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## Women Exiting Prostitution: Reports of Coercive Control in Intimate Relationships

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# Women Exiting Prostitution: Reports of Coercive Control in Intimate Relationships

## Abstract

There is burgeoning research on intimate partner violence (IPV) experiences among women globally. However, there is a dearth of research on IPV experiences among marginalized populations in Western countries. Over the past decade, IPV research has shifted from a focus only on physical and sexual violence to include coercive control experiences. These include a continuum of nonviolent behaviors centered on maintaining dominance over one's partner. However, the empirical literature on examining coercive control among women in prostitution within non-commercial intimate partners is lacking. In this study, we analyzed interviews with 17 women exiting prostitution and examined reported IPV sexual, physical, and coercive control experiences perpetrated by intimate partners. Our findings revealed that participants experienced extensive physical and sexual IPV as well as physical and non-physical coercive control within non-commercial partner relationships. Coercive control was the most frequent type of abuse reported. All nine investigated coercive control tactics were represented within participants' descriptions. Of these, exploitation (36%), intimidation (16.3%), degradation (12.5%), and deception (10.0%) were the most commonly identified. Understanding and assessing violent actions and control dynamics within non-commercial intimate partner relationships among women exiting prostitution have important implications for various stakeholders within the criminal justice system.

## Keywords

prostitution, intimate partner violence, coercive control, physical and sexual violence, problem-solving court

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## WOMEN EXITING PROSTITUTION: REPORTS OF COERCIVE CONTROL IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

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### ABSTRACT

There is burgeoning research on intimate partner violence (IPV) experiences among women globally. However, there is a dearth of research on IPV experiences among marginalized populations in Western countries. Over the past decade, IPV research has shifted from a focus only on physical and sexual violence to include coercive control experiences. These include a continuum of nonviolent behaviors centered on maintaining dominance over one's partner. However, the empirical literature on examining coercive control among women in prostitution within non-commercial intimate partners is lacking. In this study, we analyzed interviews with 17 women exiting prostitution and examined reported IPV sexual, physical, and coercive control experiences perpetrated by intimate partners. Our findings revealed that participants experienced extensive physical and sexual IPV as well as physical and non-physical coercive control within non-commercial partner relationships. Coercive control was the most frequent type of abuse reported. All nine investigated coercive control tactics were represented within participants' descriptions. Of these, exploitation (36%), intimidation (16.3%), degradation (12.5%), and deception (10.0%) were the most commonly identified. Understanding and assessing violent actions and control dynamics within non-commercial intimate partner relationships among women exiting prostitution have important implications for various stakeholders within the criminal justice system.

### KEYWORDS

prostitution, intimate partner violence, coercive control, problem-solving court

**P**ERVASIVE AND PERNICIOUS VIOLENCE AGAINST PROSTITUTED WOMEN is well documented (Farley et al., 2005; Hodges & Burch, 2019; Raphael et al., 2010). There is also a growing body of literature in developing countries on intimate partner violence (IPV) sexual and physical violence experienced by women in prostitution in non-commercial intimate partnerships (Argento et al., 2014; Muldoon et al., 2015; Ulibarri et al., 2010). However, there remains an absence of literature on IPV sexual and physical violence within non-commercial intimate partner relationships among women exiting prostitution in higher-income Western countries (Argento et al., 2014). IPV is defined as "behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual,

or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviours” (World Health Organization, 2017).

Over the past decade, a paradigm shift in the IPV literature has resulted in moving away from viewing IPV as discrete physical and sexual violence incidents towards a more comprehensive understanding based on coercive control (Hardesty et al., 2015; Tyson, 2020). While there is much debate in the IPV literature regarding the relationship between “violence” and “coercion” (Walby & Towers, 2018), Stark and Hester (2019) posited that coercive control includes a continuum of physical and non-physical patterns of controlling behavior centered on maintaining dominance over one’s partner. These authors further highlighted a critical gap in the literature concerning the examination of coercive control in marginalized populations, such as women in prostitution, who are currently or formerly in intimate partner relationships. Understanding the role of coercive control within non-commercial intimate partnerships among women in prostitution is complicated as the role of partners frequently shifts in nature (Benoit et al., 2013; Fielding-Miller & Dunkle, 2017; Mittal et al., 2018). For example, among women in prostitution, some intimate partners reflect more traditional “boyfriend” relationship statuses while other intimate partners transition to engage in “pimp behaviors” (Shannon et al., 2008, p. 914). Thus, intimate partner relationships among women in prostitution are frequently marked by fluidity in roles and the blurring of boundaries including pimping behaviors. To fill the literature gap, this paper presents results designed to strengthen the knowledge base concerning IPV sexual, physical, and coercive control experiences among women currently or previously in intimate partner relationships who are enrolled in an alternative prostitution problem-solving court program. Implications for practice, policy, and legal reform are included.

