



# Uncovering *Maternal Alienation*:

a further dimension of  
violence against women

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# Abstract

This thesis uses a feminist framework to explore one of the little-documented aspects of violence against women - the alienation that has occurred between women and their children. The alienation has come about not just as a 'by-product' of abuse, but because wedges have been deliberately put in place between mothers and children, in a context of abuse against the mother and/or the children. I developed the term *maternal alienation* for this phenomenon, which was defined as the phenomenon of children being alienated from their mothers, within a context of abuse, through the deliberate use of tactics such as mother blaming. The term was developed in response to the invisibility of this phenomenon in professional discourse and practice.

Nine open-ended interviews and two focus groups were held with women, most of whom were mothers, and a thematic analysis of the interview material was undertaken. This analysis documents women's experiences of the strategies and tactics used by abusers in *maternal alienation*, and establishes that these are deliberate and are intended to punish, control and inflict hurt on the women. These tactics deflect responsibility for men's violence in families onto mothers, by portraying mothers to children, families and communities in demeaning and blaming ways. The images of mothers and fathers that emerges from the analysis are explored, in relation to wider social and cultural discourses that shape 'common knowledge' and inform professionals' views and beliefs about mothers, and to a lesser extent, fathers.

The thesis concludes that *maternal alienation* is built on two powerful foundations - the privileging of the male voice, and the extensive mother blaming present at macro and micro levels - in cultural discourses and in families. It suggests that maternal alienation is one way in which children are initiated into and coached in dismissive and blaming attitudes and behaviours to women.

# Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Anne Morris

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