



# Abused women and the threat of parental alienation: Shelter workers' perspectives



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## ABSTRACT

Based on quantitative and qualitative data collected in 30 domestic violence shelters in the Province of Québec (Canada), the research findings reveal a noticeable increase in the perceived number of women being accused or threatened to be accused of parental alienation; the accusations or threats of accusations reported in the last year by respondents represented 45% of all the accusations reported in the last 5 years (Last year: 4.27, SD = 3.80. Last 5 years: 9.47, SD = 10.04). A large majority of respondents (86.7%) stated that this phenomenon had had an impact on their practices in shelters, and more than half (53.3%) expressed that this issue had been either a priority for their shelters or one of their main concerns. Based on the research findings, the authors argue that domestic violence perpetrators use “parental alienation” as a tactic to discredit reports of abuse by women and children. By embracing this discourse, child protection services and the family court system reproduce the perpetrators' accounts and discredit reports of abuse by women and children, and therefore undermine their core mandate.

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## 1. Introduction

While the term “parental alienation” has been used by clinicians since the mid-1980s (Bensussan, 2009; Gardner, 1985; Johnston, Kuehnie, & Roseby, 1997), its more recent popularity in the Province of Quebec (Canada) has raised concerns amongst domestic violence shelter workers, who have noticed that a significant number of abused women are perceived as “alienating” their children. For instance, findings from a consultation conducted in domestic violence shelters across the Province of Quebec reveal serious concerns regarding child protection practices in domestic violence cases, which can involve the tendency to position abused women as “engaging in parental alienation” (Lapierre, & Fédération des ressources d'hébergement pour femmes violentées et en difficulté du Québec, FRHFVDQ, 2013). In the same vein, this issue was identified as a priority by participants in a recent international conference on children's exposure to domestic violence, which was held at the University of Ottawa (Canada) in April 2015 (Lapierre, Flynn, Côté & Couturier, in press).

However, there is no empirical data providing an accurate assessment of the scope of this phenomenon. In order to fill this gap, a study was conducted in domestic violence shelters across the Province of

Quebec, using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The main research findings are presented in this article, following a presentation of the literature review and the research methodology. Implications for policy, practice and research are addressed at the end of this paper.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Parental alienation

The literature on parental alienation draws upon Richard Gardner's work on the “parental alienation syndrome” (Gardner, 1985, 1987). According to Faller (1998) “the essence of the parental alienation syndrome is a circumstance in which a child demonstrates a strong affinity for one parent and alienation from the other”, in the context where “the negative behaviors the child attributes to the alienated parent are trivial, highly exaggerated, or totally untrue” (p. 100). Faller (1998) also indicates that “parental alienation syndrome” generally involves false allegations of sexual abuse. However, the term “parental alienation” has been used much more broadly to designate situations where a parent is perceived as colluding with the child in order to exclude the other parent, particularly in the context of high-conflict separation and divorce (Baker, 2007; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Farkas, 2011; Gagné, Drapeau, & Henault, 2005; Hayez & Kinoo, 2005; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). In fact, Bruch (2001) argues

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that this term “has been extended dramatically to include cases of all types in which a child refuses to visit the non-custodial parent, whether or not the child’s objections entail abuse allegations” (p. 528).

There are limited data establishing the extent of this phenomenon (Gagné et al., 2005; Pepiton, Alvis, Allen, & Logid, 2012). In an investigation of family court cases in Canada, Bala, Hunt, and McCarney (2010) reveal a very significant increase in the number of cases with parental alienation as the primary issue; while approximately 40 cases were identified between 1989 and 1998, 135 cases were identified between 1999 and 2008, which constitutes more than a 300 percent increase. Research also shows that this issue attracts considerable attention in research, as well as in the family court system and child protection services (Ellis, 2005; Fauteux, 2013; Gagné et al., 2005; Gagné, Drapeau, Melançon, Saint-Jacques, & Lépine, 2007; Gagné, Melançon, & Malo, 2009; Gagné, Lépine, & Godbout, 2012; Johnston, Gans Walters, & Friedlander, 2001; Lafontaine, Malo, & Moreau, 2012; Malo, 2013; Malo & Rivard, 2013; Poitras, Mignault, & Goubau, 2014; Vestal, 1999). In the Province of Quebec, a Task Force on parental alienation was recently put in place (Malo, 2013), and the “Parental Alienation Risk-Assessment Support Package” was widely distributed to professionals working with families (Lachance & Gagné, 2014). Furthermore, this issue has sparked the interest of the general public, as illustrated by the publication of multiple articles in national newspapers between 2009 and 2014.

Nonetheless, several commentators have questioned the theoretical and the empirical foundations of the work on both “parental alienation syndrome” and “parental alienation” (Adams, 2006; Bensussan, 2009; Bruch, 2001; Faller, 1998; Harris, 2014; Hoult, 2006; Rand, 2010; Romito, 2011). In this regard, (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2008 [2015]; Collectif Stop Masculinisme, 2012; Winstock, 2014). According to Adams (2006), even though the term “parental alienation” was not initially put forward by the men’s rights groups, its increased popularity constitutes a victory for the men’s rights movement. Finally, commentators have argued that the recourse to parental alienation is particularly problematic in certain circumstances, including situations where there is a history of domestic violence (Berg, 2011; Dalton, Drozd, & Wong, 2006; Meier, 2009a; Walker & Shapiro, 2010).

