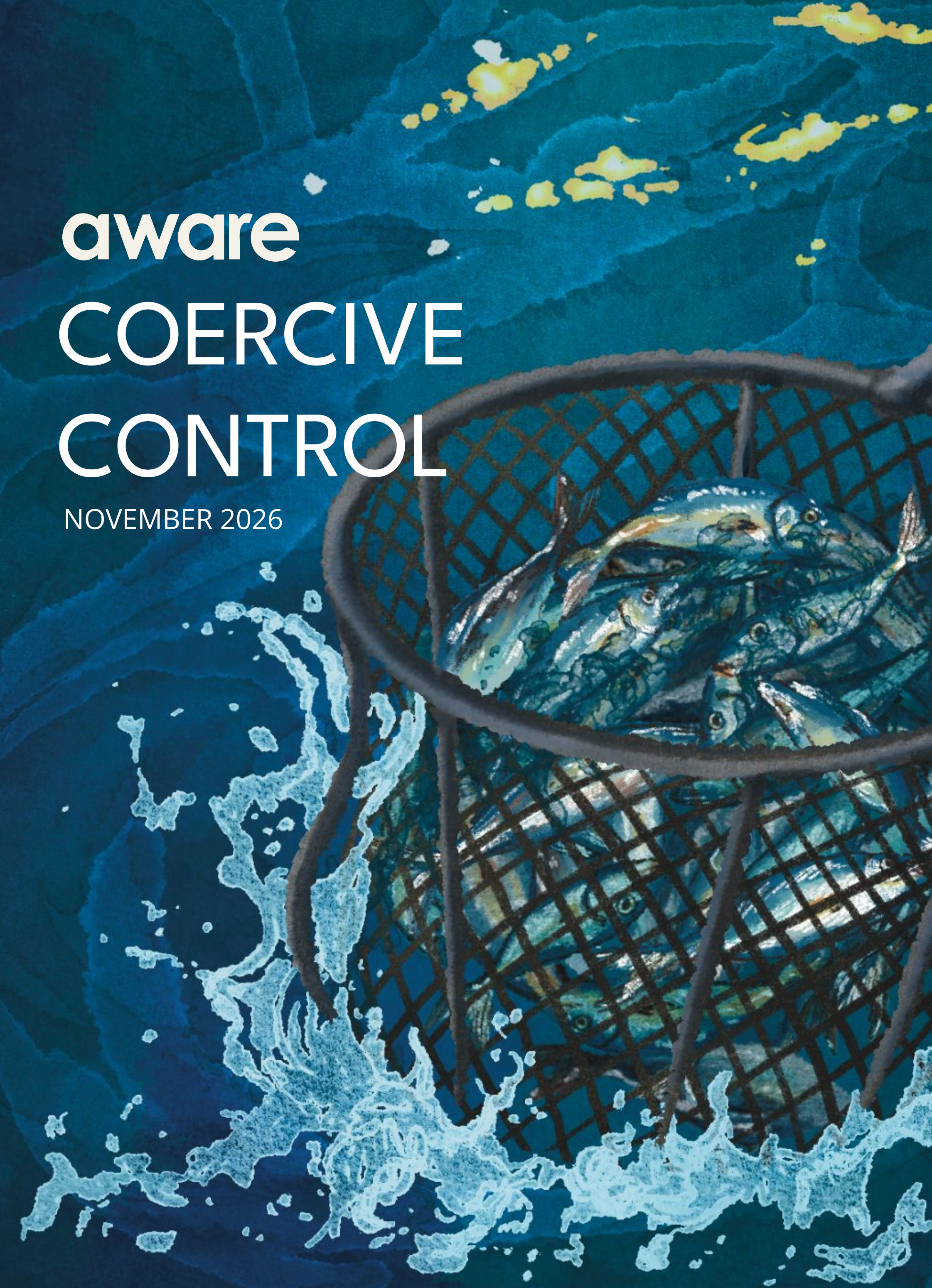
aware

COERCIVE CONTROL

NOVEMBER 2026



Acknowledgements

We extend our profound gratitude to everyone who brought this project to fruition. Firstly, we are deeply indebted to the survivor-interviewees who trusted us with their lived experiences. We thank you for your immense courage and vulnerability, your experiences remain our guiding force for driving change.

We also extend our sincere appreciation to the expert interviewees whose sector expertise provided crucial grounding for our initial findings. We thank the dedicated research teams who developed this project, methodically and rigorously conducted the interviews, and analysed the survivor accounts to write this landmark report.

Finally, we express our heartfelt thanks to the Diana Koh Foundation for their generous support and commitment to advancing survivor safety and justice.

Executive Summary

In Singapore, recognition of coercive control has increasingly entered the legal and policy landscape. Amendments to the Women's Charter have expanded the understanding of family violence to include emotional and psychological abuse and controlling behaviours such as restricting movement, monitoring whereabouts, isolating a person from family and friends, and withholding financial support. Yet, significant gaps remain in understanding how coercive control is experienced and recognised in practice.

Coercive control describes a pattern of behaviour through which an abuser seeks to entrap another person by restricting their autonomy, choices, and access to resources. Existing administrative data on family violence largely categorises cases only by relationship, which can obscure the cumulative and overlapping patterns through which coercive control operates and entraps victim-survivors.

This report addresses that gap by thematically analysing the lived experiences of 44 victim-survivors of coercive control in Singapore, alongside interviews with service providers, legal professionals, and academics. Coercive control in these accounts extends well beyond intimate partnership.

Close to a fifth of the relationships described are between adult children and their parents, where filial obligation supplies both the justification for control and the pressure to endure it. Survivors struggle to recognise coercive control while experiencing it, and the counsellors, medical professionals, and police officers that they approached often did not recognise it either, responding to a single incident rather than the years-long pattern of abuse which stood behind it. These experiences occur across diverse income, education, and relationship types.

The findings align with current scholarship in defining coercive control by a sustained pattern of domination, rather than by any single act or type of violence. That pattern can remain difficult to identify even when survivors and those around them recognise that something is wrong. The report closes with recommendations spanning data collection, legislation, frontline practice, survivor support, and prevention.

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
Methodology	10
Manifestation of Coercive Control in Singapore	15
Coercive Control as a Pattern of Entrapment	26
The Devastating Impacts of Coercive Control on Victim-Survivors	36
“Why Don’t They Just Leave?” Understanding Barriers to Leaving	46
“What Makes a Survivor Seek Help?” Exploring Critical Enablers	54
Recommendations	61
Annex	69
Designer’s Note	71



Content Warning

This report contains intense and detailed descriptions of family, domestic, and intimate partner abuse—not limited to physical intimidation and assault, psychological violence, and sexual abuse.

As the subject matter may be distressing and re-traumatising, please prioritise your well-being as you engage with this material at your own pace.

Introduction



Coercive control describes a pattern of behaviour through which an abuser seeks to entrap another person by restricting their autonomy, choices, and access to resources.[1]

Unlike violence understood as isolated incidents, coercive control is often a cumulation of psychological abuse, intimidation, social isolation, surveillance, financial abuse, sexual coercion, physical violence, and control over everyday activities, to progressively narrow a survivor's autonomy.[2]

Individual behaviours may appear insignificant or ambiguous when viewed in isolation, with their significance only becoming more apparent when understood as part of a sustained pattern of domination and control. It is a distinct dynamic which continues to grow in recognition globally.[3] Yet there is limited research on how it manifests within the Singaporean context.

The need to better recognise these patterns is particularly relevant in Singapore, where family violence remains a significant concern.[4] Singapore's policy and legal frameworks have increasingly recognised forms of emotional, psychological and controlling behaviour within its understanding of family violence.[5]

More specifically, there continues to be an upward trend of spousal and child abuse cases in Singapore since 2023.[6] While there is an upward tick in reporting domestic violence, these numbers do not provide clarity on the scale of coercive control here as this dynamic is not tracked separately.

This report therefore examines survivors' lived experiences in Singapore to address this gap and demonstrate why abuse must be understood as a broader pattern of coercive control, rather than through isolated incidents alone.

---

[1] Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[2] Evan Stark and Marianne Hester, "Coercive Control: Update and Review," *Violence Against Women* 25, no. 1 (2019): 81–104.

[3] Megan Galbally, Stuart Watson, Kelli MacMillan, Katherine Sevar, and Louise M. Howard, "Intimate Partner Violence Across Pregnancy and the Postpartum and the Relationship to Depression and Perinatal Wellbeing: Findings from a Pregnancy Cohort Study," *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 27, no. 5 (2024): 807–15; Susan Lagdon, Julie-Ann Jordan, Paula Devine, Mark A. Tully, Cherie Armour, and Ciaran Shannon, "Public Understanding of Coercive Control in Northern Ireland," *Journal of Family Violence* 38, no. 1 (2023): 39–50.

[4] Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), *Domestic Violence Trends Report 2026* (Singapore: MSF, 2026), 25.

[5] Parliament of Singapore, "Women's Charter (Family Violence and Other Matters) Amendment Bill," Singapore Parliamentary Reports System, accessed August 11, 2026, sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-644

[6] In the last three years, tier 1 spousal abuse cases have risen to be 1,560 (in 2023), 1,871 (in 2024), and 1,920 (in 2025). Similarly, tier 1 child abuse cases have also risen to be 2,128 (in 2023), 2,373 (in 2024), and 2,476 (in 2025). See MSF, *Domestic Violence Trends Report 2026,* 15 and 25.

Aims of this Study

By documenting the lived experiences of survivors, this report seeks to:

(1) Raise awareness of coercive control as an unrecognised and often misunderstood form of entrapment

Coercive control is particularly insidious because of the complex and hidden ways in which it presents, often evading detection. The mechanisms and effects of coercive control are uniquely devastating and must be examined independently from standalone categories of domestic, physical, or emotional abuse.

(2) Foster greater public understanding and empathy for survivors

Low public awareness hinders the identification of coercive control and delays victim-survivors from seeking help. Greater comprehension of the patterns and impacts of coercive control strengthens crucial bystander interventions by family members and support networks.[7]

(3) Equip frontline professionals and community members with the language and knowledge needed to recognise and respond appropriately to coercive control

Sensitivity in both language and approach is required to avoid re-traumatising victim-survivors and to validate their lived experiences when seeking help or reporting a case.

(4) Support evidence-based interventions and policies that strengthen protections and support for survivors

The current dearth of data significantly hinders frontline professionals' ability to conceptualise impactful, evidence-informed interventions. Through contextualising the experiences of victim-survivors of coercive control in Singapore, this report highlights its inherent complexities and the importance of reforms that directly address coercive control dynamics.

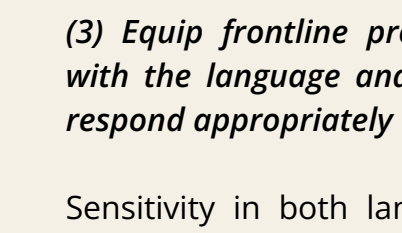
Singapore's Place in the World

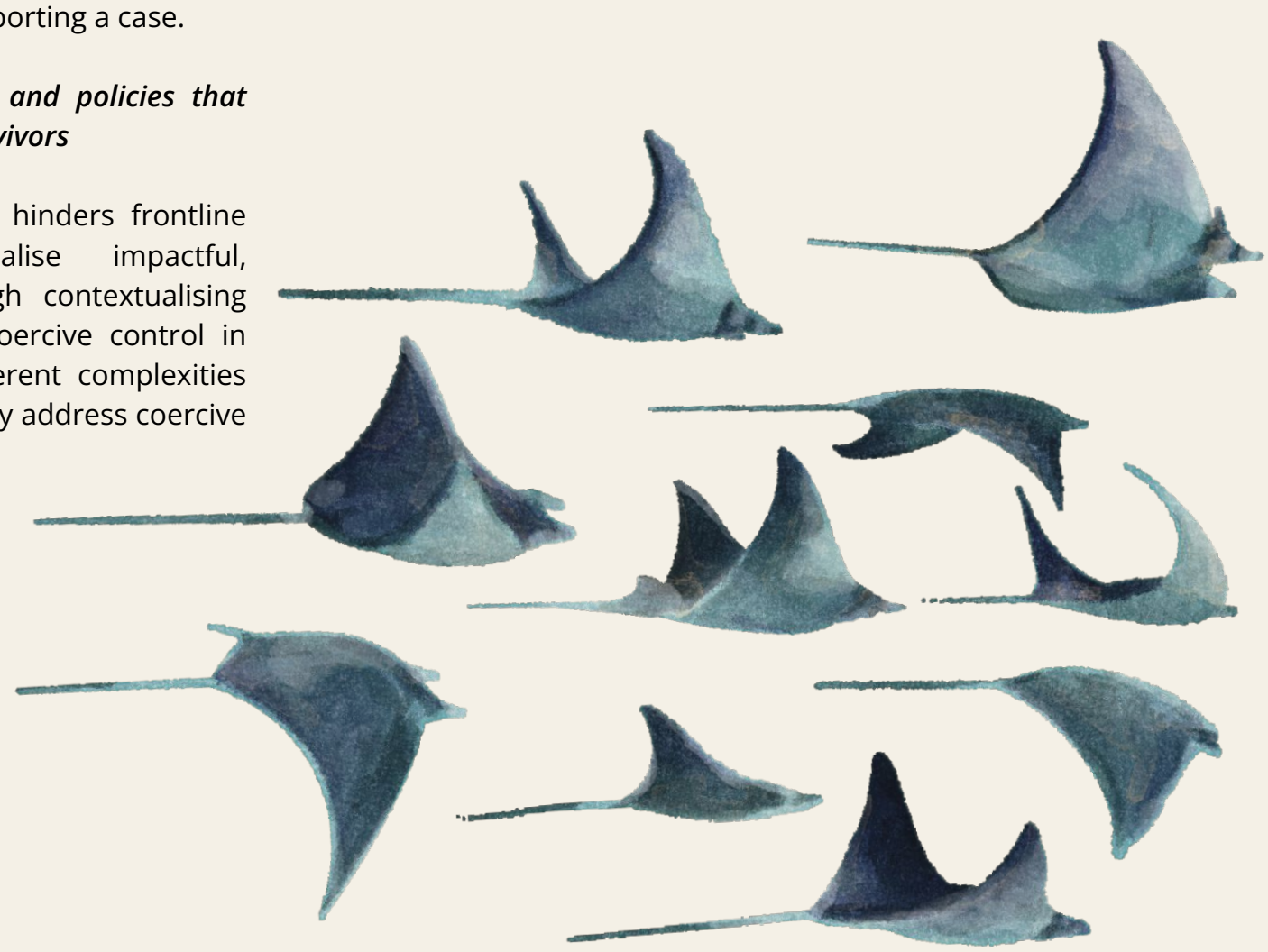
Singapore severely lags behind many countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, and the United States, in terms of conducting localised research, developing practitioner interventions, and implementing effective legislation that designates coercive control as a standalone offence.

Formally acknowledging this gap is important as victims are further harmed when their experiences go unrecognised and are invalidated.[8] The criminalisation of coercive control legitimises the harm committed against victim-survivors, recognises the state's responsibility in seeking justice for survivors, and deters similar acts by perpetrators.

Key examples are Scotland's Domestic Abuse Act 2018, Ireland's Domestic Violence Act 2018, and England and Wales in 2015, which have now developed rehabilitation programs aimed at male perpetrators.[9]

Additionally, in Australia, Queensland in 2025[10] and New South Wales in 2024, have also passed Coercive Control Acts, which make the offence punishable by up to seven years' imprisonment.[11]





[7] Jacqueline Walker, Sally Fiona Kelty, and Caroline Ng Tseung-Wong, "Bystander Intervention in Coercive Control: Do Relationship to the Victim, Bystander Gender, and Concerns Influence Willingness to Intervene?" *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 39, no. 15–16 (2024): 3791–815.
[8] Delanie Woodlock, Michael Salter, Molly Dragiewicz, and Bridget Harris, "'Living in the Darkness': Technology-Facilitated Coercive Control, Disenfranchised Grief, and Institutional Betrayal," *Violence Against Women* 29, no. 5 (2023): 987–1004.
[9] Kelly Johnson, Stephen R. Burrell, and Nicole Westmarland, "Responding to Coercive Control in Criminal Justice Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programmes in England and Wales: Conceptual, Operational, and Methodological Complexities," *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* 8, no. 1 (2024): 3–20.
[10] Queensland Government, "Coercive Control Laws," accessed August 11, 2026.
[11] New South Wales Government, Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control) Act 2022 (NSW), accessed August 11, 2026.

The Local Research Gap

Currently, published reports on domestic violence in Singapore fail to display the number of incidences of coercive control,[12] with statistics only focusing on the broader umbrella term of abuse, with no delineation on types of abuse or disaggregated demographic data.

Existing local research on overall domestic abuse fails to acknowledge coercive control's pernicious nature which often allows it to go undetected whilst sometimes displaying longer-lasting detrimental outcomes for victim-survivors, compared to other forms of violence.[13] Therefore, this study by AWARE is the first to comprehensively investigate the experiences of coercive control survivors in Singapore.

Existing Legislation Alone is an Insufficient Remedy

The Women's Charter (Family Violence and Other Matters) (Amendment) Act which came into effect in 2025 recognises emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse as family violence.[14] This enables family members to apply for a range of protection orders including the Personal Protection Order (PPO) and Domestic Exclusion Order (DEO).

Electronic Monitoring Orders (EMOs) to track the whereabouts of high-risk family violence perpetrators and Mandatory Treatment Orders (MTOs) that require perpetrators to undergo psychiatric treatment can also now be issued. Currently, perpetrators of emotional and psychological abuse, when issued with a PPO, are also tagged with a Counselling Order (CO) where they undergo court-ordered mandatory counselling.[15]

The Women's Charter's amendments, introduction of new orders, and Online Safety (Relief and Accountability) Act 2025 are a step in the right direction. However, the legislation has two significant limitations that leave coercive control inadequately addressed in Singapore's legal landscape.

The first is a structural gap in scope. As AWARE has highlighted over the years, both the Women's Charter and Protection from Harassment Act (POHA) do not adequately address coercive control that occurs in workplaces, dating relationships, as well as online and offline community settings.[16] That these gaps remain unaddressed speaks to how slowly legislative change has moved, despite the urgency of the problem for the survivors who experience it in these contexts.

The second limitation lies in how the legislation is interpreted and applied. Singapore does not yet have a standalone legal definition of coercive control, nor does the amended Women's Charter criminalise it as a discrete offence.

This has significant practical consequences. In the landmark decision of YBD v YBC [2026] SGFC 49, which is among the first cases decided under the new emotional and psychological abuse provisions, the Family Court confirmed that "coercive control is not a discrete legal concept in Singapore law."

---

[13] Nicole Moulding, Sarah Wendt, Suzanne Buchanan, and Fiona Verity, "Rethinking Women's Mental Health After Intimate Partner Violence," *Violence Against Women* 27, no. 12–13 (2021): 1987–2007.
[14] Parliament of Singapore, "Women's Charter (Family Violence and Other Matters) Amendment Bill," Singapore Parliamentary Reports System, accessed August 11, 2026, https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-644
[15] Ibid.
[16] Singapore, Women's Charter (Family Violence and Other Matters) (Amendment) Act 2023, Act 21 of 2023: 58B, Singapore Statutes Online, accessed August 13, 2026, https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Acts-Supp/21-2023/Published/20230821?DocDate=20230821#pr2-; Singapore. Protection from Harassment Act 2014. Act 17 of 2014: 3. Singapore Statutes Online, accessed August 13, 2026, https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PHA2014?ProvIds=pr3-

While the court found that conduct amounting to coercive control may fall within the definition of emotional or psychological abuse under s 58B(4), it is not the threshold required to establish such abuse.

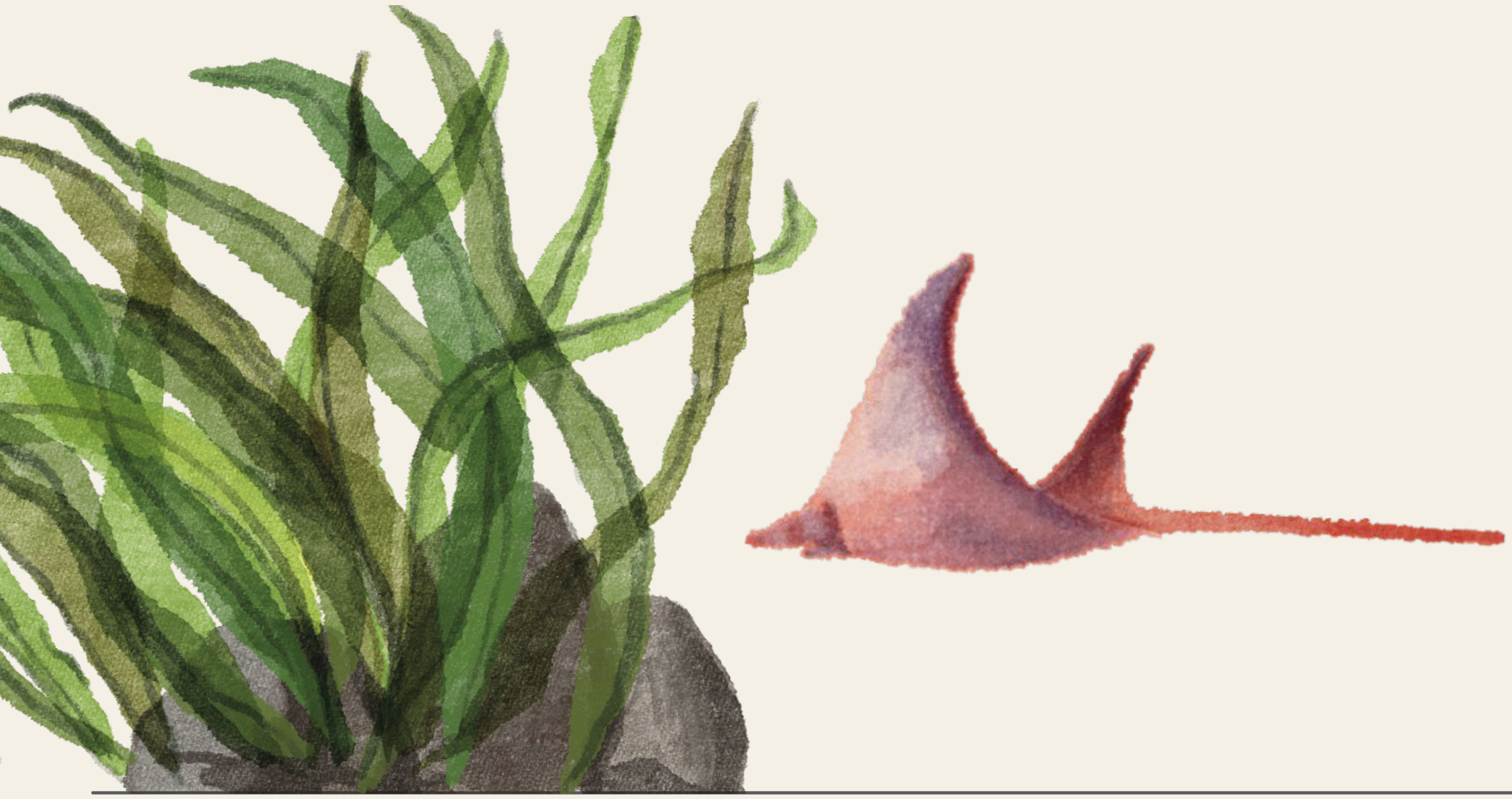
Instead, the court must assess each incident under a "Contextualised Objective Approach", asking whether the conduct would objectively torment, intimidate, harass, or distress a person in the complainant's position, in light of the full relational and situational context.[17]

Without a standalone offence, survivors in Singapore must still establish specific incidents of abuse under the current framework. This makes it structurally harder to capture the essence of coercive control, which derives its harm precisely from the accumulation of conduct that may appear minor in isolation.

