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Understanding domestic abuse and improving community responses

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Not all domestic abuse is the same

- Two main kinds 'coercive control' and 'situational couple violence' (Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2007).
- Situational couple violence is violence that occurs during couple conflicts, when verbal aggression escalates into physical violence, but where the perpetrator has no broader desire to control and dominate their partner's life (Johnson, 2008; Fontes, 2015).
- By contrast, coercive control is motivated by the perpetrator's goal of getting control of their victim's life and maintaining that control. **All** their abusive tactics, including any physical violence they inflict on their victim, are directed towards that goal (Stark, 2007; Fontes, 2015). Coercive control is *not* about stress, conflict or temper, anger issues or drinking problems – it's about the perpetrator's need to control.
- Situational couple violence tends to have significantly fewer negative impacts on victims compared to coercive control (Myhill, 2015; Nevala, 2017). Coercive control is associated with major negative long term impacts. Coercive control is the type of DA that can lead to murder (Monckton Smith, 2019).
- Myhill's (2015) study using national survey data found that about 25% of domestic abuse in the UK population was the coercive control type.

Not all domestic abuse is the same

While data indicates that women and men perpetrate situational couple violence at roughly equal rates (Myhill, 2015), there is evidence to suggest that **coercive control is mainly perpetrated by males:**

- **Myhill** (2015) reported that, out of a national sample of women and men who had experienced some form of domestic abuse, **30% of the women and 6% of the men** had experienced the coercive control type (the remaining men and women in this sample were categorised as having experienced situational couple violence).

Understanding coercive control

All these abuses can be part of coercive control:

- verbal, emotional and psychological abuse and manipulation, including sometimes being 'nice'
- control of time, space and movement and the 'micro-management' of everyday life
- continual monitoring, including by stalking and cyber-stalking
- rape, sexual coerciveness and reproductive coercion
- economic abuse, including interfering with the victim's/survivor's employment, preventing them from having money, refusing to contribute to bills, and creating debt for which victims/survivors are liable
- isolation from sources of support, including family, friends and professionals
- manipulating others (including children) to upset, marginalise and disempower the victim/survivor
- using legal or institutional means to threaten, harm or discredit the victim/survivor
- physical violence, intimidation and threats of violence against the victim/survivor, their loved ones (including pets) and their property

(Sharp-Jeffs et al, 2018; Tarzia et al, 2018; Pitman, 2017; Matheson et al, 2015; Sanders, 2015; Thomas et al, 2014; Stark, 2007, 2009, 2012; Lehmann et al, 2012; Sharp, 2008)

Understanding coercive control

- ‘By deploying these tactics the abuser can create a world where the victim is constantly monitored or criticised and has every move and action checked.
- Victims often describe coercive control as not being “allowed” or having to ask permission to do everyday things; and being in constant fear of not meeting the abuser’s expectations or complying with their demands.
- The term “walking on eggshells” is often used.’

(McLeod, 2018, p. 6).

Understanding coercive control

Some coercive control perpetrators don't use violence (see Crossman et al, 2016).

- As Stark and Hester discuss: 'fear, constraints on autonomy, belittlement, and other facets of abuse can create 'entrapment' without any notable incidents of violence' (2019, p. 91).
- Similarly, Nevala's (2017) EU wide data (from the European Union's FRA Violence Against Women Survey 2012) found that 45% of women who reported experiencing high levels of control from their current partner were not being subjected to any violence from this partner.
- Day and Bowen (2015) suggest that these perpetrators are actually the most clever and skilful abusers, because they have mastered more covert and hard-to-identify ways of abusing.

Perpetrators of coercive control

- Charming at the beginning of the relationship to suck in the victim and gain their commitment
- Can use ‘nice’, ‘caring’, ‘romantic’ or ‘contrite’ behaviours from time to time to keep the victim locked into the relationship by giving them hope. But the fact that ‘things are good in the relationship at the moment’ does not mean the abuse is over – it is all part of the abuse.
- Clever at excusing, minimising, justifying and denying their behaviour, and getting others to do the same
- Can present as a kind and caring person, but this is deceptive
- Often good at recruiting allies from among their family, friendship groups, workplaces and communities (and often good at turning professionals involved with the family into their allies)
- Will use whatever tactics work best to gain and keep control

Coercive control is caused by the perpetrator

- Perpetrators tend to be extremely self-centred and often have a highly inflated sense of entitlement: they believe their needs come first and that their partner and children should make pleasing them their priority (Bancroft, 2002).

- Coercive control is not caused by a 'turbulent relationship' or a 'bad dynamic' between partners; it is caused by the perpetrator's deeply held belief systems, attitudes and expectations, belief systems, attitudes and expectations that they held before the relationship began (and probably developed long before the age of 18). The perpetrator's tendency to coercively control doesn't disappear when the relationship ends - it remains within the perpetrator.

