

‘Not what I consented to’: When a partner tries to control the other’s choice about pregnancy

By **Eve Glicksman**

March 14, 2021 at 12:00 p.m. EDT

Sometimes he could be abusive, but the man she lived with had always honored her wish to use birth control. One night, though, he didn’t.

The Los Angeles woman, then 22, tried to get Plan B, “the morning-after pill,” but was refused at the clinic because she owed money to the state medical system. And she was pregnant.

Considering abortion made her feel guilty. Her boyfriend made it worse: “What kind of human being are you?” he taunted.

Elizabeth Miller, director of adolescent and young adult medicine at the UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh, was the first to identify and study this form of domestic abuse she called reproductive coercion — when a man or a woman tries to overrule a partner’s choice about a pregnancy.

Not to be confused with rape, the sexual relationship is consensual, and there may be no physical abuse. Reproductive coercion, Miller says, is about domination and power. “Everything from ‘Honey, we’re going to have beautiful babies together,’ to yanking out IUDs,” she says. The intent could be to make it harder for a partner to leave the relationship or simply a way to exert control. The means could be birth control sabotage, taking control of the pregnancy outcome, or lying about one’s fertility.

Yet, Miller says, “If someone isn’t hitting them, victims may hesitate to recognize pregnancy control as a form of abuse.” And most do not seek help.

“I never told anyone what happened,” the Los Angeles woman recounts. “I thought he had the right to do that; he was my boyfriend.” Like many others in this situation, she grew up in a family where abuse was normalized, plus she was financially dependent on her partner.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get over it,” she says today, asking not to be identified to protect her daughter. Still, she found the courage to leave her partner in 2012 before her daughter was born and went to live in a homeless shelter.

Miller's first research on reproductive coercion was published in 2010 in the journal Contraception. She found that 1 in 4 women, ages 16 to 29, at family planning clinics had encountered it and further, that it was an important and overlooked factor in unintended pregnancies.

Miller was met with disbelief when the study came out. "This really happens?" she was asked. Contrary to prevailing notions of pregnant teens lacking contraceptive knowledge or being careless, researchers asking different questions found that men were flushing birth control pills down the toilet or forcing partners to get abortions.

Sometimes both partners use coercive tactics against each other.

R.M.M. (through a Spanish translator, she asked to be identified by initials only) was 18 when she moved to California from Mexico to wed in 2006. She desperately wanted children and her husband didn't, insisting that she take birth control pills. R.M.M. stopped taking the pills secretly, however, and became pregnant. "I loved him and I thought that he would change when the baby was born." But he remained indifferent during her pregnancy and after the baby arrived.

"He told me that if I got pregnant again, he would leave me and not help me or the baby financially," she said. Afraid of being alone in a new country where she didn't speak the language, R.M.M. went back to using birth control.

Studies since Miller's suggest that reproductive coercion is a bigger problem for teens and the more vulnerable population seen at free or low-cost clinics than it is in the general population.

A 2019 study in Obstetrics & Gynecology found that 1 in 8 sexually active high school girls at eight California health centers had experienced reproductive coercion over a three-month period. The researchers identified them through a series of questions about their sexual activity during that time.

For instance, did anyone try to take birth control pills away from them? Say they would have a baby with someone else if they didn't get pregnant? Broken a condom on purpose during sex?

"We've talked about [reproductive coercion] for a long time without having a name on it," notes Karen Trister Grace, a nurse-midwife and researcher at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health.

Getting a handle on how often this happens is challenging because existing studies measure different samples, says Grace, who conducted a systemic review of the research on reproductive coercion.

A 2019 study in BMJ examining nine differently collected reports of reproductive coercion between 2010 and 2017 found that one-quarter of women and teen girls receiving sexual and reproductive health

services said they experienced it.

Only a handful of studies include data on men. From 2010 to 2012, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that male respondents experienced reproductive coercion slightly more often than women at a 9.7 percent rate compared with 8.4 percent of women.