## 2.2. Parental alienation and domestic violence

Far from being a straightforward solution, separation often creates new difficulties and challenges for women who have experienced domestic violence. Indeed, research evidence reveals high rates of post-separation violence (Elizabeth, 2013; Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000; Zeoli, Rivera, Sullivan, & Kubiak, 2013) and demonstrates that abusive men can use severe and even lethal violence in this context (Campbell, Glass, Sharps, Laughon, & Bloom, 2007; Campbell, Webster, & Laughon, 2003). More specifically, they can use father-child contact arrangements to perpetuate physical and psychological violence and to maintain their control over their ex-partners (Harris, 2014). In addition, abusive men can use non-violent coercion strategies in order to undermine mother-child relationships, women’s parenting, and their identities as mothers (Dalton et al., 2006; Lapierre, 2010a). In this context, women who have experienced domestic violence may have well-grounded reasons to want to limit father-child contact, due to the fathers’ violent behaviors and threats to their own and to their children’s safety and well-being.

Nonetheless, those women can be labeled as “engaging in parental alienation”, particularly when they oppose father-child contact, express serious concerns for their children’s safety, or request safe and supervised contact arrangements. This happens in a context where abusive men can use - or threaten to use - child protection and family court proceedings to maintain their control over their ex-partners (Berg, 2011; Meier, 2009a). The family court systems can become a “symbolic battlefield” for abusive men (APA, 1996; Harrison, 2006; Jaffe, Lemon, & Poisson, 2003; Przekop, 2011), in circumstances where abusive men generally have more financial resources than their female ex-partners (Bruch, 2001).

Furthermore, professionals in both the family court and child protection systems have been criticized for their persistent inability to identify and to adequately address domestic violence and to ensure women’s and children’s safety and well-being, particularly in the post-separation context (Krane, Strega, & Carlton, 2013; Romito, 2006). In fact, the term “high-conflict separation” tends to obscure domestic violence (Jaffe et al., 2003; Walker & Shapiro, 2010). At the same time, there is a presumption that shared custody is in the children’s best interest, despite their fathers’ violent behaviours (Bala et al., 2010; Harme, 2011).

With regard to the family court system, Jaffe et al. (2003) argue that “women who raise concerns about a violent partner in family court proceedings are unlikely to be believed because lawyers and judges tend to overemphasize the possibility that false allegations are being used to further custody claims” (p. 17). Women appear to have little credibility, despite the fact that false allegations are extremely rare (Romito, 2011; Trocme & Bala, 2005) and that “more common are false denials by actual perpetrators of violence” (Jaffe et al., 2003, p. 17). Therefore, the labelling of abused women as “engaging in parental alienation” seems to be in line with research evidence that demonstrates that women who oppose father-child contact, express serious concerns for their children’s safety, or request safe and supervised contact arrangements can be perceived as “non-collaborative” or as “hostile” (Harrison, 2006). In child protection services, the recourse to “parental alienation” can also reflect a broader tendency to shift the focus away from men’s violence onto women’s inability to protect and care for their children (Krane et al., 2013; Lapierre, 2008).

Finally, it should be noted that a few commentators have argued that the label “parental alienation” should not be used in situations where there is a history of domestic violence. Indeed, Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, and Bala (2008) suggest that “when there is a reasonable basis in fact for a child to be fearful of a parent due to exposure to domestic violence, it is inappropriate to label the non-offending parent as engaging in alienation” (p. 518). In the same vein, Dalton et al. (2006) even state that it should be expected that abused women limit children’s contacts with their fathers in order to protect them from domestic violence perpetrators, which can rather be challenging when they have limited financial means.

## 3. Research methodology

The purpose of the study was to assess the extent of the phenomenon whereby abused women are perceived as “engaging in parental alienation” from the perspectives of workers in domestic violence shelters in Ontario and across the Province of Quebec, Canada, but this article focuses on the data gathered in domestic violence shelters in the Province of Quebec. The research project was conducted in partnership with the *Fédération des maisons d’hébergement pour femmes* and the *Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale*, two umbrella organizations for women’s shelters in the Province of Quebec, as well as *Action ontarienne centre la violence faite aux femmes*, an umbrella organization for domestic and sexual violence services in francophone communities in Ontario. It was submitted to the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the University of Ottawa.

In the Province of Quebec, an electronic version of the questionnaire was sent to the two umbrella organizations mentioned above in June 2015, and was subsequently sent to all their members. In addition, two independent shelters that had heard of the study, directly contacted the main investigator to participate. The shelters’ directors or coordinators were invited to complete the questionnaire, on their own or in collaboration with the other workers in their organizations; they were given two months to complete the questionnaire and to return it electronically to the principal investigator. The questionnaire was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data on the following themes: the number of abused women seeking assistance in their shelters who had been accused (or threatened to be accused) of parental alienation, the provenance of those accusation, and the impacts on both women’s and children’s safety, as well as on their practices in shelters. The questionnaires were completed anonymously, on a voluntary

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