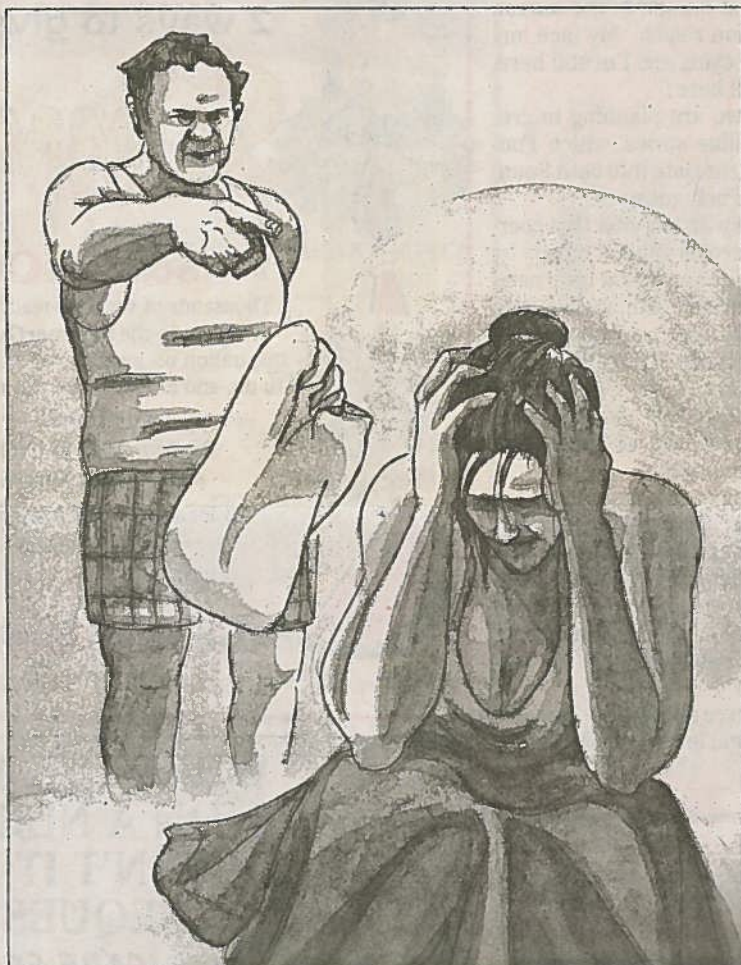




JERREY ROBERTS

Psychologist Lisa Aronson Fontes, who teaches at the University of Massachusetts University Without Walls, discusses her new book on domestic abuse at New Africa House on campus.



Fontes uses illustrations done by Liz Bannish of Florence in her presentations.

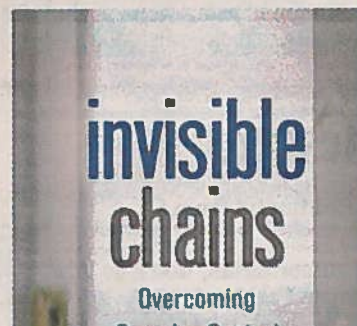
'INVISIBLE CHAINS'

By PETE REDINGTON
Staff Writer

Amherst
psychologist's new
book sheds light on
emotional abuse

In her recently published book, Amherst psychologist Lisa Aronson Fontes writes of a couple, Mandy and Tom, who were married after a whirlwind courtship featuring gifts of flowers and cards. But following their wedding Tom began complaining about Mandy talking with her sister and mother on the telephone, and obsessing about how she spent her time away from him. Later, he grew angry when she cut her hair without consulting him. Loving moments were replaced by anxiety. Mandy felt trapped.

The story of this couple, whose names have been changed by Fontes, is among several stories the author presents in "Invisible Chains:



'Invisible Chains': Amherst psychologist's new book sheds light on emotional abuse

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that is hard to define," Fontes said. "But the anguish women feel because of their lack of freedom is very real."

Though more difficult to see than physical violence, it ruins lives, too.

"Coercive control strips away victims' independence, sense of self and basic rights," Fontes writes in her book. It robs victims of the ability to make decisions about their own time, friends and appearance through combinations of degradation, isolation, micromanagement, manipulation, physical violence, sexual coercion, threats or punishment on the part of the controller.

"Victims feel anxious, dependent and afraid."

Fontes is a counseling psychologist who has worked in the areas of violence against women and child abuse for 25 years. She now teaches at the University of Massachusetts' University Without Walls in Amherst. She also has been a victim of some of what she writes about.

Fontes drew on that as well as her work as a researcher, activist and psychotherapist in writing "Invisible Chains." In the book she explores the questions: What is coercive control? Why does it happen? How can victims overcome it?

