

Presentation title:

Coercive control, legal systems abuse and the incredibility of women

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Feminist legal theory has long highlighted the barriers to being believed faced by women when they turn to the law for protection for domestic violence. Pervasive gendered myths about women's credibility, alongside the invisibility of coercive control, creates opportunities for perpetrators to harness the law as an extension of their control. This paper considers gendered credibility through an analysis of the qualitative accounts of 54 women who have experienced legal systems abuse in Australia. The data is drawn from a larger mixed-methods survey on Australians' experiences of coercive control and their views on the merits and risks associated with the criminalisation of coercive control. The paper highlights the barriers to being believed faced by women when they report coercive control to the police, and women's feelings that their abusers were able to use the law to their advantage without facing these same barriers. The findings suggest that male perpetrators of coercive control may be perceived as more credible when they vexatiously report domestic violence. Further, victim-survivors' views on the merits of coercive control criminalisation are explored, revealing that most, whilst in support of criminalisation, hold significant concerns about the exacerbated risk of legal systems abuse. The paper presents a valuable contribution to the existing body of research on women's perceived credibility within the context of domestic violence victimisation and offers a critical interrogation of the ways in which male perpetrators are turning to the law as a way to further their control over victim-survivors. Importantly, it emphasises victim-survivors' scepticism about the ability of law reform to mitigate the credibility deficits that women face when they report domestic violence.