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Abstract | Many child sexual abuse material (CSAM) offenders have non-offending partners and children who are impacted by their CSAM use. However, the specific dynamics of CSAM offending within a relationship or family context have been overlooked in forensic research, while scholarship on domestic violence and coercive control has not focused on CSAM offending as a possible correlate of domestic abuse. This paper presents the findings of the first study to examine the crossover between domestic violence, coercive control and CSAM offending in intimate relationships.

Secrecy, control and violence in women's intimate relationships with child sexual abuse material offenders

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Warning: this paper contains descriptions of physical and sexual abuse of children and abuse of animals.

Introduction

Reports of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) on the internet are increasing at a rapid rate (Bursztein et al. 2019). CSAM refers to images, videos or stories that sexually exploit children. CSAM offending escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in an unprecedented increase in reports of CSAM to authorities (Salter & Wong 2021). International data suggest that up to 42 percent of CSAM offenders were cohabiting with a partner at the time of arrest (Bouhours & Broadhurst 2012), while up to two-thirds of CSAM offenders in treatment have a partner and up to half have at least one child (Brown & Bricknell 2018). The non-offending family members of CSAM offenders are significant secondary victims of the crime and experience a range of impacts once the offending is uncovered (Walker 2019). These impacts can include mental and physical health problems and negative social outcomes for the partners and their children (Jones, Salter & Woodlock 2022).

Recent research suggests a crossover between CSAM offending and patterns of domestic violence and coercive control (Jones, Salter & Woodlock 2022). In this paper, domestic violence refers to the use of physical, sexual and emotional violence in the context or aftermath of an intimate relationship, and coercive control refers to the entrapment of a partner or ex-partner through the use of control, fear and manipulation (Stark 2007). There is a burgeoning body of research into the experiences of non-offending partners of sex offenders, including CSAM offenders (Duncan et al. 2022), but this work has focused specifically on the discovery of the offending and its aftermath.

This study aims to analyse the dynamics of CSAM offending in a relationship, including patterns of secrecy, control and violence. It seeks to identify indicators of CSAM offending in abusive and controlling relationships in order to promote appropriate and effective responses to the partners and ex-partners of CSAM offenders.

Background

Research from the United Kingdom has detailed the trauma and shock of ‘the knock’: the unravelling of women’s lives when the police knock on their door to arrest their partners for CSAM or other sexual offences (Duncan et al. 2022). However, the relationship experiences of people partnered to CSAM offenders are not well understood. The recent evaluation of PartnerSPEAK, a Victorian organisation that supports the non-offending partners and families of CSAM offenders, identified significant overlaps between CSAM offending and patterns of domestic violence and coercive control (Jones, Woodlock & Salter 2021). The 53 PartnerSPEAK clients surveyed as part of the evaluation reported that, following discovery of the offending behaviour, one-quarter had been in contact with the family court, 20 percent with domestic and family violence services, 16 percent with family mediation services, and seven percent with sexual assault services. Seven clients were interviewed as part of the evaluation and, although their relationship experiences were not the focus of the study, most described the CSAM offender as dishonest, manipulative and abusive in the relationship.

Contemporary research on domestic violence has not explored the possible role of CSAM offending in abusive and controlling behaviour. However, a range of studies point to the crossover between men who sexually abuse children and men who perpetrate domestic violence. An Australian study by Ahmadabadi et al. (2018) found that sexual abuse is one of the most common forms of contact child abuse perpetrated by domestic violence offenders. In their study, 11 percent of mothers who experienced domestic violence reported that their children had been sexually abused. Bancroft and Miller (2012) draw together the findings of numerous studies to show that a domestic violence perpetrator is approximately four to six times more likely than a non-perpetrator to sexually abuse his children. Research by Bowen (2000) and Kellogg and Menard (2003) found that over half of child sex offenders who lived in the family home also physically abused their adult female partner.

Men who engage in CSAM and child sexual offending in family settings are under-studied, despite constituting a significant group of CSAM producers and consumers (Salter et al. 2021; Seto et al. 2018). Research with CSAM offenders who do not engage in contact offences against children suggests that, compared to contact offenders, they have less capacity for adult romantic relationships and experience higher rates of emotional loneliness (Gallo 2020) although, as mentioned above, a significant number of CSAM offenders are in relationships at the time of arrest or treatment. Studies of contact or ‘mixed’

(contact and CSAM) offenders find that they have greater access to children, are more antisocial and have less victim empathy than CSAM-only offenders (Babchishin, Hanson & VanZuylen 2015). These findings point to situational and personality risk factors that are broadly congruent with risk factors for domestic violence, such as antisocial tendencies, lack of empathy and access to children.

