

# Research Paper

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Building on the Parliamentary Library paper, *What is coercive control?* (Otter, Bosanko & Hocking, 2022), this paper explores the intersectional complexities of coercive control experiences and barriers to seeking support in Australia. By investigating the existing data and literature around those groups disproportionately represented as victim-survivors of coercive control and those who experience specific controlling behaviours, gaps in the research are highlighted and additional areas of future research identified.

**Content warning:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this resource may contain names of people who have since passed away.

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## Intersectional complexities of coercive control

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As a “strategic campaign of abuse” (Hill, 2019, p. 21), coercive control encompasses a broad range of behaviours perpetrated by partners and family members alike that can manifest in varied ways and contexts. Coercive control is a form of family and domestic violence that includes intimidating and threatening behaviours by the perpetrator and an emphasis on restricting the victim’s independence (Stark, 2007). This systematic regime of abuse is a known risk factor for the most common form of homicide in Australia - intimate partner homicide (Boxall & Morgan, 2021; Bricknell & Doherty, 2021). Those women, men and gender-diverse people who experience coercive control are not a homogenous group. Understanding how intersections of individuals’ identities can impact their experience of coercive control and create potential barriers to seeking support is essential to understanding the nuances of this form of violence.

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## Introduction

Intersectionality describes “the ways in which different aspects of a person’s identity can expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination or marginalisation” (Victorian Government, 2021a). Building on the Parliament of Victoria’s paper, *What is coercive control?* (Otter, Bosanko & Hocking, 2022), this paper uses existing research and datasets to explore those groups disproportionately represented as victim-survivors of coercive control and those who encounter specific experiences and obstacles to seeking help. Thus, this paper explores the experiences of coercive control amongst women with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (Boxall & Morgan, 2021, p. 5), women living in regional, rural and remote environments (ABS, 2017), and LGBTIQ+ communities (ANROWS, 2020).

Currently, it is challenging to compare trends of coercive control across demographic groups in Victoria due to dataset and literature limitations. As such, this paper draws on a range of nation-wide and state-based quantitative and qualitative research to explore intersectional complexities.

Whilst this paper draws distinctions between defined demographic groups, identity is fluid and ever-changing, and people can belong to more than one community (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 31). Indeed, there are intersections within intersections of identity, and this must be taken into account when considering the discussion below, which may inadvertently obscure the diversity of individuals’ experiences. Nevertheless, considering broad trends in those over-represented as coercive control victim-survivors can lead to more inclusive, accessible, and informed decisions, and help identify additional areas for research.

## Vulnerability to certain experiences

As will be discussed, different population groups experience varied forms of coercive control. However, certain commonalities do emerge within marginalised communities. Whilst close-knit communities can be a source of support, companionship, and resilience, they can also be used by perpetrators to intimidate, exert control, and further isolate victims. Social norms within communities may also act to silence and minimise the experience of domestic and family violence (Campo & Tayton, 2015a, p. 3), or act as a barrier as victim-survivors fear social exclusion. Victim-survivors may also be concerned to not draw negative attention to their community (Aly & Gaba, 2007; Campo & Tayton, 2015b).

Technology-facilitated abuse is another common vulnerability for the population groups discussed. Perpetrators may use technology and social media platforms to stalk, exploit, track, intimidate, humiliate, threaten, and control their victims. In considering the experiences of technology-based abuse described, it is important to recognise that new forms are constantly emerging as technology evolves (Penzey-Moog & Slakoff, 2021). Currently, perpetrators may use smart home technology to remotely control devices within the home and listen in through “drop in call” functions, or use parental control phone apps, theft trackers, finding apps as well as digital automobile interfaces to stalk and track their victims.

In considering such nuances of coercive control, the various professions involved in the potential manifestations of controlling behaviour should be recognised. For instance, the role technology and UX designers have in creating accessible and inclusive protective solutions to potential consequences of their designs (Penzey-Moog & Slakoff, 2021, p. 663).

