

The Multifaceted Landscape Of Domestic Violence: Control Dynamics, Trauma Responses, And Intervention Efficacy

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Domestic violence (DV), also known as intimate partner violence (IPV), is fundamentally a dynamic of control, extending far beyond discrete incidents of physical aggression. This paper synthesises contemporary sociological and criminological findings regarding the dynamics of abuse, including coercive control and economic exploitation, and examines their devastating mental, physical, and financial impacts on survivors. Drawing on evidence regarding the effects of major societal disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper highlights how environmental stressors can escalate the prevalence of reported DV incidents. Furthermore, this analysis critically reviews current intervention strategies for both perpetrators and victims, noting the equivocal empirical status of traditional batterer intervention programmes (BIPs) and the proven efficacy of trauma-informed approaches for survivor recovery. It concludes by emphasising the critical need for systemic, trauma-informed responses and policy revisions to address the complex, chronic nature of domestic abuse.

Key Words: Domestic violence, physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, or psychological harm, Economic Exploitation, Impacts and Consequences etc.

Introduction:

Domestic violence (DV), also commonly termed intimate partner violence (IPV), represents one of the most pervasive and devastating forms of interpersonal harm worldwide. Although frequently discussed in relation to physical assaults, contemporary scholarship emphasises that domestic violence is more accurately conceptualised as a multifaceted pattern of power and control that infiltrates every dimension of a survivor's life. The subtle, cumulative, and insidious nature of coercive behaviours—including emotional manipulation, surveillance, deprivation, and economic restriction—often inflicts deeper harm than physical injuries alone. Understanding IPV therefore requires an analysis that transcends episodic acts of violence and instead recognises the structural, relational, psychological, and socio-economic conditions that sustain abusive dynamics. This expanded discussion examines the conceptual frameworks of coercive control, the unique role of economic abuse, the risk factors and environmental contexts that make IPV more likely, the profound psychological and financial consequences for survivors, and the current evidence base regarding intervention strategies. Finally, it outlines policy implications and future research priorities that reflect IPV's systemic and enduring nature.

I. Domestic Violence and Control Dynamics

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines intimate partner violence as physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, or psychological harm inflicted by a former or current partner or spouse.¹ While accurate in its general description, the definition does not fully capture the deeper architecture of abuse. Many scholars argue that IPV is not fundamentally about isolated violent incidents but rather about domination—an intentional, patterned effort by one partner to subordinate the other and restrict their autonomy.² Contemporary feminist and sociological research, particularly that of Evan Stark, positions coercive control as the core of domestic abuse: a “liberty crime” aimed at stripping survivors of independence, dignity, and agency.³

A. Coercive Control and Non-Physical Abuse

Coercive control refers to a constellation of strategies designed to entrap the victim in a state of dependency and fear. These strategies often unfold gradually and subtly, making them harder to detect both internally (by the survivor) and externally (by institutions and legal systems). Coercive control may involve emotional degradation, surveillance, micro-regulation of daily activities, threats—or the creation of an environment in which threats need not be made explicitly—and isolation from supportive relationships.⁴ Unlike physical assaults, which may be sporadic, coercive control functions continuously, shaping the survivor’s behaviour through an atmosphere of omnipresent monitoring.

This broader conceptualisation reveals a longstanding gap in legal and institutional responses to IPV. Internationally, feminist legal scholars have argued that traditional criminal justice approaches overemphasise discrete incidents of physical violence while neglecting the psychological, economic, and structural dimensions of abuse.⁵ Countries such as England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland have introduced legislative prohibitions on coercive control, recognising that non-physical tactics can be equally, if not more, damaging.⁶ However, these reforms are not without controversy. Critics warn that coercive control laws may unintentionally increase risks for survivors when abusers manipulate the legal system to portray themselves as victims, a dynamic previously documented with mandatory arrest and no-drop prosecution policies.⁷ Such concerns highlight the need for legal frameworks that account for power asymmetry, contextual evidence, and survivor-centred safeguards.

