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OPINION

# Commentary: Predatory alienation wrecks lives. Criminalize it.

Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco

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Now that Keith Ranieri of NXIVM — a multilevel marketing company that he ran for two decades outside Albany, and which encompassed a secret society of branded sex slaves — has been sentenced to life behind bars, what’s to stop another smooth-talking guru from spinning a web of lies to exploit others? Sadly nothing, for lawmakers have yet to connect the dots between high-profile displays of coercive control and the myriad ways undue influence infects ordinary lives.

On November 18, 1978, Jim Jones of the People’s Temple incited more than 900 members of his Guyana jungle colony to commit “revolutionary suicide” with a cyanide-laced fruit drink after the murder of Congressman Leo Ryan of California and three others—the largest single loss of American civilian life in a deliberate act until September 11, 2001. A third of the victims were children. Books and docudramas recounted the gory details, but no policies against the malicious manipulation at the root of that tragedy were enacted.

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In the decades between the Jonestown massacre and the NXIVM case, countless families have been emotionally eviscerated by the loss of loved ones to other coercive individuals and high-demand groups that managed to stay out of the headlines. Having no legal recourse, these bereft indirect victims often spend thousands on various advisers in hope of reconnecting, with no guarantee of success. Only if a prosecutable crime is committed will law enforcement step in, sometimes after irreparable harm has been

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Laws skimming this area are piecemeal. In June, the California Senate unanimously passed a bill to include coercive control and isolation from friends, relatives, or other sources of support in its definition of domestic abuse. In 2014, California adopted a new definition for undue influence incorporating how elders can be manipulated by “excessive persuasion.” But as the NXIVM case shows, the targets of such unconscionable behavior can be of any age, anywhere.

Just as a thief can hack into a computer, a human trafficker, gang leader, abusive partner, con artist, or other predator can hack into a person’s mind —distorting memories into falsehoods and convincing them to cut off family and friends, rendering the isolated person dependent on the perpetrator. Key to maintaining control over the decisions and actions of another, such predatory alienation should be illegal.

A 2017 New Jersey law defined predatory alienation and ordered a study of its effect on young adults and senior citizens, conducted by the Rutgers University School of Social Work. Bills now before both houses of the New Jersey Legislature call for the Predatory Alienation and Consensual Response Act to implement some of the study recommendations, but do not criminalize the destructive behavior.

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Those who seem to have abandoned all reason to give up everything they have and everyone they know—and even to submit to servitude in an equatorial jungle or to branding in an upstate suburb—can’t know they’ve been unduly influenced until they get away from their coercive handler. Yet once a son or daughter reaches the age of legal majority, parents lose all rights to rescue them from the psychological bondage imposed by the Keith Ranieres of the world, even if they have evidence of a pattern of deceptive control with no informed consent.

Meanwhile, victims of predatory alienation who say they’re “estranged” from their family typically don’t have to prove it to obtain subsidized housing or college financing.

Such gaming of the social services system can render care providers unwitting accessories to predatory behavior.

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Now that the gavel has come down on Keith Raniere, will lawmakers connect the dots among all manifestations of coercive control? Will they finally stop expecting those who get caught in the net of undue influence to extricate themselves, and start holding accountable those who cast it?

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Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco is a co-founder of [NJ Safe & Sound](#), a volunteer organization whose advocacy led New Jersey lawmakers to address predatory alienation.

Correction: This article has been updated to correct the date of the Jonestown massacre.

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