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Submission to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Roundtable

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Submitted by: Laura Laffitte Salis-Gabbiani, Advocare Au

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Abstract

This submission advocates for the global criminalisation of coercive control, highlighting its role in human trafficking, smuggling, child and family violence, and cyber-enabled exploitation. Drawing upon recent UNODC strategies and international legislative trends, it outlines the urgent need for cohesive legal frameworks and victim-centred supports, and calls on the UNODC to coordinate robust, evidence-driven policies with member states.

The systematic criminalisation of coercive control represents a critical frontier in international criminal justice, demanding urgent attention from the UNODC and its member states. Coercive control—characterised by patterns of intimidation, isolation, surveillance, and psychological manipulation—serves as the foundational mechanism underlying numerous transnational crimes within the UNODC's mandate. Human trafficking operations rely heavily on coercive control tactics to maintain victim compliance, whilst organised criminal networks employ identical methodologies to facilitate migrant smuggling and exploitation. The psychological dominance established through coercive control creates conditions where victims become trapped in cycles of abuse that transcend borders, making this phenomenon not merely a domestic violence issue but a fundamental component of international organised crime.

Recent legislative developments across multiple jurisdictions demonstrate growing recognition of coercive control as a distinct criminal offence, yet the fragmented nature of these approaches undermines their collective effectiveness. The United Kingdom's Domestic Abuse Act 2021, Australia's expanding state-based legislation, and similar initiatives in France and other European nations represent important precedents, but the absence of harmonised international standards creates enforcement gaps that criminal networks readily exploit. These legislative inconsistencies particularly impact victims of trafficking and smuggling, who may find themselves in jurisdictions where their experiences of psychological coercion remain unrecognised or inadequately addressed by existing legal frameworks.

The intersection of coercive control with cyber-enabled crimes presents additional complexities that require coordinated international responses. Digital surveillance, online harassment, financial control through digital platforms, and technology-facilitated abuse have created new avenues for perpetrators whilst simultaneously expanding the geographical reach of coercive control beyond traditional boundaries. The UNODC's recent emphasis on cybercrime prevention and the organisation's work on technology-facilitated gender-based violence provide important foundations for addressing these evolving challenges, yet current frameworks remain insufficient to address the sophisticated nature of digital coercive control in trafficking and organised crime contexts.

A comprehensive UNODC-led initiative must therefore prioritise the development of model legislation that establishes coercive control as a standalone offence whilst simultaneously integrating it into existing frameworks addressing trafficking, smuggling, and organised crime. Such an approach should emphasise victim-centred methodologies that recognise the complex trauma associated with psychological coercion, establish robust training programs for law enforcement and judicial personnel, and create mechanisms for international cooperation in cases where coercive control transcends borders. Only through coordinated, evidence-driven policy development can member states effectively dismantle the psychological architecture that enables transnational criminal exploitation and provide meaningful justice for victims whose experiences have been historically marginalised within traditional criminal justice paradigms.

Main Submission

Introduction

This submission respectfully addresses the urgent need for the global criminalisation of coercive control as a distinct and prosecutable offence. Coercive control is a fundamental violation of human rights, routinely underpinning abuse in trafficking, smuggling, exploitation networks, and intimate partner relationships. Its strategic pattern of psychological, emotional, financial, and physical manipulation undermines personal autonomy and perpetuates systems of dominance from organised crime to family units.

The global recognition of coercive control as a foundational mechanism of exploitation demands a coordinated legal and policy response grounded in contemporary human rights principles. Across jurisdictions, coercive control drives the same underlying pattern seen in major transnational crimes: the systematic erosion of an individual's sense of agency. Perpetrators deploy strategies of surveillance, intimidation, and dependency—often without the use of overt violence—to ensure compliance. These acts, while less visible than physical assault, inflict profound psychological harm and sustain the structures necessary for trafficking, forced labour, and smuggling to thrive. As such, recognising coercive control as a prosecutable offence is not merely a domestic issue but a global imperative tied directly to the UNODC's mandate to combat organised crime and protect human dignity.

Recent trends in international and national legislation reveal growing awareness of this issue, though significant disparities remain. Nations such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, and several Australian states have begun introducing laws criminalising coercive control within domestic contexts. However, there is a pressing need for harmonisation across legal systems to prevent jurisdictional loopholes that facilitate transnational exploitation. The absence of consistent legal definitions and enforcement mechanisms risks leaving victims unprotected, particularly those caught in cross-border trafficking and smuggling networks where patterns of psychological coercion may differ in form yet remain equally destructive in effect. Global alignment on this matter would strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies and judicial bodies to detect, investigate, and prosecute perpetrators who operate across borders.

