

**Attention: Sophie Jones**

National Principles Consultations Team

Attorney-General's Department

By email: [coercivecontrol@ag.gov.au](mailto:coercivecontrol@ag.gov.au)

**Response to draft *National Principles to Address Coercive Control***

Dear Ms Jones,

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) thanks you for the opportunity to make a submission in response to the *National Principles to Address Coercive Control – Consultation Draft*.

ANROWS is an independent, not-for-profit company established as an initiative under Australia's first *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022*. Our primary function is to provide an accessible evidence base for developments in policy and practice design for prevention and response to violence against women, nationally. Every aspect of our work is motivated by the right of women and children to live free from violence and in safe communities. We recognise, respect and respond to diversity among women and children, and we are committed to reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. ANROWS will continue to deliver and develop this function under the new *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*.

Primary funding for ANROWS is jointly provided by the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments of Australia. ANROWS is also, from time to time, directly commissioned to undertake work for an individual jurisdiction, and successfully tenders for research and evaluation work. ANROWS is registered as a harm prevention charity and deductible gift recipient, governed by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission (ACNC).

This submission draws on submissions ANROWS made to the Department of Communities and Justice NSW (ANROWS, 2022a), the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce Queensland (ANROWS, 2022b), and the NSW Joint Select Committee on Coercive Control (ANROWS, 2021b).

Yours sincerely

**Padma Raman PSM**  
Chief Executive Officer

4 November 2022

## National Principle 1: Common features

ANROWS commends the development of a national common understanding of coercive control that can be applied across legislative and policy settings in Australia. ANROWS has advocated for the development of a consistent definition of coercive control and domestic and family violence (DFV) to support consistency in the recognition of, and responses to, coercive control (Raman, 2022; ANROWS, 2021a, 2021b). The new *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* (Commonwealth of Australia. Department of Social Services, 2022, p. 36) also notes that understandings of violence and its impact on victims and survivors has evolved since the first National Plan, and identifies that “further alignment and greater consistency of national definitions will support a shared understanding of, and consistent response to, gender-based violence in Australia”.

ANROWS suggests that National Principle 1 should define coercive control as the governing logic and overarching context of DFV rather than as one of many separate examples of DFV tactics. This is consistent with recommendations made by ANROWS to the NSW Government (ANROWS, 2021b) and research that recognises coercive control as a pattern of behaviour within relationships that results in fear and the micro-regulation of the lives of victims and survivors (Stark & Hester, 2019), and which denies personhood and restricts autonomy (ANROWS, 2021b). Coercive control is characterised by entrapment – as a woman’s agency is restricted through patterns of control, she faces significant barriers to leaving the relationship (ANROWS, 2021a). The recognition of coercive control in the National Principles as being unique to the perpetrator and comprised of tactics that are tailored to the context of the relationship, situation, and the victim and survivor over time, and which may look innocuous to outsiders, is positive as this reflects findings from recent research (for example Tarrant et al., 2019). Cumulatively, these tactics diminish a woman’s ability to exercise autonomy and result in a perpetrator’s coercion, control and domination (ANROWS, 2021a).

ANROWS further suggests that this Principle refine the language concerning perpetrator intent in coercive control. The *National Principles to Address Coercive Control – Consultation Draft* states that “a victim-survivor may experience coercive control regardless of whether or not a perpetrator consciously makes decisions around the selection of tactics and the reasons for using them”, but also states that “the person using abusive behaviour makes a choice to do so”. While ANROWS notes the nuance between these two definitions, noting that former refers to the types of behaviours selected and the latter refers to engaging in abusive behaviour as a whole, we suggest providing a clearer distinction to avoid confusion.

