



Behind the Mask: Narcissistic Abuse and the Silent Crisis of Domestic Violence

A Victimological Study of Domestic Violence Tracing Psychological Trauma and Institutional Silence under Narcissistic Influence

Authored by

Sushavan Das & Ananya Ghosh

3rd Year (B.A.LL.B), Brainware University, Kolkata, West Bengal

ABSTRACT

Narcissistic abuse, a covert yet profoundly destructive form of domestic violence, remains critically underrecognized within legal, clinical, and sociocultural frameworks. Characterized by manipulation, gaslighting, coercive control, and psychological invalidation, this abuse erodes a victim's autonomy, identity, and emotional resilience over time. This paper investigates narcissistic abuse through the lens of victimology and trauma psychology, examining how such harm operates beyond physical aggression and often escapes legal and institutional acknowledgement due to its invisible nature.

The study critically analyses how systemic apathy, gendered stereotypes, and cultural myths normalize and silence this abuse, particularly when embedded in intimate partner dynamics. It explores key psychological consequences—including complex PTSD, trauma bonding, emotional dysregulation, and identity fragmentation—and their intersections with power-control models, attachment theory, and learned helplessness. Moreover, the research highlights gaps in statutory definitions, professional training, and procedural safeguards that collectively hinder timely intervention and victim support.

In advocating a trauma-informed and legally inclusive approach, this paper proposes comprehensive reforms—ranging from statutory recognition and psychological evaluation protocols to intersectional legal aid and human rights-aligned policy integration. By redefining psychological violence as a primary form of victimization, the study repositions narcissistic abuse as both a public mental health crisis and a jurisprudential blind spot. Its contribution lies in advancing a multidimensional understanding of emotional abuse and in urging transformative responses that foreground psychological integrity, victim agency, and systemic accountability.

Keywords: *Narcissistic Abuse; Victimology; Psychological Trauma; Emotional Manipulation; Coercive Control; Complex PTSD; Trauma Bonding; Domestic Violence; Legal Reform; Institutional Silence*

PREFACE

“The charming face of a narcissist is just a mask; behind it lies a deeply insecure and destructive personality”

— Dr. Ramani Durvasula
Clinical Psychologist & Narcissism Expert

Domestic violence, in its diverse manifestations, remains a critical and multifaceted issue in contemporary society. Historically, the emphasis has been on physical violence as the predominant form of domestic abuse. However, a growing body of research underscores the complexity of abuse, which encompasses psychological, emotional, and coercive control tactics that can be equally as damaging as physical violence. Narcissistic abuse, a particularly harmful and often under-researched form of psychological harm, is characterized by manipulation, gaslighting, emotional exploitation, and the intentional undermining of a victim’s independence and self-esteem.

From a victimological perspective, this form of abuse necessitates immediate attention. Victimology, as a field of study (Grant, 2025), not only examines the experiences of individuals who have suffered harm but also analyses the societal, legal, and institutional frameworks that either address or overlook such harm. Narcissistic abuse frequently occurs beneath the surface of overt violence, hidden “behind the mask” of charm, success, or authority that narcissistic abusers typically exhibit. Victims of this abuse are often ignored, doubted, or misunderstood by those around them, including law enforcement and mental health professionals. The institutional silence surrounding narcissistic abuse not only invalidates the experiences of victims but also perpetuates cycles of dependency, psychological trauma, and social invisibility.

The motivation for exploring the psychological dimensions of domestic violence associated with narcissism stems from the profound and intricate harm it inflicts. Narcissistic abuse is seldom an isolated incident; instead, it constitutes a persistent and deliberate form of psychological manipulation. Victims often experience enduring mental health challenges, including Complex PTSD, anxiety disorders, depression, identity confusion, and emotional numbness. These effects are not merely incidental; rather, they are central to the abuse itself. Psychological abuse not only undermines the victim’s sense of reality and self-identity but also distorts their understanding of relationships, love, and trust. However, because these wounds are not visible, they are often overlooked in legal and social discussions regarding domestic violence. This study aims to redefine psychological trauma as a primary form of victimization rather than a secondary consequence.

By examining narcissistic abuse as a unique type of victimization that both contradicts accepted legal definitions and demands a more complex understanding of trauma and dependency, this study seeks to close a significant gap in victimology and domestic violence studies. The study also looks at the role of institutional silence, or how societal structures like the legal system, the police, the medical community, and even family and community networks frequently ignore or condone such abuse, which makes the victim feel even more alone and miserable.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- **To conduct a critical analysis of narcissistic abuse within the context of domestic violence**, emphasizing its manifestations through both victimological constructs and psychological typologies.
- **To examine the development, progression, and neuropsychological impact of trauma** sustained by individuals subjected to prolonged narcissistic coercion and manipulative control.
- **To evaluate the role of systemic inadequacies and institutional inaction** in impeding the recognition, reporting, and remediation of non-physical forms of intimate partner abuse.
- **To advocate for the formal acknowledgment of narcissistic abuse** within public policy, legislative reform, and scholarly discourse, thereby enhancing its visibility as a legitimate form of psychological violence.
- **To propose the integration of trauma-informed, victim-centric models** that foster long-term recovery, self-efficacy, and psychological resilience through accessible legal, clinical, and social interventions.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research has substantial implications for both scholarly research and real-world implementation. By emphasizing narcissistic abuse as a systematically overlooked phenomenon that inflicts long-lasting psychological damage, this study enhances our understanding of domestic violence. It necessitates a fundamental shift in the perception, reporting, and management of abuse—transitioning from a focus on visible injuries to addressing the often-invisible pain experienced by victims. Furthermore, the study is intrinsically interdisciplinary and pertinent to policymakers, mental health experts, social workers, legal authorities, and victim advocacy groups due to its location at the nexus of psychology, criminology, gender studies, and institutional reform.

The research aims to combat institutional apathy and promote more compassionate, informed, and proactive support systems by giving a voice to the psychologically trapped and silent victims of narcissistic abuse (MD, 2024). By doing so, it aims to foster a more holistic transformation in society's perception of trauma, abuse, and recovery.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- ⊗ How does narcissistic abuse manifest within the framework of domestic violence, and what specific psychological sequelae—such as complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), dissociation, and identity erosion—are most commonly associated with prolonged exposure to such abuse?
- ⊗ In what ways do institutional systems—including legal, medical, and social welfare frameworks—fail to adequately detect, acknowledge, or respond to covert and psychological forms of narcissistic abuse within intimate partner violence?
- ⊗ To what extent do victims of narcissistic abuse experience more persistent or severe psychological impairments compared to those who have endured solely physical abuse, particularly with respect to emotional dysregulation, attachment disturbances, and long-term mental health outcomes?
- ⊗ How do psychosocial factors such as emotional manipulation, economic dependency, and societal narratives that perpetuate victim-blaming contribute to the perpetuation and normalization of narcissistic abuse in domestic settings?
- ⊗ Could the formal inclusion of narcissistic abuse within statutory definitions of domestic violence catalyse the development of more effective legal protections and psychotherapeutic interventions tailored to the unique needs of victims of psychological abuse?

HYPOTHESIS**1. MANIFESTATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA:****Hypothesis:**

Victims of narcissistic abuse within domestic violence contexts will exhibit significantly higher rates of complex PTSD (C-PTSD), emotional dysregulation, and dissociative symptoms compared to victims of non-narcissistic emotional abuse.

- **Rationale:** Narcissistic abuse often involves gaslighting, blame-shifting, and idealization-devaluation cycles, which are strongly linked to C-PTSD.
- **Testable via:** Clinical assessments (e.g., ICD-11 C-PTSD criteria), trauma symptom inventories, and structured interviews.

2. INSTITUTIONAL OVERSIGHT AND GAPS:**Hypothesis:**

Institutional responses (e.g., legal, medical, and social services) are significantly less likely to recognize and intervene in cases of narcissistic abuse compared to physical abuse, due to the absence of visible injuries and the covert nature of psychological manipulation.

- **Rationale:** Legal systems often prioritize physical evidence, while narcissistic abuse exploits procedural gaps and weaponizes institutional processes (e.g., legal retaliation, custody manipulation).
- **Testable via:** Policy analysis, victim interviews, and case law reviews comparing outcomes in psychological vs. physical abuse cases.

3. COMPARATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT:

Hypothesis:

Victims of narcissistic abuse will report longer-lasting psychological effects—including identity erosion, chronic anxiety, and somatic symptoms—than victims of physical abuse alone, even after controlling for abuse duration.

- **Rationale:** Emotional abuse, especially narcissistic, often leads to internalized self-blame and prolonged trauma bonding, which can delay recovery.
- **Testable via:** Longitudinal studies using trauma recovery scales and mental health diagnostics.

4. PERPETUATION THROUGH SOCIAL DYNAMICS:

Hypothesis:

The persistence of narcissistic domestic abuse is positively correlated with the victim's level of social dependency, exposure to emotional manipulation tactics (e.g., gaslighting), and internalized victim-blaming beliefs.

- **Rationale:** Trauma bonding, economic reliance, and societal myths (e.g., “why didn’t she leave?”) reinforce the cycle of abuse.
- **Testable via:** Mixed-methods research combining psychometric scales (e.g., Trauma Bonding Scale) with qualitative interviews.

5. LEGAL RECOGNITION AND INTERVENTION OUTCOMES:

Hypothesis:

Jurisdictions with statutory definitions of domestic violence that explicitly include psychological and narcissistic abuse will demonstrate higher rates of victim protection orders and referrals to trauma-informed therapy services.

