

EQUITABLE SEXUAL PRACTICES & SURVIVORS

A survivor of intimate partner violence (IPV) may experience reproductive coercion as a part of the abuse they endure. Reproductive coercion involves a pattern or series of behaviors an abusive partner may use to maintain power and control over their partner's reproductive health; interfering with the ability to make decisions over their body and health care¹. Reproductive coercion may present itself in a variety of ways; a common result is a sexual partner's inability to negotiate the use of contraceptive methods such as Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) condoms, dental dams, or birth control pills/intrauterine devices.

The discussion of sex, the use of contraceptives, and getting tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) may already be uncomfortable due to societal norms that label sex as a taboo subject. Many people may feel awkward or lack the confidence to have these conversations with a partner. Societally, individuals are not taught to advocate for themselves when it comes to the use of contraceptive methods. For someone experiencing intimate partner violence, these feelings may already exist before intimacy. An additional layer of fear of negative or violent responses from their partner exacerbates the barriers to approaching the topic for survivors.

Everyone has the right to bodily autonomy and to engage in sexual relationships and activities that feel comfortable. Practicing self-determination with a partner(s) means that each individual

is in control of their health and safety. This is not to say that condoms or contraceptives are always necessary to feel in control; but for some survivors, the use of contraceptives is one way to take control over their sexual health.

When it comes to working with survivors of intimate partner violence who want to start condom or other contraceptive negotiation/ use with their partner(s), it's important to acknowledge that every partner and relationship is different. What works for one relationship, may not work for another. For IPV advocates, it is necessary to let each survivor navigate and lead the conversation. Remembering that survivors know their partner(s) best, can help advocates honor their client's self-determination to proceed or not with condom/ contraceptive negotiation.

Having a conversation with survivors about sexual health and relationships may be the first step to supporting safe, equitable, and negotiable sexual practices with their partner. Equipping individuals with the prevention tools and knowledge around STIs and the chances of acquiring HIV can be a first step to empower a meaningful dialogue between partners. Education and reinforcing a survivor's right to self-determine their pleasure and intimacy are pivotal strategies to resist reproductive coercion.

¹ Gee, Rebekah & Mitra, Nandita & Wan, Fei & Chavkin, Diana & Long, Judith. (2009). Power over parity: Intimate partner violence and issues of fertility control. *American journal of obstetrics and gynecology*. 201. 148.e1-7.