‘It’s just men taking an interest’: Obscuring understanding and recognition of coercive control[1]

Angela Wilcock, University of Sunderland

angela.wilcock@sunderland.ac.uk | https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7904-8362

Abstract

This article, grounded in feminist empirical research, explores women’s perceptions of domestic violence and their routes to help-seeking, irrespective of personal experiences with domestic violence and abuse. It highlights how societal norms reinforce women’s subjugation through seemingly harmless ideas like "men just taking an interest" or a "woman’s desire to please." In line with Kirkwood’s (1993) concept of the "distortion of a woman’s subjective reality," the study reveals how women often unknowingly adapt their lives through unrecognised elements of coercive control. Deeply ingrained gendered norms perpetuate this control by subtly manipulating women's daily routines, obscuring abusive behaviour in intimate heterosexual relationships. The article argues that this manipulation starts early, making coercive control harder to recognise and resist. Ultimately, the study concludes that despite feminist efforts, societal norms continue to reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting women’s autonomy and sustaining patriarchal dominance. Concluding that unless there is a shift in these norms, women's independence in such relationships will remain constrained.

Key Words: *Domestic Violence, Coercive Control, Manipulation, Gender Norms, Gender Roles, Heteronormativity*

Wilcock, A. (2025). ‘It’s just men taking an interest’: Obscuring understanding and recognition of coercive control. *Deconstructing Criminology 1*(2), 76-101. DOI.

‘It’s just men taking an interest’: Obscuring understanding and recognition of coercive control

Academic literature increasingly highlights the global recognition of coercive control that includes oppressive behaviours in intimate relationships that disproportionately impact women (Donovan and Hester, 2015; Stark, 2007; McGorrery and McMahon, 2019; Barlow & Walklate, 2022). Coercive control, as detailed by Stark (2007), involves the micromanagement of a partner's everyday life, aiming to restrict their autonomy. This behaviour was criminalised in England and Wales under section 76 of the *Serious Crime Act* 2015 and is recognised within the statutory framework of the *Domestic Abuse Act* 2021. Unlike physical violence, which is more readily observable and measurable, coercive control is often subtle and deeply embedded in societal understandings, particularly the "public story" of domestic violence (Donovan & Hester, 2015). This "public story" tends to focus on physical abuse in heterosexual relationships, overlooking other forms of abuse, such as emotional, financial and psychological coercion. For example, a physical assault, such as a strike or a punch, can cause visible damage to the skin, making it readily identifiable and classifiable as a violent act. In contrast, behaviours that do not produce visible injuries or verbal expressions that lack explicit threats of physical harm are often more difficult to discern and categorise, thereby complicating recognition. Considering this, impetus must remain on the dynamics of coercive control to challenge reinforced barriers that serve to undermine recognition.

Kirkwood (1993) laid an early foundation in the understanding of emotional abuse, contributing to the concept of coercive control. Stark (2007) expanded this by framing coercive control as a "liberty crime," a method through which men maintain dominance over women by restricting their freedom. Kirkwood's identification of coercive tactics, such as degradation and objectification, provided a lens to understand how women are manipulated

and controlled in these dynamics. The excerpt also references the debate surrounding coercive control, with Barlow and Walklate (2022) noting some contestation around the term. The term 'coercive control' has traditionally been associated with gendered asymmetry, portraying men as perpetrators and women as victims. This asymmetry reflects broader societal inequalities reinforced by norms that uphold gender roles within patriarchal systems (Myhill, 2015; Próspero, 2008). However, recent scholarship advocates for a more nuanced perspective, acknowledging that women can also be perpetrators of coercive control (see Hilton et al. 2023). Although the broader consensus remains focused on the asymmetrical gender power dynamics in heterosexual relationships (Downes et al., 2019).

This study broadens the scope of inquiry by including the perspectives of all women, not just survivors of domestic violence, to gain deeper insights into the recognition and understanding of domestic violence and help-seeking behaviours. A significant portion of domestic violence remains hidden (Mooney, 2000), particularly about coercive control, due to its complexity and the persistence of gender norms that normalise and minimise such behaviours (Johnson, 1995; Pitman, 2017; Stark, 2007). The article continues the academic debate by examining how heteronormative ideologies contribute to the perpetuation of coercive control from the onset of intimate relationships.

This article begins by engaging with the academic literature to define and conceptualise coercive control, exploring the complex role of love and 'sex to keep the peace'. The subsequent sections present the theoretical framework of feminist standpoint theory and outline the methodological approach, including the research strategy and ethical considerations. The findings are organised around key themes: men taking an interest, aiming to please, and shifts in subjectivity. The discussion and conclusion emphasise the ongoing need to examine the dynamics of coercive control, highlight its harmful effects on women, and challenge societal barriers that hinder its recognition.

