

When the mother of three separated from her husband, she told a court he dragged her out of bed and shoved her down onto the kitchen floor. But she said it was the daily insults that hurt the most. The belittling comments that made her feel worthless.

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"You just start to question your own self worth," Ortiz said at her home in a Boston suburb. "And you only have this one person because they've blocked everybody else out. So you only have his voice and it becomes your voice."

Yet Ortiz always thought domestic violence meant physical abuse. A shove. A punch. A slap.

Until one day, she came across an article while doing research for her women's studies class about another kind of abuse, called coercive control. And as she scanned the page, she recognized all of the examples.

"Controlling where you go. Controlling who you speak to. Going through your phone to see who you've been speaking to. Going through emails. Changing passwords," she ticked off. "That coercive control was my life. I checked off every single part without knowing."

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SARAH ORTIZ

Now there's a growing movement in state legislatures across the country, including in Massachusetts, to expand domestic abuse laws to help victims get help for controlling behavior and verbal abuse.

That kind of abuse is hard to see. It doesn't leave bruises or broken bones. But researchers say it can have a similar impact and make victims feel like hostages in their own homes.

Help us report on domestic and sexual violence: Our reporter, Ally Jarmanning, has created [this form](#) for people to share their experiences and stories. You also may call and leave a voicemail at 617-353-0801, a confidential line monitored solely by the reporter.

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We appreciate you sharing your story and take your privacy seriously. We are gathering these stories for the purposes of our reporting and will not share your information without your explicit permission. That means a phone call to you seeking your permission and a conversation about what that would look like.

Lisa Fontes is a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, who has written a book about this kind of abuse.

"If there's no physical abuse some people might say, 'Oh, well, it's just not the best relationship,'" she said. "But it's something much more profound than that. Coercive control is really taking away the liberty of another person."

But controlling behavior is generally not illegal. In Massachusetts and most other states, domestic abuse laws typically only cover physical harm. So that can make it harder for victims of other kinds of abuse to obtain help.

Attorney Michelle Cruz, who represents survivors of domestic violence, said the courts currently don't recognize patterns of controlling behavior that can eventually escalate to physical violence.

"There may not actually be an assault on the victim. That doesn't mean that the victim is safe," she said. "We still have this mindset that as long as the victim's not physically being assaulted, that it's not concerning enough to give that victim a restraining order."

Lawmakers in several states are trying to change that. [California](#) and [Connecticut](#) recently expanded their definition of domestic violence to include psychological abuse for custody decisions and to award restraining orders.

[Several bills in Massachusetts](#) would allow victims to seek protection orders for additional reasons like name calling, financial control, technological abuse and isolation.

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ATTORNEY MICHELLE CRUZ

Cruz says many survivors would benefit from expanding the definition of abuse.

"This is the perfect start," she said, "to have more robust domestic violence protections for victims."

Meanwhile, Ortiz says she still doesn't feel safe even after separating from her husband and filing for divorce. In court documents, she says he follows her in parking lots and photographs her at their son's hockey games.

In 2020, she obtained a restraining order against her husband after telling a judge about the physical abuse.

But that order has since expired. And she can no longer obtain a protection order because there hasn't been any recent physical abuse. She would need to get a harassment order, a different legal process than the one she's already embroiled in at family court.

"He has continued to use control and dominance, even though we're not living together, even though there was a restraining order," she said.

Ortiz's husband declined to comment when WBUR reached out to him. In court records, he says his estranged wife is the verbally abusive one. He also acknowledged he sometimes had "volatile emotional reactions" and was inappropriately physical, but he insists those outbursts were triggered by hostility from Ortiz. He says he has considered seeking court orders against her.

Still, Ortiz said she finally feels free at home, now that her husband is no longer around. Sometimes it's the little things that make her realize it.

"I used to not be able to leave a dish in the sink or a rag in the sink," she said. "I would be World War III in here."

Now, sometimes she'll just leave it sitting in the sink, a small reminder of the control she's regained.

"I'm going to leave that rag," she said with a laugh. "It's very freeing."

She's studying to be a lawyer. And she hopes by the time she passes the bar, she'll have more tools to help women in situations like hers.

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence, you can call SafeLink, Massachusetts' 24/7 domestic violence hotline and resource: 877-785-2020 or visit: <https://casamyrna.org/get-support/safelink/>