To that end, the submission calls on the UNODC to lead the development of an integrated, evidence-based international framework that situates coercive control within the broader context of organised and gender-based violence. This framework should prioritise survivor-informed policies, strengthening both prevention and response mechanisms through training, data collection, and international cooperation.

Member states must be encouraged to adopt model legislation that not only criminalises coercive control but also embeds trauma-informed victim support systems within judicial processes. Such measures will ensure that victims are not re-traumatised through legal pathways and that perpetrators face consistent accountability across the global justice system. In doing so, the UNODC can provide essential leadership toward dismantling the invisible yet powerful forms of domination that perpetuate cycles of human exploitation worldwide.

The Nature and Impact of Coercive Control

Coercive control operates through psychological and social manipulation, leaving victims with deep-rooted harm that far exceeds physical violence. It is central to trafficking and smuggling, affecting refugees and migrants, and destabilises families and communities through persistent patterns of domination and abuse.

Coercive control functions as a deliberate system of domination that restricts autonomy and dismantles an individual's capacity to act freely. Through tactics such as isolation, surveillance, economic deprivation, humiliation, and threats, perpetrators erode victims' confidence and sense of agency over time. This process not only results in profound emotional and psychological trauma but also perpetuates cycles of dependence that make escape or resistance exceedingly difficult. Unlike episodic acts of violence, coercive control's continuous and insidious nature renders it a pervasive mechanism of oppression that targets the very core of personal liberty and human dignity. Recognising this pattern as a form of structural violence is vital to understanding its devastating social and economic consequences.

The impact of coercive control is particularly acute within global trafficking and smuggling networks, where psychological coercion is often the primary means of exploitation. Victims of trafficking are commonly manipulated through debt bondage, deceptive promises of safety or employment, and threats against loved ones. For refugees and migrants, coercive control creates conditions of entrapment that mirror domestic violence dynamics, leaving individuals isolated within foreign systems where language, legal, and cultural barriers compound their vulnerability. By weaponising fear and dependence, perpetrators sustain transnational operations that exploit labour, sexual autonomy, and identity itself—all without the constant need for physical restraint.

At the community level, the normalisation of coercive control fractures family structures and destabilises entire social systems. When patterns of control remain unrecognised or untreated, they perpetuate intergenerational cycles of abuse, economic disempowerment, and social disconnection. Survivors frequently experience long-term mental health challenges, including post-traumatic stress, depression, and complex trauma, which in turn affect their ability to re-engage with work, education, and civic life.

Addressing coercive control, therefore, is not merely an act of legal reform but a matter of social reconstruction and justice. Establishing robust international mechanisms to identify and criminalise this conduct will allow societies to break systemic patterns of abuse and promote safer, more equitable communities worldwide.

International Context: Existing UNODC Protocols

UNODC's Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons and Protocol against Smuggling of Migrants—ratified by nearly all UN Member States—provide a foundational framework for addressing coercion and vulnerability in exploitation. As of October 2025, 192 states are parties to the UNTOC, 182 to the Trafficking Protocol, and over 150 to the Smuggling Protocol. The 2025 UNODC strategies emphasise updating protocols to address cybercrime and psychological coercion in complex trafficking contexts.

The near-universal ratification of these protocols underscores a shared global commitment to combating human trafficking and migrant smuggling. However, despite their success in establishing baseline standards, the original texts primarily address physical coercion and tangible forms of exploitation, leaving psychological and digital manipulation insufficiently defined. The evolving nature of coercive control—particularly its use of technology, misinformation, and emotional dependency—demands explicit incorporation into the UNTOC framework. By acknowledging coercive control as an operational dimension of trafficking, policymakers can better reflect the realities of modern exploitation, where threats may be delivered via digital means, and victims may remain under total psychological control long after crossing physical borders.

Within this context, UNODC's 2025 strategic review rightly prioritises integrating cyber-enabled abuse, surveillance technologies, and psychological coercion into its global crime-prevention agenda. The increasing sophistication of online recruitment, social media manipulation, and encrypted communication channels used by traffickers requires that coercive control be addressed as an interconnected form of cyber-enabled exploitation. Victims are often groomed or coerced through digital means, their social and financial identities monitored or manipulated to reinforce dependence. The recognition of this pattern highlights the urgent need for capacity-building programs that equip states with tools to prosecute these subtle yet devastating forms of control under the existing convention frameworks.

To ensure meaningful implementation, member states should support the UNODC's initiative to revise interpretive notes and technical assistance guidance under the Trafficking and Smuggling Protocols. These updates should explicitly recognise psychological domination, coercive relationship dynamics, and technology-facilitated exploitation as central elements of contemporary trafficking crimes.