Additionally, there remains a lack of data tracking the occurrence of coercive control in Singapore to inform frontline and practitioner interventions,[18] without which the impact of frontline interventions and policy amendments remains unexamined.

The low awareness of coercive control as a form of entrapment among both the general public and frontline professionals contributes to the core challenge of underreporting and compounds systemic factors that enable its perpetration. While training initiatives exist, awareness alone does not constitute recognition, and recognition does not yet constitute consistent identification.

Until coercive control is consistently identified and named at every point of contact, by police, by social service practitioners, by healthcare providers, training without accountability will remain insufficient to shift practice on the ground.



[17] This stands in contrast to a growing number of jurisdictions that have moved to criminalise or regulate coercive control as a standalone offence. In the United Kingdom, s 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 criminalises "controlling or coercive behaviour" in an intimate or family relationship where it has a serious effect on the victim, defined as causing fear of violence or serious alarm or distress that has a substantial adverse effect on day-to-day activities.

In Scotland, the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 similarly creates a standalone offence of engaging in abusive behaviour towards a partner or ex-partner, with the key finding based on whether a reasonable person would consider the course of behaviour likely to cause physical or psychological harm, with no requirement to prove that harm actually resulted.

New South Wales enacted s 54D of the Crimes Act 1900 in 2024, creating a criminal offence of abusive behaviour towards intimate partners based on a course of conduct likely to cause fear of violence or a serious adverse impact on a victim's daily activities. Ireland's Domestic Violence Act 2018 similarly criminalises coercive control as a standalone offence, requiring conduct that is controlling or coercive, has a serious effect on the victim, and which a reasonable person would consider likely to have such an effect.

[18] Faythe Tan, "Intimate Partner Violence: Assessing Coercive Control Awareness in a Singaporean Sample"" (PhD diss., Murdoch University, 2025).

Methodology

This study drew on

44

semi-structured qualitative interviews with adult victim-survivors of coercive control in Singapore.

The **names of survivors have been changed** to protect their anonymity. A qualitative approach was selected to enable a grounded understanding of lived experiences, capturing the complexity of coercive control that may not be adequately reflected in quantitative measures.

The interviews, conducted in 2023 and 2024, explored survivors' experiences of different forms of coercive control, their help-seeking journeys, barriers to leaving, and interactions with formal and informal support systems.[19]

In addition to thematic analysis of survivor interviews, the study also included

7

expert interviews with service providers, a lawyer, as well as a researcher with relevant expertise in family violence, coercive control, and related support systems.[20]

Together, the two datasets allow for data validation of lived experience with professional perspectives, strengthening the relevance of the findings and recommendations. See **Table A-1** in the **Annex** for details on the report methodology.

[19] The interviews were conducted before the recent family violence amendments came into effect in Jan 2025.

[20] The expert interviews provided contextual insight into systemic responses, institutional challenges, and gaps in service provision after Jan 2025.

Profile of Survivor-Abuser Dynamic and Relationship Contexts

The 44 interviewed survivors in this study reflect a wide range of demographic backgrounds, relationship contexts, and lived experiences of coercive control. This sample is not intended to be representative of all survivors of coercive control in Singapore, nor does it suggest that survivors constitute a single or uniform "type" of person. Rather, the findings highlight the diversity of pathways into and experiences of coercive control.

You may review the demographic profiles of the interviewees below.

Figure A: Breakdown of 44 Survivors' Residency Statuses (At time of interview)

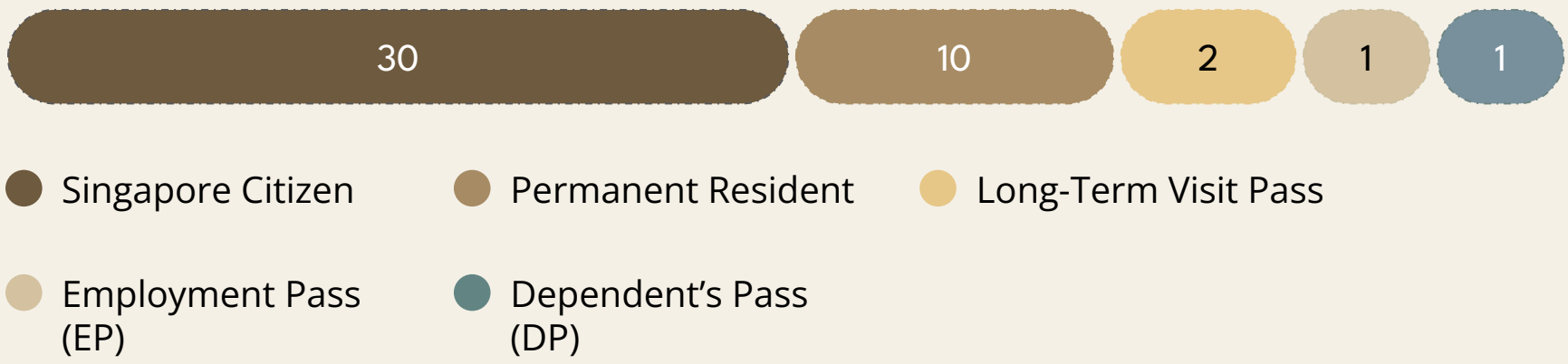


Figure B: Breakdown of 46* Relationship Types (During abuse)



* 2 interviewees experienced coercive control in more than one relationship context.
** All interviewed participants were children who grew up under one or two coercively controlling parents. They were interviewed as adults.
*** The 4 female and 1 non-binary (assigned male at birth) survivors were in an intimate relationship with 1 non-binary and 4 female abusers.

Figure C: Presence of Children in 36 Intimate Partnerships (During abuse)

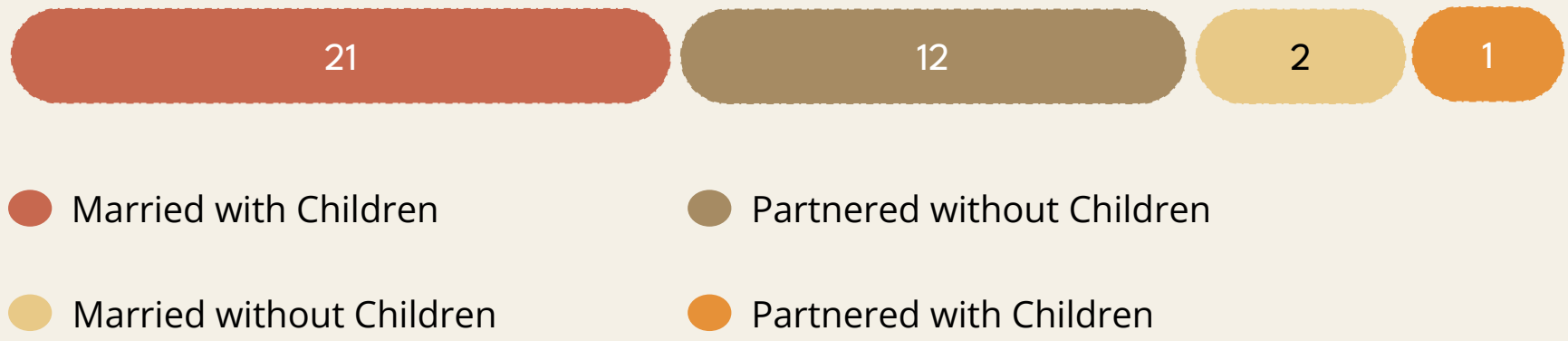
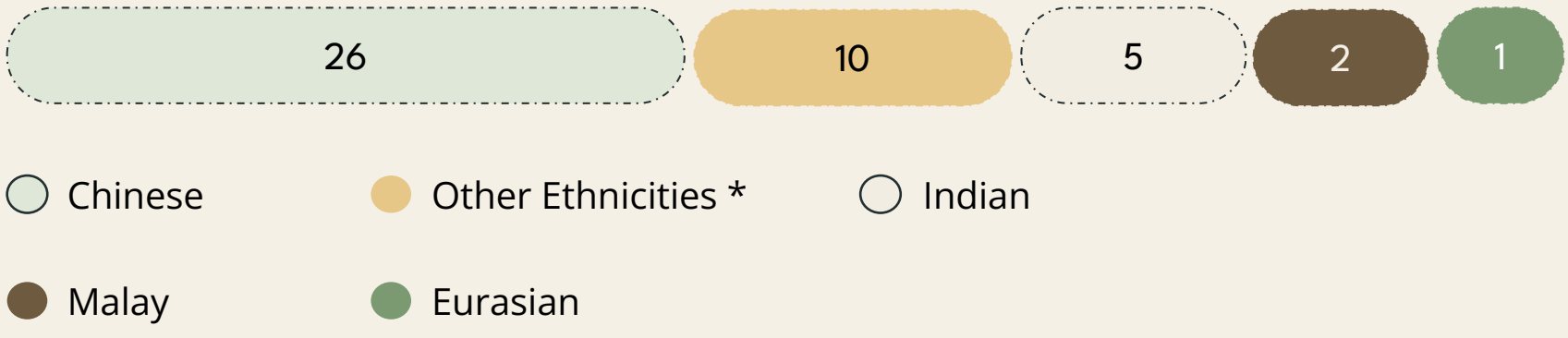


Figure D: Breakdown of 44 Survivors' Ethnicities



* Other Ethnicities included Thai, Vietnamese, Filipino, Burmese, Caucasian, and Sinhalese.

Figure E: Breakdown of 44 Survivors' Highest Educational Levels (At time of interview)

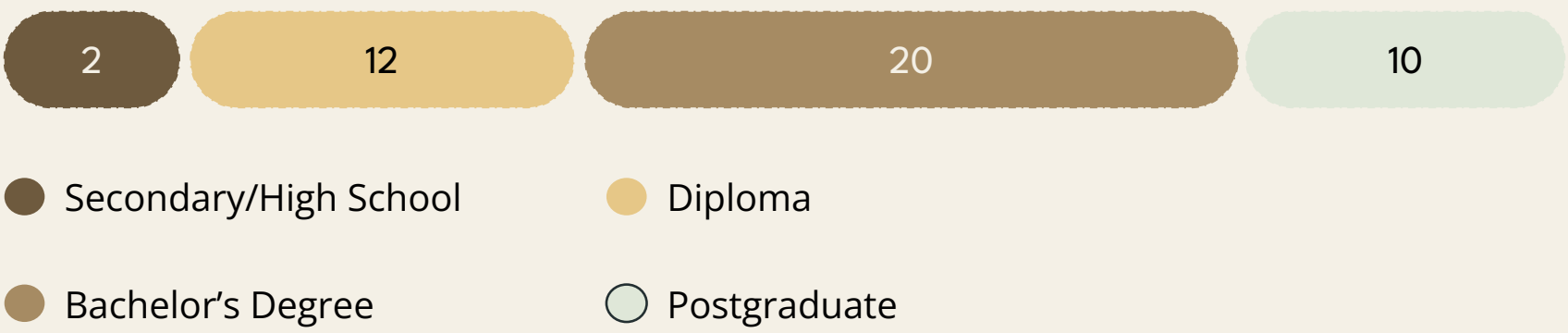
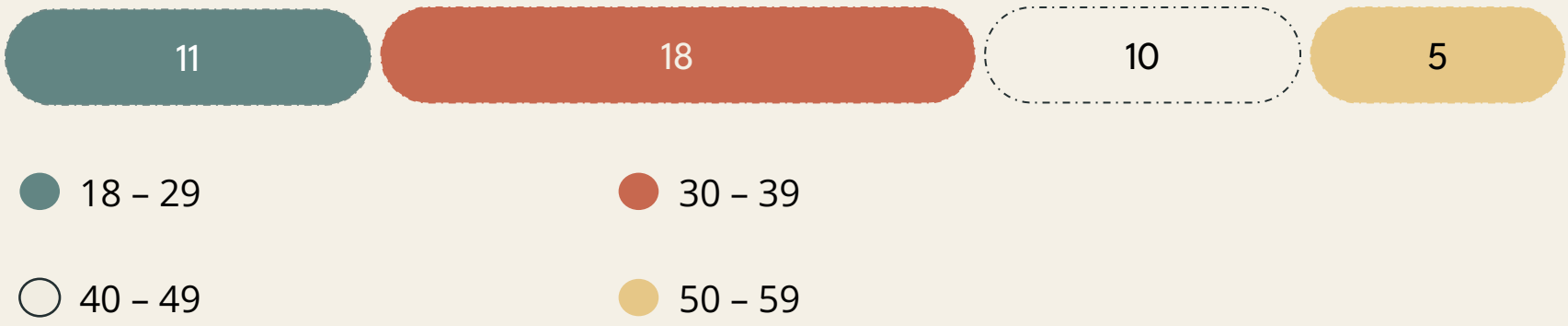


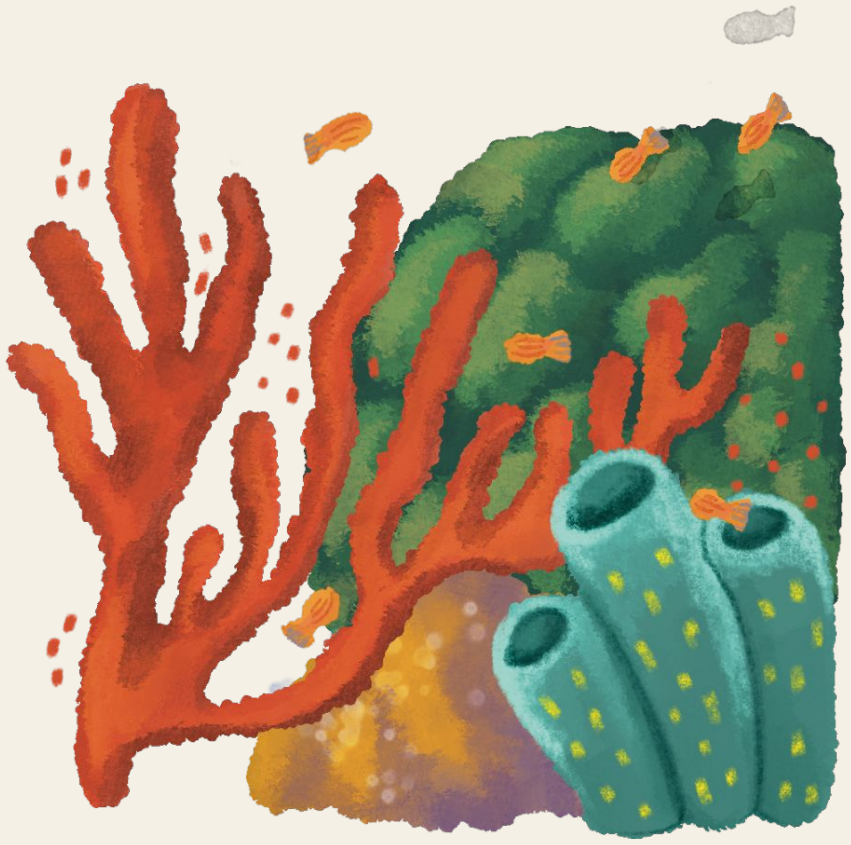
Figure F: Breakdown of 44 Survivors' Age Groups (At time of interview)



Higher Risk Demographic Profiles

An intersectional lens recognises that multiple overlapping identities and lived experiences can compound dependence on an abusive partner and reduce access to avenues of support.

These characteristics should not be understood as risk factors in isolation or be typecasted to an archetype, but rather people who may experience higher vulnerability due to intersecting identities and circumstances.[21] Interventions informed by this finding must therefore **move beyond a one-size-fits-all solutioning** and shift towards a dynamic response to addressing these intersectional barriers.



Households with Multiple Stressors

Respondents from household environments with multiple stressors have increased vulnerability to coercive control, particularly where family members experienced substance use or have vice-related issues such as gambling, that affects the wider household.

These conditions could compound the psychological distress among household members. In such environments, coercive control may become intertwined with existing family dysfunction, making abusive behaviour harder to distinguish from broader household conflict.

Relationships that Incur Social Disapproval

Relationships that attracted social disapproval also created additional barriers to disclosing and leaving coercively controlling environments. Interviewees, who were in relationships involving infidelity, described fear of judgement or rejection which discouraged disclosure and reduced access to support.

Social disapproval may also be exploited by perpetrators to isolate survivors, particularly where they can threaten exposure, shame, or the loss of family and community support. These dynamics can leave survivors more dependent on the abuser and less willing to seek help, particularly when they anticipate that others may focus on the circumstances of the relationship, rather than the abuse itself.

LGBTIQA+ Relationships

In queer relationships, distinct dynamics functioned as a form of leverage and control. Furthermore, coercive control within LGBTIQA+ relationships may be complicated by fears of being outed, ostracism from community networks, discrimination from services, or ineffective bystander intervention. These factors can lower survivors' desire to seek help and contribute to professional failure to recognise coercive control.

Women with Children

Several interviewees were or had been married to their abusive partners. Coercive control was often embedded within broader social expectations surrounding marriage permanence and family preservation.

Marriage frequently intensified barriers to leaving due to shared finances and financial dependencies, co-parenting responsibilities, immigration or housing dependency, and social stigma associated with divorce.

Children and their welfare were central in many accounts, both as emotional anchors keeping victims from being able to fully leave the relationship and as the perpetrator's mechanisms of harassment and control.

---

[21] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," Droit et société 108 (2021): 144.

Individuals with Language Barriers

Victim-survivors with limited English proficiency or lower levels of formal education faced additional barriers to recognising, disclosing, and responding to coercive control. Language barriers often restrict access to information, support services, legal advice, and employment; it can also shift power in the perpetrator's favour, particularly when survivors rely on them to navigate divorce proceedings, asset ownership, documentation, and other legal, immigration, or financial matters.

Survivors whose first language is not English also lack the vocabulary to describe the abuse to predominantly English-speaking professionals, let alone articulate the cumulative pattern of coercive control. This puts perpetrators in a position to exploit survivors' communication barriers, speak on their behalf, distort their narratives, and manipulate legal or financial processes to the perpetrator's own advantage.

Migrant Spouses and Those with Insecure Immigration Status

Similarly, victim-survivors whose residency or legal status depends on their partner may face additional barriers arising from fears of deportation, loss of residency rights, financial instability, as well as unfamiliarity with local legal and support systems. These structural constraints can significantly reduce their perceived options for leaving their home with the perpetrators safely.

Survivors of Past Abusive Relationships

Many respondents also described having limited awareness of what healthy relationships looked like, particularly where later experiences of coercive control had been normalised by previous relationships or family dynamics. Prolonged exposure to abusive family dynamics can normalise unhealthy relationship patterns and raise the threshold for recognising and leaving abusive relationships.



Manifestation of Coercive Control in Singapore

We examine in detail how coercive control manifests across different forms of abuse in the Singapore context, and the socio-institutional conditions that enable entrapment.

Coercive Control Tactics in Singapore

Coercive control is a pattern of ongoing behaviours used by a person to dominate, isolate, and regulate another person, restricting their autonomy and freedom over time.[22] Any of the abuse types mentioned in **Figure 1** below can reinforce and sustain coercive control.[23] Acts of psychological and emotional abuse, intimidation, surveillance, financial control, social isolation, and micro-regulation may appear singular or benign in isolation, but function together to entrap the victim-survivor.

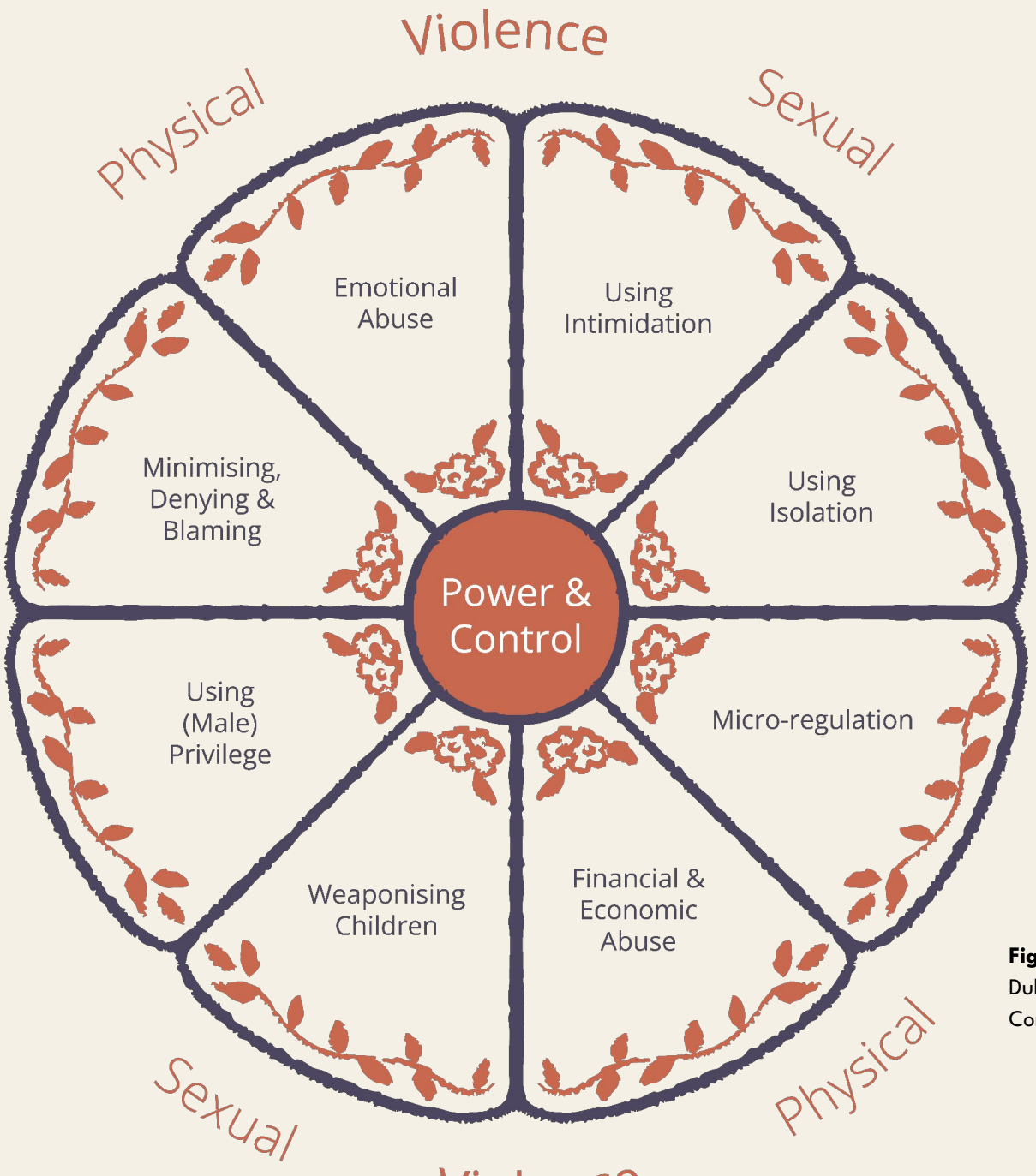


Figure 1. Adaptation of The Duluth Model's Power and Control Wheel

Minimising, Denying, and Blaming

In all survivor accounts, they described manipulation and exploitation by their abuser. This included deception (i.e., fraud, lying, withholding information), guilt-tripping, and gaslighting through cognitive overload (i.e., repeating arguments until the survivor becomes overwhelmed),[24] and invalidation of perception (i.e., making survivors question their understanding of events or believe their emotional responses are incorrect or exaggerated).

It is crucial to remember that not all forms of abuse must be present to determine the presence of coercive control. In our interviews, we found that coercive control can occur even in the absence of frequent physical or sexual violence.

Such behavior often escalated into DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender), a manipulation tactic perpetrators used to deflect the responsibility onto the person they are abusing.

---

[22] Stark, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*.
[23] In **Figure 1**, we adapt the Duluth Model's Power and Control Wheel to better reflect the experiences of coercive control survivors in Singapore. This framework conceptualises coercive control as a pattern of behaviours centred on the perpetrator's pursuit of power and control, rather than isolated incidents of physical and sexual violence. See Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter: The Duluth Model* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1993).
[24] Gaslighting is a form of manipulation where a person attempts to gain power and control by consistently making someone else question their own memory, perception, or reality.

