

Coercive Control and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women

Policy Position Paper

August 2026

Our position

Coercive control must be recognised and addressed as a pattern of domination that can be gendered, racialised, systemic and technology-facilitated. Responses must be designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, led by community-controlled organisations, and implemented with safeguards against victim-survivor misidentification, criminalisation and child removal.

Executive summary

Coercive control is not a single incident. It is a repeated and cumulative pattern through which a person uses physical and non-physical behaviours to create fear, restrict liberty and autonomy, and establish power over another person. It can include isolation, intimidation, surveillance, financial abuse, threats involving children or family, technology-facilitated abuse, misuse of legal and government systems, and interference with culture, kinship and community connection.

Nationally, an estimated 27 per cent of women (2.7 million) have experienced violence, emotional abuse or economic abuse from a cohabiting partner since the age of 15, including 23 per cent who have experienced emotionally abusive, controlling behaviours (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). These figures are not broken down for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, which is itself a significant data gap.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, coercive control must be understood in the context of colonisation, dispossession, racism, gender inequality and ongoing institutional harm. Women may face coercion from a partner or family member while also encountering unsafe responses from police, courts, child protection, housing, health, social security and other systems. A response that focuses only on criminalisation risks reproducing harm if these systems cannot accurately identify the person using violence and the person resisting or surviving it.

NATSIWA supports strong and accountable responses to coercive control, including legal responses where they are properly designed and implemented. However, criminal offences are only one part of the solution. Governments must invest equally in prevention, early intervention, culturally safe services, housing, legal assistance, healing and recovery, workforce capability, and independent monitoring.

NATSIWA's priority recommendations

1. Adopt nationally consistent, culturally informed definitions and principles that recognise coercive control as a pattern and include non-physical, technology-facilitated, financial, systems and cultural abuse.
2. Require genuine co-design and shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and adequately fund Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to lead design, delivery and evaluation.
3. Build binding safeguards against misidentification, dual charging, criminalisation of victim-survivors and inappropriate child protection intervention.
4. Fund specialist, culturally safe and community-controlled legal, crisis, housing, health, disability, financial counselling, healing and recovery services in urban, regional and remote communities.
5. Establish nationally consistent, mandatory and ongoing training for police, judicial officers, lawyers, child protection, health, housing, social security and frontline workforces.
6. Recognise children as victim-survivors in their own right and prohibit perpetrators from weaponising parenting, child support, child protection and family law systems.
7. Create safe pathways for women to report technology-facilitated and financial abuse and require safety-by-design standards across government and essential service systems.
8. Improve prevention and accountability responses for people using violence, including culturally grounded programs, without shifting responsibility for violence onto culture or communities.
9. Implement Indigenous Data Sovereignty, transparent reporting and independent Aboriginal-led monitoring of laws, policing practices and outcomes.
10. Guarantee sustainable, long-term funding and measure success through safety, freedom, housing stability, wellbeing and reduced system harm—not only arrests and prosecutions.

1. Understanding coercive control

The National Principles to Address Coercive Control in Family and Domestic Violence describe coercive control as a pattern of abusive behaviour over time that creates and maintains power and dominance. Its effect is to generate fear and deny liberty and autonomy. The pattern matters: individual incidents may appear minor or lawful when viewed alone, while their cumulative impact can entrap a victim-survivor.

Common behaviours can include:

- isolating a woman from family, friends, community, Country and support networks;
- monitoring movements, communications, devices, accounts or online activity;
- controlling money, work, education, transport, medication, identification documents or access to services;
- threatening harm, suicide, deportation, homelessness, child removal, reputational damage or disclosure of private information;
- using children, kinship obligations, courts, police, child support, taxation, migration or other systems to continue abuse;
- gaslighting, humiliation, intimidation and rules that progressively narrow a woman's daily life;
- post-separation abuse, including litigation abuse, stalking and interference with parenting arrangements.

Coercive control can occur in intimate partner and broader family relationships. Any policy or legal definition must be sufficiently broad to recognise the family and kinship contexts in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women live, while avoiding stereotypes or the treatment of culture itself as a risk factor.

2. The distinct experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience family and domestic violence within a wider environment shaped by colonisation, dispossession, the Stolen Generations, structural racism and gender inequality. These forces do not cause individual perpetrators to use violence, but they shape exposure to violence, access to safety, and the way institutions respond.

The scale of harm is stark. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are hospitalised for family violence at 26 times the rate of non-Indigenous women (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2026), and are killed by an intimate partner at a rate up to seven times the national average, making up around 16 per cent of adult female homicide victims despite being about 3 per cent of the adult female population (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2024).

Coercive control may include interference with cultural identity and obligations; preventing connection with children, Elders, family, Country or community; exploiting housing scarcity and geographic isolation; controlling transport and digital access; or threatening to involve police or child protection. Perpetrators may exploit a woman's justified mistrust of institutions or her fear that seeking help will lead to disbelief, criminalisation, removal of children, loss of housing or community repercussions.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are not a homogenous group. Responses must account for differences across Nations and communities, urban, regional and remote settings, age, disability, sexuality, gender identity, visa status and socioeconomic circumstances. Women must be heard as rights-holders and experts in their own lives—not treated only as service users or sources of consultation data.

3. NATSIWA's policy position

Recognition without unintended harm

NATSIWA supports formal recognition of coercive control because it helps systems see the whole pattern of abuse rather than isolated incidents. Recognition must not, however, be reduced to the creation of a criminal offence. Poorly implemented laws can increase surveillance and criminalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, particularly where police respond to a single incident without understanding the history, pattern, self-defence or resistance.

