadistic violence perpetrated against children is a deliberately calculated method of violence presented by some perpetrators as 'play'. This transpires as a hidden, ambiguous form of violence that, confusingly for victim-survivors, is not enacted in obvious anger and/or as overt physical violence. Though the effects are the same as blatant physical violence, such as physical injury, and instilling great fear in victim-survivors to ensure their silence and everyday compliance with their perpetrators.

The next data/analysis chapter seeks to expand and deepen the conceptualisation of the connections between private and public violence, in terms of perpetrator violence/abuse that extends beyond the domestic environment to the public sphere, and how this connects to, and is part of, the broader UK landscape of gendered violence and abuse.

**Chapter Five: Connecting Private and Public Violence**

**5.1 Introduction**

This thematic data chapter examines the connections between private and public violence, in response to my research questions that, firstly, asks what is the significance of understanding the connections between private and public violence in relation to coercive control?; secondly, what are the advantages of situating coercive control beyond the domestic? Subsequently, my thematic data shows that perpetrators' coercive-controlling behaviour can be part of a continuum of violence and abuse that extends from the domestic environment to the public realm. Furthermore, coercive control can be seen as systematic, gendered violence and abuse that is perpetrated beyond the domestic, such as in the workplace, institutions and organisations. Presently, UK violence/abuse academics' - beyond feminist scholarship - incomprehension of coercive control outside the dyadic 'partner model', limits the understanding and scope of this type of violence and abuse. Consequently, the experiences and support of a broad range of victim-survivors (and holding the full range of perpetrators to account for their offences), I argue, requires a more in-depth understanding of coercive control that exists on a continuum between private and public violence/abuse.

My thematic data that emerged from 20 semi-structured interviews, conducted with survivors of coercive control in intimate partner, domestic, and workplace abuse, and professionals working with victim-survivors and perpetrators of coercive control, demonstrates that prejudice, inequality, and discrimination exist on a continuum, where interpersonal acts of violence and abuse are irrevocably connected to the wider public sphere: the community, the family, the workplace, sometimes even the environments where survivors seek out support, and public discourses prevalent in the media. That is, perpetrators of coercive control instrumentalise and weaponise existing structures of inequality in order to both continuously perpetrate violence and abuse in private and to cover up that violence/abuse, disabling their victim-survivors from seeking out support or finding ways to be believed.

**5.2 Problematising the Compartmentalisation of Typologies of Gendered Violence**

Determining violence as a public health problem has led to the division of typologies of violence for the purpose of epidemiological research and prevention endeavours (Flemming et al., 2015). Epidemiologists categorise violence into various fields, such as youth violence, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse, and suicide (Fleming et al., 2015). Researchers, community organisations, and policymakers across several countries utilise these categorisations to conceptualise and develop interventions to prevent and respond to violence (WHO, 2010). Funding streams and prevention lines are drawn systematically

around typologies of interpersonal violence, an approach that has prevailed in ongoing research (Fleming et al., 2015).

In research and practice, the fields of domestic abuse and sexual violence, for example, are usually grouped together. Most frequently, studies and interventions are focused on men's violence against women, despite the fact that men and people in same-sex relationships are also victims of interpersonal, domestic, and sexual violence (Douglas and Hines, 2011).Youth violence, also a major form of interpersonal violence, typically refers to violence between young people, such as bullying, assaults, and homicide, with the majority of victims and perpetrators reported being male (Connell, 1995; Krug et al., 2002). Thus, different interventions are often pursued to challenge different types of violence. The few rigorous randomised control trials funded, with a focus on gender equality and economic empowerment, measure their impact on intimate partner and domestic abuse but do not measure the impact on other types of violence that may be occurring within the target population, such as male-to-male peer violence (Fleming et al., 2015).

My interview participant, Aisha, a manager of domestic abuse perpetrator programmes, spoke about perpetrators' broad contextuality of violence and abuse that extends beyond the domestic environment. Crucially, Aisha said that the men attending the groups largely work within a culture of toxic masculinity and perform masculinity as controlling and aggressive, which is often displayed across *all* areas of their lives. Aisha stated:

> Most of them are manual labourers that come through the group. Most of them work, they do work, but most of them do quite physical jobs. So, there's a lot of men in the building trade, painting and decorating, scaffolding, um, so stereotypically, um, male-dominated, male environments where there's quite a high level of pressure to conform to whatever the culture is within that trade, that site. And again, quite young men, who are daily having to conform to a certain [masculine] image.

Aisha spoke in depth about male violence and abuse that is intrinsic to perpetrators' lives, and she said that, rather than compartmentalising violence and abuse within a specific environment, many of the men she works with project an all-encompassing hyper-masculine persona in both their public/communal and private/domestic lives. She explained further:

> It's quite easy to see with the men that come on the group, you are able to pick out the ones that are controlling across a vast amount of situations, um, in their social lives, in their relationships, in their families, and at work.

Furthermore, Aisha said that the perpetrator programmes she manages are facilitated within family services, therefore, all the men initially come to the attention of the authorities due to

child protection issues. Aisha stated that it is generally school staff who raise concerns regarding perpetrators' violence and abuse against their children, as well as their partners, and that perpetrators' violence/abuse, at times, spills out into the perpetrator groups and/or the family service:

> When they're on the programme, if there are any issues, well, I generally tend to turn up when there's bad news. So, if there's a breakdown in the relationship with the social worker and a client [perpetrator], or if they're being disruptive in the programme, then I will come in and try to get to the bottom of what's going on and set it right. We have men who are high risk [of perpetrating violence], who, for whatever reason, can't engage with the group-work process. I will work with them on a one-to-one basis.

Aisha stating that "we have men who are high risk" demonstrates a concerning level of perpetrator behaviour that has led to a referral to the behaviour change programme, to address their domestic abuse, as well as the violence and abuse against their children.

Marc, a survivor of female-perpetrated coercive control and physical domestic violence, and an advocate for men and children - victim-survivors of domestic abuse - described, from a victim-survivor perspective, what Aisha had iterated regarding a toxic, masculinised workplace culture being part of men's lives. Marc described the systemic abuse of male power in his all-male work environment:

> I work in construction, it's a very hostile environment, very hostile. You know, it's a very, a massively bullying culture, um, there's a lot of physical violence in which you just wouldn't, I mean, people wouldn't believe it. Honestly, if I told you the stories of what goes on, and we're not just talking about now and then, we're talking about on a weekly basis, where people are either violent to other people or, um, verbally aggressive, it's just constant.

Marc spoke to his boss to try to address the issue of male violence and abuse in his workplace, he said that it troubled him, and it was impacting negatively on his mental health:

> It's not a healthy work environment but my boss's words to me one day when I challenged him were, this is the way it's always been, it's a man's job, and if you don't like it, go and get a job somewhere else.

Marc, a manual labourer, described a subordinating hierarchy that is established among the workers. He said that more power and respect is afforded to the men who have specialist skills (for example, carpenters, plumbers, and bricklayers), and to the men employed the longest. The men who have worked in the organisation for extensive periods have survived

violence, stood their ground against violence, or they have habitually performed violence, which, Marc said, earned them kudos in the hypermasculine culture of their workplace. Marc also said that due to a of a lack of skilled workers, the skilled employees control the boss, because they know that it would be hard for him to replace them and risk missing deadlines for the completion of work contracts:

> I've literally been stood there when one - and I've heard them all do it in the four years I've been there - they've gone [to the boss] no! you can fuck off, I'm not doing that! And they get in the car and go home. They more run the business than he does.

While Marc did not know whether his co-workers were violent and abusive in other environments, such as the home, he described a toxic workplace culture where men have the capacity for cruelty and violence borne out of the collusion with society's stereotypical notion of 'toxic' masculinity. Furthermore, Marc's boss claiming "this is how it's always been" signals a (cultural) belief that men have always been violent and there is a history of violence in the company. This acceptance of violence seems to enable the structure and maintenance of routine violence that habituates men to violence as the norm in their everyday lives. Moreover, Marc's boss telling him that the alternative is to "go and get a job somewhere else", suggests that he has no intention of resolving the issue of violence, that he sees no wrong in male violence. Thus, presenting violence as the norm exceptionalises Marc's aversion to violence and validates that most men in the workplace accept, perform, or collude in violence. Marc's narrative also resonates with the stories of violence in the previous thematic data chapter, which includes examples of the police not taking male survivors of female-perpetrated violence seriously, because being victimised became reframed as evidence that they are not "real men" (Connell, 1995: 45).

Additionally, Marc's boss stating "it's a man's job" conveys a workplace culture of sexism and inequality by consigning gender roles to men who engage in hard, physical work. Asserting that "it's a man's job" also implies that it is not women's work and denotes women as weaker than men. Hershcovis et al. (2021:1840) contend that from construction workers to police officers, male work is, by definition, dominated by men in numbers and power, and "having what it takes" to perform the work becomes conflated with being a "real man", implying that violence is an expectation in "men's work" (Connell, 1995: 45). Thus, in these types of workplace environments, women and femininity become devalued and stigmatised, while the opposite is true of men and masculinity (Hershcovis et al., 2021).

A central principle of patriarchal masculinity is superiority to and dominance over women (Connell, 1995; Pascoe and Bridges, 2016). In such a cultural context, when men are driven to protect and enhance their identity as men, they are more likely to engage in violence

163

against women and gendered violence more broadly (including between men) (Alonso, 2018). Gendered violence, then, is part of a system of domination and becomes instrumental in claiming and asserting masculinity in group struggles. This is a volatile process when an oppressed group, such as working-class men, gain the means of violence, and the assertion of marginalised masculinities against other men, which is also regarded on a continuum with the assertion of masculinity in sexual violence against women (Connell, 1995).

Connell (1995) states that most men and women are complicit with the gender order that privileges higher valuations of men over women. As such, men, like Marc's boss, who are not necessarily perpetrating violence, are complicit; that is, they may be supporting the culture of violence that exists in UK society by re-enacting it and/or colluding with it, in the workplace. Men who are complicit in violence often do not challenge the existing gender order, perhaps due to benefitting from the "patriarchal dividend" (Connell,1995: 79), in which power offers men resources, respect, authority, institutional power, status, opportunities, and a greater sense of control over their lives. As Marc said, the men employed the longest in the company, those who are skilled workers, have survived violence, stood their ground against violence, or subsequently they perform and re-enact that violence, are granted more respect and authority.

Aisha's stories of men who engage in violence both within and beyond the domestic environment provides evidence for the importance of understanding the connections between interpersonal, structural, and systemic violence, as opposed to separating and compartmentalising specific typologies of gendered violence. For example, the perpetrators that Aisha highlighted were perpetrating gendered violence in the home – rooted and modelled in misogyny/patriarchy - as well as perpetrating gendered violence in the workplace and/or the perpetrator programmes - rooted in toxic masculinity - which can also be connected to patriarchal values and hierarchies amongst men (Connell, 1995). Therefore, I argue that it is important to investigate gendered violence and abuse on a continuum, to identify the potential connections between a range of perpetrators' offences and to further investigate how certain behaviours displayed in public settings could signal abusive behaviours/tendencies in the home/in private and vice versa. I return to the perpetrator's continuum of violence further in this chapter. Below, I continue with the theme of systematic, gendered violence and abuse that is perpetrated in the workplace.

### 5.2.1 Systematic, Gendered Violence and Abuse in the Workplace

Institutions and organisations have played a significant role in upholding patriarchy for centuries; therefore, building gender equality and changing masculinised cultures means disrupting power relations in which people have invested heavily (Burrell, et al., 2021). My

thematic data demonstrates that elucidating the covert, gendered, and systematic nature of workplace abuse could, firstly, illuminate the complex dynamics of violence and abuse beyond only bodily violations. That is, understanding that abuse does not have to be physical to inflict significant harm to victims (Dutton and Goodman, 2005; Schechter, 1982; Stark, 2007), which is a concept that also applies to contexts beyond the domestic. Secondly, my data evidences the ways in which perpetrators of abuse in the workplace are structurally and systemically empowered to continue offending and overlaps with the data in the previous chapter that shows the ways in which domestic abusers can be enabled to continue offending by the service systems that are intended to help victim-survivors.

The UK Government's (Gov.UK, 2021c) initiative to support victim-survivors of domestic abuse in their places of work advocates that a safe and supportive workplace response can make a difference to an individual's journey out of a violent and abusive situation, as well as their long-term prospects. The Government rightly suggest that there are practical steps that employers can take to build awareness of domestic abuse, develop and implement supportive policies and procedures, and signpost victims-survivors to specialist domestic abuse services. Presently, however, despite the strong academic knowledge that domestic abusers' ethics and behaviours are fundamentally rooted in social structures of power, control, and gender inequality (Stark, 2007), the UK Government do not simultaneously consider the risks perpetrators may pose beyond the domestic, such as the workplace. Furthermore, my thematic data shows that there is inadequate knowledge and recognition of how employers need to respond to reports of systematic, gendered violence and abuse (which may not be recognised as such) that is perpetrated in the workplace. Controlling and coercive behaviour offences are typically perceived by UK society as primarily problematic in the specific context of the domestic. It is not widely acknowledged that perpetrators have the potential to perform gendered violence and abuse behind a range of real or metaphorical closed doors, as well as publicly, hidden in plain sight, and that there are individuals and groups who may be uniquely vulnerable to them (for example, depending on their positionality at the intersections of gender, race, class, disability, and/or migration status).

### 5.2.2 Lauren's Story of Coercive Control in the Workplace

My interview participant, Lauren, a survivor of workplace abuse, who now researches and delivers training on workplace abuse, was covertly controlled and coerced by her manager, which led to her losing an excellent career that she had established over many years, as well as developing severe mental health problems. Lauren explained:

> I'd known him from another team, he seemed really friendly, really charming, um, very popular, but on the first day he arrived he ignored me, which I thought was

strange because I'd been successfully running the place for weeks. He continued to ignore me, so I justified it as he's busy getting up to speed, but this carried on, so I said to him, um, I've noticed that you've not asked me any questions and you've not invited me to any meetings, is there an issue? He said, yes, my perception of you is that you're not very good at your job and you haven't done much while you've been here. I was so taken aback, it put my system into shock because it was so out of kilter with what I was expecting. So, I took that as, okay, I need to show you, to prove myself, but it didn't matter what I said, what I did, it was never good enough. It went from there to months of abuse and ruining my reputation, until I had a breakdown.

When Lauren reported her manager to Human Resources (HR), they could not comprehend, or did not acknowledge, the systematic, gendered abuse that was being perpetrated against her. Gendered violence and abuse in the workplace[1], as a course of conduct, has yet to be fully conceptualised; violence/abuse is restricted to bullying and forms of harassment, relating to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and religion, for example (Gov.UK, 2020). Consequently, Lauren's attempts, via HR, at dealing with systematic abuse in the workplace, that does not easily fit within the workplace policy language/model of what constitutes bullying or discrimination, then became another level to the abusive experience. This institutional form of gaslighting and invisibilisation of her experience of abuse extended and exacerbated the abuse that she was already suffering at the hands of her manager. Lauren continued:

> It's very difficult and there isn't the language for it [the abuse]. So, if I can give you an idea about how HR departments look at this, what they would look at in my case was, they would look at individual circumstances and say, can we prove that? So, they look at everything individually and go, we can't prove it happened, we can't prove it happened, we can't prove it happened, and then as an overall, if you've got all these can't prove it happened, how are you going to say you'll find the truth on that basis? They could see I was breaking down in tears in the office but still I had HR tell me, we won't do anything because he's saying one thing and you're saying another.