## Women with disabilities

### Prevalence

In Australia, approximately 18 per cent of women have a disability ranging in severity and including single or multiple conditions (ABS, 2019a). The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) *Personal Safety Survey* (PSS), which collected information about the prevalence and nature of violence experienced by men and women aged 18 years and over (ABS, 2017), is one of the only sources to provide population level estimates of coercive control for Australia. The PSS, however, did not explicitly measure coercive control, but instead measured types of emotional abuse from current or previous partners (ABS, 2017). In this instance, emotional abuse was defined as “when a person is subjected to certain behaviours or actions that are aimed at preventing or controlling their behaviour, causing them emotional harm or fear” (ABS, 2017). According to this measure, nation-wide, one in three women with disabilities had experienced emotional abuse from a current or previous partner, compared with one in five women without a disability (Figure 1).

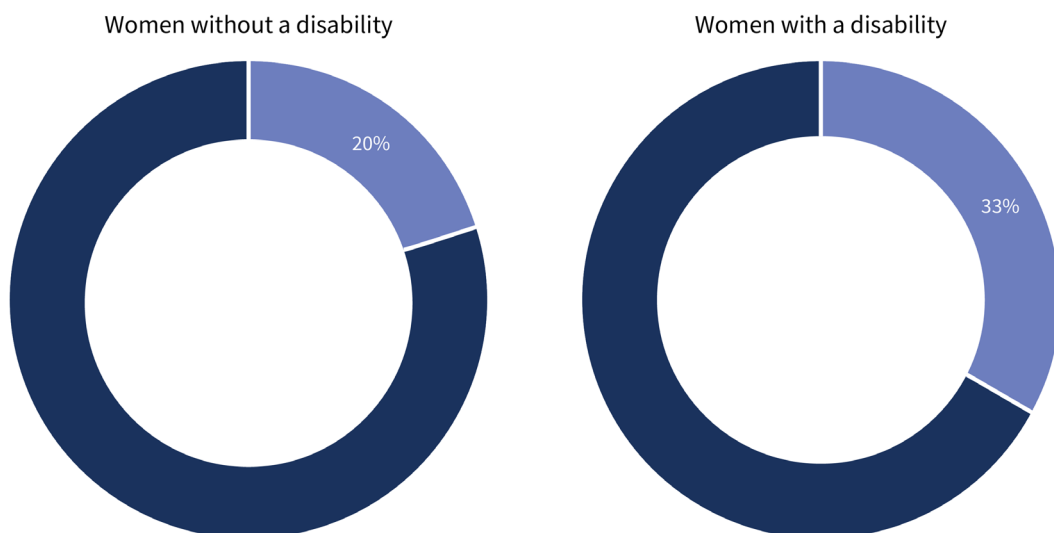


Figure 1: Experiences of emotional abuse by a previous or current co-habiting partner by women without a disability and women with a disability | Source: ABS, 2017.

The significant limitations of the PSS dataset must be noted when considering these statistics. First, the PSS defined ‘partner’ as a co-habiting current or previous partner, which fails to recognise and account for the complex nature of intimate partnerships; second, the PSS did not allow third party assistance, meaning those who require communication assistance were not included; and finally, it did not include those living in non-private dwellings (such as institutional care settings) (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 25). Despite this, these findings affirm other research suggesting that women with disabilities are more likely to experience coercive control than women without disabilities (Boxall & Morgan, 2021, p. 5). The Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre (MGFVPC), for example, found that women with disability were almost 15 per cent more likely to have experienced coercive and controlling behaviours from both a parent and an intimate partner than victim-survivors without a disability (McGowan & Malowney, 2021).

Further, it was found that women with disabilities are more likely, across their lifetime, to experience violence from multiple perpetrators in comparison to those without disabilities (ABS, 2017; Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 26).

## Experiences

As can be seen in *Figure 2* (p. 5), women with disabilities were proportionally more likely to experience each of the twenty emotional abuse behaviours measured by the PSS than women without disabilities. Whilst both women with and without a disability were most likely to experience verbal abuse, the greatest disparity was in experiences of financial abuse, where women with disabilities were 13 per cent more likely to have experienced this type of coercive control than those without a disability. Financial abuse can constitute withholding money, controlling all the household spending or refusing to include a partner in financial decisions (Anitha, 2019). It has been suggested that women with disabilities may be more vulnerable to this type of coercion as they are more likely to be living in poverty and less likely to have independence over their finances (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 26).