For example, when met with confrontation from the victim-survivor on their unhealthy behavior, perpetrators will deny that they have done anything wrong, resorting to minimising the feelings of the victim-survivor, saying that they're 'overly sensitive', or making a mountain out of a molehill.

He cries because he said that he felt like he's a monster for [hitting me] and somehow it always makes me feel like I'm the one who made him a monster. He did this because I must have done something that really hurt him and that I deserve it...I would end up saying sorry to him even though he's the one who abused me.

~ **Amira,** describing what she didn't know was DARVO from her partner at the point of the relationship.

They would also attack the victim's character, bringing up past incidents to discredit them and therefore their current accusation. In a state of gaslighting and confusion, the tables may turn in which the perpetrator starts to accuse the victim of perpetrating abuse against them, repositioning themselves as the victim.

Gaslighting lowers survivors' confidence in their own perceptions by disputing the reality of events, reframing abusive behaviour as imagined or exaggerated, or presenting the survivor as irrational or overly sensitive.[25] Over time, these tactics normalise abuse through repeated exposure to harmful behaviour, making increasingly coercive or controlling conduct appear ordinary or even tolerable.

Our study discovered that the normalisation can lead to escalation of violence in the household due to increasing levels of demands and punishment when victims fail to meet said demands from perpetrators over time.

Worryingly, coercive behaviours were explained away when viewed in isolation: monitoring framed as concern, demands for constant communication as expressions of 'love', restrictions on friendships with other genders as reasonable boundaries, financial control as responsible household management, and repeated criticism as an isolated argument or reaction to 'improving' a survivor's behaviour 'for their own good'.

Perpetrators provide seemingly plausible justifications for their actions, making it difficult for victims and those around them to distinguish coercion from healthy relationship requests.

Anywhere that I need to go, he [would] send me there and fetch me [back]. So I told him, 'Hey, I just want to take the train with my friends.' He would get very angry and tell me, "Do you know how lucky you are to have someone who will always be fetching you, taking you? You don't know the value of it.

~ **Olivia,** on her partner normalising following her around at work and in her personal appointments as a "romantic gesture".

The abuse only becomes apparent through cumulative patterns when these incidents are understood in relation to one another and in consideration of their frequency, escalation, context, and increasing constraints on the survivor's autonomy.

The ambiguity therefore delays recognition, particularly when survivors are repeatedly gaslit to believe the incident is due to their own shortcomings or making. Survivors share that they are often left with a gut feeling of something wrong (or 'off'), but are unable to pinpoint what makes it wrong.

This uncertainty is reinforced by perpetrators' impression management externally. By presenting themselves to family, friends, colleagues and professionals as caring, reasonable, or responsible, perpetrators create a public account of the relationship that conflicts with the survivor's private experience.

When a survivor's social circle places greater value on the perpetrator's account or fails to recognise the pattern of abuse, this can erode survivors' confidence in their own lived reality while further isolating them from potential sources of support.

It just felt very stifling. I remember, it felt like I wasn't safe...Even when I was with him, I didn't feel safe. And that was a very confusing feeling.

~ **Tharani,** expressing a lack of safety in her long-term relationship.

[25] Willis Klein, Sherry Li, and Suzanne Wood. "A Qualitative Analysis of Gaslighting in Romantic Relationships." *Personal Relationships* 30, no. 4 (June 24, 2023): 1316–40.

Emotional Abuse

He needs to feel the sense of power, that's why he likes to call me stupid woman, say I'm ugly, say I'm fat, [tell me to] stop eating, [to] look at my stomach, that kind of thing. He will tell me, children can make mistakes, but you cannot—you're an adult, you're not allowed to make mistakes.

~ **Kate,** married to an abusive spouse for 30 years, explained he frequently criticised, humiliated, and undermined her.



Across most survivor accounts in this study, perpetrators would repeatedly insult, belittle, ridicule, or criticise to erode survivors' sense of self-worth and reinforce their own position of power. Humiliation and degradation were often aimed at a victim-survivor's appearance, abilities, intelligence, social circle, or contributions to the household.

Some also deliberately expose survivors to embarrassment or compare them unfavourably with others, creating a sense of inadequacy and dependence for the perpetrator's approval. Repeated degradation made survivors internalise these negative messages, making them doubt their own judgement, and feel less capable of making decisions financially, asserting boundaries, or leaving the relationship.

He characterises me in a certain way, which is that I am a liar, I am a hypocrite, I'm a cheater, I have a poor memory, I can't make decisions, I don't know what I want when I make a decision. So all of this caused me to have a very, very poor view of myself.

~ **Sara,** describing her increasing loss of self-esteem due to long-term belittling by her partner.

In this study, emotional abuse also included the denial of basic emotional and social needs such as affection, attention, and validation. Perpetrators often made fulfilling such needs conditional on compliance.

For example, perpetrators often withheld affection upon rejection of a demand, arguing that their needs consistently take precedence while framing disagreement or boundary-setting as a betrayal. This reinforced the expectation that maintaining the relationship depended on meeting the perpetrator's demands at the expense of the victim-survivor's boundary.

Let's say, I did something that he did not agree with or I said something that upset them, then he would punish me by withdrawing himself entirely, in the sense physically, but [also] withdrawing any form of action.

~ **Farah,** married to spouse for 10 years.

Using Intimidation

68%
(n=30)

recounted how their abuser used intimidation, through looks, gestures, and actions, to punish perceived non-compliance and assert authority.

Common intimidation tactics ranged from hostile glares and aggressive gestures to destroying property, yelling, and spatial entrapment. Repeated displays of intimidation reminded the victim-survivor that their abuser was capable of violence, and even subtle actions that alluded to this became sufficient to ensure obedience.

Using Isolation

70%
(n=31)

detailed how their abuser would systematically interfere with and try to control their social relationships.

For example, their abuser would target the survivor's relationships with family, friends, mutual acquaintances, colleagues, and professional support systems. By implanting seeds of doubt, criticising a survivor's social circle, and restricting the amount of meaningful time spent with others, the abuser removes the survivor's safety nets and positions the relationship with the abuser as the most important.

In this study, isolation tactics included villainisation of the support circle (i.e., portraying family, friends, bystanders or those critical of the abusers as hostile, toxic, or poor influences), voicing unhappiness or dissatisfaction that the survivor is spending too much time with others, interrupting their quality time with others, enforcing rigid boundaries on external contact, and using impression management to manipulate others' perceptions and frame the survivor as unreasonable or "the problem".

Initially when I got together with him, because I was still quite friendly with my ex at that point in time, he was kind of unhappy about that and his stance was that, 'Oh if you're already in a relationship then there's no point...you shouldn't be friends with your ex.'

~ **Jiayi,** in a long-term relationship with her partner.



Microregulation and Arbitrary Rulemaking

82%
(n=36)

experienced microregulation over their choices, personal habits, and daily routines.

Microregulation and the presence of arbitrary rules invaded even the most ordinary aspect of everyday life like a survivor's food choices, appearance, way of speaking, behaviour at home, cultural practices, and how they spent their time outside.

When a survivor failed to stick to these arbitrary rules, this usually resulted in confrontation and punishment. Eventually, repeated enforcement of the abuser's arbitrary rules tends to suppress a survivor's ability to act like themselves.

If I showed even a little bit too much chest, it'd be like nonstop comments. If I insist on dressing the way that I did, sometimes he'll just yell at me to change my clothes, but other times he'll start insulting my body to the point where I feel so uncomfortable that I have to change my clothes.

~ **Ivy,** who recalled her abusive father frequently controlling her appearance through humiliating her.

Restricting access to basic physical needs is also a means of microregulating a survivor.[26] This included preventing or disrupting sleep, limiting opportunities to attend to personal hygiene, restricting access to food or rest, and denying autonomy over everyday bodily needs and routines.

The deprivation not only reduces victim-survivors' well-being but also reinforces dependency and compliance, sometimes even gratitude, to the abuser for "rewarding" them with basic necessities.

I'll be like, 'Please, let me go to sleep. It's 1am. I have to be up at 5 in the morning. Please let me sleep.' I'm there dripping in sweat. My hands are shaking...They just say, 'No, you can't leave.' And what can I do?

~ **Giselle,** on her parents pulling her out of bed past midnight to lecture her.

[26] Julia Tolmie, Rachel Smith, and Denise Wilson, "Understanding Intimate Partner Violence: Why Coercive Control Requires a Social and Systemic Entrapment Framework," *Violence Against Women* 30, no. 1 (October 9, 2023): 54–74.

Financial and Economic Abuse

75%
(n=33)

of our respondents endured frequent financial abuse and control by their abuser.

Financial control and abuse often creates immense barriers to leaving because it depletes a survivor's resources, creates financial dependence on the abuser, and hurts a survivor's ability to independently build resources.

In the interviews, survivors detailed the insidious tactics whereby the abuser pressured the victim-survivor to shoulder financial responsibility in an unreasonable manner. Tactics included the abuser not helping with expenses, taking out loans in the survivor's name, and repeatedly borrowing money from the survivor. To hinder a survivor's ability to build resources, abusers would also interfere with their ability to work and study.

Near absolute financial dependence on the abuser was especially prevalent among children who grew up under an abusive parent and married respondents who were often pressured to become full-time caregivers. In these interviews, survivors recounted having restricted access to financial resources like bank accounts and payment cards.

Abusers further cemented control through intense financial scrutiny by putting the survivor on an inadequate allowance and demanding receipts and justifications for every purchase. This actively prevented the survivor from saving up any money of their own.

Crucially, financial abuse continued post-separation. Among married interviewees, tactics included delaying or withholding maintenance payments, refusing to pay child-related expenses, hiding assets during divorce proceedings, dragging out the divorce, and draining shared financial accounts.

Weaponisation of Children

Children were weaponised as a means of exerting emotional control or surveillance over survivors. Perpetrators would use their own children to threaten, punish, surveil, or manipulate survivors. This includes threatening to withhold access, influencing children's perceptions of the survivor, involving the children in the parents' conflicts, or using custody and caregiving arrangements post-divorce as opportunities to get insights into the survivor's new life.

Survivors consequently feel compelled to remain in contact with and accommodate the perpetrator to protect their children or help preserve their children's relationship with their fathers. Where perpetrators portray themselves as the more capable parent (often when they are the breadwinners in the household), these tactics can also undermine survivors' confidence in their own parenting and increase their fear of losing their children.

I [was] very scared for the police to show up because I was under so much coercive control. I really was schooled into [thinking], 'Do not affect [his] ability to earn for this family because [we] will all suffer. Whatever happens to [him] will impact [me] and the children'. So that's why I didn't call anyone or do anything and I still haven't really...I'm just trying to move on from it.

~ **Zoe,** on her struggle to leave the abusive household due to fear of repercussions on her children and herself.



Sexual Control, Coercion, and Violence

41%
(n=18)

of interviewed survivors frequently experienced sexual control, coercion, and violence from their abuser.

Meanwhile, another 23% (n=10) encountered the same but fewer instances. Survivors recounted how this type of abuse often removed their autonomy over their own body, crushing their sense of self-worth and compounding feelings of shame and humiliation.

Sexual control involved the abuser unilaterally deciding on when and how to be intimate, relegating the survivor's own desires in a subordinate position. Interviews revealed how sexual coercion operated on a continuum. It could be pressuring the victim-survivors into sex, sexually harassing comments, and conditioning love and assistance in return for sexual acts.

For many, it escalated to non-consensual touching, attempted rape, technology-faciliated sexual violence, performing non-consensual acts during sex, rape, and long-term sexual abuse.

Because there were often no physical injuries, survivors detailed that it was difficult to immediately recognise the sexual violence, making it even harder to seek help.

[Intimacy is] only on his terms. I cannot initiate. If I initiate, he will turn me away, he will say no, or he will go to sleep. But whenever he wants it, I have to do it.

~ **Gail,** on how her husband had unilateral control over intimacy in their marriage, often conditioning it on whether she had pleased him.





Physical Violence

41%
(n=18)

experienced frequent overt physical violence.

The interviews revealed how even direct violence did not always cause visible bruising or wounds, but left them with lasting psychological scars.

Similar to physical intimidation, overt violence was used by their abusers to assert dominance, punish disobedience, and force compliance. Overt physical abuse usually manifested later in the relationship, serving to isolate and entrap the survivor even further.

He would chase after me at home and push me against the walls...I just don't even know how to describe it, because I don't think any description could really replicate the fear that I had of him. I thought he was going to kill me.

~ **Valerie,** expressed how acts of physical violence left her terrified of her abusive husband.

Socio-Institutional Conditions for Entrapment

In addition to the specific forms of abuse experienced by victim-survivors, our interviews identified the overarching conditions that reinforced their entrapment. Akin to an invisible cage, survivors recounted how (1) coercion and threats, (2) surveillance, (3) societal beliefs and norms, and (4) institutional rules made it extremely difficult to seek help.[27]

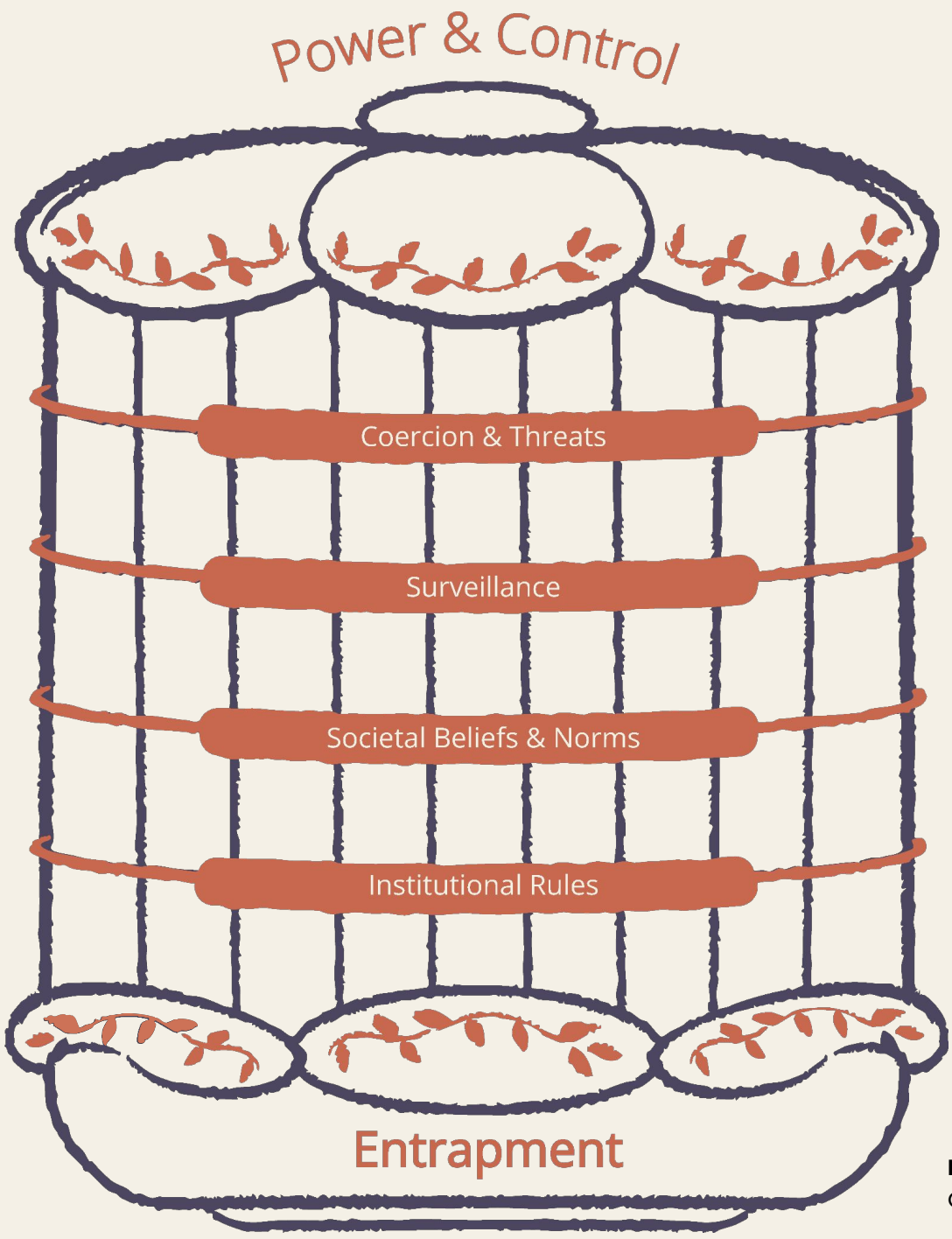


Figure 2. Conditions that Create Entrapment

Coercion and Threats

Under coercive control, an abuser uses implicit and/or explicit threats to manipulate a survivor into behaving as the abuser wants. Credible threats do not need to be physically violent or explicitly mention death to be devastating for a survivor. Instead, these threats are targeted strikes against what a survivor cares most about such as their children, reputation, safety, emotional well-being, financial security, and so forth.[28]

Zixin, detailed how her girlfriend would regularly threaten to reveal Zixin's sexuality and destroy her social standing when Zixin did not do what her girlfriend wanted.

Charlie, who was married to her abuser with children, recounted how he would implicitly threaten self-harm to maintain control over her.

He actually threatened to kill himself through indirect words lah, [he said] that the kids won't see him anymore, that's the last time and things like that. And then he just hung up [the phone].

[27] One of the conditions, "institutional rules", is further discussed in the "Barriers to leaving" section.
[28] Mary Ann Dutton and Lisa A. Goodman, "Coercion in Intimate Partner Violence: Toward a New Conceptualization," *Sex Roles* 52, no. 11–12 (2005): 743–756.

Surveillance

The interviewed survivors recounted how surveillance was part-and-parcel of the control, with their abusers demanding **excessively high** and **often one-sided visibility** over a survivor's daily activities, routines, and behaviour.

Interviewed survivors recounted experiences of excessive interrogations of their activities and whereabouts, very strict curfews, rummaging of personal belongings, and even physical stalking by the abuser and even third parties. With little privacy and reprieve, the interviewed survivors described their lives as being trapped in an invisible prison.



Concerningly, our study revealed how digital devices and footage are being increasingly weaponised to extend the reach of surveillance and abuse. Technological surveillance surfaced through our study were:

1. Overt camera surveillance at home (e.g. CCTVs),
2. Covert surveillance where cameras, recording devices, and listening "bugs" are secretly installed,
3. Movement surveillance where the perpetrator uses apps, GPS, calling, and messaging to monitor the survivor, and
4. Social surveillance where the perpetrator accesses the survivor's devices and social media, email, and calendar accounts to control who they can contact.[29]

Overt surveillance often turns the home, supposedly a safe space, into an invisible prison. For over a decade, **Kate** lived under the constant gaze of CCTVs in her home, where every movement and interaction was being monitored by her husband who travelled for work. Whenever she left the house or had guests come over, the installed cameras would immediately send alerts to his phone, which led to texting and eavesdropping.

So he will text me and say, 'Oh, you are doing exercise, you are doing this, you are listening to this song'. You know, it's like he is watching me while he is overseas… [When friends visit], then he will turn on the audio to listen to our conversations.

Covert surveillance, where listening and recording devices are secretly installed, provide perpetrators the means to listen in on survivors and collect information. Recorded conversations would be weaponised against the survivor, especially during divorce proceedings.

Tess spoke on how her mother's attempts to meet Tess' husband and facilitate a reconciliation were later weaponised in court.

My mother tried to talk [to my husband and his parents], but she was being recorded by him. And then he twisted what she was saying to support his own arguments in court…One time, I also invited him out to a public place…After that, I realised he was recording me too…[Afterwards] I just expected that he's always recording.

With smartphones, movement surveillance has become even more common. Several survivors recounted how easily their abusers could track their whereabouts, with some suspecting that their abusers installed tracking apps on their phones.

Many described how they were always on edge, having to be ready at any given moment to respond to their abuser's messages or calls, or else risk escalation. **June's** husband would harass her with texts and calls whenever she experienced delays in coming back from work.

He would constantly keep on messaging me and calling me and be like, 'Aren't you coming back soon?'..But, if I don't pick up, he'll be calling back excessively.

[29] Laura Vitis, "Technology-Facilitated Violence Against Women in Singapore: Key Considerations," in *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse*, ed. Jane Bailey, Asher Flynn, and Nicola Henry (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021), 416.

In the past decade, social norms have shifted to the point where sharing passwords and account access is normalised and even made into a sign of romantic trust. However, within an abusive dynamic, abusers exploit the expectation of openness to carry out social surveillance.

This was the case for **Olivia** whose boyfriend framed any attempt at personal boundaries as evidence of "hiding something". Soon enough, he began surveilling and controlling who she was contacting online.

In the beginning of the relationship, he was very like, 'What's there for you to hide from me?' So it got to a point where I shared with him a lot of my passwords…So in a way, whatever emails that I'm sending out, whatever things that I'm doing, he's able to vet…He will get really angry and he'll tell me, 'Why are you sending the email this way?'

Likewise, **Noelle**, who was married to her abuser, detailed how he gave himself permission to access her phone and actively reminded her that he was monitoring who she spoke with.

He took my phone and used his laptop to sign in to stuff and things like that…And also there are times where he implied that he knew who I was talking to, what I was doing.

Societal Beliefs and Norms Reinforcing Coercive Control

Coercive control is reinforced by broader cultural and societal norms that shape expectations within relationships, family, and gender.[31] The findings describe how perpetrators frequently invoked socially valued ideals to legitimise their controlling behaviours, while framing compliance as an expression of love, concern, duty and obligation, or respect. Thus, making the abuse more challenging for survivors and even bystanders to recognise and refute.

The pressure to fulfil traditional gender roles as a "good girlfriend" or "good wife" within intimate relationships were used to justify prioritising the perpetrator's needs and unreasonable demands, including meeting their sexual demands.

Sexual compliance is framed as an obligation within the relationship, diminishing survivors' sexual autonomy and ability to freely negotiate consent. Any perceived failure to comply with the abuser's sexual demands were often met with guilt, anger, emotional withdrawal, force, or general accusations of failing as a girlfriend or wife.

He would argue and force, try to convince me to have sex when I didn't want to, saying things like, 'You owe me'. [When I refused], he just said he's gonna try anyway because, 'Never know, maybe you will just enjoy it.' I just lay there, I didn't do whatever, and it was the worst part.

~ **Sara,** on remembering a freeze response to an almost decade-long relationship with her partner.

Early in our relationship, every weekend we'd meet and he would tell me, 'My friends, they're sleeping with their girlfriends every weekend. Why aren't you doing that for me?' That was an ongoing thing, there were moments where I caved in.

~ **Amira,** who was in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend.

Rather than explicitly forbidding social contact, many perpetrators of coercive control would restrict survivors' social relationships by invoking moral or social expectations as reasonable relationship boundaries.

For example, abusers' insistence that survivors should not maintain friendships with former romantic partners, questioning friendships with certain individuals, or discouraging late social activities were often aligned with broader social norms surrounding fidelity and propriety.

[30] Diana Freed et al., "'A Stalker's Paradise': How Intimate Partner Abusers Exploit Technology," in Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (New York: ACM, 2018), paper no. 667; Emily Tseng et al., "The Tools and Tactics Used in Intimate Partner Surveillance: An Analysis of Online Infidelity Forums," in 29th USENIX Security Symposium (USENIX Security 20) (USENIX Association, 2020), 1903, www.usenix.org/system/files/sec20-tseng.pdf.

[31] Julia Tolmie, Rachel Smith, and Denise Wilson, "Understanding Intimate Partner Violence: Why Coercive Control Requires a Social and Systemic Entrapment Framework," *Violence Against Women* 30, no. 1 (2023): 54–74.

