

Consultation Draft- National Principles to Address Coercive Control

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D O M E S T I C
V I O L E N C E
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Acknowledgement

This report was written on the stolen and unceded lands of the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation. We pay respects to the Elders past, present and emerging.

Domestic Violence NSW would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the breadth and depth of Australia. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lived and cared for Country for over 65,000 years and continue to do so, honouring ancestors and knowledge holders within community, and observing ancient cultural practices.

We would like to recognise the impacts of colonisation and the ongoing systemic racism and oppression that is still present within institutions and the broader community.

We acknowledge the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and hold their stories with great care.

We concede that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are at the highest risk of sexual, family and domestic violence compared with other women in Australia. We acknowledge that domestic and family violence are not part of Aboriginal culture.

Domestic Violence NSW work to position ourselves as allies, to walk alongside, to listen, to give our voice and strength, to respect, to never forget and to learn from past mistakes.



About Domestic Violence NSW

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Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) is the **peak body for specialist domestic and family violence (DFV) services in NSW**. We have over 130 member organisations across NSW. We work to improve policy, legislative and program responses to domestic and family violence and to eliminate DFV through advocacy, partnerships and promoting good practice.

DVNSW members represent the diversity of specialist services working in NSW to support women, families and communities impacted by domestic and family violence. They are non-government-funded organisations. Our member organisations include crisis and refuge services, transitional accommodation and community housing providers, family support services, Aboriginal controlled organisations and specialist CALD organisations, specialist homelessness service providers, men's behaviour change programs and networks, community organisations working with high-risk communities, specialist women's legal support services, women and children's support services, and Safe at Home programs.

DVNSW gives permission for this submission to be published publicly.

This submission is representative of DVNSW's 130+ member services.

Executive summary

Please accept this submission in lieu of a completed Consultation Draft survey. DVNSW appreciates the opportunity to make a submission for the consultation draft of the National Principles to Address Coercive Control (the Principles).

DVNSW suggests that there are a number of key issues on the foundations of the Principles. As a result, DVNSW recommends:

- Principle 1 includes guidance to deliver a definition
- The narrow nature in which misidentification is examined is expanded across all Principles,
- Perpetrator accountability is addressed throughout the Principles, as well as its own standalone Principle
- Principles 7 and 8 are joined to examine criminalisation and its potential consequences wholistically
- Appropriate literature and data is inserted throughout the Principles and/or a background paper with far more in-depth information and research is attached
- Further consultation is performed with LGBTQIA+ organisations to increase inclusivity of the community in the Principles, and
- Cultural and systems reform is addressed across all Principles, however, also as a stand-alone Principle highlighting non-legislative changes that can be made.

In line with the questions asked in the survey, this submission will explain concerns with the Principles collectively before examining the Principles individually.

While the Principles often offer good insights and rarely have incorrect information, they do miss some of the more nuanced factors of the work. Further, DVNSW argues that the holistic concerns are so significant that the Principles significant revision with a clear objective and audience in mind. Given NSW is a forerunner in coercive control legislation, DVNSW are in a position to offer unique advice from experience of what may have helped or hindered in the NSW criminalisation process.

A note on terminology

Domestic violence

Interpersonal violence or abuse perpetrated by an intimate partner or ex-partner. Domestic violence can include a variety of forms of abuse including but not limited to physical, sexual, psychological, financial abuse, stalking and intimidation. Domestic violence extends beyond physical violence and frequently involves the exploitation of power imbalances and patterns of abuse.

Family violence

Violence perpetrated by a family member, carer, guardian, child or kinship carer. Family violence can include a variety of forms of abuse including but not limited to physical, sexual, psychological, financial abuse, stalking and intimidation. Family violence extends beyond physical violence and frequently involves the exploitation of power imbalances and patterns of abuse.

Gendered violence

Gendered violence or gender-based violence refers to harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals because of their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms. The term is primarily used to draw attention to the fact that structural, gender-based power differentials place women and girls at risk for multiple forms of violence. While women and girls suffer disproportionately from gendered violence, men and particularly boys can also be victims. The term is inclusive of LGBTIQ+ populations, referencing violence related to norms of masculinity/femininity and/or gender norms.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Abuse perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner such as a partner, husband, wife, girlfriend, boyfriend, or person who someone is dating. Forms of violence are listed under domestic violence.

People with lived expertise

People with lived expertise are people who have experience of sexual, domestic and/or family violence whose expertise as context experts due to their lived experience is noted.