‘Fighting’ and ‘arguing’

- The terms ‘fighting’ and ‘arguing’ are misleading and inaccurate when it comes to coercive control
- With coercive control, anything that looks like a ‘fight’ or an ‘argument’ is actually about the perpetrator trying to impose coercive control on the victim, and the victim resisting this (this is a reasonable and psychologically healthy thing for the victim to do) (Stark, 2007)
- Perpetrators may seem ‘angry’ but this isn’t because they have a problem with anger, it’s because they are enraged that the victim is resisting their control. They have a problem with control, not with anger (Bancroft, 2002)
- Perpetrators’ often use abusive behaviours (shouting, put-downs, threats, violence) to punish the victim for resisting their control. They use abuse to manipulate, belittle and frighten their victim into greater submission in future.

Responding to domestic abuse

Might be helpful for coercive control

- A strong criminal justice response that holds the perpetrator to account and makes the victim and their children safe
- Support for the victim from specialist domestic abuse services
- Perpetrators attending a lengthy *Respect-accredited* perpetrator programme that tackles the cause of the abuse – perpetrators' belief systems, attitudes and expectations – as well as independently supporting victims (note: some perpetrators cannot be helped by perpetrator programmes)

Might be helpful for situational couple violence, but <u>likely to be *unhelpful* and *dangerous* for coercive control</u>

- The victim leaving without a safety plan
- Drink/drug treatment
- Anger management
- Couples therapy
- Family therapy
- Individual therapy for the perpetrator
- Individual therapy for the victim from an ordinary therapist (not a domestic abuse specialist)

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What **communities** need to become less tolerant of…

- **Controlling** behaviour from partners, e.g. limiting where they can go and who they can see, monitoring their whereabouts, pushing them to dress in certain ways, pushing them to move the relationship forward too fast, limiting their access money, making them feel fearful and on-edge, making them feel they need to change their behaviour to please their partner/avoid angering him/her.
- Thinking that 'love hurts' (e.g. involves emotional suffering, intense ups and downs) and that jealousy and controlling behaviours are signs of love and care.
- Situations where a person seems to be trapped in an unhealthy relationship where her/his freedoms and confidence have been greatly reduced – this should be recognised as a major cause for concern that can and should be addressed, and should not be seen as a private problem for which little can be done.
- The 'it takes two to tango' belief. This must be challenged because only the perpetrator is responsible for coercive control. The perpetrator has manipulated and entrapped the victim and has severely undermined her/his ability to make free choices.

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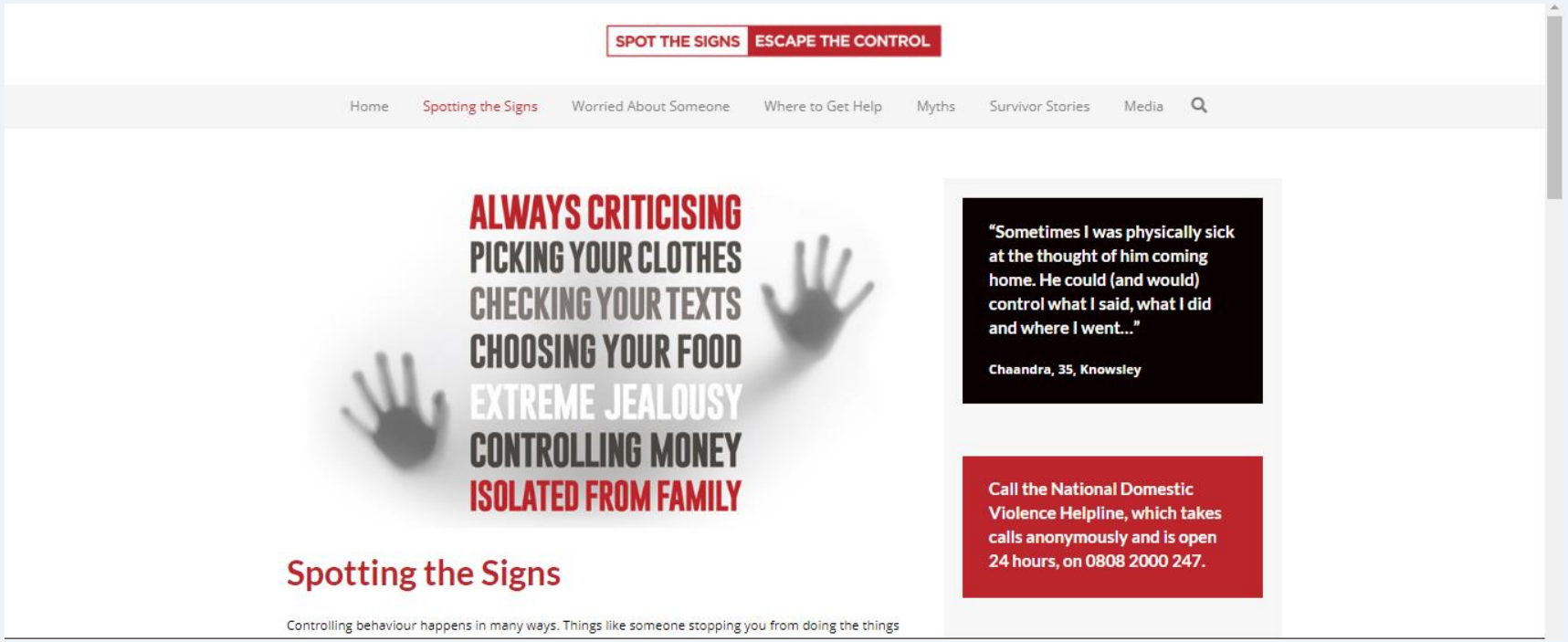
Escape the control



This public awareness campaign ran in Knowsley and Sefton in 2018. It focused on control, rather than violence.