### **Sexual and Physical Intimate Partner Violence Experiences among Women in Prostitution**

Intimate partner violence (IPV) against women in prostitution who are in non-commercial intimate partnerships in developing countries is a significant public health issue (Argento et al., 2014; Muldoon et al., 2015; Ulibarri et al., 2010). IPV experiences within non-commercial intimate partnered relationships increase the risk of entry into prostitution (Urada et al., 2013). Women in prostitution who are in non-commercial intimate partnerships are disproportionately affected by IPV compared to women who are not engaged in prostitution. For example, in Mongolia, women who exchanged sex for money or other goods were more likely to experience physical violence (38% to 52%) and sexual violence (12% to 16%) from an intimate partner versus women that did not exchange sex for money or other goods (Carlson et al., 2012). In another study of 5519 women attending a sexual health center in Sydney, Australia, 5.7% of the participants reported a recent physical IPV (Lockart et al., 2011). Moreover, the women reporting recent physical IPV in this study were more likely to be engaged in current sex work.

Argento et al. (2014) examined the experiences of 387 women in prostitution in Metro Vancouver, Canada, who had male, intimate sexual partners. They found that one-fifth (21.5%) reported moderate or severe physical and/or sexual IPV within the previous six months, and 26.2 % reported these experiences at a two-year follow-up. In another study of 300 women in prostitution in Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez with spouses or steady partners, 35% had experienced IPV during the previous six months (Ulibarri et al., 2010). In a study conducted with 401 women attending rural and urban clinics in Swaziland, 40% of the women reported experiencing some type of IPV

over the previous 12 months (Fielding-Miller & Dunkle, 2017). And 49 women involved in street-based prostitution in India reported an array of physical and sexual violence by their non-paying intimate partners (Panchanadeswaran et al., 2008). Within the US, a study of 113 women engaged in outdoor prostitution in New York City indicated that 73% of the women with intimate partners experienced physical or sexual violence from their intimate partners (El-Bassel et al., 2001).

Thus, the empirical literature indicates that sexual and physical IPV violence is pervasive among prostituted women in intimate partner relationships, particularly in developing countries. However, despite the high burden of evidence of sexual and physical IPV violence among this population in the extant literature, it is unclear the extent of coercive control experienced by women in prostitution perpetrated by non-paying intimate partner relationships.

### **Coercive Control Experiences in Intimate Partner Violence**

According to the research on IPV in the general population of women, one key to understanding IPV is the pattern of coercive control and its contribution to initiating and maintaining violence (Hamberger et al., 2017). Stark (2013) describes coercive control as involving the regulation and domination of a partner's daily behavior and the restriction of freedom. The spectrum of controlling behaviors include *exploitation* (i.e., manipulation of resources), *intimidation* (i.e., maintaining secrecy by instilling fear), *enticement* (i.e., persuading using psychological manipulation), *isolation* (i.e., prevent from obtaining social support/help), *microregulation* (i.e., monitoring coming and going/insisting on check-ins), *surveillance* (i.e., partner stalking), *degradation* (i.e., denying self-respect/marketing ownership), and *deception* (i.e., large/more subtle mistruths/gaslighting). Other researchers included threats of abandonment as a specific category of coercive control (Anitha et al., 2018; Hamberger et al., 2017).