HR narrated a non-committal, competing perpetrator/victim narrative: "he's saying one thing and you're saying another", which neither helped nor supported Lauren, while avoiding addressing her abuser's behaviour. Lauren stating that HR "would look at individual circumstances" shows that they did not understand that a 'course of conduct' deliberately

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[1] Coercive control in the workplace is generally unrecognised by UK society, albeit works by Ahmed - *Complaint!* (2021) and *On Being Included* (2012) - offer some theorisation of the controlling and coercive nature of violence and abuse in the workplace.

alters the relational power balance in favour of the perpetrator (Martin and Klein, 2013); nor that coercive control, as a strategy to constrain the negotiation of differences, can often be evidenced in situations where there are pre-existing inequities (of gender, status, class, or resources, for example). Without HR understanding (or acknowledging) the dynamics of power imbalances in the workplace, they imposed an interpretation of 'mutuality', by which the abuser and Lauren were presented as equal contributors to the problem of 'conflict', thus ignoring the systematic, one-sided, gendered abuse that she was suffering.

Lauren stating that "there isn't the language for it" shows her difficulty in conceptualising how her abuser coerced and controlled her, which is comparable to survivors' experiences of coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse, particularly as illustrated by Celia, Katrina, Jasmine, and Liz, in the previous data chapter.

When Lauren was retired by the company - in her early thirties - on the grounds of mental ill-health, HR viewed this as entirely due to an arbitrary mental health breakdown. I would suggest, however, that HR witnessed elements of the abuse but they did not recognise or act on this, or chose not to acknowledge it. Lauren explained:

> He's [the perpetrator] a good-looking chap, well presented, talks a good game and basically said, oh, well, she's *mad*, not very good at her job, I'm taking her down the grievance route [he did not]. I was so stunned, it's like this guy had completely trashed my reputation and I had no idea. Finally, I went to occupational health and they sat and listened and they said the only service they could offer me that day was to call an ambulance. I had a breakdown, I basically lost my sanity, it felt like my mind fractured. I was in a psychiatric ward for two-and-a-half months, I was left with major depression, which was treatment resistant, I also attempted suicide.

Lauren's story of abuse reveals another example of the perpetrator's use of the 'unhinged/hysterical woman' trope - evidenced in the previous data chapter - and used by perpetrators, professionals, and/or peers against Liz, Katrina's client, and Jasmine. The perpetrator's victim-blaming and framing Lauren as "mad" presented her trauma response to his coercive control as an unreasonable behavioural problem, while absenting himself from the story of abuse. Lauren's narrative: "He's [the perpetrator] a good-looking chap, well presented, talks a good game and basically said, oh, well, she's *mad*, not very good at her job, I'm taking her down the grievance route" is comparative to Jasmine's peers aligning with her abuser when he portrayed her as highly strung and very emotionally unstable. Jasmine said, "people believed him because he's attractive, he's cool, he plays the drums and guitar, and he's popular and, like, relevant". Lauren and Jasmine's narratives show how their

communities more easily aligned with men displaying "ideal masculine norms", rather than support women who are framed as "mad" or "emotionally unstable".

HR failed to recognise that the significant decline in Lauren's mental well-being was due to the effects of her being coerced and controlled in the workplace, despite Lauren displaying symptoms of (and later being formally diagnosed with) complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), resulting from this very experience. Simultaneously, the policy and language model of workplace abuse does not adequately anticipate coercive control, or does not model for a response to coercive control in the workplace. Yet Lauren could not find the language to communicate the covert and ambiguous pattern of abuse that was being perpetrated against her, as she did not, at that time, understand her abuser's insidious, systematic methods of offending. Yet the evidence of abuse, to a degree, was perpetrated in plain sight: Lauren's abuser was still perpetrating abuse via his misogynistic narrative, which Lauren later discovered. The perpetrator framed Lauren as "mad" to HR and her colleagues *after* she had begun displaying the symptoms of severe trauma and serious mental health problems - the result of his coercive control.

Despite extensive evidence to the contrary, the perpetrator stated that Lauren was "not very good at her job", which attacked her credibility as a victim-survivor outside of the abuse. This plays into the exploitative notion that victim-survivors must be 'perfect' to be considered wholly credible and to justify speaking out against the violence and abuse they are suffering (Lamb, 1996). Therefore, Lauren's long-standing, excellent work record held no value in the shadow of her authoritative male manager: "a good looking chap, well presented, [who] talks a good game". HR did not consider that Lauren was working at much less capacity than usual, due to the perpetrator's abuse that was systematically and covertly perpetrated against her; nor did they consider the ethics of a man who described a woman, suffering mental ill-health, as "mad". Lauren's experience of being framed as "mad", rather than professionals' recognising her trauma symptomatology, speaks to the larger problem that I have previously identified with evidencing coercive control in the language and terms of the available policies. A list of potential coercive-controlling behaviours or an overview of coercive control does not capture the connections between private and public violence, which are not presently recognised in relation to the structural and systemic factors that can perpetuate coercive-controlling behaviour and/or establish continuums of violence/abuse. That is, when victim-survivors are left in violent/abusive situations to endure further harm and/or suffer further violence/abuse within the services that are intended to help them.

HR neither, wittingly or unwittingly, identified or called out a misogynist, and they did not challenge his powerful narratives, which publicly victim-blamed, shamed, and devalued a

female employee (this is also an example of the power relations that are conducive to gendered violence and abuse within institutional/structural hierarchies (Kelly, 2011)). Within the dynamic of the HR/perpetrator intertwiningly abusive process, the perpetrator was easily able to divert all suspicion and/or blame away from himself. This resonates with the survivors' experiences highlighted in the previous data chapter and the difficulties they encountered - the structural abuse - a continuation of the abuse that they were experiencing in private - when the police and/or professionals within service systems, such as social workers, colluded with their perpetrators.

Lauren said that due to the devastating effects of her abuser's coercive control, she was unable to return to paid employment for seven years, which reflects the serious, continuous, and long-term level of harm that he had inflicted upon her. Yet Lauren's abuser remained free to potentially continue offending, despite her attempts to access support and justice through the HR system. Lauren's experience of help-seeking for the perpetration of coercive control in the workplace also highlights the difficulty of evidencing this type of violence and abuse because it tends to fall through the cracks of policy and law.

Societal groups who collude in toxic masculinity are more likely to reward those who persuade others that they are "real men" with status and privilege (Connell,1995:45), making them central to the group (Greguletz et al., 2019). Researchers have repeatedly shown that when these central players are abusive, the group are likely to remain silent and rally to defend and protect perpetrators, by silencing or ignoring their victim-survivors (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). This cultural pattern of protecting and enabling perpetrators is not merely there to shield individual abusers, it serves the function of upholding the broader structural and systemic gender order. In other words, coercive-controlling acts of abuse are systemic and recurring not by accident but by design: they are scripted into the normative gender order and social power structures (Ahmed, 2021).

Violence is far more than the violation of the body, and mindful of this, it becomes important to consider how UK violence/abuse scholars, culture, institutions and organisations fail to sufficiently acknowledge and actionably respond to the structures of hidden and/or ambiguous violence and abuse. However, much of what society refers to as "silence" is actually a wilful act of "not listening"; therefore, if some of the violence of silencing is a genuine suppression of speech, most of this is really the experience of "communicative impotence: the experience of others' aversion to taking in and becoming different in response to the force of what one says" (Berlant, 2018: 40).

My thematic data demonstrates that the communication of violence, abuse, and trauma occurs on various levels, including beyond the verbal and visible. Learning to recognise

those signs, I argue, is just as important as listening to victim-survivors' explicit testimonies. Lauren's story is also an example of the importance of understanding the concept of coercive control as both gendered and clinical/psychological constructs. Thus, allowing the comprehension of the gendered motivations underlying the perpetrator's abuse that Lauren suffered, as well as the emotional/psychological harm caused to her; and how these dynamics need to be accurately interpreted by the professionals who are tasked with responding to reports of workplace violence and abuse. This understanding would prevent causing further harm to victim-survivors, as well as enabling organisations and institutions to engage with violence/abuse prevention and hold perpetrators to account for their offences.

### 5.2.3 The Silencing/Not Hearing Dichotomy

My thematic data shows that victims-survivors and their advocates often speak out against violence and abuse, but in the context of the systemic normalisation of violence/abuse, offences have become such everyday acts and part of the UK social fabric (Bates, 2020), that silencing and/or not hearing victim-survivors is commonplace. For example, Naomi, the parent of a 12-year-old daughter who was coerced and controlled by her 12-year-old boyfriend, spoke about her experience of the silencing/not hearing dichotomy:

> She was 12, she had a boyfriend, you know, innocent boyfriend we thought, but I would still check her social media and he was coercively-controlling her in quite a damaging way. I called children's services because I was so disturbed by the content of his messages, but I couldn't get anywhere. There was no support, and the school weren't interested, and children's services weren't interested, you know, and actually, he moved away but it just moved the problem somewhere else. And I couldn't believe the level of sophistication of this, demanding to know who she was walking home with, wanted to see her contacts list and he even threatened to kill himself if she didn't perform a sexual act. She didn't even know what the sexual act was.

The UK social infrastructure in society: misogyny, homophobia, and racism, for example, is reflected in my thematic data, demonstrated in the responses to violence and abuse reported. In Naomi's example, not being heard, while being actively silenced, is evident in the inadequate response to gendered violence and abuse, despite the material evidence (from social media accounts and digital messages) that Naomi had. Moreover, this example of reporting coercive control raises the issue of the added element of violence/abuse not perpetrated *against* but between children. Age and the unique status of children as 'incomplete subjects', legally the property of their guardians, means that such peer-to-peer violence and abuse between children becomes even more invisibilised and difficult to

address, since a minor cannot be held personally to account for their violent and abusive behaviours as adults can (UK Parliament, 2024).

The lack of concern and action from staff within a school and children's services serves to repudiate the victim-survivor's abusive experience and also allows the perpetrator to continue offending. Furthermore, while coercive control is acknowledged within the domestic abuse sector as also perpetrated by young people (see, for example, SafeLives, 2023), young victim-survivors may not recognise the violence and abuse that is perpetrated against them; they may perceive the violence/abuse as 'normal' relationship dynamics when professionals are unconcerned or dismissive; and victim-survivors may also be unaware of where and how to access help and support for the violence and abuse they are suffering.

Even when professionals do not actively endorse abuse between young people, in schools they can do so by proxy, by not challenging the harmful gender norms which are often at the root of abusive behaviours between peers (Messerschmidt, 2012). School environments have been identified as sites which reinforce, rather than challenge, problematic expectations of gender roles and identities, a result of both staff and pupil behaviours (Firmin, 2018). This includes stereotypical masculine norms being encouraged, such as in school sports clubs, and gender-stereotyped subject allocation, which results in fewer young women studying sciences, for example (Institute of Physics, 2015). Furthermore, UK societal gender stereotypes promote the expectation for boys to dominate, to be in control of and inhibit their emotions, which are all relevant to their social experiences and to the instigation of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Firmin, 2018).

### 5.2.4 Mica's Story of Workplace Abuse

Mica, a survivor of workplace abuse, and now a campaigner and trainer in workplace bullying (both in the UK and internationally), spoke about the harm that she suffered, which (akin to Lauren's case above) had been inflicted by her male manager:

> When I tell my story of being bullied, I talk about the physical, psychological, behavioural, emotional, and also the financial impact. You can ignore the psychological symptoms until you get physical symptoms, and then you ignore those for a while until your body says enough is enough. I mean, I had all the digestive problems, crippling anxiety, things like that; and the number of people that I work with who say, they [abusers] broke me, or I lost myself, I didn't know who I was anymore, I didn't like that version of myself, all of those things, and you change so much. I was unaware of how incredibly damaged I was through the abuse or how long it would take for me to recover; and it has taken years, absolute years. I also didn't really

understand then what bullying was, and I certainly didn't know how to articulate my abusive experience.

Mica, like Lauren, spoke about the emotional/psychological effects of enduring a systematic pattern of abuse, as opposed to being able to definitively describe their abuser's strategies and methods of offending. Mica spoke further about her own experience, but also in relation to her work with victim-survivors of workplace abuse, and the discrepancy between the harm they suffered and the inadequate responses to violence/abuse within institutions and organisations:

> First of all, it [abuse] has to go on for a fairly long time, so that you can establish a *pattern* of behaviour to be able to say that it's bullying. So, you have to live through what are essentially traumatic events on a continuous basis, and then you go into that level of hypersensitivity where you're just looking for the next threat around every corner. That's when you start to feel people moving away from you because, obviously, they don't want to be brought into it because it might affect their job, their security, putting food on their table. So, you go through all these layers of trauma, and the people who come in to do the investigations, whether they might be internal or external, if they don't use a trauma-informed approach, they can cause a secondary injury at that point. So, if the organisation doesn't support people in the way they expect, essentially, you've got the institutional betrayal to endure, as well as the primary abuse that you're suffering.

Mica stating that the abuse "has to go on for a fairly long time, so that you can establish a *pattern* of behaviour" conceptualises systematic abuse, rather than mutual conflict - "traumatic events on a continuous basis" (causing a state of hypervigilance). Though it appears that beyond this recognition, there was no institutional or organisational response to the victim-survivors' trauma, or the systematic abuse that had been perpetrated in this case, subsequently also causing "a secondary injury". Furthermore, Mica stating that "you start to feel people moving away from you because, obviously, they don't want to be brought into it because it might affect their job, their security, putting food on their table", is indicative of a broader structural problem. That is, even though bystanders become aware of a colleague's suffering, they feel intimidated to speak out about violence and abuse, or they fear losing their jobs, leading to inaction, invalidation, and ostracization of the victim. Mica went on to emphasise the consequences of abuse for herself and the victim-survivors she has supported, when they did not receive the appropriate care to recover from the trauma they had suffered:

Eventually, I realised, actually, a lot of what stopped me from wanting to go back to work was an absolute fear, I was in great fear of being that ill again without really realising I was ill at the time. So, it's taken me a long time to get back to full-time work, but there's quite a large number of people who never work again. There's quite a large number of people who, if they do work again, will only work for themselves, and I very much fell into that route because I tried going for jobs but my confidence had been shattered. People also go for much lower-paid, much lower-responsibility jobs, because they have no belief in themselves anymore. They want much less responsibility and a job they can just leave at the [workplace] door. Some people will take temporary contracts to start with, so they've got the option to just get out of there really quickly if they want to.

Mica stating that "I was in fear of being that ill again without really realising I was ill at the time" reflects her abuser's insidious harm, in comparison to harm caused by overt violence or abuse, which can be more easily recognised and named as such, and subsequently linked to symptoms of trauma. Mica elaborated further:

Quite often abusers are in the senior positions and people around them say, I've never seen that [abusive] side to them, and the people underneath them say, well of course you haven't, they're not like that when you're around. So, they show very different faces to different people according to - and it's very much power-related - if that person can be useful to them, then they'll show them a different side. And it's recognised that in senior posts and with board members, there's a high level of these people. In my case, he had a reputation for abuse and that for me meant that I kind of went, no, I'm too strong to be bullied, but what I didn't realise was, he manipulated me into doing what he wanted me to do. Then you go to HR and you ask for their support, and HR are then in this incredible position where they're supposed to be supporting an employee while preventing any cases going to tribunal.

While overt physical violence or signs of physical injury would constitute obvious criminal offences, psychological/emotional abuse, intimidation, manipulation, and isolation allow hidden violence and abuse to insidiously continue with no obvious signs of the violence/abuse committed. Mica continued:

I get told all the time, don't use the word bullying, employers don't like it, and I just say, well, two things: first of all, neither does the person on the receiving end; and secondly, why are we so afraid of a word because we will use it when we're talking about children. I'm quite stubborn about using 'bullying' because there's a lot of other language that's being used instead: 'conflict', which isn't bullying. 'Inappropriate

behaviour' is another term used. Workplace abuse, it's much more covert, a lot more psychological; I come across very little physical violence, most of it is psychological abuse now, in the workplace.