- **Rationale:** India’s Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 includes emotional and verbal abuse, but enforcement and awareness vary. Legal clarity can drive institutional accountability and therapeutic access.
- **Testable via:** Comparative legal analysis across jurisdictions, court data, and service utilization metrics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**I. Definitions: Domestic Violence, Narcissistic Abuse and Victimology—**

Domestic Violence: Various forms of abuse that occur in domestic settings are encompassed by the term domestic violence, also referred to as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) (CDC, 2024). Several violent patterns, including coercive controlling violence, violent resistance, situational couple violence, and violence triggered by separation, characterize this complex socioeconomic and public health issue (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). There is a wide range of manifestations of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) (CDC, 2024), which often depend on the dynamics of the relationship, the environment, and the characteristics of the partners involved. Comprehensive strategies that consider these variances and provide specialized interventions are essential for understanding and preventing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) (CDC, 2024).

Narcissistic Abuse: Narcissistic abuse occurs in relationships where one partner exhibits behaviours characteristic of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). This disorder is characterized by traits such as a grandiose sense of self-importance, a lack of empathy, and exploitative interactions with others. The abuse can manifest as manipulation, control, and emotional exploitation, with the abuser often seeking to dominate and undermine the victim's sense of self-worth. The complex interpersonal dynamics of the disorder often make therapeutic engagement and treatment challenging.

Victimology: Victimology is the study of victims, particularly those affected by crime, and encompasses their psychological, social, and legal experiences. This field examines the factors that influence victimization, including the characteristics and behaviours of potential victims, as well as societal responses to victimization (Grant, 2025). It also examines the social processes involved in identifying and treating victims. Victimology provides valuable insights into the dynamics of victimization, as well as the development of policies and practices aimed at supporting victims and preventing future incidents.

II. Psychological Models Relevant to Trauma, Manipulation and Power Dynamics—**1. Trauma Theory: The Psychological Aftermath:**

Trauma theory provides a foundational understanding of how prolonged exposure to emotional abuse can lead to chronic depression, anxiety, dissociation, and complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD). Narcissistic abusers often employ tactics such as devaluation, gaslighting, and love-bombing, which leave victims in a constant state of emotional turmoil and hypervigilance (Wakefield, 2025). The victim is trapped in a vicious cycle of trauma bonding, dependency, and fear due to the dysregulation of the brain's stress response. The reorganization of brain circuits resulting from repeated emotional trauma makes resistance or escape psychologically taxing. This form of trauma is distinctive in that it is **relational and cumulative**; it is not linked to a single event but rather represents a gradual erosion of the victim's identity, autonomy, and perception of reality.

2. Power-Control Dynamics: Covert Domination and Dependency:

Focusing on the Duluth Model of power and control, narcissistic abuse can be understood as a form of coercive control in which the abuser employs deceptive and sophisticated tactics, rather than physical force, to establish dominance (Wakefield, 2025). To maintain power and overcome opposition, narcissists utilize strategies such as financial dominance, emotional manipulation, social isolation and deliberate invalidation (Wakefield, 2025). Due to its psychological complexity, narcissistic abuse often eludes institutional recognition, in contrast to typical domestic violence situations that involve physical aggression. The disparity of power may be further obscured if the victim appears perplexed or even complicit. The abuser meticulously preserves the facade of mutuality while systematically eroding the victim's support systems, sense of autonomy, and self-worth (Ungvarsky, 2025).

3. Personality and Attachment Theories: Roots of Narcissistic Behaviour and Victim Vulnerability:

Psychology indicates that narcissistic abusers often exhibit traits associated with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), including grandiosity, a persistent need for admiration, and a deficiency in empathy. Their deceptive actions are driven by these characteristics, especially in intimate situations where their anxieties are at risk. By examining how early experiences and attachment styles influence both the abuser and the victim, attachment theory provides valuable insights into this dynamic (Wakefield, 2025). Because of their often erratic or anxious attachment styles, individuals who have experienced trauma are more susceptible to emotional dependence and trauma bonding. They may seek approval from the person who belittles them, believing that love can mend or restore the relationship. Contrarily, narcissists often exhibit disordered or avoidant attachment styles and employ control as a coping mechanism to address deep-seated fears of abandonment or vulnerability.

4. Learned Helplessness Theory: Psychological Paralysis and Resignation:

Martin Seligman's Learned Helplessness Theory provides a crucial perspective on why victims continue to remain in abusive situations. According to this hypothesis, individuals eventually cease attempting to change their circumstances, even when they have the option to escape, if they are subjected to unpleasant or unpleasant situations over which they believe they have no control regularly (Wakefield, 2025).

Victims of narcissistic abuse often endure emotional instability, blame, and invalidation, leading them to feel worthless (Corelli, 2024). More punishment, bewilderment, or guilt trips often result from attempts to assert independence or to cease maltreatment. Victims ultimately internalize the belief that they lack control over their circumstances, leading to emotional stagnation and resignation.

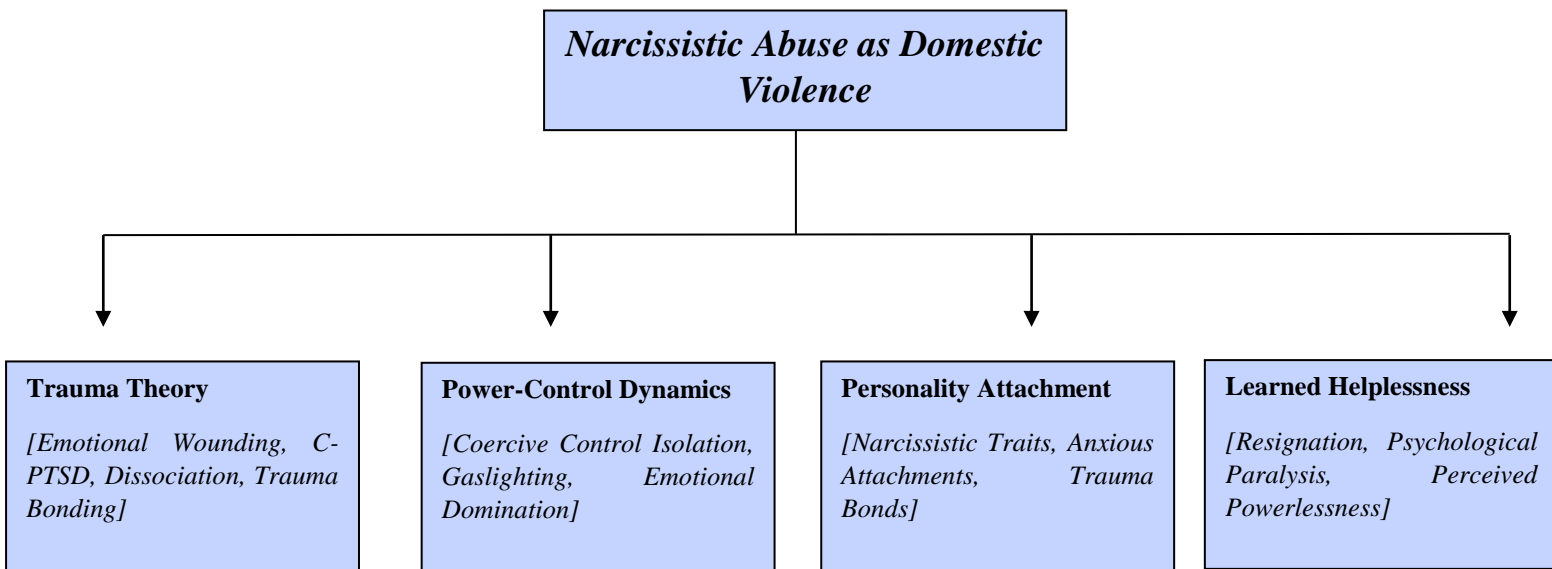


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework of Narcissistic Abuse as Domestic Violence

III. A Comprehensive Exploration of Victimological Theory—

1. Cycle of Abuse Theory:

According to the Cycle of Abuse theory, abusive relationships display a recurring and structured pattern of conflict, violence, and reconciliation (Caffrey, 2025). Although the paradigm was initially developed to explain physical violence, it is also highly applicable to narcissistic abuse, in which emotional abuse is strategic, cyclical, and often imperceptible.

Relevance to This Research:

- **Tension Phase:** Gaslighting, blame-shifting, silent treatment, and increasing emotional neglect (Wise, 2024). In order to appease the narcissist, individuals often engage in self-censorship and alter their behaviour.
- **Explosion Phase:** Narcissistic outbursts that may manifest as verbal abuse, social humiliation, or sudden abandonment, rather than typical physical violence.
- **Honeymoon Phase:** To regain control and elicit forgiveness, narcissists often employ charm, apologies, or love-bombing tactics.
- **Calm Phase:** A brief period of tranquillity during which the abuse is denied or minimized, leading victims to feel hopeful about the possibility of long-term change (Bottaro, 2025).

This cycle perpetuates **emotional dependency** and entrapment, providing insight into **why victims continue to stay** despite increasing harm.

2. Trauma Bonding Theory:

A strong psychological attachment, referred to as “trauma bonding,” develops as a result of repeated cycles of abuse interspersed with occasional acts of kindness. Trauma bonding is particularly insidious in cases of narcissistic abuse due to the deceptive cycle of cruelty and compassion.

Application to This Study:

- The highs and lows of the relationship lead victims to develop both emotional and neurological addictions (Murray, 2025).
- By purposefully isolating the victim, the narcissist fosters a dependency on emotional approval.
- Cognitive dissonance arises when victims blame themselves for the continuation of the abuse while simultaneously rationalizing it.

