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Understanding Reproductive Coercion and Abuse in the Context of
Family Violence and Family Law



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INTRODUCTION

Reproductive coercion and abuse (RCA) is located at the intersection of gender-based violence (GBV) and reproductive health. It refers to a range of behaviours that interfere with a person's reproductive autonomy and decisions and is increasingly recognized as a serious form of intimate partner violence (IPV) that affects the sexual and reproductive health and autonomy of victim-survivors (Levesque, 2023a; Levesque et al., 2023b; Tarzia & Hegarty, 2021). RCA includes any behaviour that is intended to control another person's reproductive autonomy, such as birth control sabotage, pregnancy coercion, abortion coercion, providing false or misleading information about fertility or contraception, and gaslighting (Levesque et al., 2023b). These behaviours are most often perpetrated by male intimate partners; however, family members such as in-laws, may be involved or perpetrators themselves (Wellington et al., 2025). In a 2023 report from RESOLVE Manitoba, RCA was demonstrated to also occur in the context of family violence, as a perpetrator sought to control the sexual and reproductive health and contraceptive options that his children could access (Haller et al., 2023).

The impacts of RCA are significant and far-reaching. Victim-survivors commonly experience emotional distress, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, unintended pregnancy, and an increased risk of contracting sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBIs) (Levesque et al., 2023b; Tarzia &

OVERVIEW

Reproductive coercion and abuse (RCA) is a form of intimate partner violence (IPV) that profoundly affects the health, autonomy, and safety of victim-survivors. RCA refers to any behaviours that interfere with a person's reproductive autonomy, including contraceptive sabotage, pregnancy pressure, and controlling the outcome of a pregnancy. Although RCA is incredibly common in Canada and among victim-survivors of IPV, it remains under-recognized in family law and family violence sectors. This research brief provides an overview of RCA, its connection to coercive control, and implications for family violence and family law sectors.

Hegarty, 2021; Wellington et al., 2025). Despite these many harms, RCA remains a poorly documented and understood phenomena in Canada. A recent Canadian study found that nearly two-thirds of Ontario and Quebec survey respondents reported at least one lifetime experience of RCA (Levesque et al., 2023a). This study also found that those who reported experiencing contraception sabotage¹ were nearly three times more likely to also report IPV (Levesque et al., 2023a).

Rather than viewing RCA as a factor increasing the risk of experiencing IPV, some scholars argue that IPV

¹ Contraception sabotage refers to any behaviours that interfere with the use of contraception, including hiding, removing, or destroying contraceptive methods (Miller et al., 2011).

is the mechanism through which RCA is perpetrated, (Tarzia & Hegarty, 2021). In this way, RCA is a form of IPV understood as a tactic of coercive control embedded in abusive relationships. Despite this, RCA often goes unacknowledged and unaddressed in both family violence response systems and family law (Saldanha et al., 2025). RCA is a significant oversight in the sectors of family violence and family law, particularly given that RCA may involve

long-term forms of control, especially when children are involved. There are growing calls for RCA to be explicitly considered in legal proceeding related to child custody and parenting arrangements, recognizing the ways perpetrators may use reproduction and parenting to exert power and control over victim-survivors (Monk & Bowen, 2020; Saldanha et al., 2025; Tarzia & McKenzie, 2024; Wellington et al., 2025).

RCA & Coercive Control

RCA is rarely an isolated experience, often intersecting with tactics of coercive control (Douglas et al., 2021; Saldanha et al., 2025). Coercive control can be understood as the “tactics to intimidate, isolate, humiliate, exploit, regulate, and micromanage women’s enactment of everyday life” (Stark, 2007, p. 171). Perpetrators of abuse use ongoing intimidation, hostility, degradation, and isolation to control a woman’s personal freedom and her capacity for autonomous decision-making through these tactics (Stark, 2007). At the core of coercive control is patriarchal power, control, and domination over women (Stark, 2007), which is accomplished through undermining the autonomy of women and using gendered roles to make the coercive control appear normal (Williamson, 2010). RCA is commonly conceptualized as a tactic of coercive control as it involves a variety of tactics designed to promote or prevent a pregnancy (Tarzia & McKenzie, 2024). Fundamentally, RCA is about

power and control, as perpetrators seek to weaponize women’s bodies, reproductive capacities, and social roles to degrade, dehumanize, and dominate (Grace & Miller, 2023; Tarzia & McKenzie, 2024;).