Men are more likely to report that a partner tried to entrap them through pregnancy against their wishes. Their partners lied about being infertile or using contraceptives, for example. Among women, men refusing to wear condoms was the most frequent coercion tactic, also known as “stealthing.”

Reproductive coercion is more prevalent for Black, multiracial, and Latina women, too. The reasons are systemic and structural rather than racial or cultural, says Virginia Duplessis, associate director of health at Futures Without Violence in San Francisco. “It’s about who has access to power and resources – health care, a car, a credit card.”

Both maternal and infant health outcomes suffer if a pregnancy is unwanted, Duplessis adds. Prenatal care may be neglected. The woman may drink or smoke more during pregnancy. The mother is at higher risk for mental health problems or she can contract a sexually transmitted infection if a man refuses to use condoms.

In 2013, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) issued definitions and screening guidance for members on reproductive and sexual coercion.

Diane Horvath, a physician at a Baltimore OB/GYN clinic, screens all women at clinic appointments without their partners present. If an abortion is requested, for example, they are asked: “Whose decision is this? Is there anyone pressuring you to be here?” She looks for any nonverbal signs that a patient is reluctant to move forward, like not getting undressed.

A year ago, Horvath had a patient who confided she didn’t want an abortion but she was in a violent situation. Her partner was in the waiting room. Horvath and her team got her out the back door and to a shelter and started the process of getting her a restraining order. Asked if the patient would have had the abortion had she not probed, Horvath couldn’t say.

Horvath says reproductive coercion is underreported, and anecdotal accounts suggest that all forms of domestic violence have increased during the pandemic. Reproductive coercion, she says, “sets a trajectory for someone’s life.”

There is a strong association between reproductive coercion and physical violence, too. “Overall, health-care providers don’t do a good enough job [of screening]. We need to be doing it better,” Horvath maintains.

In addition to screening for reproductive coercion, ACOG recommends “harm-reduction” strategies. If a partner is forbidding birth control, for example, the physician can recommend an IUD where the string is hidden inside the cervix.

Rose Martinez’s health-care provider recommended Depo-Provera, a contraceptive injection, after her unwanted pregnancy. Only 18, Martinez wasn’t ready for a family but her husband wanted children and was furious, throwing out her birth control pills when he found them.

She was able to conceal the contraceptive injections from her husband for the next three years, but Depo-Provera is not recommended for longer than that. Martinez then turned to other forms of birth control that were less reliable. By the time she left him, she had experienced five unwanted pregnancies and had four children. The coercion was accompanied by physical violence as well at times.

Martinez and R.M.M. both credit the programs at Next Door Solutions to Domestic Violence in San Jose, Calif., for helping them understand they were being abused and for support that helped them move on. Both divorced now, they co-founded El Comité de Mujeres Fuertes (the Committee of Strong Women), an advisory group for Next Door Solutions serving women like them.

Preventing reproductive coercion is more effective than trying to undo the lifelong damage it causes, experts say. At Futures Without Violence, Duplessis assists in producing guides and training programs for women’s health providers to identify and counsel suspected victims. “Universal education about healthy relationships” is also needed, she says.

Now 31, the Los Angeles woman who was abused at 22 says she still feels judged and shamed by people who blame her for what happened. She entered the relationship, she says, but “it is not what I consented to.” That’s why she’s sharing her story now.

“So many people are unaware that [reproductive coercion] is a real thing,” she says. “I’m raising a girl, and I don’t want her ever to be in silence.”

Posting as SilverSpring31

Comments

My profile



This conversation is moderated according to The Post's community rules. Please [read the rules](#) before joining the discussion.

B *I* ”

Share your thoughts here.

2000 characters remaining

Mark comment as Off-topic

Post

All Comments (11)

Viewing Options ▾



Domiba 5 minutes ago

Of marital coercion passive-aggressive is my least favorite....that is to say, next to physical force I do not approve of. This is where the evil-doer sits back and waits for a good moment to sock it to you and then denies the whole thing.