Cultural safety and self-determination

Cultural safety must be defined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women receiving the response. Governments should enter shared decision-making arrangements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and community-controlled organisations, including resourcing them to design local pathways, provide specialist advocacy and scrutinise implementation.

A whole-of-system response

Coercive control is enacted through systems as well as interpersonal behaviour. Government agencies, courts, banks, telecommunications providers, utilities, social media platforms and other essential services must identify how their processes can be weaponised. Women should not have to repeatedly disclose abuse or navigate conflicting evidence requirements. A “no wrong door” approach should connect women safely to support with informed consent and strong privacy protections.

Safety, healing and economic security

A woman cannot exercise meaningful choice without safe housing, income, transport, communications, health care and legal support. Crisis responses must be linked to long-term recovery and culturally grounded healing. Flexible assistance must be available without requiring a criminal complaint, protection order or repeated proof of violence.

4. Legislative and policy context

Australia's approach is not uniform. The Standing Council of Attorneys-General released the National Principles to Address Coercive Control in Family and Domestic Violence in September 2023. New South Wales commenced a standalone coercive control offence

on 1 July 2024 for repeated abusive behaviour by an adult against a current or former intimate partner, committed with intent to coerce or control. Queensland commenced its coercive control offence on 26 May 2025, inserted as section 334C of the Criminal Code (Qld) by the Criminal Law (Coercive Control and Affirmative Consent) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2024; it applies to abusive courses of conduct in specified domestic relationships. Tasmania has long recognised economic and emotional abuse as family violence. Other jurisdictions address patterns of abuse through differing family violence, protection order and criminal law frameworks.

National principles are an important foundation, but inconsistency remains in definitions, relationship coverage, evidence, police practice, protection orders, service pathways and data collection. Harmonisation should lift safety and accountability standards, not impose a narrow model that fails to recognise the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. NATSIWA calls for every jurisdiction considering or reviewing coercive control laws to publish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander impact assessment, resource community-controlled participation before commencement, and establish independent monitoring from the first day of operation.

5. Implementation safeguards

Misidentification of victim-survivors as offenders is a well-documented risk, and researchers have found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in particular are being misidentified as perpetrators on protection orders (ANROWS, 2020). The safeguards below respond to this and other known implementation risks.

Risk	Required safeguard
Victim-survivor misidentification	Pattern-based assessment; primary aggressor and predominant aggressor guidance; assessment of self-defence and resistance; specialist review before adverse action.
Over-policing and criminalisation	Independent Aboriginal-led oversight; legal representation; limits on dual charging; transparent disaggregated data and complaint pathways.
Child removal and family separation	Presume help-seeking is protective; require child protection to assess perpetrator patterns and systems abuse; fund culturally safe family support.
Evidence barriers	Accept multiple forms of evidence; avoid requiring police

	reports or court orders; enable supported disclosure and information-sharing only with informed consent.
Unsafe information handling	Safe contact protocols, privacy controls, protected addresses and accounts, audit trails, and rapid correction of compromised records.
Service gaps	Long-term funding for community-controlled, place-based services across urban, regional and remote areas, including after-hours and outreach capacity.

6. Workforce and service reform

All relevant workforces require more than one-off awareness training. Capability development must be role-specific, recurrent, assessed and supported by supervision, practice guidance and accountability. Training should be developed and delivered with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and organisations and cover:

- patterns of coercive control, including post-separation, financial, technological and systems abuse;
- racism, unconscious bias, intersectionality and the impacts of colonisation and institutional harm;
- misidentification, predominant aggressor assessment, self-defence and victim-survivor resistance;
- culturally safe engagement, interpreters, disability access and safe communication;
- information sharing, consent, confidentiality and Indigenous Data Sovereignty;
- referral pathways to Aboriginal community-controlled and specialist services.

Governments must fund the services to which workers are expected to refer women. Training without accessible housing, legal assistance, financial support, health care and culturally safe advocacy will not deliver safety.

7. Accountability for people using violence

Responsibility for coercive control rests with the person choosing to use violence. Responses must focus on stopping abusive behaviour, preventing escalation and protecting victim-survivors. Culturally grounded behaviour-change and healing programs should be community-led, evidence-informed and subject to clear safety and accountability standards. Cultural reconnection can support change, but culture must

never be used to excuse violence or transfer responsibility from perpetrators to women, families or communities.

Accountability must extend beyond program attendance. It should include active risk management, monitoring of protection orders, coordinated information sharing, consequences for systems abuse, and sustained assessment of whether women and children are safer.

8. Data, evaluation and measures of success

Implementation must be evaluated from the outset. Data about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be governed consistently with Indigenous Data Sovereignty. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women should determine the questions asked, access and interpretation arrangements, and how findings are reported and used.

Measures should include:

- rates and outcomes of reports, charges, prosecutions and protection orders, disaggregated by sex, Indigenous status, disability, location and relationship type;
- misidentification, dual charging, child protection referrals and adverse administrative outcomes;
- access to housing, legal assistance, income support, health care and culturally safe services;
- women's reported safety, autonomy, wellbeing, cultural connection and confidence in systems;
- perpetrator accountability, recurrence and systems abuse;
- whether community-controlled organisations have adequate, secure funding and decision-making authority.

9. Conclusion

Coercive control takes away freedom, autonomy, safety and identity through a pattern of domination. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, the response must see both the perpetrator's behaviour and the systems that can compound or enable it. Laws can support recognition and accountability, but they will not succeed without cultural safety, service capacity, economic security, safe housing and independent scrutiny.

NATSIWA calls on Australian governments to move beyond fragmented and incident-based responses. Reform must be nationally coordinated, locally informed, Aboriginal-led and accountable to the women whose safety it is intended to protect.

References

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Note: This position paper is a policy document and does not constitute legal advice.