Within parent-child relationships, norms surrounding filial piety and familial obligation also reinforce coercive control. Adult children described feeling morally obligated to provide financial support, assume caregiving responsibilities, and avoid challenging their abusive parent(s).

Attempts to establish boundaries or leave were frequently framed as disrespectful or "unfilial", creating strong feelings of guilt that discouraged overt resistance and prolonged entrapment.

She would constantly nag until I got [a job], just a one day [gig] to please her, then she suddenly got all sweet…When I started working [a full-time job], she started asking for money already, saying, 'I think it is time that you start giving me something la.'

~ **Diane**, on her mother asking for an allowance during the job's probation period.

Even after the children of coercively controlling parents move out, familial obligations make it difficult for the survivor to maintain a no-contact boundary for fear of being branded as a terrible child to their parents.

The thing is, even after I moved out, I'm still paying her the same amount every month, just to keep the peace and for fear that she will [harass] my [other family members].

~ **Diane**, on maintaining monthly payments to her mother even after leaving home.

Social expectations also further reduce support for survivors. Expectations of being a "good mother" discouraged married survivors from leaving abusive relationships, as preserving the family unit and maintaining a two-parent household for their children were often prioritised over their own safety and well-being. Moreover, separation and divorce continue to carry stigma, with survivors reporting pressure to not be the person responsible for "breaking up" the family.

In Singapore, there is still a reluctance among bystanders to intervene in what are perceived as private family matters. According to survivor accounts, controlling behaviours were at times justified as "strict Asian parenting", marital discipline, or expressions of concern.

Others avoided intervening altogether to preserve family harmony or avoid becoming involved in interpersonal conflict. These responses inadvertently reinforced coercive control by validating perpetrators' behaviour, discouraging disclosure, and reducing opportunities for survivors to receive recognition and timely intervention.

Widespread cultural norms such as family preservation, sacrifice, obedience, respect for authority, and fulfillment of gendered and familial roles are commonplace.

While some of these values are not inherently harmful, they can be weaponised by perpetrators to legitimise controlling behaviour and abuse, making coercive control more insidious and difficult for survivors, bystanders, and professionals to identify and respond to.



Coercive Control as a Pattern of Entrapment

Through survivor accounts, we mapped how coercion begins and is maintained, while identifying recurring trends such as the key catalysts of controlling behaviour, how it presents during the relationship, and its persistence post-separation.

Mapping the Cycle of Control through Survivor Accounts

Coercive control is a series of behaviours (intentional or subconscious) that dominate the survivor as well as systematically erode their sense of autonomy and self.[32] Coercion usually begins when the abusive agent issues a demand that is also backed with a credible threat when it is not followed.[33]

To enforce demands, we found that the abusers regularly surveilled and monitored their target's behaviour through technological and non-technological means to check for any sign of disobedience. If a survivor fails to comply, they would then act on their threat to punish. Punishment can be imposing things that the survivor does not want as well as taking away what the survivor deeply cares about.[34]

We learnt that repeated cycles of demands, threat-making, surveillance, and punishments altered a survivor's behaviour and freedom to act. Many started preemptively adopting different behaviours to keep their abuser happy or at least not angry.

Many survivors in our study described their relationship with their abusers as being locked in a volatile cycle; oscillating between "normalcy" and intense abuse or "lows". To better illustrate the dynamic during an abusive episode, we created **Figure 3** below. While it fleshes out a common pattern observed from survivor accounts, these events can also occur in a non-linear sequence.

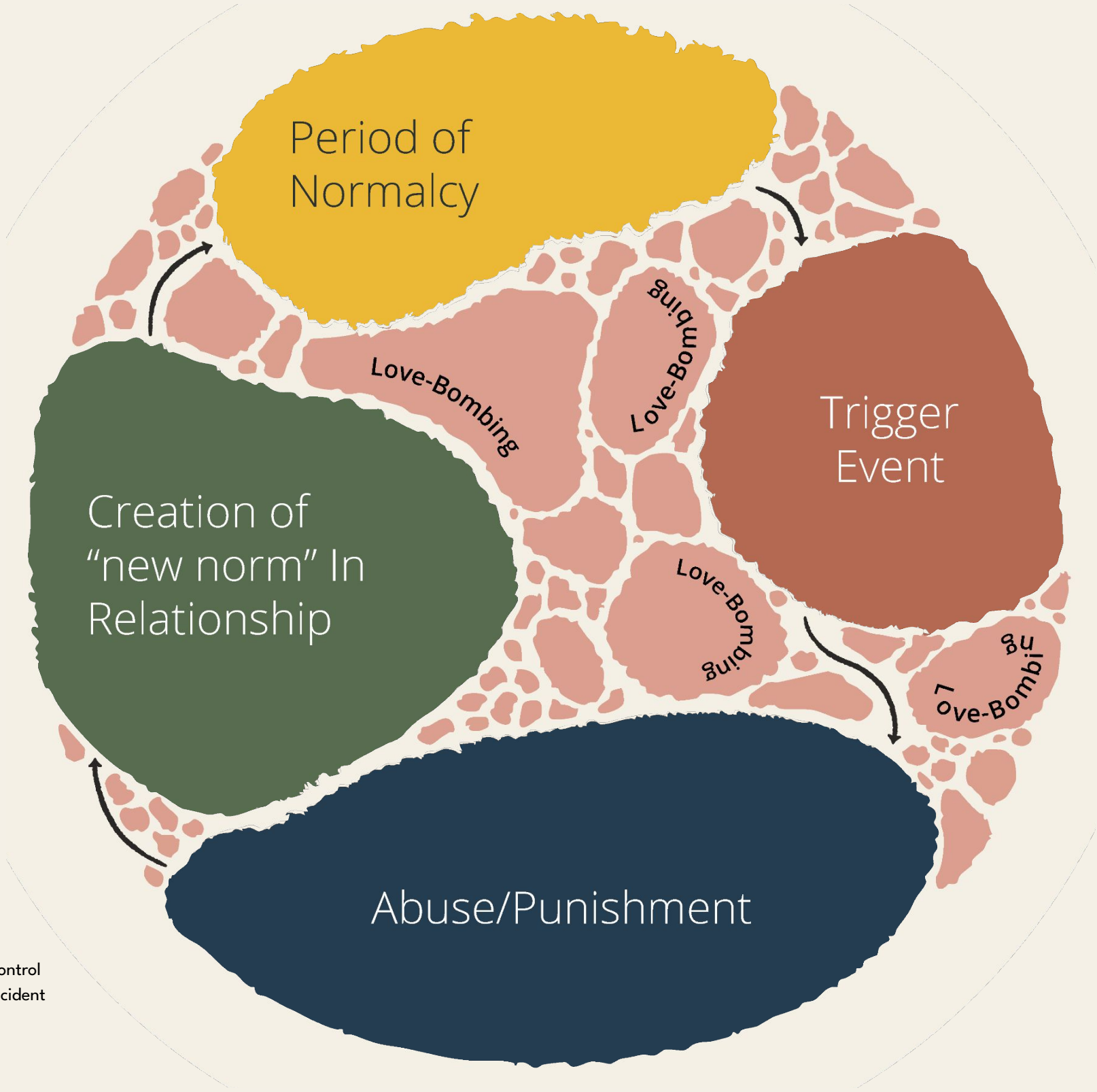


Figure 3. Cycle of Control during an Abusive Incident

[32] Caley Otter, *What is Coercive Control?*, Research Paper no. 2 of 2022 (Melbourne: Victorian Parliamentary Library and Information Service, 2022), http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-3067959661.
[33] Dutton and Goodman, "Coercion in Intimate Partner Violence: Toward a New Conceptualization," 743–756.
[34] Ibid.

Stage 1: A period of “normalcy”

Under coercive control, survivors often redefined “normalcy” as a time with much fewer or no instances of arguments and abuse. For some, they even referred to this period as the “good times” with their abuser.

Giselle recalled how her abusive parents manufactured interludes of peace through “family moments” and masked the problems at home.

It's like you wake up in the morning, your mom makes you breakfast…You all chit-chat at the table. We all made jokes with each other…It was great.

However, this calmness was fragile and several survivors remarked how they felt tense or “walking on eggshells” in anticipation of their abuser becoming upset again.

Felicia shared in detail how her mother’s periods of calmness and abuse were all part of a repeating cycle.

Maybe Monday to Tuesday, she’s very normal and she can still joke around. And from Wednesday and Thursday, her mood suddenly just drops, and then Friday and Saturday, it gets worse.

Stage 2: Trigger event

Survivors emphasised that the calmness rarely lasted as even the most “seemingly trivial” situation could become a “trigger event”. As pointed out earlier, “trigger events” do not occur in a vacuum as the abuser’s decision to escalate into abuse are fueled by the results of their surveillance and monitoring of the survivor.

Laura shared how her facial expressions were under regular surveillance for any hint of displeasure.

Sometimes, it could just be that my facial expression during the day that he kinda was sensitive about…In front of my son, he would ask, “Why is your face so black? Why are you in a pissy mood?

Quinn, a child of abusive parents, shared about the intensity in which their parents would demand updates on their whereabouts whenever they left the house as a teenager, and how failure to give accurate updates would trigger intense interrogation and punishment.

You cannot just go to one place and then go to a different place. Cannot…[If] you said you'll be out for three hours and then you have to answer text messages or phone calls from parents [the whole time].



Stage 3: Abuse or punishment

In a cycle of coercive control, an abuser punishes a survivor by inflicting harm, such as verbal abuse, psychological intimidation, reputational damage, physical violence directed at survivor or their children, financial deprivation, and sexual violence, as well as taking away what the survivor cares about, like withdrawing and withholding affection, depriving them of security (e.g. an immigration pass), and dwindling their resources.

Our interviewees revealed how these punishments were disorientating and sometimes even paralysing, especially when the abuser greatly overreacted to perceived slights and unreasonably pinned the lion’s share of blame on the survivor.

Hualin explained how her husband’s psychological intimidation and physical abuse towards their children paralysed her.

Because of the nature of how I can't discuss anything with him without him starting to shout, without the fear of him beating up the children the next day, I basically don't do anything.

Similarly, **Gail** lived in constant anxiety over her husband’s explosive outbursts, recalling an incident where he turned the family home upside down as punishment for things not being “in the correct order”.

I do not know [whether] what I do will trigger him…The drawer did not close completely, it left a tiny gap. When my husband came in and saw that tiny gap, he got angry and started pulling everything and all the drawers onto the floor.

Stage 4: Creation of a “new norm” in the relationship

With every abusive episode, a new “norm” was created in the relationship. Our interviewees usually became more attentive to their abuser’s moods and what triggered the punishments, leading them to adapt their behaviour to try and prevent future abuse.

Through attrition, the tendency to overtly resist their abuser also diminished over time. At the same time, repeated punishments also normalised which of the survivor’s boundaries could be violated and this lowered the threshold for each subsequent punishment.

In **Afiqah’s** experience, the threat of her girlfriend’s tantrums completely reshaped her agency and freedom to move during the relationship.

I was just so scared about her having a tantrum that I naturally just reported to her my every move all the time.

Survivor accounts also revealed a cruel reality in which appeasement was nearly impossible as abusers regularly shifted the goalpost for “success”. So, even if a survivor followed one set of rules to a tee, their abuser would move the line further and create new rules.

This produced a trend where the survivor was perpetually “failing”, then providing the abuser with the “justification” for continued punishment. In the midst of abuse, many survivors were often unaware that their abusers were constantly shifting the finish line.

For example, **Vera** described how difficult it was to manage her boyfriend’s intense jealousy, escalating to the point that she had to physically see him after spending time with her friends.

I had to start taking pictures of my friends that I’m hanging out with. Sometimes, I must [take a] video because he’ll say, ‘Oh, that guy can move from here to there’. So, I had to take a 360-degree video of my surroundings…And then because this kept happening, I was like, ‘Okay, you know what? After this, I’ll just go [see you]’.

Our interviewees also explained how they lived under a false illusion where they believed that modifying their behaviour would satisfy their abuser and stop the controlling behaviour.

What instead happened was the survivors exhausting most of their mental and emotional energy to fulfill their abuser’s changing demands, manage their abuser’s mood changes, and “fix themselves” to satisfy their abuser.

If he was sad or grumpy, I would feel like, ‘I have to help him to feel better. And it's my duty. And I must be a terrible person if I'm not helping him’.

~ **Meredith**, married to her abusive husband.

He would respond with, ‘Why did you have to ruin every moment?’ There was always a response that made me feel like, ‘Oh no, have I ruined the moment? Am I the one with the problem? Have I ruined another day?’

~ **Leia**, married to her abusive husband.

What about Love-bombing ?

Love-bombing,[35] known as the display of affection or attention to foster an intense emotional bond, is unpredictable within coercive control. Some survivors may refer to love-bombing behaviours as “good times”; but this is part of the wider pattern where the abuser tries to deepen the survivor’s emotional dependence and mask abusive or controlling behaviours, making it harder for the survivor to recognise and respond.

Love-bombing can happen at any point in this cycle or not at all (see **Figure 3**). Some survivors experienced it during the “normalcy” period, while others experienced it directly after abusive incidents when their abuser would apologise for their behaviour and attempt to make amends.

Sara shared how her boyfriend would try to make amends after abusive episodes.

He will be very physically affectionate, like buying me gifts, treating me to dinner or something like that. And then I’ll be convinced that he is going to be better. He would say he is going to be better, going to improve and all that.

Love-bombing is not a prerequisite to identifying coercive control. In several parent-child relationships, survivors revealed the absence of any love-bombing from their abusers. In some intimate-partner relationships, love-bombing might have only been present at the start of the relationship and subsequently decreased over time. At one point, some abusive intimate partners completely stopped love-bombing the survivor.

This was the case for **Leia**, who was married to her abusive husband for years.

In terms of attention, intimacy, and commitment to the relationship, that dropped off after marriage. [There was] no real sense of, ‘I need to work on this and put effort in’. It was just taking me totally for granted.

Because this research is survivor-led, we cannot easily pinpoint the abusive agent’s internal motivations and the exact timing behind any love-bombing efforts. Instead, survivor accounts show that love-bombing is a calculated tactic in which the abusive agent can use and discard it at will to control the survivor.



[35] Raashi Beri, “A Study on Love Bombing, Narcissism and Emotional Abuse Among Young Adults in Relationship and Situationship,” *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Approaches in Psychology* 2, no. 6 (2024): 22–46.

Key Catalysts of Control

Our interviews largely align with existing research findings that major life transitions can spark the beginning of coercive behaviour and intensify existing patterns of control.[36] This includes being in a "public relationship", moving into their own place together, moving overseas, getting married, and having children.

This is because transitions that tie the survivor more closely to the abuser can heighten an abuser's perceived ownership and their ability to exert more direct control over the survivor's daily life.

Sofia recalled how moving out of a shared rental and into their own place during her primary schooling years increased her parent's controlling and abusive behaviour.

Things only got worse when we started living alone, then the behavior started intensifying or the comments started getting meaner and harsher…the moment people are gone, he's yelling at me, telling me everything I'm doing is wrong, embarrassing him in front of his friends.

In the context of internationally mobile couples, relocation became a tool of isolation and incited an escalation in control. When survivors left their established support networks, this gave their abusers the chance to more easily control and stop them from getting help.

Lindsey recounted how leaving Singapore and living overseas gave her husband free rein to isolate and confine her.

[When we were living overseas], he took my phone and slammed it on the floor, it just cracked. Then I couldn't get any help.…He took away all the money [that I saved up to run away] and he actually locked me up in the house, so I couldn't even get any assistance.

In **Leia's** case, coming and living in Singapore created two layers of isolation; she was not in physical proximity of her family and could not build a new, close circle of friends because of her husband's regular sabotaging.

In Singapore, I didn't have any family around…And every single time I got close to somebody, he would kind of fill my days and my nights up so I couldn't go out or see much of them.

Among married interviewees, pregnancy and parenthood often intensified the survivor's emotional, physical, and financial dependence on their abusers. The presence of children would give their abusers new ways to clamp down on the survivor's autonomy.

For **Yolana**, leaving her full-time job to give birth and raise her infant daughter created total financial dependence on her abusive husband.

My pregnancy was high-risk, so he took the opportunity to tell me to stop working until the baby's one-year old, then I can resume work. After a lot of discussion, I agreed to this, but I did not know that this was the beginning of the control.

In **Donna's** case, the arrival of their newborn demanded most of her mental and physical energy, and this led to her husband's controlling behavior spiraling out of hand.

Now there's a baby who's taking up a lot of attention and time and that coincided a bit with my mum coming to help out with the baby, and his behaviour got much, much worse and much more overt at that point.



[36] Stark, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life.*

In our sample of parent-child relationships, we found that coercive control often started in the survivor's childhood when there was complete dependence on their abuser to meet their basic needs.

There was a baseline level of coercion and control already present in the relationship which tended to fluctuate according to the abusive parent's needs and expectations. Often, when the child survivor grew up, the abusive parent/s would create new demands based on their expectations.

In **Opal's** case, her childhood and teenage years were dominated by having to **"to portray a certain kind of girl in front of her [mother]"** and **"focus on [her] studies because [she] could not do other things"**, or else risk inciting her mother's physical and verbal abuse.

Being a "well-behaved" and studious child was eventually not enough as **Opal's** duties as an adult morphed into becoming her mother's caregiver and provider.

Back when I was earning like 3K, I would give her like 1.5K, like half. And then I think over the years, I already gave her a lot, and she would [still] say that is quite little.

Starts in Increments and Escalates

In our study, most intimate partner relationships rarely began with huge "red flags".[37] It was not immediately evident that the abusive partner was a controlling person and usually their early behaviour did not trigger the survivor's internal warning system. For example, some abusers' constant interest and attention in the survivor's activities were first seen as a form of affection.

Some survivors in intimate relationships experienced a "honeymoon period" in which their abuser actively love-bombed them. This usually created a foundation of trust that would later be exploited by the abuser in the relationship and obscure the seriousness of their controlling behaviour later on.[38]

Yolana shared how her husband regularly proclaimed his love for her at the start of the relationship.

He seemed to have put me on the pedestal...saying that, 'Oh, we are soulmates' and he's so grateful that he met me.

Our interviews revealed that the shift from affection to control began with repeated boundary-testing. Survivors recounted when "harmless jokes" and "suggestions" were used to cloak manipulative behaviour. When seen as isolated incidents, these actions would seem minor. However, we found that boundary-testing behaviours were still significant enough to pressure survivors to alter their self-perception and behaviour.

Jiayi shared how her boyfriend's persistent "jokes" about her self-care spending eventually led to her abandoning her favorite activities to avoid his criticism.

I would go for facials every month and they can be a bit expensive and stuff right. I mean he would say that he's joking but it kind of comes up quite often...Over time, I found myself asking him for permission to do things.

[37] "Red flags" is a modern term used to describe overt behaviour that signals there is something unhealthy or troubling in a relationship.
[38] Sarina Schrager, "The Cycle of Violence," in *Family Violence: What Health Care Providers Need to Know*, ed. Rose S. Fife and Sarina Schrager (Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2012), 25.

For most of our interviewees who cohabited with their abusers, coercive control escalated in both abusiveness and control, especially during COVID-19.

Concerningly, several survivors remarked that the periods of "normalcy" grew shorter and shorter, while the punishments for perceived "wrongdoings" escalated in both frequency and severity.

Thida recounted how her husband increased the frequency of the abuse over a ten-year period, eventually showing little remorse for his violence.

At first, he would try to make up [for slapping me] by randomly buying me gifts...but as years progressed, it got worse and worse. It became like an almost everyday occurrence, so it was just part-and-parcel of life, he wouldn't even be attempting to make up for it.

In the Circuit Breaker period, being forced to stay in close quarters meant having no reprieve from their abuser. As the abuser's frustrations and anxieties boiled over during lockdown, abusive and controlling behaviour grew.

Tanya recalled how the cancellation of her husband's work trips trapped them together which led to daily conflict and escalating verbal abuse.

When COVID happened and our son was born in 2019, [it was] not working because [my husband] suddenly [had to] face that everything was not working. It was so difficult to stay under one roof together...It was always fights related to domestic [labour].

Control Continues Even After Separation

Out of the **38 participants** who attempted separation (breaking up, starting divorce proceedings, or moving out from the home),

87% (n=33) experienced post-separation abuse and control.

While it may be upsetting to undergo separation or divorce, perpetrators of coercive control go beyond being upset. Vindictive behaviours include harassing the survivor in real life, online, or through institutions, trying to coerce or "love-bomb" them into returning, and heightening psychological and financial abuse.

For interviewed survivors, especially those who became stay-at-home mothers, their abusers escalated economic abuse and financial depletion to punish and control. For example, the abuser would refuse to pay bills, withhold necessary child support, and delay maintenance which forced the survivor into perpetual financial uncertainty.

Tanya explained that despite her abusive husband's high salary, he would regularly default on important payments and ignore her requests after separating.

He was not paying on time certain things related to rent and kindergarten...It has happened several times when he ignored payment for the apartment and the landlord called me to ask when the payment was going to happen. The kindergarten as well.

Similarly, after their divorce was finalised, **Ari's** spouse would regularly use the maintenance payments as a tool to inflict distress.

He is very tight fisted about money...The child support may or may not come [on time] lah...I think [my remote job] is a real blessing for me, otherwise I can safely tell you that I'd be in a panic every month.

When a victim-survivor and their abuser had a child together, we learnt how an abuser often weaponised their parental rights to restrict the survivor's freedom to act and peace of mind. When parental visitations were allowed, we found that abusers would repeatedly undermine the survivor in front of the child.

For example, some abusive fathers would try to instill an "us versus them" mentality into the children, positioning the survivor as the problem and cause of the family's breakdown.

Hualin's husband would implicitly poison their young children against her during the divorce proceedings.

He'll say [to our children], 'Don't fight with each other. You must love each other. I hope you all know who the real fight is against.'

Shereen's husband would exploit their young son's love to avoid accountability and place sole fault on the survivor.

[My son] told me, 'You are the reason why we are no longer an intact family. You are the person who broke the family'. Because that's what my husband told him. [My husband] cried in front of him, and he told him all these things.



In several cases, the abusive parent would manipulate the children into monitoring the survivor and providing information about her activities, and then use this information to disrupt the survivor's schedule.

In **Deepa's** case, she discovered a recurring pattern after her children's visits with her ex-spouse.

When my children tell him [about my plans], he will tell me that he can't make it. So, tomorrow I have a medical appointment, I told my children that I am going out, and then just nice, he cancelled [picking them up].

This manipulation can even extend to state institutions. By framing it as "parental concern", the abuser could make fraudulent reports to the police and social services, alleging that the survivor was abusing their child. Abusers could use institutional actors to further traumatise the survivors and their children.

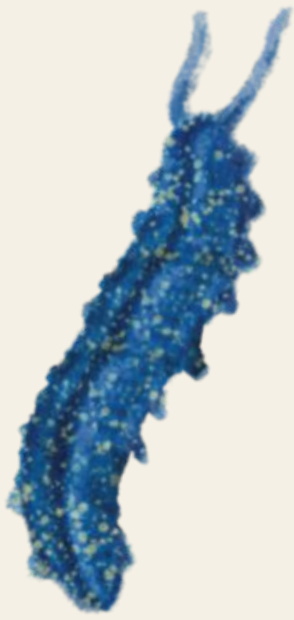
Keena recounted the harrowing experience of her ex-husband repeatedly sending police to her house, alleging suspected abuse towards their son.

At 2am, there was a knock on the door, the police were like 'we got a call from your ex-husband, your son called him, saying that you abused him'...The next day, the police came to the door [again] and my son was like, 'Mummy, the police are here again'.

Based on these survivor interviews:

We found that the family court system was not immune from an abuser's manipulation. We understand that each case filing was treated as equally legitimate to each other by the authorities to determine the facts of the matter. However, the sheer volume of cases racked up against the respondents suggest that this was a channel that abusers were exploiting to extend and maintain control over survivors.