B. Economic Abuse

Within the spectrum of coercive behaviours, economic abuse stands out as one of the most pervasive and structurally damaging. It is reported by between 76% and 99% of survivors seeking domestic violence services.⁸ Economic abuse encompasses behaviours that restrict a survivor’s ability to acquire, use, or maintain financial resources, thereby generating economic dependency that is extremely difficult to overcome.

Three key forms are widely recognised:

1.EconomicExploitation.

This involves the intentional destruction or depletion of a victim’s financial resources. Examples include stealing money, sabotaging bank accounts, gambling with shared funds,

coercing the victim to sign financial documents, or opening credit lines without their knowledge. Coerced debt is strongly correlated with poor credit scores, difficulties securing housing or utilities, and long-term financial insecurity.⁹ Many survivors leave abusive relationships burdened not only by trauma but also by thousands of dollars in fraudulent debt that impede future self-sufficiency.

2.EconomicControl.

This refers to behaviours designed to limit the victim's financial autonomy by controlling access to money or necessary resources. Abusive partners may insist on managing all household finances, require receipts for every purchase, withhold access to food or medication, or deny the survivor the right to have their own bank account.¹⁰ Such tactics reinforce dependency by eliminating the material means of escape.

3.EmploymentSabotage.

Abusers may interfere with a survivor's ability to obtain or maintain employment or education. Tactics include stalking or harassment at work, creating crises to prevent job attendance, or demanding that the survivor quit their job.¹¹ Employment sabotage often has long-term ramifications, undermining not only immediate income but also professional advancement and future earning potential.

A defining feature of economic abuse is its spatial and temporal nature. Unlike physical violence, which typically requires close proximity, many forms of economic control can be executed remotely—through digital surveillance, unauthorized online transactions, or manipulation of joint accounts. Even after separation, abusers may continue to undermine survivors' financial stability, prolonging dependence and limiting their ability to safely leave or start anew.¹²

II. Risk Factors and Environmental Contexts

Domestic violence does not emerge from a single cause. Rather, IPV arises from an interplay of risk factors operating at the individual, relational, community, and societal levels. Public health models emphasize that understanding these ecological layers is critical for effective prevention.

A. Risk Factors for Perpetration

At the individual level, risk factors include low self-esteem, limited educational attainment, income instability, aggressive behaviour during youth, heavy alcohol or drug use, antisocial traits, emotional dysregulation, and a desire for power and control.¹³ Unemployment and financial stress have been repeatedly identified as catalysts for abusive behaviour, particularly when traditional gender norms equate masculinity with economic provision.¹⁴

At the relationship level, risk is heightened by possessiveness, jealousy, high conflict, divorce or separation (often a period of escalated danger), and dominance by one partner.¹⁵ Economic stress is especially influential; research demonstrates that financial strain increases both relationship tension and the likelihood of coercive control.

At the community level, high rates of poverty, unemployment, violence, and crime weaken social networks and reduce communal willingness to intervene. Neighbourhoods where IPV is normalised or dismissed implicitly sanction abusive behaviour.¹⁶

At the societal level, cultural norms supporting aggression, rigid gender hierarchies, and inadequate health, education, and social policies create an environment where IPV is more likely to occur and less likely to be effectively addressed.¹⁷ Patriarchal structures, in particular, reinforce male entitlement and female subordination, both of which are strongly associated with coercive control.

B. Impact of Major Social Disruptions: The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates how large-scale social disruptions can sharply intensify IPV. Global stay-at-home orders confined victims with abusers, reduced access to social networks, disrupted services, and heightened economic stress—conditions long associated with increased risk.¹⁸

A systematic review and meta-analysis found that rates of officially reported domestic violence increased during lockdowns worldwide.¹⁹ Contributing stressors included rising male unemployment, widespread financial instability, increased childcare burdens, and the mental health effects of prolonged isolation. Women, who faced disproportionate job loss and caregiving responsibilities, were especially vulnerable.²⁰ For survivors already experiencing economic abuse, the additional strain of pandemic-related job losses magnified their dependence on partners and reduced their ability to seek help.

The pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing inequities in both financial security and access to safety resources. Many emergency shelters were forced to reduce capacity; court systems shifted online, limiting access for those without technology; and community support networks became fragmented.²¹ These circumstances highlight how IPV is deeply intertwined with broader socio-economic systems and how crises can deepen power imbalances.

III. Impacts and Consequences: Trauma and Financial Strain

The consequences of domestic violence extend far beyond the moments of abuse. Survivors suffer long-term psychological, emotional, physical, and economic harms that affect every aspect of their lives.

A. Domestic Violence as Chronic Trauma

Domestic violence constitutes a chronic, relational form of trauma that profoundly disrupts survivors' sense of safety and control. Unlike natural disasters or isolated traumatic events, IPV often occurs repeatedly over long periods and is perpetrated by an intimate partner—someone who is supposed to be a source of safety, trust, and affection. This betrayal deepens trauma and complicates recovery.²²

Survivors typically exhibit trauma responses across three major clusters:

1. Hyperarousal.

The nervous system remains in a heightened state of alert, producing symptoms such as hypervigilance, difficulty sleeping, exaggerated startle response, panic attacks, and difficulty concentrating.²³ Many survivors describe “walking on eggshells,” anticipating violence even in the absence of overt threats.

2. Intrusion(Re-experiencing).

Survivors may endure flashbacks, distressing memories, or traumatic nightmares. Intrusive symptoms are often triggered by everyday sensory cues—smells, sounds, places—that evoke

the trauma.²⁴ Intrusion can disrupt daily functioning, undermine stability, and impede engagement in work, relationships, or therapy.

3. Constriction (Avoidance/Numbing).

Survivors may disengage emotionally or socially to avoid reminders of trauma. They may withdraw from relationships, suppress emotions, or avoid places and conversations that evoke painful memories.²⁵ Although constriction may serve as a protective mechanism in the short term, it can hinder long-term healing by isolating survivors from supportive networks.

Understanding these trauma responses as normal adaptations to abnormal circumstances is essential for advocates and practitioners. Trauma-informed care requires professionals to avoid pathologizing survivors' coping strategies and instead recognise them as evidence of resilience.²⁶

B. Health and Economic Impacts

Economic abuse compounds psychological trauma and often results in long-term health and financial instability.

Mental Health Effects.

Survivors experiencing economic abuse exhibit higher levels of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal ideation.²⁷ The chronic stress of financial deprivation can overwhelm coping capacities and reinforce cycles of trauma.

Physical Health.

Economic abuse is associated with gastrointestinal disorders, chronic pain, cardiovascular problems, and psychosomatic symptoms.²⁸ The stress of sustained deprivation and coercion weakens the body's stress response systems, contributing to long-term health deterioration.

Financial Consequences.

Economic hardship includes coerced debt, ruined credit, unstable housing, job loss, and long-term barriers to financial independence.²⁹ Survivors may face homelessness, food insecurity, and limited access to medical care. For many, financial instability persists years after leaving the relationship, demonstrating how economic abuse outlasts physical cohabitation.

IV. Intervention Strategies and Efficacy

Effective responses to IPV must address both survivor safety and perpetrator behaviour. However, research reveals mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of existing interventions, particularly Batterer Intervention Programs (BIPs).

A. Perpetrator Interventions (BIPs)

BIPs aim to reduce recidivism among individuals who have used violence in intimate relationships. Historically, two dominant models have emerged:

1. The Duluth Model, which frames IPV as rooted in patriarchal social structures and focuses on challenging beliefs that support male entitlement and control.³⁰
2. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Hybrid Models, which incorporate skills training in emotion regulation, communication, and cognition.³¹

Despite widespread implementation, research suggests that traditional BIPs have limited efficacy. Meta-analyses demonstrate small or non-significant effects on reducing abuse, and randomized controlled trials often find no measurable difference between BIP participants and control groups.³² These results suggest that IPV is not readily addressed through short-term

educational programming alone, especially when participants are mandated rather than voluntarily engaged.