While CSAM is distinguished from adult pornography, research has highlighted connections between domestic violence and the offenders' use of pornography. Studies of women seeking support from domestic violence services have revealed an association between their male partners' use of pornography and increased levels of sexual violence, rape and stalking (Shope 2004; Simmons, Lehmann & Collier-Tenison 2008). Research with male perpetrators has also shown a connection between pornography use and levels of domestic violence. A cross-sectional study investigated the association between self-reported problematic pornography use and domestic violence perpetration among 273 men in domestic violence intervention programs (Brem et al. 2018). The study concluded that men who self-reported higher levels of excessive, compulsive and uncontrollable pornography use also perpetrated more frequent domestic violence than did men with lower levels of problematic pornography use.

Methodology

This paper presents findings from the first study to examine how non-offending partners of CSAM offenders experience control and abuse in their intimate relationships. This project used in-depth interviews with 10 non-offending partners and eight professionals to provide insights into the patterns of coercion, manipulation and secrecy that characterise these relationships.

Data collection and analysis: Non-offending partners

The question guiding the research process with women was: what are women's experiences of control and abuse in their intimate relationships with a CSAM offender? The project received approval from the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee (no. HC220076). We interviewed 10 women for this project and the interviews averaged one hour in duration.

Non-offending partners were recruited through social media, relevant support agencies and via snowball sampling strategies. Non-offending ex-partners are a difficult group to reach and advice from key Australian community organisations was that local research participation was likely to be low. To maximise participation, recruitment was international. Five interviewees were Australian and five were from other countries—namely New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. Interview questions were developed from the knowledge we gained through previous research with non-offending partners (Jones, Woodlock and Salter 2021). Our questions also gathered basic demographic and biographical information such as age, children, cultural background and any disabilities.

For all 10 women interviewed, the male ex-partner was charged with offences relating to CSAM. For three women, the ex-partner was charged with contact child sexual offences against their children, and in two cases the ex-partner was charged with offences against other children. For two other women, the ex-partner was suspected of contact offences but charges were not laid.

We coded the transcripts using the thematic analysis process outlined by King, Horrocks and Brooks (2019). Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo, where material relevant to the research question was highlighted and notes made. Transcripts were initially coded descriptively, with a focus on the behaviours of perpetrators and the impacts on women. The second step involved interpretive coding, where descriptive codes that share a common meaning are linked together from across the transcripts. The third step was to define overarching themes which attempt to answer the research question as well as draw on the theoretical framework of the research. These themes were based on our grouping of women's experiences of control and abuse in their relationships with the CSAM offenders.

Findings are presented here in an anonymised format with pseudonyms used and identifying information redacted. The focus of our analysis here is on the reported behaviour of the perpetrators rather than the specifics of the women's intersections with the criminal justice system, family law and other services. To enhance anonymity, we do not state the country in which each woman resides, although we make some high-level comment on the quality of some of their interactions with services and agencies where relevant.

Data collection and analysis: Professionals

To provide further insights into the intersections between CSAM offending and domestic violence perpetration, we conducted interviews with six professionals and held a focus group with two professionals who work in the areas of CSAM, domestic violence and sexual assault. The questions asked were built on our interviews with women and centred on the complexities of intimate partner control and abuse, and how this may particularly manifest in relationships where the male partner is a CSAM offender. The interviews and focus group were each around one hour in duration and were conducted via Zoom. They were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were then uploaded into NVivo. Among the eight professionals, two were managers in the Australian sexual assault and domestic violence sector, two from an Australian specialist service for family and friends of CSAM offenders, and four from UK charities and other services that work with non-offending partners and sexual assault victim-survivors.

We used a similar three-step thematic analysis process with our interviews with professionals as we did with the women's interviews (King, Horrocks & Brooks 2019). However, the analysis was guided by a different research question, which was: what are the links between CSAM offending and domestic violence perpetration and what supports do non-offending partners need?