ANROWS defines coercive control as “a course of conduct aimed at dominating and controlling another (usually an intimate partner, but can be other family members) and [one that] is almost exclusively perpetrated by men against women” (see ANROWS, 2021a). ANROWS is pleased to note that National Principle 1 reflects that coercive control is comprised of a pattern of behaviours which may or may not include physical violence. Dominant hierarchies of violence often prioritise examples of physical and sexual violence and de-emphasise or overlook examples of non-physical DFV tactics as less harmful or serious (ANROWS, 2021a). A study by Reeves et al. (2021) of adults who had experienced coercive control in a DFV context identified that 97 per cent had experienced emotional/psychological abuse and 86 per cent had experienced verbal abuse, while 53 per cent of respondents had experienced physical abuse (Reeves et al., 2021). As identified previously, the behaviours that perpetrators of coercive control use are varied and are tailored to the victim and survivor and the context of their relationship (Tarrant et al., 2019). It is therefore important that coercive control policy and

legislation does not reinforce hierarchies of violence and instead identifies coercive control as a pattern of behaviour and the overarching context of the perpetration of DFV (ANROWS, 2021b).

ANROWS recommends that National Principle 1 include clarification that physical and non-physical aggression between family members is not always evidence of coercive control. This is particularly important to avoid misidentification of victims and survivors of coercive control as perpetrators where they have engaged in self-defence against a perpetrator (as seen in Nancarrow et al., 2020), which contributes to women's imprisonment and disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2018; Nancarrow, 2016, 2019; Nancarrow et al., 2020). ANROWS is pleased to note that the risk of misidentification in cases of self-defence is outlined in National Principle 8 (though note our suggestions for potential reworking of National Principle 8, outlined below).

ANROWS suggests the inclusion of examples of other forms of physical and non-physical violence that do not constitute coercive control as they are not characterised by a pattern of control or power, and do not deny personhood and restrict autonomy. In the ANROWS report *The PIPA project: Positive Interventions for Perpetrators of Adolescent violence in the home (AVITH)*, the majority of AVITH cases in a merged Victorian sample were believed to be "reactive" and due to adolescents' challenges with regulating their emotions and/or actions, rather than constituting coercive control (Campbell et al., 2020). A recent ANROWS report also identified that 89 per cent of young people who had used violence in the home had also experienced domestic violence as children (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022, p. 12). The young people's use of violence was partially attributable to "retaliatory" acts of violence (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022, p. 12), and therefore isn't characterised by the denial of autonomy or personhood inherent in coercive control. These findings also highlight the importance of addressing AVITH outside of the legal system and avoiding the misidentification of young people as perpetrators of coercive control. It is also noted that coercive control is not always a factor in violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, as forms of interpersonal violence such as couple fighting have roots in tactics of traditional Aboriginal dispute resolution (see Nancarrow, 2016 as cited in ANROWS, 2020a). ANROWS suggests that clarification that physical and non-physical violence is not always evidence of coercive control be provided as part of the definition of common features of coercive control in National Principle 1. This will support the understanding of the scope of coercive control in cases where the National Principles to Address Coercive Control (the National Principles) are read in isolation.

ANROWS supports the recognition that coercive control can be perpetrated outside of intimate partner relationships, including by extended families. For example, in ANROWS research on support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experiencing family violence, the "intra-kin persecution of victims" was identified as a factor that could prevent victims and survivors from reporting violence to police (Langton et al., 2020, p. 29). Research by Vaughan et al. (2016a) reflected that immigrant and refugee women in Australia also reported experiencing abuse from extended family members, particularly immigration-related violence that included threats of deportation, visa cancellation, or the withholding of immigration documents. These experiences of coercive control perpetrated by extended families are often overlooked in understandings of, and responses to, coercive control (Langton et al., 2020). The inclusion of coercive control in the extended family context can support the National Principles to capture the experiences of diverse groups of victims and survivors.

## National Principle 2: Impacts

ANROWS supports the inclusion of recognition in National Principle 2 that coercive control is a risk factor in intimate partner and child homicide cases. A collaborative project between ANROWS and the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Network (ADFVDRN; 2022) identified that a high prevalence of coercive controlling behaviours were perpetrated prior to cases of intimate partner homicide (IPH), highlighting the need for first responders and service providers to be able to recognise and respond to coercive control. This is supported by a review conducted by the NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team (2020, p. 68) that found, after examining cases between 2000 and 2019 where female victims were killed by former intimate partners, that “a number of ... cases were not preceded by an evident history of physical abuse – instead homicides were preceded by histories of other forms of coercive and controlling behaviour”.