Mica's narrative shows how minimising language can be used within organisations and institutions to deny or inaccurately conceptualise the abuse that is perpetrated. This distortion of abuse is comparable to how perpetrators of coercive control (evidenced in the previous data chapter) typically reframe their violence and abuse as something else, such as framing violence as "sport" or "play". Similarly, survivors had deliberately avoided using accurate terminology, such as "domestic violence", to prevent bringing the reality of their situation to light and risk incurring the wrath of their abusers.

Mica also described other ways in which abuse is obfuscated:

> There is also a lack of accountability, nobody that is actually willing to say, yes, this is a problem and we will hold these people accountable, and the bystanders as well. Domestic abuse or bullying, people might know it's going on but they don't speak up, we don't want to get involved, we don't want to be brought down with that situation, or it's not our business. I inform employers, you need to actually change the culture of your organisation and make sure you have psychological safety if you want people to speak up; if all you want is for people to speak up anonymously then you're not solving the problem. I think they go for that because it's tangible and they go, look we can actually see what we're doing here, and then we can refer them [victim-survivors] on to a helpline and it's not our problem anymore.

Mica's concerns that interpersonal workplace abuse is minimised or obscured at both structural and systemic levels, and maintained by not acknowledging the existence of perpetrators' offences resonated in Peter's narrative. Peter, a survivor of coercive control in the workplace, described how HR systems worked against him, rather than support him, when he reported workplace abuse:

> I've tried for a long time to get my head around this idea of other people coming in to, you know, kind of solidify up the position of the first person involved because it becomes, like it's so muddied now, that like a lot of the correspondence in the end became about things that were other than the original problem. So, it's like it becomes about the [CCTV] pictures being deleted, it becomes about the fact that safeguarding's defined in a way that safeguarding doesn't make sense, then it becomes about the fact that the person in HR can't be bothered, so that all of a sudden one issue that could have been isolated becomes kind of like a problem with 20 people. I think somewhat consciously, there's a thought that if, if the problem

174

becomes about 50 people, it just becomes so diluted that you're just angry with the organisation and you can't really take on the organisation, so it becomes an insurmountable point of difference.

Ahmed (2021) contends that collusion is intentionally built into HR systems, as the goal is not to prevent violence and abuse or provide support/seek justice and fairness for survivors, but to mask or obscure the evidence of violence/abuse, to make it disappear from view. This is evident in Peter's narrative and resonates with Mica stating, "then you go to HR and you ask for their support, and HR are then in this incredible position where they're supposed to be supporting an employee while preventing any cases going to tribunal".

### 5.2.5 George's Story of Coercive Control in the Workplace

My thematic data demonstrates that people who do not embrace misogyny, systemic inequalities, and gendered cultural norms in the workplace can be devalued and marginalised in a society that widely embraces and accepts toxic masculinity. Witnesses will therefore have little motive to hear or take action to support victim-survivors of gendered violence and abuse (Hershcovis et al., 2021).

George, a survivor of coercive control in the workplace, demonstrates that individuals who resist misogyny can be victimised for not living up to 'manly' aggressive norms, and not accepting the misogynistic/toxic status quo. When George attempted to intervene in the pervasive workplace culture of misogyny and gender inequality, established by his male manager in an office environment, he became victimised both by his manager (the instigator) and by his colleagues. George explained:

> My manager just regularly went for her [a female colleague] and he would encourage that and brew it within the team, he would bad-mouth her and put her down in meetings, make jokes at her expense. And there was one time when we should be having a team meeting and this female colleague wasn't present, she'd gone off, and they were gossiping and bitching about her. And I said, I really don't think this is appropriate, talking about a member of staff when they're not present and not here to defend themselves. Someone in a high-ranking position said, I think it's healthy! I asked, how the fuck is it healthy? Everyone was stunned into silence, they closed the meeting and just got up and left. They couldn't deal with the situation and didn't want to look at me.

George's verbalised anger was met with deafening silence when his colleagues were faced with the indefensible abuse that they were perpetrating. Collusive silence in numbers, in this situation, became an unspoken unwillingness to deal with abuse perpetrated overtly, in plain

sight. Co-workers, George said, "didn't want to look at me" and I would suggest that the sense of shame this situation harvested is often located in the gaze of the other (Gilligan,1997). By not meeting George's eye, his colleagues were avoiding dealing with his disapproval of their behaviour - a defence against shameful exposure, whereby not looking obliterated his capacity to communicate further and reinforce his disapproval of their unacceptable behaviour. While no-one had contested George's colleagues' behaviour, they did not have to face their abusive acts or the shame of colluding in and/or perpetuating abuse against a female colleague, even in her absence. It was perhaps easier to go along with the abuse instigated by their manager, rather than risk themselves, like George, being ostracised or victimised when they would have to continue to work in an abusive environment. My data here usefully sheds a light on why wider communities and environmental structures may often fail to respond in support for victim-survivors of coercive control. Jasmine's community (in the previous data chapter), for example, ostracised her when they colluded with her boyfriend in perpetrating abuse against her; however, colluding with the perpetrator may have protected Jasmine's peers from becoming further victims of his violence and abuse.

George said that his refusal to collude in a culture of misogyny and gender inequality, from the beginning of his employment had sealed his fate, as he was never accepted within the team:

> The team [men and women] cast me as the villain, you know, rather than thinking I might just be a half decent guy. They didn't consider it might just be that there are some out-of-order things happening here and maybe I don't like them, and maybe it doesn't make me kind of, you know, unmasculine or unmanly to be affected by things that are said and done to the detriment of women in the organisation.

George's narrative echoes the "not a real man" trope that was applied to male survivors of female-perpetrated violence and abuse in the previous data chapter. This is also highlighted by Marc and his difficulty of coping with systemic male violence in his workplace. George's refusal to collude with his colleagues meant that he appeared weak to them -"not a real man" - which, in turn, made him a target of their aggression. George said that as well as experiencing covert, systematic abuse from his manager, he was also subject to verbal aggression from men in the department:

> I got on the bus one morning, there he is [a male colleague]. And I can hear him, he's on the back seat and I can hear him. I hear, oh, here's the fucking twat, I can hear him before I've even boarded.

Both women and men in the workplace expressed disdain towards George, sometimes overtly, for example, by withholding important information that affected his work, excluding him from social occasions, or sometimes in ways that he could not call out, which silenced him from speaking about the abuse that was being perpetrated against him. George said:

> They [colleagues] were talking about insults and she said, oh, I like dickhead, and she looked right in my direction, as if to say, oh, you're a dickhead. And I thought, I know what's going on here but if I raise it I'll be told, what are you on about?

George tried, through HR, to report the covert coercive control (such as isolation - lone working imposed in a remote part of the building; intimidation - threats of job loss/demotion; and gaslighting - ambiguity around work needing to be done or not) that was perpetrated against him by his manager, but his manager's abusive influence extended to controlling the entire department (this is also evident in Lauren's story). George concluded that to protect his mental health, his only option was to leave his post. He said that during his time within this institution, there had been other employees who had not colluded in the misogynistic/toxic workplace culture but they had not stayed long, or they had been moved to other departments. George continued:

> They [the team] basically have a blacklist of anyone they won't work with, so anyone they have difficulty with goes immediately on their blacklist and they try not to work with that person ever again in the organisation.

This may account for why George's colleagues ignored his attempt to confront their abusive behaviour during the team meeting. Perhaps, fearing the "blacklist", they felt that it was safer to collude in the abuse, rather than risk ostracization by the majority - possibly the manager's method of coercing, controlling, and silencing his team, while at the same time preventing the recognition of his victims-survivors. The sense of shame the team displayed when George questioned the abuse of a female colleague led me to query whether they were also victim-survivors of workplace abuse.

Ahmed (2021:135) states that "the escalation of violence against those who complain about violence is how violence remains". My thematic data shows that within workplaces, institutions and organisations, when a person points out or resists becoming part of a violence/abuse situation, they (rather than the issue of the victimisation that they are reporting) are positioned as the problem; thus, the violence/abuse situation is systemically maintained. This highlights the importance of understanding one-sided, systematic, gendered violence/abuse and the function of perpetrators creating the illusion of mutuality in the perpetration of violence. If most people in the workplace are aligned with the instigator/perpetrator (for their own protection), the abuser, I would suggest, becomes hidden

amidst the 'mutuality' of violence/abuse - the normalisation of a toxic workplace culture - rather than identified as the instigator/controller, and can continue offending.

Reflecting on the UK Government's strategy (Gov.UK, 2021c) for supporting victims-survivors of domestic abuse in their workplaces, it becomes difficult to envisage that people would receive empathy and support within a workplace culture of misogyny and toxic masculinity (such as in Lauren, Mica, and George's work environments). That is, victim-survivors who are seeking support for gendered violence and abuse from those who are performing or aligning with gendered violence/abuse. Similarly, it would be difficult for male victim-survivors of female-perpetrated coercive control/domestic abuse (such as Marc) to disclose their experiences to men within a workplace culture of toxic masculinity. In this way, at a meso-level, violence prevents seeking support for violence and silences victim-survivors from speaking out, which further obscures both victim-survivors and their perpetrators. Furthermore, due to the boundaries between the workplace and the home, it is the norm not to 'interfere' in colleagues' personal affairs. Boundaries between private and public are deemed discourteous to cross (hence why neither co-workers nor strangers in the street tend to intervene if they witness (signs of) domestic abuse in public (Mildorf, 2007)).

My thematic data provides comprehensive accounts of how abusive behaviours emerge - and are normalised - within the social dynamics of UK workplaces, institutions and organisations, and the gendered mechanisms by which colleagues can become collusive in the maladaptive behaviour of abusive individuals. Hierarchical power structures within workplaces, institutions and organisations, with their distribution of male power (and women colluding in or emulating male power) and the allocation of rights and roles, facilitate perpetrators' transgressive behaviour, rather than protect the rights of victim-survivors.

Historically, the emphasis on workplace violence and abuse has generated information confirming the incidence of bullying and harassment. Data has most often been collected via surveys (Aquino et.al., 1999; Lewis, 1999) and has not examined the personal and structural effects of the dyadic relationship between perpetrator and victim, or looked at the effects of systematic abuse on victim-survivors (Martin and Klein, 2013). I would suggest that this is akin to DASH forms (Dash Risk Model, 2022) used by the police to assess risk in domestic abuse call-outs, and how tick-box surveys can fail to capture the perpetrator's covert and ambiguous presentations of violence/abuse, as well as the high levels of fear they instil in victim-survivors (or, indeed, bystanders, who may fear victimisation and/or losing their jobs if they intervene in workplace violence/abuse).

While divisions based on typologies of violence enable targeted approaches to address violence, they omit the analysis of the risk factors and solutions that may exist across

multiple/different/diverse types of violence (Fleming et al., 2015). Consequently, in the previous research on coercive control, which has predominantly been siloed to the field of intimate partner and domestic abuse (see, for example, Stark, 2007), there is no distinct acknowledgment of this type of systematic abuse that occurs within gendered hierarchies and power relations, and violence and abuse that is perpetrated against victim-survivors across varying contexts (Fulu et al., 2013). I am seeking to contribute further data and necessary interrogation of this gap here.

## 5.3 The Problem of Compartmentalising Perpetrator Behaviour

The potential for professionals to be drawn into colluding with the perpetrators' descriptions of abuse are well-documented in specialist domestic violence services and the domestic abuse literature (see, for example, Bancroft, 2002; Hennessy, 2012; Stark, 2007). Offenders may falsely present victim-survivors as perpetrators, narrate a minimised or distorted version of their violence and abuse, or plausibly protest their innocence (Bancroft, 2002; Hennessy, 2012; Stark, 2007). Lauren, Mica and George's experiences of help-seeking to deal with their perpetrators in the workplace show that both HR and their co-workers were influenced by their abusers to obfuscate them from their offending. As a perpetrator strategy of abuse, the successful coercion and control of professionals ensures that victim-survivors' credibility is compromised; this can isolate victim-survivors from sources of help in the wider community and reinforces the control of the perpetrator (Martin and Klein, 2013). However, perpetrators' manipulation, intimidation, or abuse of professionals is not generally regarded as creating further victims, or addressed as part of perpetrators' continuum of violence. Yet professionals and supporters are also threatened with retaliation or marginalisation, which can cut off all support routes for victim-survivors (Hennessy, 2012).

All the professional interview participants spoke about the problematic behaviours that perpetrators routinely display within domestic violence/abuse service provision, which professionals must be alert to. For example, Jerome, a counsellor working with perpetrators, explained that he realised he was manipulated and intimidated by offenders to "not overstep the mark with them". This allowed perpetrators to influence the agenda in therapy or group work and avoid collaborative work to address their violent and abusive behaviours. Jerome said that he had complied with perpetrators to avoid becoming overtly (physically) victimised but, conversely, he had inadvertently colluded in permitting the perpetrator's covert victimisation. Jerome explained:

> I think, if I go too far, too quickly, I might breach his defences, so attuning to when it's right to challenge. But I have had that where men in [one-to-one counselling and group work] situations, they prevent you from doing that [challenging them], and you

179

don't always realise and that's what's shocking, until you speak with your supervisor, or you have a bit of process time afterwards. And it makes me understand how people become victims, how people become ensnared into that.

Jerome's reticence to challenge some perpetrators illustrates the degree of control they can assert even in group work or the counselling room. Therefore, it becomes difficult to see how therapeutic work can be effective in an inequitable environment when counsellors or group facilitators need to protect themselves against an abusive dynamic. However, an awareness of ensuring "process time" and utilising supervision seems to be an important strategy to address and/or prevent further violence and abuse.

Dan, an Independent Domestic Abuse Advisor (IDVA), described more overt perpetrator violence within service system provision:

> I've known perpetrators that thrive on the idea that they petrify their social worker, they absolutely love it. And they have really horrendous, *really horrendous* perpetrator risk assessments, and even like other professionals are warning you that he likes to shout at you, do this, do that, terrifying everyone in the service, but then challenging them potentially puts you in danger.

Both Jerome and Dan described how perpetrators attempt to, or actually do, gain the upper hand within service systems, whether covertly or overtly. However, I would suggest that the dynamics of the perpetrator/professional power struggle signify the perpetrator's desire for control and domination beyond the domestic environment. My findings show that there exists the potential for perpetrators to create new victims, as well as the indirect extension of abuse towards the primary victim-survivor, as perpetrators can get support services to enable, rather than prevent, their abuse (evidenced in the previous chapter: Katrina told the story of her client who experienced a mental health breakdown and was framed by her perpetrator, and subsequently by the police, as 'crazy', while social services accepted the perpetrator into the service as a 'victim').

Michael, a domestic abuse worker, said that growing up, his mother, in a domestic abuse situation, was unaware that Michael and his siblings were being abused by her husband:

> My mum was in an abusive relationship, um, my step-father was a rugby player. Um, you know, it was abusive. My mum went to work and left us at home, I took a lot of abuse off of him protecting my siblings.

Michael's description of his step-father as a "rugby player" evokes the image of a large, strong man, who took advantage of surreptitiously abusing children in the absence of another adult. To name the perpetrator as only a domestic abuser, as the abuse occurred in

the home, would situate child abuse on the continuum of domestic abuse and group the victim-survivors together. The perpetrator, hiding his abuse, may have also posed a risk to other children, and as Michael's mother was seemingly unaware of the abuse, this raises concern that the perpetrator was silencing the children and possibly even being abusive outside the home.

Furthermore, the term 'domestic abuser' confines the perpetrator to a limited category of violence and abuse, which omits the recognition of the perpetrator's continuum of violence/abuse, involving child abuse *and* intimate partner violence. Moreover, Michael's story of victimisation is complex: he witnessed the perpetrator's violence against his mother and siblings, he had to try to protect his siblings, while he was also isolated in his own experience of child abuse. These issues may be overlooked within service systems if Michael is regarded solely as living in a domestic abuse situation, rather than as victim-survivor of the perpetrator in his own right.

