

Men Becoming ‘Increasing Victims’ of Coercive Control, Legal Experts Claim

by Gabriella Swerling, Social and Religious Affairs Editor

Increasing numbers of men are becoming victims of coercive control relationships as their partners threaten to restrict access to children, legal experts claim.

The growing trend has been reported among lawyers who said they are seeing more and more cases of male clients who have become entangled in “unhealthy” coercive control relationships.

Coercive control - a pattern of behaviour which seeks to strip the victim of their liberty and sense of self - is usually associated with female victims. It became illegal to subject someone to coercive control in December 2015 following landmark legislation which paved the way for new charges to be brought where there is evidence of such behaviour in domestic abuse cases.

However male survivors and lawyers said that less social stigma surrounding men who speak out, combined with increasing numbers of cases where women threaten to take full custody of children, has led to rising numbers of cases with male victims.

According to research seen by The Telegraph, more than a third of men in the UK have admitted to being a victim in a coercive control relationship.

Case Study | Peter’s Story of Coercive Control

Peter* met Lydia at the gym when he was in his mid-20s. “For a while everything seemed to be going well, although on reflection even in the early stages of our relationship I was dealing with her issues and conflicts from her past and previous relationships,” he said.

Lydia would often become angry, speak in a raised voice, swear and seek Peter’s attention in negative ways. However she soon became verbally abusive. “It felt as if I was being blamed for her issues when it wasn’t my fault,” he said. When he got a new job abroad, Lydia agreed to move with Peter. But as soon as he started work she complained he was neglecting her. “She began punishing me, being verbally abusive, refraining from sex for long periods of time, stopping me seeing friends and family and my academic contacts telling me their behaviour was not acceptable and they should not be in my life. Bit by bit, I was losing control, I felt torn and started believing her and became very isolated,” he said.

Lydia would often “test” Peter by running away in the middle of the night, threatening to leave him and go to the airport – and he would have to run after her. “I began to accept this as normal behaviour,” Peter said.

Soon they begin to try for a family, but Lydia demanded they see a fertility specialist after just two months and they discovered there was a problem with Peter’s sperm. “Rather than be understanding, she taunted me saying I wasn’t a man and I couldn’t perform. She said I was nothing more than a sperm donor,” he said. They then tried IVF, she got pregnant immediately and they married.

“The problems compounded after the birth of my first son and the birth of my twins a couple of years later,” Peter said. She refused any kind of intimacy, banning sex, would regularly hit and spit on him, she was verbally abusive and would constantly criticise his family and say they did not love him and made him write letters to his own parents saying that he and his family did not need them in my life. “I was completely isolated, I had lost sight of reality, was a shadow of myself and felt incredibly alone,” Peter recalled. “Each time I worked up some strength to leave the marriage, Lydia would sense this and emotionally blackmail me, always finding a reason for why I had to return to the

home. She would tell me the children were ill and she had called an ambulance.” He told The Telegraph that the reason why he stayed in the relationship for so long – ten years – was because Lydia threatened him that he would not have access to his three sons.

In 2017 he finally saw a psychologist who made him see that he had suffered years of emotional and psychological abuse. However, making the decision to divorce brought out “even more toxic and evil behaviour” – during proceedings she accused Peter of sexually abusing his children and raping her. She then attempted to kill him.

The Judge and other professionals saw through her stories and lies and as a result he now has full custody of his children and a protective order against her. Currently she is unable to see the children. “Often the man is painted as the perpetrator and not the victim. I don’t think the authorities are geared up to domestic violence against men and don’t have the time or understanding about coercive and controlling behaviour – at least this was my experience. I have had very little support and have had to prove my innocence from her allegations. I feel if the situation was reversed I would be in prison,” he said.

(*Names have been changed)

However more than half of respondents (53 per cent) reported having experienced some kind of bullying or controlling behaviour at the hands of their partner. This was the exact same percentage of female respondents who said they had been in this kind of relationship.

The research was commissioned by IBB Solicitors and conducted by independent research agency Atomik amongst 1,000 men and 1,000 women aged 18-65.

Kate Ryan, a family law partner at IBB Solicitors, said that in the 15 years she has been practicing she has seen an increase in cases for both male and female victims from all walks of life including professionals.

“I think there are more men coming forward now it is more acceptable and there is better support out there in terms of mental health and psychological support.”

“There are also a lot of charities helping and generally society has less stigma around the subject so men are feeling there is less of an issue coming forward and speaking to police and lawyers telling them that they’re experiencing this kind of relationship.

“For some of them it has been going on for years and years. Even women don’t feel comfortable coming forward and as that’s becoming less of an issue for them, so it is for men. I think we’ll see a lot more of this as things go on.”

Ms Ryan said that regarding the trend of women “using” the child as leverage to threaten their partner into staying in the relationship is “100 per cent quite common”.

“Family courts, particularly where children are involved, are quite renowned with supporting women, and I think women know that and use it and know that their children are a hard-hitting point - yet that’s manipulation”.

She said that financial control, manipulation and checking up on where partners are also common features in coercive control relationships.

“The male element is coming out and undoubtedly there are other males like this who have experienced this and they will start to come out, easy with new definition of coercive behaviour.”

The research also found that amongst those who said they had experienced bullying or abusive behaviour, nearly half of men (48 per cent) said they did nothing about it - significantly higher than the figure for women (33 per cent).

In contrast, women were much more likely to say they had ended the relationship (37 per cent) compared with only 16 per cent of men experiencing issues.

Jane Wilson, a solicitor advocate at Hall Smith Whittingham who specialises in domestic abuse cases, said: "I think it's good that males feel able to come forward now and talk about their abusive experiences. I suppose we have seen more women coming forward alleging abuse than men but we do see more and more men coming forward with allegations."

Laura Guillon, senior associate at Hall Brown solicitors, added that fathers are often concerned about access to children during or following the breakdown of a relationship.

"I think it's something that couples know will hurt the other one, and it's certainly a threat. It's becoming more acceptable for men to be able to express their feelings compared to ten years ago."

What is Coercive Control?

- Professor Evan Stark of Rutgers University in New York defined coercive control as 'a course of conduct in which a pattern of violence, sexual coercion, intimidation, isolation and control are used to dominate and exploit a partner and deprive [him or her] of basic rights and resources'.
- Isolation from friends, family and colleagues is a classic method by which abusers exert control over their victims.
- Other characteristics include excessive jealousy, taking away the victim's phone, withholding food and toilet access, stalking, restricting access to money.

For help and support if you are a victim of any form of domestic violence, contact Women's Aid (womensaid.org.uk), Refuge (refuge.org.uk), Men's Advice Line (mensadvice.org.uk) or the 24-hour National Domestic Violence Helpline on 0808 2000 247.

Contact IBB's Family Law Experts Today

For more information please contact [Kate Ryan](mailto:kate.ryan@ibblaw.co.uk), Family Law Partner at IBB Solicitors, on kate.ryan@ibblaw.co.uk.

IBB Solicitors' family law practice provides expert advice for high-net-worth individuals in divorce cases involving assets ranging from £2m to £10m; pre-nuptial and post-nuptial agreements, co-habitation agreements and pre-civil partnership agreements; and representing children in private law cases in disputes involving contact and residence arrangements following the breakdown of parental relationships.

To contact the [family law team](mailto:familylaw@ibblaw.co.uk) please email familylaw@ibblaw.co.uk.