Limitations

Due to time and funding constraints, we recruited a small sample of ex-partners and professionals, which limits the generalisability of the findings. The project aimed to recruit ex-partners with concerns about control and abuse in their relationship with the CSAM offender. Therefore, the project does not represent the breadth of experiences of the partners of CSAM offenders. For example, it does not include partners who remained in the relationship with the CSAM offender, nor does it include partners who colluded or were complicit in the CSAM offending (see Salter et al. 2021). All ex-partner volunteers for the study were female, white and English-speaking and described male ex-partners who engaged in CSAM offending. There is a need for further research into diverse experiences, including those of people who are LGBTIQ+, who come from diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds, and for whom English is not their first language.

Findings

Our findings explore three key scenarios of CSAM offending in a relationship, according to women's descriptions: (1) secrecy, (2) control and (3) violence. The first scenario of secrecy is exemplified by Zara's story, where she described her now ex-husband's secret consumption of CSAM within a relationship that she felt was otherwise affectionate and non-abusive. The other nine interviews described situations on a continuum of control and violence, with five women reporting being subject to patterns of abuse and control, and four women being subject to physical and/or sexual violence. It is notable that, while all the male ex-partners were charged with CSAM offences, and five were charged with contact or online offences against children, no woman reported that charges were laid regarding her victimisation.

These three scenarios are overlapping and build on one another, such that women in the third category were simultaneously experiencing secrecy, control and violence. Women across the last two categories recounted experiences that have previously been documented in the literature on control and violence in relationships, including victimisation through financial abuse, technology-facilitated abuse and a gendered and sexist division of labour within the house. This report draws out some of the unique experiences of control and violence described by non-offending partners of CSAM offenders.

This section summarises interviews and focus groups with eight professionals regarding their opinion on the status of CSAM offending in relationships as a form of domestic violence. Table 1 presents a summary of women's experiences, colour-coded according to their respective categorisation in the study. Secrecy was coded as dark grey, control as light grey and violence as light green. The key offender behaviours identified in the study are arrayed across the X axis and grouped in categories of physical and sexual violence, coercive control and sexual preoccupation. Sexual preoccupation was one of the recurring themes of women's narratives of their ex-partners, with their broader experiences of secrecy, abuse and violence often shaped by the sexual impulses and obsessions of their ex-partner.

Table 1: Behaviours of CSAM offenders, as described by their female ex-partners

Name	Physical and sexual violence				Coercive control							Sexual preoccupation		
	Physical violence	Sexual violence	Child sexual abuse	Zoophilia	Isolation	Stalking	Tech abuse	Systems abuse	Financial abuse	Control	Emotional abuse	Adult porn use	Affairs (men)	Affairs (women)
Melanie		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Eloise		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Mary	✓					✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Nicole	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Alice			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Belinda	✓		✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Jane			✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Olivia									✓	✓	✓	✓		
Zoe			✓						✓	✓	✓	✓		
Zara				✓						✓				

Note: Light green indicates violence, light grey indicates control and dark grey indicates secrecy

Scenario 1: Secrecy and manipulation

One of the women interviewed for this study, Zara, had different experiences in her relationship to the majority of participants. Zara was clear from the outset of her interview that her ex-husband had not been violent or abusive towards her. Zara's interview offers an insight into the mixed experiences of women whose partners have viewed CSAM in the absence of overtly abusive or coercive behaviour.

Zara described her ex-partner as relaxed and easygoing, but she recognised that he had some challenging traits. He was obsessed with making sure that certain household tasks were undertaken in a specific way, to the point where he took over those duties. He was also a hoarder and Zara described their garage being stuffed full of items that her ex-partner could not bear to throw away.

A few years ago, Zara received 'the knock', in which police came to their house to investigate her husband's CSAM offending. During the investigation, Zara discovered that her husband had been looking at CSAM online for a number of years and that he had kept secret his previous conviction for CSAM. The kinds of pornography that police found were extreme, with her ex-partner confessing to her the range of material he had. Zara explained:

I remember him saying 'I had all kinds of porn, I even had dwarf porn'. I was like, 'What is dwarf porn?!'. And he said he had animal stuff. I was like 'God, is this a thing? What?' ... So I knew there was a side of life, but it wasn't something that had touched our life or our relationship, or touched our sex life in that way. So I'm standing in the kitchen looking at someone I don't know.

His obsessive and hoarding tendencies were evident in the size of his pornography and CSAM collection, which was so large that a police officer told Zara that her ex-partner could not possibly have watched all of it. This was a shock, since Zara did not know that her ex-partner looked at pornography at all. Looking back, Zara recognised that her husband had many opportunities to offend. He was a 'night owl' who spent a lot of his time on the computer at night, while she was tending to their children. This pattern, in which men went to great effort to create opportunities to offend out of sight of their partners, was evident in most of the women's stories.