Coercive control increases women's vulnerability to significant harm and fatal injuries due to the frequently diminishing capacity to resist or escape the abuse. Stark and Hester (2019) explained that the utilization of a coercive control tactics lens versus an exclusive focus on the number of assaultive behaviors meted out is vital to gain a more comprehensive understanding of IPV. Understanding coercive control includes attention to the underlying behaviors and context that sets the stage for increasing demonstrations of dominance and escalating assaults (Stark & Hester, 2019). However, sometimes recognizing coercive controlling behaviors within the context of intimate partner relationships is complicated as controlling behaviors are frequently infused with expressions of affection and intimacy, preventing victims from realizing the coercive nature of their partners' actions (Stark, 2013). For example, maneuvers used to isolate victims from supportive family members or friends may be interpreted as gestures of love and concern instead of jealousy and the demand for exclusive attention (Bishop & Bettinson, 2018). Also, the challenge of identifying and measuring coercive control may be due, in part to the variable patterns of control used by perpetrators depending on the relationship patterns, setting, and victim (Stark, 2013). However, not only are coercive controlling behaviors frequently difficult to detect, the failure to comply with controlling gestures may be an incipient to IPV (Crossman et al., 2016).

### **Experiences of Coercive Control in Women Exiting Prostitution**

Within the empirical IPV literature regarding women in prostitution who are in non-commercial intimate partner relationships, there are a few studies that have

examined aspects of coercive controlling behavior. When coercive controlling behaviors are reported, often, the exact nature of coercive behaviors is not specified. For example, Muldoon et al. (2015) indicated that among 510 sex workers in Vancouver, Canada, 50.4% reported having a non-commercial intimate partner. Over the previous six months, 32.7% of them reported physical, sexual, *and* emotional IPV. In another study using in-depth interviews with 49 street-based female sex workers in India revealed that women who reported being in an intimate partner relationship currently or over the past year experienced a variety of “severe” physical and sexual violence by their non-paying intimate partners *and* “emotional” and “verbal” violence (Panchanadeswaran et al., 2008, p. 5). However, it was unclear what “emotional violence” included.

In contrast, some women in prostitution who have non-commercial intimate partners report the occurrence of certain aspects of coercive control. For example, a study of 300 women in prostitution in Mexico who reported experiencing IPV by their non-commercial intimate partners found that 35% of the women scored lower on sexual relationship power versus women who had not experienced IPV (Ulibarri et al., 2010). In a study with 46 prostituted women in Canada, the majority of the women reported controlling behaviors by their intimate partners such as controlling their money made, use of drugs, and work conditions (Shannon et al., 2008). Further, among women in prostitution in Swaziland, 40% of 401 women attending rural and urban clinics reported some type of IPV by their intimate partner over the previous 12 months. One in four women indicated that their partner had “insulted, intimidated, or threatened” them more than one time (Fielding-Miller & Dunkle, 2017, p. 288).

While the studies on emotional abuse and controlling behaviors in the literature concerning prostituted women in intimate partnered relationships provide some information regarding coercive control, there is some labeling confusion. Crossman et al. (2016, p. 457) argued that the coercive control empirical literature includes “definitional and measurement dilemmas, with similar behaviors overlapping with a myriad of different constructs, including emotional abuse, psychological abuse, psychological maltreatment, emotional blackmail, psychological aggression, coercion, and verbal abuse.” Several researchers have further argued that while a coercive control framework concerning IPV in the general population of women has directed research, policy development, and clinical practice for several decades, there is significant inconsistency in the empirical literature regarding approaches to defining and assessing coercive control (Barlow et al., 2019; Crossman et al., 2016; Hardesty et al., 2015; Walby & Towers, 2018). Thus, while controlling constructs identified in some studies may be similar, clarity and consistent coercive control conceptualization distinct from other forms of abuse is needed.

To add to the complexity concerning the recognition and assessment of coercive controlling behavior within intimate partner relationships among women in prostitution, some women explained that their partners “transitioned” in their roles to that of “glorified pimps” concerning controlling and monitoring behaviors (Shannon et al., 2008, p. 914). In a study of 100 women in prostitution in Chicago who indicated that they currently had a pimp, 64 women perceived their current pimp relationship as a boyfriend (Raphael et al., 2010). Yet, another study reported that current partners were often previously the clients of women in prostitution who then took on pimp roles (Karandikar & Próspero, 2010). This study’s findings also revealed that when these intimate partners eventually engaged in increasing pimp behaviors, they became physically, sexually, *and* emotionally violent and economically exploitive. Thus,

it appears that the boundaries between intimate partner and pimp roles may be blurred, and the overlapping methods of coercion within some relationships necessitate clarification concerning coercive control patterns (Thaller & Cimino, 2017).