Defining Coercive Control in the UK

In 2015, the UK government criminalised coercive control under section 76 of the *Serious Crime Act* for those in intimate or family relationships. *The Domestic Abuse Act* 2021 further strengthened this by incorporating a statutory definition of domestic violence that includes controlling and coercive behaviour. This acknowledges coercive control as a core element of domestic violence, characterised by repeated patterns of power and control, such as isolation, threats, humiliation, and intimidation (Crown Prosecution Service, 2023). While this legislation is seen as positive, its effectiveness remains debated (Barlow & Walklate, 2022).

Specifically, the definition states that the perpetrator's use of coercion and control to dominate another through subordination leads to total dependence over time. The intricacies of power dynamics have been extensively explored in the literature (see Johnson, 1995; Kirkwood, 1993; Stark, 2007). As Barlow and Walklate (2022) highlight, coercive control often involves psychological, emotional, and financial abuse rather than physical violence. Subtle acts, like asking a woman to wear certain clothing (Wilcox, 2006), can seem benign but gradually increases emotional investment, embedding control over time. Stark (2007, 2012) notes that once control is established, it often escalates into more overt forms of abuse, such as verbal assaults, humiliation, and degradation. According to Wilcox (2006), this process often begins at a low level, and once such control is accepted and tolerated, it paves the way for its intensification.

Framing Coercive Control

Raising awareness about coercive control faces challenges, particularly due to entrenched gender roles in heterosexual relationships, which position men as providers and women as homemakers responsible for emotional labour (Barlow & Walklate, 2022; Hague & Malos, 2005). Arguably, this normality is an outdated mode of thought, but it is still very

much active in contemporary heterosexual relationships. This facilitates coercive control, including financial abuse, where men control by allocating household finances, reinforcing women's dependency (Stark, 2007; Wilcock, 2015; Wilcox, 2006). Subtle control tactics, such as labelling women as "spendthrifts," justify financial dominance, bringing reasoning and acceptance to monetary control, which then is unchallenged (Wilcock, 2021).

Stark (2007) describes coercive control as rooted in the "microdynamics of everyday life," involving objectification, sexual domination, and emotional overburden. This suggests masculine governance is actively tolerated in heteronormative relationships suggesting a power imbalance in most relationships. This active toleration is influenced by asymmetrical, socially accepted gender norms that perpetuate the microdynamics of gender roles and are further reinforced by the unequal positioning of women in both the public and private spheres. For example, heteronormative relationships often position men as the head of the household - the dominant figure responsible for setting rules and making familial decisions. Such dynamics are upheld through the gendered socialisation of boys and girls, which is reproduced across generations. Consequently, the process facilitates the enactment and normalisation of behaviours that underpin coercive control. Hence, the complexity of demarcating between 'normal' and what becomes controlling and at what point that happens (see Barlow & Walklate, 2022). Women often internalise these behaviours as normal, leading to a distorted sense of reality (Kirkwood, 1993). Coercive or altruistic sex (Bart, 1986, in Kelly (1988), where women prioritise their partner's desires, is a tool for maintaining male privilege. Barlow & Walklate (2022) highlight the ongoing debate on how to conceptualise coercive control and whether physical violence is necessary. Coercive control is complex and can exist without physical violence. Emphasising physical violence as a defining feature serves to obscure a deeper understanding beyond the 'public story' (Donovan & Hester, 2014). Hence, requiring a focus on the manipulative and coercive behaviours that seek to

restrict autonomy, foster compliance and emotional investment thus normalising the micromanagement and subordination of women over time (Stark, 2012). This behaviour, unchallenged, strengthens the emotional investment women bring to heterosexual intimate relationships.

Intricacy of Love

Recent academic discourse has focused on love as a barrier to recognising and naming aspects of domestic violence (Donovan & Hester, 2010; Fraser, 2003; 2008; Wilcock, 2021). Love, or feelings depicted as love, can lead individuals to tolerate coercive control to preserve the relationship (Fraser, 2003; Lloyd, 2000). Donovan and Hester (2010), amongst others, have found that love for an abusive partner often prevents individuals from seeking help, complicating the recognition of abuse. Consequently, love, deeply subjective and emotionally invested, is experienced differently based on the intensity of emotional involvement within a relationship (Fraser, 2003).

Eisikovits and Buchinder (2000) suggest that emotions shape our understanding of the world and self, progressing through stages of self-awareness, emotional definition, and self-conception based on emotional experiences. Love, therefore, becomes a tool through which abusers can distort a woman's sense of self over time. The deep emotional investment women often make in relationships (Jones & Schechter, 1992) allows abusive partners to manipulate this attachment under the guise of love.