Understanding coercive control extends to how we comprehend the nature, causes, dynamics, and consequences of child harms in violent and abusive situations, as well as how we evaluate children's responses (Stark and Hester, 2018). Based on the known overlaps of domestic violence with coercive control and child abuse, we can anticipate that coercive control extends to children in a substantial proportion of cases. Even when children are direct targets, we consider them secondary victims, not because the harm they suffer is collateral damage or of secondary importance, rather because children are almost always being harmed alongside the subordination of the mother (Stark and Hester, 2018). Importantly, considering children as victim-survivors of coercive control highlights the importance of managing coercive control as a spectrum of interrelated harms that originate from a single source (Stark and Hester, 2018).

Children and young people can be direct victims-survivors of coercive control and they can also experience it in much the same ways as adults do, feeling confused and frightened, living constrained lives, and being entrapped and harmed by the perpetrator (Katz, 2023). Coercive control can harm children and young people emotionally/psychologically, physically, socially, and educationally. Therefore, vigorous measures are required to deal with coercive control that is perpetrated by parents/step-parents/guardians, to prevent them from using adult-child relationships to continue imposing coercive control on children, as well as partners, or ex-partners (Katz, 2023).

### 5.3.1 Elucidating Perpetrators' Continuums of Violence and Abuse

Over a period of three years from 2018 to 2021, research carried out by the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) team at the Mayor of London's Office for Policing and Crime

scrutinized a random sample of 500 individuals with repeat convictions for domestic abuse (Mayor's VAWG Strategy, 2018-2021). Data on the Police National Computer was derived to explore whether perpetrators had convictions for other crimes and revealed that violence featured heavily across the cohort of men investigated: each man had an average of almost 17 convictions; 75 percent had been convicted of violence against another person; 62 percent had committed offences against property and the same proportion had convictions for offences against police officers, court officials, and prison officers (Mayor's VAWG Strategy, 2018-2021).

My thematic data, generated from the interviews with survivors and professionals working with victim-survivors and perpetrators of coercive control, provides consistently strong evidence of the varied contextuality of perpetrators' offences both within and beyond the domestic sphere. Concerningly, *all* the survivors of coercive control that I interviewed reported high levels of harm that their abusers had perpetrated against them, with no intervention to date (by social services, the police, or the CPS, for example) to stop them; or the perpetrators, due to their skill at hiding their offences, had not come to the attention of the authorities.

The varied contextuality of perpetrators' violence and abuse led me to conclude that perpetrators are serial abusers who take advantage of the privacy of the home to perpetrate violence/abuse. However, categorising perpetrators as only 'domestic abusers' or 'perpetrators of intimate partner violence' overlooks the potential for perpetrators' violence/abuse that extends to the public sphere and/or connects to and is part of the broader UK landscape of gendered violence and abuse. Survivor participants spoke about perpetrators who had perpetually offended throughout their adult lives, which includes abuse towards a succession of intimate partners, and also family members, children, and animals, engaging in substance misuse, as well as violence and abuse and/or criminality that is perpetrated beyond the domestic.

Mai, a survivor of coercive control and domestic violence, spoke about her ex-husband:

> He was very threatening and abusive to his ex's kids and he had no interest in ours […]. He could always manipulate his mum or grandad into giving him money, which they couldn't afford. They still give it to him because of his aggression, sulking, and guilt trips. His girlfriend contacted me recently and said he's still doing drugs and being very violent, I would never be surprised to hear one day that he has killed her or whatever. I think he's very dangerous.

Mai's story of her ex/husband's violence and abuse indicates wider controlling tactics beyond his partner relationships, such as using abusive strategies to extort money from

family members (including vulnerable elderly relatives), and the abuse of children. Furthermore, Mai's ex-husband demonstrated that he had the power to kill her dogs (he said by cutting their throats) but he also turned that sadistic and destructive force towards others, and he has continued to be violent in public and violent/abusive in a succession of relationships with women, as well as towards their children. Mai also said that her ex-husband's drug addiction involves criminality: for example, buying, using and selling class A drugs, routine violence with dealers when he is unable to pay his debts (which resulted in her then-husband suffering a life-changing injury) and the economic abuse of others in the wider community. Mai further stated:

> And then there was one time he pushed his way in, and he took my TV. I remember he took my TV because he wanted to sell it. He just barged his way in and ripped the TV out of the wall and took it.

Mai also said that her husband left her with £10,000 of debt, which she is still paying, years after he forced her to borrow money for him when they were married. Due to his non-payment of debts and court judgments against him, he was unable to obtain credit or loans.

Celia, a survivor of paternal coercive control, spoke about her father's adult lifetime of covert cruelty and criminality, perpetrated both within and beyond the domestic environment:

> We knew he had women everywhere and some were really young, well, teenage girls, the same age as me at that time. He was a habitual criminal, he'd think nothing of stealing anything he could get away with, even at home from all of us; he even faked a burglary, stole stuff from home, jewellery and cash mainly, and said we'd been burgled. He'd buy stuff that was 'hot' and sell it on. He'd drive without insurance and be proud of swindling the system, or tamper with the electricity meter so he wasn't paying for all the electricity, that sort of thing.

Celia said that her father coerced and controlled all the family; therefore, that "he had women everywhere and some were really young" raises concerns that he was also coercive, controlling, and exploitative of the young women (some of them minors) that he was involved with. Celia stating that "he'd buy stuff that was 'hot' and sell it on" suggests that her father was possibly involved in organised crime, or that he at least associated with other criminals. Celia continued:

> He fell out with everyone, the neighbours, even all of his family and mum's family. Then he'd do vindictive things like poison their pets, kill the plants in their garden, or key their cars and then laugh about it to us and we wouldn't dare not laugh with him.

Celia's father's aberrant behaviours extended from the private environment of the home to the public sphere. The harm her father caused in the privacy of the home extended to destroying neighbours' plants or poisoning their animals, literally creating an organically toxic, deathly environment in the neighbourhood. While Celia had previously mentioned (reported in the previous data chapter) that her family dare not discuss their father's abuse, due to their fear of him, it seems unlikely that Celia (or her family) could tell anyone beyond the home exactly what they were having to deal with. Her father's abusive tactics were also very sinister: for example, poisoning pets shows a pervasive lack of concern for defenceless animals, then laughing about what he had done (showing no remorse) and expecting the family to be complicit and laugh with him, as though forcing them to sanction his violence, and feel partially responsible for it when they did not feel able to intervene or report it.

Celia said her father made light of his offences, he normalised his violence, abuse, and criminal behaviours, and his silencing of the family (via his coercive control) ensured that he could continue offending, while facing no consequences for his crimes. Celia's family also endured her father's voyeurism, a sinister monitoring of the family that Celia thought prevented them from discussing him:

> There were holes in walls and floors where he would spy from [on the family]. Even though he couldn't always be there to watch us, it felt as though the walls had eyes and was a reminder of his ever-watchful and monitoring presence. Sometimes he would creep into the house, so we didn't know he was there, so we always acted as though he was there, because he might be.

Celia said that her father had committed criminal acts all his adult life (she was unaware when his offending began) but publicly he presented a charming persona until someone became another of his victims. He quietly, furtively, committed his crimes, and Celia described how he exacted sadistic revenge upon those he felt had wronged him. Celia related the story of her father's surreptitious violence, abuse, and criminality within and beyond the home, his charm used to seduce people and disguise his abusive character, though she acknowledged that he was also a secretive man. Inevitably, there were gaps in her story, such as not really knowing but surmising the nature of his relationships with young women, which, Celia said, frequently came to light.

Lola, a survivor of coercive control, described her victimisation and survivorhood not entirely as a personal experience, but as one where she was unfortunate to have innocently been drawn in (through the perpetrator's coercion and control of her) to become part of the broad, complex story of her perpetrator's violence, abuse, addictions, and criminality that began at an early age. Lola explained:

His mother said he was a handful at 13, he was on the school roof or wouldn't go to school; smoking; taking drugs - just 13. So, then it was stealing cars at 15-to-16; underage sex [with a sex worker]; tried to rob a post office in his late teens. A lot of gang fighting and street fighting, assaults, then he found himself in jail for the first time aged 15 or 16, I believe it was for some kind of violent assault.

Lola said that despite her ex-partner's incarceration on a number of occasions for his public crimes, this did not deter his propensity for serial violence and criminality that escalated and continued:

Then he had no job and committed a variety of crimes and there was no pattern. Like I say, cars, knives, fighting, lots of drunk and disorderly, lots of those, having to be maced by the police so they could lift him, resisting arrest, a big cloud of that stuff. Oh, yes, lots of drunk driving.

Lola portrayed the randomness of her partner's violence, which seemed to contribute to the untraceability of some of his violence because there was no pattern or predictability to his offences. Furthermore, Lola expressed concern that during the time she was in a relationship with him, his criminal activities had moved to prolific online sexual offending (including image-based sexual abuse), and she believed that he was still sexually offending at the time of the interview:

Hundreds of masturbation videos, you know, to a woman that's married and she's 70, or a girl,16. And once he'd coerced naked pictures from them - [he said] bye! I believe he shared them, I got told he shared them with other deviants. And I truly believe that deep down beneath all that he loathes and hates women, it's not sex for him, it's power.

Lola described how her partner was immersed in addictions and said that during his prison sentences he was offered psychological help and support, but she said that he would always return to misusing alcohol and/or drugs following his release from prison:

Drunken, alcoholic behaviour and he was always self-medicating with Valium and sex or just Valium or just sex, or cheating, or porn, or drugs and/or drink. He lost a relatively good job he had been in for a while; five times he was put on probation for drinking on the job, having sex with customers, going into the customer database [breaching data protection], um, things like that happening in his work.

Lola went on to explain that she lived in the same area as her ex-partner and she became aware, via social media platforms, of some of his ex-partners and their stories of the effects of his violence and abuse:

One of his ex-girlfriends committed suicide, she killed herself; one just relapsed back into Valium; another one has never really had her confidence back; another one basically lives like a hermit.

Lola discussed her ex-partner's underage sex, prolific sexual offending, cheating on her, self-medicating with sex and/or pornography, his online and offline abuse of women, and a history of violence against women in a long succession of relationships. However, Lola said that her ex-partner's violence and abuse against women has remained invisible to the police and the crown prosecution service (or possibly ignored) within the broad continuum of her ex/partner's serious and serial violence and criminality.

While the police would respond to the perpetrator's public criminality, they seemed oblivious and/or unconcerned about his prolific and pervasive gendered violence and abuse. The perpetrator's violence/abuse against women and serial sexual offending seemed to get separated from his overt public acts of violence, such as fighting and assaults, as though violence that is less visible and perpetrated against women is of no importance and can be ignored. I would suggest this reflects the police reactions to different types of violence and abuse evident elsewhere in my research and demonstrates a hierarchy of police responses to different categories of violence/abuse committed. The police seem to show greater concern for crimes against property or violating public laws, such as driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, but when it comes to sexual and physical violence and the coercion and control of women, there is no or inadequate recognition or response to these crimes. Possibly, the police may have been unaware of this particular perpetrator's sexual offences and crimes against women, which would not excuse the inadequacy of the police response. Rather, this demonstrates the lack of knowledge or consideration that a perpetrator displaying a high level of toxic masculinity and performing a serious level of criminality and violence in public, is very likely also perpetrating violence in interpersonal relationships and private spaces (Alonso, 2018).

Lola's story also resonates, in part, with Mai's story in the previous data chapter, when Mai had attended the counselling assessment with her husband and he disclosed his violence and abuse against her, which was not followed up as a safeguarding matter. Lola said:

I took him to the doctor many times, and I'd sit next to him and say, please tell the doctor what you have done, and he would go, just a few pictures, and I would go, it's hundreds of masturbation videos. He refused to be honest.

While Lola had discussed her partner's prolific online sexual offending with the doctor, like Mai's husband, the explicit knowledge of violence/abuse was not followed up as a safeguarding matter; seemingly because the offender minimised his offences and the doctor

relied entirely on personal testimony as evidence on which to make a risk assessment. There appears to be insufficient concern towards sexual violence/abuse against women and girls for a doctor to report the matter to safeguarding services and/or the police.

Much of the perpetrator's violence that Lola described (gleaned from her ex-partner and his family), such as "gang fighting, street fighting, knife crime, stealing cars and violent assault", reflects the performance and manifestation of toxic masculinity. This also echoes Aisha's story of young men performing violence in all areas of their lives, and the connections between toxic masculinity and violence against women (Connell, 1995), which similarly resounds in Lola's story. Once again, this reinforces the importance of establishing the links between intimate partner/domestic abuse and violence and abuse and/or criminality that perpetrators enact both within and beyond the domestic.

Mai, Celia, and Lola, all survivors of their perpetrators' coercive control, showed that perpetrators of violence and abuse are not a homogenous group, and their actions do not necessarily fit into a neat typology of violence, and certainly not only the typology of 'domestic abusers'. All three perpetrators, however, enacted gendered violence/abuse and toxic masculinity, and the perpetrators had offended consistently over a period of many years and continue to offend (except Celia's father, who had died shortly before I interviewed her). None of the perpetrators had come to the attention of the authorities for coercive control or domestic abuse. Only Lola's ex-partner was involved with the police and the criminal justice system for his criminality beyond the domestic (excluding public and online violence/abuse against women), and Lola said, at the time of the interview, that she was aware that he continues in his criminal career, including the perpetration of serious and serial violence against women.

Importantly, my thematic data shows that the perpetration of violence and abuse in the home is often part of the perpetrator's broader continuum of violence and/or criminality that extends beyond the domestic sphere. However, the element of perpetrator coercive control indicates particularly insidious violence/abuse and demonstrates how skilled perpetrators are at hiding their offences, rather than displaying out-of-control overt, identifiable physical violence against victim-survivors. Lola's ex-partner enacted prolific, overt toxic masculinity in public, which extended from the violence and coercive control that he covertly perpetrated against women in private environments. This is broadly representative of my thematic data, which shows that when perpetrators inflicted physical harm against victim-survivors, this was almost always hidden and occurred in private environments, demonstrating that perpetrators are consistently in control of their actions and the evidence of coercive control that could be used to incriminate them.

**5.4 The Role of the Community in the Perpetration of Violence and Abuse**

My thematic data shows that in terms of considering violence and abuse that extends 'beyond the domestic', communities can collectively promote, endorse, and commit violence and abuse against victims, especially structurally marginalised victim-survivors such as women and girls. That is, violence/abuse against women and girls is presented as inevitable and the norm, while they are taught to accept and be silent about their experiences. Maya, a survivor of coercive control, physical, and sexual violence in domestic abuse, and now a domestic abuse worker, spoke about how her community, including her church, were complicit in violence/abuse against women and girls. To protect her anonymity, Maya spoke about 'African culture' in general terms to represent the range of women she supports, rather than specifically naming the African country that is originally her homeland and where she grew up before moving to the UK. However, Maya said that in both her homeland and the UK, there are close connections between her two communities. Maya stated:

> So the thing is, you don't argue with your husband even if he is wrong, you agree with him as part of the respect and everything, so I was trained not to question him or anything. Another thing is that marriages in my culture, whether or not they are based in Africa or in diaspora, it's like when two people are getting married there is the issue of the bride price, so the groom or his family pay the bride price to the bride's family. That's deeply entrenched in my culture's traditions, even though in modern times money is not always exchanged, or it is symbolically given but then returned, though for many years now that has been the excuse that abusers use, I have paid for you, so you are mine now.