The specific mention of financial impacts (including impact on employment and housing) is consistent with ANROWS evidence (for a useful summary, see ANROWS, 2019, in press), as are the described lifelong impacts on health and wellbeing (see for example ANROWS, 2020b). ANROWS also supports the inclusion of the impact on children (see ANROWS, 2018, 2022c), as well as the impact on parent-child relationships (see Kaspiw et al., 2017; Hooker et al., 2022).

## National Principle 3: Community understanding

ANROWS notes that National Principle 3 identifies the importance of addressing gaps in the understanding of coercive control among service providers, police, the legal system, and the community. ANROWS suggests that this National Principle could be reframed with a strengths-based approach that highlights the benefits of, and opportunities for, increasing community understanding. ANROWS also suggests that this principle emphasise the role of the broader service and response system beyond the legal system, especially given evidence that low numbers of victims and survivors report abuse to the police (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

While ANROWS is supportive of a broader focus within this principle, this is not to say that improved understanding and capacity-building within the legal system is not important. ANROWS has advocated for improved and continued training of police and legal professionals in understanding and responding to coercive control in police and legal processes (ANROWS, 2021b). The Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland and the Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria both recommended improvements to education and training, and suggested embedding family violence expertise in courts or the development of specialist courts to ensure that laws were effectively enforced and prosecuted (see State of Queensland, 2015; State of Victoria, 2016). ANROWS also notes that National Principle 3 acknowledges that an incident-based understanding of DFV can mean that victim and survivor self-defence is responded to out of context. This can result in victims and survivors who engage in self-defence or do not fit the “ideal victim” mould being misidentified by police or the legal system as the perpetrators of violence rather than as the person most in need of protection (Nancarrow et al., 2020). Increased understanding and training among police and legal professionals must be accompanied by support to translate this knowledge into practice (see Wangmann, 2021 as cited in ANROWS, 2022a).

ANROWS suggests that the National Principles Consultation Team consider expanding the importance of understanding coercive control to include other groups. For example, it is important to ensure that media representations of coercive control are nuanced and

appropriate (see Sutherland et al., 2016), that perpetrators understand and take accountability for their actions, that general practitioners can identify and respond to risk factors (Hegarty et al., 2013, 2016), and that workplaces are able to identify and support employees experiencing DFV (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2021).

Improved community understanding of coercive control can aid the community and victims and survivors to recognise their experiences as abuse. ANROWS's 2017 *National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey* (NCAS) found that most Australians recognise that violence against women comprises a continuum of behaviours (Webster et al., 2018). However, the 2017 NCAS also identified an opportunity to improve Australians' understanding of coercive control, with respondents more likely to identify obvious physical violence or forced sex as forms of violence against women over non-physical violence such as emotional, social, and financial abuse and control (Webster et al., 2018). This is reflected in victims' and survivors' understanding of their experiences of violence, with the NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team (2020, p. 69) identifying that some victims and survivors in the cases that they reviewed "did not always identify what they were experiencing was domestic violence and abuse, instead believing that their experiences were part of ordinary relationship dynamics". This was also identified by Reeves et al. (2021, p. 2), who identified that only 38 per cent of adults who had experienced coercive control viewed their abuse as DFV while they were experiencing it.

Understanding the dynamics of coercive control will also assist in countering victim-blaming attitudes. As identified previously, coercive control is characterised by entrapment, with women facing significant barriers to leaving the relationship (ANROWS, 2021a). Currently, this is not reflected in Australians' understandings of violence against women, with the 2017 NCAS indicating that nearly one in three Australians (32%) believe women are partially responsible for continued abuse when they do not leave a violent relationship (Webster et al., 2018, p. 81). Furthermore, just over one in six Australians (16%) do not believe that it is hard for women to leave violent relationships (Webster et al., 2018, p. 81). Addressing and improving these attitudes in the community can assist in overcoming barriers for victims and survivors to seek support (for a list of research on negative attitudes as a barrier to seeking support, see Webster et al., 2018, p. 27).