The subtleties of intimate relationships generate deep feelings (Wilcox, 2006) that produce emotional investment by women (Jones & Schechter, 1992). Fraser (2003) points out that through popular culture, we are open to various homilies of love, displaying images of the happy-ever-after that present an opportunity for the abuse of women by men they love. Lloyd (2000) asserts that women in love expect feelings of security, safety, and the happy ever after, but this may bring insecurity from the man she loves and invests in. Love, as a tool for an

abuser, can be effective through statements like "I love you so much, I can't bear to see you with another man" (Marshall, 1996, p. 152), which conceal coercive control, encouraging further emotional investment. Donovan & Hester (2010) argue that love, when used as a tool, should be recognised as part of the continuum of emotional abuse, as it often masks and intensifies coercive control, leading to complete dependence on the abuser.

Sex to Keep the Peace

The connection between sexual and domestic violence, once overlooked in legislation, has now been increasingly recognised as a fundamental aspect of domestic abuse, including the use of coercive sexual tactics (Barlow and Walklate, 2022; Wiener, 2022). The blurring of consensual and coercive sex (Weiss, 2009) allows men to embed coerced sexual behaviour early in relationships through notions of "love" and "duty" (Lloyd, 2000; Weiss, 2009; 2011). Weiss (2009) highlights how women's acceptance of sexual violence is normalised through these roles, prioritising male sexual gratification irrespective of the woman's feelings. The recent notion of 'maintenance sex' demonstrates the pervasiveness of perspectives that continue to construct female sexual desire as secondary. The concept of "maintenance sex," where women are encouraged, often through social media, to engage in sex to maintain their relationship, regardless of desire (Petter, 2021). This reinforces gendered norms of female compliance and subordination of women in heterosexual relationships through the impetus, 'if you want to keep your man happy, then he must be maintained appropriately.'

Altruistic sex, as described by Bart, (1986), refers to instances where women engage in sexual activity with their partners/husbands out of guilt or a sense of duty. This practice remains prevalent and is often minimised through the concept of 'sex to keep the peace', which reflects the normalisation of sex as a means of maintaining harmony in a relationship rather than the woman making an autonomous choice (Wilcock, 2015; 2021). Over time, this may evolve into coerced or "pressurised" sex (Kelly, 1988), where women's objections are

ignored. Such behaviours, accepted as part of biological urges (Weiss, 2009), distort women's perceptions of acceptable behaviour, making sexual coercion appear normal. It is contended that this normalisation colludes to silence nonconsensual sex in marriage (MacKinnon 2004; Weiss 2009; 2011). As Mackinnon clearly states, it is difficult to recognise a 'sex crime when it just looks like sex' (2004, p. 172).

Wilcock (2015; 2021) found that sexual coercion within intimate relationships often goes unrecognised, largely due to prevailing notions of natural biological urges. This understanding hinders the challenge to unwanted sexual attention, allowing such behaviours to persist. Consequently, this ideology enables the normalisation of sexual coercion, positioning it as an accepted aspect of the marital role (Weiss, 2009; Wilcock, 2015). As women internalise this belief, they may feel powerless to resist or address such coercion, ultimately altering their sense of self and subjectivity (Mitchell and Raghavan, 2019).

Weiss (2009) discovered that undesirable sexual attention is accepted in relationships because coercion becomes a 'normal' part of the routine for women to keep their relationship on track. This reflects what women narrated as 'just what happens in relationships' (Wilcock, 2021:121), emphasising the microdynamics of everyday life (Stark, 2007). MacKinnon (2004) long since pointed out that this entrenches women as objects of male sexual pleasure, further reinforced by societal narratives that validate male entitlement and sexual manipulation in both private and public spheres. This routine is now being reaffirmed through the introduction of 'maintenance sex' in contemporary society, promoting and normalising male entitlement.

Theoretical Framework

Standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1987; 1991; 2004; Hughes, 2002; Intemann, 2010) provided the theoretical framework for this study. Emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, standpoint epistemology developed two main strands: philosophical (Hartsock, 1983) and sociological (Smith, 1987). Hartsock's feminist standpoint posits that women's lived

experiences provide privileged insight into a male-dominated world, justifying knowledge production from a feminist perspective. In contrast, Smith emphasises women's standpoints without labelling them as inherently feminist, focusing on how women's perceptions and experiences generate knowledge (Hughes, 2002). Smith's approach, placing each woman's lived experience is at the core of the research process, recognising that no two women will have the same standpoint but by drawing together the individual realities we can recognise and organise concepts and theories (Smith, 1997). Intersubjectively, the researcher becomes integral to the theorising process and must 'acknowledge, embrace and appropriately manage these concepts in our methodological accounts' (Wilcock, 2024, p. 1).

Kirkwood's (1993) typology of the "distortion of a woman's subjective reality" also served as a framework to examine coercive control. This concept helps explain how women may unintentionally comply with coercive control through altruistic actions and gendered norms, gradually altering their perception of reality. Over time, coercive control reshapes a woman's understanding of her lived experience, making it difficult to recognise or challenge her subordination, thus aligning her worldview with the abuser's.