More recent approaches have emphasised motivation and readiness to change. Motivational interviewing and individualized interventions have shown promising results in improving participant engagement and reducing dropout rates.³³ Although findings remain preliminary, these approaches indicate that addressing underlying emotional, psychological, and relational processes may be more effective than solely focusing on cognitive restructuring or gendered belief systems.

B. Victim/Survivor Interventions

Survivor-centred interventions focus on emotional functioning, trauma recovery, safety planning, and long-term empowerment.

1.Trauma-FocusedTherapy.

Programs such as Cognitive Trauma Therapy for Battered Women (CTT-BW) and Helping to Overcome PTSD through Empowerment (HOPE) have demonstrated strong efficacy in reducing PTSD symptoms, depressive symptoms, and trauma-related distress.³⁴ These therapies utilise structured cognitive-behavioural techniques to reprocess traumatic memories and rebuild survivors' sense of agency.

2.AdvocacyandSupport.

Postshelter advocacy programs, often delivered by trained paraprofessionals, have been associated with reductions in revictimization and improvements in economic stability, social support, and quality of life.³⁵ Advocacy interventions help survivors navigate complex systems (legal, social, housing) and connect with community resources. Nonetheless, even with strong advocacy, revictimization rates remain high, underscoring the deeply entrenched nature of IPV.³⁶

3.BriefInterventions.

Short-term interventions delivered in healthcare settings show mixed outcomes. While these programs consistently increase safety behaviours (e.g., safety planning, awareness of resources), they do not reliably reduce exposure to abuse or significantly improve mental health outcomes.³⁷ Minimal interventions such as screening alone have limited impact, suggesting that survivors benefit most from sustained, multi-layered support systems.

Legal Framework:

Domestic violence is a complex social, public health, and human rights issue, and its legal regulation has evolved significantly over the past several decades as societies have increasingly recognised the need for robust frameworks to prevent abuse, protect survivors, and hold perpetrators accountable. Although legal systems vary widely across jurisdictions, modern domestic violence law typically rests on several foundational principles: the recognition of intimate partner violence as a crime rather than a private family matter; the understanding that domestic abuse encompasses not only physical violence but also psychological, emotional, sexual, and economic forms of coercive control; the need for comprehensive protective measures; and the obligation of states to investigate, intervene, and provide accessible remedies to survivors. The legal framework surrounding domestic violence is therefore shaped by a combination of criminal law, civil law, family law, constitutional

protections, and international human rights norms, each contributing to a broader ecosystem of legal responses designed to address both immediate and long-term needs of survivors.

Historically, domestic violence was regarded as a private issue, shielded from legal oversight by patriarchal doctrines such as the “rule of chastisement,” which permitted husbands to discipline their wives in many jurisdictions. Over time, feminist activism and human rights advocacy challenged these norms, highlighting how the private sphere often facilitated systematic abuse and oppression of women. As a result, many countries began passing domestic violence legislation from the late 20th century onward, establishing statutory definitions, criminal penalties, and civil remedies. In contemporary legal discourse, domestic violence is widely understood as a pattern of behaviour involving coercive control, including physical assaults, sexual coercion, stalking, threats, intimidation, isolation, and financial abuse. Several jurisdictions, such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, and parts of Australia, have explicitly criminalised coercive or controlling behaviour, recognising that non-physical abuse can be equally harmful and that existing laws focusing solely on physical harm were insufficient to capture the complex dynamics of IPV.