Trauma Bonding in This Study Explains:

- Delayed escape tactics occur when victims remain in poisonous settings.
- Denial and downplaying of abuse, especially during family or institutional investigations.
- The challenge of prosecuting non-physical violence poses challenges, particularly when the victim appears to have a strong emotional attachment to the offender (Bottaro, 2025).

3. Victim Precipitation Theory—A Critical Theory:

According to this contentious theory, victims are either directly or indirectly responsible for the circumstances that led to their abuse. Although helpful in certain criminological contexts, its application to domestic violence—particularly in cases of narcissistic abuse—poses ethical and scientific challenges.

Critical Viewpoints of the Study:

- **Victim-blaming Risk:-** It perpetuates negative stereotypes, such as the “difficult woman” or the “overreacting partner,” suggesting that narcissistic abuse is somehow “provoked.”
- **Oversight of Power Dynamics:** Narcissistic abusers operate from a position of psychological dominance and often prey on empathic, dependent, or affected by trauma.
- **Reinforcement of Institutional Neglect:** Social services and law enforcement may inadvertently perpetuate this issue by failing to take action in case of non-physical abuse.

Relevance:

- This theory is used to critique its role in facilitating institutional gaslighting and the systematic silencing of victims, rather than to justify its application.

4. Feminist Victimology & Intersectionality:

Domestic violence is characterized by feminist victimology as a gendered phenomenon that stems from power disparities and patriarchal systems. By exerting male control over female autonomy and agency through emotional manipulation and a sense of entitlement, narcissistic abuse aligns with these frameworks (Batool, 2024).

Application to This Study:

- **Normalization of Patriarchy:** Cultural complicity results from the glamorization of narcissistic traits in the media and business, including dominance, entitlement, and a lack of empathy (Batool, 2024).
- **Legal Gaps:** Victims of non-physical emotional abuse have few options because most legal systems do not recognize or prosecute it.
- **Intersectional Disadvantage:** Because of interlocking oppressive systems, victims who are disabled, women of color, and LGBTQ+ people experience amplified invisibility.

Feminist Victimology is Used in This Study To:

- Describe how abusive dynamics use emotional labor as a weapon.
- Encourage the inclusion of narcissistic control techniques in more inclusive definitions of domestic violence.
- Examine the institutionalized bias in the legal and psychiatric institutions that downplay or deny the emotional suffering of women.

Relevance:

- This study explores how narcissistic abuse is minimized, normalized, and left unpunished in society through a critical structural framework informed by feminist victimology.

IV. Physical & Non-Physical Intimate Partner Violence—

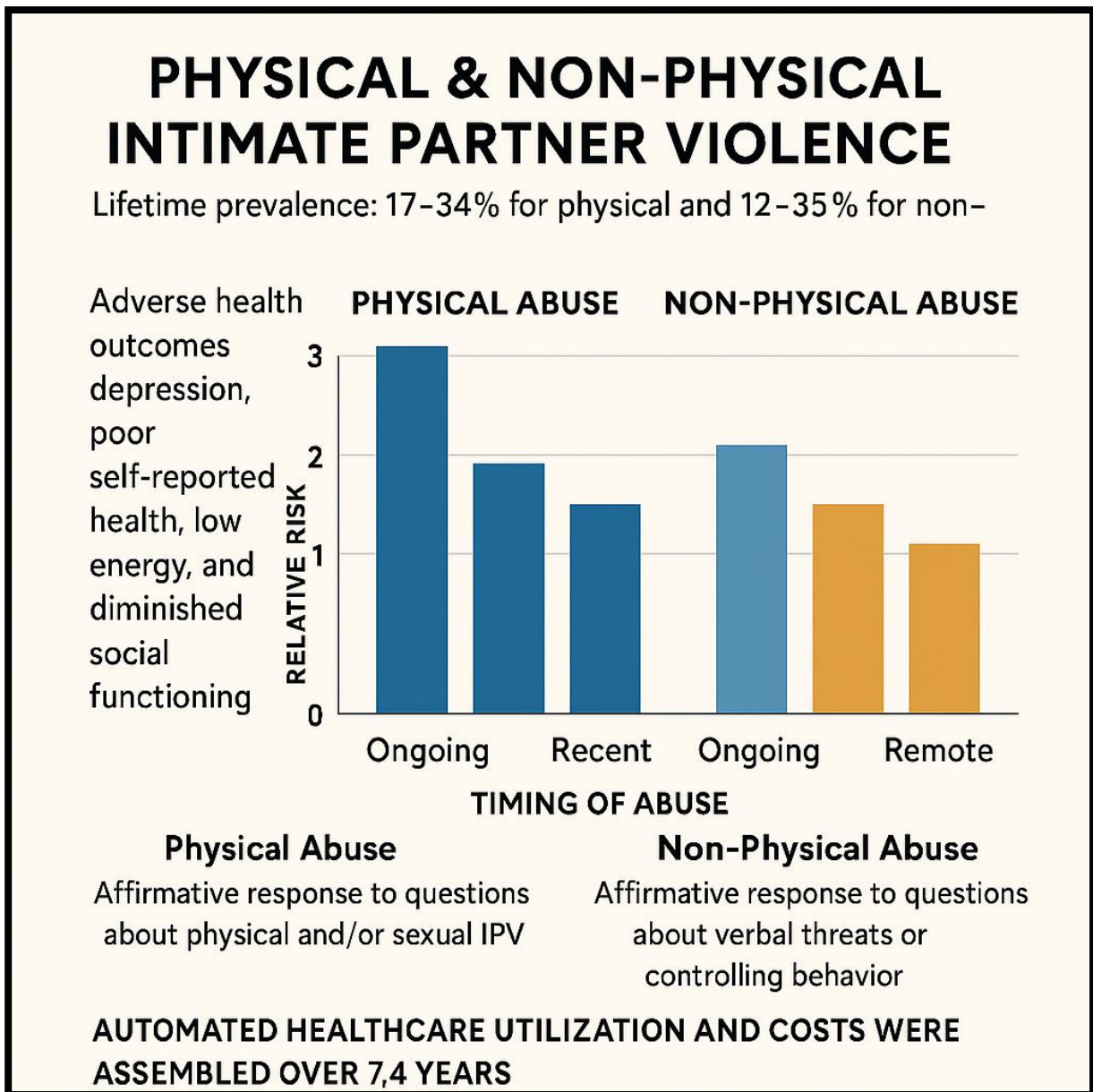
Physical and nonphysical types of intimate partner violence (IPV) are common in women, with lifetime prevalence ranging from 17 to 34 percent for physical IPV, and 12 to 35 percent for nonphysical abuse (e.g., verbal threats; chronic controlling behaviour; (Bonomi et al., 2009)). In addition, each of these types of abuse (physical and nonphysical) has been shown to be independently associated with adverse health outcomes in women, including depression, poor self-reported health, low energy, and diminished social functioning (Breiding et al., 2008).

A total of 3,333 women (ages 18–64) were randomly sampled from the membership files of a large health plan located in a metropolitan area and participated in a telephone survey to assess IPV history, including the type of IPV (physical IPV or nonphysical abuse only) and the timing of the abuse (ongoing; recent, not ongoing but occurring in the past 5 years; remote, ending at least 5 years prior). Automated annual health care utilization and costs were assembled over 7.4 years for women with *physical IPV* and *nonphysical abuse only* by the time period during which their abuse occurred (ongoing, recent, remote), and compared with those of never-abused women (reference group) (Bonomi et al., 2009).

- 1) **Physical abuse:** It included women who responded affirmatively to the BRFSS questions on physical and/or sexual IPV. This group of women could include those who also had nonphysical/psychological abuse according to the BRFSS questions or the WEB scale.
- 2) **Nonphysical/psychological abuse only:** It included women who did not report physical and/or sexual IPV according to the BRFSS questions, but who responded affirmatively to either BRFSS question on verbal threats or controlling behaviour, or whose WEB score for any partner was 20 or higher.

For both the physical abuse and nonphysical abuse exposure groups, person-years of utilization data were then categorized relative to the timing of abuse: *ongoing* (i.e., abuse was ongoing), *recent* (i.e., abuse was not ongoing but occurred within the past 5 years), and *remote* (i.e., abuse occurred before past 5 years only). For the physical abuse group (which could include women who also experienced nonphysical abuse), the timing of abuse was computed relative to the timing of their physical abuse exposure only (Bonomi et al., 2009).

Mental health utilization was significantly higher for women with physical or nonphysical abuse only compared with never-abused women—with the highest use among women with ongoing abuse (relative risk for those with ongoing abuse: physical, 2.61; nonphysical, 2.18). Physically abused women also used more emergency department, hospital outpatient, primary care, pharmacy, and specialty services; for emergency department, pharmacy, and specialty care, utilization was the highest for women with ongoing abuse. Total annual health care costs were higher for *physically abused* women, with the highest costs for ongoing abuse (42 percent higher compared with non-abused women), followed by recent (24 percent higher) and remote abuse (19 percent higher). Women with recent *nonphysical abuse only* had annual costs that were 33 percent higher than non-abused women (Bonomi et al., 2009).



Healthcare Utilization and Mental Health Impact by Type and Timing of Intimate Partner Violence Exposure in Women

This figure presents a comparative analysis of physical and nonphysical intimate partner violence (IPV) across three abuse timelines—ongoing, recent (within past 5 years), and remote (more than 5 years ago)—and their corresponding effects on mental health service use and overall healthcare costs. The data highlights elevated risks and costs for both forms of abuse relative to never-abused women, with the most profound impact observed in the ongoing abuse subgroup.

