

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Violence, coercive control and ‘humiliated fury’: The shame of masculinity

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#### Abstract

In this review essay, I draw on Jess Hill’s ground-breaking work, *See what you made me do: Power, control, and domestic abuse* (2019), to consider how hegemonic masculinities are so often constructed around patriarchal discourses of male entitlement and control. Hill argues that victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) must remain our priority, but it is also vital to focus attention on perpetrators’ understandings of masculinity if we have any chance of tackling the current crisis of IPV. Following Hill’s argument, I trace the connections between male entitlement, coercive control and the violence that can all too easily erupt as the result of men’s sense of shame and ‘humiliated fury’. To break this cycle of violence, Hill endorses Michael Salter’s vision of non-violent masculinity – a masculinity that grant men permission to live fully embodied, emotional lives without feeling the need to use violence or control to protect their sense of entitlement. Here in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Hill’s and Salters’ call for a non-violent masculinity could not be timelier, given the country’s shameful record of gender-based violence and IPV.

#### Key words

*Intimate partner violence (IPV), coercive control, Jess Hill, humiliated fury, masculinity*

In her ground-breaking book, *See what you made me do: Power, control, and domestic abuse*, Australian journalist Jess Hill considers the epidemic of intimate partner violence (IPV) that casts a heavy shadow over her homeland, where, on average, one in six women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former partner (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). As well as documenting the horrendous impact of IPV on women’s lives, Hill also pays particular attention to the men who perpetrate it, not just to condemn their behaviour but also to understand *why* they do it. More specifically, she asks some important questions: why do men feel entitled to hurt the women they love? What are the societal and cultural forces that foster this sense of entitlement within constructs of hegemonic masculinity? And how might we begin educating boys and men about better, healthier ways of ‘being a man’?

Hill argues that ‘traditional notions of masculinity – particularly male entitlement – are at the core of men’s violence against women’ (2019, p. 109). Thus, while victims of IPV must remain our priority, it is also vital to focus attention on perpetrators’ understandings of masculinity if we have any chance of tackling the crisis of IPV. As she states, ‘Domestic abuse is, first and foremost, a tragedy for the victim. But it is also a tragedy for the perpetrator. Most abusive men were once tender little boys, vulnerable and shy, who just wanted love and to be loved’ (2019, p. 155). To understand why boys grow up to become abusers of women, and to end the vicious cycle of IPV, Hill contends that it is not enough to simply tell perpetrators that their violence is intrinsically wrong; men need to understand how cultural norms of masculinity cause incredible harm, not only to the victims that they abuse but also to them.

Throughout her book, Hill draws on the work of Australian criminologist Michael Salter, who has likewise written about the need to consider IPV through the lens of contemporary masculinity. According to Salter, ‘It’s often the men most concerned about their reputation as “real men” who turn to violence ... Those boys and men who hold traditional and conservative attitudes towards masculinity and gender relations are at far greater risk of engaging in violence than others’ (2016; see also Flood, 2019b, p. 17). These understandings of ‘real’ masculinity are neither natural nor innate, but are learned and enforced through boys’ everyday socialisations. In a male-dominated society, suggests Salter, boys and men are expected to show an aptitude for (or interest in) violence, ‘if not through outright physical conflict then in coded forms such as on the sports field or through the consumption of violent media. We idolise violence, war and sport as the quintessential tests of masculinity’ (2016). As a result, ‘A considerable degree of self-censorship and denial is involved as boys and men work ourselves into the narrow confines of aggressive masculinities, sometimes cutting ourselves off from those parts that won’t fit’ (Salter, 2016).

Salter’s depiction of this unhealthy ‘learned’ masculinity is also echoed by Australian writer Tim Winton (2018), who notes:

[Th]ere’s great native tenderness in children. In boys, as much as in girls. But so often I see boys having the tenderness shamed out of them. Boys and young men are so routinely expected to betray their better natures, to smother their consciences, to renounce the best of themselves and submit to something low and mean. As if there’s only one way of being a bloke, one valid interpretation of the part, the role, if you like. There’s a constant pressure to enlist, to pull on the uniform of misogyny and join the Shithead Army that enforces and polices sexism.

