



# **POST-SEPARATION ABUSE**

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AN OVERVIEW

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**Post-separation abuse** refers to abuse that takes place *after* the survivor has left the abusive relationship. A common misconception is that if the survivor leaves the abusive relationship, the abuse will end. This is not always true. Usually, the abuse will simply change forms.

As Jess Hill states in her book, “A survivor can choose to leave an abusive relationship; but the choice to end the abuse is not in their hands.” (*See What You Made Me Do, 2019*)

Post-separation abuse takes place because **the abuser feels they are entitled to continue abusing** the survivor. They are highly motivated to carry on the abuse using both the system and their interpersonal relationship(s); despite the survivor’s successful escape. It is almost as though their ego cannot understand that they no longer are in control of the survivor’s life — that, for once, the other person actually decided to stand up for themselves (and their children) and made their own choice(s), without requiring their approval or permission. The (seemingly sudden) agency found by the survivor and their independent action(s) is *unbearable* for the abuser.

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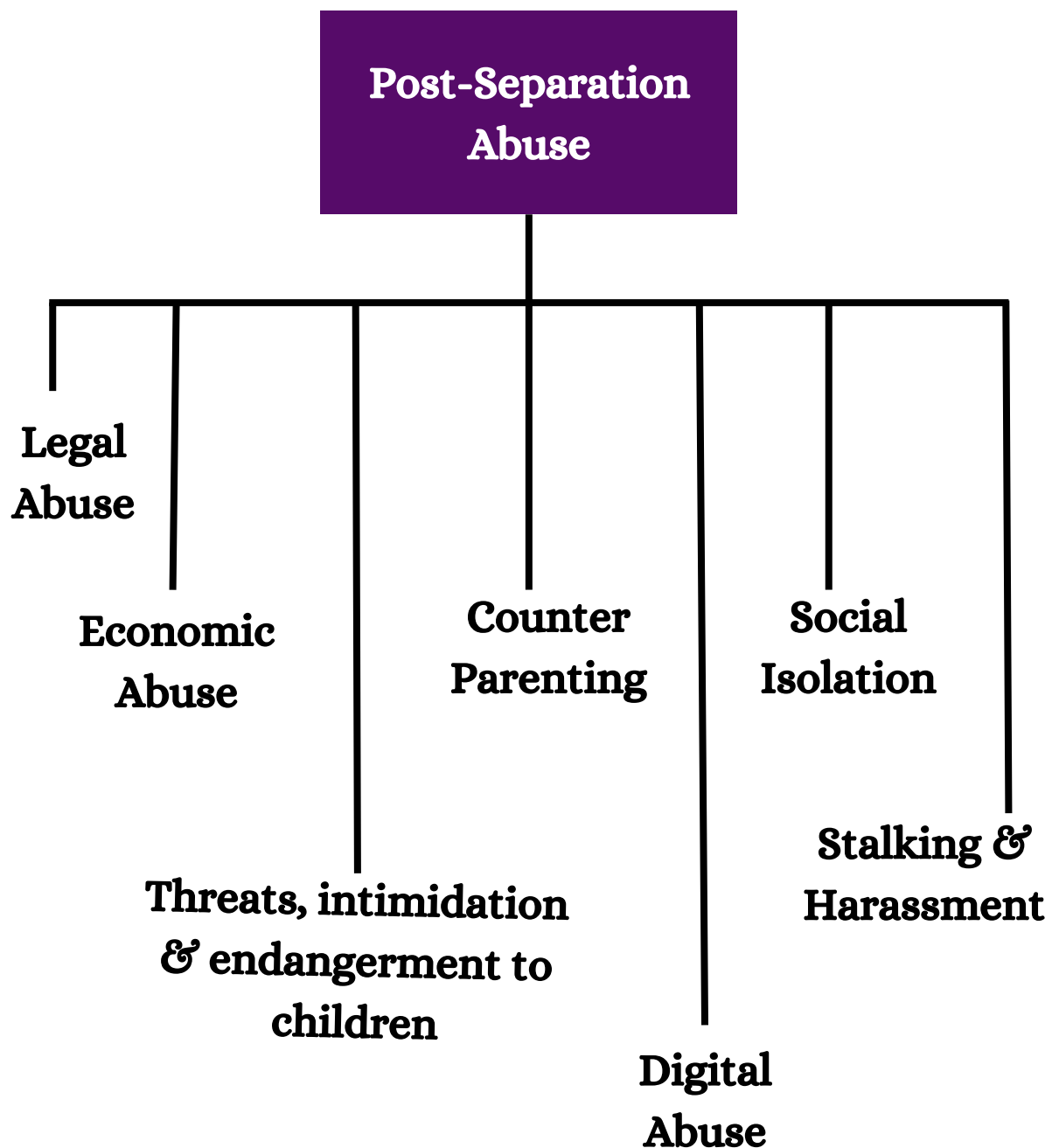
Post separation abuse can be defined as “the ongoing, willful pattern of intimidation and abuse of a former intimate partner“.