For example, abusers would regularly file motions, prolong legal proceedings, and challenge who held care and control of the children. This intensified financial depletion as repeatedly dragging a survivor to court created astronomical legal fees (sometimes over SGD$100,000) and disrupted the survivor's ability to go to work or concentrate at their jobs.



Hualin explained how her husband utilised every avenue in family court to deplete her.

The current system is a rich man's game and it's how long you can put up the fight. He did things like delaying the selling of the house, not paying the interim child maintenance, all that to try and bleed me dry so that I'll run out of money to continue fighting.

Similarly, **Valerie** recalled the years lost to lawsuits launched by her husband. Unlike her abuser, his financial abuse left her without a stable income and she could not afford a lawyer. This forced her to spend the hours that her children were in school navigating all the legal paperwork by herself.



He took out over 30 lawsuits during the divorce proceedings...There were times when I was working on 4 or 5 legal cases against me...He would file affidavits that were thousands of pages long and the judge would say, 'You have 2 weeks to reply'...I felt like my brain was hijacked [for years].

Devastating Impacts of Coercive Control on Victim-Survivors

Here, we unpack how victim-survivors experience severe repercussions on their mental and emotional stability, physical well-being, social functioning, and independence and financial capacity.

Erosion of Mental and Emotional Stability

"Nowhere is Safe"

Tech-enabled coercive control heavily isolates and distresses survivors because their abuser's presence feels even more inescapable, making the abuse unrelenting.[39]

Because of low-cost and easily accessible communication tools, even the least technologically-savvy abuser knew how to weaponise basic functions in WhatsApp to repeatedly terrorise the survivor with messages, calls, and voice notes. It costs their abuser very little to repeatedly call and send a high volume of texts,[40] which subjects a survivor to relentless and high-volume digital bombarding.

Felicia recounted how her mother kept flooding her phone with abusive voice recordings following a big argument, which led to Felicia briefly leaving the home.

There's all these [voice recordings]. It's non-stop…[In them], she would keep scolding me all the derogatory remarks like, 'I'm fat, I'm stupid, I should die, I am betraying her, I should get [assaulted] by strangers, and I should just get kidnapped'.

For many survivors, advice to simply "block the abuser" or "delete an app" rarely works because many coercive control abusers are extremely persistent. For **Daisy**, who left home, it only led to her abusive parents creating fake social media accounts to surveil and harass her online.

I found out my dad made several Instagram accounts to stalk me…They still do it now and they will send me hate messages from their fake Instagram accounts.

Furthermore, when a victim-survivor shares a child with their abuser, it is often impossible to completely disengage from digital communication because of practical and legal considerations related to co-parenting.[41]

Priya shared how her husband, who usually paid little attention to their child, would directly bombard her with demands to speak with their child over the phone.

I remember telling him, 'I really need my time off to really think about a lot of things.' And he just didn't want to allow that, it was constantly coming, messages after messages, calls after calls after calls. Sometimes, 'No, I want to speak to the child', you know, he uses the child as a means to come to me.

When survivors attempt to reduce direct contact with their abuser, their abusers would then shift their focus to the survivor's networks and find other ways to contact them. For example, while many survivors try to control their own social media presence, friends and family might have very different privacy practices, which their abuser can exploit for surveillance and harassment.[42] These tactics effectively robbed the survivor of any peace of mind.

This was the case for **Loraine** whose mother was her primary abuser.

I basically blocked her on all my social media…And then she started adding all my friends on social media, especially in university. That escalated because I was very far away [overseas]…She started adding my friends and dropping them messages to ask about me.

Similarly, even though **Reena** had blocked her abusive ex-boyfriend on all communication and social media platforms, he went on to deceive her and contact her through his sibling's social media account:

I blocked him on WhatsApp and Facebook…He would use other peoples' accounts, people who he knew were friends with me, like his sibling's accounts and his friend's accounts. He would see what I was doing and once he contacted me through his sibling's account and had a whole conversation with me.



[39] Delanie Woodlock et al., "'Living in the Darkness': Technology-Facilitated Coercive Control, Disenfranchised Grief, and Institutional Betrayal," *Violence Against Women* 29, no. 5 (2023): 987–1004.
[40] Vitis, "Technology-Facilitated Violence Against Women in Singapore," 415.
[41] Delanie Woodlock, Mandy McKenzie, Deborah Western, and Bridget Harris. "Technology as a weapon in domestic violence: Responding to digital coercive control." *Australian Social Work* 73, no. 3 (2020): 375.
[42] Dana Cuomo and Natalie Dolci, "Gender-Based Violence and Technology-Enabled Coercive Control in Seattle: Challenges and Opportunities," *TECC Whitepaper Series* (2019): 14.

Chronic Anxiety, Fear, and Emotional Dysregulation

As a result of their unpredictable and psychologically unsafe environment, many interviewed survivors reported feeling stuck in a state of chronic anticipatory anxiety. They described this state as being hypervigilant; constantly monitoring their abuser's moods and behaviour to preempt or avoid triggering an abusive episode.

Chronic instability and unsafety can also produce emotional dysregulation.[43] When survivors have to shoulder immense emotional pressure and are fearful of upsetting their abuser, this manifests in acute physiological responses such as a rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, trembling, and overwhelming panic episodes.

Everything was too triggering. I couldn't breathe. I was having panic attacks so often.

~ **Olivia**, on her relationship with her abusive ex-boyfriend for years.

For **87% of the interviewed survivors** (n=39), emotional dysregulation then escalated into prolonged psychological distress and the worsening of mental health conditions.[44]

In **Jasmine's** case, her husband's complete control over her life led her to perceive suicide as the only way to escape her entrapment:

You just fear for everything, you cannot see your future, you just feel that it's good to end your life and then you have your freedom back.

Several survivors reported needing to seek therapeutic and clinical interventions for mental health conditions such as severe depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and complex trauma responses.

I was depressed and it quickly escalated to me like going to IMH…I was on medications for quite a while, trying to talk through the anxiety and the depression that I was left with.

~ **Siti**, on what it was like after leaving the relationship with her controlling ex-girlfriend.



"Who am I?"

In coercive control, an abuser systematically reshapes the victim-survivor's behaviour, appearance, interests, and personality to match their preferences, which leads to the erosion of the victim-survivor's identity.



I became very insecure. I became very frightened to lose him and people who knew me before knew I wasn't like that. I was very confident. I was very outgoing. I was very daring.

~ **Ari**, on being married to her abusive husband for over two decades.

Every now and then, I do hear that voice at the back of my head where he was saying, 'I'm not good enough, and people are just tolerating me'. All the negative things, you know? That voice is still here.

~ **June**, on being married to her abusive husband for over a decade.

---

[43] Susanne Lohmann et al., "The Trauma and Mental Health Impacts of Coercive Control: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 25, no. 1 (2024): 631.

[44] Lauren E. Simpson et al., "The Cumulative Impact of Recurrent Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence on Emotion Dysregulation: A Longitudinal Investigation," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 40, no. 11–12 (2024): 2760–83.



According to the survivors, all of their abusers repeatedly insulted, humiliated, or degraded them. Being regularly told that they are inadequate or worse conditions a survivor over time to internalise criticisms and degrading comments as the absolute truth.

An academic described how survivors can become psychologically locked in an “invisible cage”, where the messages of their inferiority persist in their heads for a very long time. We found evidence of such a situation among our respondents.

Many times in that relationship, he had led me to believe that I would be nothing without him. So when I got out of it, for quite a while, I [still] felt that way.

~ **Olivia**, on what it was like after leaving her abusive boyfriend of years.

I didn’t feel like I was good at my jobs. I was constantly thinking that I was an imposter. I think I also just started hiding more. I hid more of myself.

~ **Rami**, on what it was like being partnered with her abusive boyfriend of six years.

In addition to losing their confidence, many survivors grapple with the erosion of their autonomy. Through tactics like emotional manipulation, gaslighting, and DARVO, an abuser can destabilise a survivor’s own confidence in their judgement and memories.

With time, many survivors voiced needing their abuser’s approval for decisions because they felt increasingly unable to trust their own instincts or act without external validation.

Opal recalled how growing up with her abusive mother leads to her overthinking in all aspects of her life.

I overthink so much. Even for normal things that don’t involve her, like maybe planning for a thing, very simple stuff, or even what to eat. I would always think of what could go wrong.

As it often leads to conflict and punishment, a survivor may perceive independent decision-making as dangerous and thus feel pressured to offload important decisions to their abuser. While cognitive offloading is a survival strategy that works in the moment, it starts to decrease a survivor’s autonomy over the long run.[45]

[45] Kristy Kassing and Anthony Collins, “‘Slowly, Over Time, You Completely Lose Yourself’: Conceptualizing Coercive Control Trauma in Intimate Partner Relationships,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 41, no. 3–4 (2025): 662–84.

Not Only the Survivor — **Their Children Too**

Children living in homes with coercive control dynamics are not immune from its effects.[46] Through witnessing the abuse of the survivor parent and sometimes directly experiencing it, the child's mental health, development trajectories, and relationships with other adults and peers are adversely impacted.

Even when the child is not a direct target, witnessing unpredictable hostility, intimidation, or abuse is akin to experiencing the violence.[47] Survivors recounted how their children learnt to keep monitoring the abusive parent's tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and reactions for signs of potential escalation.

To minimise conflict or danger, their child practiced silence, compliance, people-pleasing, or emotional caretaking to avoid the abusive parent's punishment, anger, or a withdrawal of affection.

The stress of living under coercive control broadly manifests in two distinct ways; internalised distress and/or externalised imitation. Quite often, the children of our victim-survivors hold unprocessed anger and trauma that led to expressions of violent thoughts towards themselves or as a desire to harm others.

This was the case for **Rachel's** young teenage daughters.

[My children] were on the verge of really turning dark…[They began] to really hate people, to really want to destroy people, and want to kill people…They would actually self-harm or say they [wanted to] harm others.

A child can also externalise their traumatic experiences through imitating the abusive parent's hostile and manipulative behaviours and towards their peers or family members. **Priya's** younger son began imitating her ex-husband's hostile behaviour towards his cousins and family members.

[My son] started emulating the way [my ex-husband] was behaving. The aggressiveness, the shouting, the screaming in a very disrespectful manner and harsh tone…He was only four years old at that point of time.

The psychological impacts do not disappear, even after escaping the same household. Several survivors reported how their child wanted to minimise contact with the abusive parent, explicitly refusing to interact or visit the abusive parent.

While this was the child's attempt to maintain safety, some abusive parents misrepresented the situation and framed it as the protective parent's attempt at alienation.



[46] Jeffrey L. Edleson, "What Is the Impact of Coercive Control on Children Exposed to Domestic Violence?," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 41, no. 23–24 (2026).

[47] Jane E. M. Callaghan, Joanne H. Alexander, Judith Sixsmith, and Lisa Chiara Fellin, "Beyond 'Witnessing': Children's Experiences of Coercive Control in Domestic Violence and Abuse," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 33, no. 10 (2018): 1551–1581.

Compromised Physical Well-Being

Escalation to **Direct Physical Violence**

For several survivors in our study, their abuser's behaviour escalated into direct physical attacks such as beatings, shoving, and strangulation.

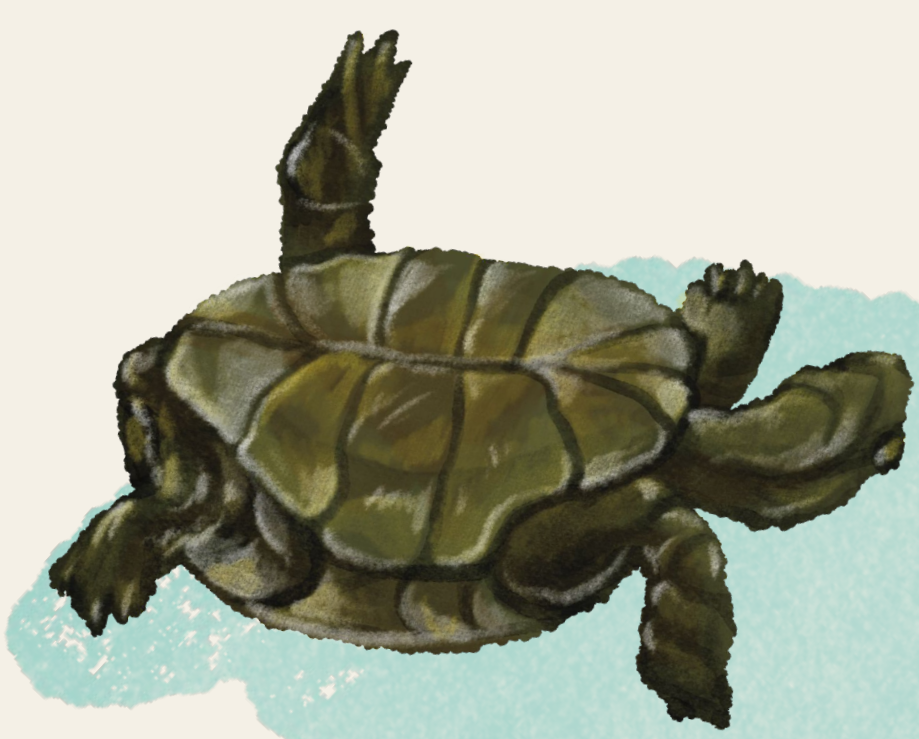
Several abusers knew to strategically avoid leaving clear physical marks or evidence, doing just enough to traumatise the survivor. For some survivors, physical and sexual assaults caused physical trauma such as heavy bruising, bleeding, vaginal tears, and head injuries.

Lavanya's boyfriend's physical assault left her both physically scarred and severely traumatised afterwards.

When he threw me to the ground, I landed [badly]. Both of the tendons were injured, so I couldn't walk for months. I could only do a very painful waddling for five minutes, then I had to sit down.

Physical abuse can also include an abuser disrupting a survivor's sleep, like waking a survivor up too early, starting arguments that last through the night, or forcing a survivor to keep awake.

This can leave a survivor disoriented and severely fatigued. With their cognitive functioning so heavily impaired, it has knock-on effects on their immune system.



The **Mind-Body** Connection

The mind-body connection is inextricable in coercive control trauma as there is significant overlap between mental health and physical health impacts.[48]

Chronic stress, anxiety, and depression lead to rippling effects across a survivor's immune, digestive, and nervous systems, sleep patterns, and energy levels. A higher susceptibility to health problems was a recurring trend among survivors who endured intense or long-term coercive control.

Rita recalled how her health issues flared up when she was dealing with the trifecta of managing her abusive husband's mood swings, working full-time, and carrying the household load.

I was having breakouts, hot flushes, and continuous anxiety attacks…My doctor said, 'Your hormones are messed up, your cortisol level is high, and you have no iron in your body…That's why you're having these anxiety attacks, headaches, and all these [health issues]'.

High levels of stress can also manifest in digestive issues, with some survivors developing severe constipation while living with their abuser, heightened gut sensitivity or intolerances with certain foods, or episodic diarrhea.

In terms of appetite, several survivors experienced drastic weight gain or weight loss, either from eating a lot to cope with the stress or having no appetite at all. In severe cases, living under coercive control aggravated disordered eating. This was so for **Sammi** who **lost at least 8kg** during her months-long relationship with her abusive boyfriend.

[48] Department of Communities and Justice, "What Are the Impacts of Coercive Control?," NSW Government, August 14, 2024, https://www.nsw.gov.au/family-and-relationships/coercive-control/what-are-impacts.

Sustained **Physical Depletion**

Mental distress, poor physical health, and disrupted sleeping patterns often leads to sustained physical depletion, where the survivor cannot rest, is chronically fatigued, struggles with low energy levels, and has difficulty performing daily tasks.

Bella's mother's destructive behaviour pushed her to seek clinical intervention and medication for her severe sleep issues.

I was at the point where my daily functioning was very impaired already because my stress levels were constantly super high and I was anxious. I couldn't sleep and it was causing my physical health to deteriorate.

Sustained physical depletion was prevalent among interviewed female survivors with children. The abuser often weaponised the survivor's motherhood to enforce patriarchal expectations, relegating most and sometimes all the unpaid domestic and care work to them. With very little energy left, several survivors recounted how hard it was to resist their abuser's demands.

Thida's abusive then-husband often disrupted her sleep while making her responsible for their young son's upbringing.

My brain was muddled. I was quite frazzled and quick to agree with him or very agreeable, just because I'm in that sleep deprived state.

Disruptions to Social Functioning

Isolation and **Social Withdrawal**

During and even after leaving a coercive controlling relationship, many survivors mentioned continuing to withdraw from their social spheres and friendships, citing reasons like poor mental health, low self-esteem, fear of social rejection, and cognitive exhaustion from dealing with their abuser.

Karin recalled how cognitive exhaustion from trying to meet her abusive partner's expectations heavily depleted her capacity for socialising. It eventually led her to losing some friends for good.

After experiencing one or more forms of violence from someone who is supposed to care for them, many survivors voiced how difficult it became to trust people. This distrust can persist long after the relationship, surfacing in both romantic and platonic relationships.

For example, after years of her husband manufacturing paranoia and convincing her that people were inherently hostile, it became very hard for **June** to trust new people and expand her social circle.

I'm hypercritical of others because of what he's taught me, that people are always out to get me, they're always jealous of me, they're trying to steal my ideas, or they're trying to access certain people through me...I was always very wary of meeting new people.



Similarly, **Emma**, who navigated over a decade of manipulation and gaslighting, explained how she now constantly scans behaviours that resemble that of her ex-husband.

Trust is the biggest issue now. I do not trust people, the moment there's even one single red flag, I'm out of there.

Even after separation, survivors' sense of distrust extended to others who remained in the social periphery of their abusers. Survivors often worried about proxy surveillance; whereby mutual contacts would report their whereabouts and actions to their abuser.

Suffering **Severe Reputational Damage**

Several victim-survivors recounted the ordeal of dealing with networked contact-based harassment.[49] This refers to their abuser actively recruiting and manipulating others, such as the survivor's parents, siblings, relatives, friends, or even their own children, to harass the survivor on the abuser's behalf.

Deepa's husband frequently recruited others to harass her digitally and disrupt her livelihood.

He had people calling me to my work line…My bosses would question me on what was happening. After a while, I just had to quit, I had to change jobs so he doesn't know where I am basically and he will stop sending people [after me].

Rita's husband directly hounded her own brother and poisoned their sibling relationship for years.

It came to a point he was using my own brother to put a lot of pressure on me…When I spoke to my brother, I found out that there were constant calls that [my husband] would place on him, asking him to get involved.

For **Leo**, this fear was well-founded because their ex-girlfriend managed to extract details about their life that had only been shared with friends. It escalated to the point that they had to go through the mentally and emotionally exhausting task of vetting anyone who asked to meet up.

While cutting ties is a self-protective measure, it simultaneously creates greater social isolation for the survivor.

If private and proxy harassment are not enough, abusers can escalate their digital violence to the more public realm of social media. This would inflict widespread social damage to the survivor and intensify their isolation.

Tech-enabled coercive control is often gendered; where male abusers use online spaces to tap into societal prejudices and double standards to attack their female partner's reputation.

A common tactic within intimate-partner coercive control is misrepresenting situations and posting them online, specifically denigrating the female victim-survivor as a "bad mother" while the abuser presents themselves as a "good" father who is being barred from seeing his child.[50]

When **Deepa** fled with her children to her parent's house, her husband used the opportunity to film their younger child crying and uploaded it to social media.

The younger child started crying, he took a video of that and sent it to everyone in my Facebook friends list and most of them stopped talking to me because they got traumatised listening to the crying…And then he kept continuing to spin this narrative that I left him because I have an illicit relationship with somebody else.

[49] Vitis, "Technology-Facilitated Violence Against Women in Singapore," 415.

[50] Anna Nikupeteri, Emma Katz, and Merja Laitinen, "Coercive Control and Technology-Facilitated Parental Stalking in Children's and Young People's Lives," *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* 5, no. 3 (2021): 405–407.

Greater Vulnerability to Abusive Dynamics

Some survivors reported how coercive control ultimately altered their baseline for what is normal and healthy within a relationship. While some survivors became hypervigilant and very distrusting towards new people, other survivors reported poor boundary setting and struggles with identifying the "red flags" in their relationships.

Interviewees who lived under coercive control as children particularly struggled to develop healthy connections later in life. **Wan Ting** reflected on how living under severe coercive control by both parents facilitated her attraction to similarly abusive partners, trapping her in an unrelenting cycle of abuse.

Ivy explained how her father's abusive behaviour shaped her disposition to being around equally abusive people.

I tended to gravitate towards people who were just equally as unhealthy or unproductive as my dad was…Where I still struggle with is I still don't notice the red flags…It still takes me quite a while to notice if I'm in a red flag sort of situation.



Undermined Independence and Financial Capacity

Financial and economic abuse in coercive control is a systematic strategy used to drain a survivor's assets and sabotage their employment and housing stability.[51] This creates devastating short- and long-term consequences such as trapping survivors without financial autonomy and hurting their capacity to build future economic security.

Asset Depletion and Housing Instability

In coercive control dynamics where the abuser depleted a survivor's assets, the survivor had to grapple with a severe lack of savings, housing instability, and high legal expenses.

Several survivors experienced severe housing insecurity. Those who had to flee suddenly and could not afford a rental in Singapore's expensive market had to rely on the goodwill of friends, partners, and other family members to escape the abuse. Fleeing under duress can compound a survivor's trauma and stress as they must grapple with immediate financial and housing insecurities.

As mentioned earlier, several abusive spouses use the courts to punish the survivor post-separation. Repeatedly dragging a survivor to court for divorce proceedings and custody disputes often translates to exorbitant legal fees, effectively bankrupting the survivor who is often more financially vulnerable.

This was what happened to **Rachel** whose husband was earning a very high income while she eventually had to turn to a pro-bono lawyer for help.

Because of his lies, it caused the [lawyer] bills to go up and up and up, it was sky high. It reached six figures for me and for him too.

[51] Silke Meyer et al., "Experiences of Post-Separation Coercive Control: Family Law-Involved Victim-Survivors' Perspectives on Coercion, Litigation Abuse and Financial Impacts," *Violence Against Women* (2026), 2.

Disruption to **Employment and Career Trajectories**

Under coercive control, many survivors are deprived of the ability to generate their own income. We found male abusers often coerced female victim-survivors into full-time caregiver roles. Isolated from the workforce, many survivors have significant gaps in their employment history, all of which lowers their "desirability" as a new hire in the eyes of unsupportive employers. This affects a survivor's opportunity to become financially independent.

Emma became her child's full-time caregiver after being pressured by her abusive husband.

When you haven't worked for so long, I've not worked for 20 years, who's gonna hire me?

Even when a survivor is employed, their work performance can be heavily affected by (1) direct sabotage, and (2) exhaustion and trauma.

Based on our interviews, we found that abusers often sabotaged a survivor's employment; depriving them of sleep, destroying work materials, distracting them from their work, and pressuring the survivor to quit or change jobs.