Based on this research, elements of coercive control are a critical component of IPV among women in prostitution who are in non-commercial relationships, much in the same way that coercive control is an underlying dynamic of IPV physical and sexual violence in the general population of women. However, studies examining similar coercive control tactics experienced by women in prostitution in intimate partnered relationships that have also been found in the general population of women are absent (see Stark, 2013). Given the UN's call to comprehend all forms of violence to women to inform policies and interventions (UN, 2014), understanding the coercive control experiences among prostituted women in intimate partner relationships is vital. This would allow for a more informed model of the role of coercive control, as well as bear clinical implications.

The purpose of the present study was twofold: to document the extent of experiences of IPV in the forms of sexual and physical violence and coercive control within current or former intimate partner relationships among women exiting prostitution and to systematically analyze the extent and types of coercive control tactics reported by participants using Stark's (2013) descriptions of coercive control.

## METHODS

### Participants

The participants included seventeen individuals who were enrolled in a prostitution problem-solving court in the Midwest. All of the participants identified as female, with ages ranging from 24 to 46. Length of time participating in the program ranged from several weeks (15.4%), months (61.5%), and years (23.1%).

### Procedure

Participants were part of a previous study that involved individuals enrolled in a pre-sentencing and prostitution problem-solving court in the Midwest. Participants were recruited between March 2016 and January 2017 by the alternative court program coordinator and/or judge. The court coordinator answered any questions about the study. Participants were informed of the study's voluntary nature; specifically that participation in the study did not affect their court programming participation or adjudication of charges. Informed consent was then obtained from the participants. During the initial recruitment, approximately one-third of the participants completed their surveys, and additional participants were recruited over several months.

The specialty court coordinator recruited participants. The problem-solving court coordinator and associated therapists considered therapeutic readiness before approaching participants regarding participation. Prospective participants were then emailed regarding the study's purposes. Participants who agreed to participate completed informed consents, demographics, life maps, and individual life narrative interviews.

## Measures

### Life Maps

The principal investigators developed the life map, adapting it from the life graph developed by Shmotkin (2005). In the life map, participants identified points that were better or worse concerning other events in their life (coined “turning points” by Shmotkin [2005]). These events were pictorially represented them on a graph with an x-axis representing good vs. bad points in their lives and the y-axis representing time. They were also asked to mark the following on their maps: 1) Developmental stages are represented by the different points on the timeline; 2) A description of the events that were marked as high and low points; 3) The point at which they entered into prostitution; and 4) The point at which they began exiting prostitution.

### Interviews

The interviews asked about the participant’s life map and were based on Cox et al.’s (2013) and McAdam’s (1995) life story interviews. The interviews explored involvement in prostitution, including terminology for prostitution, current views of prostitution, exiting from prostitution, and views concerning identity and spirituality/religious beliefs. The interviews took approximately two hours and were conducted by three licensed clinicians. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service whose transcribers had been trained to protect human research participants. All of the files were deidentified and given a pseudonym to protect the participants. Previous research has used the life map in conjunction with the life narrative interview (Shmotkin, 2005). However, this research expanded on Cox et al.’s (2013) version that examined the experiences of Nicaraguan sex workers.

### Coding Process

Three raters coded the interviews. Two raters scored all of the interviews, and the third rater scored 58% of the interviews. Because the project’s focus was investigating types of IPV and coercive control discussed in the interviews, we utilized a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the preparation phase, a coding scheme was developed *a priori* which involved looking for instances of sexual and physical violence and coercive control during the interviews. The unit of analysis was defined as an event. An event could be a single sentence or multiple sentences that discussed one instance of violence; however, a single event could include multiple elements of IPV, and each instance of coercive control could include multiple coercive control tactics. Each expression of IPV and each coercive control tactic was coded separately. Therefore, the interviews were scored based on the occurrence of each type of violence code.

In this analysis, we used an unconstrained matrix. Before coding the data, the raters agreed on specific coding categories: IPV types (physical, sexual, coercive control), the coercive control subtype, the perpetrator, and the age when the event happened (minor or adult). We recognized that additional categories may need to be included when coding because we used an unconstrained matrix. Specifically, for the coercive control tactics, the raters used the range of coercive behaviors discussed by Stark (2013). However, a code for abandonment/threats of abandonment was added based on other empirical literature (Anitha et al., 2018; Hamberger et al., 2017).

