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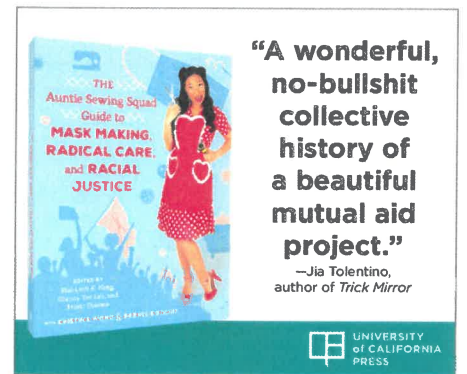
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## *Maid's* Crucial Message: Emotional Abuse \*Is\* Abuse. Is America Ready to Acknowledge It?

10/29/2021 by [AMY POLACKO](#)

In Netflix's *Maid*, Alex is brainwashed by society to believe abuse is purely physical—so the young mom doesn't even realize she's a victim.



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Margaret Qualley and Rylea Nevaeh Whittet in *Maid*. (Ricardo Hubbs / Netflix)

No, I didn't cry when Alex—the main character in the hit Netflix series *Maid*—escapes a volatile, abusive partner.

Or when she has nowhere to sleep with her toddler daughter.

I didn't even shed a tear when her quest for help turns into a crazy game of Whack-A-Mole trying to qualify for social services. As a domestic abuse survivor, I was irate.

I broke down when it became devastatingly clear that Alex (Margaret Qualley) is brainwashed by society to believe abuse is purely physical, so the young mom doesn't even realize she's a victim. The show is based on the story of Stephanie Land, who fell into poverty after leaving a toxic relationship. Her memoir [\*Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive\*](#) and this spinoff has shaken survivors' to their core.

Because we were Alex too.

*"Do you want to call the cops now? It's not too late," the social services coordinator asks Alex in Episode 1 after hearing about the violent night that made her flee.*

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*"There's shelters for domestic violence victims but you have to go on record with your abuse," the woman tells her in a desperate attempt to find her a bed.*

*"I'm not abused," Alex says, clearly conditioned by everything she's learned that equates this word with bruises and black eyes.*



(Ricardo Hubbs / Netflix)

The most stunning part of this series that's taking America by storm is not that it expertly depicts the cycle of abuse. It's Alex's metamorphosis along the way—because this mirrors the forces at work in our country right now. Ultimately, *Maid* begs the question: If a few states are following the United Kingdom's lead by passing [coercive control laws](#), are we as Americans ready to put emotional abuse on par with physical?

***Maid* begs the question: Are we as Americans ready to put emotional abuse on par with physical?**

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“I started crying right in the opening scene when Alex is plotting her escape,” Sarah, who is afraid to identify herself and has created a new life after her domestic trauma, told me. “I could feel her fear but I actually never had the courage to leave. I think we’re inching toward progress on treating emotional abuse seriously but more work has to be done.”

In Connecticut, Jennifers’ Law, named for two women who lost their lives to domestic violence, took effect on October 1. Legislation like this makes coercive control—which can include financial abuse, stalking, intimidation, sexual coercion and physical harm—a part of domestic violence laws. The [Gabby Petito case](#) has also raised questions about law enforcement’s ability to spot psychological abuse when they see it. Petito’s death was ruled a homicide by strangulation. Her fiancé’s remains were just found.

“I’m hoping this case brings to the forefront that if you see those emotional signs, you can save someone’s life,” Long Island, N.Y. family law attorney Sandra Radna said of Petito’s death. “It’s not just a young person, an older person, a poor or a rich problem and it’s not one race or another.”

As for how coercive control is handled in states where it is part of domestic violence law? “It all depends on the judge you get,” Radna admitted.

Connecticut Protective Moms was at the forefront of pushing for Jennifers’ Law and just held a workshop in New Haven to educate lawyers, judges and other practitioners on how to implement it. Speakers included Dr. Evan Stark, who wrote the groundbreaking book [Coercive Control: How Men Trap Women in Personal Life](#). One attorney who spoke said a family court judge told her, “I didn’t know what I didn’t know.”



Connecticut Protective Moms logo and materials.

Also this month, the first-ever International Coercive Control Conference drew in experts from around the world, with at least 350 people attending virtually. Stark spoke there too, alongside legislators, attorneys, social workers, activists and survivors.