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Attitudes and norms supportive of men's abuse of women

- Heilman et al (2017) conducted a representative survey of *young* men in the UK about what it means to be a man
- 44% of UK young men reported feeling that society tells them that 'a man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage'. Very similar numbers reported feeling that society tells them that 'if a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time' (Heilman et al, 2017, p. 25).
- Such societal messages normalise boyfriends/husbands having a degree of ownership, possession and proprietary rights over girlfriends/wives (Lombard, 2015).
- This in turn makes it more likely that coercively controlling behaviour from boyfriends/husbands will be excused or romanticised (e.g. seen as a sign of love, protectiveness or care) and will be viewed as normal masculine behaviour by perpetrators, victims, and their friends, family and wider communities (Monckton Smith, 2019).

Addressing the social and cultural context

- Ecological frameworks are now extensively used to describe the multiple levels at which factors operate to influence the occurrence of domestic abuse
- There is growing recognition that as well as targeting individuals, violence prevention strategies must address the social, cultural and economic contexts in which domestic abuse occurs

(Abramsky et al, 2016)

The SASA! community mobilisation model

- SASA! was first conducted at sites in Uganda from 2007-12 and, due to its success, has now been rolled out to sites in a further 14 countries
- The SASA! Activist Kit for Preventing Violence Against Women is a community mobilisation intervention seeking to change community attitudes, norms and behaviours that result in gender inequality and violence
- The approach supports whole communities through a phased process of change, systematically involving a broad range of stakeholders
- SASA! was designed by Raising Voices (http://raisingvoices.org/activism/local/)

(Abramsky et al, 2016)

SASA! The results

- SASA! was associated with reductions in women's experience of physical domestic abuse, as well as men's perpetration of domestic abuse.
- After three years of intervention, women in intervention communities were 52% less likely to report past year experience of physical IPV, compared to women in control communities.
- *Changes to community-level normative attitudes* were the most important factor in bringing about these reductions, with changes to community norms around the acceptability of domestic abuse explaining 95% of the intervention's effect on men's perpetration (Abramsky et al, 2016).

SASA! The details

Throughout this process *SASA! intervention staff work with 4 groups of actors*:

1. Community activists (CAs) selected from among the more progressive men and women rooted in the community, who work voluntarily to facilitate and promote SASA! activities (see next slide)
2. Community leaders including religious, cultural, educational, governmental and other types of local leaders, who are encouraged to recognise and work to improve gender inequalities and power imbalances as part of their leadership roles
3. Professionals such as health care providers and police officers, who provide direct prevention and response services
4. Institutional leaders, who have the power to implement policy changes within their institutions

SASA! The details

- SASA! entails the selection, ongoing training, and mentoring of these individuals and groups, to help improve their knowledge, communication skills, and motivation to participate in mobilising their communities to address gender inequality and violence.
- They are introduced to, and then supported to introduce into their communities, new concepts of power, encouraging analysis of gender-related imbalances of power through four strategies: Local Activism, Media and Advocacy, Communication Materials, and Training.
- As part of this, CAs and leaders are supported by intervention staff to conduct a range of local activism activities, including (but not limited to) public events such as community dramas, discussions and meetings; small group activities; one-on-one 'quick chats'; door-to-door discussions; trainings; poster discussions and soap operas.

SASA! The details

- Similarly, the police, health workers and other professionals receive training and are supported in efforts to improve the provision of services.
- In this way, community members are exposed to SASA! ideas repeatedly and in diverse ways within the course of their daily lives, from people they know and trust as well as from more formal sources within their communities. The specifics of intervention activities develop and continually evolve in response to community priorities, needs and characteristics (Abramsky et al, 2016).

Reminder – SASA! results

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Using a SASA! type model in St Helens

Aspects of SASA! (or similar community mobilisation interventions) could be taken up in St Helens as appropriate

- SASA! primarily focused on reducing physical violence, but we know that's not sufficient when what we desperately need to reduce in the UK is coercive control type domestic abuse (the most harmful kind), which involves so much more than just physical violence.

Therefore, when adjusting the focus for St Helens, I suggest –

- Not just focusing on violence. Focusing on…
- …*violence* and *controlling behaviour*, with an emphasis that both are equally serious, destructive and unacceptable

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Questions?

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Thank you

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