Victims from all backgrounds

A few weeks ago, Fontes spoke about these issues at the New Africa House at UMass to a crowd of close to 70 people — mostly women, but many men as well. The event was organized by the UMass Center for Women and Community and the Stonewall Center. Those in attendance included campus police officers and staff from the women's center as well as other advocates for victims of domestic violence.

"This is a really important topic," said Rebecca Lockwood, associate director of the Center for Women and Community, who attended the event. "It is really applicable to many in the UMass community."

And that means people in all kinds of intimate relationships.

"We wanted to sponsor this program because abuse can exist in same-sex relationships, and trans people can, and sadly, too often, do experience abuse from (their) partners," Genny Beemyn, director of the Stonewall Center, said afterward.

While Fontes acknowledges Beemyn's point, her book focuses on men abusing women, the most common circumstance.



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Fontes has worked in the area of violence against women and children for 24 years.

Victims, she says, come from all racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds. "They live in mansions, trailer parks, city apartments, and suburban and rural homes."

In a crowd the size of her audience at UMass, Fontes said, it was likely that some had experienced or are experiencing this form of abuse.

There is an elusive nature to it, she says. "It's less that there is a cycle of violence than that love is used as a method of coercive control."

"Every day, incalculable potential is lost," said Fontes.

Taken in isolation, each controlling act by the abuser may simply look like a sign of a less-than-ideal relationship, she says. But when viewed together, they form a pattern that has damaging effects.

Victims can be isolated from their family and friends, obsessively monitored by a boyfriend or husband, degraded in public or threatened with physical violence.

"This book was born out of the anguish I experienced myself and witnessed in others," Fontes said. "The anguish of coercive control is the same, even if the circumstances are different."

Accessible message

Fontes said she was inspired to write her book after reading "Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life," by Evan Stark, which came out in 2007. She said the book was a good first attempt to name the problem, but she

found it dense and academic. She wanted to write a book that is easier to read, more accessible to a larger population.

In fact, she originally conceived of the book as a graphic novel and she began working with illustrator and print maker Liz Bannish of Florence.

"Her illustrations were really edgy," Fontes said. "I was really drawn to them."

Fontes' publisher, however, did not buy the graphic novel approach. Still, Fontes uses Bannish's drawings in her presentations.

One drawing shows a woman looking at herself in the mirror. Its caption reads: "My face, my hair, my eyes, me. I'm still here. Am I still here?"

The two are planning to create an online series, which Fontes will translate into both Spanish and Portuguese.

In line with her view that coercive control is applied mostly by men, Fontes says that boys need to be provided with positive role models to illustrate how not to confuse love with jealousy and possession.

"We need to educate each other about how we treat each other," she said.

Actions by various student-led groups at UMass, Amherst Regional High, and elsewhere, that are challenging what has come to be known as the rape culture on college campuses and violent acts against women has encouraged her.

But there needs to be changes at the legal level, too, she said.

he said after the talk. He said the way cases are handled in court is another example. Often a woman will have to describe her situation while the man responsible for it sits just a few feet away. Many women can't muster the courage to do it, he said, and the abusers never receive their just punishment.

While the legal system in the United States is ahead of that in many countries in regards to domestic violence, it is still far behind several countries in Europe, particularly those of northern Europe, Fontes says.

A law has been proposed in England that would consider emotional and psychological abuse to be crimes as violent as physical abuse, according to Fontes.

In countries like the United States, certain actions, such as stalking, kidnapping, criminal harassment, physical and sexual violence, are considered a crime. "Other behaviors," Fontes writes in her book, "are not crimes by themselves, but they can be included in protection or restraining orders, which does criminalize them."

Getting help

Often, Fontes says, it is impossible for victims of coercive control to imagine life outside of the relationship, regardless of how destructive it is. Work still needs to be done in this area, she says, but she is hopeful.

The first step, she says, is to thoroughly evaluate one's rela-

For more information about the University of Massachusetts-Amherst Center for Women and Community and the services they offer, see www.umass.edu/ewc or call 545-0883. To reach the 24-hour rape crisis hotline, call 545-0800 or (toll free in Hampshire County) (888) 337-0800.

tionship.

"Only through assessing all different kinds of harm do victims connect the dots between the various ways they are being controlled," she said.

Then, a decision needs to be made to stay in the relationship and see if it can be changed, or to end it.

The second half of "Invisible Chains" details strategies, such as seeking support from counselors, police and others and protecting finances.

"If the person wants to try to end the relationship," Fontes said, "it is usually important to have the support of a domestic violence advocate, even if there is no physical violence. An advocate can help the person figure out how to exit the relationship safely."

Victims need love, understanding, support, and material help from family, friends and knowledgeable professionals, Fontes says. "The process of achieving freedom does not happen overnight, but it happens."

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