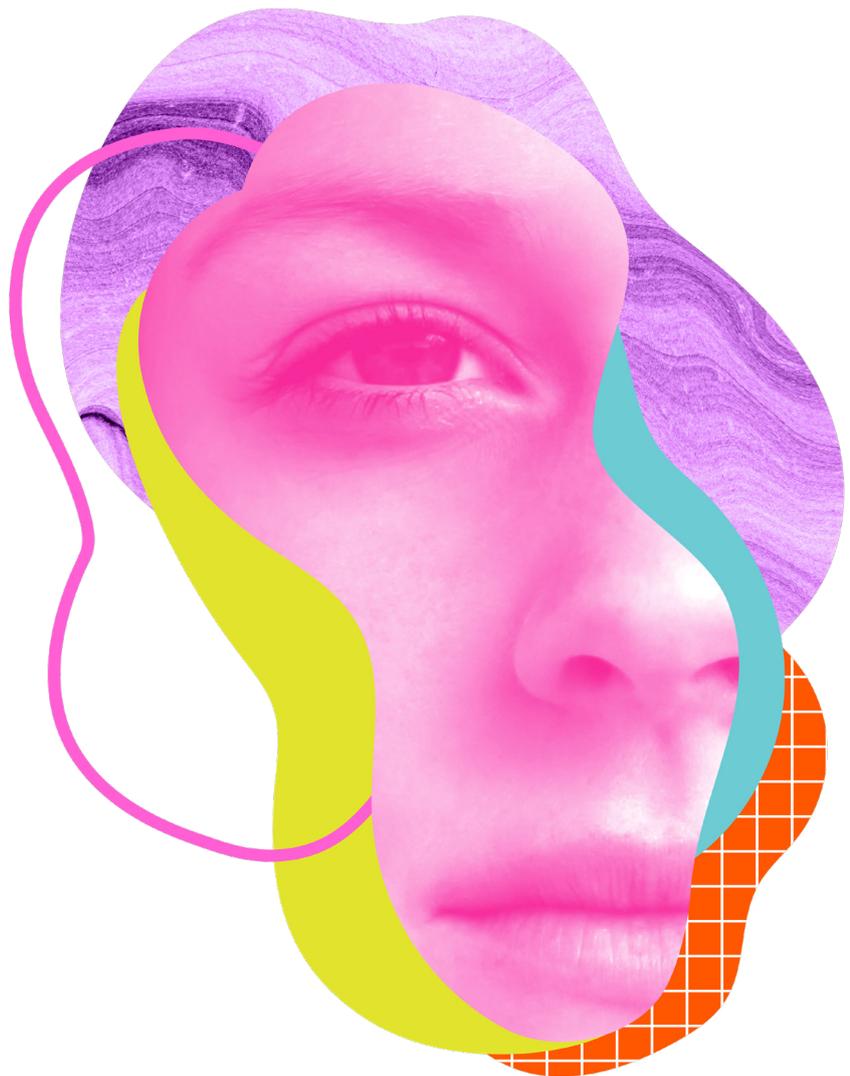


Systems Abuse in Intimate Partner Violence

Based on doctoral research by J Rowles (2026) Institutional
Systems Abuse within Systemic Coercive Control



Systems Abuse in Intimate Partner Violence

Specific Focus: Institutional Systems Abuse a tactic of Systemic Coercive Control Tactics.

Institutional Systems Abuse in Systemic Coercive Control (Rowles, 2026).

Introduction to System Abuse

Systems Abuse refers strategic manipulation of both legal and institutional systems by perpetrators of family violence. Done to exert power, threaten, harass, control dominate, remove and restrict the freedoms of a partner (current or former). Systems Abuse also includes harmful system responses that result from inadequate and/or weaknesses in systems - that result in compounding harm and social entrapment. Institutional abuse is often the precursor to legal systems abuse - they are both tactics used in systemic coercive control.

System Coercive Control

Evan Stark explained coercive control as a pattern of behaviour which seeks to take away the survivor's agency and freedoms - to strip away their sense of self, through domination (2009).