An intimate partner is someone with whom a person has a close relationship, comprising of emotional support, regular contact and ongoing physical contact (but the latter does not necessarily have to be physical). However, most common intimate partner relationships are those that consider themselves to be “coupled“.

Regardless of whether the abuser (or their enablers) claim refuge in “personality disorders”, it is the **pattern of abusive behaviors** that must be the focus if one is to determine whether or not abuse actually takes place. Sometimes, the pattern is obvious - at other times, it can be fragmented and at irregular intervals - but it will always be there.



**Post-separation abuse** can take many forms - it is usually a combination of various types of abuse. It combines numerous types of abuse, with one form usually being used more than the others (depending on the circumstances of the survivor and the abuser).



## Legal Abuse

**Legal abuse** refers to making use of the legal and court system to perpetuate abuse. This includes filing for custody in court; custody stalking, which includes fathers' use of custody battles to overturn the historic patterns of care of the children, causing tremendous grief, damaging mothers' psychological wellbeing and detrimentally affecting their mothering relationships; instigating frivolous lawsuits; threats to "take children away" via child custody proceedings; and other system-related manipulations. Their main aim in gaining sole custody is to take revenge from the survivor and punish them for walking out of the relationship; and also continue to maintain a level of control over the safe parent.

Abusers will disregard court orders, create false reports, deliberately delay court proceedings and give legal threats to maintain emotional and financial control over the survivor.

Legal abuse usually includes litigation tactics that shift blame onto the survivors (post-separation) and reduce their credibility. It is usually the physical and legal aspects of separation that lead to post-separation abuse.

## Economic Abuse

This refers to exerting control over the survivor's finances, such as the survivor's income, spending, bank accounts, bills, mortgage and borrowing. It includes withholding access to basic resources such as technology and transport, that allows the survivor to stay in touch with the outer world, work and support themselves (and their children).

The abuser may withhold financial support (such as child support and maintenance), medical expenses and even interfere with the survivor's ability to work (such as by creating issues with transport) and housing (such as by refusing to pay enough money to cover their rent). It also includes causing conflict at the survivor's place of work and home by involving them (or their landlord or employer) in tedious litigation. If the abuser has access to the survivor's bank account information and other passwords, they may even freeze their access to essential funds.

It can follow long after the relationship ends. Economic abuse is legally recognized as a form of abuse in the UK under the **Domestic Abuse Act (2021)**. It is not yet recognized as a form of abuse in Pakistan.



## Threats, Intimidation and Endangerment to Children

Another common form of abuse is when the abuser uses a combination of threats, intimidation and endangerment to children. This includes threats to harm the children, refusal to return them to the parent, physical / sexual abuse of the children, medical / psychological neglect, and/or exposing the children to settings not appropriate to their age (such as pornography or illicit drugs).

In relationships where children are involved, they are often used by the abuser as a weapon against the survivor. This is a very effective tactic by which abusers will try to regain control once the survivor has successfully escaped the relationship. If the couple is married (or divorced), the abuser may apply for sole custody in court to intimidate the survivor (and gain access to the children).

If there is scheduled visitation between the abusive parent and the children (whether ordered by Court or simply due to a mutual understanding between the families), the abuser may try to use the child(s) to keep an eye on the other parent. They may even try to brainwash the children against the survivor (other parent), with the aim to alienate them from the children's lives. The abuser may pretend to care for the well-being of the children - but ultimate aim is only to emotionally hurt the survivor through the children.

They will always put their own needs above that of the child's. They will use violence, intimidation, threats, manipulation and ridicule to wield control over the children. They may expose the children to unsafe content, situations and people, creating fear and concern within the safe parent.



## Counter-parenting

Along with the combination of tactics used by the abuser to intimidate the survivor (including using the children as a weapon of abuse), counter-parenting is a strategy by which the abuser intentionally works against the co-parent in order to undermine their parenting practices and how they raise the children. They do this simply to spite the (survivor) co-parent, disregarding the adverse affects their counter parenting tactics have on the children. Such parents often:

- Let their kids do things that the other parent would never allow
- Badmouth the other parent in the presence of the child
- Tell the child the other parent is to blame when something goes wrong
- Prevent the other parent from speaking with the child during visits
- Encourage the child to be insubordinate and disrespectful to the other parent
- Tell the child the other parent doesn't care about them
- Disobey court orders and decrees

An abusive parent bent on counter-parenting may even prevent access to medical and essential health supplies for their children.

They may also guilt-trip the children in order to maintain control - especially if the children speak positively about the other parent. Eventually, as the children grow older and realize the control the abuser has on their lives, they may slowly start to distance themselves from the counter parent.

