

“Insidious”: Tech-facilitated coercive control on the rise

On the tenth anniversary of Legal Aid NSW's Domestic Violence Unit, we are sounding a warning about rising levels of domestic abuse involving digital tools and other technology.

It comes as new figures show record numbers of women across NSW are seeking help from this specialist unit, with almost 8,000 women reaching out for help in the last financial year.

According to new data from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) released last week, 224 incidents of coercive control have been recorded with 60 per cent of these involving harassment, monitoring and tracking.

Rising smartphone use and digital abuse

“Smartphone use has skyrocketed in the past ten years and so has the incidence of domestic violence involving digital technology,” says Director Domestic and Family Violence Anna Baltins.

“Technology-facilitated coercive control is becoming increasingly common and it’s vital that people recognise the signs of it.

“It can involve victims being forced to hand over their phone or to give the perpetrator access to their calls, messages, emails, social media pages and bank accounts.

“This non-physical abuse is insidious. It can hide in plain sight and can lead to or reinforce physical violence.

“We also see victims being tracked through banking apps, toll accounts and GPS trackers in their cars. Surveillance devices are being hidden in their homes and their kids’ phones.

“We are also seeing other coercive behaviours that involve victims being isolated from family and friends, stopped from getting jobs, and being told what to wear and where they can go.”

The high cost of financial abuse

The Domestic Violence Unit is a highly specialised team that includes lawyers, mental health professionals, case workers and financial counsellors.

“Financial abuse is increasingly common and can involve perpetrators withholding money or controlling household spending,” Ms Baltins says.

“Some abusers maliciously rack up large debts under a victim’s name through credit cards, bank loans, Centrelink debts and utility bills. In these situations, our unit has been able to waive more than \$200,000 in debt between 2023-24 for victim-survivors of this abuse.”

As domestic violence rates rise, so has demand for legal assistance. In the past two years there has been a 69 per cent increase in the number of women seeking legal advice from the Domestic Violence Unit. In the past ten years, this figure increased 700 per cent. So far this year, the DVU has provided about 3,000 legal advice services – the highest number in five years.

“Legal Aid NSW’s Domestic Violence Unit does vital work in assisting women escaping domestic and family violence,” says Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Jodie Harrison.

“The legal system can be very daunting for victim-survivors. The Domestic Violence Unit, working with the Women’s Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service, helps them navigate the process and makes sure their interests are advocated for and protected.

“Last year, coercive control became a criminal offence. Coercive control is insidious abuse and manifests in many ways, including tracking victim-survivors through their phone, or racking up debts in their names.

“The support the Domestic Violence Unit provides to victim-survivors in recognising financial abuse and tech-facilitated coercive control, as well as recovering money for them, allows them to reclaim their lives and live free from violence and abuse.”

Legal Aid NSW is the main provider of domestic violence legal representation services in NSW. For free legal support, call its Domestic Violence Unit on 1800 979 529.

Case studies

Rada

Rada* sought help from the Domestic Violence Unit after Jon* started to monitor her phone including checking her emails and texts. He also installed security cameras inside the house and monitored her transport card statements to track her movements. Jon did not allow Rada to have her own bank account nor access to their joint accounts and he managed all their combined finances. Jon threatened to harm Rada’s family overseas if she reported to police or talked to anyone about his abuse. Following police involvement, an ADVO was applied to protect Rada.

Susan

Susan* and John* were married for 25 years. John was financially controlling throughout the marriage. Susan and John both worked and although they were both paid into a joint account, John would immediately transfer money out of the account on pay day and allocate Susan funds for groceries. He would also transfer money out of the joint account when he was angry at her, so she would have to ring him at the supermarket to ask for money. Following separation John started to turn up in unexpected locations including at a park when she was walking with a friend and at a café, with Susan suspecting he was tracking her through her phone. Susan came to see the Domestic Violence Unit and they provided her with advice about a property settlement and provided her with a new, free and secure phone. They also made a referral to the Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service who assisted her to make a report to police, who applied for an ADVO.

*Pseudonyms have been used to protect the client's identity

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