Methodology

Research Strategy

The data presented in this article is derived from a study on domestic violence and help-seeking behaviours conducted in a city in Northeast England, focusing on women regardless of their experience of domestic abuse (Wilcock, 2015). A mixed-methods approach was employed to allow for a wider participant pool (Reinharz, 1992). Although the study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, this article draws on the qualitative phase.

The researcher was intersubjectively positioned within the fieldwork thus, reflexivity was key to the process throughout (Wilcock, 2015; 2024). Feminist standpoint embraces

reflexivity to enable the researcher to critically reflect on their own standpoint prior to any positionality in the field (Harding, 2004). This enables researchers to examine and understand their own social background and how any assumptions might interfere in the research process prior to any interaction with participants.

The fieldwork involved 20 semi-structured interviews with women, all of which were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by field notes in a research journal (Wilcock, 2015). Participants were recruited through an online survey designed to collect background data. The only criterion for participation was that women were 18 and above. While 50 women expressed interest in the study, 20 were selected to ensure diversity in terms of age, social class, education, marital status, employment, income, and ethnicity allowing for an exploration of potential differences in knowledge through social stratification. The sample included women aged 18 to 60 +, with 9 having studied at higher education levels and only 2 having no qualifications. Half the participants earned £30,000 or more annually, and 12 owned their own homes. The recruitment and interviews were conducted over six months.

The interview schedule was structured around themes identified during the analysis of the quantitative data. The questions focused on several key areas: demographics and background history, participants' understandings of what constitutes domestic violence and abuse, whom they would approach for help if experiencing domestic violence, and at what point would they seek assistance, if at all (see Wilcock, 2015). Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, interviews were conducted in private, confidential settings, with some women choosing to be interviewed at home for safety, while others opted for their workplace or a neutral location (Thompson, 1988). It quickly became evident that the women in the sample who chose to be interviewed at home had some prior experience of domestic violence and abuse.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted under the auspices of a university, with ethical approval granted by the institution's ethics committee. Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the research aims and procedures, and all signed a consent form prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, with each participant being assigned a pseudonym of their choosing. This approach not only aids anonymity but also allows participants to identify themselves in any published data.

In recent years, ethical considerations surrounding sensitive topics such as domestic violence have gained greater attention, particularly the risk of disclosure during research (Wilcock, 2024). As Sin (2005, p. 281) highlights, researchers must account for ethical issues "before, during, and after the study." To address these concerns, all participants were provided with a list of support agencies following their interviews, ensuring access to necessary resources if needed.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used as it essentially allows the ‘data to speak’ (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2009, p. 159). It allows “the researcher to keep the language of the respondent as far as possible” (Bryman, 2008, p. 554). Initially, the focus was on familiarisation of the dataset, listing comments and ideas and identifying links to form part of the initial coding process; the next stage generated initial codes; then from those potential themes were drawn by collating similar codes; finally, or what Silverman (2011) refers to as the process of data reduction, looking for codes that do not fit. To note, repetition was not rejected at this point as new dominant sub themes can emerge, in fact, Silverman (2011, p. 285) contends that in the latter stages it ‘could be a sign that you have hit gold’. Finally, a thematic map was drawn upon to connect potential themes (Silverman, 2011), and this enabled reflection and refining of the themes.

The themes that emerged and are outlined in this paper include ‘men taking an interest’, which highlights how abusive men’s behaviour can be misinterpreted as caring; ‘aiming to please’, which addresses women’s altruistic acts aimed at maintaining the relationship through a willingness to please; and ‘changes to subjectivity’, which explores how women transform into the individuals that their partner/husband wants them to be, often at the expense of their own needs and desires. NVivo was used to manage, organise and store the data (Bazeley, 2007). However, the analysis also involved a manual approach, as it was crucial for me to remain closely connected with the narrative and the situated emotion that emerged in the field. As participants reflected on lived experiences, situated emotion emerged, which then became an integral part of knowledge production and the story being told (Wilcock, 2024).

Findings

Men taking An Interest!

One key aspect identified was the expectation of patriarchal leadership in developing intimate heterosexual relationships. This expectation focused attention on the nature of this role, raising concerns among the young women in the sample. For instance, Jodi explained;

> *So when you are with someone and they are really caring, wanting to be with you all the time then it is a good thing, because they are being protective, they don’t want anyone else to take them from you*.

Their partners’ close monitoring, via a mobile phone, an app such as Facebook, and/or physically, from the onset of the relationship, was perceived as merely protective. Such behaviours were often justified by partners expressing fears regarding “issues with trust” and concerns about “losing them.” This fear extended to concerns about the behaviour of other men towards women, consequently limiting their autonomy without challenge.