This discussion of masculinity and IPV by Hill, Salter and Winton resonates strongly with me, given my location in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Just across the Tasman from Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand holds a shameful record, having one of the highest rates of violence against women in the so-called ‘developed world’ (Hagar, 2020). It is a country whose colonial legacy has bruised the land with a violent, patriarchal masculinity. As Gavey et al. note:

[M]yriad forms of colonial violence severely disrupted Māori social structures and undermined tikanga, paving the way for the imposition of colonial norms and values around gender and the introduction of patriarchal masculinities. These Western models of gender endorsed men’s dominance over women and children and destructively impacted whanau already suffering from the colonial assault on the traditional values, knowledge, structures, and practices of te ao Māori. (2021, p. 7)

This colonial legacy can still be felt today in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where one in three women report having experienced physical, sexual or coercive IPV (Hagar, 2020), and where Māori women endure some of the highest rate of IPV in the country (Gavey et al., 2021, p. 7). During 2020, the New Zealand police responded to a report of domestic violence every three minutes (Shine, n.d.). This is likely the tip of the iceberg, as it is estimated that around three quarters of domestic violence incidents are never reported to the police (Clark & The Aunties, 2021, p. 11). Moreover, in Aotearoa/ New Zealand, death due to domestic violence is the leading cause of homicide for women (Clark & The Aunties, 2021, p. 10). As activist and writer Jackie Clark insists, we cannot deny that IPV is happening in our communities, because it is ‘not only happening, it’s happening alarmingly often and more brutally than you can imagine’ (‘Domestic violence extends well beyond the stereotypes’, 2019).

To be sure, the media in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand do foster conversations about both countries’ troubling record with IPV. But all too often, as Hill notes, the wrong questions are asked: ‘Why doesn’t she leave him?’ ‘Why does she stay?’ Instead, we should be asking why the *perpetrator* stays in a relationship where he needs to use his voice and his fists to inscribe his displeasure. We should be asking why *he* feels entitled to inflict emotional, physical and sexual

violence on his partner. ‘If we were to think about *his* actions as much as we think about hers’, observes Hill, ‘it would make even *less* sense that a man who inflicts abuse on his partner would want to stay – and even kill her after she leaves. Why does he stay?’ (2019, p. 7, emphasis original).

To answer that question, Hill considers the relationship between masculinity, IPV and control. At the heart of violent masculinity is a man’s need for control, or to be more precise, his sense of entitlement at being in control. As Hill notes:

Men don’t abuse women because society tells them it’s okay. Men abuse women because society tells them they are entitled to be in control. In fact, society says that if they are *not* in control, they won’t succeed – they won’t get the girl, they won’t get the money, and they will be vulnerable to the violence and control of other men. (2019, pp. 7-8; emphasis original)

Similarly, Allan G. Johnson describes patriarchy’s ‘obsession’ with control as a key factor in men’s use of violence: ‘Because violence is the most extreme instrument of control, then the capacity for violence – whether or not individual men actually make use of it – is central to the cultural definition of manhood’ (2014, p. 212; see also Flood, 2019b, pp. 14-15).

In relationships where IPV occurs, the perpetrator’s desire for control is often enacted through both violence (physical, sexual) and coercion. He may use various tactics – collectively referred to as coercive control – to utterly subordinate his victim and sustain his own sense of power and control within the relationship. Although it may at times be viewed less seriously than physical forms of abuse, coercive control is far from benign; as Hill warns, it is widely recognised as a red flag for escalating physical abuse and homicide in families and relationships (2019, p. 259). When a man coercively controls his partner, any attempts she makes to retain her agency are met with further punishment. This allows the perpetrator to maintain his power and control in the relationship, while the victim becomes convinced that she cannot escape the abuse (Hayes & Jeffries, 2015, pp. 22, 28). Through their repeated experiences of threats, humiliation, surveillance and isolation, victims lose any sense of their own autonomy, as their victimiser attempts to control their thoughts, microregulate their everyday lives and activities, and redefine their reality. Scaffolded by patriarchal power structures, coercive control thus serves to legitimise male privilege and men’s sense of entitlement to subordinate and dominate women (Hayes & Jeffries, 2015, p. 23). As Evan Stark maintains, men who perpetrate coercive control do so in order to ‘defend their traditional prerogatives against the perceived threats posed by women’s increasing economic independence, cultural autonomy, and political/legal equality’ (2007, p. 96).

