Support, Help & Empowerment (SHE) Inc.

A Contemporary Tasmanian Family Violence Service

(Courtesy of Tasmania’s Family Violence Action Plan 2015–2020)

Family violence is any of the following types of conduct committed by a person, directly or indirectly against that person’s spouse or partner:

**What is family violence?**

Family violence is any of the following types of conduct committed by a person, directly or indirectly against that person’s spouse or partner:

- assault (including sexual assault);
- threats;
- coercion;
- intimidation;
- verbal abuse;
- abduction;
- stalking; or
- an attempt to do any of those things.
It also includes:

- economic abuse;
- emotional abuse;
- intimidation; and
- breaching any existing orders relating to Family Violence.

SHE is a not-for-profit organisation that provides specialist counselling services for people who have experienced domestic and family violence (DFV). We were established in 1989 in acknowledgement of the long term effects of violence on women’s lives. As a feminist service, SHE believes people are disadvantaged by cultural, social and historical inequalities as well as gender roles. We work towards the elimination of abuse and violence by providing an integrated response to family violence. We recognise that community change will not come about without social inclusion, education and opportunities for growth.

The majority of SHE’s client are women who have experienced family violence perpetrated by male partners or a former partner. However, we also acknowledge and work with family violence that occurs in same-sex relationships or is experienced by men.

The services that we offer include: Individual face-to-face and/or phone counselling, trauma informed and evidence-based counselling, support sessions, support groups, community education, information and resources, and referral to other services.

As an organisation we have some major concerns for the welfare of women and children in Tasmania.

In contrast to the early research that equated domestic violence as physical violence, more recent research refers to DFV as having a core of coercive control (Pitman, 2016, Stark, 2007) that may or may not include physical violence (Pitman, 2016). Unpacking coercive control means acknowledging that women, children and young people are being subjected to a continuous pattern of conduct that is far more subtle than the types of conduct listed in the Family Violence Act. Despite acknowledging the different forms of abuse that are part of family violence, social and legal responses still focus primarily on acts of violence in discussions and responses to domestic abuse. Using the term coercive control helps us to conceptualise what actually constitutes family violence. In 2012, the UK passed a law recognizing coercive control and making it a prosecutable offense. In most other countries including Australia, the tactics of coercive control are well recognised nor targeted for intervention.
Our organisation experiences on a daily basis that which has been made clear in the research literature; perpetrators are well able to subjugate and entrap female partners without the use of any physical violence or sexual assault at all. The more obvious and subtle tactics of coercive control are
crucial for social workers to know, as are the tactics used by perpetrators to evade ever having to be made accountable for the depth and breadth of the impact of coercive control on women and children.

Whereas we provide education, intervention, and trauma informed counselling to address the social, financial, mental and physical effects of living with a coercive and abusive partner, we consistently have to provide counselling for the effects on women of the legal process and response they can encounter.

A common experience for our agency, for example, is working with women who have experienced assault, sometimes a very severe and prolonged assault involving strangulation and weapons, yet their partner/ex-partner may be out on bail and is not kept under close supervision. For a woman who knows that many crimes are committed by a person out on bail, it is an all-consuming task to continue to lead their lives for the many months before the court date arrives. Court can also be traumatic and unsatisfying. Another common scenario is women who are trying to establish or maintain shared parenting arrangements with a partner who was and still is highly coercive and abusive. They routinely find themselves desperately navigating mediation, lawyers and the family law court hoping but not usually finding a resolution that takes into account the effect of the coercion and control of their ex-partner. There are still, unfortunately, far too many ways that a perpetrator can evade detection and never have to account for the cost to the women and children of the impact of his pattern of conduct.

Many of our female clients live in fear as they are unable to stop the harassment, defamation, surveillance and monitoring by their ex-partners even well after separation. Technology abuse is becoming more skilful and it is not uncommon for our female clients to have their phone and computers hacked, their cars tracked and social media used against them either pre or post separation. Flying monkeys is the term sometimes given to people who are used to do the harassment for the perpetrator, sometimes unwittingly. Our work can therefore be dominated by addressing the difficulty that women have because of the legal and social obstacles to creating a safe environment for themselves and their children in which to live and recover from the effects of a perpetrator’s coercive control and possibly physical violence and sexual assault. This is, of course, usually compounded by financial distress, and sometimes homelessness.

We work with women who have been charged with assaulting or being abusive towards their male partner. Whereas women may well use physical violence, it is often in response or retaliation to how they are being treated. Sometimes they are set up or goaded. Many female clients have had partners who knew well how to get them charged with an offence. The interesting thing in these scenarios is that the women who are charged with an incident of assault or abuse were not running a pattern of coercive control over their male partner. They were not dominating him. It is inevitable that we will find evidence of the women who have been charged being subjected to an intense pattern of coercive control from their male partners that completely denied them any autonomy, agency or equality within the relationship. Although they may have perpetrated abuse or violence of some kind, their lives had been reduced to second class citizens by their partner’s domination. For women charged with assault, our experience has been that it was rarely an equal playing field where they were dominating and coercing their partner.

A person who is entitled and feels superior will have an adversarial communication style. Part of this style will be the use of intense self-pity, a sense of being victimised, along with using charm and
blame and propensity to retaliate to block and deflect the women’s attempts to hold them accountable. These behaviours routinely obstruct any real negotiation or evolution of emotional intimacy within the entire relationship. Bancroft and Silverman (2002) also refer to the men in their practice as adroitly creating sympathy for themselves in the negative portrayal of their partners. Stark (2007) notes how ‘controlling partners perceive events through a veil of primary narcissism that suggests that they are the real victims, not their partners, and may persist in claiming to be battered themselves even after being confronted with evidence of the harms they’ve caused’ (Stark, 2007, pp. 246–7). To avoid the temptation to collude with blaming the woman, it is helpful to consider that, despite all protestations to the contrary, mapping out what happens in each area of the relationship and who makes the decisions as to who can decide what (Stark, 2007) will provide a clear picture for you.

A very uncomfortable and related topic that has been emerging in practice and policy is determining the parenting capacity of a perpetrator who has been coercive and controlling, even if not physically violent or sexually assaultive, and to what extent is the mental and emotional health of a child at risk from unsupervised contact with such a parent.

Research indicates, as does the experience of our counsellors, that the level of control in a relationship is a better predictor than whether there were prior assaults for any future physical or sexual assault. In addition, Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart, as early as 1994, clearly outlined the array of family violence typologies of male domestic violence perpetrators in their research, as does Bancroft, (2002). Social workers need to be aware of these different typologies, and the different tactics each type uses to evade detection and accountability. More recently, family violence has been described in the literature as an interpersonal colonising process (Pitman, 2016) which relies on hostage, cult like tactics to dominate and control and the likelihood of retaliation for any resistance. There are different types of interpersonal colonising styles, similar to different international colonising strategies, which are relatable to the typologies of perpetrators outlined by Bancroft (2002).

The more nuanced understandings of family violence such as these are instructive for social workers to understand in order to make an assessment and an informed response. There is a very thorough assessment tool available online at https://www.guilford.com/add/forms/fontes3.pdf from Invisible Chains: Overcoming Coercive Control in Your Intimate Relationship by Lisa Aronson Fontes. Copyright 2015 by The Guilford Press. Another particularly useful document to understand the characteristics of coercive control has been written by Lundy Bancroft, the author of Why Does He Do That: Inside the minds of Angry and Controlling Men (2002). It is also available online at http://www.gway.org/Websites/gway/Images/10%20Realities%20About%20Batterers%20based%20on%20Lundy%20Bancroft.pdf

Torna Pitman, SHE