While women with disabilities experience similar forms of coercive control as women without disabilities, other research suggests that women with disabilities encounter additional forms of coercion. Perpetrators may take advantage of their caring role and an individual's potential increased dependency on them (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 26) through such behaviours as:

- Withholding of or forcing medication (Dyson et al., 2017).
- Withholding of essential assistance with personal tasks.
- Denigrating and unethical behaviours in institutional and service settings.
- Threats to withdraw care.
- Criticism relating to disability.
- Reproductive coercion, such as involuntary sterilisation and/or termination of pregnancies (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 26).
- Tech-based abuse related to an individual's increased reliance on technology for accessing services and the community (Woodlock et al., 2019, p. 374).

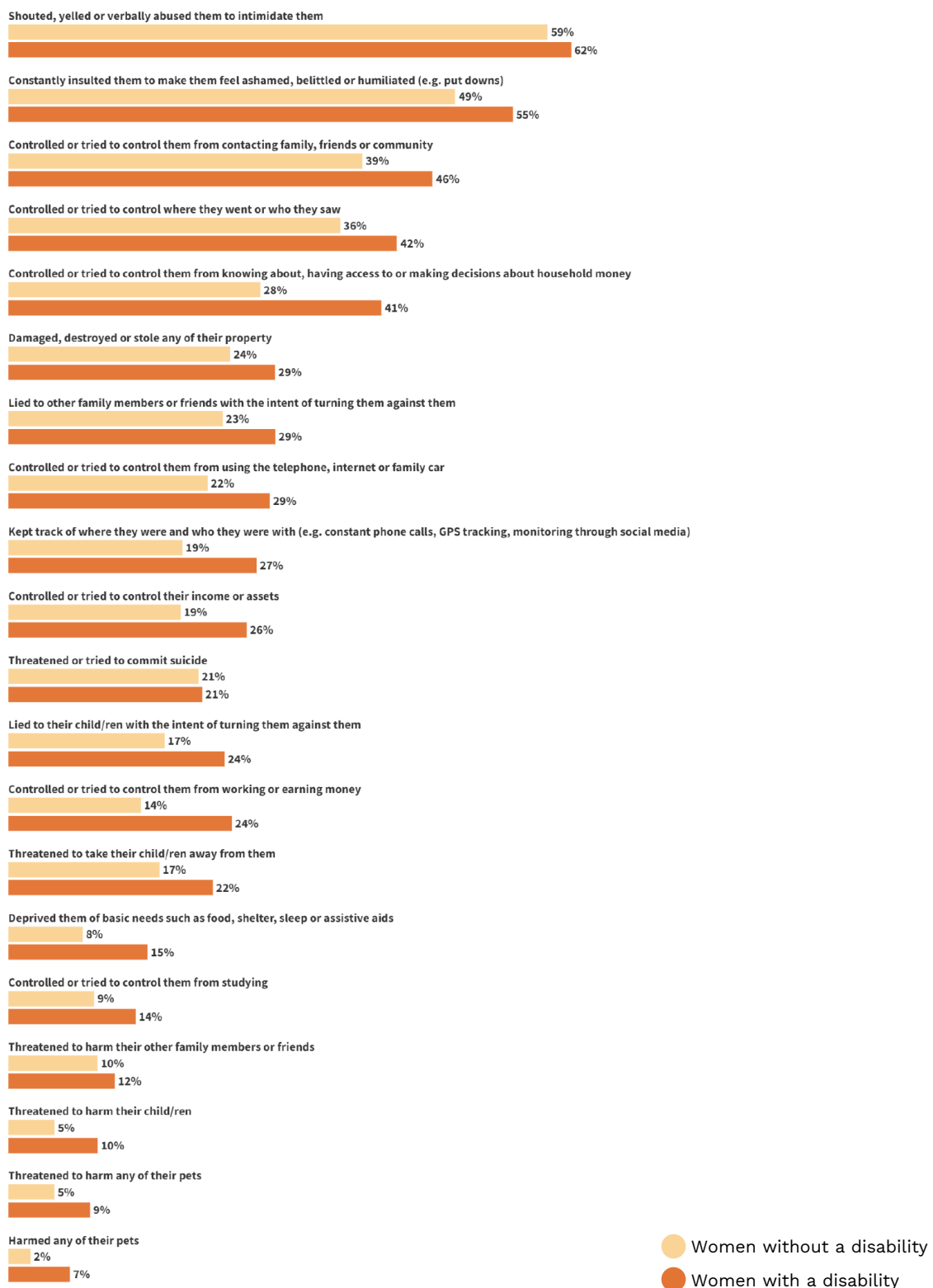


Figure 2: Types of emotional abuse experienced by women without a disability and with a disability who experienced emotional abuse from a current or previous co-habiting partner. Source: ABS, 2017.

## Barriers to seeking support

Compounding the higher prevalence and additional forms of controlling behaviour, women with disabilities also face significant barriers to recognising and seeking assistance for coercive control. Past research has found:

- Coercive control is often not recognised as abuse amongst women with disabilities, suggesting a lack of awareness that non-physical coercive and controlling behaviours also constitutes as abuse (McGowan & Malowney, 2021).
- Challenges within institutional, residential, or service settings where incidents may be difficult to detect, and residents may be conditioned to remain silent (Frohman & Sands, 2015).
- For those with communication difficulties, there can be substantial barriers to connecting with services. For instance, phone lines that are not accessible to those with hearing or speech impairments or websites that are inaccessible for those with vision or cognitive impairments (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 27).
