

# Domestic Violence Redefined

Stark, Evan. *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 452 pp. \$28.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-19-515427-6.

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In *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, Evan Stark broadens our understanding of violence against women as a major human rights violation. Scholars, law enforcement officers, shelter providers, social workers, and legal professionals interested in improving society's approach to dealing with the abuse of women should examine this work. At the onset, the book seems too theoretical, sketching a new definition for a long-standing problem that prevents women from achieving personhood. Its argument, that domestic violence violates constitutional rights and causes the suppression of liberty, has remained unaddressed by policymakers and practitioners even long after the success of the domestic violence revolution. Stark's theory however, provides a persuasive argument as to why physical violence is only one dimension of the complex political issues that play out within interpersonal relationships characterized as abusive. His argument also makes an important connection to compelling empirical evidence that permits the analysis of the social context of women's entrapment and resulting male social and economic privilege.

The book begins with the story of two well-publicized cases of domestic violence to carefully distinguish the everyday experiences of abused women from the failures of the current approach to dealing with the issue. Because the law did not recognize or provide legal standing for the hostage-like aspects of the abuse of these women, they were left unprotected and, as result, were murdered. Stark uses these well-known cases to anchor the book and outline the historical, theoretical, and strategic dimensions of coercive control. He goes on to argue that entrapped women are denied the opportunity to achieve full personhood because of the restrictions on their liberty. He develops what he calls the "theory of coercive control" to encapsulate gender violence, intimidation, economic oppression, limitations of speech and movement, and the denial of human rights. By making a social connection to the human rights literature, Stark is able to identify specific rights violations for each of the broad tactical categories embodied in coercive control. His true interest is in advancing public policy that would permit women to have an equitable chance of achieving full citizenship.

Stark examines the multiple dimensions of physical violence, abuse, and coercive control and argues that coercive control is the most important element. Coercive control in this case is conceptualized in a framework of constitutional rights violations with the suppression of liberty as the principal harm. The integral components of the theory of coercive control are learning theory, conjugal terrorism, and human rights. Stark spends considerable energy connecting his work to that of Camella Serum, Margaret Singer, Lewis Okun, and Ann Jones. Coercive control is rooted in the application of learning theory, in that tactics of control identified from the experiences of persons subjected to war prisons, mental facilities, and hostage situations parallel those of abused women. Okun's study of abusive men and battered women made the connection between women being conditioned to prostitution by their pimps and the coerced persuasion of abused women. Ann Jones established the connection to the human rights literature to extend Okun's work by incorporating psychological control skills that men could use in place of physical violence. The enduring effects of such control are critical to redefining partner abuse as controlling behavior created and sustained by power asymmetries between the perpetrator and the victim.

The richness of Stark's work is enhanced by the chapters that follow his explication of the theory of coercive control. Having sketched the evolution of coercive control from previously identified forms of physical violence against women and identifying the suppression of personal liberty as its primary harm, he goes on to examine the role of technology in its implementation. Stark carefully distinguishes the strategic aims, dynamics, and effects of coercive control from partner assaults, identifying its tactics and documenting the prevalence of their use. Drawing on case material from 30 years of practice, he details the full range of the effects of violence, intimidation, isolation and control which usually results from men using this technology.

The contributions of *Coercive Control* are varied. First, this text elevates coercive control from a rarely enforced misdemeanor to a major human rights violation. Previous efforts to combat domestic violence have failed to ensure women's rights to live independently in relationships. Stark details this failure to uncover the techniques used to enslave women. He makes use of cases from his 30 years of experience as a researcher, advocate, and forensic expert, along with FBI statistics and popular film material, to show the particulars of how men use coercive control to undermine women's autonomy, isolate them, and invade their personal space. On a practical level, Stark effectively reframes the "battered wives" definition of domestic violence to that of coercive control to show the rational nature of crimes committed in the context of abuse. Second, *Coercive Control* extends the story of physical and sexual violence against women by showing that most abused women seek help not only because they have been injured but also because their rights and liberties have been violated. Third, *Coercive Control* provides well-reasoned responses to three challenges concerning abused women: (1) Why do women continue in abusive relationships? (2) Why do coercively controlled women develop a set of problems unique among assault victims? and (3) Why, in spite of the legal system, does justice still elude these women?

Stark is quick to point out that sexual justice is not likely to be addressed within the current political and economic environment. He does, however, remain hopeful that the scope of civil and human rights will continue to expand. He recognizes that justice is a dynamic concept and, as a result, the law offers the capacity to achieve greater equality

and freedom for all. Until equal personhood for women is achieved, the “dance of justice” will go on to enrich our understanding of how coercive control entraps women in their daily lives.

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