Systemic Coercive Control is when the predominant aggressor extends their abuse strategy and tactics to include the use of third-party systems - social, institutional and legal. The perpetrator seeks to amplify their power and control strategy by leveraging informal and formal systems. That is why coercive control is profoundly systemic as it takes place within social communities and systems - not only within the direct relationship.

Legal Systems Abuse

Legal Systems Abuse or sometimes called paper abuse or procedural abuse (Miller &

Smolter, 2011) refers to how legal processes can be used by the perpetrator to expand and extend their repertoire of coercive and controlling behaviours post-separation (Douglas, 2018; Reeves, 2018)

The Relationship between Legal and Institutional Systems Abuse

Legal systems abuse and institutional systems abuse are interconnected forms of systemic coercive control that occur when systems designed to protect or support people are strategically manipulated or fail in harmful ways. Both are tactics and/or outcomes of systemic coercive control and often occur simultaneously, particularly post-separation (Table below).

Institutional Systems Abuse

Institutional Systems Abuse is specific tactic of system coercive control. This form of abuse occurs not only through the intentional manipulation of systems and system actors by the perpetrator but also through the harmful or complicit responses of systems and system actors. These responses may

appear procedurally correct or professionally neutral, yet they often have the effect of escalating harm, legitimising abuse, and entrapping victim-survivors.

Institutional Systems Abuse operates across multiple social sites of practice and policy. It includes but is not limited to social, health, education, housing, independent organisations, immigration, and welfare systems. It is cumulative, patterned, and strategic.

It is neither accidental nor incidental.

It relies on systemic vulnerabilities, such as gender-neutral policies, risk-based assessment tools, or decontextualised service practices, which perpetrators exploit to entrap, discredit, and silence victim-survivors.

To date, systems abuse has been under-researched and there is minimal research on perpetrators who manipulate the system and of the victims who experience the system as a tool of further abuse. Understandings of family

violence progress and evolve, it is important that this type of coercive and controlling violence is not left undetected by social, institutional and justice systems and system actors.

Disrupting Institutional Systems Abuse

The disruption of institutional systems abuse requires, firstly that it is named – as referring to this abuse tactic as “other abuse” is problematic because it obscures responsibility, distances institutions from their complicity in harm, and reinforces the very systems of exclusion and powerlessness that institutional abuse enacts. Therefore an understanding of how social systems – both formal and informal can become instruments of harm is important.

Developed from two decades of frontline practice and doctoral research the following two pathways are shared as was of mapping out the various paths that can lead to institutional systems abuse, which offer improved ways of understanding and opportunities to disrupt harms and work against complicity.

Institutional Systems Abuse includes two interlinked pathways of harm:

- 01 Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM)
- 02 Harmful System Responses (The 4Ps)

Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM)

A Tactic of Systems Abuse in Systemic Coercive Control

Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM) is a key tactic used by perpetrators of coercive control to manipulate how systems, organisations, and professionals respond. It demonstrates how harm is not only relational, but also socially and institutionally produced – through for example the misuse, misidentification, misdirection, and misapplication of protective measures.

PAM operates through five distinct sub-pathways:

- 01 Manipulation of Social Communities
- 02 Manipulation of Organisations
- 03 Manipulation of Professionals
- 04 Manipulation of Formal Support Institutions
- 05 Manipulation of Legal Systems

As the perpetrator can move through the various sub-pathways the harm is compounded by the time it reaches the legal systems it is legitimised and enforced through legal channels.



Design Note: Fragments of Hope

The collage imagery throughout my website and handouts carries deliberate meaning and hope. Each artwork, designed by Lucie, represents the “taken parts of the self” those whose lives have been diminished by both perpetrators and systems that perpetuate injustice. The partial faces and layered shapes symbolise how women’s lives are devastated and constrained through systemic coercive control, how a perpetrator tries to dismantle her from her own core, her sense of knowing, and from all the parts of herself.

These images hold hope – as the women are “not broken” - they remain present, visible, and whole within their complexity. The bright colours reflect their true inner vibrance and the possibility of recovery, restoration, and the reclaiming of what has been dismantled and fragmented.