V. Psychological Coercion and Behavioural Influence in Romantic Relationships—

Manipulators derive a sense of power and control by employing various psychological and emotional manipulation techniques. These strategies are typically designed to ensure that the manipulator’s needs and demands are consistently met, often at the expense of the victim’s autonomy and well-being. When such manipulative behaviors become a recurring pattern within a relationship, they serve as key indicators of a toxic dynamic and may constitute psychological or emotional abuse.

i. Gaslighting:

Gaslighting is a psychological manipulation strategy aimed at undermining an individual's confidence in their memory, emotional stability, perceptions, and even sense of identity. It commonly manifests through behaviors such as labelling the victim as "crazy" or manipulating events to provoke persistent self-doubt. The underlying objective of gaslighting is to destabilize the victim's reality, thereby increasing their reliance on the manipulator's version of events. By fostering trust and gradually eroding the victim's self-assurance, the manipulator seeks to establish unquestioned control.

ii. Triangulation:

Triangulation is a manipulation tactic in which a third party is deliberately introduced into a conflict between two individuals to sway the outcome in favor of one side—typically the manipulator. This strategy may involve presenting selective or biased information to the third party in advance (i.e., frontloading) or choosing someone already predisposed to align with the manipulator's perspective. By doing so, the manipulator seeks to validate their position, diminish the victim's credibility, and secure external reinforcement. Over time, this tactic discourages the victim from challenging the manipulator, fostering emotional dependence and a growing sense of isolation within the relational dynamic.

iii. Projection:

Projection is a psychological defense mechanism in which an individual attributes their own emotions, traits, or desires to another person. In the context of manipulation, this may occur when a victim proposes alternative activities or encourages the manipulator to engage in self-care, prompting a reaction such as, "*You're so controlling.*" Through this tactic, the manipulator avoids confronting their own feelings or acknowledging how their behavior may be perceived by others. Instead, they externalize their internal conflicts by projecting them onto the victim, thereby shifting blame and maintaining psychological control within the relationship.

iv. Controlling Your Life:

All forms of manipulation are ultimately aimed at gaining power and control. Beyond influencing a person's thoughts or behaviors, manipulators often seek to shape the victim's perception of reality and interfere with daily life. This may include restricting social connections, obstructing educational or professional development, or exerting control over financial resources—a tactic commonly known as *financial abuse*. Over time, such behaviors are designed to erode the victim's confidence and autonomy, making them feel incapable of functioning or making decisions without the manipulator's input. This sustained loss of independence reinforces the manipulator's dominance over the victim's daily choices and overall well-being.

v. Name-Calling:

Manipulators often utilize derogatory language to demean a victim's behavior or actions, subtly reinforcing the notion that the victim is undeserving of respect or fair treatment. This tactic is designed to erode the victim's self-worth and establish a dynamic of psychological inferiority. Initially, the name-calling may appear mild or veiled in humor, but over time it tends to escalate in both frequency and severity. As the victim becomes increasingly desensitized to these verbal attacks, they may internalize the criticism, further entrenching the manipulator's control.

vi. Generalizations:

Generalization is a manipulation tactic in which the characteristics or behaviors of an individual are inaccurately projected onto an entire demographic group. Statements such as "*All women are more focused on themselves than on their partners*" exemplify this strategy. By invoking such sweeping claims, the manipulator imposes restrictive expectations on the victim, pressuring them to conform to behaviors that the manipulator deems acceptable or manageable. This not only distorts individual identity but also reinforces power imbalances through stereotyping and psychological control.

vii. Moving the Goal Posts:

Moving the goalposts is a manipulation strategy wherein an individual changes the parameters of success midway through a situation, thereby obstructing the other person's ability to achieve their goal. This may involve introducing new requirements or emphasizing disqualifying factors that were not initially disclosed. The intent behind this tactic is to keep the targeted individual in a continuous cycle of striving for approval or validation from the manipulator, reinforcing dependency and undermining self-confidence.

viii. Love-Bombing:

Love bombing refers to the act of overwhelming someone with excessive affection, intense emotional expressions, and disproportionate investment of time and energy. This may include offering lavish gifts, delivering elaborate declarations of adoration, and focusing one's entire attention on satisfying the partner's desires. Such behavior is often employed by manipulators to swiftly foster a sense of closeness and trust. By creating an idealized version of relational intimacy, the manipulator exploits the individual's innate need to feel valued and appreciated, ultimately using these sentiments to intensify the victim's emotional dependence and devotion.

ix. Changing the Subject:

While a common aspect of natural dialogue, can be employed by manipulators as a passive-aggressive tactic to punish or undermine an individual. In such cases, when the victim articulates a valid point or receives praise from an external source, the manipulator deliberately redirects the conversation to diminish the significance of that moment. This behaviour serves to deny the victim

any opportunity for confidence-building or self-affirmation. Emotional manipulators often use this strategy to assert control by ensuring that the victim's sense of validation stems solely from them, thereby fostering self-doubt and diminishing the victim's perception of their own competence and intelligence.

x. Playing on Insecurities:

Emotional manipulators are often adept at identifying and exacerbating an individual's insecurities. At the core of this tactic lies the targeting of shame—an internalized sense of inadequacy. Because shame is a deeply distressing emotion that individuals instinctively seek to avoid, manipulators exploit it to elicit compliance and emotional dependence.

As Rickeman observes, “The most common tactic is for someone to learn your unique triggers or sensitivities and use those against you. Some people are naturally very good at studying you and learning exactly what buttons to press to manipulate you. For example, if you had a childhood where you didn't feel important because you had a selfish or self-absorbed parent, accusing you of being selfish would be an excellent manipulation tactic. This is because it will press on a deep childhood wound, and so you will question yourself and be motivated to do what it takes not to appear selfish.” This form of manipulation creates a psychological dynamic in which the victim is not only vulnerable to the manipulator's cues but is also conditioned to prioritize the manipulator's approval above their own emotional well-being.

xi. The Silent Treatment:

While emotional and verbal withdrawal can be a natural response to emotional overwhelm—commonly referred to as “emotional flooding”—this behaviour may also be deliberately employed as a manipulation tactic. In such cases, the manipulator intentionally shuts down communication and connection as a form of punishment, often manifesting as the silent treatment. This tactic may involve withholding affection, verbal engagement, or intimacy, thereby creating emotional distance and power imbalance within the relationship.

xii. Passive Aggressiveness:

Passive-aggressiveness is characterized by indirect expressions of hostility or discontent, often without explicitly stating one's intentions or feelings. This behavior may manifest through sarcasm, pouting, backhanded compliments, or other subtle forms of emotional opposition. Such tactics compel the victim to remain in a perpetual state of hyper-vigilance—constantly monitoring, second-guessing, and adapting to the manipulator's unpredictable moods and reactions. Ultimately, this dynamic shifts the victim's focus away from their own emotional needs, placing control and psychological dominance in the hands of the manipulator.

xiii. Being Dismissive or Diminishing:

In group settings, manipulators may attempt to maintain control by responding to a victim's valid contribution or achievement with dismissive or diminishing remarks. This behavior often manifests as offering reasons why the success was undeserved or downplaying the legitimacy of the victim's input. Such responses serve to undermine the victim's confidence and diminish their standing in the eyes of others, effectively curbing their influence while reinforcing the manipulator's dominant position within the social dynamic.

xiv. Treating You Like a Child:

Infantilization is a manipulation tactic in which the perpetrator deliberately treats the victim as younger or less competent than they truly are, often by portraying them as childlike or incapable. This behavior constitutes a targeted form of gaslighting, designed to erode the victim's confidence in their ability to manage responsibilities and make independent decisions. It may manifest through condescending speech that implies lesser intelligence, unnecessary intervention in tasks the victim is fully capable of handling, or physical gestures that suggest incompetence. Over time, such repeated behaviors can severely undermine the victim's autonomy and reinforce dependence on the manipulator.

xv. Blaming the Victim for the Abuse:

When a victim of emotional abuse attempts to assert themselves or voice their experience, manipulators frequently respond by deflecting responsibility and placing blame on the victim. This tactic involves convincing the victim that they somehow provoked or deserved the manipulative behavior—often framed as, “You should have known better because of specific reason.” Such statements serve to undermine the victim's confidence and moral standing, resulting in a constant state of self-doubt. Over time, this dynamic fosters hyper-vigilance, as the victim continually second-guesses their actions in an effort to avoid future conflict or emotional punishment.

xvi. Using Guilt Trips:

Guilt-tripping is a manipulation tactic wherein the perpetrator seeks to alter the victim's emotions to achieve control or compliance. This may involve statements such as, “*If you decide to go out with your friends tonight, I'm going to feel lonely and sad,*” which are designed to evoke feelings of guilt. The long-term objective is to condition the victim into modifying their behavior—such as avoiding certain actions—without open discussion or mutual agreement. Over time, this strategy diminishes the victim's autonomy and fosters emotional dependence on the manipulator's approval.

xvii. Using Coercion or Threats:

Threat-based coercion is a form of emotional manipulation wherein an individual uses intimidation or threats to control another person's behavior. Such threats may involve ending the relationship, withdrawing something of value, or even self-harm if their demands are not met. While these threats may not always be acted upon, they exert significant psychological pressure on the victim. It is essential to take any mention of self-harm seriously, while also maintaining clear boundaries to safeguard one's physical and emotional well-being. Encouraging the individual to seek professional help is a necessary step when confronted with threats of self-injury (Holland, 2024).