Scenarios 2 and 3: Coercion and violence

The nine other women interviewed in this study described relationships of coercion and abuse. Five of the 10 women in our study described patterns of coercive control in the absence of overt violence against them. Four women described controlling relationships that included physical and/or sexual violence against them. There were a number of shared experiences and perceptions across the women in these two scenarios. This section is divided into two categories: tactics of abuse and control, and specific forms of abuse linked to CSAM offending.

A consistent theme across the interviews was that the relationship with the CSAM offender began when the women were relatively young, often late teens or early twenties. The offender was most likely to be older than the female partner, with the average being three years older, with age gaps of up to 12 years. The average length of relationship in the study was 12 years, ranging from two years to 27 years. It was common for women to comment that, during the relationship, they did not initially recognise abusive and controlling behaviour for what it was. It was only as they got older or once the relationship ended that they identified the abusive nature of their ex-partner's behaviour.

Tactics of abuse and control

Women described forms of abuse and control that were infused with an unusual level of sexual preoccupation, evident in their ex-partner's extensive pornography consumption, extramarital affairs, coercive sexuality or sexually withdrawing from their partner since their primary sexual interest lay elsewhere (for instance, in CSAM and children).

Control of household

Women generally described partners who were 'selfish' (Alice), 'lazy' and 'self-indulgent' (Zoe), and 'slacking' (Olivia), who enforced a gendered division of labour in which the female partner was expected to undertake most if not all of the housework and parenting. Alice's partner demanded a 'perfect' house and family despite putting in very little effort:

I was taking care of the kids, basically on my own... He was like so OCD, where everything had to be perfect and clean. The food had to be freshly cooked, he wouldn't eat reheated food. The kids had to be picture-perfect clean... Or they couldn't have toys on the floor.

This was common across most women's stories, with offenders maintaining strict control over the house, while contributing little to the care of their children. Much of this behaviour was focused on maintaining what Salter (2018) has called the offender's 'double life', in which the offender constructs a pseudo-normal facade behind which he could consume CSAM and, for at least five of the 10 interviewees, commit other offences against children. Jane's partner became so detached from her and 'extremely duplicitous in everything he said' that, during the relationship, she felt 'he was obviously up to something'.

Abusive fathering

Some women also recalled frightening and abusive parenting by their ex-partners. Mary described her ex-partner's treatment of their infant son at six months of age: he would 'swing him upside down by the feet' and 'start shaking him'. Eloise recalled an incident in which her ex-husband stood over their five-year-old son and tore apart his favourite teddy bear as punishment when her son accidentally broke a toy. She said, 'That memory is still with him and I don't think it will ever leave. It's still with me and it's awful.' For women whose partners sexually abused their children, violent fathering served to silence the child victims.

Financial abuse

While some women reported that they were expected to manage the household budget and financial affairs, other women were subjected to financial abuse. Jane's husband controlled their finances and refused her access to their bank accounts and records. When the police investigated his offending, they explained to her that their bank statements showed the extent of her husband's engagement with online pornography and sexual services, which was likely why he had been so controlling and secretive regarding their banking.

Technology-facilitated abuse

Technology-facilitated abuse was a strategy that some men used to conceal their CSAM offending. Mary's partner insisted on maintaining a separate residence (with a separate computer that she was never allowed to use) despite the fact that they had a child together. He would regularly place a spy camera in her house to watch her movements. She explained that 'so many times when I sat down and ate lunch here at my house ... to find myself being monitored by a camera' so that he could watch her through his phone. It seemed that her partner was paranoid that she might drop in on him unexpectedly during the day. Mary explained: '... if I'd surprised him and gone to his house for lunch, he might get caught out, you know'.

Extramarital affairs

Three of the 10 women in the sample discovered that their partners had been having extramarital affairs. This rate of infidelity is likely to be higher than that of the general community, with a large representative Australian survey finding that four percent of men in a monogamous heterosexual relationship had had sex with someone else in the previous year (Richters et al. 2014). After their divorce, Nicole found that her husband had been unfaithful throughout their marriage, and had given her sexually transmitted infections. Melanie came across sexual text messages between her partner and a local man within a year of their wedding. When she confronted him, he blamed her and said he was forced to cheat because she was 'weird'. She explained:

He was communicating with 20 or so people a day. And whenever I was away for a night people were invited to my home. He was sending photos that were taken on our bed, and in our bathroom.