The coding process was done in three iterations. The first iteration involved the three raters reading and coding three of the interviews. All three raters then met to discuss the codes, the coding process, and any additional codes that needed to be



added. Interrater reliability was not calculated on the coding of these three interviews because further discussion about necessary codes as needed. During round two, two of the raters coded and discussed five of the interviews. During the final round, all three raters coded and discussed seven of the interviews. For the final round of rating, there was a high degree of similarity in the total number of codes for each participant ( $r = .93$ ). Any differences in coding were resolved by discussion.

### Coding Categories

#### *Type of Violence*

Sexual Violence (any unwanted sexual experience including rape, sexual assault, and oral sex), physical violence (any non-sexual physical harm including but not limited to being hit/punched by a person or a person using an object to inflict harm (e.g., a gun), and coercive control (See Table 1 for a full list of codes).

#### *Type of Perpetrator.*

Intimate partner, “baby daddy” (individuals with whom the participant had continuing frequently cohabitating relationships), and sugar daddy (individual engaged in a longer-term relationship who provides an allowance for sex and companionship; see Table 1).

**Table 1 Type of Abuse, Perpetrator, and Type of Coercive Control Reported**

| Category      | Code                        | Number of Reported Events | Percent of Codes within Abuse Category | Number (Percent) of Participants Reporting Event/Perpetrator |
|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--|--|
| Type of Abuse | Sexual                      | 9                         | 8.0%                                   | 7 (41.1%)  |
|               | Physical                    | 16                        | 14.3%                                  | 12 (70.6%)   |
|               | Coercion                    | 79                        | 70.5%                                  | 16 (94.1%)   |
|               | Unspecified Violence        | 3                         | 2.7%                                   | 3 (17.6%)  |
| Perpetrator   | Intimate Partner/Baby Daddy | 30                        | 26.8%                                  | 10 (58.8%)   |
|               | Pimp                        | 54                        | 48.2%                                  | 12 (70.6%)   |
|               | Sugar Daddy                 | 27                        | .9%                                    | 1 (5.8%)   |
|               | Unspecified                 | 1                         | 24.1%                                  | 11 (61.1%)   |
|               | Coercive Control Tactic     | Exploitation              | 29                                     | 36.3%  |
|               | Intimidation                | 13                        | 16.3%                                  | 10 (58.8%)   |
|               | Isolation                   | 5                         | 6.3%                                   | 5 (29.4%)  |
|               | Microregulation             | 3                         | 3.8%                                   | 2 (11.8%)  |
|               | Surveillance                | 4                         | 5.0%                                   | 8 (47.1%)  |
|               | Degradation                 | 10                        | 12.5%                                  | 8 (47.1%)  |
|               | Deception                   | 8                         | 10.0%                                  | 8 (47.1%)  |
|               | Enticement                  | 4                         | 5.0%                                   | 4 (47.1%)  |
|               | Abandonment                 | 4                         | 5.0%                                   | 3 (17.6%)  |

\*Note. Although perpetrators were coded under separate categories, each of the perpetrators were described as an intimate partner at some point in the interview. The codes represent the label used to describe the perpetrator at that specific point in the interview.

### *Coercive Control Tactics.*

Using Stark's (2013) definition of coercive control, we categorized coercive control tactics as exploitation, intimidation, isolation, microregulation, surveillance, degradation, deception, enticement, and abandonment/threats of abandonment. A single event could have been assigned multiple codes. For example, an event in which someone was prostituted and then forced to give her pimp the money was coded as exploitation and intimidation.

## RESULTS

### **Quantitative Analysis**

The interviews were coded by the type of IPV reported, and a single event may have had more than one violence code attached to it. Therefore, the unit of analysis is the code, not the participant. We analyzed the number of coded events for each participant of each type of IPV category, the number of each type of perpetrator, and the number of each type of coercive control reported. While these data are descriptive, they are important in understanding the co-occurrence and overlapping nature of IPV in this population.

### **Participants**

The number of coded events varied significantly by the participant, ranging from two codes of IPV events for one participant to 17 different codes for a single participant. There was a large amount of variability in the number of events reported and the complexity of the events reported.