- Challenges being heard and believed in reporting coercive control experiences (McGowan & Malowney, 2021).

In Australia research is only just beginning to explore the specific challenges women with disabilities face when experiencing coercive control, and little is known of the significance of other intersecting identities with disability (McGowan & Malowney, 2021).

## Culturally and linguistically diverse women

### Prevalence

With close to 30 per cent of Victorians born overseas and 26 per cent speaking a language other than English at home, Victoria is the most multicultural state in Australia (Victorian Government, 2021b). In spite of this, data on the prevalence of coercive control for culturally and linguistically diverse women is somewhat limited. In the PSS (ABS, 2017) women born in another country were less likely to have experienced emotional abuse (18.5%) than those born in Australia (27%), but this data is thought to significantly under-represent culturally and linguistically diverse women due to a lack of access to interpreters and bilingual interviewers (Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, 2014). In contrast, other Australian literature suggests culturally and linguistically diverse women may be more vulnerable to coercive control due to visa/migration statuses and English language skills (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 22).

In 2020, the Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre (MMIC) conducted an online survey focused on migrant and refugee women in Australia (Segrave et al., 2021a). While the study did not explicitly explore coercive control, it did measure some forms of controlling behaviours, such as limiting contact with family and/or friends, verbal abuse and financial abuse. It also included measures of specific forms of control directly related to respondents' uncertain and vulnerable migration/visa statuses.

In the sample of 1392 respondents, 29% had experienced one type of controlling behaviour (Segrave et al., 2021a, p. 9). In comparing Australian citizens, permanent visa holders and temporary visa holders (Figure 3), temporary visa holders were most likely to have experienced controlling behaviour types (Segrave et al., 2021b, p. 9).