VI. Stages of Manipulation—

Patterns of manipulation often follow a predictable trajectory. Gaining insight into these phases enhances one's understanding of manipulation as a thematic construct, as well as the potential psychological and social impacts on individuals over time. Typically, manipulation unfolds in four distinct phases, each emerging gradually and covertly. This subtle progression can make it challenging to recognize manipulative behaviour in its early stages.

- ***Stage 1: Flattery***

Flattery involves deliberate attempts to make an individual feel special and prioritized. It can manifest in various forms, including physical affection, excessive praise, gift-giving, and heightened emotional attunement. These gestures create a false sense of security and intimacy, ultimately designed to foster trust and emotional dependence.

- ***Stage 2: Isolation***

Once trust is established, manipulators may initiate strategies to isolate the individual. The primary goal is to induce dependency and a sense of powerlessness. This can involve overt control tactics such as limiting external communication, discouraging other relationships, or subtly criticizing close ties to instill doubt and create emotional distance from support networks.

- ***Stage 3: Devaluation and Gaslighting***

Devaluation entails persistent criticism and belittling, whereas gaslighting involves distorting the victim's perception of reality. Both techniques severely erode self-esteem and heighten emotional dependence. Intermittent episodes of renewed flattery during this stage can create confusion, reinforcing the manipulator's control.

- **Stage 4: Fear or Violence**

The final phase is often marked by the most overt and dangerous behaviors. Manipulators may resort to threats, self-harm, or outward violence to assert dominance and maintain control. By this stage, the victim often feels emotionally exhausted, vulnerable, and unable to resist or escape the toxic dynamic (Holland, 2024).

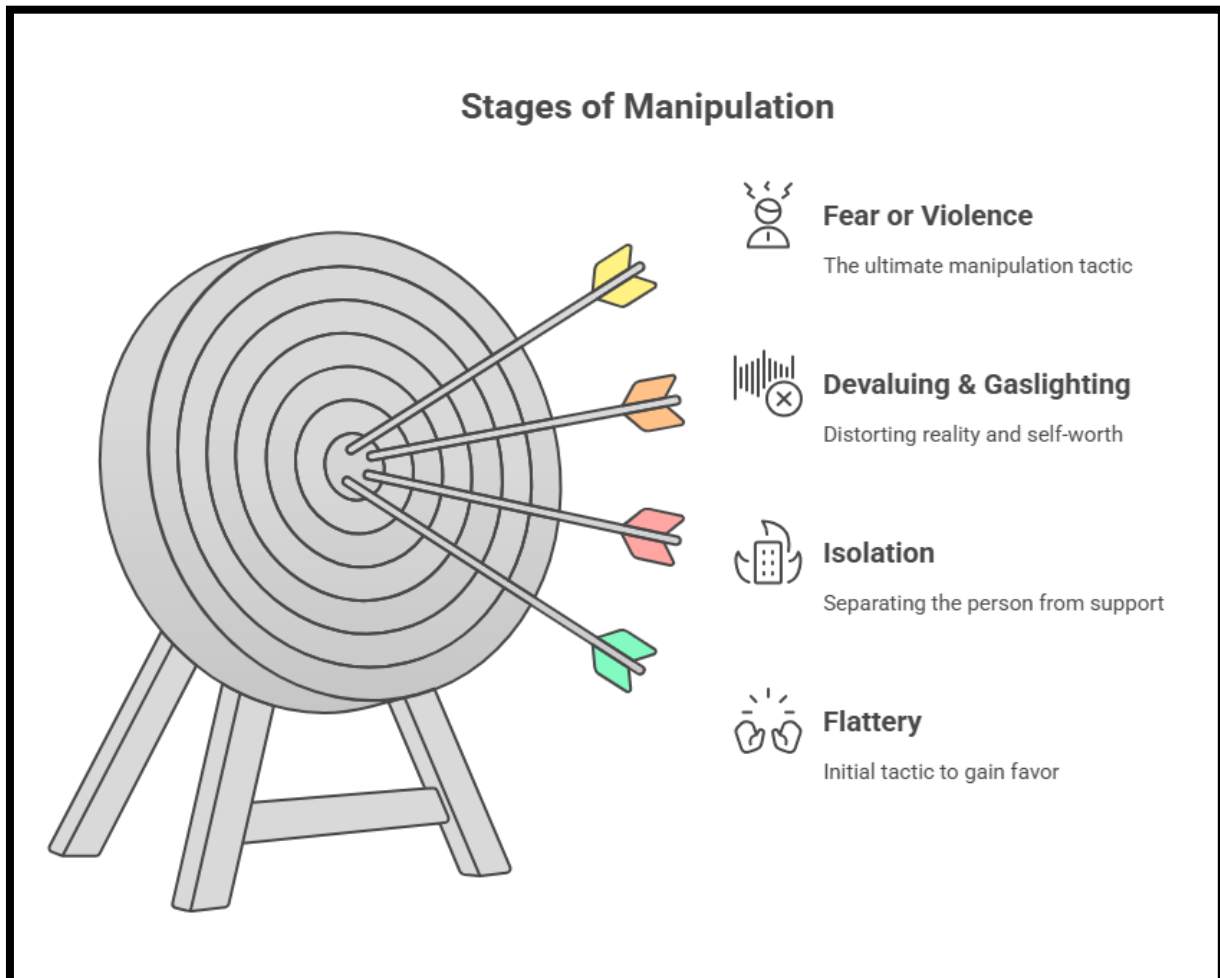


Fig. 3: Legal and Psychological Dimensions of Manipulative Progression

VII. How Abuse Often Goes Undetected or Mischaracterized—

a) **Minimization and Normalization:**

Abusive behavior is often normalized within interpersonal and cultural contexts, where controlling, jealous, or demeaning conduct may be misinterpreted as passion or protectiveness. In efforts to maintain harmony or avoid confrontation, victims may internalize these dynamics and downplay their experiences. This normalization creates significant barriers to recognizing abuse—particularly when the perpetrator is perceived as charming, endearing, or socially respected—thus allowing harmful behavior to persist unchallenged (The Mend Project, 2024).

b) The Inconspicuousness of Non-Physical Maltreatment:

Although physical signs such as bruises or injuries are commonly associated with abuse, many other forms—including verbal, emotional, psychological, financial, and digital abuse—leave no visible trace. These forms of harm are often subtle, covert, and cumulative, making them difficult for both victims and observers to recognize. Because they do not conform to conventional images of violence, such behaviors are frequently minimized, dismissed, or mischaracterized as mere communication issues or relationship difficulties. This misperception can delay recognition and intervention, allowing the abuse to persist unchallenged (Bader & Frank, 2024).

c) Shame, Fear and Social Stigma:

Victims of abuse often experience profound shame and fear when attempting to confront or disclose their experiences. Concerns about not being believed, being blamed, or facing retaliation serve as powerful deterrents to speaking out. Additionally, cultural stigmas surrounding divorce, victimhood, and notions of family honor—particularly affecting women—can further suppress disclosure. The fear of judgment or ostracization by friends, family members, or religious communities reinforces this silence, creating significant barriers to the recognition and reporting of abuse (Patrick, 2019).

d) Not Enough Professional Acknowledgement:

Professionals such as doctors, police officers, social workers, and even therapists may lack sufficient training to identify subtle or non-physical signs of abuse. In the absence of visible injuries or concrete evidence, emotional and psychological abuse is often overlooked or misconstrued as a mutual disagreement. This evidentiary gap contributes to inadequate validation and protection for victims, as institutional responses tend to prioritize observable harm. Consequently, non-physical abuse remains underacknowledged, leaving many victims without appropriate support or intervention (Gestetner, 2024).

e) Stereotyping and Bias Against Women:

The understanding and recognition of abuse are deeply shaped by institutional and cultural biases. Toxic masculinity and gender stereotypes often lead to the dismissal of women as overly emotional or vindictive, while male victims may be ridiculed or disbelieved due to prevailing notions that men cannot be vulnerable or subjected to abuse. LGBTQ+ individuals face additional layers of stigma, shame, and invisibility, which further complicate the identification and acknowledgment of abuse. These prejudices create systemic barriers that prevent equitable recognition, support, and intervention across different populations (OHCHR, 2014).

f) Isolation and Fear-Based Silencing:

Abusers often isolate their victims from friends, family, and support systems to prevent external validation or alternative perspectives. This deliberate seclusion reinforces the victim's dependence on the abuser while simultaneously concealing warning signs from outside observers. When individuals are subjected to social or financial confinement, the abuse is rendered invisible to the broader society, enabling it to occur in secrecy and beyond the reach of intervention (Roa, 2023).

g) Multicultural Myths and Media Representation:

Mainstream media often prioritizes graphic portrayals of abuse—such as physical violence, beatings, or murder—while neglecting the nuanced, long-term harm caused by psychological or coercive abuse. These dramatized depictions contribute to distorted public perceptions of what abuse “should” look like, leading both victims and observers to overlook more subtle but equally damaging behaviors. Myths such as “*a black eye is the only sign of abuse*” perpetuate harmful misconceptions, reinforcing the invisibility of non-physical forms of abuse and delaying recognition and intervention (Beddows, 2019).

h) Systemic and Legal Barriers:

Legal frameworks often prioritize physical harm when defining abuse, overlooking the profound and lasting impact of psychological and coercive control. As a result, legal definitions of *domestic violence* may not extend protection to victims until visible injuries have occurred. This limitation allows abusers to exploit systemic vulnerabilities—such as financial dependence, immigration status, or custody arrangements—to maintain power and deter victims from seeking help. These structural gaps contribute to the under recognition of non-physical abuse and hinder timely legal intervention (Knight, 2024).

