Optimising the “spaces in-between”

The maternal alienation project and the
politics of gender in macro and micro contexts

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
Discipline of Gender, Work and Social Inquiry, School of Social Sciences

University of Adelaide

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any 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 made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the conditions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Anne Morris Date
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Acknowledgements are due to the Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service and Women’s Health Statewide, who funded the Maternal Alienation Project. Many other organisations and individuals participated in the project, and richly contributed to its outcomes. As well as acknowledging the members of the Advisory Group, and the Reference Group, I warmly thank the participants in the two Working Groups, representatives from the Central Violence Intervention Program, the Northern Violence Intervention Program, and the metropolitan Women’s Community Health Centres (Women’s Health Statewide, Dale Street, Southern Women’s Health Centre, and Northern Women’s Community Health Centre). Thank you all for your collegiality and friendship, generosity of spirit, hard work and – yes, the fun!

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I wish once again to warmly thank the women who participated in the initial research project in 1999. The PhD evolved from your wishes to see positive change.

I want to give particular acknowledgement to my family and friends who provided strong encouragement throughout the project and PhD, and participated in many helpful conversations over these years.

This research has made me so much more appreciative of my own family. It is to my family, and my partner, that I dedicate this thesis, with gratitude and love.
## List of abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<td>CEO</td>
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<td>CRC</td>
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<td>Fathers’ Rights Organisations</td>
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<td>IVAWS</td>
<td>International Violence Against Women Survey</td>
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<td>MAP</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Government Organisation</td>
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<td>NMCHS</td>
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Thesis summary

The centrepoint of this thesis is an action research project, the Maternal Alienation Project (MAP), implemented during 2002 and 2003 in Adelaide, South Australia. Resourced by two government-funded community health services, it was established to improve organisations’ (health, welfare and legal) and systems’ responses to the newly termed ‘maternal alienation’. MAP was situated within a tradition of feminist participatory and action research. It was designed to work on three levels: practice, systems and policy-making, and research. The outcomes, processes and events of MAP at the different levels of its operation are examined in the thesis through the employment of a gendered analysis drawn mainly from materialist feminism and standpoint theories. Post-project interviews and focus groups provided further data to the fieldnotes written throughout MAP, and the project’s formal and informal documents.

A recent example of a contested gendered concept, “maternal alienation” was first identified and named in 1999 as a component of gender violence (Morris 1999). It forms part of a spectrum of violence perpetrated in households, and had been identified within domestic violence and child sexual abuse. It is a term for the range of tactics used by mainly male perpetrators, predominantly the mothers’ intimate partners and the children’s fathers or step-fathers, to deliberately undermine the relationship between mothers and their children. The mother-blaming discourses and degrading constructions of mothers conveyed to children and those in the family’s orbit are strongly related to wider socio-cultural constructions of women and mothers.

The thesis examines theories of gender, gendered organisations and gender violence. It develops the concept of an abusive household gender regime, characterised by perpetrators’ imposition of a coercive and abusive regime on household members, and particular patternings of gendered relations. Comparisons are made between household and organisational gender regimes, which are also viewed in relation to the local gender order at the time of MAP. It was found that services that lack an analysis of gender are likely to re-inscribe the dynamics of maternal alienation in their responses to families.

Language was found to play a significant part in addressing maternal alienation, particularly in developing congruence between language and women’s and children’s “lived” experiences. The principles that were developed were founded on supporting mothers and rebuilding their relationships with children, and making visible the tactics employed by perpetrators, thereby reducing their power to coerce and increasing their accountability.
The concept of maternal alienation and MAP itself were attacked by a coalition of men’s rights and Christian Right lobbyists. This compromised the operations of MAP, and of its key supporters, managers of feminist and gender-aware organisations. In many ways these attacks, played out at a macro level, reflected the techniques and dynamics of maternal alienation at a micro level.

This thesis raises questions about the strategies that feminist organisations need to develop to more effectively pursue feminist agendas, and to re-invigorate a women’s movement.