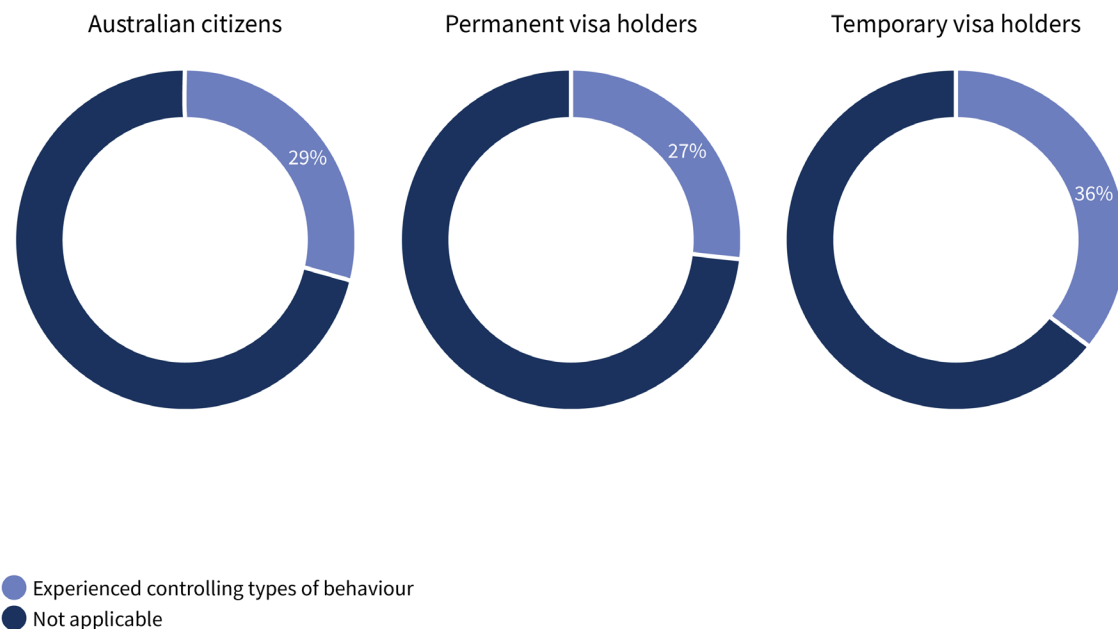


Figure 3: Experiences of controlling behaviour by partner and/or family members by women who are Australian citizens, permanent visa holders and temporary visa holders. | Source: Segrave et al., 2021a, p. 40.



## Experiences

As described by Dr. Sabrin Farooqui, “coercive control is found across all cultures, but migrants and refugee women in Australia face many issues particular to their status that increase the possibility of facing and suffering from this form of domestic violence” (Farooqui, 2021). In the MMIC study, of those who experienced controlling behaviours the majority reported financial control (56%), followed by the perpetrator trying to limit the respondent’s contact with family or friends (54%). Whilst most of these behaviours were perpetrated by intimate partners, members of extended families, including parents-in-law and partners’ siblings could also be involved. Alongside these experiences, respondents described a range of other forms of coercive control (Segrave et al., 2021a, p. 40), such as:

- Control related to an individual’s visa status, which determines the health services, welfare services, working rights and social security an individual is eligible for (Vaughan et al., 2016). For example:
  - threatening to report immigration status to authorities;
  - threatening to withdraw sponsorship and visa cancellation;
  - threatening to prevent other family members from accessing visas and/or travelling to Australia;
  - withholding immigration documents;
  - threatening deportation;
  - threatening to send children to another country (Segrave et al., 2021a, p. 41).
- Forms of family coercive control such as shaming and humiliation, which could be inflicted by multiple perpetrators (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 23).
- Financial abuse, including dowry or other inter-familial financial related abuse (Vaughan et al., 2016, p. 3).

## Barriers to seeking support

In many ways perpetrators are assisted in their “campaign of abuse” (Hill, 2019, p. 21) by the specific and numerous barriers culturally and linguistically diverse women encounter when seeking support for family and domestic violence. For example:

- Perpetrators may deny their victims access to information about their rights, which is exacerbated by the fact that information and advice is typically communicated in English and even when victims can speak English, the language is often inaccessible and challenging to understand (Vaughan et al., 2016, p. 3).
- Lack of culturally sensitive services with limited translators and interpreters (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 25).
- Personal barriers to reporting including isolation from family in their home country who would otherwise offer social support or would act to mitigate family violence; feelings of shame or dishonour; fear of not being believed; and fear of continued violence from the perpetrator’s extended family (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 24).
- Inadequate financial support and/or economic dependence on the perpetrator (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 24).
- Racist, anti-refugee and anti-immigration sentiments in the broader community can also create barriers that discourage women from seeking help. A 2007 Australian study, for example, found that the Islamophobia that women and youth from Muslim backgrounds faced created barriers to seeking support as they did not want themselves, or their community to be seen in a negative light (Aly & Gaba, 2007).