A harmonised interpretation across legal systems would not only enhance cross-border collaboration but also strengthen victim identification, protection, and rehabilitation measures. By embedding coercive control within the evolving operational scope of UNTOC, the international community would reaffirm its commitment to upholding human rights and dismantling the invisible mechanisms of coercion that sustain global exploitation networks.

Global Legislative Momentum

Recent legislative advances have expanded the criminalisation of coercive control, marking a historic shift from event-based definitions of violence to the recognition of persistent patterns of abuse. This evolution reflects a growing understanding that coercive control constitutes an ongoing process of domination rather than isolated incidents of harm, demanding legal frameworks capable of capturing its cumulative and psychological nature. By addressing these patterns holistically, states are moving towards a model of justice that recognises the continuum of abuse and its enduring impact on victims' autonomy and mental health:

- Australia, through pioneering reforms in New South Wales, South Australia, and Queensland, has taken significant strides in enshrining coercive control within law—each jurisdiction framing it as a serious indictable offence with penalties comparable to physical violence. Canada has introduced legislation criminalising controlling and coercive behaviour in intimate relationships, solidifying the principle that psychological abuse warrants equal legal protection. Similarly, England and Wales were among the first to create statutory offences for coercive and controlling behaviour (2015), followed by Scotland's world-leading Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, which recognises control, humiliation, and intimidation as central to domestic abuse. Ireland's Domestic Violence Act 2018 further embedded these principles, while several European Union member states have begun implementing parallel frameworks reflecting shared commitment to tackling structural and relational abuse.
- The European Court of Human Rights has reinforced this international momentum, urging all member states to include coercive control within domestic violence frameworks as an essential element of human rights protection. Its jurisprudence has made clear that states have positive obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights to prevent and prosecute coercive control where it constitutes inhuman or degrading treatment. This judicial standard provides a compelling foundation for harmonisation across the European region and beyond, ensuring consistency in victim protection and accountability mechanisms.

Building on these developments, there is growing consensus that the international system must align these disparate legislative models under a unified global standard. Such harmonisation—coordinated through the UNODC and in conjunction with international protocols on trafficking and violence—would allow cross-border recognition of psychological abuse and improve law enforcement collaboration. Establishing coercive control as a globally recognised criminal category would not only enhance accountability but also signal a paradigm shift towards treating freedom from psychological domination as a fundamental human right.

Policy Recommendations

The UNODC is uniquely positioned to guide and coordinate global progress under the following principles.

A comprehensive global response to coercive control must be anchored in legal, institutional, and cross-sectoral reforms that embed accountability and victim protection at every level. The UNODC’s 2021–2025 Strategy outlines the importance of integrated frameworks that unite normative, research, and technical assistance functions to address emerging forms of crime and strengthen the rule of law. In alignment with this vision, comprehensive legal frameworks should explicitly define coercive control to encompass manipulation, surveillance, isolation, economic abuse, and threats, thus closing the persistent legal gaps that allow psychological domination to evade prosecution. Statutory reform should also harmonise definitions internationally, linking domestic abuse legislation with transnational crime instruments to reflect coercion’s multi-dimensional reach across trafficking, smuggling, and digital contexts.

Enhanced victim support is a critical pillar of this framework. The UNODC and partner agencies emphasise expanding access to culturally sensitive, trauma-informed survivor services to better reach trafficked persons, refugees, and victims of family violence. Survivor-centred systems must prioritise safe reporting, legal representation, and long-term psychosocial rehabilitation to counter the chronic trauma caused by coercive control. Programs such as EU-led victim rights campaigns in 2025 have highlighted the necessity of turning international commitments into practical, localised services that uphold dignity and autonomy. Embedding these support mechanisms within national and regional action plans ensures that victims are not only protected but empowered to rebuild independence and participation in civic life.

Building capacity through specialised training for law enforcement, the judiciary, and frontline social services is essential to effective implementation.

Research across Australia and the EU demonstrates that trauma-informed, problem-based training—featuring scenario-based learning and reflective practice—significantly improves the recognition and response to patterns of coercive control. These programs cultivate awareness of the dynamics of power, fear, and dependency that typify coercive abuse and strengthen investigative practice to centre victim perspectives. The UNODC’s technical assistance mandate supports such efforts through integration of human rights safeguards and a commitment to evidence-driven policy learning.

Sustained international cooperation, prevention, and evaluation complete the strategic framework. Strengthened cross-border mechanisms are required to investigate and prosecute coercive control within organised crime, trafficking, and cyber-enabled exploitation networks—a priority already reflected in UNODC’s 2025 working groups. Prevention initiatives should include global awareness campaigns to break stigma, promote early intervention, and mobilise communities against controlling behaviours. Finally, robust monitoring and evaluation systems—such as those in place across Australian jurisdictions—allow governments to measure impact, ensure accountability, and adapt strategies based on emerging evidence. Aligning these components under UNODC’s coordination would solidify coercive control as a recognised global offence, fostering a consistent, survivor-centred response to one of the most insidious forms of human exploitation.