### **Types of IPV**

The highest reported type of IPV was coercive control, with 75 different codes (some referring to a single event) accounting for 70.5% of the coded IPV events (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

### **Perpetrator**

For each coded instance of violence and physical and non-physical coercive control, there was one code for the perpetrator that was analyzed. Since multiple participants explained that their intimate partners transitioned to different roles during the interview, the quantitative analysis used the code for the primary role the perpetrator filled at that point that the event occurred. Of the total number of reported perpetrators, the most commonly reported perpetrators were pimps (48.2% of the time,  $n = 54$ ). Intimate partners were also common perpetrators (26.8% of the time,  $n = 30$ ). Although perpetrators were coded under separate categories (e.g., pimps, sugar daddies), all of the perpetrators were described as an intimate partner at some point during the interview.

### **Coercive Control Tactics**

Within the coercive control code, each instance of coercion was coded. The most commonly coded type of coercion was exploitation, accounting for 36.3% of the codes ( $n=29$ ), and intimidation (16.3% of the codes,  $n = 13$ ) (See Table 1 for all of the codes).

## Qualitative Analyses

Interview responses were examined to understand the types and perpetrators of physical and sexual violence and coercive control tactics reported above. Overall, types of violence were reported as experienced in combination and appeared to co-occur at very high rates. Therefore, although presented as distinct constructs within the results of the thematic analysis, there were high degrees of co-occurrence in these constructs. Additionally, many of the participants did not appear to recognize the overlapping nature of the relationship at the time it occurred, or even at the time of the interview. Frequently participants used drug dealer, boyfriend, and pimp designations interchangeably throughout the same interview. For example, one woman noted, "I did meet John Smith (pseudonym) because at first, he was my sugar daddy....I ended up getting feelings for him...we did move in with each other." Throughout her interview, she referred to him as her sugar daddy or her boyfriend. To maintain the integrity of the quotes, we used the label the participant used at the time of the interview.

## Examples of Violence

### *Physical Violence*

The majority of participants ( $n = 11$ ; 65% of participants) discussed the physical violence that they experienced as adults during their interviews. Many of the participants reported multiple types of, and often extreme, physical violence, including getting beaten up, being physically forced to complete sexual acts, robbed, getting pistol-whipped, and having guns pointed towards them...One participant recalled getting beaten up by her intimate partner, "...he broke my jaws, he fractured my ribs, he fractured my nose...busted my lips..." Often this happened in the context of the perpetrator fulfilling multiple roles. For example, one participant discussed how her drug dealer became her intimate partner, "I moved in with a drug dealer who was abusing me...kept my ribs broke. He would beat me up. You know, we went through that honeymoon stage where he would give me stuff." Another participant highlighted the overlap between physical violence and their romantic relationships, "I started being with men that beat on me, and I believed that was love. If they beat on me, they loved me, and I needed to be with them more, and more, and more."

### *Sexual Violence*

Many participants ( $n=11$ , 65% of participants) also reported instances of sexual violence. Many participants reported being raped multiple times, with one participant stating that "I've been raped so many times I...can't even tell ya how many times I've been raped. It-it's almost like I became desensitized." The participants appeared to be "fair game" for sexual violence by their intimate partners. Sexual violence often co-occurred with physical violence, as one participant discussed the violence experienced by her intimate partner, "I've been beat up. I've been raped. You know, I'm just, man... It's just a downward spiral."

### *Surveillance*

Surveillance often occurred as a form of intimidation in which partners monitored the participants' behaviors, which deprived their rights of privacy. Frequently, surveillance co-occurred with microregulation, as participants were both watched and had their activities restricted and/or controlled by partners/pimps. One participant explained that she and her partner ended up being on the street living in abandoned and drug houses. She further explained, "my partner would follow me around and see what car I got into and there at the end, he expected -that's what he expected, you

know...He expected me to go out every day and do that ---and he expected the money, and he expected the drugs.”

### *Degradation*

A number of participants explained that their intimate partners would often use demeaning verbiage towards them. “When I first met him, I was attracted to him because he would fight anyone. Like, he would stand up to anyone...And then I just kept feeling less and less and less, and he would just keep tearing me down physically, emotionally, and mentally and then isolate me from my family...Why did I keep going back?... Because he’s my son’s dad and I had this fantasy of us being this happy family.” While another participant described how her intimate partner treated her, saying, “I think that is what broke me down the most...Because he would say little stuff like nobody’s going to want you with somebody else’s kid or, you know, just real mean stuff. And you know, after you hear that so long it starts to, you start to believe it.”