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

### Prevalence

Whilst it is well established that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience higher rates of violence and are more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence (Cripps et al., 2019, p. 10), literature on the prevalence and experience of coercive control is limited. The PSS (ABS, 2017), for instance, did not gather information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (ABS, 2019b) did not specifically ask about experiences of coercive control. Boxall and Morgan (2021), however, in a recent survey of 15,000 women in Australia aged over 18, found that of those who had experienced coercive control in the three months prior to the survey, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women were significantly over-represented (Boxall & Morgan, 2021, p. 5).

Within the literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences of coercive control, the importance of understanding the perpetration of domestic and family violence within the context of colonisation and the consequent intergenerational and historical trauma is emphasised (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 20). Further, coercive control must be considered within the context of the complex and diverse family and kinship relationships that differ between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 20).

### Experiences

Qualitative studies suggest that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are vulnerable to common forms of coercive control, they may also experience forms of lateral and intergenerational coercion that sit outside conventional paradigms of coercive control as a purely gendered phenomenon (Blagg et al., 2018, p. 6). For instance:

- Negative behaviours between family members, such as:
  - Humbugging, which refers to aggressively demanding money, goods and services (Blagg et al., 2018, p. 31).
  - Jealousing or jealousing up, which is the practice of testing the loyalty of a partnership by excessive flirtation with one party. Blagg et al. (2018, p. 31) found that in Kimberley communities such jealous fights were frequently instigated by women on other women.
- Forms of lateral violence within communities, such as gossiping, jealousy, bullying, shaming, social exclusion, organisational conflict, and feuding between families (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 20), which may be facilitated and exacerbated by technology-facilitated abuse through platforms such as Facebook (Woodlock et al., 2020, p. 374).

### Barriers to seeking support

Again, there is limited research looking specially at the barriers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women may face when seeking support for coercive control, but existing research captures the multiple, intersecting barriers to broadly reporting domestic and family violence and accessing services. The following has been found to impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women seeking and accessing support:

- Limited culturally appropriate services and inaccessibility of information and services – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff or staff with cultural competency are limited across services, and interpreter services in Indigenous languages are sparse (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 21).
- The influence of distrust in government authorities, as women may fear being treated “as an offender” as in the Western Australian case of Tamica Mullaley, or “that their children may be taken away and fear of what will happen to the perpetrator in custody” (Watego et al., 2021).

- Research from New South Wales with 49 human and justice service providers in rural and regional towns, identified shame, silence and community sanctions as significant factors deterring Aboriginal women from seeking help (Owen & Carrington, 2015).
- Geographical remoteness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in rural and remote areas, as will be discussed in the next section, also magnifies the challenges women face to accessing support and services (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 21).

## Women living in rural, regional and remote areas

### Prevalence

It is well established that rates of domestic and family violence in Australia are higher in regional, rural and remote settings (Campo & Tayton, 2015a, p. 2), but research looking specifically at experiences of coercive control within such environments is limited. In line with the higher rates, the PSS (ABS, 2017) suggests that women in non-urban environments were more likely to have experienced emotional abuse (30%) than those living in major cities (22%) (Figure 4). It should be noted, however, that the PSS did not include those living in extremely remote areas of Australia (ABS, 2017).

Alongside the sample limitations, the PSS did not take into account intersecting identities of women living in non-urban environments. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in non-urban settings have been found to be 45 times more likely to experience family violence than other women living in non-urban areas (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 2). Further, little is known of the experience of culturally and linguistically diverse women, women with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ people who live in rural, regional or remote areas (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016, p. 23).