Extensive pornography use

The extensive use of pornography was a persistent theme throughout the interviews. Nicole explained that 'when I was at work or wasn't home, he would masturbate for eight hours a day' watching pornography online. Olivia's husband claimed he could not stop using pornography and blamed her. She explained:

He'd come to me and say I can't stop myself, and it became an issue where he couldn't stop watching it. His rationalisation was that because I wasn't being intimate enough with him. He'd say if I had sex with him more or if I gave him more attention he could better control himself.

When they spoke up about their partner's use of pornography, women often found that they were blamed, or were told that 'this is normal, this is what guys do' (Eloise).

Coercive sexual activity and/or lack of sexual interest

Some women described their partner's decreasing sexual interest and disengagement from them over time. For example, Alice commented on her ex-partner's excuses to avoid sex during their marriage, including telling her that she 'gained too much weight' after the birth of their children. Women believed that the offender's withdrawal from their sexual relationship was part of a pattern of coercive behaviour that stemmed from their sexual interest in children. They felt that his disinterest in intimacy was part of his duplicitous and controlling actions to hide his offending and attraction to children. Other women reported being pressured into sexual interactions that they preferred to avoid.

Belinda experienced these two patterns simultaneously: her ex-partner seemed disinterested in sexual activity with her unless it involved elements that made her uncomfortable. She would later discover that he was sexually abusing their children and producing CSAM of them. On reflection, Belinda feels that he often practised his grooming skills on her, pushing her boundaries when it came to their sex life. Belinda explained: 'When I think back now, it's amazing how these things get pushed to the back of your mind. He always wanted to try to put me in situations that I wasn't interested in being in.' This included suggesting a threesome with a male friend of theirs, as well as taking intimate images of her.

Specific forms of abuse linked to CSAM offending

Using women as a 'cover' for offending

Some women were concerned that their relationship had been purely a 'cover' for their partner's sexual offending. Jane first unravelled her ex-partner's double life when she discovered he was having affairs with men. This confrontation led him to try and dispose of his extensive pornography collection, which included CSAM. The discovery of CSAM in their garbage led to their house being raided by police. Following his arrest, Jane had a conversation with him in which he admitted to having affairs with men, as well as sexually abusing boys and viewing CSAM. During the conversation, he was clear that he had married her for, in her words, 'cover'. She said:

I asked him 'Why me?', and he said 'Because I knew you were strong enough to cope with it'. So he knew from the get-go how he was going to be. I don't think there was any care factor for how it would impact me, or the children, or anybody. It was just him.

Retrospectively, a number of women reflected that they may have been appealing partners to the offender because of their own 'childlike' qualities at the onset of the relationship. Zoe commented: 'When I first met him, although I was 20, I looked about 12.' Belinda remembered, 'I was 20 when he met me and he was eight years older, and I probably looked young for my age then.' Melanie recalled that her ex-partner used to tell her that he loved her 'childlike' characteristics.

Invalidating women's suspicions of their paedophilic interests

Four women encountered evidence of their partner's sexual interest in children throughout their relationship. However, the offenders would vehemently lie, make up excuses, and blame their partner for asking questions. For instance, when she was pregnant with their child, Mary saw CSAM on her partner's computer, but he denied it and she was too afraid to confront him due to his violence. After her child was born, she was supported by a friend to report him to the police.

Two women who voiced their concerns to professionals were not supported. Zoe suspected that her ex-partner was sexually interested in children after witnessing his inappropriate behaviour around young girls and coming across suspicious material on his computer. She sent him to a psychiatrist, who diagnosed him with an internet addiction but did not identify him as an offender.

In Alice's case, she came home one day after shopping and saw that her then husband had a naked picture of their infant daughter on his computer. She was deeply concerned but her ex-partner insisted that it was just a 'cute' picture of their daughter and that she was overreacting. She had her daughter assessed by a paediatrician and then contacted child protection services. They concluded

that her suspicions were 'unfounded'. Three years later, her husband was charged with sexually abusing their daughter and producing CSAM of her.

Other women were clear that they had no indication that their husband or partner was sexually interested in children. Jane explained, 'In 20 years of being with him, there is nothing that would have made me go "that's what you are" [a sex offender]'. She described her ex-husband as an 'expert liar' who hid his behaviour with a 'well-secured mask'.