The young women also articulated that their partners' desire for them to dress in a specific way was viewed as a sign of protection, contributing to feelings of safety. This perspective linked back to the themes of trust and fear of other men, which inhibited any challenge to such controlling behaviour. More mature women in the sample discussed the expectation of male approval regarding their appearance:

> *You hear of men going out shopping for their wives; they may say, 'put that on,' or I have heard them say, 'you are not putting that on; it is too short,' but that is more of a control freak. I don't think it would be classified as domestic violence, no.*

Linda expressed that she had never experienced domestic violence, adding:

> *I think it is just different individuals' outlook on life, really; it is just taken for granted. If they go out shopping, she probably stands back and lets him pick the clothes, as it has probably happened over the years. You are just used to it, and it becomes part of your routine.*

Linda initially spoke in third person but then positioned herself within the dialogue by reflecting on her husband as the "breadwinner, the head of the household, and what he says goes." It became evident that the approval of women regarding their appearance often began passively early in relationships, establishing a pathway to a routine lifestyle. Many women reported having changed their appearance to appease their partners, as Christine explained:

> *I think the dressing issue is well; women do ask their partners, 'how do I look?' Because we always want to please him. Men often say, 'you look awful in that' or 'you look nice in that,' and women generally want to dress up to please men.*

The discourse surrounding the desire to please men was more pronounced when men took an active interest in the women's appearance, as noted by both Linda and the younger members of the sample. This early manipulation facilitated the subtle emergence of coercive control, occurring without question or challenge.

Evidence of financial control was also noted, with most women relating to being given "housekeeping" and their husbands maintaining income for "pocket money" for personal spending. Although many women had their own income, it was typically used to support the family without question. Leanne recounted the situation of someone she knew:

> *It was all about not knowing what money was available to spend. He only had access to the online banking, and he would give her money for shopping, but she didn't know what they had in the bank. If she wanted anything, she had to call and ask.*

Such financial control often went unrecognised by the victim until after the relationship had ended. This realisation highlighted how subtly financial control was implemented, leading to an acceptance of monitoring. The younger women in the sample also acknowledged uneven financial distributions, accepting it as "just the way it is, they earn the most, so they spend it as they want" [Chelsea]. This situation was perceived as routine, shaped by their upbringing and, therefore, unchallenged.

All participants highlighted the prevailing expectation that men take a leading role in the physical progression of intimate relationships. The findings illustrate how this dominant leadership role was primarily framed as 'just men taking an interest', a characterisation that participants found reassuring due to the common belief that men are generally less emotionally engaged in relationships. However, participants with experiences of coercive control, despite now recognising such behaviour, described the difficulties in discerning coercive intent beyond the initial emotional façade of intense interest.

Aiming to Please

The findings highlighted a strong sense of altruism, as illustrated by Jessica, who has experienced domestic violence:

> *It comes back to that role again; it is the role of the woman. I think even when I was married, you do—you just think, well, get it over and done with (sex), shut them up, and then there will be no arguments, and the day will be a bit more peaceful.*

A prominent theme that emerged is the desire "to please," which signifies a vulnerability among women. This willingness to maintain peace aligns with the contemporary concept of "maintenance sex," wherein women prioritise the sexual needs of their partners over their own. The women shared various instances of engaging in sex to preserve harmony in the relationship:

> *The sex to keep the peace thing is a kind of common joke. It's like 'I did it to keep him quiet,' and as women, we laugh about it. So, when persistent pressure is put on and the answer of no is not accepted, that's when it becomes a problem [Jessica].*

This notion of sex to maintain peace is further reinforced by women using humorous phrases such as "lie back and think of England" or "pull my nightie down when you are finished". (Wilcock, 2021, p. 121) Such expressions of jest contribute to the normalisation of coercive sex. Pauline elaborated on this sentiment, stating:

> *I think a lot of men think if you are married, the wife can't say no; it's just their right to have sex whenever they want.*

This perspective raises critical questions regarding male entitlement, which encourages altruistic sex among women. Furthermore, the discourse surrounding the idea of "aiming to please" or that a man is "taking an interest" was perceived as a positive development, particularly among women who reported no experiences of domestic violence.

This tolerance, often perceived as a positive action, was recognised as an inherent aspect of the relationship dynamics and the emotional investment women make in their relationships. Participants noted that women are primarily responsible for maintaining emotional harmony within the family unit, viewing this responsibility as an integral

component of being in a relationship. Altruistic behaviour, driven by a desire to please, functions to preserve this emotional imbalance within the household, thereby normalising traditional gender roles and ultimately reinforcing coercive behaviours.

Challenges to subjectivity

The findings revealed that women often altered their appearance to please their partners, driven by pressures related to their partners' desires and expectations. This led to difficulties in distinguishing between controlling behaviour and typical relationship dynamics. As Jennifer articulated:

> *I don't think they recognise it as control, and I don't think people see it as a crime. I think people see it as a relationship problem. It is just how it is.*

Additionally, feelings of jealousy and the fear of infidelity prompted some women to sympathise with their partners, which subsequently limited their independence, often resulting in a reluctance to go out with friends. For example, Sarah stated;

> *Well, it's not worth it really, if you do (go out) you get accused of having affairs. I mean men's minds I don't know how they work sometimes as they read more into it than is actually the case. I suppose they get worried they are going to lose you.*

This behaviour was justified as "keeping the peace" and deemed "not worth the hassle afterwards." The younger women in the sample noted that conforming to a partner's wishes was seen as a demonstration of devotion. Subsequently, this appeared to encourage conformity and emotional investment as Theresa narrated, '*it can be comforting to be in that sort of protective environment sometimes you know, it is peace of mind for them in some way.* However, there was no mention of such devotion being reciprocated by their partners or husbands.