Specialist sexual, domestic, and family violence sector

The specialist sexual, domestic, and family violence sector includes crisis and refuge services, transitional accommodation and community housing providers, family support services, Aboriginal controlled organisations, specialist multicultural community organisations, specialist LGBTIQ+ organisations, counselling services, sexual violence services, specialist homelessness service providers, men's behaviour change programs and networks, community organisations working with high-risk communities, specialist women's legal and support services, women's health centres, women and children's support services, Safe at Home programs and the Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services.

Victim-survivor

Victim-survivor refers to a person who is being or has experienced violence, acknowledging that people who have been victimised are survivors and are also victims of crime. We acknowledge that people who have been victimised are survivors and are also victims of crime. This is not intended as an identity term. In the specialist domestic and family violence sector, the preferred term is victim-survivor.

DVNSW notes that the justice sector and legislation use the term victim. In this submission, although used interchangeably, the emphasis has been placed on the term victim-survivor, with victim used at times particularly when discussing the justice system or legislation.

Coercive Control National Principles

DVNSW appreciates the opportunity to make a submission for the consultation draft of the National Principles to Address Coercive Control (the Principles). We note that it was asked that we focus our submission around the survey questions being asked. These questions ask the survey respondent to indicate on a Likert scale how well they believe the Principles effectively describe the:

- common features of coercive control
- impacts of coercive control
- key issues associated with a lack of understanding of coercive control
- impact of discrimination and inequality in the context of coercive control
- importance of listening to and working with victim-survivors of family and domestic violence
- key elements needed to effectively address coercive control
- key issues to consider when deciding whether or how to criminalise coercive control
- potential unintended consequences of criminalisation
- Inclusivity of a diverse range of experiences and voices

DVNSW are concerned that these questions take for granted the belief that the principles themselves are appropriate, only asking for feedback on how well they are executed, meaning that the responses received from the survey data may be restricted. Rather, DVNSW suggests that there are many key issues with the foundations of the Principles. In line with the questions asked in the survey, this submission will explain concerns with the Principles collectively before examining the Principles individually.

Holistic Concerns

DVNSW are concerned with the following ways in which the Principles miss opportunities to be a guiding document for states and territories.

Establishing a clear Definition

There is no definition of coercive control in the Principles, nor guidance offered as to how the states and territories could create one. In NSW, we have had significant recent discussion regarding concerns with the differing proposed definitions in the Crimes Act (1900) and the Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act (2007) in connection with the introduction of the new criminal offence of coercive control. The Principles should be examining and providing guidance on this issue. Offering a definition of coercive control would, for example, assist with establishing that coercive control is not one form of domestic and family violence, rather than the *foundation* of all domestic and family violence (ANROWS, 2021). This links to calls that have been made for a significant period of time for a nation-wide, homogenous definition of domestic and family violence (ANROWS, 2021; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). This would solve both issues, as stated by ANROWS (2021, p. 2):

The revised definition of DFV must set the context for how to understand coercive control, that is, as a gendered, overarching context for DFV behaviours, rather than a tactic or an example of a DFV behaviour.

The understanding of coercive control as a gendered, overarching context of domestic and family violence, rather than one example, needs to be reflected in the Introduction on page 1, which states,

The Australian Government and state and territory governments recognise that understanding and responding to coercive control **is an important part** of preventing and responding to family and domestic violence (emphasis added).

This would bring together differences in definitions around the country and allow the examination of a contextual definition that examines the differences between types of violence. For example, not all violence is domestic abuse, particularly excluding reactive, retaliatory, or primitive violence.

Misidentification of the Primary Aggressor/Person most In Need of Protection

Misidentification of the primary aggressor is only mentioned in Principle 8, examining the unintended consequences of criminalisation. However, misidentification is an issue across many systems.

Firstly, concerns around misidentification have not started with the criminalisation of coercive control. Research from the Family Violence Reform Monitor (2021) in Victoria explore the ways in which misidentification is persistent across the criminal legal system, as well as many other systems that domestic and family violence intersects with. The Family Violence Reform Monitor (2021) sets out sixteen proposed actions to address systemic misidentification across the police, courts and legal services, child protection, and the system as a whole.

Secondly, the risk of misidentification is not limited to the narrow scope of the criminalisation of coercive control. Misidentification can happen at numerous junctures of systems, such as the Family Court, housing, and child protection agencies. As such, a focus on misidentification and coercive control should also be accompanied by accountability mechanisms to ensure the action on the institutional racism and discrimination the contributes to misidentification.