### *Deception*

Participants were often deceived, yet treachery was often not evident to some participants at the time. The changing nature of the relationships that women had with various perpetrators was often based on deception. One participant highlighted the changing nature of relationships, stating, “[Y]ou know, even though I was tricken’ with this dope guy...I would go out in the street, make money, come back, and give it to him. Like, I didn’t, like, realize that’s what was happening. I thought he liked me.” Another participant still did not fully realize at the interview how her boyfriend was controlling her. She stated, “It was kind of different for me because I had a boyfriend, which was basically my pimp. You know he was my security guard. He was the one that handled all the money, you know.”

### *Enticement*

Several participants explained that they were lured into prostitution by their intimate partners’ promise of money, housing, or security. One woman stated, “My baby daddy introduced me to prostitution.” She then added a question: “Was he my partner or my pimp?” Enticement also occurred related to using substances. For example, one participant said, “I was 22 when I started doing heroin. And my baby’s daddy kept trying to get me to do it...And finally, I did. One participant whose drug dealer became her intimate partner explained how enticement and physical violence went hand and hand together. “I moved in with a drug dealer who was abusing me...he like, kept my ribs broke. He would beat me up. You know, we went through that honeymoon stage where he would give me stuff.”

### *Abandonment*

Although not included by Stark (2013) in his description of coercive control, several participants talked about threats to cut off the relationship/abandonment by partners as an entry point into prostitution. In one case, a woman with a small child was deserted by her boyfriend, and she determined that the only way to have him back in her life and to help with the baby was to begin doing drugs with him. Another woman reported being abandoned by an intimate partner after the death of her child. The effects of abandonment were not only psychological, but the women were left without a means to increased their vulnerability to prostitution.

## DISCUSSION

This study's overarching purpose was to document the extent of IPV experiences in the forms of sexual and physical violence and coercive control within current or former intimate partner relationships among women exiting prostitution who were enrolled in an alternative problem-solving court. The second primary aim was to systematically analyze the extent and types of coercive control tactics reported by participants using Stark's (2013) descriptions of coercive control. The findings, both qualitative and quantitative, revealed the disturbing observation that physical and sexual violence by intimate partners were reported by the vast majority of our participants. Moreover, while sexual and physical violence were extensive, the most frequently mentioned pervasive forms of abuse were coercive control.

That women in prostitution are immensely vulnerable to violence perpetrated by their intimate partners has been documented in the literature on women in developing countries (Argento et al., 2014; Muldoon et al., 2015; Ulibarri et al., 2010). Our results show that women exiting prostitution in a problem-solving court in the US experienced similar vulnerabilities and violence from intimate partners. Specifically, we discovered that women exiting prostitution who are currently in or previously in non-commercial intimate partner relationships experienced high exposure to rape and other forms of assault by their intimate partners which is consistent with findings in developing countries.

While the current study revealed that intimate partners frequently battered participants, the relationships between the participants and their batterers were often complicated and multifaceted. For example, early in the exiting process, a number of the participants explained that their intimate partners frequently exhibited pimp behaviors yet these individuals were viewed as intimate partners, which is consistent with the literature (Karandikar & Próspero, 2010; Raphael et al., 2010; Shannon, et al., 2008). While other participants viewed their relationships with intimate partners as nurturing, the behaviors by partners frequently exhibited escalating coercion and violence that mirrored pimp actions. Moreover, these relationships were frequently marked by controlling dynamics, and the subtlety of the behaviors prevented the participants from recognizing the controlling aspects of the behaviors. Frequently, the controlling behaviors were interpreted as a means of "helping" the participants or that the participants were "helping" their partners. Thus, many participants in this study experienced shifting relationships and permeable boundaries with intimate partners who engaged in pimp-like roles. Also, while not all participants stated that their relationships were marked by control, several participants explained their compliant posture with intimate partners was due to the unpredictability of their abuser's behavior and fear of reprisal. Thus, yielding to their abuser's demands was often a protective measure that increasingly became viewed as futile.

These findings shed light on aspects of coercive control such as deception and exploitation in this group of women. For example, the overlap between pimp roles and romantic partner roles may have stemmed from partners who feigned romantic interests to coerce their partners to engage in prostitution, increase revenues earned, and obtain drug money. In other situations, the removal of affection or support appeared overtly coercive, leading the participant to engage in prostitution for money or drugs for herself. Other underlying mechanisms of the shifting roles may be at play and further research should investigate how the transitioning roles may play a role in coercive controlling behaviors. For example, do the roles shift from pimp to romantic partner, from romantic partner to pimp, or is it more complex? Comprehending more

specifically how roles shift is critical in furthering our understanding of women's vulnerabilities to IPV.