As the National Principles highlight the importance of tracking and understanding community attitudes, ANROWS recommends that further funding be committed to enable ANROWS to continue delivering these insights through the NCAS.

## National Principle 4: Effects of discrimination and inequality

ANROWS commends the inclusion of a National Principle that addresses the effects of discrimination and inequality on victims' and survivors' experiences of coercive control. While gender inequality is acknowledged as a primary driver of coercive control, research indicates that other forms of social, political, and economic discrimination and inequality intersect with gender inequality and each other to influence the frequency and severity of experiences of violence against women (see Elliott, 2017; Nancarrow, 2019). These intersecting effects of discrimination and inequality can impact a victim's and survivor's ability to seek help, influence their interactions with the service system, and increase the negative impacts of coercive control (for examples of the experiences of victims and survivors who experience intersecting discrimination, see Vaughan et al., 2016b; for barriers to help-seeking for migrant and refugee women, see Koleth et al., 2020). Discrimination and inequality can be weaponised by perpetrators, such as through threats to cancel the visas of victims and survivors (Vaughan et

al., 2016a). As identified in our response to National Principle 1, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are also disproportionately impacted by misidentification as perpetrators of DFV (Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2018; Nancarrow, 2016, 2019; Nancarrow et al., 2020). As such, when designing systemic change to address coercive control through the National Principles, it is important to consider how women who experience multiple intersecting forms of systemic and structural inequality will be impacted.

## National Principle 5: Lived experience

ANROWS commends the inclusion of a National Principle focused on ensuring that lived experience of victims and survivors informs policies regarding, and solutions to, coercive control. The ANROWS-funded project, *Speaking truth to power: The role of victims and survivors in driving policy change on gender-based violence* (Wheildon et al., 2022), provides clear guidelines for conducting meaningful engagement with women with lived experience. ANROWS will be developing a resource based on this project, which will be made public once finalised.

ANROWS supports the inclusion of death reviews and research on IPH within the National Principles as ANROWS evidence has shown that studying homicides and death reviews yields vital information on women's experiences, risk, prevention, and intervention that would otherwise remain invisible. As discussed previously, a collaborative project between ANROWS and the ADFVDRN (2022) and a review conducted by the NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team (2022) both identified evidence of a high prevalence of coercive and controlling behaviour prior to incidents of IPH. In ANROWS-funded research by Boxall et al. (2022) that examined 199 incidents of male-perpetrated IPH of a female partner or ex-partner, the researchers identified three primary offender types and pathways to IPH. While this research highlighted the diversity of potential pathways to IPH, it also identified potential intervention points for each (Boxall et al., 2022). The findings from across these studies suggest that death reviews of IPH cases may be used to reveal valuable information to inform responses to coercive control. However, ANROWS would suggest that input from victims and survivors will be imperative to decisions around where within the principles this information appears, and if it is deserving of a standalone principle.

## National Principle 6: Coordinated approach to prevention, early intervention, response and recovery

ANROWS supports the inclusion of a National Principle that emphasises the need for a coordinated approach to prevention, early intervention, response and recovery. Victims and survivors often have complex and diverse needs that cannot be met by a single service and therefore benefit when services are integrated across sectors (ANROWS, 2020c). This is particularly pertinent for women who face systemic barriers to accessing services, including women who live in rural and regional areas, women with disability, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (ANROWS, 2020c). Another group of women impacted by a lack of integration are women with experiences of complex trauma, who are often in frequent contact with healthcare, police, and crisis services, but must navigate these various systems simultaneously in order to meet their health and safety needs (Salter et al., 2020).