It is also important to note that, while outside the scope of these Principles, there is a significant need for the examination of misidentification as a whole of systems issue. Queensland have recently made significant developments in this area in their new bill: Domestic and Family Violence Protection (Combating Coercive Control) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2022. DVNSW recommend referring to this bill for legislative suggestions on how to address misidentification.

Perpetrator Accountability

Perpetrator accountability is key to shifting the blame of the perpetrator's violence away from the victim-survivor experiencing it and back where it belongs- on the perpetrator. Perpetrator accountability is not mentioned until Principle 6, and only once in passing, in the first line of the description. There are multiple junctures along the way that perpetrator accountability should be raised, and multiple instances of a passive voice being used.

For example, in Principle 2, points two, three and four use a passive voice, with point 4 stating "Coercive control can affect a victim-survivor's whole life, and take away their independence, dignity, sense of self-worth, identity, feeling of security and health and wellbeing". Coercive control is not in itself sentient. Rather it is *perpetrators' use* of coercive control that has these effects. By leaving the perpetrator out of the picture, the principle de-centres perpetrators and reinforces the view that it is the victim-survivors' responsibility to end the violence. Instead DVNSW would suggest that perpetrator accountability should form its own Principle, and perpetrators are named and held accountable throughout. For more on clear language, see Insight Exchange (n.d.).

Lack of reference to other work

There is a concerning lack of reference to any literature or data throughout the Principles. It is important that the Principles are evidence-based, and that this evidence is appropriately cited. In development of their own approach to coercive control, it will be of vital importance that states and territories have access to the most up-to-date research and evidence, and the Principles should help them to source it.

There are also many pieces of work that have come before the Principles that should be drawn upon for this work, such as academic material, community campaign research, the Australian Law Reform Commission's (2010) extensive report on family violence and the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (the National Plan). Noting that the Principles are named within the National Plan, it is important that they are integrated into other work under the Action Plans.

Audience

Finally, it is unclear who the audience is intended to be for this document. If the audience is intended to be legislators in each state, the document lacks adequate nuance and direction. If the audience is intended to be the sector, it is at a level far below that of the understanding of the sector. If the audience is intended to be the community, there needs to be far more reference to other work and resources.

Other missing elements

Additional to the concerns discussed above, the Principles also need to include:

- Guidance on how the above should be addressed
- While the LGBTQIA+ community is mentioned, the language does not reflect their inclusion, such as a lack of mention around bodily autonomy
- Non-legislative change should be highlighted as a stand-alone Principle as the majority of victim-survivors do not access the justice system
- The ongoing effects of coercive control post-separation, particularly where children and Family Court are involved
- Attention to children and young people as victims in their own right.

Principle 1

Firstly, DVNSW recommend that within Principle 1, a more nuanced understanding of coercive control being the foundation of domestic and family violence could be articulated (see “Establishing a definition”), and this principle offer direction in establishing a clearer definition of the issue. The principle states:

Coercive control is often a significant part of a person’s experience of family and domestic violence.

Coercive control should not be separated as a part of domestic and family violence but be understood as the overarching context for the majority of violence. For example, it contextualises retaliatory violence, which makes up a significant portion of women’s violence against men. Retaliatory violence is not committed with the view to control the other person, but rather in an attempt to wrestle back the control over themselves that the other person has been attempting to take. When we examine all domestic and family violence through the lens of coercive control, we are afforded a much clearer understanding of the violent dynamics of the relationship, which the incident-based approach that is currently favoured lacks.

Secondly, DVNSW hold concerns about a passive voice is used in this Principle, with the first dot point speaking about a person’s experience of family and domestic violence as opposed to a perpetrator’s employment of coercive control (See “Perpetrator accountability” and Principle 2 below for more).

Thirdly, in the in-depth section, sexual violence is added on to physical violence in parentheses, as if it is an afterthought, and then the section continues to refer only to physical violence. Sexual abuse is an extremely common and devastating form of abuse that requires its own in-depth discussion rather than being relegated to parentheses. While it is important to recognise the weaponizing of threats to remove children or withhold contact, this needs to be contextualised. Victim-survivors will often withhold their children from the perpetrator when they feel their children are in danger of being harmed or killed. This may be due to having only just left the relationship, after an incident that they know will have angered the perpetrator, or a number of other discreet indicators that the perpetrator is upset with the victim-survivor and may wish to harm them. It is important that this protective parenting is not manipulated against the victim-survivor and is clearly contextualised within the document.