As responders, we hold a profound responsibility – as our actions can either compound harm or contribute to safety and dignity. From a place of safety, space and justice, the fragmented parts of herself may be restored to wholeness as they are still there. This, like the images, is the embodiment of hope.

Institutional Abuse Tactics

Note: This is a sample list, not exhaustive. It is intended as a reference for professional reflexive practice.

Social Services Systems Abuse

- Service access obstruction
- False welfare claims
- Benefit access control
- Support service eligibility manipulation
- Privacy and information control
- Blocking referrals or supports

Child Protection System Exploitation

- False reports to child protection services
- Manipulating assessment processes to discredit survivors
- Interfering with child safety assessments
- Exploiting mandatory reporting
- Influencing professionals through selective disclosures

- Obstructing inter-agency information sharing

Housing System Abuse

- Manipulating tenancy records
- Controlling joint leases
- Interfering with housing authority processes
- Blocking access to emergency accommodation
- Sabotaging housing stability
- Using property control as leverage

Education System Manipulation

- Disrupting school engagement or access
- Sabotaging educational progress
- Interfering with academic records
- Controlling school communications
- Using schools to monitor or control movements
- Employment System Abuse
- Spreading false information at work

- Coercing survivor into or out of employment
- Disrupting attendance via childcare or transport
- Sabotaging job security or promotions
- Monitoring via workplace contacts
- Immigration System Exploitation
- Withholding or threatening to cancel sponsorship
- Restricting access to documents
- Misleading immigration authorities
- Using deportation threats
- Distorting immigration records

Community and Cultural System Manipulation

- Creating cultural isolation
- Exploiting religious/community leaders
- Blocking community support
- Disrupting social networks
- Using cultural norms to justify control

- Restricting access to culturally specific resources

Health and Mental Health Systems Abuse

- Fabricating or distorting medical records
- Obstructing access to healthcare
- Falsely claiming mental illness
- Sabotaging treatment plans
- Manipulating psychiatric assessments
- Monitoring health appointments

Economic and Financial System Abuse

- Freezing or draining accounts
- Opening loans/credit in survivor's name
- Cancelling insurance or withholding claims
- Creating false financial records
- Reporting false financial crimes

Law Enforcement Manipulation

- Manipulating police identification of predominant aggressor

- Using retaliatory or pre-emptive protection orders
- Weaponising focus on physical violence
- Criminalising trauma responses
- Using police inaction to maintain control
- Professional Systems and Responders
- Weaponising psychological or parenting assessments
- Framing survivor as ‘unstable’
- Performing compliance/charm to gain credibility
- Parroting therapeutic language to mask coercion
- Legal and Bureaucratic Spillover
- Withdrawing/shifting complaints to confuse timelines
- Using excessive bureaucracy to delay help
- Forcing repeat interactions across sectors
- Exhausting survivor with repeated procedural tasks

Legal Systems Abuse Tactics can include:

Protection Order Abuse

- Retaliatory protection order filing
- Cross-order application strategy
- Order breach manipulation
- Using third parties to circumvent orders
- Protection order variation applications

Custody and Parental Alienation Tactics

- Malicious custody filing
- False parental alienation claims
- Child contact litigation abuse
- Vexatious access applications
- Unsafe access proceedings
- False parenting capacity claims

Vexatious Litigation Patterns

- Serial court applications
- Multiple without notice applications
- Punitive legal proceedings

- Deliberate process prolongation
- Legal process manipulation
- Court-Based Misrepresentation
- False character evidence filing
- Fabricated evidence submission
- Discriminatory legal arguments
- Gender bias legal arguments

Asset and Financial Litigation Abuse

- Asset control proceedings
- Property settlement litigation
- Financial resource depletion
- Legal aid exhaustion strategy

Non-Legal Coercive Tactics Impacting Legal Outcomes

- Malicious child protection notifications
- False child risk claims
- Child protection investigation manipulation
- Courthouse intimidation
- Post-court stalking
- Financial support withholding

Professional Note

This research brief is based on the doctoral research of Jacki Rowles. It is intended as a professional reference for practitioners, advocates, legal professionals, educators, and systems actors working in the context of family violence.

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Rowles, J. (2025). Institutional Systems Abuse in Systemic Coercive Control

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