Examples of potential integrated approaches include the introduction of a case management system for women navigating the complex legal system (on the complexities of the legal system,

see Nancarrow, 2021; on the benefits of case management see Wangmann et al., 2020; see also Salter et al., 2020), or holistic early intervention programs for perpetrators (ANROWS, 2021c). Integrated approaches can improve the safety of victims and survivors by supporting more accurate risk assessments, enabling coordinated responses to perpetrators and decreasing systemic barriers faced by women seeking support (ANROWS, 2020c). The success of integrated approaches depends on collaborative work underpinned by practices such as shared training and education across the service system (ANROWS, 2020c).

## National Principle 7: Criminalisation of coercive control

The statement that criminalisation is only one form of legal response to coercive control, and that all legal responses must occur alongside non-legal responses, is consistent with ANROWS's previous recommendations and stated positions (ANROWS, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b). The need for alternative approaches to addressing coercive control is of particular relevance for diverse groups and women who face systemic barriers to accessing and navigating the legal system (ANROWS, 2021a). ANROWS (2022b) has previously emphasised that research demonstrates that mainstream legal approaches can be harmful to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. As criminalisation is only one part of the legal landscape, ANROWS is recommending (see below in "Overall feedback") that an additional principle is added, which focuses more generally on other legal responses to coercive control, including federal-level responses, and state and territory-level responses.

ANROWS agrees that any progress towards criminalisation in any jurisdiction should include consideration of, and harmonisation with, the National Principles. This is consistent with Recommendation 5 made by ANROWS (2022a) in response to the NSW Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control Bill). ANROWS (2021b) has also previously emphasised that any legal response to coercive control should be informed by evidence and ongoing data collection to identify use, impact, and effectiveness following implementation. This should include gathering evidence around unintended consequences (ANROWS, 2021b). In *Defining and responding to coercive control: Policy brief* (ANROWS, 2021a), ANROWS outlines learnings from four other jurisdictions that have implemented legislative responses to coercive control, and highlights the scarcity of evidence currently available. Evidence should also be collected to identify whether criminalisation of coercive control generates any changes in community attitudes towards violence against women (ANROWS, 2021b). ANROWS's NCAS currently tracks these attitudes, and could be a valuable resource for any jurisdiction considering or implementing criminalisation.

ANROWS has also previously identified that criminalisation of coercive control must be accompanied by increased understanding of coercive control among police and judicial officers, underpinned by the ability to apply this understanding in practice (2022a, 2022b, 2021a, 2021b; see also Nancarrow et al., 2020).

## National Principle 8: Unintended consequences of criminalisation

ANROWS commends the inclusion of a focus on the unintended consequences of criminalisation, but suggests that this should be incorporated as a key component of National Principle 7 to highlight that the unintended consequences cannot be considered independently from criminalisation. Principle 8 is consistent with research that suggests criminalisation may have

the unintended consequence of victims and survivors, including children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, being misidentified as perpetrators of coercive control (an issue identified in ANROWS research including Nancarrow et al., 2020), traumatising victims and survivors through criminal justice processes (ANROWS, 2021b), and increasing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the justice system (ANROWS, 2021b). ANROWS also positively notes the inclusion of consideration for how police and justice professionals could be supported through training to apply the legislation in practice, which ANROWS has previously highlighted the need for in jurisdictions considering criminalisation (for example see ANROWS, 2021b).

