Working with Aboriginal People Impacted by Coercive Control: What Practitioners Need to Know

Use this scenario as an educational activity with your team. Read the case study then refer to Division 6A and section 54D of the Crimes Act 1900. Think about:

- *Whether the offence could apply in this scenario*
- *What interventions, services or referrals may be available to the services*
- *What do you and your colleagues need to be aware of when working with these Aboriginal families and the communities they belong to*

Reflective Case Study - Leah

Leah is a 28-year-old Aboriginal woman from a small regional town. She is a proud mother of two children: Jayden (6) and Mia (4). Leah grew up surrounded by her extended family, drawing strength from her connection to Country and culture. After finishing school, Leah moved away for study but came back during a placement and was able to find a permanent job in town. She met her partner, Aaron, through a work colleague at a local footy event. Aaron is an Indigenous man who grew up locally and is well-known in the community.

During their early relationship, Aaron was charming and attentive. For instance, he would often escort her to and from work and brought flowers or sweet treats to enjoy. He was really good at making Leah feel special in lots of different ways. Over time, Aaron started to give strong views about what Leah should wear to work or social events, even saying certain outfits made her look “cheap’ or “shame job”. If Leah wanted to go out with friends and was wearing clothes he didn’t like, Aaron would refuse to let her go, threatening to end the relationship if she didn’t do as he said.

When Leah attended community events Aaron would demand to see her phone, insisting he needed to make sure she wasn't talking to former boyfriends or making new male friendships. He would access her social media to monitor messages and had deleted contacts he didn't like more than once. He pressured Leah to turn on 'Find a Friend' location sharing, claiming it was for her safety. When Leah told her mum about the location sharing, she said "get rid of that rubbish" but Leah was convinced by Aaron's constant requests. Escorting Leah to and from work gradually became an everyday event and Aaron also began regularly turning up at lunch time. At first, Leah thought this behaviour was romantic, however, after a while she felt smothered, like Aaron was mad with jealousy.

When Leah became pregnant with Jayden, Aaron insisted he attend every medical appointment with her, otherwise he would not permit her to go. Around this time, Aaron started making direct comments about Leah's friends and family, saying they were "no good" and "always in her business." He would run her mob down at any opportunity. He insisted Leah spend less time with them, claiming he wanted to "build their connection before they had a family." Leah would push back on this and still go visit her mob but it became exhausting arguing. Eventually Leah's visits to her mother, aunties and other supports became less frequent, and Aaron would get impatient and angry if she spoke to them on the phone. Aaron's behaviour escalated with each pregnancy and birth. He refused to let her, or their children, attend community events like initiation ceremonies or to discuss 'women's business' with her kinship network. Sometime Leah and the children would secretly attend but Aaron would somehow find out and threaten to spread rumours through the community, about her past relationships or her parenting, aiming to humiliate her and damage her reputation.

Leah's family grew concerned about Aaron's behaviour and would secretly arrange time to see Leah. However, Aaron would often find out and show up at their house, yelling and threatening them. He would tell the kids to "get in the car now or you'll get a walloping." The family felt they were making things worse and eventually stopped planning these meetings. Leah's mum was supportive whenever she asked for help but was wary of getting involved with police or courts. It was years later when Leah first found a tracking device inserted in the kids' toy Kookaburra which Jayden and Mia took with them everywhere.

Over time, Aaron came to control every aspect of Leah's life. He took her wages and bank cards leaving Leah with no independent access to money, promising to "look after the money for the family," but Leah never saw any of it. Sometimes he would give her just enough for groceries, but never enough for anything extra. She often had to ask for money to buy nappies or food, and sometimes he would refuse, telling her she was "wasting money" or "not grateful" and accused her of spending it on other things. Aaron belittled Leah, calling her "useless" and "a bad mum" often in front of the kids. If they complained about not having something Aaron would say "why hasn't mummy got you that yet, isn't she naughty." He blamed her for the children's behaviour and for any problems in the house.

On a few occasions over the years, Aaron was physically violent to Leah including almost breaking bones on more than one occasion. Leah was terrified to call the police when this occurred as she had fears of seeking help from authorities, shaped by her family's history and the experience of others in community. Leah's mum, a member to the Stolen Generation, was deeply fearful of government involvement and when Leah was growing up always said to "keep your business to yourself" and "they never help our mob, just make things worse."

Around three years earlier, her cousin Carly had also been violently assaulted by her partner in a nearby rural town. Neighbours who were alarmed by the noise called the police. When police arrived, they found Carly outside wrapped in a bed sheet with obvious and serious injuries to her face and body. She was traumatised, in shock and needed medical attention. Instead of receiving care and support, Carly was arrested for allegedly assaulting a police officer. While in a heightened emotional state, Carly had been screaming at the Police who she perceived were siding with her calm and measured partner. While in distress and unable to process what had happened to her, Carly refused to give a witness statement. Police considered Carly's refusal as aggressive and defiant behaviour which lessened their focus on her injuries and need for help. Carly's partner, the perpetrator of the violence, was not taken into custody and tragically, the next day, he tortured and killed their son. The trauma of Carly's experience deeply affected Leah and her family. Leah worried that if she called the Police, she might be wrongly blamed, arrested or lose their children and feared for their life.

Lately, Aaron had begun yelling at Leah and the children late into the night smashing objects and punching walls. Sometimes when this happened, Leah would put the kids in the car, drive to the next town and sleep in the car overnight just to get away and let Aaron 'cool down'. Knowing there would be repercussions the longer she stayed away, Leah would return home with the kids the next morning, get them ready for school and then go to work. There were periods she did this for 3-4 days and nights each week, so Leah was exhausted.

Going away in the car for the night was not always possible. On one occasion, afterLeah tried to leave, Aaron called the police and claimed that she was "crazy," "a drunk" and trying to steal 'his' kids. He threatened to "tell child services" Leah was an unfit mother who left open bottles of alcohol around the kids. He threatened to hurt her family if she spoke to them or tried to get help. He said if she reported anything to Police she would get backlash from the community because "You're not a real black fella if you go to white fella police or lawyers. Family business stays in the family." Leah felt torn between her safety, community history, and cultural values.

Being frustrated with her lack of freedom, isolation from any supports and concern for the kid's wellbeing, Leah thought about getting a Protection Order (ADVO), but she didn't know how. She had no money for a lawyer and struggled to keep appointments. She had trouble finding time to look up the process, let alone understand the paperwork, and was embarrassed to ask for help. Community legal services were available, but Leah was afraid Aaron would find out and retaliate. Leah found it hard to access services or escape and worried about being seen as someone who couldn't keep her family together. One night, after

Aaron threatened to take the children, ‘go bush’ and “make sure she never saw them again” Leah called her aunty in tears. Her aunty picked up Leah and the kids and took them to a women’s refuge in a nearby town.

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