Maya spoke in depth about how abusers are enabled by families and communities to perpetrate violence and abuse, how she was publicly watched and monitored by her community (by both women and men), who routinely reported her daily movements and behaviour to her husband. Furthermore, such coercive and controlling tactics towards women in Maya's community are so intrinsic to their lives, they do not necessarily see them as such, and Maya said that she questioned her perceptions of the violence and abuse that she was suffering. She continued:

> Oh, so many things and I hear the same from so many people I'm supporting now, that they didn't know what they [perpetrators] were doing was abuse. As I said, from an early age girls are conditioned to take it. Part of what is drummed into the girl-child in my culture is that whatever you see, whatever you experience, you keep quiet about it and just deal with it. So, I was like part of me, part of that, whatever violence or abuse I'm experiencing, I just have to keep quiet and deal with it. Then, you know,

the other part is just that I didn't want to believe it because I thought I loved him so much and, you know, all these things I'm seeing are in my imagination or whatever.

Maya also spoke about being unable rely on older women for support with the domestic violence and abuse she was suffering, though elders in her community are revered for having wisdom that comes with age; therefore, if problems occur in the home, they are generally brought in to intervene in family matters and offer advice:

> I discovered that even though women suffer abuse in my community, for some silly reason older women condone it. Even though they know it's happening and they probably themselves have experienced it, they condone it and they enable abusers to carry on perpetrating violence. And that really floors me.

Maya also spoke about how she was generally treated in the family and the violence and abuse she experienced from her husband's family members:

> So, when a woman marries into a family she's like a house guest, a glorified slave to them, so they can talk to them and treat them anyhow. A 5-year-old child can talk to them anyhow, the new bride. So, this 18-year-old niece came to live in our house and she would treat me anyhow. So, it's like I have to respect her with the same respect that I give to him [husband]. Respect her, but as a teenager, she took it for granted, looked down on me and would be really, really abusive and disrespectful. You know, there was a time that I told them [family], listen, all this that's happening in the house and I'm not happy. And he [husband] said to me, listen, this girl was practically born into my hands, so she's like a child to me, my own child, so I can't ask her to leave, that kind of thing, you'll just have to put up with it. I spoke to the elders in the church and community and the advice I was given was look, she's a girl, she'll be married one day, then she'll be out of your home, so just put up with it until she moves out.

While Maya explained how girls in her culture are conditioned to be subordinates of men, abuse by women and girls towards other women and girls is also permitted and overlooked. Maya also said that her husband's family would often arrive at short notice and stay for long periods when she would have to look after them and accommodate all their needs in cramped living conditions and not having a bed to sleep in, as well as working and looking after her husband and their two children. She said she was treated as a slave, while guests were permitted to be abusive and disrespectful towards her. However, at that time, she said she was afraid to leave her husband, as she feared losing her children:

> In African culture, it's like the child belongs to the father whether it's a boy or girl. The child is the father's. So, it's like, if a woman has been divorced, the idea is to push her out of the house and leave the children behind.

Maya experienced coercive control in her marriage over many years (as well as physical and sexual violence, and I return to Maya's story again later in the chapter). However, she also suffered abuse within her broader community and by her husband's family. Maya was also raised in a patriarchal community, so in many ways she had been conditioned to expect and accept violence/abuse as a part of her everyday life. Her own family could not intervene in the violence and abuse that she was suffering because once she was married, she was regarded as belonging to her husband's family. Therefore, it is difficult to see Maya as only a survivor of domestic abuse occurring strictly within the couple, as much of the violence/abuse that she experienced was intertwined with domestic abuse but occurred beyond the home environment (creating a connection between private and public violence). For example, daily monitoring of her amongst her community and reporting her movements/behaviour back to her husband which, Maya said, was subject to her community's interpretation and judgement. Her husband would often say, "my ears are full of you", which meant that the reports he was getting from the community were not good and that Maya was in deep trouble, which fuelled his domestic violence against her.

### 5.4.1 Structural and Systemic Violence: Controlling Victim-Survivors Under the Guise of Protection

The UK Government describe domestic abuse as "hidden" violence and acknowledge that "the majority of victims of domestic abuse are unlikely to ever appear in official statistics" (ONS, 2018: paragraph 2). This is strongly reflected in my data and leads me to argue that while the UK Government acknowledge the indiscernibility of the private and insidious forms of violence/abuse that victim-survivors experience, there is no simultaneous consideration of the indiscernibility of (corresponding) perpetrators. The domestic abuse/sexual violence sector has been resourced (though inadequately) to deal with the *effects and consequences* of intimate partner and domestic abuse without effectively addressing the underlying causes that allow perpetrators to escape detection, accountability, and to continue offending.

My thematic data evidences that when the power of the carceral state is inaccessible to victim-survivors, and the evidence of violence and abuse consists chiefly of survivors' testimonies against perpetrators, perpetrators' behaviour is deemed by community services and the criminal justice system to not pass the threshold for criminality. Simultaneously, structural and systemic power enables the blaming of women and minoritised individuals and "allows perpetrators to be untouchable" (Srinivasan, 2021: 21).

The current response to policing domestic abuse is wide-ranging, complex, and resource intensive but largely characterised by a one-size-fits-all minimum standard ethos, with progression in resource prioritisation based on risk assessment (CJJI, 2020). It is standard procedure, in accordance with England and Wales statutory guidance (Home Office, 2023), for police officers to attend all intimate partner and domestic abuse call-outs, complete a risk assessment in every case, re-assess potential risk with a specialist, and make an arrest where there is the power to do so (CJJI, 2020). However, Katrina, a survivor of coercive control and a domestic abuse worker, voiced her concerns about risk assessments:

> I've accompanied many victims when an officer has come out and conducted the DASH [Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment risk assessment form (Dash Risk Model, 2022)] and I'm thinking, this is terrible. And it's ended up really pissing off the victim because they've [police officer] just sat there and gone: has he done things of a sexual nature that make you feel blah, blah, blah? And I'm thinking, god, you haven't even built up any rapport and literally reading the questions like it's a shopping list, and then ticking a box. And that's why we don't get a true picture of what's going on and, actually, does the DASH form - really? That's our standard? That's what the police use, but does it really highlight coercive-controlling issues? No.

Similarly, Kasia, an ISVA at a SARC, reported:

> Obviously, working so closely with the police and some of the men, how they talk to victims about rape and sexual assault, or even how they talk to me, a professional woman, talking about it professional-to-professional and I think, you shouldn't be saying that. Or they have a form of, um, like a chip on their shoulder, like, I'm right, I'm a police officer, this is how it goes.

Katrina's narrative highlights a recurrent lack of police sensitivity and respect for women reporting violence and abuse, especially of a sexual nature. Kasia's narrative reinforces this and also testifies to her experience of the lack of police respect for professional women in her position, as well as their expectation of taking full control of violence/abuse criminal proceedings. This was also demonstrated in Katrina's case history in the previous data chapter, when her comprehensive experience of coercive control had been dismissed by the police and social services; when Dan, an IDVA, attended a MARAC and presented the danger his client was in, which was "shrugged off" by the detective inspector; and when Liz - as a victim-survivor - was wrongly framed by the police as perpetrating violence, when her abuser had got the police to collude with his violence.

Herman (1997: 240) states that, "the relationship between victim and investigator is subject to the same power imbalances and the same contagious emotions as any other relationship". My data shows that this concept is compounded within the police officer/victim-survivor dynamic, as a police officer's authority provides a level of immunity against accountability for their abusive behaviour and enables them to operate beyond the law (Evans and Parr, 2021), while keeping victim-survivors firmly subjected to it. Systems of structural power that marginalise individuals are psychologically abusive in ways that are comparable to person-to-person psychological abuse (Evans and Parr, 2021). They deny people's dignity and limit the types of resources that victim-survivors have access to, to make meaningful lives; instead, perpetrator violence/abuse can be denied or minimised by the police and the needs of victim-survivors may be diminished or dismissed, as demonstrated in my interview participants' accounts in the previous data chapter. Again, this shows the extension of the victim-survivor's interpersonal abusive experience to include structural/systemic violence and abuse, and the subsequent broader perpetuation of gendered violence and abuse - constituting a continuum of violence/abuse - I argue.

Historically, police authority has been characterised by hierarchical relations in which some people's views and contributions count and others do not, often to serve the privileged in society and oppress those who are marginalised (Smith, 2020; Srinivasan, 2021). Oppressive power can be fostered and enabled to perpetuate when the police influence the outcome of criminal proceedings to the detriment of victim-survivors and to the advantage of perpetrators. Katrina suggested that filling in a standard tick-box survey does not always capture the wide range of the individualised methods of coercive and controlling offending. I would also suggest that standardised surveys impose a pre-existing framework for what the England and Wales Home Office (2023) constitutes as violence. Thus, there is a further problem that the pre-existing framework can also fail to capture the complexity, chronic and cumulative nature of coercive control, *and* continuums of violence. At this point, violence/abuse against victim-survivors becomes intersectional, structural violence/abuse, perpetrated or enabled by the professionals who adhere to and uphold structures and processes that have gendered, racial and other systemic inequalities built into them. Therefore, the power/control that policing offers poses an additional risk of abuse of power.

Moreover, a tick-box survey could not possibly capture the violence and abuse that the survivors in the previous data chapter endured, such as Liz and the decades of coercive control that she experienced; or the perpetrator's methods of abuse that Katrina could not easily articulate; or the coercive control that the survivors across the interviews conveyed by relating "every little detail" of their story. This reinforces my argument that the Home Office

(2023) have tried to 'fit' coercive control into a quantifiable form and this is not only ineffective in supporting survivors but actively further marginalises and violates them.

The use of the DASH risk assessment (DASH Risk Model, 2022) in every intimate partner and domestic abuse case reported is also troubling. I would suggest that if the DASH report is inaccurate or insufficient, due to, for example, an insensitively handled interview (like Katrina reported), subsequent steps to re-assess risk with a specialist will not be based on the authenticity of the victim-survivor's violent and abusive experience. This may then fail to make a perpetrator arrest where there would have been the power to do so, if accurate and equitable information had been gathered by the police.

Katrina further explained how the police allow perpetrators to continue offending, illustrated in the following example:

> We still are not getting the recognition, um, certainly not at the level of police and prosecution of these cases. I had a case with a woman [domestic abuse victim-survivor] whose ex-partner, well, they'd split and he was living separately, and she said he'd start mentioning things in conversation that she was like, but how does he know that? I've only mentioned those things in my own home. Anyway, it transpired she found a bugging device in the lounge, and one in the bedroom. He'd do things like come and sit at the bottom of her garden, just sit at the bottom of the garden and stare at her house. When she reported it to the police they said, yes, but he's got a right to do that because he still is the joint owner of your home.

Katrina said that the police showed no empathy towards the victim-survivor, or any understanding of domestic abuse, the violating nature of surveillance, or the implication of possible violence and abuse escalation. The police seemed more concerned about the "rights" of the perpetrator, and did not view him as an offender, or at least they were willing to find justifications for his behaviour and their own inaction. Katrina continued:

> She wrote about 35 pages of evidence, which I helped her to condense down to about seven to take to the police and they just said, we won't touch it. And this had, you know, this is to the point, like I said, where they were justifying that he was able, he was entitled to have devices in his house to listen in to her.

Katrina has 15 years' experience working in domestic abuse and probation services, working with victim-survivors, perpetrators, and families, and she is extremely knowledgeable with regard to coercive control and domestic abuse. Yet her comprehensive experience, knowledge and expertise had not been held in regard by the police, in this case, and they allowed the perpetrator to continue offending. The theme of the police undermining

professionals in support services is consistent throughout Katrina's narrative. This also reflects an apparent systematic dismissal of women's reporting of violence and abuse, whether they are professionals or victim-survivors.

Katrina's evidence also shows that the police showed no regard or understanding for the fact that violence can be psychological as much as physical, and that professional awareness of different forms of violence does not automatically lead to action or structural change. Katrina's client had no voice in the matter of the abuse that was being perpetrated against her; she was also dismissed by the police. Ultimately, the police controlled the situation and influenced the outcome: that no further action against the alleged perpetrator needed to be taken and they left Katrina's client in an abusive situation. The police also did not heed the vital knowledge that the period of highest risk for victims-survivors of domestic abuse is when a relationship has ended (SafeLives, 2022). This happens when a perpetrator has lost control of the victim-survivor, yet the police did not consider "bugging devices" as a form of re-instating perpetrator control in this case, evidencing further, egregious failures of the existing systems intended to address and prevent such violence and abuse.

Kasia, an ISVA at a SARC, expressed her concern about perpetrators' high level of harm committed against the clients that she was supporting, even after they had been reported to the police. She also reflected on the ongoing risks perpetrators pose, which had seemingly been ignored by the police in her experience:

> She introduced him [the perpetrator] to her mum, so she's now in fear for her mum's safety. So, if she doesn't answer her phone after a certain amount of time he will say, I'm going to your mum's house to punch her in the face. And there are safety measures put on her mum's house, but she continues in this relationship and he is absolutely awful to her, he will call her a bitch, say he's going to rape her, going to rape her mum.

Kasia said the police were aware of the danger the perpetrator posed to her client and her mother, as they recommended the installation of safety measures on her mother's house, but at the same time, they had not intervened. The predominant theme to emerge from Kasia's stories of perpetrators' violence are her constant, exhausting endeavours to try to her keep clients safe. Kasia continued:

> One time she went to his house and he gave her a drink, she felt sick then she sort of passed out, woke up the next day and she thinks he spiked her drink. And there's that level of, element of, he's strangled her, and so it's explaining the dangers of strangulation and how serious that is. She knows that he's a perpetrator of violence to women, and not just one, to multiple women, and she's still in that relationship.

194

> She was also concerned he gave her an STI [sexually transmitted infection], so we
> had to arrange that follow up for her.

In this case, the police did not question the hold the perpetrator has over the victim-survivor (comparative to the case that Kasia discussed in the previous data chapter) or prioritise intervening in his coercion and control, even though Kasia fears that her client's life is at risk, that the perpetrator may kill her:

> In the joint conversations I've had with her IDVA and also the client, it's about how we
> can keep her safe because she might go to his house and it could be for the last time
> because he becomes so angry with her.

Furthermore, non-fatal strangulation (NFS) is a known method for perpetrators to control and intimidate their victims. It is an insidious form of violence in intimate partner/domestic abuse that is difficult to prosecute, as it may leave no visible external (only internal) signs of injury; yet strangulation is known to be a strong risk indicator that a victim could be killed by the perpetrator (Ofer, 2022). While this is well-documented within the domestic abuse literature (see, for example, Women's Aid, 2021), my data indicates that such insidious, invisible methods of violence, intimidation and control do not always get picked up by the police.

Dan, an IDVA, also spoke about his experience of police's inaction when supporting a client at high risk of harm:

> The perpetrator was one of the top offenders in the county and he was with several
> women at the time, and he was incredibly dangerous, chasing one of my clients
> around the car park with a machete while the kids were locked in the car.

Notably, Dan said the perpetrator "was with several women at the time" and that the perpetrator had been identified as one of the "top offenders in the county", therefore, it becomes a matter of questioning: if he is known to be a dangerous offender, why is he permitted to be armed with a dangerous weapon, permitted to continue perpetrating violence against women and children, and why are the police not intervening in his violence?

### 5.4.2 The Commonality of No Further Police Action Taken

Kasia automatically assumed that I would be aware of the common knowledge within UK violence/abuse service provision, that so few cases of perpetrator violence reach the courts and proceed to prosecution. Kasia said:

> I will see them [perpetrators] if the case goes to court but you know how poor
> charging decisions are from the CPS, so rarely I'd see them in court. Very often, I'm
> having NFA [no further action] meetings when cases are closed [by the police or

CPS] and I hear what some of the men say and, yes, their explanation as to why they sexually assaulted someone. I would say, yes, they [perpetrators] manipulate services and the police, yes, I would say that. So, when we have those meetings the police will say, we've closed the case and this is why…. So, then a client will ask, what was his [the perpetrator's] explanation? And he [the perpetrator] would say [via the police], he said you wanted it for years [sex], you've always been after him.