## Digital Abuse (Including Revenge Porn)

Technology-facilitated abuse can continue even after separation occurs. Aside from online intimidation tactics, the abuser may resort to further criminal acts, such as threaten to leak intimate photos and videos of the survivor online in order to ruin his/her reputation. They may even post such intimate videos to porn websites in a bit to humiliate the survivor.

The frightening thing about such abuse is that the victim will never truly know how far it went, how many people it reached and how much those who saw it - bought it. There is also limited help available to survivors against digital abuse.



## Social Isolation

Social isolation is yet another common tactic used by abusers via which they deprive the victim of their social support system. It aims to cut the survivor off from their friends, family and/ or community. The abuser may do this by refusing to allow the victim to meet up with friends or family, or by destroying their social and professional reputation so they have nowhere to turn but the abuser. They will spread lies and misinformation about the survivor, trying to destroy their social image before their friends, family and other social and professional circles. They may even accuse the other parent of parental alienation and spread rumors about their mental health.

Social isolation is not just limited to the (survivor) parent. The abuser may even withhold the social interaction of the children with the outside world, as a way to maintain control over the family.

When children favor the safe parent, the abuser will level allegations of **parental alienation** as a way to malign the other's reputation and discredit the safe parent. Additionally, if a survivor tries to prevent the abusive parent from hurting the child, the latter will usually level allegations of alienation as a way to deflect from the accusation(s) of abuse.

Allegations of parental alienation significantly affect a survivor's case in court and, due to the gendered nature of such allegations, mothers accused of parental alienation are at a greater risk of losing access to child custody than fathers.

Social structures within our society ensure that most judges naturally assume that mothers are the "gate keepers" of father's relationships with their children. This ensures that the burden of the relationship lands squarely on the mother's shoulders, regardless of the abuse she has suffered / continues to suffer within the relationship.



## Stalking and Harassment

The abuser may begin to stalk and harass the survivor once the latter successfully escapes the relationship. Such tactics are designed to intimidate, create fear and exert power and control over the survivor.

Stalkers normally use a combination of both physical and electronic monitoring, in order to track and harass the survivor. While physical stalking may be blatant and “out in the open”, the accompanying electronic surveillance may be covert. Abusers often bombard the survivor with emails (hate or threatening mail), online messages and threats, and phone calls. They may even disclose the survivor’s whereabouts online to put them at risk.

Custody arrangements may also sometimes provide legitimacy to the abuser’s points of contact, providing additional opportunities for harassment. The abuser will terrorize and intimidate the safe parent with threats, without involving law enforcement.

Abusers often use social media to trail and harass their former partner in an effort to regain control. They will use their mutual social circle in order to malign the survivor and destroy his/her social and professional reputation. Many survivors of abuse understand that they must balance carefully in order to keep themselves safe. This is why many survivors do not immediately cut contact when they first leave the relationship (especially if children are involved); as they are afraid that this might enrage the abuser and cause him/her to show up at the survivor’s door.





Katheryn J. Spearman, along with her colleagues at John Hopkins University, recently released a helpful article on post-separation abuse. While the prevalent belief is that separation from the abuser is enough to end abuse, most studies fail to take into consideration the power imbalance that is the main cause of said abuse.

According to the research quoted above, gendered differences in economic power, gendered discourses on parenting that undervalue the mother's unpaid domestic labor and norms that position mothers as vindictive, are all to blame for societal systems that help perpetuate abuse long after separation takes place.

For parents with minor children, for example, the legal systems and policies in place are central in influencing the ability to maintain safety following separation from an abusive partner. For example, dragged out legal custody battles and the refusal to pay maintenance / alimony can cause great psychosocial harm to the survivor. There is a general belief in Pakistan's District and Family Courts that the father must be present in the lives of the children. Despite the survivor's efforts to showcase the violence and abuse during the time of the relationship, the Courts are still reluctant to prevent separation of the abusive parent from the children.

Such mindsets and practices ensure that the cycle of abuse continues, long after separation has taken place. Patriarchal norms are responsible for creating the context for post-separation abuse; especially due to the gendered notions of responsibility and caregiving, male entitlement and gender bias in courts. Such widespread practices make similar abuse seem routine and "commonplace", with no one from society daring to speak up against such convention.

The belief that the family unit is "better" for the society and children than "single parent homes", has caused more harm than good; forcing survivors to continue living in abusive relationships for the sake of their children, due to lack of resources and as a result of societal pressure(s).

There is a dire need to work at the community level to spread awareness about post-separation abuse and the tactics used by abusers – including weaponizing their family and social and professional relationships to continue harboring control over the life of the survivor (and their children).



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*Pakistan's Digital Domestic Violence Resource Centre*

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