“It was the right moment for bringing all these people working on coercive control together,” said Teri Yuan, the event organizer who founded the Engendered Collective, a community for victims and allies. Yuan is a coercive control survivor who has

"Jennifers' Law is one small microcosm of hope," she said, but insists the state of equality for women is still dire. "Until you tackle misogyny on all fronts, there are always going to be gaps. Until you have all the holes patched like accountability, criminal justice reform, plus get judges and attorneys on board, it's just one patch."

Yuan purposely hasn't watched *Maid* but said from what she's heard, the fact that Alex has custody of her daughter in the end is not really realistic. Often coercive control perpetrators manipulate the legal system to gain custody in these winner-take-all battles, making women like Alex hesitant to speak up about abuse.

In Episode 2, she's still looking for a place to sleep after a rough night in the ferry terminal with her daughter after taking on a job as a maid.

*"I'd really hate to take a bed away from somebody who was abused for real," she tells the social services coordinator when offered a room at the domestic violence shelter.*

*"Abused for real? What does that mean?" the woman asks.*

*"Beaten up. Hurt," Alex replies, nodding.*

*"And what does fake abuse look like? Intimidation? Threats? Control?" the woman pushes back, grabbing the pamphlet and telling Alex she needs to call the Domestic Violence Hotline.*

*"Call and say what?" Alex retorts, still in denial.*

*"Help." The coordinator, who's seen this before, speaks with her eyes more than her lips.*

*"Maid may be one of the most important series of our time," Christine M. Cocchiola, a coercive control advocate and researcher at New York University, told me. "It exposes viewers*

domestic abuse seven attempts before she escapes for good. A woman is safer in an alley than her own home.”

*“A woman is safer in an alley than her own home.”*



(Ricardo Hubbs / Netflix)

People—including lawyers who are cross-examining them in court—often ask victims, “Why didn’t you leave sooner?” It’s not that simple when someone is controlling you, holding the money and threatening to take away your kids. Women need to know that when they report emotional abuse they will be believed.

In a pivotal moment, Alex tries out four powerful words for the first time as she’s packing to move to the shelter. She takes a deep breath then tells her mother, a spacey narcissistic figure

“What does that even mean?” her mother asks, pushing back with a list of men who did her way more harm than Alex’s example of being denied money due to financial abuse.

But Alex didn’t just make this bold statement for her mom to hear. She said it to America.

So America, are we ready to listen?

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## **Connecticut Governor Signs ‘Jennifer’s Law,’ Expanding Definition of Domestic Violence in Attempt to End Coercive Control in Intimate Relationships**

Coercive control laws are an important part of addressing the abuse you cannot see, and preventing the physical violence that often follows from it.

“Coercive control is a gateway to physical violence,” said Doreen Hunter, co-founder of the Americas Conference to End Coercive Control. “A high percentage of people who engage in coercive control will eventually resort to physical violence.”





## Race, Disability and Coercive Control: One More Look at the Gabby Petito Case

Two features of Petito's case have been strikingly absent from media coverage: her disability, and the myriad signs that Petito's boyfriend was subjecting her to a form of domestic violence known as coercive control.

Yet Petito's disability was central to how the system failed her prior to her death. Her case also shows what happens when law and society oversimplify domestic violence and overlook coercive control.

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## Femicide: The Need To Name Gender-Based Killing of Women in the United States

The U.S. downplays the growing issue of gender-based killings and violence by failing to call it what it is: femicide.

Recent high-profile murders have received immense media coverage, but the reality is they aren't rare events. Femicide is a global issue that disproportionately impacts BIPOC women and requires urgent action to prevent. The U.S. needs to adopt a language of femicide that recognizes the gendered nature of ongoing murders of women in the nation, as well as the larger social patterns connecting them.

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### **ABOUT AMY POLACKO**

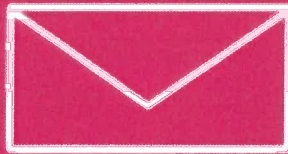
Amy Polacko is a divorce coach and journalist who

she's writing her first book "Don't Fall for a Con: How to Spot Narcissists and Sociopaths Before It's Too Late." Learn more about Amy and her mission at [www.freedomwarrior.info](http://www.freedomwarrior.info).

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