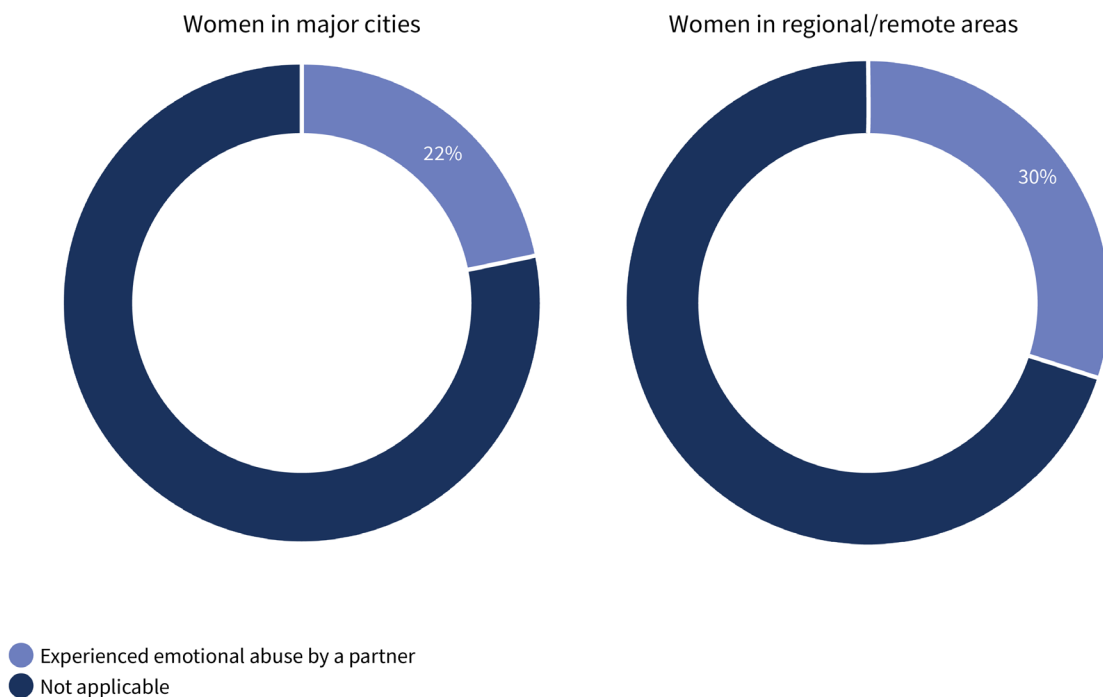


Figure 4: Experiences of emotional abuse by a current or previous co-habiting partner by women living in major cities and those living in regional/rural areas. Source | ABS, 2017.

## Experiences

Women living outside major cities face specific issues “related to their geographical location and the sociocultural characteristics of living in small communities” (Campo & Tayton, 2015a, p. 2). For instance:

- Increased vulnerability to social isolation due to geographical remoteness (Campo & Tayton, 2015a, p. 5).
- Technology-based abuse can be particularly devastating for women in rural and remote places as they frequently require internet connection for safety, which can be exploited by perpetrators who constantly phone, text or even track them. In small communities, perpetrators may also publicly humiliate their victims on Facebook or other social media platforms, causing victims to lose friends and become further socially isolated (Woodlock et al., 2020, p. 374).
- Greater risk of domestic and family violence during natural disasters such as bushfires, floods and droughts, which non-urban communities tend to experience the worst of. For example, during the 2009 Black Saturday fires there was a significant increase in referrals to domestic violence support services in bush-fire affected communities (Parkinson & Zara, 2013).

## Barriers to seeking support

Alongside the specific experiences of controlling behaviours, women living in rural, regional and remote areas have been found to experience the following obstacles when seeking support:

- Centrality and prevalence in the belief of concepts around self-reliance and privacy which suggest that family problems should be kept private (Owen & Carrington, 2015).
- Victim-survivors concerns of stigmatisation and becoming the subject of gossip and community exclusion (Owen & Carrington, 2015).
- Lack of privacy and intimacy of life in smaller communities, where service providers, police and health professionals are likely to know those involved (Owen & Carrington, 2015, p. 5).
- Limited support services with longer wait times and higher service provision costs (Campo & Tayton, 2015a, p. 6).
- Complicated financial arrangements. As Owen and Carrington (2015) describe, in farming communities money is often tied up in assets or trust funds, such as the family farm, making financial independence particularly challenging. Further, there are often limited employment opportunities in rural areas and may be seen as ineligible for Centrelink benefits as these are means tested based on assets (such as property).
- Higher rates of gun ownership in non-urban communities have also been cited as a serious concern for victim-survivors of domestic and family violence (Campo & Tayton, 2015a, p. 5), which increases the vulnerability of those experiencing coercive control “to serious harm and death” (Wendt et al., 2015, p. 6).