Perpetrators of coercive control often use verbal threats, threatening behaviours and intimidation to instil fear, anxiety and despair in their victim and to prevent them from leaving or seeking help (Hill, 2019, p. 37). These may include threats of violence (to the victim, her children, or her pets), emotional punishment (such as the withdrawal of affection) or public shaming. Through such threats and intimidation, the perpetrator can establish his ‘ownership’ of the victim, subordinating her, ensuring her obedience, and reinforcing his authority and control (Fontes, 2015, p. 50). Victims may be left fearing that they can never be safe, either in or out of the relationship (Hill, 2019, p. 38).

Another common tactic of coercive control is isolation. Abusers may attempt to isolate their victims from family, friends and other sources of social, cultural and spiritual support. These isolation tactics diminish the victim’s ability to seek help from others, not to mention reinforcing her sense of dependence on her controller who will remind her that she is now exclusively ‘his’ (Stark, 2007, p. 262). As Hill observes, ‘As long as the victim maintains meaningful social and emotional connections [with others], the abuser’s influence is diluted. To become the most powerful person in her life, he must eliminate her external sources of support and silence voices that would question his behaviour’ (2019, p. 26). Through isolating

his victim, the abuser effectively ensures that he becomes the only means by which she can make sense of what is happening to her, or even make sense of herself. This allows him to monopolise her perceptions and gaslight her into doubting her own perceptions, memories and even her sanity (Hill, 2019, pp. 29-30). Isolation serves to limit the ways victims can express themselves or seek affirmation about the abusiveness of their relationship.

An abuser isolates his victim to keep her away from others, but also to keep her more closely in his sights, thereby restricting her freedom and autonomy (Hayes & Jeffries, 2015, p. 33). An isolated victim finds it increasingly difficult to locate places, spaces and times to be alone, as her controller insists that he must always be with her, involving himself in the activities she may otherwise do herself, such as going to class, work, meeting friends, choosing her outfit, shopping or even having a bath (Stark, 2007, p. 5; Hayes & Jeffries, 2015, p. 37; Fontes, 2015, p. 16). He may colonise any space in which his victim feels safe – her office, a place of worship, the supermarket, even the bathroom – gradually eroding her sense of autonomy (Hill, 2019, p. 33). Even when he is not able to be physically with her, he may call his victim repeatedly throughout the day (or insist that she call him at set times), question her in granular detail about her daily movements, thoughts, and interactions, or track her activity on social media. Even her most private spaces (diaries, phones, laptops and closets) are surveilled and invaded. An abuser may even download a tracking app onto his victim's mobile device (without her knowledge) so that he can 'watch' her from afar and intimidate and terrorise her with his seemingly 'godlike powers' and extraordinary knowledge about her every move (Hill, 2019, p. 33). He thus invades *all* her personal spaces, taking away anything (a place, time, activity, or even a piece of clothing) that gives her a sense of freedom or meaning in her life. Instead, she is compelled to put him first, over and above her own needs (Hayes & Jeffries, 2015, p. 33). As Stark notes, 'If abusive relationships were filmed in slow motion, they would resemble a grotesque dance whereby victims create moments of autonomy and perpetrators "search and destroy" them' (2007, p. 217).

In addition to threats, isolation and microregulation, abusers may also use humiliation and degradation as 'obscenely targeted' means by which they can assert their control and subordinate their victims (Hill, 2019, p. 39). Victims may be criticised and shamed, sometimes in front of others, while their strengths, opinions and achievements are minimised or denied. An abuser may remind his victim that she is 'nothing' without him, that no one else could love her as much as he does because she is so unlovable and so unworthy of respect, compassion or a better relationship than the one she is currently enduring (Hayes & Jeffries, 2015, pp. 32-32; Stark, 2007, pp. 259-61). Filled with shame, a victim 'doesn't just feel bad about certain things she's done – she starts to feel that *she* is bad ... From there, the shame becomes a spiral ... The more ashamed she feels, the more dependent she becomes on her perpetrator, and the less likely she is to seek help. After all, who would want to help a person like her?' (Hill, 2019, pp. 28-29, emphasis original).