The discourse primarily centred on the necessity of pleasing a male partner and reassuring him of their love by conforming to his desires, which arguably shifted their

subjective reality. For some women, this behaviour was framed as caring and comforting, reciprocating the interest that men invested in them. However, these dynamics posed risks of intensification, as Rose pointed out:

> *I guess the woman would know whether the man would be happy with the way she dresses. Maybe it would only take a couple of instances for the woman to adopt a victim role. They may automatically dress in a way that their partner desires without recognising it as a form of control; it is quite a tricky situation, beyond what is a man taking an interest.*

This statement reflects the sheer complexity of coercive control and power dynamics within relationships, which can create barriers that pursue subordination and potential intensification. Abhijita further explained:

> *It starts off very, very mild and escalates to comments like, 'I don't think you look good in that' or 'you look too fat in that.' Eventually, you reach a point where, if it makes him happy, you go along with it.*

Women with experiences of domestic violence illustrated how the desire to make their partners happy fundamentally changed their identities, altering their subjective realities. Abhijita emotionally expressed: "*You eventually believe you are that person, who you were does not matter anymore*." The data foregrounds a pattern of conformity among women, which emerges through careful emotional manipulation early in relationships. This dynamic is reaffirmed through gendered societal understandings of women's positions within heterosexual intimate relationships.

Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that relationship routines and a willingness to please often lead to an unintentional reinforcement of gendered norms within heterosexual intimate relationships. For the women in the sample who reported no personal experience of

domestic violence, elements of coercive control were evident. The data suggests that young women aged 20 to 24 are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence and abuse (ONS, 2023), underscoring the relevance of these findings. The discourse among the young women in the sample aligns with the traditional notion of the head of the household as the protective father figure. Indeed, a study on young women found that "girls often have difficulty demarcating control and lack of trust from protectiveness and care" (Girlguiding, 2013, p. 7). This confusion allows an abuser to reinforce a male-centric worldview, fostering an acceptance of male entitlement at the onset of heterosexual relationships. This dynamic creates opportunities for a perpetrator to establish compliance early in a relationship by demonstrating an invested interest in a woman who, in turn, seeks to reassure him through emotional investment. This pattern aligns with what Wilcox (2007) identifies as low-level abuse, which can lead women to lose their sense of subjectivity as they alter themselves to make their partners happy.

The findings reaffirm the societal acceptance of unequal gender norms that facilitate the perpetuation of coercive control. They raise concerns about how the pathways into heterosexual relationships can foster passive manipulation, becoming familiar and developing into a routine of coercive control without question or challenge. The acceptance of "men just taking an interest," which leads to women altering their appearance and "aiming to please" to maintain relationship harmony, results in an internalisation of the right to consent. This internalisation further obscures what constitutes a violation, as women may inadvertently normalise sexual abuse through humour. Additionally, there is a new collusion that reaffirms male entitlement through the promotion of maintenance sex, which requires women to prioritise men's needs over their own.

Furthermore, the findings accentuate the challenges in defining and recognising coercive control, particularly in the early stages of a patriarchal-led relationship. Coercive

control is situated within deep-rooted heteronormative structures that society continually perpetuates, hindering recognition until it escalates, in line with Donovan and Hester's (2014) concept of the "public story." This has been a long-standing concern in the field, and the ongoing debate reflects our struggle to dismantle these barriers. Coercive control serves to strip women of their autonomy, distorting their subjective reality, and is enabled by male privilege and power. The structural inequalities in gender norms and conceptions of love cement relationship roles from the outset, making them difficult to dismantle, particularly given the emotional investment women are expected to maintain (Fraser, 2003).

Such behaviours are often framed within the context of a man wanting "his" woman to look a certain way, which features a sense of ownership and objectification, misleadingly categorised as a man simply taking an interest. Jones and Schechter (1992) highlighted that this abuse encompasses elements of financial and material control, gradually devaluing a woman's role within the relationship, a theme evident in this study. The societal expectation for women to please men obscures the distinction between positive and negative investments in their relationships. This silent alteration of a woman's subjective reality allows coercive control to intensify without the presence of physical force, which is typically associated with coercive control (Barlow & Walklate, 2022).