Finally, while broader family relationships are mentioned in the fourth point of the in-depth explanations, this Principle does privilege intimate relationships. Most research on coercive control have centred intimate relationships, however experts have been clear in their concerns around coercive control being employed in other domestic relationships. Coercive control within other domestic relationships can be just as prevalent and severe as coercive control from intimate partners and is used as a strategy for dominating a victim across a spectrum of relationships, not just intimate partners (Stark & Hester, 2019). Especially in marginalised populations, forms of coercive control are diverse, with these differences often exacerbated by economic inequalities, cultural biases, and institutional barriers (Stark & Hester, 2019).

Principle 2

Principle two continues to demonstrate a passive voice in dot points three and four. In dot point three, the perpetrator is entirely absent from homicide, and in dot point four, coercive control is the main operational factor, rather than the perpetrator’s use of it.

While the in-depth section of the principles mentions escalation after separation, the danger of this could be emphasised, particularly with readily available statistics. A perpetrator’s use of coercive control could

also result in victim-survivors responding in many diverse ways. While the risk of job loss is noted, and the traumatic impacts on children and young people are noted, there needs to be more emphasis on how victim-survivors may respond to trauma, including in ways that may result in job loss. Further, while the cumulative impact of coercive control is mentioned, loss of autonomy could be more of a focus. As this list of effects is based on evidence, it is particularly important that citations are available.

Principle 3

Principle three does not appear to constitute a principle, and is not entirely factual. Victim-survivors and the DFV sector have long understood coercive control to be synonymous with domestic and family violence, leading to widespread advocacy. The Principle requires a commitment from all governments, at both federal and state and territory level, to rectify the issue being pointed out, such as a commitment to systems and cultural reform. While reference is made to differing responses from systems, DVNSW recommend that this should be the central focus for Principle three, as well as recognition of the structural barriers that victim-survivors are presented with.

This principle also focuses heavily on incorrect assumptions about victim-survivors including how victim-survivors often use violent resistance. There is again an invisibility of perpetrators. The incorrect assumptions made about perpetrators are the other half of this issue that has led to inconsistent responses. There needs to be more focus on the incorrect assumptions made about perpetrators that lead to women and other victim-survivors being disbelieved.

Principle 4

While Principle four explores several intersections of discrimination and how they can be weaponised by perpetrators, it does not sufficiently note the centrality of inequitable systems, nor address the cultural and systems reform that are required to combat them. The in-depth section appropriately outlines how perpetrators use discrimination and inequality as a tool. However, a heavier focus is required on the existence of discrimination and inequalities in systems to begin with, and how the Principles will combat the tool of discrimination and inequality itself through cultural and systems reform. The drivers of discrimination and inequality are not examined, and the use of passive language around how differing forms of discrimination 'may' and 'can' cause inequality is inaccurate.

DVNSW recommend that this principle is reconfigured to assert a pro-active focus for jurisdictions. For example, acknowledging the effects of discrimination and inequality, and working towards creating equitable systems to respond to coercive control.

Principle 5

DVNSW are generally in support of centring the experiences of people with lived experience, however, note several concerns with the nuance in this principle.

The absence of perpetrators is most obvious in Principle 5. The victim-survivors that this Principle refers to were not victims of coercive control, but a perpetrator's weaponizing of coercive control. For example, the first sentence could read:

Working with victim-survivors and listening to their voices and experiences is essential to ensure that approaches to address coercive control meet their needs effectively **and hold perpetrators accountable.**

These Principles must always be bringing the onus back to the perpetrator, a focus which could be improved across the document as a whole.

While the in-depth section, as well as the summary to some degree, explores the recognition of victim safety from a number of angles, as well as their strength and expertise in their own lives, there is very little about really *listening* to victim-survivors. Many processes use the same terminology of having victim-survivors' experiences "inform policies and solutions", however very few do this in a way that is more than tokenistic. Working with victim-survivors to create change can cause a lot of harm if it is not done well, with support, transparency, and accountability. It is worth noting that there are, sadly, millions of people with lived expertise, so it is vital that support is offered alongside this principle as to how lived expertise may be included and managed safely.

Further, it is important to remember that victim-survivors are experts in context, but not necessarily content. For example, a person with lived expertise may be a contextual expert into the dynamics of coercive control from having lived it as a child and as an adult, but be unfamiliar with the legal process in that jurisdiction. It is the job of policy makers to listen to the expertise in context and translate that into content, rather than asking victim-survivors to come ready with all of the answers. This nuance needs to be examined in Principle 5. How consultations will utilise victim-survivor expertise and the extent to which this expertise will inform the work, should be outlined from the beginning, and the Principle itself could do more work in proposing how victim-survivors should be engaged, such as through Lived Experience Advisory Groups. The Victorian Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor has performed extensive work in this area and should be looked to as best practice. It is worth noting that victim-survivors are compensated for their expertise in the Victorian model, as is best practice.