Abusers may denigrate their victims, but they also ensure victims' loyalty by manipulating them with flourishes of love language and reassurances of devotion. This behaviour, known as 'love bombing', is never carried out with the intent of nurturing mutual love and commitment; rather, as Hayes and Jeffries note, it is a form of 'romantic terrorism' (2015, p. 38). An abuser may bombard his victim with flattery, gifts, romantic gestures and declarations of love in order to ensure her devotion and loyalty, all the while bringing her under his control. He may alternate abuse and love bombing, creating a 'mercurial' cycle of rewards and punishments, further confusing and gaslighting his victim until she constantly feels terrified of what to expect next (Hayes & Jeffries, 2015, p. 39). A victim may even begin to feel grateful whenever her abuser shows her some small kindness, paradoxically viewing him as her 'saviour' simply because he has allowed her to live (Herman, 1997, p. 71; cited in Hill, 2019, pp. 35-36).

While the dynamics and strategies of coercive control are becoming more widely recognised and understood as powerful components of IPV, ‘Why doesn’t she just leave him?’ remains a question we hear so often today in conversations about abused women. It is an infuriating question because it ignores the insidious nature of IPV and coercive control, which operate to corrode victims’ agency and redefine their reality to the point that they start to see their repeated abuse ‘as unremarkable as breathing’ and any hope of escape unthinkable (Hill, 2019, p. 7). An abused woman often stays with her abuser because she truly believes that this is her *only* option. What choice does she have, when he keeps reminding her that he will never let her leave and that she cannot survive without him?

This takes us back to Hill’s question: why does her *abuser* stay? Why doesn’t *he* leave a relationship that requires him to enact so much violence and control? What can he possibly gain by staying in such a coercive and volatile relationship? Hill wrestles with this question by exploring the concept of ‘humiliated fury’. This term, coined by psychoanalyst Helen Block Lewis in 1971, refers to the violence perpetrated by men when they feel shamed, powerless and lacking the control to which they believe they are entitled (Hill, 2019, p. 112). Abusers feel entitled to their partner’s deference and subordination and, when they believe this is being withheld from them, their own sense of shame and humiliation can have catastrophic repercussions (Hill, 2019, p. 140; see also Salter, 2016). Shame can be such a powerful motivator for men who perpetrate IPV – the shame of feeling powerless, inadequate or not ‘man enough’ according to discourses of hegemonic masculinity. To be shamed as a man is to feel ‘unmanned’ – emasculated and humiliated, not to mention vulnerable and weak (Hill, 2019, p. 115). Humiliated fury allows abusers to refute their sense of weakness through exerting control over their partner and enacting violence against her. It thus protects men, albeit temporarily, from being overwhelmed by the pain of their shame.

Of course, this is not to say that male shame ‘excuses’ IPV – many men feel shame but deal with it in more constructive ways. However, Hill notes that:

when abusive people are confronted with feelings of shame, they take the path of least resistance. Instead of acknowledging their own sense of powerlessness and sitting with their discomfort, they blame others and, like the schoolyard bully, use violence to achieve a phony – and often short-lived – feeling of power and pride. Women and children suffer horrific abuse – and sometimes death – at the hands of men who refuse to deal with the true source of their own pain and frustration. (2019, p. 116)

Hill is right – the relief men may feel through a display of ‘humiliated fury’ does not numb the pain for long and the cycle of abuse will inevitably continue. *Whenever* an abuser feels he is losing the control he believes he is entitled to – when his status as a man is threatened, undermined, or disrespected – he will respond with a humiliated fury to reassert his sense of control and thus lessen his shame (Hill, 2019, pp. 120-22, 128).

The irony is, of course, that a man’s enactment of humiliated fury may make him feel as though he is back in control, but that is simply not true. The reliance on violence and coercion to sustain a partner’s loyalty betrays an ongoing *lack* of control, one that does not go away for good once the threats, humiliations and violations stop raining down on her head. Any discourse of masculinity that places entitlement and control at the centre of what it means to ‘be a man’ is deeply flawed and deeply damaging, both to the women and children caught in the cross-hairs of IPV but also to the men who enact it. Patriarchal frameworks of masculinity only diminish men and boys, rather than helping them flourish. They keep men trapped in a perpetual cycle of entitlement, shame and violence, depriving them of meaningful relationships and cutting them off from enriching emotions, such as compassion, tenderness, intimacy and empathy, because these are deemed too ‘feminine’ and unmanly (Salter, ‘Real men’; Hill, 2019, pp. 137-38). As Hill notes, patriarchy ‘shrinks the rich landscape of intimacy to a staging ground for

competition and threat. This is the realm of men's violence, with its underworld of male shame and humiliated fury' (2019, p. 138).

