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What Does the Domestic Violence Act Say About Gaslighting?

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The short answer: nothing! But that is not the end of the enquiry.

While gaslighting is not specifically mentioned in the [Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998](#), it arises in circumstances which are provisioned for in the Act. This article briefly examines those circumstances.

By definition, gaslighting is a type of psychological manipulation by a person (the perpetrator) who distorts the narrative circumstances of an event or a factual truth in order to cause self-doubt or confusion in the mind of another person (the target), such that the target questions their sanity or sense of reality.^[1] Although the definitional parameters of “gaslighting” may vary depending on the context (e.g. law, psychology, sociology, philosophy, etc.), fundamentally, it involves: “a pattern of manipulative behaviors that target a victim’s capacity to perceive and evaluate reality independently. These behaviors can take many forms, vary in severity, and can be enacted through different modes including speech, actions, facial expressions, and manipulation of the physical environment or social networks”.^[2] The objective of the perpetrator’s manipulative distortions is to influence the target to abandon their real and objective observations, knowledge, recollections, and/or beliefs in favour of the perpetrator’s false narrative.

Technically, the above descriptions of gaslighting are not limited to [domestic relationships](#) and may therefore arise in other contexts (e.g. collegial relationships in an employment context).^[3]

In domestic relationships, the perpetrator intentionally and maliciously creates an “unreality” – a psychological cage in which the target is entrapped by the perpetrator’s manipulations.[4] If the target succumbs to the unreality, rather than trusting their own mind or the veracity of their own perceptions, they effectively submit to the perpetrator’s psychological domination or coercive control.[5] Prolonged subjection to gaslighting (and the perpetrator’s unreality) can be detrimental to the target’s psychological well-being,[6] may cause psychological and/or emotional distress, and may erode their self-esteem, self-determination, autonomy, and sense of individuality.[7] It may also make the target more susceptible to more and/or other abuses.[8]

While South African courts have not yet judicially analysed gaslighting in abusive domestic relationships, English courts have recognised it in the context of domestic violence. For example:

- In **M v F** [2024] EWFC 55 (B) the court had to determine whether F was subjecting M to coercive and controlling behaviours. Following some odd incidents in their household, F suggested to M that the “*only logical explanation*” for the occurrences was that M had been sleepwalking, which M accepted because she could not explain the occurrences. Based on the evidence, the court found that this constituted gaslighting and coercive control, because it was a form of “*psychological manipulation*” perpetrated by F, which caused M to doubt herself and to unjustifiably fear harming herself and her children in her sleep. In its judgment, the court considered that: it was F who planted the idea of sleepwalking in M’s mind; sleepwalking was not the only logical explanation for the incidents; F had never actually seen M sleepwalking in all their years together; F provided “*his own diagnosis of [M] with no medical evidence*” to support his claims; F’s assertion had a “*material impact on [M]’s wellbeing*” and caused her to worry about her mental health and become distressed; F made running jokes (to M and other people) at M’s expense leaving her feeling “*belittled*”, “*humiliated*”, “*mocked*”, and “*stupid*”.
- In **Re B-B (Domestic Abuse: Fact-Finding)** [2022] EWHC 108 (Fam) a mother and father accused each other of coercive and controlling behaviours. The court found that the father had repeatedly alleged that the mother suffered from bipolar disorder without any medical evidence that she suffered from that condition “*in an attempt to characterise her to third parties as mentally unstable and/or unreliable*”. The court identified this as gaslighting as “*the father’s conduct represented a form of insidious abuse designed to cause the mother to question her own mental well-being, indeed her sanity*”.

In the judicial analyses that South African courts will inevitably undertake, they will have to navigate how to differentiate gaslighting from conduct that resembles gaslighting but is definitionally not. For example, instances may arise where two people recall the same event differently, and one vehemently insists that their recollection is correct and the other person’s is not. To determine whether such a scenario amounts to gaslighting or is merely a difference in recollections, courts will have to juxtapose the unique evidential matrixes presented to them by parties against the above definitions and elemental factors (e.g. manipulation, narrative distortion, intent, malice, impact, self-doubt/confusion, psychological/emotional distress, etc.).

In conclusion, when interrogating the place of gaslighting in the Act, it may be regarded as either a form of psychological abuse, a tactic of coercive control, or both. As psychological abuse, a single serious instance of gaslighting may conceivably constitute domestic violence. However, to cross the threshold of actionable coercive and controlling behaviours, there must necessarily be repeated conduct as the indicators of coercive control include behaviour that is “*patterned, repeated and/or continual*”.[9]

The psychological manipulation involved in gaslighting may also form constitutive aspects of other types of domestic violence in the Act (e.g. emotional abuse, economic abuse, spiritual abuse, elder abuse, harassment, etc.), depending on the abuser’s intentions and/or the impact on the affected target. Oftentimes, psychological abuse and coercive control are subsumed into other types of abuse, because they are rooted in the abuser’s efforts to dominate and control the survivor. This need for domination, power and control is a core part of domestic violence in general, and gender-based violence in particular.

[1] Dakalo Singo “Coercive and Controlling Behaviour in the Domestic Violence Act” *South African Law Journal* (2023) Vol. 140, Issue No. 4, 763-794 at 775 (<https://doi.org/10.47348/SALJ/v140/i4a4>).

[2] Darke, L., Paterson, H., Dhillon, H., & van Golde, C. (2025) “Defining Gaslighting in Intimate Partner Violence: Insights from victim survivors and support service providers” *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* at 13 (<https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/law0000461>).

[3] Singo, 775.

[4] Emma Williamson “Living in the World of the Domestic Violence Perpetrator: Negotiating the Unreality of Coercive Control” *Violence Against Women* (2010), Vol. 16(12) 1412-1423 at 1414 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801210389162>).

[5] Williamson, 1415.

[6] Williamson, 1415.

[7] Singo, 776.

[8] P.L. Sweet "The Sociology of Gaslighting" *American Sociological Review* (2019) Vol. 84(5), 851-875 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419874843>).

[9] Singo, 783.



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