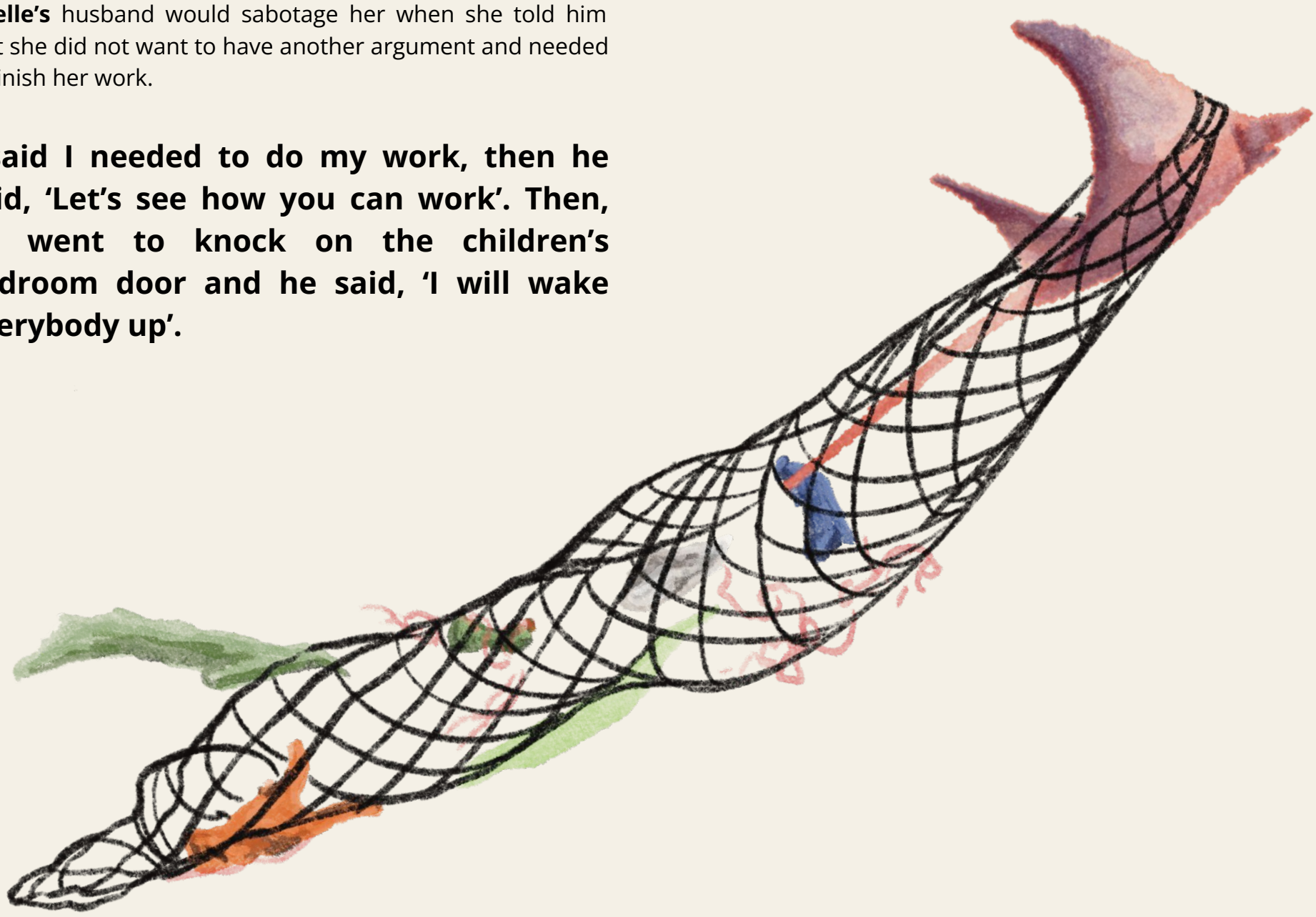
Noelle's husband would sabotage her when she told him that she did not want to have another argument and needed to finish her work.

I said I needed to do my work, then he said, 'Let's see how you can work'. Then, he went to knock on the children's bedroom door and he said, 'I will wake everybody up'.

Exhaustion and trauma also adversely impact a survivor's ability to concentrate and do well at their jobs. In more unforgiving workplaces, a survivor's decreased productivity can destabilise their employment such as receiving poor performance reviews, slower career progression, and possibly losing their jobs.

Rami struggled with both her abusive relationship and becoming a caregiver to her sick mother.

[My employer] was basically threatening to fire me for this breach of contract because I was having trouble completing work in the middle of a pandemic…Then, I got a performance improvement plan and tried to compensate for those months that I was having trouble with work by overworking and overperforming.



“Why Don’t They Just Leave?” Understanding Barriers to Leaving

Complex, cross-cutting barriers often prevent victim-survivors from leaving coercively controlling relationships. This includes the emotional, cognitive, social, structural, and institutional factors that limit survivors' ability to recognise abuse, seek help, and exit an abusive household.

The question, "Why don't they just leave?", overlooks the realities of survivors in coercively controlling relationships, placing the responsibility on survivors to leave instead of faulting the abuse that entraps them. Coercive control creates conditions of entrapment, whereby survivors' choices become progressively constrained over time.[52]

We found that leaving the abusive relationship was a repetitive, gradual, and difficult process, hardly ever a single point decision. Interviewees described how repeated cycles of separation and reconciliation, returning to their abuser after periods of love-bombing, promises of change, strong emotional attachment, or familial bonds repeatedly drew them back into the relationship.

Safety at Shore

- Lacking Access to Information & Language
- Survival Depends on Abuser
- Fear of Losing Children
- Social Stigma, Isolation & Feeling Alone
- Conditioned Loyalty to Abuser
- Professional Failure to Recognise
- Misconceptions of Abuse



[52] Kimberly A. Crossman and Jennifer L. Hardesty, "Placing Coercive Control at the Center: What Are the Processes of Coercive Control and What Makes Control Coercive?" *Psychology of Violence* 8, no. 2 (2018): 196; Evan Stark, "The Dangers of Dangerousness Assessment," *Family & Intimate Partner Violence Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (2013): 13–22.

Lacking Access to Information and Language

A recurring barrier to victim-survivors of coercive control leaving is their:

1. Difficulty in identifying abuse,
2. Limited knowledge of coercive control, and
3. Lack of vocabulary to describe their experiences with coercively controlling abusers.

This pattern was observed across relationship types. Our respondents broadly fell into two groups: the first interpreted their experiences as miscommunication, normal relationship conflict, or personal failings.

But at that point of time, I did not realise that it was abuse because other than [being short-tempered], he is a wonderful husband.

~ **Mavis,** on recognising red flags in the initial stage of the marriage.

I realised oh, actually, maybe [the relationship] was abusive. She was very manipulative...mentally, physically, and verbally abusive. So I guess maybe it's an abusive relationship, but I was never comfortable with [acknowledging that] I was in an abusive relationship.

~ **Siti,** on recognising coercive control as a form of an abusive relationship dynamic and coming to terms as a victim-survivor.

This is very weird because [since I was] a kid, I was conditioned to believe that [the abuse] was normal. And because I wasn't allowed to socialise, I never had the chance to talk to other people to be like, hey, this is what's happening in my life.

~ **Daisy,** on how much longer it took to recognise her family dynamic with her parents was abusive.

The second group recognised that "something felt wrong" but lacked the vocabulary or knowledge of coercive control to identify the pattern as abuse.

I think on some level I always knew that something didn't feel right, and I just didn't know either how to say it, or I didn't really recognise what [the abuse was]...And I felt very uncertain about what was happening, about what was real...But it was a very consistent pattern.

~ **Donna**, on being married to her spouse for over 15 years.

Even when survivors suspected something was wrong, many described having little opportunity to process their experiences. Respondents described feeling mentally exhausted and unable to notice patterns of abuse, research available support, or develop a safety plan to tackle the abuse.

The interviews suggest that persistent cognitive overload created by the abusers through constant emotional and physical demands, interruptions, multitasking, and the absence of time or space to think restricts victim-survivors' opportunities for reflection.

This then delays recognition of coercive control as a patterned form of abuse, and hinders safety planning to leave the abuse cycle.[53]

This further restricts help-seeking behaviors to safely contact friends, family members, or support services as perpetrators monitor their communications, reducing their opportunities to be alone, often reacting negatively when the respondent attempts to spend time away from the relationship.[54]

Across both groups, respondents also commonly believed the relationship could be repaired through greater patience or improved communication, thus delaying help-seeking and leaving.

---

[53] David Kirsh. "A few thoughts on cognitive overload." *Intellectica Revue de | Association pour la Recherche Cognitive* 30, no. 1 (2000): 22.

[54] Stark, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, 129; Julia Tolmie, Rachel Smith, and Denise Wilson, "Understanding Intimate Partner Violence," 54–74.

Survival Is Dependent on the Abuser

Many respondents described financial dependence on the abuser as one of the greatest barriers to leaving. Financial and social reliance was particularly common among mothers who had left the workforce to become primary caregivers and respondents who experienced coercive control from parents.

Leaving the household often meant losing access to housing, income, help with childcare, healthcare, and other basic necessities. Married mothers also feared that legal separation would leave them unable to meet caregiving responsibilities amidst securing employment and alternative accommodation.

I stay only for the sake of the children and I am not full-time employed so it is hard for me, financially, to be independent and where should I live – what about the housing and everything. I cannot rent so I don't dare to move on to the divorce.

~ **Haziyah,** who was a stay-at-home mom with 2 children at the point of the interview.

Economic abuse was particularly consequential for survivors attempting to divorce. The interviews showed that perpetrators who withheld access to assets such as housing deeds or bank accounts, transferred shared funds into personal accounts, often left survivors without the necessary financial resources to leave the relationship or pursue legal proceedings.

The longer the financial abuse went unnoticed, the further the survivors' savings diminished, increasing their vulnerability at the point of legal separation.

Children of coercively controlling parents also faced a unique set of challenges to leave the household, such as age restrictions on full-time employment and complete dependence for access to school and educational resources. As they grew up, financial obligations to the family (i.e. paying household bills, giving allowance to parents out of filial piety) then depleted their savings in the absence of regular income.

Respondents with this demographic profile often cannot establish independent living arrangements to reduce contact with the abusive parent, or even leave the relationship entirely until much later in life when they are young adults or working adults.

When I was growing up, when I was a teen, if I had the means to move out and stay somewhere else, I would but the problem is that relatives [I could stay with], they will side with the family. I couldn't really stay with my friend either.

~ **Bella**, on her lack of housing alternatives to leave the abusive relationship with her mother.

Institutional barriers contribute to the reliance on the abuser. Interviewees described difficulties re-entering the workforce after prolonged caregiving periods, concerns about employment stigmas, limited workplace flexibility, and the absence of emergency leave that would allow them to safely relocate or attend legal proceedings.

For migrant survivors, immigration status was directly contingent upon marriage to the abusive husband, making separation synonymous with losing legal residency, employment opportunities, and access to their child.

There were a lot of those career@Mums or Mum at work [platforms] where I tried to apply [for a job], but they didn't take my application because I was still a foreigner then...It was very difficult to get a job and move out, it was a very frustrating period.

~ **Reyna**, who was holding onto a long-term visit pass sponsored by her husband during the marriage.

These structural barriers made leaving significantly more challenging and increased the survivor's vulnerability during and after separation from their abuser.

Fear of Losing Their Child

Victims of coercive control may also remain in abusive relationships because of anticipated consequences following legal separation.

Interviewees feared losing custody of their children, exposing them to further harm, or being unable to provide adequately for them following separation. Some also delayed leaving because they feared retaliation or anticipated that perpetrators would use children as leverage to maintain contact.

I thought that if I filed for a divorce, I wouldn't have custody for my child. Also, I was scared of this thing. I didn't know anything about the law…I'd rather him leaving me first because that was easier for me to handle, instead of me leaving him.

~ **Mai**, a migrant wife on LTVP, recounted her fears of losing custody of her child to her abusive Singapore citizen husband in a divorce.



Social Stigma, Isolation, and Feeling Alone

Coercively controlling abusers often present themselves as caring, respectable and even charming members of their families and communities, while actively isolating the survivors from supportive networks.

While victim-survivors experienced controlling and abusive behaviours in private, abusers can maintain a positive public image externally, causing family members, friends, and even professionals to view them as misunderstood or well-intentioned. This disparity leaves many victim-survivors feeling that their experiences were not believed or difficult to prove, discouraging further disclosure of the abuse.

He was a very soft-spoken, very polite, very charming individual.

~ **Meredith**, on her spouse at an early stage of the marriage and in the public eye.

Every time after her explosive episode, she would also call up [family], who is very close to her… poison[ing] their perceptions of me…my relationships with my relatives used to be so good, but she's been just poisoning their heads with whatever nonsense that she told them then I find that I don't have anyone to go to [anymore].

~ **Opal**, on how her mother gradually isolated her from seeking social support.

Many interviewees also share internalised feelings of shame about the abuse they were experiencing, worried that they would be blamed for the abuse or viewed as having failed as a partner, wife, mother, or child.

As a result, conversations about abuse were often contentious, preventing survivors from having emotional validation, practical advice, or intervention at an earlier stage.

Whenever he is upset with me, he will ask the counsellor for a session. So, he will tell his side of story [which is] only half part of the story which he knows that he is innocent and sometimes when the counsellor confronts me about that to clarify with me, and then I ask the counsellor, 'Did he tell you about this [abusive] part?' and the counsellor said no…It seems like I am the abusive person and that is what he makes me [out to be], until now.

~ **Haziyah**, recounting her experience of counselling, where she felt she had to prove that she was the one she was experiencing abuse, rather than perpetrating it.

Conditioned Loyalty to the Abuser

Not all fears center on violence towards survivors. It is important to keep in mind that the nature of abuse is often cyclic and rarely filled with only bad moments. Periods of affection or perceived behavioural change often coexist with the abusive behaviour, reinforcing survivors' hope that the relationship will improve, or the abuse will go away for good.

The positive interactions are a part of the cycle of control, increasing the emotional attachment and obscuring true recognition of the abuse as a pattern.[55]

Many respondents remained in abusive relationships, or maintained contact after separation because they:

- Felt responsible for the perpetrator,
- Believed the abuse was driven by trauma or stress rather than deliberate control, or
- Were unable to fully disengage due to enduring family bonds.

These findings reflect and align with current literature on the role of intermittent reinforcement and trauma bonding arising from sustaining contact in an abusive relationship despite physical separation.[56]

I'm not going to completely disown her. I will still provide for her, if I can, within my means…Whenever I go back, I have to choose a day when I'm not mentally drained cause I have to brace myself and then I have to time [the interaction duration]. It's very stressful lah.

~ **Heidi**, reflecting on how contact with her mother continued to take an emotional toll.

He would tell me things like, 'I depend on you emotionally and financially and mentally.' He tells me things like that so I find it very hard for me to just leave the situation. Because I'm afraid that if I'm gone, who's gonna help him?

~ **Amira**, having been in a relationship with her partner since adolescence.

Many interviewed survivors held onto positive memories, periods of affection, or promises of change, making it difficult to reconcile the abuse they endured with these positive experiences.[57]

Whether intentionally or not, many abusers also leveraged on this conditioned loyalty to keep the survivor in the relationship.

He would be like, 'Oh you are right, that is sexist. How incredibly ignorant of me.' And he would show that he is learning these things and he would never mention [about] my clothes again. So then I perceived that as he's actually listening to me.

~ **Tharani**, perceiving the relationship to have improved after her partner stopped commenting on her clothing.

It's not straightforward as just a man abusing you, it is not like that. He's not a 100% evil person you know…I know he [has his] own trauma from his childhood and even in his adulthood years.

~ **Laura**, recognising that her abusive partner had his own emotional burdens and past trauma.

Together, these findings show that emotional attachment should not be understood as irrational or contradictory to why survivors return or did not leave, but as one of the several mechanisms through which coercive control sustains entrapment.



[55] Mags Lesiak MPhil, "Understanding Trauma Bonding, Coercive Control, and the Illusion of Choice," *Psychology Today*, September 16, 2025, https://www.psychologytoday.com/sg/blog/psychology-in-the-courtroom/202509/why-do-i-still-love-him-after-the-abuse.

[56] Joan A. Reid, "Trauma Bonding and Intimate Partner Violence," in *Trauma Bonding and Interpersonal Crimes* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2024), 37; Donald G. Dutton and Susan Painter, "Emotional Attachments in Abusive Relationships: A Test of Traumatic Bonding Theory," *Violence and Victims* 8, no. 2 (1993): 105.

[57] Reid, "Trauma Bonding and Intimate Partner Violence," 40.

Professional Failure to Recognise Coercive Control



The coercive control scholarship shows that although victimisation manifests differently across contexts, professionals working with perpetrators and survivors have consistently identified a common pattern of predatory tactics that transcends conventional understandings.[58]

Given the diverse and covert nature of coercive control tactics, professionals were reported to have frequently missed recognising it in survivors' accounts, resulting in inappropriate responses and missed opportunities in providing effective support and intervention.

Our findings saw several survivors seeking formal support from the police, counsellors, and social workers but having their experiences interpreted as relationship conflict, communication difficulties, or even mutual abuse rather than a sustained pattern of abuser domination and survivor resistance.[59]

I did try [seeing] a counsellor before my marriage fell apart…and this [counsellor] was like 'Oh, it must be really hard for you…your husband must be really stressed at work', 'Oh, you know, he must be really funny', and I was like crying…I really needed somebody to validate that I was going through a tough time and [ask], 'What can I do to help you?', 'Are you safe?'

~ **Zoe**, who was in the marriage for over 20 years.

In cases where survivors reported the abuse, police were often unable to pursue criminal charges or make an arrest due to insufficient evidence and DARVO.[60]

As cases of coercive control frequently lacked visible physical violence, survivors felt their concerns were minimised or dismissed, while others reported receiving interventions from police, social workers, and counsellors that focused on improving the relationship rather than prioritising safety. These experiences reduced confidence in formal support systems and, in some cases, stopped further help-seeking.[61]

I did call the police. But I called so many times that even the police said, "Please don't call us anymore."…They gave me [AWARE's] number and said to only call [the police] when it got too serious…But I stopped calling the police then. I felt like calling wouldn't help resolve anything.

~ **Mai**, on her struggle with explaining her abusive situation to the police as English is not her first language.

You tell [me] that yeah your parents must have loved you because they didn't try to kill you…In my head, I'm thinking, 'Oh you mean some patients, their parents really tried to kill them'…So [my experience is] not that bad lah…I don't have the right to complain.

~ **Quinn,** on their counselling experience.



[58] Jacquelynn F. Duron, Laura Johnson, Gretchen L. Hoge, and Judy L. Postmus, "Observing Coercive Control Beyond Intimate Partner Violence: Examining the Perceptions of Professionals About Common Tactics Used in Victimization," *Psychology of Violence* 11, no. 2 (2021): 144; Ellen R. Gutowski and Lisa A. Goodman, "Legal Abuse and Mental Health: The Role of Judicial Betrayal," *Psychology of Violence* 13, no. 6 (2023): 468; Lucie Hery, Valérie Roy, and Robert Courtois, "Representations of Coercive Control Among Professionals Working with Victims of Intimate Partner Violence: A Scoping Review," *Journal of Family Violence* (2025): 1–17.

[59] As this study is qualitative and not designed to produce representative estimates, these findings reflect respondents' lived experiences rather than the overall performance of police, counselling, or social service professionals. Nevertheless, they highlight important instances where coercive control was not recognised, resulting in delayed intervention.

[60] The interviews underpinning these findings were conducted before amendments to the Women's Charter, which recognised emotional and psychological abuse as family violence, came into effect in 2025. Respondents' experiences of police reporting may not represent current police responses following the recognition of coercive control in the amendments.

[61] Sarah R. Robinson, Kristen Ravi, and Rachel J. Voth Schrag, "A Systematic Review of Barriers to Formal Help Seeking for Adult Survivors of IPV in the United States, 2005–2019," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 22, no. 5 (2021): 12; Andy Myhill and Katrin Hohl, "'The Golden Thread': Coercive Control and Risk Assessment for Domestic Violence," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 34, no. 21–22 (2019): 4477–97.

Misconceptions of Abuse and the “Perfect Victim”

Underlying many of these barriers described are broader misconceptions about what abuse and victims can look like.

The concept of the “perfect victim” refers to the expectation that a “real” victim would recognise the abuse immediately, resist consistently or exhibit total passivity, present clear, visible evidence of harm or leave at the earliest opportunity.[62]

My impression of an abusive relationship was very straightforward; the person would be very innocent and then the abuser would be very malicious…But because I felt like we were both in a very bad headspace and we were both kind of like bringing out the worst in each other, I didn't feel comfortable with calling myself like a victim of emotional abuse or physical abuse.

~ **Siti**, describing stereotypical perception of abuse and the “perfect victim”.

Our interviews and international research demonstrate that the “perfect victim” archetype is impossible. Instead, interviewed survivors adopted several strategies to cope with the abuse and de-escalate hostile situations. This included strategic compliance, freezing, fawning, covertly resisting demands, and overtly resisting the abuser’s demands.

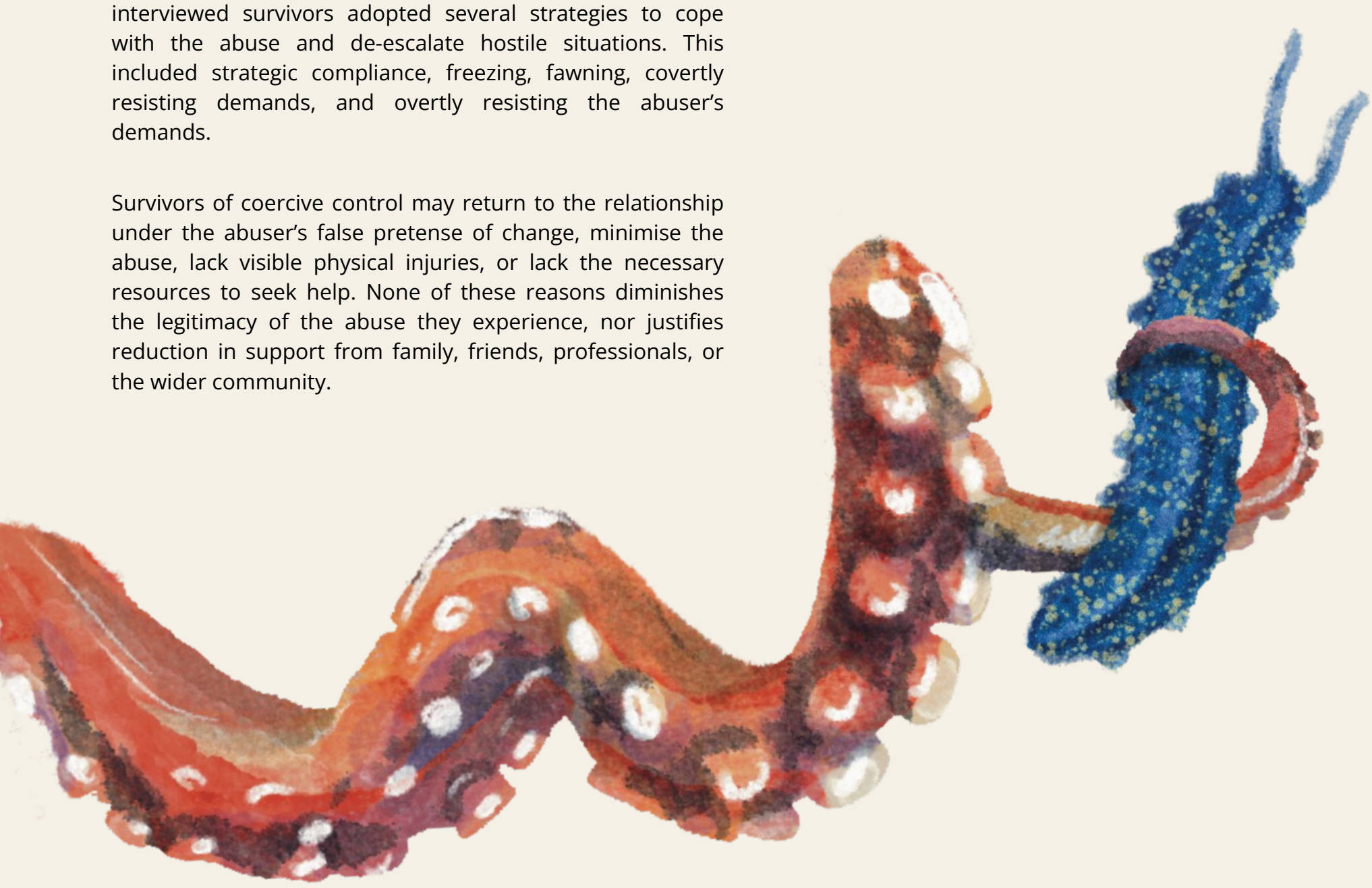
Survivors of coercive control may return to the relationship under the abuser’s false pretense of change, minimise the abuse, lack visible physical injuries, or lack the necessary resources to seek help. None of these reasons diminishes the legitimacy of the abuse they experience, nor justifies reduction in support from family, friends, professionals, or the wider community.

