

Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey Signs Coercive Control Bill Into Law

by

A new bill signed into law on Thursday cracks down on coercive control by domestic abusers *and* bans revenge pornography in Massachusetts.



Gov. Maura Healey during 2023 Massachusetts Conference for Women on Dec. 14, 2023 in Boston. Healey signed legislation Thursday morning that bans revenge pornography and cracks down on coercive control by domestic abusers. (Marla Aufmuth / Getty Images for Massachusetts Conference For Women)

Massachusetts just became the seventh state in the country to pass [legislation](#) classifying coercive control as a form of domestic violence. The state's coalition against sexual assault and domestic violence, [Jane Doe Inc.](#), praised the bill, H4744, as advancing ["essential protections for survivors of](#)

[sexual assault and domestic violence across the Commonwealth.](#)

Coercive control is a strategy that abusers use to dominate their intimate partners. Signed on Thursday morning, the Massachusetts law defines coercive control as “a pattern of behavior intended to threaten, intimidate, harass, isolate, control, coerce or compel compliance of a family or household member that causes the family or household member to fear physical harm or have a reduced sense of physical safety or autonomy.” It specifically lists several coercive control tactics including isolation; threatening to harm a child, family member or pet; intentionally damaging property; threatening to release sensitive images or information, and more.

In passing this bill, Massachusetts joins California, Connecticut, Colorado, Hawaii, Washington (state) and New Jersey which all have passed laws defining coercive control as a form of domestic violence in the past five years.

Attorney Jamie Sabino of the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute said the survivor and expert testimony that influenced legislators “spelled out the lifetime and generational harm caused by coercive control. Non-physical abuse like revenge porn, which is a form of technology abuse, is typically a precursor to more serious and violent acts, including sexual and physical assault or homicide.”

The new Massachusetts law does not criminalize coercive control. However, if an abuser has a protective order against them, and commits coercive control, this can be considered a criminal violation of the protective order.

Passing an initial law is the first great hurdle. The law will undoubtedly be improved and refined over time, as has happened in other states. For example, subsequent legislation may establish that child safety is the first priority in custody and parenting adjudications and must be resolved as a “fundamental consideration in determining the best interests of the child before assessing other best interest factors,” as is currently the case in

Colorado.

Subsequent revisions could also close “the boyfriend loophole,” which is a possible sticky point, since this current law covers “family or household members.” It may not apply to all cases in which members of a couple have not ever lived together, are not married, and do not share children.

The push to pass this law was coordinated by a coalition formed for this purpose: Together Rising Above Coercion ([TRAC](#)), a statewide coalition of organizations, survivors, advocates and allies including [Jane Doe Inc](#), [The Massachusetts Law Reform Institute](#), [Jane Does Well](#) and The Mass Family Advocacy Coalition ([MFAC](#)), among others. The year-long efforts included targeted webinars, putting a book on coercive control into the hands of every legislator, letter-writing campaigns, a day of testimony in the legislature, and much more.

Continued outreach to legislators on both sides of the aisle ensured that the bill was passed unanimously in both houses and signed rapidly by Gov. Healey.

“Abusers don’t typically change,” advocate and survivor Carmen Aliber said, “so the law must change to keep up with their tactics.”

The coercive control law is part of a larger bill expanding protections against abuse and exploitation. With this bill, Massachusetts also joined the 48 other states with laws against “revenge porn,” or the nonconsensual sharing of sexual images. The law also enhances education for young people about the dangers of sexting.

South Carolina is [now the only state](#) with no laws prohibiting the nonconsensual sharing of sexual images.

Take Action

Want to take action around coercive control? Here are some steps:

- Educate yourself about coercive control by [reading books](#) and [articles](#) on the [topic](#), as well as engaging with related [webinars](#), [podcasts](#) and [television](#) programs.
- If you think you may be coercively controlled by your partner or ex-partner, contact your local domestic violence agency and speak to a domestic violence advocate about your concerns.
- Share information with people you know who you believe may be subject to coercive control.
- Contact your state legislators and find out if a coercive control law is in the works in your state, and how you can be part of a movement to propel forward laws on coercive control.

Up next:

[We Have to Stop Calling it 'Revenge Porn'](#)

[The Tradwife's Catch-22](#)

[America Needs Bethenny Frankel's Divorce Podcast](#)

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