

Domestic abuse: when suicide masks homicide

In October 2025, UK campaigners and bereaved families called for a change in how domestic abuse-related suicides are understood and investigated. They argued many such deaths are the logical conclusion of prolonged violence and coercive control. They contend that existing laws are adequate but are seldom used effectively to hold perpetrators accountable when abuse drives a victim to take their own life.

At a Westminster meeting organized by *Project Resist*, relatives of survivors described how the criminal justice system routinely fails to scrutinise these deaths with the seriousness they deserve. One mother, Saskia Lightburn-Ritchie, unambiguously stated: *'When someone dies by suicide after they've endured domestic abuse, we have to investigate it for what it really is, which is homicide.'* Her daughter, Hannah, endured years of violence, psychological torture, and systematic breakdown before her death, experiences that Lightburn-Ritchie described as being *'destroyed... piece by piece until she could not see a way forward.'*

Families say that although laws exist to prosecute homicide and coercive control, they are rarely used when a death is ruled a suicide, even when there is clear evidence of abuse. As one campaigner noted, *'We have the laws...we need police to investigate properly.'* The reluctance to pursue legal accountability is not a reflection of the absence of harm, but a systemic failure to recognise how the cumulative effects of long-term abuse can result in suicide.

This concern is supported by research on the link between domestic abuse and suicide. For example, data from the UK's *Psychological Violence* report indicate that nearly half (47 %) of survivors of non-physical abuse have experienced suicidal thoughts, underscoring that it is often the cumulative psychological impact of coercive control, not only physical injury, that can drive victims toward taking their own lives. In this context, suicide cannot be viewed solely as an isolated act by the decedent, it is frequently the final stage of a chronic pattern of harm that medical, psychological, and legal systems have failed to interrupt.

Government and prosecutorial voices have begun to acknowledge these issues. A Crown Prosecution Service spokesperson stated that prosecutors are now *'actively advised to consider murder and manslaughter charges in suicide cases where there is a known context of domestic abuse or other controlling or coercive behaviour.'* Nonetheless, the experiential testimony of families suggests that guidance alone has not been sufficient to create consistent legal accountability. More needs done to acknowledge and investigate this.

The UK example illustrates a broader truth that intimate partner abuse is not episodic, it is a process of cumulative, adaptive and dynamic harm. When the dynamics of coercive control are left unchecked, both in daily life and in systems designed to mitigate violence, the long-term psychological and physical effects can itself be lethal. Rather than treating suicide as an unrelated personal act, there is growing recognition that it may in many cases be the final link in a chain of abuse. This aligns with research showing that coercive control and chronic psychological violence create sustained and accumulated trauma that can push victims to the point of despair.

In the words of one campaigner reporting to UK policymakers: *'These deaths are often written off as if they were their decision...when, in truth, these were the culmination of actually somebody else's violence.'* Understanding suicide as a potential outcome of domestic abuse is essential to expanding both legal accountability and social support structures that could prevent these avoidable deaths.

About the author: Evin Daly, PhD, is a forensic sociologist and behavioural analyst who provides investigative, court, and expert consultation in cases involving intimate partner abuse, coercive control, and child welfare.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/oct/25/enforce-law-when-suicide-linked-to-domestic-violence-say-uk-campaigners>