In an Australian-based study, Tarzia and McKenzie (2024) found that victims-survivors conceptualized their perpetrator’s motivations of RCA as ranging from entitlement and self-interest to a profound desire for domination and entrapment. Pregnancy promoting behaviours were especially common in relationships characterized by ongoing control, with men seeking to impregnate their partners as a means of deepening dependency and solidifying control. Tarzia and McKenzie (2024) also highlighted how perpetrators commonly utilized pregnancy and parenthood as the ultimate weapons for entrapment, with the children often becoming pawns in their efforts to dominate the mother.

RCA PREVALENCE & INSIGHTS

A recent US study focusing on women residing at an IPV shelter found that 33% of participants experienced RCA in their abusive relationships (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2021). Alarming, nearly one-third (31%) of shelter participants reported that their partner tried to get them pregnant when they did not want to be, and 17% reported that their

partner physically hurt them or threatened to leave if they did not get pregnant (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2021). These findings emphasize the high prevalence of RCA in contexts of IPV.

RISK FACTORS

Women and gender-diverse folks are at a heightened risk of experiencing RCA due to intersecting systems of oppression and marginalization. Further, those who are young, racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+, or have a history of foster care involvement face significantly increased vulnerabilities to experiencing RCA (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2021; Pettyjohn et al., 2021; Tarzia & Hegarty, 2021). These risk factors reflect the broader social inequities that shape power dynamics within intimate relationships and may limit individuals' ability to access reproductive autonomy and safety.

IMPACTS

The impacts of RCA are severe and multifaceted. RCA is associated with an increased homicide risk, indicated by severe scores on the Danger Assessment (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2021). RCA also frequently co-occurs with other forms of GBV and coercion, including sexual violence, stalking, and psychological abuse (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2021; Grace & Miller, 2023; Swan et al., 2021). Further, RCA is associated with religious abuse, polyvictimization,² technology-facilitated abuse, and traumatic brain injury, highlighting its role within broader patterns of control, surveillance, and harm (Grace et al., 2022; Grace & Miller, 2023; Swan et al., 2021).

LEGAL AND POLICY CHALLENGES

HIGH EVIDENTIARY BURDEN REQUIRED TO SUBSTANTIATE RCA ALLEGATIONS

Despite its pervasiveness, RCA remains poorly recognized in legal systems. As Douglas, Sheeran, and Tarzia (2021) argue, RCA is often invisible in family violence proceedings and seldom raised in legal arguments, despite research suggesting that one-third of IPV victim-survivors experience RCA. One major barrier to the recognition of RCA in family law courts is the high evidentiary burden often required to substantiate RCA allegations, particularly because many of its manifestations, such as contraception sabotage or pregnancy coercion, lack physical evidence. Legal professionals may hesitate to include RCA claims out of concern that they will be dismissed, especially because RCA is so closely linked to sexual violence, which is a similar form of violence that is frequently met with minimization or disbelief in legal contexts (Douglas et al., 2021).

LEGAL SYSTEMS PRIORITIZE PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AS MOST LEGITIMATE FORM OF HARM

Legal systems, especially within family and criminal law, have historically and continue to privilege physical violence as the most legitimate or serious form of harm (Saldanha et al., 2025). This emphasis

² Polyvictimization refers to having experienced multiple victimizations, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying, and exposure to family violence (Safe Start Center, n.d.).

marginalizes abuse that is often invisible but deeply impactful, such as coercive control and RCA. As a result, victim-survivors and family lawyers may feel compelled to frame their experiences in ways that fit the current narrow legal understandings of abuse, which can lead to retraumatization as the courts fail to acknowledge the full scope of the abuse (Douglas et al., 2021). While some jurisdictions have made strides in recognizing coercive control as a form of family violence, this recognition has not consistently extended to consider RCA. The specific tactics used in RCA are rarely named explicitly in legal discourse, and when they are the RCA tends to be subsumed under other claims of violence, rather than treated as its own distinct and serious form of harm (Saldanha et al., 2025; Sheeran et al., 2022). Without clear legal definitions or guiding precedents related to RCA, courts risk overlooking crucial elements of the abuse, leading to rulings that fail to protect victim-survivors and their children.

