Economic abuse

Studies of domestic and family violence often identify economic abuse as part of a pattern of behaviours [Cortis & Bullen 2015] used by perpetrators to exert control over the victim [Adams et al 2008], sometimes referred to as coercive control. Economic abuse is also known as financial abuse.

Such abuse may include behaviours that exclude the victim from decisions about finances that affect the victim. It may also include controlling the victim's access to finances and income. For example victims may be refused access to, or information about, bank accounts. Access to finances may be a particular concern in cases where the victim has no access to income, for example where a victim is on a visa requiring the perpetrator to provide financial support [Sanders 2007]. Lack of financial independence is reported as a primary reason victims do not leave abusive relationships [Kim & Gray 2008].

Sometimes perpetrators may exploit the victim's finances or coerce the victim to take on debt. Examples include perpetrators taking out credit cards in the victim's name without the victim's knowledge, coercing the victim to sign a contract for the provision of finance, a loan or credit, coercing the victim to sign assets over to the perpetrator or to enable access to line of credit (for example associated with a mortgage [Littwin 2012]).

Behaviours that sabotage the victim's employment may also constitute economic abuse. Such behaviours may result in victims losing their job or being unable to apply for employment. For example the perpetrator may prevent the victim from leaving the house for work or job interviews, or may harass the victim at the workplace resulting in their employment being terminated or hours reduced [Fawole 2008].

Economic abuse may involve coercive behaviours associated with the giving or receiving of dowry at any time before, during or after the marriage. For example, demands for larger gifts or increased cash payments from a victim and their family. A number of individuals can be involved in perpetrating dowry abuse, including in-laws, former spouses and fiancés, and other family members and friends [United Nations 2009].

Economic abuse may jeopardise a victim's economic self-sufficiency resulting in a diminished ability to parent, access healthcare and education, generally to act independently or to leave the relationship [Fawole 2008]. In some cases where victims of economic abuse do leave the relationship they may continue to be legally responsible for long-term debt and loss of assets incurred as a result of the perpetrator's economically abusive behaviours, which may significantly limit the victim's financial security and future opportunities. For example, some victims report paying off a car loan for many years after leaving the relationship, for a car they have never driven.

Research also demonstrates the systemic continuation of economic abuse post-separation through the courts and government agencies. This may include the ongoing engagement of the victim in legal proceedings so as to prolong the burden and impact of legal costs, for example by undermining the victim's ability to work; or masking income and hiding assets to avoid paying child support [Cameron 2014]. Exemptions enabling victims to opt out of the child support scheme where applying for child support would compromise their safety may have the effect of perpetuating this abuse and further financially disadvantaging low-income victims on welfare [Patrick et al 2008].

Economic abuse may be one aspect of a complex pattern of behaviours engaged in by perpetrators in order to control another person, sometimes referred to as coercive control.