Criminal law plays a central role in the legal response to domestic violence by defining prohibited conduct and prescribing penalties. Many jurisdictions prosecute domestic violence under general criminal statutes such as assault, battery, harassment, stalking, sexual assault, criminal damage, or unlawful confinement. Increasingly, jurisdictions have enacted specific domestic violence offences or dedicated domestic violence legislation, recognising the distinct context and heightened vulnerability present in intimate relationships. Some legal systems incorporate aggravating factors, meaning that violent conduct occurring within an intimate relationship attracts harsher penalties than similar actions committed outside of such relationships. Despite improvements, criminalisation remains a contested arena. While proponents argue that strong criminal sanctions deter violence, recognise its seriousness, and provide formal mechanisms of accountability, critics warn that overreliance on criminal law can inadvertently harm survivors—particularly marginalised women—through unintended consequences such as dual arrests, mandatory prosecution policies, or child protection involvement that may penalise survivors for the actions of abusers.

Civil law remedies complement the criminal justice approach by providing protective measures intended to prevent further abuse. Protection orders—also known as restraining orders, non-molestation orders, or intervention orders—constitute one of the most widely used civil mechanisms. These orders can prohibit an abuser from contacting or approaching the survivor, exclude them from the shared home, mandate the surrender of firearms, or impose behavioural requirements such as attending counselling or refraining from harassment. Many jurisdictions permit survivors to obtain emergency or ex parte protection orders, allowing courts to issue immediate safeguards based on the survivor’s sworn statement without requiring the presence of the alleged perpetrator. Violation of protection orders is typically criminalised, creating a bridge between civil and criminal domains. Protection orders can also be extended to cover children, relatives, or others endangered by the abuser’s behaviour. Although protection orders are recognised as an essential tool, their effectiveness depends heavily on law enforcement’s willingness to enforce them, survivors’ ability to access the courts, and the availability of resources such as legal aid.

Family law is another critical component of the legal framework. Domestic violence often intersects with issues of child custody, visitation, divorce, property settlement, and financial maintenance. Courts in many jurisdictions must consider the existence of domestic violence when determining the best interests of the child in custody disputes. Some legal systems adopt a rebuttable presumption against awarding custody or unsupervised visitation to a parent who has committed domestic violence. Family courts may also grant exclusive use of the matrimonial home to the survivor, ensure financial support, divide property in a manner that recognises the economic impact of abuse, or expedite divorce proceedings where domestic violence is present. However, the family court system is frequently criticised for failing to adequately recognise the dynamics of coercive control, giving undue weight to notions of parental rights or “friendly parent” doctrines, and sometimes compelling survivors to maintain contact with abusers through co-parenting arrangements. Structural biases, limited judicial training, and varying standards of proof can further disadvantage survivors in family law proceedings.

Beyond domestic legal systems, international human rights law has played a crucial role in shaping domestic violence frameworks. Key instruments include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Belém do Pará Convention), the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention, and various United Nations declarations and resolutions. CEDAW, through its General Recommendation No. 19 and No. 35, explicitly recognises gender-based violence, including domestic violence, as a form of discrimination that states are obligated to prevent, investigate, and remedy. The Istanbul Convention—one of the most comprehensive international treaties on violence against women—requires state parties to adopt coordinated policies encompassing prevention, protection, prosecution, and integrated support services. These international frameworks impose positive obligations on states to create accessible domestic violence laws, ensure survivor-centred practices, provide shelters and support services, train officials, and eliminate discriminatory norms that perpetuate abuse. While not all countries have ratified these instruments, they have had significant influence on global domestic violence law reforms and advocacy movements.

Another crucial development within legal frameworks is the increasing recognition of economic abuse as both a form of domestic violence and a barrier to leaving abusive relationships. Economic abuse may involve controlling access to bank accounts, sabotaging employment, incurring debt in the survivor’s name, withholding financial information, or purposefully impoverishing the victim. Some legal systems, such as the UK’s Domestic Abuse Act 2021, explicitly define economic abuse as part of domestic abuse. This recognition allows survivors to seek protection orders, financial compensation, or criminal remedies for conduct previously invisible within legal structures. The inclusion of economic abuse in statutory definitions reflects a broader shift toward understanding domestic violence as a pattern of coercive control rather than a series of isolated assaults.