RCA, FAMILY VIOLENCE & FAMILY LAW

Family lawyers, mediators, and family violence service providers occupy a critical position in recognizing and addressing RCA. However, RCA remains largely invisible in legal and service responses. As a result, RCA is rarely considered in parenting capacity assessments or best interest determinations, despite its lasting impacts on parental functioning, child wellbeing, and survivor safety (Sheeran et al., 2022).

Perpetrators of abuse may weaponize the family court system as a tool of post-separation abuse, using custody proceedings to prolong contact, exert power, and maintain coercive control over survivors (Tarzia & McKenzie, 2024). In these cases, RCA can be understood as part of a broader strategy to destabilize the victim-survivor's life through forcing pregnancy and leveraging parenthood to remain legally and emotionally entangled. This is incredibly harmful, especially as courts often operate on the presumption that shared parental custody is in the best interests for the family, which instead may perpetuate the cycle of abuse (Douglas et al., 2021).

Court rulings of shared parental custody are especially harmful when RCA has shaped the very circumstances of parenthood. Through tactics of RCA, children become a mechanism used by the perpetrator to trap the victim-survivor in the abusive relationship (Tarzia & McKenzie, 2024). When the victim-survivor leaves the relationship, the perpetrator still utilizes children and parental rights as a way to insert themselves back into the victim-survivor's life. This continues to trap the victim-survivor in a co-parenting relationship with the perpetrator until the child is at least an adult. In this way, the child that was coercively conceived becomes the ultimate tool or weapon for the perpetrator to maintain control over the victim-survivor (Tarzia & McKenzie, 2024).

Additionally, RCA has profound implications for children's wellbeing. Children who are exposed to coercive control, including forms of RCA, are at an increased risk of emotional distress, developmental challenges, and continued trauma (Tarzia & Hegarty, 2021). Parenting arrangements that ignore or downplay the

tactics of RCA may inadvertently re-expose children to unsafe environments, while also undermining the victim-survivor's safety and ability to parent without fear or interference (Tarzia & McKenzie, 2024; Tarzia & Hegarty, 2021).

To ensure that legal responses are trauma-informed and rights-based, RCA must be explicitly recognized as a serious form of coercive control, especially within family law and parental custody arrangements. Family violence sector workers, including shelter workers, family lawyers, and victim services must learn and

incorporate RCA into their practices. Doing so would not only enhance victim-survivor's safety but also support more accurate and equitable determinations of the best interests of the child. As RCA underpins the ultimate weaponization of children, it becomes a tool through which abusers manipulate legal systems to maintain proximity, control, and psychological dominance over survivors and their children (Tarzia & McKenzie, 2024). This makes the recognition and disruption of RCA not only a legal imperative, but a crucial act of safeguarding and justice.

CONCLUSION

Reproductive coercion and abuse (RCA) is a pervasive and devastating form of IPV that undermines reproductive autonomy, bodily integrity, and parental safety. It is often obscured and marginalized in legal contexts due to the legal culture that prioritizes physical abuse over tactics of coercive control. In doing so, legal contexts overlook how RCA is a profound tool of domination that often continues long after the end of a relationship, particularly through family law systems that enable post-separation abuse. Addressing RCA requires that legal systems move beyond narrow understandings of violence and take seriously the reproductive and parental dimensions of coercive control. Legal professionals, service providers, and policymakers must work collaboratively to ensure that RCA is integrated into family violence frameworks, parenting risk assessments, and custody determinations. Doing so will not only protect victim-survivors and their children but will advance a more just and trauma-informed legal response as one that centres safety, autonomy, and the right to parent free from violence and control.

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