As Kasia stated, "you know how poor charging decisions are from the CPS", as *most* cases of perpetrator violence do not reach the court (Baird, 2020/21). My data demonstrates that this is certainly, in part, due to perpetrators' manipulating individuals within service systems (such as in Liz's case in the previous data chapter) but it is also indicative that the police, the CPS, and service systems are colluding with perpetrators' misogynist narratives that portray women as blameworthy. In the case above, the woman was framed by the perpetrator as hyper-sexual, saying "you wanted it for years [sex], you've always been after him", as a form of justification, rather than identified as the victim-survivor of the perpetrator's sexual violence. The police, Kasia said, routinely accept the perpetrator's explanation and justification for their violence or abuse, as portrayed in Katrina's story of the "bugging devices", for example.

Kasia particularly questioned whether the police had not adequately responded to victim-survivors from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups due to racism:

> My case load, they are all cases from BAME backgrounds. And I find that really difficult because I'm a BAME female and it's worrying to think what is going on with racism.

Kasia's narrative resonates with the diversity and inclusion issues that are evident in my data relating to policing gendered violence and abuse, and that organisations like Sistah Space (2023) have long highlighted, leading to their campaign for Valerie's Law (Lewis, 2021)[2] - a strong theme that emerged throughout my data and is evident in Maya's story below.

Maya's story of coercive control, physical and sexual violence in the presence of her children highlights an example of the police failing to recognise (or ignoring) a repeat offender where race plays a significant role. Maya told her story:

> He [husband] had punched me everywhere, face, it got to a point he was just doing it blindly. He had me on the floor and was sat on me, punching my head, he was

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[2] Sistah Space campaigned for Valerie's Law, a law which, if instated, will make sure anyone who is supporting Black survivors of abuse (including the police, healthcare, VAWG sector and schools) is given compulsory training by African Heritage people, on African and Caribbean Heritage women's experiences of abuse (Lewis, 2021).

actually sat on me, really violent. So, the police came, and at that time the police said they couldn't do anything because it was a civil matter [civil law is concerned with the rights and property of individuals or organisations, such as personal injury that is not deemed within criminal law]. It was like, no arrest was made, they just told him to get his stuff and go and not return and that kind of thing.

Had the police acted appropriately and intervened in the perpetrator's violence, further violence against Maya may have been prevented. The police seemed to assume that the perpetrator would comply with their verbal instruction to leave and not return, with no follow-up to check on Maya's welfare, and seemingly no awareness (or care) of the serious danger the perpetrator posed. Maya continued:

Another time, I knew in that split second I was going to get raped but I wasn't penetrated by his manhood but by his fist. And my daughter was on the bed next to me! His aim was to do the maximum amount of damage possible and he was scratching inside me, he was savage […]. I tried to call the police and he smashed the phone out of my hand, and I had to scream for my other daughter, call the police! call the police! and she did. So while the police were on they could hear what's going on in the background and he was saying he was going to kill me. So, the police heard all that. So, when they came, *eventually*, they said, look, we heard what he said on the phone and we would advise you, but can't force you, but strongly advise you, not to stay in the house tonight. He has threatened that when he comes back from work he will kill you.

The police advising Maya not to stay in the house put the burden of risk prevention on her - the victim - while offering no safety or prevention measures from their side. Furthermore, they responded to an 'incident' of violence, rather than acknowledging a pattern of violence and abuse or taking seriously a dangerous perpetrator. Maya's husband had viciously beaten her on more than one occasion, had raped her, committed rape in the presence of their children, and threatened to kill her, but this led to no action from the police. And while the police acknowledged the danger Maya was facing from her violent husband in the moment, they suggested that she should remove herself from further harm, rather than having law enforcement deal with the issue of a violent offender. Maya concluded:

The report was made and all that, um, and um, he was questioned and I was questioned, as well. I mean, I had to give my statement and all that, and I was told he was going to be released within the next hour, to get anything I need to get, documents and all that. And that's what I did and that was the last time I stayed in that house.

When physical and sexual violence is not taken seriously by the police (Maya was admitted to hospital following her husband's physical and sexual assault), it becomes hard to envisage that the coercion and control of victim-survivors - over many years - as Maya experienced, and at times escalated to physical and sexual violence, will be considered by the police. Maya was left with two options: leaving her home with her two children, to seek a place of safety; or stay in the violent and abusive situation, at high risk of harm to both her physical and mental well-being (and her two daughters witnessing violence). Her husband was free to continue offending. He was not charged with physically assaulting and raping Maya and faced no consequences for his offences, despite the fact that some of the violence, including threats of murder, had been witnessed by the police first hand over the phone and they admitted to this. Maya, the victim-survivor, had to leave her home to ensure her safety, as opposed to her husband - the perpetrator of violence - being compelled to take any action or accountability. Maya lived in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation until she could find a permanent home, rendering her temporarily homeless; her husband, the perpetrator, remained safe in the family home. Maya, however, did not question whether the police had not taken her situation seriously because she is a woman of colour but the potential impact of race must not be ignored. Furthermore, Maya - as reported earlier in the chapter - could not rely on her family and community for support, as they were also complicit in her husband's violence against her.

Within masculinist organisations and institutions, such as the police or the military, there tends to be a culture of valorising masculinity (Acker, 1990). A social group that valorises masculinity encourages masculine traits of domination, the devaluation of women, violence, and misogyny (Kupers, 2005), subjugating women and minoritised individuals, such as transgender people or gay men, while promoting the dominance of hyper-masculine men (Hershcovis, et al., 2021). Therefore, when belief systems within a social group deny or justify violence against women and minoritised individuals, group members tend to either fail to recognise or act on violence and abuse, or see those who engage in it as a problem (Hershcovis, et al., 2021).

## 5.5 Summary

In the UK, due to continued pressure from feminists, violence against women and girls has been the focus of increased political and policy attention. While domestic abuse has been the predominant lens for officially defining and responding to this problem, feminists have campaigned for the adoption of the term 'violence against women' (Horvath and Kelly, 2007). The term "violence against women" acknowledges that not only do women experience more severe and frequent violence and abuse, but this is also connected to other systems of

inequality based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, immigrant status, class, ableism, ageism, and so on (Thiara and Gill, 2010:15).

Adopting a gendered rationale towards violence and abuse acknowledges a pattern of coercive control perpetrated by an abuser; however, it is important to recognise that definitions are complex and cannot be universally applied unmodified, or without qualification to all victim-survivors. For example, men such as George become victims of misogynist and sexist perpetrators; or Marc, who was struggling with male violence in the workplace due to structural and systemic toxic masculinity; or Issac, who feared his friends would judge him as unmasculine for being unable to stand up to his controlling father, or them knowing how terrified he had been of him.

Gendered violence and abuse can also be perpetuated by family and community groups, occurring in both public and private spaces. Perpetrators are proficient at weaponizing structural inequalities, cultural stigmas, and gaps in the system to assert and maintain power and control over people for the purposes of regulating their behaviour and actions, and to ensure that individuals (including adults and children) comply with UK societally stipulated inequalities and gendered cultural norms. At times, this also takes on culturally specific forms, such as forced marriage and so-called 'honour-based violence', which can also be viewed on the continuum of violence (Thiara and Gill, 2010).

My data evidences that gendered violence and abuse, conceptualised as a singular and interpersonal form of violence, such as domestic abuse, overlooks what is a predictable expression of the general social infrastructure – such as sexism, misogyny, racism, homophobia, ableism, classism - within interpersonal relationships and private spaces, like the microcosm of the "family". While the patterns of structural irregularities and failings of existing systems, like the criminal justice system, do not routinely effectively address or prevent long-term, insidious, and cumulatively damaging abuse, such as coercive control. Most crucially, I have argued that coercive control is not isolated to the private or the interpersonal but extends out into shared communal cultural, and public spaces. This relationship between private/public manifestations of violence and abuse therefore needs to be understood and meaningfully acted on.

Intersectionality, as a critical social theory, investigates how knowledge has been vital for resisting interpersonal, structural, and systemic domination. Whether visible or not, resistance to unwarranted power relations of race, class, and gender have always existed. Individuals and groups who are oppressed within systems of power create and share knowledge that fosters their survival, resilience, and resistance (Collins and Bilge, 2016). Therefore, I would argue, that understanding coercive control beyond the domestic

environment, as an abusive method of facilitating and maintaining power and control over individuals and groups, would contribute towards effectively analysing and dealing with intersectional violence, which crosses the divide between private and public. Bringing to light the hidden methods and systems that perpetrators use both interpersonally and collectively would elucidate the maintenance of power and control over women and marginalised individuals and groups, across UK society.

**Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusions - Developing the Concept of Coercive Control Within and Beyond the Domestic Environment**

**6.1 Introduction**

The previous two chapters have set out the key themes generated from 20 semi-structured interviews with survivors, and professionals working with victim-survivors and perpetrators of coercive control that were conducted for this research project. The synthesis of my research in this chapter considers the interpretations of the study and the implications of my developed understanding of coercive control. I thus propose what the field of coercive control, professionals in violence/abuse work and service systems can learn from my research; and how this may translate for UK stakeholders, policy, legislation, and professional practice. The chapter also explores the limitations of the study; and recommends how my study may be taken forward with further research on coercive control.

**6.2 The Importance of Researching Coercive Control Within and Beyond the Domestic**

Coercive control is at the heart of most intimate partner and domestic abuse, yet only a small minority of perpetrators are held to account, which is consistently reflected in the low (and decreasing) conviction rates for controlling or coercive behaviour offences in England and Wales (ONS, 2021, 2022, 2023a). Therefore, it is important to investigate the difficulties of evidencing this type of violence and abuse. Furthermore, in the UK (and beyond), the concept of coercive control is predominantly siloed to intimate partner and domestic abuse, which results in a specific form of coercive control in settings where the law (or common definitions of coercive control) do not tend to have reach. Thus, existing conceptual understandings and policy practices are struggling to recognise, capture, and respond to the full complex spectrum of coercive control, given the dominant framings and emphasis on one-to-one relationships and domestic abuse, rather than a more in-depth conceptual understanding of coercive control beyond one-to-one relationships and domestic abuse.

**6.3 The Main Aims of the Study**

There are three main aims of the study: to develop the conceptualisation of coercive control, in order to elucidate the difficulties of evidencing this type of violence and abuse; to investigate the connections between private and public violence/abuse in relation to coercive control; and to situate the concept of coercive control beyond the domestic. This chapter draws together the findings from the study in response to my research questions that asked:

1. What are the factors that can impede evidencing coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse?

2. What is the significance of understanding the connections between private and public violence and abuse in relation to coercive control?

3. What are the advantages of situating the concept of coercive control, as gendered violence and abuse, beyond the domestic?

My key research findings are as follows:

- Despite the UK scholarly conceptualisations and policy/legislation relating to controlling or coercive behaviour as a course of conduct, UK police still often respond to domestic abuse call-outs as 'isolated incidents' of violence. Thus, they do not always consider potential cumulative histories of violence/abuse and subsequently overlook coercive control as a pattern of abuse that is perpetrated by abusers over a protracted period of time. When specifically coercive control is reported, without material evidence to take to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), cases can be discontinued by the police. However, aside from a purported lack of evidence, there are concerning factors (such as professionals' unethical practices) that can lead to the discontinuation of cases. There are also significant factors that contribute to the difficulties of evidencing coercive control and/or its obfuscation (such as victim-survivors often being unable to conceptualise coercive control; and the lack of recognition within service systems of victim-survivors' trauma symptomatology in response to coercive control), which need be better understood within UK policy, legislation, and support organisations.

- Violence and abuse can be intrinsic to perpetrators' lives. That is, rather than violence/abuse being compartmentalised within a specific environment, domestic abusers can project an all-encompassing hyper-masculine persona in both their private/domestic and public/communal lives. Therefore, while male violence/abuse is problematic in the domestic environment, simultaneously, their violence, abuse, and criminality can also be problematic beyond the domestic, such as within the workplace (often as male-to-male violence) and across their social environments.

- Elucidating the connections between private and public violence/abuse in relation to coercive control allows the identification of the different contexts and ways in which coercive control - as gendered violence and abuse - occurs on a continuum. For example, victim-survivors' experiences of coercive control in intimate partner and domestic abuse can be exacerbated, extended, and/or obfuscated by some professionals, and the structural systems within the organisations that are intended to help them. Comparative abusive dynamics can also be perpetrated by personnel/professionals, and through structural systems, in organisations and

institutions that are tasked with responding to workplace harassment, bullying and abuse, and supporting victim-survivors.

- Applying psychological and socio-political perspectives to coercive control (Stark, 2007) that occurs beyond the domestic, such workplaces and institutions, distinguishes conceptualisations of mutual conflict from coercion; while identifying coercive-controlling strategies and tactics can differentiate systematic interpersonal abuse from bullying interactions (Martin and Klien, 2013). However, when bullying or abuse is reported in workplaces/institutions, personnel and practitioners are more inclined to impose an interpretation of 'mutuality' or 'conflict,' thus, the abuser and the abused are presented as equal contributors to the problem. Neutrality is not a viable position when dealing with the systematic abuse of one person by another, therefore, framing coercion as cases of 'mutual conflict' detracts from individual accountability for violence/abuse, and presents mutual responsibility for interpersonal clashes. Situating the concept of coercive control beyond the domestic highlights the importance of distinguishing between conflict and coercion. A specialised assessment of violence/abuse allows coercion and control to supplant notions of mutuality, and enable the accurate identification and appropriate response to reports of workplace abuse, as well as identifying and responding to the abusive dynamics that can occur within institutional/organisational help-seeking contexts.

## 6.4 The Practical and Theoretical Implications of the Findings from the Study

My key contributions to the scholarship on coercive control are, firstly, extending the contemporary academic understanding of the issues that impede practitioners/professionals in service systems (such as the police, the criminal justice system and social services) evidencing coercive control in intimate partner/domestic abuse; and the issues that hinder victim-survivors' understanding and/or communicating their experiences of coercive control to practitioners/professionals in help-seeking contexts and/or their communities. Further, my research extensively enhances the knowledge of the factors that can prevent practitioners'/professionals' recognition of, and/or adequate response to, the effects of coercive control on victim-survivors' personhood and lives; and the structural and systemic issues that can prevent holding perpetrators to account for their offences, which, in turn, enables abusers to continue offending.

Secondly, my thesis contributes to the scholarship on coercive control by elucidating the connections between private and public violence/abuse in relation to controlling and coercive behaviour offences. My research demonstrates how private/interpersonal and public/social/institutional violence and abuse intersect in coercive control. I evidence abusive

practices within service system provision for victim-survivors, and/or within their communities, which show how their experiences of interpersonal violence/abuse can be extended beyond survivors' one-to-one relationships and the domestic, constituting broadly reaching continuums of violence/abuse.

Thirdly, my research contributes to the scholarship on coercive control by situating the concept beyond the domestic (such as workplaces, institutions and organisations). Comprehending the concept of coercive control that occurs beyond the domestic expands academic knowledge and practitioners'/professionals' understanding of the distinction between cases of violence/abuse that are incorrectly framed as 'mutual conflict' from the more sinister, systematic 'patterns of abuse' that are perpetrated against a person (or persons) by an abuser - constituting a perpetrator/victim(s) dynamic. My thesis further demonstrates how interpersonal workplace or institutional violence/abuse can intersect with structural and systemic violence/abuse. This interpersonal-public/social/institutional dynamic is comparable to the experiences of victim-survivors of intimate partner/domestic abuse in their help-seeking and/or community contexts. Thus, violence/abuse that exists on a continuum (when the collective/community forms part of the abusive mechanism) can be seen to transpire across a range of help-seeking and social contexts, such as the police, the criminal justice system, social services, workplaces, communities, and peer groups, as evidenced in chapters four and five. Identifying interpersonal 'patterns of abuse' and how that violence/abuse is extended within and/or across service systems or communities, indicates a broader coercive-controlling violence/abuse problem, beyond only one-to-one relationships and the domestic.

