

As a victim of coercive control and domestic violence, I am asking that the Canadian Government act now on behalf of the lives of women and children affected by domestic violence and coercive control. Some beneficial changes that can be made are to criminalise this behaviour and broaden the definition of domestic violence to include more forms of abuse, and to offer education and tools needed to improve the ability for officer's, child protection workers and judges to recognize and protect against violence.

For 3 years, I was in a coercively controlling relationship and **the psychological trauma that I endured was far more detrimental than the physical trauma.** In the first week of our marriage, the abuse escalated severely. Before our 1 year wedding anniversary, I had lost much of what I knew of myself. I had experienced a continuous, calculated attack on my identity, personhood, faith, family, and dreams. He would degrade me, manipulate me, and use gaslighting tactics to make me feel like I was crazy. He would wake me up to abuse me, confine me to spaces and yell for hours, and even when I would plead for him to leave me alone he wouldn't. When I would tell anyone what was happening or ask for help, the abuse escalated. He was calculated in his ability to keep me in the relationship and make me afraid to get help. In various incidents he would break things and throw things in anger to intimidate me, lie to confuse me and steal things like my phone to control me.

The fear of my ex-partner having unsupervised visitation with my child was an influential factor in causing me to stay with him or to go back with him when I left. The reality in the family court system is that, even with documented physical, psychological and verbal violence within the household, my daughter has to be alone with him. Though I fought for supervision, she still sees him 3 times a week, unsupervised and alone. Now, my daughter still witnesses his abuse towards me during the transfers of our daughter, and the toxic way that he communicates with her about me. She is affected by his calculated and covert attempts to harass myself, her teachers, and use her as a pawn in our family court case. **The fact that my 2 year old daughter is not in any way protected from this coercive control and isn't yet considered by the system as a victim of violence and abuse is simply wrong.**

Child protection workers have expressed significant concerns for my daughter in the care of her father, yet they will not further involve themselves since my daughter is safe in my primary care and they do not get involved with family court orders. Family courts have not protected her since they have a duty to allow both parties to see the child. Police cannot protect her because what he is doing is not yet a crime and without her being able to speak, there is no evidence. Protection while allowing her to still see her father could look like some of the following:

1. court ordered psychological assessments;
2. court ordered involvement in therapy or an educational program for those who have been violent towards their partners;
3. supervised visitation or at the least, supervised transfers - this would require more facilities to combat the demand and waitlists;
4. increased access to child advocates particularly in cases with young children who cannot yet talk (even though she does not say much, an advocate should be trained to see the signs of abuse that extend beyond a child's ability to make a statement);

5. child protection workers who are trained to protect a child from psychological and verbal abuse, not simply physical violence;
6. education for those working within this field to assist with identification of coercive control and the protection of families facing these experiences.

After we left, we were at increased risk of abuse and we were not protected. Our risk of violence increased further after I reported him to the police and they charged him. There were victim/witness advocates and police officers who assured me that his release conditions would protect us by requiring that we perform our transfers in a supervised access facility. Instead, he was released with a no contact order EXCEPT for during transfers and when we are in communication about our daughter. The police have been unable to assist me in times where he is breaching the order due to the covert and careful ways he does this and due to the “grey areas” in his release conditions. **Supervised access facilities/supervised exchange programs can offer significant protection to children and mothers after fleeing domestic violence. We need more of these programs and they must not simply be recommended in family court or by advocates / criminal justice workers - they need to be ordered in family court orders and criminal court release conditions.**

There is a need for education for professionals to alter the language and to better understand the realities of abuse / how coercive control presents itself in family court and police related domestic calls. I have come across the 3 following issues in relation to this. First, Judges, lawyers, police etc. have called the abuse that we are experiencing, “marital conflict”, “communication issues”, and “conflict caused by separation”, which dramatically minimises the realities of the danger of domestic violence. This has caused the family court system to make the assumption that, even though there is conflict between myself and my daughter's father, it does not mean that she will also experience abuse. However, with a coercively controlling person, this behaviour extends into most facets of their life and there is a high likelihood that the individual will perpetuate this onto their children. Second, my ex partner has lost legal counsel due to break down of their relationship and he is now self-representing which has allowed him to manipulate the story, speak for himself (which can be traumatising for the victim), and more affordably bring continuous motions to the courts. In an attempt to deal with this, courts in Scotland do not allow the abusive or coercively controlling party to self-represent. Third, when I have reported the abuse to the police they have asked me to “stay focussed on the incidents where criminal activity occurred, where he was physically violent”, causing me to be required to leave out the incidents that left the most detrimental impact on me.

In conclusion, I am constantly looking over my shoulder afraid of the next thing he will do to harm my daughter or I. Despite the distance, he still regularly impacts our lives negatively. Due to barriers within family court, child protection, and access to resources, leaving will not free us from the grip of the abuser, particularly when there is a child involved. **Therefore, it is the duty of the Canadian Government to begin to take steps to break down the barriers involved in leaving domestic violence and protecting victims after fleeing domestic violence.**