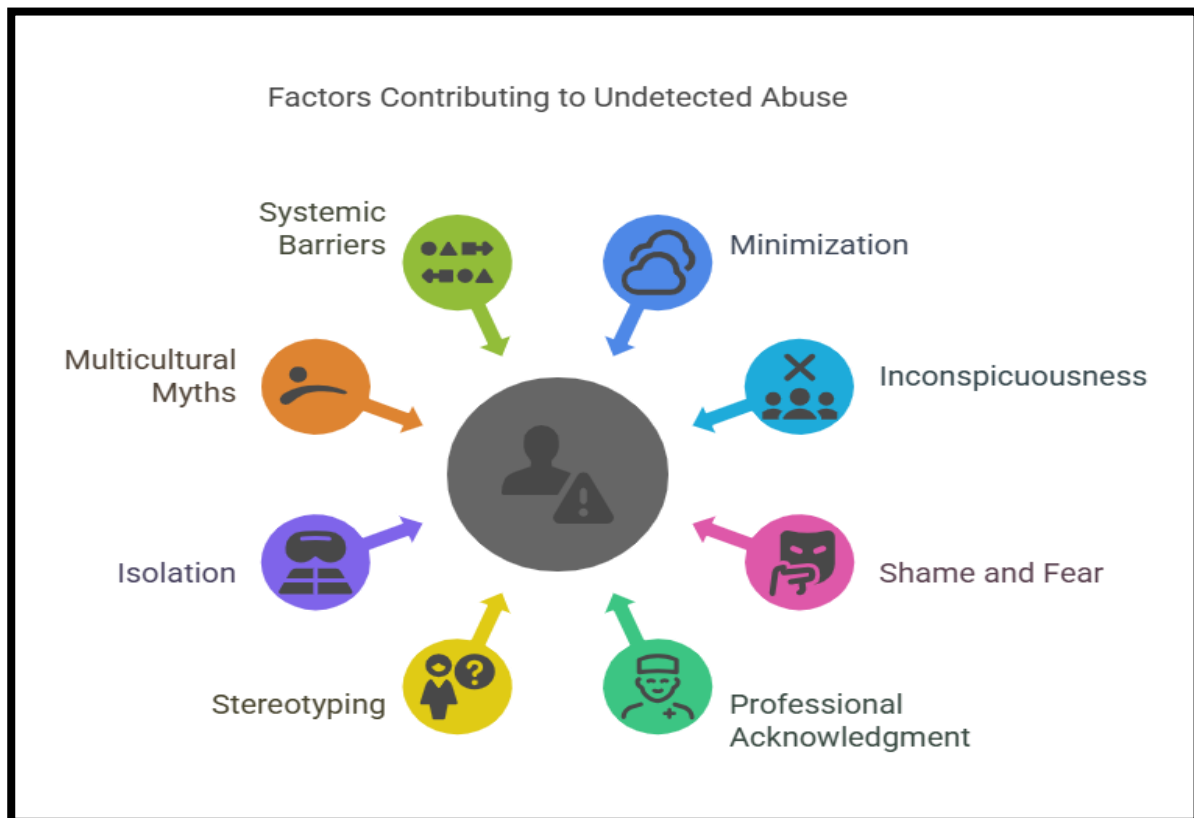


Fig. 4: Continuum of Manipulative Tactics in Emotionally Abusive Relationships

VIII. Depression, PTSD, Anxiety and Suicidal Ideation: A Deeper Analysis—

Victims of narcissistic abuse often experience a **complex interplay of psychological disorders**, where depression, anxiety, and PTSD do not occur in isolation but reinforce one another—creating a feedback loop that intensifies suicidal ideation.

❖ Comorbidity & Symptom Clustering:

Recent network analysis studies reveal that **depression and anxiety symptoms often co-occur and form tightly connected clusters** in individuals with suicidal ideation. In a 2024 study of adolescents, symptoms like *sad mood*, *restlessness*, and *trouble relaxing* emerged as central nodes in the depression-anxiety-suicidality network. Notably, *sad mood* was directly linked to suicidal ideation with the highest variance, suggesting it may serve as a predictive marker (Xu et al., 2024).

This clustering effect implies that interventions targeting one symptom (e.g., restlessness) may have cascading benefits across the network, potentially reducing suicidal thoughts.

❖ PTSD and Trauma-Related Guilt:

PTSD in victims of narcissistic abuse is often **compounded by trauma-related guilt**, which acts as a mediator between trauma and suicidal ideation. A 2023 study found that individuals with high PTSD symptoms and elevated guilt scores were significantly more likely to report suicidal thoughts, even when controlling for demographic factors (Chou et al., 2023).

This guilt may stem from:

- Internalized blame for the abuse.
- Perceived failure to escape or protect others.
- Cognitive distortions implanted by the abuser (e.g., “You made me do this”).

Such guilt not only exacerbates depressive symptoms but also **undermines self-worth**, making suicidal ideation more persistent and resistant to treatment.

❖ **Emotional Dysregulation and Learned Helplessness:**

Victims often develop **emotional dysregulation**, characterized by difficulty managing fear, anger, or sadness. This is particularly true in environments of chronic narcissistic abuse, where the victim is subjected to unpredictable cycles of affection and cruelty. Over time, this leads to:

- **Hypervigilance** (a PTSD symptom).
- **Anhedonia** (a core symptom of depression).
- **Somatic symptoms** like fatigue or gastrointestinal distress (common in anxiety disorders).

These conditions foster a state of **learned helplessness**, where the victim believes escape or change is impossible—further entrenching suicidal ideation.

❖ **Gendered Dimensions and Risk Amplifiers:**

Women, particularly those in patriarchal or stigmatizing environments, are disproportionately affected. Cultural silence, victim-blaming, and lack of institutional support amplify psychological harm. Studies show that **female victims of emotional abuse are more likely to experience suicidal ideation than those subjected to physical abuse alone**, due to the insidious nature of psychological manipulation (Seong et al., 2024).

IX. Emotional Dependence and Trauma Bonding: A Deeper Analysis—

Emotional dependence and **trauma bonding** are central psychological mechanisms that explain why victims of narcissistic abuse often remain in harmful relationships despite clear evidence of harm. These phenomena are not merely emotional reactions but are rooted in neurobiological, behavioural, and attachment-based processes that reinforce the cycle of abuse (Lima & de, 2021).

☒ Intermittent Reinforcement and the Cycle of Abuse:

At the core of trauma bonding lies **intermittent reinforcement**—a behavioral conditioning mechanism where rewards (e.g., affection, apologies, intimacy) are unpredictably interspersed with punishment (e.g., criticism, gaslighting, withdrawal). This pattern creates a **dopaminergic loop** in the brain, similar to gambling addiction, where the victim becomes neurologically conditioned to seek the abuser’s approval despite repeated harm (Trauma bonding, 2024).

This cycle typically follows a pattern:

1. **Idealization** – The abuser showers the victim with affection and attention (love bombing).
2. **Devaluation** – The victim is criticized, ignored, or emotionally manipulated.
3. **Discard** – The abuser withdraws or threatens abandonment.
4. **Reconciliation** – The abuser offers temporary affection, reigniting hope.

This cycle fosters **emotional dependency**, as the victim becomes psychologically tethered to the abuser’s unpredictable validation (Huysman, 2024).

☒ Attachment Trauma and Developmental Roots:

Trauma bonding is often intensified in individuals with **insecure or anxious attachment styles**, particularly those with histories of childhood emotional neglect or abuse. According to a recent data, such individuals may unconsciously seek out familiar relational dynamics—even if they are harmful—because they mirror early attachment experiences (Trauma bonding, 2024).

This creates a paradox: the victim may **feel safest with the person who is most dangerous**, due to a learned association between love and pain. The bond is further reinforced by:

- Fear of abandonment
- Low self-worth
- Hope for change

☒ Cognitive Dissonance and Identity Erosion:

Victims often experience **cognitive dissonance**, struggling to reconcile the abuser’s moments of kindness with their cruelty. This internal conflict leads to:

- **Self-blame** (“Maybe I provoked them”)
- **Minimization** (“It’s not that bad”)
- **Rationalization** (“They’re just stressed”)

Over time, this erodes the victim's **sense of identity and autonomy**, making them increasingly reliant on the abuser for emotional regulation and self-definition (Karakurt et al., 2014).

☒ **Empirical Insights:**

A 2024 dissertation by Megan Palmer at Kansas State University used **latent profile analysis** to identify trauma bonding patterns in romantic relationships. The study found that individuals with high anxious attachment and low self-esteem were significantly more likely to experience trauma bonds, particularly in relationships involving psychological or sexual abuse (Palmer, 2024).

Additionally, trauma bonding was associated with:

- Increased tolerance for abuse
- Delayed help-seeking behaviour
- Higher rates of re-victimization

Phase	Abuser Characteristics	Victim Vulnerability Profile	Scientific Insights
<i>Early-Phase</i>	Charismatic, Attentive, Idealizing (love bombing)— Masks manipulative intent	High empathy, Low self-esteem— History of childhood neglect or insecure attachment	Victims with anxious-preoccupied attachment styles are more likely to form trauma bonds
<i>Mid-Phase</i>	Begins devaluation— Gaslighting, Control, Emotional withdrawal	Emotionally dependent— Cognitive dissonance, Social isolation	Intermittent reinforcement creates addictive trauma bonds, impairing rational judgement
<i>Late-Phase</i>	Discarding or threatening abandonment— May cycle back to idealization	Learned helplessness— PTSD symptoms, Suicidal ideation or dissociation	Victims often exhibit neurobiological changes affecting decision-making and autonomy

Fig. 5: Victim Profiling Across Phases of Narcissistic Abuse

X. Institutional and Legal Responses—

Recognition of Psychological Abuse in Indian Jurisprudence: *Smt. Haimanti Mal v. State of West Bengal*:

The case of *Smt. Haimanti Mal v. State of West Bengal*¹ serves as a rare judicial acknowledgment of **psychological and emotional abuse** under the *Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005*². Despite the absence of physical violence, the court awarded ₹1,00,000 for **mental agony**, validating psychological trauma as actionable harm.