Like 1 Reply Link Report



lizinsarasota 6 minutes ago

Happened to me. The man I was seeing sabotaged my birth control, later telling me he "wanted me to get pregnant" so we'd get married.

Wow, you can't believe how fast I got out of there.

Like 3 Reply Link Report



pt-109 11 minutes ago

I've read this article twice but I'm still confused about the definition of reproductive coercion. I know a couple that had two children, then became pregnant with a third. The husband wanted the child but the wife did not and she obtained an abortion. The husband did not know until afterwards. I think he felt a bit betrayed. Does that amount to reproductive coercion? Obviously it's coercion when someone's threatening a partner to either take or not take birth control. But this article suggests that there are nuances to

to either take or not take birth control. But this article suggests that there are nuances to the concept without doing us the courtesy of defining the term.

Like  1 Reply  Link  Report 



mikenola08 2 minutes ago

@pt

One of the points in the story is that very situation. Read it again.

Female coercion and the ability to obtain abortions is one of the many problems as is the converse of lying about being on birth control to "trap" the guy using the pregnancy.

That is not to defend or slide past male coercion, just meant to stay on point with your example...and yes I feel I have to explain that before some clown accuses me of misogynistic thinking.

Like  Reply  Link  Report 



CT---- 11 minutes ago

Martinez and R.M.M. both credit the programs at Next Door Solutions to Domestic Violence in San Jose, Calif., for helping them understand they were being abused

Um, what? RMM was the one who intentionally got pregnant without her husband's consent. Maybe she couldn't really afford to leave him, especially after having that baby that only she wanted, but that doesn't mean he had an obligation to keep getting her pregnant with children he didn't want.

Maybe he did other things to her, but when it comes to reproduction, she coerced him.

Like  1 Reply  Link  Report 



mikenola08 14 minutes ago

Doesn't this article beg for a national standard on sex education cross multiple high school years?

Everyone's experience is their own but in mine women frequently wanted to get pregnant and tried to use that as a pretext to get married. It still happens despite my age.

I should note I was on Active Duty and there was always a culture around the Naval Bases about capturing a military husband.

It might be interesting if a study was done on the subject of female to male coercion centering on military men and it span several decades of men to see what their experience was then and now

Like  1 Reply  Link  Report 



Liberty Be Gone 23 minutes ago

If you don't want to have children, best to avoid sex with people you are not interested in raising a child with. This wanting to have your cake and eat it too is so neo-American, post-modern, my feelings and lived experience are all that matters.

A woman gets to choose an abortion. A man must accept her choice to reproduce as his choice, except that even if he doesn't want to reproduce, the law will make him pay if she disagrees.

Like  3 Reply  Link  Report 



Teri in the West 30 minutes ago

In the 70s, a woman's husband made reproductive decisions, at least mine had the legal right (yep, needed his signature for birth control, medical care) yet- of course- never paid a penny for the welfare of the child he chose for me to have. It's not just sexual partners, it is state legislatures. Where I live, a bill to ban certain medications for women (never for males) is under consideration. When I read of this, I wrote my state representatives (as usual, all males) to add an amendment that would require DNA from all males so that they would be financially responsible for the children they produce. Nope, not one of them responded. As far as I know, no amendment either.

Like  8 Reply  Link  Report 



mikenola08 11 minutes ago

so Teri you tried to demand a pre-emptive DNA database just in case some random guy got some random woman pregnant.?..and you're now miffed it went nowhere.

Wow just wow

Like  Reply  Link  Report 



Wookieebait 5 minutes ago

Men always get upset when equivalents of measures routinely demanded of women are suggested for men.

Like  1 Reply  Link  Report 



Chartreuxe 50 minutes ago

The act of obtaining consent from a partner isn't fully understood by all men nor all women. Body autonomy isn't taught at home so we must begin teaching it in schools.

I began explaining it in simple terms when my son was only 10 years old. He understands it now that he's an adult. It takes time but most kids can comprehend it.

Like  6 Reply  Link  Report 