This patriarchal construction of masculinity is prominent in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where boys are taught from an early age that showing emotion is a sign of male weakness. According to psychologist Nicola Gavey, such emotional repression is widely recognised as incredibly damaging, both to boys and men and to the women in their lives. She explains:

[W]hat that does to the psyche, if you can't show emotion or hurt or disappointment – that gets turned into anger and violence, and self-harm ... It's a dangerous combination, to have that idea of masculinity in a society where men exist in a hierarchy of power – where they feel they should be in control, they should be heard, their perspective should be taken into account ... and what happens when that goes wrong. (Cited in Johnston, 2021)

There are no happy endings available in patriarchy. Male violence and coercive control only serve to diminish men, rather than allowing them to flourish. Abusers become 'miserable creatures, unable to love or be loved, and so wracked with secret shame that their only defence is to construct a grandiose narcissism behind which they can hide' (Hill, 2019, p. 156). But, as Salter (2016) insists, what they *really* need to do is to find their way back to non-violence – to embrace those human characteristics that oppose violence completely, such as care, compassion and empathy. Non-violence reveals 'the weakness and destructiveness of violence in comparison to the enduring power of peace-making', thus demonstrating to boys and men 'not only the pitfalls of violence but also the potential of non-violence as the basis for meaningful relationships and happy lives' (Salter, 2016). Non-violent masculinity prioritises love, respect and compassion, recognising that these are central to being a 'real' man. Drawing on Salter's work, Hill likewise argues that men need to be shown 'the way back to non-violence. They need to be shown ... that taking the path to non-violence leads to a better and more successful life' (2019, p. 156, emphasis original).

If we want to see an end to IPV here in Aotearoa/New Zealand, we need to find ways to interrupt those societal processes that turn our tender boys into violent men, recruits of the patriarchal 'Shithead Army' who feel entitled to hurt and control women. We need to teach boys that non-violent masculinity is an infinitely better path towards being an ethical person. And we need to invite men and boys to join us to become *part* of the fight against harmful patriarchal ideals that render male violence almost inevitable. For, as Michael Flood insists, men have an essential role to play in ending men's violence against women: '[T]o make progress toward eliminating violence against women, we will need to change men – men's attitudes, behaviors, identities, and relations ... we have no choice but to address men and masculinities if we want to stop violence against women' (2011, p. 359; also Flood, 2019a, 2019b). To achieve this goal, we must encourage boys and men to 'work in partnership with, and be accountable to, feminist and women's rights organisations' to achieve this goal (Flood, 2019a, p. 2387). Because, above all else, we need all the boys and men in Aotearoa/New Zealand to know that, through embracing non-violence, they can live their best life.

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## Notes

1. Intimate partner violence is highly gendered; women and girls are more likely to be victims, while men are its primary perpetrators. We acknowledge that boys, men, and non-binary people may also be victimised by

- a violent and coercively controlling partner (who likewise may have any gender identity). But given that this essay is focusing on Hill's (2019) exploration of male perpetrators of IPV, I refer to victims of IPV and coercive control as female and perpetrators as male. This in no way denies or downplays the experiences of survivors and victims who do not identify as women or girls.
2. Prior to 2020, the New Zealand police responded to a domestic violence report on average every four minutes; the increase in reports during 2020 may likely have been due to the country's repeated lockdowns at Levels 4 and 3. See New Zealand Family Violence Clearing House (2021) for further details.
  3. See also *Her say* (Clark & The Aunties, 2021), which documents the stories of women who are survivors of domestic violence, told in their own words. Jackie Clark is a key member of the Aunties, which is a grassroots organisation assisting women who have experienced domestic violence, offering them material and emotional support.
  4. The term 'gaslighting' comes from the 1944 movie *Gaslight*, starring Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman. In essence, gaslighting involves the deliberate use of deception to manipulate and confuse another person by challenging their own memories or experiences and bombarding them with mixed messages to the point that they begin to question their own reality and sanity. As Fontes explains, 'An abuser who gaslights his partner is trying to disorient her and make her seem crazy to herself and others, strengthening his control over her' (2015, p. 44). See also Hayes and Jeffries (2015, p. 37); Hill (2019, pp. 29-30).

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