Zoophilia and indiscriminate sexuality

In two women's accounts, zoophilia was part of a pattern of indiscriminate sexuality, in which offenders were engaging in sexual activity with adults of both sexes, as well as abusing children and animals. Alice discovered that, in addition to his sexual offences against their infant daughter, her husband had been having extramarital affairs with men and also sexually abusing a dog. Melanie discovered a similar pattern of behaviour, in which her husband was engaged sexually with men and sexually abusing teenaged boys, and she suspected he had abused their pet dogs.

Scenario 3: Physical and sexual violence

For Melanie, Eloise and Nicole, their relationship with the offender was one where they could identify incidents of physical and sexual violence within a broader campaign of abuse and control.

Nicole's ex-partner primarily used tactics of isolation to control her; however, he was also physically abusive towards her. She said that the violence began after they were married. When police attended her house to investigate her partner for CSAM, Nicole recalled feeling 'horrified' about the abuse of the children in the images viewed by her partner. However, she also felt some relief that 'I could go, I could leave and he couldn't use his threats to keep me there anymore, and I could finally walk away and prove that he was a monster'.

Melanie was repeatedly sexually assaulted by her then husband. After Melanie discovered her ex-partner's affairs with men, she agreed to 'cover' for his sexual behaviour on the condition that their sexual relationship ended. However, he refused to accept this boundary and began to rape her during the relationship. These repeated attacks had an enormous impact on Melanie. She linked the development of an eating disorder to the trauma of the assaults.

Eloise recalled that her husband became violent when she returned to study and work as their children got older. She reflected: 'it was very textbook-type family violence. It was a slow burn. It was isolating from family and friends, that sort of thing.' She explained, 'He would throw things at me that would just miss me. And then when I'd tell him to stop he'd say "if I wanted to hit you I could".' She also considered that she had experienced sexual assault in the relationship. She said:

I guess thinking that I'm the wife and I'm supposed to give it to him when he wants it. So I think in that sense, yeah, there was a lot of sexual contact that I probably would have rather not had.

Following his investigation and arrest, she was told by police that he had been sexually abusing and producing CSAM of their children. After her husband was imprisoned, Eloise undertook family violence training at her work, and explained: 'watching these slide shows. I was like "oh my god, this is a slide show about my marriage".' Highly traumatised, she needed to take two weeks of family violence leave to cope.

Professionals

There was general agreement among the professionals we spoke to that CSAM offending was abusive to a non-offending partner. They linked CSAM offending with domestic violence and coercive control through two pathways: either because of the control and abuse that offenders exerted over their partners to hide their secrets, or because the action of viewing CSAM in a relationship is in itself abusive. Professionals also conceptualised the impacts of the offending as abusive, with women and their children having to live with the stigma, trauma and ramifications of their partner's offending. One support professional emphasised how patterns of control and violence, and responses to women seeking support, were situated within a broader social context of gender inequality such that women often felt constrained and entrapped in the relationship. She said:

I guess it's a fine line whether it's the consequences of the crime that is abusive or the crime itself ... what makes something family violence is it's a bunch of things together, it's a pattern that's sustained. In terms of it being part of the broader picture, the nature of the crime is control over someone with less power.

Most professionals described the most common overlap between CSAM offending and domestic and family violence as involving coercive controlling behaviour that was often subtle and difficult to identify. A sexual assault services professional said: 'In the experience I've had, it's that more insidious coercive control.' The ways in which women were controlled by CSAM offenders were quite specific, with several professionals emphasising strict routines and the regulation of household tasks. A policy manager said: 'They had a routine within the families that was, of course, set up by him so he could know when he was safe to do what he wanted to do.' Professionals felt this routine was designed to keep women preoccupied and distracted.

Several workers identified an abusive inter-relationship between the offender's use of CSAM and his sexual behaviour towards his partner. A professional recalled a woman that she worked with who was disgusted by what her ex-partner had coerced her to do sexually. She explained:

He was very, very controlling in their sexual relationship. Very domineering, very prescriptive. He liked to dress up as a little girl. She said, 'I look at that now and go—what was that?!'

This process of boundary-pushing and transgression could lead to women engaging in compromising or illegal behaviours, which introduced major complications for professionals seeking to protect women and children. One service manager recalled a case in which a woman and her children arrived at a domestic violence refuge with safety concerns that her ex-partner was tracking her mobile phone. However, the woman had been coerced by her ex-partner into making abuse images of her own children and refused to contact police or provide her mobile phone for inspection on the basis that it would implicate her. The manager said, 'She was quite compromised in terms of being able to seek assistance.'