In our findings, these assumptions made it more difficult for victims, bystanders, and professionals to identify coercive control, particularly where abuse was subtle, cumulative, and interwoven into everyday dynamics.

The absence of visible physical violence compounds the issue, as family and friends do not recognise the victim’s experiences as abuse or would perceive them as overreacting.

He used to call me names…but [the increasing abuse] was sort of little bit by little bit and you just kind of put up, put up, put up…it’s never bad, he never hit me, so you know I would complain to my mother over the years sometimes and she said, ‘Oh, did he lay hands on you, he can’t hit you okay.’ So he never hit me, but he would always just lose his temper, he was always shouting a lot.

~ **Zoe,** who experienced emotional, financial, and sexual abuse, as well as physical intimidation, control of her behavior and social relationships.



[62] Nils Christie. “The ideal victim.” *From crime policy to victim policy* (1986), 27.

“What Makes a Survivor Seek Help?” Exploring Critical Enablers

Coercive control doesn’t always stop once a survivor seeks help and leaves the household or relationship, However, there are critical enablers which can help alleviate the intensity of abuse and control.

Tracing Survivor Outcomes

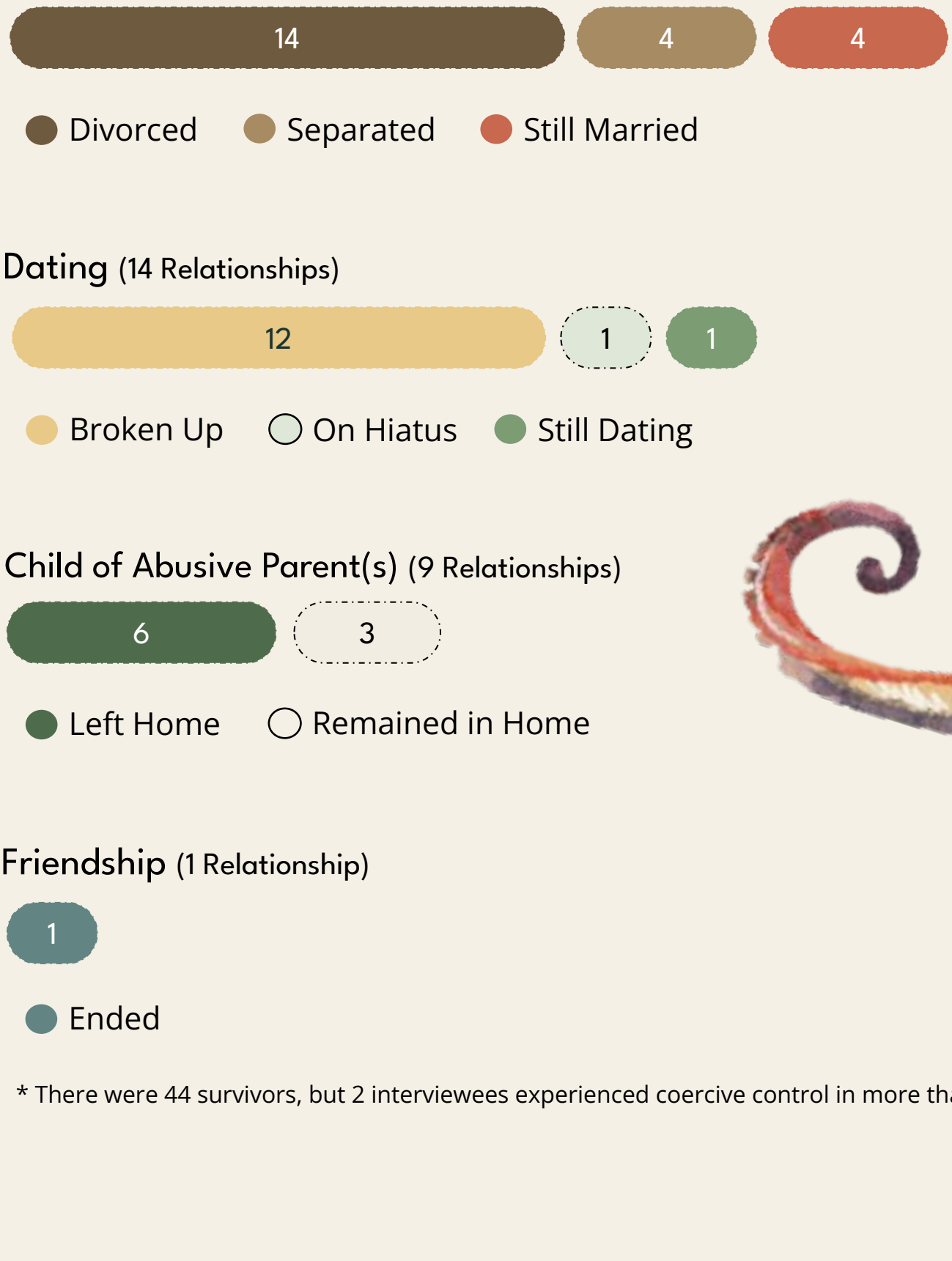
70% of interviewees eventually left their abusive household or ended the relationship.

It is crucial to remember that **leaving does not usually stop coercive control** as post-separation abuse was high across survivor accounts.

Among this sample of interviewees, the 30% who remained together or living in the same household as their abuser voiced that they stayed not because the situation had greatly improved, but due to the fear of retaliation, lack of financial resources, and the perception that they could not live independently without their abuser.

Figure 4:

Overview of Survivors' Statuses with Abusers * (At time of interview)





* There were 44 survivors, but 2 interviewees experienced coercive control in more than one relationship context.

Survivors Determine That The Costs of Staying Are Too High

A common thread across survivor experiences is the occurrence of a significant psychological shift; where it becomes clear that staying in the situation has become either too difficult or too dangerous.

89%
(n=39)

experienced an escalation in controlling behaviours and abusiveness over time.

This turning point, where the accumulated costs of staying eclipse the risks of leaving, usually manifests in a few ways.

The Gradual Accumulation of Coercive Abuse

Survivors described how coercive abuse became extremely unbearable, and in some cases, made the survivor fear for their life. Many abusers exhaust any remaining goodwill from survivors, and repeatedly demonstrate that they cannot change, despite being given numerous chances to do so.

I gave [him] a year and that year is up. [He] didn't change, so my mind is made up already…It's like [he] doesn't care about the wellbeing of me, so no reason for me to go back.

~ **Deepa**, on how her husband's continued refusal to stop his emotional and physical abuse catalysed her decision to leave.

Some survivors also recounted having a series of "wake-up calls" that made it harder to stay in the situation. These were moments where a survivor realised that their abuser did not actually care for them and treated the survivor as a piece of property rather than a person with feelings and opinions.



I was [sick] for a couple of months and he still demanded sex…He couldn't [wait any longer], he said he had to have it. I remember, I cried and cried and cried when he was doing it…And that made me realise he doesn't care about me…That was the first waking up lah.

~ **Emma**, recalled how an especially traumatising rape at the hands of her husband opened her eyes on his lack of concern for her.

A few survivors came to the realisation, by themselves or through others' remarks, that the abuse fundamentally reshaped their personality and the way they behaved. While once self-confident, these survivors developed deep-seated insecurities which spilled over into their close relationships.

[My sister] said, 'Can you stop asking me if there is something wrong? You were not like this before you started dating your ex!…I'm telling you that I'm not mad, I'm not upset, and you don't believe me. What do you want me to do?'…That moment was also kind of a wake-up call.

~ **Reena**, recounted how her sister's frustration pushed Reena to see how badly the relationship with her boyfriend was affecting her and those around her.

The Final Straw

For some, they could pinpoint a single episode where their abuser's behaviour crossed into what they believed was unforgivable territory. On top of existing manipulative behaviours, this episode revealed the extent of their abuser's controlling nature.

Because psychological and emotional manipulation in coercive control can be ambiguous, some survivors only learned to recognise physical assault as the "dealbreaker" in a romantic relationship.

When an episode of physical violence does occur, it completely shatters any illusion of a loving relationship and makes it clearer that the situation is abusive. This then pushes some survivors to seek help and try to leave the relationship.

In other situations involving non-physical violence, the final straw came in the form of verbal statements that made it clear that the abuser was very cruel or controlling, thus negating any possibility of a healthy future with them.

For a married survivor with children, the final straw was the threat to their children's safety and well-being. As mentioned earlier, many survivors fear losing custody and "breaking up" the family.

Yet, despite such risks, witnessing the repercussions of their abuser's hostility, unpredictable mood swings, or physical and emotional abuse on the children forced many to realise that staying in the same household would do even more harm.

When he started to target the children by shouting at them and yelling at them, picking on them basically, I knew it was time to exit…I couldn't take it anymore. He was starting to take it out on them.

~ **Ari**, who endured over a decade of abuse explained how her husband's escalating verbal abuse towards the children was the tipping point to leave.

Gaining Distance from the Abuser

Access to Safer Alternatives

A key barrier to leaving is the threat of homelessness, thus making the knowledge about and availability of safer housing arrangements a critical help for coercive control survivors.

Our respondents, usually cohabiting couples and adults with an abusive parent, described how being allowed to stay in a friend's or family member's spare room, a shelter, or a newly leased rental removed a critical logistical barrier in leaving the abusive household.

I confided in [my friend]…She was like, 'I have a room and a place…by all means, you and your son can stay there'. So, that's what got everything [in motion].

~ **Keena**, recounted how her friend understood how dangerous and violent Keena's husband was at home and quickly offered her and her son a place to stay.



Acting During a Window of Opportunity

Occasionally, a window of opportunity also presents itself when the abuser has either emotionally or physically disengaged from the relationship. This makes it less likely for the abuser to drag out the divorce process and can hasten the survivor's escape.

For **Leia**, her abusive husband's departure restored the financial independence that she and her children needed to rebuild their lives after years of instability.

He left us, he walked out one day and never came back…It's the most incredible feeling to have my income. For the first time in such a long time, what I'm earning was truly for the children and me.

Broader environmental shifts, like the COVID-19 pandemic, also catalysed many exits. For example, non-cohabitating survivors were able to gain physical distance from their abuser due to strict lockdown measures, giving them the much-needed space to consider a life without their abuser.

Meanwhile, other survivors living in the same household as their abuser anticipated the violence and controlling behaviour to only worsen from the stress of staying together indoors for prolonged periods. This fear propelled them to leave as soon as possible.

I know that I can't survive, I can't stay there alone. So yeah, we all moved out during the pandemic.

~ **Loraine**, on leaving the family home with her siblings and away from her abusive mother.

Such fears were well-founded as domestic violence cases in Singapore spiked significantly during the pandemic. In the first month of the Circuit Breaker alone (7 April to 6 May 2020), the Singapore Police Force reported a 22% increase in family violence reports compared to pre-pandemic averages.[63] This escalation was mirrored by AWARE's helpline, which saw a 40% surge in annual inquiries, from 4,343 in 2019 to 6,092 in 2020.[64]

Receiving Support from Social Systems

Coercive control thrives on isolating the survivor, grinding down their self-esteem, and manipulating them into believing that they can only rely on their abuser. This is why external intervention from informal support networks, like friends, colleagues, and family, can be a key enabler in helping survivors to step away from the relationship.

Creating External Reality Checks

Abusers frequently use gaslighting and DARVO to make survivors question their perception of reality and sense of self, often with the aim of making the survivor feel at fault for things going wrong or irrational for their feelings.



It is beneficial when a survivor can turn to other connections, without the abuser's knowledge, to challenge and dismantle their abuser's false narratives. In **Karin's** experience, having a trusted group of friends helped challenge her partner's attempts to invalidate her feelings.

External validation can come not only from friends, but from other social contacts like family and colleagues. Receiving it can remind survivors to trust their own judgement, while enabling them to better recognise the severity of the abuse and control. All this can then encourage them to seek help for their situation.

---

[63] Jay Jay Lin, "22 Per Cent Increase in Reports Related to Family Violence Since Circuit Breaker: SPF," *AsiaOne*, May 14, 2020, https://www.asiaone.com/singapore/22-cent-increase-reports-related-family-violence-circuit-breaker-spf.

[64] Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), *Annual Report 2019* (Singapore: AWARE, 2020); Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), *Annual Report 2020: Crisis, Change, Opportunity* (Singapore: AWARE, 2021).

Providing Validation and Support

For several respondents, having online and real-life communities to validate their struggles helped them to recognise their abusive situation. Survivors highlighted how at the very least, simply reading about other people's experiences with abuse online helped in sense-making their own situation.

For **Charlie**, online resources and communities helped her finally find an accurate label for what she had been experiencing from her husband.

There were groups for people who have experienced the same thing I did. And a lot of the experiences were similar…And then I got to slowly realise what is coercive control but I didn't really have that much of understanding.

In some cases, survivors actively participated in sharing their experiences in these online spaces; receiving both emotional support and introductions to additional resources. This was what happened for **Thida**.

They share videos and reading materials from psychologists…We are also really supportive of each other, we will tell each other it is not [our] fault. Because often, we will bash ourselves up for [staying in the relationship].

Emotional validation and support, in both online and real-life settings, can alleviate a survivor's internalised shame and isolation, thereby improving their coping skills and potentially encouraging them to find ways to end the relationship with their abuser.

The period when I was talking to my colleague who really understood and was going through it [too]…We learned from each other, from each other's mistakes, we also encouraged each other and shared resources.

~ **Laura**, recalled finding validation and support from her colleague during Laura's tumultuous relationship with her boyfriend.

Several respondents recalled the importance of patient and non-judgemental spaces in helping them process the abuse and plan leaving. When family and close friends offered a safe space without ultimatums or simplistic advice to "just break up", they gave the survivor the space and time to come to terms with their abusive situation.

An interviewed practicing counsellor reaffirmed that demanding that a survivor "just leave" can feel judgmental and alienating. Allies, whether friends, family, or professionals, must instead build a safe space that preserves the survivor's power of choice.

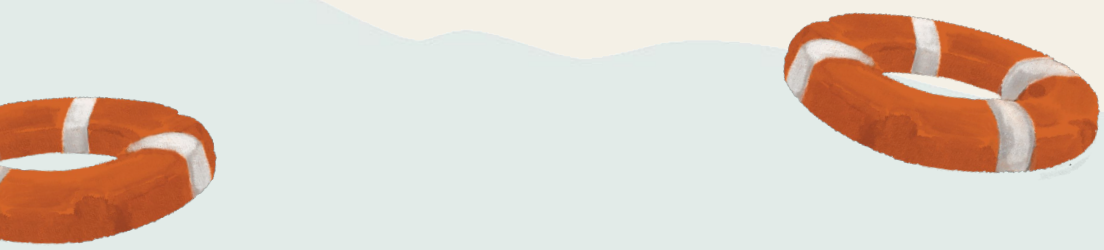
For example, **Jiayi's** parents respected her agency by not immediately asking her to break up with her boyfriend, but instead pointed out that his controlling behaviour was not healthy.

Eventually I did tell my family. Credit to my parents, they gave me the space and didn't say, 'You have to break up with this guy right away. [My parents] were quite a big reason why I broke up with him in the end.

In more volatile situations, some of the survivors' family members even stepped in to act as physical buffers against the abusive party's coercive behaviour.

For **Rita**, who was from another country, her parents' physical presence in Singapore encouraged her to proceed with a divorce from her violent and manipulative husband.

And if not for my mother, I don't think I would have gone through [with the divorce]…When the whole thing [escalated], I had my Mom and [then] my Dad moved [to Singapore] to be with me. If not for them, I think I would have succumbed to his way of manipulation.



Accessing Skilled Professional Intervention

Professionals, particularly counsellors and social workers, can provide skilled interventions by validating a survivor's confusions and concerns, helping a survivor recognise that something is wrong, and equipping the survivor with practical tools to exit the relationship as safely as possible.

Astute counsellors and psychologists could see beyond the presenting issues and highlight the underlying patterns of coercion and violence to our respondents. For **Bella**, her counsellor was able to point out the unhealthy dynamics at home that contributed to her burnout.

I first went to see a counsellor over my work burnout issues lah. And then they pointed out that it wasn't just work abuse that I cannot get any rest at home either…[Then] I realised that this is clearly not what a healthy parent-child relationship is.

Similarly, for **Farah**, her psychologist at a non-profit could identify coercive dynamics within her marriage and quickly pivoted to offering individual support to Farah.

We went for marriage counseling…The psychologist there kind of pulled me aside and asked me if I wanted to do individual therapy instead. So, I definitely agreed on individual therapy, thankfully, she really helped me sort of shine light on a lot of things.

Professionals are often seen as an expert third party, which makes their advice particularly impactful on survivors who are already struggling to make sense of the abuse in their relationships.

I got to talk to the shelter's case worker. So I actually told them and they told me that this is not right, what I'm facing is actually violence. That's when I realised [what I was experiencing]…You need somebody, a third party, to tell you.

~ **Jasmine**, fled from her abusive husband and stayed in a shelter.

Social workers occupy a particularly important position as survivors often depend on their expertise to plan for a safer escape.

Emma shared a positive experience where her social worker offered both needed emotional support and a concrete plan of action. This helped Emma to better plan her and her children's escape from her abusive husband.

[The social worker] gave me a lot of emotional support in terms of the leaving, they had a lot of practical [safety plans and] strategies…They also gave a lot of good advice, like go and find out your options with a lawyer.



Recommendations

Effective responses must tackle the barriers that allow abuse to remain hidden at various levels. We advocate for changes in policy and legislation, frontline response, support resources for survivors, greater public education, and continued research.

Budding Progress in the Protection of Domestic Violence Survivors

In recent years, Singapore has made significant legislative and operational strides to strengthen its framework against family violence. A major milestone came with the passage of the Women's Charter (Family Violence and Other Matters) (Amendment) Act 2023, with key provisions having come into operational effect in 2025.

Operational advances have appeared in the establishment and expansion of the Domestic Violence Emergency Response Team (DVERT),[65] enhanced protection measures alongside Personal Protection Orders (PPOs), expanded emergency intervention powers for high-risk cases, interventions aimed at rehabilitation, and the passing of the Online Safety (Relief and Accountability) Act (OSRAA) in 2025.[66]

These reforms reflect a growing policy recognition of non-physical forms of harm and expanding protection mechanisms for domestic violence survivors.

While measures are commendable, we recognise that they are still relatively new and might not explicitly target the unique mechanics of coercive control. Coupled with the uneven knowledge of coercive control dynamics across frontline responders, the court system, and the public, significant gaps still persist.

To address these gaps, we put forward the following recommendations that explicitly target coercive control in Singapore.

Recommendation 1: Improving First-Responder Detection and Interventions

While law enforcement agencies, social workers, healthcare providers, counsellors and psychologists, and school educators are going through training to better recognise emotional and psychological abuse.

Our helpline data and interviews with current practitioners in 2026 demonstrate that frontline responders still require training to build their knowledge on the subtle and overt signs of coercive control as well as develop appropriate interventions.

1.1 Police

It is imperative that police officers and staff undergo training modules which help them to understand patterns of coercive control, better identify abuser tactics, avoid victim-blaming and misunderstanding a survivor's resistance, effectively respond to emergency situations where coercive control is suspected, protect the survivor from immediate harm, and gather evidence of cumulative abuse in a sensitive, trauma-informed manner.

Such training materials have proven successful in England and Wales, where coercive control education for frontline responders resulted in a 41% increase in arrests for controlling or coercive behaviour.[67]

1.2 Social Workers

Family Service Centres (FSCs) are often at the forefront of supporting victim-survivors of domestic violence. The recent upward trend of cases managed by Singapore's FSCs highlights the importance of ensuring that social workers can better recognise the signs of coercive control, especially the more subtle and insidious forms, as well as appropriately intervene.[68]

In-depth knowledge and adequate risk assessment skills of coercive control would enable a social worker to better psychoeducate their clients, avoid misjudging a presenting case as just a "bad relationship", intervene earlier and before escalation, and give safer recommendations to their clients.[69]

For example, countries like Belgium have begun developing "rapid detection" tools for police and frontline social workers so that they can more accurately detect insidious and overt signs of coercive control, especially in intimate partner relationships.[70]

---

[65] Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), "Domestic Violence Trends Report 2026," media release, October 29, 2026, www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/article/domestic-violence-trends-report-2026.

[66] Harmful online conduct that occurs in a coercively controlling relationship such as online harassment, online stalking, doxxing, and intimate image abuse can fall within the categories of online harm mentioned in OSRAA.

[67] Iain Brennan, Andy Myhill, Giulia Tagliaferri, and Jacki Tapley, "Policing a New Domestic Abuse Crime: Effects of Force-Wide Training on Arrests for Coercive Control," *Policing and Society* 31, no. 10 (2021): 1153–67.

[68] MSF, "Domestic Violence Trends Report 2026."

[69] Karen J. Mitchell, Janet Melville-Wiseman, and Felicity McFarlane, "The Deeper Context of Coercive Control: New Insights into Behavioural Patterns in Coercive Controllers to Support Greater Precision in Social Worker Assessments of Critical Risk," *Probation Journal* 72, no. 4 (2025): 485–510.

[70] Institut pour l'égalité des femmes et des hommes (IEFH), "Outils de détection du contrôle coercitif," IGVM-IEFH (Government of Belgium), accessed August 20, 2026, https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/fr/documentation/outils-de-detection-du-controle-coercitif.

1.3 Healthcare Providers

Medical practitioners in Singapore should be trained to screen and identify the emotional and psychological distress associated with coercive control, as well as have the skills to responsibly ask survivors about their situation in cases of suspected abuse.

For example, responsible asking could be getting the suspected abuser to wait outside the room and asking a survivor through non-verbal means (e.g. a written note). Psychological abuse can evade detection unless medical practitioners proactively screen for its subtle indicators.[71]

1.4 Counsellors and Psychologists

Nearly all of the interviewed survivors (n=43) sought assistance from mental health professionals such as counsellors, psychologists, or psychiatrists while they were experiencing coercive control.

This reiterates how important it is for mental health professionals to have the knowledge and skills to identify the signs of controlling behaviour in different relationship contexts, validate their clients' experiences, and work with the client to alleviate the mental strain.

Insights from our interviews with survivors and an experienced counsellor highlighted how effective support needs patient psychoeducation, strategies to rebuild their self-esteem, and a safe space to develop the autonomy to make decisions on their situation.

1.5 Educators and School Administrators

We recommend creating relevant training modules and learning materials on coercive control for educators and school administrators. This is so that they can better identify coercive control among vulnerable children, intervene without threatening the young survivor's safety, and safely escalate suspected abuse to the relevant agencies.[72]

Given that coercive control is particularly difficult to recognise for those unfamiliar with how it presents, especially in child survivors, specialised training for educators is needed to help differentiate parental concern from parental coercion and control.

In our interviews, we found that coercive control experienced by children can manifest as the suppression of independence through rigid rules without reasonable cause, excessive and disproportionate reactions to "minor" wrongdoing, framing negotiations for independence and flexibility as a betrayal, and psychological distress and fear towards the abusive parent.

In New South Wales in Australia, the government funded a workshop designed to train educators on coercive control, build teachers' capacity to intervene, and encourage educators to reflect on their role in harm reduction and reporting.[73]

A welcoming and understanding school environment that provides necessary accommodations for survivors is also essential in building resilience in young survivors of coercive control.[74]

Accommodations should be provided for survivor students such as access to counselling, minimising overall educational stress, and implementing trauma-sensitive pedagogical adjustments for these young survivors when required.



[71] ReachLink Editorial Team, *"Coercive Control: Why Psychological Abuse Stays Hidden,"* ReachLink, May 27, 2026, www.reachlink.com/advice/domestic-violence-2/coercive-control/.

