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News analysis

Family violence manifests in a range of abusive behaviours

Many unaware coercive control and financial exploitation are forms of family violence



Theresa Tan

Senior Social Affairs Correspondent

The woman struggled with thoughts of suicide, as her husband constantly made her feel she was never good enough as a wife and mother.

This was after the Singaporean in her 30s – cajoled by her husband – gave up a promising career to be a stay-at-home mother when she was pregnant with their first child.

After she quit her job, the husband controlled more and more aspects of her life, down to what she wore and the brands of household items she bought. He often questioned her ability to manage a household.

He also isolated her from her family and friends.

At first, it started off with him throwing a tantrum each time she wanted to meet her friends. To avoid upsetting him, she just stopped contacting her friends as time passed.

Ms Kristine Lam, principal social worker at Care Corner Project StART, said: “The husband kept saying things like a good mother should do this or should not do that. There was a lot of emotional blackmailing and guilt-tripping, and she tried to conform herself to what he wanted.”

“Over time, she didn’t know what was right or what was wrong any more. She no longer recognised herself from before she stopped working.”

The final straw was when he choked her while their baby cried in the middle of the night. He called her an irresponsible mother for not responding to the

baby quickly enough.

The woman moved out and applied for a personal protection order, which is a court order restraining her husband from committing violence against her. She later filed for a divorce.

She was shocked to learn from social workers she was a victim of coercive control, which is a repeated pattern of behaviour that seeks to control, subordinate, suppress and isolate victims, Ms Lam said.

COERCIVE CONTROL COMMON IN FAMILY VIOLENCE CASES

In many family violence cases, there is usually some form of coercive control, social workers interviewed say.

Yet the public, and even victims themselves, still equate family violence primarily with physical violence.

This is because many are unaware that family violence manifests in a range of abusive behaviours – from psychological abuse to financial exploitation – and occurs on a spectrum of severity.

For years, social workers and groups such as the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) have been raising the alarm about the harms caused by coercive control, a form of emotional and psychological abuse.

On July 4, they cheered as it was announced that the laws governing family violence would be updated to make it clear that besides physical abuse, other forms of violence such as sexual,

emotional and psychological abuse are also considered family violence.

In reading the Women’s Charter (Family Violence and Other Matters) Amendment Bill, Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sun Xueling said there are cases where perpetrators threatened to withhold monthly allowance from their spouses, constantly called their spouses to check on their whereabouts, and isolated them from their family and friends, such as not allowing them to leave their house.

She said: “These egregious forms of controlling behaviour – which falls within the definition of what some other jurisdictions call coercive control – can cause distress or mental harm to a survivor and would be considered emotional or psychological abuse under the new Bill.”

Ms Sun said that the definition of sexual abuse includes conduct or behaviour that coerces, or attempts to coerce, a person to engage in sexual activity.

Lawyer June Lim said that the old definition of family violence covered aspects of emotional and psychological abuse, such as “wilfully or knowingly placing, or attempting to place, a family member in fear of hurt” and “causing continual harassment with intent to cause or knowing that it is likely to cause anguish to a family member”.

However, the chairman of Pro Bono SG’s Family Justice Support Scheme said the old definition tended to lean towards injuries or harm that can be physically

observed.

So it was difficult for a victim to show that the perpetrator had caused multiple small incidents that added up, amounting to psychological and emotional abuse.

As Aware said in a Facebook post after the Bill was passed: “For far too long, violence has been misunderstood as primarily physical in nature, resulting in many victim-survivors of non-physical violence going unheard.”

“This wider definition of family violence will empower more survivors to speak out and seek help.”

FOREIGN WIVES A VULNERABLE GROUP

While coercive control and family violence cut across all demographic groups, foreign wives are a segment of society who are particularly vulnerable, as many of them are dependent on their Singaporean husbands to sponsor their visit passes to stay in Singapore.

A common tactic these husbands use is to threaten to cancel their foreign spouses’ long-term visit pass to exert some form of control over them, those interviewed said.

Ms Lim said another tactic the men use is to give their foreign wives money for expenses only when she asks for it, instead of a monthly allowance.

She said: “If the women want money to buy food or groceries, for example, the men would ask for sex in return.”

HARMS FROM COERCIVE CONTROL

Due to the intense level of monitoring, scrutiny and control that they face, victim-survivors of coercive control commonly experience feelings of isolation, subordination, humiliation and loss of liberty... As a result, the emotional and psychological impact on survivors can include a loss of self-esteem, self-worth and identity, depression and anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidality.



AWARE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CORINNA LIM

SEXUAL ABUSE NOT UNCOMMON

Sexual abuse is another form of violence spelt out in the amended law.

Ms Katherine Baptist, director of social advocacy (anti-violence) at Montfort Care, said that sexual abuse is “not uncommon” among the cases the social service agency has handled.

She said: “Some women tell us their husbands force themselves on them.”

“It made them wonder if their husbands see them as an equal partner or just a sex object, and they feel violated.”

For example, a woman called Aware’s helpline as her ex-partner would coerce her into sex.

The man lashed out at her if she did not agree to have sex when he asked, and he sexually assaulted her multiple times.

When she broke up with him, he spread rumours about her and got his friends to harass her. His actions led to the woman suffering panic attacks and depression, said Aware’s executive director Corinna Lim.

She pointed out it is a myth that non-physical forms of violence are less serious than physical abuse.

She said: “Due to the intense level of monitoring, scrutiny and control that they face, victim-survivors of coercive control commonly experience feelings of isolation, subordination, humiliation and loss of liberty.”

“As a result, the emotional and psychological impact on survivors can include a loss of self-esteem, self-worth and identity, depression and anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidality.”

With the law making clear that sexual abuse and coercive control are family violence, social workers say that this signals to the public that such actions are not to be tolerated and this has a deterrent effect.

What is needed now is to have more public education efforts to raise Singaporeans’ awareness about the different forms of abuse, those interviewed say.

This is necessary as many victims do not even realise they have been abused as coercive control operates in an insidious manner and the perpetrators often gaslight their victims, social workers say.

Gaslighting refers to a form of psychological manipulation that causes the victim to question the validity of his or her perception of reality.

Lawyer June Lim said: “They may be gaslit into believing that the controlling behaviour is the perpetrator’s way of showing love to them or his way of protecting her from harm in the outside world.”

theresat@sph.com.sg

Helplines

MENTAL WELL-BEING

- Institute of Mental Health’s Mental Health Helpline: 6389-2222 (24 hours)
- Samaritans of Singapore: 1800-221-4444 (24 hours) /1-767 (24 hours)
- Singapore Association for Mental Health: 1800-283-7019
- Silver Ribbon Singapore: 6386-1928
- Tinkle Friend: 1800-274-4788
- Community Health Assessment Team 6493-6500/1

COUNSELLING

- TOUCHline (Counselling): 1800-377-2252
- TOUCH Care Line (for seniors, caregivers): 6804-6555
- Care Corner Counselling Centre: 6353-1180
- Counselling and Care Centre: 6536-6366

ONLINE RESOURCES

- mindline.sg
- stayprepared.sg/mymentalhealth
- eC2.sg
- www.tinklefriend.sg
- www.chat.mentalhealth.sg
- carey.carecorner.org.sg (for those aged 13 to 25)
- limitless.sg/talk (for those aged 12 to 25)