An emerging issue identified by one service manager was the apparent targeting and 'grooming' of single women on dating apps by men with a sexual interest in children. She located this phenomenon within a broader pattern of technology-facilitated abuse in which male offenders are using dating apps to track, deceive and abuse women. She recalled a case in her service in which a client was targeted through a dating app by a paedophile:

I know of a case here of somebody that had two gorgeous long-haired blond daughters. Mum got groomed into a relationship and then found out that he was only really interested in the daughters, a predator.

Attempts to groom women via dating apps into producing CSAM or otherwise making their children sexually available have been documented elsewhere in Australian research (Salter et al. 2021). While the ex-partners interviewed in this study were protective mothers, child sexual abuse offenders who seek to groom and compromise adult partners pose a complex challenge to child safeguarding and women's safety.

Summary and conclusions

This study has described the ways in which CSAM offending shapes relationship patterns of secrecy, control and violence. Contrary to characterisations of CSAM offenders as single men disinterested in or incapable of adult relationships (Henshaw, Ogloff & Clough 2017), a significant proportion of CSAM offenders have adult romantic partners (Bouhours & Broadhurst 2012; Brown & Bricknell 2018) and this study was the first to specifically examine CSAM offending within patterns of domestic abuse. The study suggests that secrecy is a foundational dynamic between CSAM offenders and their unwitting partners (recognising that some partners are complicit co-offenders; see Salter et al. 2021) which can provide the backdrop for practices of control and violence. Importantly, the study finds that the secrecy of CSAM offending motivates and shapes men's use of control and violence against their partners, giving rise to specific dynamics and behaviours that may distinguish domestically abusive CSAM offenders from other domestic abusers.

Zara's interview indicates that CSAM offending can have a serious impact on partners and children even in the absence of control and violence. The revelation of her ex-partner's offending behaviours, including a prior conviction, prompted her to view her husband of many years as 'someone I don't know'. Her interview also highlighted key themes that recurred throughout this study, including secrecy and obsessive pornography consumption, as well as the indiscriminate sexual interests that characterise some CSAM offenders.

The other participants described their ex-partners' behaviour as featuring a shared repertoire of abuse that overlaps significantly with what is known from existing research about coercive control. Women were expected by their ex-partners to undertake the bulk of housework and parenting, and this expectation was enforced by emotional abuse. An asymmetrical division of labour enabled the men to spend significant amounts of time engaged in CSAM offending and other sexual activity. Professionals in domestic violence and related sectors agreed that coercive control, including the strict regulation of household tasks, was the most commonly observed form of domestic abuse perpetrated by CSAM offenders.

Generally, women described highly sexually preoccupied men who spent much of their time pursuing their sexual interests. For the interviewees, a visible signal of their ex-partner's sexual preoccupations was their excessive consumption and collection of pornography. Characteristically, if they were challenged on this behaviour, men blamed their partners for being insufficiently attractive or not being sexually available.

Some women had suspicions about their partner's sexual interest in children but this could be difficult to confirm or act on in the context of pervasive emotional, physical and/or sexual violence. Furthermore, two women who did try to seek assistance from professionals in mental health or child protection were unable to access support. As a result, their ex-partners continued offending for a number of years, putting them, their children and other children at risk. Five of the 10 women reported that their partner had been charged with offences against a child as well as a CSAM offence, and two women suspected that their partner had committed contact offences although charges were not laid. Tellingly, contact offenders were present across the spectrum of experiences identified in the study, from relationships without overt violence and control to very violent and controlling relationships.

Three women in the sample described how physical and/or sexual violence was used to reinforce the offender's dominance and control over their lives and family. Professionals expressed significant concern about the overlap between domestic violence and child sexual abuse, and identified patterns of abuse that were not described by the non-offending partners interviewed. One service manager indicated that the violence and boundary transgressions committed by CSAM offenders in relationships could place women in a compromised position if they joined their partner in illegal activity, such as the abuse of children. Such a case introduced conflicting obligations regarding women's safety, child protection and mandatory reporting. Other potential scenarios identified in the professional interviews included predatory approaches to women by child abusers on dating apps.