This case demonstrates:

- The *invisibility of narcissistic abuse* in institutional detection.
- The *need for trained first responders* (police, magistrates, counsellors) who understand trauma dynamics.
- The *slow recognition of psychological violence* despite its profound emotional and neurobiological consequences.

“The court must acknowledge that emotional abuse can cripple the human psyche no less than physical violence.” – Excerpt from judicial observations in this case.

This rare ruling highlights a critical **gap in law enforcement and legal culture**: absent physical marks, victims are often dismissed or mischaracterized, prolonging cycles of abuse.

Profiling Dimension	Case Reflection
<i>Victim Traits</i>	Educated, financially dependent, emotionally isolated
<i>Abuser Traits</i>	Emotionally manipulative, controlling, socially respected
<i>Phase of Abuse</i>	Mid-to-late phase: psychological erosion, trauma bonding, loss of autonomy
<i>Institutional Response</i>	Initially slow; eventual recognition of psychological abuse by the judiciary

Fig. 6: Victim Profiling Insights

¹ *Smt. Haimanti Mal v. State of W.B.*, C.R.R. No. 3907 of 2016 (Cal. HC July 9, 2019).

² Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, No. 43, Acts of Parliament, 2005 (India).

XI. Judicial Interpretation in Recognizing the Invisible Wounds—

The Indian judiciary has played a pivotal role in expanding the scope of fundamental rights to address evolving societal harms. However, psychological abuse—particularly under narcissistic influence—remains insufficiently recognized in judicial discourse, despite its profound impact on victims' autonomy, dignity, and mental health. This section explores how judicial interpretation can bridge this normative gap by reimagining constitutional and statutory protections through a trauma-informed and intersectional lens.

1. *Expanding Article 21: From Physical Liberty to Mental Dignity:*

In *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*³, the Supreme Court held that the “right to life” under Article 21 is not confined to mere physical existence but includes the right to live with dignity. This interpretation was further reinforced in *Francis Coralie Mullin v. Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi*⁴, where the Court emphasized that life under Article 21 includes the right to protection of health and mental well-being. These precedents provide a constitutional foundation for recognizing **psychological abuse as a violation of personal liberty**, especially when such abuse systematically erodes a victim's sense of self through manipulation, gaslighting, and emotional coercion.

2. *Purposive Interpretation of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005:*

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA) defines domestic violence to include “verbal and emotional abuse” under Section 3. However, the Act does not explicitly name or define **narcissistic abuse**, nor does it elaborate on complex psychological tactics such as gaslighting, love bombing, or trauma bonding. Judicial interpretation can adopt a **purposive approach**, as endorsed in *Shayara Bano v. Union of India*⁵, to read the statute in light of its objective: to provide comprehensive protection to women from all forms of abuse, including those that are non-physical but equally debilitating.

Legal scholars have argued that courts must interpret “emotional abuse” in a manner that reflects contemporary psychological understanding. This would allow for the inclusion of narcissistic abuse patterns within the statutory framework, thereby enhancing access to justice for victims whose trauma is often invisible.

³ *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*, A.I.R. 1978 S.C. 597 (India).

⁴ *Francis Coralie Mullin v. Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi*, (1981) 2 S.C.R. 516 (India).

⁵ *Shayara Bano v. Union of India*, (2017) 9 S.C.C. 1 (India).

3. *Judicial Activism in the Absence of Legislative Clarity:*

In *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*⁶, the Supreme Court issued binding guidelines to address workplace sexual harassment in the absence of specific legislation. This case exemplifies **judicial activism** as a tool to fill legislative voids in matters of gender justice. A similar approach could be adopted to define and address narcissistic abuse, especially given the lack of statutory recognition of psychological manipulation as a distinct form of domestic violence.

The Court in *Vishaka* relied on international conventions such as CEDAW to frame its guidelines, demonstrating that **international human rights norms** can inform domestic interpretation. Given that psychological abuse is recognized under international instruments like the Istanbul Convention (Istanbul Convention, 2011), Indian courts could similarly draw upon global standards to interpret domestic laws expansively.

4. *Intersectional Interpretation: Recognizing Compounded Vulnerabilities:*

The doctrine of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, has gained traction in Indian jurisprudence. In *Patan Jamal Vali v. State of Andhra Pradesh*⁷, the Supreme Court acknowledged that a blind Dalit woman's experience of sexual violence was shaped by her **caste, gender, and disability**, and that these identities must be considered cumulatively in judicial reasoning.

Applying this lens to narcissistic abuse, courts must recognize that **women from marginalized communities**—such as Dalits, Adivasis, or economically disadvantaged groups—face heightened barriers to disclosure, legal recourse, and institutional support. Intersectional interpretation ensures that judicial remedies are not one-size-fits-all but are tailored to the lived realities of diverse victims.

5. *Toward Trauma-Informed Justice:*

The Indian judiciary has begun to acknowledge the need for trauma-sensitive procedures. In *State of Punjab v. Gurmit Singh*⁸, the Court emphasized the importance of protecting the dignity of rape survivors during trial. Extending this principle, courts could interpret procedural laws to mandate **trauma-informed practices**—such as sensitive cross-examinations, psychological assessments, and victim support services—for survivors of psychological abuse.

Such an approach aligns with the constitutional mandate under Article 39A to ensure equal access to justice and reflects the evolving understanding of victimology as a discipline that centers the victim's experience.

⁶ *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*, AIR 1997 SC 3011 (India).

⁷ *Patan Jamal Vali v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, A.I.R. 2021 S.C. 2190 (India).

⁸ *State of Punjab v. Gurmit Singh*, A.I.R. 1996 S.C. 1393 (India).

RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Toward a Trauma-Informed and Legally Inclusive Framework—

The following legal reforms are proposed to address the structural invisibility of narcissistic abuse within the current domestic violence framework in India. These recommendations aim to realign statutory, judicial, and procedural tools with the realities of psychological trauma, in keeping with constitutional principles and global human rights norms.

1. Statutory Reform: Explicit Recognition of Psychological and Narcissistic Abuse:

Section 3 of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA) should be amended to codify *psychological abuse* as a distinct and actionable form of domestic violence. Specific reference must be made to narcissistic patterns such as gaslighting, coercive control, love bombing, and trauma bonding. Comparative insight can be drawn from the United Kingdom's *Serious Crime Act, 2015*, which criminalizes controlling and coercive behavior in intimate or familial settings (Section 76).

Such definitional reform would provide interpretive precision for police officers, protection officers, judges, and magistrates—many of whom currently lack the legal vocabulary to identify narcissistic abuse as a form of systemic psychological harm.

2. Judicial Guidelines and Training:

In the spirit of *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*⁹, where the judiciary issued binding workplace sexual harassment guidelines in the absence of enabling legislation, courts should proactively issue interpretive guidance that:

- Recognizes narcissistic abuse as a legally actionable form of domestic violence under existing provisions.
- Encourages courts to analyze manipulative behavior patterns as part of evidentiary assessment.
- Mandates trauma-informed judicial training focused on the psychology of power, manipulation, and post-traumatic response.

This initiative would help close the jurisprudential gap between legal text and lived victim experience.

⁹ *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*, *supra* note 6, at 28.

3. *Mandatory Psychological Evaluation and Support Services:*

Given the psychological nature of narcissistic abuse, courts handling cases under PWDVA or related family law matters should be empowered—via procedural reform—to order:

- Forensic psychological assessments to detect emotional abuse and trauma history.
- State-funded access to trauma counselling, especially in under-resourced districts.

This approach aligns with Articles 21 and 39A of the Indian Constitution, ensuring both dignity and meaningful access to justice. Moreover, such services reflect trauma-informed care standards promoted by international mental health jurisprudence.

4. *Trauma-Centric Procedural Safeguards:*

Current procedures often exacerbate secondary trauma in survivors of emotional abuse. To make proceedings more humane and victim-friendly, the following must be institutionalized:

- In-camera hearings for all cases involving psychological or emotional abuse.
- Prohibition on cross-examinations that resort to gaslighting, character attacks, or intimidation.
- Appointment of court-accredited *support persons*—preferably trained in trauma response and legal aid—to guide the complainant throughout the litigation process.

These safeguards create space for testimony that is emotionally safe, especially for victims of covert abuse who may struggle with verbalizing harm.

5. *Intersectional Expansion of Legal Aid Frameworks:*

Women from historically marginalized communities—such as SC/ST groups, religious minorities, LGBTQ+ populations, and women with disabilities—are doubly silenced. A reformed legal aid model must:

- Prioritize psychological abuse cases from these demographics.
- Offer multilingual, trauma-sensitive services.
- Institutionalize a multidisciplinary team approach combining legal aid, social work, and psychological support.

This builds on jurisprudence like *Patan Jamal Vali v. State of Andhra Pradesh*¹⁰, where the Supreme Court acknowledged the compounded vulnerabilities of marginalized survivors.

¹⁰ *Patan Jamal Vali v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, *supra* note 7, at 29.