## LGBTIQA+ people

### Prevalence

LGBTIQA+ communities are diverse and include those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual or otherwise diverse in gender, sex or sexuality (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2022). Research into the prevalence of coercive control within LGBTIQA+ communities in Australia is limited and findings vary across datasets (Campo & Tayton, 2015b). Despite this, the community has been identified as being vulnerable in specific forms of domestic, family and sexual violence (ANROWS, 2020). The most recent *Private Lives Survey* (Hill et al., 2020), which gathered data from 6,835 LGBTIQA+ participants living in Australia, found that emotional abuse was the most common form of abuse perpetrated by an intimate partner (48%), followed by verbal abuse (42.4%). Many participants also experienced forms of coercive control from family members. Verbal abuse was the most common (41.5%) experience from family members, followed by LGBTIQA+ related abuse (40.8%), which includes shaming about being LGBTIQA+, threatening to 'out' someone or reveal HIV status, and/or withholding hormones or medication (Hill et al., 2020, p. 71).

### Experiences

The Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (2020a, p.5) describes that "identity-based, or identity-related tactics of abuse are often central to the way dynamics of power and coercive control manifest in (LGBTIQA+) relationships," as captured by the *Private Lives Survey*, where 42.6 per cent of those who had ever experienced violence from an intimate partner or family member felt that they had been targeted based on sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression or intersex variation/s (Hill et al., 2020, p. 74). As such, experiences of heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are central to understanding how LGBTIQA+ people experience coercive control. Certain experiences have been identified, such as:

- The actual or threatened practice of 'outing' or disclosing HIV status to family and social networks (Calton et al., 2015).
- Perpetrators using their partner's identity and/or sexuality as a form of control by limiting access to friends/social networks (Calton et al., 2015).
- Suggestions that the victim will not be believed due to homo/bi/trans-phobia or that they will be discrimination against by services and the law (Calton et al., 2015; Fileborn, 2012).

### Barriers to seeking support

A range of factors have been identified as barriers for LGBTIQA+ people seeking support for intimate partner violence. Whilst most of these barriers are from studies not explicitly focused on coercive control, they illustrate the types of barriers that may be experienced. These include:

- A lack of recognition of what constitutes domestic and family violence due to heteronormative understandings of intimate partner violence (Ristock, 2014).
- Fear of not being taken seriously and encountering homo/bi/trans-phobic responses from support services (Leonard et al., 2008).
- Service providers lacking awareness and understanding of the specific experiences of LGBTIQA+ populations (Campo & Tayton, 2015b, p. 6).
- Fear of losing friends and/or being alienated within LGBTIQA+ communities (Fileborn, 2012).
- The desire to not draw negative attention to LGBTIQA+ communities (Campo & Tayton, 2015b, p. 6).
- Fear of being 'outed' by seeking support (Leonard et al., 2008, p. 38).
- Lack of awareness of available services (Leonard et al., 2008, p. 60).

## Additional considerations

Whilst this paper has focused on marginalised groups previously identified as disproportionately represented as victim-survivors of coercive control as well as family and domestic violence more broadly, there are clear gaps in the research around the significance of different intersections of identity and experiences of coercive control. As noted, it is challenging to compare across population groups or identify others who may be significantly and differently impacted by coercive control due to content and participation limitations within existing datasets.

Future study may aim to capture the distinct experiences of coercive control across the Victorian population, ensuring that different axes of identity are accounted for and enhancing accessibility by establishing multiple modes of participation and providing multiple language translations. Such a dataset would illuminate how intersections of individuals' identities overlap to create multiple and compounding experiences of coercive control and barriers to seeking help, enabling future research and policy discussions to be directed with a more comprehensive understanding of the current state of coercive control within Victoria.

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*Hyperlinks correct as of March 2022.*

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