My review of the literature on coercive control demonstrates that the contemporary academic/scholarly conceptualisations (for example, work by Dutton and Goodman (2005), Johnson (1995, 2008), and Stark (2007, 2009)) have siloed the concept of coercive control to one-to-one relationships in intimate partner/domestic abuse. However, to situate coercive control beyond the domestic, I elected to research the concept within the transdisciplinary field of Women's Studies. Many women who had been active in Women's Liberation Movements took their activism into higher education and, during the 1970s and 1980s, Women's Studies' courses and programmes were established at universities (Charles, 2020). Feminists argued both that gender was fundamental to disciplines such as history, English and sociology and that there should be a specific area called Women's Studies (Charles, 2020). This movement within education was initially pioneered in the United States, however, feminists in higher education elsewhere soon became involved and the number of Women's Studies' courses and degree programmes were greatly expanded (Charles, 2020). This growth in courses/programmes led to Women's Studies being

recognised as an interdisciplinary field of study in its own right; a development that can be seen as a significant outcome of the Women's Movement and gender becoming a central part of the curriculum in many arts and social science disciplines (Charles, 2020). The demands raised by Women's Liberation Movements are also central to the global political agenda (Charles, 2020). This has transpired by feminists working both within and beyond political parties to develop policies which address the demands of feminist movements and, crucially, within universities to create the knowledge on which these policies are based (Charles, 2020).

While my review of the literature evidences the siloing of coercive control to the domestic, simultaneously, I evidence how transdisciplinary the concept is; therefore, studying coercive control within the transdisciplinary field of Women's Studies allowed the concept to be examined from the perspective of a range of constructs (gendered, clinical/psychological, social and legal), as opposed to only examining coercive control as a unitary phenomenon that is perpetrated within the context of the domestic. Moreover, a multi-dimensional understanding of coercive control is important, as my project adopts a 'transdisciplinary approach' to coercive control, to enable a broader comprehension of this type of violence and abuse that is perpetrated both within and beyond the domestic.

Furthermore, feminist values in research are principally concerned with the politics of power. By their very nature, feminist research approaches within Women's Studies endeavour to create spaces and opportunities to reveal lived experience of power disparities and provide evidence that can be used to work towards addressing these deep-seated inequalities (Jenkins et al., 2019). Women's Studies promotes the concept that it is not enough to consider that there is one solution or series of steps to take to achieve gender equality, as different groups of people are faced with different struggles. This knowledge helps others to understand the diverse, lived experiences of individuals based on both their identities and extenuating circumstances, thus, further extending the understanding of societal structures and power dynamics (Jenkins, et al., 2019). By developing my knowledge of societal/cultural structures and systems, I could readily identify institutional inequalities and the related problems (such as the intersection of interpersonal and structural/systemic violence and abuse); I could then approach these problematic issues with care, comprehensively research- as well as apply professional practice-informed awareness and understanding.

Utilising work from a range of feminist research thus allowed me to identify the dynamics of power and control across a range of violence/abuse contexts. For example, Ahmed's (2012, 2021) feminist work and activism within (and beyond) institutional structures, such as universities, is deeply focused on institutional violence, including interpersonal harassment

and bullying, as well as the impacts of "institutional mechanics" (2021: 6). Ahmed (2021) therefore elucidates individuals' experiences of interpersonal violence within institutions, as well as the institutional violence/abuse they can experience when attempting to deal with the primary perpetrator of violence.

While Ahmed's (2012, 2021) work describes continuums of violence, the controlling and coercive nature of interpersonal harassment and bullying, and structural institutional violence (as does Hirigoyen's (1998) work on psychological/emotional abuse both within and beyond the domestic, including the intersection of private/interpersonal and public/social/institutional violence and abuse), neither Ahmed nor Hirigoyen explicitly name coercive control as such in their work. Yet, understanding these perpetrator dynamics and victim-survivor experiences of violence/abuse through the lens of 'coercive control' (also demonstrated in Martin and Klein's (2013) work on workplace abuse) brings something new and necessary to this conversation on harassment and bullying, as well as further understanding the intersection of private/interpersonal and structural/systemic violence. My research strongly aligns with Ahmed's work in *Complaint!* (2021) and *On Being Included* (2012), and Hirigoyen's work in *Stalking the Soul* (1998), thus, facilitating my analysis of the structural and systemic issues that are evident through my interviewees' experiences of violence/abuse in their workplaces, help-seeking contexts, communities and families.

Furthermore, the contemporary research/theorisations of coercive control currently do not sufficiently consider or concretise how violence/abuse does not necessarily remain confined behind the closed doors of the domestic environment; or how the wider community (such as co-workers, family members, friends, etc.) can (often inadvertently) become part of a broader strategic pattern of abuse. Here, work by Walby (1989, 1990) on the transition from private to public patriarchy in the UK in recent decades, and Kelly's (1988) work on the continuum of sexual violence, were useful to further theorise the connections between private and public violence/abuse.

The effectiveness of Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control - which has significantly influenced so much UK policy and practice - appears to have limitations, as the perpetration of coercive control continues to be highly problematic in the UK (see, for example, ONS, 2023c), as well as jurisdictions beyond (WHO, 2021). Although gender is, importantly, key to Stark's (2007) framing of the concept, he does not wholly engage with the ways in which gender intersects with other structural/cultural constraints to produce multiple inequalities and barriers for women (particularly Black, Indigenous, and ethnic minority women) seeking help for coercive control; his concept also fails to address men as victim-survivors or significantly include LGBTQ+ victim-survivors (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Furthermore,

Stark (2007, 2009) does not consider the broader continuum of coercive-controlling mechanisms that extend beyond the domestic. However, conducting research within the transdisciplinary field of Women's Studies shows just how greatly people's experiences with gender differ based on other identities and positions that people hold, such as ethnicity/race, indigenous or minority status, socioeconomic status, religion, and so on (CEDAW, 2017).

Feminist research epistemologies have recognised that progressive and innovative methodologies and methods of analysis are needed to include the various factors contributing to the lives and motives of research participants; encouraging not only the study of the differences between males and females (Hester, 2012) but also the varied experiences that occur within gender and sexuality as well (Donovan and Barnes, 2019). Documenting gender-differentiated aspects of the research agenda means understanding not only research participants' individual characteristics of gender, race, class, sexuality etc., but also untangling broader social dimensions of history and power. Therefore, my research mitigates some of the limitations of Stark's (2007, 2009) (and others') conceptual framing of coercive control and its confinement to the domestic environment. For example, my interview data delves into experiences of coercive control that are uniquely filtered through and impacted by intersecting identity categories, such as sexuality, race, and even age, alongside gender. Stark (2007, 2009) also does not sufficiently explore the nuances of what coercive control means, or how it manifests, on a continuum between the domestic and beyond it. Crucially, my research concretises coercive control through my interview data evidence and the copious examples of the creative, unexpected ways in which patterns of coercive-controlling abuse can emerge in everyday life, in the workplace, and even in the experiences of domestic abuse caseworkers attempting to support their clients who are survivors of intimate partner/domestic abuse.

More recently in the field of coercive control, Barlow and Walklate (2022) have offered a perspective that explores how professional responses to victimised women can expose them to further jeopardy in the criminal and family courts, child protection systems, and from perpetrators themselves. Thus, they advocate situating the rising preoccupation with coercive control within the broader concerns with policy transfer, ways of taking account of victim-survivor voices, alongside the importance of aiming for more holistic policy responses to violence(s) against women (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). Barlow and Walklate state that their book, *Coercive Control* (2022), will be of particular interest to academics, policymakers and practitioners working in criminal justice who wish to understand both the nature and extent of coercive control and the importance of appreciating the role of nuance in translating that understanding into practice. My thesis pushes their observations further by seeking to enhance the understanding of coercive control *both within and beyond the domestic*, to

uncover a wider range of issues that prevent holding most perpetrators to account for their offences, as the majority are not presented within the criminal justice system - knowledge that is consistently reflected in the low conviction rates for this offence (ONS, 2023c). Importantly, specific findings from my analysis chapters, such as how coercive control functions to reframe reality, demonstrate how nuance can be taken into account and instrumental in current policy on coercive control. My thesis therefore makes an important contribution to understanding coercive control, both conceptually and from the perspective of the impact of its definition on professional practice.

I now reflect on what the UK field of coercive control, practitioners/professionals in violence/abuse work and service systems provision can learn from my research; and how this may translate for UK stakeholders, policy, legislation, and professional practice.

### 6.4.1 The Field of Coercive Control

While coercive-controlling offending can be difficult to evidence, this is unnecessarily made more problematic by some professionals, and structural systems, within service provision. Knowledge of the problems that prevent the identification and/or the obfuscation of coercive-controlling offending (summarised below) allows the consideration within support agencies of how these serious issues can be addressed and resolved.

Some professionals within UK service systems (beyond feminist organisations), such as the police, the CPS, and social services, can influence the outcome of reports of coercive control to the detriment of victim-survivors and the advantage of perpetrators. This is due to professionals' responding to reports from their own unethical perspectives and judgements (such as sexist, misogynist, racist, and homophobic views), rather than adhering to policy and recommended best practice when dealing with reports of coercive control.

Some professionals' lack respect for other professionals (often demonstrated as men's lack of respect for women), which can lead to dismissing practitioners' specialist knowledge of coercive control, domestic abuse and sexual violence. This abusive dynamic can significantly impact the outcome of reports of coercive control/domestic abuse/sexual violence, as professionals (such as police officers) can adopt an inequitable stance of superiority and enforce their lead in such cases, rather than collaborating with experts in the field of domestic/sexual violence to discover and analyse the facts of the offending reported.

Professionals can fabricate a false reality of a violence and abuse situation. For example, police officers' adhering to their own misogynist and sexist perspectives/judgments of women framed a woman suffering a mental health breakdown (due to years' of her partner's

coercive control) as bored and causing trouble in the home, rather than collaborating with domestic abuse practitioners to establish her as a victim of coercive control.

The use of gendered tropes, by professionals (and by perpetrators and the wider UK public), such as the "unhinged/hysterical woman", are victim-blaming narratives that pathologize and/or criminalise female victim-survivors when they display distressed behaviour (such as reaching a "breaking point"), rather than routinely recognising their symptoms of trauma resulting from abusers' coercion and control. Similarly, professionals within service systems (and perpetrators and the wider public) can feminise male victim-survivors of female-perpetrated intimate partner, domestic abuse, and coercive control (inferring that "real men" would able to deal with violence/abuse). This is also a victim-blaming narrative that leads to insufficiently, or not at all, responding to coercive control, intimate partner, and domestic abuse, which can obfuscate both male victim-survivors and their female perpetrators.

Personnel within UK service systems (beyond feminist organisations), often view LGBTQ+ victim-survivors and perpetrators of coercive control through a heteronormative lens, resulting in, for example, the notion that men are used to physically fighting, or two women cannot harm each other. Therefore, in same-sex relationships, men's non-physical tactics and strategies of coercive control, and women's physical and sexual violence can be overlooked, again, obfuscating both victim-survivors and their perpetrators.

When victim-survivors' experiences are invalidated by the ways reported above, there is no violence/abuse presented by professionals for consideration; rather, victim-survivors are left to endure further harm by these processes of enabling perpetrators to continue offending. Victim-survivors' violent/abusive experiences are therefore extended beyond their primary abusers and the domestic, by professionals within the services that are intended to help them, thus creating continuums of violence/abuse. While continuums of violence are conceptualised in the literature on violence (see, for example, Boyle, 2019; Kelly, 1988; Walby, 1989), the notion that coercive control is confined to intimate partner and domestic abuse overlooks the connections between coercive control that occurs in the home, and the comparative structural inequalities and gendered abusive dynamics that are replicated by abusers, beyond the domestic realm. Therefore, coercive control is not isolated to the private or the interpersonal but extends out into shared communal cultural and public spaces. This relationship between private/public manifestations of violence and abuse needs to be understood on a continuum and meaningfully acted on within controlling or coercive behaviour policy, legislation, and professional practice.

*6.4.2 The Field of Violence and Abuse Work*

The professional interview participants working in domestic abuse/sexual violence services were mostly unable to contest the bias and unethical practices of professionals in positions of authority, such as police officers and court officials. This demonstrates a continuum of abuse between the ways in which victim-survivors can be silenced within service systems and the abuse of power and authority that is used to silence the practitioners supporting them. The silencing of practitioners not only impedes the evidencing of coercive-controlling offending (and physical and sexual violence), but professionals' unethical practices/abuses also impose a toxic workplace environment. Therefore, empowering stakeholders within domestic abuse/sexual violence organisations to embed systems of accountability is vitally important to challenge, document, and report unethical practices and abuses to governing regulatory authorities; as well as establishing equitable work environments for practitioners/supporters at the frontline of services for victim-survivors. The coercive control literature (see, for example, Hester, 2011) has conceptualised the systemic ways in which competing frameworks of child protection, the family courts, and the criminal justice system can comprise a difficult path for victim-survivors to traverse. Knowledge of the coercive control continuum that occurs at an interpersonal level within primary service provision, can challenge professionals' and agencies' responses to abusers' coercive-controlling offences to ensure the prioritisation of survivor-centred holistic support, equitable/gender-responsive policing and justice systems, and primary prevention efforts.

Violence and abuse work also involves personnel (such as within human resources (HR)) whose responsibilities include responding to reports of bullying, violence, abuse, harassment, and discrimination, which manifest in many forms, in all sectors, and in jobs/occupations across workplaces, and institutions/organisations. However, systematic abuse as a course of conduct, has yet to be fully conceptualised in the coercive control literature. Consequently, victim-survivors' attempts to address patterns of abuse, via HR, do not easily fit within the workplace policy language/model of what constitutes bullying, harassment, or discrimination, which then becomes another level to the abusive experience. This institutional/organisational form of invisibilising victim-survivors' experiences extends abuse in this way, but can also exacerbate the abuse they are suffering at the hands of their primary abusers, as institutional/organisational inaction and/or collusion with abusers enables them to continue offending. Furthermore, when bystanders are aware of a colleague's suffering, they can feel intimidated to speak out about violence and abuse, or they fear losing their jobs, leading to inaction, invalidation, and ostracization of the victim. Bystanders may also collude with the instigator/perpetrator of workplace abuse to avoid becoming another of their victims. Further, if people position themselves outside an abusive,

toxic workplace culture they risk ostracization by the majority, who can be under the influence and control of the instigator/perpetrator of abuse. While coercive control is predominantly conceptualised as gendered violence and abuse, men can also be victims of systematic interpersonal abuse in workplaces, and institutions/organisations, particularly if they do not conform to societal expectations of masculinity and/or they avoid colluding in a misogynist, sexist, toxic workplace culture. However, presently, within workplaces and institutions/organisations (beyond feminist organisations), there is scant understanding of the connections between workplace abuse, the continuum of violence, and coercive control. Training is therefore vitally important to educate/disseminate information to institutions/organisations on the recurring theme of violence/abuse that is continuous, insidious, and that involves drawing the wider community/collective into it; and how violence and abuse may not be an isolated one-to-one abusive dynamic, but that the collective can be swept up and cast into the abusive mechanism. However, it is also vitally important for institutions/organisations to address systemic inequalities and gendered cultural norms that are at the core of toxic workplace/institutional/organisational cultures.