What requires attention is the passive manipulation that occurs at the onset of a relationship, which aims to strengthen women's emotional investment, thereby laying a foundation for coercive control to flourish. Women in this study who acknowledged experiences of domestic violence recognised how the gradual intensification of coercive control was facilitated early in their relationships. Their loss of autonomy remained concealed, as the man's needs were prioritised, and altruistic acts of care by women led to tolerance of further subtle manipulations. This caused the women to lose familiarity with their known subjective reality as it became subsumed by their partners' needs. This adds

complexity to the understanding of coercive control, particularly in the initial setting of boundaries, often justified under the guise of "men being protective" or "partners wanting to please." Such justifications enable subtle manipulations that cross boundaries without challenge, thereby reinforcing an emotional base of power (Fraser, 2003) and exonerating coercive control through women's willingness to keep the relationship intact.

While the statutory definition acknowledges coercive control as a pattern of behaviours (*Domestic Abuse Act,* 2021), deeper societal structures impede recognition and challenge. Unless these pathways are publicly addressed and a societal shift occurs, coercive control will continue to remain hidden and active. Despite the presumption of progress toward a more equitable society, this remains largely rhetorical. Gendered norms active within heterosexual relationships provide opportunities for abusive men to undermine women's subjective reality, hindering recognition of coercive control. Therefore, ongoing research is essential to examine regurgitated understandings of coercive control across the general population, regardless of gender, to continue challenging the barriers that reinforce women's subordination.

Concluding Thoughts

The findings of this study reinforce the need for continued emphasis on recognising and addressing coercive control in intimate heterosexual relationships. Despite legislative advancements, societal narratives continue to obscure coercive control by normalising its presence within traditional gender roles. The themes of "men taking an interest," "aiming to please," and "changes to subjectivity" illustrate how coercive control operates subtly from the onset of a relationship, reinforcing women's emotional investment while simultaneously seeking to restrict their autonomy.

By examining coercive control through a feminist standpoint and incorporating the lived experiences of women, this study highlights the need to challenge ingrained

asymmetrical societal norms that enable its persistence. Recognising coercion beyond physical violence to overcome the 'public story' is essential for advancing public understanding, shaping policy responses, and enhancing support mechanisms for those affected. Future research should continue to explore how coercive control manifests at the onset of relationships, how it serves to render women subservient, and how interventions can better address its complexities. Only by challenging the deeply engrained societal and gender norms that enable coercive control, can progress be made in combatting domestic abuse in all its forms.

References

Barlow, C. & Walklate, S. (2022). *Coercive control*. Routledge.

Bazeley, P. (2007). *Qualitative data analysis with NVivo.* Sage.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bryman. A. (2008). *Social research methods 3rd edition*. Oxford University Press.

Crown Prosecution Service. (2023, April 24). *Controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship.* https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/controlling-or-coercive-behaviour-intimate-or-family-relationship

Domestic Abuse Act. UK Public General Acts, 2021 c. 17. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/17/contents/enacted.

Donovan, C & Hester, M. (2010). 'I hate the word "victim"': An exploration of recognition of domestic violence in same sex relationships. *Social Policy & Society, 9*(2) 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746409990406

Donovan, C. and Hester, M. (2014) *Domestic violence and sexuality: what's love got to do with it?* Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447307457

Downes J., Kelly, L., & Westmarland, N. (2019). "It's a work in progress": Men's accounts of gender and change in their use of coercive control. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence 3*(3), 267–282. https://doi.org/10.1332/239868019X15627570242850

Eisikovits, Z., & Buchbinder, E. (2000). *Locked in a violent embrace: Understanding and intervening in domestic violence*. Sage Publications.

Fraser, H. (2003). Narrating love and abuse in intimate relationships. *British Journal of Social Work, 33*(3), 273-290. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/33.3.273

Fraser, H. (2008). *In the name of love: Women's narratives of love and abuse.* Canadian Scholars Press Inc.

Hague. G., & Malos. E. (2005). *Domestic violence action for change 3rd edition.* New Clarion Press.

Harding, S. (1987). *Feminism & methodology.* Open University Press.

Harding, S. (1991). *Whose science? Whose knowledge*? *Thinking from women's lives.* Open University Press.

Harding, S. (2004). *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual & political controversies*. Routledge.

Hartsock, N. (1983). The feminist standpoint: Developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism. In S. Harding & M. Hinitkka, (Eds.). *Discovering reality* (pp. 283-310). Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Hilton, N. Z., Eke, A. W., Kim, S., & Ham, E. (2023). Coercive control in police reports of intimate partner violence: conceptual definition and association with recidivism. *Psychology of Violence, 13*(4), 277-285. https://doi.org/10.1037/vio0000457

Hughes, C. (2002). *Key concepts in feminist theory and research.* Sage Publications.

Intemann, K. (2010). 25 Years of feminist empiricism and standpoint theory: Where are we now? *Hypatia, 25*(4), 778-796. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01138.x.