Principle 6

Principle 6 appropriately aligns with the National Plan, however, the in-depth section seems to focus almost exclusively on the prevention pillar. Further expansion is required on the other three pillars, which the groundwork is laid for in the summary Principle.

Further, the cultural and systems reform that is required would sit appropriately within this Principle, as would the significant work that needs to be performed across the criminal justice process to reduce the re-traumatisation for victim-survivors. This is work that advocates have been calling for, for a number of years and is yet to be prioritised. If the National Principles aim to deal with criminalisation of coercive control and the consequences, as explored in the next two Principles, then they must also address the larger issues with the processes within which criminalisation is situated.

Note - there is a spelling error in the title.

Principle 7

DVNSW recommend that this principle offer more clear direction to states and territories or is deleted, with the section noting that a criminal offence is only part of a broader approach being repetitive of Principle 6. While it is understandable that the Australian Government cannot influence the legislating of the states and territories, Principle 7 goes so far as to offer no direction on the criminalisation of coercive control when they do in fact require guidance to support a more consistent national approach. A recommended alternative is:

Whether coercive control should be a specific criminal offence, and the form this may take, is a matter for individual state and territory governments to determine based on an evaluation of sufficiency of their laws and policies to address coercive control and in alignment with the National Principles and National Plan.

The Principle does not acknowledge that it is not just a criminal law response that is required, with every area of law requiring an understanding of domestic and family violence. There should be significant discussion around the intersection of coercive control and Family Law and Immigration Law, both being the responsibility of the Federal Government. This would then lead into discussions around the intersection between state and federal law, which also need to be a part of this discussion.

Further, regardless of criminalisation, the cultural and systems reform required should be a stronger focus in dot point three of the in-depth section. DVNSW would suggest a principle that speaks about how it is important that the Criminal Justice System has mechanisms to deal with this type of abuse, noting the different parts of the system that coercive control operates within. That is, it does not necessarily need to be criminalised in a separate offence, but there does need to be mechanisms within other provisions in all areas of law that coercive control is able to operate within.

DVNSW also recommends this principle should be joined with Principle 8.

Principle 8

DVNSW recommend that Principle 7, the consideration of the criminalisation of coercive control, and Principle 8, the unintended consequences of such criminalisation, should not be separate principles. The unintended consequences of criminalisation need to be discussed as a central part of whether there is criminalisation. Unintended consequences especially for marginalised groups, including misidentification, should be at the absolute forefront at all times.

As Buxton-Namisnyk, Gibson, and MacGillivray (2022) explain, these consequences are unintended, but not unanticipated. These consequences have been “repeatedly, explicitly identified and acknowledged during the law reform process” (Buxton-Namisnyk, Gibson, and MacGillivray, 2022, np). There are many elements of misidentification explored in the in-depth section, and the issue of victim-survivors appearing agitated or uncooperative is mentioned, albeit could be explored further. However, many elements are also missing, such as not having the perpetrator identified as the aggressor, even if the victim is not misidentified. For example, women who are considered ‘mouthy’, ‘strong’, or have powerful careers often struggle to be identified as the victim by police and other agencies, and agencies can have challenges correctly identifying perpetrators in same-sex couples.

Lacking in this Principle is also any guidance on how to avoid misidentification, such as a better understanding of domestic and family violence in policing, the lived expertise of victim-survivors particularly women in prison, legislative mechanisms and accountability and auditing frameworks across our entire criminal legal system to identify and address misidentification.

Promotion

In order to make suggestions as to how governments could promote the final National Principles to increase awareness and understanding of coercive control, it would first need to be made clear who the audience of the Principles are. It is outlined on the Consultation Draft webpage (Australian Government, 2022):

The National Principles are designed to be used by government and non-government organisations involved in addressing coercive control. The National Principles will also be a tool to support greater community awareness of coercive control.

However, this summary includes very different audiences.

In the case that the principles are used by policy makers in government and non-government organisations, a background paper with far more in-depth information and research would need to be easily accessible. As per the Principles themselves, it is imperative that specialists and people with lived expertise are involved in any kind of training and development. Webinars are a useful way of promoting information to the sector and amongst policy-makers.

If the audience of the Principles is the community and education, there would need to be links to easily-accessible and digestible information, interactive elements, and case studies so that those unfamiliar with how coercive control functions can contextualise the information. DVNSW do not believe that the general community should be the primary audience for the guidelines.

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