6. *Incorporation of International Human Rights Norms:*

India must draw from its international obligations under **CEDAW** and the emerging normative power of the **Istanbul Convention**. CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35 (2017) recognizes psychological violence as a core form of gender-based violence. Domestic law and judicial interpretation must harmonize with these standards to (United Nations, 2017):

- Reframe domestic violence as a violation of fundamental human rights, not merely private harm.
- Expand protection mechanisms in line with global best practices.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals the insidious nature of narcissistic abuse within the broader context of domestic violence, drawing critical attention to its psychological impact and the socio-political structures that allow it to remain largely unrecognized. Unlike overt physical brutality, narcissistic abuse operates covertly through gaslighting, emotional manipulation, social isolation, and coercive control—gradually dismantling the victim’s autonomy and sense of reality.

Employing a victimological framework, the study highlights the profound psychological consequences endured by survivors, including complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), learned helplessness, and trauma bonding. These psychological responses contribute to survivors’ difficulty in securing recognition, validation, and justice. The research further exposes a systemic failure wherein emotional violence—precisely because it lacks visible markers—is routinely overlooked by institutional mechanisms and societal perceptions. This invisibility both obstructs timely intervention and reinforces the perpetrator’s control.

Exacerbating this neglect are entrenched cultural narratives that perpetuate victim-blaming, policy gaps, and widespread misunderstanding of emotional abuse. As this study concludes, it becomes imperative to recognize narcissistic abuse as a distinct and severe form of domestic violence. Institutional responses must be grounded in trauma-informed, victim-centred approaches and supported by greater public awareness and legal reform. Only by expanding our conceptual boundaries of domestic violence and disrupting institutional silence can we meaningfully address the full spectrum of narcissistic abuse—empowering survivors to reclaim their agency, voice, and well-being.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bader, D., & Frank, K. (2024, September 18). *Understanding experiences of non-physical maltreatment in childhood in Canada: What is the relationship with suicidal ideation and mental health disorders?* Retrieved from Statistics Canada: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2024009/article/00002-eng.htm>
- Batool, S. (2024, September 5). *Toxic Relationship Highs and Lows: Navigating the emotional rollercoaster.* Retrieved from Our Mental Health: <https://www.ourmental.health/toxic-and-fake/understanding-toxic-relationship-highs-and-lows>
- Beddows, A. (2019, October 2). *Breaking the cycle: media representations of Victim-Survivors and child abuse.* Retrieved from Discover Society: <https://archive.discoversociety.org/2019/10/02/breaking-the-cycle-media-representations-of-victim-survivors-and-child-abuse/>
- Bonomi, A. E., Anderson, M., Rivara, F., & Thompson, R. (2009). Health Care Utilization and Costs Associated with Physical and Nonphysical-Only Intimate Partner Violence. *Health Services Research, 44*(3), 1052-1067. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6773.2009.00955.x>
- Bottaro, A. (2025, April 3). *The four stages of the cycle of abuse.* Retrieved from Verywell Health: <https://www.verywellhealth.com/cycle-of-abuse-5210940>
- Breiding, M. J., Black, M., & Ryan, G. (2008). Chronic Disease and Health Risk Behaviors Associated with Intimate Partner Violence—18 U.S. States/Territories, 2005. *Annals of Epidemiology, 18*(7), 538-544. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annepidem.2008.02.005>
- Caffrey, C. (2025). *Cycle of violence.* Retrieved from EBSCO Information Services, Inc.: <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/cycle-violence>
- CDC. (2024, May 16). *About intimate partner violence.* Retrieved from Intimate Partner Violence Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/intimate-partner-violence/about/index.html>
- Chou, P.-H., Wang, S.-C., Wu, C.-S., & Ito, M. (2023). Trauma-related guilt as a mediator between post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal ideation. *Frontiers in Psychiatry, 14.* <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1131733>
- Corelli, C. (2024, October 8). *What happens to the survivor? The impact of narcissistic abuse.* Retrieved from Carla Corelli: <https://www.carlacorelli.com/narcissistic-abuse-recovery/the-devastating-effects-of-narcissistic-abuse/>
- Francis Coralie Mullin v. Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi , 1 SCC 608 (The Supreme Court 1981).
- Gestetner, S. (2024, May 22). *The trauma of not being acknowledged; emotional neglect: healing through therapy.* Retrieved from IFS Psychotherapy: <https://www.ifsp psychotherapy.com/post/the-trauma-of-not-being-acknowledged-healing-through-therapy>

- Grant, D. A. (2025, April 27). Understanding Victimology: The Study of Victims and Their Rights - PSYFORU. *PSYFORU*. Retrieved from <https://psyforu.com/understanding-victimology-the-study-of-victims-and-their-rights/>
- Holland, M. (2024, November 20). *17 Manipulation Tactics Abusers Use*. Retrieved from Choosing Therapy: <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/manipulation-tactics/>
- Huysman, D. J. (2024, August 14). *Trauma Bonding: Exploring the Psychological Effects of Abuse*. Retrieved from CPTSD Foundation.org: <https://cptsdfoundation.org/2024/08/14/trauma-bonding-exploring-the-psychological-effects-of-abuse/>
- Istanbul Convention. (2011). *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence*. Council of Europe.
- Karakurt, G., Smith, D., & Whiting, J. (2014). The Impact of Emotional Abuse on the Mental Health of Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence. *Journal of Family Violence*, 29(7), 693-702. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-014-9633-2>
- Kelly, J. B., & Johnson, M. (2008). DIFFERENTIATION AMONG TYPES OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE: RESEARCH UPDATE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTIONS. *Family Court Review*, 46(3), 476-499. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2008.00215.x>
- Knight, S. (2024, November 15). *Systems abuse: exploitation of legal and institutional systems to control victims*. Retrieved from Shadows of Control: <https://shadowsofcontrol.com/articles/systems-abuse/>
- Lima, N. d., & de, B. Q. (2021). Trauma Bonding: Concepts, causes and mechanisms in intimate relationships. *Knowledge Core: Multidisciplinary Scientific Journal*, 6, 60-78. <https://doi.org/10.32749/nucleodoconhecimento.com.br/psychology/intimate-relationships>
- Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India, 1 SCC 248 (The Supreme Court 1978).
- Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India, 1 SCC 248 (The Supreme Court 1978).
- MD, L. L. (2024, February 15). *A Trauma-Informed Lens on the Narcissist/ Co-Dependent (EMPAth) Dynamic- Part I*. Retrieved from The Body Is A Trailhead: <https://lissarankinmd.substack.com/p/a-trauma-informed-lens-on-the-narcissist>
- Murray, K. (2025, March 4). *Relationship Addiction: Understanding the signs*. Retrieved from Addiction Center: <https://www.addictioncenter.com/behavioral-addictions/relationship-addiction/>
- OHCHR. (2014). *Gender stereotypes and stereotyping and women's rights*. United Nations Human Rights.
- Palmer, M. (2024). *An examination of how individuals experience a traumatic bond: A latent profile analysis expanding traumatic bonding theory*. Kansas State University.
- Patan Jamal Vali v. State of Andhra Pradesh , 9 SCC 1 (The Supreme Court 2021).

- Patrick, W. (2019, July 17). *How social stigma silences domestic violence victims*. Retrieved from DomesticShelters.org: <https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/escaping-violence/how-social-stigma-silences-domestic-violence-victims>
- Roa, A. S. (2023, May 30). *Suffering Alone: The Impacts of Isolation on the Mental Well-Being of Victims and Survivors of Relationship Violence*. Retrieved from Human Options: <https://humanoptions.org/suffering-alone-the-impacts-of-isolation-on-the-mental-well-being-of-victims-and-survivors-of-relationship-violence/>
- Seong, E., Lee, K., Lee, J.-S., Kim, S., Seo, D., Yoo, J., . . . Kim, J.-W. (2024). Depression and Posttraumatic stress disorder in adolescents with nonsuicidal self-injury: Comparisons of the psychological correlates and suicidal presentations across diagnostic subgroups. *BMC Psychiatry*, 24(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-024-05533-5>
- Shayara Bano v. Union of India , 9 SCC 1 (The Supreme Court 2017).
- Smt. Haimanti Mal v. State of West Bengal (The Calcutta High Court July 9, 2019).
- State of Punjab v. Gurmit Singh, 2 SCC 384 (The Supreme Court 1996).
- The Mend Project. (2024, June 27). *THE SUBTLE ABUSE THAT INVALIDATES VICTIMS: MINIMIZATION*. Retrieved from The Mend Project: <https://themendproject.com/minimization/>
- Trauma bonding*. (2024, July 11). Retrieved from Psychology Today: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/trauma-bonding>
- Ungvarsky, J. (2025). *Psychological abuse* | EBSCO. Retrieved from EBSCO Information Services, Inc.: <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/psychology/psychological-abuse>
- United Nations. (2017). *U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women*.
- Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan , 6 SCC 241 (The Supreme Court 1997).
- Wakefield, M. (2025, February 2). The cycle of narcissistic abuse. *Narcissistic Abuse Rehab*. Retrieved from <https://www.narcissisticabuserehab.com/cycle-of-narcissistic-abuse/>
- Wise, R. (2024, August 13). *Two Severe Forms of Abuse: Silence & Blame-Shifting*. Retrieved from Inconvenient Ruth: <https://www.inconvenienttruth.com/post/two-severe-forms-of-abuse-silence-blame-shifting>
- Xu, S., Ju, Y., Wei, X., Ou, W., & Ma, M. (2024). Network analysis of suicide ideation and depression–anxiety symptoms among Chinese adolescents. *General Psychiatry*, 37(2). <https://doi.org/10.1136/gpsych-2023-101225>