### 6.4.3 Coercive Control Policy and Legislation

The England and Wales Government apply a gender-neutral approach to policy and legislation in relation to controlling or coercive behaviour offences (to include family members) (Home Office, 2015, 2023). However, in terms of evidencing coercive control, a gender-neutral approach can prevent professionals and practitioners from understanding that some victim-survivors may perceive coercive control as structurally and/or culturally normative behaviour, which leads to taking themselves out of the stories of violence/abuse, thus, there is no violence/abuse to report.

Victim-survivors often do not recognise the impact of UK systemic inequalities and gendered cultural norms (such as the notion that caregiving and household duties are 'women's work') on their perceptions of the gendered violence/abuse that is perpetrated against them. Consequently, they conflate perpetrators' 'need' with 'victimisation,' rather than conflate 'entitlement' with the perpetration of coercive control. While victim-survivors' empathise with abusers' victimisation and feel sorry for them, they are unlikely to seek justice and restitution for perpetrators' coercive-controlling offences (none of the survivors that I interviewed reported their abuser's coercive control to the authorities).

Currently, the broader UK influence/impacts of systemic inequalities and gendered cultural norms on victim-survivors' *perceptions* of gendered violence and abuse is insufficiently recognised beyond feminist scholarship/activism. This lack government knowledge can be seen as a barrier to violence/abuse identification and prevention, while victim-survivors'

access to appropriate support is impeded. Therefore, I strongly advocate that the England and Wales Government implement a gender-informed approach to controlling or coercive behaviour offences in policy and legislation. A feminist and critical gendered analysis of violence/abuse recognises and addresses harmful masculinities, discriminatory social norms, structural gender inequalities and stereotypes that can be weaponised to obfuscate both victim-survivors and perpetrators.

### 6.4.4 Working in Professional Practice with Victim-Survivors of Coercive Control

The Home Office (2015, 2023) conceptualisation of controlling and coercive behaviour presents a generalised formulation of violence and abuse that does not adequately reflect the complexity of perpetrators' covert and ambiguous violent/abusive behaviours, the pervasive fear that they instil in victim-survivors, or the confusion that victim-survivors experience - inculcated by perpetrators - that prevents their full understanding and articulation of their lived experience of coercive control. This is not intended as a critism of the Home Office information, but to highlight that it is difficult to capture and distil abusers' wide range of individualised methods and tactics, and victim-survivors' experiences of coercive control over a long period of time. While the literature on coercive control rightly states the importance of recognising a perpetrator's course of conduct, rather than focusing on isolated incidents of violence (Stark, 2007), this theory does not adequately translate in practice when attempting to evidence coercive control and/or support victim-survivors. Rather, for assessment purposes, abridging a course of conduct tends to reduce coercive control to separate aspects of behaviour. Moreover, coercive control is most evident in victim-survivors' distressed behaviour, trauma symptomatology, mental ill-health and often reaching a 'breaking point', rather than perpetrators' behaviours, which are most often covertly-perpetrated, insidious, and hidden (including physical violence). Therefore, there is room for improvement within service provision (including within workplaces, organisations and institutions) and therapeutic service intervention, to better capture courses of conduct, as opposed to attempting to corelate victim-survivors' experiences to a potential list or overview of perpetrators' behaviours. While DASH forms can be useful to assess risk of harm to victims (if equitably conducted), allowing victim-survivors to story their experiences of coercive control, and paying close attention the nuance in those stories, is valuable for recognising both coercive-controlling offenders/offending and coercive control victimisation. However, this is dependent on practitioners being astute to the nuance in those stories and having 'specialist' knowledge of coercive control. A specialist understanding of coercive control can also alert professionals to the ways in which they can avoid colluding with perpetrators. Therefore, I advocate the role of 'specialist coercive control practitioners' within violence/abuse agencies and service systems.

Within UK service systems (such as the police, social services, and the CPS), in the absence of material evidence of coercive control, often professionals give no consideration to victim-survivors' distressed behaviour/trauma symptomatology, as a response to the violence and abuse that has been perpetrated against them. However, as my thematic data shows that coercive control is most evident in victim-survivors' trauma symptomatology, a clinical/psychological understanding of coercive control is vitally important. While a trauma-informed understanding of coercive control may not compile material evidence to charge perpetrators for their controlling or coercive behaviour offences, a trauma-informed approach can enable the identification of coercive control, validate victim-survivors' experiences, and generate an understanding of the need for trauma-informed care, potentially leading to trauma recovery; identify victim-survivors' support requirements when living or working with coercive-controlling abusers and the potential connections between private and public violence/abuse; and/or the help victim-survivors may need to escape violent/abusive situations. Therefore, I recommend that training in coercive control needs to be grounded in a clinical/psychological, trauma-informed approach/response to victim-survivors. Furthermore, an understanding of coercive control from gendered, social, and legal construct perspectives, allows a transdisciplinary approach to coercive-control victimisation to consider a holistic range of appropriate interventions.

## 6.5 Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research

Interviewing perpetrators would have added a further dimension to the study; this may have been valuable towards understanding the notion of the 'perpetrator-as-victim' from the perpetrator's perspective, or knowing whether this phenomenon would have emerged in perpetrators' narratives. However, I was unable to recruit perpetrators to interview (addressed in my methodology chapter). Nonetheless, my interviews generated rich data on perpetrators, far more than I had anticipated, and accommodating more data into my thesis would have been difficult. I had not anticipated the extent, connections, and overlaps of coercive control within and beyond the domestic and how the latter can also be situated within the broader UK public landscape of gendered violence and abuse, which became a key focus of the project. Subsequently, addressing this significant gap in the coercive control literature featured as a primary goal for elucidating and promoting the recognition of the coercive control continuum - of private and public violence/abuse, and coercive control that occurs beyond the domestic environment, such as in workplaces and institutions.

I believe that evolving the understanding of coercive-controlling abusers could be achieved through extensive qualitative research with perpetrators. I would suggest that a research project exclusively dedicated to this would prove valuable in further addressing the

connections between perpetrators' private/domestic and public/communal violence and abuse, particularly in relation to the connections between domestic abuse and the perpetration of male-to-male violence in all-male or predominantly male work environments. Importantly, I believe that research would benefit from being conducted by researchers with specialist knowledge of coercive control to utilise the nuance that emerges in 'stories' or narratives of violence and abuse, via qualitative semi-structured interviews, rather than asking a set of fixed questions on coercive-controlling offending. Furthermore, research to develop a model of coercive control that occurs beyond the domestic, in workplaces, institutions/organisations, could clearly define the similarities and discontinuities between coercive control that occurs within and beyond the domestic. However, I believe that research should be grounded in feminist standpoint epistemology to facilitate the continuation of conceptualising coercive control from a gendered construct perspective of the perpetration of coercive control both within and beyond the domestic.

**6.6 Conclusion**

The findings from this study provide a number of important key factors to consider in the scholarly development of the concept of coercive control both within and beyond the domestic realm. Survivors, and professionals working with victim-survivors of coercive control, have shown that confining the concept of coercive control to intimate partner and domestic abuse excludes many people who experience this type of violence/abuse beyond the domestic, such as in communities, workplaces and institutions. Yet, my findings show that interpersonal systematic abuse that is perpetrated beyond the domestic can cause the severity of traumatic harm to victim-survivors that can be evidenced in coercive control in intimate partner/domestic abuse. However, coercive control as everyday gendered violence and abuse that is perpetrated beyond the domestic, remains absent within the dominant scholarly framings of coercive control that focus on one-to-one relationships and the domestic, and is therefore largely unaddressed. Thus, perpetrators are able to continue offending and victim-survivors are fundamentally unrecognised and unsupported.

The professional interview participants working in violence/abuse services and responding to reports of coercive control in intimate partner/domestic abuse, and workplace abuse, demonstrate that an urgently-needed action within service provision is the recognition of the coercive control continuum. Living or working with coercive-controlling abusers can cause victim-survivors to experience high levels of traumatic harm, while seeking support for coercive control, within or beyond the domestic, can cause further harm, and often dire consequences for victim-survivors when some professionals, and/or structural systems, enable perpetrators to continue offending. However, a key focus on the problem of

evidencing coercive-controlling offending must take account of the fact that some professionals within support agencies, workplaces, and institutions can be complicit in the perpetuation of violence/abuse against women and marginalised individuals. Addressing and resolving this problem will not be an easy task however, as professionals in positions of authority (such as the police, court officials, and HR personnel) that are responsible for dealing with violence/abuse, can be part of the problem of obfuscating both coercive-controlling abusers and their victim-survivors. I therefore conclude that the perpetration of coercive control is part of much broader violence and abuse problem - a problem of power and control - that exists on a continuum between private and public violence/abuse. Thus, existing conceptual understandings and policy practices are struggling to recognise, capture, and adequately respond to the full complex spectrum of violence and manipulation inherent to coercive control. I therefore propose a necessary framing of coercive control that is not limited to the domestic or interpersonal but one that operates on a continuum between private and public, individual and collective, domestic and institutional violence/abuse, which needs to be meaningfully extended beyond the domestic.

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**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A: Participant Information Form**

THE UNIVERSITY *of* York

My name is Joanne Burdett, I am a doctoral research student at the Centre for Women's Studies, the University of York.

**Research project title**: Understanding Coercive Control Within and Beyond the Domestic Environment.

**Participant Interview Information Sheet**

You are being invited to take part in a research study looking at coercive control within and beyond the domestic environment. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Talk to others about the study if you wish. Ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of coercive control and the issues affecting all those involved. Having a broader understanding of coercive control can provide more accurate information and better interventions when supporting survivors, devising programmes for perpetrators, and training professionals.

**Why is the study being done?**

Currently, there is not enough known about coercive control within domestic abuse or beyond the domestic environment, such as in the workplace or in friendships. Coercive control is a relatively new concept and there is disagreement in defining coercive control. The study aims to clarify coercive control in a range of situations so that both professionals and the public can have a clearer understanding when dealing with this issue.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been approached because you are in contact with a domestic abuse organisation for support; or you have written or spoken publicly about your experiences of coercive control; or you are an organisation that offers support.

20 interviews will be conducted as part of the study.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw up to one month after your interview and without giving a reason. You do not have to take part but your participation in the study is greatly appreciated. While this may be a difficult subject for you to discuss, care will be taken to provide a non-judgemental and confidential interview environment. The interview will last no more than 90 minutes.

You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. If you want the interview stopped this is not a problem. The interview will be audio recorded, fully transcribed, and kept confidentially as a password-protected and encrypted computer file accessible only to the researcher. You are welcome to have a copy of your file once the interview has been transcribed. Joanne Burdett (investigator of the study) is responsible for the security and confidentiality of the interview data. You will receive a copy of this information sheet and the signed consent form to keep.

**Will the information the researcher collects be kept confidential?**

All information collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential, and pseudonyms will be used instead of real names or any details that could identify you. An anonymised transcript of your audio recording will be kept as a secure computer file for up to four years after the end of the study. Anonymised data from this study may also be used in conjunction with research data from other studies for academic purposes. While written extracts (verbatim quotations) may be used within publications relating to the study, individuals will not be identified from the details presented. All data will be treated in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. This study has received approval from the University of York research ethics committee.

The researcher has a duty of care to inform the relevant agencies of any illegal activity or safeguarding issue disclosed to her.

**What if I change my mind after the interview?**

If you change your mind about being part of the study, up to one month after your interview, your data will be left out of the study and all related information about you erased.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

The results of the study will be reported in the PhD thesis.

**Who can I talk to for more information or advice about the study?**

If you have any queries about this research please do not hesitate to contact Joanne Burdett at:

CWS, Grimstone House, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD.

Email: jb2581@york.ac.uk

Research Project Supervisors: Dr Rachel Alsop, email: rachel.alsop@york.ac.uk;  Dr Boriana Alexandrova, email: boriana.alexandrova@york.ac.uk

Chair of ELMPS Ethics Committee: Professor Tony Royle, email: tony.royle@york.ac.uk

**What do I do now?**

If you would like to hear more about the study or think you might like to take part, just approach the researcher by emailing the address above.

Thank you for your time.

**APPENDIX B: Participant consent form**


**Joanne Burdett, Doctoral Student Research Project**

**Understanding Coercive Control Within and Beyond the Domestic Environment**

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**Participants Consent Form**

Have you read, or has someone read to you, the 'Information Sheet' about the project?

**Yes ☐ No ☐**

Do you understand what the project is about and what taking part involves?

**Yes ☐ No ☐**

Do you understand that if you take part in the research that your words will be used but you will not be identifiable in any way. A pseudonym will be used and no other identifying data will be included?

**Yes ☐ No ☐**

Do you understand that the information you provide may be used anonymously in future research?

**Yes ☐ No ☐**

Do you know that if you decide to take part and later change your mind, you can leave the project up to one month after your interview without giving a reason?

**Yes ☐ No ☐**

Would you like to take part in the project Understanding Coercive Control Within and Beyond the Domestic Environment?

**Yes ☐ No ☐**

**If yes, is it okay to record your interviews?**

**Yes ☐ No ☐**

Please write your name here (in BLOCK letters): _____

Please sign your name here: _____

Interviewer's name: _____

Date: _____

**APPENDIX C: Participant Support Information Sheet**

**Support Information Sheet - National Support Services**

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**National Domestic Violence Helpline**: A national service, run by Women's Aid and Refuge, for women experiencing domestic violence, or family, friends, colleagues and others calling on their behalf. Freephone: 0808 2000 247 (Open 24 hours)

**Men's Advice Line**: Advice and support for men experiencing domestic violence. Freephone: 0808 801 0327. Open Monday-Friday 9am-5pm, or you can leave a voicemail. E-mail: info@mensadviceline.org.uk , Webchat: www.mensadviceline.org.uk

**SHOUT**: TEXT 85258 - Shout is the UK's first 24/7 text service, free on all major mobile networks, for anyone in crisis anytime, anywhere. It's a place to go if you're struggling to cope and you need help: https://www.giveusashout.org/

**Calm**: 0800 58 58 58 Offers support to men in the UK, of any age, who are feeling down or in crisis via helpline, webchat and website. https://www.thecalmzone.net/

**The Mix**: 0808 808 4994 - A free telephone, webchat, and email listening service for young people that provides confidential emotional support and can offer signposts to relevant services. http://www.themix.org.uk/

**Youth Access**: The largest provider of young people's advice and counselling services in the UK. http://www.youthaccess.org.uk/

**Supportline:** 01708 765 200, email info@supportline.org.uk – Supportline also provides a confidential telephone helpline offering emotional support to young people on any issue. http://www.supportline.org.uk/problems/support_children_young_people.php

**Galop:** Support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans victims of domestic violence. Telephone: 0800 999 5428, Open 10am-5pm Monday-Wednesday (1pm-5pm Tuesday is a trans specific service), 10am-8pm Thursday, 1pm-5pm Friday, 12pm- 4pm Sunday Online chat: www.galop.org.uk/domesticabuse/ Open 3pm-7pm Saturday and Sunday E-mail: help@galop.org.uk

**Survivors UK**: Provides support for men who have been raped or sexually abused. Text chat: 020 3322 1860, WhatsApp: 074 9181 6064, Webchat: www.survivorsuk.org/speak-to-us/ Open Monday-Friday 10.30am-9pm, Saturday-Sunday 10am-6pm E-mail: info@survivorsuk.org

**Nightline.** If you're a student, you can look on the Nightline website to see if your university or college offers a night-time listening service. Nightline phone operators are all students too.

**Black & Asian Therapists Network**
www.baatn.org.uk
Online directory of qualified therapists  experienced in working with the distinctive African, Caribbean and Asian experience.

**Muslim Community Helpline**:
020 8904 8193/020 8908 6715
www.muslimcommunityhelpline.org.uk
National organisation providing listening and emotional support service for members of the Muslim community in the UK.