A robust legal framework also requires procedural and institutional mechanisms to ensure access to justice. These include police protocols, specialised domestic violence units, risk assessment tools, dedicated courts, mandatory reporting requirements in certain circumstances, and trauma-informed judicial training. Police responses remain a focal point of

reform, as historically, officers often minimised domestic violence or declined to intervene. Many jurisdictions have implemented pro-arrest or mandatory arrest policies, intended to prevent officers from dismissing abuse as a private matter. However, evidence suggests such policies may produce unintended consequences, including dual arrests, racial disparities, and increased risks for survivors who may face retaliatory violence or economic hardship. Specialised domestic violence courts—which integrate criminal, civil, and family matters—have shown promise in improving coordination, reducing case processing times, and enhancing survivor safety. Nonetheless, their effectiveness varies depending on resources, training, and the availability of community support services.

Legal frameworks increasingly emphasise survivor-centred and trauma-informed approaches. This involves recognising the psychological effects of abuse, avoiding practices that retraumatise survivors, and respecting their autonomy in decision-making. Trauma-informed legal practice acknowledges that survivors may exhibit behaviours—such as inconsistent testimony, delayed reporting, or reluctance to pursue charges—that are common responses to trauma, rather than signs of credibility issues. Courts and law enforcement agencies that adopt trauma-informed methods are better equipped to handle domestic violence cases with sensitivity and fairness.

Despite substantial legal advances, significant gaps remain. Many survivors face barriers to accessing legal remedies due to poverty, immigration status, language challenges, disability, or fear of retaliation. Undocumented survivors may be afraid to seek help due to concerns about deportation, while LGBTQ+ survivors often encounter systems that do not recognise nontraditional relationship dynamics. Indigenous women, women of colour, and rural survivors face disproportionate rates of violence and systemic inequities within justice systems. These disparities underscore the need for intersectional legal frameworks that address the unique experiences of diverse populations.

Ultimately, an effective legal response to domestic violence must be holistic, integrating criminal accountability with civil protection, family law considerations, social support services, and international human rights obligations. Laws alone cannot end domestic violence, but when designed thoughtfully, enforced consistently, and supported by adequate resources, they can play a vital role in preventing abuse, enhancing survivor safety, and promoting long-term recovery. The evolution of domestic violence law demonstrates a growing societal commitment to recognising the dignity and rights of survivors. Continued reforms must focus on strengthening protections, removing structural barriers, and ensuring that the justice system responds with compassion, competence, and fairness to all those affected by domestic violence.

V. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Domestic violence is a complex, multilayered social problem rooted not only in individual pathology but also in systemic and structural inequities. Coercive control—particularly economic abuse—undermines survivors' autonomy by restricting access to resources, manipulating financial systems, and generating chronic fear. The COVID-19 pandemic vividly illustrated how disruptions in economic security, social networks, and public services amplify risk factors for IPV, leading to global increases in domestic violence incidents.

Policy responses must therefore confront the underlying drivers of abuse: structural inequality, economic dependence, inadequate housing and childcare supports, and insufficient legal protections. Addressing IPV requires integrated strategies across health, legal, educational, and social service systems. Trauma-informed care must be at the forefront of all service delivery, ensuring that survivors' behaviours are understood as adaptive responses to trauma rather than evidence of dysfunction. Agencies must prioritise non-violence, respect survivor autonomy, and provide consistent yet flexible support.

Future research should focus on longitudinal analyses that capture the long-term effects of economic abuse and evaluate interventions across diverse populations, including LGBTQ+ individuals, male survivors, and individuals with disabilities. The field must continue developing evidence-based perpetrator interventions, as traditional BIPs have shown inconsistent efficacy. Without meaningful change at the global, federal, and state levels, IPV will persist as a pervasive public health crisis.

Domestic violence is fundamentally a human rights violation. Only through sustained, intersectional, and survivor-centred policy and practice can societies hope to reduce the prevalence and impacts of IPV and support survivors in reclaiming safety, dignity, and independence.

Footnotes

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