Due to the fluidity in participants' perceptions of intimate partner/pimp roles, making and interpreting distinctions between the types of violence perpetrated by individuals in these roles becomes increasingly complex. In some cases, perpetrators were initially perceived by participants as romantic partners, while later, they described these individuals as engaging in pimp roles. In other cases, perpetrators were identified as pimps first and then perceived to be romantic partners. It was often the case that participants revised their views of partners as "pimps" much later after previously framing these individuals as engaging in "pimp" roles solely "with other women."

We applied Stark's (2013) conceptualization of coercive control to the current data to create a more systematic approach to understanding the types of controlling behaviors experienced by women in prostitution within their intimate partner relationships. Our findings showed that women exiting prostitution experienced similar types of control strategies by their intimate partners as those reported in the general population of women (Bishop & Bettinson, 2018). These maneuvers included exploitation (e.g., demands to endure longer shifts to obtain drug money), intimidation (e.g., loaded guns were pointed at the women), isolation (e.g., the pressure to separate from sources of social support), microregulation (e.g., restricting social and daily activities), surveillance (e.g., tracking movements/how much money was made), degradation (e.g., using demeaning names), deception (e.g., presenting illegal substances as beneficial), and enticement (e.g., promises to fulfill future dreams). In addition to the continuum of coercive control tactics described by Stark, our participants also revealed threats of abandonment that were frequently used by intimate partners to control their behavior. This finding was consistent with other literature that explained that threats of abandonment are a common form of coercive control (Anitha et al., 2018; Hamberger et al., 2017). In our study, several participants indicated that warnings of desertion and actual abandonment were doled out by intimate partners to garner compliance with monetary, substance, and sexual demands.

Thus, we found multiple instances of each of the coercive control tactics described by Stark, as well as threats of abandonment, in the reports by participants in this study, showing that this framework can be applied to this population. This is critical because existing research has viewed women in prostitution as a separate category from women in the general population who experience IPV (Thaller & Cimino, 2017). The results suggest that the underlying coercion may be similar.

This study has significant implications for practice, policy, and legal reform. Clinical practice that includes the implementation of IPV screening instruments and is informed by what we know about the subtleties and nuances of coercive control within often overlooked non-commercial intimate partner relationships is vital. When the role of coercive control in IPV among women exiting prostitution in non-commercial relationships is better understood, clinicians can more effectively tailor interventions concerning early recognition, assessment, and safety planning. The awareness that pimp relationships frequently transition into the role of intimate partners (and vice versa) can help clinicians be attuned to the complexities of women's attachments and perceptions of unequal power dynamics to strengthen survivor agency and decision-making.

Education within healthcare and criminal justice settings that promotes the recognition of coercive control as a cumulative form of abuse involving various

controlling tactics is needed. This understanding can facilitate policy-making to increase access to justice for women, including the most vulnerable populations of women (i.e., women exiting prostitution). Moreover, funding and resource allocation to provide shelter access needs thorough review. When women exiting prostitution who are in non-commercial violent and non-violent coercive controlling relationships are denied shelter access, there is a risk of heightened abuse.

Within the criminal justice arena, it is commonplace that arrests and sanctions are limited to discrete violent assaults occurring in intimate partner relationships. However, when criminal consequences are solely based on the severity of violent actions, other forms of abuse remain obscured. Reframing IPV using a coercive control lens is a paradigm shift that can impact police intervention strategies and improve criminal justice responses with marginalized populations (i.e., women exiting prostitution).

## CONCLUSIONS

We found that participants exiting prostitution in non-commercial intimate partnerships who were enrolled in a problem-solving court system experienced a high degree of physical violence, sexual violence, and coercive control. While physical and sexual violence are important components of IPV, a focus on discrete violent acts alone does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the frequently complex and subtle forms of controlling behavior as underlying dynamics within IPV. Definitional clarity concerning coercive control can assist various stakeholders at all levels of the judicial system to assess and develop interventions with women exiting prostitution. We, therefore, urge continued investigation and training, to meet the needs of all survivors of violence and coercive control, including marginalized populations.

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