Eliminating the gendered violence scourge



Disclaimer: This article contains information that may be triggering for some members.

The Cook Government's new education campaign about the dangers of coercive control aims to emphasise that family and domestic violence (FDV) is not only about physical violence.

The campaign's slogan states this clearly: "It doesn't have to be physical. Coercive control is family and domestic violence."

Part of this campaign will focus on the state government's legislation for those experiencing coercive control to gain a restraining order.

The government is spending $5 million on a two-year awareness campaign to build on the work being done to end FDV.

What is coercive control?

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, "coercive control is often defined as a pattern of controlling behaviour, used by a perpetrator to establish and maintain control over another person. Coercive control is almost always an underlying dynamic of family and domestic violence and intimate partner violence. Perpetrators use coercive control to deprive another person of liberty, autonomy and agency" (Cortis and Bullen 2015; ANROWS 2021).

"While some of the behaviours that contribute to coercive control can be considered acts of violence themselves – and may be recognisable as emotional abuse, harassment, financial abuse, stalking or technology-facilitated abuse – it is important to see coercive control as the overall pattern within a relationship that is ongoing, repetitive and cumulative in nature" (ANROWS 2021).

Data on those impacted by coercive control is limited due to the lack of awareness and the complex nature of the subtleties that this behaviour often presents.

However, the Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey 2021-2022 found:

Women are more likely than men to have experienced economic abuse and emotional abuse.

- Twenty-three per cent (2.3 million) of women and 14 per cent (1.3 million) of men have experienced emotional abuse by a current or previous partner.
- Sixteen per cent (1.6 million) of women and 7.8 per cent (745,000) of men have experienced economic abuse from a current or previous partner.

Coercive control also forms part of the broader definition for gender-based violence (GBV).

GBV refers to harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals based on their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms.

The term is primarily used to underscore the fact that structural, gender-based power differentials place women and girls at risk for multiple forms of violence. While we know that GBV occurs to all genders, we know that it is predominantly women and girls who are most impacted.

The term is also sometimes used to describe targeted violence against LGBTIQ+ populations, when referencing violence related to norms of masculinity/femininity and/or gender norms (United Nations Women Australia).

GBV can include, but is not limited to:

a. Physical harm.

b. Psychological harm.

c. Threats of sexual harm.

d. Any sexual acts performed on an individual without their consent.

e. Sexual harassment:

• Unwelcome touching, hugging, cornering or kissing.

• Staring or leering at someone or at parts of their body.

• Unnecessary familiarity, such as deliberately brushing up against a person.

• Suggestive comments or jokes.

• Insults or taunts based on sex.

• Using suggestive or sexualised nicknames for co-workers.

• Following, watching or loitering nearby another person.

• Sexually explicit pictures, or indecent emails or text messages, phone calls or online interactions, including on social media platforms.

• Intrusive questions and comments about a person’s private life or body.

f. Coercive control.

g. Undermining a person’s sense of self-worth through constant criticism.

h. Non-consensual physical contact.

i. A social environment that allows sexual violence to be normalised and justified.

The SSTUWA conducted a gendered violence survey for all members to participate in. The aim of the survey was to gather a base level of data to check members’ understanding of GBV, whilst also having the necessary evidence to lobby for preventative measures with the Department of Education, Department of Training and Workforce Development and relevant ministers.

The union received 523 responses, of which 48.95 per cent of the respondents were from secondary schools, 29.8 per cent from primary, seven per cent from TAFE and the rest from various other educational institutions. Unsurprisingly 75.2 per cent of the respondents were women, with over 66 per cent of total respondents being from the metro area.

The responses came mainly from permanent full-time employees, with many having 15-plus years teaching experience, with many reporting they had witnessed GBV. Half of the respondents felt that their workplace listened to concerns about overall safety, however, more needed to be done to hold perpetrators accountable and to have a system that will not stand for any form of violence, including GBV.

As a result of the areas of concern raised in the survey, the SSTUWA wrote to relevant ministers and government departments calling for the following actions:

- An increased focus on appropriate workforce behaviours for all staff during induction processes.
- An expansion of programs such as Respectful Relationships across schools and TAFEs to ensure all relevant workplaces are targeted.
- An improved education process on how to report incidents using workplace health and safety legislation.
- An emphasis to all line managers on the requirement for these incidents to be formally reported.

What is important to note is that though the victims of GBV are predominantly women, it is not a women's issue but a societal concern, which in itself is a pandemic.

For too long any form of violence where the main victim is a woman sits only within women's groups, committees and government.

We need to do better than that. While we know not all men perpetrate violence against women and we do not want to pitch boys against girls, or men against women; we do call upon all men to take an active role in addressing violence against women.

A useful resource is the *Men in focus* practice guide by Our Watch.

As the guide itself puts it: "Our Watch outlines the current context of gender inequality and the gendered nature of violence and the gendered drivers of that violence. While these details may be familiar to some readers, they are framed here to provide examples of how this information can be presented with a focus on addressing masculinities. Practice approaches are presented that aim to strengthen motivation, build rapport and activate men to challenge and transform the social norms, structures and practices that underpin gender inequality and drive men's violence against women. Backlash and resistance are inevitable responses to this work and suggestions are provided throughout the guide to assist you to plan for them and address them confidently."

This is also where education is key. Currently in all WA schools, consent education has been added to the health and physical education curriculum, as a way for our students to navigate ways to be respectful.

As reported previously this year, we know that the *Respectful Relationships Teaching Program* is part of some schools' actions. We need all schools to be funded to deliver this program.

As I end this article, I want to remind everyone of the *16 days in WA - Stop Violence Against Women* campaign, which will be running across the state 25 November-10 December. For more information visit bit.ly/3BKxkXq

If you need assistance, you can call Women's Domestic Violence Helpline (1800 007 339), Men's Domestic Violence Helpline (1800 000 599), 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732) or
Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800).



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