[72] Singapore Children's Society, *Study Brief: Survey on Child Protection in the Preschool Sector* (Singapore: Singapore Children's Society, 2025).

[73] Community Early Learning Australia (CELA), "Recognising and Responding to Coercive Control," accessed August 11, 2026, www.cela.org.au/training/self-paced/recognising-and-responding-to-coercive-control-sp.

[74] Maria Isabel Castro-Castaño and William Frank Español-Sierra, "Teacher Training, Empowerment, and Child Resilience: A Systematic Review," *Nexus* 5, no. 1 (2025), 80–94.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen the Judicial System with Targeted Legislative Reforms

2.1 Curbing Litigious Abuse

We advocate that Singapore's family court and Syariah court establish robust statutory safeguards to identify, deter, and penalise litigious harassment. Through survivor accounts, we determined how perpetrators of coercive control prolong litigation to punish survivors after separation.

Judges, in observing patterns of unnecessary filings, delay tactics, and repetitive, spurious applications, must factor in the possibility of malicious intent in their ruling. At the same time, clear penalties and screening filters should be enforced to prevent perpetrators from manipulating the court system to harass survivors.

2.2 Enshrine Economic and Financial Abuse in the Women's Charter

We strongly recommend that the statutory definition of family violence in the Women's Charter explicitly include economic and financial abuse, using examples from this report. Explicit recognition can provide grounds for granting PPO, Expedited Orders (EOs), and Domestic Exclusion Orders (DEOs), while also directly informing maintenance and matrimonial asset division.

2.3 Explore Criminalisation of Coercive and Controlling Behaviour

We highly recommend exploring a dedicated criminal offence for repeated, continued patterns of controlling or coercive behaviour. A standalone offence can be applied to intimate partnerships (heterosexual and LGBTIQA+), familial relations, and other contexts (i.e. friendships, work relations).

While the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA) can address isolated acts of harassment or stalking for groups not protected under the Women's Charter, POHA cannot accurately capture coercive control dynamics where seemingly "benign" daily acts aggregate into severe subjugation. As coercive control involves systematic domination and a loss of autonomy, sentencing should reflect the corresponding mental health consequences and trauma suffered by survivors.

Singapore can consider drawing on common-law precedents in other places like Scotland and Australia, where penalties could be community service, mandatory rehabilitation of the perpetrator, fines, and jail time. Criminalising the cumulative pattern of abuse directly can enable law enforcement to intervene, make perpetrators accountable for their actions, and help prevent long-term entrapment.

2.4 Introduce a Statutory Tort for Coercive Control

We recommend introducing a specific civil cause of action that allows coercive control survivors to sue perpetrators directly for damages. A dedicated statutory tort would help survivors claim compensation from their abuser for inflicted psychological trauma on the survivor and their children or dependents, physical injuries, and/or financial interference and deprivation (i.e. lost wages, siphoned funds).

2.5 Enhancing Judicial Training and Awareness of Coercive Control

We recommend that judges, judicial officers, and court support staff be trained on the nuanced dynamics of coercive control and patterns of non-physical abuse. This ensures that assessments move beyond looking at isolated incidents and instead evaluate the overarching climate of fear and control.

For example, the withdrawal of PPOs and victim-survivor recantations should be evaluated as potential indicators of severe coercion, rather than mistakenly interpreted as proof that the abuse did not occur.

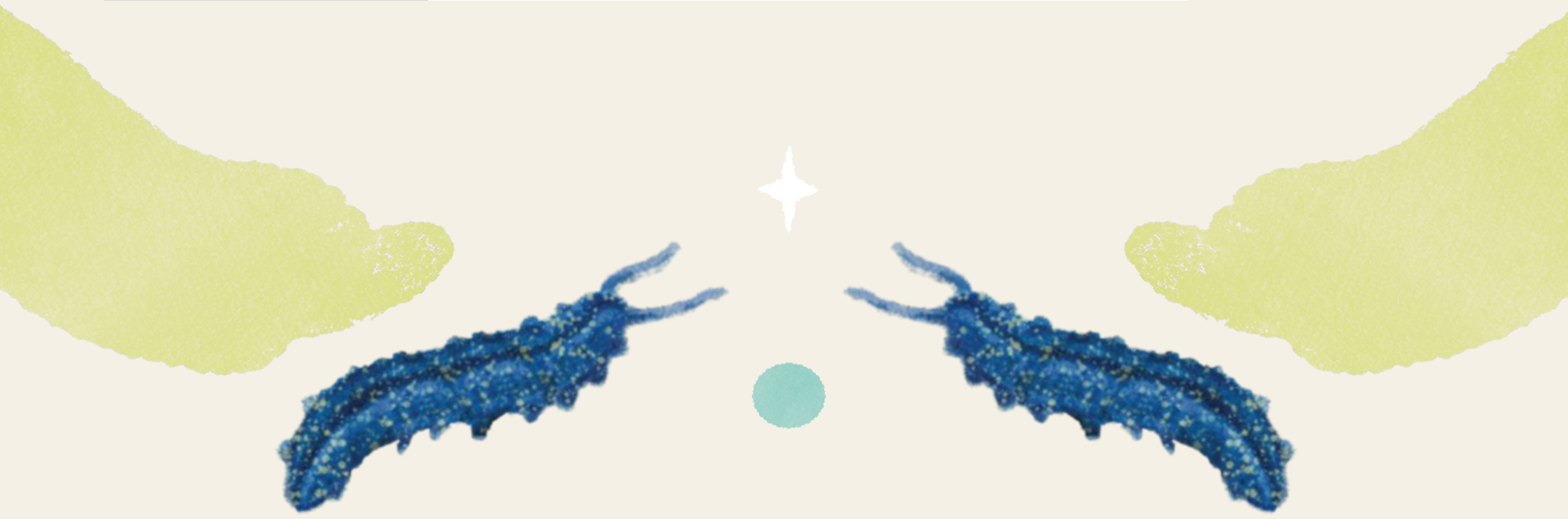
In PPO proceedings without evidence of physical abuse, we advise the court to request, admit, and utilise clinical evaluations conducted by qualified psychologists. Without clear injuries, expert psychological assessments can provide an objective evidentiary pathway to substantiate chronic trauma, fear, and intimidation. This ensures protective relief is granted based on the cumulative impact of abuse, rather than singular incidents of violence.

Specialised training and awareness of coercive control dynamics are especially important In divorce cases involving children. Often, an abusive parent seeks to manipulate legal assessments by influencing the child's behaviour in front of social workers, counsellors, and judges.

Furthermore, family courts must prioritise trauma-informed evaluations that recognise a child's rejection of an abusive parent as a rational self-protective response rather than manufactured hostility by the survivor.

Any determination of custody and care arrangements should consider signs of subtle psychological manipulation, compliance, and fear-based responses in a child. This can help ensure that decisions are made in the child's best interests and do not reinforce patterns of abuse.

Recommendation 3: Improving Material Support for Victim-Survivors



3.1 Create Expedited Access to Public Housing

Victim-survivors of family violence and coercive control in Singapore need HDB policies that ensure expedited access to public housing. Housing security is essential to trauma recovery because it allows victim-survivors to restore stability and foster optimism for their future.[75] While Singapore has crisis shelters, this is not a substitute for long-term housing stability.

Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that survivors with extended family have a place to stay after fleeing an abusive household, this is because many survivors routinely face victim-blaming and backlash from family members after disclosing their abuse.

Drawing upon our past recommendation for single unwed mothers,[76] we recommend a HDB division to coordinate services for survivors of coercive control leaving abusive households, particularly more vulnerable persons who have depleted or low personal savings, are on an immigration pass, and caring for one child or more.

Having a centralised HDB unit will help streamline and expedite housing processes. With stable and affordable rental housing, this would provide the foundational security that survivors need to re-enter the workforce, build their financial capacity, as well as potentially build a realistic pathway to purchasing a HDB flat in the future.

3.2 Provision of Emergency Funds to Exit Abuse

A large barrier to victim-survivors leaving coercive control situations, especially those with limited funds, are concerns around material and financial security. Therefore, we recommend the provision of emergency funds to victim-survivors. Direct financial aid can break the cycle of abuse and help victim-survivors to not return to their abusers.

For example, in the UK, victim-survivors are referred by frontline professionals to receive funding that helps them to flee their abusers.[77] Similarly, France provides emergency funding on a sliding scale based on the number of children in their care.[78]

When determining a survivor's eligibility for financial assistance, we recommend that the criteria adopt a holistic approach. It should factor in not only the survivor's monthly income, but also their necessary monthly expenses (i.e. child-related expenses, being forced to rent on the open market, and the financial burden of legal fees).

---

[75] Adrienne Hetling, Angie Dunford, Stephanie Lin, and Erica Michaelis, "Long-Term Housing and Intimate Partner Violence: Journeys to Healing," *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work* 33, no. 4 (2018): 526–42.

[76] Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), *Why Stable Housing Matters: Outcomes of the S.H.E. Project for Single-Mother Families* (Singapore: AWARE, May 2022), 28, www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/AWARE-S.H.E-Project-Report-Why-Stable-Housing-Matters-May-2022.pdf.

[77] Women's Aid, *Emergency Fund Evaluation 2023* (Bristol: Women's Aid, 2024).

[78] French Government, "Financial Emergency Assistance for Victims of Domestic Violence," Service-Public.fr, November 2023.

3.3 Subsidise Trauma-Informed Psychological Services

We recommend heavily-subsidised trauma-informed counselling for victim-survivors of coercive control, regardless of immigration status. This is a necessary provision given that the mental health consequences for victim-survivors of abuse are overwhelming, putting them at higher risk of depression, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and suicidal ideation.[79]

Trauma-informed counselling utilises an approach centred on understanding how trauma affects the victim-survivors and how it shapes their recovery.[80] This has been shown to be an effective form of therapy with better outcomes for victim-survivors.[81] France,[82] Finland,[83] and Denmark[84] have publicly funded or statutorily mandated counselling programs for victim-survivors and children who have witnessed or experienced abuse.

3.4 Strengthen Workplace Support for Victim-Survivors

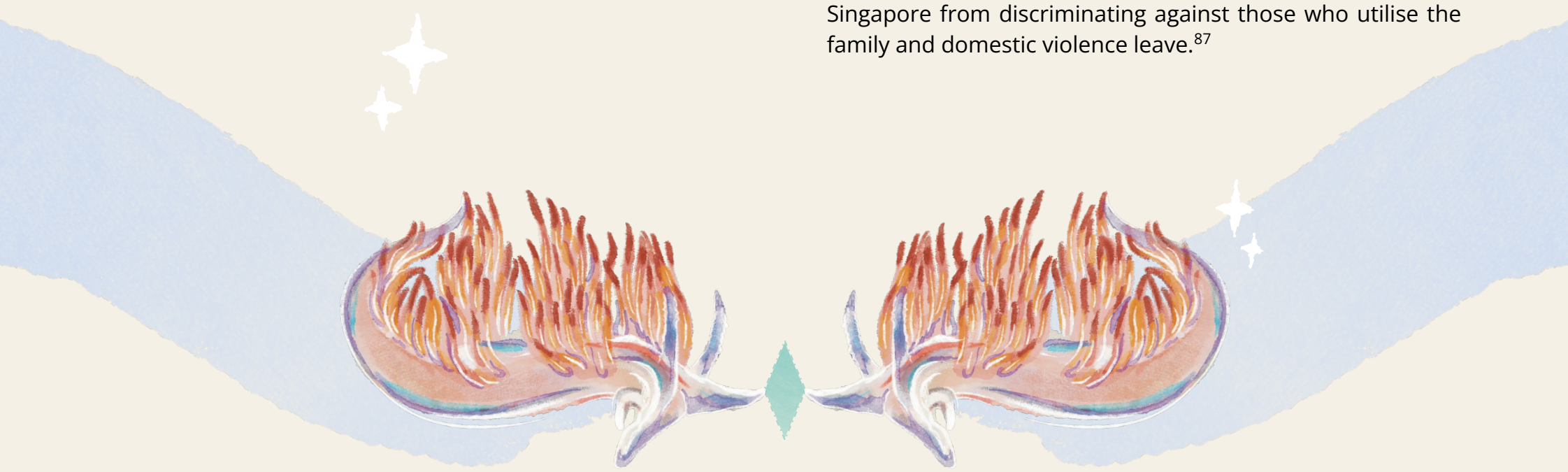
We recommend that workplaces in Singapore institute a scheme where all employees are entitled to a dedicated period of paid emergency leave with no questions asked.

Similar to Australia's leave policies, employees (including part-time and casual employees) are entitled to 10 days of paid family and domestic violence leave each year.[85] This enables victim-survivors to mobilise relocation plans, access police services, or attend court or counselling sessions as required.

For the Singapore context, modelling Australia's Employers' Guide to Family and Domestic Violence is a good way to minimise judgement for disclosing abuse as the experience is often difficult and re-traumatising.[86]

When victim-survivors encounter a crisis or escalation of danger, it is imperative to their safety and the safety of their dependents that they are empowered to make logistical arrangements to leave, often on very short notice.

The guide also advises on provision of evidence such as documents issued by the police service or the courts. This builds legal workplace protections that prevent employers in Singapore from discriminating against those who utilise the family and domestic violence leave.[87]



[79] Mariana Gonçalves, Gabriela Martinho, and Bita Ghafoori, "Trauma-Focused Treatments for Victims of Interpersonal Violence: A Comparison of Treatment Interventions and Outcomes," *Psychotherapy Research* 35, no. 6 (2025): 918–31.

[80] Karen Williams, Merrylord Harb, Lata Satyen, and Mia Davies, "s-CAPE Trauma Recovery Program: The Need for a Holistic, Trauma- and Violence-Informed Domestic Violence Framework," *Frontiers in Global Women's Health* 5 (2024): 1–7.

[81] Shaolingyun Guo, Qiqi Chen, and Ko Ling Chan, "Effectiveness of Trauma-Informed Care Programs: A Meta-Analysis," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 26, no. 1 (2025): 1994–2009.

[82] World Bank, Operating Networks for Victim Support Services (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2019).

[83] Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), "Shelters for Victims of Domestic Violence," accessed August 11, 2026, https://thl.fi/en/our-services/shelters-for-victims-of-domestic-violence.

[84] Danish Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing, "Services under the Social Services Act for Persons Exposed to Violence in Close Relationships," accessed August 11, 2026.

[85] Fair Work Ombudsman, "Family and Domestic Violence Leave," accessed August 11, 2026, https://www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/fact-sheets/minimum-workplace-entitlements/family-and-domestic-violence-leave.

[86] Fair Work Ombudsman, "Small Business Employer Guide to Family and Domestic Violence," accessed October 5, 2026, https://www.fairwork.gov.au/sites/default/files/migration/1414/employer-guide-to-family-and-domestic-violence.pdf.

[87] New Zealand Government, "Family Violence Leave," accessed August 11, 2026, https://www.govt.nz/browse/work/family-violence-leave/.

Recommendation 4: Bolstering Public Education on Coercive Control

We recommend that Singapore implement nationwide public education campaigns and localised resource packs that raise awareness of subtle and overt forms of coercive control.

Updated materials should equip the Singapore public with the vocabulary to identify non-physical abuse, safely report incidents, or know the options for help-seeking. Building on existing initiatives like MSF's Break the Silence campaign, this initiative should be updated to include examples on coercive control.[88]

Drawing from international examples, the Australian Government's Coercion Hurts campaign reached over 35 million impressions across digital, TV, and radio platforms by depicting concrete, relatable examples of coercive behavior.

A parallel multi-platform initiative in Singapore, supported by multilingual toolkits (including explainers, posters, case studies, and short-form videos) online and offline would significantly raise public awareness and bystander readiness.

Recommendation 5: Improve Primary Prevention through Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)

Having Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) that discusses coercive and controlling behaviours will better educate young people about abusive dynamics, improve bystander intervention, and also halt the development of these concerning behaviours.

AWARE has long advocated for the Ministry of Education (MOE) to revise the sexuality education curriculum in alignment with UNESCO's International Technical Guidance. Starting from as young as five years old and adapted across different developmental stages, age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education should cover consent, gender relations, gender stereotypes, gender-based violence, and gender inequality.

Whilst students learn that it is an offence to engage in sex below 16 years even if it is consensual, consent still underpins a wide spectrum of interactions beyond sexual intercourse, including touch, digital behaviour, and emotional boundaries. It is a critical protective concept for recognising and seeking help for emotional and psychological abuse from a young age.

Informed by our interviews with coercive control survivors, we also strongly recommend that school curriculum be revamped to educate young people on early warning signs, understand harmful dynamics in familial and dating relationships, and help them amend their own behaviours before they harm others.



[88] Currently, only PAVE explicitly mentions coercive control as a type of violence and provides examples.

Recommendation 6: Enhance Data Tracking of Coercive Control

6.1 Increase Data Sharing Among Agencies

We strongly recommend enhancing cross-agency data tracking of suspected coercive control cases to inform targeted, evidence-based policies. Instead of categorising cases into a binary dichotomy of “physical” and “non-physical”, we recommend expanding classifications for non-physical abuse indicators that are hallmark signs of coercive control.

To better elucidate patterns of control, granular indicators are needed such as psychological intimidation, humiliation and degradation, physical intimidation, financial control, coercive micro-regulation, social isolation, and non-digital and digital surveillance.

This data framework should be implemented across several frontline touchpoints; namely community organisations, Family Service Centres (FSCs), Protection Specialist Centres, crisis shelters, Ministry of Education (MOE), Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA), the Family Justice Courts (FJC), and Syariah Court.

Standardising the data collection process can then generate important longitudinal insights into survivor trajectories and perpetrator recidivism. This will help ministries and social service providers to identify critical risk points and develop targeted legal, financial, housing, and social service interventions.

6.2 Sharing Disaggregated Data Transparently

We strongly recommend publishing the data found. Greater transparency and disaggregation of interpersonal violence data are needed to identify patterns that may otherwise remain obscured in aggregate statistics.

More granular reporting would allow policymakers, service providers, non-profit organisations and researchers to identify populations facing different forms of abuse, assess gaps in existing responses, and better track emerging patterns of coercive control across relationship contexts.

Data should therefore be disaggregated along the following key sociodemographic lines, and types to map any intersectional vulnerabilities, risk profiles, and gaps in support:

- Demographics (gender, age, race, income, immigration status, and sexual orientation)
- Abuse types (physical, sexual, psychological, financial)
- Perpetrator types (family, spouse, intimate partner, colleague, friend, stranger)



Annex

You can find more details about this study's methodology, and demographic information of our interviewees here.

Table A-1: Additional Details on this Study's Methodology

Recruitment

Recruitment was conducted through an open public call posted on AWARE's social media platforms and through referrals by Family Service Centres (FSCs). Eligibility screening questions during the intake interview were focused on determining if recruits' experiences fell under the distinction of coercive control within intimate partner or familial coercive control contexts. In total, 44 victim-survivors of coercive control were recruited for this qualitative study.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted either in person at the AWARE Centre or online via Zoom between 2023 and 2024. Translators were provided when required. All interviews were conducted as individual, one-to-one interviews, either within a single session or over multiple sessions. The interviews, which lasted from one and a half hours to three hours, were audio-recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

Safety Measures

In accordance with the research ethics and data protection policy, interviewees reserve the right to anonymity, confidentiality and to withdraw from the study at any point during the process and retract all information provided when requested. A designated safety person and counselling support were available upon request. All interviewees received an honorarium for their involvement.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interview data was analysed using a combination of inductive and deductive coding. Deductive coding utilised existing literature on coercive control, while inductive coding allowed for unique local themes to emerge through the data. The data was first processed through open coding and then subsequently axial coding, which allowed the identification of emergent themes and the formation of relationships between categories.

To further inform and strengthen the validity of this study, data triangulation was conducted via interviews with professionals who have a degree of knowledge and experience with coercive control in Singapore. This included social workers, counsellors, a lawyer, and a psychologist based in Singapore as well as an Australian-based academic conducting research in Singapore. Their practitioner insights and experiences helped to further contextualise the findings in this study.

Limitations

As a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews, the findings are not statistically representative of the wider population and should not be generalised to all experiences of coercive control in Singapore.

The sample may also underrepresent survivors who were unable to participate, due significant safety, access, and language barriers. There is thus a degree of selection bias, as the interviews were mostly conducted in English, with a small mix of the respondents whose first language is not English. This limits the participation of survivors with lower English proficiency.

Similarly, while the educational profile of respondents in this study is skewed towards those with higher levels of education, this should not be taken to suggest that coercive control is concentrated among more highly educated individuals. Rather, the findings highlight that coercive control can affect individuals across different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The study also captures a transitional policy landscape, as the legislative amendments recognising emotional and psychological abuse and controlling behaviours under the Women's Charter were introduced shortly before the report's publication.

As such, the findings largely predate the implementation of measures intended to strengthen the response to coercive control across professional settings, including the courts, counselling services and healthcare institutions.

The experiences documented in this report should therefore not be taken as a reflection of the current state of practice, which is continuing to evolve in response to new legislative and policy developments.



The findings should therefore be understood as providing in-depth insight into how coercive control is experienced and recognised, rather than estimates of its prevalence or the overall effectiveness of existing responses.

Designer’s Note



I'm Dada, a Singaporean Chinese-Thai visual artist with a background in Fashion, Business, & Marketing. I've been painting murals for the past 13 years & my practice has since grown to span textile-based work, illustration, branding, & public art. I enjoy exploring different mediums & approaches to storytelling, often drawing inspiration from nature, wildlife, femininity, & the complexities of human experiences.

Beyond my own practice, I also co-run In The Boonies, a shared creative studio & space where we support emerging artists through opportunities to create, collaborate, experiment, & connect with the wider creative community.

This report shares some emotionally complex & difficult experiences, I imagine it must've been a heavy read. Just as the researchers checked in on me throughout this project, consider this note my little check-in on you. I hope you're okay.

Working closely with the Advocacy & Research team, who encouraged me to explore ways of communicating these experiences without depicting violence literally, I began exploring how water could convey the subtleties of abuse.

Water became the central visual language of the illustrations.

It can be comforting, familiar, & beautiful, yet also unpredictable, suffocating, & dangerous. Its shifting nature felt particularly relevant to coercive control, where seemingly ordinary acts of affection, care or concern can gradually become mechanisms of manipulation, isolation, & entrapment.

What began as an exploration of water forms gradually developed into an underwater world inhabited by real marine creatures, placed in environments that symbolise different experiences of coercive control. For instance, the anglerfish's lure suggests the deceptive promise of light & warmth, while fish caught in nets or confined within tanks reflect surveillance, isolation, & the loss of autonomy.

I also want to mention some of my favourite illustrations here, including our ancient velvet worm, who first appears on page 35 & the pink manta ray. I wanted to introduce storylines that gradually reveal themselves throughout the pages, allowing readers to explore their own emotions as the report unfolds.

Much like the octopus that makes several appearances before the velvet worm, their recurring presence serves as both a visual narrative & to reinforce within the illustrations the existence of such situations existing in seemingly beautiful & harmless environments.

Rather than defining survivors by their experiences, these illustrations were designed to acknowledge the complexity of their experiences, including the difficult decisions, resistance, & courage that may not always be visible to others, especially without the context or understanding of what they’ve had to endure.

Throughout the report, changes in colour, marine life, & their environments reflect different situations & emotional conditions. I wanted readers to experience these shifts in atmosphere, much like how coercive control can develop gradually, how difficult it can be to recognise from within, & why leaving is rarely as straightforward as it may seem.

My hope is that these illustrations offer moments of reflection alongside the research & survivor experiences shown in this report. And that they encourage us to look beyond what is immediately visible, question our assumptions about abuse, & approach those experiencing it with greater understanding & compassion.

Above all, what mattered most to me was honouring the bravery & honesty of the survivors as well as the dedication of the researchers who put so much time, care, & effort into making this report possible.

Thank you for taking the time to read, & to see.





Dada

www.barelydada.com | @barelydada