In Summary:

Comprehensive Legal Frameworks

Advocate statutory definitions encompassing manipulation, surveillance, financial control, isolation, and threats, closing gaps in existing laws.

Enhanced Victim Support

Encourage accessible, culturally sensitive survivor services, especially for trafficked persons, refugees, and family violence survivors.

Capacity Building and Training

Deliver specialised, trauma-informed training for law enforcement, judiciary, and frontline social services globally.

International Cooperation

Strengthen mechanisms for cross-border investigation and prosecution of coercive control within trafficking, smuggling, and digital exploitation operations.

Prevention and Awareness

Sponsor international campaigns to illuminate coercive control's dynamics and reduce stigma, empowering victims and fostering community resilience.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Support evidence-based monitoring, evaluation, and learning frameworks to track the application and impact of coercive control legislation and policy.

Conclusion

Global criminalisation of coercive control would close critical gaps in international protection and justice, aligning with the UNODC's strategic aim to strengthen global responses to transnational and emerging crimes. As outlined in the UNODC Strategy 2021–2025, the organisation's mandate prioritises supporting member states in building strong, accountable institutions and advancing justice through integrated normative, research, and technical functions. Expanding this mandate to explicitly include coercive control as a prosecutable transnational offence represents a necessary evolution in addressing the psychological and technological mechanisms of exploitation underpinning trafficking, smuggling, and organised crime. This step would not only enhance accountability but also promote the broader UN goals of human rights, peace, and sustainable development.

The 2025 UNODC agenda demonstrates a clear transition toward addressing modern manifestations of coercion within cyber-enabled and cross-border contexts. This includes providing member states with technical assistance to strengthen rule-of-law responses, cybercrime prevention, and human rights-based justice reforms. Integrating coercive control into this framework would ensure that abusive dynamics facilitated through digital surveillance, financial manipulation, and online intimidation are recognised as integral to criminal enterprises, rather than peripheral acts. By embedding these elements within the global crime prevention architecture, the UNODC can facilitate the harmonisation of definitions and enforcement standards across jurisdictions—creating a unified global norm that recognises psychological coercion as a criminal act within transnational criminal operations.

Equally significant is the UNODC's survivor-centred vision, reinforced through initiatives such as the 2025 Global Forum for Human Trafficking Survivors in Vienna, which institutionalises survivor voices as integral to policymaking. This marks a paradigm shift from tokenistic consultation to meaningful collaboration, positioning survivors as experts in shaping anti-trafficking and coercive control responses.

The inclusion of survivor-informed policy frameworks ensures that interventions are grounded in lived experience, trauma awareness, and dignity. Such participatory governance models improve justice outcomes and reflect the UN's broader commitment to inclusivity and resilience-building across systems of recovery.

Accordingly, this submission urges the UNODC to prioritise harmonising legal definitions, strengthening data-driven evaluation, and scaling global capacity-building programs under its expanded 2025 mandate. Coordinated cross-border investigations, survivor-led advisory structures, and enhanced use of disaggregated data should form the foundation of an evidence-based global strategy to detect, prevent, and prosecute coercive control.

By integrating these priorities, the UNODC can lead the international community in dismantling the structural and psychological foundations of modern coercion, ensuring that survivors worldwide gain meaningful access to justice, recovery, and long-term resilience. Embedding coercive control within the scope of both transnational and family violence frameworks would strengthen the global reach of protection while acknowledging the continuum between domestic and organised forms of abuse.

A globally harmonised approach—aligned with UNODC's 2021–2025 Strategy and its commitment to building inclusive, resilient, and rights-based societies—would enable legislative coherence, coordinated enforcement, and survivor-centred justice across jurisdictions. Recognising coercive control as both an international crime and a domestic violence offence would bridge critical policy divides, ensuring that psychological, digital, and relational abuse receives equal weight in global justice systems.

This inclusive model would also advance the Sustainable Development Goals by addressing the intersections of gender inequality, human trafficking, and violence prevention. Through capacity-building, data-driven evaluation, and the development of culturally sensitive support networks, UNODC can empower member states to operationalise effective responses that safeguard victims at every stage—from prevention to prosecution and rehabilitation.

A unified legal and policy framework encompassing family violence and transnational exploitation would thus represent a genuinely sustainable and humane approach to global crime prevention and survivor protection.

References

- UNODC Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons
- UNODC Model Legislative Provisions on Smuggling of Migrants
- UNODC Strategy 2021–2025
- Working Group on Trafficking in Persons, 2025
- Australian, Canadian, British legislative reforms and monitoring reports