ANROWS suggests that the National Principles should consider that the criminalisation of coercive control may lead to increased opportunities for systems abuse by perpetrators. Walklate et al. (2018) suggest that the requirement of proving coercive control to a criminal standard may increase opportunities for systems abuse by perpetrators. Systems abuse is defined as the “abuse or manipulation of legal systems and processes by perpetrators to exert power and control over the victim/survivor” (Douglas & Chapple, 2019 as cited in Nancarrow et al., 2020, p. 8). We know that perpetrators already engage in systems abuse through the legal system, such as through retaliatory applications for protection orders (Nancarrow et al., 2020) to intimidate victims or survivors to withdraw their own applications, or to deplete their financial and emotional resources (Carson et al., 2022; Douglas & Chapple, 2019; Kaspiew et al., 2017, 2022; Miller & Smolter, 2011; Reeves, 2019; Wangmann et al., 2020). The potential for increased systems abuse through the criminalisation of coercive control is supported by evidence emerging from Scotland, where a standalone offence that criminalises a course of abusive behaviour has been introduced (ANROWS, 2021a). An initial evaluation of this offence revealed that some women felt that the legal system empowered their perpetrators even when the process resulted in conviction (Lombard et al., 2022). In the introduction of a new offence, consideration must be paid to how this could be manipulated by perpetrators.

ANROWS suggests that the National Principles should include consideration of additional potential unintended consequences of criminalisation. ANROWS (2021b) has previously noted that the court experience may re-traumatise victims and survivors and/or invalidate their experiences where the offence is not prosecuted or conviction is not achieved due to the criminal standard of proof. Directing resources into the criminal legal process may also pull resources from alternative safety responses (as identified by Douglas, 2021). As previously identified, the introduction of a new offence also has the potential to increase the barriers that diverse groups of women already experience when accessing the justice system (ANROWS, 2021a). Furthermore, ANROWS research highlights that accountability for violence within the legal system does not necessarily promote personal responsibility by the perpetrator (ANROWS, 2021c) and therefore may not necessarily lead to a reduction in violent behaviour (ANROWS, 2022a).

## Overall feedback

ANROWS commends the efforts to introduce a set of National Principles that promote a shared and consistent understanding of coercive control across the Australian Government and state and territory governments. ANROWS notes the inclusion of a focus on strengthening and utilising the evidence base to inform responses to coercive control and a commitment to enhancing data collection to support ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the use, impact, and effectiveness of responses. This is consistent with previous recommendations that ANROWS has made to the Department of Communities and Justice NSW (ANROWS, 2022a) and in the *Policy*



*brief: Defining and responding to coercive control* (ANROWS, 2021a). These recommendations included funding research to monitor the progress and implementation of coercive control offences, and any unintended consequences, and providing ongoing funding for the NCAS to monitor improvements in attitudes towards violence against women and to enable continued improvement in policy and programs (ANROWS, 2022a).

ANROWS suggests that the inclusion of an additional National Principle that covers the potential for the application of, and improvements to, existing legislation would be beneficial. The National Principles currently focus on criminalisation of coercive control as the key legislative lever for addressing coercive control. ANROWS notes that legislation currently exists across myriad sectors including but not limited to immigration, family law, telecommunications, housing, and health that could be reviewed and applied to support responses to coercive control that function independently of the criminal law system. For example, current immigration laws can increase women's dependency on men through sponsorship and thus impact their experiences of family violence (Vaughan et al., 2016a). This highlights that, while the National Principles note that state and territory governments have the primary responsibility and accountability for responding to coercive control, there are still opportunities for the federal government to facilitate broader legislative responses.

ANROWS notes that the introduction to the draft National Principles states that they are intended to be used by policymakers and service providers, and to support wider awareness of coercive control. ANROWS suggests that the National Principles would benefit from a clearer articulation of the purpose of the document and the National Principles themselves to support their translation into practice. ANROWS would be happy to work with the Attorney-General's Department on plans for socialisation, dissemination, and uptake of the Principles.

ANROWS suggests that the scope of coercive control covered by the National Principles should be more clearly articulated. The introduction notes that the document considers coercive control in the context of "family or domestic relationships and settings" and does not address it in the context of "family, domestic, and sexual violence, and broader gender-based violence, both of which extend to violence outside of family and domestic relationships or settings". These descriptions would benefit from further elaboration and examples to support understanding of what types of coercive control these descriptions refer to and to distinguish them from each other.

ANROWS notes that each National Principle may be read in isolation and therefore suggests that clear references or interactive links be included in the document where relevant to ensure that key information is not missed.

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