Johnson, M.P. (1995). Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: Two forms of violence against women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 57*(2), 283-294. https://doi.org/10.2307/353683

Johnson, M. P. (2008). *A typology of domestic violence: Intimate terrorism, violence resistance, and situational couple violence.* University Press of New England.

Jones, A., & Schechter, S. (1992). *When love goes wrong.* Harper Collins.

Kelly, L (1988). *Surviving sexual violence.* Polity Press.

Kelly. L., & Lovett, J. (2005). *What a waste: The case for an integrated violence against women strategy.* Women's national commission and London Metropolitan University.

https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/what-a-waste-2004.pdf

Kirkwood, C. (1993). *Leaving abusive partners.* Sage Publications.

Lloyd, A. S. (2000). Intimate violence: Paradoxes, romance, conflict and control. *National Forum, 80,* 19-22.

Lloyd, A. S. & Emery, B. (2000). *The Darkside of courtship: Physical and sexual aggression.* Sage Publications.

MacKinnon, K. (2004). Feminism, Marxism and the state: Towards feminist jurisprudence. In S. Harding, (Ed.). *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual & political controversies* (pp. 180-200). Routledge.

Marshall, W.L., & Hambley, L.S. (1996). Intimacy and loneliness and their relationship to rape myth acceptance and hostility toward women among rapists. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 11*(4), 586-592. https://doi.org/10.1177/088626096011004009

McGorrery, P., and McMahon, M. (2019) Prosecuting controlling or coercive behaviour in England and Wales: Media reports of a novel offence. *Criminology and Criminal Justice 21*(4): 566–584. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895819880947

Mitchell, J. E., & Raghavan, C. (2019). The Impact of Coercive Control on Use of Specific Sexual Coercion Tactics. *Violence Against Women*, *27*(2), 187-206. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219884127

Mooney, J. (2000) *Gender violence and the social order.* Palgrave.

Myhill, A. (2015). Measuring coercive control. *Violence Against Women, 21*(3), 355-375. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801214568032

Petter, O. (2021, August 9). What is 'maintenance sex' and why do people think it's sexist? *Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/maintenance-sex-meaning-caprice-bourret-b1899391.html

Wilcock, A. (2025). 'It's just men taking an interest': Obscuring understanding and recognition of coercive control. *Deconstructing Criminology 1*(2), 76-101. DOI.

Pitman, T. (2017). Living with coercive control: trapped within a complex web of double standards, double blinds and boundary violations. *British Journal of Social Work, 47*(1). 143-161. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw002

Próspero, M. (2008). Sex-symmetric effects of coercive behaviors on mental health? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 24*(1), 128-146. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260508315778

Ramazanoglu, C., & Holland, J. (2002). *Feminist methodology.* Sage Publications.

Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research.* Oxford University Press.

Serious Crime Act, UK Public Generals Act 2015 c. 9 Part 5, Domestic abuse Section 76. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/9/section/76/enacted

Sin, C.H. (2005). Seeking informed consent: Reflections on research practice. *Sociology, 39*(2), 277-294. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038505050539

Silverman, D. (2011). *Qualitative research, 3rd edition.* SAGE Publications.

Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive control.* Oxford University Press.

Stark, E. (2009). Rethinking coercive control. *Violence Against Women, 15*(12), 1509-1525, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801209347452

Stark, E. (2012). Looking beyond domestic violence: Policing coercive control. *Journal of Police Crisis Negotiations, 12*(2), 199-217, https://doi.org/10.1080/15332586.2012.725016

Smith, D.E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist.* Open University Press.

Thompson, P. (1988). *The voice of the past: Oral history.* Oxford University Press.

Weiss, G.K. (2009). "Boys will be boys" and other gendered accounts: An exploration of victims' excuses and justifications for unwanted sexual contact and coercion. *Violence Against Women, 15*(7), 810-834, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801209333611

Weiss, G.K. (2011). Neutralizing sexual victimization: A typology of victims' non-reporting. *Theoretical Criminology*, *15*(4), 445-467, https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480610391527

Wiener, C. (2022). Coercive Control and the Criminal Law (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429201844

Wilcock, A. (2015) *An exploration of the knowledge women in Sunderland have of help-seeking in response to domestic violence.* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Sunderland]. Unpublished.

Wilcock, A. (2021). Exploring understandings of domestic violence with women in Sunderland: negotiating and positioning emotionality within sensitive research. In: Quaid, S., Hugman, C. and Wilcock, A., *Negotiating Families and Personal Lives in the 21st Century: Exploring Diversity, Social Change and Inequalities* (pp. 110-125). Routledge.

Wilcock, A. (2024) Shifting consciousness: Challenges to ontological assumptions in feminist research. *Emotions, Space and Society*, 50, 1-7, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2024.101004

Wilcox, P. (2006). Communities, care and domestic violence. *Critical Social Policy, 26*(4), 722-747, https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018306068471

Wilcox, P. (2006). *Surviving domestic violence: Gender, poverty and agency.* Palgrave MacMillan.