Three typologies of CSAM offending in a relationship emerged from this study. The first was the CSAM offender who is not controlling or violent but secretly engages in CSAM offending and is dishonest with his partner and family. This scenario was evident from Zara's interview and further research is necessary to build on this picture.

The second typology is the CSAM offender whose CSAM consumption is part of a broader pattern of abusive and violent behaviour. He establishes relationships with adults out of romantic and/or sexual interest but he is also sexually interested in children. His mistreatment of his adult partner reflects a broader pattern of misogyny and self-entitlement in which his partner is expected to accommodate his needs and desires to the detriment of her own. His partner is forced to take on the majority of housework and parenting so he can pursue his own interests, including his sexual preoccupations with pornography and CSAM.

The third typology is the predatory CSAM offender who seeks adult relationships instrumentally as 'cover' for his illegal sexual activities, including CSAM as well as child sexual abuse and other forms of sexual deviancy. He may target women for romantic relationships in order to birth children for abuse, to access her children from a previous relationship or to further his double life. Characteristics of this offender may include: a preference for 'childlike' adult partners, sexually withdrawing as the adult partner ages, and hyper-sexuality in which he is engaged in sexual activity with women, men and children (and, in some cases, animals).

Key 'red flags' and potential indicators for CSAM offending in a relationship identified in this study included:

- using coercive control and/or violence to maintain a double life and ensure extreme privacy and secrecy around computer and phone use;
- excessive or compulsive pornography consumption and collection, including very diverse and paraphiliac content;
- a lack of sexual interest in adult partners or a preference for young-looking adult sexual partners; and
- coercive sexuality reflecting atypical interests including paedophilia and zoophilia.

Within the small sample size of this study, there was a diverse range of potential indicators for CSAM offending across women's narratives. While not all women described every indicator, they all described at least one or two of these 'red flags'.

This study has a number of implications. Research, policy and practice relating to domestic violence and coercive control do not currently address the overlap between domestic abuse and sexual offending against children. As rates of CSAM offending continue to grow, it is important for all professionals in safeguarding, law enforcement and related roles to recognise this overlap as well as the signs and impacts of CSAM offending in a relationship. Risk assessment tools across domestic violence and child sex offending should be sensitised to the intersections of CSAM with domestic violence and coercion. Distinguishing between the scenarios and typologies explained here may support safeguarding professionals to make more accurate decisions in the aftermath of arrest, particularly where questions of shared care and parenting arise. This study finds that violence and control can be enacted by CSAM offenders in distinctive ways, and early identification of these patterns could protect women and children from abuse.

A number of women in this study suspected that their partner was sexually attracted to children but did not know where to report it and were not supported when they did. Interviews with domestic violence and sexual assault workers suggested that these concerns are surfacing among clients in the sector. It is therefore important that relevant agencies, including child welfare agencies and domestic violence and sexual assault services, receive training on patterns of CSAM offending in a relationship and are able to identify warning signs and support women to act on their concerns. Secondary prevention services that support people concerned about their sexual feelings towards children, as well as their partners and family, should be sensitive to the ways in which CSAM offenders can blame their partners for their sexual compulsions and otherwise engage in controlling and abusive behaviour.

In women's accounts, obsessive, extensive pornography consumption was one of the earliest warning signs that their partner was a CSAM offender. Some men told their partner during the relationship that they felt their pornography use was out of control. Sexual preoccupation is a well-recognised risk factor for child sexual abuse perpetration and recidivism (Whitaker et al. 2008). Support for women with concerns about their partner's excessive pornography consumption, or men with concerns about their own pornography use, may provide new avenues for early intervention and prevention of CSAM and child sexual abuse. It is important that women are supported and taken seriously when they raise concerns about their partner's pornography use.

This study has contributed to two parallel bodies of research in child sexual abuse and relationship abuse. Firstly, it has provided insights into the behaviour of CSAM offenders who seek romantic relationships with adult women. While this study is exploratory in nature, and has a small sample size, it nonetheless may be important for forensic typologies of CSAM offenders to address this group and their particular characteristics, recognising the potential for secrecy, violence and abuse. Secondly, the study has traced patterns of coercion and violence in relationships that are motivated by the offender's sexual interest in children. Literature on relational control and violence often assumes that the female partner is the locus of the offender's aggression and manipulation, but in this study the offender controlled and abused a female partner to keep his illegal sexual activities secret. This is an alternative motivation for domestic abuse that has not been well recognised in research, policy and practice to date.

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